June 2018 marks two years since the Leave campaign won the referendum on Britain’s membership of the European Union, bringing David Cameron’s tenure as Prime Minister to a sudden, catastrophic end.

Since Cameron’s resignation, his successor, Theresa May, has been working to steer a course towards “Brexit”, but it has not been smooth sailing. She has faced disagreement within the UK Parliament, and her own party, on what the future of Britain’s relationship with the EU should be. Many are entirely set against leaving, while others refuse to countenance any arrangement that would keep Britain subject to EU rules, preferring a clean (if painful) break with the past.

In March 2018, EU and UK negotiators agreed a transition deal to last 21 months after the formal time of departure, beginning at 11pm (UK time) on 29 March 2019. As with all things Brexit-related, the deal has met with concerns and complaints from all sides. But has the rancour surrounding Brexit prompted any real, lasting shifts in public attitudes?

In a special article to mark the two-year anniversary of the Brexit vote, pollsters Sir Robert Worcester, Roger Mortimore, Paul Baines and Mark Gill explain how people voted in the 2016 referendum and whether differential turnout affected the final outcome. Then, in the Q&A that follows, the authors reflect on the results of recent public opinion surveys and consider what has changed in the past 24 months.
On 23 June 2016, the British public voted on the question, “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?” In the referendum, Prime Minister David Cameron threw his full weight – and that of his government – behind the Remain vote.

The count subsequently revealed that voters rejected Cameron, rejected supporting MPs, peers, the City, large companies, academics and other experts, and rejected the European Union, by a vote of 52% to 48%. They did so, too, on an impressive 72.2% turnout.

Age and social class splits the vote
The Brexit question divided the British public in unusual ways, cutting across normal party divisions that operate in general elections. The young (18–44) and affluent (ABC1) mostly voted for Britain to remain; older (45+) and poorer (C2DE) voters, usually on different political sides, joined forces to support Leave and lend it a narrow majority (see Figure 1).

Within an overall close result, there were some very stark differences in the voting of different groups. Younger people, aged 45 and under, voted strongly to remain in the EU, while older people voted just as strongly to get out. Women were almost evenly split, while Leave had a distinct advantage among men. Professionals and managers voted by a majority to remain, the other middle-class voters were evenly split, but working-class voters preferred to leave. Similarly, graduates voted two to one to remain, while those with lesser or no qualifications voted the other way.

Normally in British politics the Conservative Party draws support particularly from older and more middle-class groups, but in this referendum age was pointing in one direction while social class pointed in the other. The political outcome was that those who had voted Conservative at the 2015 election split about three to two for Leave, while Labour Party voters broke almost two to one for Remain. The diminished band of Liberal Democrats voted more strongly still for Remain, but even three in ten of its former supporters crossed to the Leave camp. Supporters of the pro-Brexit UK Independence Party, unsurprisingly, were close to unanimous in voting for Britain to reject the EU.

This interaction of age, class, education and political background produced at least one superficially surprising case of strange bedfellows: Leave was supported by a clear majority of those owning their homes outright and of council tenants; Remain was almost as far ahead among those with mortgages and those renting in the private sector. From a regional perspective, only in London, Northern Ireland and Scotland did a majority of the electorate support remaining within the EU (see Figure 2, page 32); in every other region of the UK, the majority voted to leave.
also less likely to be on the register in the first place. Taking account of the first shortfall, but not the second, would underestimate the real impact of younger people’s lower political participation.

Consequently, we recalculate the percentage of all resident adults who voted by relying on official population estimates to tell us how many people in each age group live in Britain (though we do not attempt to distinguish between those who were on the register but failed to vote and those who were not on the register at all). This measure is also slightly imperfect, because the resident population includes many adults who are not entitled to vote (mainly because of their nationality); but in the absence of any reliable figures on the size of the eligible population, we use it as representing the best available. On this basis, the overall referendum turnout was 66%, but it was lower among the young, among the working class and among ethnic minorities, as has been the case in British elections for many decades.

Modelling differential turnout

In the immediate aftermath of the Leave campaign victory, theories sprang up about how easily the result might have gone the other way. Many commentators seized on the strong support for Remain among young voters and combined this with their lower than average turnout to point the finger of blame squarely in their direction. But it was unfair to do so.

Younger people have always been less likely to vote than their older counterparts, at least since opinion polls started measuring turnout. However, turnout among the young was much higher than usual at the referendum, in both absolute and relative terms. At the 2015 general election, we estimated that 61% of all adults and 38% of 18–24-year-olds voted. In the 2016 referendum, it was 66% of adults and 53% of 18–24-year-olds. Instead of being barely three-fifths of the average, as it was in 2015, turnout of young voters was four-fifths of the norm in 2016. It would therefore be unreasonable to blame the young when they increased their participation to a greater degree than other age groups.

Nevertheless, turnout by the young was lower than for everybody else, and that does raise the question of whether young people might have changed the result had a greater proportion voted. But that is not the case. Even if the turnout of 18–24-year-olds had been as high as the 78% turnout of 65–74-year-olds, and assuming that all those youngsters who did not vote would have voted the same way as those who did, there still would not have been enough of them to put Remain ahead. Even if we bring the 25–34-year-olds and 35–44-year-olds into the equation – both groups had a Remain majority – and calculate what would have happened if there had been an equal turnout across all age groups, Leave still wins. The outcome of the referendum cannot be blamed on too few young voters.

It was not only in voting pattern by age that turnout in the referendum was unusual. As turnout was higher than at any general election since 1992, it must have included a good many people who have not been in the recent habit of voting. What is more, there seems to have been a particularly marked improvement in turnout among working-class voters with no qualifications, a group who tend to be less politically engaged than most and who, in this referendum, leaned towards Leave.

Perhaps, instead of young people, it was the first-time and occasional voters who swung the referendum for Leave? Our view is that it was not. Of those who were old enough to vote in 2015 but said they had not done so, we estimate that 45% voted in the referendum – not bad, all things considered, but as they split only 58–42 in favour of Leave, this was insufficient to have made a decisive difference to the result.

What about London? The capital had the strongest support for Remain of any region apart from Scotland, but only 56% of adult Londoners voted, compared to 66% of adults in the UK as a whole. Would it have made any difference if more people in London had gone to the polls? The answer is no, not even close. If turnout in London had been 66% instead of 56%, the national Remain vote would have been 48.3% instead of 48.1%. The turnout figures we discuss here are the proportion of the total 18+ population who voted; but London has far more foreign residents than any other region, and foreign residents were not entitled to vote in the referendum in any case.

Final remarks

The 2016 referendum result was unique in British politics for the ways in which diverse groups of the public voted across normal partisan lines. It was also unique in bringing a larger number of non-voters back to the voting fold, whereas the turnout trend had only been inching up in general elections since a historic low of 59.4% in 2001.

The result was not decided by certain groups failing to show up at the polls. Rather, Leave was victorious because it was clear, well before the campaign started, that the outcome was not a foregone conclusion – and, during the course of the referendum campaign, it was Leave, rather than Remain, that persuaded more voters to back it at the ballot box.
Where are we now?

Have voter attitudes to Brexit shifted since the referendum? Opinions have changed very little. There is limited evidence that there may have been a very small shift against Brexit, but it still leaves the two sides too close to call. Since the referendum, YouGov has regularly tracked answers to the question, “In hindsight, do you think Britain was right or wrong to vote to leave the European Union?”. It has found very limited movement. In its poll for 26–27 March 2018, 45% of respondents thought Britain was wrong to leave the EU and 42% thought it was right; in March 2017, the results were 42% wrong, 44% right. Meanwhile, several companies have been polling on how people would vote now if there were another Remain/Leave referendum: very few people say they have changed their minds in either direction, and most of those polls have found that the result would still be too close to call. In their most recent polls, YouGov and ComRes found Remain a little ahead, but ORB and ComRes had Leave slightly in the lead.

We have had a year of Brexit negotiations so far, with a post-Brexit transition deal agreed in March. This deal has proved to be somewhat divisive, at least in Parliament. But what has been the response of voters, and how do they rate Prime Minister Theresa May’s handling of the negotiations? May’s ratings have recently improved on handling Brexit. According to Ipsos MORI’s March 2018 poll, 43% now say she is doing a good job, compared to 35% in July 2017, and 50% say she is doing a bad job (compared to 55% in July 2017). Still, this contrasts considerably with her ratings in December 2016, when 51% thought she was doing a good job and 35% thought she was doing a bad job.

The transition deal is by no means the end of the negotiations, and there are still many difficult issues to work through. Are voters confident of the UK securing a good outcome post Brexit? And does that confidence vary by whether a person voted Leave or Remain? According to a poll by Survation for the Daily Record shortly after the June 2017 UK general election, the majority (once don’t knows are removed) thought the government was handling the negotiations badly – but more Leave voters than Remain voters agreed with that statement (57% versus 23%). Interestingly, a Lord Ashcroft poll from before the election asked voters to indicate on a numbered scale, from no confidence (0) to total confidence (100), how they felt about the likelihood of a good outcome in the negotiations; the average mark was 52. In November 2017, Lord Ashcroft’s polling found that voters were losing confidence, with an average score of 42 (with Remainers moving from 38 to 30 and Leavers from 66 to 54). By April 2018, this position had reversed somewhat, with 52% of voters thinking May and her team would negotiate a good deal (and Remainers had moved back to 39% and Leavers to 66%).

Is there any appetite for a second referendum, or do you expect that to be contingent on the outcome of Brexit talks? To some extent, the answer depends on exactly how the question is asked. There is certainly more support for a vote once the final proposed terms of Brexit are known than there is for a vote before that to try to stop Brexit in its tracks. In 2018, YouGov has regularly asked, “Do you think there should be a second referendum to accept or reject the terms of Britain’s exit from the EU once they have been agreed?” It has found “should not” ahead each time. But when ICM asked, “To what extent do you agree or disagree [that] the public should have the chance to take a final decision on whether or not to leave the EU in another referendum when the outcome of the negotiation is known?”, 47% agreed and only 34% disagreed. Ultimately, attitudes towards another referendum will surely be influenced by the outcome of the talks: a deal perceived by the electorate as “fair” and “good for Britain” is much less likely to need to be voted on than a deal perceived as “unfair” and “bad for Britain”. Also, few of those in favour of a second referendum at the moment are Leave supporters, so a new vote on the terms of the deal might well be seen by Leavers as an attempt to block Brexit and not as a legitimate further step in the democratic process.

Has there been any noticeable impact on attitudes to Brexit following allegations of inappropriate use of social media data and the micro-targeting of ads during the referendum campaign? There have been no signs of any significant movement in attitudes to Brexit since the allegations surfaced, but this may be because many voters on both sides were already convinced that their opponents were playing dirty. In a YouGov poll at the end of March 2018, 44% of respondents thought the Leave campaign had cheated or broken the rules, and 32% thought Remain had done the same (with those figures including 24% who thought both sides had cheated); only 13% thought both sides had largely followed the rules. This fits naturally with attitudes during the referendum, when many voters believed that the other side was lying in its campaigning. The probable impact of the allegations will be to deepen the belief of many Remain supporters that they were beaten unfairly, while failing to convince Leave supporters that their votes were improperly swayed and perhaps instead confirming their fears that the political establishment is looking for any excuse to ignore the result of the referendum.