

CSI Brexit 7: The State of Trust in British Politicians[†]

Thursday 7th November, 2019

Summary

- In wave 8 of the CSI Brexit panel study, participants were asked to select which politician they trusted from a list we provided, including the main party leaders.
- The most popular answer by far was ‘None or Other’, showing a substantial lack of trust in political elites among the sample. Theresa May, the then Prime Minister, was the second most frequent answer.
- Party loyalty was limited, with only Nicola Sturgeon being named as ‘trusted’ by more than 50% of her party’s identifiers.
- Many respondents demonstrated a lack of knowledge about their trusted politician’s position on Theresa May’s negotiated withdrawal agreement, including a large proportion of those individuals who trusted Jeremy Corbyn or Boris Johnson. Nigel Farage, however, appears to have communicated his position very clearly; almost all of those who trusted him knew his opinion.

[†]This work is part of a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council’s The UK in a Changing Europe initiative. For more information, see: <http://ukandeu.ac.uk/>. The report was written by Dan Snow, a DPhil candidate in Oxford’s Sociology department who is also funded by the ESRC. Suggested citation: ‘Snow, D. (2019). CSI Brexit 7: The State of Trust in British Politicians. Centre for Social Investigation’.

Introduction

This report begins by briefly describing the theoretical importance of trust in politics, particularly in the context of Brexit. It then analyses answers given by respondents to questions about trust in politicians from wave 8 of the CSI Brexit Project. It proceeds to compare different politicians by how well they communicate their political position to those respondents who trust them. Overall, the findings suggest that trust in politicians is low, that partisan identity plays a limited role in promoting trust in party leaders, and that there is variation in the extent to which politicians convey their opinions on important political issues clearly.

Trust in Politicians

The 2016 EU referendum in Britain has inspired a great deal of research and analysis, not only in academic circles.¹ One theme that has emerged from these debates is the idea that the vote for a British exit ('Brexit') was tied closely to a loss of trust among voters in political elites. The establishment encouraged individuals to vote for Remain but, unlike in the 1975 referendum on EEC membership, voters chose not to follow their recommendation.²

Politicians are indeed widely distrusted in Britain,³ both in their propensity to tell the truth⁴ and their propensity to 'do what is right'.⁵

But distrust in politicians 'as a whole' does not imply distrust of every single politician. Indeed it was Michael Gove, a prominent politician himself, who raised the point about voter distrust in a debate prior to the referendum.⁶ And Boris Johnson's defection to the Leave side is considered by many to have been pivotal to the campaign's success,⁷ implying that at least some voters were willing to listen to, and trust, what Johnson had to say. It is therefore fruitful to consider the question of trust at a more fine grained level, asking which politicians specifically, if any, are trusted.

Which political leaders are trusted?

In wave 8 of our survey we provided respondents with a list of 13 politicians and asked them to select which one they trusted.⁸ The survey was collected online by Kantar Public UK in June / July 2019, with the aim of being representative of the UK population. 3076 individuals answered our question,⁹ and over half of these chose to select a politician from our list, rather than responding 'None or Other'.

Table 1 shows the percentages of respondents who trusted each politician. Respondents were presented the options in randomised order, but the table below is ordered by frequency.¹⁰

The first and most interesting finding is that 'None / Other' received a substantial number of responses; 49% of those who answered this question appear to have not trusted a single politician

¹Oliver 2019.

²Goodwin 2019.

³Sippitt and Kersley 2019.

⁴Skinner and Clemence 2018.

⁵EdelmanTrust 2019.

⁶Mance 2016.

⁷Farrell and Goldsmith 2017.

⁸Unfortunately, the list we provided was partly a product of the political situation at the time, which has since changed. For example, we asked about trust in Vince Cable, but the leader of the Liberal Democrats is now Jo Swinson (who did not appear on our list). We also included a large number of Conservative MPs because there was a leadership election at the time, and we wanted to maximise the chance of including the next Prime Minister.

⁹2635 respondents were residents of England, 146 of Wales, 246 of Scotland, and 49 of Northern Ireland.

¹⁰Weighted percentages are used, applying the post-stratification weights to attempt to account for the sample's under-representation of certain types of individuals, and to account for both demographic characteristics and previous electoral turnout.

Table 1: Percentage of Sample Trusting Major Politicians

Politician	Party	Percentage
None / Other	NA	49
Theresa May	Conservatives	11
Nigel Farage	Brexit Party	8
Jeremy Corbyn	Labour	6
Boris Johnson	Conservatives	5
Vince Cable	Liberal Democrats	5
Nicola Sturgeon	SNP	4
Ruth Davidson	(Scottish) Conservatives	4
Jeremy Hunt	Conservatives	3
Arlene Foster	DUP	1
Adam Price	Plaid Cymru	1
Jonathan Bartley	Greens	1
Ian Blackford	SNP	0
Mark Drakeford	(Welsh) Labour	0

on the list.¹¹ It is also surprising to note the large degree of trust shown in Theresa May (relative to the other politicians listed), though this might simply reflect that, as Prime Minister at the time the survey was collected, her name was particularly recognisable for those unfamiliar with politics. Also worth noting is that Farage was trusted by more individuals than Corbyn, though Johnson and Hunt, both senior Conservative politicians, were not trusted by quite as many people. Less well known figures, such as Ian Blackford and Mark Drakeford, were selected by very few respondents (rounded down to 0%).

Party Loyalty: Its role and its limits

To give a better picture of how trust varies by partisan identity, Table 2 is broken down by respondents' answers to the question 'with which party do you most identify?'.¹² The columns reflect this party variable so that, for example, the column 'Party Leader' shows the number of individuals in each party who trust the official leader of their party.¹³

Trust in the leader of the two major parties, among party identifiers, was nearly level for the Conservatives and Labour; both May and Corbyn were trusted by about 25% of those self-identifying as supporting their party. One difference, however, is that many Conservatives who did not trust May instead opted to select Johnson (12%), another Conservative MP (19%) or Farage (8%). By contrast, less than 10% of Labour identifiers declared trust in either Johnson or Farage. More Labour identifiers instead chose to select 'None or Other' (41%), which might simply reflect the lack of alternative options in our questionnaire compared to the large number of Conservative MP options. Even with all of these options, 29% of the Conservative identifiers claimed that they trusted no one or someone not on the provided list.

Turning to the other parties, party leaders seem to be slightly more trusted by their supporters than in the case of Labour or the Conservatives, though only in the case of the SNP do more than half of party identifiers trust their party leader. Farage is, unsurprisingly, trusted little except by those

¹¹ Interestingly, our application of weights to the sample increased the proportion of support for 'None or Other', implying that the hard to reach individuals in surveys (who are weighted more highly) are also less likely to trust mainstream politicians.

¹² Results not shown for the DUP or Plaid Cymru because there were too few responses for the percentages to be meaningful, and not shown for other parties that did not have a leader featured in the list (except for UKIP because Farage is a former leader).

¹³ A dash is found in cells where no available option was offered in the list, e.g. UKIP Leader, and square brackets are used when two options overlap e.g. Conservatives with 'Party Leader' or 'May'.

Table 2: Political Trust by Party ID as Row Percentages

	Party Leader	May	Johnson	Farage	Other from party	Other Selected (in list)	None or Other (not on list)
Conservatives	25%	[25%]	12%	8%	19%	7%	29%
Labour	26%	5%	3%	4%	0%	21%	41%
Brexit Party	41%	10%	10%	[41%]	-	13%	26%
Lib Dem	31%	11%	2%	1%	-	24%	31%
Green Party	7%	7%	3%	2%	-	40%	41%
UKIP	NA	17%	14%	18%	-	25%	27%
SNP	58%	0%	0%	3%	2%	13%	23%

identifying with the Brexit Party or with UKIP. The varying levels of trust in May and Johnson, however, may reflect the differences in Remain versus Leave support. For example, whilst a higher proportion of Brexit Party identifiers claim to trust Johnson than May, the converse is true for the Liberal Democrats.

Finally, it is worth considering the last two columns. Not much can be gained by looking at the ‘Other Selected (in list)’ column, because it will partly reflect the number of respondents who chose not to select for May, Johnson or Farage (who have their own columns). This likely explains why only 7% of Conservative party identifiers were sorted into the ‘Other Selected’ column.

Considering the column ‘None or Other’ is more illuminating. Firstly, and again perhaps reflecting the extra choice available to Brexiteers, supporters of more left-wing and pro-Remain parties seem to have been more likely to choose ‘None or Other’ than a politician on the list provided. But it is still surprising that just over 40% of those identifying as Labour or as Green supporters found no one on the list that they would claim to trust. Indeed, the apparent low level of trust across all of the parties, with a higher percentage of party identifiers trusting *no one* rather than their own party leader for all parties, seems to mirror the voter volatility that increasingly characterises the British electorate.

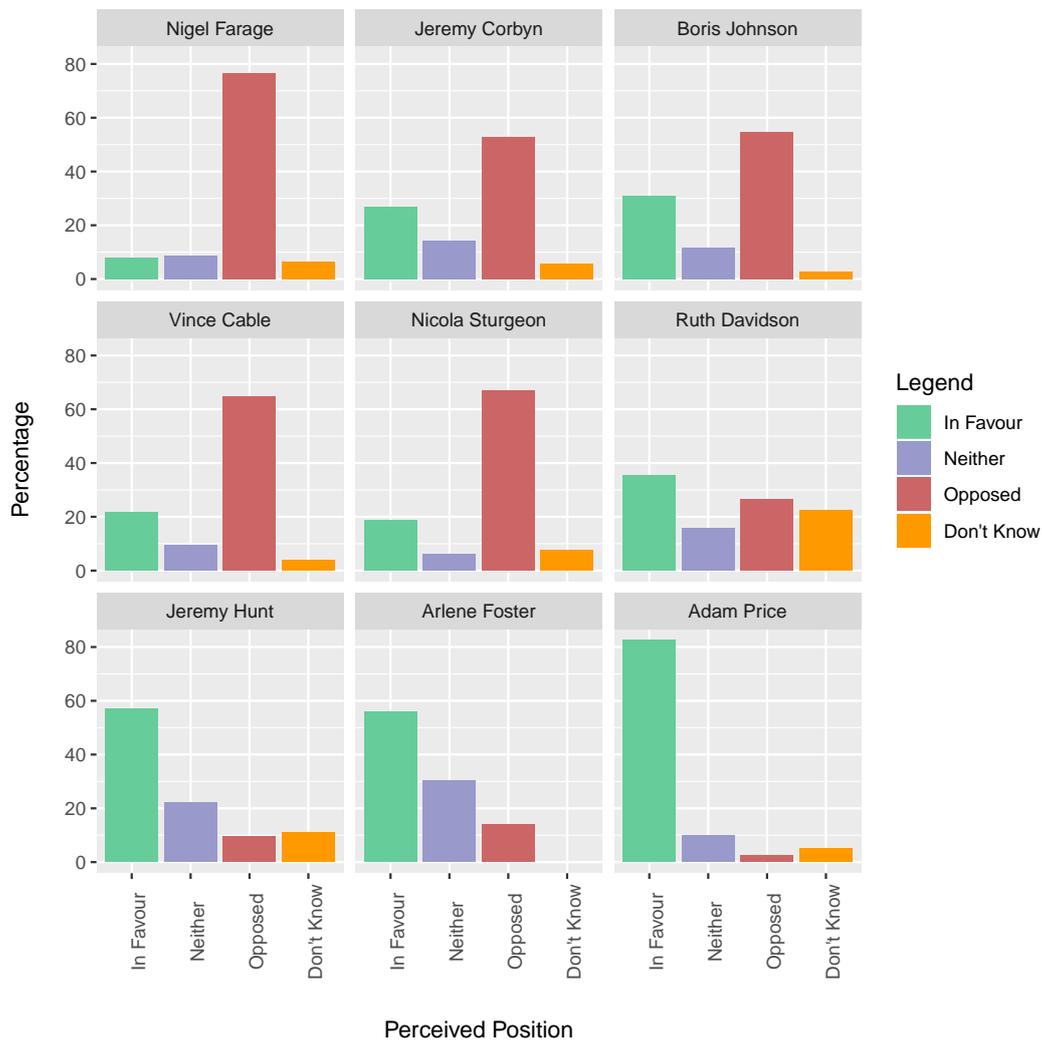
Despite the limited link between party identity and trust in that party’s leader, there is still a link between party identity in general and trust. In a logistic regression with ‘no trust’ as the dependent variable, identification with a political party substantially and significantly reduced the odds of selecting no one from our list of politicians (relative to no party identity). This was true for *all* of the main political parties,¹⁴ and held when controls were added for age and gender (full results are reported in the Appendix). It therefore seems that party identity might at least increase the chances of trusting a major politician, and that this is not simply due to individuals of a certain age or gender self-selecting into both partisan identity and a trusting mindset.

¹⁴As well as for a variable capturing party identification for the smaller parties

Political Communication: Public knowledge of where politicians stand

Following the question about trust in politicians, those who had selected a politician from the list (other than Theresa May) were asked what position they thought their trusted politician took on Theresa May's deal, negotiated with the EU. The responses are shown in Figure 1.¹⁵ Readers should note that almost all of those featured in our list were vocally opposed to Theresa May's deal. Of those who, as MPs, had an opportunity to vote on the agreement, only two from the list voted in favour of the deal on any occasion; Boris Johnson and Jeremy Hunt. Johnson voted in favour, reluctantly, on the third and last reading of the Bill, whilst Hunt supported it on all three occasions. Ruth Davidson, who is a member of the Scottish Parliament, was also in support of the deal but unable to vote.

Figure 1: Perceptions of Politicians' Opinions about May's Withdrawal Agreement



Firstly, it appears that very few individuals responded that they did not know their trusted politician's position on Theresa May's negotiated deal (between 0 and 15% for most politicians). This might reflect that 'trust' is not given without respondents at least *believing* that they have some degree of understanding of where the politician stands on important political issues.

Secondly, despite the low frequency of 'don't know' responses, there was quite a lack of knowledge displayed in the responses that *were* given. Overall, more respondents correctly stated their

¹⁵ Answers not shown for those who trusted Bartley, Blackford or Drakeford because there were too few individuals for meaningful comparisons to be made

trusted politician's position than incorrectly, but there are still a sizeable number who were completely wrong about what their 'trusted' political figure thought about a highly salient political issue. It is particularly interesting to note the heterogeneity across politicians in this respect: Johnson, Corbyn and Davidson, in particular, seem to have left those trusting them somewhat confused about their position when compared to Farage or Sturgeon. In the case of Johnson this may simply reflect the fact that there isn't a straightforward answer to the question we posed; he did vote in favour for the deal on one occasion. And yet for most in the list, confusion about their position cannot simply be attributed to political flexibility. Corbyn, for example, was clearly and consistently opposed to May's deal, and yet 27% of those trusting him thought he was in favour of it. This suggests that, whether or not he was *trying* to convey a clear political message to his main supporters, he did not do so effectively. Farage, by contrast, appears to have very successfully communicated his strong opposition to the deal to those who trust him, and his clarity of opinion may be part of the reason he is trusted by such a relatively large number in the first place. Part of the explanation for confusion about some politicians' positions on May's deal may also be that some voters themselves were difficult to communicate to, choosing to project their own opinions onto their favoured politicians, rather than attempting to actually learn what those politicians had to say first.

Conclusion

This research note has, hopefully, provided some insight into the state of trust in British politicians in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. It has shown that trust in major British politicians is fairly low, and relates only partially to party loyalty. It also appears that trusting a politician does not entail understanding that politician's position on important political issues.

The surprisingly weak connection between partisan identity and trust in party leaders also raises questions concerning electoral volatility at the coming general election. If the election campaign focusses heavily on the issue of Brexit, as seems likely, many voters will have to choose between four parties,¹⁶ essentially split across a single dimension. The question of whether a Remain voter chooses to cast their ballot for Labour or the Liberal Democrats may well depend partly on the degree to which they trust each leader to deliver on their promises concerning renegotiations and a second referendum, as well, of course, as tactical voting considerations. Likewise, ardent Brexiters might well decide their vote on the basis of whether they trust Boris Johnson or Nigel Farage more to deliver an uncompromising exit from the EU.

The analysis above also points to avenues for further research. Given that individuals were asked to only pick one individual from a list of politicians, future surveys might consider broader questions about trust, such as the option to declare trust in as many politicians as they wish, or to rank them in order of trustworthiness. This would facilitate investigation into the degree of trust shown by different individuals, and allow for a more in-depth comparison of which politicians are partly trusted by many individuals, even if they are not the *most* trusted.

The importance of communication, and its connection to trust, has also been highlighted. Some of the more frequently trusted politicians, such as Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn, also appear to be the least successful at communicating their political opinions to those who trust them. Of course, this may partly explain *why* they are so trusted, with individuals able to interpret their political opinions in a charitable light, (though Farage is both better understood and more trusted than either). More research could be done to understand how politicians communicate their position, why some are much more effective at this than others, and whether trust is best cultivated in the long term by clear or vague communication.

¹⁶Curtice 2019.

In a political landscape marked by widespread cynicism, party u-turns, and a general dislike of ‘political elites’, the politics of trust is highly relevant. Researchers should work to better understand the trust, or lack thereof, that can exist between voters and politicians.

References

- Curtice, John (2019). *It's My Job to Predict Elections, but This Four-Party Fight Will Mean Everything Is up for Grabs* — *The Independent*. URL: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/brexit-general-election-poll-boris-johnson-conservatives-labour-lib-dems-vote-a9097216.html> (visited on 10/22/2019).
- EdelmanTrust (2019). *2019 Edelman Trust Barometer* — *Edelman*. URL: <https://www.edelman.com/trust-barometer> (visited on 10/25/2019).
- Farrell, Jason and Paul Goldsmith (2017). *How To Lose A Referendum: The Definitive Story of Why the UK Voted for Brexit*. London: Biteback Publishing.
- Goodwin, Matthew (2019). “The End of Trust in Our Political Class”. en. In: *New Statesman*. URL: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2019/05/end-trust-our-political-class> (visited on 09/08/2019).
- Hlavac, Marek (2018). *Stargazer: Well-Formatted Regression and Summary Statistics Tables*. Bratislava, Slovakia: Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI). URL: <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=stargazer>.
- Mance, Henry (2016). *Britain Has Had Enough of Experts, Says Gove*. en-GB. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c> (visited on 10/25/2019).
- Oliver, Tim (2019). “Brexitology: Delving into the Books on Brexit”. In: *International Politics Reviews*. ISSN: 2050-2982. DOI: 10.1057/s41312-018-0069-1.
- Sippitt, Amy and Esther Kersley (2019). *Everyone Talks about Trust but How Many People Understand It?* URL: <https://fullfact.org/blog/2019/jun/political-trust-in-uk/> (visited on 10/25/2019).
- Skinner, Gideon and Michael Clemence (2018). *Advertising Execs Rank below Politicians as Britain's Least-Trusted Profession*. en-uk. URL: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/advertising-execs-rank-below-politicians-britains-least-trusted-profession> (visited on 10/25/2019).

1 Appendix

Table 3: Multinomial Regression of Distrust of Politicians on Partisan Identity

	<i>Dependent Variable: No trust in any on list</i>	
	(1)	(2)
Conservative Id	0.159*** (0.114)	0.164*** (0.118)
Labour Id	0.275*** (0.116)	0.281*** (0.118)
Lib Dem Id	0.173*** (0.159)	0.183*** (0.161)
Brexit Party Id	0.136*** (0.157)	0.141*** (0.159)
Other Party Id	0.181*** (0.139)	0.201*** (0.141)
Prefer not to say (Id)	1.262 (0.340)	1.439 (0.347)
Male 25-34		1.799 (0.392)
Male 35-44		2.920** (0.388)
Male 45-54		3.093** (0.399)
Male 55-69		3.688*** (0.375)
Male 70+		2.477* (0.400)
Female 18-24		4.351*** (0.415)
Female 25-34		3.210** (0.384)
Female 35-44		4.113*** (0.387)
Female 45-54		5.056*** (0.391)
Female 55-69		3.955*** (0.375)
Female 70+		3.377** (0.394)
Constant	2.576*** (0.081)	0.742 (0.368)
Observations	3,076	3,076
Log Likelihood	-1,891.668	-1,865.552
Akaike Inf. Crit.	3,797.337	3,767.105

Note:

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Reported as Odds Ratios, with untransformed standard errors in brackets