

Explaining the pro-Corbyn surge in Labour's membership

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*In the course of a year and a half, Labour Party membership has increased massively. The number of full members has moved from 190,000 in May 2015 to 515,000 in July 2016 – an influx of 325,000 new members. **Monica Poletti, Tim Bale and Paul Webb** explore how we can explain the pro-Corbyn surge in this growth.*

As part of our ESRC-funded [Party Members Project](#) (PMP), we fielded a first survey with existing Labour members in May 2015 and a second one with post-election members in May 2016. We now know that at [the most recent leadership election](#) those who were members before May 2015 voted predominantly for Owen Smith, whereas the new members opted mainly for Jeremy Corbyn. This prompts a key question: in what respects did the 'new' members differ from the 'old' members?

In order to find out, we compare these two groups: older members (pre-GE2015) and newer members (who joined after May 2015 but before January 2016 and were therefore eligible to vote in the leadership election). A number of features stand out: gender; left-wing identity; social liberalism; campaign activism; feelings about the leadership; and the possibility that the ranks of the newer members, and those that support Jeremy Corbyn, may have been swollen by what we call 'educated left-behinds' – people who, given their qualifications, might have been expecting to earn more than they currently do.

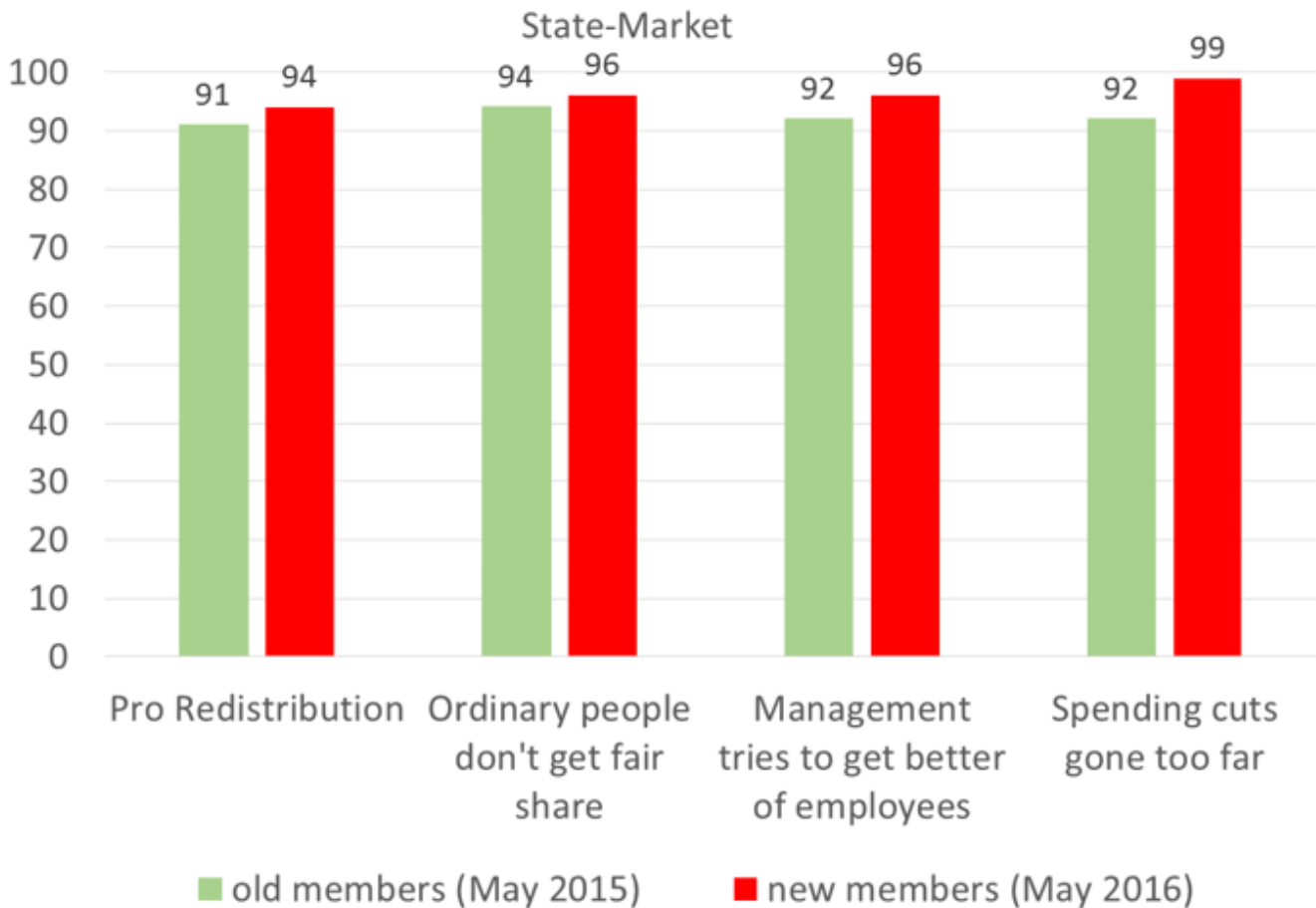
Slightly less well off – and a lot more women

First up, we find that new members are *not* significantly younger or more working class – but they are more likely to be slightly less well-off and female. The average age of both old and new members is 51 and more than half of them are graduates (56% and 58% respectively). Whereas three quarters of them live in households in which the [chief income earner](#) (CIE) has a 'middle class' (ABC1) occupation (76% vs. 75%), a third (34%) of old members' household gross income falls below the national average of around [£35,000](#) – something that's the case for 41% of new members. Moreover, women make up a greater proportion of the new members than of the older members (52% to 38%). Corbyn, then, does not seem to have attracted a very different type of crowd in many socio-demographic respects, except insofar as it is slightly less well-off and more gender-balanced.



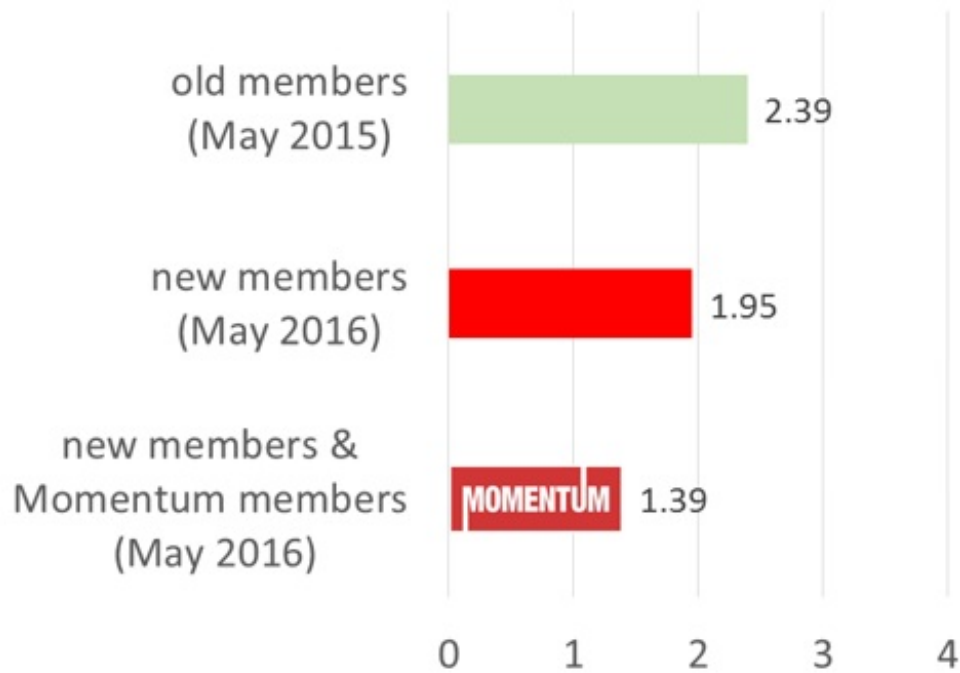
No necessarily more left wing – although some of them think they are

New members are certainly not very different from the old members when it comes to their views on the state vs the market. The overwhelming majority of members are pretty left wing, whether they joined prior to the 2015 GE or after: they are pro-redistribution (91% vs 94%), believe that ordinary people do not get a fair share (94% vs. 96%), think that the management tries to get the better of employees (92% vs. 96%) and think that spending cuts have gone too far (92% vs. 99%).



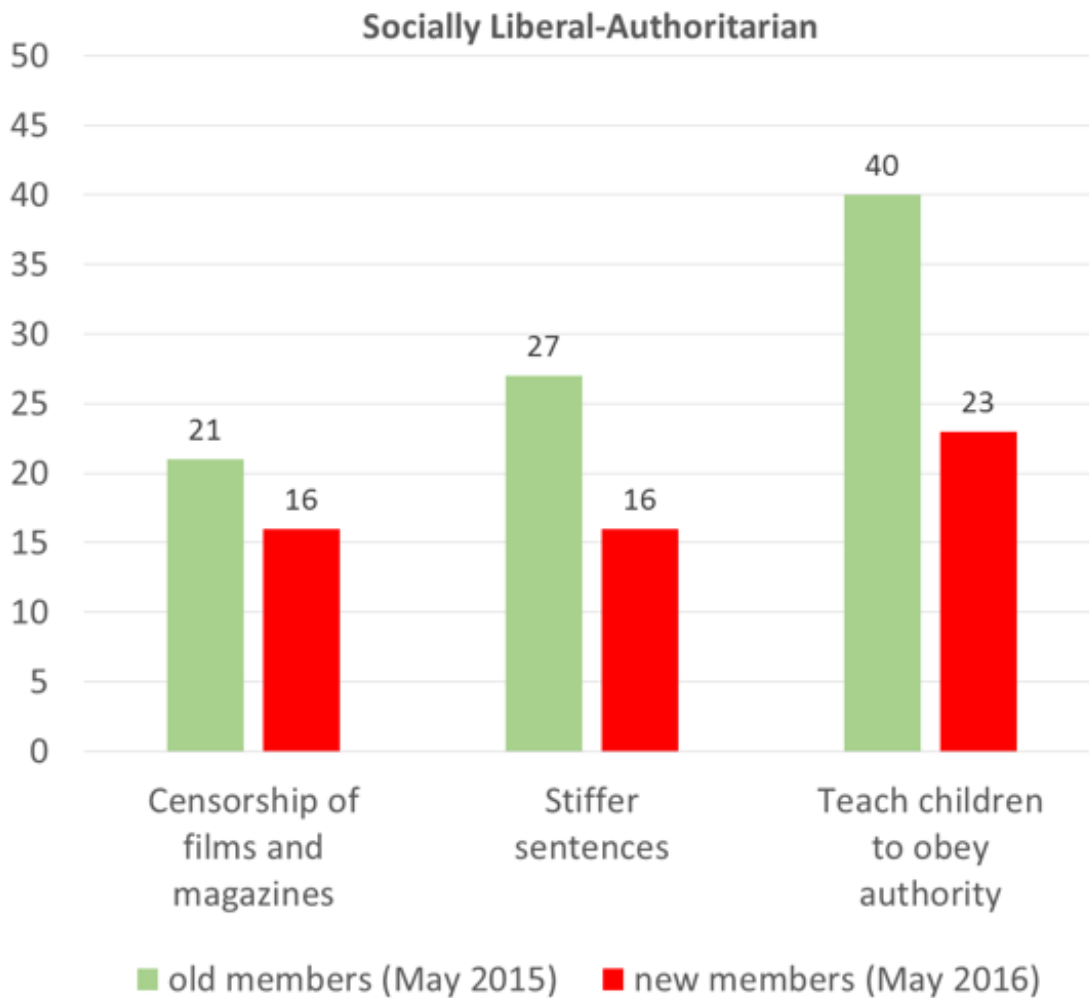
They do, however, *self-position* differently on a left (0) – right (10) scale, with new members seeing themselves as significantly more left-wing (1.95) than older members (2.39). And if we isolate only Momentum members (10%), this difference is even more accentuated, given that they self-locate a full point further to the left than older members (1.39). Thus, in terms of subjective self-image, which probably embraces more than just state-market opinions, the new members see themselves as something of a leftist vanguard.

Left (0) – Right (10) self-placement

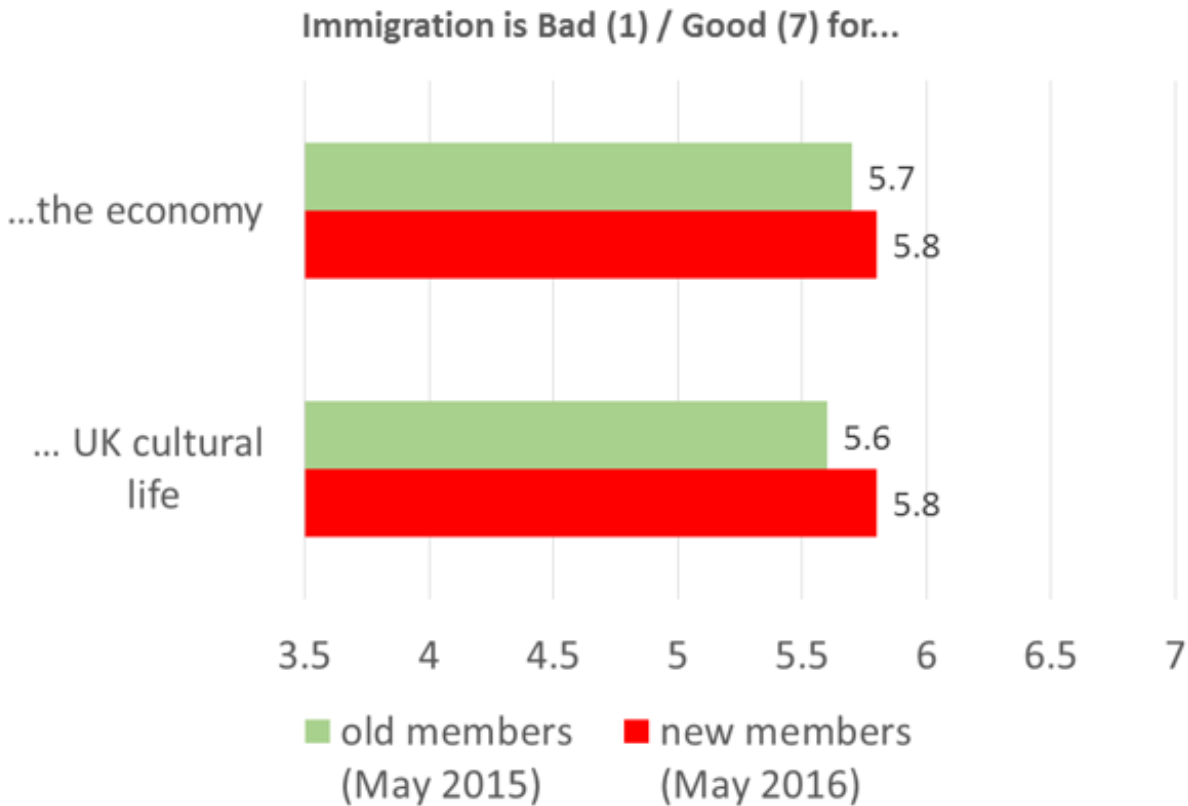


They are decidedly more socially liberal

New members are, in fact, decidedly more [socially liberal](#) than older ones on a few central issues: they are considerably less keen than old members on introducing censorship of films and magazines (16% vs. 21%), stiffer sentences (16% vs 27%) or teaching children to obey authority (23% vs 40%).

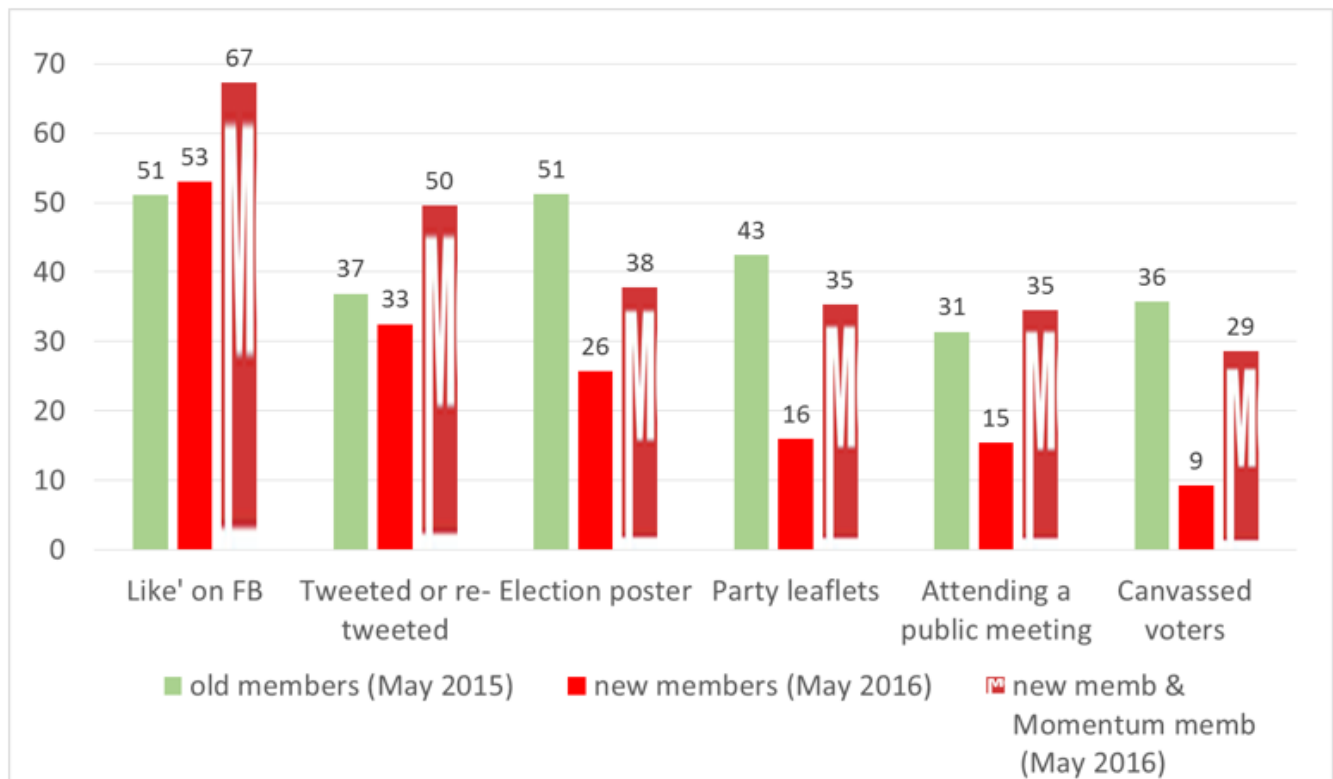


The two groups seem, however, to have similar positions on considering immigration a good thing for the economy (5.7 vs. 5.8 on a scale running from bad (1) to good (7)) and for the UK's cultural life (5.6 vs. 5.8).



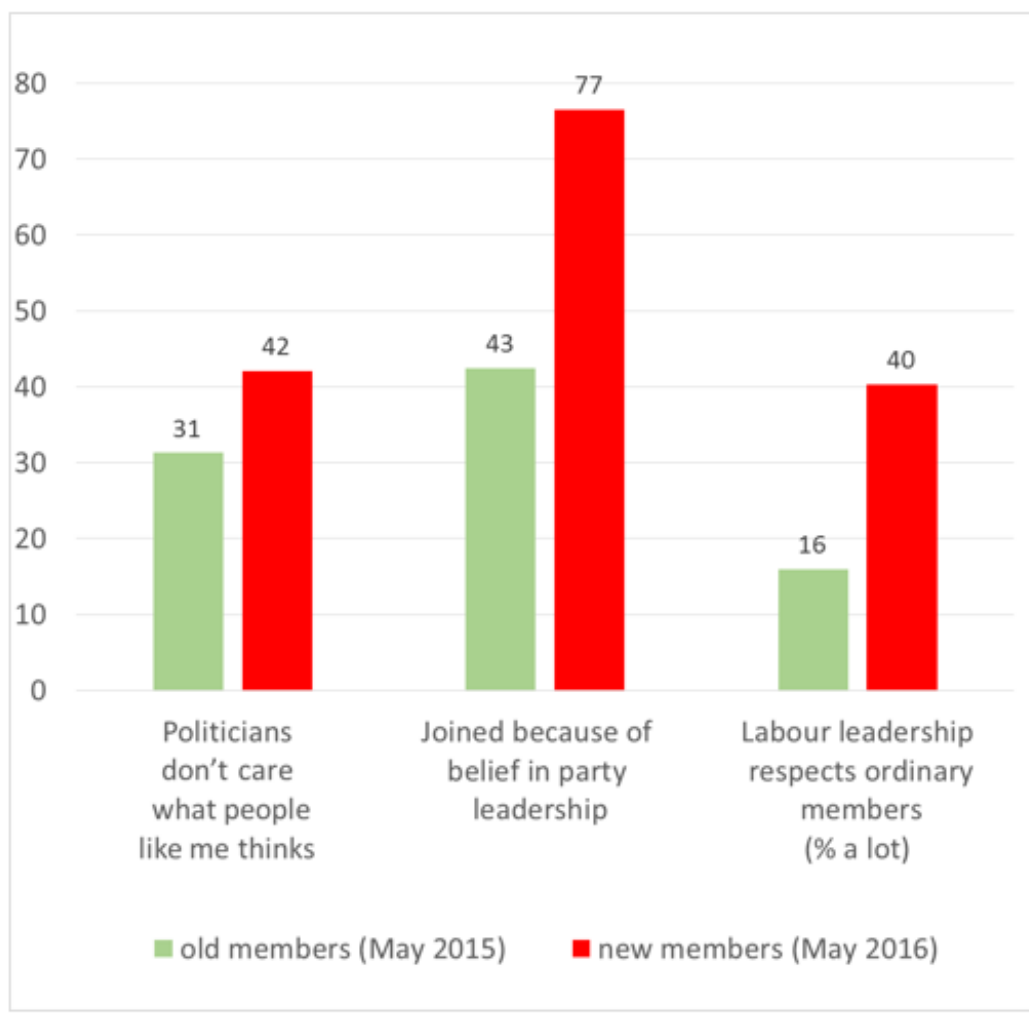
More likely to restrict their activism to online clicktivism

Old and new members tend to participate similarly in online political activity: (Facebook 51% vs. 53%; Twitter 37% vs 33%). When it comes to offline participation, however, there is a striking difference: new members are plainly not as keen to get stuck in. While a third (31%) of the old members attended a public meeting during the GE campaign, less than a sixth of new members did so during the campaign for the 2016 local/regional/mayoral elections (15%). Although less was presumably at stake in 2016 than 2015, an even wider gap is registered when looking at activities such as leafletting (42.5% vs. 16%), displaying election posters (51% vs 26%) or – most notably of all – canvassing voters (35.7% vs 9.3%). The preference for [clicktivism](#) over other forms of activity, however, is much less pronounced for those who are Momentum members. Although these people do tend to participate more in online activities than everybody else (Facebook 67%; Twitter 50%), the gap with older members’ participation in offline activities is much smaller (displaying election posters 38%, leafletting 35%, canvassing voters 29%); indeed, Momentum members were actually more likely than old members to have attended public meetings (35%).



Feel more respected by the leadership

Whereas the new members are more likely to believe in general terms that politicians don't care what people like them think (42% vs. 31%), they are much happier with what they're getting from the Labour leadership than members in 2015. Not only did three quarters of them join the party because of belief in the party leadership (76.5%), as opposed to only 42.5% of old members – the difference between Corbyn and Miliband (and his predecessors). They are also much more inclined to believe than those we surveyed back in 2015 that the [Labour leadership respects](#) ordinary members (40.3% vs. 16%).



They are more likely to be 'educated left behinds'

[Relative deprivation theory](#) suggests that people tend to make comparisons between what they expect out of life and what they actually experience, looking at people who are rather similar to themselves for cues as to what to expect. Thus, university graduates tend to derive their expectations from looking at other graduates and risk frustration if these expectations are not met. Did a sense of relative deprivation trigger some graduates to join Labour in the hope that the Corbyn leadership would help render their actual economic conditions closer to their professional expectations? Possibly so. The proportion of graduates among Labour members earning less than the average salary (around [£25,000](#)) is 10 points higher among new members than among older ones (51% vs. 41%). And a considerable gap also exists between pro- (54%) and anti- (41%) Corbyn new members.



In short, the Corbyn leadership has attracted similar people in terms of age, education and occupational class to those who were Labour members in 2015, although new members are slightly less well-off and more gender balanced than the past. New members are similarly left-wing on the state-market dimension, although they are more likely to regard themselves as further left and are certainly somewhat more socially liberal than older members. Although they tend to participate mainly online and not so much offline, this is less true for those who are also members of Momentum. Clearly, the new members are confident that the new leadership respects them and this is something that distinguishes Corbyn from most other politicians in their eyes. Finally, there is some evidence that the [educated left-behinds](#) might have been particularly moved to place new hope in Corbyn. How long they keep the faith, and what that means for the Labour Party, remains to be seen.

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Note: This blog is based on research from the ESRC Party Members Project: <https://esrcpartymembersproject.org/>, @ESRCPartyMembers, partymembersproject@gmail.com

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