

Not just “the left behind”? Exploring the effects of subjective social status on Brexit-related preferences

Authors: Lindsay Richards, Anthony Heath, and Noah Carl

Corresponding author: Lindsay Richards, Sociology department, 42-43 Park End Street, Oxford, OX1 1JD. **Email:** Lindsay.richards@sociology.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

It has recently been argued that subjective status – the way individuals feel about their worth in society – deserves greater prominence in accounts of political preferences including anti-immigration sentiment and Brexit. In this paper, we give a detailed empirical account of the relationship between Subjective Social Status (SSS) and Brexit-related preferences, using data collected online in the autumn of 2017 (N = 3,600). We find limited evidence that ‘objective’ dimensions of status translate into preferences via SSS. Rather, most of the effect of education and social class on political preferences is direct (or via another unmeasured mechanism). We propose that SSS has a role in norm compliance and demonstrate that high SSS among the university-educated and among those with high-status social ties is associated with a *higher* probability of voting leave in the referendum, as well as higher levels of anti-immigrant sentiment. Thus, we conclude that if SSS has a role in shaping populist preferences, it is more complex than has been assumed. It exerts an effect in the opposite direction to the expected one among the privileged, and does not appear to explain the preferences of the ‘left behind’.

Key words: Brexit; subjective social status; socio-economic status; social ties; attitudes to immigration

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1. Introduction

Is Brexit the result of deep-seated inequalities in the UK? This is one prevailing explanation for why the British public voted for the UK to leave the European Union. This body of scholarship argues that the leave vote came from those with nothing to lose, having been ‘left behind’ by social change and ignored by political elites (e.g. Inglehart and Norris 2016; Hobolt 2016; Goodwin and Heath 2016). The ‘left behind’ argument began as an economic one. A number of early studies seeking to explain the EU Referendum outcome showed that the leave vote was more common among people living in economically deprived areas, and among those with low incomes and in working class occupations (Goodwin and Heath 2016; Hobolt 2016). Others, however, have made the distinction between economic loss and symbolic loss (Clarke and Newman 2017), and a growing number of studies have challenged the account of leave voters as economically left behind, emphasising instead the cultural factors that appear to have greater explanatory power (Curtice 2016; Chan et al. 2017). These cultural factors include other attitudes, particularly attitudes to immigration (e.g. Inglehart and Norris 2016; Hobolt 2016).

In a recent article on ‘the politics of status’, Gidron and Hall (2017) suggested that attempts to unravel the mystery of culture *or* economics miss the point: economic under-privilege is accompanied by being culturally-distant from the mainstream. This economic and cultural distance, they argue, manifests as low social status - defined as ‘the level of social respect or esteem people believe is accorded them within the social order’ (p. S61) - which in turn shapes political choices.

In addition to the mixed evidence, a weakness of the left behind argument is that it does not, on its own, fit well with patterns of social attitudes and change in Britain. For example, recent analyses of old data have revealed that there is nothing new in the socio-demographic divisions in attitudes towards the EU and immigration in Britain (Heath 2018), and that the majority of leave voters came from the middle classes, not the working class (Dorling 2016). Gidron and Hall (2017) argue that attention to subjective status can address this weakness. Subjective social status offers an alternative view into the psychosocial processes that motivate populist preferences.

In this paper we further explore the role of perceived social status by considering the psychosocial processes linking status to political preferences. We examine the role of subjectively-felt social status - one’s perceived standing in the social world - on political preferences in Britain, making use of new data collected online in the autumn of 2017. We explore the role of social ties and socio-economic status as the normative context in which political decisions are made, and find that the role of subjective status is contingent upon social context.

2. Theoretical Background

Subjective Social Status (SSS from hereon in) is a concept arising from Weberian sociology. It is based on the relations of inferiority, superiority and equality arising from social positions, and here considered as an evaluative belief, held by an individual, of the honour, esteem or deference that he/ she obtains from the social actors around (Ridgeway 2014; Chan and Goldthorpe 2007). While perceived social standing is interwoven with the distribution of resources in society to some extent (Ridgeway, 2014), it is also unlikely that status divisions depend entirely on material resources (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007).

In terms of its relationship to ‘objective’ dimensions of status, SSS may serve a summative function, being a cognitive total of status dimensions such as occupation, education and income (Andersson 2015)¹. Gest (2016) explains a process whereby ‘social status integrates overlapping divisions and *converts* them into narratives that structure people’s experiences in the market, society and political sphere’ (148, emphasis added), which is to say that SSS mediates the relationship between objective status and political preferences. On the other hand, the Weberian perspective highlights the discrete nature of the status dimension which presumably arises from non-economic sources of worth that might include beauty, intelligence, race, gender, and so forth (Ridgeway, 2014; Anderson et al. 2015). In empirical studies, SSS is found to correlate with social class, education and income, but also with other dimensions of social standing including sex and ethnicity (Lindeman and Saar, 2014).

¹ In this paper, we pit subjectively felt status against ‘objective’ socioeconomic status, though we accept that SSS may refer to a set of cultural values that might be seen as objective. Our labelling of objective and subjective is a cognitive shortcut for the concepts rather than a definitive claim.

The arguments put forward by Gidron and Hall (2017) and Gest (2016) suggest that lower SSS fosters intense concerns about defending social boundaries, and therefore by extension greater hostility to immigrants, and a preference for the UK to leave the European Union. Populist parties, including the Brexit campaign, apparently offer hope for an improvement in social status by promoting symbolic representations that enhance the status of the group to which the individual belongs (Gidron and Hall 2017). These authors find that, after controlling for objective indicators of status, lower SSS is associated with a significantly higher chance of supporting one of the right wing political parties in Europe.

Subjective class identification

There is, separate from studies of SSS, a literature on subjective class identification and political preferences (e.g. D'Hooge et al. 2018). It argues, on the basis of Marxist and Durkheimian theory, that material class position (which we label here as 'objective') can only have consequences for political preferences if the individual is subjectively aware of their class position (D'Hooge et al. 2018). However, subjective social status, while related, diverges from this idea in important ways. First, subjective class is part of a social identity, whereas SSS is not. One would not expect individuals to be aware of the SSS that others hold; rather, it is internal and private and unlikely to be the basis of homophily. Second, it is more than possible in the British context that subjective class and SSS pull in opposite directions. For example, one might feel particularly high in social standing on that basis of 'making it against the odds' or in spite of working class origins. The literature on subjective class emphasises the degree to which objective and subjective positions are concordant, whereas the theory underlying SSS emphasises that there are many other sources of status.

The normative context: Social ties, social class and compliance

Many status-based accounts of the Brexit voter have failed to account for social ties and the normative context of political preferences (notable exceptions include McAndrew et al. 2017 and Chan et al. 2017). Political preferences and behaviours are shaped by our social contexts which provide a set of norms and information flows which, in turn, inform political decision-making (Fieldhouse and Cutts 2016).

Social ties play a role in the formation of political preferences, attitudes and voting intentions in at least two ways. In the first, the desire to take an informed position brings about informational and accuracy-seeking motivations and thus an exchange of information. We assume that the information available within the social network varies by the status position of the ties, a point which relates to the second way in which networks matter: *normative influence*. The social actor embedded in a network will have normative concerns to covet a favourable evaluation of the self and to ensure satisfactory relations within the social network (Wood 2000). Normative concerns and conformity are likely to be greater among those with low perceived social status for whom it may be more important to seek social approval with the expectation of being accepted by high-status members of the group (Merton 1968), and to enhance self-esteem (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004).

Higher SSS also brings about heightened status awareness and fear of 'falling down the ladder' (Loughnan et al. 2011), and perhaps therefore linked with a tendency to make political choices on the basis of personal morale, rather than for the public or moral good (Piff et al. 2012). In studies conducted in the psychology lab, it has been shown that elevated rank brings about

greater freedom and independence and, as a result, more ‘self-focused social cognitive tendencies’ (Piff et al. 2012, p. 4086).

We interpret, in this paper, socio-economic position in terms of class or education as indicative of the wider social context. Symbolic interaction theory posits that opinions of others form the major source of the self (Goffman 1959; Blumer 1969). Thus the social context, the reference group, forms a central component of decision-making and opinion. Normative reference groups can be distinguished from comparative reference groups. In normative reference groups, norms and values are imitated in anticipation of being accepted into the group, while comparative reference groups are used for appraising achievement (Merton 1968). In the context of this paper, the crux of reference group theory is that SSS may be low even among those in high SES positions as they benchmark their social standing against their own group within their own stratum of society. It follows that meanings and political choices are contingent upon both subjective and objective dimensions of status (cf. Chan and Goldthorpe 2007).

3. Hypotheses

In this article we explore preferences for the UK to leave or stay in the EU, but we expand our focus to cover preferences for immigration into the UK. Immigration preferences are closely linked with Brexit preferences as clearly evidenced with data from the British Election Survey (Hobolt 2016). We posit three main hypotheses which are all intended to get at the mechanisms of effect. First, we hypothesise that SSS functions as a separate dimension to economic standing which exerts a separate and independent effect on preferences. Second, as made explicit in scholarship on SSS (e.g. Gest 2016), we hypothesise that SSS serves a mediating role between objective dimension of status such as educational attainment or occupational class and preferences.

Finally, we hypothesise that the influence of SSS is uneven across groups in society due to normative concerns and information flows. Following symbolic interaction theory, we consider culture and social ties as social situations that transform meanings (Blumer 1969) and suppose that group life involves social interaction and information flows between group members. Specifically, we expect that the socially desirable view varies by the status-context with normative preferences for Remain and being open to immigration among those with high-status social ties, and preferences for Leave and restrictive views on immigration among those with low-status social ties. As low-SSS individuals will be more likely to adhere to the group norm, and high-SSS individuals will be more likely to eschew group norms, the directional ‘pull’ of SSS will depend upon the context. The sub-hypotheses are set out in grid form in Table 1. Within the context of high objective status, for example, we expect higher levels of pro-remain and pro-immigration attitudes among those with low SSS than those with high SSS.

Table 1 Expectations for the interaction of subjective and objective dimensions of status

		SUBJECTIVE STATUS	
		High	Low
OBJECTIVE STATUS	High	Norm = Remain/ pro-immigration Adherence to norm = low	Norm = Remain/ pro-immigration Adherence to norm = high
	Low	Norm = Leave/ anti-immigration Adherence to norm = low	Norm = Leave/ anti-immigration Adherence to norm = high

4. Data and variables

We collected primary data as part of an ESRC-funded project, as part of a wider project to understand Brexit-related attitudes. The data² were collected online by fieldwork agent Kantar Public in October and November 2017. Respondents were recruited from an access panel using quota sampling with efforts made to get adequate subsamples of ‘hard-to-reach’ sections of the population, which in this case included younger people and people in Northern Ireland. We apply post-stratification weighting based on sex, working status, region, education, vote choice in the 2016 referendum, and vote choice in the General Election of 2017. Elsewhere (Carl 2017a; Carl 2017b) we have undertaken validation and benchmarking and found that the data perform well in comparison to random probability samples. One known bias is that our respondents are more interested in politics than average, and this is something we examine in robustness checks. The sample size is 3,600.

Variables

Brexit preferences

Support for Leave versus Remain was measured by asking respondents which way they voted in the referendum. As a robustness check, we modify this variable with updated preferences obtained by asking if respondents would vote the same way if there was another referendum.

Anti-immigration sentiment

Respondents were asked: to what extent do you think the UK should allow people from the following countries to come and live here? This was asked for the following six countries: Australia, France, Poland, Romania, Pakistan and Nigeria. The answer options are on a 4-point scale 0 (‘allow none’), 1 (‘allow a few’), 2 (‘allow some’), or 3 (‘allow many’). From these six items, using latent factor analysis, we derive a single score for general anti-immigrant sentiment.

Socio-economic status (SES)

There are challenges to adequately measure socio-economic status; we use occupational class and education but acknowledge that these are just two choices from an array of possible measures. We include income as a robustness check. We use a measure of self-reported occupational class with four categories: other/ never worked, semi-routine and routine occupations, intermediate occupations, and professional/ managerial. Highest educational qualifications are recoded into five categories (from low to high): None/ other, GSCE or equivalent, A-level or equivalent, Higher education, and Degree or higher degree. We use the

² The data will be deposited with the UK Data Service in 2021 and will be publicly available.

term Socio-Economic Status (SES), in contrast to SSS, to discuss in general terms the various dimensions of objective status.

Network SES: Position Generator

The 'position generator' is a survey instrument designed to measure the occupational class positions of ego's reported social ties which we treat here as a dimension of objective status. Respondents indicated if they knew anyone in eleven different occupations each designed to represent a particular location in terms of social class, and each having a substantial representation in the British workforce. The eleven different occupations are as follows: 1. Secretary/ 2. Solicitor/ 3. Clerical officer in national or local government/ 4. Bus or coach driver/ 5. Bank or building society manager/ 6. Factory worker/ 7. University/college lecturer/ 8. Electrician/ 9. Nurse/ 10. Sales or shop assistant/ 11. Postal worker

To interpret these variables, each occupation is assigned a CAMSIS score (Britain, males only, 2001), where higher scores reflecting positions of greater advantage along the stratification dimension (Lambert and Prandy 2013). CAMSIS scores are scaled to cover the range 1-99 with a mean of 50. This score is mean-centred for the statistical analysis thereby taking a mean of zero. For those not knowing a person in any one of these eleven occupations, a dummy variable was generated.

Subjective social status

We make use of the MacArthur scale of social status, a validated measure which has been regularly applied in research on political preferences. The question wording is as follows: *There are people who tend to be towards the top of our society and people who tend to be towards the bottom. Where would you place yourself on this scale nowadays? 0-10.* Thus, we understand status as not necessarily rooted in the economic domain though socioeconomic factors are likely to be one source of SSS as we conceptualise it; individuals will be drawing on economic status as well as other areas of lived experiences of social interaction and status such as ethnicity. Our measure of the SES of social networks (above), as separate to SSS, counters Chan and Goldthorpe's (2007) argument that SSS should be captured by social interaction distance measures. We prefer the direct subjective scale of SSS for the reason that it is less dependent on occupation, which we expect to be one element of, but not the single most important dimension of, SSS. It has been argued that SSS simply 'mops up' measurement error of SES, but several studies have failed to explain the SSS influence away after best efforts (e.g. Präg 2020). Our measure of SSS can be expected to pick up on perceived self-worth (Ridgeway 2014) as well as deference (cf. Freeland and Hoey 2018). As several studies have found a curvilinear effect of SSS (e.g. Gidron and Hall, 2017), we include a quadratic term in the regression models.

Correlations and controls

Table 2 shows the rank correlations between the subjective and objective dimensions of status. Occupational class, education and network status all have a moderate-low correlation with SSS with coefficients ranging from .22 to .28. Network occupational status is moderately correlated with occupational class and educational attainment, and to a lesser degree with SSS. It is possible that these correlations may vary by age and sex, and we control for these in the multivariate analysis, along with ethnicity and region which have been shown to correlate with Brexit preferences (e.g. Hobolt et al. 2016).

Table 2 Correlations of SES dimensions and SSS

	1	2	3	4
1. SSS	1.00			
2. Occupational class	0.279	1.00		
3. Education	0.226	0.440	1.00	
4. Occupation status of social ties	0.224	0.310	0.363	1.00

Spearman's Rank Correlations; N = 3,600; all estimates significant at $p < 0.05$

5. Analysis

Descriptive results

Tables 3 and 4 show the weighted means of Brexit support (%) and anti-immigration sentiment (factor score) for each of the four quadrants set out in Table 1. They show a strong direct effect in the direction expected of social ties and educational attainment, namely that anti-immigration sentiment and leave support are lower among the high status groups. However, there is also preliminary support for hypothesis 3 in that the effect of SSS is contingent upon objective status. Among people with no qualifications, anti-immigration sentiment and Brexit support are higher among those with low SSS. However, we see the opposite pattern among degree-holders whereby anti-immigration sentiment and Brexit support are higher among those with high SSS. We find the same pattern for those in low status networks compared to high status networks.

Table 3 Means of anti-immigration score and Brexit vote by education

		SUBJECTIVE STATUS	
		High	Low
Education	High	Anti-immigration score = -0.15 Brexit support = 39%	Anti-immigration score = -0.48 Brexit support = 31%
	Low	Anti-immigration score = 0.32 Brexit support = 62%	Anti-immigration score = 0.39 Brexit support = 72%

Anti-immigration score derived factor score, mean = 0. Low education defined as having no qualifications, high education as having a degree. Low SSS defined as scoring 4 or below, high SSS defined as scoring 8 or above. N = 3600

Table 4 Means of anti-immigration score and Brexit vote by social circle

		SUBJECTIVE STATUS	
		High	Low
Social circle	High	Anti-immigration score = -0.33 Brexit support = 44%	Anti-immigration score = -0.70 Brexit support = 31%
	Low	Anti-immigration score = 0.09 Brexit support = 48%	Anti-immigration score = 0.29 Brexit support = 60%

Anti-immigration score derived factor score, mean = 0. Social circle defined as lowest tertile and highest tertile. Low SSS defined as scoring 4 or below, high SSS defined as scoring 8 or above. N = 3600

Multivariate analysis

Table 5 shows regression models of the leave vote (logistic) and anti-immigrant sentiment (linear). Model 1 for both outcomes includes SSS and its quadratic term with just a limited set of control variables. It reveals that higher SSS is associated with lower odds of supporting Leave and lower levels of anti-immigration sentiment. In the case of anti-immigration sentiment the quadratic term is positive and statistically significant, indicating that the effect of SSS tails off at higher levels.

The two dimensions of SES are included in model 2. It is evident that, as we would expect from the literature and as demonstrated above in Tables 2 and 3, higher educational attainment is associated with a lower likelihood of voting leave and with a lower level of anti-immigration sentiment. Being in a higher occupational class is associated with lower odds of voting leave. For these naïve estimates, i.e. without interactions specified, but with objective status in the model, SSS drops to borderline statistical significance.

In model 3 we introduce the average social ties status score. The negative and significant coefficients show that the higher the status of the social ties the lower the leave vote and anti-immigration sentiment. Once the status of social ties is included in the model, the average effect of SSS all but disappears. The models including status of social ties are better fitting in terms of the Akaike Information Criterion and the R-squared of the linear model.

Table 5 Models of Leave support in the 2016 referendum and anti-immigrant sentiment

	Voted Leave			Anti-immigration score		
	Log odds/ se	Log odds/ se	Log odds/ se	b/se	b/se	b/se
Age	0.019**	0.016**	0.016**	0.008**	0.006**	0.006**
	[0.002]	[0.003]	[0.003]	[0.001]	[0.001]	[0.001]
female	-0.003	-0.011	0.003	0.069*	0.065*	0.077*
	[0.075]	[0.078]	[0.078]	[0.031]	[0.031]	[0.031]
White British	0.853**	0.682**	0.673**	0.226**	0.143**	0.128*
	[0.148]	[0.156]	[0.157]	[0.050]	[0.051]	[0.051]
Qualifications. Ref category = none						
GCSE etc		0.008	0.02		0.093	0.106
		[0.186]	[0.187]		[0.070]	[0.070]
A level etc		-0.429*	-0.401*		-0.154*	-0.122
		[0.193]	[0.193]		[0.074]	[0.073]
Other higher ed		-0.425*	-0.390		-0.12	-0.082
		[0.201]	[0.202]		[0.078]	[0.078]
Degree/ higher degree		-0.918**	-0.865**		-	-
		[0.194]	[0.195]		0.362**	0.310**
					[0.074]	[0.074]
Occupational class. Ref = Other/ never worked						
Semi-routine and routine		-0.055	-0.071		0.058	0.055
		[0.186]	[0.187]		[0.071]	[0.071]
Intermediate occupations		-0.332*	-0.328		-0.054	-0.043
		[0.168]	[0.169]		[0.066]	[0.065]
Professional/ managerial		-0.461**	-0.439*		-0.121	-0.096
		[0.178]	[0.179]		[0.070]	[0.070]
SSS	-0.192*	-0.173	-0.166	-	-0.069	-0.057
	[0.077]	[0.104]	[0.104]	0.115**	[0.039]	[0.040]
SSS squared	0.012	0.017	0.017	0.009*	0.008	0.007
	[0.008]	[0.010]	[0.010]	[0.004]	[0.004]	[0.004]
Social ties status average			-0.010*			-
			[0.005]			0.007**
No social ties			-0.174*			-
			[0.081]			0.208**
Constant	-0.725*	-0.01	0.004	-0.061	0.061	0.096
	[0.306]	[0.421]	[0.424]	[0.133]	[0.160]	[0.159]
Adj R-squared				0.05	0.09	0.11
AIC	4117.36	3886.29	3881.51	9767.14	9175.34	9121.85
N observations	3080	2986	2986	3607	3460	3460

*Notes: Leave vote coefficients are log odds based on binary logistic regression; anti-immigrant sentiment b coefficients from linear regression model. Stars/ significance levels * 0.05 ** 0.01. Dummy variables for region are included in the model but not shown.*

Testing the mediating role of SSS

In order to test whether SSS mediates the relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and political preferences, we specify a path analytic model that produces statistical estimates of direct effects of SES versus mediated effects via SSS. The model specification and results are shown in Figures 1 and 2. For simplicity, here we report the linear effect of SSS, but the results are unchanged if we include the quadratic term as an additional mediator. In the model, the two dimensions of objective SES – education and occupation – are allowed to influence the outcome directly and indirectly through SSS. We find that higher occupational class and higher qualifications are significantly associated with higher SSS, as have previous studies (e.g. Lindeman and Saar 2014). This pattern of association lends support to the notion of the summative function of SSS (Andersson 2015). Higher occupational class and higher educational qualifications also significantly increase the probability of supporting Leave and opposing immigration directly.

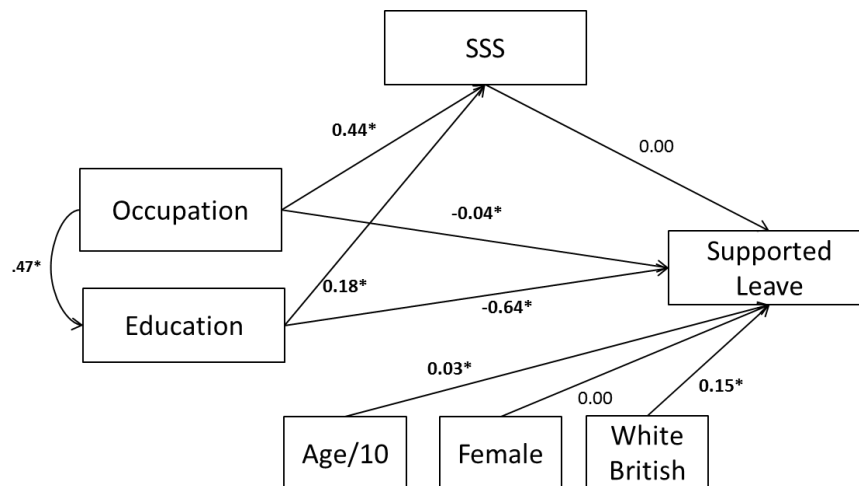
The paths, however, from SSS to supporting Leave and to anti-immigration preferences are non-significant and the coefficient estimates close to zero. According to these estimates, of the average effect of SSS, there is no evidence that one's perceived standing in the social world performs a mediating role between the more objective dimensions of status and political preferences. The overall model fit statistics for both outcomes suggest that the models are not a particularly good fit to the data, but we take this as supporting the null finding, namely that SSS is not a mediator of SES to preferences (hence the specified model is not a good fit). These models show, not that SSS does not matter, but that its naïve estimate, without interaction effects is non-significant. We now go on to show that a more precisely specified model is one that allows for interaction effects between SSS and SES.

Exploring differential effects of SSS

In this section we test whether SSS has differential effects according to an individual's standing in terms of SES and social ties. The models are shown in Table 6. Model 4 includes an interaction term of SSS with educational attainment, and shows that higher SSS among people with tertiary education is associated with higher odds of support for Leave and higher levels of anti-immigrant sentiment. A similar pattern is seen with the interaction with social tie status revealing that higher SSS has a positive effect on both outcomes among those with high status ties, but not among the rest – see model 5. In models 6 (education) and 7 (social ties), we also include the SSS quadratic term and its interactions. In these models the interactions lose significance in some cases, and since the quadratic terms makes the interpretation less intuitive, we show these results as marginal effects in Figure 3. The pattern is consistent, showing that for those situated within a high-status social context – in terms of education or the status of social ties – the probability of voting leave and levels of anti-immigration sentiment are higher among those higher SSS. To illustrate the effect size: the predicted probability of supporting leave for a degree-holder scoring 1 on the SSS scale is 39 per cent compared to 52 per cent of those degree-holders scoring 9, a difference of 13 points³.

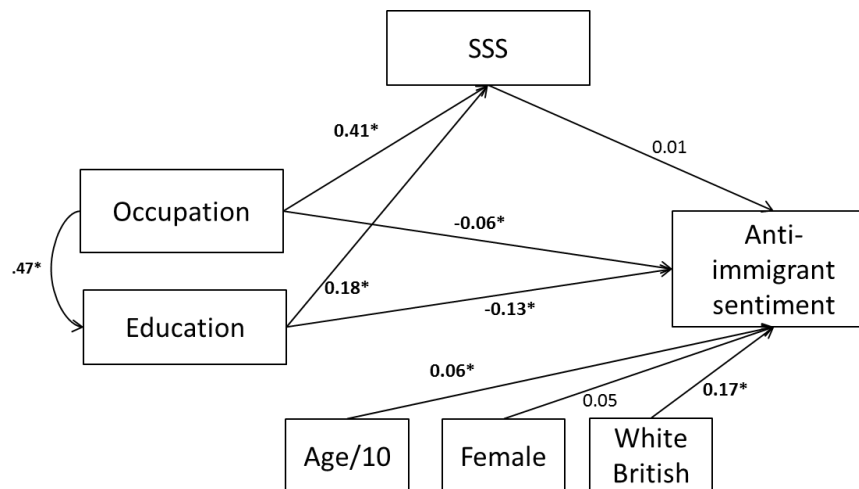
³ In addition, we run stratified models rather than relying on interaction terms. The finding holds: models of leave vote and anti-immigration sentiment show a significant effect of SSS for the highly educated and those sited in high status networks, but not for the lower status subgroups.

Fig 1 Path analytic model of the Leave vote



Notes: bold coefficients with * are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$; Goodness of fit indicators: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.052, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.957, Tucker Lewis Index = 0.841.

Fig 2 Path analytic model of anti-immigration sentiment



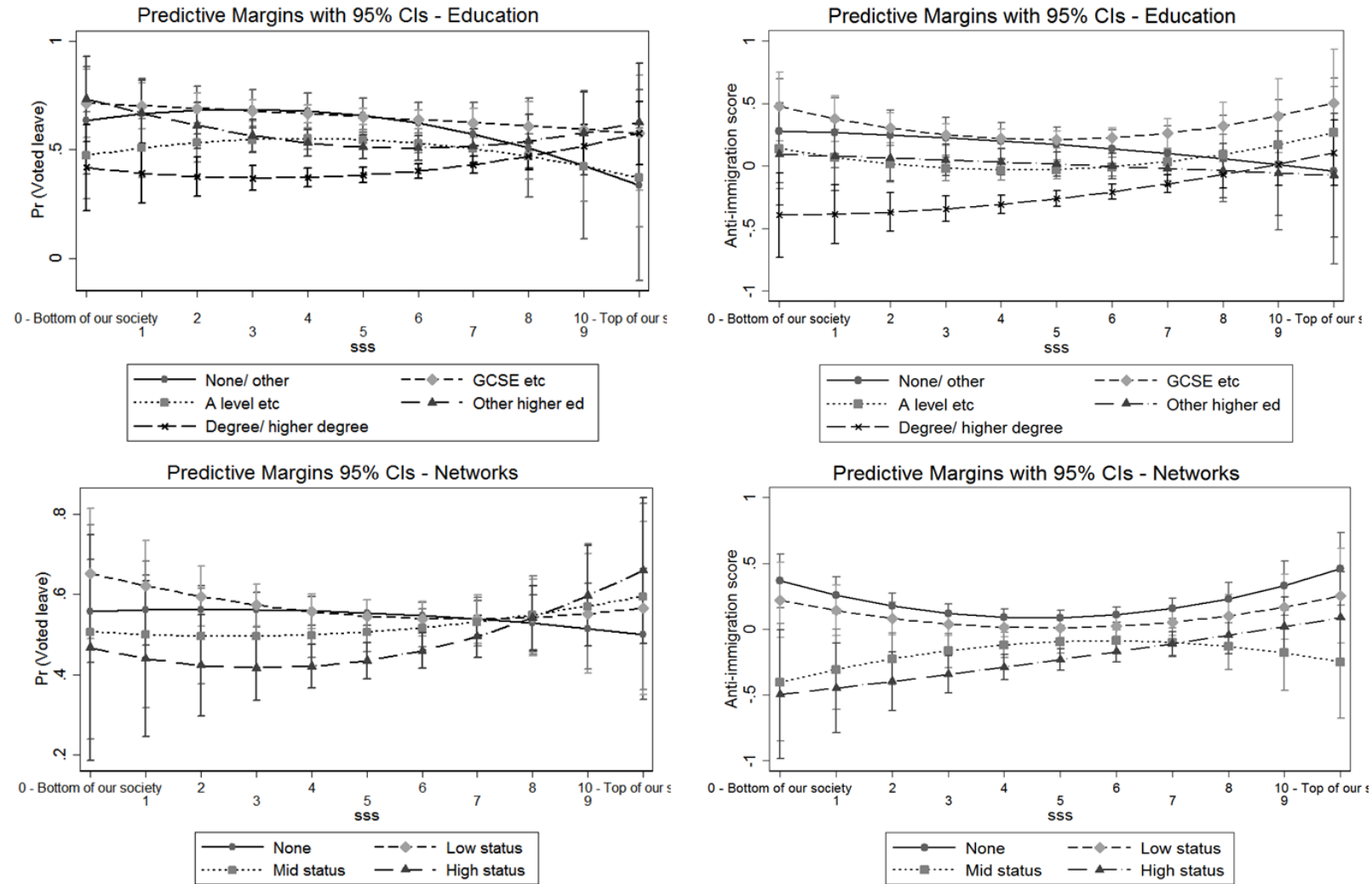
Notes: bold coefficients with * are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. Goodness of fit indicators: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.052, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.953, Tucker Lewis Index = 0.829.

Table 6 Models of supporting Leave in the 2016 referendum and of anti-immigrant sentiment, with interaction terms

	Voted Leave				Anti-immigration score			
	4) log odds	5) log odds	6) log odds	7) log odds	4) b	5) b	6) b	7) b
Qualifications. Ref = none								
GCSE etc	-0.269	0.089	1.44	0.063	-0.114	0.094	0.289	0.092
A level etc	-0.866	-0.440*	0.138	-0.444*	-0.453*	-0.136	-0.021	-0.128
Other higher ed	-0.688	-0.399*	1.685	-0.415*	-0.299	-0.093	-0.092	-0.089
Degree/ higher degree	-2.032**	-0.927**	0.106	-0.921**	-0.945*	-0.334*	-0.636	-0.323*
SSS	-0.115	-0.019	0.736	0.044	-0.057	0.008	0.091	-0.139*
GCSE etc * SSS	0.067		-0.865		0.048		-0.174	
A level etc * SSS	0.098		-0.485		0.067		-0.154	
Other higher ed * SSS	0.065		-1.152*		0.044		-0.074	
Degree * SSS	0.218*		-0.867		0.117*		-0.047	
SSS squared			-0.099*	-0.007			-0.017	0.016*
GCSE etc * SSS sq			0.108*				0.026	
A level etc * SSS sq			0.071				0.024	
Other higher ed * SSS sq			0.136*				0.014	
Degree * SSS sq			0.121*				0.019	
Social ties status. Ref = none								
Ties status low		0.166		0.732		-0.089		-0.317
Ties status mid		-0.484		0.004		-0.353*		-0.992*
Ties status high		-1.104**		-0.116		-0.659*		-1.021*
Ties status low * SSS		-0.028		-0.307		-0.001		0.105
Ties status mid * SSS		0.061		-0.155		0.02		0.318*
Ties status high * SSS		0.127*		-0.28		0.060*		0.232
Ties status low * SSS sq				0.029				-0.011
Ties status mid * SSS sq				0.021				-0.031*
Ties status high * SSS sq				0.039				-0.018
Constant	1.069	0.447	-1.02	-0.263	0.438*	0.218	0.055	0.374*
Adj R-squared					0.09	0.1	0.1	0.11
N observations	2986	3080	2986	3080	3460	3607	3460	3607

*Notes: Leave vote coefficients are log odds based on binary logistic regression; anti-immigrant sentiment b coefficients from linear regression model. Stars/ significance levels * 0.05 ** 0.01. Additional variables in the model but not shown in the table include age, sex, ethnicity, income, occupation and region.*

Figure 3 Effect of SSS by status context (predictive margins based on Models 6 and 7)



Robustness checks & ruling out alternative explanations

As a first robustness check, we stratify the sample by political interest and find that our substantive results hold in the main, with one exception. In the path model of anti-immigrant sentiment, we find that there is an indirect effect of objective status through SSS only for those with high levels of political interest. However, here the effect of SSS is positive (i.e. increases anti-immigrant sentiment), which is to say that it supports the idea of differential effects of SSS. Second, since income is a crucial component of social status and a driver of attitudes, we re-specify all models with income included. Income is associated with higher SSS and also exerts a direct effect on anti-immigration sentiment but again there is no evidence that SSS mediates preferences. Our findings from the interactions with objective status also remain robust. Third, as Leave/ Remain preferences are likely to have changed since the referendum: we try new models using preferences updated with “Would you vote the same way again?” but we find our results hold firm. Finally, given Gidron and Hall’s (2017) finding on the importance of gender dynamics for status, we also stratify the sample by sex, but find the results to be the same for both men and women.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Though our operationalisation and findings differ, we agree with Chan and Goldthorpe (2007) that the Weberian distinction between status and class remains important for the sociological understanding of political attitudes. We suggest, that in the case of Brexit and immigration attitudes, the effect of subjective status is contingent upon objective dimensions of SES. In our account SSS pulls political preferences in opposite directions according to the social context. Among those in a high-status environment, defined in terms of networks or educational attainment, high SSS is associated with more support for Leave and higher levels of anti-immigrant sentiment. We argued that people with high SSS have fewer normative concerns (Piff et al. 2012) and may therefore be less likely to conform to group norms governing political preferences (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). These high-SSS individuals, who display a tendency for independence of mind and go against the remain-voting norm, cannot be described as left-behind or deficient in self-worth. Perhaps it is fear of future status loss that matters most; this may provide a fruitful direction for future research. In terms of the number of potential high-status voters going against the Remain norm, 28% of the population hold a university degree, and of those 27% rate themselves as 7 or above in the subjective status scale. We are thus talking about a sizeable proportion of society⁴; a proportion large enough to sway marginal elections and exert important influences on society. This does not in itself, of course, negate the ‘left behind’ thesis; we have confirmed the findings of others in that the low educated and the lower classes are more likely to support Brexit and hold anti-immigration views.

In order to resolve the pressing issue of how and why Brexit happened, some scholars have drawn distinctions between the ‘deep causes’ of Brexit and the ‘immediate triggers’ (Clarke and Newman 2017). The deep causes are presumed to include processes of globalisation, deindustrialisation, and rising inequality that gave rise to a dispossessed and forgotten working class (Dorling 2016; Hobolt 2016). Among the ‘immediate triggers’ are the Brexit campaign and the role of the media (Clarke and Newman 2016). Our findings perhaps sit between the immediate and the deep. If globalisation and its ‘left behind’ was a deep cause of support for

⁴ A point we have not addressed directly, but also potentially consequential would be to consider the consequences of status for voter turnout.

Brexit, then it was just a partial one. Our analysis has evidenced that free-thinking elites – those confident in their own position and status – were more willing to cast a vote against the majority view of their in-group.

In conclusion; while attempts to focus on the subjective experience of those living in the left behind sections of society have provided some insights, they have missed a wider perspective showing that status among those at the top of society is likely to influence political preferences (and election outcomes), against the mainstream flow. The apparent independence of mind that comes with high subjective status might be lauded in terms of deliberative democracy, but denigrated in terms of individualistic versus collectivist concerns (Piff et al. 2012). Either way, it would be a mistake to think of SSS in rudimentary terms as a phenomenon that only explains the political preferences of the left behind.

7. References

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