

Europe – the Final Countdown in the UK

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Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union? By Friday morning, we will know the verdict of the British people. The opinion polls suggest that the outcome of Thursday's referendum is on a knife-edge. Last week, support for Leave appeared to be in the ascendency. Of the nine polls published between 13 and 16 June, all but two had Leave ahead. Moreover, analysis by Professor John Curtice suggested that there had been a general trend towards Leave since the beginning of the short campaign at the end of May. But, only one of the four polls published since last Thursday gave Leave the lead, suggesting perhaps that the Remain camp has recovered some ground.

Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?

	% Remain	% Leave	% DK	Method
19 June (YouGov)	42	44	13	Internet
18 June (Survation)	45	42	13	Phone
17 June (Opinium)	44	44	12	Internet
17 June (YouGov)	44	43	13	Internet
16 June (YouGov)	42	44	14	Internet
15 June (Survation)	42	45	13	Phone
15 June (BMG Research)	41	51	9	Internet
15 June (BMG Research)	46	43	11	Phone
14 June (Ipsos-Mori)	43	49	8	Phone
13 June (ICM)	44	49	7	Internet
13 June (ICM)	45	50	6	Phone
13 June (ComRes)	46	45	9	Phone
13 June (TNS)	40	47	13	Internet

Source: <http://whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/should-the-united-kingdom-remain-a-member-of-the-eu-or-leave-the-eu/>

Two other features of these polls merit discussion. First, is the large proportion of electors who still declare they don't know how they will vote. We don't know why so many voters remain undecided, and we can't be sure if they will turn out to vote – opinion polls suggest they are proportionately less likely to have voted in previous elections, and less likely to vote this week. But among those who do, past experience suggests the possibility of at least a small status quo bias which could boost the Remain vote. Second, the method of polling may affect the picture they paint. During the weeks and months leading to the referendum, polls conducted online have generally shown a higher level of support for Leave than do polls conducted by telephone. This is illustrated by the results of the 15 June polls carried out by BMG Research on the same day using these methods. While BMG's internet poll gave Leave a 10 point lead, its phone poll suggested a 3 point lead for Remain. But the effect is not always evident. For example, the ICM polls on 13 June – one conducted online and the other by telephone – each gave Leave a 5 point advantage. Again, we can't know in advance

whether online or telephone polls are more accurate until we see the result of the only poll that matters on Friday morning.

At time of writing, there are a number of polls still to come which have been conducted in the last few days. These are critical because they should be able to capture the effects – if any – of two events last Thursday, which could prove to be defining moments in this campaign. The brutal murder of Labour MP Jo Cox at the hands of what appears to be a man motivated by right-wing extremism sent shockwaves across the UK and beyond. Jo Cox was pro-Remain and, more visibly, she championed the plight of Syrian refugees and civilians. Some have expressed concern that the febrile and bitter atmosphere of the referendum campaign, and the portrayal of immigration as out of control by the Leave campaign, has fostered a climate of intolerance which was at least a backdrop to this tragedy. On the same day, UKIP leader Nigel Farage unveiled a campaign poster, emblazoned with the headline ‘Breaking Point’, depicting a queue of refugees crossing the border into Europe. The poster was not endorsed by the official Leave campaign and was widely criticised by both sides. The Chancellor George Osborne suggested it was reminiscent of Nazi propaganda. It is too early to determine whether these two concurrent episodes have hurt the Leave campaign, but they certainly won’t have helped.

One other factor that could be crucial is voter turnout. As we’d expect in a close contest on an issue viewed with considerable importance, all opinion polls suggest that turnout will be high. But even in the context of high overall participation, differential turnout between different demographic groups can affect the result, as we saw in the Scottish independence referendum. Here, though, there are countervailing influences at play. We know, for example, that older people are more likely to vote Leave *and* more likely cast their ballot than younger voters. Conversely, more affluent, well-educated voters are more likely to vote Remain *and* more likely to vote than are working class voters with less educational qualifications. More worryingly for the Remain side, some polls suggest that Leave voters appear disproportionately more motivated to cast their ballots on Thursday. The YouGov survey of 19 June found that 79% of those supporting Remain were absolutely certain to vote or had already voted by post, compared to 84% of Leave supporters. The Opinium poll of 17 June found an even bigger gap between Remain and Leave supporters’ certainty to vote (76% and 84% respectively), although Survation reported no such gap – perhaps another differential effect of internet and phone polling.

Whatever the outcome on Friday, one thing seems clear. The debate over the UK’s relationship with the EU will continue. What began as an attempt to resolve an issue which has divided the Conservative Party for decades has served only to expose divisions, not just within that party but within the country.. Even if the result of the referendum produces a clear victory for Remain - which is far from certain - it is unlikely to be clear enough to tame debate over the UK’s European future.

Nicola McEwen is Professor of Territorial Politics at the University of Edinburgh and Associate Director of the Centre on Constitutional Change. She is a guest on this blog.