On June, 23 2016 the United Kingdom voted to end the state’s membership of the European Union. The UK had joined the European Community in 1973 and then confirmed its membership in a 1975 referendum with a 66 per cent share of the vote. This time around the Leave side secured a narrow majority, 51.9 per cent of all those who voted. Thirteen million registered voters did not turn out. Some seven million eligible adults were not registered to vote in 2016. They were disproportionately ‘the young, flat-dwellers, especially renters; members of ethnic minorities; [and] recent movers’ (Johnston et al., 2015).

Many people chose not to register to vote because they feared debt collection agencies that are allowed access to the electoral register even of those who request anonymity on the public roll. Furthermore, these figures do not include the millions of mainland EU citizens and 16 and 17 year olds who were not allowed to vote. The outcome was unexpected by the polls, markets, politicians and almost all pundits. The immediate picture that emerged from post-referendum polls was confusing. Several polls, such as those paid for by Lord Ashcroft and used for this analysis, agreed that older people voted in greater numbers. They generally voted for Leave, while the youngest demographic demonstrated the strongest support for Remain. Among those aged 18 to 24, 73 per cent voted Remain, but the youngest age groups also had the largest share of the electorate that decided not to vote. The estimates of how many abstained vary between different polls, ranging from 36 to 64 per cent for the youngest voters. Among over 65 year olds turnout was closer to 90 per cent.

A less discussed feature of the referendum voting pattern is the geographical distribution of votes across the regions and countries of the United Kingdom beyond the overall outcome. The cartogram opposite re-sizes each voting area according to its total electorate. The outcome was frequently – and erroneously - blamed on the working class in the North of England. However, because of differential turnout and the size of the denominator population, most people who voted Leave – by absolute numbers – lived in the South of England.

Furthermore, of all those who voted Leave, 59 per cent were middle class (A, B or C1), and 41 per cent were working class (C2, D or E). The proportion of Leave voters who were of the lowest two social classes (D and E) was just 24 per cent. The Leave voters among the middle classes were crucial to the final result. This was because the middle class constituted two thirds of all those who voted. However, if personality traits mattered at all, it was of those who lead the campaigns. Within two weeks of the Brexit vote Boris Johnston, Michael Gove and Nigel Farage had all given up their leadership or potential UK political leadership ambitions, or had been forced to by others. The repercussions of the outcome were as unexpected as it was itself.
There are distinct geographical differences in the vote across the UK (Figure 2). In contrast to surprise expressed at the time over its Leave majority, Wales is actually the least unusual part of the UK, with its shares of Remain, Leave and No Vote being almost equal to the total UK shares. The South East, in contrast, has a much lower proportion of No Votes than its share of the electorate would predict if there were no geographical influences while at the same time having above average shares of Remain as well as Leave Votes. At the other extreme, disproportionate shares of the electorate chose to not vote in the strongholds of Remain, in London and Scotland. Had turnout in London and Scotland been nearer the UK average this story would be very different.

The Brexit vote will be a divisive moment in the United Kingdom’s politics for years to come. A closer look at the voting patterns is essential to make sense of the implications and the underlying divisions in society that need addressing and understanding if we are to know the likely future route of politics in the country. Was it complacency among life’s winners, and in those areas where it was most assumed that Remain would prevail that led to this outcome? Not so much a protest vote as a lack of voting in London, in Scotland and among the young, among those not given a vote at ages 16 and 17, and among those who had the most interest of all in the outcome: the citizens of Europe who lived in the UK but were not born here and who had assumed that this would not matter in what, until 2016, was slowly becoming an ever closer union.

References