Don’t count on young people to undo Brexit

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April 11, 2019

The Takeaway:

Underrepresenting disengaged young people in 2016 led to the incorrect assumption that more young people would vote and Remain would win comfortably. New 2019 RIWI data signals the risk of young people not voting has only gone down slightly, with no dramatic change in their views and engagement despite almost three years of Brexit uncertainty. A Remain win in a Brexit 2.0 vote would not be the certainty that traditional polls suggest.

Summary:

- **RIWI data correctly anticipated the risk that Britain’s under-40s were unlikely to vote in the 2016 referendum, the critical factor that decided the Brexit outcome and a key reason why traditional polls failed to predict that outcome.**
- **If we fail to adequately represent disengaged young people in 2019, we might assume that support for Remain has increased among young people who will vote, and Remain would therefore win comfortably, which is what traditional polls expect.**
- **This is a risky assumption: By factoring in the views of disengaged populations, RIWI data signals that the risk of under-40s not voting has only gone down slightly.**
- **In a Brexit 2.0, Remain would need to overcome the 1.3 million gap between Leave and Remain in the 2016 vote. RIWI data shows that only 1 million more under-40s are likely to show up and vote Remain today than in 2016, and so Remain would still have reason to worry.**

Looming over the current Brexit chaos is the assumption by many, now that the British public presumably better understands what a Brexit Leave vote entails, that the British people must certainly realize that Brexit was a mistake and overwhelmingly oppose it. Is this assumption correct?

Traditional polling in advance of the 2016 Brexit referendum predicted that the British people would vote to remain in the European Union. Yet 52 percent voted to leave, a shock to most of the UK and to the global community.

The critical factor was younger people. Under-40s tended to support Remain, but many of them did not vote, and so not enough under-40s came out to overcome the older voter tendency to vote Leave.

While the traditional polls did sample views of younger people, when they did they largely captured the views of those who tended to be more interested in politics, who participated in surveys frequently, and were likely to vote. As a result, they did not sufficiently capture the views of young non-voters and failed to anticipate the result.[1]

By contrast, an academic analysis of RIWI data gathered in real-time in the weeks before the Brexit vote showed that there was a strong risk that voters 40 and under would not come out to vote. Pointing to RIWI data in the lead-up to the vote, Jonathan Mellon and Christopher Prosser of the University of Manchester concluded the day prior to the vote that the Remain camp had reason to worry, since a full half of those aged 18-40 were not likely to vote, and they were most likely to vote to remain in the EU.

RIWI's method accesses a much larger, more diverse set of voices than are typically captured in surveys or on social media. The technology randomly engages anyone accessing the Internet in the UK (and globally), drawing from a vastly larger and randomly intercepted set of potential respondents than other methods. RIWI was therefore able to capture the views of disengaged voters who do not typically answer surveys. Mellon and Prosser note that phone polls and Internet panels underrepresent politically disengaged young people in their samples. They also find that the RIWI method is effective at naturally contacting politically disengaged young people compared with standard methodologies.

Have young people become more engaged now that they see the complications and uncertainties Brexit raises? As part of RIWI's continuous daily UK tracking, RIWI gathered observations from approximately 900 randomly engaged British people (including non-habitual survey takers) aged 18-40 from March 21 to April 11 to see where Britain's young people stand today. We used the same questions asked in the 2016 study, adjusted to refer to a new referendum, to ensure the data are comparable. Whether a second referendum does or does not take place, this provides a proxy for whether the public's attitudes and engagement on Brexit have changed.

Engagement and support for Remain among 18-40 year olds

	2016[2]	**2019**
Intend to vote Remain (%)	**62**	**65**
Likely to vote (%)	**51**[3]	**53**

Source: RIWI data

[1] One of the key causes of the polling miss of the 2015 British general election was also the inability to achieve representative samples of young people. Similarly, polling data suggesting incorrectly that there was a "youthquake" of previously disengaged young voters voting Labour in the 2017 election was likely due to the tendency for those who vote to be more likely to participate in traditional surveys.

[2] The government did not collect youth turnout data for the Brexit vote, so we use RIWI data on voter intentions on Brexit collected from March 11-June 9, 2016, in advance of the Brexit referendum.

[3] We used RIWI data on voter intentions for both 2016 and 2019 for comparable results.

While a greater share of young people in the UK would vote to remain in the EU in a second referendum, we find that young people are still uninterested in voting. The data signal voter "stickiness" - those that vote are more likely to vote in subsequent elections and those that do not vote will continue to abstain.

Prior to the 2016 referendum, RIWI data showed that the Remain camp had reason to worry about the result of the referendum. There was a high risk that there would not be enough youth voting for Remain to counterbalance older people voting for Leave. We now examine whether this risk would exist in a second referendum:

Potential lead for Remain among 18-40 year olds

	2016	2019
Number of 18-40 year olds (UK's Office for National Statistics, 2015 and 2017)	19 million	20 million
Intend to vote Remain (%)	62	65
Lead for Remain among youth	4.4 million	6 million

Source: RIWI data

Of the 20 million youth in the UK today, we calculate that, based on RIWI voter intentions, 13 million would vote Remain in a new referendum. This implies a lead for Remain of 6 million for those under 40. However, only about half are likely to vote.

*Predicted lead for Remain among **voting** 18-40 year olds*

	2016	2019
Lead for Remain	4.4 million	6 million
Likely to vote (%)	51	53
Lead for Remain among *voting* youth	2.2 million	3.2 million

Source: RIWI data and calculations.

In 2016, a lead of 2.2 million for Remain among under-40s was not enough to outweigh Leave-supporting older voters. 2019 data show that the lead has now widened to 3.2 million. The risk to the Remain camp of a similar result has therefore decreased.

However, the 1 million difference between 2016 and 2019 is still less than the spread between Leave and Remain in the 2016 referendum (1.3 million). Therefore the result of a second referendum would be very tight. There is still a risk that engaged older voters supporting Leave

could again outnumber the engaged younger voters supporting remain (unless many older voters who voted to leave the UK switch their votes to Remain, an unlikely prospect).

Recent traditional polling data supports Remain comfortably winning in a second referendum. The British Social Attitudes Survey reports 55 percent of Britons would vote for Remain, YouGov reports 53 percent, and Deltapoll reports 54 percent. These polls suggest that either about 4 million unengaged voters have entered the Remain camp or 2 million Leave supporters have switched sides, or more likely a combination of both. *However, the polling miss of the 2016 referendum in combination with RIWI's signal of low turnout for under-40s suggests that a Remain win is not a certainty.*

In sum, underrepresenting younger non-voters in 2016 led to the incorrect assumption that young people would vote and Remain would win comfortably. If we fail to adequately represent younger non-voters in 2019, we might assume that support for Remain has increased further among young people who are likely to vote and Remain would therefore win comfortably. But this is a risky assumption: by factoring in the views of disengaged populations, RIWI data signals that the risk of under-40s not voting has only gone down slightly. So the risk to Remain would be reduced, but it is still there. We do not see the dramatic change in the views and engagement of younger people that many expect after almost three years of Brexit uncertainty.

RIWI continues to track views on Brexit and daily UK confidence amidst the Brexit roller coaster, as well as many other issues globally for which the inclusion of disengaged young people results in more reliable, cleaner data signals. To learn more about this patented system, RIWI technology or to add questions to global or UK tracking, please contact:

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RIWI's Approach to Predictive Work

RIWI signals differ from conventional approaches in several key ways, including:

1. RIWI respondents come from a broad and truly random set of the population, and go far beyond those who typically answer surveys or those in urban centres. Over a third of RIWI Global predictors say they have never answered a survey of any kind. This results in a large number of observations from young people, and includes both urban and rural respondents.

2. Anyone on the Internet has a chance of being randomly engaged as a RIWI predictor, enlarging the potential respondent base far beyond traditional surveys or social media listening and leading to a cleaner, more reliable signal. The result is data representative of the Web-using population without requiring quotas for certain age groups or other manipulation. In this analysis, since the UK Web-using population is 95 percent of the population, RIWI data comes close to representing the general population. Still, it is slightly skewed to a younger population and so we adjust by age and gender using data from the latest UK census to get results generalizable to the under-40 population.

3. RIWI predictors remain anonymous and RIWI does not collect any personally identifiable data, allowing predictors to provide their views freely and securely, reducing social desirability bias.

4. RIWI respondents are not incentivized in any way (i.e., with cash or coupons).

5. RIWI technology works in all countries, in real-time, and on a continuous basis, in contrast to snapshot data offered by traditional polls.

For more information about RIWI's data quality, privacy, and security certifications and features, see here.