

Splitting the difference: the role of fairness in British society on perceptions of politicians' honesty

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Throughout the campaign for 2017 General Election, the Conservative party and the Labour party faced addressing issues of inequality in British society, the honesty of their statements and MPs, and ultimately who could capture voters from the political centre ground. As part of a project at the University of Kent, we explored the relationship between perceived fairness in British society, how this related to perceptions of politicians' honesty, and how this influenced who the centrist electorate intended to vote for.

The Conservative party manifesto was accompanied by a note from party leader Theresa May detailing that their manifesto was “to see us through Brexit and beyond. A plan for a stronger, fairer, more prosperous Britain”¹. The Labour party campaign slogan championed “for the many, not the few”² to suggest tackling inequality in Britain. The party pledged to prioritise jobs and living standards during Brexit³. Media coverage of both UK and EU leaders was mixed, with some discussing whether the UK would receive an unfair “punishment deal”⁴ from EU leaders, while others debated the honesty of UK politicians and in their campaign assertions^{5 6 7}. The traditionally ‘right-wing’ Conservative party and ‘left-wing’ Labour party faced an additional obstacle: both parties faced pressure of appealing to the centre ground^{8 9} to gain votes from the politically centrist electorate.

Post-election analysis has explored why it became a two-party race in the final weeks, examining issues such as people’s previous votes in the EU referendum, and preference for the leadership styles of Theresa May or Jeremy Corbyn¹⁰. Little research, however, has explored which issues split the centrist voters – which factors influenced their perceptions throughout the campaign. As part of our research into political behaviour, we explored where the differences lay in the centre ground and what factors influenced the perceptions of the politicians.

The survey

In the weeks preceding the General Election, we conducted an online study through Qualtrics across Kent and Scotland to explore the perceptions and beliefs of the British electorate. In order to investigate which issues motivated the centrist electorate to vote for a political party, we analysed the perceptions of 1913 respondents who self-reported their political beliefs as being on a scale of 1 (left-wing) to 7 (right-wing). Of these voters, the majority (37.6%) selected 4 as their political

¹ <https://www.conservatives.com/manifesto>

² <http://www.labour.org.uk/index.php/manifesto2017>

³ <http://www.labour.org.uk/index.php/manifesto2017/brexit>

⁴ <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/790921/Brexit-news-EU-members-punish-Britain-tough-deal-divorce-bill-leaving>

⁵ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-dementia-tax-election-2017-dishonesty-u-turn-accusations-a7750291.html>

⁶ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3585680/Ministers-trying-bury-bombshell-migration-report-Boris-Johnson-blasts-dishonest-politicians-misled-public-true-number-EU-immigrants-come-Britain.html>

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http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/15315223.Marianne_Taylor__Davidson_s_depressing_dishonesty_on_immigration/

⁸ <https://www.ft.com/content/f1dcb508-3bc7-11e7-ac89-b01cc67cfeec>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/may/09/tony-blair-labour-return-centre-ground-general-election-defeat>

¹⁰ <http://www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/news/the-brexit-election/>

orientation, indicating that the centrist voters were a key battleground area for the parties to capture. From these politically centrist respondents, we selected the 258 who intended to vote for either the Conservative party or the Labour party. Since both parties emphasised equality in British society and EU negotiations in their campaigns, we used a 5-point scale (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree) to ask respondents questions about their perception of fairness in British society (“In general, I find British society to be fair”), and the honesty of UK and EU politicians (“Most members of UK/EU parliament are honest”). Analysis by YouGov has indicated that the Leave and Remain voters in the Brexit campaign were divided by age, education¹¹, and ethnicity¹² and the General Election votes were divided by age and education¹³, so we controlled for these demographics in the analysis.

The role of perceived societal fairness on ratings of politicians’ honesty

To explore the differences between politically centrist Conservative and Labour supporters, we analysed 1) their perceptions of honesty of UK politicians, 2) how fair British society was perceived to be. Finally, we explored whether the perceptions of honesty were influenced by how fair the respondents believed British society to be. The results suggest that overall, there was a significant differences in how the parties perceived the honesty of UK politicians, with Conservative supporters rating UK politicians as more honest than Labour supporters did (although this effect was quite small). When examining the fairness of British society, Labour party supporters rated society as less fair than Conservative party supporters did.

However, analysis suggests when examining the ratings of UK politicians’ honesty, the connection between party support and perceptions of honesty is influenced by ratings of the fairness of British society. A key component to the picture is that as respondents rated British society as more fair, the UK politicians were rated as more honest. For example, people who intended to vote for the Conservatives rated British society as more fair, and in turn those who rated British society as more fair rated UK politicians as more honest (Figure 1).

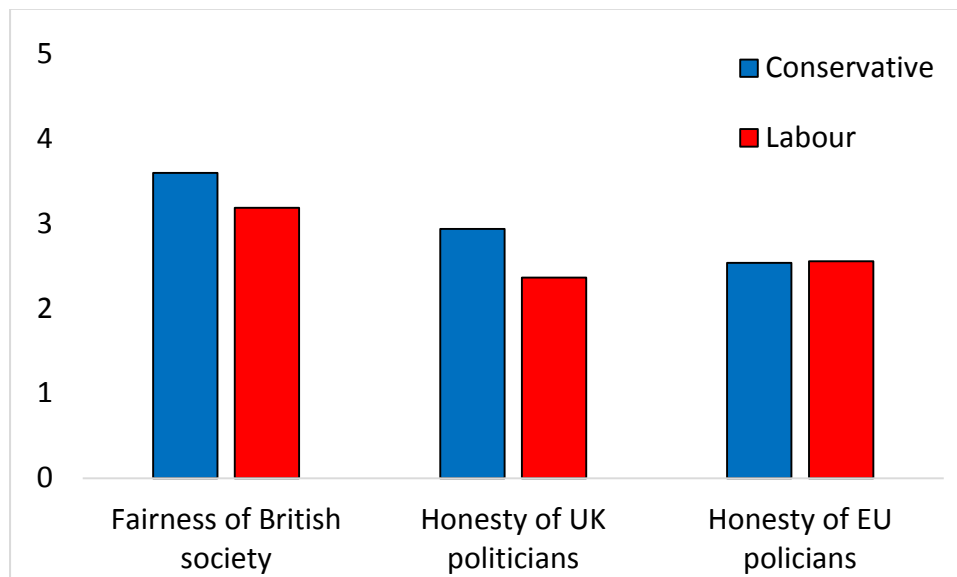


Figure 1: Mean scores for respondents intending to vote for the Conservative party of the Labour party.

¹¹ <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2016/06/27/how-britain-voted/>

¹² <http://ukandeu.ac.uk/how-do-britains-ethnic-minorities-view-the-eu-referendum/>

¹³ <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2017/06/13/how-britain-voted-2017-general-election/>

Distrust of all politicians?

One potential explanation for the relationship between fairness of British society and perceptions of politicians' honesty could be that respondents were generally distrusting of politicians. To test this, we explored how honest the respondents rated EU politicians. The perceived honesty of UK and EU politicians were highly correlated, suggesting a general tendency to trust or distrust politicians. However, when we compared ratings of honesty for UK and EU politicians depending on whether the respondents intended to vote Conservative or Labour, party supporters perceived the honesty of UK politicians differently but had very similar perceptions of EU politicians. We then investigated the connection between party support and perceptions of *EU* politicians' honesty and found that fairness in British society did not have an influence.

Conclusions

Our analysis reveals three processes that elucidate the differences between political moderates and how politicians are perceived. First, even amongst the political centrist there was a clear distinction between how fair the Conservative and Labour supporters perceived British society to be, with Labour supporters rating British society as significantly less fair. Second, the fairness of British society influenced the perceived honesty of UK politicians: as the ratings for fairness of society increased, so did the ratings of honesty. Third, these findings are not due to general tendency to trust or distrust politicians, as the results did not replicate for EU politicians.