

## **1 Introduction**

On Thursday 23 June 2016, 16.1 million people in the United Kingdom voted for their nation to remain a member of the European Union. However, 17.4 million voters chose to leave, sparking an immediate political frenzy. On Friday morning at 8:15 a.m., Prime Minister David Cameron announced his resignation after a six-year premiership. The Great British Pound dropped to a 31-year low.

The UK's relationship with the EU has consistently been questioned by both British elites and the public — and other European nations — since its first application to join in 1961 and eventual accession in 1973. The first referendum on membership of the European Community (as it was then known), held in 1975, revealed that 67 percent of voters supported the UK's accession. The debate, nevertheless, continued, and by 2015, the public mood was clear — immigration reform was a priority, according to opinion polls. From June 2015 to February 2016, Cameron and his team renegotiated the terms of the UK's membership, hoping to convince the public that remaining within the EU yielded more benefits than costs. Whether Cameron's discussions with Brussels were enough was now up to Britons. The June referendum was officially announced on 20 February 2016.

In early 2016, the media, business world and financial markets held an assumption that the status quo would likely endure after June. Since the results of the referendum, an impressive post-mortem has been conducted on the Leave vote. Plenty of literature has sought to explain the surprise result by investigating campaign strategies of both sides, trends in opinion polling, and the political environment surrounding the debate. There has been consensus that the largest driver of the Leave vote, both in terms of campaign strategy and public opinion, was the prevalent feeling of the need for immigration control.

This article strives to contribute to understandings of the sociological aspects of anti-immigration sentiment in the context of the Leave vote. Specifically, it is an investigation of British public opinion on race, culture, identity, and xenophobia, and how this manifests into a pervasive anti-immigration societal attitude. In other words, this article seeks to explain to what extent the Leave vote was caused by issues of racial identity.

Current literature suggests that anti-immigrant sentiment within the EU membership debates is caused primarily by fear of cultural pluralism and the perception of economic burden that immigrants bring. A gap in the literature can be found in accounting for the role of racism (discrimination based on skin color, separate from cultural xenophobia) in the Brexit debates. In the context of immigration, this article compares whether racial concerns were more instrumental than economic concerns in pushing Britons to vote Leave.

The next section outlines theoretical and historical frameworks for understanding public opinion on identity, culture, and race, as well as whether these opinions contribute to anti-immigrant sentiment more than economic concerns. It also explains some media effects in causing anti-immigrant attitudes. Section three provides a review of current literature on explaining the result of the 2016 referendum, including a focus on explaining opposition to immigration. Section four dives into empirical analyses of public opinion data, evaluating the comparative explanatory power of race and economic concerns within the 2016 referendum debates. Section five discusses these data, evaluating them against existing literature and frameworks of understanding, as well as previous opinion polling.

## **2 Theory and history: public opinion on identity issues in immigration**

Scholarship on public opinion on immigration has been widespread. This review focuses on a few areas of identity politics concerns within anti-immigrant sentiment. Firstly, it looks

at research on British attitudes towards different ethnic groups and immigrants from differing regions. Secondly, it reviews research on people's fear of cultural pluralism and concerns over the potential threat of immigrants to national identity. This article seeks to compare the importance of identity politics and economic concerns in shaping anti-immigrant sentiment, so the third section of this chapter gauges existing studies that execute this multivariate analysis.

### *Ethnic hierarchy*

Researchers have conducted and analyzed various public opinion polls investigating discrepant attitudes towards different immigrant groups. Specifically, relevant results compare immigrants' region of origin and race. Saggar (2003) found that negative sentiments are not purely based on color, citing a 2001 ICM poll which showed that every age group of respondents emphatically disapproved of having Romanian immigrants as neighbors. Almost every age group approved of having Chinese neighbors. The poll also revealed that almost every group of respondents approved of white South African asylum seekers as neighbors, while almost every group disapproved of Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers, suggesting a complex mix of attitudes relating to differing perceptions based on national origin (Saggar 2003, 187).

While Saggar found opposition to certain white Eastern European immigrants, diminishing the importance of skin color, a wealth of scholarship points to the importance of the white versus non-white divide. Ford (2011) pointed to historical evidence emphasizing that non-white immigration is far more opposed by the public than white immigration. Early settlements of Polish wartime refugees and workers from Mediterranean Europe and Ireland caused little public resistance compared to the hostility faced by South Asian and Caribbean migrants. 'Race riots' occurred in Notting Hill (1958), Toxteth and Brixton (1981), and Bradford and Burnley (2001) in areas with concentrations of black and Asian immigrants and their descendants (Cantle, cited in Ford 2011, 1020), while there have never been riots of this scale against white immigrants. By 2008, the population of West European migrants had surpassed that of Indian-born migrants, which did not result in public interest, suggesting the higher acceptability of white immigrants (Ford 2011, 1020).

Historical evidence in terms of policy also reveal ethnic hierarchies in the minds of the public. While West European migrants have been uncontroversial, Eastern European arrivals have attracted significant media attention and are monitored by the Home Office (Ford 2011, 1022). Within non-white migration, a ranking ladder is also apparent. The 1950s saw Westminster's defense of migration from the West Indies; this population was regarded as more 'British' than South Asians (Hansen, cited in Ford 2011, 1022). Recently, Muslims have been seen as more 'threatening' than Afro-Caribbeans (Ford and Goodwin, cited in Ford 2011, 1022).

Ford also used data from six British Social Attitudes surveys to provide further evidence of an ethnic hierarchy, with each white ethnic group above the non-white groups. The surveys, conducted between 1983 and 1996, reveal that the least opposed group of immigrants are Australians and New Zealanders, followed by Western Europeans, Eastern Europeans, and then (in order of preference) immigrants from Hong Kong, Africa, the West Indies, and South Asia (Ford 2011, 1026).

Kaufmann (2014) compared Eastern Europeans with non-white groups from other regions, and found that while white British 'habituate' to both Eastern European and non-European immigrant groups, assimilation occurs far more rapidly among European immigrants than minorities. Forty-six percent of people classified as children of 'Mediterranean Commonwealth' immigrants on the 1971 Census considered themselves as

dominant white British by 2011. Meanwhile, there is a majority attitude that visible minorities are not accepted as fully ‘one of us’ (Kaufmann 2014, 271).

### *Cultural unity*

Replicated research has highlighted that perceptions of immigrant groups differ depending on the group’s perceived threat to cultural unity and national identity.

In the United States, Bogardus (1925) showed that individuals preferred to live among people associated with the dominant White Anglo-Saxon Protestant group, as opposed to those that were racially, religiously or linguistically different from the dominant group (Bogardus, cited in Ford 2011, 1019). Preferences based on ethnic proximity to the majority, dominant group have also been found in Canada and Holland. Saggar (2003) cited the 1997 British Election Study which revealed resistance to cultural pluralism. Of white respondents, 71 percent agreed that ‘it is far better for immigrants to adapt and blend into society,’ rather than keep their customs and traditions (British Election Study, cited in Saggar 2003, 186).

Kaufmann (2014) noted that ethnic minorities are perceived as the greatest threat when immigrants are close but not too close (the ‘halo effect’). Diversity in one’s city or local authority adds to threat perceptions because of immigrants’ potential to introduce large-scale change, but Kaufmann’s study showed that positive contact with minorities mitigated fears (Kaufmann 2014, 272).

Kaufmann also discussed that England did not experience the same ‘recasting’ of its national identity in favor of multiculturalism that the United States did in the 1960s. The conjuncture of specific liberal historical events, such as the Civil Rights movement, helped reframe the United States within a ‘nation of immigrants’ narrative. The fact that Anglo-Saxon settlement happened in England over a thousand years earlier than in the United States, coupled with the limited immigration prior to 1948, consolidated a ‘native’ English ethnic group. Most western European ethnic majorities use their nation’s name to describe their ethnic group, providing an indigenesness that acts as an obstacle to introducing multiculturalism into their national identities (Kaufmann 2014, 274-75).

### *Are racial and cultural concerns stronger than economic?*

The two types of identity-politics concerns that voters may hold regarding immigration are race (or skin color) and culture — the ideas, social behavior and customs that differ among societies. Another factor that may lead to anti-immigration is economic concerns, for example immigrants’ perceived burden on national resources, or the added competition for jobs.

Multivariate experiments are particularly useful to answer the question of why people harbor anti-immigrant sentiments. Studies have compared the relative importance of racism, concerns over multiculturalism, the economy, and other influences.

There is a multitude of research that justifies anti-immigrant sentiment in economic terms. Duffy’s (2004) survey found high levels of resentment towards asylum seekers and recent migrants, as opposed to minorities, over the concern of the use of public resources (Duffy, cited in Somerville 2007, 132). Halman (2001) found that British attitudes towards immigrants on the issue of racial diversity are more positive than the EU average (Halman, cited in Somerville 2007, 132).

However, multiple studies indicate that a preference for cultural unity is the strongest predictor of anti-immigrant sentiment. In their experimental study, Sniderman et al. (2004) found that Dutch hostility to immigrants is amplified by describing them in cultural rather than economic terms (Sniderman et al., cited in Ford 2011, 1019). Ivarsflaten (2005)

acknowledged the research that explains public opinion on immigration in terms of economic concerns, but highlighted that most studies which compare economy and identity explanations find that cultural concerns more strongly influence opinions on immigration (Burns and Gimpel; Gibson, cited in Ivarsflaten 2005, 23). Dustmann and Preston (2003) tested the variables of race against welfare concerns and economic competition, and found race to be the key determinant (Dustmann and Preston, cited in Somerville 2007, 132).

Ford (2011) once again used historical evidence to argue against the notion that hostility to non-white immigration is driven by fear of increased economic competition for jobs and government resources. Far-right mobilizations by the National Front in the 1970s (Husbands, cited in Ford 2011, 1020), and the British National Party since 1999 (Eatwell and Goodwin, cited in Ford 2011, 1020), have been on non-white immigrants. Irish, European and Australian immigrants have often migrated to Britain in larger numbers but Ford discussed the lack of political movements against these groups. Although Ford's article predates the 2016 referendum (and its unique circumstances) by five years, he argued that there is strong historical evidence of non-white migrants garnering more passionate and organized opposition than white migrants (Ford 2011).

Ivarsflaten's (2005) influential study used multivariate analysis to pit cultural unity concerns against other factors in determining individual preferences for immigration policy. The study found that a preference for cultural unity matters more than all other variables taken together, including concerns about the national economy and racism. In the model of maximum impact, where respondents feel strongly about one explanatory variable but average on other concerns, belief in cultural unity is five times more influential than concerns about the national economy. Racism is also influential in this model (meaning that strong feelings of racism can have a significant impact on people's preferences), but in the model showing current impact of each variable observed today, racism is not more influential than concerns about the economy (Ivarsflaten 2005).

Ware (2008) discussed the racialization of economic concerns. Immigration arouses a sense of resentment from the white working class, for whom inequality and perceptions of unfairness are compounded by fear of multiculturalism and the visible changes in the community around them (Ware 2008, 2).

This article also seeks to compare the relative importance of identity and economy concerns, in the context of immigration debates surrounding the 2016 referendum on the UK's EU membership.

### *Erroneous perceptions*

It is necessary to note that a significant contributor to anti-immigrant sentiment may be a lack of awareness of the proportion and size of immigrants, as well as minorities, in the population. A 2000 MORI/Reader's Digest poll found that the average estimate of the size of the ethnic population was 26 percent of the UK population, at a time when the actual figure was seven percent. The poll also revealed that the average estimate for the proportion of migrants and asylum seekers was 51 percent of the population, when in reality it was four percent. Among the public, ethnic minorities, immigrants and asylum seekers are often viewed as one group. Several polls reveal that more intolerant population subgroups are more likely to have erroneous views of migrant and ethnic populations (Saggar 2003, 185).

Blinder's (2015) study found that both EU and non-EU nationals appear prominently in mental images of immigrants. Sixty-two percent of respondents pictured non-EU nationals as immigrants, while 51 percent pictured EU nationals, which overstated the 2010 EU-immigrant proportion of 30 percent (Blinder 2015, 89).

Two significant influencers of public opinion are media effects and elite influence in the form of policymaking, with the former having the potential to heavily impact perceptions of the numbers and characteristics of immigrants.

Past literature has suggested that incorrect estimates of immigrant proportions may stem from the large quantity of media coverage or the tendency to inflate the prominence of salient minority groups (Baker et al., cited in Blinder 2018, 1448). In terms of the composition of different immigrant types, media framing has been found to be an effective tool in influencing perceptions. Blinder's (2018) analysis of British newspaper coverage from 2013 revealed that the two most common modifiers of 'immigrant' were 'illegal' and 'EU'/'European,' consistent with analyses from the past decade, even though irregular migrants only comprised 11 percent of the foreign-born population. Immigrants from outside the EU were also greater in quantity than those from within (Blinder 2018, 1450). Blinder also noted that racial framing is rare. Although national origin is frequently mentioned, the avoidance of racial terms may be attributed to efforts by anti-immigration elites to 'detoxify' immigration (Partos and Bale, cited in Blinder 2018, 1451).

Blinder's own experiment explicitly tested the effects of framing on perceptions, but it found that neither an 'Eastern European' nor an 'illegal' frame was able to shift public perceptions on innumeracy. This was attributed to the fact that 'illegal' was already the most common modifier, and thus, participants were already overly exposed to the phrase for the experiment to add any further effect (Blinder 2018, 1455).

A 2016 paper by Blinder et al. moved beyond explaining quantitative perceptions to explore the effect of the 'illegal' frame on qualitative perceptions of immigrants. British media outlets' consistent emphasis on illegal immigration causes illegality to be associated deeply with immigration, depicts immigrants as law-violators, and infuses immigrants with a taint of criminality, according to the conceptual metaphor theory. Language in news reports contributes to asylum seekers' routine conflation with immigrants (Blinder et al. 2016, 18-24).

Elite policymaking can also play a part in qualitative perceptions of immigrants. From the beginning of post-war immigration policy, there has been a preference for white immigrants. From the privilege of immigrants from white-majority former colonies to the lack of policymaker interest at growing Western European immigration in the 2000s, elites have socialized the public to adopt diverging attitudes on different migrant groups. For example, Whitehall has been more willing to defend West Indian migration than South Asian, in reference to the former's greater cultural proximity to 'Britishness' (Hansen, cited in Ford 2011, 1022). Ivarsflaten (2005) hypothesized that elites can influence public opinion by disseminating that reducing immigration is a solution to existing problems, thereby associating problems with immigration. Her experiment showed that while elites can successfully link some potentially-unrelated problems to immigration, other problems are already so strongly tied to immigration that elite visibility does not make a difference, for example a desire to preserve cultural unity (Ivarsflaten 2005, 24).

### **3** Brexit explained: existing research on the Leave vote and opposition to immigration

#### *Explaining the Leave vote*

In the lead up to the referendum, many issues were on voters' minds. Unequivocally though, immigration was at the fore, with 63 percent selecting it as the most pressing issue at the end of 2015 in a YouGov poll, well ahead of healthcare (39 percent) and the economy (33 percent) (YouGov, cited in Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017, 11). Net migration reached

336,000, and 69 percent said that migration from the EU was too high (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017, 11-12).

Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley's (2017) regression analyses found that while evaluations of the economy, immigration and the NHS each had statistically significant effects on support for EU membership, judgments about immigration actually exerted stronger effects than economic assessments (*ibid.*, 84). Their analyses also revealed that the benefit-cost variable of Britain's ability to better control immigration in a post-Brexit world was one of the most significant predictors of the Leave vote (*ibid.*, 161).

Additionally, perceptions of potential post-Brexit immigration levels differed between Leave and Remain voters. Among Leave voters, 84 percent thought there would be less immigration if Britain left the EU, compared with 27 percent of Remainers, according to a YouGov poll (YouGov/Times, cited in Hobolt 2016, 1263).

However, most polls conducted around the time of the referendum revealed that sovereignty was the number one stated reason that people voted Leave, and immigration was the second. YouGov's poll showed 45 percent selecting sovereignty and 26 percent choosing immigration, echoed by Lord Ashcroft's result of 49 percent selecting sovereignty and 33% selecting immigration. The British Election Study found around 30 percent for each (YouGov, Lord Ashcroft, British Election Study, cited in Carl 2018, 2).

The Leave campaign employed positive non-immigration messages including the renewal of sovereignty and democracy that would result if the UK left the EU. This appealed to middle-class Eurosceptics who may have privately agreed with negatively rhetorical anti-immigration ideas but were conscious about potential tones of racism within the Leave campaign's messaging. Another important message was the amount of money that could be redirected to the NHS if the UK left the EU. Although many Remainers contested the truth of this message, the idea that the NHS would be strengthened rather than weakened with a Brexit result resonated with Leavers (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017, 59-60). Additionally, many Leave voters from the left contested that the EU had become an 'uber-capitalist' club whose efforts threatened the possibility of nationalization of public services (*ibid.*, 15).

Overall though, while there were other issues that contributed to Vote Leave, it is clear that immigration was the dominant concern. Even in surveys that placed sovereignty concerns over immigration, it is clear that the two are not mutually exclusive — in fact, to the contrary, the desire for sovereignty can be read as a desire to control immigration.

### *Explaining anti-immigration within the Leave vote*

While this article investigates whether racism motivated anti-immigrant sentiment; existing literature has also generated differing explanations for this attitude.

The perceived economic burden of immigration has been a large contributor to its opposition. A very timely and widely circulated 2015 Bank of England report documented that rising immigration could impact wages of UK-born people, especially in semi- or unskilled labor forces (Nickell and Saleheen 2015). This caught media attention immediately; a *Telegraph* headline from December 2015 read "Mass migration driving down wages offered to British jobseekers" (Dominczak and Spence 2015). Dustmann et al. (2013) also showed that the biggest impacts on wages of immigration occurred among low-wage workers, and that it was actually associated with an increase in wages of higher-paid workers, potentially creating widening inequality in the labor market (Dustmann et al., cited in Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017, 113). This could contribute to the differing views from different occupational groups about EU membership (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017, 113). Interestingly, the Migration Advisory Committee found that EU migrants actually

appeared to have no impact on UK-born employment while non-EU migrants were associated with a reduction in UK-born employment (Migration Advisory Committee, cited in Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017, 113). Additionally, the perceived burden on the NHS is another economic concern that people had about immigration. The Vote Leave campaign strongly focused on the strain that immigrants exert on welfare resources. At the beginning of 2016, healthcare professionals warned that the NHS was being ‘bled dry’ by ‘health tourists.’ In April, vote Leave released statistics claiming to show increased waiting times from immigrants’ pressure on the system. This was effective as surveys showed that the percentage of people thinking that it was beneficial for the NHS to leave the EU was consistently higher than those who thought that remaining would help (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017, 48).

National identity’s role in producing anti-immigrant sentiment have also been explored in existing literature. Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley (2017) found that national identity was a significant predictor for having positive or negative attitudes towards the benefits and costs of immigration. As is widely documented in anecdotal evidence, those who identified as English were more likely than those who identified as British to emphasize the benefits of leaving the EU (ibid., 168). Hobolt (2016) found that European identity was a powerful predictor of the Remain vote (Hobolt 2016, 1269), while English national identity is more associated with national sovereignty (Wellings, cited in Hobolt 2016, 1270).

Within the realm of identity, there has also been exploration on people’s perceptions on threats to cultural unity and minorities. There are widespread and entrenched negative attitudes towards minority groups among the whole British electorate, with survey data showing far more favorability towards the white majority than the four groups tested: Asians, Eastern Europeans, Blacks, Muslims (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017, 102-3). However, Curtice (2017) found that a strong majority of Leave voters and a solid half of Remain voters favored requiring EU migrants to go through the same application processes as non-EU migrants (Curtice 2017, 40-1), indicating that the opposition to immigration in general may be based upon concerns with culture more than race. This fear of British cultural erosion is substantiated through investigations that find culture to be a bigger factor in anti-immigration than economic concerns. Sobolewska and Ford (2017) found that people who thought immigration posed a threat to culture did not always have the same misgivings about equal opportunity programs for minorities. In fact, only half of those that were worried about culture said that equal opportunity programs had gone too far (Sobolewska and Ford 2017, 21-2), indicating a deeper concern for cultural displacement than material. Some studies have also shown that concerns over national identity are more important than economic calculations in the context of European integration (Hooghe and Marks, cited in Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017, 64).

There is not an overwhelmingly dominant consensus in the literature about the relative importance of economic considerations and cultural, but the evidence for concerns about cultural erosion are strong. What follows is a deeper dive into how big of a role race plays in determining aversion to immigration within the 2016 referendum.

## **4 Data Analyses**

### *Data and Methodology*

Analyses were conducted using Wave 8 of the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), commonly known as Understanding Society. Wave 8 was conducted over two years from January 2016 to December 2017. Surveys were mostly conducted online, but

households who had not participated were issued a face-to-face interviewer and finally a small amount of telephone interviewing also occurred. The individual questionnaire portion of the survey was used, which surveyed 31,166 adults aged 16 and over from 16,015 households, who were mostly selected at Wave 1 in 2009.

### *Analysis*

Wave 8 of the Understanding Society survey asks respondents how important “your ethnic or racial background” is to “your sense of who you are.” Using Wave 8 early release data, McAndrew, SurrIDGE and Begum (2017) found that seeing race and ethnicity as important to one’s sense of identity was a statistically significant predictor of voting Leave, but only among White British. Among ethnic minorities, the importance of race to self-identity was not statistically associated with either choice in the referendum (McAndrew, SurrIDGE and Begum 2017, 18). These results show that, broadly, for white British, concerns over race are likely to play into their opinions on immigration.

But, to determine with more nuance the extent to which race plays a role in anti-immigrant sentiment, a comparison of the strength of people’s concerns about race with their financial concerns was made through a series of different models and analyses.

In order to compare racial and economic attitudes, permutations of two variables were used. The first was the importance of skin color to one’s identity, which was recoded into a binary variable (important/not important). The second variable was satisfaction with income, which was also recoded into ‘satisfied’ and ‘not satisfied.’ Subsets of people who satisfied different permutations of these two variables were tested for their mean Leave vote proportion.

The first question keeps income satisfaction constant: do people who are satisfied with their income and think skin color is important vote in the same way as those who are also satisfied with their income but do **not** think race was important? The first is a key group as they are likely to have less economic concerns, but worry about racial identity. The latter group is likely to be also economically stable but more ‘color-blind.’ If race were not an important factor in the leave vote, we could expect the two groups to vote in the same way. From the first race-conscious group, 45.0 percent voted Leave, while 39.7 percent voted Leave from the non-race-concerned group. This is a statistically significant difference ( $p$ -value  $< 10^{-10}$ ), indicating that among people who were satisfied with their income, those that thought their race was an important part of their identity were more likely to vote Leave.

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#### **People who are satisfied with income**

	<b>Race is important</b>	<b>Race is not important</b>
<b>Leave</b>	45.0%	39.7%
<b>Remain</b>	55.0%	60.3%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%

*Table 1: Of those that are satisfied with their income, the Leave vote proportion differs according to attitudes on race.  $p$ -value for difference of means for Leave vote:  $6.66 * 10^{-15}$*

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The second question keeps racial attitudes constant: is the first group (satisfied with income and race-conscious) less likely to vote Leave than those that are also race-conscious but **dissatisfied** with their income? If race were not an important factor in the leave vote, we could expect the first group to be less likely to vote Leave as they are more satisfied with their financial state. A difference-of-means test found that the two groups do in fact vote

differently to a statistically significant degree ( $p\text{-value} = 1.66 * 10^{-5}$ ). As stated above, 45.0 percent of the first group voted Leave, while 49.4 percent of the economically dissatisfied group did, when keeping racial attitudes constant. This indicates that among people who are racially-conscious, economic evaluations are still significant for the referendum vote.

A logistic regression was also modelled to substantiate these difference-of-means tests. The regression confirmed that when controlling for income satisfaction, the variable that measured the importance of race was a statistically significant predictor of the Leave vote ( $p\text{-value} = 0.005$ ). The regression also found that income satisfaction was a powerful predictor of the Leave vote.

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	<b>Voting Leave</b>
Importance of race	0.21834 ***
(standard error)	(0.03523)
Income dissatisfaction	0.17719 ***
(standard error)	(0.04011)

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**Table 2:** Results of logistic regression analysis.

*Importance of race: 1 = important, 0 = not important*

*Income dissatisfaction: 1 = dissatisfied, 0 = satisfied*

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The next analysis tests the role of race within the Brexit debates in a different way. Under the null hypothesis, if race played no role, those that are dissatisfied with the economy should vote in the same way regardless of their concerns with skin color. Dissatisfaction with the economy is measured using three variables available in the Understanding Society dataset: income dissatisfaction, unemployment and lack of job security in the next 12 months. These variables were each further subset into two groups: those that thought race was important and those that did not. Since the race question is the only ‘treatment’ variable, if the Leave vote proportion differed between race-conscious and non-race-conscious groups of economically dissatisfied people, then the null hypothesis can be rejected.

The first test on people who were dissatisfied with their income found that there was a statistically significant difference between the mean Leave vote proportion for those that thought race was important and those that did not. This indicates that for those dissatisfied with their income, attitudes on race had an effect on likelihood to vote Leave. The second measure of economic dissatisfaction — unemployment — found similarly significant results. Of those who were unemployed, racial attitudes also made a statistically significant difference, with 54.0 percent of the race-conscious unemployed voting Leave and 47.4 percent non-race-conscious unemployed voting Leave. The third measure of economic dissatisfaction was similar: for those that thought it was likely they would lose their job within the next 12 months, racial attitudes impacted decisions to vote Leave. It is evident that across three measures of economic dissatisfaction, attitudes on race still affected the Leave vote.

## **5** Discussion

### *Limitations*

Racist attitudes are difficult to survey, and therefore survey questions do not always wholly represent true attitudes towards different racial groups. The variable in the

Understanding Society dataset that was most closely related to a respondents' potential views towards racial minorities was a question that asked how important "your ethnic or racial background" is to "your sense of who you are." This question acts as an important proxy for attitudes on race. While this merely relates to one's personal identity, placing greater importance on race generally translates into greater sensitivity to race. The assumption for the purposes of this discussion is that for white British, more value and importance in their own race, plus sensitivity to and concern for race, corresponds to a sense of superiority and/or more racist attitudes.

It is highly important to note the limitations in making such an assumption. It is possible to value one's own white race or ethnicity in Britain and not view other racial groups negatively — since the question also specifies "ethnic background," one probable example is a white Briton being proud of her Polish heritage. Additionally, for non-white British, placing importance on one's ethnic identity does not have the same implication of superiority due to their minority status, which is a limitation not accounted for in the data. However, as mentioned, McAndrew, Surridge and Begum (2017) found a statistically significant correlation between placing importance on race and voting Leave for white Britons, which intuitively adds conviction to the assumption for discussion purposes. Furthermore, ignoring the use of this question as a proxy for racism, simply taking the variable at face value (the importance people place on racial identity) yields valuable findings in itself.

Related limitations apply to the questions measuring economic concern. Similarly, these questions probe satisfaction with one's own financial circumstance. As there were no questions on evaluations of the national economy, the questions used were: whether a respondent was satisfied with her income, whether she was unemployed, and a self-evaluation of likelihood to lose her job in the next 12 months. These three different variables were used to build a more robust model of national economic dissatisfaction. It is important to note that personal satisfaction does not always translate into national, and vice-versa. Nevertheless, how attitudes towards race vary by economic status in itself is revealing and worthwhile to discuss.

With these limitations addressed, the discussion of results should be taken in a broad sense, indicative of avenues of future research.

### *Economic concerns versus racism*

Regression analysis demonstrated that when income was kept constant, racism was a statistically significant predictor of the Leave vote, consistent with intuition and past literature on attitudes towards racialized immigration in Britain (Dustmann and Preston, cited in Somerville 2007, 132; Ford 2011). When respondents are subset into those that are satisfied with their income and those who are not, both groups demonstrated that evaluations of race contributed to the Leave vote.

A difference-of-means test confirmed that for respondents who were economically satisfied, racism mattered. Their attitudes toward race factor into their vote choice: if they are simultaneously racist, they are more likely to vote Leave. As the survey question was about personal financial situation, it is unknown if this group has national economic concerns. But, even so, race did play a statistically significant role in pushing respondents one way or another.

Even for those that were financially dissatisfied, the vote was not simply about economics, contrary to some elite narratives. They did not all follow the same voting patterns; their racial attitudes mattered in determining their Leave vote.

Consistent with past literature but inconsistent with contemporary elite rhetoric in the Brexit campaigns, people responded to their sociological concerns, despite efforts from some

in the Leave camp to shy away from race-baiting. A review of the Leave campaign's strategy and media coverage suggests that economics should have been more important. Granted, the analyses show that for more racist respondents, economics mattered. Those that are racist were more likely to vote Leave if they were also dissatisfied economically, and less if they were not. Keeping immigration at the fore of their campaign, Vote Leave focused on economic and cultural concerns with mass migration, sometimes twisting economic facts. The previously mentioned Bank of England report that garnered significant media attention was repeatedly used and misused. A *Telegraph* headline from December 2015 read "Mass migration driving down wages offered to British jobseekers" (Dominiczak and Spence 2015). Sir Stephen Nickell, one of the authors of the report claimed that his findings had been misrepresented and that the impact was "infinitesimally small" (Chu 2017). Conservative Member of Parliament Iain Duncan Smith said during the campaign that British wages are on average 10 percent lower because of EU immigration within the past decade. This claim was repeated by two senior figures in the campaign, including Boris Johnson (Chu 2017). Nigel Farage, outspoken former leader of UKIP, has been consistently espousing for years prior to the referendum that EU immigrants are a detriment to British jobs, saying in 2014 that there was a "massive oversupply" of foreign, unskilled labor, pushing wages of the British down (Graham 2014). Additionally, immigrants' burden on the NHS was a Leave camp favorite. Conservative MP Priti Patel said "Current levels of migration are causing unsustainable pressure on our public services and we can see that the NHS is creaking under the strain" (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017, 48). This is likely to fit with people's intuitive logic that immigrants use NHS resources without contributing to its operation. The observed media and elite influence highlight efforts from the top to rid the debates of racism, instead using economic framing as much as possible, potentially as a façade of latent racism within sects of Leave voters. The data analyses demonstrate that latent racism was in fact still a major contributing force to the Leave vote, which the campaign did not dare to publicly admit. These results bolster the argument that economic framing was effective in appeasing social desirability effects of public rhetoric, while still allowing the Leave vote to flourish through private racist motivations.

### *National identity*

Using national identity survey questions from Wave 6 and combining it with Wave 8 of the Understanding Society data, McAndrew, Surrige and Begum (2017) found that having a strong British identity — responding to the question "How important is being British to you?" with a 6 or more out of 10 — was a significant predictor of support for leaving the EU. Notably, this identity had a statistically significant association with the Leave vote for both white British and non-White British (McAndrew, Surrige and Begum 2017, 19). The fact that a strong national identity is associated with a desire to leave a supranational institution is not surprising, but the consistency among the white and non-white population is pertinent. Wanting to protect British national identity from the EU is therefore not associated with 'whiteness.' For all races, feeling British led to a desire to reject the EU, suggesting that national identity concerns within the referendum debates were not framed around race.

### *Culture*

People's evaluations of race do not necessarily suggest the same about people's attitudes towards cultural unity. Unfortunately, Wave 8 of the Understanding Society dataset's questions on attitudes towards culture were exclusively asked in the ethnic minority boost sample. Thus, there was no way to analyze this data in conjunction with the referendum vote

choice to yield an accurate picture of how concerns about cultural unity affected immigration debates in Brexit.

But, both past literature and the current narrative point to the fact that people are protective of their culture. Section two of this article reviewed literature that supported the importance of cultural identity. The 1997 British Election Study found that 71 percent of white British prefer immigrants to adapt rather than keep their customs and traditions (British Election Study, cited in Saggar 2003, 186). It is clear that many white British prefer cultural unity to pluralism. This is not necessarily based on race, but since the white population is indigenous to Britain, perhaps there is a preference for sustenance of the native culture. Therefore, there could be resistance to immigration which would upset this. Since cultural concerns are not based on race, this hypothesis is consistent with wanting to limit immigration from the EU, even if the immigrants are white, because immigrants from within Europe also pose a cultural ‘threat.’ This article demonstrated that race was an important consideration in the Leave vote, but past literature has been able to place this within debates on culture. For example, Ivarsflaten’s (2005) model showed that concerns about cultural unity had a larger impact on anti-immigration than racism.

An analysis of UKIP strategy and support affirms the importance of cultural concerns. Goodwin and Milazzo (2015) showed that public support for UKIP was partly motivated by feelings of anxiety over immigration, especially when this could threaten people’s identity and culture (Goodwin and Milazzo, cited in Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017, 64). At a UKIP conference in 2014, leader Nigel Farage said that immigration was making parts of the country “unrecognizable” and like “a foreign land.” He also later expressed during a press conference his discomfort at hearing foreign languages being spoken on a train (Sparrow 2014). In the final month of the Brexit campaign, Michael Gove and Boris Johnson, key Leave figures, promised a points-based system that would require migrants to speak English (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017, 54).

When elite influence is taken in conjunction with past British public opinion showing aversion to cultural pluralism, it is apparent that people’s evaluations of culture may have played a part within anti-immigration debates in Brexit, separate from race’s impact.

This article demonstrated that racism was a predictor of the Leave vote, but did not solve the puzzle of why there would be aversion to EU immigrants based on racism, given that the majority of these immigrants are white. A very likely explanation is that those who are sensitive to race are also sensitive to cultural unity. This article’s claim that racism is a powerful predictor does not counter the potential predictive power of a preference for cultural unity. Further research is necessary to disentangle the two.

## **6 Conclusion**

After June 2016, there has been a multitude of analyses that strived to dissect why Britain voted to leave the EU. Immigration was unanimously recognized to be the primary issue not only for the Leave campaign’s strategies, but also to voters. What caused anti-immigrant sentiment was a more complex question. The mobilization of concern over the perceived economic burden of mass migration was key, from increased job competition to a strain on welfare resources, namely the NHS. Analyses also showed strategies of cultural scaremongering to stoke public fears of cultural pluralism. There was also plenty of robust scholarship on public opinion towards immigration more generally, which also strived to compare economic concerns with sociological.

This article sought to locate race within the anti-immigration debate. It asked the question of whether anti-immigrant sentiment was motivated more by racism or concerns with the

economy in the 2016 referendum. Using new Understanding Society data from 2018, this article found that race mattered even when holding economic evaluations constant in determining individual referendum choices.

The amalgam of past literature and this article's analyses suggest that, although the British public and elites who advocated to exit the EU insisted that their campaign was not based on racism, people inherently respond to their sociological concerns when making a political determination about immigration. It is possible that many white Britons voted to curb immigration from the EU because they preferred that the UK retain its Anglo-Saxon culture — which would extend antipathy to include white EU immigrants. However, regardless of cultural attitudes, people's racism was translated through the ballot box. Brexit was not simply about perceived declining economic conditions of the country — in 2016, the United Kingdom played the race card.

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