

A race apart or no different from the rest of us? MPs and the European Union

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Between now and the referendum on Britain's EU membership there will be much discussion of, and research into, the views of the general public. But what of their elected representatives? We are used to hearing from a vocal minority of MPs, with the most polarised opinions. But we have very little idea whether they are speaking for all of their colleagues at Westminster who may well have more nuanced views on the issue – or to what extent they represent the wider public and their grassroots members.

Funded by the ESRC's The UK in a Changing Europe Initiative, we commissioned Ipsos MORI to carry out a survey of a representative sample of MPs, asking their views on the referendum and the EU more generally. This short briefing paper reports those findings, drawing comparisons where possible with other surveys of public and party members.

Methodological details:

The fieldwork took place between 6 November and 18 December 2015, as part of Ipsos MORI's programme of regular multi-sponsored studies among key audiences.

129 MPs were interviewed in total, with the questionnaire versioned so that 98 MPs answered the EU and UK section of the survey (49 Conservatives, 40 Labour, 8 SNP and 1 from other parties).

An initial sample of 413 MPs were contacted to ensure that those interviewed closely represent the profile of the House of Commons.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face.

The total sample interviewed is closely representative of British MPs. Based on those asked each question, data have been individually weighted where necessary to reflect the true balance by party and ministerial status.

Where results do not sum to 100%, this may be due to computer rounding, multiple responses, or the exclusion of "don't know" categories.

All answers are in % format. Data is weighted.

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The referendum

The core part of the survey was on attitudes to the referendum itself.

In total, half of respondents said they would be voting in favour of remaining in the EU, 11% said that they would be voting to leave – but a full third said that their views would depend on the terms of any renegotiation. A further 3% did not know how they would vote (and one respondent said that they would not be voting at all).

There were, however, very clear differences by party, as shown in Table 1.

1. In the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union between now and the next general election, how will you vote?

	Con MPs (members)	Lab MPs (members)	Others	All MPs
I will vote for the UK to remain a member of the EU regardless of any re-negotiated terms of membership	11% (19%)	87% (85%)	100%	50%
I will vote for the UK to leave the EU regardless of any renegotiated terms of membership	20% (15%)	3% (5%)	-	11%
My vote will depend on the terms of any renegotiations of our membership of the EU	61% (63%)	10% (9%)	-	35%
I will not vote	2% (0%)	0% (0%)	-	1%
Don't know	6% (2%)	0% (1%)	-	3%

Note: data on party members from May 2015.

Almost 70% of Conservative MPs either said their vote would be contingent on the negotiations or that they did not yet know how they would vote. A full 20% said they were going to vote to come out regardless, almost double those who would stay in regardless. Once we allow for a margin of error on the poll, these figures represent a full 66 Conservative MPs (+/- 33) voting to leave, with another 200 (+/- 43) still weighing up the options. Outside of the Conservatives, those voting to remain in the EU were overwhelmingly the majority – and in the case of the other MPs consisted of every respondent.

We also report, in parentheses, equivalent figures for Conservative and Labour grassroots members, from a survey conducted by Tim Bale and Paul Webb in May 2015. Labour MPs are very much in line with their party membership. Conservative MPs are slightly more Eurosceptic than their grassroots, although the overwhelming majority of the latter take the same wait and see attitude as Tories at Westminster.

We then asked those whose minds were not yet made up (almost all of whom were Tories) what would swing their vote. The question was open-ended, and the answers are summarised in Table 2.

2. What two or three outcomes from the renegotiations will be most important in determining how you will vote?

	%
Border control / free movement / immigration	52%
Controlling access to the welfare state / benefits / aid	43%
Regain our sovereignty / not being ruled from Brussels	29%
A second path / tier / not becoming more embedded in a federal state	21%
Don't know	12%
Maintaining free trade / competitiveness within EU	10%
No answer	10%
Abolition of the Human Rights convention / human rights issues to be defined in the UK	5%
Employment protection / jobs / work	5%
Flexibility on regulations / European legislation	7%
Making a smaller financial contribution	2%

Note: percentages sum to more than 100 as MPs could give more than one response.

The top issue, mentioned by more than half of the MPs who had still to make up their mind, was border control, with access to the welfare state coming a close second. One or both of these issues was mentioned by just over 70% of all those who said their vote was contingent on the negotiations. These may be difficult areas in which to achieve reform, but the Prime Minister is at least pitching at the issues that matter to (mostly his) MPs – either that or they have accepted his framing of what the important issues really are.

We also asked how great a change MPs thought the renegotiations would produce. Just 9% of MPs said that they expect the negotiations to produce a great deal of change, and 21% expected ‘a fair amount’. The majority expected ‘not very much’ or none. But again there are very stark party differences, as shown in Table 3.

3. How much difference, if any, do you expect the renegotiations to make to the terms of Britain's membership with the EU?

	Con	Lab	Others	All MPs
A great deal	16%	3%	-	9%
A fair amount	36%	2%	13%	21%
Not very much	38%	60%	50%	48%
None at all	7%	35%	38%	20%
Don't know	3%	-	-	2%

Just 5% of Labour MPs and 13% of other parties' expected at least a fair amount of change to come from the renegotiation. The equivalent figure for Conservatives is 52%.

This is (not surprisingly) linked to the much higher percentage of Conservatives who said they expect their vote to be contingent on the negotiations. Of those who say they will vote to remain or leave, the percentage expecting very much of the negotiations is small (just 15% of remainers and 15% of leavers said they expect a great deal or a fair deal of change). But of those – almost all Conservatives – who said their vote will depend on the negotiations, 48% said they expect to see either a great deal or a fair amount out of the negotiations. The causal link here is not obvious. Is it that they genuinely expect more change – perhaps as a result of having more faith in the Prime Minister - and are thus willing to claim that their vote is contingent on that change? Or is it that, having said their vote is contingent, they then have to say they expect a reasonable amount of change?

We also asked MPs what they thought the outcome of the referendum would be. Overwhelmingly, MPs thought that Britain would vote to stay in in the EU: that was the response of seven out of ten of our respondents. Some 23 percent said they thought Britain would leave, and 7 per cent said they did not know. And here the party differences became smaller, as shown in Table 4.

4. Thinking ahead to the referendum on European Union membership, which of the following outcomes do you think is most likely?

	Con	Lab	Other	All MPs
Britain will vote to remain a member of the European Union	64%	85%	38%	70%
Britain will vote to leave the European Union	30%	10%	50%	23%
Don't know	7%	5%	13%	7%

Majorities of *both* Conservative and Labour respondents think Britain will remain in the EU. (A full half of the other MPs thought Britain would leave, but the N here is low, and the figure should be treated with some caution).

MPs' views of what will happen tend to align with their own preferences: 81% of those who said they are voting to stay in also said they think the outcome will be to remain; 77% of those who are voting to leave thought it will be to leave. The key to the fact that Conservatives overall expected the outcome to be to remain is that the majority of those who want to see the results of any negotiations before deciding how to vote expected the eventual outcome to be to stay in: two-thirds of those who say their vote is contingent on the negotiations expect a remain vote and just a quarter expect Britain to leave. (The remaining 10% don't know). We suspect this may well change the calculus of whether to come out for Brexit on the part of some Eurosceptic but ambitious Conservatives. That they mostly expect the outcome to be a vote to Remain must make it more likely that some wavering MPs will eventually come down on the same side.

We also asked open-ended questions asking MPs *why* they expected that outcome, with the responses summarised in Table 5.

5. Reasons why outcomes are expected

And what is the main reason why Britain will vote to remain in the European Union		And what is the main reason why Britain will vote to leave the European Union	
[asked of those thinking the outcome will be remain]		[asked of those thinking the outcome will be leave]	
People don't like change / prefer the status quo / fear of the unknown	45%	Border control / immigration / control entry to the UK	92%
Economic security / economic stability / our economic well being	34%	Sovereignty / not being ruled from Brussels / managing our own affairs	34%
Risk of job losses / unemployment / lack of job security	21%	Economic crisis in the Eurozone / our economy would be in better shape	18%
Opinion formers / the majority of people are in favour of remaining	19%	More jobs / job security / employment opportunities	12%
It would be better for trade / imports / exports if we remained	16%	Strength / persuasiveness of the 'leave' campaign / campaigners	14%
Political isolation / loss of European allies / influence if we leave	16%	Strength / persuasiveness of the (right wing) media / press	13%
It is in our best interest to remain	9%	Bureaucracy / the inefficiency of the European Union	11%
David Cameron / the PM will re-negotiate a better deal	7%	Cost of membership / cost outweighs the benefits	8%
Lack of detail on how things would work if we leave	7%	David Cameron / the PM will fail to re-negotiate a better deal	8%
The polls are close / could go either way	6%	It would be better for trade / imports / exports if we left	7%
Over 50 years of peace in Europe	4%	Not being part of a federal state	4%
Other remain	4%	Other	5%
Common sense will prevail / dictate that we remain	3%		
None	3%		

Note: although we asked for a main reason, respondents often conflated multiple reasons, which is why the percentages do not sum to 100.

Of those who thought Britain will remain in the EU, the two most common two explanations were that “People don't like change / prefer the status quo / fear of the unknown” and “Economic security / economic stability / our economic well being”. (It is striking how, given

the importance that so many Conservatives placed on the renegotiations, that only 7% of those respondents who thought Britain will remain in the EU thought that a better deal emerging from the renegotiations would be a significant factor!). Those who thought Britain would leave had a more narrow set of explanation for why they thought that will be the outcome – which focussed on immigration and border controls, mentioned in some form by 92% of those who think the outcome will be to leave.

Two different Europes

We also asked broader questions about the EU. Again, we found, perhaps not surprisingly, large inter-party differences, which, as above, were primarily between Conservative MPs and the rest. Conservatives have differing views to other MPs about the past, present, and future of the EU.

MPs in general think that the UK has ‘greatly’ benefited from being a member of the EU. Here we asked a question used in Sofia Vasilopoulou’s 2015 survey for Policy Network, with the responses detailed in Table 6.²

6. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? The UK has greatly benefited from being a member of the EU.

	Con	Lab	Other	All MPs	Voters
1 - Strongly disagree	20%	3%	-	11%	11%
2	18%	-	-	9%	13%
3	13%	-	-	7%	13%
4	25%	8%	-	16%	23%
5	10%	23%	13%	15%	20%
6	10%	15%	50%	15%	15%
7 - Strongly agree	5%	51%	38%	27%	6%
Don't know	-	-	-	-	

Note: data on voters from April-May 2015

The question utilises a seven point scale, from 1 (‘Strongly disagree’) to 7 (‘Strongly agree’). MPs as a whole were more likely to agree (giving an answer of 5-7) than disagree (1-3). And this was true especially of Labour MPs (90% of whom agreed) and others (100%). But Conservative MPs were more likely to disagree (51%) than agree (25%). For the majority of Conservative MPs, the EU has not benefited the UK – or at least not ‘greatly’ benefited it .

The table also shows the figure for voters as a whole, with the data from Vasilopoulou’s survey. Conservative MPs are, on balance, considerably more inclined than voters to believe the UK has not benefited from EU membership. Labour MPs are, if anything even more out of line but in the other direction. MPs as a whole are more positive about the EU than voters, although not by much.

We asked about the future direction of the EU, again using a question asked in Vasilopoulou’s survey, with the results in Table 7.

² Sofia Vasilopoulou, *Mixed feelings: Britain's conflicted attitudes to the EU before the referendum*, 2015. Available at <http://www.policy-network.net/publications/4964/Mixed-feelings-Britains-conflicted-attitudes-to-the-EU-before-the-referendum>

7. Some say European integration should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. To express your views use a scale from 1 to 11, where 1 means that the integration of Europe has already gone too far and 11 means that European integration should be pushed further. Which of the numbers on this scale best describes your position?

	Con	Lab	Other	All MPs	Voters
1 - Gone too far	64%	5%	-	35%	17%
2 -	3%	5%	-	4%	6%
3 -	15%	3%	13%	10%	9%
4 -	3%	8%	-	5%	11%
5 -	3%	14%	13%	8%	8%
6 -	11%	22%	25%	18%	24%
7 -	-	19%	13%	9%	9%
8 -	-	13%	-	5%	7%
9 -	-	-	25%	2%	5%
10 -	-	8%	-	3%	2%
11 - Should go further	-	-	13%	1%	-
Don't know	-	3%	-	1%	-

Note: data on voters from April-May 2015

This question utilises an 11-point scale, where 1 indicates integration has gone too far, and 11 indicates it should go further. Not a single Conservative gave a response of more than 6, indicating that they would like to see further integration, compared to 40% of Labour MPs and 50% of others. And a full 64% of Conservatives gave the most sceptical response possible of 1, compared to just 5% of Labour and no other MP.

Again, we can compare our data with the equivalent figures for voters, drawing on Vasilopoulou's survey. Voters, while sceptical about integration (more think integration has gone too far than would like to see it go further), are nowhere near as likely to express the kind of ultra-sceptical response expressed by some Conservative MPs.

Next, we asked about two particular policy proposals, on freedom of movement and benefits, with both questions using a seven point scale. Table 8 shows the responses to the question about freedom of movement; Table 9 shows the responses to the question about welfare benefits.

8. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? The right of EU citizens to work in other EU countries should be restricted

	Con	Lab	Other	All MPs	Voters
1 - Strongly disagree	5%	34%	38%	19%	5%
2	15%	17%	38%	18%	9%
3	11%	10%	13%	11%	13%
4	21%	15%	13%	19%	17%
5	18%	8%	-	12%	25%
6	8%	5%	-	6%	17%
7 - Strongly agree	22%	10%	-	15%	14%
Don't know	-	-	-		

Note: data on voters from April-May 2015

9. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? EU citizens should be allowed to receive welfare benefits only in their country of origin

	Con	Lab	Other	All MPs	Voters
1 - Strongly disagree	2%	12%	25%	8%	3%
2	3%	17%	63%	14%	4%
3	10%	15%	-	11%	6%
4	13%	20%	13%	16%	14%
5	11%	12%	-	11%	18%
6	21%	10%	-	16%	24%
7 - Strongly agree	39%	10%	-	24%	31%
Don't know	-	3%	-	1%	

Note: data on voters from April-May 2015

Conservative MPs were more likely to say they agreed with both proposals than disagreed. Labour MPs – and most dramatically, the others – were more likely to say they disagreed. This was particularly the case with the second proposal, on welfare benefits, where almost three quarters of Conservative MPs agreed. The final column in both tables gives the equivalent figures from Vasilopoulou’s survey, and on both questions, especially on restricting welfare benefits, Conservative MPs are much closer to voters than are their Labour and other counterparts.

We also asked, more generally, about what the EU means to respondents and what they felt about it, using a question asked in the EU’s Eurobarometer survey, and shown in Table 10.

10. What does the EU mean to you personally?

	Con	Lab	Other	All MPs	Voters
Bureaucracy	77%	30%	22%	54%	20%
Cultural diversity	10%	45%	67%	29%	21%
Democracy	7%	35%	33%	20%	12%
Economic prosperity	26%	74%	56%	47%	13%
Freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU	39%	82%	100%	62%	39%
Loss of our cultural identity	17%	0%	0%	8%	14%
More crime	6%	0%	0%	3%	9%
Not enough control at external borders	64%	18%	0%	40%	23%
Peace	10%	65%	78%	38%	16%
Social protection	3%	47%	33%	23%	8%
Stronger say in the world	16%	70%	56%	41%	17%
The euro	26%	11%	11%	18%	11%
Unemployment	30%	0%	0%	15%	12%
Waste of money	46%	8%	0%	27%	22%
Other	2%	0%	0%	1%	3%

Note: data on voters from May 2015

For Conservatives, the EU means ‘bureaucracy’ (77%), ‘not enough control at external borders’ (64%), and ‘waste of money’ (46%). For Labour MPs it means ‘freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in Europe’ (82%), ‘economic prosperity’ (74%), ‘a stronger say in the world’ (70%) and ‘peace’ (65%). They could easily be talking about two different organisations altogether.

The final column, on the attitudes of voters, comes from Eurobarometer data.³ In general voters mention almost every topic less often than MPs; out of the 15 topics, there are just three where voters identify more often than MPs – all of these three score low (and they include ‘other’). But the two columns on data correlate quite well, with the two groups broadly speaking prioritising the same issues.

We see something very similar if we examine the emotions MPs say the EU arouses in them, as in Table 11.

³ More precisely, Eurobarometer 83 (2015), available at:

<http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/66899>

11. Which, if any, of the following words describe your feelings about Britain's membership of the EU?

	Con	Lab	Other	All MPs	Voters
Afraid	13%	15%	0%	13%	16%
Angry	25%	8%	0%	16%	18%
Confident	8%	37%	33%	22%	10%
Disgusted	16%	8%	0%	11%	15%
Happy	3%	37%	22%	18%	12%
Hopeful	21%	64%	89%	44%	26%
Indifferent	17%	15%	11%	15%	25%
Proud	8%	42%	33%	24%	7%
Uneasy	69%	21%	22%	46%	49%
Other	3%	0%	0%	2%	-
None	2%	0%	0%	1%	-

Note: data on voters from April-May 2015

The top feelings Conservative MPs associate with the EU are uneasy (69%), angry (25%), and hopeful (21%).⁴ The top Labour feelings were hopeful (64%), followed by proud (42%) happy (37%), confident (37%). Among voters, drawing on Vasilopoulou's survey, they are uneasy (49%), hopeful (26%) and indifferent (25%). Voters are every bit as uneasy as MPs, although not quite as much as Tory MPs. Far more of them are indifferent: the EU clearly doesn't interest them as much as it does Conservatives at Westminster. On the other hand, far fewer voters than Labour MPs are likely to say they feel proud of or confident about the UK's membership of the EU.

⁴ The 'hopeful' responses are *not* because these are Eurosceptic MPs who are hopeful about Britain's exit; all the Conservative 'hopeful' respondents thought Britain would vote to remain in the EU.

Holidays in the sun

We asked all respondents where they had been on holiday (Table 12).

12. Please think about the countries outside the UK you have visited on holiday in the last five years. Which are the three most recent you have visited in the last five years?

	N
Spain	37
France	29
USA	27
Italy	13
Greece	9
Australia	7
Germany	7
Switzerland	7
Egypt	6
Netherlands	5
Turkey	5
Belgium	4
Czech Republic	4
Norway	4
Barbados	3
Canada	3
Cyprus	3
Iceland	3
India	3
Ireland	3
Morocco	3
New Zealand	3
UAE	3

There were also another 32 destinations mentioned by one or two MPs, plus 3 respondents who said they had not had a holiday outside of the UK, and another 6 who did not answer.

We then coded up whether these holidays were taken within the EU or not. Whereas only nine MPs had not been on holiday (or refused to say), there were 21 who had not been on holiday in the EU (or refused to say).

But there was basically no difference between the number of EU countries visited on holiday by Labour MPs (a mean of 1.5) v Conservative MPs (1.4). Our other respondents – almost all SNP – however came out at just 0.8. With such a small N it would not be wise to spend long on this, but this small number was only in part caused by this group visiting fewer countries in general; the total number of countries visited had a mean average of 2.1 for the others, v

2.4 for Labour and 2.6 for Conservatives.⁵ Rather, it seems that those who are most united in their desire to stay in the EU don't actually visit much of it.

But in general, there was also no substantive difference between those who would vote to stay in (a mean of 1.4 EU countries visited) or those who would come out (1.3) or those whose vote would depend on renegotiation (1.3).

⁵ Note that this figure is *not* the number of holidays taken. We asked about places, rather than frequency, and so someone who took multiple holidays in (say) France would still have only answered once to France.

Knowledge

We wondered whether MPs who knew a lot about the EU might have different attitudes to it – pro or con. So we asked two questions testing knowledge. These questions failed miserably in their stated aim – primarily because MPs failed miserably to answer them correctly...

For example, we asked:

Which country currently holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union?

A full 60% of respondents admitted they did not know. The remainder went for a range of options, almost all wrong. Just 8 of the MPs interviewed gave the correct answer, which – at the time the survey went into the field – was Luxembourg. The most common answer, apart from ‘don’t know’, was Poland, presumably because Donald Tusk was President of the European Council at the time, although that is actually a completely unrelated (and permanent as opposed to revolving) post. But even if we were very lenient, and counted Poland as an accurate response, we would still only be talking about 18 of the MPs interviewed who gave the correct response.

We also asked:

What do the 12 gold stars on the EU flag represent?

Respondents were given three options. The majority (73%) said that it was ‘The twelve nations in the European Community when the flag was first designed’. Others went for: ‘The twelve policy areas or competencies for which the EU is responsible (2%)’ and ‘The twelve stars symbolise the original 12 articles in the European Convention of Human Rights’ (9%).

Just 7% got the correct answer, which is that ‘the number twelve is traditionally the symbol of perfection, completeness and unity’. (9% had the grace to admit they didn’t know).

Given this, it is very difficult to do what we wanted to do, which was to compare those who knew a lot with those who did not. But, for what it’s worth...

There were 14 MPs who got at least one of the two knowledge questions right.

Only one (yes, one) got both right – and that person was a Conservative who intends to vote to withdraw from the EU regardless of the outcome of negotiations.

The 14 who got at least one of these questions right were less likely to be willing to say they would remain in the EU regardless of negotiations (just 15% of this group, compared to 55% of those who got none right), and more likely to be voting out regardless (20% as opposed to 10% of those who got none right), and more likely to be waiting on negotiations or to say they did not know. Ignorance isn’t necessarily bliss but bliss may, perhaps, encourage ignorance.