

Project **Blueprint**

Winning a Conservative majority in 2015

Lord Ashcroft, KCMG
May 2011

© Lord Ashcroft

Lord Ashcroft, KCMG, is an international businessman, author and philanthropist. He is founder and Chairman of the Board of Crimestoppers, a Trustee of the Imperial War Museum Foundation, Chairman of the Trustees of Ashcroft Technology Academy, Chancellor of Anglia Ruskin University and Treasurer of the International Democrat Union. From 2005 to 2010 he was Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party.

Contents

Introduction: The coalition that matters	4
Methodology	10
1. Why they voted Tory (or didn't) in 2010	11
2. The coalition	14
3. The economy	19
4. Brand	21
5. Election 2015	24
6. Building the Conservative voting coalition	26
7. Full poll results	38

The coalition that matters

FOLLOWING DAVID CAMERON'S first anniversary as Prime Minister, comment has been dominated by the state of the coalition government: the dynamics of the two-party partnership, relations between senior figures in the aftermath of local elections and the referendum, the likely implication of grumpiness among Liberal Democrat ministers. To me, those things are secondary – intriguing, but transitory. Worse, they are of interest mainly to those who play the game of politics or write about it. I am more interested in the people who make their living outside Westminster.

What matters to me is not so much the coalition between the parties, but how to create the coalition of voters who will elect a Conservative government with an overall majority at the next general election.

As I concluded in *Minority Verdict*, my review of the 2010 campaign, David Cameron's decision to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats was the right one in the circumstances. As well as offering strong and stable government for the country, it gave the Conservative Party a chance to show still sceptical voters that it could be trusted to govern. In doing so, the Tories could complete the job of rebuilding support to a level where they could win outright.

Doing so will be tough. As the May local elections showed, Conservative support is holding up fairly well – quite an achievement given the action the government is taking on the deficit. But unlike most previous parties of government, today's Tories must do more than just keep the voters that put them in power. We should be aiming to move beyond our 2010 share of 37 per cent to a level above 40 per cent that is usually needed for outright victory. Viewed from this perspective, the fact that the Conservatives are just about holding their own offers limited comfort.

The Conservative Party has always been a coalition, comprising voters with different attitudes and priorities. This was the case when the party attracted less than a third of the country's votes, just as it was in 2010. Expanding the Conservative voting coalition to the point where it will elect a majority Conservative government is a strategic challenge for Mr Cameron. First, he must hold together those who voted in 2010. These included first-time Tories voting against Gordon Brown's Labour, who were still not sure the Conservatives were really on their side or were concerned about the party's approach to public services, as well as loyal Tories who may since have become frustrated by some of the compromises of two-party government.

Just as important, he must attract new voters in substantial numbers. Many of these will come from the ranks of those who considered the Tories in 2010 but thought better of it. Their fears were the same as those of first-time Conservative voters, but more deeply rooted. Winning them over means changing the perceptions that have led these voters to believe for many years, and sometimes their whole lives, that the Conservatives are not for people like them – and doing so at a time of economic uncertainty and "Tory cuts".

On the other side of the equation, while the Conservatives struggle to piece together two fifths of the electorate, Labour's core support plus left-leaning former Lib Dems could theoretically give Ed Miliband close to 40 per cent of the vote without needing to get out of bed.

The purpose of this study is to provide some signposts to help the Conservatives through their strategic conundrum. My research has looked in detail at those who voted Conservative in 2010, and those who thought about doing so but decided not to (the group from whom most new supporters will have to be drawn). In addition, polling of more than 10,000 adults has helped define and quantify the elements of the potential Conservative voting coalition, and to isolate the issues or perceptions that drive the voting intentions of different voter groups. I wanted to work out what they have in common, where they differ, and whether attracting one element of the potential

coalition would necessarily repel another. Some may think the government is a bit too Tory, and others think it is not Tory enough: can both be persuaded to vote for David Cameron in four years' time?

Much of the comment from Conservatives expresses frustration that the government has not pursued as robust a Conservative agenda as they would like, and concern that disappointed Tory voters will take their business elsewhere. No doubt this may happen in some cases. But my research found that those who voted Conservative in 2010 were, by and large, pretty satisfied with how things are going. Nearly nine out of ten of them thought the right decisions were being made on the economy and three quarters supported the cuts. They were more likely to say their view of the party had improved since the election than to say it was worse. They understood the inevitability of compromise in a coalition government and, if they disliked it, usually thought the answer was to get a Conservative majority next time, not to vote for smaller parties which can make trenchant pronouncements on all issues without the prospect of office.

In fact, the most vulnerable Conservatives are not longstanding supporters, but those who voted for the party for the first time in 2010. The main motivation for these first-time Tories was the desire to get rid of Labour, so their view of the Conservatives was not necessarily very positive to start with. The research found them much more likely than Conservative voters as a whole to say the coalition was doing worse than they had expected, and also much more likely to say they saw the coalition as essentially a Conservative government with some Lib Dem window dressing. Though a majority thought the cuts necessary and unavoidable, they were twice as likely as Tories generally to say they were too deep and too quick. First-timers whose view of the party had changed for the better since the election were all but matched by those who said it had worsened. The proportion wanting to see an outright Conservative victory next time, though still a majority, was lower than among Conservative voters as a whole. Only just over half said they would probably vote for the party in 2015 (though a very high proportion said they didn't know), well below the level for Conservative voters overall.

The research also found a gender gap. Women were consistently and significantly less enthusiastic about the Conservative Party and the government's performance, and more concerned about the cuts, than men.

Not surprisingly, those who considered voting Conservative in 2010 but decided not to do so were less sanguine than Tory voters about the government and its decisions. The biggest barrier, which was not overcome by election day and remains in place for most of them, is the perception (which Tories are sick of hearing about but is real nonetheless) that the Conservative Party is for the rich, not for people like them. As with Conservative voters, Considerers who had never voted Tory were more negative in their views than those who had done so in the past.

That is not to say their minds are closed. A fair chunk of them said the coalition government was doing better than they had expected, most thought the right decisions were being made on the economy and that things will have improved in three or four years, and around half of them supported the government on deficit reduction. They rated the Conservatives well ahead of the other parties on hard measures like being willing to take tough decisions for the long term, being competent and capable, and doing what they say they will do – though behind on softer measures like standing for fairness or equal opportunity. They were as likely to say their view of the Conservatives had changed for the better (most often because they thought the party in government was doing what it promised, particularly in sticking to tough decisions on the deficit, and they were impressed with David Cameron) as to say it had changed for the worse. Nearly a third said the performance of David Cameron and the Tories in government had made them more likely to consider voting for them at the next election. Unlike Conservative voters, though, most said they would much prefer the present coalition to a Conservative government with an overall majority –

potentially an important obstacle to them voting Conservative at the election if an outright Tory victory looks like a real prospect.

Those prepared to hazard which party they would probably end up voting for in 2015 divided evenly in our poll between the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats – but the qualitative research found them deeply unconvinced by Ed Miliband and Labour, and often scathing about their kneejerk opposition and refusal to offer an alternative to the government's deficit reduction plans. These voters are very far from being in the bag for any party, but most are prepared to give the coalition at least a couple of years before they start to make up their minds.

Some Tories are suspicious of any talk of reaching out to new voters, as though this necessarily implies a string of PR gimmicks and the abandonment of all principle. It does not mean any such thing, of course. But the need for new supporters is a mathematical fact – we will not be able to implement a Conservative manifesto in full unless we get a bigger share of the vote than we did last time. Inescapably, that means attracting voters who could not bring themselves to vote Conservative in 2010. Equally inescapably, this means continuing to overcome the brand negatives that have held us back. David Cameron made progress on this score in the last parliament, but the deep-seated belief remains among many uncommitted but so far un-Conservative voters that the party is not for people like them. As a result, the new territory the party conquered was limited: at the 2010 election, 83 per cent of those who voted Conservative had done so before.

There are lessons to be drawn from voters' impressions of the way the government is handling the main areas of policy. Our research suggests that welfare reform is a striking political success story for the Conservatives. Public demand for changes to the welfare system has been clear for years, and certainly not just among Tories. We found that people grasped and strongly supported specific elements of the government's plans, such as ensuring that people are better off in work than on benefits, and they recognised that these plans are being implemented. In our segmentation analysis, agreement that the Conservatives have the best approach to welfare emerged as one of the factors most closely correlated with Conservative voting intention.

Immigration is a less clear cut success. Again, many people strongly supported Conservative plans, which they remembered from the election campaign, to restrict immigration from outside the EU (though they often lament the immigration from within the EU is the bigger problem), and to establish a Border Police force. It was very much less clear to them, though, exactly what had been done in the last year, prompting many to wonder whether any government will take the issue seriously. As I have written more than once before, the Conservatives do not need to push immigration further up their political agenda, since we have a big lead on the issue and people are more worried about our commitment in other areas – but we do need to show we are delivering on our promises.

Crime represents a Conservative coalition-building opportunity that is currently being missed. As my research report, *Crime, Punishment & The People* showed earlier this year, a firm approach to law and order is the very essence of the centre ground. One of the things people expected from a Conservative-led government, whether they voted for it or not, was a tough approach to crime, but so far they have been disappointed. Asked what the government was doing on the issue, previously one of the Conservative Party's strongest suits, most people thought only of police cuts – with some adding that they had heard we want to send fewer criminals to prison.

For many potential Conservative voters who doubt the party's intentions, the NHS serves as a litmus test. Many in our research believed the NHS was subject to cuts, though the government maintains its budget is being protected and increased. Most people were sceptical of the proposed reforms, and those who had noticed that some health professionals opposed them tended to take the same view. Nobody seemed to know why the reforms were needed and how, even in theory, they were supposed to improve things for patients.

The grim backdrop to all these issues is the economy. Here the government retains a good deal of support but the research offers some warning signs. Voters recognised that cutting the deficit was the government's overriding purpose, and they agreed it should be an important priority. But for them, the more important factor was getting the economy growing and creating jobs. The two are complementary, of course, but voters thought the government appeared to see everything – economic growth, welfare reform, changes to sentencing policy, immigration control – as a means to the end of deficit reduction. But what is the end to which deficit reduction is the means? What are the bigger goals that a lower deficit will allow us to achieve? People did not feel the government had spelt out the benefits that the cuts would bring in the years to come. They understood that debt had to be brought under control, but many assumed the reason for the speed of the cuts was political as much as economic: the government wanted to cut while it could still plausibly blame Labour for the problem, and it wanted to have finished – and to be able to introduce tax cuts and other inducements – in time for the next election. And while the deficit seemed a rather abstract issue, detached from people's everyday lives, the cuts felt somewhat closer to home.

The political dangers for a government whose agenda seems to begin and end with cuts go beyond the hostility that the cuts themselves generate in some quarters. Many, after all, think the government is doing the right thing and give it extra credit for sticking to its guns over such difficult decisions. But the plan is to eliminate the structural deficit by the end of the parliament. If that is the government's defining purpose in the eyes of voters, and it achieves aim, its job is done. What are we going to do for an encore? What is the mission for which the Conservatives need to be re-elected? People may be glad we took the action we did, but they don't vote out of gratitude. Some voters see the government's purpose as a wider one of clearing up the mess, which goes beyond the deficit – but can we claim that as our job for the next parliament too?

As ever, building the Conservative voting coalition is as much about brand as about policy. They are not entirely separate: a party's brand is clearly helped by having policies that reflect voters' priorities, and delivering on them. For some voters, seeing the government get to grips with things will be enough to persuade them to hold their noses in the polling booth and take the Tory medicine. But voters also want to support a party that has a bigger vision they can identify with. Whether or not the Conservative Party "shares my values" emerged in our analysis as an important predictor of Tory voting intention.

The absence of a recognised overall theme beyond cuts needs to be addressed if the Conservatives are to hold together 2010 Tory voters and attract new ones. However commendable the idea of encouraging personal responsibility and relinquishing state control, the Big Society, the theme that is intermittently claimed as the government's guiding philosophy, shows no sign of resonating with voters. The very few who mentioned it during the course of our research usually did so in tones of bemusement. Most people still do not understand what it is supposed to mean, or find the concept too nebulous to get to grips with. They do not connect it with any of the government's more concrete policies, whether they support them or not.

Views of the Prime Minister's performance are another critical determinant of voting intention. We found that both Conservative voters and Considerers were much more likely to have a positive than a negative opinion, and gave him higher ratings than they gave the government as a whole. He is commonly regarded as professional, human, better than his predecessor, and to be doing a good job in difficult circumstances. A few concerns emerged, however, including a feeling among some that he was not yet a strong enough leader. This was partly due to the fact of being in coalition and, consequently, not seeming to be fully in command. Some also felt this impression owed something to lack of experience, and that he would grow into the role. Some critics, particularly among the Considerers, also mentioned an air of inauthenticity, in that he "tries to show us he's one of us, but he's not".

Detailed analysis of our polling yielded some fascinating insights on how to build and maintain the Conservative voting coalition. It shows that putting together an election-winning vote share is not, in fact, a matter of trading off “core voters” against potential converts. For 2010 Tories who would vote for the party again tomorrow, a positive view of David Cameron was the most important distinguishing factor.

Headline voting intention figures in the polls obscure the fact that the Conservative Party has in fact lost close to one in eight of its voters from 2010. The reason the Tories still retain a share in the mid-thirties rather than the high twenties is that they have won over a section of the electorate which did not vote Conservative at the election. By far the most important feature of this group was the belief that the Conservatives had the best approach on the economy; this was followed by high approval ratings for the Prime Minister.

Unfortunately these welcome additions to the Conservative voting coalition were matched by the number of defectors, who voted Conservative in 2010 but would not do so in an election tomorrow. For half of these, the most important factor was that they did not think the Conservatives had the best approach to the economy; the great majority also felt the Tories were not the best party on the NHS. Given the other evidence, these were likely to include a high proportion of first-time Conservatives, who were worried about the cuts and had been wary of trusting the party on public services. For the other half, the strongest common factor was that they did not give high marks for David Cameron’s performance.

Among those who did not vote Conservative in 2010, the best indicator of newfound Conservative support was whether they thought the Conservatives had the best approach to the economy. The number of former Labour voters available was limited even among the few who did take this view: just under one in four Labour voters who said the Tories were best on the economy said they would vote Conservative tomorrow (though this compares to just three in a thousand of those who did not think this). Among former Liberal Democrats, prospects are better: nearly half of 2010 Lib Dem voters who thought the Conservatives were best on the economy and had a very positive view of David Cameron said they would vote Tory. This rose to two thirds if they also thought the Conservatives had the best approach to welfare. Those who thought the Conservatives were right on the economy but gave more middling marks to David Cameron were two and a half times as likely to vote Conservative if they also thought the Conservative Party shared their values.

Our complex segmentation analysis has actually revealed that the things that will build and maintain the Conservative voting coalition are the economy, David Cameron, welfare, crime, the NHS, and a demonstration that the Conservative Party shares people’s values. These are fundamentally mainstream concerns that have the potential to expand the Conservative voting coalition and delight longstanding Tories at one and the same time. In other words, attracting new voters need not alienate existing supporters, and we do not have to pursue a separate agenda for each segment of voters. There is no need to engage in elaborate and slippery triangulation.

Moreover, the way to keep voters onside is not to second-guess which party they would end up with if they left. If we get it right on the big, mainstream themes, and have a clear overarching purpose, we will keep Conservative voters on board and attract new ones; if we get it wrong, they will scatter to the four winds (and not necessarily in the direction that might be expected: defectors from the Conservatives who do not think the Tories have the best approach to crime are as likely to have gone to Labour as to another party, as are those who think the Tories are best on crime but not on immigration). A defining purpose, and feeling that their concerns are being acted on, will galvanise those in the Conservative voting coalition, whether they would otherwise be inclined to drift to the left, or to the fringe.

Project Blueprint does not end here. Over time I intend to track the changing size and nature of the Conservative voting coalition, the strength of support in its different elements – including the enthusiasm of 2010 Tories – and ultimately the prospects of achieving an overall majority in four

years. We will see whether the government is being seen to deliver, and whether it is getting the credit for tough decisions or the blame for tough times. And the project will remind people that it is the coalition of voters that matters, not the coalition of parties. As always, my message to the politicians is: it's not about you, it's about them.

Given all the challenges, an overall Conservative majority at the next election is going to be hard to achieve. Yet as I noted above, Mrs Thatcher's first government – which was ultimately rescued by public recognition that her economic strategy was difficult but right, by an unexpected event in the shape of the Falklands invasion, and by the hopelessness of the Opposition – is the exception that proves there is no rule to stop the Conservatives winning outright in 2015.

MAA

May 2011

Methodology

Conservative voters

- An online poll of 1,502 people who voted Conservative at the 2010 general election was conducted between 25 February and 3 March 2011.
- Eight focus groups of people who voted Conservative at the 2010 general election were held in Elmet, Hastings, Brentford and Leamington between 2 and 15 March 2011. Separate groups of men and women were held at each venue.

Conservative 'Considerers'

- An online poll of 2,000 people who considered voting Conservative at the 2010 election but decided not to was conducted between 25 February and 3 March 2011.
- Eight focus groups of people who had considered voting Conservative in 2010 but decided not to were held in Hammersmith, Southampton, Dudley and Bolton between 16 and 28 February 2011. Separate groups of men and women were held at each venue.

General public

- An online poll of 10,238 adults was conducted between 10 December 2010 and 5 January 2011.

Conservative Party members

- A poll of 401 members of the Conservative Party was conducted between 4 and 9 March 2011. 300 interviews were conducted by telephone and 101 online.

Full data tables are available at lordashcroft.com.

Why they voted Tory (or didn't) in 2010

'Conservative voters' refers to people who voted Conservative at the 2010 general election. 'Considerers' refers to people who considered voting Conservative in 2010 but decided not to.

Voting history

According to our poll, 83% of those who voted Conservative in 2010 had done so in at least one previous general election (see page 38 for full poll results). Of those who considered voting Conservative but decided not to, 61% had voted for the party at a previous general election. Overall, 70% of those who voted Conservative or thought about doing so had done it before, and less than a third had no history of voting Conservative.

Reasons for voting Conservative (or considering it)

Conservative voters as a whole were evenly divided as to whether they had voted mainly for positive reasons (52%) or because they had negative views about Labour (48%). Nearly two thirds of first-time Tory voters said they had been motivated mainly by negative views of Labour.

Conservative Party members were under no illusions on this score. The majority quite rightly thought that most first-time Conservative voters had been driven more by their view of Labour than a positive view of the Tories.

Asked in the poll how important a number of different factors had been in their voting decision, the highest scoring was that the Conservatives "seemed more likely to get the economy back on track" – even beating, though only by a fraction, "it was time for a change from Labour and the Conservatives were the most obvious alternative". The perception that the party seemed more willing to reform welfare and cut the deficit also scored very highly, followed by the expectation that it would control immigration.

The evidence from the focus groups, though, was that people's decision to vote Conservative owed much more to general impressions than to policies. Many felt that Labour had run out of steam, and if there was little to choose between them on policy the Conservatives seemed fresher and more likely to get things done.

For Considerers in the focus groups, by far the most common reason for having thought about voting Conservative was loss of faith in Labour and Gordon Brown, and the need for change. Several also said they had been attracted by David Cameron, and some said that they thought the Conservatives would do better in a variety of specific policy areas, including the economy, tax, immigration, crime, welfare and education.

Most Considerers said they had thought about the Conservatives much more seriously in 2010 than in recent general elections. This was nearly always because they saw the Tories as more credible and attractive in their own right, not just because their view of Labour had declined so far: "There was a completely different party image with the Conservatives. It was a viable alternative for once"; "they were trying to say the party had changed to some degree. They tried to get to the centre ground, whereas Howard and Hague were quite right wing". Some also said the televised leaders' debates had made them think more broadly about the choice on offer than they would usually have done.

Reservations about voting Conservative

Our poll found that the single biggest reservation among those who voted Conservative in 2010 was over whether the party could be trusted to keep its promises. Lack of experience of government, doubts about how David Cameron would perform as Prime Minister, the scale and impact of spending cuts and whether they would look after the better off rather than the working classes or the vulnerable were also prominent.

This was reflected in the focus groups of Conservative voters. Having been out of government for so long the party was “new and untried”, and though some of their plans sounded good “you never know until they do it”; “is anything going to change, and if it does will it be any better?” Some who had never voted Conservative before found the transition quite hard: “it’s like being a football fan. It’s like swapping sides. It’s not an easy thing to do”.

Conservative Party members also took quite a realistic view of other voters’ reservations about voting Tory. They recognised the perception of the party as being for the better off, fears about the scale of cuts, trust on public services and concerns about inexperience. However, they rather overestimated the importance of straightforward loyalty to Labour as a barrier to switching, rating this as the second most important reason for voters deciding not to vote Conservative.

Our poll of the general public asked whether respondents “identify” with a political party (“that is, do you think of one party as consistently representing people like you and feel an affinity towards that party beyond the question of how you vote?”) only 62% of those who voted Conservative in 2010 said they identified with the party according to this definition, compared with 71% of Labour voters who identified with the Labour Party. Less than a third of Liberal Democrat voters identified with that party, with nearly half saying they identified with no party.

Any regrets?

Very few of those who had voted Conservative said in the focus groups that they now regretted their decision. Some were concerned about the cuts or about specific policies, or were frustrated that things were not improving fast enough, but most reflected that the situation would have been difficult whoever had won, and at least a new team were now trying to get to grips with the country’s problems. Most felt that things would certainly have been no better had Labour been re-elected: “I did regret it to begin with, but if we had stayed with Labour how much worse would it have been?”

If you thought about voting Conservative, why didn’t you?

Even though it had been improvements to the Conservative Party rather than a further decline in their view of Labour that had led them to take the Tories more seriously than at recent elections, it was a continuing lack of trust in the party that ultimately persuaded most Considerers not to vote Conservative. This stemmed from perceptions of the party’s history and priorities, rather than any particular proposal. The idea that the Conservatives still favoured the rich rather than ordinary people was by far the most common barrier for Considerers, and there was concern about how far the Tories could be trusted with public services. Several also admitted that having come from a Labour family background they found it very hard to change.

Our poll of the general public found 21% of those who voted Labour in 2010 saying their political views and the way they voted had been influenced “a great deal” by how their parents voted. This compares to 15% of Conservative voters and 12% of Liberal Democrats.

This poll suggested that class identification still plays some part in voting decisions. 61% of those who described themselves as working class voted Labour in 2010, compared to 36% of those who

voted Conservative. 60% of Conservative voters described themselves as middle class. (Overall, 46% of the public described themselves as working class – including three quarters of C2s, 48% of C1s and a quarter of ABs. Among those who described themselves as middle class, nearly half said their father was working class).

Some Considerers also had reservations about David Cameron, or said that there was so little to choose between the parties that they decided to stick with the devil they knew: “In the end it was because of the NHS. When I hear the Conservatives are going to reform the NHS it sets alarm bells ringing, because I think ‘privatisation’; “They’re a bunch of public schoolboys. They don’t have the breadth, they’re not a fair representation of the general public”; “The Conservatives stand more for the top earners and the higher classes. I just think Labour do care more about the working class”; “There’s a lot of stigma with the Conservative Party for working class people, and that still runs now”; “There was still the legacy of the Thatcher years – will we go back to looking after the higher middle class and the working class get left?”; “It was a vibe from the Conservatives – snobbish, ‘we’re more educated than you, better than you, we only care about rich people’. At least Labour try to hide it”; “It’s about lifestyle. The things that are of interest to that group of people are not going to be of interest to others. The private education, the detached house, the four-by-four...”; “I wasn’t brave enough to change my vote. A bit of me thought, he says all this but is he going to do it?”

The coalition

The election result and reactions to the coalition government

Many Conservative voters would have preferred to see an outright Conservative victory at the election and were unhappy about the coalition or concerned about how it would work: “It’s a compromise so no-one gets what they wanted”; “I didn’t vote for the Lib Dems. I felt they had done a deal, but they didn’t do a deal with me”. Several said they had been surprised, or even shocked and unsettled: “What did it mean? Previous coalitions have not lasted long and we have needed another election”; “They had different outlooks. I thought, is this going to be one big battle?”

This was by no means a universal view. Some who had been uncertain about voting Conservative were rather relieved at the outcome, and liked the idea of the two parties working together: “I was quite glad. It was nice to have a brake on them so they can’t plough on and do what they want”; “A bit of a sigh of relief – I thought, we’re going to get some change but there’s going to be a bit of crossover between the parties”; “It was quite refreshing. It lifted morale”; “It was a Conservative government with little choosy bits of Lib Dem policies that I liked, like raising the tax threshold”.

Considerers had greeted the formation of the coalition government with a mixture of surprise, confusion and scepticism, though several said it had been the only viable option and some had been rather pleased. Few were disappointed or angry.

Performance so far

Most participants in the Conservative voting focus groups were reasonably happy with the way the coalition had turned out, despite their early reservations. Some said it was doing much better than they had expected, but the more common response was that it was going fairly well considering the size of the job the government faced. Even so, some reiterated that a Conservative government with an overall majority would be stronger and less constrained by the need for compromise.

In the poll, Conservative voters as a whole were more likely to say the coalition government was doing better than they had expected (26%) than worse (20%); 54% said it was doing about the same as they had expected. However, there were two important divides.

First, men were much more positive about the coalition’s performance than women – both among Conservative voters and Considerers.

Second, while previous Conservative voters said the coalition was doing “better” rather than “worse” than they had expected by 26% to 18%, nearly a third of first-time Tory voters said the coalition was doing worse than they expected (32%), compared to 22% saying it was doing better. Party members were more likely than Conservative voters as a whole to say the coalition government had so far performed better than they had expected (33%).

Considerers were almost as likely as Conservative voters to say the coalition was doing better than they expected (25%), but were more likely to say it was doing worse (31%). In the groups, Considerers were as likely to give the government the benefit of the doubt, saying that it had a tough job that would take time, than to say that they disapproved: “They haven’t had time yet to deliver, but they came in at a difficult time worldwide”. Complaints usually related to the scale of cuts: “It doesn’t affect someone in a big posh house. We have been here before”.

A sizeable minority of Considerers gave the government credit for taking the right decisions in difficult circumstances: “They’re doing what they need to do to get the country back on its feet, but

it will take years”; “It’s better than I expected. Our children will get all this debt. It’s got to be paid back, and they are doing it fair and square”.

Conservative voters said they would rather have a Conservative government with an overall majority than the current coalition by three to one. For first-time voters, the margin was lower, at two to one. For Considerers, though, the proportions were reversed: two thirds prefer the current Conservative-Lib Dem coalition to the alternative of a Conservative government. Even Considerers who later said they were more likely to think about voting Conservative at the next election as a result of the party’s performance in government preferred the coalition to an overall Conservative majority, albeit by a lower margin (58% to 42%).

David Cameron, Prime Minister

Ratings for David Cameron’s performance as Prime Minister were slightly better than those for the coalition as a whole, both among voters and Considerers, but with the same divides according to gender and voting history. Again, Conservative Party members were more likely to say that he had performed better than expected (34%) than Conservative voters as a whole (27%).

Asked to rate ten prominent politicians on their performance, David Cameron scored highest, followed by William Hague and Boris Johnson, among both Conservative voters and Considerers. Considerers ranked Nick Clegg higher than Conservative voters. Considerers awarded lower marks than Conservative voters for all politicians except Ed Miliband and Ed Balls – though they came bottom of both lists.

Among Conservative voters in the groups, though, there were some concerns about Mr Cameron’s performance. They were unanimous that he was proving a better Prime Minister than Gordon Brown, and his strengths were that he was charismatic, straight-talking, professional, well-presented, human, and doing a good job in difficult circumstances. At the same time, several worried that he did not yet seem to be a strong enough leader – partly because being in coalition gave the impression that he was not fully in command: “He’s still got to ask permission. It’s like he’s got the keys to drive the country but he’s got to have L-plates and dual controls”. Some felt he seemed slightly phoney or inexperienced, but there was an implied expectation that he would grow into the role: “Tony Blair looked like he belonged there, and with Gordon Brown it was ‘pull your trousers up’, but David Cameron is just there on the side. He’s not part of it yet”; “I don’t think he’s got enough grey hairs yet. Give him a war and see how he gets on”.

Considerers in the groups were more likely to have a positive than a negative view of Mr Cameron, with many saying he was a good speaker, well presented, capable, willing to admit mistakes, and much better than his predecessor. Critics mentioned inexperience, and sometimes a sense of fakeness: “he tries to show he’s one of us, but he’s not”.

Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister

Some Conservative voters thought Nick Clegg was doing a reasonable job, but for most he had “receded into the shadows”; “you only ever see him sitting on the bench”. For some, his apparent lack of impact suggested weakness. However, few Conservative voters had strongly negative views of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Nor were Considerers particularly critical of Mr Clegg. Though a few saw him as a “lapdog” and many thought he had disappeared from the limelight, some said they sympathised with him – he had had little choice but to enter the coalition, in which his power was necessarily limited: “He would have been slaughtered if he had stayed with Labour”.

The Liberal Democrats

The polls found that Conservative voters were more likely than Considerers to think the Liberal Democrats were playing an influential role in government. Considerers (30%) were more than three times as likely as those who had voted Conservative (11%) to say the coalition was “essentially a Conservative government with some Liberal Democrat window dressing” (though first-time Conservative voters were more than twice as likely to say this as Conservative voters as a whole). Conservative voters were more likely to say it was a true coalition where decisions were made jointly, or a coalition led by the Conservatives in which the Lib Dems have a say. Conservative Party members were the most likely of all to think the Lib Dems had a substantial influence (31%).

A few of the Conservative voters in the groups thought of the government as “the Conservatives in power. It’s easy to forget the Lib Dems have anything to do with it”. More often, though, they would say that although the Conservatives clearly have most power on the basis of seats, “at the same time the Lib Dems must have some influence as the Conservatives need them to get anything through”; “the Tories are annoyed because they can’t say certain things. The Lib Dems have got more power than it looks like”. Most, though, had no clear idea of any policy areas in which the Liberal Democrats had had a particular influence.

Several Considerers said they were glad the Lib Dems were there to have a restraining influence on the Conservatives, without which the government’s policies would be even harsher than they were: “They’re running roughshod anyway, so what would it be like if they were let free? They have been reined in a bit”. More often, though, they said the coalition felt like a Tory government, and they sometimes forgot the Liberal Democrats were there at all.

Coalition policies and priorities

Asked what the coalition government regarded as its overall mission, by far the most common answer was dealing with the deficit. Some thought there might be a wider vision, but were not sure what it was, or that the parties had had to put their plans to one side because of the coalition or the financial situation. Overwhelmingly, though, both Conservative voters and Considerers thought the government’s purpose began and ended with cuts and repairing the financial damage of the previous administration: “It’s financial prudence”; “picking up the mess”; “stabilisation”; “damage control”; “the cuts are all you hear about”; “they’ve probably got a vision to try and get back to the manifesto pledges that are on the back burner”; “debt is the top priority and once they deal with that things will fall into place a little bit”.

The groups discussed the coalition government’s performance in a number of areas:

Welfare reform was an important priority both for Conservative voters and Considerers, and an area in which they felt the government was taking positive action. The groups generally grasped the purpose of the reforms, and although a few were concerned that people could hardly be forced into work if there were no jobs, the general reaction was overwhelmingly positive: “It’s a big deal for them. They’re testing people on incapacity. My neighbour got incapacity years ago and he sits there doing eight hours in the garden”; “now you can never be on benefits and earn more than if you were at work”; “there’s a reform bill, and something to do with linking credit ratings to benefits to see who is cheating the system, which is a brilliant idea”; “if there is a deterrent for people sponging, that’s good”.

However, several felt that welfare reform had been introduced primarily as a means of cutting the deficit, rather than as an end in itself: “It is important to them but only for money saving”. Some had also been impressed with changes higher up the income scale. One Considerer observed: “They’ve got rid of Child Benefit at a certain rate. That was a great step. That got my attention. I thought, maybe this is different, maybe these are different Conservatives”.

Conservative voters were disappointed at the coalition's approach to **crime**. Though most said the issue was a big priority for them personally, they felt that police cuts showed the government was not following the policy they wanted to see: "they're cutting money from the police but they say they want to make Britain a safer place. How's that going to work?"; "They're cutting bobbies on the beat. This area is losing a lot of police, it was just announced." Some had also heard about the government's changing approach to prisons and sentencing: "You can't get tough on crime if you just make them apologise for shoplifting"; "they're weak. I haven't heard them say they're building prisons and bringing in stiffer penalties". A few Conservative voters thought the government's crime policies would be tougher if the Tories had an overall majority.

Considerers took the same view: "they're cutting the police and letting more people out of jail early"; "how can you be tough on crime when you're taking money from the police?"; "they're on about not sending so many down and letting more out.

Immigration was high on Conservative voters' personal agenda, and many mentioned government plans including a points system, a Border Police force and a cap on numbers (though only from outside the EU – which several regarded as a serious drawback). However, the groups were unclear about which if any of these measures had yet been introduced: "I haven't noticed any change. nothing has been put out there"; "if they are doing what they wanted to do that would be tougher, but I don't know if they are doing it"; "they wouldn't dare. They talk about it but they never do anything". Some thought the Conservatives were being held back in their plans by the Liberal Democrats.

Likewise, the Considerers said immigration was very important to them, but there was resignation as to whether the issue would be properly dealt with, even though many thought it was a high Conservative priority. Though many recalled what had been promised or talked about, the groups were much less sure what was being done: "They're going to make it more difficult to come over. You've got to be skilled"; "They tried to do immigration but they can't because their hands are tied. If they're in the EU, anyone can come in"; "Aren't they limiting the number of people who can come into the country each year?"; "I think it's still in the pipeline".

Conservative voters tended to think the **NHS** was a higher priority for them than it was for the government. It was hard to see how the government could be improving the NHS while subjecting it to cuts (only a few recalled the coalition promising the NHS budget would be protected). There was a good deal of uncertainty and concern about the proposed structural reforms, particularly over whether GPs were the right people to be managing such large budgets, and some were worried that the plans would involve "privatisation". Nobody understood how the proposals were intended to benefit patients: "They're scrapping PCTs and giving more power to GPs. I think it's a bad idea – they've got a lot on their plate"; "I think they think they are improving it, but they are cutting at the rock face rather than the bureaucracy. When wards are losing beds, they are the wrong cuts"; "GPs will control the budget. It will tie them up with things that are not their job"; "They're talking about putting GPs in charge of everything. It's OK if you've got a good GP, but what if you've got a rubbish GP?" Considerers had similar opinions about current policies but were more entrenched in their view that the Conservatives did not regard the NHS as a high priority, or were actively hostile.

On **schools**, Conservative voters were more likely to mention the creation of more academies than they were to mention cuts to the building programme. They tended to give the government some credit for trying to make improvements, though most were very hazy about the differences between academy schools and others. Considerers were more likely to focus on the cuts but also talked about the establishment of free schools, about which the groups were doubtful but not damning: "It isn't a priority for them because they've stopped all the builds"; "They scrapped improvements at my son's school. I'll never forgive them for that. Typical Conservatives. As soon as they got in, it was 'screw you'"; "this thing about schools that parents do – it's a good idea, I just can't see it taking off"; "I read something about Michael Gove. I think they are thinking about it. It was saying don't

knock it, because it's a good idea – not the same old same old"; "I think it's quite a high priority, they just haven't got the funds to do it".

Most people did not consider the **environment** to be a high current priority relative to other issues, nor did they think it was for the government: "they will pay lip service when asked, but it's not high on their agenda". Several observed that environmental concerns often seemed to be a pretext for new taxes.

Cutting taxes was not thought to be a priority for the coalition, or a realistic hope given the public finances: "not worth thinking about for the next five or ten years"; "if they're taking money from taxes they've got to take it from somewhere else"; "it would be nice but realistically we know they can't do it"; "I think the Conservatives used to be interested in cutting taxes, but I don't think they're in a situation at the moment to do anything about it". Fuel duty was most often mentioned as the tax that should be cut first when it was possible to do so.

Conservative voters thought it was important to stand up to **Europe** ("I can't understand why Europe has such a big say in how much I pay for my car insurance"), but there were mixed views as to whether the government was actually doing so. All the groups had noticed the row over prisoners' voting rights, and most recognised that that government had forcefully expressed what they regarded as the correct view, but it was not clear whether it had put a stop to the idea ("they stood up on prisoners' voting rights and told Europe we're not complying") or whether "Europe" would get its way ("the government are a bit miffed but they haven't done anything"). Several of the Considerers recalled that the Conservatives had historically been Eurosceptic ("they don't like Europe, do they?"), a position which most endorsed, although most felt it to be a lower priority than most other issues.

Most Conservative voters and Considerers were bemused by the idea that the coalition was, or should be, **promoting or supporting marriage**. Some had heard the government talking about couples in relation to welfare reform. Few, however, thought supporting marriage in a wider sense was part of the government's agenda, or ought to be, whether in principle or as an effective way of tackling social breakdown: "It shouldn't have anything to do with politics"; "they do mention it occasionally and people groan"; "my parents weren't married and I didn't break into any cars"; "Both my children are unmarried with children. A wedding can be twenty grand. Isn't it more important to get a house?"

There was some support among Conservative voters for the idea of the government **scrapping unnecessary rules and regulations**, but few had heard of any action in this area and the theme generated little excitement: "it's not hugely important to me but it will save money if they get rid of some pointless pen-pushers". Nobody felt they themselves were mired in red tape, and several thought this was an old political chestnut, and one person's pointless regulation was another's indispensable safeguard. However, several mentioned the scrapping of quangos, which was regarded as a good thing – some said that when they saw the list of quangos to be scrapped they had been amazed they had existed in the first place.

Many felt **small businesses** were an important priority, and assumed the government did too, but had heard little or nothing on the subject. The lack of bank lending was thought to be the biggest problem in this area, and though the government was trying to persuade banks to lend more it appeared not to have achieved much so far.

Very few participants knew what was meant by **cutting the size of the state**: "Lopping off Cornwall?"

The economy

Trust and growth

Conservative voters were fairly happy with the government's performance on the economy. Nearly nine out of ten thought "although things are difficult now, the right decisions are being made and things will improve significantly in the next three or four years" (though only 72% of first-time voters thought this). Considerers also took this view, but by a smaller margin: 38% thought that "in three or four years' time, the economy will be no better, or worse, than it is now".

Both Conservative voters and Considerers thought the government was placing more emphasis on deficit reduction than the economic growth that voters themselves regarded as a greater priority. Some thought the government probably did have a plan to help the economy grow and create jobs, but very few could say what it involved. Considerers in particular were worried that the private sector would not be able to create enough jobs to replace those lost in the public sector, particularly since many relied on public sector contracts.

Conservative voters were nearly unanimous in trusting David Cameron and George Osborne more than Ed Miliband and Ed Balls to handle the economy (96% to 4%). First-time Conservative voters also did so by an overwhelming margin (87% to 13%). Considerers also most trusted DC and GO by a wide margin (74% to 26%), but the gap was wider among men (54 points) than women (42 points).

Evidence from the focus groups suggested that a strong reason for the Conservative lead on the economy was the perceived lack of any credible alternative plan from Labour.

The deficit and the cuts

70% of Conservative voters said the cuts were "necessary and unavoidable and are the right thing for the economy", and a further 9% thought they did not go far enough (though only 54% of first-time Conservative voters thought this; they were more than twice as likely as Conservative voters as a whole to say "the cuts are too deep and are being made too quickly").

Conservative voters in the groups largely accepted the need for deep cuts, which would be necessary whichever party was in power. They also accepted that the necessary action would be uncomfortable for many people, including them, but that this too was unavoidable: "It's like ripping a plaster off. You've got to get it done".

However, there was a widespread feeling among both Conservative voters and Considerers that no-one had properly explained why the cuts had to be made so quickly, how ordinary people would benefit from deficit reduction, or even how the country had got into such a state: "Nobody ever said before the election, 'look what we're doing, we're millions in debt', but suddenly they got in and we're millions in debt. I check my gas meter every month. How did we get into this drastic state?" Relatively few even mentioned the cost of interest payments on the government's debts as a reason to cut the deficit quickly. The absence of a clear understanding led some to see deficit reduction as a cover-all pretext for things the government wanted to do anyway: "They aren't explaining it clearly. It's just an excuse for everything. 'It's the deficit, we had to do it because of the previous government'."

In fact, many instinctively felt that addressing debt was best done sooner rather than later. But when asked for their own explanation for the speed of the cuts, people often assumed the government's motivation was political as much as economic: cutting early meant it could still plausibly blame the previous Labour government for the pain; it needed to be able to claim credit for a finished job by the end of the parliament; and, crucially, it would allow tax cuts or other

inducements to be put in place in time for the next election: “If they want to be re-elected they will have to concentrate on other things before the election”; “they’re doing it so quickly because in a few years’ time they won’t be able to say it’s Labour’s fault”; “they’re trying to get the bad things out of the way first so by the time of the next election we will have forgotten”; “it’s so they can finish the cuts in three years and start improving things in year four when the election is coming up”.

Considerers (46%) were more than twice as likely as Conservative voters (21%) to say the cuts were too deep and too quick. Among both groups, women were significantly more likely than men to say the cuts were too severe.

In the groups, Considerers often said they understood the need to cut the deficit in principle but were concerned that the cuts were too severe, too fast, and hitting the wrong people (though when asked for alternative targets, there were few suggestions beyond high salaries for senior council staff and MPs’ expenses). However, many also defended the government for being prepared to take the necessary action, however unpopular: “They are trying to take the bull by the horns. Whether they can pull it off I’m not sure, but the poor are going to be hit whatever happens, whoever is in”.

Considerers who thought the government was cutting too quickly and deeply had mixed views as to why it was doing so. Only a third believed the government was hostile to public services and was using the deficit as an excuse for big cuts. As the focus groups confirmed, for most people the explanation is a combination of the government doing what it mistakenly thinks is right, and what it believes to be to its political advantage.

Among both Conservative voters and Considerers, there was some concern that rather than stopping after three or four years, the cuts might go on and on with no end in sight: “How long is it going on for? Is it going to be short and sharp, or will it go on for years and years?”; “When they get it right, is it ever going to stop?”

Brand

Party attributes

Considerers rated the Conservatives well ahead of other parties on hard factors: “willing to take tough decisions for the long term”, “competent and capable”, “will do what they say”. However, they put Labour slightly ahead of the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats a long way ahead, on measures including “its heart is in the right place”, “represents the whole country, not just some types of people”, “wants to help ordinary people get on in life”, “stands for fairness” and “stands for equal opportunity for all”.

Men were more likely to agree that each positive attribute applied to the Conservatives than women – especially “on the side of people like me” (43% of men, 31% of women). This division did not apply for the other two parties.

Relative priorities

For Conservative voters and Considerers, the top priority was “getting the economy growing and creating jobs”, followed by “cutting the deficit and the debt” and “reforming welfare to stop scroungers and cut benefit dependency”. Both groups, though, thought the Conservative Party regarded dealing with the deficit as its top priority for them personally. Considerers thought “getting the economy growing” was only the third priority for the Tories, after cutting the deficit and reforming welfare.

There were some stark differences in perceived priorities lower down the scale, particularly among Considerers. For Considerers, dealing with crime and improving the NHS were the fourth and fifth priorities, with 79% and 75% respectively saying they were a high or very high priority. However, they saw these issues as being seventh and eighth on the Conservatives’ priority list, with 43% and 42% respectively naming them in the top two categories.

The differences between the proportions who said an issue was important to them and who thought it was important to the Conservatives were bigger among Considerers – not just because of the perceived order of priorities, but because they seemed to lack evidence that the government has any priorities beyond cutting the deficit and reforming welfare (which many see as part of cutting the deficit rather than an end in itself).

Despite their preference for a Conservative government over the present coalition, majorities of Conservative voters thought such a government would be performing better than the current coalition in only three areas: reforming welfare, controlling immigration, and standing up for Britain in the EU. Substantial numbers also thought a Conservative government would do better at getting the economy moving, cutting the deficit, scrapping unnecessary rules and regulations and dealing with crime. In most policy areas, though, they were more likely to say a Conservative government would be performing no better or worse than the current coalition.

Considerers were much less likely to think anything would be better under a Conservative government. A majority thought there would be no real difference in every policy area, but in four cases – the NHS, schools, taxes and protecting the environment – they were more likely to think a Conservative government with an overall majority would handle things worse than better.

The four areas in which Considerers were most likely to think that a Conservative government would perform better than the coalition (though still only a minority in each case) were welfare reform, immigration, controlling the deficit and standing up for Britain in the EU. Notably, these were the

same areas in which Conservative Party members were most likely to say would be better handled by a Conservative government (though by very much bigger margins).

Again, there was a gender gap, with male Considerers more likely to say that each issue would be handled better by the Conservatives on their own (with the exception of schools).

Whose side?

Neither group thought the Conservative Party or the coalition was particularly on the side of people like them, but for different reasons. For Conservative voters, it was nothing personal – times were hard, particularly for people in the middle, but the economic situation meant the government was not in a position to offer much to anybody at the moment: “they see their job as stabilising the country”; “they’re looking at the whole of society. There are cuts for everyone”; “I think the deficit and the debt are more important at the moment”; “I don’t think they think about particular people. They are just looking at the numbers”.

Among Considerers, though, the perception remained that the Tories were not only not on their side, but were on the side of someone other than them – indeed this had been one of the most important factors in their decision not to vote Conservative. Several mentioned ways in which they felt they were affected by government policies, including the VAT rise, high fuel taxes and changes to tax credits, and some felt they were at the bottom of the government’s priority list.

Some volunteered that comparing the issues on which the government had performed u-turns after public pressure and those where it had not showed what sort of people it prioritised. Though pressing ahead with cuts that hit the less well off, Ministers had backtracked when some middle class people complained about selling the forests: “There was all this fuss about selling the forests and suddenly there was a u-turn, but they didn’t do one on tuition fees. These middle class people in the New Forest made a fuss and they caved in. I would rather they kept the EMA and sold a bit of the forest. Once you’ve seen one pony you’ve seen them all”; “that was the people who are his voters, middle England. They think people who go rambling are working class, but they’re not, they’re middle class people”.

Up or down in voters’ estimation?

A quarter of Conservative voters and Considerers said their view of the Conservatives had changed for the better since the election. First-time voters were slightly more positive, with one third saying their view of the party had changed for the better, compared to 21% of previous Conservative voters (who were more likely to say their view had not changed at all); 19% said it had changed for the worse, compared to 15% of previous Conservative voters. Considerers (27%) were more likely than voters (16%) to say it had changed for the worse.

Conservative voters who said their view of the party had changed for the better said they liked the fact that it was taking tough decisions and getting things done, that it was addressing the deficit despite the difficulties, that it was working well in coalition, and that it seemed prepared to listen and admit mistakes. Considerers whose view of the party had improved were also most likely to say it was getting things done, but the next most important factor, above dealing with the deficit, was their view of David Cameron’s performance as Prime Minister.

Conservative voters whose view of the party had changed for the worse complained that the cuts were too deep or quick or being made in the wrong places, that they did not like the coalition or thought too many concessions were being made to the Liberal Democrats, and that the party was not delivering on its promises or was committing U-turns.

By far the most important factor for Considerers whose view had changed for the worse was the scale and impact of cuts. This was followed by the perception of broken promises, that the

Conservatives seemed to be protecting the interests of the better off while hitting the vulnerable, and that tax rises and the cost of living was making life harder for ordinary people.

The opposition

Almost none of the Conservative voters had a good word to say about the Labour Party, including first-time Conservatives who had previously voted for Tony Blair. Many observed that the party only ever contradicted the government, and the automatic nature of Labour's opposition meant their attacks lacked credibility. Several observed that no constructive alternative was being offered: "Labour have got a long way to go before they can mount a serious challenge"; "they're licking their wounds"; "they're just saying 'don't do any cuts'. The usual"; "everything they say is just the opposite of what the coalition say"; "there's only so much they can say because they're the reason we're in this mess"; "they're just opposed to everything".

Neither were the Conservative voting groups impressed with Ed Miliband. Several said the party had chosen the wrong brother, and he seemed very unlikely to become Prime Minister: "Not up to it. Fish out of water"; "professional politician. He hasn't got a clue what goes on outside politics"; "he hasn't said how he would do things differently. Hasn't come up with an alternative"; "his brother had more about him"; "he's just there for a few years until they find someone else".

Considerers in the groups were just as damning of Labour as the Conservative voters. The party offered no credible alternative since "they haven't come up with any policies, they're just arguing". Labour's only message was opposition to the cuts, "but they're the ones who left a note in the office saying there's no money left". Most thought that if Labour had remained in office the same cuts would have had to be made. For those who thought Labour would have "carried on spending", though, this did not indicate a more favourable view – rather it suggested the party would have been unwilling to face up to the scale of the crisis.

Considerers were also practically unanimous in their assessment of the Labour leader: "They picked the wrong Miliband"; "It's the same as the Conservatives after John Major – they didn't know what to do"; "Doesn't give you confidence when he speaks"; "Posh. If you said 'draw a typical posh person, he'd be the one you'd draw"; "He's an absolute tool. He says, whatever the Conservatives do, say it's the wrong thing. What's all that about?"

For Conservative voters in the groups, UKIP was not a serious option, even among those who were familiar with the party ("Who? Never even heard of it"; "Are they the ones who wear silly hats?"). Most had not heard of Nigel Farage, and some thought the party was still led by Robert Kilroy-Silk. Some said they often agreed with what Mr Farage said, but that they saw UKIP as a single-issue party whose low level of support meant it would be a wasted vote: "Farage sometimes makes a lot of sense and is quite likeable, but no matter what he talks about he brings it all back to Europe"; "they would get us out of Europe, but what else would they do?"; "if 70% of decisions are taken in Europe, he does have a point. But they're not powerful enough, there are not enough candidates, they're not going to form a government"; "it's just a group of people who don't like Europe getting together to say 'we don't like Europe'."

Election 2015

Direction of travel

Conservative voters said they were moving “towards” rather than “away from” the Conservative Party by 55% to 10%. They were moving away from Labour (by 67% to 5%) and the Liberal Democrats (by 30% to 17%). First-time Conservative voters were nearly as likely as others to say they were moving towards the Tories, but were also twice as likely to say they were moving away (21%). They were also more than three times as likely to say they were moving towards Labour (17%), though a majority (54%) still said they were moving away from Labour.

Considerers were as likely to say they were moving towards the Conservatives as away (33% in each direction). Within this group, though, men were moving towards the party by 35% to 31%, and women moving away by 35% to 30%. Considerers as a whole were also more likely to be moving away from rather than towards Labour (by 46% to 26%) and the Liberal Democrats (by 35% to 22%). 18-24 year-olds were the most likely to say they were moving away from the Conservatives (44%), and younger Considerers were also more likely to say they were moving towards Labour.

31% of Considerers said that the performance of David Cameron and the Conservatives in government made them more likely to think about voting Tory than they had been before; 29% said they would be less likely and 40% said they would be no more or less likely. (In other words – depending how you look at it – 71% were at least as likely to vote Conservative next time as they were last time, or 69% were no more likely to vote Conservative than they were last time). Male Considerers said they were more rather than less likely to vote Tory next time by 33% to 26%; women were less likely by 32% to 28%. 44% of 18-24s said they were now less likely to consider voting Conservative – the highest proportion of any age group.

A quarter of Conservative voters said they could see themselves voting Labour at some time in the future. 42% said they could see themselves voting Liberal Democrat, and 36% said they could see themselves voting UKIP.

Over a third of Conservative Party members said they could see themselves voting UKIP at some time in the future – though they were also more likely than average to say their preferred outcome of the next election would be an overall Conservative majority.

Preferred result

Three quarters of Conservative voters said they would like to see a Conservative government with an overall majority as the outcome of the next election; 17% said they would like another Conservative-Lib Dem coalition. Among first-time Conservative voters the proportion preferring a Conservative government was 60%. This group was more than twice as likely as 2010 Conservative voters generally to want a Labour government or a Labour-Lib Dem coalition next time (22%, compared to 10% of Conservative voters overall).

Most Considerers said they would their preferred outcome would be to see the Conservatives back in government in some form, but they were equally likely to want to see an overall majority (31%) and another Con-Lib Dem coalition (31%). Men were more likely to prefer a Conservative government than women. A quarter of Considerers would prefer to see a Labour government after the next election, and 13% a Labour-Lib Dem coalition. A third of those who had never voted Conservative wanted to see a Labour government, compared to 19% of those who had voted Conservative previously. Only a fifth of those who had never voted Conservative wanted to see a Conservative government, compared with 38% of those who had.

Voting intention...in 2015

79% of Conservative voters said they would probably vote for the party again in 2015; 11% said they didn't know, and the remainder were scattered among the other parties. Among first-timers, only 57% said they would probably vote Conservative again, and 21% didn't know. Conservative voters who in 2010 had been motivated mainly by negative views of Labour were less likely to vote Conservative again (69%) than those who had felt positive towards the Tories (89%).

Most of the Conservative voters in the groups expected to stick with the party at the next election, though some said they would want evidence that current policies were producing results. Several said they would need to see that things were heading in the right direction but would not necessarily need to be solved completely, since it would take a long time to clear up the mess the government inherited.

Considerers were evenly divided between the Conservatives (22%), Labour (21%) and the Liberal Democrats (23%). 10% said they would probably vote for other parties, and 23% didn't know. Only 14% of Considerers who had never voted Conservative said they would probably do so next time, compared to 28% of those who had voted for the party previously. Of the Considerers who had said they were more likely to think about voting Conservative next time as a result of the party's performance in office, only 59% said they would probably do so; 18% didn't know, and 16% said they would probably vote Lib Dem.

In the Considerers' groups, very few said they would probably vote Labour in 2015. Several were leaning towards the Conservatives because they supported the action they were taking on the deficit, but most said they would give the coalition at least another two years before they started to make up their minds.

Conservative voters said they would rather vote for a Conservative than a joint coalition candidate by 84% to 16%. Considerers, though, would prefer a coalition candidate to a Conservative by 61% to 39%. Qualitatively, though, there was strong resistance to the idea of joint candidates among both groups – the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats remained separate parties with different agendas and voters wanted to be able to choose from the full range of options.

In the groups, most Conservative voters expected the next election to produce either a Conservative majority (especially if the economy is growing and the coalition's policies are seen to be paying off) or another hung parliament. Very few expected to see Labour back in government in 2015. Considerers were as likely to expect a Conservative overall majority as a Labour victory – but as with their own voting decision, many thought it was much too early to make predictions.

Building the Conservative voting coalition

The following analysis is based on a 10,000-sample poll completed in early 2011. The purpose of the poll was not primarily to measure the level of support for each party, but the drivers of that support, particularly for the Conservatives. In the analysis that follows, therefore, the size of the overall vote share is secondary to the breakdown of the vote, and the factors most closely associated with strength of support for a particular party. Even if vote shares have changed in the interim, the principal drivers behind people's votes are unlikely to have done so significantly.

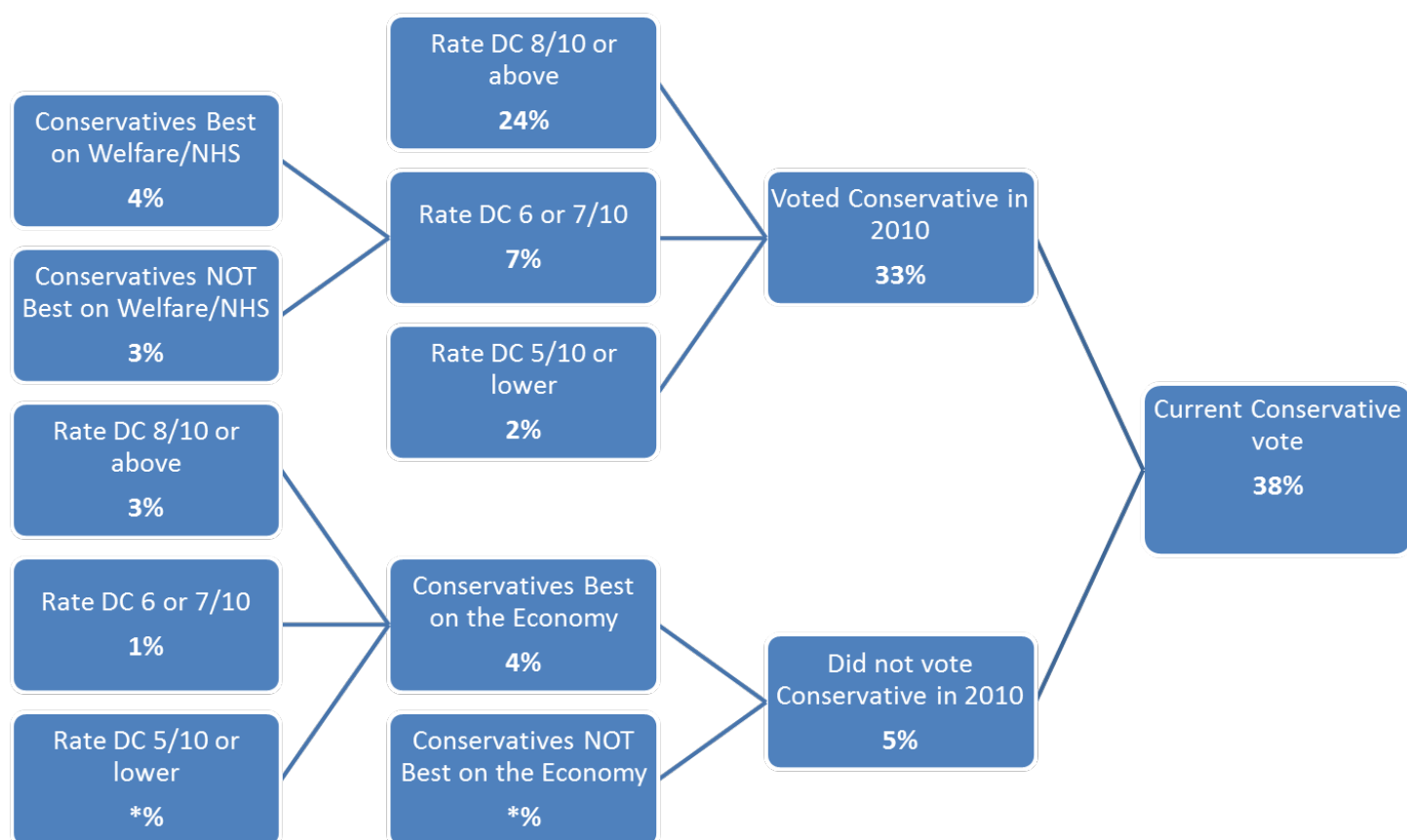
The poll asked respondents a host of questions on subjects that could have a bearing on their political views. These included their voting history, parents' voting history, class identification, newspaper readership, economic optimism, personal character traits, agreement with statements about social and political issues, perceptions of political parties, the best party on specific issues, ratings of party leaders, and comprehensive demographic information. The data was analysed to identify the factors most closely associated with support for each party.

More detailed analysis was conducted to break the population into segments, ordered according to their propensity to support the Conservative Party.

This has helped to illustrate:

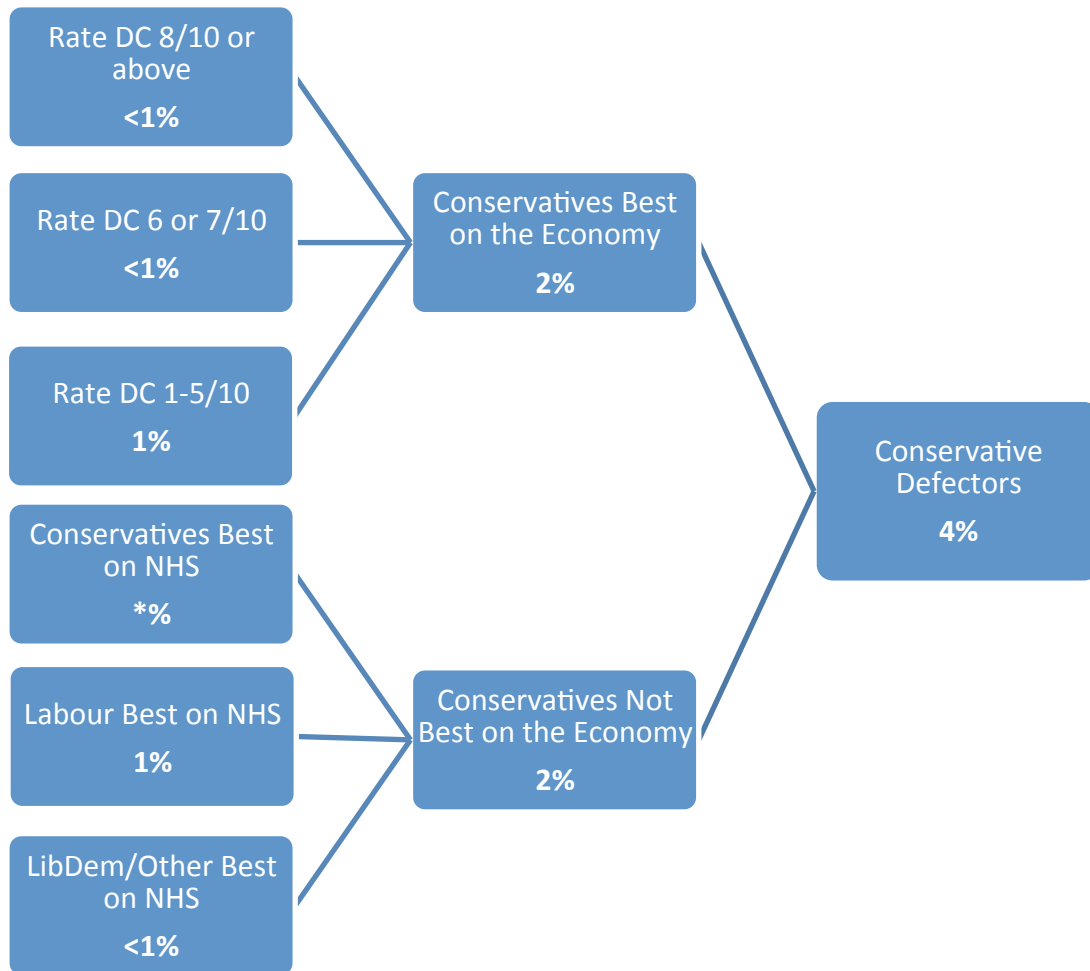
- The factors that discriminate between different groups of voters within the Conservative Party's current overall support.
- The factors that define different groups among the party's current supporters who also voted Conservative in 2010.
- The most important factors among those who did not vote Conservative in 2010, but say they would do so in an election tomorrow.
- The most important factors among those who voted Conservative in 2010 but say they would not do so in an election tomorrow, and which parties they are likely to support instead.
- The most important factors among different groups of voters among whom Conservative support is weak, but who need to be brought into the Conservative voting coalition.

Breakdown of the Conservative vote



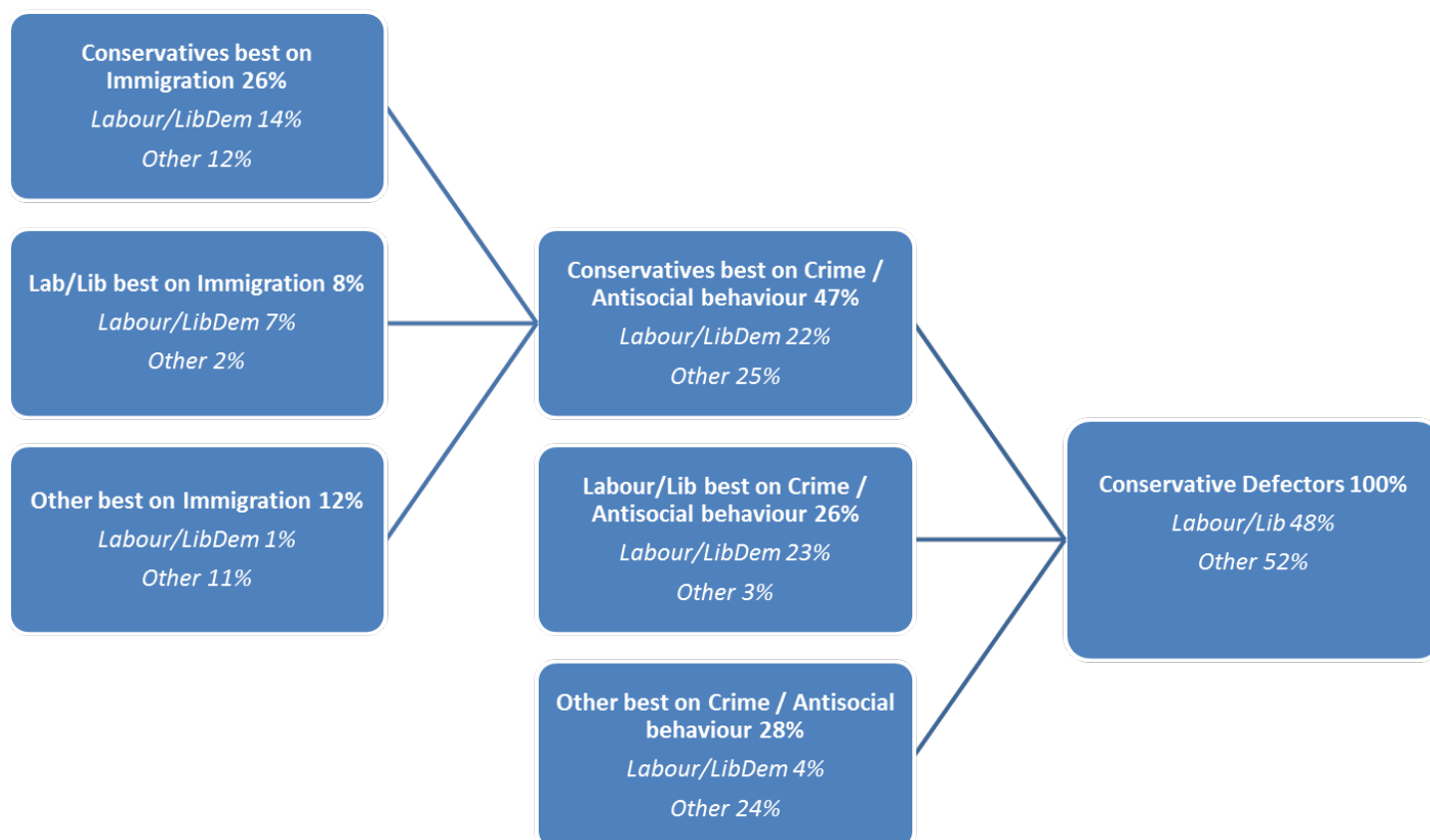
- Of the Conservatives' 38% vote share at the time the fieldwork was conducted, 33% (just under 9 out of 10 of those who said they would vote Conservative at the next election) had voted Tory in 2010. David Cameron was the most important unifying factor among 2010 Tories who would vote for the party again tomorrow. Nearly three quarters of this group rated his performance at 8 out of 10 or better. Conservative voters from 2010 who gave high marks to David Cameron accounted for nearly two thirds of all those who said they would vote Conservative next time.
- 5% of voters said they would vote Conservative in an election tomorrow even though they had not voted Conservative in 2010. (Our poll found 11% of 2010 Lib Dems and 3% of 2010 Labour voters saying they would now vote Conservative). By far the most important factor for this group was the belief that the Conservatives had the best approach to the economy. Most of this group also awarded high marks for David Cameron's performance as Prime Minister.

Why have defectors defected?



- Our poll found 88% of those who voted Conservative at the 2010 election saying they would do so again in an election tomorrow. 12% of the party’s 2010 voters had therefore defected, equivalent to 4% of voters in this poll.
- Two main factors were at work among those who voted Conservative in 2010 but would not do so in an election tomorrow. For around half, the most common factor was that they did not think the Conservatives had the best approach to the economy. The overwhelming majority of these also did not think the Conservatives had the best approach to the NHS. The other polling and qualitative evidence detailed above suggests that this group largely comprised first-time Conservative voters, who were more likely to be concerned about the cuts and more wary about trusting the Conservatives on public services.
- For the other half of Conservative defectors, the most important factor was that they did not give high marks for David Cameron’s performance as Prime Minister, even though they thought the Conservatives had the best approach to the economy. Some defectors, however, gave high marks to David Cameron and thought the Conservatives were best on the economy, and must therefore have been driven by a range of other factors, but the sample size of this subgroup is too small for meaningful analysis.

Where have defectors gone – and why?



- Overall, Conservative defectors divided roughly evenly between Labour or the Liberal Democrats, and other parties.
- The factors at work in defectors' decision not to vote Conservative (the economy, the NHS and views of David Cameron) were not the same as the factors that determined which party they said they would vote for instead. Here, the key discriminator was which party they thought had the best approach to crime and antisocial behaviour.
- Around half of defectors did not think the Conservatives had the best approach to crime. Of these, around half thought Labour or the Lib Dems were best on the issue – in which case they were overwhelmingly likely to vote for one of those parties. Those who thought another party was best on crime were far more likely to vote for others.
- Within the half of defectors who thought the Conservatives had the best approach to crime, the strongest discriminating factor was immigration. Those who did not think the Conservatives were best on immigration were nearly as likely to say Labour or the Lib Dems were best on the issue as they are to say this of another party.
- Around a quarter of defectors, equivalent to 1% of voters in this poll, thought the Conservatives had the best approach to both crime and immigration, and must therefore have been motivated by other factors. These voters divided quite evenly between Labour or the Liberal

Democrats, and other parties. This subgroup is too small for meaningful analysis, but the evidence on defectors' motives overall suggests the economy, cuts and the NHS may have been important factors.

Drivers of Labour support

- The strongest single indicator of whether a voter would vote Conservative tomorrow was whether they voted Conservative in 2010. This was not the case with Labour voters – for them, the most important discriminating factor was which party had the best approach to the economy. 84% of those who thought Labour were best on the economy said they would vote Labour tomorrow, compared to 7% of those who preferred the Conservatives' economic approach.
- How someone voted in 2010 was the next best predictor of Labour support. 63% of the few who said the Conservatives were best on the economy but voted Labour in 2010 said they would vote Labour again tomorrow; this rose to 81% of those who also thought Labour had the best approach to schools.
- Ed Miliband was a very much less important factor for Labour voters than David Cameron was for Conservative voters. Of those who thought Labour were best on the economy and voted Labour in 2010, but gave Ed Miliband very low marks (1 to 3 out of 10), 92% still say they would vote Labour tomorrow. 87% of this group would do so even if they also thought Labour was not "competent and capable" (suggesting a strong continuing tribal element within the Labour vote).
- Of those who thought Labour had the best approach to the economy but voted Liberal Democrat in 2010, 71% said they would vote Labour tomorrow. Over half this group still said they would do so even though they gave relatively high marks (4 to 10 out of 10) to Nick Clegg.
- Former Liberal Democrat voters made up one of Labour's most solid segments of support. These voters thought Labour had the best approach to the economy, gave very low marks to Nick Clegg (1 to 3 out of 10), and agreed that Labour stands for fairness. Nine out of 10 voters in this group said they would vote Labour tomorrow.

Drivers of Liberal Democrat support

- As with the Conservatives, the best predictor of Liberal Democrat support was a vote for the party in 2010 – though only 45% of those who voted Lib Dem at the last election said they would do so again tomorrow.
- This rose to 75% if they also gave 8 out of 10 to Nick Clegg (the next most important factor) and 84% if they gave him 9 or 10 out of 10. However, support fell to 38% among 2010 Lib Dem voters who marked him at 4 or 5, 20% of those who gave him 3, and 8% of those who gave him 1 or 2 out of 10.
- After views of Nick Clegg, the best discriminating factors between Lib Dem support or non-support were whether or not voters thought the party had the best approach to welfare, schools and the NHS.