

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Brexit vote explained: poverty, low skills and lack of opportunities

Key findings:

The poorest households, with incomes of less than £20,000 per year, were much more likely to support leaving the EU than the wealthiest households, as were the unemployed, people in low-skilled and manual occupations, people who feel that their financial situation has worsened, and those with no qualifications.

Groups vulnerable to poverty were more likely to support Brexit. Age, income and education matter, though it is educational inequality that was the strongest driver. Other things being equal, support for leave was 30 percentage points higher among those with GCSE qualifications or below than it was for people with a degree. In contrast, support for leave was just 10 points higher among those on less than £20,000 per year than it was among those with incomes of more than £60,000 per year, and 20 points higher among those aged 65 than those aged 25.

Support for Brexit varied not only between individuals but also between areas. People with all levels of qualifications were more likely to vote leave in low-skill areas compared with high-skill areas. However, this effect was stronger for the more highly qualified. In low-skilled communities the difference in support for leave between graduates and those with GCSEs was 20 points. In high-skilled communities it was over 40 points. In low-skill areas the proportion of A-level holders voting leave was closer to that of people with low-skills. In high-skill areas their vote was much more similar to graduates.

Groups in Britain who have been 'left behind' by rapid economic change and feel cut adrift from the mainstream consensus were the most likely to support Brexit. These voters face a 'double whammy'. While their lack of qualifications put them at a significant disadvantage in the modern economy, they are also being further marginalised in society by the lack of opportunities that faced in their low-skilled communities. This will make it extremely difficult for the left behind to adapt and prosper in future.

What's a public opinion poll?

A scientific, nonbiased public opinion poll is a type of survey or inquiry designed to measure the public's views regarding a particular topic or series of topics. Trained interviewers ask questions of people chosen at random from the population being measured. Responses are given, and interpretations are made based on the results. It is important in a random sample that everyone in the population being studied has an equal chance of participating. Otherwise, the results could be biased and, therefore, not representative of the population.

Representative samples are chosen in order to make generalizations about a particular population being studied.

Why are opinion polls important?

Helping regular people be heard

Polls tell us what proportion of a population has a specific viewpoint. They do not explain why respondents believe as they do or how to change their minds. This is the work of social scientists and scholars. Polls are simply a measurement tool that tells us how a population thinks and feels about any given topic.

This can be useful in helping different cultures understand one another because it gives the people a chance to speak for themselves instead of letting only vocal media stars speak on behalf of all. Opinion polling gives people who do not usually have access to the media an opportunity to be heard.

How are the surveys conducted?

Two of the most common ways in which public opinion polls are conducted are telephone and face-to-face interviews. Other methods include mail, online, and self-administered surveys.

How are face-to-face samples selected?

Such surveys, also known as "in-person" interviews, are conducted with the interviewer and the interviewee next to each other. The interviewer reads material from the questionnaire and records the interviewee's responses. At times the interviewer may hand a card to the respondent for him/her to select a response(s).

Scientific face-to-face surveys are normally conducted using geographic-area probability sampling. Some refer to this as "block sampling." This is done by dividing a given population into blocks of roughly equal population density. Each block is further divided into blocks until a single household is chosen at random, and then a single respondent is randomly chosen from the household.

How does one read opinion polls?

Percentages in an opinion poll reflect the proportion of a given population that has a particular response. If the results of a scientific poll claiming a 3-point margin of error say that 30% of Americans like ice cream, this means that if we asked all Americans this question, we would expect between 27% and 33% to say they like ice cream.

How are scientific polls different from other polls?

When a radio or TV station asks its listeners to call in to vote on a particular issue, the results of this activity are not scientific because the sample is not representative. The sample reflects only the people who happen to be watching or listening to the show and are motivated to call in. This cannot be generalized to represent the whole population because the respondents were not randomly selected, and therefore, they are not representative.