**‘Mind the Values Gap’**

Once Brexit supposedly revealed a Britain and an England divided down the middle, the search has continued to understand the political dividing lines. ‘Mind the values gap: the social and economic values of MPs, party members and voters’ [[1]](#footnote-1)sits neatly in this canon. Going beyond the values of voters to examine their alignment – or lack of it - with the values of Labour and Conservative MPs, their party activists and their party’s voters it asks how those alignments might affect the ability of each party to put together a winning electoral coalition in the future.

If the Conservatives, elected on promises not just to ‘Get Brexit Done’ but to ‘level up the economy’ find that the latter is hard and made more difficult by the former, the challenge will be to find additional means of keeping their new ‘Red Wall’ voters onside. For Labour, having opted for a leader who looks more electable than Jeremy Corbyn, the wicked question is whether it will make any other changes to bring it more into line with the voters it now needs to win. Despite the apparent resurgence of two-party politics in England, ‘Mind the Values Gap’ suggests neither party looks to have a comfortable fit between its own internal values and of those of their current voters, let alone those they will have to win in the future.

This challenge will dominate much of the tactics and strategy of both major parties over the next few years. But, in summarising the paper and its argument we can also explore how much insight this focus on values gives into the real world of politics and voter behaviour.

The analysis builds on the placement of voters and party members on the now familiar axes of left-right economic views and liberal-authoritarian social views. An advantage of these scales is their repeated use in the British Election Study and other surveys over many years. The very ubiquity of this data can obscure a more fundamental question of whether it deserves the weight it is given in providing an insight into attitudes. This is explored further below.

The study’s first conclusion is that May’s Law, first postulated in 1973 and suggesting that party voters and MPs will share more closely aligned values than party voters and activists, no longer applies reliably (‘if it ever did’ as the paper observes).

On the left-right economic scale Labour MPs and their voters are reasonably well aligned, with their activists only somewhat further to the left. Amongst Conservatives, however, MPs are significantly to the right of members and activists who themselves are to the right of Conservative voters. Indeed, on four out of the five questions used to construct the economic scale Conservative voters have more in common with every part of the Labour ‘bloc’ then they are to Conservative MPs or activists. Only on whether the state should redistribute from the better off to the less well-off are Conservative voters better aligned with the party the vote for. (Labour voters, while somewhat more supportive than the average voter, are also less enthusiastic for this particular measure. It should be noted that support for the proposition that, for example, ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth, does not imply consent for state action to produce a different outcome. This reminds us that, perhaps unhelpfully, the left-right spectrum bundles up views of how the world works with policy questions about how governments should act).

On social values, both Labour and Conservative MPs and their members are more socially liberal than either of their groups of voters (although, as might be expected, Labour MPs, activists and voters are all more liberal than their Conservative equivalents). In both ‘party blocs’ the MPs are more socially liberal than either their activists or their voters. Conservative MPs are significantly more socially liberal than the average voter. Although the paper’s focus is on the alignment of the different elements of each party and its voters, it is hard not to draw the conclusion that the political system as a whole, at least as represented by its MPs, is distinctly out of step with the electorate on social values.

At a time when neither of the major parties really reflects the views of the ‘average’ voter on social issues it is perhaps not surprising that many voters express a lack of confidence in the political system. Similarly, on economic issues, the average voter is more closely aligned with Labour but there is huge gulf between even 2019 Conservative voters and the Conservative MPs that they elected. The picture that emerges is less one of political parties compromising their views to meet those of the electorate than of voters being forced to compromise their values in order to choose a party.

The dilemma facing voters is highlighted by the paper’s focus on two key groups of voters: Leavers and Remainers and the 2019 Labour-Tory switchers. On the economic axis Remain and Leave voters are only slightly divided, though Remainers sit just to the left and Leavers just to the right of the average voter. This makes the average Remainer less radical economically than Labour and the typical Leavers much more radical than Conservative MPs or activists. Assessed by social identity Labour emerges much more clearly as the party closest to Remainers and the Conservatives the same for Leavers.

The voters who switched from Labour to the Conservatives in 2019 have authoritarian values that are closely aligned with Conservatives voters as a whole even though they are to the left of centre (though by less than Labour voters) on economic issues.

This might be taken to imply that the decisive issue in both the referendum and the 2019 election were social rather than economic values. But this is where we need to look more carefully at the values scales.

There is a strong literature, based largely on BES and other data, that explores left-right and liberal-authoritarian values. The analysis provides a valuable insight into two of the ways that voters might look at the world. Such studies also can also be used to highlight the challenges faced by political parties in reaching all party of their electoral coalition. Surridge[[2]](#footnote-2) has shown, for example, that Labour’s biggest problem is in reaching voters who are economically to the left but socially conservative: this conclusion, drawn from the same BES data is entirely in line with the paper being discussed here.

However, it is less clear that these two axes, though readily available and easy to analyse, provide the comprehensive and rounded view of voters’ world views that they are sometime implied to represent. One omission which might be important both post-Brexit and after a general election won by the party promising to ‘Get Brexit Done’ are voters’ views on national identity, democracy, sovereignty and governance. Given that that many voters who chose Leave actually wanted to leave the European Union it might seem perverse to put more weight on their economic and social values than on the questions about the nation, sovereignty, parliamentary democracy and governance that were actually on the ballot paper.

In 2013 the Future of England Survey[[3]](#footnote-3) highlighted how English voters had come to adopt a far more hostile attitude towards the EU than voters in Scotland and Wales. They were much more likely to perceive the EU as having a major influence on the way the country was governed. Those who emphasised their English rather than their British identity were the most Euro-sceptic (and were also the most likely to resent the Barnett formula and to believe that devolution had been detrimental to England’s interests).

In the EU referendum, self-declared national identity on the Moreno scale showed a dramatic correlation with Leave-Remain voting. Future of England Survey polling[[4]](#footnote-4) suggests that 73% of the ‘English not British’ and the ‘more English than British’ voted Leave while 66% of the ‘more British’ and ‘British not English’ voted Remain. In the BES ‘word cloud’ of Leave voter[[5]](#footnote-5) motivation immigration dominated with other words concerning sovereignty and nation – including sovereignty itself, ‘control’, ‘laws; and borders – featuring the strongly. In the context of the referendum, the sovereign ability to control immigration was a key political issue. It is one that cannot be crudely reduced to the by-product of a social or cultural value.

The political salience of national identity was evident in the 2019 election.

The Conservative victory was delivered almost entirely amongst voters who identified as English or more English than British, and the Conservatives dramatically extended their lead amongst these groups between 2015 and 2019. (BES w19)

National identity also influences the internal politics of political parties as I showed in a survey conducted I conducted with the ConservativeHome website in 2017[[6]](#footnote-6). Though a self-selected group of activists, the survey showed that English identifying Conservative activists held far more negative views about the union and devolution than those who prioritised their British identity.

Further surveys by the BBC/YouGov (2018), the Centre for English Identity and Politics (2019) show that the more that voters emphasise their English identity the more they are likely to perceive distinct English interests, as could be glimpsed in the 2015 Conservative campaign posters with a hapless Miliband in Salmond’s pocket. These voters want political parties to stand up for English interests within the union, to prioritise England over the union, and to support either an English Parliament or a full-blooded English Votes for English Laws.

As yet there is not a consistent data base to allow the construction of axis of national identity, sovereignty, and democracy to compare with the left-right, libera-authoritarian scales. But the fragmentary data we have suggested that such a scale would offer a third insight into the alignment of voters and their position on the economic and social axes. Those voters to the left of the economic scale will tend to be those who are most distinctly English rather than British, and those who are more British than English. The equally English and British will be somewhat to the right of those poles of the spectrum. On social values, most socially conservative are the English and views become steadily more liberal as we move towards the British end of the scale. (BES w17). A nation, sovereignty and democracy scale would explore the extent to which voter’s stronger identities were national, union or European, where they thought the focus of political action should lie, and the range of issues that should be determined by different levels of local, national union and international governance.

As well as providing a more rounded view of voter outlooks, the addition of a nation and sovereignty dimension sheds additional light on recent voter behaviour and the challenges facing political parties. In practical politics, parties don’t just offer choices of economic and social values, but also different views of the nation and democracy. If the parties’ economic and social values don’t appear to align well with those of the voters then issues of democracy, sovereignty and national identity may come to the fore. Both ‘Take Back Control’ and ‘Get Brexit Done’ spoke clearly to what was an ultimately the decisive section of the electorate and in a context where the ‘other side’ – Remain in the referendum or Labour on 2019 – was barely attempting to address the same issues or concerns. Faced with decisions where few voters could find a party that reflected all their economic, social and national democratic values it would not be surprising if the one apparently clear-cut issue – national democracy and sovereignty - emerged as definitive for a critical mass of voters.

In the future, the major parties will need to negotiate this three-dimensional political landscape with their voters and, so far as possible, keep their members and activists motivated and determined.

It is important to remember that the categories of voters summoned up by studies like ‘Mind the Values’ don’t actually exist as people. They are constructions that stem from the correlation of values data with voter behaviour. This is well understood in political science but in popular translation the impression is sometimes given that there are distinct tribes - Leavers and Remainer, or swing voters, for example – that represent distinct groups of people united by their adherence to certain different sets of values. The values data itself does not suggest that any such clear-cut tribes exist. On both social and economic values there is a distribution across the spectrum. In popular political commentary this notion of a divided nation has fed the idea that parties of necessity have to appeal to one side over the other or be left uncomfortably appealing to both.

Even evidence that our Remain or Leave identities are stronger than our party affiliations does not mean that these are actually separate value tribes. At the time of the referendum, we were not divided in this way, and the middle ground was almost certainly held by nervous Leavers and reluctant Remainers, not the ‘true believers’ on either side. The post referendum divide does not reflect changing values amongst voters. Polarisation was driven by hard core Leavers and Remainers who refused to countenance any middle ground strategy. Coupled to the failure of Westminster democracy to deliver either Brexit or a route to alternative, the strengthening of identities around Brexit itself and the anticipation of its outcomes was inevitable but is likely to fade once Brexit itself is no longer a defining electoral choice.

“Mind the Values’ suggests that ‘ideally those voting for a party would broadly share its values’. A better way of framing this statement might be that ‘ideally political parties would reflect the values of those they ask to vote for it’. On the evidence here, voters have recently had to compromise with the political parties; the future winners might be parties who are prepared to compromise with the electorate.

This does not mean that parties have to abandon all their core values in order to appeal to new voters. The underlying data in ‘Mind the Values’ show that each party needs to extend its envelope of values only a fairly short distance from its current voter base to capture the middle ground on economic and social issues. In other words, relatively large numbers of voters appear to be within reach if the parties want to aim for them. (And it may be a mistake for either party to assume its only target are recent switchers. Labour, for example, must do far more than win back the working-class seats lost since 2010.)

As we have seen in recent elections, parties do not have to align entirely with voters to gain their support. Of equal or greater importance is the skill with which the parties can define electoral issues on their strongest ground and neutralise the importance of issues that lie in more hostile values territory. This is what Leave and the Conservatives have managed in the recent past.

All things being equal, Labour stands to benefit if the economy is the key dividing line. Labour certainly did better than expected in 2017 when many voters assumed that Brexit was a done deal. But unless Labour can public unease with an unfair economy into a popular programme, the Conservatives may be able to neutralise the issue by simply acknowledging, as Michael Gove has done recently, that the economy does not work for many people.

In turn Labour can defuse the social values gap by playing to issues on which its MPs and members are relatively comfortable. If Corbyn’s Labour could promise 10,000 more police it may now be time for ‘tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime’ to be revived by a more patriotic Starmer. If the Conservatives fail on ‘levelling up’, or the economy simply struggles to recover from Covid and Brexit they still have a fertile agenda of populist social conservatism and patriotism to mine. Conservatives should certainly want to fight a culture war around issues of immigration, ‘interfering judges’ and political correctness. It remains to be seen whether Labour’s members will allow the leadership to skirt such a conflict.

Even if Brexit itself lose electoral salience, a huge panorama of national democratic issues will remain in place, including English devolution, the future of the union and shared or contested ideas of national identity and belonging. It is not yet clear how each of the parties will define their appeal to key sections of the electorate. Labour shows few signs of wanting to target those left of centre English identifiers. Leading figures argue that Labour cannot win power without winning seats in Scotland, implying that Scottish Labour MPs would impose policies on England for which England had not voted. That idea is likely to be only slightly less toxic than the threat of dependence on the SNP was in 2015. The Conservatives new ‘muscular unionism’, incuding spending additional money in Scotland and Wales rather than in England’s deprived regions is not what those those same English identifiers want to see. Neither of the national stories currently on offer from the major parties - a traditional British unionist story to which all have to assent or a cosmopolitan, internationalism that eschews national pride – looks about to unite a diverse nation at either the English or the union level.

The underlying question of the study is whether party members will allow their leadership to take the measures needed to win. This will depend rather less on what the members believe or want and rather more on how much they want to win. After all, few Conservative members, and even fewer MPs, would have taken Michael Heseltine as defining their economic and social values as Boris Johnson has done. They elected him because they thought he could win. The architects of New Labour were well aware that they had taken over a party tired of defeat; they had not won hearts and minds. Labour members bruised by recent failure may well tolerate a leader who spoke more of security, justice and national values if they thought it would bring victory.

Synposis:

‘Minds the Values Gap’ highlight the poor alignment of the values expressing within the major parties by their MPs and their activists with those voters who support them. Voters as a whole tend to the left on economic values and to the authoritarian on social values. Although the data implies that it is the social authoritarianism that defines both Leave voters and Labour-Conservative switchers, this response argues that issue of national identity, democracy and sovereignty are neglected in that analysis.

Key words: politics, values, democracy, national identity sovereignty

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2. https://medium.com/@psurridge/values-and-the-2019-election-94ec07cc7552 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/files/20030688/Taking\_England\_Seriously\_The\_New\_English\_Politics.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1369148117730542 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-findings/what-mattered-most-to-you-when-deciding-how-to-vote-in-the-eu-referendum/#.Xx6k7y2ZOfU [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.conservativehome.com/thetorydiary/2017/03/scotland-independence-and-our-survey-finding-are-conservative-party-members-just-about-unionist.html [↑](#footnote-ref-6)