



DIAGNOSIS OF DEFEAT

Labour's turn to
smell the coffee

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC
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INTRODUCTION

After the Conservatives lost their third consecutive election in 2005, I published *Smell the Coffee: A Wake-Up Call for the Conservative Party*. I felt that the Tories had failed to grasp the reasons for their unpopularity and needed a serious reality check if they were ever to find their way back into government. With Labour now having been rejected by the voters four times in a row, I thought it was time to do the same for them.

No doubt some will be suspicious of my motives. I'm a Tory, after all – indeed, a former Deputy Chairman of the party. There are two answers to that. The first is that the country needs a strong opposition. Britain will be better governed if those doing the governing are kept on their toes. Moreover, at its best, the Labour Party has been a great force for decency, speaking up for people throughout the country and ensuring nobody is forgotten. We need it to reclaim that role.

The second answer is that you don't have to trust me – just listen to what real voters have to say in the research that follows. Last month I polled over 10,000 people, paying particular attention to those who voted Labour in 2017 but not in 2019. We have also conducted 18 focus groups in seats Labour lost, with people who have moved away from the party (often feeling that the party had moved away from them). The report includes extensive quotes from these discussions, since they explain Labour's predicament better than any analyst could. They are all the more powerful when you consider they come from people who were voting Labour until very recently and probably never expected to do otherwise.

We also polled over 1,000 Labour Party members, and conducted focus groups with members of the party and of Labour-supporting trade unions, to see how the Labour movement's understanding of the election differs from that of the electorate at large and whether – and how far – they think the party needs to change.

From election night on, senior Labour figures have argued that the result was all about Brexit – with the implication that their lost voters will be back in force once that issue is off the agenda. While there is no doubt that Brexit played a huge part in the election, Labour would be wrong to draw too much comfort from that. Yes, many voted to “get Brexit done.” But they also thought Labour's policy of renegotiation and neutrality was simply not credible: it stemmed from hopeless division and proved the party was nowhere near ready for government.

More serious still for these voters was the principle that Labour had refused to implement the democratically expressed wishes of the people, and often of their own

constituents. Brexit therefore became a metaphor for a party that no longer listened to them, taking their votes for granted while dismissing their views as ignorant or backward. “They were saying, ‘it's the adults talking now, leave the table and we'll sort it out for you’,” as one former supporter put it. Another linked Labour's apparent attitude on Brexit to Gordon Brown's encounter with Gillian Duffy in 2010: “He tarred her with the bigot brush rather than listening to what she had to say. It's the same with Brexit.” These impressions – of a party unready for office and unwilling to listen – will not vanish just because the Brexit legislation is complete.

It was reported that Labour's official inquiry “exonerated” Jeremy Corbyn from any blame for the election result. I can only assume this was a compassionate gesture for an already-outgoing septuagenarian leader, because no serious reading of the evidence could reach such a verdict. “I did not want Jeremy Corbyn to be Prime Minister” topped the list for Labour defectors when we asked their reasons for switching, whether they went to the Tories or the Lib Dems, to another party, or stayed at home. Though a few saw good intentions, former Labour voters in our groups lamented what they saw as his weakness, indecision, lack of patriotism, apparent terrorist sympathies, failure to deal with antisemitism, outdated and excessively left-wing worldview, and obvious unsuitability to lead the country.

But the feeling that the Labour Party was no longer for them went beyond Brexit and the Corbyn leadership. While it had once been true that “they knew us, because they were part of us,” Labour today seemed to be mostly for students, the unemployed, and middle-class radicals. It seemed not to understand ordinary working people, to disdain what they considered mainstream views and to disapprove of success. The “pie in the sky” manifesto of 2019 completed the picture of a party that had separated itself from the reality of their lives.

As far as many of these former supporters were concerned, then, the Labour Party they rejected could not be trusted with the public finances, looked down on people who disagreed with it, was too left-wing, failed to understand or even listen to the people it was supposed to represent, was incompetent, appallingly divided, had no coherent priorities, did not understand aspiration or where prosperity comes from, disapproved of their values and treated them like fools.

Despite all this, the defectors we spoke to do not rule out returning to Labour. Indeed, many now clearly relish their new status as floating voters, ready to hold governments to account and take each election as it comes. But they won't do so until Labour

changes, and most expect the necessary transformation to take years. While many Labour members grasp the need to change in principle, it is clear that they would find some of the shifts voters say they want to see – such as a less liberal stance on immigration, or much stricter fiscal discipline – harder to stomach in practice.

This report is not a road map to recovery: different people can draw sharply different conclusions from the same data, and I'm sure that will be the case with this research. But the first step is to come to terms with your starting point. What follows is a pitiless but objective assessment of where that is.

Michael Ashcroft
February 2020

METHODOLOGY

10,107 adults in Great Britain were interviewed online between 14 and 20 January 2020. Data have been weighted to be representative of all adults in Great Britain.

1,073 members of the Labour Party were interviewed online between 10 and 14 January 2020.

Full data tables are available at LordAshcroftPolls.com.

Eighteen focus groups of former Labour voters were held in January 2020 in former Labour constituencies won by the Conservatives in 2019: Bolsover, Bridgend, Burnley, Don Valley, Scunthorpe, Sedgefield, Stoke-on-Trent North, West Bromwich East and Wrexham. Participants had voted Labour in 2017 but stayed at home or voted for other parties in 2019, or had voted Labour in 2015 but for other parties in 2017 and 2019.

Four focus groups of Labour Party members and members of Labour-supporting trade unions were held in London and Birmingham in January 2020.

1: ELECTION EXPLANATIONS

How did it happen?

In our polls of the general public and Labour Party members we offered twelve factors that might have contributed to the election outcome and asked them to say how important they thought each one had been in explaining the result.

Here are some reasons that different people have suggested as to why Labour lost the 2019 general election. On a scale of 0 to 10, please say how important you think each of these is in explaining the election result – where 0 means it was not a reason at all and 10 means it was extremely important.
Mean score

All		
1	Jeremy Corbyn was not an appealing leader	7.7
2	Brexit dominated the election	7.5
3	Labour's election promises were not believable	6.8
4	Labour were divided	6.7
5	Labour no longer really represented its traditional voters	6.6

Labour defectors		
1	Brexit dominated the election	7.8
2	Jeremy Corbyn was not an appealing leader	7.6
3	Labour were divided	7.0
4	Labour no longer really represented its traditional voters	6.9
5	Labour's election promises were not believable	6.7

Labour members		
1	Brexit dominated the election	8.7
2	The media gave an unfairly negative picture of Labour & Jeremy Corbyn	8.4
3	Many voters believed Conservative lies	8.1
4	Voters didn't understand what was at stake & what Con gov. under Johnson would mean for them	7.7
5	Many voters have bigoted views about race & immigration, which Con were able to exploit	6.9

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Labour defectors – who voted for the party in 2017 but not in 2019 – believed the top two factors were that Brexit dominated the election, and that Jeremy Corbyn was not an appealing leader. Voters as a whole also considered these the main reasons. Next on the list for defectors were the view that Labour were divided, that the party no longer really represented its traditional voters, and that its election promises were not believable.

Labour members concurred that Brexit had dominated the election (though they gave it a higher importance score than voters as a whole), but agreement ended there. Next on the list were an unfair media portrayal of Labour and Jeremy Corbyn, voters believing Conservative lies, voters not understanding what was at stake and the Conservatives exploiting many voters' bigoted views on race and immigration.

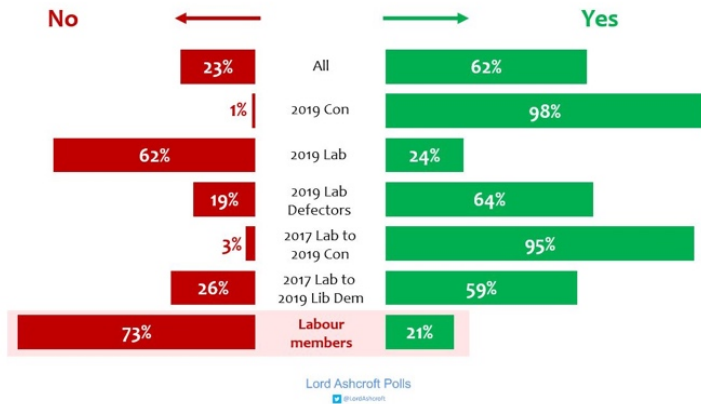
Did Labour deserve to lose?

More than six in ten voters overall said that Labour deserved to lose the election, including nearly two thirds of Labour defectors and 95% of those who switched from the Labour to the Conservatives.

However, only just over one in five Labour members agreed, and 73% of them said the party had not deserved to lose. This rose to 87% among members who had voted for Jeremy Corbyn in the 2016 leadership election; more than half of those who had voted for Owen Smith said the party had deserved the result in December.

All things considered, do you think Labour deserved to lose the 2019 election, or not?

By 2019 General Election vote



No surprises, no regrets

Very few of the former Labour voters in our focus groups had any regrets about not turning out for Labour in 2019. Even those who had stayed at home or switched to a party other than the Conservatives often said they were relieved at the outcome: “It was the best result of the options. There is clarity and direction;” “I’d never admit it in my family but I’m secretly pleased. Boris knows exactly what he’s doing. Corbyn would just get walked over;” “The general public were treated by people in parliament as though they were stupid and didn’t know what they were voting for. I’m pleased we’ve got a direction and the government is going to do what people wanted.”

“It was a vote to say ‘we’re sick and tired of all the faff.’”

Though a few were surprised by the size of the majority, none were surprised by the Conservative victory: “I knew people were going to vote Tory because they were fed up with ‘are we or aren’t we?’” “It was a vote to say ‘we’re sick and tired of all the faff’.” People thought he had the balls to take control of Brexit;” “I think Labour underestimated how strongly people felt about it, that what the majority of the country voted for wasn’t being acted on;” “Our local MP was a remainer and all the chances he had to vote, he never voted to leave. And the majority of the people, his

constituents, voted to leave. They’re working for us, that’s what they’re getting paid for, and they didn’t do it. I think that’s why.”

Why did you defect?

Those who voted Labour in 2017 but not in 2019 were given a list of nine factors that may have contributed to their decision and asked which applied to them.

Here are some reasons people have given for not voting Labour in the 2019 general election. Which of these applied to you? Tick as many as you like.

2019 Labour Defectors only, by 2019 General Election vote

	All 2019 Labour Defectors	2017 Lab to 2019 Con	2017 Lab to 2019 Lib Dem
1	I did not want Jeremy Corbyn to be Prime Minister 53%	I did not want Jeremy Corbyn to be Prime Minister 75%	I did not want Jeremy Corbyn to be Prime Minister 51%
2	I did not believe Labour would be able to deliver the promises it was making 40%	I wanted to get Brexit done and voted to try and make that happen 73%	I did not believe Labour would be able to deliver the promises it was making 36%
3	The Labour Party no longer seems to represent people like me 37%	I did not believe Labour would be able to deliver the promises it was making 62%	Another party seemed closer to my values and outlook on life than Labour did 35%
4	I wanted to get Brexit done and voted to try and make that happen 30%	The Labour Party no longer seems to represent people like me 61%	None of these 28%
5	I did not like the policies Labour were proposing 26%	I did not like the policies Labour were proposing 49%	The Labour Party no longer seems to represent people like me 24%

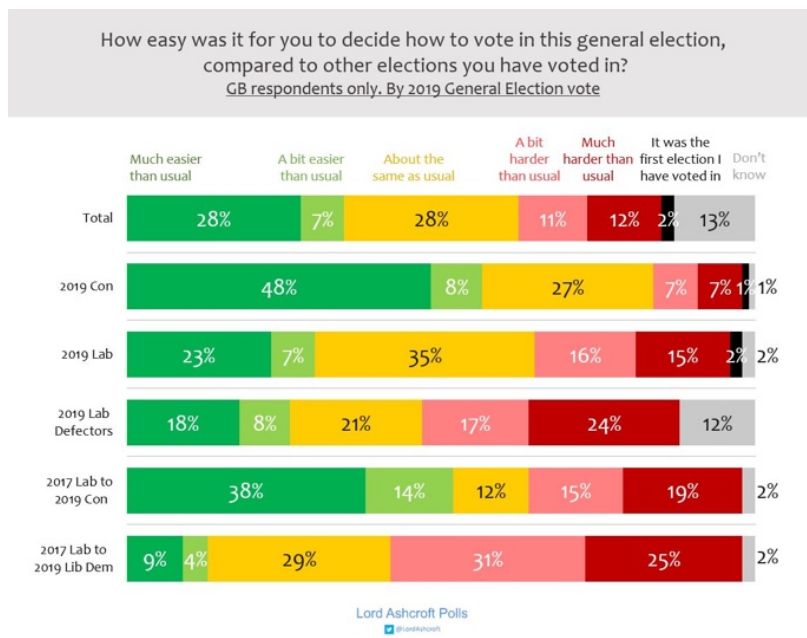
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For defectors as a whole – including both those who switched to the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats – the most popular reason was “I did not want Jeremy Corbyn to be Prime Minister.” For switchers to the Tories, this just pipped “I wanted to get Brexit done and voted to try and make that happen.” More than half also said not believing Labour would be able to deliver its promises and no longer feeling the party represented them had played a part.

Did it hurt?

We asked people how easy they found their voting decision in 2019 compared to previous elections they had taken part in.

Labour defectors as a whole were more likely than most to say they had found the decision harder than usual, but there was a significant split according to where they had ended up.



While just over half of those who switched to the Liberal Democrats said they found the decision unusually difficult, most of those who moved to the Conservatives said they found it easier – including 38% who found it much easier. As we will see in the following chapters, this is partly explained by the fact that Labour-Lib Dem switchers were more likely still to think of Labour as their party, and more likely to say that 2019 was an unusual election and that they will probably return to Labour next time.

“For me it was easy. Labour had a proper numpty in charge.”

This was reflected in our focus groups of former Labour voters. While a few had some qualms, most switchers to the Conservatives in particular ultimately found the decision quite painless. This was usually because, as well as wanting to get Brexit done, they

could not support Jeremy Corbyn as Prime Minister and felt Labour was no longer the party to which they had previously been loyal: “It was easy for me, the simple fact that I couldn’t possibly have voted for Corbyn, although I’ve been a Labour voter all my life. He was too far to the left;” “The party’s views have altered completely since I was young. And Corbyn had some very odd allegiances;” “To me it was easy. Labour had a proper numpty in charge;” “It was easy because I wanted Brexit, and that alone told me I had to vote Conservative because Labour weren’t going to go through with it;” “It was easy. You’d just have to see Corbyn on television, you’d say ‘no!’”

Why vote Labour?

For those who did vote Labour in December, the single most important reason, cited by more than 7 in 10 of the party’s voters, was “I did not want another Conservative government.”

Here are some reasons people have given for voting Labour in the 2019 general election. Which of these applied to you?
2019 Labour voters only

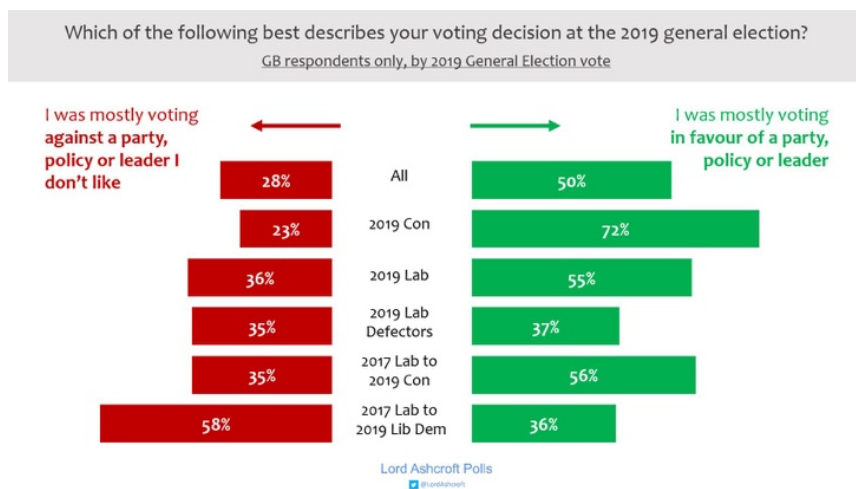


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Nearly two thirds of Labour voters said they thought the party would do a better job on public services like the NHS, and just over half said they liked the policies Labour were putting forward. Just under half said Labour’s values were closest to their own, and four in ten said wanting a second referendum on Brexit was part of their decision to vote Labour. Only 25% did so because they wanted Jeremy Corbyn to be Prime Minister, and 28% because they thought Labour would make the most competent government. Nearly one in four said “I always vote Labour.”

For or against?

Half of all voters said their vote at the election had been mostly in favour of a party, policy or leader, while for 28% it had been mostly against a party, policy or leader they didn’t like.



Conservative voters were the most likely to have been voting positively. 36% of Labour voters (and 52% of Lib Dems) said they had been voting mostly against a party, policy or leader.

Most (56%) of those switching from Labour to the Conservatives said they had voted mostly for positive reasons, compared to 36% of those moving to the Lib Dems.

No, Jeremy Corbyn

As we saw in the poll, not wanting Jeremy Corbyn to be Prime Minister was the single biggest motivation for Labour defectors, including switchers to the Conservatives and the Lib Dems, and was considered the biggest explanation for the election outcome among voters as a whole (though not by Labour Party members).

“Nothing about him says ‘leader’.”

Discussions about Jeremy Corbyn in our focus groups of former Labour voters produced a number of recurring themes. One was that he was not a strong leader and simply not a convincing candidate to be PM: “Nothing about him says ‘leader’;” “He wasn’t someone I would trust my country to be run by. The amount of people in the party who were turning their backs and leaving, and he never really addressed a lot of issues, like antisemitism. He never really had that authority;” “The thought of Jeremy Corbyn and Donald Trump butting heads while we tried to get a trade deal with them;” “He can’t be bothered to get dressed properly. Half the time he didn’t have a tie. He was like Farmer John up the road. You can’t imagine him in the White House, can you?;” “It’s Bonkers Boris, but people react to strength. Corbyn is ‘I don’t want to make a decision, I don’t really want to commit to anything, I’ll just tell them whatever I think will get me a vote’;” “Watching the debates, I got a bad feeling about him. He never fully answered the question and he was so weak;” “He sat on the fence on Brexit. I thought, if he can’t make a decision on something like that, what’s he going to do if something important happens and a decision needs to be made? He’d run around with his hands in the air.”

“He is not patriotic. He meets all those terrorist parties. You want someone with good old values.”

Many also worried about his approach to defence and national security, including his reported meetings with terrorist groups: “His sympathies with Hezbollah and the IRA and all these different groups. He empathises with everybody;” “That woman who moved to ISIS, he said she should be let back into the country. That was a turning point for me;” “He wanted to disarm the country;” “He said he would never press the button. We need protection. He should have said he would, even if he didn’t mean it.” Some cited other evidence for what they saw as his lack of patriotism: “He’s anti-Royal as well. He refused to sing the national anthem.”

“He was a throwback to the 60s or 70s.”

There was also feeling that Corbyn was too left-wing and that his approach was irrelevant or even dangerous in the modern world: “Corbyn was stuck in the past, stuck in the 80s, and he’s not moved on with his policies. He was a nice person, but his policies didn’t fit in;” “It was too much of a throwback in one step to the 60s or 70s. It reminded me of Michael Foot.” Some also felt he was too given to protesting, rather than grasping the realities of government: “The way he was with Trump put me off. I mean, I hate Donald Trump, but when he came over last year and Corbyn was protesting outside parliament, I thought, ‘well if you’re going to be PM you’ve got to deal with him, you can’t behave like that’.”

“In 2017 there was a lot of momentum behind him, and then he sort of lost it. There was no clear plan or direction.”

Many of our focus group participants had nevertheless voted Labour when Corbyn was leader in 2017. For some of them, Labour’s changing position on Brexit had pushed them away: “They said they would support the referendum result, but since then they’ve done nothing but block it.” The different alternatives on offer had also been a factor: “It was a different vote in 2017. I don’t think Theresa May was a very strong candidate.” Others were simply less impressed with Corbyn’s leadership the more they saw of it: “He went from bad to worse. He got dafter and dafter;” “In 2017 there was a lot of momentum behind him, and then he sort of lost it. There was no clear plan or direction;” “He went so far to the left. In 2017 it was about supporting people, but this was nationalising everything. State-controlled energy, state-controlled broadband, state-controlled this and that...;” “It seemed to be one thing after another. It was like coming down a ladder;” “You build up an image over time. I thought, actually, do I really want Corbyn? No, I don’t.”

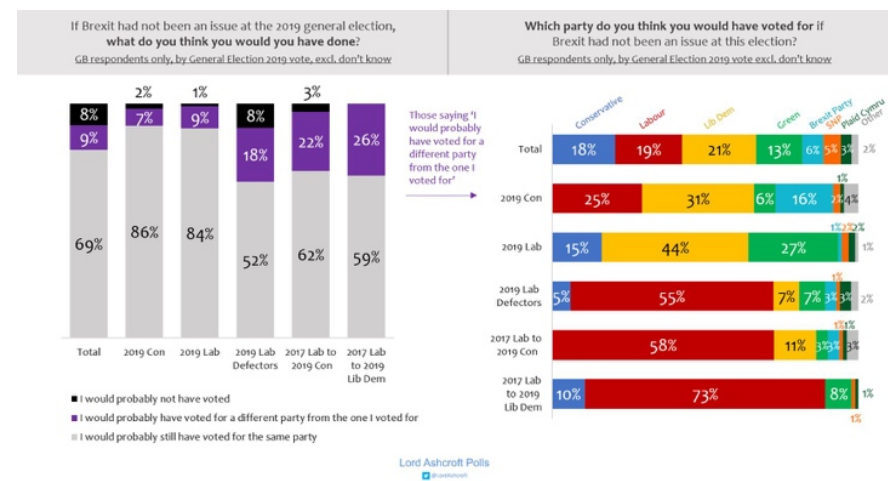
In our Labour Movement focus groups, party and union members often acknowledged that Jeremy Corbyn had not won over the electorate – but often because he was too earnest or serious for what the voters wanted: “He’s not a showman, and that’s what people want. He’s not bright and shiny like Boris, and people seem to want that, they don’t look at substance;” “There is a carefully calibrated over-simplification. Cameron did it, Boris did it, and Trump. ‘Get Brexit done.’ If you’re authentic, simplifying like that goes against the grain;” “Theresa against Jeremy was a level playing field, but Boris likes the media circus around him. Jeremy is very earnest, and I don’t think people appreciate that. They want a circus.” They also felt he was treated very unfairly by the media: “There were big anti-Muslim charges against the Tories but that was never in the papers. The smear campaign was insane.”

Some members did concede that the voters may have had better reasons: “He didn’t commit himself on Brexit. He was asked again and again if he was remain or leave. By the end, even I thought ‘just answer the bloody question!’” “Sometimes he should have

kept his mouth shut. When that guy stabbed two people on London Bridge, he was there saying terrorists should be released from prison!” “He didn’t assemble a team that inspired you to think they could run the country;” “There was a very clear message from the other parties and Labour’s message wasn’t clear. If you’ve got mining communities in the North voting Conservative, something must have gone seriously wrong;” “I wouldn’t go out canvassing because when people asked ‘what are you going to do about Brexit?’ it would be ‘renegotiate the deal and then do this and do that and in three years’ time we might have Brexit or we might not’. You would get slated.”

The Brexit factor

We asked voters whether they thought they would have voted for a different party had Brexit not been on the agenda at the 2019 election – and if so, which one.



86% of Conservatives, 84% of Labour voters and 65% of Lib Dems said they would probably have voted the same way had Brexit not been an issue. Just over half of Labour defectors, including 62% of 2017 Labour voters who switched to the Tories, said they would have voted as they did in 2019 even if Brexit had not been at stake.

Among those who said they would have voted differently without Brexit to consider, 73% of Labour-Lib Dem switchers but only 58% of Labour-Conservative switchers said they would have stayed with Labour.

“He said he would go to Brussels as a neutral. I thought, that’s completely ridiculous.”

Former Labour voters in our focus groups often mentioned Brexit when asked their reasons for switching away from the party. However, there were three main aspects to this. First was the issue itself – that they wanted it done, or at least out of the way, and this would only happen under the Conservatives: “I voted remain, but I just wanted to get it done. I got so sick of it all I wanted some sort of closure;” “It needed to be sorted. It was embarrassing. The whole world was watching us squabble;” “We had to get it done and Boris was the person to do it;” “We weren’t going to get Brexit if Labour got in, were we?”

Second was Labour’s policy on the issue, which many felt further undermined the credibility of the leadership, and its opposition to whatever specific proposals were brought forward: “He said he would go to Brussels as a neutral, not saying if he wanted to be in or out. When I heard that, I thought, that’s completely ridiculous;” “I didn’t like the fact that he was prepared to sit on the fence;” “Labour were like children in a playground. Whatever Boris brought to the table for Brexit, even if it was the best plan ever, they would have just thrown it out. They wouldn’t even look at anything and consider it.”

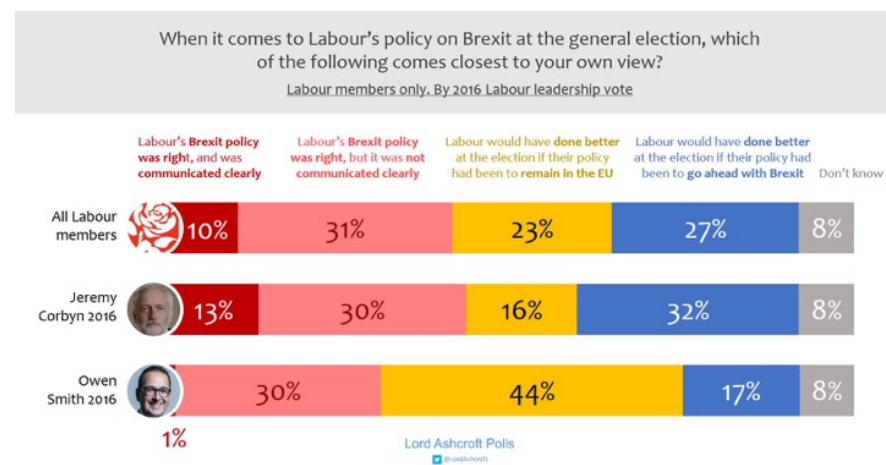
“It wasn’t so much Brexit, it was democracy. It was that they wouldn’t honour the referendum.”

Third, and perhaps most importantly, was the principle of Labour refusing to listen to them and failing to implement the result of a democratic vote: “It wasn’t so much Brexit, it was democracy. It was that they wouldn’t honour the referendum;” “I felt let down. 17.4 million people voted leave, and we’re supposed to be a democracy. They threw spanners in the works and did everything they could to stop it. It was arrogance. They were no longer listening to the people;” “It was a backlash against Labour disregarding Brexit. They were saying ‘it’s the adults talking now, leave the table and we’ll sort it out for you;” “When your own MP votes against her constituents, you lose faith.”

“It goes back to Gordon Brown calling that woman a bigot. He tarred her with the bigot brush rather than listening to what she had to say. It’s the same with Brexit.”

For some, this was the culmination of a pattern of behaviour from Labour that they had noticed before: “It goes back to Gordon Brown calling that woman a bigot. He tarred her with the bigot brush rather than listening to what she had to say. It’s the same with Brexit.”

Labour Party members were split as to whether their Brexit policy had been the right one – and if not, what it should have been instead.





Overall, 41% said they thought the policy had been correct, but most of these said it had not been communicated clearly; only one in ten thought it had been both right and well presented.

The half of Labour members who thought the policy was wrong were closely divided as to whether the position should have been to remain in the EU (23%, including nearly half of Owen Smith’s 2016 leadership voters) or to go ahead with Brexit (27%, including one in three of those who voted for Corbyn).

Two thirds of Labour Party members – including three quarters of Corbyn leadership voters – said Brexit dominated the election and had a bigger effect on the result than how people felt about the parties, leaders, and other policies.

Here are three broad explanations people have given for the result of the 2019 election. Please rank them in order, where you think 1 was the most important factor and 3 is the least important.
Labour members only. By 2016 Labour leadership vote. % ranked first

All Labour members	 Brexit dominated the election, and had a bigger effect on the result than how people felt about the parties, their leaders and other policies	66%	The Conservatives managed to convince large numbers of voters that they were on their side and had the right policies for Britain, not just on Brexit	19%	Labour had fundamentally lost touch with large numbers of its former voters, and not just because of Brexit	13%
Jeremy Corbyn 2016	 Brexit dominated the election, and had a bigger effect on the result than how people felt about the parties, their leaders and other policies	76%	The Conservatives managed to convince large numbers of voters that they were on their side and had the right policies for Britain, not just on Brexit	18%	Labour had fundamentally lost touch with large numbers of its former voters, and not just because of Brexit	5%
Owen Smith 2016	 Brexit dominated the election, and had a bigger effect on the result than how people felt about the parties, their leaders and other policies	42%	Labour had fundamentally lost touch with large numbers of its former voters, and not just because of Brexit	37%	The Conservatives managed to convince large numbers of voters that they were on their side and had the right policies for Britain, not just on Brexit	20%

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However, Corbyn and Smith leadership backers were divided as to whether voters had been more attracted by the Tories or put off by Labour. Similar proportions agreed that the most important factor had been the Conservatives convincing large numbers of voters that they were on their side and had the right policies. Yet while 37% of 2016 Smith voters said the main factor had been that “Labour had fundamentally lost touch with large numbers of its former voters, and not just on Brexit,” only one in 20 Corbyn backers agreed.

A question of policy

In our focus groups, former Labour voters had a number of observations to make about the party’s other policies at the 2019 election. One was that they seemed wildly unrealistic: “Cutting the working week, free internet. It was undoable, and the cost was astronomical;” “What he promised was just impossible. The billions of pounds they were promising for this, that and the other... It was pie in the sky. People are not daft;” “When he came out with the stuff about the Waspi women, my friend said to me ‘we’re going to get £23,000, vote for him!’ And I said, ‘are you mad? Where’s he going to get that?’”

“It was pie in the sky. People are not daft.”

Another worry was that the manifesto suggested a return to overspending and debt – or significantly higher taxes: “They were going to tax everything and spend money we haven’t got;” “We’d just had ten years of austerity because of the last Labour government. We’d have had to go through all that pain again;” “The money was coming from the middle class, people like us;” “I don’t want this country turning into Greece or Spain, one of those countries that can’t finance itself;” “Taxing the rich – but we need clever, innovative millionnaires in this country. We need a welfare state, but you’ve still got to reward people for doing well. They’re very blinkered, they don’t see the big picture.”

“We don’t need free wifi, for heaven’s sake. It costs £20 a month. I can afford it.”

For many, the promise of free broadband, in particular, signalled an odd set of priorities: “We don’t need free wifi, for heaven’s sake. It costs £20 a month, I can afford it;” “When they said they were going to give everyone free broadband, I thought, ‘what are you talking about? That money could be going towards the police, or nurses.’ That was a red-flag moment for me. I thought, I don’t trust a word you say anymore;” “They kept chucking in crazy ideas like free broadband. Nobody was sure what he was doing. He was all over the place.”

“It was like being in an African country, where they bribe everyone to vote for them.”

Some had the impression that Labour were simply trying to buy votes, especially from younger people who they hoped might prove more credulous: “If you overhear teenagers about to bullshit someone, you’ll hear them say ‘just tell them this’ or ‘just tell them that.’ And that’s what it felt like to me. ‘Just tell them we’ll give them free broadband,’ and it’s complete crap. It wouldn’t happen;” “They were promising such stupid things, paying off student loans and giving everyone free broadband. They were trying to buy everybody. It was like being in an African country, where they bribe everyone to vote for them;” “They tried to include 16-year-olds. That showed how desperate they were getting.”

“He was taking us back to the 70s with all the strikes and power cuts. I thought, I don’t want to go that way, we’re a great country.”

There was also a widespread sense that Labour’s policies would take Britain back to the past, whether on industrial relations, the benefits system or the nuclear disarmament debate: “He was taking us back to the 70s with all the strikes and power cuts. I thought, I don’t want to go that way, we’re a great country. And he would never say ‘we’re a

great country'. He would talk about Palestine and all that sort of stuff but nothing positive about Great Britain;" "They were on about scrapping Universal Credit, but they didn't say what they were going to do instead. Were they going to return to the old days when Blair and Brown were in charge, when people could choose whether they wanted to work for the rest of their lives or not?"; "He wanted to drop nuclear weapons. His stance on everything was so lovely and idyllic, but we've got Trump, Kim Jong Whatever, the world blowing up around us and we've got a guy waving the flag of peace. It's not going to work." Though they were not clear on the policy detail, many also felt Labour had an unduly soft approach to immigration: "It's 'come in, come in!' Too much of an open-door policy."

Our Labour Movement focus groups were also critical of the 2019 manifesto, usually because of the array of policies and promises ("it was a bit like being on eBay") which did not convince voters: "Free broadband – it was like someone in South America throwing money off the back of a lorry;" "The manifesto was fantastic, but can he do it in real life? It was like a fairy tale; people didn't believe it."

However, some members were disappointed or puzzled that the voters had rejected the programme: "It's neoliberalism. People have been brainwashed that these things aren't possible, but when I was a child, they were normal;" "They think capitalism is the only way. It's baffling. People are screaming out for real change and he was offering a solution;" "There is an element of racism too. Especially the older generation."

A new dawn has broken, has it not?

Despite the Conservatives having been in office since 2010, most in our focus groups said that this felt like a new government or, as some put it, "a new beginning."

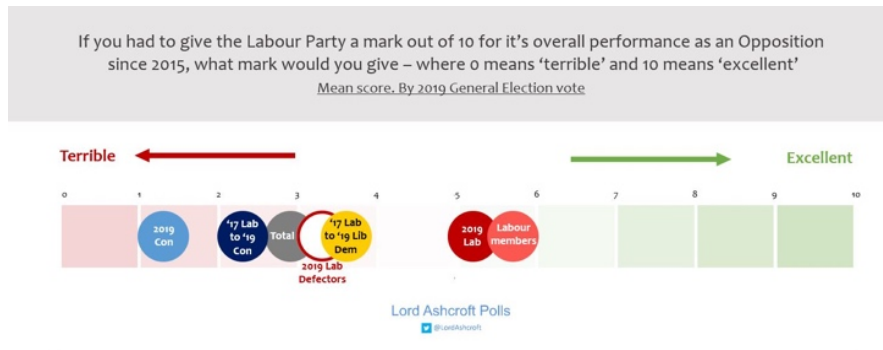
"With Boris and Brexit, it feels like maybe things are going to happen. Good things, hopefully."

After more than three years of indecision, "it feels like there is a party in place now that is actually interested in the public;" "Things are happening. They're already recruiting police;" "It feels completely new, so fresh. I feel hopeful. I think he represents a lot of hope and a fresh start and getting Brexit done." For some, this optimism was tinged with a degree of wariness: "With Boris and Brexit, it feels like maybe things are going to happen. Good things, hopefully;" "Say what you like about Boris, he has brought a breath of fresh air to it. You don't know what he will do next, though."

2: WHERE DID IT ALL GO WRONG?

Marks out of ten

Asked to rate Labour's performance as an opposition since 2015, party members gave an average score of 5.7 out of 10. Jeremy Corbyn's 2016 leadership voters awarded 6.8, compared to 3.0 from voters for Owen Smith.



This was slightly more generous than the 5.2 awarded by 2019 Labour voters as a whole, and considerably more so than the 2.9 given by the public in general.

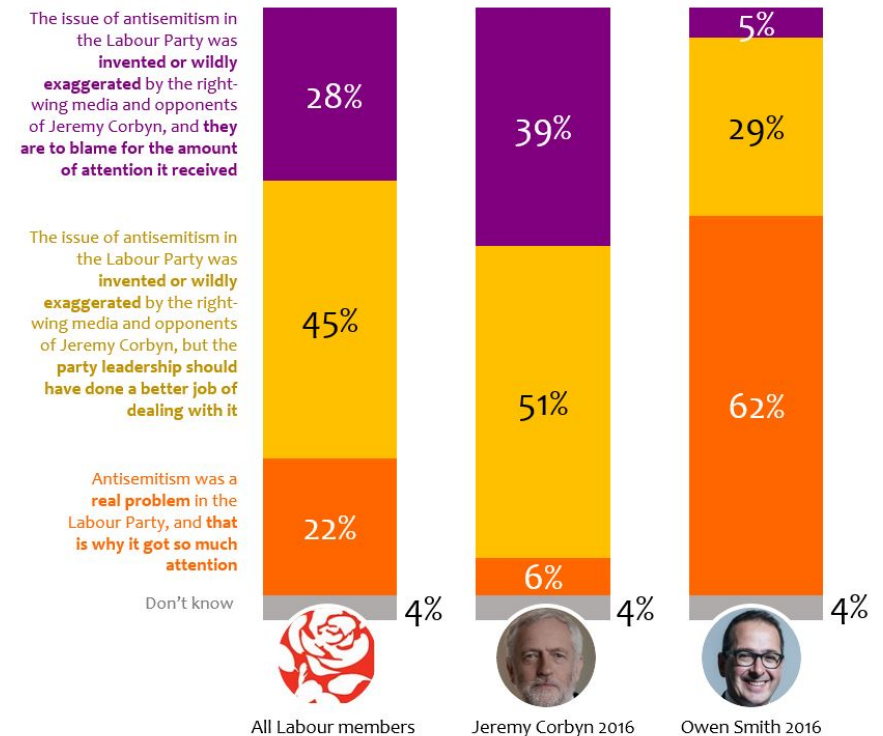
Labour defectors gave an average score of 3.3 – though switchers from Labour to the Lib Dems (3.6) were slightly more generous than switchers from Labour to the Conservatives (2.3).

Antisemitism

Nearly three quarters of Labour Party members said the issue of antisemitism in the party was invented or wildly exaggerated by the right-wing media and opponents of Jeremy Corbyn.

Thinking about the controversy over antisemitism in the Labour Party, which of the following comes closest to your view?

Labour members only. By 2016 Labour leadership vote



Lord Ashcroft Polls @LordAshcroft

Even so, most of those who thought this also said that the leadership should have done a better job of dealing with the issue. Only just over one in five, and only 6% of 2016 Corbyn voters, agreed that “antisemitism was a real problem in the Labour Party, and that is why it got so much attention.”

This was largely echoed by Labour Party members in our focus groups: “The antisemitism stuff was rubbish. There may have been the odd incident, but it was hyped, weaponised. Other parties didn’t get the same scrutiny.” But some also felt the issue should have been handled better: “He should have said there’s no room for prejudice in the Labour Party, it’s not what we stand for, we’re going to have a really open, visible investigation and we’ll stamp it out – not do it all behind closed doors.”

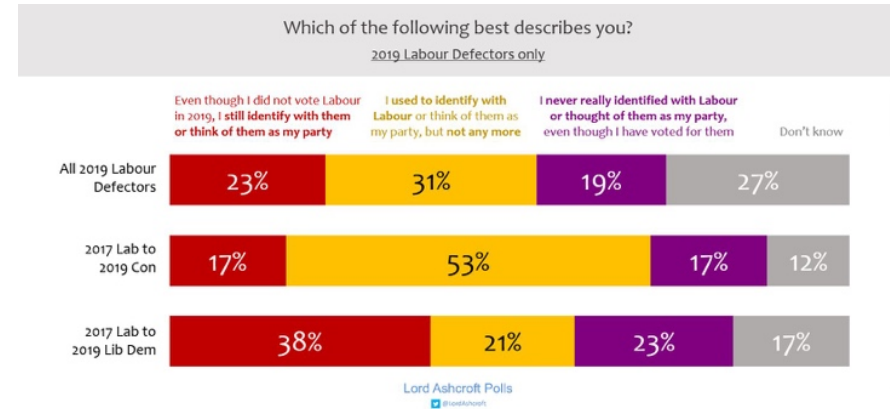
“Why couldn’t he say, ‘yes we’ve got a problem and I’m dealing with it and I’m sorry’? Why couldn’t he say that?”

Former Labour voters in our focus groups often raised the subject spontaneously. Though there were mixed views as to how widespread the problem was and whether Jeremy Corbyn himself was guilty of it (and some linked it to his reported support for terrorist groups), they regarded his apparent inability to deal with the problem convincingly as an indictment of his leadership: “Corbyn has a dark shadow – links to terrorism, the antisemitism stuff. I don’t know much about it but it was there;” “He denied things but there was proof, and he argued black was white;” “He didn’t do anything about the antisemitism. He knew it was rife, he knew it was, and he denied it all the way along. You lose respect for someone then;” “Why couldn’t he say, ‘yes we’ve got a problem and I’m dealing with it and I’m sorry’? Why couldn’t he say that?” “I was very unhappy about the Jewish stuff. Even if it wasn’t all true, the insensitivity was stunning.”

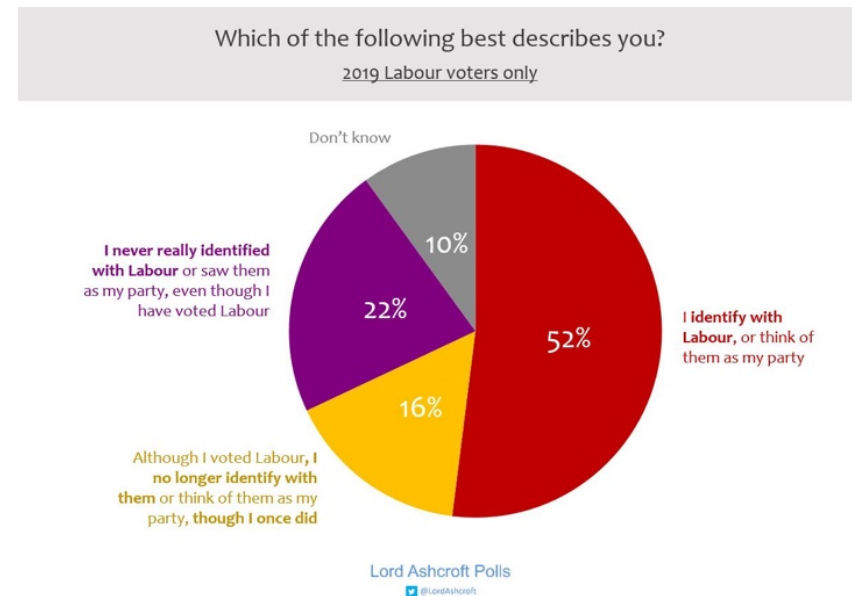
Still your party?

Just under a quarter of those who voted Labour in 2017 but not in 2019 said they still identified with Labour or thought of them as their party – though this was true for nearly four in ten of those who switched to the Lib Dems.

More than half of those who switched from Labour to the Conservatives said they used to identify with Labour or think of them as their party, but not anymore.



Among those who did vote Labour in 2019, just over half said they identified with the party. A further 16% of Labour voters said they no longer identified with Labour or thought of them as their party, though they once did.



If not you, who?

Asked who they thought Labour did stand for these days, several in our focus groups said, “I don’t think they know themselves,” and a few said the party was still for “the underdogs, the less well off.”

“It’s for young people and students, and the unemployed. It used to be for normal working people, who pay for their house, pay for their car.”

However, most thought remaining Labour voters tended to fall into one of two categories: older voters who were too set in their ways ever to change (“people like my mum who’s 84 and voted Labour all her life and on her way out”), or a basket that included young people, students, the unemployed, ethnic minorities and affluent middle class socialists with few material concerns.

“It was for middle-class people in London who go on marches to get rid of Brexit.”

“It’s for young people and students, and the unemployed. It used to be for normal working people, who pay for their house, pay for their car;” “I don’t think they’re interested in supporting single mums, families, but affluent people with plenty of money who don’t need their help. If you’re working class, your priorities are paying the bills, keeping your car on the road, not keeping the swimming pool open or whether your kids have access to university. Middle class people are the ones who appear on *Question Time*;” “It used to be that the Conservatives looked after the rich and Labour looked after the working class. Now the Conservatives still look after the rich but Labour look after people on benefits. No-one looks after the middle, the working poor;” “Corbyn has a very big student following. Students don’t live in the real world, do they?;” “I do think they’re in a bubble in London. I don’t think they venture out to see what life is really like;” “Ethnic groups. They play that card all the time;” “First-time voters. They’re all about dropping the voting age to 16. That’s because they knew they’d lost us;” a current Labour supporter “probably lives in North London and they’re a college lecturer or something like that. A Hampstead socialist. A middle class radical;” “It was for middle-class people in London who go on marches to get rid of Brexit.”

“They all stood up and said they wanted to do what was best for their constituents. But they didn’t listen to us.”

Several also remarked that Labour in parliament had shown itself to be entirely self-interested, rather than trying to represent their voters: “When they were not making decisions about Brexit it was for the party, not for the people. They just cared about

getting into power;” “They all stood up and said they wanted to do what was best for their constituents. But they didn’t listen to us;” “Plebs like us voted to leave but they’re the ruling class and they wanted to keep ruling.”

“They say ‘we’ve got 300,000 members’... They’re ignoring the fact that the voters who don’t go to rallies and conferences, who just go out and do a day’s work, still go out and vote.”

Some also felt that the party had been taken over by activists whose agenda was far removed from that of traditional Labour supporters: “They say ‘we’ve got 300,000 members’, which are all quite young and left-wing and generally remain. So they’ve changed their principles on that kind of minority. They’re ignoring the fact that the voters who don’t go to rallies and conferences, who just go out and do a day’s work, still go out and vote.”

Local Labour

For our former Labour voters, the idea that the party no longer represented them and had stopped listening was closely related to the feeling that Labour took them for granted. As well as local MPs voting how they wanted on Brexit irrespective of their constituents, some also felt that the local Labour establishment, including councils, did not do as good a job as they ought to.

“They take our votes for granted and think we were born yesterday.”

In the election, “they thought they were sitting pretty. Certain villages have always been Labour, they thought they were guaranteed the vote. They didn’t bother canvassing. I didn’t have anyone knock on my door;” “They take our votes for granted and think we were born yesterday.” More broadly, “I don’t think they get out and listen to people like they used to. They used to be part of the local community, but they became complacent. They thought ‘whatever we do we’re going to get the votes off the local people, especially in the North,’ but it didn’t work like that;” “The council has been Labour all my life and they are shocking. Fly tipping is awful;” “Stoke has always been Labour but it hasn’t done us any favours. If you walk round, some of it is quite scary. It was voted the 9th worst place to live;” “Bridgend has grown exponentially but how many new hospitals and GPs have we got? You’d think they’d take these problems back to Westminster. There are more and more people but there is no infrastructure, no plans, nothing;” “Rotherham Council wouldn’t talk about the child abuse in case it caused racial tensions;” “In Conservative-led councils, the roads are better, the schools

are better. Labour councils are so run down it's unbelievable. I lived in Portsmouth before. In Stoke, you need a four-by-four to drive on the streets."

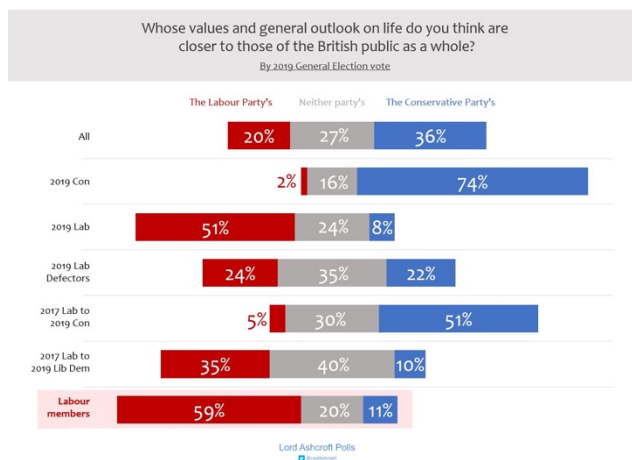
"There's a guy down in Teesside, Ben Houchen, who's actually doing what he said... It's easier to vote Conservative when you can see them doing things for you."

Some drew comparisons with what they had seen of Conservative-run areas: "There's a guy down in Teesside, Ben Houchen, who's actually doing what he said, whereas Labour councillors will stab you in the back. He's got the airport up and running, he's following through. It's easier to vote Conservative when you can see them doing things for you."

Closer to the people?

A majority of Labour members, including nearly two thirds of 2016 Corbyn leadership voters, said they thought Labour's values and general outlook on life were closer to those of the British public than the Conservatives'.

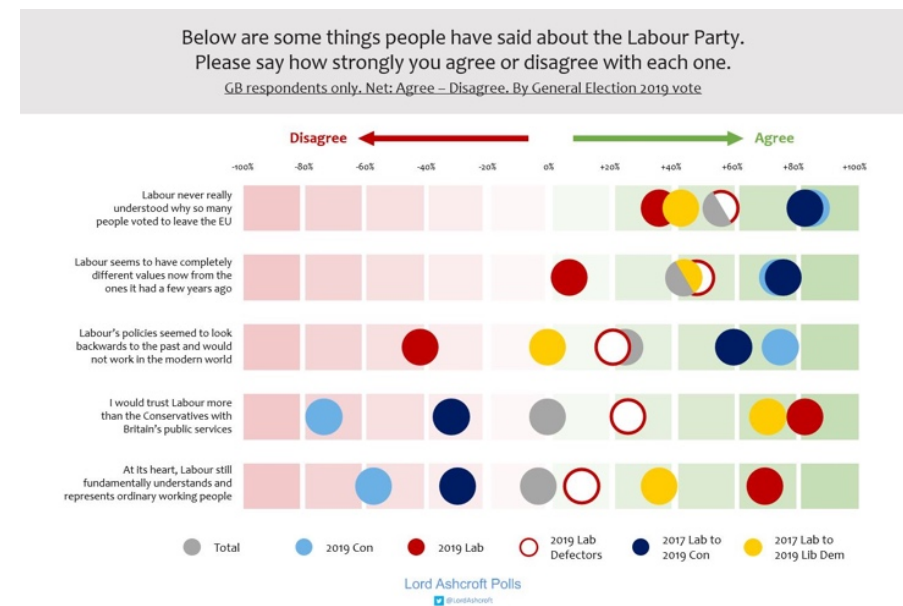
Voters themselves were more likely to think the Conservatives' values were closer (36%) than Labour's (20%), though 44% said neither party's was closer, or that they didn't know.



More than half of those who switched from Labour to the Conservatives said they thought the Tories' values were closer to those of the British public, with only one in 20 thinking this was truer of Labour. Labour defectors to the Lib Dems, however, were more than three times as likely to think Labour values were closer to those of the public at large than to think this was true of the Conservatives.

True or false?

Of five statements about Labour, the one that found the highest level of agreement was that the party "never really understood why so many people voted to leave the EU." More than two thirds of all voters agreed, including nearly 9 out of 10 Labour defectors to the Conservatives.



Most also agreed that "Labour seems to have completely different values now from the one it had a few years ago." Two thirds of defectors (including 83% of switchers to

the Conservatives) agreed, and 2019 Labour voters themselves were more likely to agree than not.

A majority (52%) concurred that “Labour’s policies seemed to look backwards to the past and would not work in the modern world.” Seven in 10 Labour-Conservatives switchers agreed, as did more than one in five 2019 Labour voters themselves.

The statement “I would trust Labour more than the Conservatives with Britain’s public services” was the most divisive, with 40% agreeing and 41% disagreeing. There was a sharp divide among Labour defectors: three quarters of Labour-Lib Dem switchers agreed with the statement, while a majority of Labour-Conservative switchers disagreed.

There was a similar split over the contention that “at its heart, Labour still fundamentally understands and represents ordinary working people.” Voters as a whole disagreed by 44% to 40%, but while Labour-Conservative switchers disagreed by 59% to 29%, those who moved from Labour to the Lib Dems agreed with the statement by 63% to 28%.

The good old days?

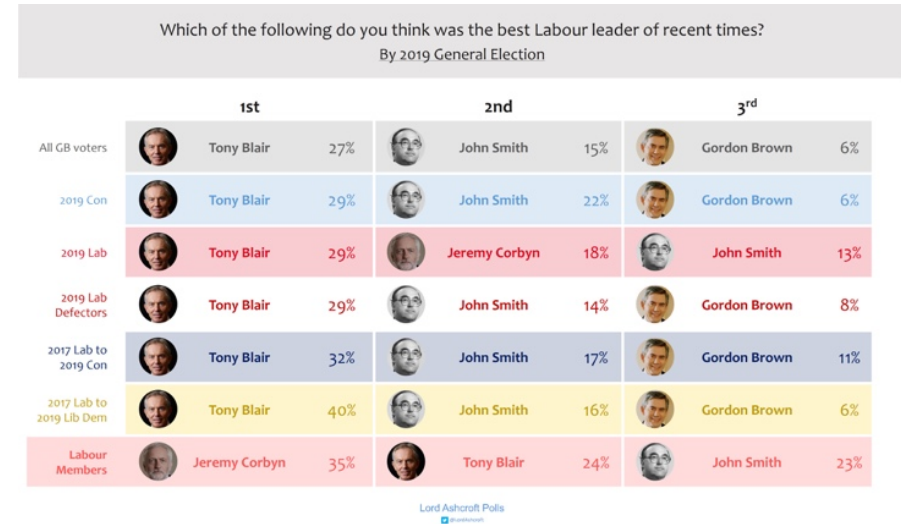
We asked Labour members and voters as a whole who they considered the best Labour leader of recent times, beginning with Michael Foot in the early 1980s.

For the public in general, including 2019 Conservatives, Lib Dems and Labour defectors, the answer was Tony Blair, with John Smith in second place.

According to Labour members, the best recent leader of the Labour Party was Jeremy Corbyn.

Former Labour voters in our focus groups tended to agree that Tony Blair had been the most effective Labour leader they could remember (at least until he “got too big for his boots” and “caused a boatload of trouble”), though there were also some takers for John Smith and Harold Wilson.

“With Blair, you felt you had a bit of a connection with him. He understood what needed doing.”



Many had liked what seemed to be a sensible, moderate approach that had produced practical changes for the better: “I liked it when they were building children’s centres;” “1997, centre-left, things can only get better. There was an optimism;” “It was Conservative-lite, but supporting people and putting money into things like social care;” “With Blair, you felt you had a bit of a connection with him. He understood what needed doing. He was a leader, he was leading the party in a certain direction. They had an identity. He encapsulated the working people.”

Labour Party members in our groups were more torn about the Blair years: “When he was first there, I thought, we’ve got to move with the times. Now I think he’s a war criminal. I despise that man;” “The hope was that there would be more fairness, but I don’t think that happened. He moved to the right;” “It was a wasted opportunity;” “The Sun backed him because he was a neoliberal.” On the other hand, “they did invest in schools and infrastructure and things;” “A lot of school roofs were fixed under the Blair banner. A lot of people went to university.”

Battle of the brands

In our 10,000-sample poll, people were offered a selection of words and images and asked which they most associated with the Labour and Conservative parties. They were also able to write a short explanation of their choice of image. For Labour defectors, the resulting “mood board” looked like this.

Below is a selection of words and phrases. Please choose up to three that you would most associate with each party as it is today / From the images below, please choose up to three that best sum up your view of each party as it is today.
2019 Labour Defectors only. The larger the word / image the more times it was selected.

Labour Defectors on the Labour Party



Division 2
Football club

Weak **Out of touch**
Confused Untrustworthy
Tired
For the many




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The most-chosen words and phrases – “out of touch,” “confused,” “weak,” “untrustworthy” and “tired – speak for themselves, as does “for the many,” which some still considered to be Labour’s redeeming feature, even if the party had lost its way.

The lazy bloke on the sofa tended to stand for an indulgent attitude to benefit claimants and, as we often heard in focus groups, an apparent preference for those who do not work rather than those who do. The Division 2 Football Club represented the idea that the party was second rate, while the frightened woman embodied a fear of Labour being elected, and especially of Jeremy Corbyn becoming Prime Minister.

The miner carried two different meanings. For some, as with “for the many,” it was a reminder of Labour standing with the workers – but for others the image signified a backward-looking approach to the economy and a potential return to strikes and industrial strife.

When it came to the Conservative Party, the collected choices of Labour-Conservative switchers looked like this.

Below is a selection of words and phrases. Please choose up to three that you would most associate with each party as it is today / From the images below, please choose up to three that best sum up your view of each party as it is today.
GB respondents only. The larger the word / image the more times it was selected.

Labour to Conservative switchers on the Conservative Party





Hope

Optimistic
Reasonable
Patriotic
Mean what they say
Opportunity



Lord Ashcroft Polls
@LordAshcroft

Again, the words – “optimistic,” “hope,” “mean what they say,” “patriotic,” “opportunity” and “reasonable” – are self-explanatory. Among the images, Big Ben tended to signify strength, belief in the UK and the return of sovereignty to Britain after Brexit; the policeman represented their preferred approach to law and order and the promised recruitment of new police officers; the soldier represented patriotism, tradition, Britishness and a stronger approach to national defence; and the man in a suit stands for a combination of business, entrepreneurship and professionalism – though with some saying he represents a typical rich Tory voter.

Some former Labour voters in our groups felt the Conservatives had changed and was no longer the party of privilege.

“I think they’ve changed. They’re more for the people, all the country, not just one class.”

This was partly due to Brexit and the personality of Boris Johnson: “It feels like we’ve actually got a leader of the country. He comes across as passionate about the country and the people. If it’s all a front, he does it very well;” “When he took over, he said, right, you want Brexit, we’ll do it. On the other side of the House they were saying, ‘nah, we’re not doing that, we don’t want to’;” “In his acceptance speech in Downing Street he acknowledged that a lot of people, especially up North, who had never voted Conservative before had voted Conservative. And he actually got up and said, ‘I won’t let you down’. I’m not saying he will keep that promise but he didn’t have to say that, and it quite impressed me.”

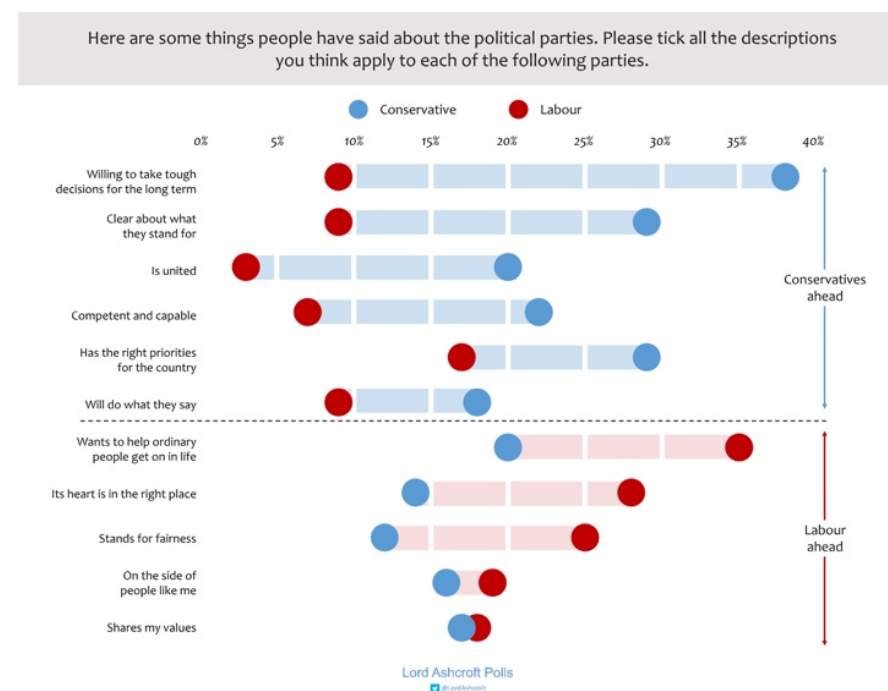
There was also a view that the Tories now represented the priorities of working people more than Labour did: “I think they’ve changed. They’re more for the people, all the country, not just one class. It used to be that the Conservatives were for the rich, but I don’t think that’s true anymore;” “I think the Conservatives are less stuffy than they were. They’re trying. And they’re going to have to, or they’re not going to get people’s votes;” “Boris seems more like a real person than a politician. He reminds me a bit of Churchill. He gets stuck in and gets on with it;” “The Conservatives seem more aspirational, while Labour are quite regressional, looking back all the time, with things like the four-day week. Anyone who’s worked all their life, has bought a house, wants to keep hold of that, and that means the Conservatives.”

“I don’t think the Tories are to blame for austerity. Gordon Brown sold all the gold and they left a note saying there was no money left.”

Moreover, many said they held Labour at least as responsible as the Conservatives for austerity, which they felt had been made necessary by the previous government’s

mismanagement: “I don’t think the Tories are to blame. Gordon Brown sold all the gold and they left a note saying there was no money left;” “We were up to our earholes in debt;” “It was a process we probably had to go through. It was hard but the country needed it. They spent and spent. There was a lot of waste.”

In our poll, we asked whether people thought certain descriptions applied to the Conservative Party or to Labour. “Wants to help ordinary people get on in life” was the description most often picked to describe Labour, but only by 35%. Around a quarter picked “its heart is in the right place” and “stands for fairness.” Fewer than one in five chose “on the side of people like me” and “stands for fairness,” though slightly fewer still chose these descriptions for the Conservatives.



The Conservatives were most associated with being “willing to take tough decisions for the long term” (by 38%, compared with 9% for Labour), having “the right priorities for the country” (by 29%, compared to 17% for Labour) and “clear about what they stand

for” (also by 29%, more than three times the proportion who chose this for Labour). More also considered the Tories “competent and capable,” “united” and thought they “will do what they say.”

Labour values?

When we asked our focus groups of former Labour voters how they would describe the party’s values, several said it was hard to say with the party so divided: “It’s more difficult to say because of the discord. Labour hasn’t had any direction really since about 2016. There seemed to be a lot of conflict and contrast within one party. How can you vote for a party who don’t even know which way they want to go?”

“It’s not a mainstream political party anymore, it’s a cult around Corbyn.”

A number of themes did emerge, however. One was that the party had been taken over by unrepresentative activists who were much further to the left than most people, including Labour voters: “They’re pandering to a minority of members, the Momentum movement, which is too left-wing for me, I’m more middle of the road. I’ve been watching what’s going on and thinking ‘there’s no way I’m voting for this shower’;” “Thatcher and the pit closures was 40 years ago, it’s ancient history now. I’ve got to look at what’s best for me and my family. Is it socialism bordering on communism, or the centre right, a focus on business, looking forward?” “A lot of them are quite educated people but it’s fashionable to be well-off and educated and be a socialist. They haven’t lived the kind of life we’ve all lived in a steel town;” “Corbyn and Momentum have hijacked the Labour Party. If any moderate Labour MP speaks out, they get rentamob. McDonnell is the ringleader;” “It’s not a mainstream political party anymore, it’s a cult around Corbyn.”

“Sarah Champion in Rotherham was booted out for saying the vast majority of child abuse groups were from ethnic minorities... Why? It’s 100% true.”

Partly because of this, some also felt the party had come to embody an excessively politically correct or “woke” culture, which would be intolerant of what they considered sensible, mainstream views: “Sarah Champion in Rotherham was booted out for saying the vast majority of child abuse groups were from ethnic minorities. She was speaking the truth, but because it was ‘racially insensitive’ it was, ‘oh, you can’t say that’. Why? It’s 100% true;” “They’re classing themselves as liberals but won’t let

anyone else have a different viewpoint;” “You’re a bigot if you don’t agree there are 125 different genders;” “They can be woke, but they can also be vitriolic. I’ve heard them say things to Conservatives where I thought, ‘well, that wasn’t very nice’;” “The other day Jeremy Corbyn even did his pronouns! He said, ‘my name’s Jeremy Corbyn and my pronouns are ‘him’ and ‘his.’ You can Google it!”

“They knew us because they were part of us, but not anymore.”

At the same time, Labour seemed to have become disconnected from the kinds of people – like our participants – whom they used to represent: “They knew us because they were part of us, but not anymore;” “I was born and bred Labour, they were for the working man. But now they’re all bloody millionnaires, loads of them have got three or four houses. They’re hypocrites;” “Since Blair and Brown, Labour have become totally London-centric. If it doesn’t exist outside the Greater London area, they’re not really interested. They forgot about the real world. I can’t relate to what they’re talking about at all;” “They don’t know what everyday life is like here. Especially when you’ve got all the Lithuanians, Poles, all the ethnic majorities in this town. They’re just used to their own social life;” “They just thought ‘we’ll do what we think is right for the working-class people,’ but a lot of people have moved on from the 70s, thank God.” This in turn helped explain why Labour seemed not to represent them in areas like immigration and welfare, on both of which the party was much too “giving”: “they seem to want to open the borders for everybody;” “They want to go back to the old way when people on benefits earned more than I probably do.”

“They take you for granted in places like this that they think are the heartland. But if you raise something they don’t like, it’s like Kiosk Keith – the shutters come down.”

As a result of this disconnection, some felt Labour had failed to understand how what might once have been considered the working class had changed, and seemed not to understand or approve of their aspirations: “They’ve tried to go back to hard left Labour policies that they think represent the working-class man or working-class families, but at the same time working-class families have changed. They’re not the same as they were in the late 70s or early 80s. Policies like renationalising energy providers, I think, that’s what it was like before I was born. It seems a backward attitude;” “The lines are blurred between the classes, which is as it should be – we shouldn’t stick people in these different bands. We’re all the same, we all came in the same way and we’re all going out the same way. So to try and aim at the traditional working-class vote – it’s not there anymore.”

“They want everyone dependent on the state in one way or another.”

“If someone is successful, will they still vote Labour? So they want to keep them down;” “They want more of everybody the same than people being entrepreneurs and that sort of thing. They want everyone dependent on the state in one way or another;” “They’re champagne socialists, aren’t they? People who have got lots of money but say ‘vote Labour’ to look after us poor people.”

This led many to feel that Labour had taken them and their votes for granted while understanding and representing them less and less: “They expect you to vote the way your father did, which we can see isn’t always the case now. They think, ‘oh, they’ll vote for us anyway;” “They relied on a heavy-spending manifesto, arrogantly assuming their voters are so uneducated that they won’t ask who’s paying for it. The working man knows things aren’t free;” “They take you for granted in places like this that they think are the heartland. But if you raise something they don’t like, it’s like Kiosk Keith – the shutters come down.”

In our Labour Movement focus groups, it was clear that some members and supporters recognised many of these problems, and even acknowledged that they themselves were in something of a bubble: “I was on holiday during the referendum and there were leave posters everywhere. Loads of people outside London wanted to leave. It

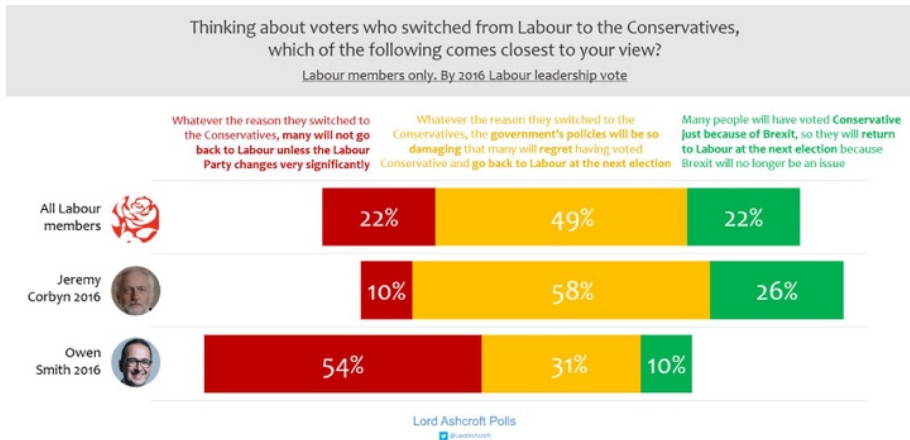
really shocked me;” “Labour used to be a working-class party, but it has shifted to being an ultra-liberal party. It has lost its identity;” “The average person would probably agree with Labour’s principles but they’re dressed up in this super-liberal modern way, very woke, and some traditional Labour voters might find that a bit repellent;” “They may be from a working-class background but they have moved to better careers and salaries, and they hear these policies and think ‘that’s going to affect me’. Taxing what he thinks are high earners but are really not anymore, they’re standard middle-class earnings;” “What is a working-class person now? What does that look like? I don’t think they even know.”

Some members recognised a divide, but simply thought they were on the right side of it: “If I lived in a different part of the world that was more homogenous, I might think differently too;” “We fact-check the news, and I’m not sure everyone does;” “They have been duped. If they are being spoon-fed by the media, they’re probably not seeing both sides of the argument. If you get both sides of the argument, how could you come to that conclusion?” “We’re not polar opposites, everyone wants their child to have a decent education, equal opportunities. So it just comes down to morals.”

3: THE FUTURE

Was it a one-off?

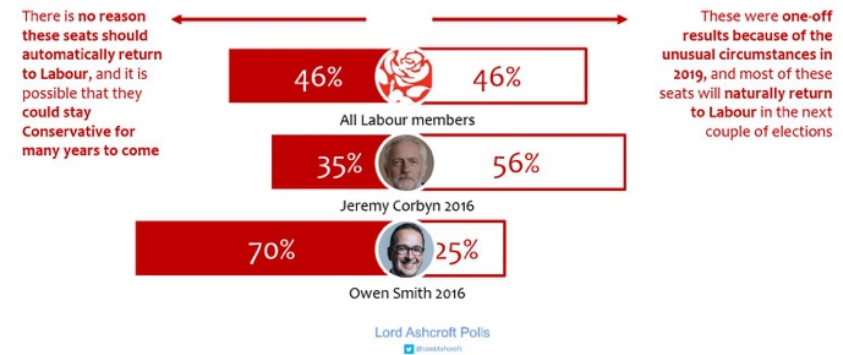
More than 7 in 10 Labour members agreed that many Labour-Conservative switchers will go straight back to Labour at the next election either because they voted purely over Brexit in 2019 (22%), or because the government’s policies will prove so damaging that they will regret having voted for it (49%).



Only just over a fifth – and only one in ten 2016 Corbyn voters (but more than half of those who backed Owen Smith) – felt that “whatever the reason they switched to the Conservatives, many will not go back to Labour unless the Labour Party changes very significantly.”

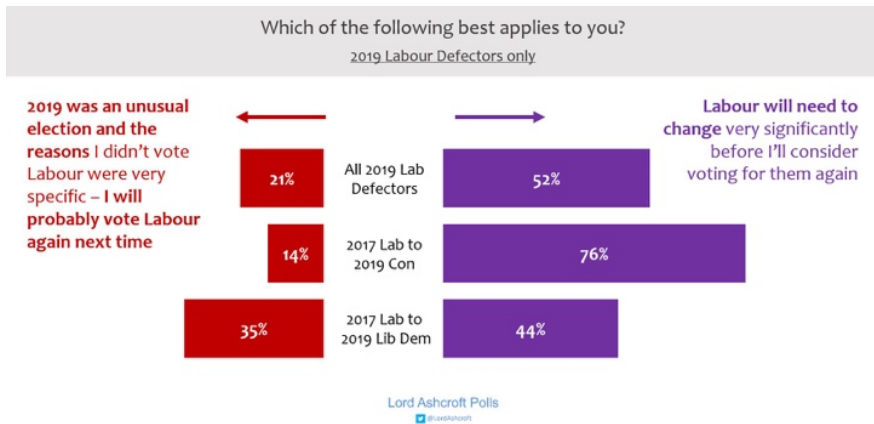
Members were evenly divided as to whether traditionally Labour seats that fell to the Tories would naturally return to Labour in the next couple of elections (46%, including a majority of 2016 Corbyn voters) or might now stay Conservative for many years to come (46%).

As you will know, the Conservatives won many seats which had previously been considered Labour strongholds, especially in the Midlands and the North of England.
Which of the following comes closest to your view about this?
Labour members only. By 2016 Labour leadership vote

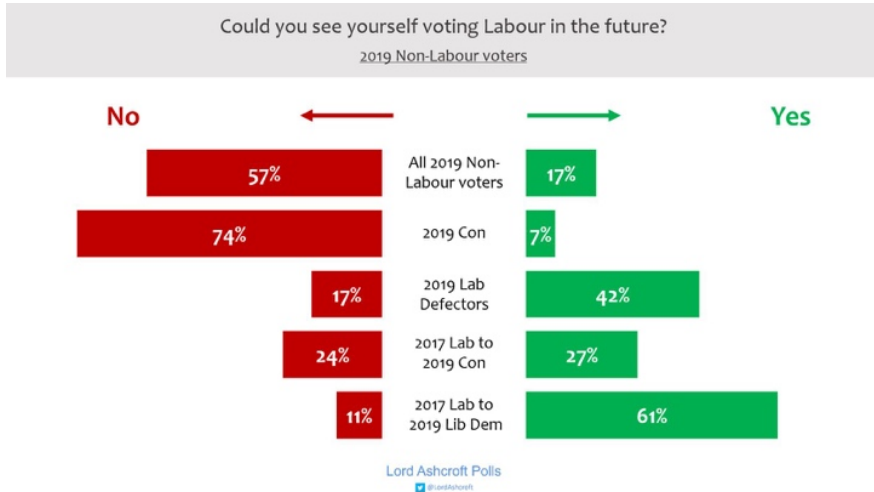


Asking Labour defectors themselves a similar question produced a somewhat different answer. Only one in five agreed that “2019 was an unusual election and the reasons I didn’t vote Labour were very specific – I will probably vote Labour again next time.” This included more than a third of Labour-Lib Dem switchers, but only 14% of 2017 Labour voters who moved to the Tories.

More than half of Labour defectors – including three quarters of Labour-Conservative switchers – said instead that “Labour will need to change very significantly before I’ll consider voting for them again.”



More broadly, most of those who did not vote Labour in 2019 said that as things stand, they could never see themselves doing so – though this included only 40% of those who voted Lib Dem, compared to 74% of 2019 Conservatives.



While 6 in 10 Labour-Lib Dem switchers said they could see themselves voting Labour again in the future, switchers to the Tories were more circumspect, with 49% saying “don’t know.”

In our focus groups, former Labour voters sometimes emphasised that “we’re not necessarily Tories, we’ve just been pushed this way because there is no-one standing up for us,” and a few were clear that as far as they were concerned they had lent the Conservatives their vote for one election only. But most said they were open to voting Conservative again if Boris Johnson delivered, as they hoped and expected him to: “Boris has pumped a shedload of money into the NHS and is recruiting more police officers. Even in the first three weeks he was making all the right moves. If he’s going to continue in that vein, more power to the guy;” “If things improve, I’d have no hesitation in voting for Boris again. I don’t think you can jump back to Labour as soon as Brexit is done. Or I won’t, personally.”

“I don’t think you can jump back to Labour as soon as Brexit is done. Or I won’t, personally.”

“It’s not like we’re convinced Tories for life. We could change every time.”

Above all, they were at pains to point out that they would take each election as it comes and could not be taken for granted by any party: “It’s not like we’re convinced Tories for life. We could change every time;” “It does send a message to the greedy ones in London that if they rile us up again, we can go whichever way we like;” “We’re in the age of price comparison sites.”

“My grandad always said to me, you always vote Labour. But I got to the point where I thought, I can’t anymore, it’s the end of the road. So I won’t say that to my lad when he’s older, I won’t say you always vote Labour.”

“As the generations go on, people are more educated, they understand more what they’re voting for;” “There’s no loyalty now. I’ll take each case as it comes;” “My grandad always said to me, you always vote Labour. But I got to the point where I thought, I can’t anymore, it’s the end of the road. So I won’t say that to my lad when he’s older, I won’t say you always vote Labour.”

Show me a sign

Though they often named Brexit and Jeremy Corbyn among their primary reasons for not voting Labour, most former Labour voters in our groups did not think the party would be fixed once these two factors were out of the way. As well as a strong and credible leader, the party needed to be united, have sensible priorities that showed they understood the modern world and people like them, to project patriotism, and adopt believable, costed policies. Many expected this to take a decade or more.

“They’ve got a long way to come back. It’s not going to happen in the next ten years.”

Many said Labour needed to “start from the beginning,” which in turn meant getting back in touch with the kind of people they had lost: “They need to show a greater level of respect. They treat voters like idiots. The smugness, the virtue-signalling – people don’t want to be told they’re idiots for considering voting Conservative. There is a big attitude problem;” “They need to recruit from communities they’re representing, not someone from a university students’ union who’s full of crap from the word go;” “Hold their hands up and say we got it wrong, we went in the wrong direction, things are going to change. But they have to follow it up as well.”

“They need to show a greater level of respect. They treat voters like idiots. The smugness, the virtue-signalling... There is a big attitude problem.”

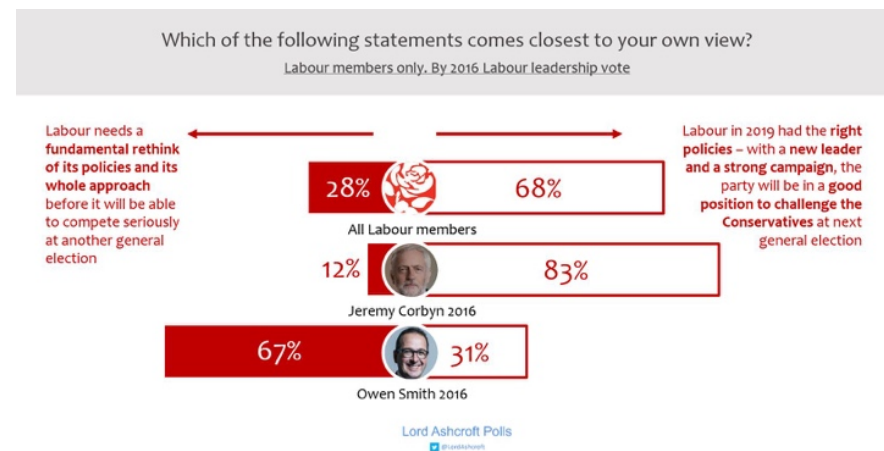
In terms of policies, many wanted to see Labour move to a more selective attitude to immigration, a more centrist approach to the economy, spending and debt, and an understanding of aspiration: “Be less communist. They wanted us all to be at that level, with no-one striving for excellence.”

Some also wanted a guarantee that Labour now accepted Brexit. For some, this meant “a recognition that they should have gone with the public. Their downfall was that they tried to overturn the democratic vote of the public. They should hold their hands up and say they got it wrong.”

Rebound or rethink?

More than two thirds of members agreed that “Labour in 2019 had the right policies – with a new leader and a strong campaign, the party will be in a good position to

challenge the Conservatives at the next election.” This included 83% of those who voted for Jeremy Corbyn in the 2016 leadership election.

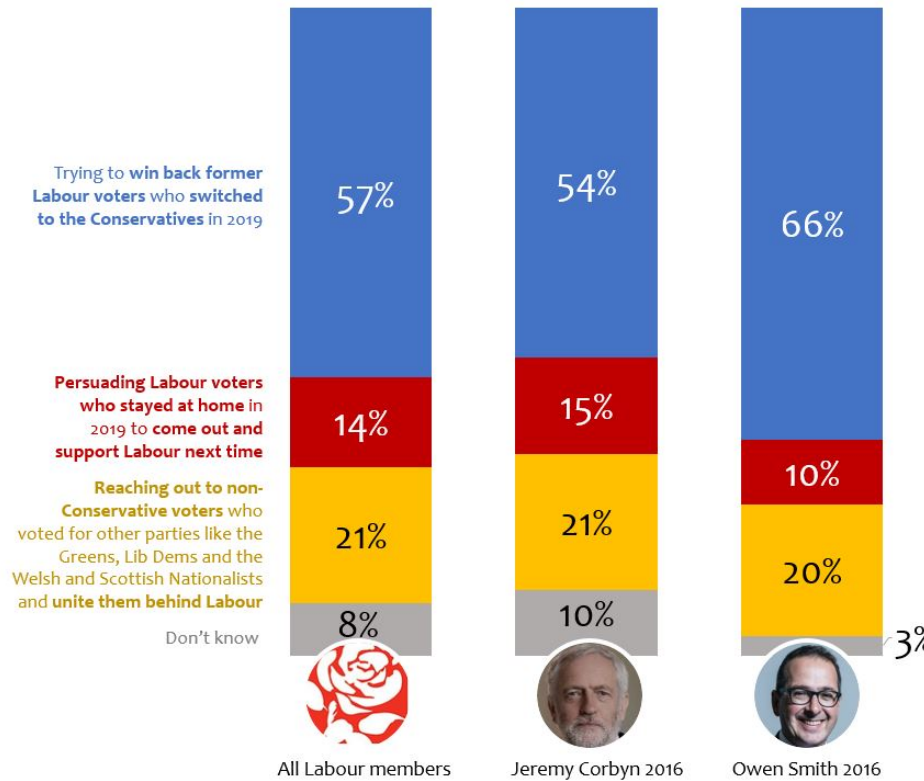


Only 12% of 2016 Corbyn voters agreed that the party “needs a fundamental rethink of its policies and its whole approach before it will be able to compete seriously at another general election – the view taken by two thirds of those who voted for Owen Smith in 2016.

When it comes to rebuilding electoral support, only just over half of Labour members agreed that the party’s priority should be “trying to win back former Labour voters who switched to the Conservatives in 2019.”

What do you think should be Labour's priority in aiming to win the next general election?

Labour members only. By 2016 Labour leadership vote



Lord Ashcroft Polls
@lordashcroft

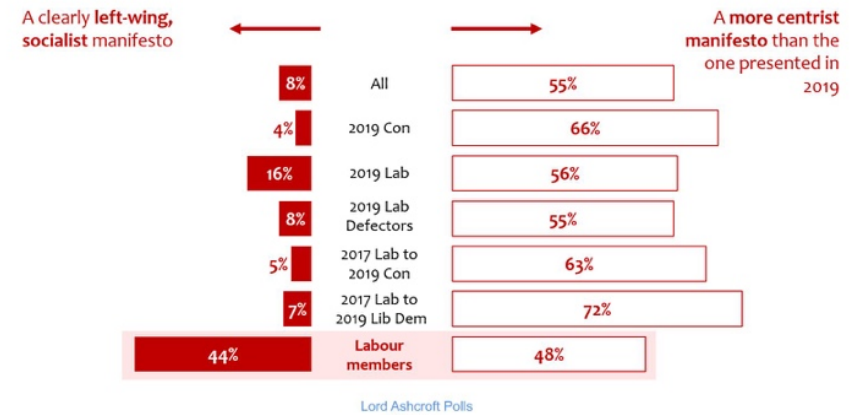
More than one third thought the most important thing was either to reach out to other non-Conservative voters and unite them behind Labour (21%), or to persuade Labour voters who stayed at home in 2019 to turn out again next time (14%).

Members were even more closely divided over whether the best route to an election victory was “a clearly left-wing, socialist manifesto” (44%, including 59% of 2016 Corbyn voters) or “a more centrist manifesto than the one presented in 2019” (48%, including 85% of 2016 Smith voters).

Voters as a whole, meanwhile, were much more likely to think a more centrist manifesto would give Labour the best chance of winning (55%) than that a left-wing, socialist manifesto was the answer (8%).

Which of the following do you think will give Labour the best chance of winning future general elections?

By 2019 General Election vote



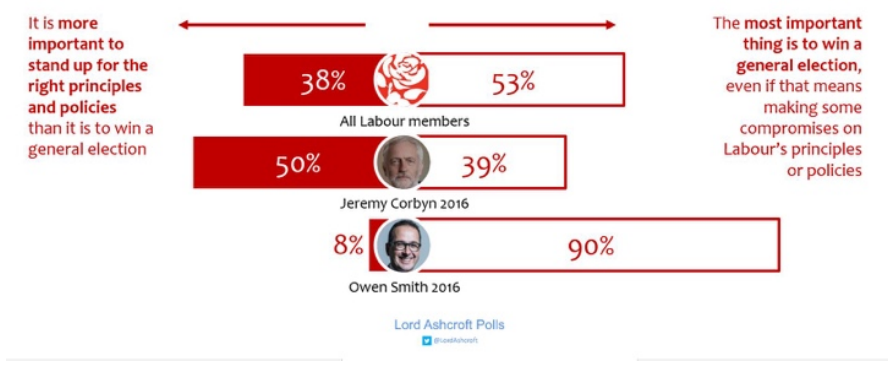
Lord Ashcroft Polls
@lordashcroft

This included a clear majority of Labour defectors (which includes those who did not vote in 2019), and a large majority of those who switched to the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats.

Compromise with the electorate?

Labour members as a whole were more likely to agree that “the most important thing is to win a general election, even if that means making some compromises on Labour's principles or policies” than that “it is more important to stand up for the right principles and policies than it is to win a general election,” by 53% to 38%.

Thinking about the Labour Party's future strategy, which of the following comes closest to your own view?
Labour members only. By 2016 Labour leadership vote



Those who voted for Jeremy Corbyn in the 2016 leadership election took the opposite view, saying principles and policies were more important than winning by 50% to 39%. Nine out of ten 2016 Smith voters were prepared to make compromises to win a general election.

Most Labour members in our focus groups felt there would need to be a move towards the centre before they could win another election (though not everyone: “Don’t go to that murky place in the middle! Stay on the left!”) They sometimes said they knew they expected to find this process uncomfortable: “I have very strong values but it’s not just about me. Listening to people we don’t agree with has never been more important;” “It’s so difficult because I want Labour to be left, but to win it has to be more middle.”

Most also said the party needed to understand its former voters, sometimes implicitly acknowledging that they currently did not: “People changed their minds for a reason. Find out why and win them back. Don’t rush into it;” “We need to be proactive; we can’t wait for a catastrophe. We’ve got to reach out to people. Don’t just say they must be racist or right-wing.”

However, some admitted they would find certain policy shifts very difficult. For example, should Labour have a more restrictive approach to immigration? “Curtailing freedom of movement? I’d have a real problem with that;” “I think if we were not open to accepting people, I’d be very uncomfortable with it;” “We could have been more informative about what the reality was.” What should be done about the idea some

people have that Labour always wants to spend too much money? “That’s a media thing. The Conservatives do it as well, but they only ask Labour ‘where’s the money coming from?’” “I don’t think that’s fair. We want to spend a lot; we just need to justify the figures better – where it’s coming from and what we’re going to do with it.”

We’ll be back?

Asked what they thought would be the result of the next general election, more than one in three – including 40% of Labour defectors – said they didn’t know. Of those with an opinion, most expected the Conservatives to be re-elected, while 17% expected a hung parliament and only 6% expected a Labour victory. More than half (52%) of those who switched from Labour to the Conservatives expected another Tory victory at the next election.

Our focus groups of former Labour voters certainly reflected this. Most expected another Conservative majority and felt it would take a Tory implosion for Labour to have a chance.

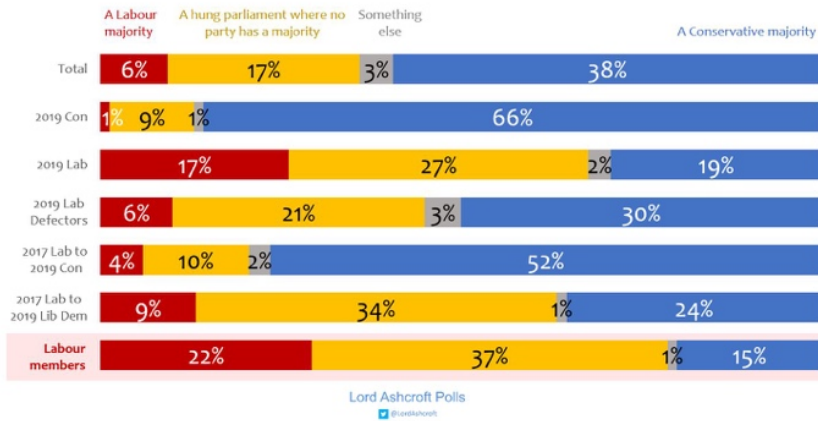
“The only way someone else would get in is if they mess up. I mean, really mess up. It would have to be post-apocalyptic.”

Though many noted that this partly depended on the effects of Brexit, they often noted that things currently seemed to be going in the right direction: “He’s talking about an Australian immigration system, recruiting police, funding the NHS – people have been talking about it for years but he’s doing it.” Some also wondered ruefully what Boris Johnson could do to put his voters off: “He’s got loads of children, he’s an adulterer, he’s been fired for lying to his employer, he’s under suspicion for misuse of public funds – what else could he do?;” “The only way someone else would get in is if they mess up. I mean, really mess up. It would have to be post-apocalyptic.”

Labour members were much more optimistic about their prospects. In our poll, only 15% (including only 9% of 2016 Corbyn voters) said they expected another Conservative majority, while 37% anticipated a hung parliament. More than one in five expected Labour to win a majority in four- or five years’ time.

What do you think is the most likely result of the next general election – which will probably be in four or five years' time?

By 2019 General Election vote



Some party members in our focus groups were similarly sanguine – either because they thought people had switched only because of Brexit, or because they expected them to be horrified by the consequences of electing Boris Johnson: “I think a significant proportion will go back because they voted on a single issue;” “Brexit will be done, and if the new leader is not a semi-Marxist they will be able to bring the recovery forward;” “With a new face at the head of the party, the next election will be a totally different thing;” “It will be a Labour landslide because the Tories will have turned the country into something out of Mad Max by then.”

Others were much less sure: “If we let Boris run with it he will eventually do something horrific. If we get someone votable we could maybe get a hung parliament. But that’s the best we can hope for;” “People lost a lot of faith in Labour, and I don’t think they will change enough. The people coming forward for the leadership are too entrenched;” “When you go into the booth you do what you usually do. The fact that people have done something different is quite telling.”

4: THE LEADERSHIP

Wake me up when it's all over

The leadership election had sparked little interest among the former Labour voters in our focus groups, partly because of general political fatigue (“I’m tired of politics. I’ve switched off”) and partly because they were more interested in the new government than in news about Labour (“I’m looking to see what Boris is going to do. He’s got to deliver, and I think he’s going to. If he doesn’t, we’ll look at other people, but we’ve got to give him a chance.”)

Though some had noticed (usually with approval) that most of the candidates were women, few were inspired by what they had seen: “None of them look sincere and there’s no change;” “None of them look like they’ve got an ounce of a sense of humour;” “They’re all a bit woke, aren’t they?;” “Is there no Brexiteer? After what’s happened to them?”

Their ideal Labour leader would be “professional,” “realistic,” “strong,” would “bring the party back together,” “stand up for Britain” and, perhaps above all, would listen: “They’ve got to go with what the people have asked for, not just what they themselves want.” Several also called for a more centrist approach: “I would want someone fairly moderate. We all understand that you’ve got to work, and the company has to make a profit, in order to pay the taxes so we get the services. I would want someone with an understanding of that.”

Rating the candidates

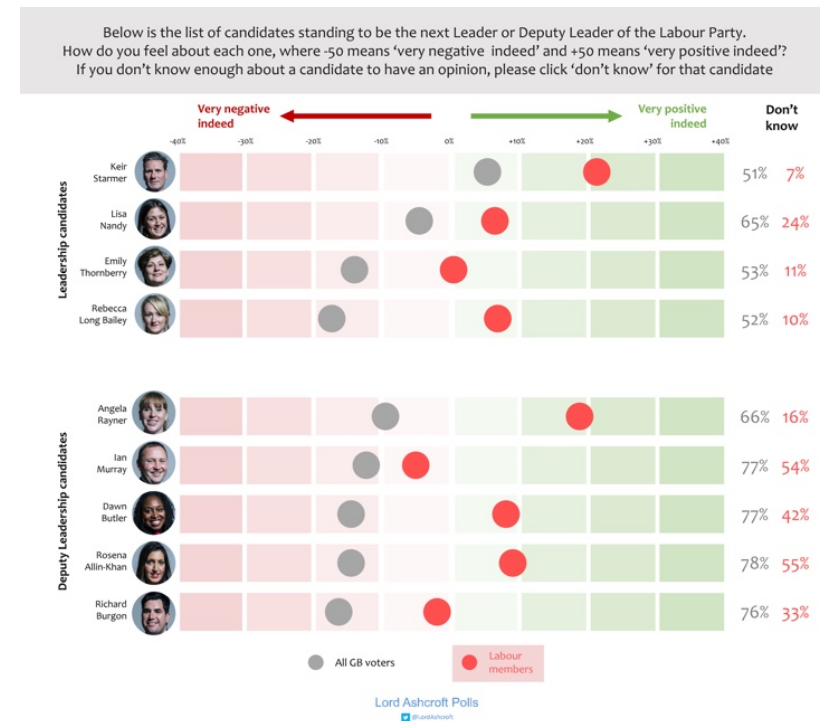
In our surveys of Labour members and voters as a whole we asked how positive or negative people felt about each of the candidates to be Leader or Deputy Leader of the Labour Party.

Participants could click ‘don’t know’ if they did not feel they knew enough about the candidate to have an opinion, and the first thing to note is just how many took this option. Just over half said ‘don’t know’ for the best-known candidates (Keir Starmer, Rebecca Long Bailey and Emily Thornberry), while two thirds did so for Lisa Nandy and more than three quarters for most of the candidates for Deputy.

Keir Starmer scored the highest ratings among Labour members by a clear margin, and he was the only candidate to win a net positive rating among voters as a whole.

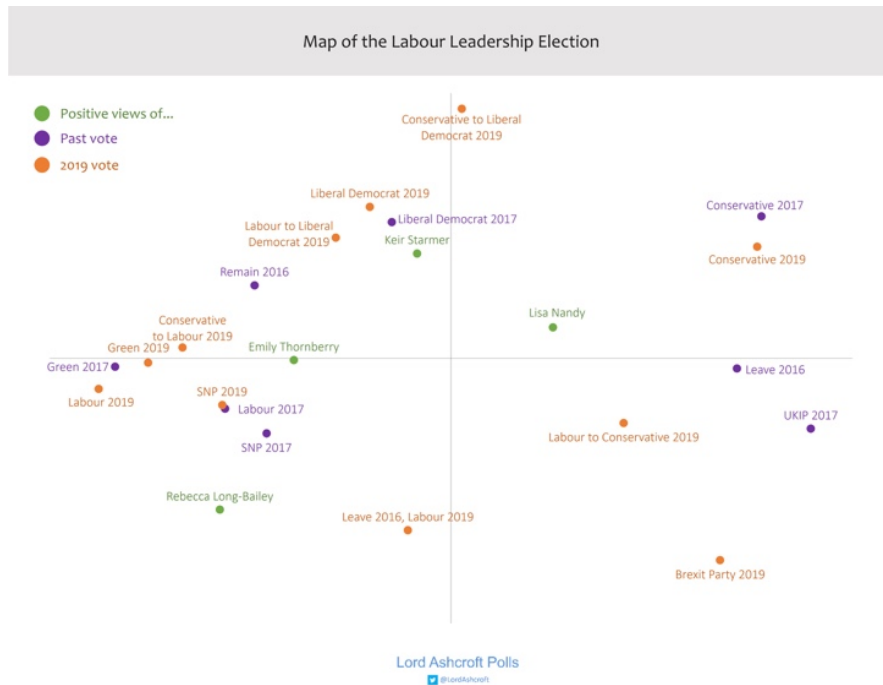
Rebecca Long Bailey was the most divisive figure, scoring the second highest rating among Labour members and the lowest of any of the contenders among the public as a whole.

Angela Rayner was the best known and most popular (or, for voters as a whole, least unpopular) candidate for Deputy.



Our political maps, based on correspondence analysis, show how different issues, attributes, personalities and opinions interact. The closer the plot points are to each other, the more closely related they are. Our map of the Labour leadership election shows the kinds of voters from which each of the candidates finds their peak support.

Keir Starmer’s most positive ratings are to be found in remain-voting territory, close to voters who switched to the Lib Dems from Labour or the Conservatives. Peak support for Rebecca Long Bailey is to be found much deeper in current Labour territory, while the highest ratings for Emily Thornberry are to be found between the two. Of the four candidates, Lisa Nandy finds the peak of her appeal closest to Leave voters and those who switched from Labour to the Conservatives in 2019.



Keir Starmer

Among Labour defectors, Keir Starmer scored much higher with Labour-Lib Dem switchers (+21.9) than Labour-Conservative switchers (+0.6).

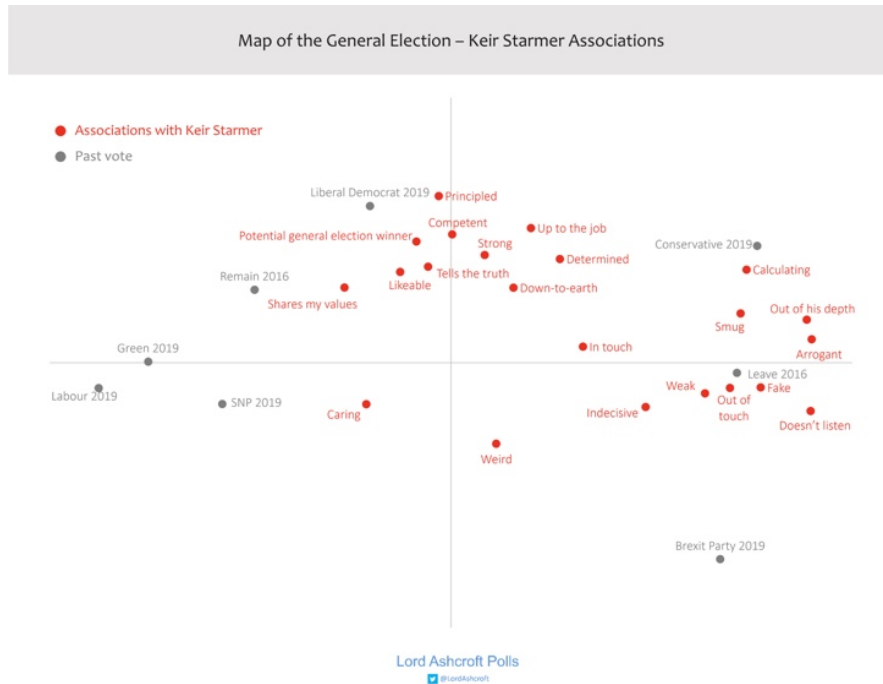
Participants were shown a list of positive and negative words and phrases and asked which they most associated with each candidate. The most frequent choices for Keir Starmer were “competent,” “up to the job” and “potential election winner.”

Below are some words and phrases that people have used to describe political leaders. Which words and phrases do you think describe each of the candidates to be the next Labour leader? Please choose up to three for each, or click 'don't know' if you don't know enough about them to have an opinion.
GB respondents only

Keir Starmer



When we map the words and phrases chosen for Keir Starmer we see the most positive views (“likeable,” “principled,” “competent,” “strong”) coming from centrist remainer and Lib Dem-voting territory – while descriptions like “out of touch” and “doesn’t listen” are most likely to come from Conservative/Leave voting parts of the map.



Much of this was echoed in our focus groups of former Labour voters: “Best of the bunch. A bit like Tony Blair in some ways. He could be a bit more centre-ground. He didn’t get on with Jeremy Corbyn, although they pretended they did;” “He was the DPP, obviously very intelligent. He has that authority;” “He’s shown he can be resolute and is quite competent;” “The only one I think would be electable.”

“He did everything in his power to stop Brexit.”

However, some Labour defectors doubted he would be standing up for them, not least because of his position on Brexit: “He was happy to overturn a democratic process,

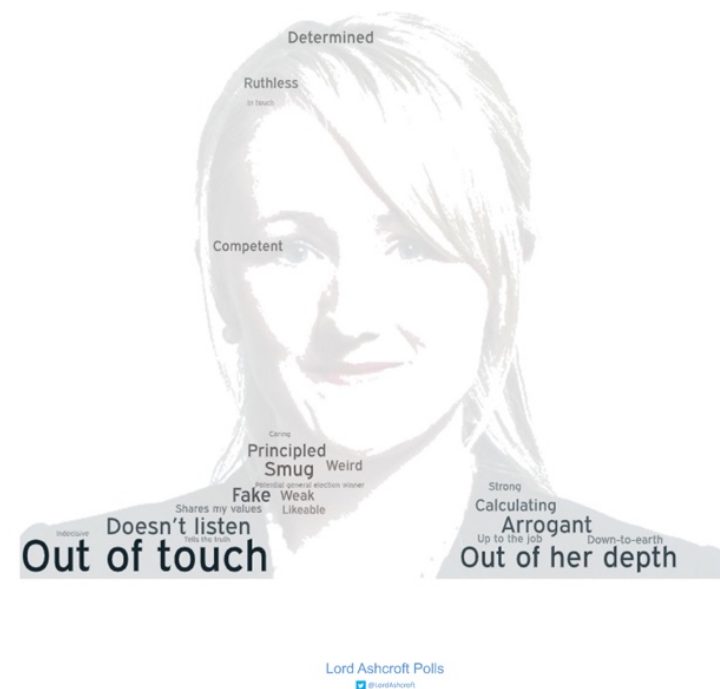
which is a bit of a worry;” “He did everything in his power to stop Brexit. And he’s privileged and upper-class;” “It’s Sir Keir Starmer, isn’t it, so straight away you think, ‘who are you representing?’”

Rebecca Long Bailey

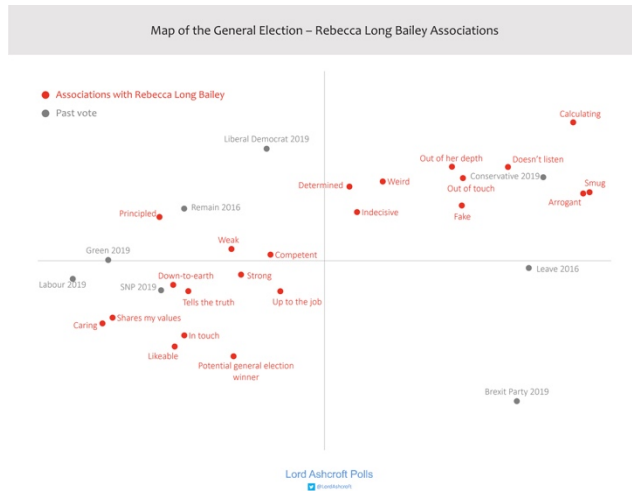
Rebecca Long Bailey’s rating was firmly negative among switchers from Labour to both the Conservatives (-20.8) and the Lib Dems (-11.8). The most chosen words and phrases in our poll were “out of touch” and “out of her depth,” followed by “arrogant” and “doesn’t listen”.

Below are some words and phrases that people have used to describe political leaders. Which words and phrases do you think describe each of the candidates to be the next Labour leader? Please choose up to three for each, or click ‘don’t know’ if you don’t know enough about them to have an opinion.
GB respondents only

Rebecca Long Bailey



As we can see on the map, positive associations like “shares my values,” “caring,” “down to earth” and “tells the truth” were most likely to have been made by core Labour voters.



Focus group participants who were aware of her believed her to be the candidate closest to Jeremy Corbyn and felt she would continue in the same direction.

“She would be Jeremy in a skirt.”

“She’s taking Labour’s biggest failures and trying to use that as her banner. She’s saying, ‘I wrote those policies!’”; “She’s just going to go down Corbyn’s route, no change whatsoever. She would be Jeremy in a skirt;” “She would be a nail in the coffin. It would show Labour are absolutely not looking to change.”

Emily Thornberry

Emily Thornberry’s score was much lower among Labour-Conservative switchers (-23.1) than among Labour-Lib Dem switchers (-3.0).

Below are some words and phrases that people have used to describe political leaders. Which words and phrases do you think describe each of the candidates to be the next Labour leader? Please choose up to three for each, or click ‘don’t know’ if you don’t know enough about them to have an opinion.
GB respondents only

Emily Thornberry



In our poll, the words and phrases most often associated with her were “arrogant,” “smug,” “out of touch” and “doesn’t listen.”

Our map shows that positive descriptions like “principled,” “strong,” “tells the truth” and “competent” are to be found closer to Lib Dem and Remainer territory, a similar space to that occupied by Keir Starmer.

Map of the General Election – Emily Thornberry Associations



Former Labour voters in our focus groups often saw her as “arrogant” or said she “talks down to people” – though one observed that she had recently “changed her style. She used to be one of the most arrogant remainers on TV.”

“She slagged off someone because he had an England flag outside his house.”

However, several recalled her tweeting a picture of a house sporting a flag of St. George, which suggested a disdain for people of a certain social class or cultural outlook: “She slagged someone off because he had an England flag outside his house. She was derogatory about it. So that’s her off.”

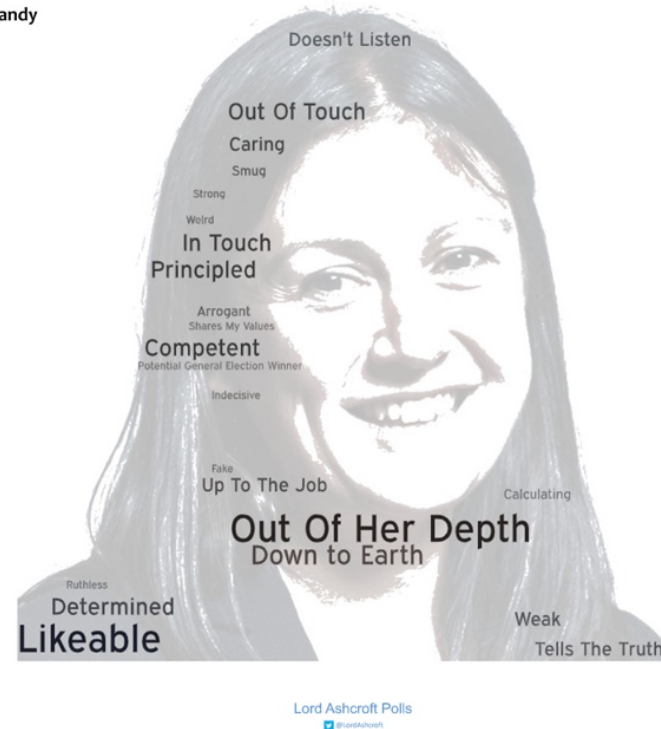
Lisa Nandy

Lisa Nandy’s score was the second highest among both Labour-Conservative switchers (-4.7) and Labour-Lib Dem switchers (+6.9).

Though she was the least known of the four contenders, those who had an opinion chose “likeable” as often as “out of her depth.”

Below are some words and phrases that people have used to describe political leaders. Which words and phrases do you think describe each of the candidates to be the next Labour leader? Please choose up to three for each, or click ‘don’t know’ if you don’t know enough about them to have an opinion. GB respondents only

Lisa Nandy

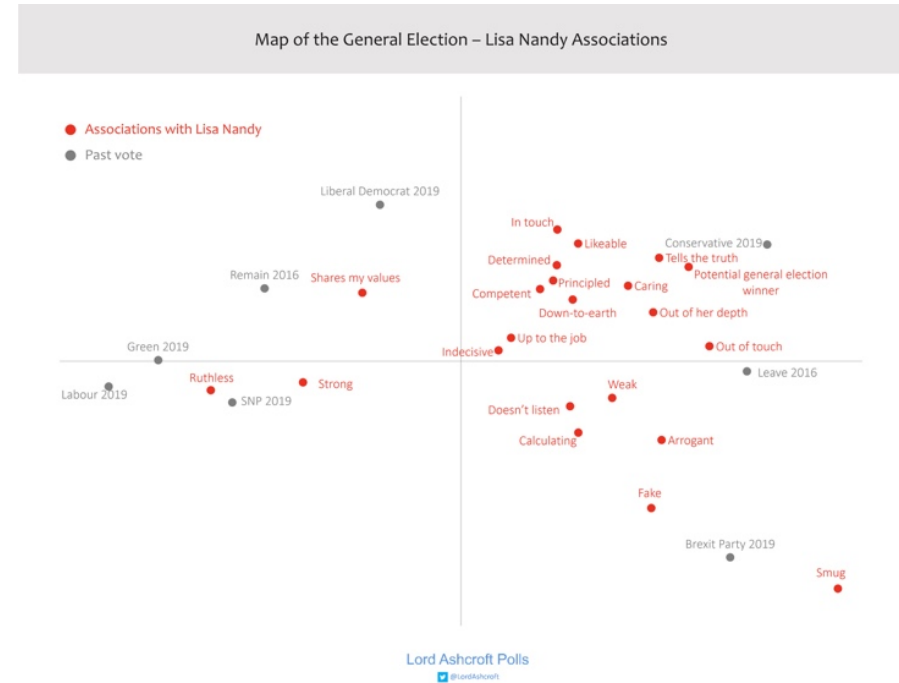


Most of the positive associations came from the Leave-voting and Labour-Conservative switching side of the map, putting the centre of her appeal further away from core Labour and Remainer territory than that of the other three candidates.

Lisa Nandy was also the least well-known of the candidates among our focus group participants, but for most those who had a view the impression she had made was positive: “I’d pick her. She’s young, she’s got fresh ideas, she wasn’t with Corbyn.”

“She was one of the first people to speak out against Corbyn, so that’s a start.”

Some were encouraged that “she was one of the first people to speak out against Corbyn, so that’s a start.” But “hasn’t she got a thing about private schools?”



ABOUT LORD ASHCROFT

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, author, philanthropist and pollster. From 2005 to 2010 he was Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party, having been its treasurer from 1998 to 2001. He is the founder and chairman of the board of Crimestoppers, chairman of the trustees of Ashcroft Technology Academy, Chancellor of Anglia Ruskin University, Honorary Chairman of the International Democrat Union, vice-patron of the Intelligence Corps Museum, a senior fellow of the International Strategic Studies Association and a former trustee of Imperial War Museums. From 2012 to 2018 he served as the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Veterans' Transition.

Lord Ashcroft's political works include:

Smell the Coffee: A Wake-Up Call for the Conservative Party

Minority Verdict: The Conservative Party, The Voters And the 2010 Election

Pay Me Forty Quid and I'll Tell You: The 2015 Election Through the Eyes of the Voters

Well, You Did Ask: Why the UK Voted to Leave The EU

Call Me Dave: The Unauthorised Biography of David Cameron (with Isabel Oakeshott)

Hopes and Fears: Trump, Clinton, The Voters and the Future

The Lost Majority: The 2017 Election, The Conservative Party, The Voters & The Future

Jacob's Ladder: The Unauthorised Biography of Jacob Rees-Mogg

His other books include:

Victoria Cross Heroes

Special Ops Heroes

Heroes of the Skies

George Cross Heroes

Special Forces Heroes

Victoria Cross Heroes Vol. 2

White Flag? An Examination of the UK's Defence Capability