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Perception of political influence within the general population of the United Kingdom

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Abstract

When reflecting upon politics, people express judgements about the political influence exerted by different institutions. However, the nature of these judgements remains to be studied by scholars. The paper explores this with a focus on the United Kingdom. Online, participants recruited from the general population judged the political influence of a variety of institutions such as parties, media and economic powers. Political institutions (e.g., the Conservative Party) were attributed the highest influence, followed by economic powers (e.g., banks), the media (e.g., BBC) and by marginal groups (e.g., laypeople without political expertise). Variability in judgement was explained by two factors: one capturing a tension between marginal groups and economic powers and the second between the media and political institutions. Ideology modulated the latter factor, with participants opposing tradition in politics attributing higher influence to political institutions over the media. These observations shed light on an important, yet poorly known, aspect of political thinking, namely, the perception of political influence.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The notion of influence (and related concepts such as power, efficacy and accountability; Craig and Maggiotto 1982; Lasswell and Kaplan 2017; Mulgan 2000) is central to theories in political science and sociology (Banfield 1961; Becker 1983; Salamon and Siegfried 1977; Stromback 2011; Tedeschi 2017; Wagner 1988). These posit that political dynamics are driven by the interaction among various institutions, each exerting a certain influence upon the others. An institution's influence reflects to what extent the institution can affect political dynamics (Banfield 1961). As an obvious example, a head of state is arguably more influential than any common person within a country. Besides being fundamental for scholars, the notion of political influence is important also for the general public: When

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reflecting upon politics, lay people are capable to judge the influence exerted by various institutions (Brands 2013; Bondonio 1998; Gomila et al. 2020; Krackhardt 1987; Raven 1990; Watts and Dodds 2007). Although lay people's judgements are potentially important, yet they remain to be studied empirically. Specifically, three fundamental questions remain to be explored. First, which institutions are considered more influential? Second, do people vary in their judgements about political influence, and how? Third, are judgements related with variables such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, education or political ideology?

Here, I explore judgements about political influence within the general population of the United Kingdom (UK). In an online study, British participants rated the perceived political influence of a set of institutions. My analyses allowed me to rank the institutions in terms of their perceived political influence and to assess how participants' judgements varied. Furthermore, I explored the relationship between judgements, on the one hand, and gender, age, socioeconomic status, education and political ideology, on the other.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Participants

Recruitment was carried out online using the Prolific website (www.prolific.co). Any (18 years old or older) individual from any country interested in participating in online social science studies can register for Prolific. Individuals receive a monetary reward after participating. Most people get to know Prolific via social media, poster/flyer campaigns at universities and through referrals from researchers and participants already using the site. When registering for Prolific, individuals are asked demographic questions, which later allow researchers to prescreen participants during recruitment. When a researcher creates a new study, any eligible participant (i.e., those meeting the prescreening criteria) can participate until the sample is complete (the sample size is established a priori). Eligible participants are informed that a new study is available because the study becomes visible to them when accessing the Prolific website, and because the Prolific system sends an email to a random subset of eligible participants.

For the study, 350 adults (18 years old or older) were recruited. However, two participants did not complete the study, resulting in a final sample of 348 participants (age: mean 34.7, SD 12). By relying on the Prolific prescreening, I ensured that half of the participants were females, and the other half were males. Participants were all UK citizens and English speakers (this also was ensured based on prescreening). The study was published on November 30th, 2018, and the sample was fully completed on the same day. The focus on one single country (the United Kingdom) and on one single day (November 30th, 2018) allowed me to control for country and time.

2.2 | Measures and procedures

Participants were presented with a list of political institutions or groups, shown one by one on the same web page (the order was randomised across participants). These included (for each, the sentence presented to participants is quoted): 'Conservative Party' (Conservatives), 'Labour Party' (Labour), 'large Internet companies and social media such as Google, Facebook and Twitter' (Internet Companies), 'large multinational firms' (Multinationals), 'ethnic minority groups' (Ethnic minorities), 'financial institutions and banks' (Banks), 'armed forces and secret service' (Army), 'radical Islamic groups' (Radical Islam), 'American government' (USA), 'Russian government' (Russia), 'European Union' (EU), 'trade unions' (Unions), 'national TV channels such as the BBC' (BBC), 'national newspapers and magazines' (Newspapers), 'websites and blogs that are outside the mainstream media' (Blogs), 'laypeople without any specific political or technical expertise' (Laypeople), 'political experts such as academics, scientists and technologists' (Experts) and 'immigrants' (Immigrants). The list was

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developed by me before data collection. For each item, participants assessed its influence in UK politics choosing among 'scarcely influential', 'a little influential', 'moderately influential', 'quite influential' and 'extremely influential'.

Afterwards, participants were presented with the following sentences (labels used in the manuscript are in brackets). For each, participants indicated whether they agreed or disagreed by choosing among 'strongly disagree', 'moderately disagree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'moderately agree' and 'strongly agree':

- 'The government should promote equality among citizens in terms of economy, education and health' (ID1).
- 'The government should tax richer citizens to help poorer citizens' (ID2).
- 'The government should not interfere with the economy' (ID3).
- 'Homosexuals' rights should be a priority for politics' (ID4).
- 'Politics should promote traditional values regarding family, sexual orientation and lifestyle' (ID5);
- 'Brexit is good for the United Kingdom' (ID6).

These statements were included to measure political ideology and examine the relationship between the latter and judgements about political influence. Prominent theories (Ashton et al. 2005; Feldman and Johnston 2014; Kerlinger 1967; Treier and Hillygus 2009) distinguish between two dimensions underlying ideology, one (economic ideology) describing a preference for economic equality versus inequality, the other (cultural ideology) describing preference for tradition versus opposition to tradition. I predicted that the first three questions above (ID1, ID2, ID3) mapped onto economic ideology, while the last three questions (ID4, ID5, ID6) mapped onto cultural ideology.

Next, participants were presented with the following questions (labels used in the manuscript are in brackets):

- 'In your opinion, how much your own choices can impact society and politics in the United Kingdom?' (with options being 'no impact', 'mild impact', 'moderate impact', 'substantial impact' and 'strong impact'; PE1).
- 'In your opinion, how good is your knowledge about British society and politics?' (with options being 'poor knowledge', 'modest knowledge', 'intermediate knowledge', 'good knowledge' and 'excellent knowledge'; PE2).
- Do you consider yourself socially or politically active? (with options being 'not much active', 'a little active', 'moderately active', 'quite active' and 'very active'; PE3).

These questions were predicted to reflect a unique underlying factor: political engagement (Barrett and Zani 2014; Boeckmann and Tyler 2002; Thomas et al. 2014). I aimed to explore the relationship between this factor and judgements about political influence. Finally, participants reported their (i) age, (ii) gender, (iii) party preference (answering the question 'Do you prefer the Conservative or the Labour Party', with options being 'strongly Conservative', 'moderately Conservative', 'neutral', 'moderately Labour' and 'strongly Labour'),[1] (iv) education (answering the question 'Please indicate your highest education', with options being 'no formal qualification', 'GCSE', 'A level', 'undergraduate degree' and 'graduate or doctorate degree') and (v) subjective socio-economic status (answering the question 'How would you define your economic status in comparison with other people in the United Kingdom?', with options being 'substantially worse off', 'moderately worse off', 'middle level', 'moderately better off' and 'substantially better off'). These five variables were collected to measure their relationship with judgements about political influence.

Participants answered the questions online via the Prolific website. Answering all questions took approximately 3 min, and subjects were paid £0.80 for participating (in order to receive the payment, participants had to complete the whole survey).

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TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of the variables measured.

Variable	Mean	Sd	Skewness	Kurtosis
Conservatives	0.91	0.98	−0.61	0.75
Labour	0.19	0.95	−0.62	0.37
Internet companies	0.50	0.94	−0.11	−0.26
Multinationals	0.61	0.90	−0.35	−0.28
Ethnic minorities	−0.65	0.95	0.30	−0.11
Banks	0.75	0.91	−0.51	−0.16
Army	−0.07	0.91	−0.02	−0.36
Radical Islam	−0.73	1.00	0.47	−0.35
USA	0.12	0.95	−0.13	−0.26
Russia	−0.64	0.96	0.30	−0.27
EU	0.80	0.91	−0.49	0.22
Unions	−0.11	0.84	−0.12	−0.17
BBC	0.45	0.89	−0.26	−0.58
Newspapers	0.49	0.87	−0.07	−0.45
Blogs	−0.73	0.99	0.53	−0.31
Laypeople	−1.12	0.91	0.49	−0.11
Experts	−0.04	0.88	0.09	0.24
Immigrants	−0.73	0.95	0.36	−0.12
ID1	4.30	0.86	−1.37	1.79
ID2	3.78	1.19	−0.79	−0.38
ID3	2.39	1.06	0.56	−0.37
ID4	3.01	1.18	0.77	−0.49
ID5	2.74	1.32	0.15	−1.07
ID6	2.44	1.47	0.47	−1.23
PE1	1.95	0.92	0.95	0.649
PE2	2.97	1.04	−0.02	−0.82
PE3	2.04	1.09	0.79	−0.39
Party preference	3.09	1.32	−0.07	−1.17
Age	34.70	12	0.66	0.64
Education	3.59	0.96	−0.28	−0.72
Socio-economic status	2.93	0.83	−0.02	0.24

3 | RESULTS

Before analysing the data, for each participant, I calculated the average across the 18 items about political influence, and this average was subtracted from each of the 18 items. The analyses below were based on these transformed data. For statistical testing, I adopt two-tailed $p = 0.05$ as the significance threshold. For exploratory purposes, I also flag tests associated with $p < 0.1$, described as trends towards significance—although I emphasise that, formally, these should be treated as non-significant results. Descriptive statistics for all variables are reported in Table 1.

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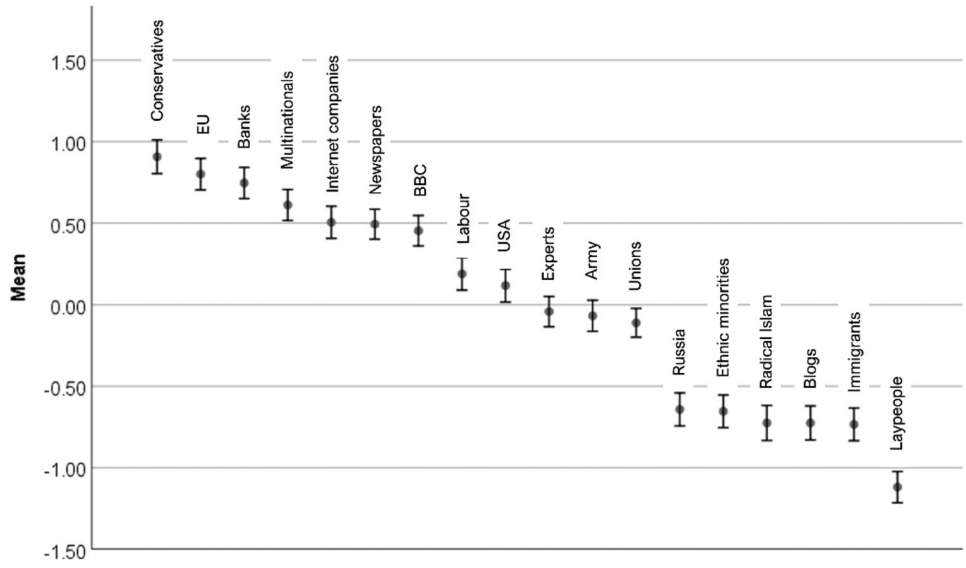

FIGURE 1 Scores for the items regarding judgements about political influence. Items are ordered from the most to the least in terms of perceived influence.

3.1 | Ranking

Figure 1 reports the ranking of the items in terms of perceived political influence. Conservatives (governing the country when the study was run) appear first, followed by the EU, and by Banks as third. Laypeople appear last, with Immigrants being second last.

3.2 | Variability in judgement

To assess how participants varied in their judgements about political influence, I analysed the correlations among the items. Figure 2 describes the Pearson correlation matrix among the items (see Brandt and Sleegers 2021, for a similar analysis) ($|r| < 0.18$, associated with $p > 0.001$, are suppressed; dotted lines indicate negative correlations; the thicker the line, the stronger the correlation). Interesting features emerge, such as that Army and Unions are not related with any other item and that Conservatives, Labour and Blogs are all related together.

To explore the correlation matrix more systematically, I applied multidimensional scaling (Figure 3; obtained using the *Smacof* library of the *R* software; Borg et al. 2012), projecting the items on two dimensions (Stress-1 = 0.335). Two axes emerge from Figure 3. The first goes from items such as Laypeople, Immigrants and Ethnic minorities (collectively labelled as Marginal Groups [MG]) to items such as Russia, USA, Multinationals and Banks (collectively labelled as Economic and Geopolitical Powers [EGP]). This highlights a tension between MG and EGP, with participants attributing higher influence to the former also attributing lower influence to the latter, and vice versa. The second axis goes from items such as Internet Companies, Newspapers and BBC (collectively labelled as Media) to items such as Labour, EU and Conservatives (collectively labelled as Political Institutions [PI]). This highlights a tension between Media and PI, with participants attributing higher influence to the former also attributing lower influence to the latter, and vice versa.

A potential issue with multidimensional scaling is that it assumes two dimensions. This assumption is problematic when the data reflect more than two dimensions. To address this, I applied clustering (using the *igraph* library of the *R* software) to the correlation matrix (Figure 4; Everitt et al. 2011).

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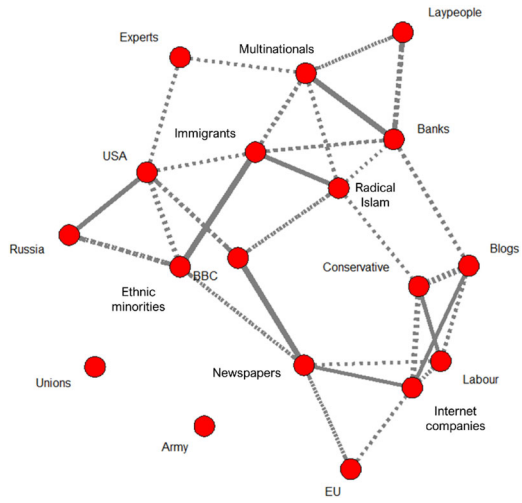

FIGURE 2 Representation of the Pearson correlation matrix among the items regarding judgements about political influence ($|r| < 0.18$, associated with $p > 0.001$, are suppressed; dotted lines indicate negative correlations; the thicker the line, the stronger the correlation). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

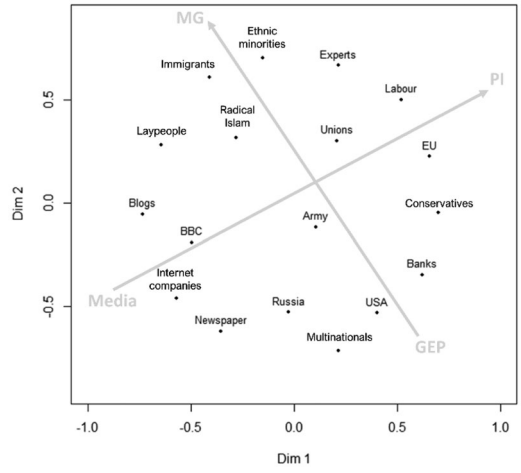

FIGURE 3 Results of the multidimensional scaling analysis of the Pearson correlation matrix among the items regarding judgements about political influence.

This analysis was based on treating Figure 2 as a network where nodes correspond to the items, and a tie is deemed to be present if a correlation between two items exists (i.e., when $|r| > 0.18$, associated with $p < 0.001$). Applying clustering, I obtained two isolates (Unions and Army) and three groups: one (e.g., including items such as Banks and Laypeople) matching the MG-EGP axis found above, one (e.g., including items such as Internet Companies and Conservatives) matching the Media-PI axis found above and a third (e.g., including items such as USA and BBC) comprising elements of both (different approaches, including Optimal, Leading Eigenvector and Label propagation, produced the same results).

Finally, I examined the correlation matrix adopting factor analysis. This approach allows one not only to characterise the correlation matrix, but also subsequently to analyse it in relation with variables such as gender, age, socio-economic status, education and party preference. However, factor analysis

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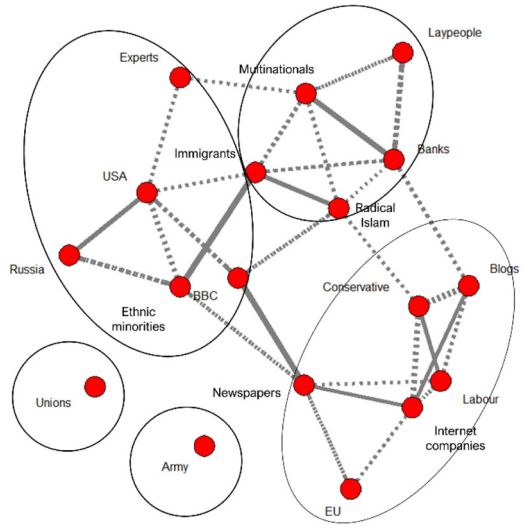

FIGURE 4 Results of the cluster analysis based on the network described by Figure 2 (representing the Pearson correlation matrix among the items regarding judgements about political influence). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

requires a sufficient level of common variance among items, which can be quantified with the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) score. When including all items in an exploratory factor analysis (maximum likelihood estimation was used because all items showed skewness and kurtosis smaller than one; see Table 1; exploratory factor analyses were run using the *Factanal* and *Psych* libraries in the *R* software), a very low KMO score of 0.2 was obtained (the minimum required should be 0.6). To address this, I ran several exploratory factor analyses, each time with a different set of items, and each time I calculated the KMO (Cattell 2012). Then, I selected the analysis associated with the highest KMO score (KMO = 0.664; the Bartlett test of sphericity was also significant: $\chi^2\ (28) = \ 274, p < 0.001$)). Items included in this analysis were: Conservatives, Labour, Banks, Multinationals, Internet Companies, Laypeople, Blogs and Newspapers. Once these items were selected, I ran again the exploratory factor analysis with these items to ask how many factors should be extracted. Multiple methods (eigenvalues, parallel analysis, optimal coordinates and acceleration factor) converged in indicating that two factors should be extracted (Figure 5 shows the associated scree plot; Finch and French 2015). Factor loadings (obtained after Promax rotation; Table 2) suggested the first factor to be linked with Internet Companies, Newspapers, Blogs, Conservatives and Labour (suppressing loadings < 0.2 and > -0.2). Internet Companies, Newspapers and Blogs exhibited positive factor loadings, while Conservatives and Labour exhibited negative factor loadings (Table 2). This factor fits nicely with the Media-PI axis found in the multidimensional scaling analysis, showing that individuals attributing higher influence to Media (Internet Companies, Newspapers and Blogs) tend to attribute lower influence to PI (Labour and Conservatives), and vice versa. Moreover, factor loadings (Table 2) suggested the second factor to be linked with Blogs, Labour, Laypeople, Banks and Multinationals (suppressing loadings < 0.2 and > -0.2). Multinationals and Banks exhibited positive factor loadings, while Laypeople, Blogs and Labour exhibited negative factor loadings (Table 2). This fits with the MG-EGP axis found in the multidimensional scaling analysis, showing that individuals attributing higher influence to MG (Laypeople, Blogs and Labour) tend to attribute lower influence to EGP (Multinationals and Banks).

To validate further these results, I applied confirmatory factor analysis (using maximum likelihood estimation; this analysis was performed using the *Lavaan* library in the *R* software) to the data comparing the model suggested by exploratory factor analysis (our target model) against alternative models (Figure 6). In the target model (Figure 6a), factor one (Media-PI) links to Internet Companies,

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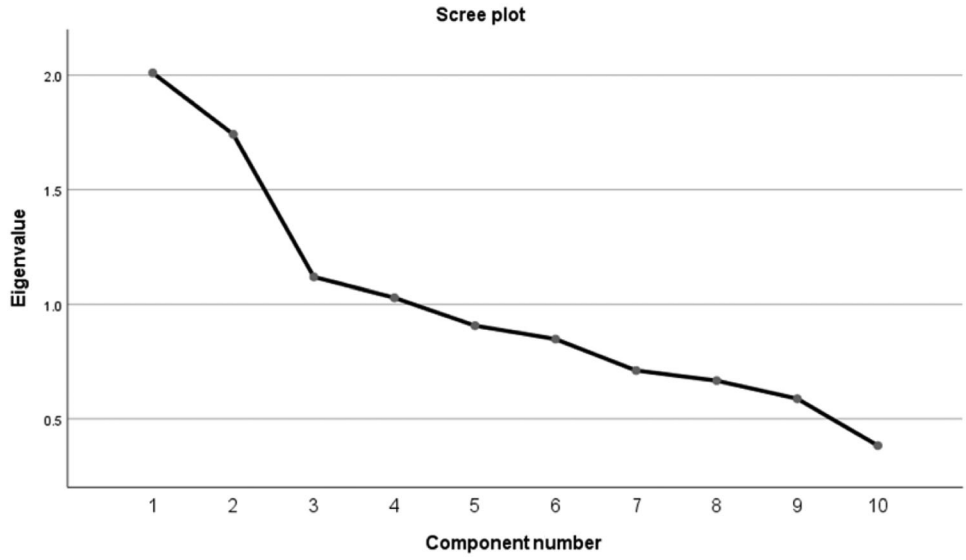

FIGURE 5 Scree plot relative to the exploratory factor analysis for the eight selected items regarding judgements about political influence.

TABLE 2 Factor loadings for the exploratory factor analysis

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Conservatives	−0.574*	0.095
Labour	−0.486*	−0.248*
Internet Companies	0.529*	0.056
Multinationals	0.106	0.537*
Banks	−0.049	0.634*
Newspapers	0.338*	0.083
Blogs	0.474*	−0.243*
Laypeople	−0.068	−0.444*

Note: Values higher than 0.2 or lower than −0.2 are marked with asterisk.

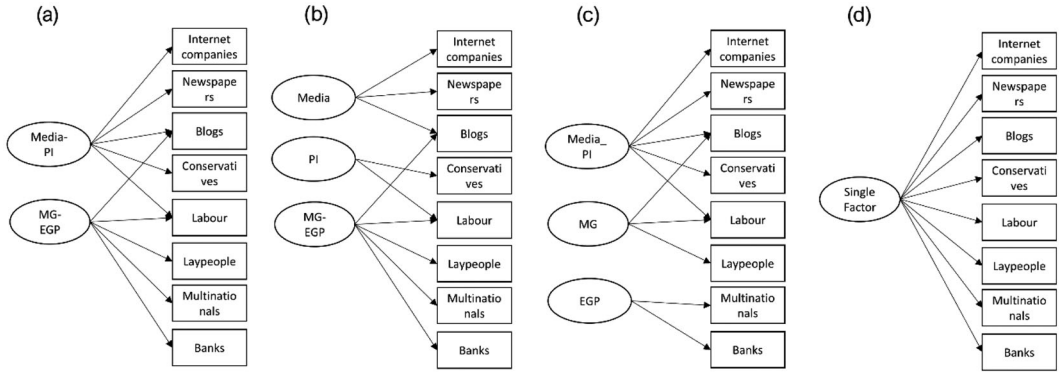

FIGURE 6 Models compared by the confirmatory factor analysis for the eight selected items regarding judgements about political influence.

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Newspapers, Blogs, Labour and Conservatives, while factor two (MG-EGP) links to Blogs, Labour, Laypeople, Banks and Multinationals. In a second alternative model (model two; Figure 6b), one factor (Media) links to Internet Companies, Newspapers and Blogs; one factor (PI) links to Labour and Conservatives; and a third factor (MG-EGP) links to Laypeople, Blogs, Labour, Multinationals and Banks. In model three (Figure 6c), one factor (Media-PI) links to Internet Companies, Newspapers, Blogs, Labour and Conservatives; one factor (MG) links to Laypeople, Blogs and Labour; and a third factor (EGP) links to Multinationals and Banks. Finally, model four (Figure 6d) links a single factor to all items. The results of this confirmatory factor analysis are reported in Table 3. When, based on the difference in χ^2, I compared the target model against model two and model three, I obtained $\chi^2\ (2) = 4.91, p = 0.086$ and $\chi^2\ (2) = 1.81, p = 0.404$, respectively. These tests are non-significant, indicating that the increased number of parameters for model two and model three is unwarranted, implying that the target model should be selected. When comparing the target model against model four, I obtained $\chi^2\ (2) = 91.51, p < 0.001$, indicating that the increased number of parameters of the target model is beneficial, and therefore the target model should be preferred to model four.

Altogether, exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis both suggest that two factors underly the eight items selected, with factor one (Media-PI) linked to Internet Companies, Newspapers, Blogs, Labour and Conservatives and with factor two (MG-EGP) linked to Blogs, Labour, Laypeople, Banks and Multinationals.

3.3 | Judgement and individual differences

I asked whether the two factors highlighted by factor analysis are associated with variables such as gender, age, education, socio-economic status and party preference. This analysis was based on fitting a Multiple Indicators Multiple Causes (MIMIC) model (Hoyle 2012) having the latter variables as predictors and the two factors of Media-PI and MG-EGP as dependent variables (estimation was based on maximum likelihood; this analysis was performed using the *Lavaan* library in the *R* software). Education (Media-PI: $z = 0.584$, $p = 0.559$; MG-EGP: $z = -1.222$, $p = 0.222$) and socio-economic status (Media-PI: $z = 0.153$, $p = 0.878$; MG-EGP: $z = 0.242$, $p = 0.809$) showed no effect for either factor. Age showed an effect for both (Media-PI: $z = 2.046$, $p = 0.041$; MG-EGP: $z = -2.476$, $p = 0.013$), indicating that older participants attributed higher influence to PI and less to Media and attributed higher influence to EGP and less to MG. Regarding party preference, no effect emerged for MG-EGP ($z = -0.420$, $p = 0.675$), but a trend towards significance emerged for Media-PI ($z = 1.873$, $p = 0.061$), suggesting that participants preferring Labour over Conservative attributed higher influence to PI and less to Media. Gender showed no effect for Media-PI ($z = -0.053$, $p = 0.958$), but a trend towards significance for MG-EGP ($z = -1.701$, $p = 0.089$), suggesting that males, compared to females, attributed higher influence to MG and less to EGP.

3.4 | Ideology

I aimed to probe the relation between judgements about political influence and ideology. To this aim, I first devised a method to assess ideology in its multiple facets. I relied on influential theories of ideology proposing that this construct encompasses two distinct dimensions, one economic and the other cultural (Ashton et al. 2005; Feldman and Johnston 2014; Kerlinger 1967; Treier and Hillygus 2009). I predicted the former to map onto questions ID1, ID2 and ID3 and the latter to questions ID4, ID5 and ID6 (see Methods section). I also considered another group of questions (PE1, PE2 and PE3; see Methods section) predicted to map onto a third factor capturing political engagement (Barrett and Zani 2014; Boeckmann and Tyler 2002; Thomas et al. 2014). To test these predictions,I ran a confirmatory factor analysis (Diagonally Weighted Least Square (DWLS) estimation was used because

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TABLE 3 Results of the confirmatory factor analysis for the eight selected items regarding judgements about political influence.

	χ^2	root mean square of the residuals (RMSA)	comparative fit index (CFI)	Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	standardised root mean square residual (SRMR)	Bayesian information criterion (BIC)	Akaike Information criterion (AIC)
Target model	28.58, df = 17, $p = 0.039$	0.044; CI (0.010, 0.072); $p = 0.599$	0.954	0.924	0.043	7352.895	7278.893
Model 2	23.67, df = 15, $p = 0.071$	0.041; CI (0.000, 0.071); $p = 0.658$	0.965	0.935	0.037	7358.880	7277.984
Model 3	26.76, df = 15, $p = 0.031$	0.047; CI (0.014, 0.076); $p = 0.518$	0.953	0.912	0.042	7361.978	7281.082
Model 4	120.12, df = 20, $p < 0.001$	0.120; CI (0.100, 0.141); $p < 0.001$	0.599	0.438	0.097	7426.065	7364.429

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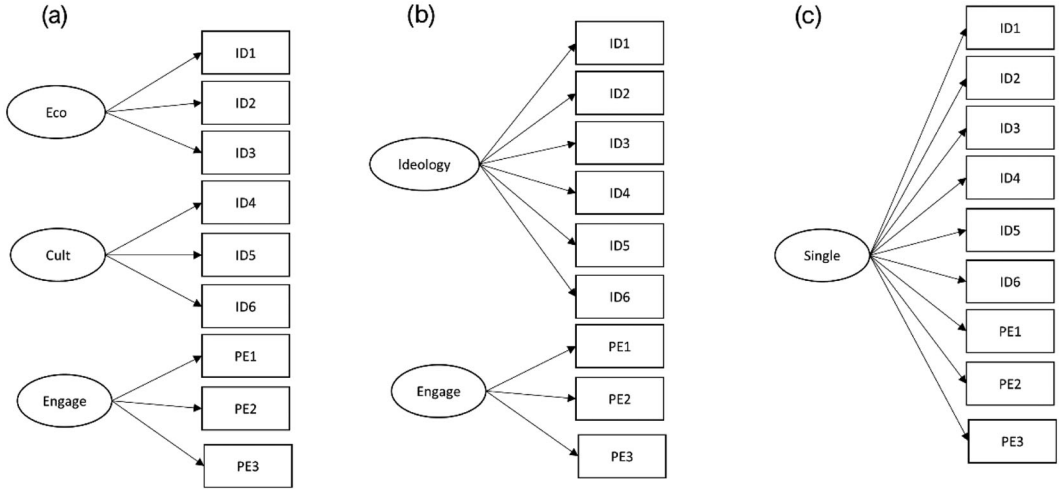

FIGURE 7 Models compared by the confirmatory factor analysis for the items regarding political ideology and political engagement.

some items showed skewness or kurtosis larger than one or smaller than minus one; see Table 1; this analysis was performed using the *Lavaan* library in the *R* software) assessing (i) a target model including three factors, each mapping to three items (Figure 7a); (ii) model two, including two factors, one mapping onto both economic and cultural ideology items (six in total) and another mapping onto the three political engagement items (Figure 7b); and (iii) model three, including only one factor underlying all nine items (Figure 7c). The results of the analysis are reported in Table 4. Based on the difference in χ^2, the target model performed better than model two (χ^2 (2) = 13.63, p = 0.001) and than model three (χ^2 (3) = 108.27, $p < 0.001$).

Next, I asked whether the three factors of economic ideology, cultural ideology and political engagement (highlighted by factor analysis) were associated with variables such as gender, age, education, socio-economic status and party preference. This analysis was based on fitting a MIMIC model (Hoyle 2012) having the latter variables as predictors and the three factors of economic ideology, cultural ideology and political engagement as dependent variables (estimation was based on DWLS; this analysis was performed using the *Lavaan* library in the *R* software). Regarding economic ideology, an effect emerged for party preference (z = 8.591, $p < 0.001$, indicating that participants supporting Labour favoured more economic equality) and for socio-economic status ($z = -2.738$, $p = 0.006$, indicating that worse-off participants favoured more economic equality). A trend towards significance emerged for gender (z = 1.722, p = 0.085, suggesting that females favoured more economic equality) and age (z = 1.771, p = 0.077, suggesting that older participants favoured more economic equality), but not for education (z = 0.984, p = 0.325). Regarding cultural ideology, an effect emerged for party preference (z = 8.140, $p < 0.001$, indicating that participants supporting Labour opposed more tradition), gender ($z = -2.305$, p = 0.021, indicating that males opposed more tradition), age ($z = -3.371$, p = 0.001, indicating that younger participants opposed more tradition) and education (z = 2.562, p = 0.010, indicating that more educated participants opposed more tradition). A trend towards significance emerged also for socio-economic status (z = 1.810, p = 0.070, indicating that better-off participants opposed more tradition). Regarding political engagement, an effect emerged for education (z = 3.839, $p < 0.001$, indicating that more educated participants were more engaged); a trend towards significance emerged for age ($z = -1.770$, p = 0.077, suggesting that younger participants were more engaged), but not for party preference (z = 1.495, p = 0.135), gender (z = 1.120, p = 0.263) nor for socio-economic status (z = 1.087, p = 0.277).

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TABLE 4 Results of the confirmatory factor analysis for the items regarding political ideology and political engagement

	DWLS χ^2	root mean square of the residuals (RMSA)	comparative fit index (CFI)	Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	standardised root mean square residual (SRMR)
Target model	32.75, df = 24, $p = 0.109$	0.033; CI (0.000, 0.058); $p = 0.855$	0.978	0.966	0.048
Model two	47.28, df = 26, $p = 0.007$	0.049; CI (0.026, 0.071); $p = 0.507$	0.945	0.924	0.058
Model three	158.66, df = 27, $p < 0.001$	0.119; CI (0.102, 0.137); $p < 0.001$	0.662	0.550	0.110

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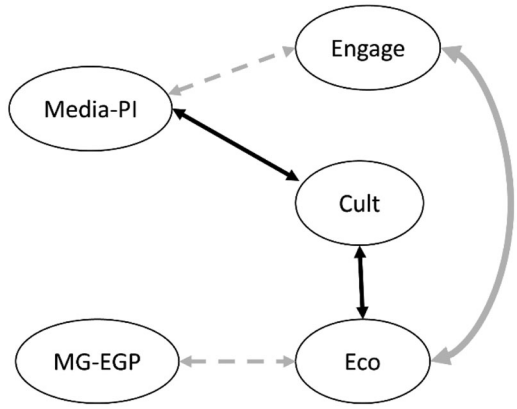

FIGURE 8 Description of the results of the analysis of the model including the eight selected items regarding judgements about political influence (captured by the factors Media-PI and MG-EGP), the items regarding political ideology (captured by the factors Cult and Eco) and political engagement (captured by the factor Engage). Relationships among latent variables are illustrated. Statistically significant relationships are shown in black; relationships associated with a trend towards significance are shown in grey. Positive relationships are described by continuous lines, and negative relationships are described by dotted lines.

3.5 | Judgement and ideology

Finally, I explored the link between judgement about political influence (described by the Media-PI and MG-EGP dimensions underlying the eight items considered in our previous factor analysis) on the one hand, and economic ideology, cultural ideology and political engagement on the other. To this aim, I fitted a model including all these latent variables (i.e., Media-PI, MG-EGP, economic ideology, cultural ideology and political engagement) and where these variables were all linked with one another (estimation was based on DWLS; this analysis was performed using the *Lavaan* library in the *R* software). Then, I tested the parameters describing the relationship among these latent variables (Figure 8). Results showed that the Media-PI factor was related with cultural ideology ($z = 2.579$, $p = 0.010$), indicating that participants opposing tradition attributed higher influence to PI over Media. A trend towards significance emerged also when considering the relation between Media-PI and political engagement ($z = -1.808$, $p = 0.071$), suggesting that more engaged participants attributed higher influence to Media over PI. Media-PI was unrelated with economic ideology ($z = 0.999$, $p = 0.318$). Regarding the MG-EGP factor, a trend towards significance emerged when considering its relationship with economic ideology ($z = -1.733$, $p = 0.083$), suggesting that participants favouring economic equality attributed higher influence to EGP over MG. No significant relation emerged when considering cultural ideology ($z = 0.221$, $p = 0.825$) nor political engagement ($z = -0.061$, $p = 0.951$).

This analysis allowed me to look also at the remaining relationships among latent variables in the model (Figure 8). Cultural and economic ideologies were related ($z = 4.964$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that participants favouring economic equality also opposed tradition more. Political engagement was not related with cultural ideology ($z = 0.814$, $p = 0.416$), but its relationship with economic ideology showed a trend towards significance ($z = 1.819$, $p = 0.069$), suggesting that higher engagement was associated with favouring economic equality. Finally, the two factors underlying judgements about political influence (MG-EGP and Media-PI) were unrelated ($z = -1.390$, $p = 0.165$).

4 | DISCUSSION

The paper explores judgements about political influence expressed by the general population of the United Kingdom. The data illustrate how different institutions were ranked in terms of perceived

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political influence. Variability in people's judgement could be explained by two factors: the first capturing a tension between MG and EGP and the second between Media and PI. Older participants attributed higher influence to PI, compared to Media, as well as to EGP, compared to MG. Moreover, the Media-PI factor was related with cultural ideology: Participants opposing tradition attributed higher influence to PI over Media. A trend towards significance emerged also when considering the relation between Media-PI and political engagement, suggesting that more engaged participants attributed higher influence to Media over PI. Regarding the MG-EGP factor, a trend towards significance emerged when considering its relationship with economic ideology, suggesting that participants favouring economic equality attributed higher influence to EGP over MG.

When looking at ranking, we can identify five categories of items (Figure 1). The category perceived as the most influential includes items with an institutional role, namely, the EU and the Conservatives, the latter governing the country at the time of testing. This suggests that British people attributed the highest influence to well-established political organisations. These are followed by economic items such as Banks and Multinationals, revealing British people's beliefs that economic forces are important too. The third category includes 'mainstream' media such as Internet companies, Newspapers and BBC (note that Blogs are not included). Notably, these are viewed as less influential than economic powers (Banks and Multinationals). The fourth category includes rather diverse items, spanning from Labour to Russia. Finally, the fifth category (going from Ethnic minorities to Laypeople) comprises groups that remain somewhat marginal to the centre of political power.

Regarding the variability in judgement, two underlying factors emerged: Media-PI and MG-EGP. Participants attributing higher influence to Media also attributed lower influence to PI, and those attributing higher influence to MG also attributed lower influence to EGP. How should this finding be interpreted? A possibility is that people see a conflict between the two poles (i.e., between Media and PI and between EGP and MG), thereby perceiving a pole as weaker when the opposite pole is perceived as stronger. In other words, the interpretation is that people view Media and PI as antagonistic, hence perceiving one as stronger when the other is perceived as weaker. Likewise, people may perceive EGP and MG as antagonistic, thus perceiving one as stronger when the other is perceived as weaker. Note that, according to this interpretation, British people share the same general frame (where Media oppose PI and EGP oppose MG) but vary regarding their beliefs about whether each pole is more influential than the other. The shared frame might reflect a shared political experience: for example, the belief that Media oppose PI might stem from observing that, on a daily basis, the media criticise political institutions (Stromback 2011). The emergence of the Media-PI and MG-EGP as factors is interesting, especially because I had no specific prior hypotheses. For example, a priori one might predict a factor opposing EGP and PI (where economic and geopolitical forces interfere with legitimate political institutions) or one opposing MG and PI (where political institutions oppress marginal groups). The emergence of the Media-PI and MG-EGP factors is informative about how British people interpret the political landscape.

Judgements about political influence were related with ideology and political engagement. Specifically, participants opposing tradition attributed higher influence to PI over Media, participants favouring economic equality attributed higher influence to EGP over MG, and more engaged participants attributed higher influence to Media over PI. Can any pattern be identified here? I speculate that these findings might reflect a general tendency to attribute higher influence to the unfavourite, compared to the favourite, pole (Kumbasar et al. 1994). For example, assume that participants supporting economic equality favour MG over EGP; consistent with our results, this hypothesis implies that higher influence is attributed to EGP, compared to MG. Likewise, assume that participants opposing tradition favour Media over PI (in turn based on the assumption that PI represents tradition and Media represents criticism to tradition); consistent with our results, the implication is that higher influence is attributed to PI, compared to Media. Finally, assume that engaged participants favour PI over Media; consistent with our results, the implication is that higher influence is attributed to Media, compared to PI. Thus, altogether, the possibility that people attribute higher political influence to the disfavoured pole fits with our findings. Yet, testing this possibility in a systematic fashion requires further research, for example, where participants report explicitly what their favourite poles are.

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I highlight the limitations of the study and suggest future research directions. A first limitation stems from the sampling method: Recruitment was carried out online, implying that some categories of people (e.g., young, highly educated and technology-proficient) are overrepresented, that compensation for participating is small and that participants are likely to be familiar with similar surveys.

It is also critical to emphasise that the study is based on a specific time (November 2018) and place (the United Kingdom). How general our observations are remains an open question. Consider the PI-Media axis as an example: Is this axis the same for countries where the media are independent, compared to countries where the media are under strict state control? This and similar questions remain open.

Substantial research has shown that political beliefs are highly context-dependent (Berger et al. 2008; Chong and Druckman 2007a). Does this apply also to judgements about political influence? For example, do judgements change with exposure to cues related with one's own country (Kalmoe and Gross 2016) and if one is experiencing stress or emotions such as fear (Brader 2005, 2006; Way and Masters 1996)? What about the role of cognitive load (Deck and Jahedi 2015)? Do judgements change if one is simultaneously engaged in a task that requires a heavy cognitive load? These questions remain open for future research.

Another limitation of the study is the reliance on self-reports, a method affected by issues such as social desirability (Van de Mortel, 2008). An interesting possibility for future research is to assess judgements about political influence based on overt behaviour or on implicit measures (Jost 2019).

This study raises the question of where judgements about political influence come from (Chong and Druckman 2007b; Leeper and Slothuus 2014). Addressing this requires studying how judgements are formed through direct experience, through interaction among people and through exposure to the media. Regarding the latter, today Internet arguably plays an increasingly important role. A consequence of this might be that, while in the recent past beliefs about political influence were largely transmitted vertically by institutional media, today these beliefs emerge largely from horizontal interactions on the web.

The findings also raise questions about the behavioural implications of beliefs about political influence. Do these beliefs impact people's actions at all? A possibility is that they might: Beliefs about how much an institution (e.g., the EU) is influential might affect people's decisions regarding how to interact with that institution (e.g., by voting for or against Brexit).

To summarise, this paper examines judgements about political influence as expressed by the general population. This topic has rarely been explored, and yet it might be fundamental for understanding people's political thinking and behaviour. The findings reveal which institutions are deemed as being more influential, how people vary in their judgements and how judgements relate with variables such as age, gender and political ideology.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available upon request to the corresponding author.

PEER REVIEW

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NOTE

[1] We focused on the Conservative and Labour parties because, within the context of British politics, these are the major parties and because they map onto the left–right dimension, which is the most common way to define ideology in the literature (Feldman and Johnston 2014).

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