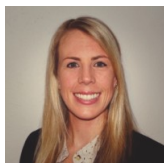


How data-driven democracy both helps and hinders politics



Much data relating to parliament is now being collected and made available for anyone to access. Does this monitoring mean more democracy? [Ben Worthy](#) and [Stefani Langehennig](#) argue that the resulting numbers often lack context and so feed into subjective narratives.

We live in a data-driven democracy, never more than now. Our eyes are locked on graphs, measures and comparisons, and an unending stream of data offers ways of making sense of and [quantifying the political world](#) around us. Yet our faith in the [‘transparency of numbers’](#) might be misplaced. Layers of biases, uncertainties and inequalities lurk beneath the clarity they offer.

One target of this data-gathering is Westminster, which is what our new [Leverhume Trust project](#) looks at. The project combines analysis of media stories and social media with case studies and surveys to map out who is using all of this data and what impact it is having, both on those being watched and those doing the watching.

You can now easily measure, analyse and compare what MPs and peers are doing. For any curious citizen, there is now a whole raft of data sources about how elected and unelected members vote, how they use their expenses, or what they do or don't do outside their political role. [Postcode look ups](#), where you can find which way your MP went in key votes, are now a regular feature. New sites analyse and update [members ‘expenses](#) and [register of interests data](#).

The data creates a set of benchmarks and measures, and a kind of ecosystem of political monitoring. They are often used as a shortcut to tell us about individual politicians we don't know, and to get a sense of where they stand, or stood, on various issues. It creates a trail of accountability that can come to haunt politicians, as seen recently with [controversy](#) over who voted against pay rises for the public sector in 2017. It also opens up the group dynamics of blocs of MPs and can tell us, for example, who blocked Brexit ([not who you think](#)).

But how much transparency does it really offer? The first problem is that numbers over-simplify a complicated world. Quantification, measures and numbers offer us the illusion of certainty. Voting for or against something can be far from simple. The [website that provides this data](#) itself warns that ‘bit more subjectivity comes into play’ in interpreting voting decisions. Take Huw Merriman's explanation of the contortions members faced in the Brexit vote in April 2019:

I passionately believe that we have to follow the 2016 referendum result, even though I voted remain. I voted for the triggering of article 50, to keep no deal on the table, against a second referendum and against a long delay to our exit date. My voting record in Parliament reflects the will of the British people...anything else would lead to huge mistrust in our political system.

Much of what MPs do is hidden or very difficult to quantify. There is no comparable data, for example, on how many constituency surgeries MPs hold, and we can only see on social media or the local press what they do in their communities. Even in Westminster, valuable work in committees or bending ministerial ears is necessarily out of sight.

The second problem is that objective numbers lead to subjective judgment. Data makes lists and comparisons easy – almost too easy. Any benchmark risks slipping from describing something to making a moral judgement about it. Jeremy Corbyn's voting record either proves he was [‘on the right side of history’](#) or would [‘make Thatcher proud’](#), depending on your taste. Data on expenses can tell us who is the ‘worst abuser’ or who claimed the least ([22p for a banana](#), before you ask). But what is a good level of expenses use and what does that tell us? Even the public sector pay vote is more complex than it looks and, as Full Fact pointed out [‘needs some context’](#) as did the £10,000 pay rise [that was for office costs](#).

The judgment itself is skewed. Female MPs suffered [more from the expenses](#) crisis. *The Sun* had to apologise to one female MP on its list of 'lazy' MPs. The House of Commons was [concerned](#) that well-off MPs could afford not to claim any expenses, while less wealthy had to – and risk criticism. Even more complex is the House of Lords, where everything the data reveals is bound up in the slow-burn question of the 'other places' legitimacy, role and reform.

The final problem is that these measures become '[Engines of Anxiety](#)' for those being watched, who then react accordingly. Can you game the numbers? It's often said [Written Question numbers shot up](#) when TheyWorkForYou used it as measure of activity. Nick De Bois MP [pointed out](#) how speaking in the House was done:

Sometimes...so you can enlighten constituents on your position on any given issue. Either that, or because it's not a good thing to have against your name 'Below-average number of speeches in the House of Commons' on that pesky 'They Work for You' website, which relentlessly measures how active you are in the chamber.

The danger is that these new tools help and hinder politics, a problem of numbers versus narrative. Taken together, this data creates a kind of continuous scrutiny, which constantly expands. Beyond expenses you can see, for example, which [former MPs still have Parliamentary passes](#) or even if someone with a [Parliament IP address has made changes to Wikipedia](#).

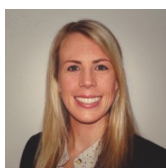
The numbers help the public to know and understand more, more simply and make it easier to hold politicians to account. Yet the numbers themselves are trapped in a narrative, a familiar story of expenses, interests and black and white views. The danger is that our new data-driven democracy reinforces an age-old tale about politicians.

Note: the project on which the above draws is funded by the Leverhulme Trust. If you have used Parliament data, please help with the project survey [here](#).

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