THEY THINK IT'S ALL OVER

Can the Tories turn it round?

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC
November 2022

Lord Ashcroft Polls

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INTRODUCTION

Ask a group of former Tory voters what they felt when they heard Rishi Sunak was to become PM and the chances are someone will say "relief". There are plenty of doubts – about his ability to empathise with voters given his family's wealth, his role in Boris Johnson's downfall, and some of the covid bailouts he unveiled as chancellor – but many welcome the return of some sanity to politics and sense to the public finances.

But in footballing terms, the Conservatives find themselves three goals down with the clock ticking. The scoreline is made up entirely of own goals (though Boris, the former captain, still claims one of them never crossed the line). A late substitution seems to have put the Tories back in the game and gives a glimmer of hope for extra time.

How likely is that, really? The fact that basic competence now feels like statesmanship of the highest order is surely a bad sign. My latest research shows how voters are seeing things.

Head-to-head, Sunak and Keir Starmer are closely matched. There is little to choose between them when we ask how people compare their judgment, strength as a leader or ability to get things done – though Starmer leads comfortably on honesty, integrity and caring about "people like me".

But the Conservative brand is in as bad a state as I have seen in all my years of polling. Fewer than one in ten say the party is competent, shares their values or is on their side. Labour are more trusted on nearly all policy issues – not just the NHS and the cost of living, but on traditionally Tory territory like immigration and crime. Voters say the Sunak government feels like a rehash of its predecessors rather than a fresh new administration.

Few are optimistic that the latest new government will succeed in any of its immediate challenges such as bringing financial stability, controlling inflation or making a success of Brexit – let alone dealing with small-boat migrant Channel crossings or cutting NHS waiting lists. Moreover, many reject the claim that world events are responsible for Britain's predicament: voters are more likely to blame the government than the after-effects of covid or the war in Ukraine.

No two elections are the same, but the portents from recent contests are not good for the Conservatives. First, Sunak's Tories face Theresa May's 2017 problem, when she struggled to unite austerity-backing Cameron voters (many of whom voted remain in the referendum) with 2016 Brexiteers (many of whom disliked austerity). In the absence of the twin unifiers of the last election – the drive to "get Brexit done" under Boris and horror at the prospect of Jeremy Corbyn in No. 10 – the 2019 coalition has collapsed. Anti-austerity leavers have deserted the party in droves, while more liberal Tory remainers had already gone. My research shows that views about austerity are once again the best predictor of whether someone will back Labour or the Conservatives.

Next, Sunak has Gordon Brown's 2010 problem. Brown argued furiously that Britain's credit crunch and subsequent recession were the result of a global financial crisis, not his own mismanagement. The voters took a different view – or in any case decided that whoever had caused the problem, they wanted someone else to get them out of it.

Worst of all, it looks increasingly like Sunak is up against John Major's 1997 problem – a governing party that looked so exhausted, tainted and ill-disciplined that even a strongly recovering economy could not stave off defeat at the hands of a newly detoxified Labour opposition. Indeed, the final disservice of the Truss experiment was not just to wreck what remained of the Tory reputation for financial competence but to show just how constrained any government is when it comes to economic policy, reducing the risk of putting Labour in charge.

My poll found one third of 2019 Tories saying they would probably vote for the party again next time, and a quarter saying they were off – either for the next election or for good. Another third said they might give the party another go, but it would really have to sort itself out first. These people want to give Sunak the benefit of the doubt and see what happens. Many of them grimly accept the necessity of Jeremy Hunt's tax rises. They don't expect every problem to be fixed, but they want things moving in the right direction. Crucially, they want an end to scandals and distractions.

And it's possible to see how, if everything goes right, enough people might be convinced by policy successes – inflation down, borrowing under control, progress on migration and NHS waiting times – to give the Tories another chance.

But policy and competence may no longer be enough for people. To extend our World Cup analogy, they think it's all over. Most expect Labour to win the next election, with or without an overall majority. Only one in ten former Conservatives expect an outright Tory victory. On paper, Sunak and the party could turn things around – and maybe they will yet. But the vibe is against them. Placating the markets is one thing. Overcoming the mood is another.

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A NEW GOVERNMENT?

Many of our focus group participants said their initial reaction to Rishi Sunak becoming prime minister was relief. They felt he would offer calmer and more competent leadership, particularly on the public finances, and would be able to bring a degree of stability after recent political turbulence.

> 66 I was quite relieved. It feels like someone more competent at the wheel."

> 66 When times are tough you need someone with authority. In terms of finances, Rishi has got more clout."

However, many wondered how much backing Sunak had within the Conservative Party, noting that he had lost the leadership election to Liz Truss and that there was still plenty of evidence of division.

> 66 I don't think he's got control of the party. One has resigned already, and he took on someone who had resigned beforehand, and his mate's in the jungle."

> 66 Everything he said would go wrong with Truss actually happened, but no-one listened to him. It doesn't really matter that he's the best person for the job – the party is so broken that he's not really able to do it."

> 66 It's not very reassuring that when he went for it before he wasn't chosen by his own party, they didn't believe in him. And now he's got the position by default."

> 66 They don't forgive him for sticking the knife in Boris."

All participants thought Sunak was an improvement on his immediate predecessor (though a few would have liked Boris Johnson to have remained in place). However, many thought the Conservative Party as a whole was divided and worn out after 12 years in government.

> " I don't think they know what they're doing. It's chaotic, it's become a joke."

> " I feel quite positive about him, but in general I'm becoming disillusioned and a bit numb with politics."

> " It's the MPs causing the problems. They won't let anyone get on with their jobs. They just keep finding obstacles all the way. They're out for their own ends."

> " I feel like it doesn't really matter who's in charge, the whole party is broken."

Accordingly, few felt that the Sunak administration felt like a new government. The reappearance in the cabinet of several former ministers reinforced the view that the government was a "rehash" rather than a new beginning.

> " I'm slightly surprised by some of the cabinet choices, like Suella – they got rid of her before. Same with Dominic Raab. I suppose it's a narrow field though."

> " It would have been better to have a clear-out. He could have had a fresher start pulling people from the back benches, people who don't have the scars of lockdown parties and bullying claims."

> " It's the same mess but with a new general in front"

STATE OF THE NATION

Causes

In our poll we asked people to rank four possible causes of the problems currently facing Britain: the after-effects of covid, Brexit, the war in Ukraine, the government in Britain, or something else.

Voters overall were most likely to rank the government in Britain as the main cause (37%), with equal numbers most likely to blame covid and Brexit (both 20%). The Ukraine war was named as the top cause by 15%.

However, there were marked differences by party support. For 2019 Conservatives, the after-effects of covid was most to blame, followed by the Ukraine war; only 24% said the government was the main culprit, and just 9% named Brexit as the main cause. Meanwhile more than half (52%) of 2019 Labour voters blamed the government first, while 30% ranked Brexit as the main cause of Britain's problems; only 8% put covid at the top of the list and 6% most blamed the war in Ukraine.

Below are some things that people have said are to blame for the challenges facing Britain today. Please can you rank then from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning it is most to blame for these challenges , and 5 meaning its the least to blame.
[NB 2019 General Election vote, ordered by % ranking each issue as the most to blame]

All voters

The government in Britain	37%
Brexit	20%
The after-effects of Covid	20%
The war in Ukraine	15%
Something else	3%

Conservative voters

The after-effects of Covid	34%
The war in Ukraine	25%
The government in Britain	24%
Brexit	9%
Something else	4%

Labour voters

The government in Britain	52%
Brexit	30%
The after-effects of Covid	8%
The war in Ukraine	6%
Something else	1%

Liberal Democrats voters

Brexit	39%
The government in Britain	35%
The war in Ukraine	14%
The after-effects of Covid	9%
Something else	1%

Priorities – and who can deal with them

Which of the following do you think are the most important issues facing the country? Please select three from the list below. And which do you think would do a better job in each of these areas – a Conservative-led government with Rishi Sunak as Prime Minister, or a Labour-led government with Keir Starmer as Prime Minister
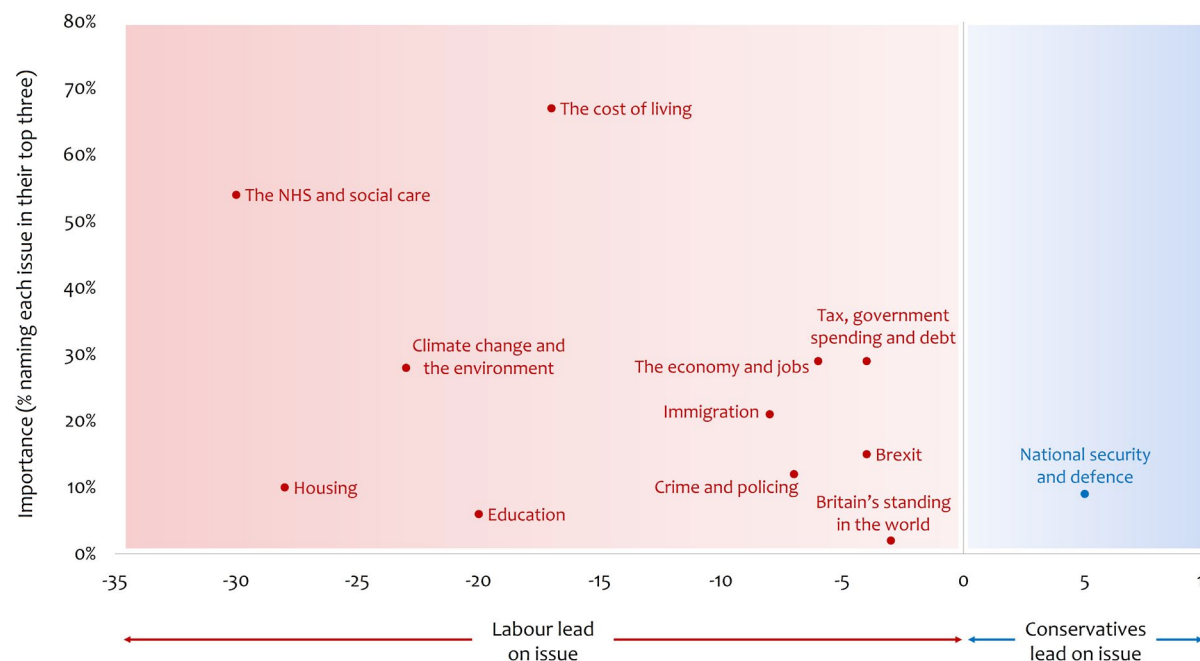
We offered our poll respondents a list of 12 issues and asked which three they thought were the most important facing the country. The cost of living easily topped the list, with 67% naming it among their top three. The NHS and social care was second, named by 54%, followed by the economy and jobs (29%), tax, government spending and debt (also 29%), climate change and the environment (28%) and immigration (21%).

2019 Conservatives had a similar list, except that immigration was in third place (39%) and with 20% naming crime and policing; climate change and the environment did not make the top six.
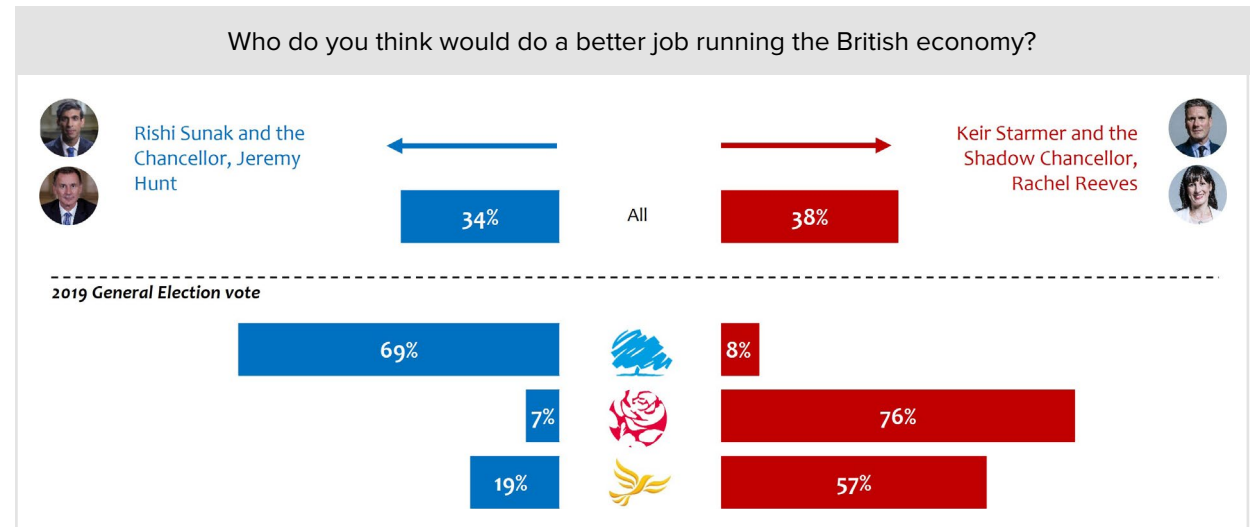
Among Labour joiners – those leaning towards voting Labour at the next general election who did not do so in 2019 – the cost of living was named by 71%, followed by the NHS and social care (58%), climate change and the environment (35%), the economy and jobs (27%), tax, spending and debt (24%) and Brexit (21%).

We also asked who people thought would do a better job in each area – a Conservative government with Sunak as PM or a Labour government led by Keir Starmer. On the top six most important issues for the country as a whole, Labour led by between 4 points (tax, government spending and debt) and 30 points (the NHS and social care). Starmer and Labour led by 17 points on the cost of living, 8 points on immigration and 7 points on crime and policing. The Conservatives led on one issue among voters as a whole: national security and defence (by 5 points).

Trust on the economy

Asked who would do a better job running the British economy, 38% named Keir Starmer and Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves, while just over one in three (34%) named Rishi Sunak and Chancellor Jeremy Hunt.

Nearly a quarter (23%) of 2019 Conservatives said they didn't know who would do a better job, while a further 8% chose the Labour team. Just over three quarters (76%) of 2019 Labour voters chose Starmer and Reeves. Of those currently leaning towards voting Labour at the next election, 16% said they didn't know which team would do the better job.

Who do you think would do a better job running the British economy?

Rishi Sunak and the Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt

Keir Starmer and the Shadow Chancellor, Rachel Reeves

	All	
34%		38%

2019 General Election vote

|		
69%	(Conservative)	8%
7%	(Labour)	76%
19%	(Liberal Democrat)	57%

Will the new government succeed?

We asked our poll respondents how successful they thought Rishi Sunak and the government would be in dealing with some of the immediate challenges they faced. By a 6-point margin (44% to 38%), voters thought they would have some success in fixing the mistakes of the Liz Truss government.

However, more thought Sunak and the government would be unsuccessful than successful when it came to brining financial stability, improving the Conservative party's reputation, making politics calmer, controlling inflation and the cost of living, making a success of Brexit and – especially – dealing with small-boat migrant Channel crossings (by 54 points) and cutting NHS waiting lists (by 56 points).

Those who voted Conservative in 2019 were optimistic that the Sunak government would be successful in fixing the Truss mistakes and bringing financial stability, and more likely than not to think it would succeed in controlling inflation, making a success of Brexit, calming politics down and improving the Tories' reputation (though only just over half thought these things were likely). However, 2019 Conservatives expected the government to fail in dealing with small-boat migrant Channel crossings (by a 40-point margin) and cutting NHS waiting lists (by 56 points). Only 42% of 2016 Leave voters said they expected the government to make a success of Brexit.

How successful do you think Rishi Sunak and the government will be in dealing with each of the following issues?
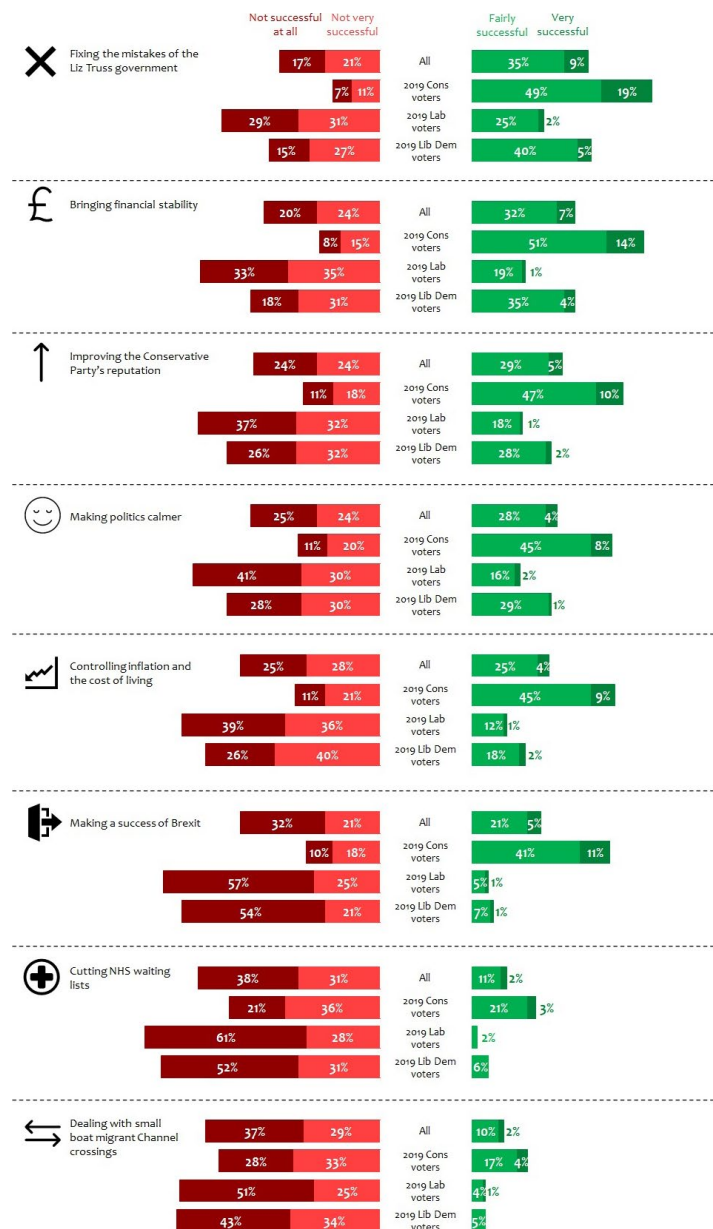
Our focus groups of 2019 Conservative voters agreed that dealing with the cost of living was the most important task facing the government, which itself meant proper management of the public finances. Energy supplies, illegal immigration, the NHS and other public services were also mentioned. However, as shown in the poll, few expected much progress on any of these fronts in the next few months – the most optimistic hoped for stabilisation. Most expected a degree of austerity, with some fearing significant cuts.

> 66 I don't think they know what to do. They don't give the public confidence that they have a plan."

> 66 I think it's just damage limitation now in a way."

> 66 I think caretaking is going to be the way forward for the next few months. They're going to have to calm things down before they try and impose major changes."

> 66 They're softly breaking us into 'we've got to pay the money back' – cutbacks here, cutbacks there."

Our participants were not surprised by the contents of Jeremy Hunt's Budget. Many accepted higher taxes and tighter spending control as inevitable and largely necessary after the huge spending during covid, whether they welcomed the prospect or not.

> 66 At least they're being honest that it will be painful."

> 66 The middle people will suffer. It's always middle-class taxpayers who suffer the most."

> 66 People have to accept hard truths. We can't keep giving people money. It's got to come back at some point."

> 66 They're calling it the new era of austerity. The second one of this Conservative government."

> 66 I don't mind as long as it works. If by the next election there's a big dent in the debt, it's working."

PARTIES AND LEADERS

We asked our poll respondents to say how positive they felt about various parties and leaders on a scale from -5 to +5. The highest rated Conservative among voters as a whole was Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, who achieved a neutral score along with Keir Starmer, Rachel Reeves and the Green Party.

Among 2019 Tory voters Wallace tied with Rishi Sunak and Boris Johnson, both of whom scored higher than the Conservative Party has a whole. Among Labour voters Keir Starmer, Angela Rayner and Rachel Reeves, their highest rated politicians, both scored lower than the Labour Party itself.

How positively or negatively do you feel about each of the following, where -5 means you feel very negative and +5 means you feel very positive?
[NB Mean scores]
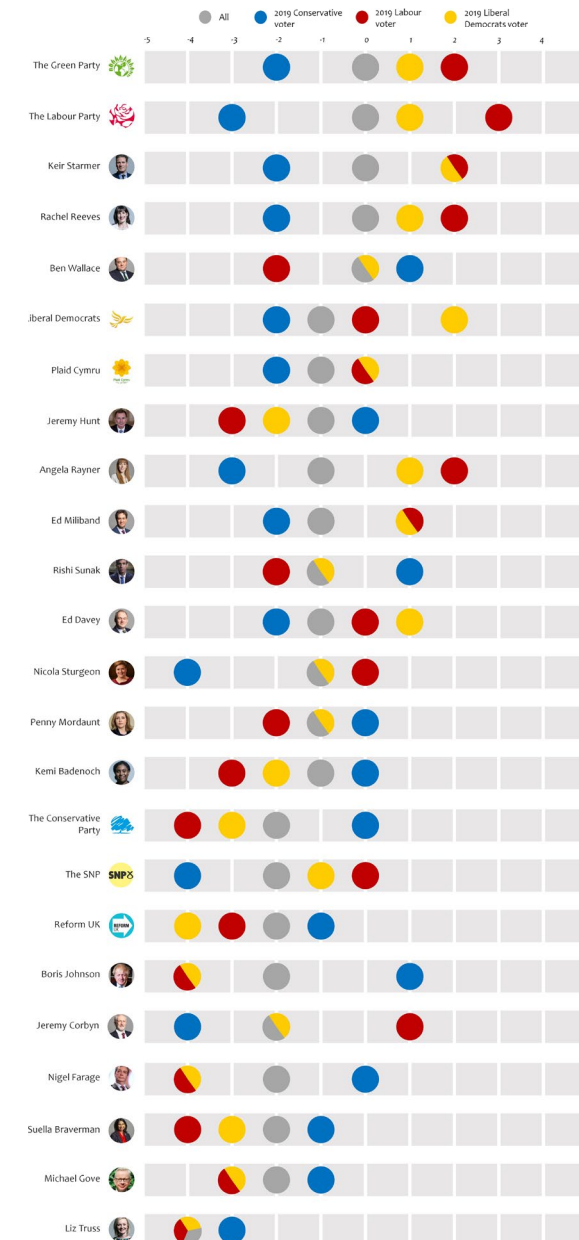
Party attributes

Here are some things people have said about the political parties.
Please tick all the descriptions you think apply to each of the following parties.

● Conservative   ● Labour

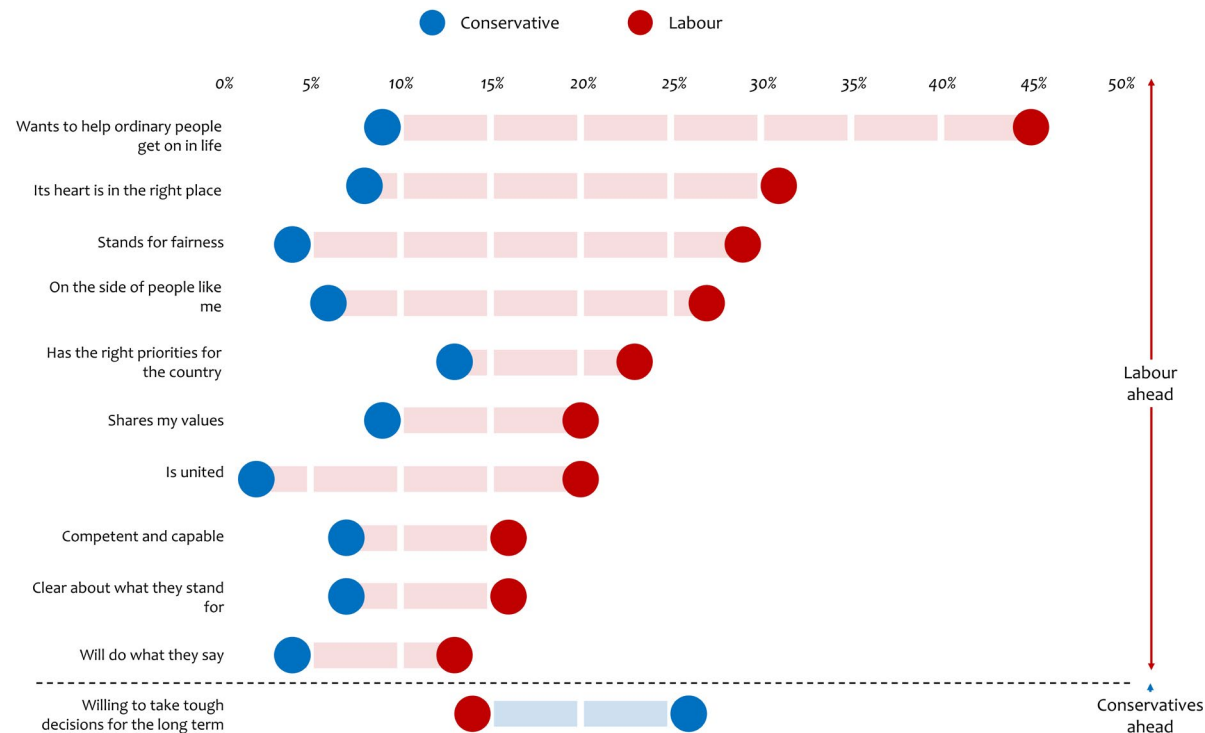| | 0% | 5% | 10% | 15% | 20% | 25% | 30% | 35% | 40% | 45% | 50% |

Wants to help ordinary people get on in life
Its heart is in the right place
Stands for fairness
On the side of people like me
Has the right priorities for the country
Shares my values
Is united
Competent and capable
Clear about what they stand for
Will do what they say
Willing to take tough decisions for the long term

Labour ahead

Conservatives ahead

Just over a quarter of voters (26%) said they thought the Conservative party was willing to take tough decisions for the long term, compared to 14% who thought this was true of Labour.

However, Labour were thought more likely than the Tories to possess every other positive attribute we asked about, with leads of between 9 points (competent and capable, will do what they say, clear about what they stand for) and 36 points (wants to help ordinary people get on in life). Even so, relatively few voters thought these things were true of Labour either: for example, 23% said they thought Labour had the right priorities for the country, and 13% thought they would do what they say.

Apart from being willing to take tough decisions for the long term, only a minority of 2019 Conservative voters thought any of the positive attributes currently applied to the party, and 38% said none of them did. Only 2% of voters – including only 2% of 2019 Tories and those currently leaning towards voting Tory – said they thought the Conservative party was united.
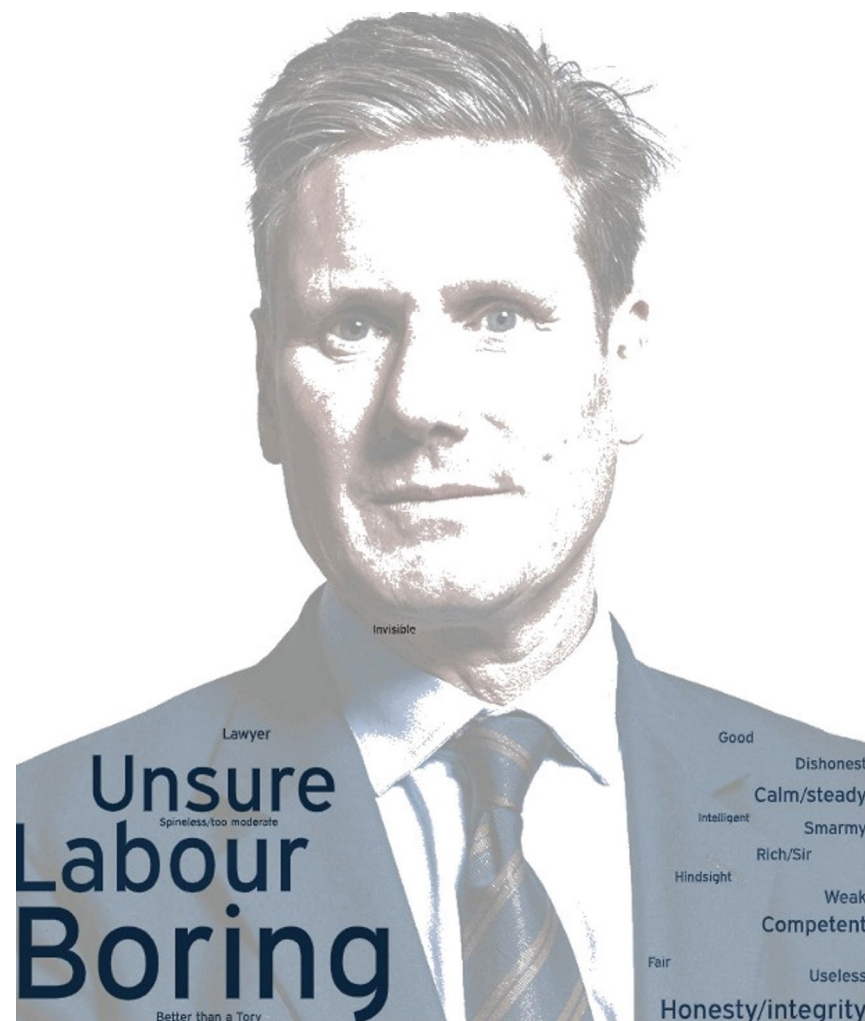
The leaders in a word

We asked our 5,000 poll participants to write the first word or phrase that came to mind when they thought of the Conservative and Labour party leaders. For Rishi Sunak, by the most chosen word was "rich"; for Keir Starmer it was "boring". Positive choices for Sunak included "competent", "financial experience", "intelligent" and "calm"; for Starmer they included "calm", "competent" and "honesty" or "integrity". More negative choices included "out of touch", "backstabber" and "corrupt" for Sunak and "weak" and "smarmy" for Starmer.

What is the first word or phrase that comes to mind when you think of **Rishi Sunak**?

Backstabber/snake
Conservative
Unsure
Out of touch
Competent
Rich
Useless
Calm
Selfish
Good
Foreigner
Stuck up
Strong
Liar
Corrupt
Best of a bad bunch
Intelligent
Hope
Smooth
Prime Minister
Financial experience

What is the first word or phrase that comes to mind when you think of **Keir Starmer**?

Invisible
Lawyer
Unsure
Labour
Boring
Spineless/too moderate
Better than a Tory
Good
Dishonest
Calm/steady
Intelligent
Smarmy
Rich/Sir
Hindsight
Weak
Competent
Fair
Useless
Honesty/integrity

This map shows how views of Sunak and Starmer are distributed across the political spectrum. Those describing Sunak as competent or intelligent or mentioning his financial experience are most likely to be found among the more prosperous and often Conservative-leaning top-right quadrant; the strongly Brexit-backing bottom right is where we are most likely to find people mentioning his role in deposing Boris Johnson. This corner is where we also see the most critical views of Starmer. The most positive views of Starmer are found in more prosperous but left-leaning Remain territory in the top-left quadrant; in more diverse but less secure territory he is more likely to be seen simply as the less bad alternative to the Conservatives.

- **2019 vote** (green)
- **Words most associated with Rishi Sunak** (blue)
- **Words most associated with Keir Starmer** (red)

SECURITY – defined by e.g. health, wealth and wellbeing

DIVERSITY – defined by e.g. ethnicity, culture, and population density

Competent
Strong
Calm
Intelligent
Financial experience
Lib Dem
Lawyer
Smooth
Good
Boring
Unsure
Good
Calm / steady
Best of a bad bunch
Conservative
Competent
Intelligent
Green
Hope
Weak
Honesty / integrity
Prime Minister
Unsure
Rich / Sir
Fair
Labour
Smarmy
Hindsight
Labour
Conservative
Rich
Spineless / too moderate
SNP
Out of touch
Invisible
Useless
Corrupt
Better than a Tory
Stuck up
Dishonest
Backstabber / snake
Selfish
Useless
Brexit Party
Liar
Foreigner

In line with the poll, and with our research during the leadership campaign, Sunak's wealth was the first thing our focus groups mentioned when asked what they knew about him. This was usually combined with memories of his wife's non-dom status, often described as "dodging tax". The contention that Sunak is "richer than the King" (mentioned in a number of separate groups) led some to think Sunak would be more out of touch than most politicians.

> ❝ None of them understand what it's like to struggle. But there's wealth, and there's mega-wealth."

> ❝ His wife was giving reporters tea outside their house in £50 mugs from Harrod's. He's got a weekend home with a spa in it."

> ❝ How can he be PM when his wife did what she did? She's a multibillionaire and didn't pay tax in this country. And she had all these companies and closed them down after furloughing people. It's corrupt."

> ❝ There's a clip of him many years ago saying he's never had a working-class friend."

> ❝ Does he have us in mind? He's not worrying about how to pay for Christmas."

This view was far from universal – many said they did not mind how rich he was as long as he did a good job. However, these people often said it was important for him to be authentic and not claim implausibly to be a "man of the people".

> ❝ 'Success' is the word I'd use rather than wealth. If you're successful it's because you're good at what you do. That gives me a bit of confidence."

> ❝ He went to a community centre or something wearing £400 shoes. It's going to be difficult to say 'I know what you're going through'."

> ❝ There was the blunder with the small car and the contactless card and McDonald's. I don't begrudge him his millions but don't try and be one of the people."

> ❝ If he starts saying 'I understand how you're feeling' I'll start to lose respect quite quickly."

Views of Sunak's time as Chancellor were very mixed. Some remained positive about his actions during covid, and this made them more confident about his premiership. However, many said they had changed their mind in the light of news about the scale of waste and fraud.

> ❝ On covid I couldn't fault him. I wouldn't have a job if it wasn't for all that. It's got us into a lot of debt, but it had to be done."

> ❝ It wasn't hard to claim. You could get a £10,000 grant for saying you had your own business. They didn't do checks or anything."

> ❝ You hear all this stuff about backhanders, and the fraud was incredible. Why hasn't anyone gone to jail?"

> ❝ He was like a knight in shining armour during covid. But his true colours have come to light in the last year."

> ❝ In retrospect, was it accountable and going to the right places? Probably not. But at that point we were all panicking."

More generally, participants often said they found Sunak likeable, if a bit dull – though some said this was not necessarily a bad thing in the current circumstances. Some had not liked his role in Boris Johnson's downfall, or worried about his political outlook.

> ❝ I think he's likeable, relatable, a family man."

> ❝ Cameron was the family man, Boris was the showman, Rishi is the money man."

> ❝ He's a bit of a wet lettuce. He got us through covid and helped businesses, but he doesn't seem to fit this job."

> ❝ Having a neutral personality is probably what we need at the moment to help steady the ship."

> ❝ If he was an Indian with a big character we probably wouldn't trust him. But because he's a boring Indian we don't focus on it."

> ❝ I find him a bit distant. Boris was more in touch with reality."

> ❝ I didn't like the way Rishi behaved around Boris, stabbing him in the back. I don't think he's very trustworthy."

> ❝ He's too much of a globalist. We've got to maintain our national identity and not a global agenda."

Some of our participants saw Keir Starmer as more down-to-earth than Sunak, and perhaps better able to relate to ordinary people. Several also felt he was more trustworthy, even if that was a relative term where politicians are concerned.

> " He's got a bit of a different background. A bit more in tune with the people than Rishi. I feel like he would have people's interests more at heart."

> " I think confidence is growing. Maybe that's more down to the Tories giving him that rather than him getting it, but he's got it and he's using it."

> " He seems more straight up. There's no scandal around him as there was with Jeremy Corbyn or Boris."

> " With currygate he said, 'if I broke the law, I will resign'. So in that sense he could be trusted a little bit."

Not everyone was impressed, however. Several said Starmer constantly criticised the government without offering any concrete alternatives (though a few mentioned windfall taxes or rail nationalisation; only one mentioned the proposed GB Energy company). Others said they found him generally uninspiring.

> " He's very analytical. It would be good if we had another side to it. It's a bit dull."

> " He's never been able to say, 'Labour would be better because we'll do this instead'."

> " I think he's a really genuine guy, he's done really well as a QC, but I don't feel confident in him running the country."

> " When Liz Truss was there, I looked at Keir Starmer and thought 'he's not so bad'. But he's still a bit wet and never has anything of substance to say."

> " He's another privileged middle-aged man in a privileged position. And if he was in power we would be in exactly the same boat. Are rents going to come down? Heating bills?"

> " After the referendum he said, 'you chose wrong'. That still rankles."

Although our participants universally regarded Starmer as an improvement on Corbyn and many felt the party was moving towards the centre, many of these 2019 Conservatives were still worried about trusting Labour on the economy.

> " They're borrowers aren't they. We'd get something like Liz Truss again."

> " Their desire to help the poor means they will potentially push us further into debt. Mind you, the Tories are doing the same, it's just that the poor aren't getting any help."

> " They left a letter saying there was no money in the kitty."

> " It's not the time for Labour. I'd vote for them in times of plenty but this isn't that."

In constituencies where the Liberal Democrats were the main competitors to the Conservatives, participants often said they thought they did a good job locally but were less sure about the party's value in national politics. Some were worried that electing a Lib Dem MP would make a Labour government more likely.

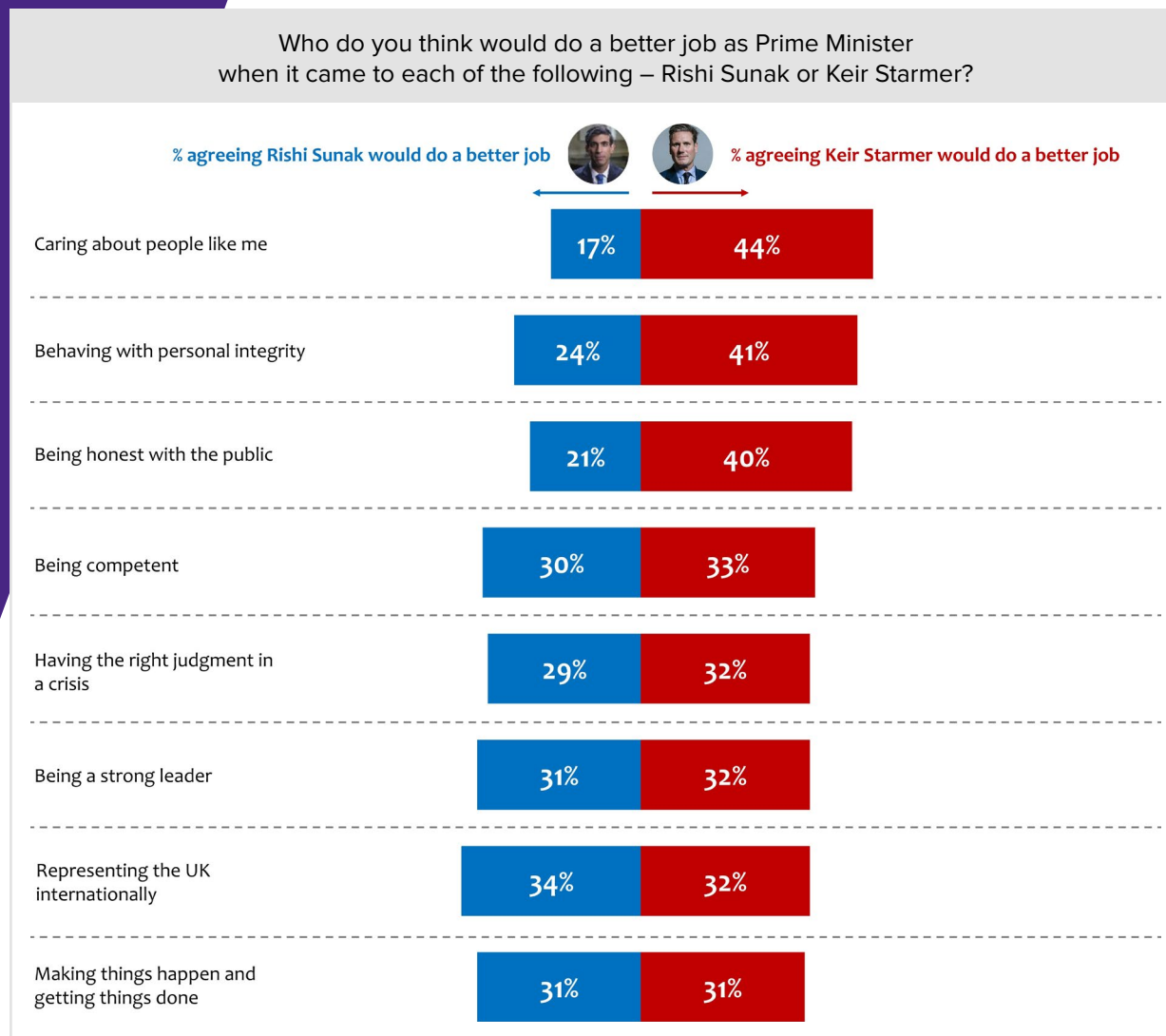> " At a local level they're good. The council leader is getting on with local things, but I don't think it would translate to the whole country."

> " The coalition between Cameron and Clegg worked quite well."

> " It would put me off voting Lib Dem if I thought Labour would get in."

> " They're more of an eco-community-green-type feel. We'd all be eating dust."
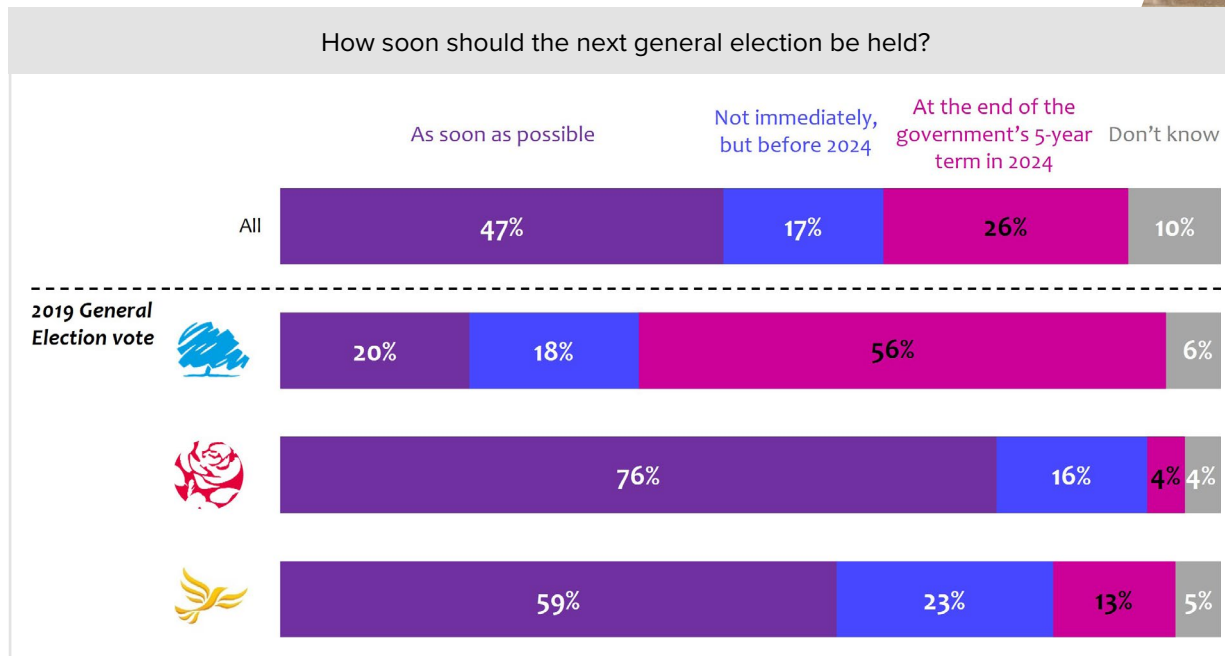
Prime Ministerial attributes

When we asked in our poll who would perform better in various aspects of the job of PM, Sunak had a 2-point lead on representing the UK internationally, and he and Starmer were tied on making things happen and getting things done. Starmer scored marginal leads on being a strong leader, being competent and having the right judgment in a crisis. The Labour leader led by much bigger margins when it came to behaving with personal integrity (17 points), being honest with the public (19 points), and "caring about people like me" (27 points).

Between 34% and 39% of respondents said they didn't know which of them would do better in each case.

Who do you think would do a better job as Prime Minister when it came to each of the following – Rishi Sunak or Keir Starmer?

% agreeing Rishi Sunak would do a better job   **% agreeing Keir Starmer would do a better job**

	Sunak	Starmer
Caring about people like me	17%	44%
Behaving with personal integrity	24%	41%
Being honest with the public	21%	40%
Being competent	30%	33%
Having the right judgment in a crisis	29%	32%
Being a strong leader	31%	32%
Representing the UK internationally	34%	32%
Making things happen and getting things done	31%	31%

THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION

How soon should the next general election be held?

	As soon as possible	Not immediately, but before 2024	At the end of the government's 5-year term in 2024	Don't know
All	47%	17%	26%	10%

2019 General Election vote

	As soon as possible	Not immediately, but before 2024	At the end of the government's 5-year term in 2024	Don't know
(Conservative)	20%	18%	56%	6%
(Labour)	76%	16%	4%	4%
(Liberal Democrat)	59%	23%	13%	5%

Timing

Nearly half (47%) of respondents in our poll – including 76% of 2019 Labour voters but only 20% of 2019 Conservatives – said they would like the next general election to be held as soon as possible.

Only just over half (56%) of 2019 Conservatives said the election should wait until the end of the government's 5-year term in 2024. Almost as many wanted it to be held before 2024 but not immediately (18%), or as soon as possible (20%).

Likelihood to vote for each party

We asked in our poll how likely people thought it was on a 100-point scale that they would vote for each party at the next general election. For voters as a whole, the mean likelihood of voting Labour was 37/100, while the mean likelihood of voting Conservative was 24/100.

Those leaning towards Labour and the Conservatives were equally determined to vote for their respective parties (both 88/100). However, while 2019 Conservatives' average likelihood of voting Tory again was 54/100, Labour voters' average likelihood of voting Labour again was 73/100.
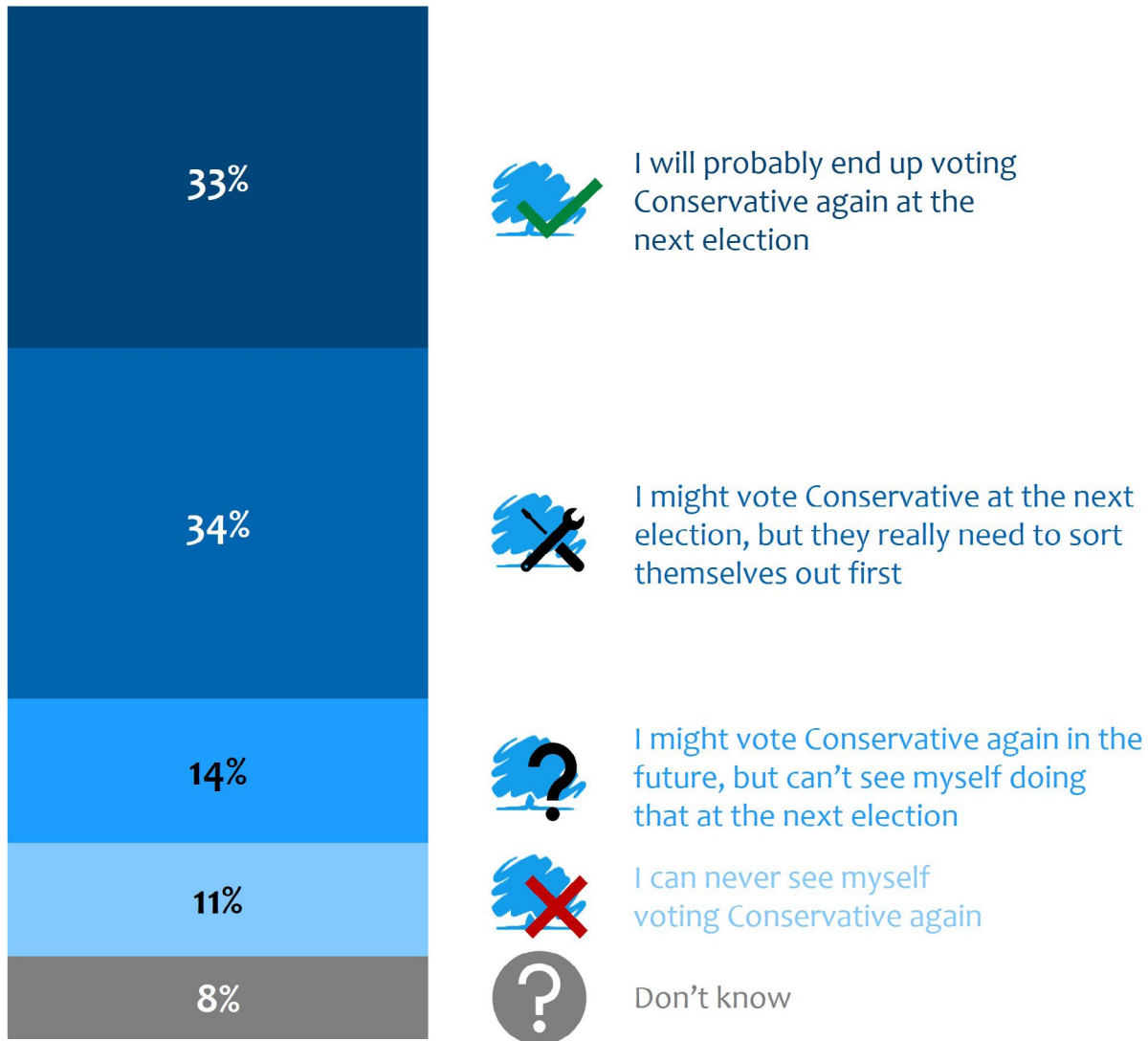
One in four 2019 Conservatives put their chances of voting for the party again at the next election at more than 90/100, compared to 40% of 2019 Labour voters who said the same of their likelihood of voting Labour.

Ten per cent of 2019 Conservative voters put their chance of voting Labour next time at more than 50/100.

As things stand today, how likely would you say it is that you will end up voting for each of the following parties at the next election – where 0 means "there is no chance I will vote for that party", and 100 means "I will definitely vote for that party".
[NB Mean scores]
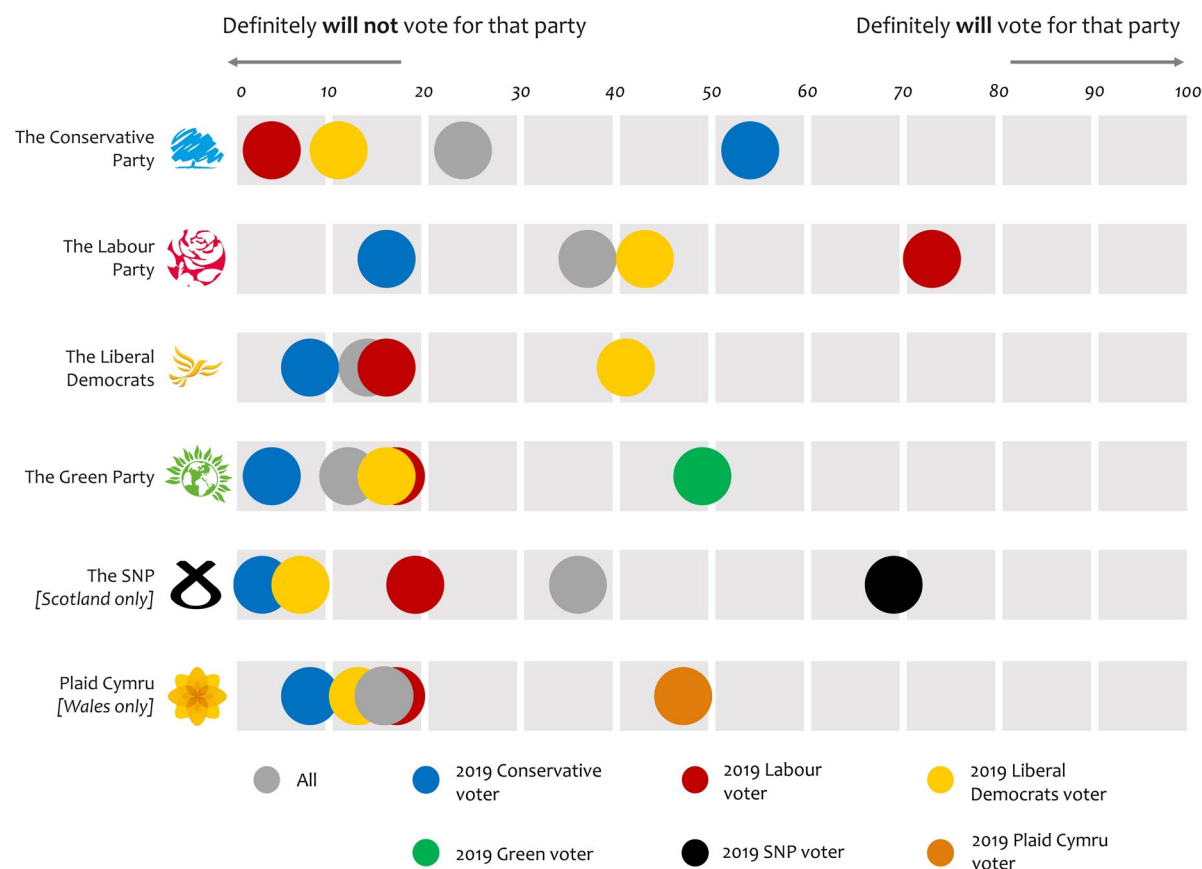
Which of the following best describes you?
[NB those who voted Conservative at the 2019 General Election]

33%	✔ I will probably end up voting Conservative again at the next election
34%	🔧 I might vote Conservative at the next election, but they really need to sort themselves out first
14%	❓ I might vote Conservative again in the future, but can't see myself doing that at the next election
11%	✖ I can never see myself voting Conservative again
8%	❓ Don't know

What will 2019 Tories do?

One in three 2019 Conservative voters (33%) said they would probably end up voting Conservative again at the next general election. Very slightly more (34%) said they might do so "but they really need to sort themselves out first".

A quarter of 2019 Tories said either that they might vote for the party in the future, but they could not see themselves doing so at the next election (14%) or that they could never see themselves voting Conservative again (11%).

2019 Conservatives who voted Remain in the EU referendum were more likely to say they would probably vote Tory again next time (37%) than those who had voted Leave (32%).

In our focus groups, some 2019 Conservatives said they would definitely vote Labour if the election were tomorrow. This was usually not because of Sunak or any particular policy, but a general erosion of confidence in the party over months or years. Starmer, meanwhile, had done enough to reduce the risks of a Labour government in their eyes.

> " If I had to pick tomorrow, I'd think 'how much worse could it be?'"

> " We're just so far deep in it all, and Labour haven't had the controversy with people being sacked for bullying and all that. There's just no trust in the Conservatives anymore. So I'd go with Labour and a fresh start."

> " The Conservatives have been in charge of the economy for 12 years and it's on its arse, isn't it?"

Those who were prepared to give the Sunak government time to prove themselves said they would not necessarily expect to see all problems resolved by the next election. However, they would expect to see a clear direction of travel, with inflation, borrowing and interest rates under control, progress on other issues, and an end to scandals and other distractions.

> " They haven't got to fix everything, but they have to show intent. And they need to be squeaky clean. If anyone steps out of line, they've got to go."

> " If MPs are still rioting in the ranks and they're still not united, I'd say OK guys, enough is enough."

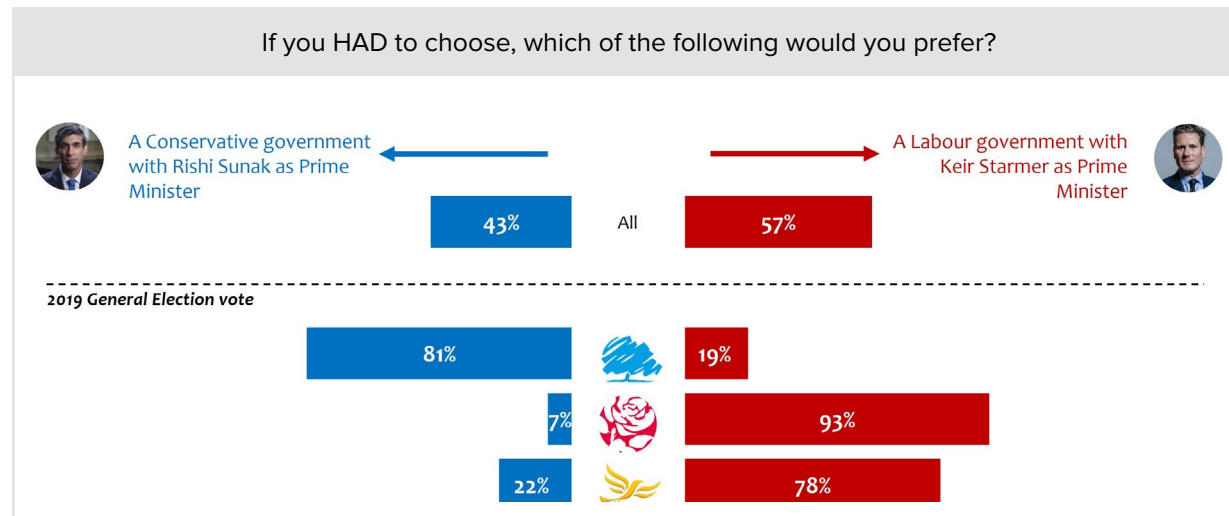> " If nothing has changed in a year and they're still being caught out in lies and cover-ups..."

> " People need to know there's light at the end of the tunnel. Lower inflation and lower interest rates, petrol prices, utilities. Knowing people are paying taxes for the right things."

If you __had__ to choose...

Forced to choose between a Conservative government with Sunak as PM and a Labour government led by Keir Starmer, our poll respondents preferred Starmer and Labour by 57% to 43%. Nearly 8 in 10 of those who voted Lib Dem in 2019 chose Labour. Just under 1 in 5 of those who voted Conservative in 2019 said they would now prefer a Labour government with Starmer as PM.

Among voters as a whole who preferred a Labour government, only 31% said they thought Keir Starmer and Labour would do a good job governing Britain; 58% said they might not do a good job "but they can hardly be worse than the government we have now". Those currently leaning towards voting Labour were quite evenly divided: 47% thought they would do a good job, 49% thought they might not but could hardly be worse.

If you HAD to choose, which of the following would you prefer?

A Conservative government with Rishi Sunak as Prime Minister

A Labour government with Keir Starmer as Prime Minister

	Conservative		Labour
All	43%		57%

2019 General Election vote

	Conservative		Labour
Conservative	81%		19%
Labour	7%		93%
Lib Dem	22%		78%

Which of the following comes closest to your view?
[NB those who would choose a Labour government with Keir Starmer as Prime Minister]

Keir Starmer and Labour would do a good job governing Britain

Keir Starmer and Labour might not do a good job but they can hardly be worse than the government we have now

Don't know

31%	58%	11%

What is driving people's vote?

We gave our poll respondents pairs of statements on various issues and asked which they most agreed with, then looked at how closely people's answers on each issue were related to their likelihood to vote for each party at the next election.

People's views on austerity – whether it is "an excuse to make the well-off richer at the expense of the less well-off" or whether it means "the country living within its means; without it everyone will be worse off" – were the most closely related to their likelihood of leaning towards the Conservatives or Labour. People's likelihood of supporting the Liberal Democrats was most closely related to their view of Brexit – whether "the UK needs to accept that Brexit has failed and should try to re-join at least some aspects of the EU" or "the UK needs to accept that it has left the European Union for good and should try to make the best of Brexit".

How important are these trade-offs in driving likelihood to vote at the next election for...

The darker the colour, the more important the trade-off is in determining the vote for each party...

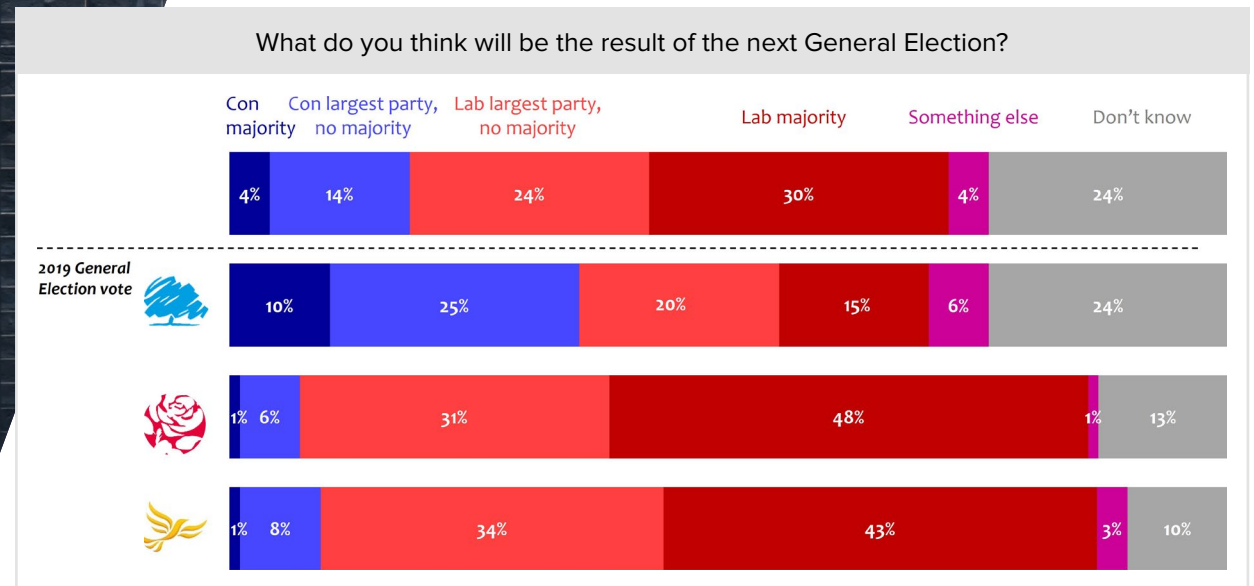|	The Conservative Party	The Labour Party	The Liberal Democrats
Austerity is an excuse for cuts vs Austerity means living within our means			
Brexit has failed and we should re-join parts of the EU vs We need to make Brexit work			
Social issues matter more vs Economic issues matter more			
There's more in British history to be proud of vs There's more in British history to be ashamed of			
There is too much focus on environment vs There is too much focus on growth			
The British state is not fit for purpose vs We just need better politicians			
Someone's sex is more important than their chosen gender identity vs Someone's chosen gender identity is more important than their sex			
Protect free speech vs Protect people from offence			

Expected result

Only 4% of all voters – including just 10% of 2019 Conservatives and 16% of those currently leaning towards voting Tory – said they expected a Conservative overall majority at the next general election. 2019 Tories were evenly divided as to whether they expected Labour or the Conservatives to be the largest party.

Most voters expected either a Labour majority (30% – the outcome most likely to be predicted) or a hung parliament with Labour as the largest party (24%).

Only around half of 2019 Labour voters and those currently expecting to vote for the party expected an outright Labour victory.

What do you think will be the result of the next General Election?

	Con majority	Con largest party, no majority	Lab largest party, no majority	Lab majority	Something else	Don't know
	4%	14%	24%	30%	4%	24%
2019 General Election vote	10%	25%	20%	15%	6%	24%
	1%	6%	31%	48%	1%	13%
	1%	8%	34%	43%	3%	10%

THE POLITICAL MAP

Our political map shows how different issues, attributes, personalities and opinions interact with one another. The closer the plot points are to each other the more closely related they are. Here we see that the centre of gravity of Conservative support has shifted from its 2019 position further into the top right quadrant of the map, where voters tend to be more secure and prosperous. Among those who voted Conservative in 2019, those most likely to do so at the next election are to be found in the top right-hand corner; those who say they will not do so next time or will never do so again are most likely to appear in the less well-off, strongly Brexit-supporting bottom right.

Those who name the economy and the cost of living among the most important issues facing the country are to be found close to the centre of the map, showing that they are universal concerns among voters across the board. Immigration and crime are most likely to be concerns among voters in the territory where Conservative support has fallen away the most sharply.
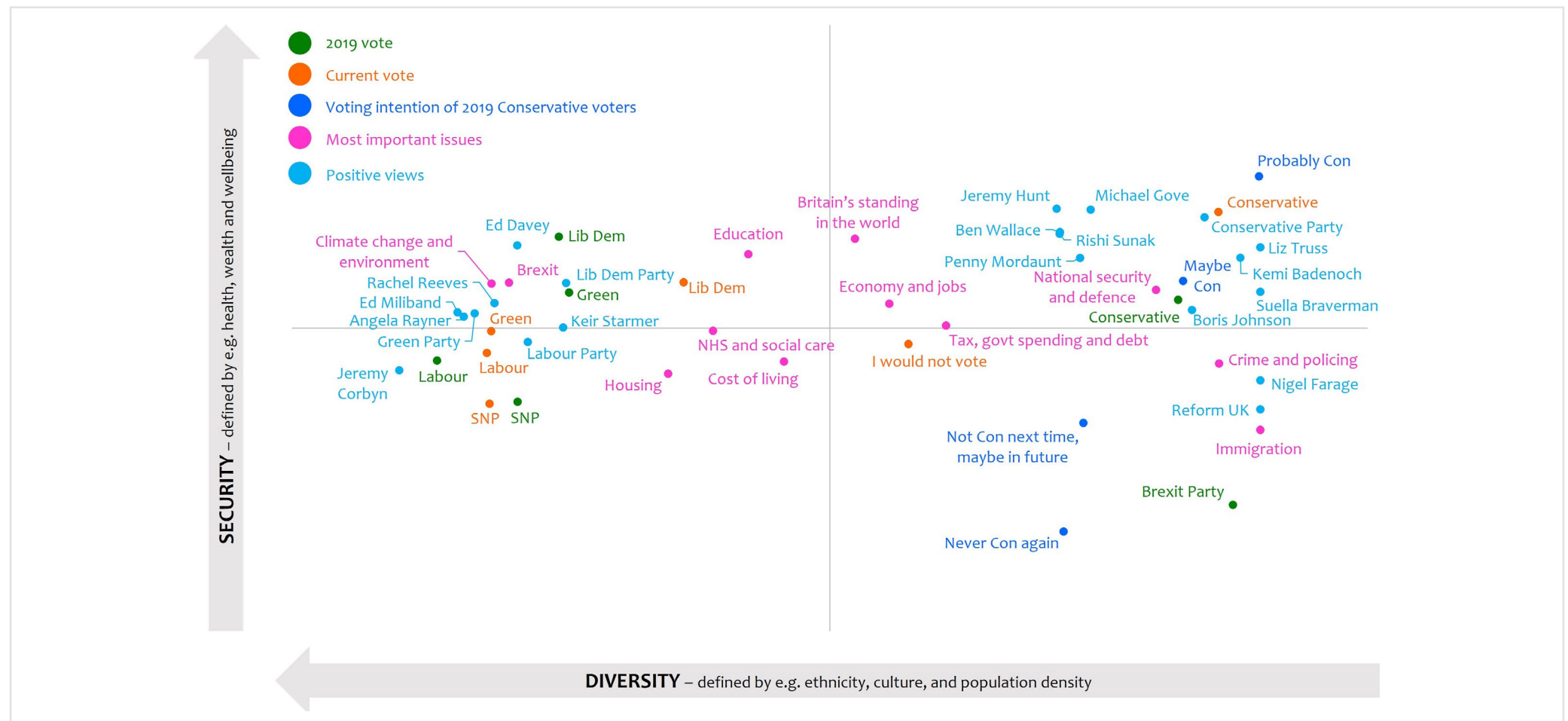
METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

5,210 adults in Great Britain were interviewed online between 28 October and 4 November 2022. Results have been weighted to be representative of all adults in Great Britain. Full data tables are available at LordAshcroftPolls.com.

Ten focus groups were held between 9 and 17 November in the following constituencies:

• North-West Durham

• Ashfield

• Bolton West

• Wokingham

• Taunton

The groups comprised voters from a wide range of backgrounds who voted Conservative at the 2019 general election. The groups included equal numbers of men and women.

ABOUT LORD ASHCROFT

LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. He is a former treasurer and deputy chairman of the UK Conservative Party. He is also honorary chairman and a former treasurer of the International Democrat Union. He is founder and chairman of the board of trustees of Crimestoppers, vice-patron of the Intelligence Corps Museum, chairman of the trustees of Ashcroft Technology Academy, a senior fellow of the International Strategic Studies Association, former chancellor of Anglia Ruskin University and a former trustee of Imperial War Museums.

His political books include:

- Smell the Coffee: A Wake-Up Call for the Conservative Party
- Call Me Dave: The Unauthorised Biography of David Cameron
- Hopes and Fears: Trump, Clinton, the Voters and the Future
- Well, You Did Ask: Why the UK Voted to Leave the EU
- The Lost Majority: The 2017 Election, the Conservative Party, the Voters and the Future
- Jacob's Ladder: The Unauthorised Biography of Jacob Rees-Mogg
- Diagnosis of Defeat: Labour's Turn to Smell the Coffee
- Going for Broke: The Rise of Rishi Sunak
- Reunited Nation? American Politics Beyond the 2020 Election
- Red Knight: The Unauthorised Biography of Sir Keir Starmer
- First Lady: Intrigue at the Court of Carrie and Boris Johnson

His other books include:

- Victoria Cross Heroes, Volumes I and II
- Special Forces Heroes
- George Cross Heroes
- Special Ops Heroes
- Heroes of the Skies
- White Flag? An Examination of the UK's Defence Capability
- Unfair Game: An Exposé of South Africa's Captive-Bred Lion Industry
- Life Support: The State of the NHS in an Age of Pandemics
- In the Shadows: The Extraordinary Men and Women of the Intelligence Corps