

Enough of experts?

Trust and the
EU referendum

*“Trust is important. If I can’t believe
what someone is telling me **then I
won’t vote for them.**”*

Mumsnet user

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Introduction

“Trust is important. If I can’t believe what someone is telling me, I won’t vote for them”

Mumsnet user

2016 has been a shattering year for conventional wisdom. It closes with Donald Trump measuring up the Oval Office and the UK on its way out of the EU; someone who placed an accumulator bet on those outcomes in December 2015 would now have nearly enough to put down a month’s rent on a small bedsit in Greater London.

Analysing the forces behind the political earthquakes of 2016 will probably consume the careers of a generation of political scientists. There are many possible factors: the make-up of the electorate; divisions within our societies and unlikely emerging coalitions of interest; the influence of the media and the internet; voters’ gut feelings about their future; the impact of the 2008 financial crash. In this report we’re going to look at the question of where voters place their trust - and how they decide whom to trust - when it comes to making big political choices.

This is the fourth joint report from Mumsnet and Ipsos MORI into women’s voting patterns and viewpoints.¹ This year, we’re taking as our focus the Veracity Index, Ipsos MORI’s annual check on how much the public trust a spread of professions and job functions. It will surprise nobody to learn that politicians continue to languish right at the bottom of this league table, trusted by just 15% overall. In a normal year, it might be surprising that this is a precipitous 6% drop on the level of trust they enjoyed this time last year - but 2016 is, of course, some way away from being a normal year, and voters’ levels of trust in mainstream politicians seem to be approaching rock bottom.

In addition to the new data from the Veracity Index, we at Mumsnet and at our sister site Gransnet conducted interviews with more than 100 of our users, asking them detailed questions about trust and political decisions, focused around the EU referendum. We split them up into groups according to how they voted in the referendum - those who were firmly for ‘Leave’, those who were firmly for ‘Remain’, and a third group who were undecided until the last minute or who had not voted - and asked them about their views on issues around trust and political decisions. Why did they trust some political messages and messengers, but not others? Did they trust any message despite usually disagreeing with that particular messenger - or vice versa? Did they think politicians, economists and journalists tell the truth, and did they trust them more or less than their family and friends when it comes to complex national issues? Which messages from the EU referendum resonated most strongly with them? Have they, like Michael Gove - a notable political Icarus in 2016 - had enough of experts?

The political landscape is in flux and diverse media sources are publishing deeply conflicting versions of ‘the truth’. As the referendum approached, no one public figure seemed to inspire confidence in the majority of voters. Where did women turn for trustworthy information in making one of the most momentous decisions of their lifetimes? This report aims to find out.

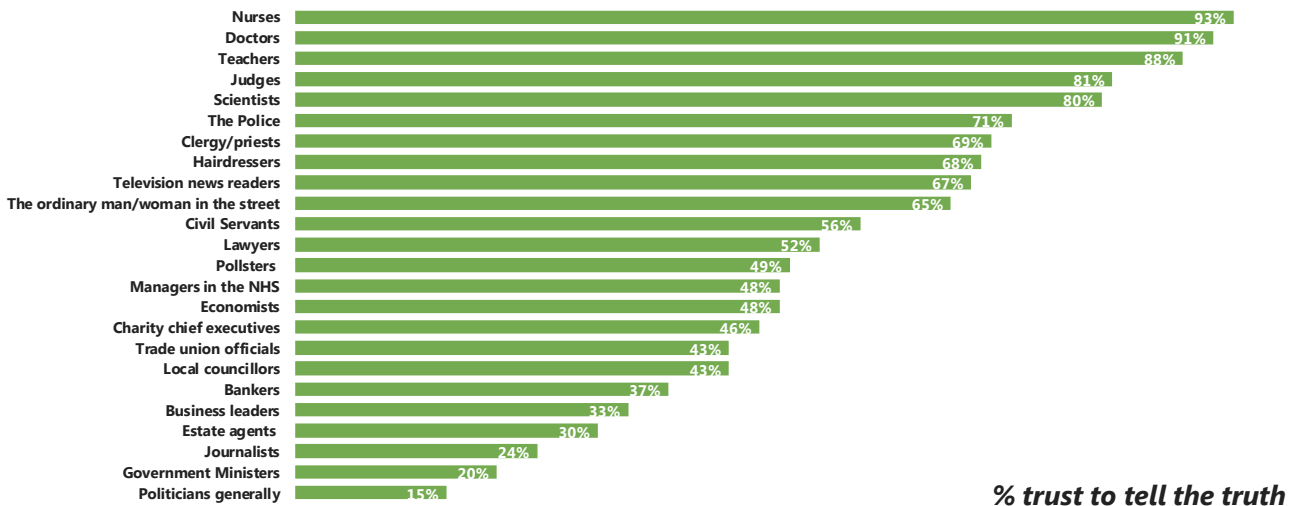
¹ The Women Problem (2013) <http://www.mumsnet.com/pdf/womens-voting-intentions-report.pdf>; All to Play For: The Battle for Women’s Votes (2014) <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/publications/1700/All-to-play-for.aspx>; The Blame Game: Women’s Views on Generational Strife and Solidarity (2015) <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/publications/1786/The-blame-game-Womens-views-on-generational-strife-and-solidarity.aspx>.

The 2016 Veracity Index

Since 1983, Ipsos MORI's Veracity Index² has asked the public to rate the trustworthiness of professionals, defined as whether 'you would generally trust them to tell the truth'.

Figure 1.1: Veracity Index 2016

"Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth, or not?"



Base: 1,019 British adults aged 15+, fieldwork 14th October – 1st November 2016

2016 saw nurses included in the list for the first time, and they shot to the top of the league, trusted by 93% of the sample - marginally more than doctors, at 91%.

Economists were also included in the survey for the first time. 48% trust them, but 45% don't. The proportion of the sample who say they trust economists is exactly the same - 48% - as the proportion of the voting public who voted Remain. This may not be entirely coincidental: trust was higher among groups more likely to vote Remain, such as the young, graduates, middle classes and broadsheet readers, and lower among older people and those with no qualifications. In other changes, trust in civil servants, which has been on a long-term upward trend, fell back, as did trust in business leaders.

Perhaps not surprisingly following the shock of Brexit hot on the heels of the Conservative's surprise election win in 2015, trust in pollsters has taken a bit of a knock, with 49% trusting them, but a rise in those who don't trust them to 42% (even though in the last weeks of the campaign more polls were pointing to a Leave victory than a Remain one). But trust in politicians falls even further, dropping down 6% to just 15%.

In our online focus groups with women voters from Mumsnet and Gransnet, those who were willing to say that they actively trust politicians were very few and far between.

² Ipsos MORI interviewed a representative sample of 1,019 adults aged 15+ across Great Britain. Interviews were conducted by face-to-face between 14th October – 1st November 2016.

"I have trouble believing in any politician I'm afraid – have lived through too many false promises made at election times."

'Firm Leave' voter

"I can't think of an MP who I trusted at the time [of the referendum]."

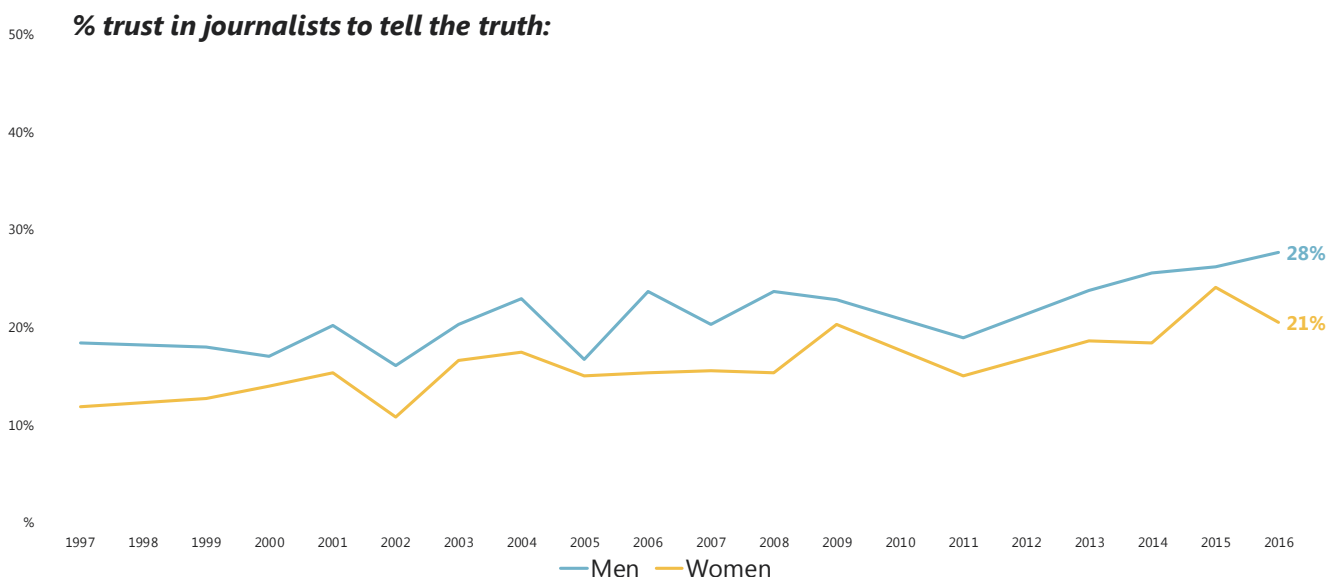
'Firm Remain' voter

"There are only a very limited number of politicians that I would trust and I can't think of any off the top of my head."

Swing voter

The other interesting snippet: in terms of differences between men and women, men trust journalists significantly more than women do. Neither group find journalists particularly trustworthy, but just 21% of women trust journalists to tell the truth, compared with 28% of men. And this is not a new phenomenon – there was a similar six-point gap back in 1997.

Figure 1.2: Trust in journalists over time by gender



Base: c. 1,000 British adults aged 15+ per year

Ipsos MORI polling from just before the referendum in June 2016 dug down into these issues in a little more depth. Just under half (46%) of Britons in the poll said politicians from both campaigns were mostly telling lies; only 19% thought they were mostly telling the truth.

The EU referendum saw certain issues being bitterly contested: whether Turkey was about to join the EU, whether leaving the EU would result in a £350 million pound weekly bonus for the country's finances, whether immigration from within the EU had been good for the UK's economy. In the June 2016 Ipsos MORI poll, 45% thought it was true that Turkey will be fast-tracked into the European Union; 45% said it was false. 47% believed that the UK sends £350 million a week to the EU while 39% thought it was false.

In this context, it's significant that politicians and journalists overall are so widely regarded as untrustworthy; when it comes to big political decisions, voters are not convinced their elected representatives or the news media will tell them the truth - and are deeply divided among themselves about what the truth is.

How did women vote in the EU referendum?

Ipsos MORI's estimates of how Britain voted in the EU referendum indicates that there was a small but significant difference between the sexes, with women splitting 51%/49% for Remain, while men broke 55%/45% for Leave.

However, as previous Ipsos MORI and Mumsnet reports have shown, the differences within gender are often more important than a crude men vs women distinction. Younger men (and women) were much more likely to vote Remain; women (and men) from the C2DE socio-economic groups were much more likely to vote Leave.

Figure 1.3: EU referendum: Ipsos MORI voting estimates³

Voting	Remain	Leave		Remain	Leave
All	48%	52%	All	48%	52%
Gender					
Male	45%	55%	Men by class		
Female	51%	49%	AB	54%	46%
Men by age			C1	51%	49%
18-34	64%	36%	C2	35%	65%
35-54	44%	56%	DE	36%	64%
55+	35%	65%	Women by class		
Women by age			AB	65%	45%
18-34	67%	33%	C1	54%	46%
35-54	55%	45%	C2	41%	59%
55+	39%	61%	DE	37%	63%

³ Base: 7,816 GB adults aged 18+ (of whom 5,955 were classed as voters), interviewed by telephone during the campaign

What is trust?

We asked users on Mumsnet and Gransnet how they define 'trust' when it comes to information about big political decisions. They defined it in multiple ways. Some emphasised the role of truthfulness.

"Trust is believing in what someone is telling you."

Swing voter

"Trust is believing that people or organisations are being true to their word. It's earned over time based on a person/organisation's integrity and whether they keep their promises."

Swing voter

Some participants - particularly Remain voters - emphasised the importance of objective analysis and familiarity with the issues at play. They wanted an absence of emotion and for people to show their working.

I define trust as being confident that what is being said is accurate, true and objective – and an honest representation of what the evidence and analysis shows. So yes, "trust" is massively important to me in helping to inform my opinions and decision-making. If a viewpoint feels too emotive, or too subjective, then I am likely to disengage. In the referendum, I trusted people who had direct experience of working with EU policy makers. I rarely take the outputs of lobby groups or NGOs at face value. 'Firm Remain' voter

I've worked in media, and spent years in statistics. I know how to lie for effect and publicity. I like being able to see the data to back everything up. Firm Remain' voter

I trust impartial views that are backed by evidence, and people who are transparent about why they hold the opinions they do, whether I agree with them or not. Swing voter

I trust people who don't think of their own interests first. I trust people who will consider both sides of the argument and acknowledge that both sides have their pros and cons. Swing voter

Some spoke about how deciding trustworthiness requires a judgement about people's motivations. Do they really have the country's best interests at heart, or do they have other reasons for holding a particular position? Many participants said they were much more likely to trust people they know, particularly those they are close to, such as spouses, best friends and parents. These people may not be 'experts' in any sense, but we can (usually) be fairly confident that they genuinely want the best for us and our families.

I don't believe you can fully trust anyone without knowing them, so whilst I would pay regard to others' opinions, I would never trust someone who I wasn't personally connected to. Everyone has their own agenda. 'Firm Leave' voter

Trust all boils down to whether someone has your interests at heart, and for that to be true, they have to be able to understand me as an individual. So the people I trust the most are those who know me and know what I value in life. Swing voter

Lots of participants spoke about the importance of consistency. They're reassured by a transparent track record of sticking to one's principles. Pro-Brexit voters said they particularly trusted those who had long-held, long-articulated anti-EU convictions - and had stuck to them even when it had impeded their careers.

I felt more in tune with politicians who had always been Eurosceptics, such as David Davis. Despite disagreeing with some of his views, I respected Nigel Farage for being sure of what he stood for and why. 'Firm Leave' voter

I was most impressed with the politicians who articulated their views clearly and stuck to them, instead of changing their minds if it seemed politically expedient. I can admire an adherence to principles, even if they're different from mine. 'Firm Leave' voter

Conversely, very few Remain campaigners - particularly politicians - had spoken up about their support for the EU before the referendum was called. Some participants felt that people suddenly appearing on a pro-EU bandwagon after holding mildly Eurosceptic positions for many years made it difficult to believe that they were telling the truth about what they thought. Nick Clegg - for so long the whipping boy of the electorate - was a rare exception: a politician who had consistently advocated for the EU over many years and who was highly trusted by Remain voters.

I wish we'd heard more from Nick Clegg. 'Firm Remain' voter

Can we have Nick Clegg back please? (Only half joking.) 'Firm Remain' voter

Boris Johnson turned off even Leave voters because of the perception that he didn't believe what he was saying.

I think Boris has some interesting ideas but I wasn't convinced he genuinely believed the stuff he was spouting. 'Firm Leave' voter

Boris Johnson is like a wind sock on a stormy day. David Davis seems a little more measured and balanced. I don't agree with him but think that he will act with a degree of care. 'Firm Remain' voter

Some voters on all sides were convinced that Jeremy Corbyn was saying the opposite of what he believed.

Jeremy Corbyn puzzled me somewhat, and I suspect (although clearly have no proof) that at heart he wanted to leave the EU. 'Firm Leave' voter.

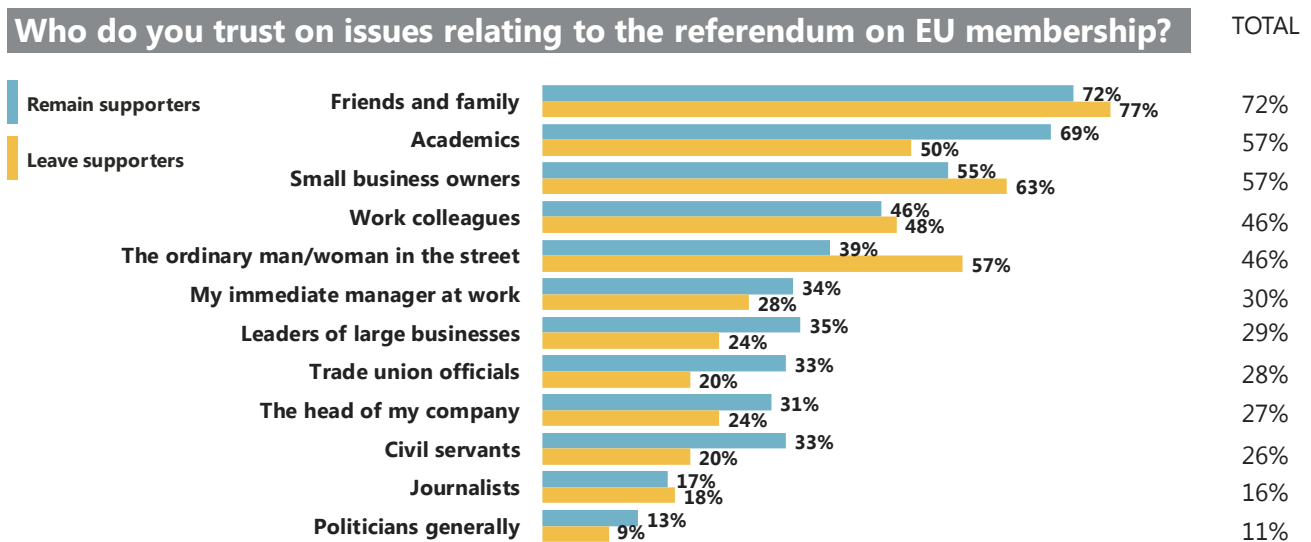
I didn't feel that Jeremy Corbyn actually believed in Remain. Swing voter

So who, and what, did people trust?

As discussed above - and in line with the Veracity Index findings - trust in politicians as a group is exceptionally low. So who did people trust?

An Ipsos MORI poll from March to April 2016 indicated that the UK public wanted to hear from businesses - but wouldn't necessarily trust what big business, at least, had to say. 75% said that small and medium-size British businesses should participate in the debate, and 69% wanted to hear from big British international-trade businesses – more than said the same for think tanks (54%) and newspapers (52%). However, while 57% said that they trusted small business owners on issues relating to the referendum, leaders of large businesses fared worse, being trusted by just three in ten (29%), while banking and the media were the most distrusted sectors.⁴

Figure 1.4: Trust on issues related to the EU referendum – some voices were trusted more than others



Base: All respondents (2007), Remain (842), Leave (816), 24 March – 1 April 2016

Source: Ipsos Reputation Centre

I distrusted the views of the City of London, financiers and directors of large companies. They draw huge salaries and I feel that their own continued earning power is all that sways them. 'Firm Leave' voter

Just before the referendum, a Mumsnet survey showed that Mark Carney topped the list of those trusted by respondents, with Christine Lagarde, Barack Obama and the Queen all making a strong showing. We never did find out for sure what the Queen thought (although some newspapers tried), but Mark Carney's cool Canadian caution was respected by many in our panels.

Some Leave voters, however, thought the Bank of England chief was being forced to contribute to 'Project Fear': an indication, possibly, of how some voters resolve conflicting feelings about trusting someone whose positions they do not share.

⁴ <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3729/British-public-wants-to-hear-from-business-on-Brexit-but-may-not-trust-what-they-have-to-say.aspx>

I hated the way that Mark Carney was wheeled out to talk about the doom and gloom that a vote to Leave would bring, especially when the Bank of England is supposed to be impartial. 'Firm Leave' voter

Overall, Leave voters struggled to name individuals or organisations whom they had trusted throughout the referendum campaign. Few were openly enthusiastic about Nigel Farage, although Gransnet users (likely to be 50 or over) were significantly more positive about him than Mumsnet users. David Davies and Liam Fox had some adherents. Not a single Leave voter among Mumsnet participants reported that they had been persuaded to vote Leave by any of the associated campaigners alone.

I'm not sure that there was anyone I could say I really trusted during the Brexit debate. Least of all organisations. 'Firm Leave' voter

I think that some of the Leave "personalities" might not have done them much good. 'Firm Leave' voter

I didn't trust them at all - as someone who works in education, I had to think long and hard about being on the same side as Michael Gove. 'Firm Leave' voter

When it came to mainstream figures, Remain voters found it easier to name people who they trusted.

One of the people who I trusted during the campaign in the main was David Cameron, and I'm not a Tory voter. He was a fairly moderate politician and genuinely believed that leaving would have dire consequences for the country. 'Firm Remain' voter.

I trusted the opinions of David Cameron, George Osborne, the CBI, Mark Carney, the IMF, the science community (led by the Royal Society and the Russell Group), the environmental community (for example, analysis I read by the Institute of European Environmental Policy) and analysis offered by academics, such as Paul Collier from Oxford University. 'Firm Remain' voter

Ruth Davidson was fantastic. 'Firm Remain' voter

The one who came out best in the whole thing was Ruth Davidson. Swing voter

In retrospect it seems amazing to me that I would make my decision based upon one person's ideas, but it was indeed Alan Johnson who helped me formulate my decision. 'Firm Remain' voter

Echoing the rock-bottom ranking of politicians in the Veracity Index, Leave voters in particular reported simply not trusting politicians at all. When asked to list which politicians they trust, most responded with variations on the theme of 'It's easier to say who I don't trust'.

I don't trust politicians at all as they all have their own agendas and motives. 'Firm Leave' voter

I don't generally trust anyone with an agenda to influence my vote, even if they are from a party I would vote for. 'Firm Leave' voter

I find it hard to trust any politician; just look at the lies peddled by both sides of the campaign. 'Firm Leave' voter.

One developing theme over the last few years - coterminous with the lack of trust in journalists outlined in the Veracity Index - has been a waning of trust in the media. A 2015 survey echoes this: it found that while 81% trust statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), only 28% think that the government presents official figures honestly when discussing its policies, and only 19% agreed that newspapers present official figures honestly.⁵

Participants from all sides believed that 'the media' was biased against their point of view. Where can voters turn for truly non-partisan information? Is there a developing belief that 'non-partisan information' simply doesn't exist?

The media are far more interested in printing/televising/tweeting what they think people want to hear rather than what is actually going on in the world. 'Firm Remain' voter

My motto is, never trust the BBC. 'Firm Leave' voter

Some participants were aware of their own 'filter bubbles' - the tendency of voters to seek out news sources and perspectives that reinforce what they already think.

I read widely and trust my own opinions, judgement. The problem with that is that you edit what you read to support the opinions and views you already have. 'Firm Remain' voter

I think I was brainwashed by drip-fed statements on Facebook - and to be honest they seemed to concur with my experience! 'Firm Leave' voter

To be honest I think I trusted people whose opinions I was already sympathetic to, such as the people I follow on Twitter. That's partly why I was so shocked at the result as it seemed like everyone felt the same as me! I did try to look at pro-Brexit articles to widen my views but they never rang true with me. I think I would have really paid attention if someone I normally trusted politically argued Leave, but none did. 'Firm Remain' voter

One thing seems clear: voters of all persuasions have a vanishingly small amount of trust in 'the media' as a whole.

I trust none of the mainstream media; in the main I take my news from other sources. 'Firm Remain' voter

If it's true that the weight of expert opinion was on the Remain side, Leavers tended to interpret this as evidence of media bias.

In terms of financial forecasts for the country, I think this was all propaganda. I'm not sure 'experts' are ever unbiased since they are paid to spin the views of the people/politicians who are paying them. 'Firm Leave' voter

For many participants on both sides, the most trusted people were those who were closest to them or who had concrete knowledge of specific factors in participants' lives.

I took some points from my sister on trust. I trusted my trade union, and also my employer's senior leadership - who I would not normally trust - when it came to effects on our sector. I was more persuaded if I felt people had concrete knowledge. 'Firm Remain' voter

⁵ <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2015/february/british-social-attitudes-public-trust-official-statistics,-but-not-how-they-are-used/>

I trust my husband, my dad, The Guardian, the BBC and Mumsnet. 'Firm Remain' voter

I have friends who are Brexiters who helped me see their point of view. Swing voter

Many also said they trusted those who were disinterested (in the sense of not standing to lose or gain), and/or had direct experience.

I trust people who I perceive not to benefit materially from the course of action being proposed. 'Firm Remain' voter

Experts: who needs them?

During the campaign, Michael Gove famously remarked that ‘people in this country have had enough of experts’.⁶ Was this borne out by our panels?

Among Leave voters, there was a strong and consistent assertion that when it comes to leaving the EU, it’s not so much that they had had enough of experts: it’s that there are none.

What exactly would make someone an expert on Brexit anyway? No one can possibly know FOR SURE how this is going to affect us. How you can be an expert on something that no one has any experience of? Have we left the EU before? ‘Firm Leave’ voter

Leave voters also made the point that while someone can be an expert in fiscal policy or trade, they cannot be experts in individual voters’ lives and circumstances: only the voters themselves can provide that level of insight to inform their own votes.

I think the ordinary person on the street was fed up with being told what is best for them, often without the experts actually knowing and understanding what life is like for those people. ‘Firm Leave’ voter

I think very few politicians understand the plight of ordinary people. Nor do I think many actually care. ‘Firm Leave’ voter

When an expert says that the UK would benefit from staying in the EU, which subsections of the population are they talking about? What’s good for the political elite, or the wealthy, isn’t necessarily good for all of us. ‘Firm Leave’ voter

There’s also no doubt that since the 2008 global financial crisis, economists and central bankers have something of an image problem. Many still find them deeply untrustworthy. The 2016 Veracity Index shows that economists are trusted by 48% (and bankers by even less) - exactly the same figure as the proportion of the voting public who backed Remain.

I think any predictions by the government or Bank of England or many economists also lack all credibility given that they failed to predict the 2008 crash. ‘Firm Leave’ voter

The economists were all very clear that the financial world would implode if people voted to Leave. And guess what - it didn’t! I think the ordinary person in the street was always going to find it difficult to trust bankers and economists after the banking crash. ‘Firm Leave’ voter

Economists in particular have not served us well recently. ‘Firm Remain’ voter

Expert? Anyone can be an expert. According to Wikipedia my husband is the expert on a certain type of wood because he once wrote a blog post about it. ‘Firm Leave’ voter

⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>

And finally, there was a fairly widespread view among Leave voters on Mumsnet that the experts advocating for Remain were not impartial.

I have had enough of experts, yes. I don't trust that they are independent. Because of the massive imbalance in opinions coming from so-called experts, they just seemed totally biased. People have had enough of biased experts who have been influenced by the government. 'Firm Leave' voter

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Remain voters displayed a much greater level of respect for 'experts'; after all, many high-profile experts who expressed an opinion supported the Remain cause. However, a few made a careful distinction between 'experts' and 'expertise'; someone may be an expert, but do they have expertise in this specific issue? And how impartial are they?

Arguments from lawyers who understood European law or economists who had a grasp of the financial implications were convincing. It was trickier with business figures as a number were either donors to the major parties or had previous political links. 'Firm Remain' voter

The central message I trusted was the economic messages from the IFS. In my view they are as impartial as any institution can be and formed of genuine experts in their field. 'Firm Remain' voter

Overall level of knowledge is most important to me, followed by impartiality. True impartiality is quite difficult to come by, but level of knowledge is demonstrable. I considered economists and financial institutions trustworthy as they have a much better understanding of the situation than me. I also trusted other bodies such as the BMA who I believe have the country's best interests at heart. 'Firm Remain' voter

I'd trust an economist more than a nuclear physicist when looking at the economic impact of leaving the EU. I'd trust both if talking about the impact on research funding. I'd trust whoever gave the more reasoned and clear opinion about something unrelated to their particular field. Swing voter

Which messages did EU referendum voters trust?

Most Leave voters said they weren't swayed by a specific message or messenger: they had long ago decided that they wanted the UK to leave the EU, and not much would sway them. Those who did specify a particular message often echoed the main campaign slogan: the desire to 'take back control'.

There was no one message that I trusted. Outlandish claims were made by both sides. 'Firm Leave' voter

We need to be able to rule ourselves. We should be able to decide on our own human rights policies, how we educate our children, how we spend our own money, our prison sentencing, our medical care, our armed forces, our minimum wage, our maximum working hours. We need to be able to control our own borders, decide our own immigration policies, decide how many refugees we can comfortably accommodate. 'Firm Leave' voter

Immigration was a key battleground in the referendum campaign. But rather than trusting any particular messenger, both sets of voters used messages about immigration to work out whom they distrusted.

Remain voters said that they tended to stop listening to people who expressed concerns about immigration, and undecided or weakly aligned voters found the topic a turn-off too.

I did not trust people whose arguments seemed to be a cover for anti-immigrant rhetoric. 'Firm Remain' voter

I tended to distrust anyone who started on about how much immigrants are costing, as EU immigrants are net contributors to the economy. If they couldn't grasp that basic economic fact I wasn't much interested in listening to their other arguments. 'Firm Remain' voter

The main message I got from Leave was the racist views that I saw on Facebook posted by the general public. Swing voter

But for Leave voters, insinuations about their own supposed views on immigration and ethnicity lowered their trust in other Remain messages. The characterisation of Leave voters as being - frankly - racist and a bit ignorant simply made them stop listening. The lesson may be that calling someone dim and bigoted isn't a great way to gain their trust.

I am not and never will be racist, but branding all Leave voters ignorant racists was what Remain relied upon. 'Firm Leave' voter

As the campaign went on and I saw how Leave voters were being demonised as ignorant and/or racist, my own views became that bit more polarised in response. 'Firm Leave' voter

Initially, I was open-minded and listened to both sides. But it became clear that the Leave voters were being characterised as ignorant, racist Little Englanders. The Remain messages felt tainted with the

assumption that somehow anyone leaning towards Leave were stupid, and so I tended to switch off. 'Firm Leave' voter

Nearly six months after the referendum, there's still a great deal of disagreement over what will be the long-term consequences of leaving the EU. Will it bring a new, exciting world of openness and global opportunity, or will it hobble the UK economy and our children's futures? There's no more agreement now than there was in June.

Participants who ended up voting Leave reported high levels of distrust in Remain campaigners' projections of economic chaos. They saw them as deliberate exaggerations intended to frighten wavering voters, and quite a few spontaneously mentioned that this was one of the things that settled the matter for them.

It became a joke in our house just what ludicrous threat would be made next. If anything, it made me more determined to vote the other way. 'Firm Leave' voter

It took away some of their credibility for me. I would have listened to more moderate views, but it became like a competition to see who could give the direst predictions. 'Firm Leave' voter

The lies seemed to get more and more far-fetched as the campaigns went on. George Osborne basically threatened people (including his own loyal Conservative voters) with Armageddon if we didn't vote Remain. 'Firm Leave' voter

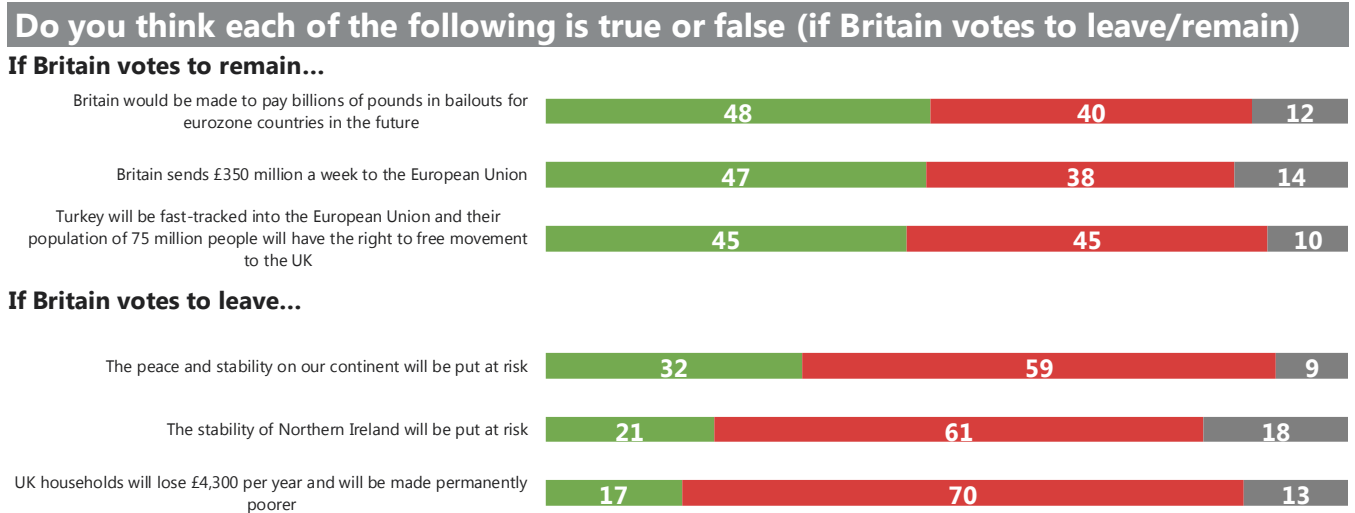
Some who voted Remain trusted and believed these messages implicitly. Moreover, they believe that Leave messages about 'Project Fear' were themselves untrustworthy, a tactic to devalue Remain arguments without addressing them.

They responded to any successful Remain messages by saying they were scaremongering. That effectively killed any argument stone-dead. 'Firm Remain' voter

An Ipsos MORI poll from June 2016 backs up the impression that most voters thought the government's figures on the economic impact were untrue, particularly the figures contained in a government leaflet delivered to all UK households before the referendum. Just 17% thought it was true that UK households would lose £4,300 per year and will be made permanently poorer, while 70% thought it was false.

Further, Ipsos MORI's research from during the campaign showed how Remain wasn't winning the economic argument as much as it would have liked. While people thought that Brexit might be bad for the economy in the short-term, they were if anything more likely to think it would be positive in the long-term, and in any case the economic argument wasn't felt to be relevant by many people – nearly half thought their own standard of living would be unaffected.

Figure 1.5: EU referendum campaign messages – Leave messages were more believed



Base: 1,257 British adults 18+ 11th – 14th June 2016

Source: Ipsos MORI Political Monitor

Little caused as much fury among Remain participants (and some undecided participants) as the campaign message that Brexit would result in £350m per week being made available for the NHS. Yet Ipsos MORI's research showed that 78% had heard of the figure, and more believed it to be true than false (by 47% to 38%).

The whole NHS lie about the £350 million was so misleading, and infuriating. It seemed to persuade so many people who were on the fence. 'Firm Remain' voter

They said there would be more money for the NHS, despite it being impossible for them to promise that because they couldn't control where the saved money went. Swing voter

But most Leave voters were baffled by the fuss. Interestingly, some assumed that nobody would have believed the claim anyway.

I don't think anyone believed that. 'Firm Leave' voter

Do people vote with their hearts or their heads?

After all the sound, fury, energy, money, emails, targeted Facebook posts, media appearances, televised debates, bus advertisements and posters... how many voters were really open to persuasion at all? Many participants in the Mumsnet study had made up their minds not just months, but years previously - and at least one explicitly framed it in terms of 'feeling', not 'thinking'.

Was there one central message that I trusted? Not really. I have felt for years that we would be better off out of Europe. 'Firm Leave' voter

Almost every respondent in our panels concluded that in the end, they had 'made up their own mind'; very few report being turned around decisively by a fact or an opinion.

In many cases, ultimately, people's votes were essentially based on emotion. Few could pinpoint one piece of information that had changed their minds. Those who felt that the question spoke to their own strong sense of personal identity seem to have barely needed to consider which way they were going to vote.

I feel European as much as Scottish and British. My partner is Dutch. 'Firm Remain' voter

For me this referendum was about my sense of identity as much as anything else. The very idea of Brexit seemed so fundamentally wrong to me that I found it difficult to discuss with friends or colleagues without becoming upset. 'Firm Remain' voter

I think the most important thing is that we are British and too many people are trying to erode that. 'Firm Leave' voter

Political campaigns need to reach voters' hearts as well as their heads, and some felt that the Remain campaign's reliance on technocratic, legal and economic arguments led to a lack of emotional appeal that may have been fatal to the cause.

Aside from the experts, they seemed to just stay quiet, blinking in bafflement. They needed charisma. They needed a stronger line about why Europe is great. 'Firm Remain' voter

Experts aren't very memorable or emotive, and have narrow fields of expertise. When electioneering you need charismatic and persuasive people. 'Firm Remain' voter

One near-universal trusted source is 'people you know': spouses, family and friends. You may not always agree with their political choices, but you trust them to have your interests at heart - and you know them well enough to feel confident about their character.

Across the world, political campaigners are picking up on this personal influencer potential. The 'Yes' side in 2015's Irish referendum on gay marriage exhorted its supporters to speak directly to people they knew about why they were voting Yes, and in retrospect say this was one of their campaign's most powerful tactics. It's also the key point behind targeted

messaging on Facebook - an environment in which people expect to hear from people they know, and an increasingly crucial battleground for political campaigns.

I discussed it with friends and family. 'Firm Leave' voter

*My husband has a good political head on his shoulders and I'm able to discuss (and trust) what he says.
'Firm Leave' voter*

In whom we distrust

Few would disagree that trust is a vital element in a healthy democracy and a vibrant civic life. Scepticism and a preference for independent thinking are, of course, desirable and healthy too. But the overwhelming message from our focus groups was that everyone, on all sides, found it much easier to talk about distrust than about trust. Even when asked explicitly for specific examples of people or messages they trusted, many participants could not give an answer.

When so few voters trust politicians and journalists, and less than one half trust economists, and so many anecdotally distrust 'experts' of any kind, voters have few avenues - in the relatively small amounts of spare time they have - to gather information that's useful to them when making huge political choices.

What can be done to recover voters' trust?

A few Leave voters say that the act of actually taking the UK out of the EU will be the point at which they start to trust politicians again.

I don't trust them to enact what the British people have voted for. 'Firm Leave' voter

I will begin to rebuild my trust in any one of them when they actually do what the country has asked them to do - get us out of Europe. 'Firm Leave' voter

Even among delighted Leave voters, cynicism about politicians remains high.

I think Theresa May has been brilliant so far - a really strong leader and diplomatic too. So yes, I'm glad she is Prime Minister. Trust is still the wrong word though. All politicians are just pursuing their own political gain, and that of their colleagues. 'Firm Leave' voter

And many participants on both sides were particularly disappointed by David Cameron's resignation - in view of his promise that he would not resign if Leave won.

I trusted Cameron. He then showed he could not be trusted by resigning. 'Firm Remain' voter

One rare point of agreement between Leave and Remain voters is that neither of the campaigns covered themselves in glory; between them they demonstrated most of the characteristics that turn voters off. Politicians in Westminster in particular have much work to do to start reconnecting with voters and demonstrating that they have priorities other than getting their own viewpoints across and ignoring debate.

Both campaigns were almost laughably bad. I looked carefully at the leaflets I received from each, and they were both full of simplistic statements designed to appeal to populist opinion. I didn't learn anything from either of them. I was particularly irritated by the Leave campaign's helpful map showing us just how close Turkey is to Syria (!) and the Remain campaign's stance that their opponents were all xenophobic and probably not very intelligent. 'Firm Leave' voter

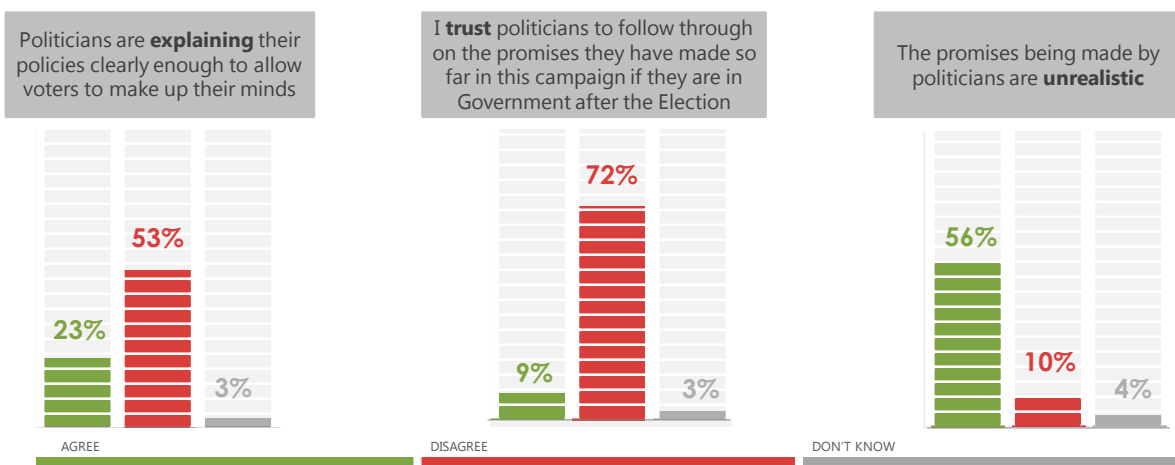
It was loads of mudslinging on both sides, and I can imagine that those who were not clearly Leave or Remain would have had a job unpicking the real issues. 'Firm Leave' voter

Fudging people's very reasonable questions about immigration (Labour) or trying to scare people with the prospect of financial ruin (Tory) both, I'm sure, contributed to the result. 'Firm Remain' voter

One respondent suggested that politicians need to be more circumspect and to stop over-promising. This matches Ipsos MORI research for the BBC in 2015, which found seven in ten of an online community of voters lacked confidence that parties would follow through on their manifesto promises, with a belief that politicians weren't being fully open about their arguments (not being prepared to recognise any downside), and were making unrealistic promises anyway.

Figure 1.6: Confidence in manifesto promises

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Base: 1,077 online community members aged 18-75, 24th – 28th April 2015

Source: BBC Ipsos MORI Election Uncut community

What erodes trust is someone saying 'this WILL happen' and then, when it doesn't, saying they didn't say it or were wrongly advised or the situation has changed. Politicians shouldn't say 'this WILL happen', they should say 'if things stay the same' or 'if things work out how I think they will'. 'Firm Leave' voter

Politicians could also help themselves by holding consistent positions - in private and in public. It was notable among participants that the politicians singled out as being trustworthy were those who had often got themselves into trouble (or at least notoriety) by openly advocating inconvenient views, or appearing to be unmediated and unspun: David Davis, Nick Clegg, Ruth Davidson, Gisela Stuart, Alan Johnson.

Overall, participants often seemed most enthusiastic about politicians who don't always toe their own party's line. Tony Benn - often a thorn to his own side - got an honourable mention from some Leave voters.

It's difficult to have trust in politicians, bankers or big businesses as they often say something publicly but are found to say something else in private. 'Firm Leave' voter

And whether Remain's tactics really were 'Project Fear' or not, the strong suggestion from our panel is that politicians would do much better to present sober estimates and acknowledge uncertainty if they want people to trust what they say.

I felt we were being lied to and given the worst case scenario. I expected that the economy would be unstable for a while but for people like me who always wanted to Leave, some financial instability was a price worth paying. 'Firm Leave' voter

One of the very few organisations positively cited as being trustworthy was Full Fact, the fact-checking charity. It seems as though there's a hunger for information that can truly be considered impartial - and unconnected with political parties.

The group I thought were the most impartial were Full Fact. I use them to find out about anything I am interested in. Their well-researched impartiality was the reason I trusted them more than anyone else.

'Firm Remain' voter

Reading all of the participants' responses, what comes through very clearly is a sense that the public would rather be cynical than be taken for suckers. Perhaps trusting politicians and experts leads to long-term disillusionment; better, as they say, to cut out the middle man (or woman) and distrust almost everyone from the start.

We asked all the participants whether they would change their vote if the referendum were to be re-run tomorrow, and - almost unanimously - the answer, on all sides, was 'no'. Leave voters are no more persuaded by predictions of economic calamity and trade chaos than they were in June; Remain voters are no more accepting of the outcome. Our focus group work suggests that voting decisions in the referendum were ultimately determined by emotion and identity. Whichever way people voted, they're not yet ready to be persuaded otherwise.

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About Mumsnet

Mumsnet is the UK's largest network for parents, with over 9.4 million unique visitors per month clocking up over 96 million page views. It has 170 local sites and a network of over 8,500 bloggers. It regularly campaigns on issues including support for families of children with special educational needs, improvements in miscarriage care and freedom of speech on the internet.

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