

Speaking for Britain? MPs broadly reflect the views of their supporters on Europe – but one side should worry a little more than the other

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*Do MPs' views on Europe reflect those of their voters? **Tim Bale (left), Sofia Vasilopoulou, Philip Cowley and Anand Menon** asked both groups the same questions about the EU, and found some notable differences on the issues of freedom of movement and migrant benefits. In particular, Labour voters are significantly more Eurosceptic than the MPs they elect.*



To hear some people talk about ‘the political class’, you’d think that those who do the electing and those that get elected have little in common, creating a damaging disconnect which is supposedly fuelling populist politics on both left and right. If they’re right, then we need to worry: representative democracy structured around political parties relies on there being at least a reasonable congruence between the ideas of those who are represented and those who do the representing.

Europe is often given as a prime example by those who claim there’s a gulf between the views of ‘the people’ and those at Westminster. Out there, it is said, folk have been fed up with Brussels for years, but up (or down) in London, only a handful of MPs have – until recently anyway – been prepared to put their heads above the parapet and say we should get out of the EU.

With a referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU imminent, it is worth taking a look at that so-called gulf between those who sit in the House of Commons and those who put them there – and in particular at whether the views on Europe held by those who sit on the green leather benches in the name of a particular party bear any similarity to the views of those voters who support that party.



Alan Johnson, leader of Labour’s In campaign. Photo: [Catch21 Productions](#) via a [Creative Commons 2.0 licence](#)

In the spring of 2015, [we asked voters a series of questions designed to get at their opinions and their feelings about the European Union](#). A few months ago [we asked the same questions to MPs](#). How do they compare?

First, we asked a general question about how much the UK had benefited from being in the EU. The results are shown in Table 1.

All			Conservatives			Labour		
All			Conservatives			Labour		
MPs	Voters	Difference	MPs	Supporters	Difference	MPs	Supporters	Difference

	All			Conservatives			Labour		
1 - Strongly disagree	11%	11%	0	20%	9%	-11	3	6	+3
2	9%	13%	+4	18%	16%	-2	-	8%	+8
3	7%	13%	+6	13%	17%	+4	-	9%	+9
4	16%	23%	+7	25%	21%	-4	8%	22%	+14
5	15%	20%	+5	10%	22%	+12	23%	21%	-2
6	15%	15%	0	10%	10%	-	15%	24%	+9
7- Strongly agree	27%	6%	-21	5%	5%	0	51%	11%	-40

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Note: In this and all subsequent tables, data for voters come from a survey (N=3000) of British voters in April and May 2015; the figures for party supporters are those who said they felt close to one of the parties (Conservative supporters N = 802; Labour supporters N=587). The data for MPs comes from a survey (N=98) conducted by Ipsos Mori's Reputation Centre in November and December 2015; the figures for all MPs include representatives of the other parties in the House of Commons, with data weighted to reflect the balance of the House by party and ministerial status. Data reported are rebased to remove Don't Knows and non-respondents.

The House of Commons is rather more inclined than the population it represents to think that the UK has done well out of EU membership. A majority of MPs (57%) agreed with the claim that the UK has greatly benefitted from being in the EU (that is a score of 5-7), compared to 41% of voters – and more than a quarter of MPs (27%) gave the strongest possible score of 7, compared to just 6% of voters. There are plenty of Eurosceptic MPs (27% gave a response of 1-3), but fewer than there are out there in the electorate (37% of whom ticked 1-3) and the centre of gravity in the Commons is clearly more pro-EU than it is in the country as a whole.

When it comes to the two main parties, Conservative supporters, although they aren't quite as likely as Conservative MPs to dismiss out of hand the idea that the UK has benefited from EU membership, are broadly speaking similarly Eurosceptic. That said, rather more of them are prepared to see some (albeit not much) good in the whole thing.

For Labour, however, a larger proportion of the parties' supporters than its MPs reckon the UK hasn't got much out of the EU. And, by the same token, a much smaller proportion of Labour supporters than Labour MPs are inclined to believe that the country has benefited greatly from membership: a full half of Labour MPs gave the most pro-EU response possible, compared to just 11% of Labour supporters.

A similar, though not identical, pattern, was revealed when we asked about whether integration had gone too far or should go further: on that question, Labour supporters are broadly in line with their MPs; Tory supporters, predictably enough, come over as Eurosceptic but are much less willing than Tory MPs to hold what one might call ultra-sceptical positions. On a scale from 1 to 11, where 1 meant that the integration of Europe has already gone too far and 11 meant that European integration should be pushed further, 64 per cent of Tory MPs selected 1, compared to just 20 per cent of Tory supporters.

We then turned to policy, asking questions about the right of free movement of workers and the right of those moving from one country to another to claim benefits outside their home country, two key parts of the government's renegotiation agenda. The results are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

All	Conservatives	Labour
All	Conservatives	Labour

	All			Conservatives			Labour		
	MPs	Voters	Difference	MPs	Supporters	Difference	MPs	Supporters	Difference
1 - Strongly disagree	8%	3%	-5	2	2	-	13%	3%	-10
2	14%	4%	-10	3%	3%	-	18%	6%	-12
3	11%	6%	-5	10%	3%	-7	15%	9%	-6
4	16%	14%	-2	13%	8%	-5	21%	17%	-4
5	11%	18%	+7	11%	18%	+7	13%	19%	+6
6	16%	24%	+8	21%	27%	+6	11%	23%	+12
7 - Strongly agree	25%	31%	+6	40%	37%	-3	10%	23%	+13

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	All			Conservatives			Labour		
	MPs	Voters	Difference	MPs	Supporters	Difference	MPs	Supporters	Difference
1 - Strongly disagree	8%	3%	-5	2%	2%	-	13%	3%	-10
2	14%	4%	-10	3%	3%	-	18%	6%	-12
3	11%	6%	-5	10%	3%	-7	15%	9%	-6
4	16%	14%	-2	13%	8%	-5	21%	17%	-4
5	11%	18%	+7	11%	18%	+7	13%	19%	+6
6	16%	24%	+8	21%	27%	+6	11%	23%	+12
7 - Strongly agree	25%	31%	+6	40%	37%	-3	10%	23%	+13

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On these two touchstone issues, those elected to represent the British people do not, as a whole, take as hard a line as those they represent. Taking scores of 5 to 7 to indicate agreement, we find majorities of voters supporting both proposals (56% and 73% respectively), but only a minority of MPs back restrictions on the right to work and only a bare majority (52%) support the restrictions on welfare benefits. Tory supporters, broadly speaking, take an equally, and even a slightly harder line, on both issues than their MPs. But the difference is particularly striking when it comes to Labour supporters, who are take a much harder line than their MPs on both issues.

Finally, we turned to feelings, presenting MPs and supporters of both parties with a series of words designed to tap into the emotions evoked by the country's EU membership. The results are summarised in Table 4.

	All			Conservatives			Labour		
	MPs	Voters	Difference	MPs	Supporters	Difference	MPs	Supporters	Difference

		All			Conservatives			Labour		
		MPs	Voters	Difference	MPs	Supporters	Difference	MPs	Supporters	Difference
Positive	Confident	22%	10%	-12	8%	6%	-2	37%	10%	-27
	Happy	19%	12%	-7	4%	9%	+5	37%	39%	+2
	Hopeful	44%	26%	-18	20%	9%	-11	63%	21%	-42
	Proud	24%	7%	-14	8%	3%	-5	42%	15%	-27
	Indifferent	15%	25%	+10	16%	22%	+6	16%	21%	+5
Negative	Afraid	12%	16%	+4	12%	20%	+8	16%	10%	-6
	Angry	15%	18%	+3	24%	21%	-3	8%	11%	+3
	Disgusted	11%	15%	+4	16%	15%	-1	8%	9%	+1

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Apart from the fact that more voters than MPs seem indifferent to the UK's membership of the EU, what stands out is how much more positive about it the Commons as a whole is compared to the public. MPs are more likely than the public to say they are confident, happy, hopeful and proud – and less likely to say they are afraid, angry, disgusted or uneasy. This is especially true when we compare Labour MPs and Labour supporters. With one exception (the scores for 'happy'), there are sizeable differences between the proportion of Labour MPs giving positive responses and the proportion of Labour supporters doing the same. Conservative supporters, while they are slightly more likely than the party's MPs to say that the UK's membership makes them feel 'afraid' and slightly less likely to say that it makes them feel 'hopeful', are more in line with those MPs in the sense that membership makes almost two thirds of them, too, feel uneasy.

We do, then, find some support for the idea that there is a gap between the views of representatives and the represented. In general, the Commons is a little less Eurosceptic than the public, although the difference is hardly a gulf. MPs from both of Britain's main parties broadly reflect their own supporters' views on Europe, although voters take a harder line on the free movement of labour and on migrant benefits than MPs, including those MPs representing the parties they favour. This is particularly the case for Labour supporters, who also feel much less positive about the EU than do Labour MPs. All the more reason, perhaps, why Labour's In for Britain campaign, fronted by one of its big beasts, former Home Secretary Alan Johnson, may play a crucial part in efforts to ensure that the UK remains in the EU.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.

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