

Do Britons and other Europeans disagree on policy issues?

The answer might surprise you

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Eurosceptics in the UK and elsewhere often argue that the EU subverts democracy by forcing countries with different values and economic systems to follow the same rules. The Vote Leave Campaign, for instance, [laments](#) that “Politicians have surrendered the UK’s power to veto laws we disagree with, so if the EU decides to introduce a law that will be bad for Britain there is nothing we can do to stop it.”



*But is it true that Britons and other Europeans want different things? Does European integration cause people in Britain, and possibly other member states, to be systematically outvoted on the policies they care most about, and thus find themselves relegated to a position of “permanent minorities”? Research by **Thomas Hale** and **Mathias Koenig-Archibugi** provides some surprising answers to this question.*



In our article [Are Europeans Ready for a More Democratic European Union?](#), we analyse a large amount of data from various Europe-wide opinion surveys to see how citizen’s policy preferences vary at the national and European levels. Strikingly, we find that the average Briton is more likely to be systematically outvoted in Westminster than in Brussels or Strasbourg.

Our research looks at how public opinion in each EU member state is distributed along three policy dimensions:

1. An **economic** left-right dimension that pits supporters of state intervention and redistribution against supporters of markets and private initiative;
2. A **cultural** libertarian-traditionalist dimensions that divides supporters and opponents of same-sex marriage, abortion rights, multiculturalism, and a range of other policy issues;
3. An **EU** dimension, which pits those for whom European integration has gone too far against those for whom it should go further.

It is inevitable that some citizens will be disappointed by the policies that legislatures adopt on any of those issues – this is in the nature not only of democracy but of politics in general. But good democracies should try to do two things. First, the policy chosen by the legislature should be relatively close to the policy preferred by the average citizen. Second, if citizens lose on some issues they should win on others. Otherwise, if they are systematically outvoted across the board, they become “permanent minorities” likely to lose faith in politics.



Jeremy Corbyn speaks in the Commons. Photo: [UK Parliament](#) via a [CC BY-NC 2.0 licence](#)

So do national parliaments perform better than the EU on these criteria? Is the British Parliament in a better position to minimize both dissatisfaction with policies and the risk of permanent minorities than the European Parliament? Our analysis provides a way to answer those questions empirically, although here we have to set aside a number of aspects, notably how citizen preferences are filtered through electoral and party systems.

In our [article](#), we argue that permanent minorities are more likely when a) the policy preferences of the public are very diverse, and b) those preferences are not “*crosscutting*” – that is, when it is possible to accurately predict a person’s preference over economic issues, such as state intervention in the economy, if we know her preferences over cultural issues, such as the legalisation of same-sex marriages.

Looking at the EU population *as a whole*, we find that its preferences are slightly more heterogeneous and polarised than those of the population of the average member state, although several member states are more heterogeneous and polarised than the EU polity. But views on public policies are significantly more crosscutting in the EU polity than in the average member state.

Based on data from one of the surveys we used (the 2009 European Election Studies), Figure 1 shows the position of the EU with regard to the polarisation of economic preferences (horizontal axis) and the extent to which citizens’ view on economic policies cross-cut their views on cultural policies (vertical axis). Polarisation is measured as the standard deviation of survey responses. Countries are at risk of having significant permanent minorities if they are very polarised and not very cross-cut—in other words, if they fall in the bottom right-hand quadrant of the graph.

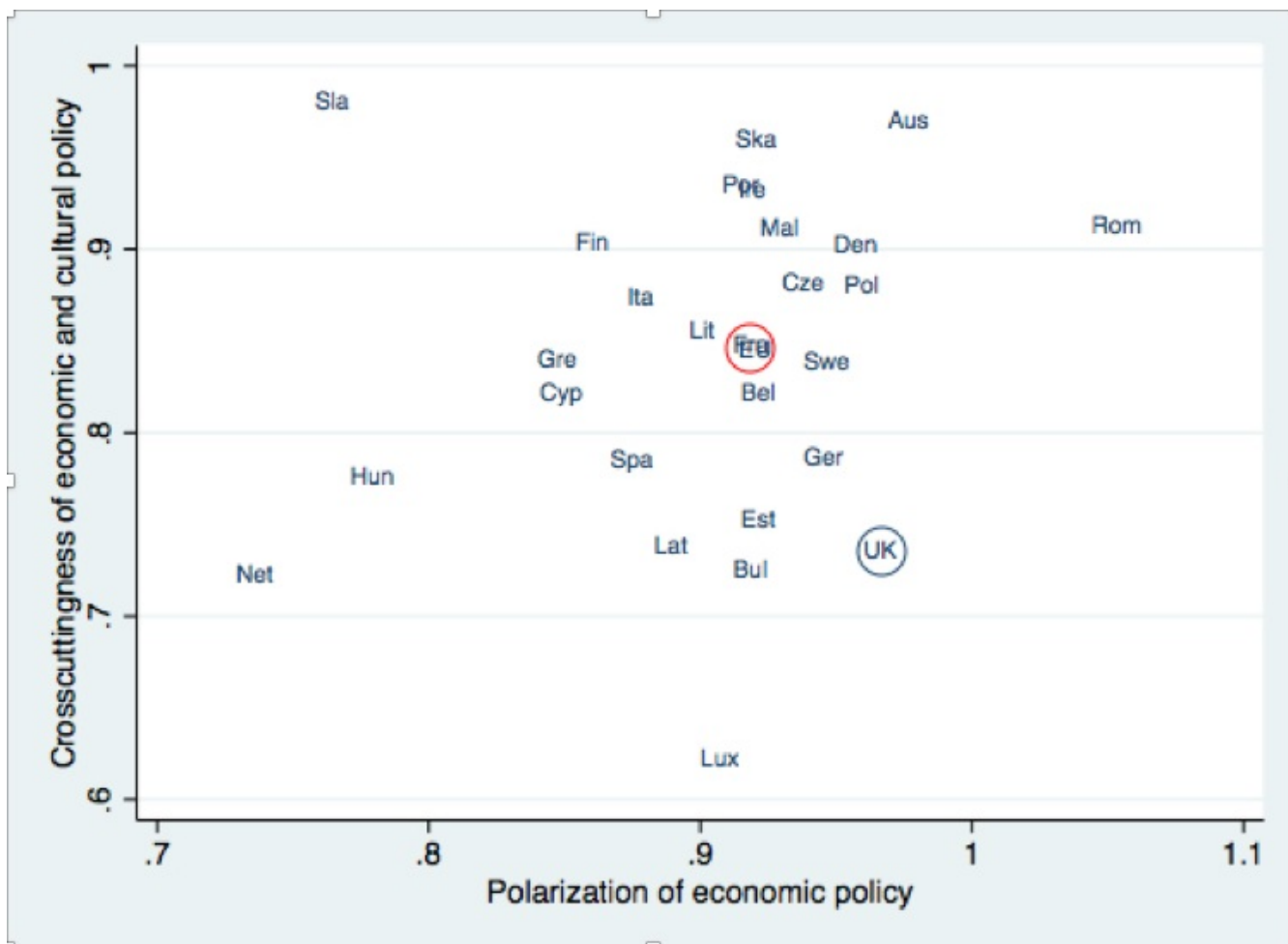


Figure 1: Crosscuttingness and polarisation of policy preferences in the EU and its member states [Note that France and the EU, and Portugal and Ireland, overlap somewhat with each other]

Note that the EU is nowhere near the danger zone. Moreover, it is further from it than many countries, including the UK. This is good news for supporters of the further democratisation of the EU through the strengthening, rather than weakening, of EU-level parliamentary politics.

But what about the UK? Is there a British exceptionalism that would put people in the UK at a greater risk of being pushed in a position of permanent minority? Quite the opposite. The data show that, in terms of the distribution of policy preferences on economic and cultural matters, Britain is a fairly average EU country.

Consider Figure 2. It shows the distribution of citizens' policy preferences on economic policy issues across the left-right spectrum for 3 Member States: the UK, France, and Germany, as well as the EU as a whole. The distribution of policy preferences in Britain displays a striking resemblance to the distribution of policy preferences in the EU. Germany and France are also relatively close to the EU as whole, though less so than the UK. France skews left, while Germany skews right. In other words, of the major EU economies, Britain comes out closest to the EU as a whole.

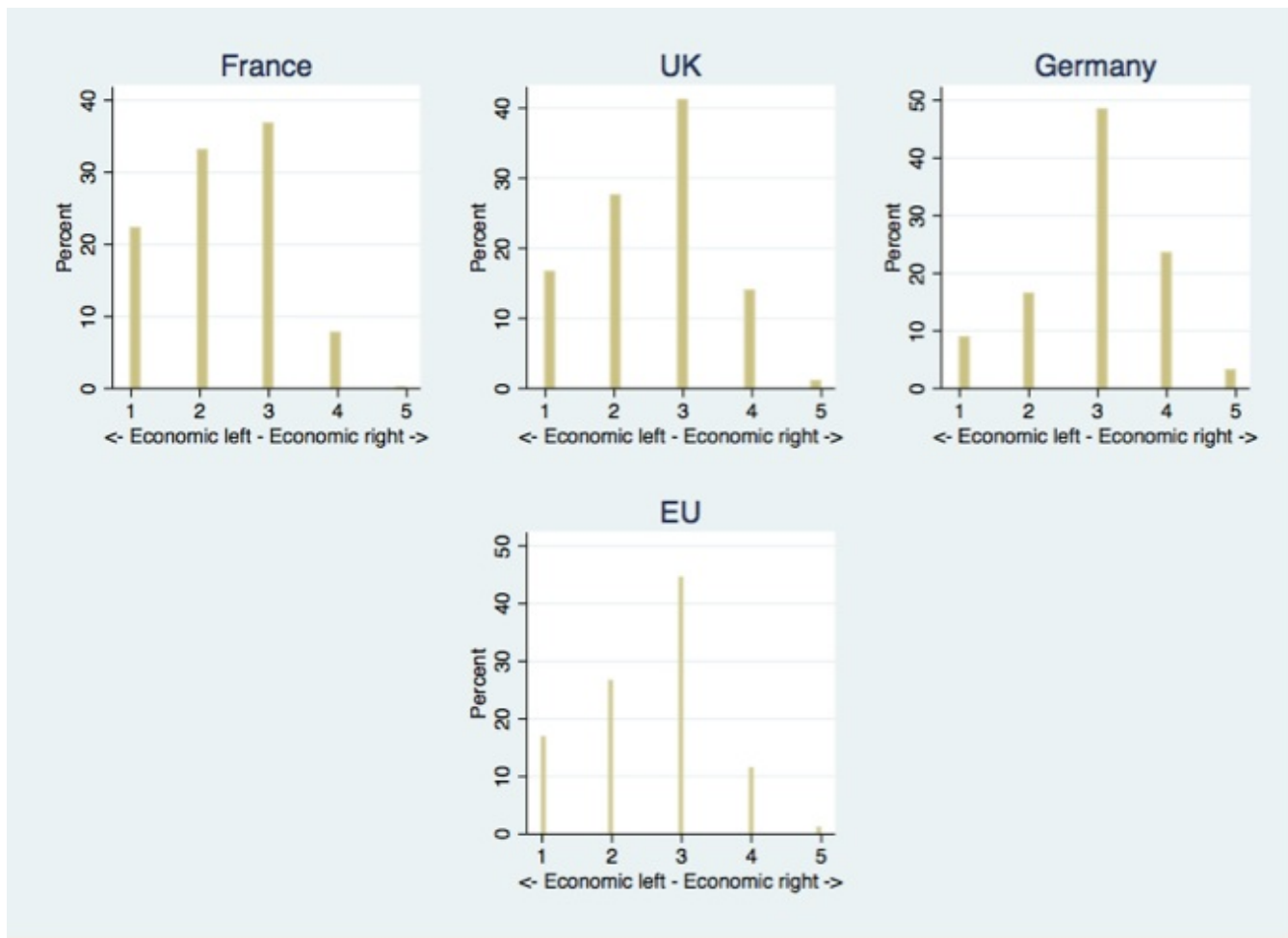


Figure 2: The distribution of Europeans on economic policy

Eurosceptics might retort that the EU is not just about economic policy: it will be increasingly involved in non-economic issues such as policies on multiculturalism and personal rights. Should Britons fret about being outvoted by EU-wide majorities in those matters? Not at all. Consider Figure 3. It shows the distribution of citizens' policy preferences on cultural policy issues across the traditionalism-libertarianism spectrum for 5 different polities: the UK, France, Germany, Hungary and Sweden, as well as the EU as a whole. Again, the distribution of policy preferences in Britain displays a striking resemblance to the distribution of policy preferences in the EU. Germany and France are also close to the EU as whole, though less so than the UK. And looking at countries with more extreme national positions, Hungary and Sweden, shows that they are distributed much differently than the EU as a whole.

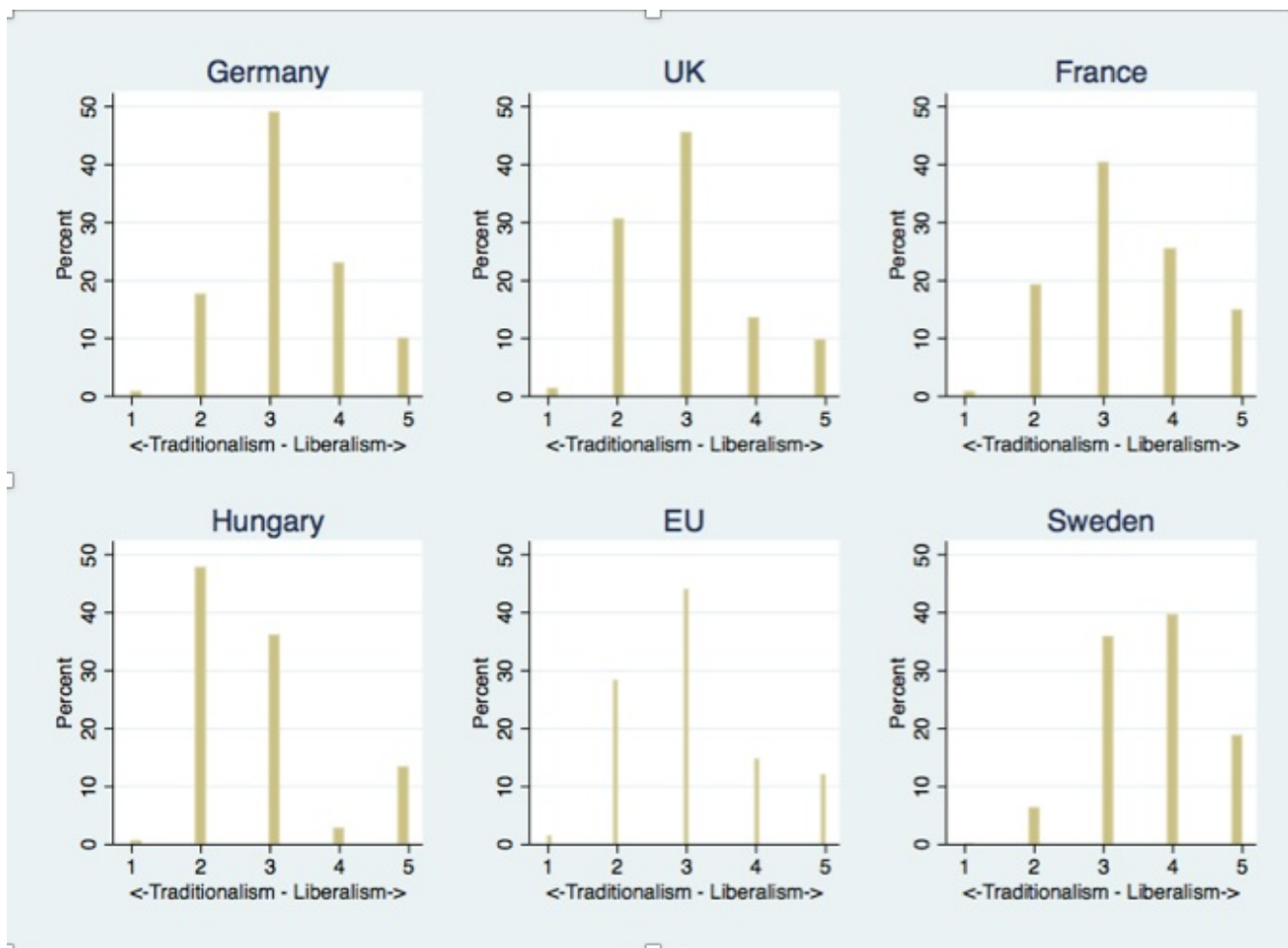


Figure 3: The distribution of Europeans on cultural policies

We can also prove the point more rigorously. We created an index of policy dissatisfaction, which measures the average distance between the policy preference of every citizens of a polity and the median preference in that polity and then aggregates this distance for all policy issues we have information on (we call this measure “divergence,” and will explore it more thoroughly in forthcoming papers).

Strikingly, the preferences of the average person in the UK are closer to the EU median than to the UK median. This means that the total policy dissatisfaction experienced by British citizens is *reduced, not increased*, by a transfer of legislative power from the Westminster parliament to the European parliament. The same is true for just six other EU countries: Ireland, the Czech Republic, Finland, Luxembourg, Germany, and Estonia. Admittedly, this conclusion depends on the simplifying assumption that legislative decisions reflect the preferences of the UK and the EU median voter respectively. But it points to the fact that compared to most other EU countries, Britons have even less reason to fear that people across the EU as a whole wants different things than they do.

In sum, a British citizen is more likely to find her preferred position outvoted in Westminster than in Brussels or Strasbourg (and that it is even before considering the strongly non-proportional electoral system in the UK, which may increase policy dissatisfaction further).

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of BrexitVote, nor the LSE.

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