

# The Power of Brexit Arguments

A Survey Experiment of the Impact of Economic,  
Cultural and Political Frames on Support for  
Leaving/Remaining in the EU

Matthew Goodwin (Kent), Simon Hix (LSE) and Mark Pickup (Simon Fraser)

# Motivation

Forthcoming referendum on UK membership in the EU

Multiple campaigns, e.g.:

*Leave Side*

[Vote Leave](#)

[Leave.EU](#)

[Conservatives for Britain](#)

[Labour Leave](#)

[Business for Britain](#)

[UK Independence Party](#)

[Grassroots Out](#)

[Better Off Out](#)

etc.

*Remain Side*

[Britain Stronger In](#)

[British Influence](#)

[Labour In for Britain](#)

[Conservatives for Reform in Europe](#)

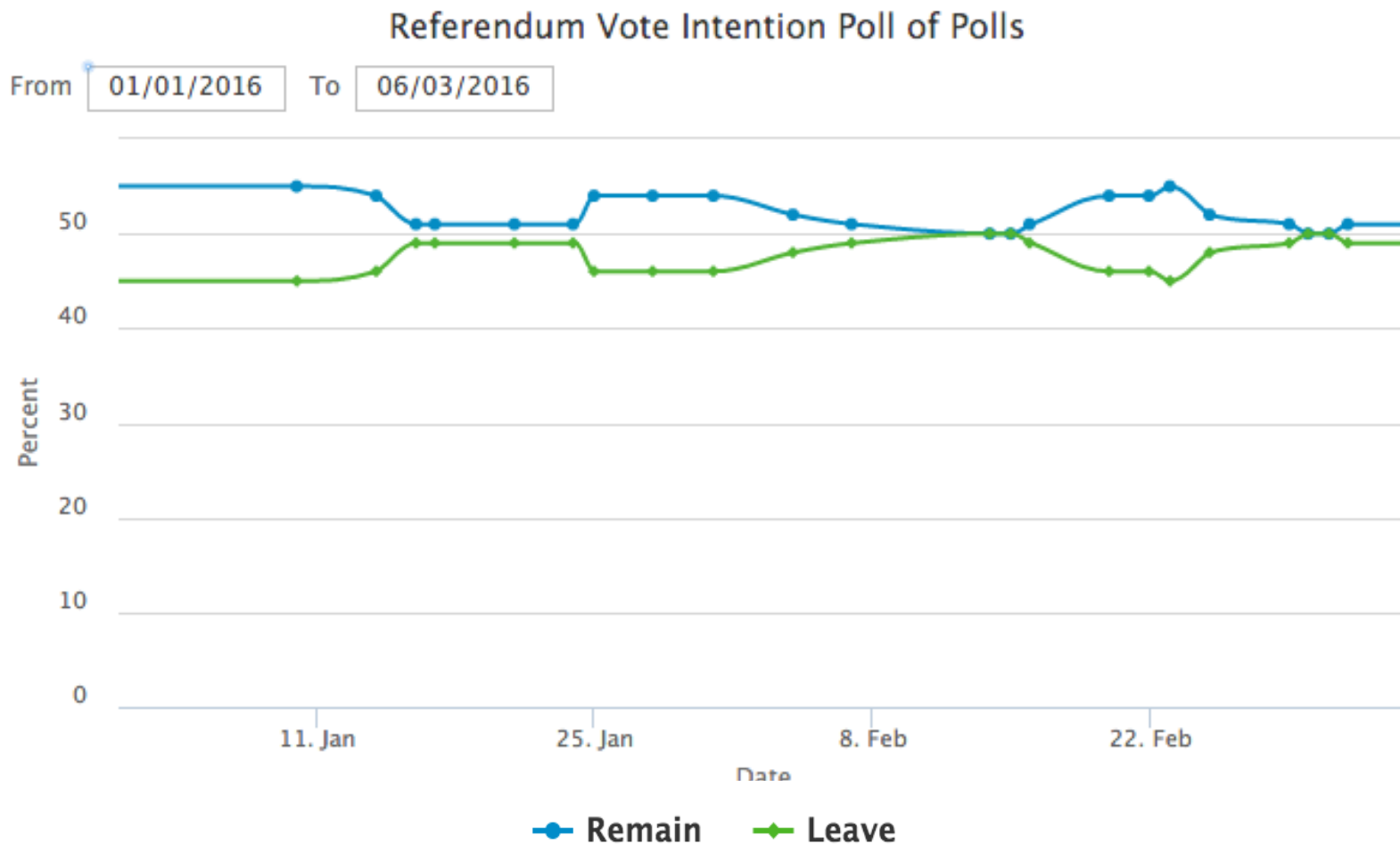
[Scottish National Party](#)

[Liberal Democrats](#)

[UKIP to Stay \(?!\)](#)

⇒ Voters bombarded with messages  
Which ones will work, and for which side?

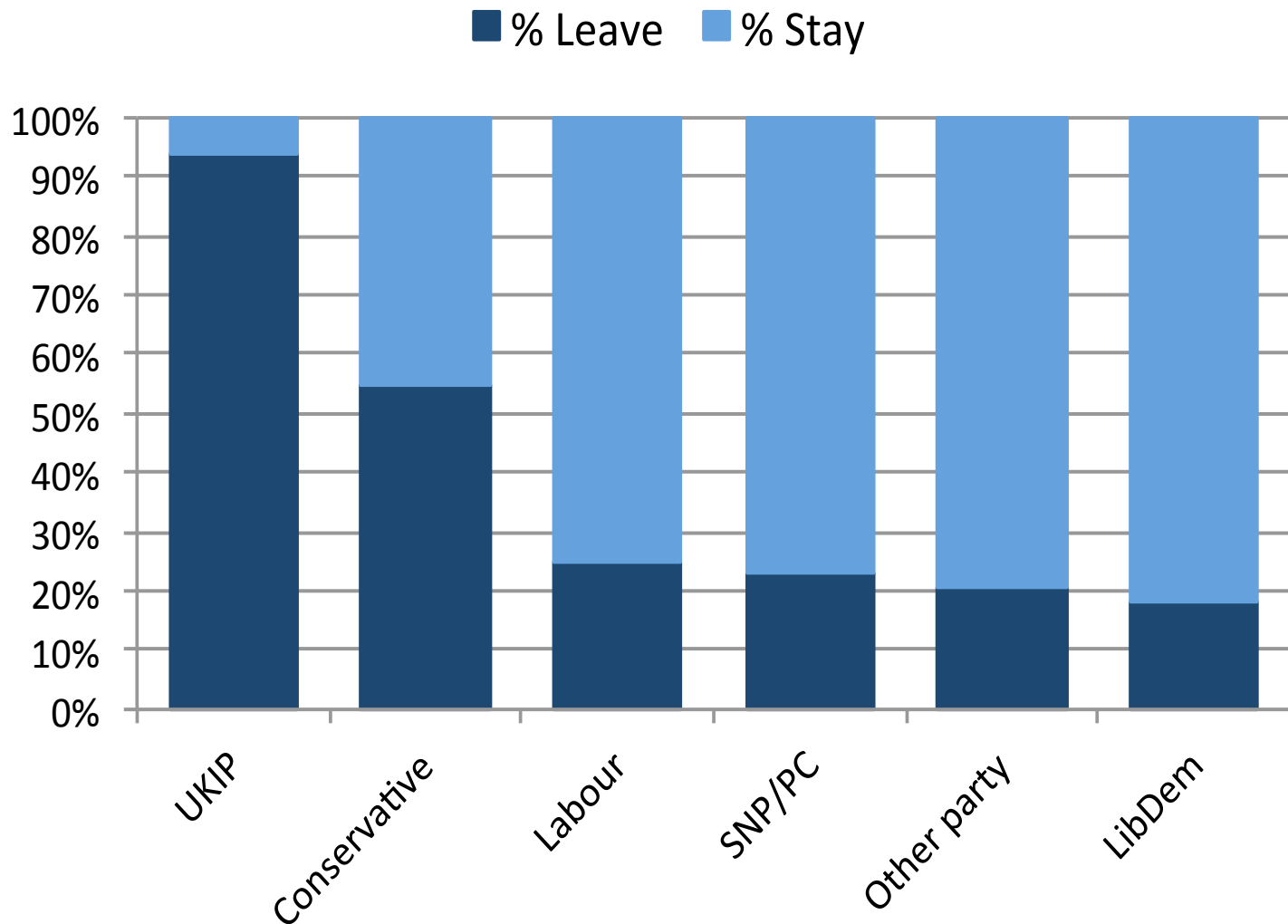
Plus opinion polls are tight, so “winning frames” during the campaign could make a difference



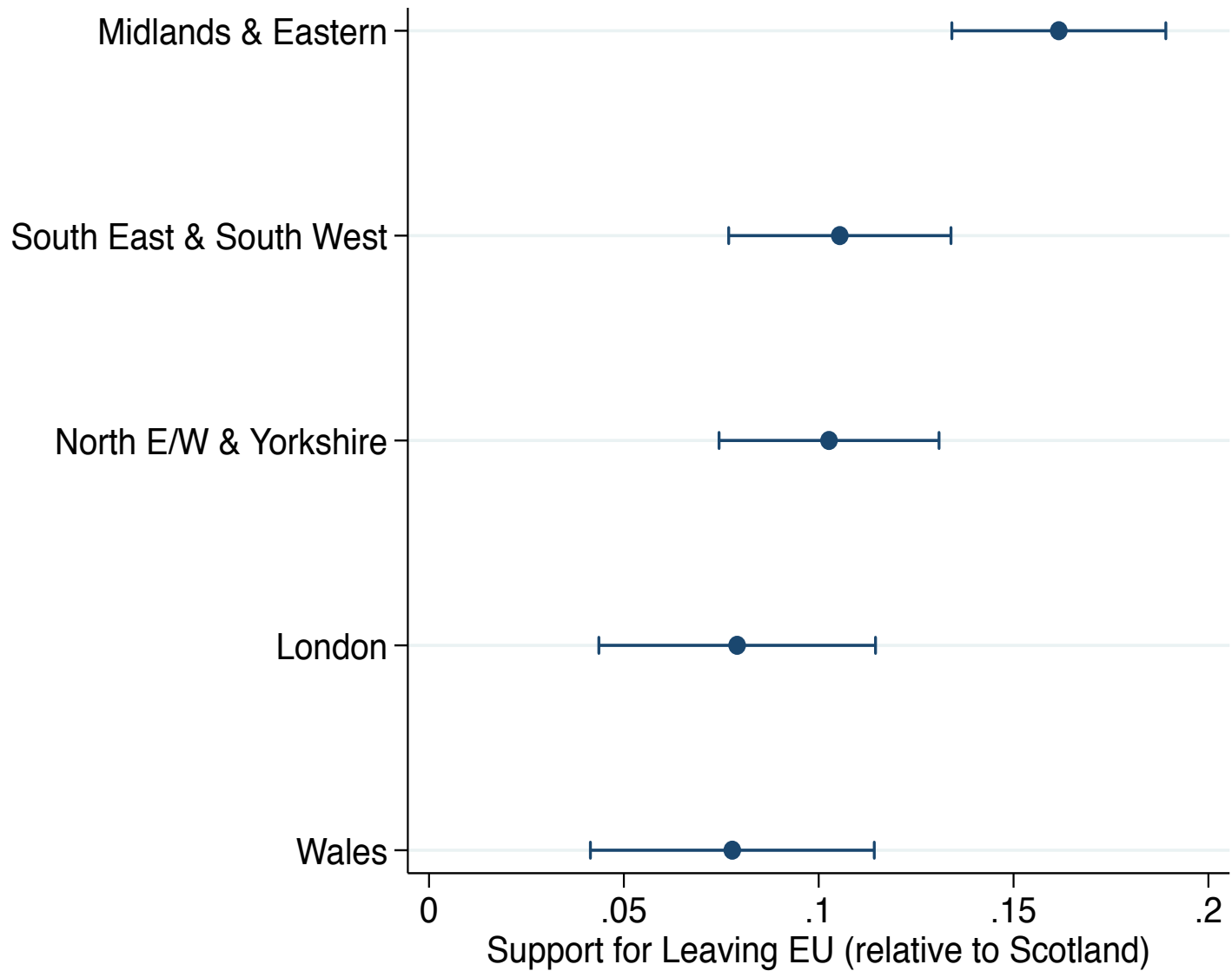
Source: [whatukthinks.org](http://whatukthinks.org)

# What we know about UK attitudes towards the EU

Parties matter! Evidence from British Election Study 2015, Wave 6

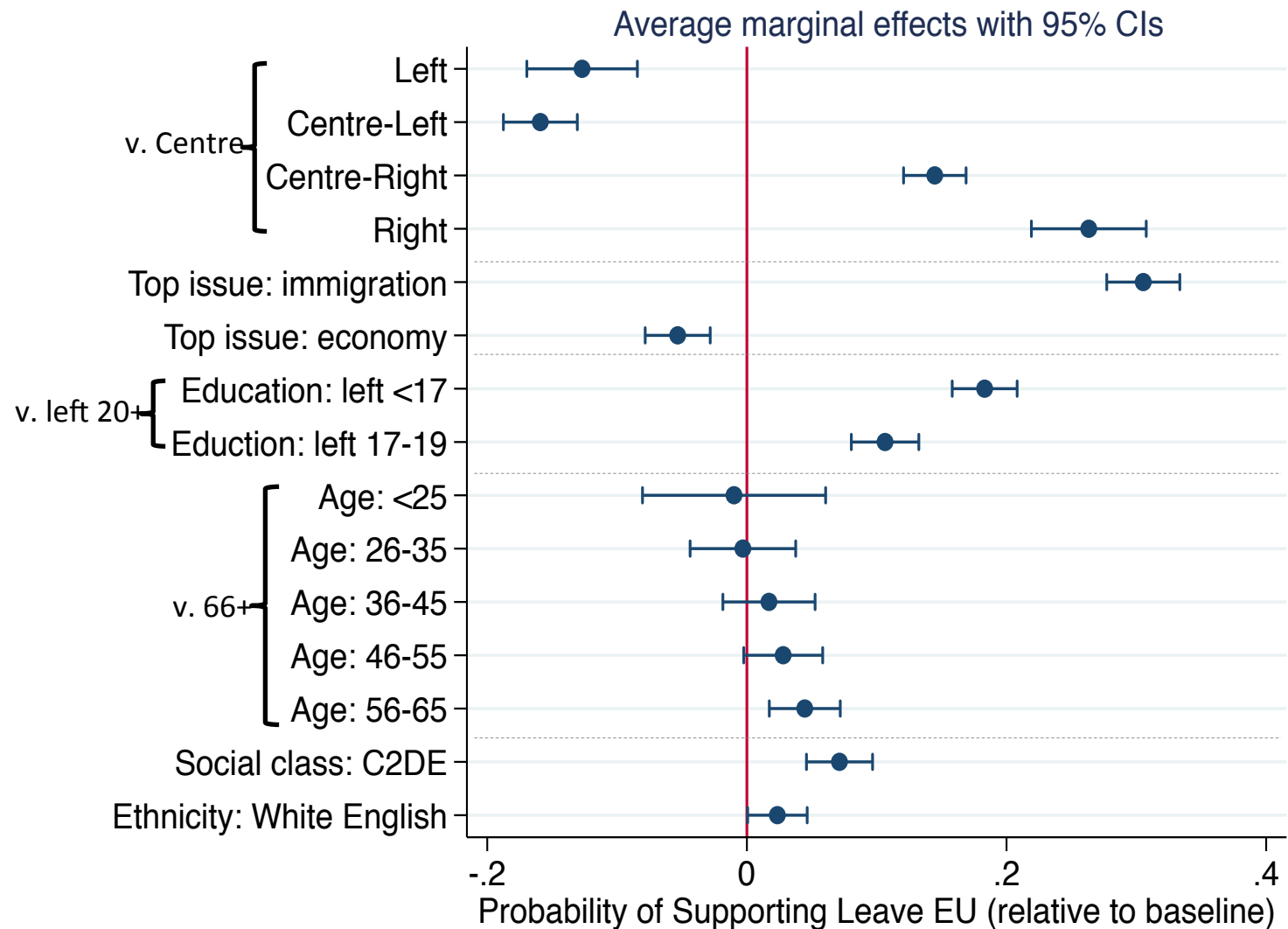


## Significant regional variation (BES 2015 Wave 6)



## Other key covariates

BES 2015 Wave 6. Multivariate logit, N = 9,248, Psuedo R<sup>2</sup> = 0.208



# Literature I – Attitudes towards the EU

Huge literature on public attitudes to EU (e.g. review see Hobolt & de Vreese 2016)

Recent experimental work shows multi-dimensional nature of opinions (e.g. Bechtel et al. 2014; Boomgaarden et al. 2011)

**Three explanatory frameworks** routinely identified:

- 1. Economic factors** – attitudes towards trade integration, EU migration & integration driven by economic cost-benefit calculations and/or personal asset endowments, including educational level (e.g. Gabel 1998; Hainmuller & Hiscox 2006, 2010)
- 2. Cultural factors** – attitudes influenced more by cultural threat than economic calculations. Anxieties over national identity & ethnic in-group key  
Likely to be relevant for EU Ref: unlike 1975 there is now strong association between EU & immigration (Evans & Mellon 2016; Goodwin & Milazzo 2015)
- 3. Political factors** – especially at referendums, attitudes may be driven by domestic political factors, such as party ID (e.g. Hug 2003, Hobolt 2009), and concerns about democracy and sovereignty (e.g. Abbarno & Zapryanova 2013)

But each argument can be framed in a **very** different way, by media and campaigns....

## Literature II – Message Framing

Frames select and organise information on issues, provide meaning, attribute positive or negative values -> influence attitudes (Entman 1993; Chong & Druckman 2007; de Vreese & Boomgaarden 2003)

People can make very different decisions (e.g. EU Ref) when presented with message that stresses *positive* or *negative* aspects of argument (Tversky & Kahneman 1981)

For example, Schuck and de Vreese (2006) found public support for EU varied significantly according to whether enlargement presented as 'risk' or 'opportunity'

Past studies suggest that negative framing of the EU as a threat (especially cultural) will suppress public support for integration (McLaren 2002; Werts et al. 2012)

Conversely, studies that frame EU membership as opportunity for benefits & gains will help to mobilise support for EU membership, but especially among certain groups....

### -> **Different framing effects for different social groups:**

Framing EU as threat will mobilize support for Leave among older, less well educated & lower social grade voters who are known to be more anxious over perceived threats from EU and immigration (Ford & Goodwin 2014; McLaren)

Framing EU as positive opportunity will resonate more strongly among younger, fiscally secure and more highly educated voters who are consistently most pro-EU



## **Some *priors*** (not quite propositions!)

Motivation

Theory

Experiment

Results

Conclusions

### **Aggregate level**

*Pro-EU economic* framing should increase (reduce) support for Remain (Leave)

*Anti-EU cultural* framing should increase (reduce) support for Leave (Remain)

*Anti-EU political* framing should increase (reduce) support for Leave (Remain)

### **Sub-group level**

*Pro-EU* framing should affect “winners” (younger, ABC1s, southerners)

*Anti-EU* framing should affect “losers” (older, C2DEs, northerners)

# Experiment Design

## Panel study, conducted by YouGov

**Wave 1:** In the field 24 Sept-1 Oct 2015

**Q1: EU referendum vote intention:** *“How would you vote if the referendum on Britain’s membership of the EU were held tomorrow? (Remain in the EU / Leave the EU)”*

**Q2. General EU attitude:** *“On a scale of 0 to 10, how supportive are you of Britain’s membership of the European Union?”*

*0 = Strongly opposed to British membership of the EU*

*10 = Strongly in favour of British membership of the EU*

YouGov’s battery of socio-demographics

**Wave 2:** In the field 16 Oct-9 Nov 2015

Control group + 8 treatment groups: (randomly assigned & ordered)

a ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ *cultural* argument

+ a ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ *economic* argument

+ a ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ *political* argument

Then same 2 EU questions from Wave 1

N = 5,333 (i.e. approx. 590 per group)

## Vignettes – Cultural

**Pro-EU cultural:** “Britain shares important values with our European neighbours, such as freedom of speech, gender equality, the rule of law, and respect for liberal democracy. Amid a world that seems less stable, and where there are competing ideologies, European countries can better promote and protect their values by acting together, as members of the European Union. For Britain, remaining in the EU would help defend its national culture, traditions and values.”

**Anti-EU cultural:** “One of the founding pillars of the European Union is ‘free movement’, which allows citizens of EU member states to travel and work freely in other EU member states. But this free movement of migrant workers into Britain poses a threat to the country’s long established values and ways of life. For Britain, leaving the EU would help protect its national culture, values and traditions.”

## Vignettes – Economic

**Pro-EU economic:** “Britain’s membership of the European Union attracts significant inward foreign investment into the British economy. The EU is Britain’s major trading partner, which in 2014 accounted for 45% of exports and 53% of imports of goods and services. It is estimated that over three million jobs in Britain are linked, directly or indirectly, to its exports to the European Union. By remaining in the EU, these economic benefits would be safeguarded.”

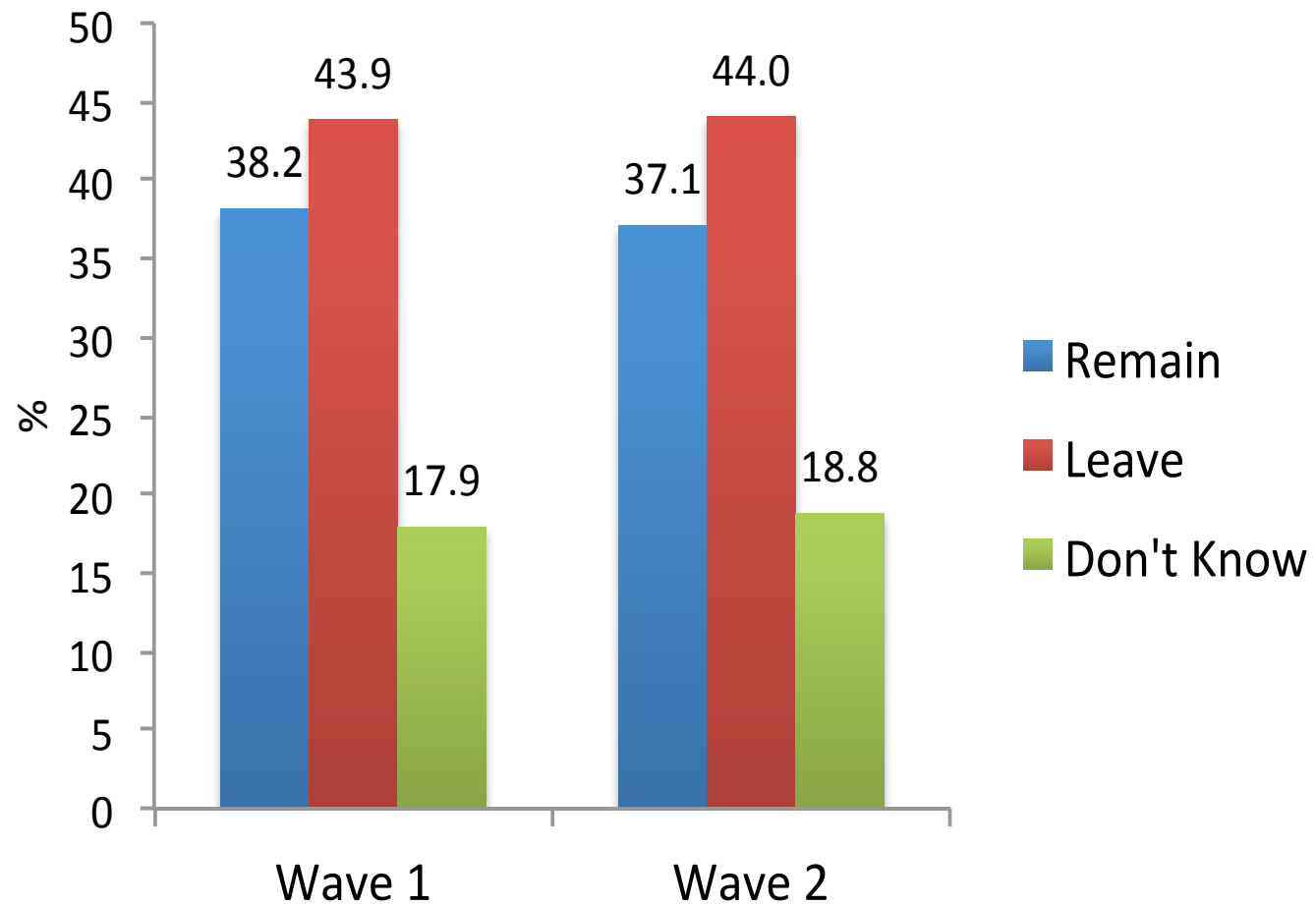
**Anti-EU economic:** “The Eurozone economy is experiencing significant economic problems, including high debt and youth unemployment. Britain’s membership of the EU is also costly. In 2014 alone, Britain’s net contribution to the EU budget was an estimated £9.8 billion, up from £3.3 billion in 2008. For Britain, remaining in the EU would risk its economic recovery and endanger the jobs of British wage earners.”

## Vignettes – Political

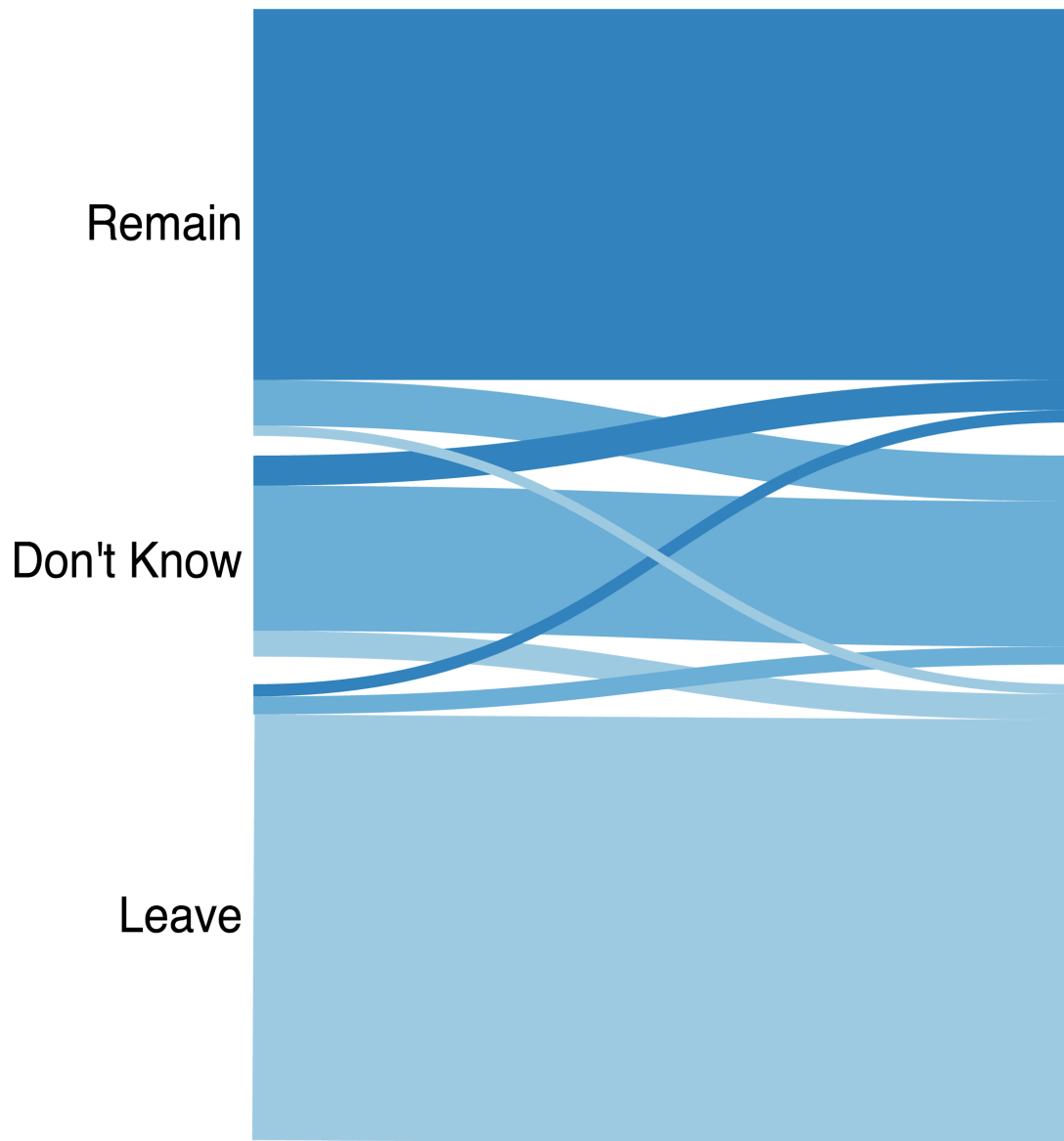
**Pro-EU political:** “If the European Union is to work in Britain’s interests, then Britain needs to be involved in the decision-making process. France and Germany would have no incentive to listen to Britain if it is not working closely with them as a member of the EU. If Britain were to leave the EU, to continue to trade with EU countries it will need to apply EU rules on trade, investment, product standards and services, but it will have no say when these rules are made. For Britain, remaining in the EU would ensure that it enjoys these political benefits.”

**Anti-EU political:** “By leaving the European Union, Britain would be able to set its own course. Britain does not need to be a member of the EU to play an important role in the world. Britain has a ‘portfolio of power’ in its own right, which includes membership of the G20 and G8 nations, a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, leadership of the Commonwealth of 54 nations, and a close relationship with the United States. London is the financial capital of the world. For Britain, leaving the EU would allow the country to regain its national sovereignty while continuing to be a major power on the world stage.”

## Baseline change in the control group

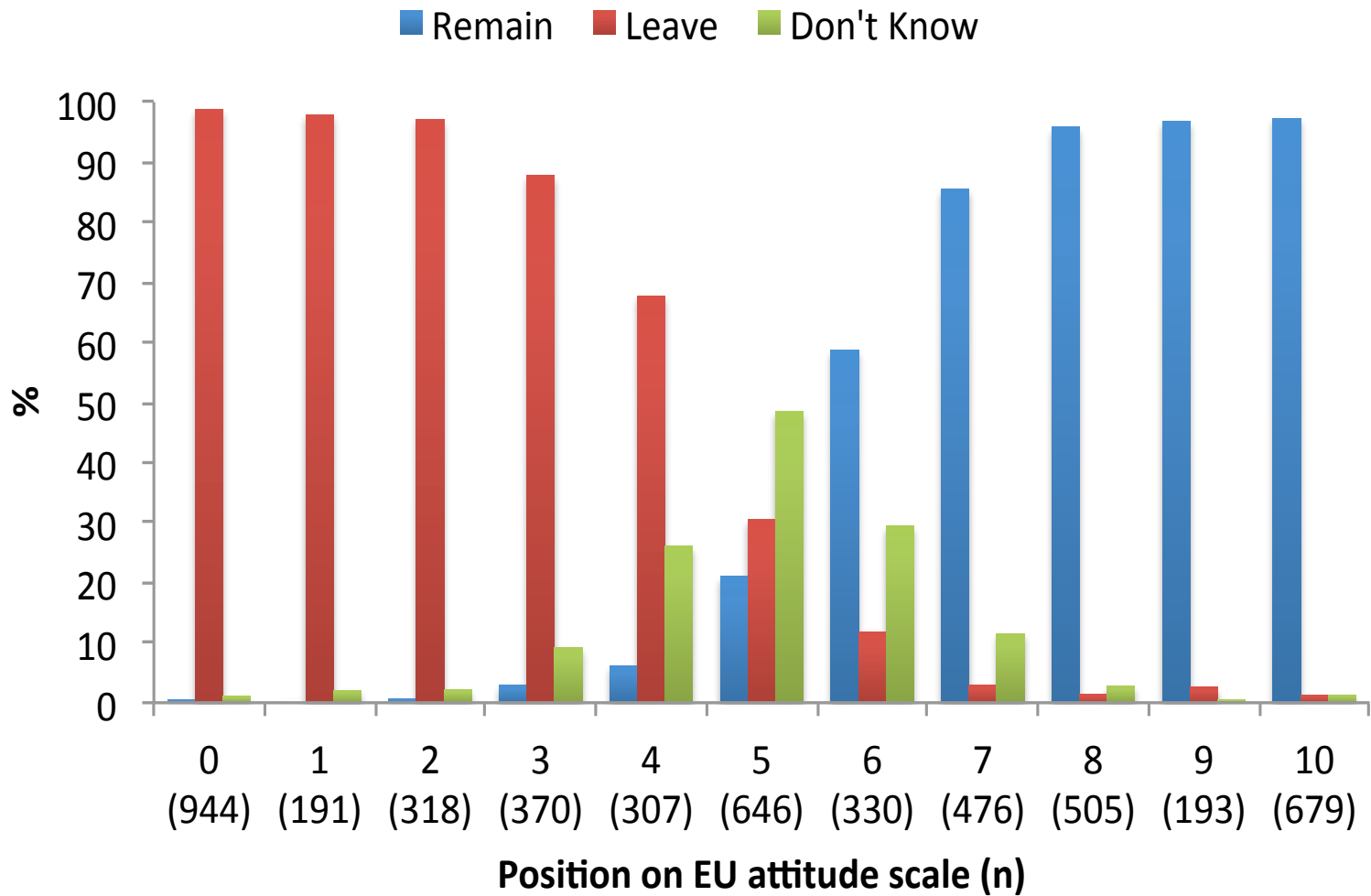


# Control group “flows” from wave 1 to wave 2



# Highly polarised attitudes

Wave 1, all respondents





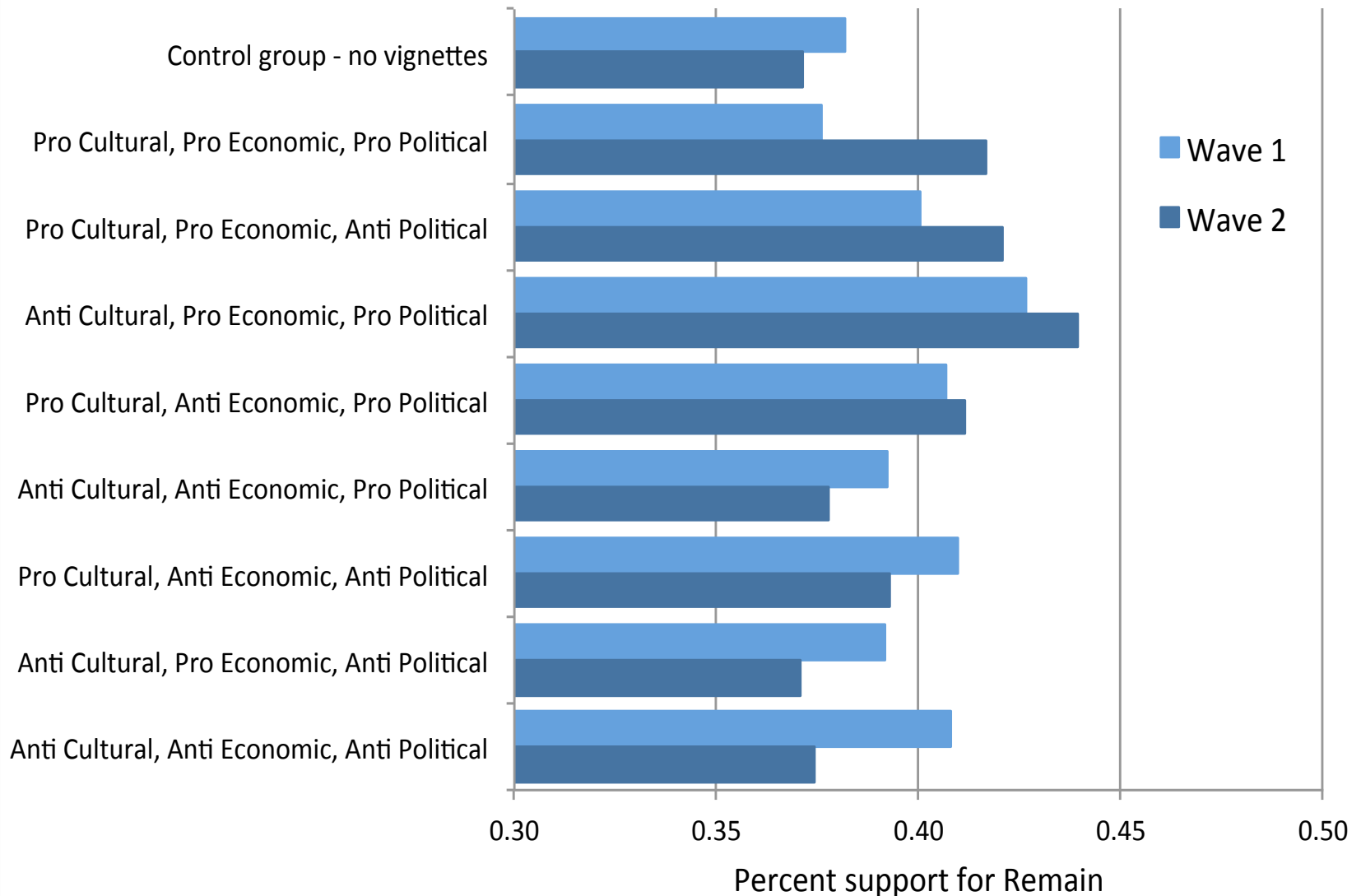
# Balance between treatment groups

Motivation  
Theory  
Experiment  
Results  
Conclusions

	Means for treatment groups									P> t
	Control	+C+E+P	-C+E+P	+C-E+P	-C-E+P	+C+E-P	-C+E-P	+C-E-P	-C-E-P	
Leave (%), wave1	0.439	0.431	0.390	0.429	0.398	0.422	0.439	0.406	0.442	0.550
Remain (%), wave1	0.382	0.376	0.426	0.407	0.392	0.400	0.392	0.410	0.408	0.786
Party ID 2015	7.31	8.21	10.12	8.13	8.20	7.32	7.38	8.52	8.86	0.366
Age	50.8	50.6	50.9	51.2	51.3	52.1	50.4	51.1	51.2	0.816
Education level	3.26	3.26	3.21	3.32	3.31	3.26	3.32	3.31	3.33	0.930
Ethnicity	1.54	1.52	1.51	1.60	1.60	1.60	1.49	1.41	1.54	0.874
Gender	1.53	1.52	1.52	1.49	1.47	1.51	1.51	1.50	1.51	0.731
Household income	9.26	9.06	8.55	9.41	8.92	9.36	9.04	9.17	9.06	0.211
Social grade	2.52	2.22	2.30	2.20	2.24	2.21	2.23	2.22	2.22	0.942
Region	3.46	3.37	3.34	3.40	3.37	3.50	3.37	3.42	3.39	0.918

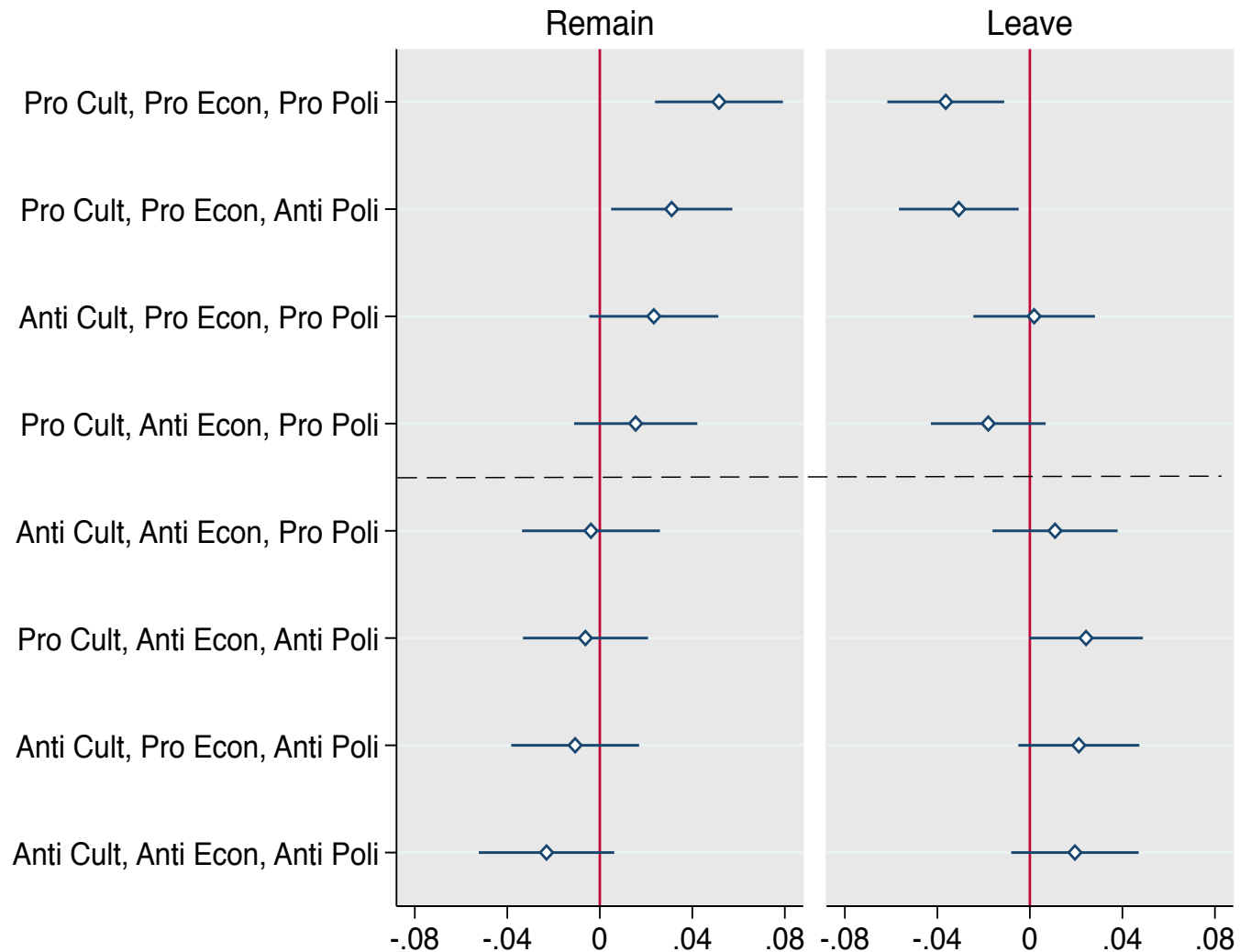
# Results

Support for “Remain in EU” by treatment group in Waves 1 & 2



# Difference-in-Difference analysis

W1 to W2 change in support for Remain/Leave by treatment group vs.  
W1 to W2 change in support for Remain/Leave in control group (90% CIs)

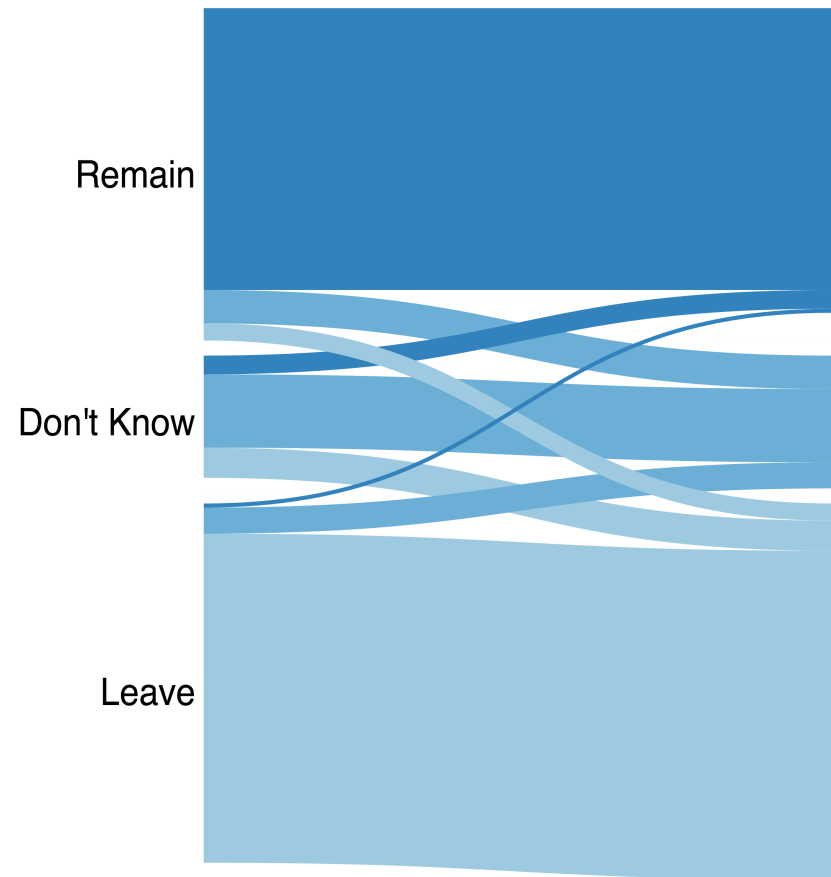
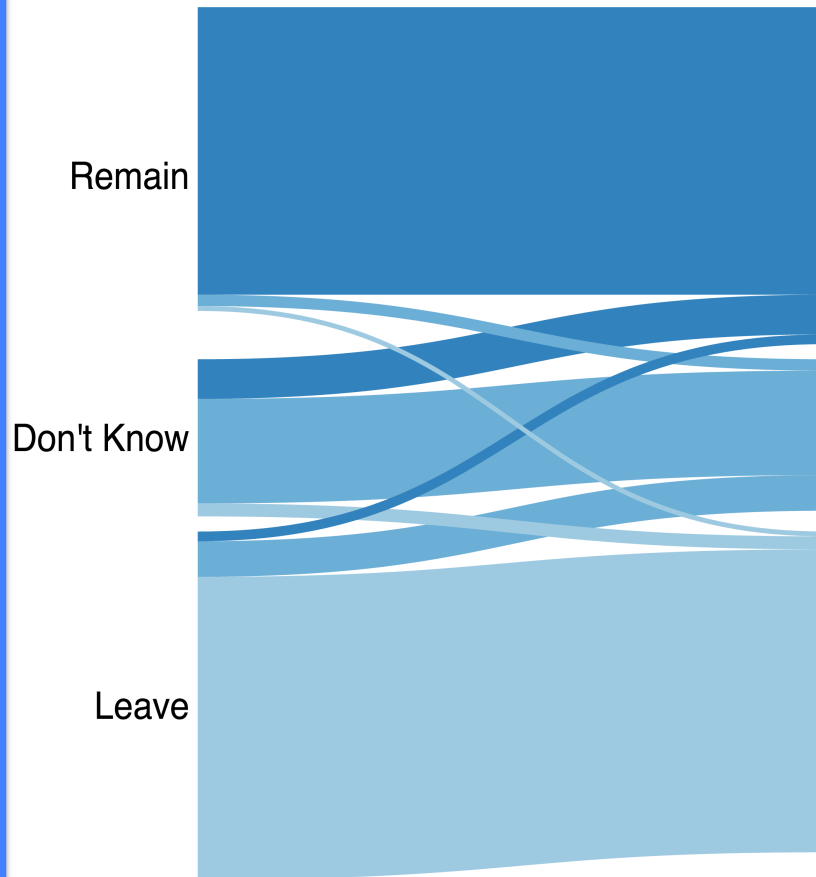


# PPP vs AAA “flows” from wave 1 to wave 2

**Pro Cultural, Pro Economic, Pro Political**

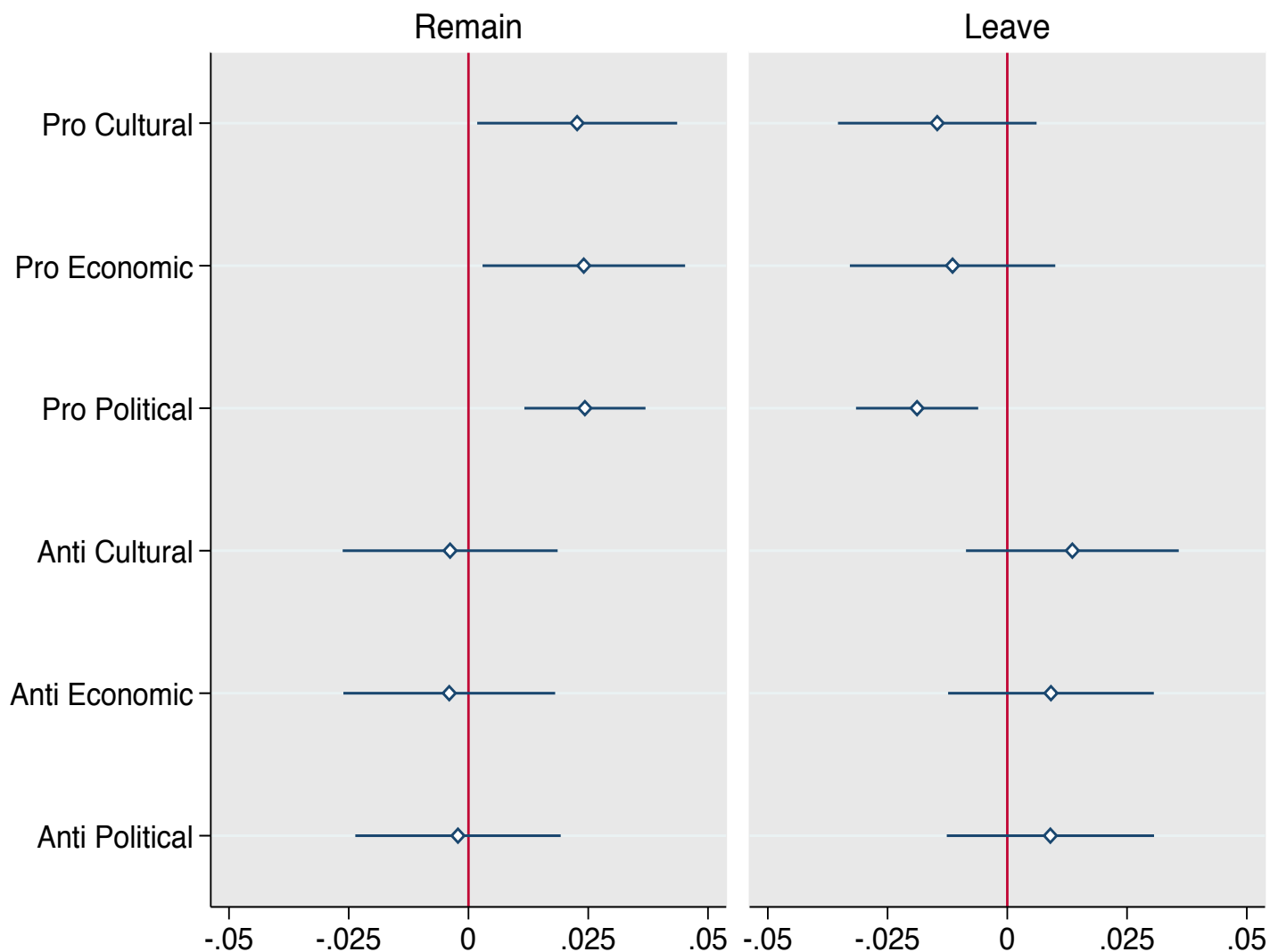
**Anti Cultural, Anti Economic, Anti Political**

Motivation  
Theory  
Experiment  
Results  
Conclusions



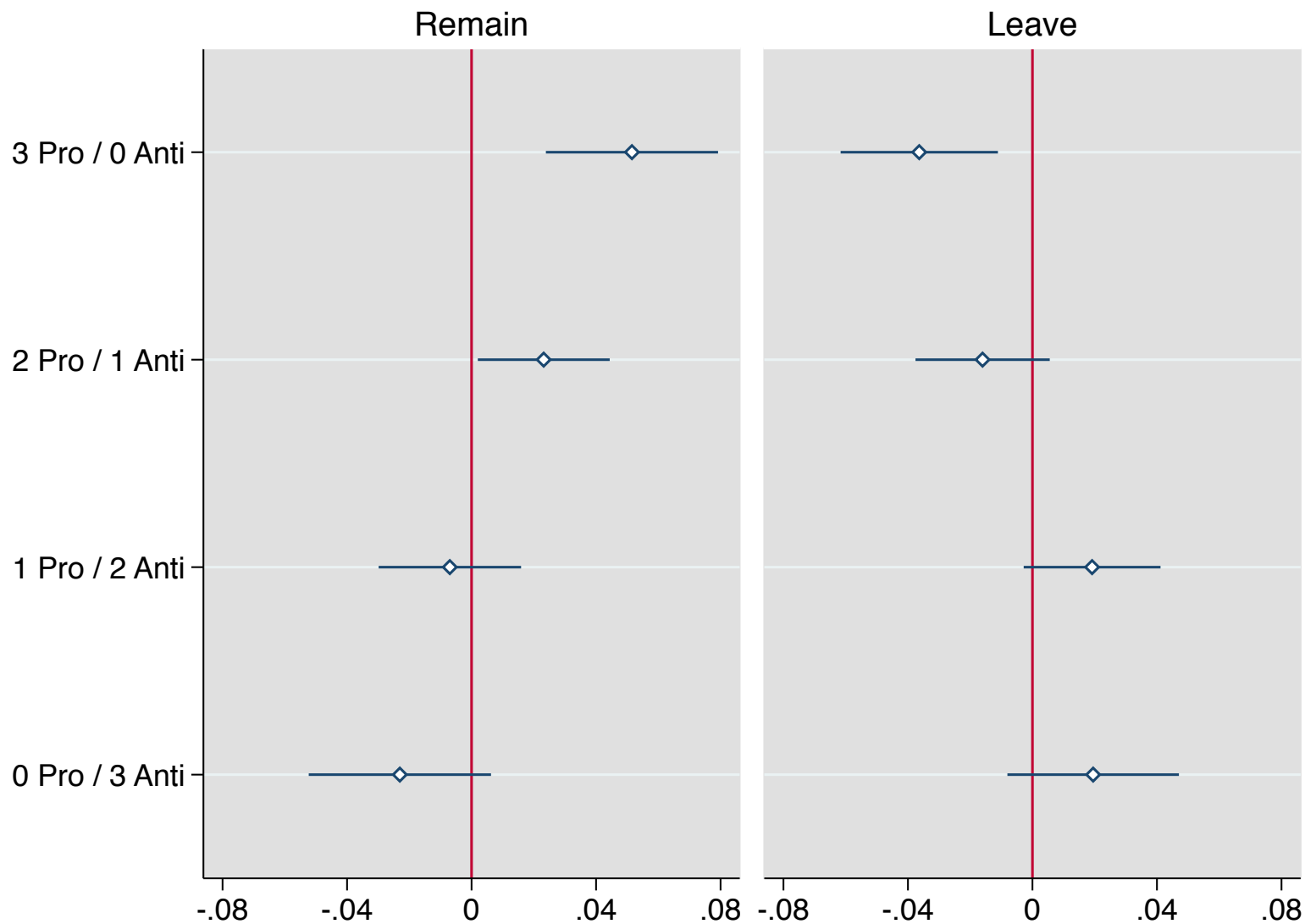
# Power of individual frames

Average effect (diff-in-diff) of a set of frames containing a particular vignette, relative to the control group



# Relative volume of arguments

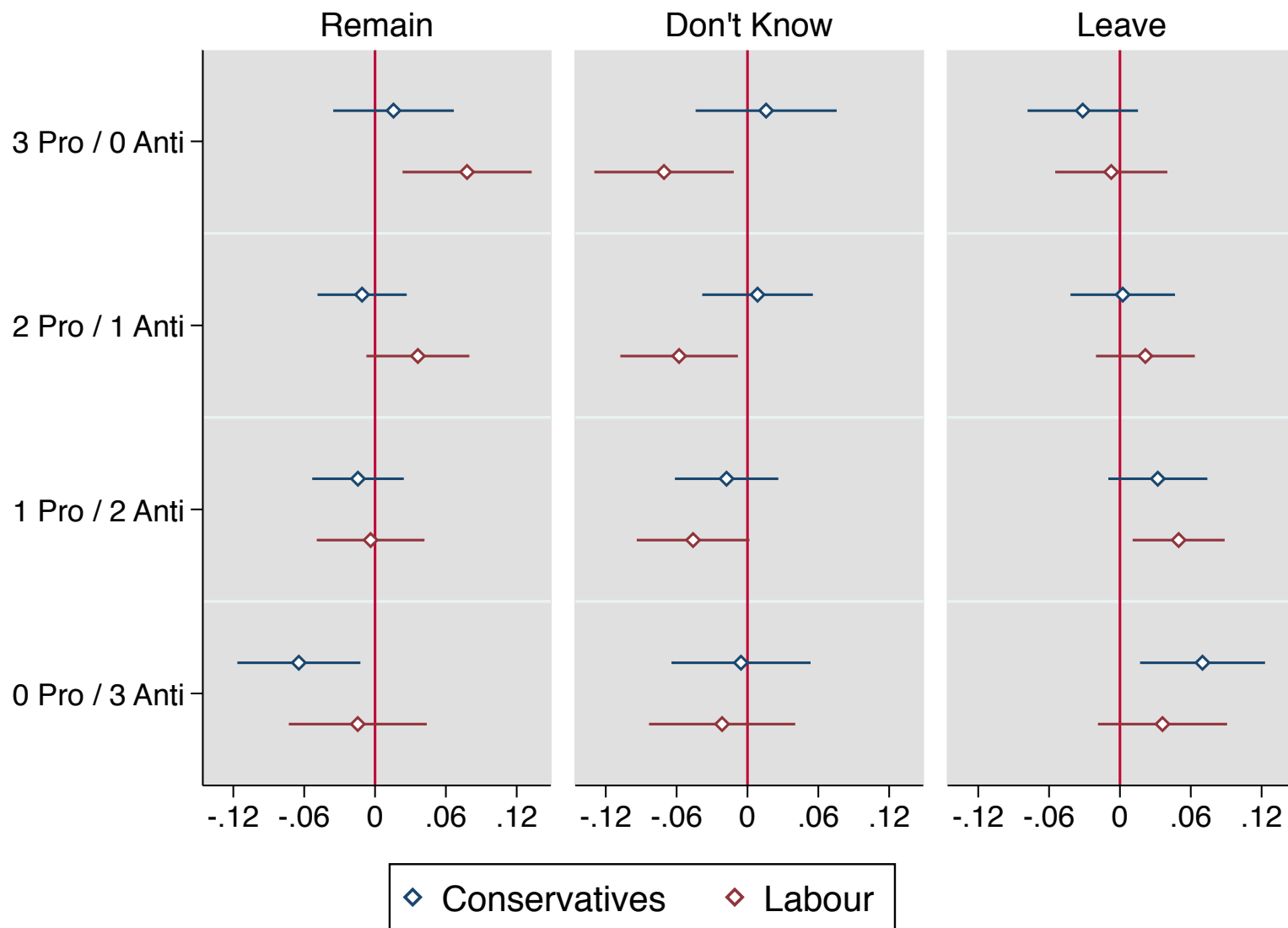
=> Volume is more important than type of argument



# Effect of frames by sub-group: Party ID

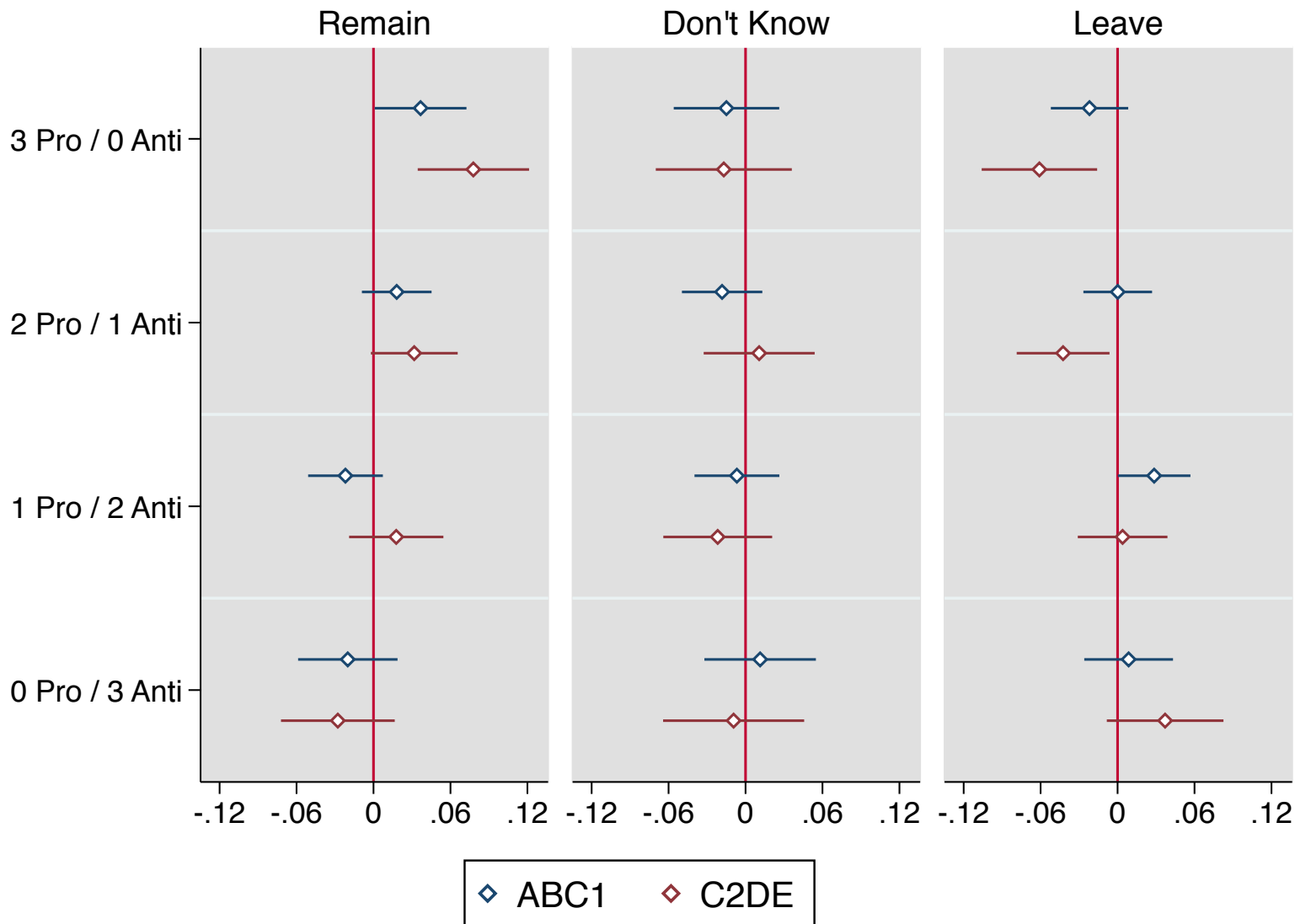
Pro-EU frames affect Labour voters most

Anti-EU frames affect Conservatives voters most



# Effect on sub-groups: Social grade

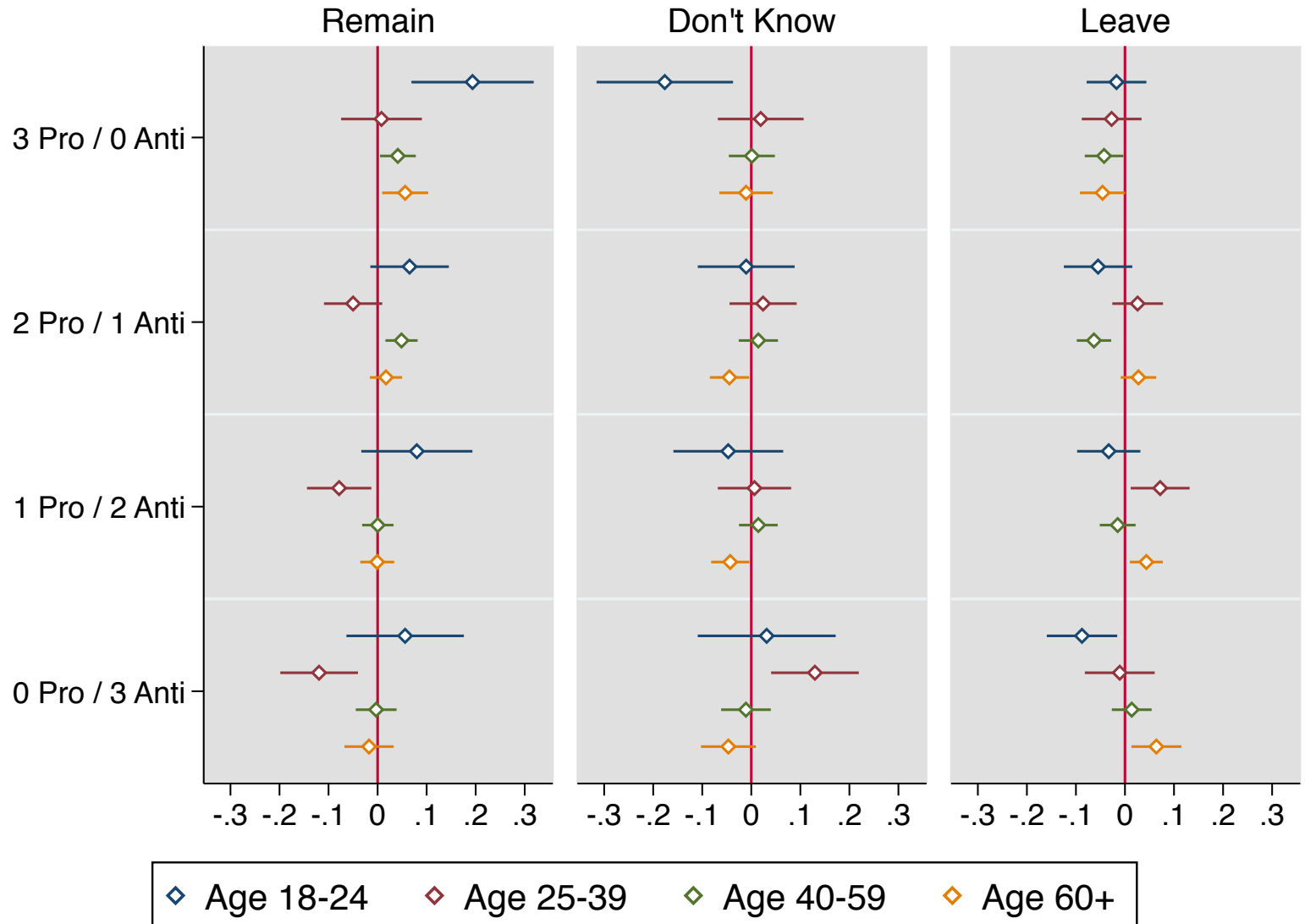
Pro-EU frames have a bigger effects on C2DE





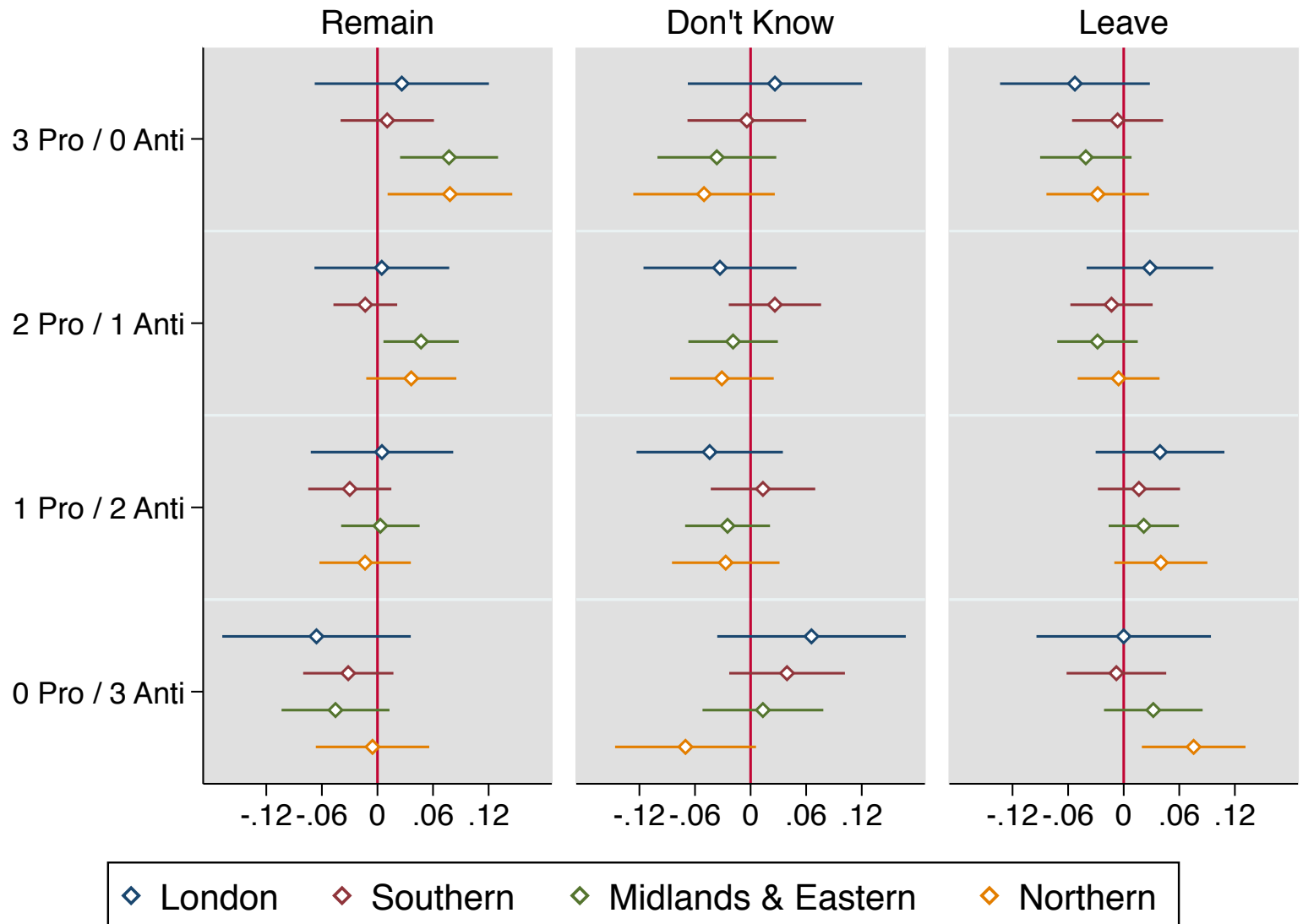
# Effect on sub-groups: Age

Pro-EU frames work on youngest, and with substantive effect  
Anti-EU frames work on older, but with smaller effects



# Effect on sub-groups: Region

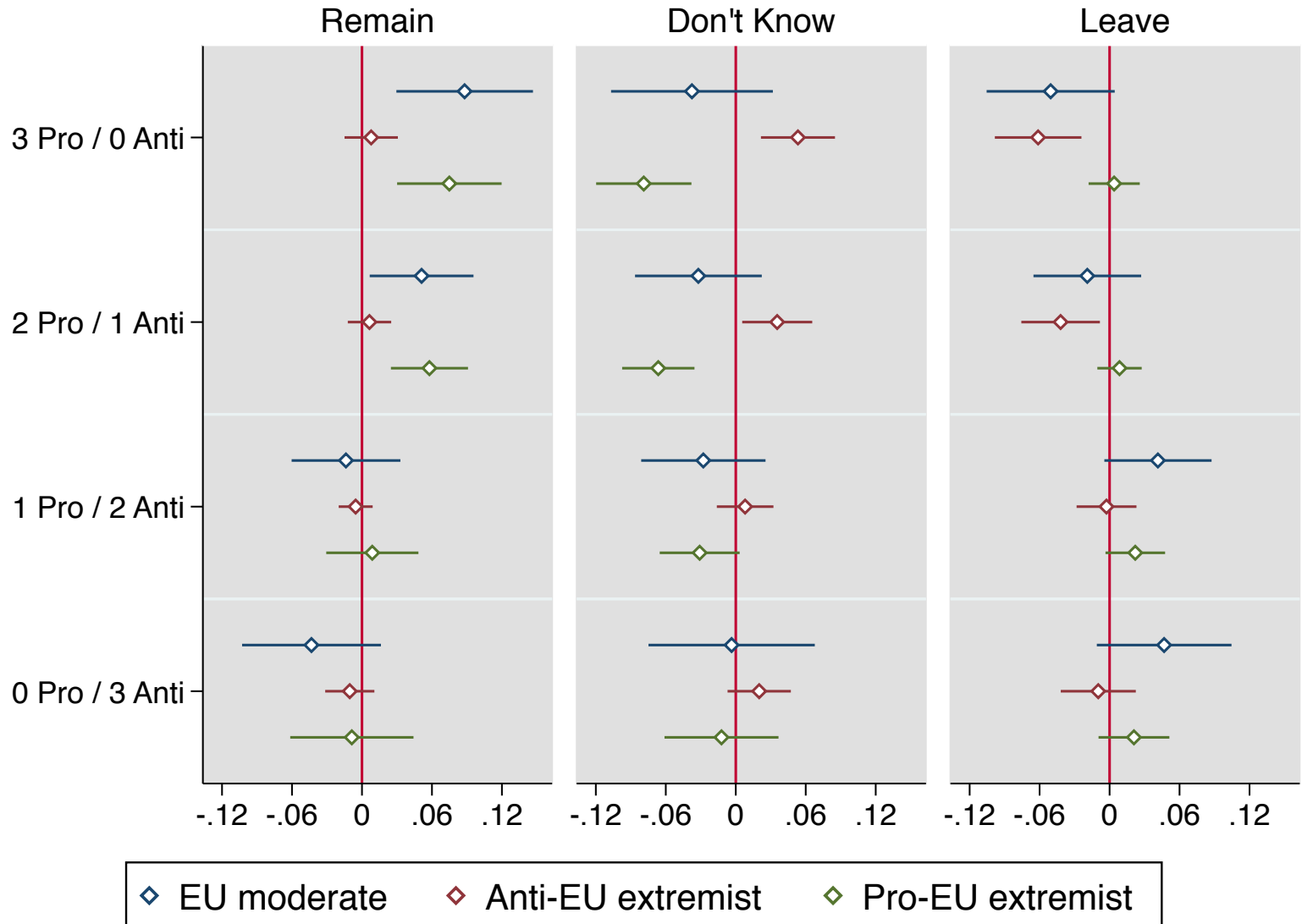
Pro-EU and Anti-EU frames more effective in the North and Midlands & Eastern England



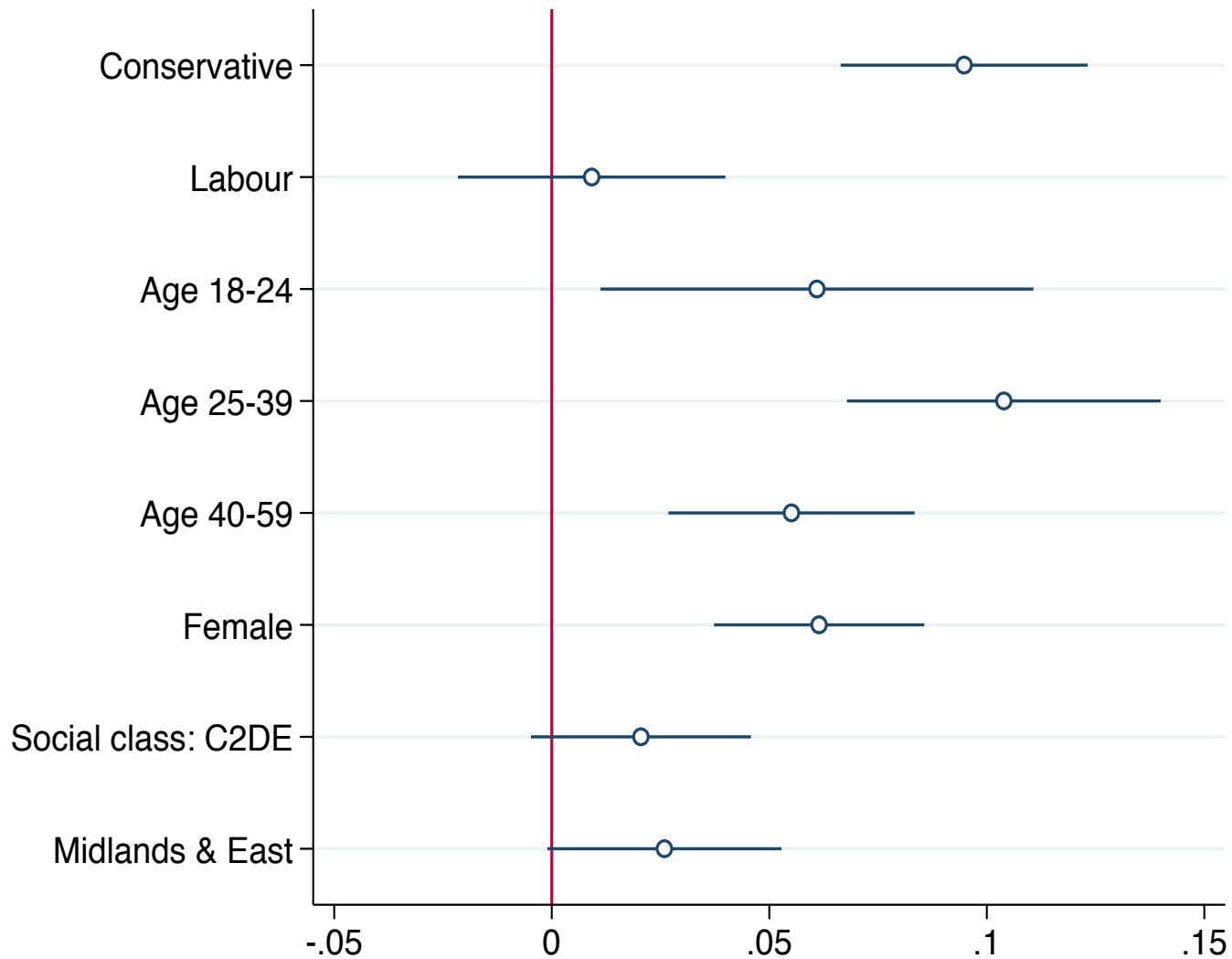
# Subgroups: Moderates vs Extremists

Moderates moved more than Extremists

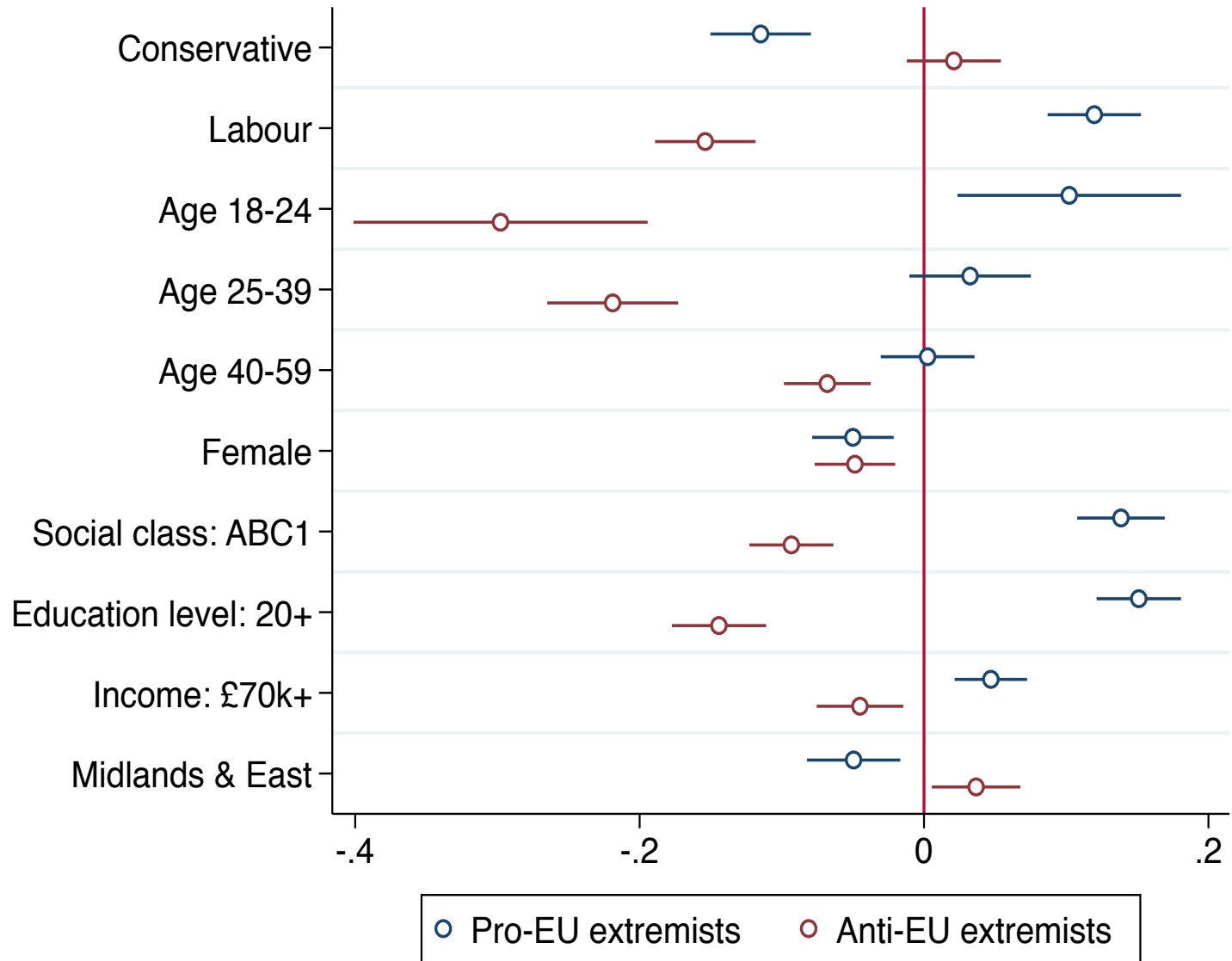
Anti-EU frames 'priced-in' for Extremists



# Who are the 'EU moderates' ?

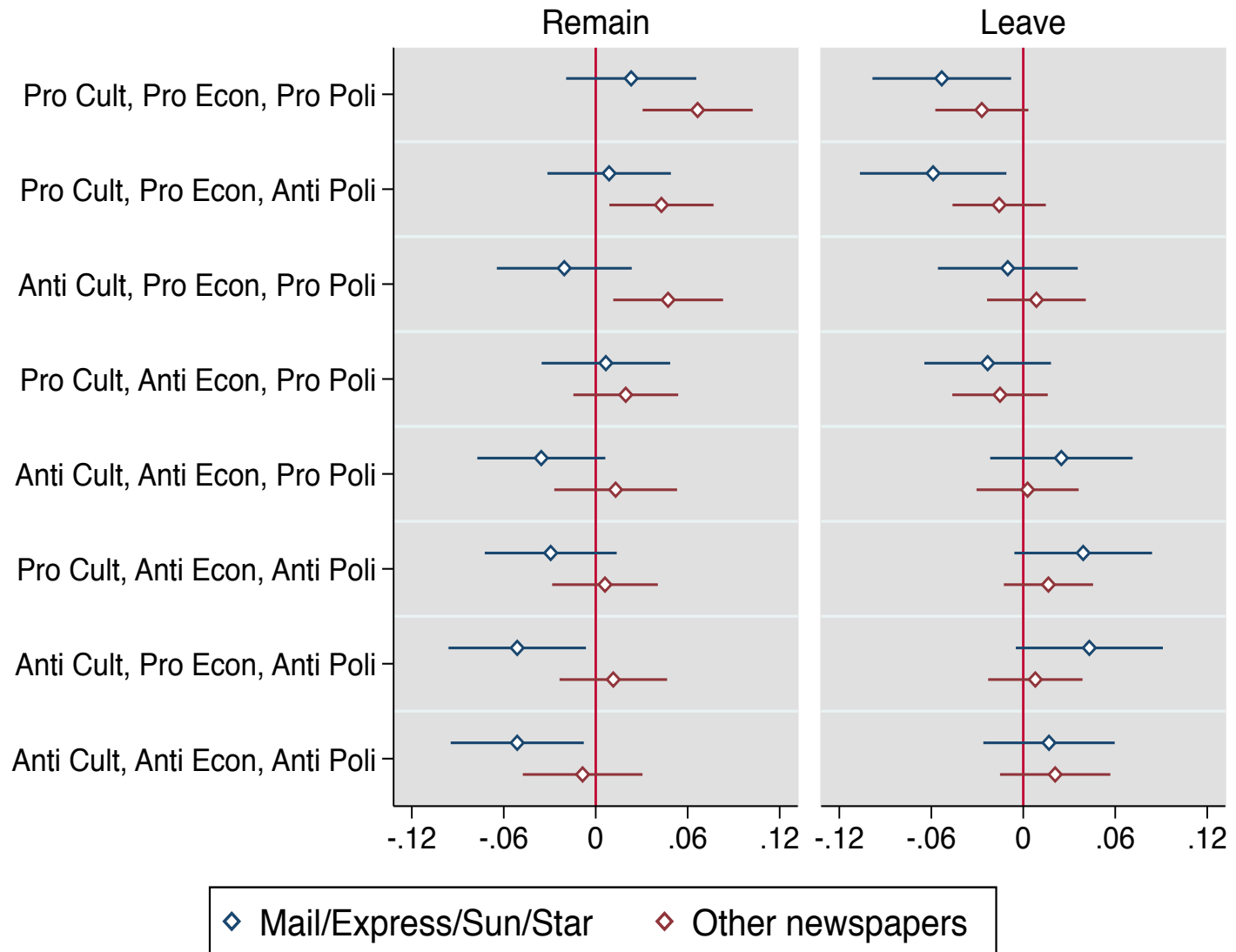


# Who are the 'EU Extremists' ?



# Are Anti-EU arguments “priced in”?

i.e. Mail/Express/Sun/Star readers (n=1,934) more likely to have heard anti-EU arguments already



# Conclusions

EU attitudes are highly polarised and correlated with main social divisions

In a close referendum, argument framing could make all the difference

Our experimental design tests the effect of established “pro-Remain” and “pro-Leave” vignettes

Main findings:

- Pro-EU arguments significantly increase support for Remain while anti-EU arguments have less of an impact on support for either side

- Pro-EU frames increase support for Remain among Labour voters, undecided voters, lower social grades, younger & southern voters

- Anti-EU arguments, when combined, reduce support for Remain among Conservative voters, older voters & northerners

Suggests that people not usually exposed to pro arg's are responsive to them => anti-EU arguments are 'priced in' (after 30+ years of anti-EU press)

But, readers of anti-EU papers *are* persuaded by both Pro- and Anti-arguments (?!)