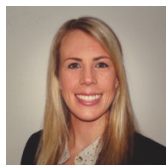


An MP's voting record matters, but not in the way you think



While a single vote is unlikely to end an MP's career, their voting record can have a series of more subtle influences on various groups, explain [Ben Worthy](#) and [Stefani Langehennig](#).

Does one vote by a legislator matter? In an age of Twitter, monitoring platforms, and seemingly unending cliff-edge votes, it certainly seems so. But can one vote really have career-ending consequences? We examine this as part of our [Leverhulme project looking at who is using data to monitor what politicians do](#).

In the UK, the last few decades are littered with symbolic and important votes, from military action in Iraq and Syria to same-sex marriage. Since 2016, how MPs have or haven't voted seems to have dominated British politics in a series of apparent cliff-hangers. Newspapers, local and national, regularly [report on how an MP or groups of MPs voted](#), while sites such as TheyWorkForYou make it easy to track and post results. [The BBC and others regularly offer vote searches for each MP](#). So, if you open a newspaper or log on to social media, every vote does indeed seem to matter.

However, the truth is a little more complicated. Votes are the end point of closed-door bargaining and (occasionally) pleading. Given party loyalty, most votes are foregone conclusions and political theatre, unless something goes wrong or [proceedings go virtual](#).

As [this paper points out](#), for one vote to really matter, a number of factors need to be in play all at once. An MP needs a small (and overturn-able) majority, an opponent who is clearly on the other side of the argument, and a standout issue that the public care about, know about, and will vote about. All these things happening at once is quite rare.

Has there ever been such a perfect storm? The four years of Brexit would seem to fit. There was public interest, political opposition, and the conundrum of Remainer MPs in Leave seats (and vice versa). Yet even Brexit didn't really have all the factors in play. To illustrate, in 2019 of 'the 650 parliamentary constituencies, 67 seats were won by a margin of 5% or less of votes cast'. One study estimated that Brexit only [influenced five seats](#) in 2017. For all the sound and fury, the recent free school meals votes is unlikely to have an effect on many Conservative MPs because we are so far from another election (except perhaps for Ben Bradley, [whose explanation for his vote will probably be remembered for some time in Mansfield](#)).

The academic literature supports this scepticism. The conventional wisdom is that an MP needs to be pretty seriously, but also pretty regularly, out of line with their constituents' wishes. And even if MPs are pitched against their constituents, they can argue and make their case, which they do a great deal in Hansard, on twitter, and everywhere else they can. It is rare that any issue is so stark. One of the few clear examples, from the US, was the career-ending voting behaviour of [committed pacifist Jeanette Rankin](#), the first female Congresswoman who voted against World War One. She was voted out and then voted back in again just in time to be the sole member of Congress to vote against World War Two. Perhaps Trump's appeasers in the House and Senate will find their voting records tie them [to Trump 'with a cord of steel for all of history' to quote Adam Schiff](#).

But that doesn't mean MPs are immune. Voting can have a series of more subtle influences on various groups watching. One vote sometimes matters because MPs *think it matters*. As [Arnold found in the US](#), legislators continuously try to anticipate what their voters want, and imagine which votes could prove deadly for their re-election or would look damaging on another party's election leaflet. Being a legislator is a constant struggle for [voting 'leeway'](#). They must explain, justify, and be accountable for what they do. Sometimes, [they even apologise](#). It's at least important enough that a group of 50 MPs [complained recently in a public letter](#) about how TheyWorkForYou displays their voting record on climate change.

This can lead to all sorts of interesting outcomes. John Redwood drove a coach and horses through the classic argument about whether MPs are 'trustees' or 'delegates'. In 2013 he became a kind of super-delegate when he committed on his blog to vote on same-sex marriage depending on what [most of the letters sent to him told him to do](#) (dear reader, they told him to vote no). MPs can also use voting records against other members, as [Keir Starmer did against Boris Johnson recently in PMQs](#).

Another influential group are opposition candidates and local parties. Opponents gleefully look over and use MPs' records, of course. Interestingly, MPs' own local parties also watch their MPs' voting record closely. One vote can lead to party unhappiness and defections, as seen with same-sex marriage in 2013, which can make an MP's life harder. De-selections became a reality for the Conservatives during Brexit, when [local parties started a purge against its Remainers which the national party then finished](#).

Finally, data is often used as a shortcut to see where an MP stands, or what they might do in the future. How MPs vote as groups can thus shape all sorts of different narratives about politics that really do matter. For the last few years, data on key Brexit votes have helped create a narrative that Parliament was 'blocking the Will of the People'. While this [wasn't strictly true](#), it was powerfully used by Theresa May and then Boris Johnson to help get 'Brexit done'.

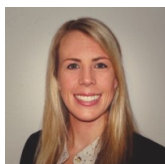
On the surface, it seems disappointing for believers in democratic accountability that, for all the cliff-hangers, votes don't seem to matter. But while there is no direct accountability, there are more subtle influences. Just being watched makes legislators wary of their votes and makes them think about what they do. And wary legislators are good for democracy.

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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