An Authenticity Expectations Gap? A Comparison of Publics' and Members of Parliament's Views on Politicians Being True to Themselves

John Kenny, University of East Anglia
Lucas Geese, University of East Anglia

Authentic representatives may offer voters an antidote to the perceived failings of the stereotypical out-of-touch "fake" politician. While gaining more scholarly attention, the nascent literature rarely considers both publics' and politicians' views simultaneously. Here, we draw on rare public opinion and Member of Parliament (MPs) surveys fielded in 2023 in Britain and Germany. One hundred UK MPs and seventy-nine German MPs answered the extent to which they will act according to their strongly held views when these come into conflict with those of (1) their voters, (2) their party, or (3) the consensus of independent experts. Publics in these countries were asked for each of these situations the extent to which MPs should act according to their own views. We thus measure preferences for a central feature of an authentic politician in being consistent in representing their core beliefs in their behaviors. We find that German MPs are much more willing compared to UK MPs to state they would follow their own views when faced with a conflict with their voters, and at higher levels in comparison to situations when they are faced with a conflict with their party. Yet publics in both countries have a greater wish on average for an MP to be true to themselves when their views conflict with their party line than when they conflict with their voters. From this emerges expectation gaps between what MPs prioritize, and the principles that publics would like to see them emphasize.

Keywords: political authenticity, representation, political elites, public opinion, surveys

A widespread pattern exists across Western countries of distrust in politicians,[1] with trust in national legislators declining notably over the past number of decades.[2] At the same time, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of the career politician, who tends to have less experience of the world outside politics and to be less in touch with the mass electorate than was formerly the case.[3] With this comes concerns that politicians lack conviction, deliver empty promises they know cannot be achieved, and are more motivated by their political careers and self-interest than achieving meaningful change.[4] The pressure to be all things at once to different groups may indeed lead them to "feign values and engage in hypocrisy,"[5] which raises serious dilemmas of trust and to whose interests politicians are truly following.

In this light, politicians displaying their true authentic selves has been proposed as a potential antidote, with publics today appearing to display a greater desire for politicians to be authentic than was the case in the past.[6] An authentic individual is said to be true to themselves, transparent about their views and values, and genuinely themselves in public rather than putting on an act to appear as what others want them to be.[7] As Ceccobelli and DiGregorio[8] remark, central to the concept of authenticity in politics is "how much does a politician behave as him/herself rather than a puppet without a backbone who is maneuvered by spin doctors or other

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1. Troels Bøggild, "Politicians as Party Hacks: Party Loyalty and Public Distrust in Politicians," *The Journal of Politics* 82 (2020): 1516–29.

2. Jack Citrin and Laura Stoker, "Political Trust in a Cynical Age," *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018): 49–70.

3. Anthony King, "The Rise of the Career Politician in Britain — And Its Consequences," *British Journal of Political Science* 11 (1981): 249–85; and Nick Clarke et al., *The Good Politician: Folk Theories, Political Interaction, and the Rise of Anti-Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

4. Timur Kuran, "The Authenticity Deficit in Modern Politics," *CATO Unbound* (blog), (March 7, 2016), https://www.cato-unbound.org/2016/03/07/timur-kuran/authenticity-deficit-modern-politics/.

5. Ben Jones, "Authenticity in Political Discourse," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 19 (2016): 489–504, at 490.

6. Clarke et al., *The Good Politician*; and Viktor Valgarðsson et al., "The Good Politician and Political Trust: An Authenticity Gap in British Politics?," *Political Studies* 69 (2021): 858–80.

7. Viktor Valgarðsson et al., "The Good Politician: Competence, Integrity and Authenticity in Seven Democracies," *Political Studies* 0 (2024): https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217241261180; Dieter Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity: 'To Thine Own Self Be True,'" *Political Behavior* 43 (2021): 1181–1204; and Jones, "Authenticity in Political Discourse," 20.

8. Diego Ceccobelli and Luigi Di Gregorio, "The Triangle of Leadership. Authenticity, Competence and Ordinariness in Political Marketing," *Journal of Political Marketing* 21 (2022): 113–25, at 116.

obscure political figures?" For if a politician is authentic—or at least perceived to be—then voters can feel more comfortable in placing their trust in them to apply their core values consistently, even behind closed doors and in unforeseen circumstances.[9] The former German Chancellor Angela Merkel for instance has been described as authentic based on her "consistency and ordinariness"[10] over sixteen years of office as well as for "defy[ing] stereotypes and pressures to conform."[11] Indeed, recent research indicates that politicians who voters perceive to be authentic receive an electoral reward.[12] Conversely, being perceived as inauthentic may have the opposite effect. In the 2016 US Presidential Election campaign, Hillary Clinton was "cast as too wary, as inauthentic, as politically correct,"[13] something that Clinton herself considered as an important factor in her defeat.[14] In this light, politicians' desire to cultivate the appearance of authenticity is very understandable.[15]

And yet, being authentic may not always be desirable and it does involve trade-offs. Firstly, "inauthentic politicians can be preferable to authentic ones proudly touting reprehensible values."[16] Unmitigated authenticity may also come at the expense of a willingness to compromise and reach consensus, and there may be occasions where strongly displaying one's core values can cause more harm than good.[17] For instance, a thoroughly authentic politician may be less likely to de-escalate hostilities.[18] From this perspective, it may be "a concept that allows for

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9. Jones, "Authenticity in Political Discourse"; Ceccobelli and Di Gregorio, "The Triangle of Leadership"; and Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity."

10. Julia Sonnevend and Olivia Steiert, "The Power of Predictability: How Angela Merkel Constructed Her Authenticity on Instagram," *New Media & Society* 26 (2024): 5719–41, at 5720.

11. S Aqeel Tirmizi, "Globally Responsible Leadership: The Courageous Case of Angela Merkel," *Leadership* 19 (2023): 549–67, at 561.

12. Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity"; John Kenny, Jac Larner, and Michael S. Lewis-Beck, "Candidate Authenticity and the Iowa Caucus," *Electoral Studies* 73 (2021): https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102390; and Simon M. Luebke and Ines Engelmann, "Perceiving Politicians as True to Themselves: Development and Validation of the Perceived Political Authenticity Scale," *PLOS ONE* 18 (2023): https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0285344.

13. Lilly J. Goren, "Authenticity and Emotion: Hillary Rodham Clinton's Dual Constraints," *Politics & Gender* 14 (2018): 111–15, at 113.

14. Kenny et al., "Candidate Authenticity and the Iowa Caucus," 1; and Gunn Enli and Linda Therese Rosenberg, "Trust in the Age of Social Media: Populist Politicians Seem More Authentic," *Social Media + Society* 4 (2018): https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118764430, 3.

15. Constantine Sedikides and Rebecca J. Schlegel, "Distilling the Concept of Authenticity," *Nature Reviews Psychology* 3 (2024): 509–23.

16. Jones, "Authenticity in Political Discourse," 499.

17. Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity."

18. Paul Starr, "Spare Us from Authenticity," *CATO Unbound* (blog), (March 9, 2016), https://www.cato-unbound.org/2016/03/09/paul-starr/spare-us-authenticity/.

politics rooted in instinct rather than reason."[19] There are other character traits that politicians are adjudicated on—such as integrity, leadership, competency and empathy[20]—that a politician that is perceived as authentic may not necessarily possess. Being authentic may also come into conflict with the core democratic ideal of policy responsiveness to one's electorate, something that voters tend to value.[21] Moreover, party discipline is an important aspect for parties to make substantial progress on achieving their policy goals, and indeed parties that appear united are also preferred on average by voters compared to those that are divided.[22] As a result, if politicians express their authentic views in ways that conflict with their party line, they "may risk alienating themselves from increasingly centralised party systems."[23] This may in turn involve substantial personal costs to them given the disciplinary tools that parties have at their disposal.[24] Thus, while being authentic undoubtedly has many political benefits as empirical research has now shown, it also has potential drawbacks.

What is particularly missing in existing research exploring these trade-offs in democratic ideals is a perspective that examines politicians' and publics' views on political authenticity at the same time. At the heart of this paper are thus the following research questions: (1) to what extent are elected mandate-holders willing to prioritize their own strong views over those of others, (2) to what extent do members of the public actually want their representatives to prioritize such views over those of others, and (3) how do these two perspectives compare to each other? In short, we seek to explore to what extent there is an authenticity expectations gap.

We carry this out in a comparative context of Britain and Germany. These cases are comparable in many respects in that they are both large Western

19. Catherine Fieschi, *Populocracy: The Tyranny of Authenticity and the Rise of Populism* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Agenda Publishing, 2019), 36

20. David B. Holian and Charles L. Prysby, *Candidate Character Traits in Presidential Elections* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

21. Peter Esaiasson and Christopher Wlezien, "Advances in the Study of Democratic Responsiveness: An Introduction," *Comparative Political Studies* 50 (2017): 699–710.

22. Roni Lehrer, Pirmin Stöckle, and Sebastian Juhl, "Assessing the Relative Influence of Party Unity on Vote Choice: Evidence from a Conjoint Experiment," *Political Science Research and Methods* 12 (2024): 220–28.

23. James Weinberg, "Building Trust in Political Office: Testing the Efficacy of Political Contact and Authentic Communication," *Political Studies* 72 (2024): 1288–1312.

24. Jonathan B. Slapin et al., "Ideology, Grandstanding, and Strategic Party Disloyalty in the British Parliament," *American Political Science Review* 112 (2018): 15–30; and Stefanie Bailer, "To Use the Whip or Not: Whether and When Party Group Leaders Use Disciplinary Measures to Achieve Voting Unity," *International Political Science Review* 39 (2018): 163–77.

parliamentary democracies. However, they crucially differ in terms of the behavioral incentives that are in place for Members of Parliament (MPs) to act (in)dependently as agents of their voters and parties as two of their key principals.[25] Especially the two countries' electoral systems place different emphases on the relevance of politicians' personal vote-earning attributes.[26] Whereas Britain can be argued to operate under a strongly candidate-focused first-past-the-post electoral system, Germany elects its national parliament through a more strongly party-controlled mixed-member proportional system.[27] In the German Constitution furthermore, Article 38 specifies that MPs "shall be representatives of the whole people, not bound by orders or instructions and responsible only to their conscience."[28] This guiding principle may empower MPs in Germany to be more true to themselves than those in the UK. Though the fact that German MPs nonetheless need to in practice rely on the support from others within their parliamentary party to advance in their careers may limit their ability to prioritize their own conscience.[29] As there has been less work in the area explicitly on this in the context of political authenticity, we begin by drawing out lessons from the broader political representation literature and then identify the findings from the specific research papers on political authenticity that have compared the views of publics and politicians.

Our findings reveal considerable expectation gaps. Notably, in both countries, politicians report favoring their own strong views over voters' views more than voters actually want them to. In other words, here politicians act too authentically. However, it is also notable that vis-à-vis parties' position-taking, voters are more willing for their MPs to be true to themselves when MPs are in disagreement with the views of their parties than when they disagree with the views of their voters. We further examine these patterns within party families, revealing that expectation gaps are more pronounced for center-right than for center-left MP-voter comparisons.

25. John M. Carey, *Legislative Voting and Accountability* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

26. Matthew Soberg Shugart, Melody Ellis Valdini, and Kati Suominen, "Looking for Locals: Voter Information Demands and Personal Vote-Earning Attributes of Legislators under Proportional Representation," *American Journal of Political Science* 49 (2005): 437–49.

27. Sven-Oliver Proksch and Jonathan B. Slapin, *The Politics of Parliamentary Debate: Parties, Rebels and Representation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

28. German Federal Ministry of Justice, "Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany," (accessed December 20, 2024), https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html.

29. Katja Wolter, "Liebe vergeht – Fraktion besteht! Wie zerschellt man möglichst schnell an den Strukturen in der Politik?: Widersprüche und Herausforderungen für Bundestagsabgeordnete," *Gruppe. Interaktion. Organisation. Zeitschrift für Angewandte Organisationspsychologie (GIO)* 50 (2019): 271–80.

Interestingly, we find remarkably small differences between MPs and voters of the populist right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany.

Literature

Work on the representation preferences of publics has examined what individuals think should be done in the case of conflict between the views of politicians and their representees. In one 2003 British survey,[30] 53% of publics stated a preference for MPs following what they perceive those in their constituency want over what they themselves think is best, with just 11% thinking they should follow their conscience.[31] In a further survey wave in the study, 76% stated that MPs should base their vote in parliament on their constituents' preferences rather than their own judgments when these two views conflict. The study also found differences in the individual predictors of whether publics think that their personal preferences, those of the MP's constituents, or those of the MP's party should most influence their parliamentary voting decisions, based on for instance education levels, political efficacy, and political engagement. A more recent study of publics in the US, UK, and Denmark demonstrates that while publics have a preference for their politicians to vote in line with their constituents rather than their parties when these conflict, that publics perceive them to be more likely to prioritize the party line.[32]

Other studies have focused on the views of politicians. Trumm and Barclay[33] looked at whether candidates for the 2015 and 2017 UK general elections believe that MPs should prioritize their views or those of their constituents when voting. They found that candidates across parties favored MPs prioritizing their own views, with the exception of United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) candidates where the pattern was reversed. Another study using data collected in 2022 of MPs in the German Bundestag and state parliaments asked whether MPs should follow their conscience even if a majority of citizens have a different opinion. On a one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree) scale, respondents from the center-right Christlich Demokratische Union (CDU)/ Christlich-Soziale Union (CSU), Greens, and the liberal Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) parties averaged around six, the average for the right-wing populist AfD and the left-socialist Die Linke

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30. Christopher Jan Carman, "Public Preferences for Parliamentary Representation in the UK: An Overlooked Link?," *Political Studies* 54 (2006): 103–22.

31. The remainder responded "Depends on the issue" (35%) or "Don't know" (2%).

32. Bøggild, "Politicians as Party Hacks."

33. Siim Trumm, and Andrew Barclay "Parliamentary Representation: Should MPs Prioritise Their Own Views or Those of Their Voters?," *Political Studies* 71 (2023): 1151–70.

respondents was notably lower at five, with the social democrat Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) responses in between.[34] With populist-right politicians having been put forward as being both more likely to benefit from authenticity appeals[35] while at the same time claiming to represent the "will of the people"[36] both of these studies suggest that such politicians are on balance more people-centric in their stated preferences than those in other parties.

Some studies have brought these top-down and bottom-up perspectives together. Campbell and Lovenduski[37] focus specifically on differences among UK MPs and publics through surveys carried out in late 2012. Ranking eight different roles of MPs, responding to issues raised by constituents was ranked by the majority of both MPs and publics as the number one priority, whereas less than 5% of both MPs and publics placed supporting their party in this position.

There does exist some elite-public studies focusing directly on the priorities afforded to authenticity. Comparing the views of a representative sample of British publics with responses from forty-seven members of the House of Commons, House of Lords, and the dissolved assemblies from late 2017, Valgarðsson et al[38] show that publics are more likely to perceive being authentic as an important characteristic of a good politician than representatives. In the public surveys, younger individuals and those with higher levels of distrust were more likely to value authenticity. Weinberg[39] draws upon elite interviews with MPs in the UK, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand—as well as Lords and elected representatives from the devolved parliaments in the UK—in addition to public surveys in the UK to examine preferences for authentic politicians. Interviewees emphasized the importance of communicating authentically and not making promises that could not be kept. Testing this experimentally with publics in the UK, the study

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34. Leonard Häfner, Claudia Landwehr, and Lea Stallbaum, "German Legislators' Conceptions of Democracy and Process Preferences: Results from a New Survey," *German Politics* (2023): 1–26.

35. Fieschi, *Populocracy*; Gunn Enli, "Populism as 'Truth': How Mediated Authenticity Strengthens the Populist Message," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* (2024): https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612231221802; and Corina Lacatus and Gustav Meibauer, "'Saying It like It Is': Right-Wing Populism, International Politics, and the Performance of Authenticity," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24 (2022): 437–57.

36. Cas Mudde, "Populism in Europe: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism (The *Government and Opposition* /Leonard Schapiro Lecture 2019)," *Government and Opposition* 56 (2021): 577–97.

37. Rosie Campbell and Joni Lovenduski, "What Should MPs Do? Public and Parliamentarians' Views Compared," *Parliamentary Affairs* 68 (2015): 690–708.

38. Valgarðsson et al., "The Good Politician and Political Trust."

39. Weinberg, "Building Trust in Political Office."

finds that if politicians make conditional rather than absolute promises and communicate these honestly, this can mitigate the loss of citizens' trust in the event that external circumstances prevent policy delivery.

These works have been important, but there is a lot more to learn. Firstly, as detailed, studies in the representation literature tend to concentrate on what MPs do when their views in general differ from that of their voters. As MPs may have a view on an issue but it may not be one that would affect their core sense of self if they adapted their stance to match that of others, these questions may not capture the important feature of authenticity of standing behind one's *core values* in the face of adversity. Thus, if the questions were framed as whether MPs should prioritize more deep-rooted views of theirs over the views of other stakeholders, would publics show more of a willingness for MPs to stick to their guns, or would they prefer for MPs to compromise on their sense of authenticity in order to fulfil the wishes of their voters for instance?

Secondly, previous surveys of politicians tend to focus on how MPs should vote when their own views differ from others. While voting against one's party certainly does occur in parliamentary systems like the UK and Germany, as Slapin et al[40] note there is a "relative rarity of individual defections from party line voting in the United Kingdom and elsewhere." Thus, focusing on the voting behavior of parliamentarians sets a high threshold as many MPs would not be able to countenance such a possibility—which no doubt signals authenticity as observed in the case of former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn[41]—given the tools that parties have to discipline them. However, there are other influential methods that MPs have at their disposal to get their desired policy through or signal their responsiveness to their voters' and/or parties' preferences, such as through raising parliamentary questions, committee work, and internal party working groups.[42] These can sometimes be even

40. Slapin et al., "Ideology, Grandstanding, and Strategic Party Disloyalty," 16; see also Ulrich Sieberer and Tamaki Ohmura, "Mandate Type, Electoral Safety, and Defections from the Party Line: The Conditional Mandate Divide in the German Bundestag, 1949–2013," *Party Politics* 27 (2021): 704–15.

41. Frank Mueller, Andrea Whittle, and Gyuzel Gadelshina, "The Discursive Construction of Authenticity: The Case of Jeremy Corbyn," *Discourse, Context & Media* 31 (2019): https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2019.100324.

42. Werner J. Patzelt, "What Can an Individual MP Do in German Parliamentary Politics?," *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 5 (1999): 23–52; Shane Martin, "Parliamentary Questions, the Behaviour of Legislators, and the Function of Legislatures: An Introduction," *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 17 (2011): 259–70; and Lucas Geese and Javier Martínez-Cantó, "Working as a Team: Do Legislators Coordinate Their Geographic Representation Efforts in Party-Centred Environments?," *Party Politics* 29 (2023): 918–28.

more effective means through which representatives can influence the final outcome than their voting behavior in the chamber.[43] And though a study of publics in Austria, Britain, and Germany does find that publics are more likely to reward politicians when they actually vote against their party rather than when they just criticize it,[44] MPs themselves may think more holistically about what is the best means through which their policy preferences that are important to them can best be realized.

Thirdly, there is a paucity of studies quantitatively studying the preferences of elected MPs on the matter (rather than politicians or political candidates more broadly), and especially so in a cross-national setting. This is understandable given the difficulties of recruiting MPs, but it raises questions on where MPs themselves sit on this point and how far empirical findings can travel.

To contribute to this debate, we collected survey data from both MPs and publics in Britain and Germany, designing a question battery specifically to address the above points. In the next section, we detail the data and the survey questions.

Data

MPs are a notoriously difficult group to contact given severe limits on their time.[45] One approach when carrying out MP surveys is for researchers to initiate contact with them and issue subsequent reminders to complete the survey; however this typically leads to very low response rates or sample sizes by which it is not possible to make inferential claims on the wider population.[46] The approach that we instead chose to use was for the data collection to be carried out via organizations that had a solid track record of accessing MPs.

In Germany, the survey was carried out by the Institut für Sozialforschung und Gesellschaftspolitik (ISG), whose record in the area included an MP survey carried out on behalf of the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina.[47]

43. Cory L. Struthers, "The Political in the Technical: Understanding the Influence of National Political Institutions on Climate Adaptation," *Climate and Development* 12 (2020): 756–68, at 764.

44. Markus Wagner, Nick Vivyan, and Konstantin Glinitzer, "Costly Signals: Voter Responses to Parliamentary Dissent in Austria, Britain, and Germany," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 45 (2020): 645–78.

45. Philip Cowley, "How to Get Information Out of Members of Parliament (Without Being Told Off by the Speaker)," *Political Studies Review* 20 (2022): 236–42.

46. Valgarðsson et al., "The Good Politician and Political Trust."

47. Katja Seidel et al., "Nutzen von wissenschaftlicher Evidenz: Erwartungen an wissenschaftliche Expertise: Bericht über eine Bundestagsbefragung im Rahmen der Leopoldina-Evidenzinitiative unter Leitung von Claudia Buch, Regina T. Riphahn und Monika Schnitzer," *Diskussion* (October 2021), https://doi.org/10.26164/LEOPOLDINA_01_00408.

The field dates were from October 10–December 1, 2023. All 736 members of parliament received a postal invite to the survey, followed up by an email invitation with the survey to be completed through an online form. A number of reminder emails were sent along with 678 phone calls to MPs' offices to encourage responses. Following an initial question on the policy areas that the MPs were most active in, seventy-nine MPs (10.7%) answered the authenticity battery which was the first of eight substantive questions fielded (see wording below). After some attrition during the survey, sixty-three MPs (8.6%) answered the demographic questions at the end of the survey.

In Britain, our questions were placed on an Omnibus survey of MPs carried out by Savanta which has a record of obtaining high-quality data with high response rates from MPs.[48] The field dates were from September 6–October 16, 2023, with a total sample of 100 MPs.

It needs to be acknowledged that the sample size for these MP surveys comes with higher degrees of statistical uncertainty than would be the case in a standard publics survey, and that this thus limits the complexity of statistical analyses that can be carried out. But as has been observed elsewhere,[49] the matching of the responses of MPs in such surveys with those of the wider population is extremely valuable and has proven to provide important advances on a range of substantive topics.

The publics surveys of adult populations were fielded by Survation. Survation has a record of accuracy in polling, such as being the only member of the British Polling Council to correctly predict the hung parliament of the 2017 General Election.[50] In Britain, a total of 2,002 respondents completed the survey between November 15–December 18, 2023. In Germany, 2,177 respondents completed the survey between November 20–December 15, 2023. In both cases, post-stratification weights were applied to match national targets on age, gender, geographic region, educational attainment, and vote at the previous general election. In Britain, the

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48. See Campbell and Lovenduski, "What Should MPs Do?"; Chris Hanretty, Jonathan Mellon, and Patrick English, "Members of Parliament Are Minimally Accountable for Their Issue Stances (and They Know It)," *American Political Science Review* 115 (2024): 1275–91; and J.A. Usher-Smith et al., "Evaluation of the Reach and Impact of a UK Campaign Highlighting Obesity as a Cause of Cancer among the General Public and Members of Parliament," *Public Health* 219 (2023): 131–38.

49. Mitya Pearson and Alan Wager, "Not so Different: Comparing British MPs' and Voters' Attitudes to Climate Change," *Parliamentary Affairs* 78 (2025): 53–76.

50. Philip Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2017* (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); and Will Jennings, "The Polls in 2017," in *Political Communication in Britain: Campaigning, Media and Polling in the 2017 General Election*, ed. Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore, and Simon Atkinson (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 209–20.

post-stratification weights additionally accounted for household income and vote at the 2016 Brexit referendum.

We designed the following battery to measure MPs' perceptions of how much they would be true to themselves when their own views come into conflict with those of other actors, and publics' views of what they perceive MPs should do in such circumstances. In this way, we measure preferences for a central feature of an authentic politician in being consistent in representing their core beliefs in their behaviors.[51]

> At times, members of parliament find themselves in situations in which their own strongly held views differ from that of others'. To what extent would you agree or disagree[52] with each of the following statements.
>
> [MPs]: In my role as a member of parliament, I will act according to my own strongly held views even if such views differ from:
> - those of my voters;
> - the official position of my party;
> - the consensus of independent experts.
>
> [Publics]: In their role as a member of parliament, MPs should act according to their own strongly held views even if such views differ from:
> - those of their voters;
> - the official position of their party;
> - the consensus of independent experts.

When presenting the results below we group response options into agree (strongly agree + agree); middle (somewhat agree + somewhat disagree); and disagree (disagree + strongly disagree). These are presented as a total of all respondents (following the removal of "don't know" responses). The three-category approach was chosen to differentiate those with more decisive views on the question, from those whose views would only slightly lean one way or the other.

Importantly, the "strongly held views" framing taps into an issue that is deep-rooted for MPs. The question also focuses on a conflict with regards to their wider parliamentary behavior, rather than specifically in relation to their voting behavior. One must remember that this wording does not capture the full spectrum of factors people may consider when evaluating a politician's authenticity. The literature also suggests other components may matter such as spontaneity, conviction, boldness,

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51. Jones, "Authenticity in Political Discourse," 491.
52. Response options were: "Strongly agree"; "Agree"; "Somewhat agree"; "Somewhat disagree"; "Disagree"; "Strongly disagree"; and "Don't know."

ordinariness, and intimacy for instance.[53] Given space constraints on the elite survey, we had to focus on a specific component, for which being true to oneself was the most central element. It is difficult to consider a politician as authentic if they are willing to abandon their own core views while carrying out their work.

A further advantage of this framing is that it enables a differentiation between MPs' pressures from different actors. When it comes to voters, there may be a tension between MPs being true to their own views, versus the electoral incentives—and one could argue a democratic imperative—to do as their voters want. Yet the constraints set by acting against one's party are different, given that parties have the means to reward certain MPs by promoting them to frontbench or committee chair positions, or punish them by holding these rewards back.[54] We know that the costs of dissent are larger in the German than the British parliament given the different electoral system incentives, and that voters recognize this by rewarding dissent more in the German than the British context.[55] Due to these institutional differences, we hypothesise that we will witness differences among MPs in both countries in their willingness to prioritize their own views (**Hypothesis 1**).

Given that voters have been found in the literature to be more likely to want politicians to follow their voters than their parties, we expect that a greater share of the public will want MPs to prioritize their voters over that of their own strongly held views than they will want MPs to prioritize their parties' views over their own (**Hypothesis 2**). Despite the growing desire for authenticity recorded in the literature, we hypothesise that MPs will be more willing to prioritize the official position of their party over their own strongly held views, and conversely less likely to prioritize the positions of their voters over their own than publics will wish them to do so (**Hypothesis 3**).

When it comes to independent experts, even an authentic politician may be able to update their priors in light of new evidence without compromising their authenticity. As Jones[56] remarks, "If new information causes an individual to conclude that her reasons for a commitment are in error, it would be inauthentic of her to hold onto that commitment for illegitimate reasons." We thus expect MPs to be the most willing to concede to the consensus of independent experts than to concede to the

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53. See Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity"; Simon M. Luebke, "Political Authenticity: Conceptualization of a Popular Term," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26 (2021): 635–53; and Valgarðsson et al., "The Good Politician and Political Trust."

54. E.g., Carey, *Legislative Voting and Accountability*; Ulrich Sieberer, "Party Unity in Parliamentary Democracies: A Comparative Analysis," *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 12 (2006): 150–78.

55. Wagner, Vivyan, and Glinitzer, "Costly Signals."

56. Jones, "Authenticity in Political Discourse," 493.

views of their voters or their party **(Hypothesis 4a)**. However, as MPs in practice may suffer accusations of u-turns or duplicity for doing so,[57] we also hold open the possibility that they will be the least likely to compromise here **(Hypothesis 4b)**. While we test for differences based on party affiliations, we do not form hypotheses for these associations beforehand.

Results

Our empirical strategy is as follows. In a first step we map German and British MPs' survey responses to compare them across the two countries. In a second step, we do the same for members of the German and British publics. Then, in a third step, we estimate gaps between politicians' and publics' survey responses in each country separately. Finally, we dig deeper into these gaps by comparing gaps between politicians and their voters based on party affiliation/ voting decisions.

Figure 1 shows the figures for German and British MPs' agreement towards favoring their own strongly held views over those of their voters, parties, and independent experts. While both German and UK MPs show overall a tendency towards prioritizing their own strongly held views over the majority opinion of their voters, this is more pronounced in Germany than in the UK: almost two-thirds of German MPs and half the British MPs agree or strongly agree that they would do so.

When comparing their parties' positions, MPs in both countries also tend towards following their own views than those of their parties. It is notable that surveyed German MPs indicated a somewhat stronger focus towards their parties' views than British MPs. However, British MPs, as we have seen before, are relatively more inclined to follow their voters' majority views than German MPs.

When taking into account the views of independent experts, the majority of German MPs are on the fence between experts' and their own strongly held views. To the contrary, British MPs tend to favor their own views overall more than those of experts. Thus, Hypothesis 4a is confirmed in the case of Germany, and in Britain there is a null finding.

In summary, German MPs would follow their own views considerably more strongly than those of their voters, and somewhat more than those of their parties, while they are divided over following their own views rather than those of experts. By comparison, British MPs are more moderately inclined to prioritize their own views over those of their voters', their parties', as well as experts' opinion. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is confirmed.

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57. Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity"; Rosie Campbell, "Authenticity," *BBC Radio 4* (November 19, 2017), http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09dxddw.
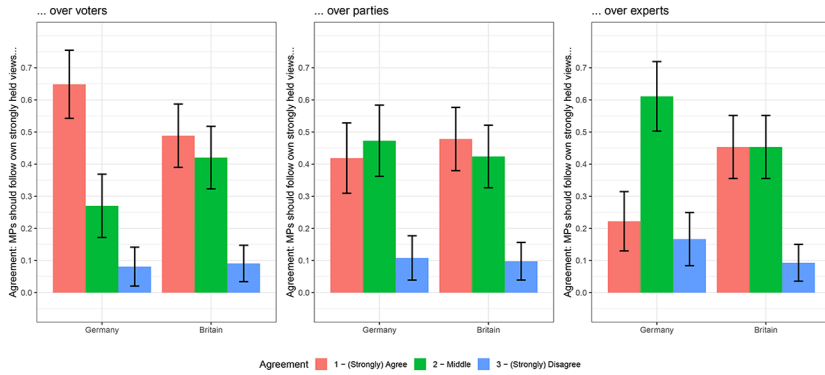
Figure 1. Agreement that MPs should follow their own strongly held views over their voters, parties, and experts (German and British MPs comparison)

Note: 95% confidence intervals are displayed

In Figure 2, we see the breakdown for each of the three questions answered by members of the public in both Britain and Germany. A number of observations are apparent. Firstly, agreement that politicians should be true to themselves shows little variation between the countries, regardless of whether their strongly held views are being contrasted against those of voters, parties, or experts. Britons are however more likely to disagree that politicians should be true to their own views in such situations; this is especially pronounced for when their views conflict with those of
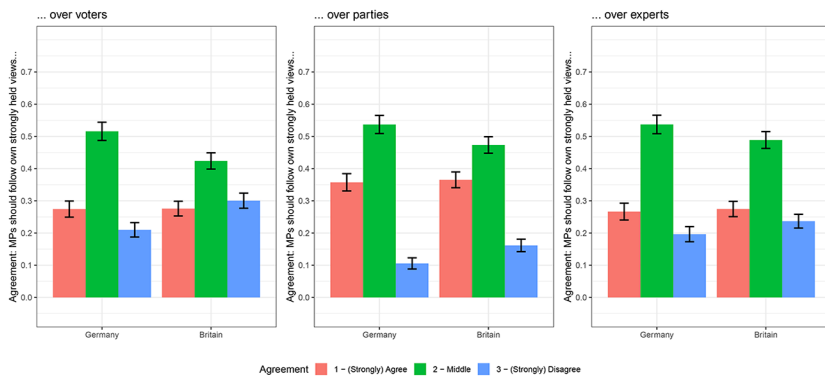

Figure 2. Agreement that MPs should follow their own strongly held views over their voters, parties, and experts (German and British publics comparison)

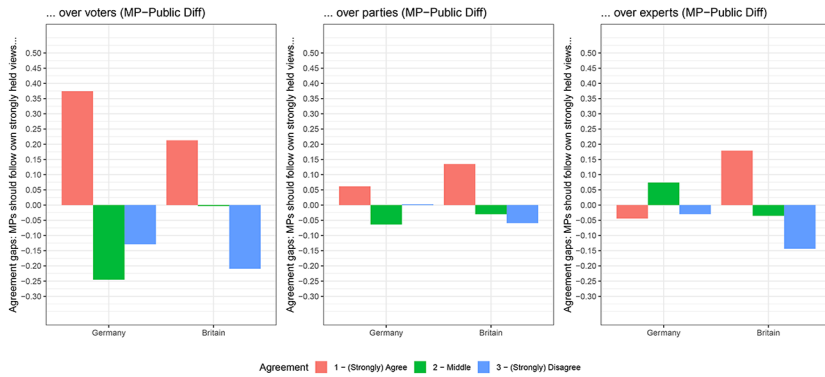Note: 95% confidence intervals are displayed

Figure 3. German and British authenticity gaps (percentage differences: MPs vs. Publics)

voters, where 30% of respondents in Britain hold this view compared to 21% in Germany.

Moreover, publics in both countries consider that politicians should be more willing to prioritize their own views when they come into conflict with those of their party than when they conflict with those of their voters or experts. This confirms Hypothesis 2. That there is still quite the variation in respondents' agreement to this statement ties in with recent research from Denmark that illustrates that voters do recognize that parties perform vital democratic functions, yet may be distrustful of their motivations.[58]

How do publics' and politicians' survey responses compare to each other? To elaborate on this question, Figure 3 presents relative percentage differences between politicians and publics. To generate the figures, we have subtracted the percentages in Figure 2 from those shown in the corresponding columns in Figure 1.

It becomes apparent that there are considerable gaps between what politicians consider they should do when their views are in conflict with those of others and what members of the public want them to do in such situations. Both German and British MPs are considerably more inclined to favor their own views over those of their voters than members of the public want them to. Similarly, in both countries, publics want their politicians to follow more strongly their own view than the party line in comparison to what politicians are willing to do. Hypothesis 3 is

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58. Ann-Kristin Kölln and Helene Helboe Pedersen, "Virtuous Party Linkages: Developing a Data-based Analytical Model to Explain Voters' Attitudes towards Political Parties," *European Journal of Political Research* (2024): https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12699.

Table 1. Authenticity Gaps by Party (Percentage Differences: MPs vs. Publics)

| | Over voters | | | | | | | |
| | Germany | | | | | Britain | | |
	SPD	CDU/ CSU	AfD	FDP	90/Die Grünen	CON	LAB	SNP
(Strongly) agree	43	38	9	33	44	34	5	−6
Middle	−33	−30	−4	0	−30	−4	11	27
(Strongly) disagree	−9	−8	−4	−34	−14	−30	−16	−20

| | Over parties | | | | | | | |
| | Germany | | | | | Britain | | |
	SPD	CDU/ CSU	AfD	FDP	90/Die Grünen	CON	LAB	SNP
(Strongly) agree	−10	24	−14	4	9	27	−12	−24
Middle	2	−13	18	−6	−16	−16	6	42
(Strongly) disagree	8	−10	−4	2	7	−10	5	−18

| | Over experts | | | | | | | |
| | Germany | | | | | Britain | | |
	SPD	CDU/ CSU	AfD	FDP	90/Die Grünen	CON	LAB	SNP
(Strongly) agree	−19	−9	8	15	−8	34	5	−8
Middle	21	5	−16	−9	18	−22	11	42
(Strongly) disagree	−2	4	9	−6	−9	−12	−16	−34

Note: "Middle" are those who responded slightly agree or slightly disagree. Don't know respondents are excluded before these percentages are calculated.

only partially confirmed. The most striking cross-country differences, however, become apparent when considering the role of independent experts. Here, German MPs and publics are relatively aligned in the view that MPs should strike a balance between their own views and those of experts. However, in the British surveys, publics want their MPs to take on board the views of independent experts more than MPs are willing to.

Table 1 differentiates these expectation gaps further by looking at party-related patterns.[59] Looking at gaps in MP-vs-voter attitudes in Germany, it is striking that

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59. See the Online Appendix for a breakdown of the party composition of the two MP samples. Do note that, in Germany, there were a number of MPs who did not disclose their party affiliation, or indeed their gender. Publics' party vote is based on reported vote at the previous General Election.

politicians from the right-wing populist AfD are actually most aligned with their voters, compared to MPs from all other parties. In Britain, by contrast, while Labour MPs' inclination to favor their own views over those of voters is only somewhat higher than what voters would want them to do, Conservative voters appear to want their MPs to follow the views of voters much more than Conservative MPs are willing to. Interestingly, MPs from the Scottish National Party (SNP) seem to be much more inclined to take on board the views of voters than their voters want them to.

Looking at MP-vs-party attitudes, party differences are especially pronounced in Germany. For the smaller Liberal (FDP) and Green parties, there is relatively little difference between MPs and their voters over whether MPs should be true to themselves than following the party line. Yet, this is different for the other three parties shown in the table. Notably, voters of the center-left SPD *and* right-wing populist AfD want MPs to follow their own strongly held views more than the party line compared to what those parties' MPs want, while voters of the center-right CDU/CSU want MPs to obey more strongly the party line than CDU/CSU MPs themselves. This pattern seems to be similar in Britain: Conservative MPs are more inclined to favor their own views over the Conservative party line, yet their voters want them to take on board more strongly the views of the party. To the contrary, Labour MPs are more inclined to follow the party line than their voters want them to.

Lastly, party differences in expectation gaps also become apparent when considering attitudes on whether MPs should prioritize their own strongly held views over those of independent experts. In Germany, MPs from both mainstream parties, i.e. the center-left SPD and center-right CDU/CSU, are overall slightly more inclined to follow expert views than their voters want them to. This is, however, the other way around for MPs and voters from the FDP. Patterns for MP-voter dyads from the Greens and the AfD are less clear. Interestingly, in the UK, center-left (Labour) and center-right (Conservatives) patterns are the opposite to those found in Germany: MPs from both parties are more inclined to follow their own views rather than those of independent experts—a pattern that is actually notably stronger for Conservative than for Labour MP-voter dyads.

Conclusions

In this paper, we set out to examine whether there are gaps between publics' wishes for their representatives to be true to themselves, versus MPs' preferences for doing so. This was examined through high-quality original survey data carried out among both publics and MPs in Germany and Britain in late 2023. A custom-designed measure was fielded to capture situations in which representatives' strongly held

views come into conflict with those of their voters, those of their parties, and those of independent experts, with MPs asked whether or not they would prioritize their own views in such a situation, and publics asked how they thought their MPs should act.

The findings reveal, firstly, that—though being true to themselves has been argued to be something voters want and value—there is in fact important variance in whether both publics and MPs deem it to be important. German and British publics display remarkable between-country consistency in their desire for their representatives to fulfill this central aspect of authenticity. However, they both have a greater wish on average for an MP to be true to themselves when their views conflict with their party line than when they conflict with their voters. This is in line with previous findings that publics value MPs that are independently minded—especially in relation to their parties' position-taking.[60] Though previous research suggests publics prefer in general for their MPs to follow their voters over their own opinions when there is a conflict,[61] our study provides an important advancement in demonstrating that publics are much more willing to report wanting their MPs to act in accordance with their own views if the MP is doing so out of having strong views on the issue than previous literature would suggest. This points to a fruitful avenue of future research on how publics' understandings of the motivations of politicians may mitigate or exacerbate their overall perceptions of politicians. Though given that politicians in both countries appear to be more willing to follow their own strongly held views when they conflict with their voters than publics would like them to, such expectation gaps highlight that politicians being true to themselves may still conflict with their representation functions.

Institutional characteristics may play a role in explaining differences across countries. In the candidate-centered British system whereby each MP represents a single constituency—and the constituency focus of MPs has dramatically increased in the post-war period[62]—MPs report in equal measure that they would be true to themselves when their strongly held views come into conflict with those of either their voters or their parties. Yet in the German system "it is normally the party line, which is crucial for renomination"[63] given the parties' control over

60. Wagner, Vivyan, and Glinitzer, "Costly Signals."

61. Carman, "Public Preferences for Parliamentary Representation in the UK"; and Ruth Dassonneville et al., "How Citizens Want Their Legislator to Vote," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 46 (2021): 297–321.

62. Lawrence McKay, "Does Constituency Focus Improve Attitudes to MPs? A Test for the UK," *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 26 (2020): 1–26.

63. Markus Baumann, Marc Debus, and Jochen Müller, "Personal Characteristics of MPs and Legislative Behavior in Moral Policymaking," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 40 (2015): 179–210, at 185.

selection to and placement on party lists which can be associated with different behavioral incentives.[64] And we see suggestive evidence of this whereby German MPs are much more willing to follow their own views when faced with a conflict with their voters than they are when faced with a conflict with their party. Differences between the countries may also be due to other institutional or cultural factors. While much work on political authenticity to date has focused on single case studies,[65] our findings point to the importance of country-comparative research so that the potential impacts of contextual constraints on opportunities for and expectations of politicians to be authentic can be more fully explored.

Our paper also makes advances by examining whether expectation gaps of what publics want out of their MPs when their strong views conflict with others compared to what their MPs want to do themselves differ according to ideological profiles. Of the two largest parties in each country, the mainstream right parties (the CDU/CSU and the Conservatives) see MPs stating they would be more authentic than their voters wish of them when it comes to conflicts of views with their parties, whereas the Social Democrat parties (SPD and Labour) see MPs being less likely to value authenticity than their voters would like them to. This is even more notable given that, at the time of fielding, in Germany the SPD were in government and the CDU/CSU in opposition, whereby in Britain the ideological government/opposition composition is reversed.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, populist-right politicians have been put forward in the literature as being able to present themselves as being true to themselves while also claiming to be carrying out the "will of the people."[66] While these claims may be contradictory at times when right-populist politicians are faced with a conflict between their own views and those of "the people," what we find here is that among AfD MPs and voters, there is similar heterogeneity in terms of whether AfD voters think MPs should be more authentic or prioritize their voters' views, and which views AfD MPs would actually prioritize. Indeed, on this measure, AfD voters and MPs display the greatest alignment. Thus, perhaps one of the reasons for which right-populist parties are able to straddle what appears to be two different goals of both being true to themselves and following the will of the people is because both AfD voters and representatives are on the fence in terms of which of these should be prioritized. While the lack of Reform UK MPs in the UK at the time

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64. Baumann, Debus, and Müller, "Personal Characteristics of MPs and Legislative Behavior in Moral Policymaking"; and Wagner, Vivyan, and Glinitzer, "Costly Signals."

65. For an exception, see Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity."

66. Mudde, "Populism in Europe."

of fielding prevented us from examining such a gap within the UK, future work should investigate whether such a pattern extends to other contexts.

Finally, our paper focused on the central aspect of political authenticity in terms of politicians upholding their core beliefs, even under circumstances whereby it might make their careers more difficult. While this aspect has been argued to be a necessary component of a politician being regarded as authentic, it may not be sufficient by itself. In reality, this factor is likely to interact with others. As Sheinheit and Bogard[67] write, to be considered authentic "a politician must simultaneously present a consistent political message while also appearing spontaneous and natural." Devising ways to expand our findings on this authenticity-expectations gap between publics and their representative to incorporate other characteristics of an authentic politician would be a valuable endeavor for future research. Moreover, though we focused on the general principle of politicians being true to their own views, future research may also wish to examine whether patterns vary if different types of issues are specified.

John Kenny is a Senior Research Associate at the School of Environmental Sciences and the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, University of East Anglia, UK. His research focuses on public opinion, political behavior, elections and environmental politics. He can be reached at John.Kenny@uea.ac.uk.

Lucas Geese is a Research Fellow in the Tyndall Centre, School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, UK. He holds a PhD from the University of Bamberg, Germany. His research focusses on political representation, in particular citizen-elite links in democratic politics with a focus on the policy issues of immigration and climate change. His work has been published in journals such as *European Journal of Political Research*, *Environmental Politics*, and *West European Politics*. He can be reached at l.geese@uea.ac.uk.

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67. Ian Sheinheit and Cynthia J. Bogard, "Authenticity and Carrier Agents: The Social Construction of Political Gaffes," *Sociological Forum* 31 (2016): 970–93, at 973.