

Northern Lights

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Public Policy and the
Geography of Political Attitudes

Neil O'Brien and Anthony Wells



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Why this Project?

Politics and policy are intimately connected. Understanding what different voters want, and why, is pretty complicated. From day to day politicians and policy makers use conventionally understood terms which reflect their understanding of the electorate. We think we know what we mean when we talk about parties competing for the “centre ground”, or what the “aspirational working class” is, or the “North-South divide”. But do we? Ideas about the electorate reflect different generations of academic research - including some long defunct ideas. Society is always changing, and with it, so does academic research and polling evidence. This report is an attempt to update our maps.

How should we understand geographical differences and the urban/rural divide? Is there really a North-South divide, and if so why? What are different voters’ policy priorities? How do they think the parties should change?

To answer these questions this project brings together existing opinion research, and uses an extensive polling exercise, regression analysis and qualitative research to try and improve our understanding of public policy, and the geography of political attitudes in Britain today.

Thanks

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Political Choices in Britain Today

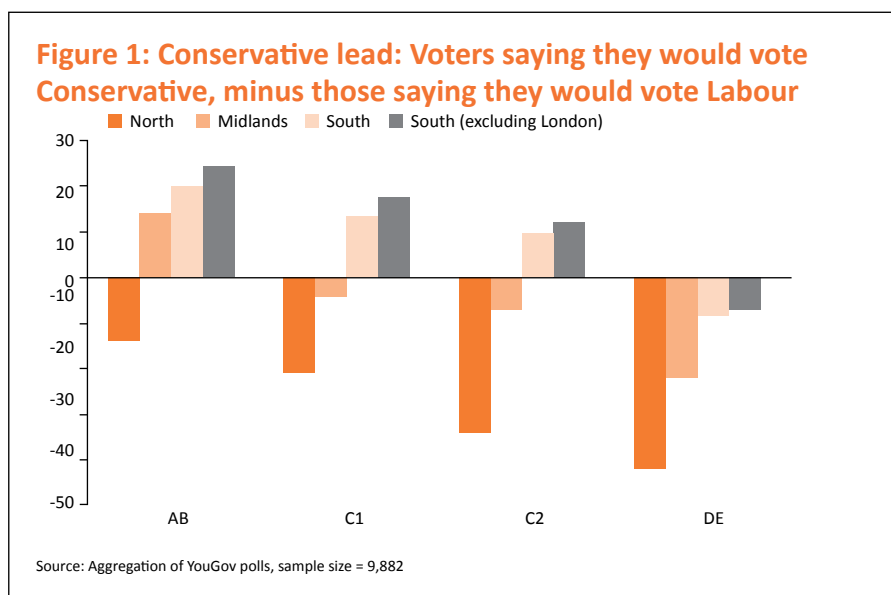
Geographical differences

In different parts of Britain people vote in very different ways, and think different things. For example, there are clear differences between urban and rural areas. Only two Conservative MPs have Premiership Football teams in their constituencies – although there are 20 teams in the league – because such teams are based in big cities, and the Tories typically do poorly in such places.

Take another example. Commentators often talk about the North-South divide. It is certainly true that the Conservatives do better in the South and Labour in the North, but within these regions there are huge differences. Labour do fine in inner London. And the North is very diverse, containing Hull and Harrogate, Moss Side and Sheffield Hallam. In fact if you were to take the TransPennine Express train from Liverpool to Newcastle you would find that 13 of the stops are in Conservative-held seats and 19 in Labour. It is in the Northern cities specifically that the Conservatives do badly, rather than the North as a whole.

Academics have spent several decades arguing about whether these differences are simply because different *sorts of people* live in different areas, or if there is something more to it than that.

Clearly, people in the same social class vote quite differently in different parts of the country. In fact, although class used to be said to be the dominant factor in British politics, actually working class (DE) voters in the South are more likely to vote Conservative than middle class (AB) voters in the North.



But are these really the “same sort of people” we are looking at? Working class people in one part of the country might be more likely to earn more, or to live in a city, or work in the public sector. Later on in this paper we will try to control for all these differences more thoroughly.

Recent academic work suggests that even controlling for everything else about people, the *local area* that they live in can make a difference to the way they vote.¹ But the “local area” is quite small: more your neighbourhood than your region.

Even at this scale it is not obvious why the area you live in should make a difference. Is it because people form judgements about politics from what they see happening locally? Is it because conversation with like-minded neighbours makes them bring their opinions in line with the local norm? Or are they just voting tactically: they may think their preferred party has no chance of winning locally (or, on the other hand, no chance of losing). The research suggests that all three effects are in play. Furthermore, in the US, there is evidence that people are “sorting” themselves into homogenous groups – by moving to communities of people who are like them, and also vote the same way.²

Is British politics becoming more geographically polarised?

Some argue that the country is becoming more politically polarised. Danny Dorling at Sheffield University argues that the country is being politically polarised by growing geographical inequality:

“Conservative Britain is becoming ever more of a fringe, restricted to very few parts of the country... Those who have most have voted to try to hold on to as much as they can. Those who have less have not been fooled... The segregation of the Tory voter is greater now than it was in 1922 [showing] how little empathy most people in Tory shires now feel for those who live in the cities, or the North, or the countries outside of England.”³

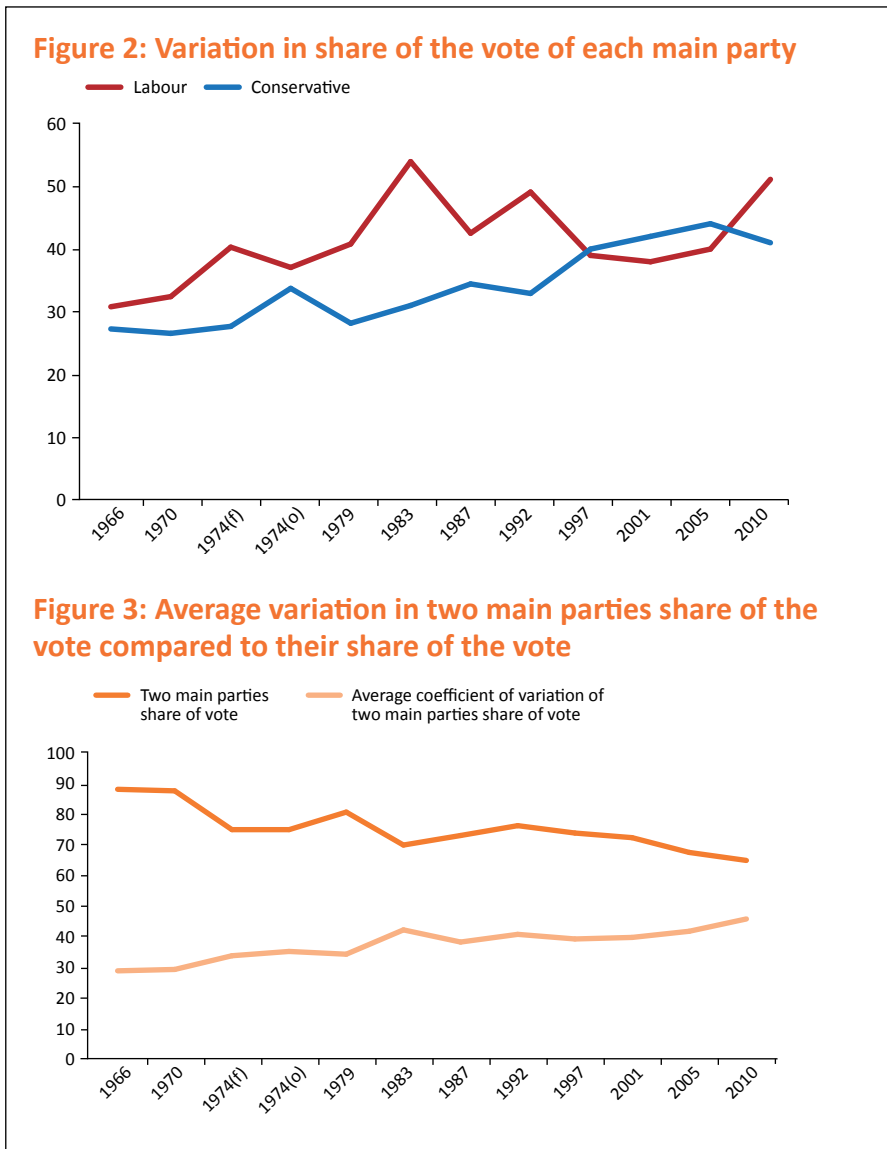
This argument is based on an increase in the variation of the Conservatives’ share of the vote around the country. However, there are a number of things to say about this analysis. Firstly the focus on the Conservative vote alone is odd, as the variation in Labour’s share of the vote has gone up too.

But the real problem is the rise of other parties. The variation in the main two parties’ share of the vote around the country has gone up as the two main parties’ share of the vote has gone down. With the rise of Liberal Democrats and nationalist third parties, the Conservatives and Labour are more often pushed into third place. This causes their share of the vote to fall sharply because – as Lib Dem leaflets famously point out – “It’s a two-horse race.”

1 R. Johnston and C. Pattie, “Putting Voters in their Place” (2006)

2 B. Bishop, “The Big Sort”, (2008)

3 New Statesman, “Our Divided Nation” 14 June 2010



A series of two party contests?

A more compelling argument is that the classic national two party election system has fragmented into a series of *different* two-party contests.⁴

Johnston and Pattie have assembled evidence that true “three way marginals” are rare. The number of seats in which the two main parties are in first and second place has steadily dropped, from 448 seats in October 1974 to just 286 seats in 2010.

⁴ R Johnston and C. Pattie, “The British general election of 2010: a three-party contest – or three two-party contests?” *The Geographical Journal*, March 2011

Table 1: The number of British constituencies in which different pairings of parties occupied first and second places at each post-1970 general election*

	Conservative and Labour	Conservative and Liberal Democrat	Labour and Liberal Democrat	Other	Total
1974 (February)	430	145	22	26	623
1974 (October)	448	104	14	55	623
1979	511	98	5	9	623
1983	287	282	52	12	633
1987	331	246	36	20	633
1992	415	161	14	43	633
1997	335	126	124	48	633
2001	413	99	60	45	633
2005	338	126	121	42	637
2010	286	203	95	45	629

* Liberal Democrats includes SDP and Liberals pre 1981

Where the main parties are not in first or second place their share of the vote is on average very low. In Lab-Lib contests the Conservatives got 16.9% of the vote. In Tory-Lib Dem battle seats Labour got an average of 12.7% of the vote. Where the two main parties are slugging it out, the Lib Dems got just 17.1% compared to 30% or 32% where they were battling either Labour or the Conservatives.

Table 2: The average constituency percentage of the votes cast at the 2010 general election, by contest type

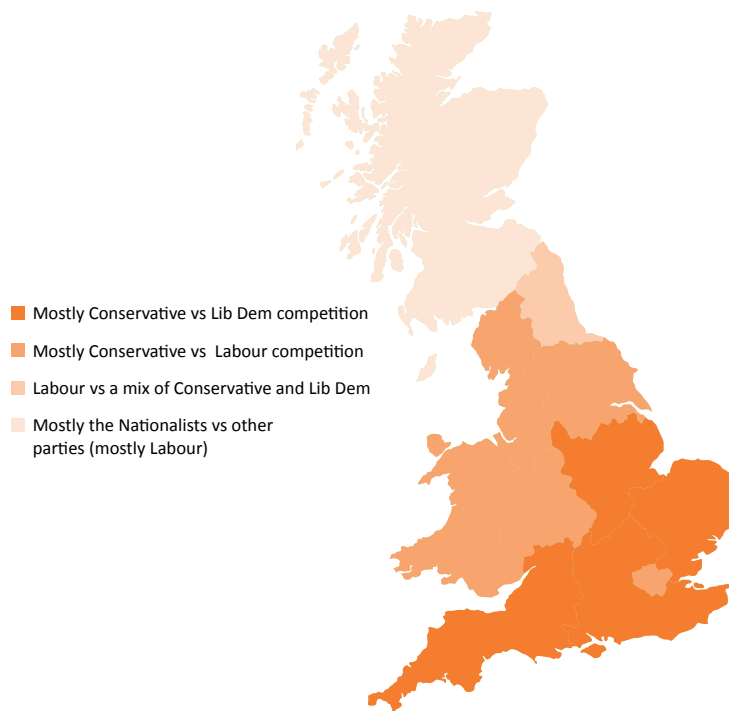
	Con	Lab	Lib	Nat
Conservative–Labour	37.3	37.8	17.1	0.9
Conservative–Lib Dem	48.8	12.7	32	0.4
Labour–Lib Dem	16.9	44.6	29.7	2
Conservative–Nationalist	28.8	16	12.4	41
Labour–Nationalist	11.9	51.8	11.2	23.2
Lib Dem–Nationalist	15.5	11.7	42.2	24.9

The Diagonal Divide

And there is huge variation in the types of two party contests going on around the country. Leaving London aside, there is effectively a “diagonal divide” across England. In the South East, South West, East, and East Midlands, the dominant form of party competition is Conservative – Lib Dem. In the West Midlands, Yorkshire, the North West, and Wales, the classic Labour-Conservative contest remains the norm. In the North East Labour are dominant, taking on a mix of Lib Dem and Tory challengers. Scotland is another country: the majority of the contests are SNP-Labour with a handful of SNP-Tory contests.

Table 3: Proportion of seats where different combinations of parties occupied first and second places at the 2010 general election

	Con-Lab	Con-Lib Dem	Lab-Lib Dem	Other
London	60%	14%	26%	
South West	24%	73%	4%	
South East	24%	74%	1%	
East	34%	64%	2%	
East Midlands	34%	64%	2%	
West Midlands	69%	20%	10%	
Yorkshire/Humber	58%	19%	23%	
North West	63%	16%	21%	
North East	48%	7%	45%	
Wales	50%	3%	23%	25%
Scotland	14%	7%	20%	59%



Source: Adapted from Johnston and Pattie 2011, highlighting added to show dominant form

Have there been longer term changes in the geography of party support?

Still, looking at the results of the 1951 election compared to the 2010 election there are clear changes. If we ignore other parties, just look at Conservative-Labour competition, and only look at big regions, you could argue that the North-South divide has got bigger. The Tories have gained ground in the South, lost it in the North, and been nearly wiped out in Scotland.

Table 4: Conservative share of combined Labour and Conservative seats

	1951	2010
South Excl. London	81%	94%
London	50%	42%
Midlands	37%	62%
North	39%	29%
Scotland	45%	2%
Wales	16%	24%

However, scratch the surface and things aren't so simple. There isn't such a neat pattern of increasing polarisation, not least because of the rise of the other parties. True, Labour have faded further from a low base in the South East, losing seat share to the Lib Dems. But the Tory seat share is almost unchanged. It is really in the East specifically that the Conservatives became more dominant with the party gaining new supporters (Essex man?), and pushing out both other parties.

“The Lib Dems replaced Labour as the Conservatives' main challengers in the South West but the Conservatives also lost ground”

The Lib Dems replaced Labour as the Conservatives' main challengers in the South West but the Conservatives also lost ground. In London the Conservatives lost ground to the Lib Dems. However, the Midlands have flipped clean over – from being mainly Labour to mainly

Tory. True, the Tories have absolutely collapsed in the North West and lost even their toe-hold in the North East. But the Conservatives actually eroded Labour dominance in Yorkshire. Yes, they were eradicated in Scotland, but they clawed back some ground from Labour in Wales. In other words, the idea that a simple “North-South” divide has opened up is too simplistic.

Table 6: Share of seats by region, 1951 and 2010 elections

	Con		Lab		Lib	
	1951	2010	1951	2010	1951	2010
South East	87%	88%	13%	5%	0%	5%
South West	73%	65%	22%	7%	4%	27%
Eastern	68%	90%	19%	3%	14%	7%
London	50%	38%	50%	52%	0%	10%
East Midlands	37%	67%	61%	33%	2%	0%
West Midlands	37%	56%	63%	41%	0%	3%
Yorks and Humberside	30%	35%	63%	59%	7%	6%
North West	51%	29%	48%	63%	1%	8%
North East	16%	7%	81%	86%	3%	7%
Scotland	41%	2%	49%	69%	10%	19%
Wales	14%	20%	75%	65%	11%	8%
Total	48%	47%	48%	40%	4%	9%

Northern lights

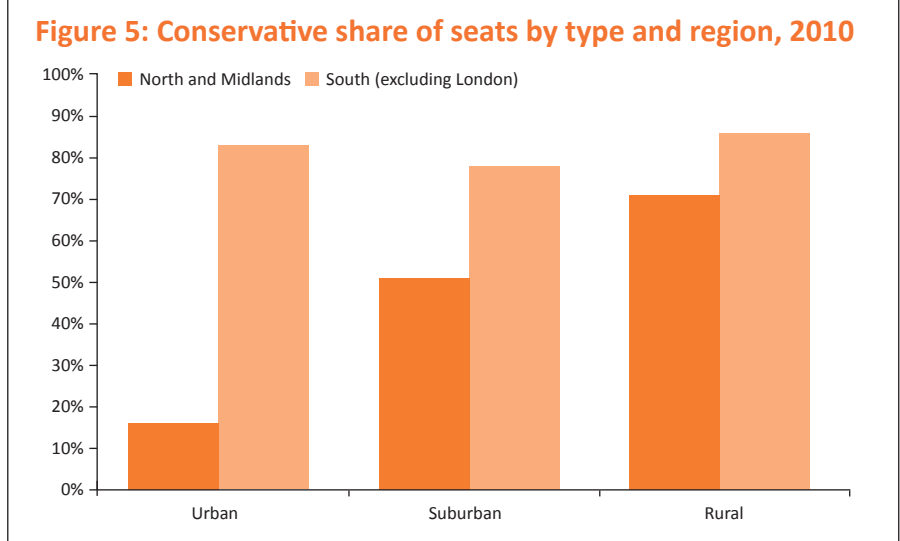
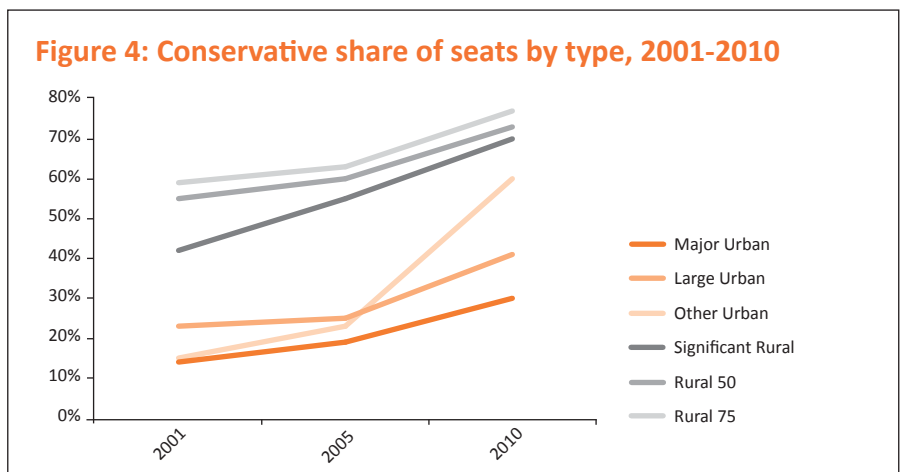
An equally important split is between urban and rural – a rarely explored divide which we will return to later in this paper. The graph below shows the number of different seats held by the Conservative party in different types of seat from major urban to rural.

After the last election the Conservatives held the majority of rural seats, but only a third of “major urban” (city) seats. Of these, most were in London, even though nearly half of such seats are in the North and Midlands.

Commentators often talk about a North-South divide in voting.⁵ But the division is not simply to do with the North but Northern cities specifically.

There are 80 broadly rural seats in the North and Midlands. The Conservatives hold 57 of them (or 71%). No Northern problem for the Tories there – their problem is in the Northern cities. There are 124 parliamentary seats in cities in the North and Midlands (“Major Urban” and “Large Urban”). Of these seats the Conservatives hold just 20 – or 16%.

Over the last two elections the Conservatives have increased their share of seats across all categories, with a particularly large improvement in middling suburban seats (“Other urban” in Figure 4). However, the proportional gains seem to have been a little smaller in urban areas, and overall the rural-urban gap does not seem to be closing.



⁵ E.g. Andrew Rawnsley, “No wonder the coalition hasn’t got many friends in the North”, 26 June 2011

Path dependent politics?

One reason why such differences may be maintained over time is that parties may become stuck in a self-reinforcing cycle. When pushed into third place, their supporters may tactically vote for another party. Parties increasingly focus their efforts on the most marginal seats. And evidence gathered by political scientists over recent decades suggests that local campaigning does make a big difference.⁶

Winning seats in general elections is like the top of a pyramid of political activism, with local councillors as an important lower tier. Without elected councillors, a party is less likely to have the activist base necessary to fight an effective campaign.

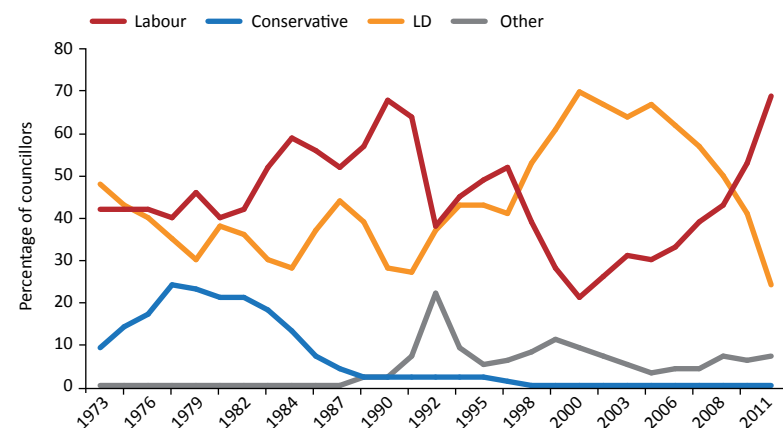
As noted above, in large parts of the country the Liberal Democrats have become the effective challengers to whichever of the two larger parties is dominant. At the local level this has led to the formation of “party deserts” where one of the larger parties may lack any elected councillors at all.

For the Conservatives the desert areas are the Northern cities, for Labour, the rural South. In fact Conservatives have no councillors at all in Newcastle, Liverpool, Manchester or Sheffield, having been replaced by the Lib Dems as Labour’s opponents during the 1990s. Meanwhile Labour have no councillors in 66 different shire and unitary councils.

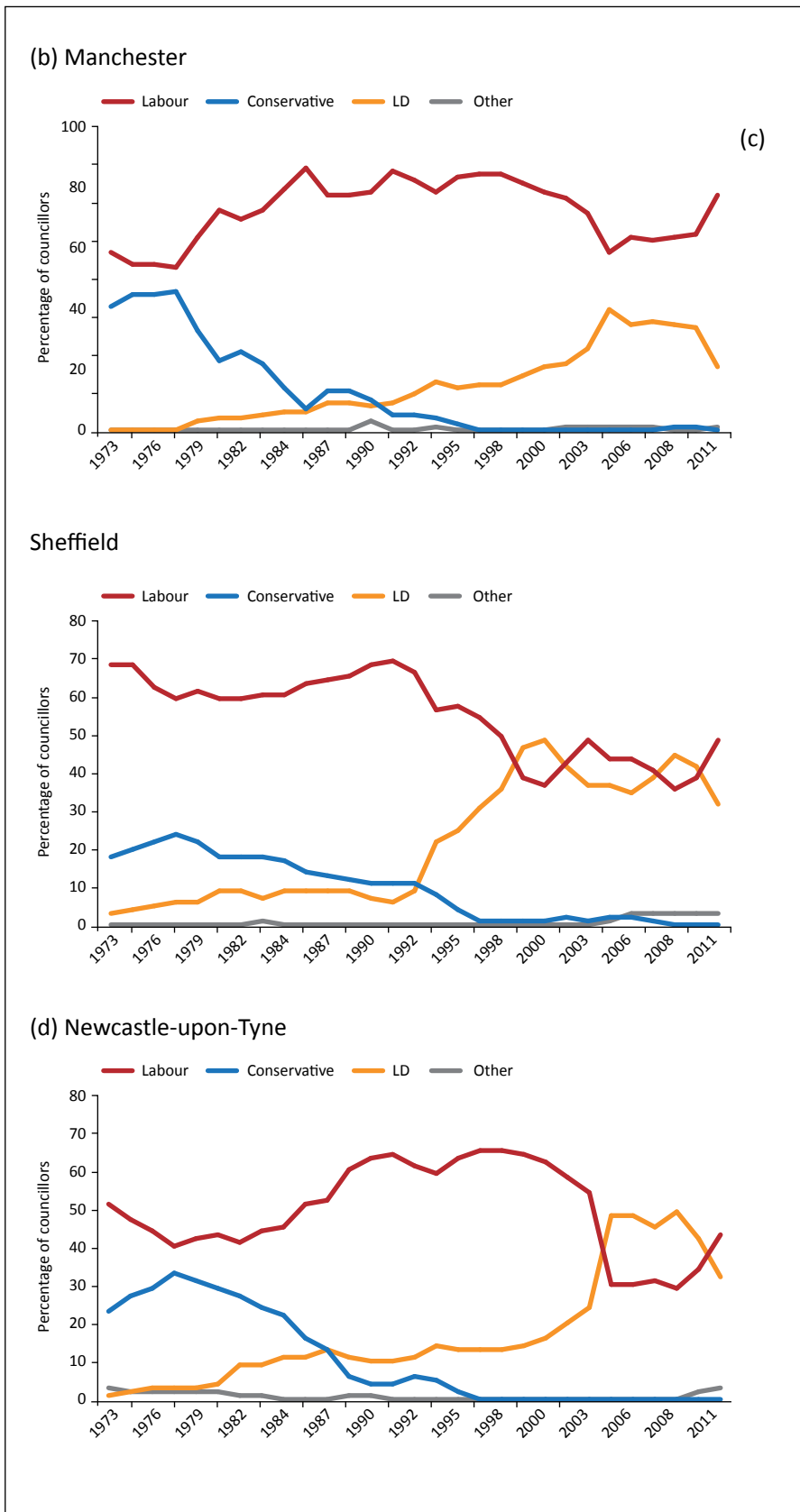
Over time the changes are quite striking. And there are major differences between areas. In some cities like Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield and Newcastle, Conservative councillors became extinct during the 1980s and 1990s, never to return. In other cities, quite similar in many ways, the Conservatives held on and even recovered a little: places like Birmingham, Bradford, Leeds and Salford.

Figure 6: Some cities have seen Conservative councillors become extinct...

(a) Liverpool

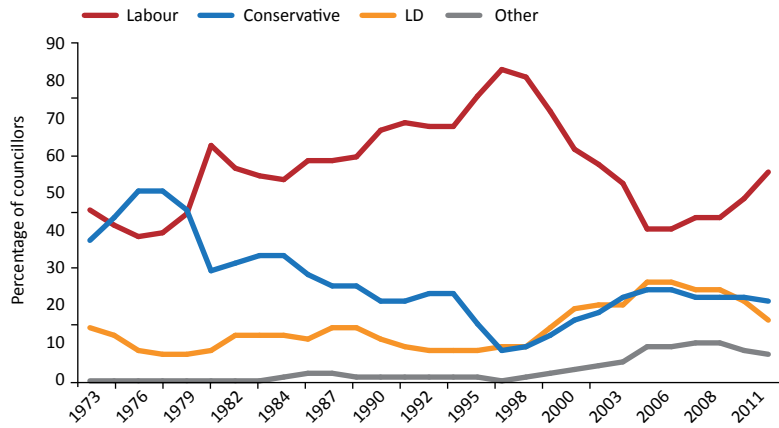


6 E.g. http://www.essex.ac.uk/government/epop/Papers/Panel18/P18_Fisher_EPOP2010.pdf

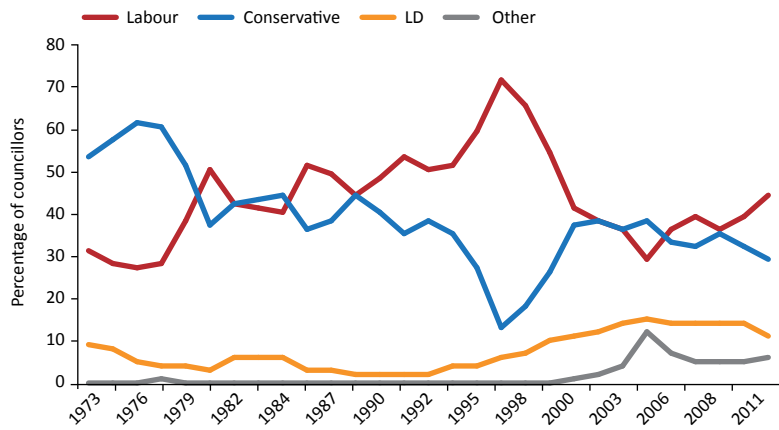


...but in other cities the Conservatives have been more resilient or even recovered

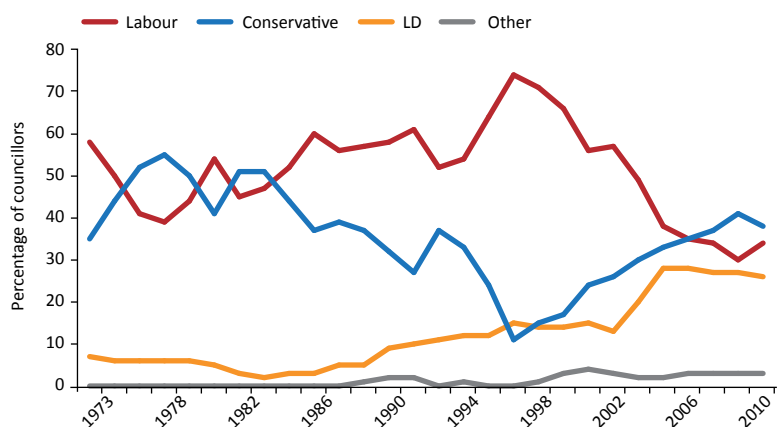
(e) Leeds Council

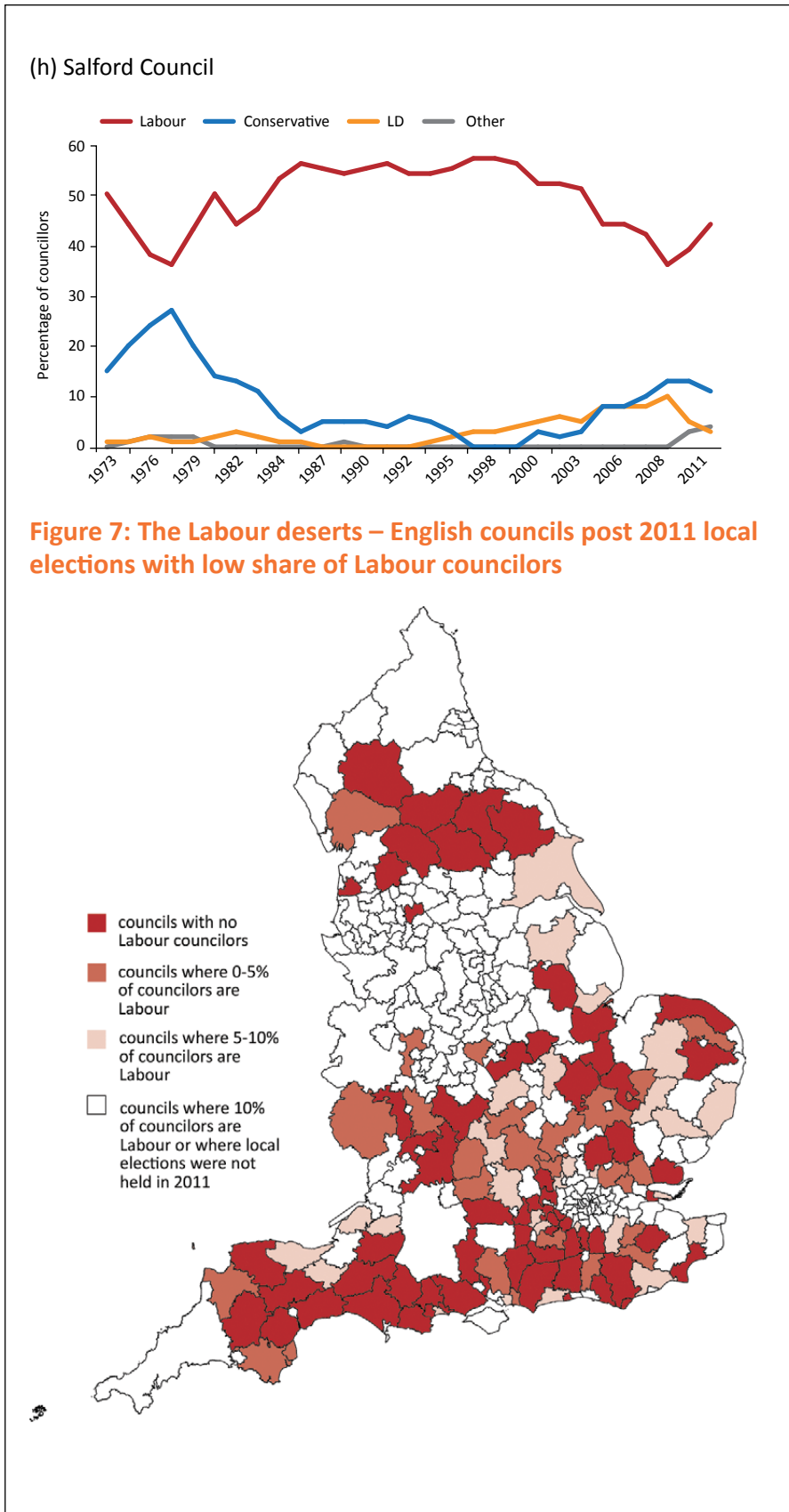


(f) Bradford Council



(g) Birmingham Council



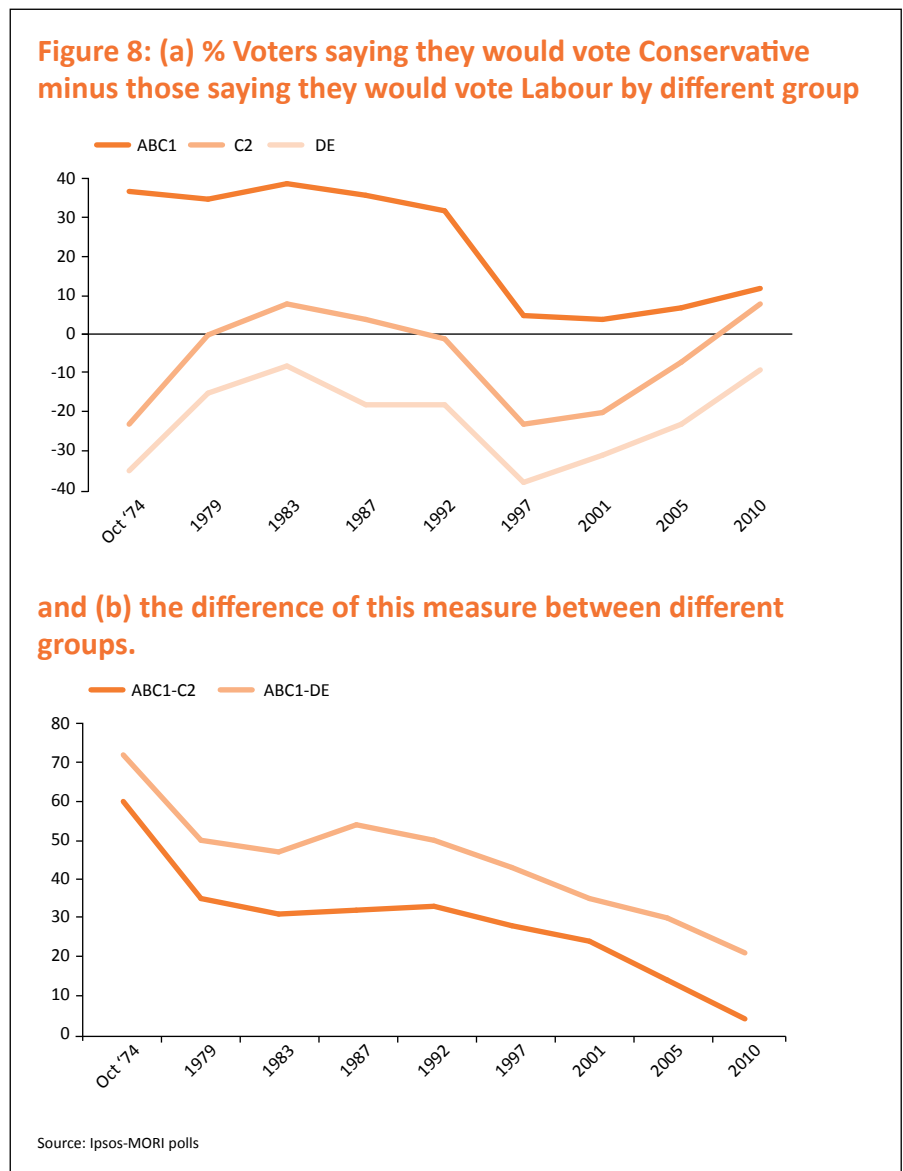


2) Why do people vote the way they do?

While there have been big geographical changes in the way political choice works, there have also been big changes which affect the whole country.

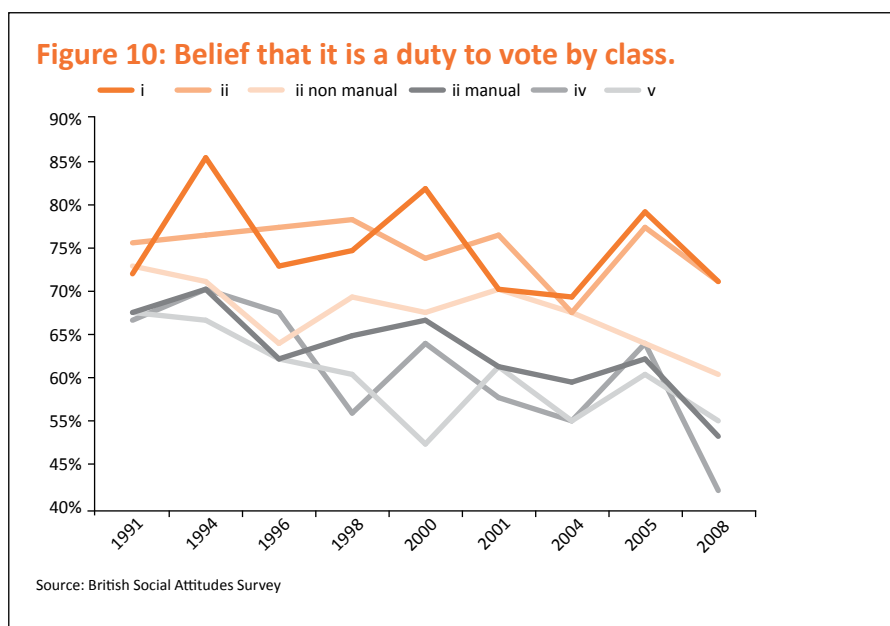
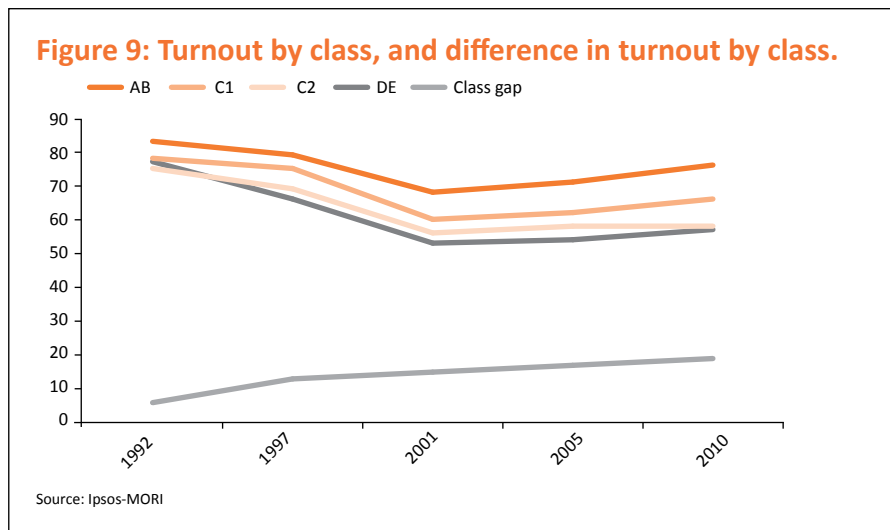
Traditionally, voting behaviour in Britain since 1945 has been explained with reference to demographic factors, particularly voters' social class. Generations of politics students have written essays responding to Peter Pulzer's famous 1967 observation that "Class is the basis of British party politics: all else is embellishment and detail."

Since the 1970s, this has become steadily less accurate. Though people still identify themselves as being in a particular social class, the link between their class and how they vote has weakened ("class dealignment" in the jargon). This seems to have happened in most industrialised countries over the last couple of decades. Perhaps coincidentally, over the same period people's identification with a particular party has weakened too ("partisan dealignment"). The chart below shows how the voting behaviour of middle class voters and working class voters have converged in recent decades.



In one respect class differences are widening, not closing. In recent elections there has been a growing “class gap” in turnout. Middle class voters have become more likely to vote than working class voters. This may simply reflect a long period of Labour government, and growing disenchantment among Labour’s core vote. On the other hand it may not – there is some evidence (explored below) that “anti-politics” sentiment is strongest among Labour voters. It is certainly the case (also below) that Labour voters are more likely to feel “their” party used to represent them, but no longer does so.

Polling for the British Social Attitudes survey shows that the belief that it is a duty to vote has declined most among working class voters. However, while the data is noisy, this decline seems to have been under way before 1997. So it may not reflect Labour’s long period in government. On the other hand, between 1992 and 2001 the bias in the system towards Labour increased – meaning that there was a bigger tactical incentive for Labour’s core voters not to vote. Although this bias has declined since, this period coincides with the later part of the Labour government, so perhaps it does reflect disenchantment, rather than tactical considerations.



Is class politics finished?

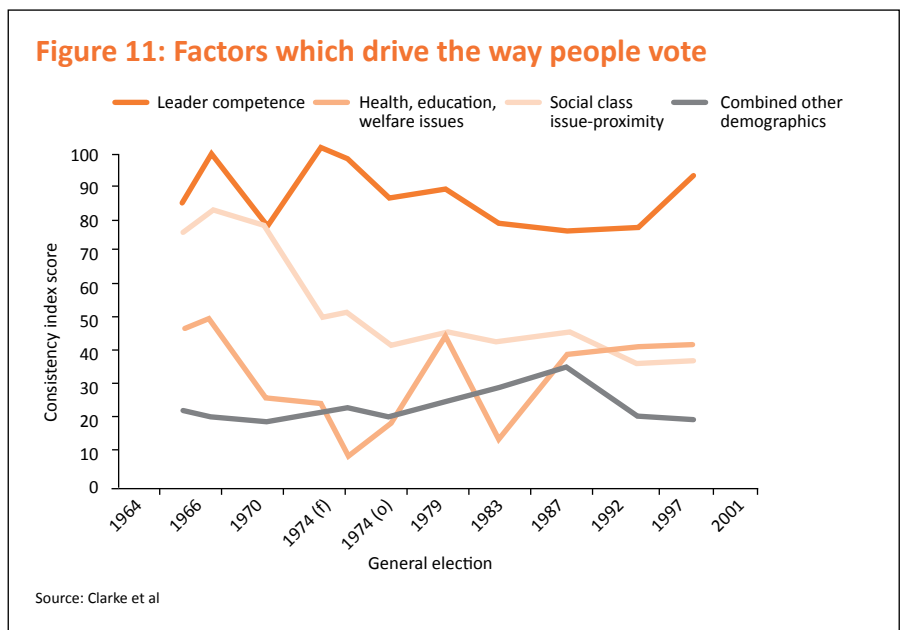
Academics argue over a chicken and egg problem: have political parties reduced class voting by moving to the centre? Or have they moved to the centre because voters don't vote along class lines any more, but instead "shop around" for policies? Academics disagree.

Class clearly still matters to some extent. And so do other social or demographic factors, including age, whether people work in the public sector, ethnicity and so on.

But psephologists⁷ increasingly explain the results of elections with reference to voters' judgements and choices, rather than their demographic or sociological background.

A series of studies by Clarke et al,⁸ shows that social class has become a less powerful predictor of the way people will vote. People's perception of the competence of the different party leaders is most important. Individuals' attitudes to various issues have become relatively more important as class has waned as a factor.

As Clarke et al write, "Although... empirical evidence documenting the weakening of the class – party choice nexus has been available since the 1970s, proponents of the class voting model have continued to insist that it constitutes the canonical account of political choice in Britain. Our analyses indicate that they are wrong to do so."



Clarke et al show that as class-based and sociological factors have waned, voters' individual attitudes and assessments have become relatively more important. These could be either voters' different values (which party do I agree with on a particular issue?) or judgements about competence (everyone wants a strong economy, but who can deliver it?). In the jargon these are "positional" and "valence" issues. As class explanations have fallen away, these sorts of explanations of voting behaviour and political choice have become relatively more important. Both obviously overlap: for example, a voter might regard a decision made by a politician as evidence that the politician in question does not share their values, and also evidence that they are incompetent.

7 Experts on voting behaviour, from the Greek *psephos* – 'pebble' – which the Greeks used as ballots

8 Performance Politics and the British Voter (2009)

While it's difficult to disentangle positional and valence issues, both types of approach now dominate the older sociological approach – in fact political studies academics talk about the “valence revolution” which has displaced demographic explanations in recent decades.

How does all this affect politics and policy?

This kind of academic work may seem rather abstract, but can have huge impacts on policy makers.

For example, the New Labour modernisation project was strongly shaped by arguments about the decline of Labour's traditional electoral base. Key thinkers like David Lipsey, Giles Radice and Philip Gould argued that falling trade union membership, declining numbers of people in social housing, shrinking numbers of workers in traditional blue collar jobs meant that Labour “cannot afford to rely on its ‘core’ voters because there are not enough of them.”⁹ Tony Blair agreed that “Society had changed and we did not change sufficiently with it.”¹⁰

As well as a shrinking core, Labour strategists also stressed changes in values, and the rise of “aspirational” working class voters. The working class was smaller and its attitudes had changed too. Aspirational working class voters wanted choice, self improvement, and they “had outgrown crude collectivism and left it behind in the supermarket car-park.”¹¹

They argued that the research suggested that the party needed to “show that Labour believes in giving individuals control over their own lives; prove that it is no longer a trade-union-dominated party by giving individual members more say; demonstrate that it understands the modern world by rewriting Clause IV.” These points were all adopted by Tony Blair once he became leader in 1994.

Some similar arguments were (and are) in play regarding modernisation in the Conservative party. Perhaps reflecting the fact that this debate took place more recently, debates about Conservative party focussed a little more on voters' preferences than changes in the class structure (to some extent reflecting changes in the way academics and politicians thought about politics).

For example Lord Ashcroft's all-encompassing post-2005-election report, *Smell the Coffee*, argued that the Conservative “brand” was badly tarnished. He argued that “on the issues that mattered most to people, Labour's lead remained unassailable – or at least, unassailed. People did not feel the Conservatives shared their aspirations or their priorities, and for two thirds of voters the answer to the ubiquitous question ‘are you thinking what we're thinking?’ was ‘No’.”

The same report fretted that the Conservatives had a declining share of middle class AB votes even as this group grew in size:

“The profile of party support by social class describes a demographic disaster for the Conservatives. In the 1992 general election the Conservatives won 54% of AB votes. Even in 1997, when it won only 31.5% of the vote nationally, the party held 43% of this group. By 2001 this had fallen to 40%. According to this poll, the Conservatives now commanded just 35% of AB support, only two points ahead of Labour.

“Moreover, as Conservative support among ABs diminished, the size of the AB category relative to the population as a whole grew rapidly. The Conservative Party was holding a shrinking share of an expanding market that had once represented the bedrock of its electoral support.”

9 G. Radice, “Southern Discomfort” (1992)

10 Blair 1992, quoted in Heath et al “The Rise of New Labour” (2001)

11 P. Gould “The Unfinished Revolution” (1998)

It argued that “We must recreate that real core vote – the election-winning coalition of professionals, women, and aspirational voters without whom the party risks becoming a rump. More than anything else we must make sure we understand Britain as it is today, and how Britain sees us.” At this point, in 2005, Ashcroft’s focus was on the ground that the Conservatives had lost among the modern middle class, though in later analysis he would put greater stress on the party’s need to make progress with working class voters and show that it was not the “party of the rich”.

In 2003 Andrew Cooper and Rick Nye, set up the pollsters Populus. Both were formerly Conservative Party staff, and produced an influential stream of polling data showing that overall the Conservatives were seen as much further away from the political centre than the Labour party. For example a party conference poll in September 2003 revealed that the Conservatives were seen as off to the right, while Labour were seen as almost smack in the political centre.

“ Month after month the MORI poll of the top issues facing the nation reported that the most salient issues were the public services ”

The Tories were seen as less understanding, less caring, and less competently led.¹²

Month after month the MORI poll of the top issues facing the nation reported that the most salient issues were the public services – above all the NHS – issues which the Conservatives trailed badly on. Between 1997 and 2007 the NHS was seen as the most important issue most months. During 2006 and 2007 immigration and crime became roughly as important, and after the 2008 crash the economy became once again the central issue.

After his election as Conservative leader in late 2005, David Cameron’s strategy reflected much of the polling analysis which had been generated in the preceding years. His victory speech referenced, amongst other things: attempts to ensure more women were elected; a new commitment to the environment; a promise to end oppositional “Punch and Judy” politics; to fund public services generously rather than promoting an “opt-out culture of helping a few more people to escape public services”; a promise to tackle social breakdown in the inner city; and the belief that “There is such a thing as society.”¹³

Since then there have been further big changes in the electorate. The financial crash and recession changed attitudes in many ways. Labour changed leaders twice, from Blair to Brown to Miliband. The election saw a period of “Cleggmania” – a phenomenon which could not really have happened in an age where voters were firmly anchored in a two-party class based system. A coalition government was formed, uniting around a programme to reduce the deficit. These various events have thrown up a new generation of political analysis, which is examined below.

So what do voters in different places want now?

The result of the 2010 election produced a further round of soul-searching and attempts to discern what the electorate wanted.

Conservative

On the Conservative side Lord Ashcroft produced an initial ‘minority report’ on the 2010 election. Tim Montgomerie, Editor of the influential website *ConservativeHome*,

¹² Populus, September 2003: <http://www.populus.co.uk/Poll/Party-Conference-Poll-2/>

¹³ Cameron victory speech, 6 December 2005

produced a critique of the campaign which overlapped with Ashcroft's critique in some ways, but differed in others. These two accounts blended analysis of the election campaign with a series of observations based on opinion research. Montgomerie argued, amongst many other things, that the electorate had become more cynical since 1997 about politicians and that as a result the Conservative leadership needed to be more specific and authentic.¹⁴ He argued that the first two years of Cameron's modernisation project had been dominated by "second-order matters: the environment, international development, civil liberties, social justice, more diverse Parliamentary candidates". He argued that the modernisation project had become more balanced after 2007 when "tax cuts and welfare reform were revived." He argued that this later balance was more successful, but that "The failure to integrate the old and new messages from the start fed a sense that there was something inauthentic about the Tory message".¹⁵

Ashcroft subsequently followed up his election review with a more substantial analysis of the polls, entitled *Project Blueprint: Winning a Conservative Majority in 2015* published in two parts in 2011.

Based on polling people who had considered voting Conservative in 2010, but did not do so, he concluded that:¹⁶

"The biggest barrier, which was not overcome by election day and remains in place for most of them, is the perception (which Tories are sick of hearing about but is real nonetheless) that the Conservative Party is for the rich, not for people like them."

Based on poll data, the analysis argued that:

"Crime represents a Conservative coalition-building opportunity that is currently being missed... a firm approach to law and order is the very essence of the centre ground. One of the things people expected from a Conservative-led government, whether they voted for it or not, was a tough approach to crime, but so far they have been disappointed."

In part two of the document he noted that:¹⁷

"The rising cost of living was a recurring theme: 'It's a lot harder to make ends meet. If you don't have much money, there's not a lot of fun in life any more'."

Part two of the analysis also found that voters were sceptical that the NHS budget was being protected, sceptical that immigration was being controlled, that schools reform was abstract for most people, and that fears of falling police numbers tended to "kibosh the expectation that the government would be more effective in dealing with crime than its predecessor".

Labour

Liam Byrne was first off the blocks with a May 2010 report entitled *Why did Labour Lose – and How Do We Win Again?* He argued that:

"The 2010 election has punched a serious hole in the bedrock of our coalition – those 'blue-collar' workers employed in a range of modern jobs from retail and logistics to routine manufacturing. Often known in the jargon as the C2s, they make up a fifth of Britain's voters.

14 Conservative Home General Election Review, <http://bit.ly/dflUG7>

15 Conservative Home General Election Review, <http://bit.ly/9pMGXf>

16 http://lordashcroft.com/pdf/14052011_project_blueprint.pdf

17 http://lordashcroft.com/pdf/03102011_project_blueprint_phase2.pdf

Historically, they overwhelmingly voted Labour. Yet in 2010, our support fell a full 20 per cent, down from 43 per cent to just 23 per cent – its biggest ever fall”.¹⁸

His analysis linked stagnating living standards for the squeezed middle with hostility to Labour over immigration and welfare:

“My research shows workers on between £20-30,000 a year have now faced huge forces in our economy squeezing pay packets and the cost of living for at least five years. That’s why so many are so frustrated with welfare reform and immigration.”

He also stressed the importance of local activism:

“Gisela Stuart’s extraordinary triumph in Edgbaston will be one of the great memories of election night... These results were not delivered by direct mail from on high – but by community campaigning on the ground.”

In a follow up report *The new centre ground: how can progressives win a majority?* Byrne argued that, amongst other things, the key things Labour needed to demonstrate were fiscal responsibility, value for money government and a tougher, more demanding welfare system.¹⁹

Stephen Beer, writing for the Fabian Society, made some similar points in *The Credibility Deficit: How to rebuild Labour’s economic reputation*.²⁰ He argued that:

“To restore economic credibility, Labour needs to be clear that its credibility problem began before the crisis. Amidst all the good things it did, people sensed they were not sharing the experience of the good times...”

“Labour cannot restore economic credibility simply by finding the right words to say about the past... Labour should make a covenant with the people. It will maintain tight control over spending, especially relative to tax. It should work on an ‘effective spending guarantee’. Shadow frontbenchers must show how they buy into this.”

Polling for the centre left think tank Policy Network in 2010 found that Labour were associated with immigrants, benefit claimants and trade union members.²¹ Voters were also much less clear about what Labour stood for compared to the Conservatives. Their paper *Southern Discomfort Again* (which saw Giles Radice returning to the fray 20 years on from the original paper of the same name) argued that Labour:

“has to win far more marginal seats in the South and Midlands. The marginal seats that the party has to win to secure a governing majority contain a higher proportion of C2, C1 and AB voters.”

To do this it would need to develop:

“an approach to tax and spend that protects middle income voters... Labour has to demonstrate that it is both the party of social justice and individual aspiration...it has to face up to, and debate openly, contentious issues that concern voters such as immigration [and] welfare reform...”

18 Progress, 21 May 2010: <http://www.progressonline.org.uk/pamphlets/>

19 Progress, February 2012: <http://www.progressonline.org.uk/pamphlets/>

20 http://www.fabians.org.uk/images/The_Credibility_Deficit_full.pdf

21 <http://www.policy-network.net/publications/3899/Southern-Discomfort-Again>

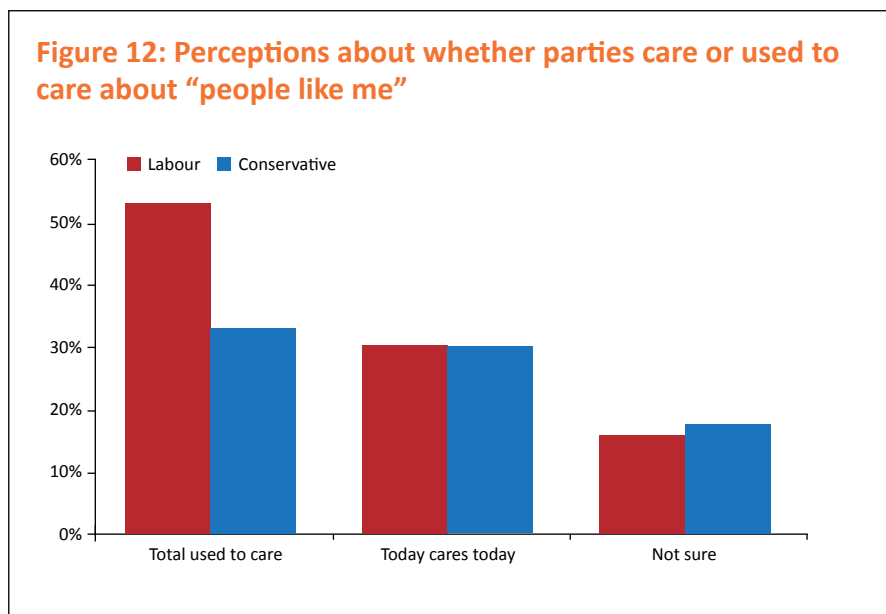
to strengthen its position in local government, both to ensure decent local services and to act as a spring board for national power”

A further paper, *Southern Discomfort OneYear On*, released in 2011, contained further bruising findings.²² 61% agreed that “Labour is not really serious about changing the something for nothing culture among people living on welfare”. Only 26% disagreed. 50% agreed that “Labour is more interested in helping immigrants than working people born in Britain”. Only 38% disagreed.

Peter Kellner and the Labour MP Gareth Thomas focused on London’s commuter hinterland in their September 2011 paper *The politics of anxiety*.²³ Thomas wrote that:

“Whilst there are many marginal seats around the country, it is in London’s commuter belt that Labour needs to win more marginal seats if it is to return to power”

As well as arguing that such voters were particularly interested in public transport, the paper found that many people think that Labour used to represent people like them, but no longer does, while they felt the Conservatives never represented them in the first place.



This poll suggests that Labour may have lost ground, over the longer term, in terms of being seen to care about ordinary people. However, when this poll was previously asked in 2009, the results were even worse for Labour: 63% thought the party used to care and only 19% that it still did. The Conservatives had regressed: in 2009, 29% thought the Tories used to care and 37% that it did now.²⁴

The questions we wanted to answer

All of the above analysis formed the basis for our polling exercise. They raise a huge number of questions, which we wanted to explore in our polling exercise and qualitative research.

²² <http://www.policy-network.net/publications/4060/Southern-Discomfort-One-Year-On>

²³ <http://www.scribd.com/doc/63977322/Co-op-report-Gareth-Thomas>

²⁴ http://www.yougov.co.uk/archives/pdf/Megapoll_EuroElections.pdf

- There are big geographical differences around the UK – between North, South, urban and rural. Are these differences just compositional, or does geography matter in its own right?
- If there are geographical differences what sort of scale do they operate at?
- What do people in different parts of the country want?
- How much of a problem is the “party of the rich” for the Tories?
- How much of a problem is economic competence for Labour, and what does that mean anyway?
- To what extent do people identify with the concept of the squeezed middle?
- How important are demographic factors, compared to voters’ attitudes to different policies, or their assessments of the party leaders?
- How do people judge their own local areas, and how important are voters’ assessments of their own local area in their political choices?
- Are we living in an age of performance politics? How much do voters’ political preferences reflect their experience of unemployment, either personally, or in their area?
- What does it mean for voters to be “aspirational”? What do they aspire to and what are their fears?
- Are there differences between what voters want for the nation and what they want for themselves and their families?

2

Our Polling

To explore the issues above we commissioned polling work from YouGov.

Given our interest in the North-South divide, we had to design the poll in such a way as to allow rigorous conclusions to be drawn. While many polls show a breakdown of the results by region, this is problematic. The sample size is often too small to be reliable. Furthermore, the sample is weighted to be representative of the UK as a whole, rather than each region. For example, there might be the right number of working class people in the sample so that it is representative of the UK. But the number of working class people in each region might not be representative of the number of people in that region.

For this reason our polling included a boosted sample in the North, and YouGov separately weighted the Northern and Southern parts of the sample to the demographics of the North (The North East, North West and Yorkshire) and the South (London, the East of England, the South East and South West) respectively to ensure properly representative polling of these two parts of the country. This allows us to make meaningful comparisons between the two regions.

The full results of the poll are in Appendix 2. In the section below we describe the main findings and interesting findings for particular groups. There were 2002 people in the GB sample, plus an additional 505 people in the North only. Fieldwork was undertaken between 7th and 13th February 2012.

Headline vote intention

- In this sample headline vote intention is Lab 40%, Con 39%, Lib Dem 9%.
- Most of the findings are as you would expect. Looking at the Conservative lead over Labour (Conservative vote share minus Labour share) this is largest among older voters, in rural areas, higher social classes, and in the South – particularly the South outside London.
- All these different demographic factors overlap: e.g. there might be more middle class people in some parts of the country or some age groups. We will try to pick apart these different factors using regression analysis later.
- Layering up more than one factor gives bigger differences. For example the Tory lead among people in the rural South is +42%. But their lead among people in cities in the North is -43%. It is +22% among AB voters in the South, but -34% among DE voters in the North.
- The Conservatives lead Labour among all social class groups in the South as a whole, and are behind among all groups in the North. However, London and the rest of the South are really quite different with Tory leads of -14 and +27 respectively.

This poll allows us to look at some less often explored factors:

- **Previous vote.** Of the people who voted for Labour and the Conservatives in 2010, nine out of ten plan to do so again. But only 35% of Liberal Democrats plan to, with 39% now planning to vote Labour and 13% for the Conservatives.

“ People who say they live in more urban areas are more likely to vote Labour than Conservative ”

- **Public sector:** In households where both adults are in the public sector the Conservative lead is -32%. Where there is at least one public sector worker it is -18%, but where all workers are all in the private sector, it is +9%.

- **Benefits:** Among those on out of work benefits or other means tested benefits the Tory lead is -23% and -26% respectively. Among the larger group not on such benefits it is +7%.
- **Worries:** respondents were asked how worried they were that they would lose their jobs, lose their home, struggle to pay the bills, or that their children would struggle to get on in life. Among those not worried the Conservative lead is +14%. Those who were “fairly worried” about at least one of these things it was +2%, but among those “very worried” about at least one of these things it was -25%.
- **Aspirations:** respondents were asked if they aspired to a better house or job. Looking at the under 60s, the Conservative lead among those who said they had one of these aspirations was +2% but among non-aspirationals of the same age it was -17%.
- **Parents vote:** people’s votes are strongly correlated with the way they think their parents voted (this link could run in either direction). Among those who thought they remembered their parents voting Tory, the Conservatives had a lead of +46%, while among those who remembered Labour parents it was -37%.
- **Housing tenure:** The Conservative lead among those who own their own house outright is +15%. Among those buying their house through a mortgage it is +9%. Among those renting from a private landlord it is -14%. For those renting from a local authority or housing association it is -39% and -44% respectively.
- **Urbanity.** The poll asked people to describe how urban they thought the place they lived in was. People who say they live in more urban areas are more likely to vote Labour than Conservative. The Conservative lead is +15% in the countryside and +17% in the suburbs of towns. City suburbs (-4%) and people living within towns (-8%) are less favourable to them, while the lead is -19% for those who live inside a city.
- **Education:** The Conservative lead seems to be largest among people with mid-level education. Among those who left full time education at age 16, the Conservative lead is -8%. Among those who left at 17-18 it is +16%. But among those who left after age 20, it is -5%. Looking at specific highest qualifications is tricky, as people hold many different qualifications, all of which have quite small sample sizes. Among more common qualifications the same sort of pattern is repeated, as can be seen by looking at school leaving age: among those with GCSEs/O-Levels the Tory lead is -1%, among those with A-Levels or Highers it is +22%, with a first degree -6% and with a higher degree -20% (though this last has a small sample size).

All of these different factors layer up on top of one another: those in social housing are more likely to be unemployed. Urbanites are younger and so on. One geodemographic system which brings together different demographic, financial and location information is Mosaic, which groups people by 15 different main groups of households and many subgroups. The sample size here for some of these groups is small, but gives some feel for how these different groups break down.

Table 7: Voting intention by Mosaic group

Mosaic UK Group (Household)	Sample size	Conser- vative	Labour	Lib dem	Other / don't know / missing	Conser- vative – Labour lead
Professional Rewards	180	48	15	6	31	33
Alpha Territory	74	42	10	12	35	32
Rural Solitude	97	46	17	12	25	29
Careers And Kids	114	36	21	8	35	15
Active Retirement	67	34	26	6	34	8
Suburban Mindsets	274	35	28	6	32	7
Small Town Diversity	175	30	28	5	37	3
New Homemakers	110	23	25	9	43	-3
Upper Floor Living	83	17	23	6	54	-6
Industrial Heritage	152	29	37	6	28	-7
Liberal Opinions	199	25	35	7	33	-10
Terraced Melting Pot	125	23	38	6	33	-15
Elderly Needs	56	14	41	6	40	-27
Ex-Council Community	179	18	46	3	33	-29
Claimant Cultures	68	10	52	4	35	-42

Certainty of vote

- Those saying they would vote Lib Dem are somewhat less likely to say they will “definitely” vote that way than those who plan to vote Conservative or Labour. Only 20% say their vote intention is “definite” compared to 42% and 49% of Conservative and Labour voters.

Strength of support or hostility to the parties

- Respondents were asked to gauge their support or opposition to the parties on a 0-10 scale from saying they would “never” vote for a party to that they would “definitely” consider voting for them. More people say they would “never” vote for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats than Labour. A large part of this is because while 69% of people who plan to vote Labour say they would “never” vote Tory, only 48% of people who plan to vote Conservative would “never” vote Labour. Liberal Democrat voters are more likely to say

they would never vote Tory than Labour, though overall their ratings of the Conservatives are similar or slightly more favourable.

Parental vote

- Overall people are more likely to remember their parents as having voted Labour than for other parties. The differences are quite large given that this sample had the two largest parties quite evenly matched in terms of current support: 44% think their parents mostly voted Labour, 31% the Conservatives and only 8% the Liberal Democrats or one of their predecessor parties. 71% of those who plan to vote Labour recall their parents voting Labour.
- This perhaps chimes with findings from previous polling – people think their parents were more working class than they are, and polls over time have found increasing numbers of people identifying themselves as middle class.

Ideological position of the parties and self

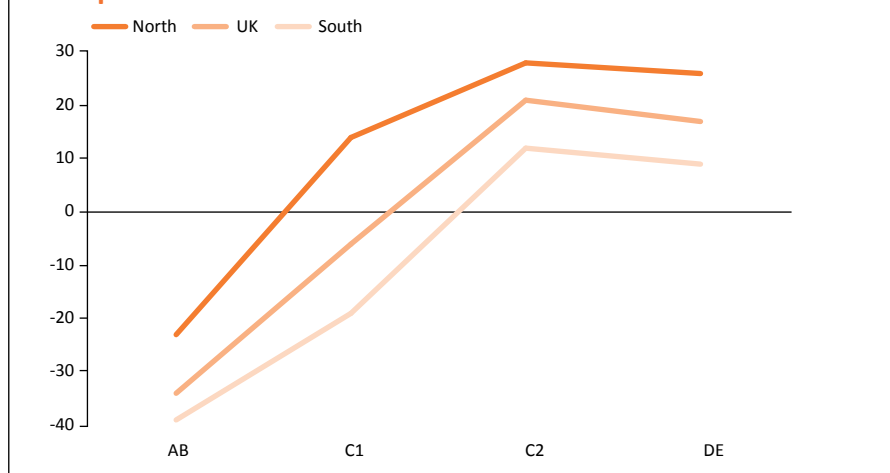
- Respondents were asked to place the main parties and themselves on a left-right spectrum – from option 1 “very left wing”, to option 7 “very right wing”. Averaging their scores out, 4.0 represents the centre, which is exactly where, on average, voters as a whole place themselves.
- The Conservatives were seen as a little more to the right than Labour were to the left: scoring 5.4 and 2.9 respectively. The Liberal Democrats were closest to the centre, but slightly to the left at 3.7. As you would expect, supporters of each party think their party is closer to the centre. Swing voters and those who would *consider* voting for each party put themselves closer to the centre than “certain” supporters of those parties.

Self-described class identity

- As well as recording respondents’ class by occupation, we also asked them to describe how they thought of themselves in class terms by choosing from a list of options. How people describe themselves generally matches their social class, but only roughly: 34% of DE voters put themselves somewhere in the middle class, while 29% of AB’s regarded themselves as working class.
- Interestingly, people in the South were more likely to regard themselves as middle class for any given social class than people in the North. In the South, 54% of C1 voters described themselves as middle class and only 35% as working class. In the North it was almost exactly the other way round: only 38% of C1s thought they were middle class and 52% thought they were working class.
- This chimes with academic evidence suggesting that the process of class identity formation can be different in different places.²⁵

25 E.g. Munroe Eagles: “An ecological perspective on working class political behaviour” in *Developments in Electoral Geography* (1990)

Figure 13: Proportion of respondents describing themselves as working class minus middle class, by region and real occupational class



Overlaying this there are big differences between urban and rural areas. In both North and South people who say they live in rural areas tend to perceive themselves as middle class (53% and 54% respectively). The North-South differences in perceived class are much greater in urban and suburban areas. While for the nation as a whole 46% of people think they are middle class and 43% working class, in towns in the North 56% think they are working class and only 32% think they are middle class.

Worries

- Respondents were asked how worried they were about unemployment, being unable to pay the bills, losing their home, or that their children would not be able to get on in life.
- Of these, that their children will not be able to get on in life is the most common fear, with 45% of all respondents very or fairly worried about this. 39% were very or fairly worried about paying the bills, 33% about unemployment in the family, and 19% about losing their home. Overall, young and old voters have less worries than people in middle ages. Middle class voters have fewer worries, but Labour voters, urbanites, and women have more.
- As you would expect, these concerns are different for different groups. Women are more concerned about paying bills and their children's future than men are – the numbers very or fairly worried about these problems were (44% / 34%) and (51% / 39%) respectively
- Worries about being able to pay the bills are larger in the North: 43% compared to 36% in the South outside London. People who either rent privately or are paying a mortgage are much more worried about losing their job than people in social housing or outright owners.

Personal priorities

- Voters are often asked about what they see as the most important issues facing the nation. While these are important, voters' priorities about what would improve their own lives are at least as important in making political choices.

- In this poll respondents were asked about “the most helpful things politicians could do to improve life for you and your family” and could choose up to three options from 18 different choices. The top personal priorities people identify are quite similar across all social groups. They are: reducing energy bills (50% chose this) reducing fuel duty (43%) reducing income tax (26%), reducing VAT (26%) and reducing council tax (22%). Interestingly these are all “cost of living” issues, and these top five choices are the same across all social classes.
- Even framed in local terms, national priorities like “reducing crime and anti-social behaviour in my neighbourhood”, “improving our local hospital” and “improving my child’s school” come quite low down the list, at 14%, 11% and 3% respectively. This might seem surprising, but only because it is more common to see “most important issues facing the nation” polls which concentrate on the national rather than the personal. Academic analysis shows that people are moved by both types of consideration.
- Looking at differences between groups, concern about cost of living issues is highest among C1 and C2 classes, older voters and more rural areas.
- The desire for lower energy bills is higher in the North (54%) than the South (45%) and particularly compared to London (38%). It is highest among DE voters (62%) and highest of all among people in social housing (68%) among people in housing associations.
- Desire for lower rents and mortgage costs differs little in the North, South and London. It is particularly high among private renters: 31%.
- One group who have somewhat divergent preferences are under-24s, and full time students. For full time students the top priorities were reducing tuition fees, making it easier to find a job, and reducing the cost of public transport. For 18-24s as a whole, as well as concerns about energy bills and fuel duty, other similarly important priorities were reducing fares, tuition fees and rents, and making it easier to find a job.
- Urbanites are less concerned about fuel duty. London is the only part of the country where reducing fuel duty is considered less of a priority than reducing the cost of public transport.

Fairness and meritocracy in theory and practice

- Almost all groups identify overwhelmingly with the idea of meritocracy: nine out of ten people (87%) in most groups agreed with the statement that “In a fair society, people’s incomes should depend on how hard they work and how talented they are.” Only one in ten (8%) disagree.
- However, asked whether in Britain today, people’s incomes really do reflect how hard they work and how talented they are, people do not think this is the case. People disagree that Britain is a meritocracy by a margin of 74% – 21%.
- Who disagrees? Net disagreement is 53% on average. It is higher among women (63%) the over 60s (61%) and voters who place themselves on the left (67%). It is quite similar across social classes, though DE voters are somewhat more likely to say that they don’t know.
- Another question asked people to choose whether they thought “fairness” was a matter of “getting what you deserve” or about equality. Overall the idea of fairness as desert is preferred to fairness as equality by 70% to 30%.
- Looking at different groups, Conservative voters are the most drawn to desert (by

a margin of 91% to 9%) while Labour voters are more split (52% – 48%) and Liberal Democrat voters tending towards merit (66% – 34%). People in higher social classes and less urban areas are particularly in favour of merit over equality.

Party leader ratings in historic context

- Respondents were asked to rate the current party leaders on a 0-10 scale, and also to rate previous prime ministers in the same way.
- Looking at the average scores, Mrs Thatcher was most favourably rated on average.

Table 8: Party leader ratings for current and past leaders

	All	North	London	South excluding London	Own party voters
Margaret Thatcher	4.5	4.0	4.3	5.3	7.7
David Cameron	4.2	3.8	4.1	4.8	7.3
Tony Blair	3.8	4.1	4.3	3.4	5.6
Gordon Brown	3.2	3.3	3.8	2.8	5.6
Ed Miliband	3.2	3.3	3.7	2.9	5.1
Nick Clegg	2.9	2.7	3.0	3.0	6.3

- All of the results for the current party leaders are likely to move from month to month, while ratings of previous leaders are likely to be more stable.
- For example, subsequent polling by IPSOS-MORI in April 2012 had Ed Miliband ahead of David Cameron on their “leader satisfaction” question.
- Nonetheless this result tells us some interesting things. Looking at how the leaders were seen by people who planned to vote for their own party yields a different picture to the main results. One reason why Nick Clegg was unfavourably rated is that many Conservative and Labour voters rate him unfavourably, and there are fewer Lib Dem voters than the other two parties. Among Lib Dem voters he is relatively more favourably rated. In this poll Tony Blair and Ed Miliband did not enjoy as large an advantage among supporters of their own party as the other leaders did.
- Tony Blair was more favourably rated by younger voters, while Mrs Thatcher and David Cameron were more favourably rated by higher social classes.
- It is sometimes said that “memories of Mrs Thatcher” hold the Conservatives back in the North. This poll finds no real evidence to support that idea. While Mrs Thatcher was relatively less favourably rated in the North than the South, even there she was more favourably rated than any other leader except Tony Blair.

Beliefs and values 1: Individual and state responsibility

- In a previous question (see above) respondents had been also asked to place themselves on a left-right scale – without any explanation of what “left” or “right” meant. But of course these words mean lots of different things, and the poll went on to explore this in more detail.

“ Tony Blair was more favourably rated by younger voters, while Mrs Thatcher and David Cameron were more favourably rated by higher social classes ”

- Respondents were asked to place themselves on a left-right spectrum relating specifically to the balance of responsibility between the state and the individual. This is arguably the core sense of left and right – though many other dimensions and issues overlay this (see below).

- On a scale where 0 meant “It is entirely the government’s role to ensure people have jobs, income and housing” and 10 meant “It is entirely people’s own responsibility to ensure they have jobs, income and housing”, on average people placed themselves at 6 – towards individual responsibility. Twice as many

people were on the individualist end of the scale as the state-responsibility end: 54% compared to 21%.

- This scale does not match the simple left-right axis perfectly. About 20% of people who favour individual responsibility also put themselves on the left. And about 42% of people who put themselves on the left also favour individual over state responsibility. You could call these people the individualist left. On the other hand 11% of those who put themselves on the right believe in state responsibility, and 12% of those who say they believe in state responsibility put themselves on the right. You could call these people the non-individualist right.

Beliefs and values 2: other dimensions and attitudes.

- Respondents were asked a large number of different questions about their beliefs and attitudes. They were asked to agree or disagree with a number of quite strongly worded statements.
- These are “wedge” type questions, designed to be polarising. This is because we wanted people to take clear positions, in order to inform the regression analysis of what drives political choice in the section below.
- They also allow us to explore some other dimensions of politics. The British Social Attitudes Survey and British Election Study have explored different dimensions of voters’ attitudes and ideology. As well as on an economic left-right scale, these studies have used batteries of questions to examine attitudes on “welfarist” and “libertarian-authoritarian” scales too. The battery of questions below touches on these and also some other issues which don’t fit neatly into left or right, but have been said to be important or represent new cleavages in the electorate.²⁶
- Broadly speaking the questions reveal quite strong anti-political sentiment. Attitudes towards law and order are more authoritarian than liberal. On average people are anti-welfarist and favour the idea of tackling “root causes” of poverty.
- People don’t think high house prices are a good thing, and want to build more houses. They do think low interest rates are a good thing.
- Some ideas thought of as “socially Conservative” are popular. By two to one, people agree that Britain should allow “almost no immigration”. On the other hand people disagreed with a Section 28-like statement (“Schools should not be allowed to teach children that homosexuality is normal” by a large margin (51%-35%). Though the wording of the question is different, this is quite

²⁶ Commentators often distinguish between social and economic left right scales (and there are many online questionnaires that offer to place people on a two dimensional ideological space). But it is less clear what does and doesn’t count as social conservatism or liberalism. This explains the multiple scales and dimensions used by the BSA and BES

a different result to polls in March 2000, which suggested 65% support for retaining Section 28.²⁷

- Attitudes to the public sector are mixed. Public sector workers are, on balance, seen as getting better pay and pensions than their private sector equivalents. There is a small majority in favour of varying public sector pay around the country and most people would use private health and education services if they could.
- People are pessimistic about Britain's future.

Table 9: Attitudes to various “wedge” questions

	Agree	Disagree	Net
The real way to fight poverty isn't to hand out more benefits, but to tackle the causes like drug addiction, educational failure, and bad parenting	81	11	70
Politicians don't understand the real world at all	81	12	69
Human Rights have become a charter for criminals and the undeserving	72	16	56
Criminals should be given longer sentences, even if that means we have to build more prisons	69	20	49
The benefits system is too generous	63	26	37
Government should favour manufacturing over other sectors of the economy	56	19	37
You can't get ahead in life these days without a good education and qualifications	64	29	35
Low interest rates are a good thing	58	26	32
We should allow almost no immigration	61	31	30
The political parties are pretty much all the same these days	59	32	27
I would use private healthcare and/or education if I could	57	34	23
We need to build more houses in Britain	55	33	22
People in the public sector get better pay and pensions than people in the private sector for doing equivalent jobs	50	34	16
My local council delivers reasonably good value for money compared to other councils	43	31	12
So called “green” policies are mostly a waste of money	48	39	9
Public sector workers in areas where the cost of living is high should be paid more than public sector workers in less expensive places	45	38	7
Schools should not be allowed to teach children that homosexuality is normal	35	51	-16
Building the high speed rail line from London to the North is a good use of money	30	52	-22
Rising house prices are a good thing	25	61	-36
Britain's future is going to be better than its past	18	55	-37

Looking at different groups attitudes to these questions there are a number of interesting variations:

²⁷ <http://web.archive.org/web/20071123085208/http://www.ipsos-mori.com/mrr/2000/c000211.shtml>

Public vs private

- Unsurprisingly, public sector households were the only group to disagree that people in the public sector were better paid for doing the same work. Still, 25% of those in all-public-sector-worker households agreed, and 32% of those in households where there was at least one public sector worker.
- There were big differences between North and South on the statement that “Public sector workers in areas where the cost of living is high should be paid more than public sector workers in less expensive places”. In the South people were 52%-33% in favour of the idea. But in the North people were 47%-38% against the idea.
- While Conservative and Liberal Democrat voters strongly agreed that “I would use private healthcare and/or education if I could”, Labour voters were against by 48%-41%. Higher social groups and people in the South are more likely to agree. There is quite a large difference between the sexes, with women more likely to agree (61%-31%) than men (51%-38%).

Housing

- Conservatives supported building more houses by 52%-41%, while Labour voters were more strongly in favour (66%-23%). Mortgage-payers were the group with the lowest margin of support for building more houses (though they were still in favour, by a margin of 50%-40%). Private renters and those who owned outright were more in favour, and those in social housing were most supportive of all: three-to-one in favour.
- Interestingly, older voters were more likely to think that rising houseprices were not a good thing. Only among those currently buying their home with a mortgage was there any variation from the average view that rising house prices are not a good thing. But even among this group people disagreed with the statement “Rising house prices are a good thing” by 49%-38%. Interestingly, those who fully owned their home (who might be thought to have more to gain from rising prices) disagreed by a larger margin of 64%-26%.
- Only among those who owned their homes outright was there more of a split about whether low interest rates were a good thing (48%-42%). Unsurprisingly, older people were less strongly in favour of low interest rates than younger people, but over 60s still thought low interest rates good by a margin of 56%-36%.

Anti-political sentiment

- Conservative voters disagreed with the statement that “The political parties are pretty much all the same these days” by a margin of 50%-45%. But Labour and Lib Dem voters agreed with it by (55%-36%) and (59%-39%) respectively.
- Pretty much all groups strongly agree that “Politicians don’t understand the real world at all”. Support for this was idea was particularly strong among Labour voters, older people, lower social classes and those in social housing.

Crime and authority

- The idea that “Criminals should be given longer sentences, even if that means we have to build more prisons” was supported by a margin of three-to-one

overall. It was most strongly supported by people in the North, Conservative voters, older people, lower social classes and people in social housing. Only among Liberal Democrat voters was there less of a clear consensus – they were 48%-41% in favour.

- Agreement with the statement that “Human Rights have become a charter for criminals and the undeserving” followed a similar pattern, though it is even more strongly supported.

Welfare

- The statement that “The real way to fight poverty isn’t to hand out more benefits, but to tackle the causes like drug addiction, educational failure, and bad parenting” was widely supported, with Conservative voters and older people particularly strongly in favour.
- The statement that “The benefits system is too generous” was supported by more than two-to-one overall, but it is more divisive. Labour voters were narrowly against it, by a margin of 47%-44%, while Conservatives agreed by 86%-9%. Older people, higher social classes and more rural people were more likely to agree.

Social conservatism?

- Overall, people agree by nearly two-to-one that Britain should allow “almost no immigration”. Women, people in the North, older people and lower social classes most strongly agreed. Liberal Democrat voters disagree by 51%-45%.
- By 51%-35% a majority of people disagreed with the statement that “Schools should not be allowed to teach children that homosexuality is normal”. But there were variations. Men were much more likely to agree than women: they were only 45%-42% against, compared to women, who were 57%-29% against.²⁸ Young people were against, while older people were in favour. Higher social classes and the more highly educated were more opposed. Conservative voters were slightly in favour (47%-43%) while Liberal Democrats were strongly opposed (67%-26%)

Other issues

- There was pretty strong support across the board for the statement that “Government should favour manufacturing over other sectors of the economy”. Support was higher among Conservatives than Liberal Democrats, and among men, older people, the less educated, and in the North.
- Everyone agreed on the importance of qualifications, and emphasis on this was strongest amongst older voters, higher social groups and the more highly educated.
- More people see their local council as offering good value for money than bad. Support for this is higher among older people and higher social classes. Londoners were the happiest (63%-23%), but in general people in more rural areas were happier than urbanites. People in Northern towns were less impressed, although more people agreed than disagreed. (39%-37%). Working class (DE) people in the North were least impressed of all, disagreeing by (39%-37%)
- Agreement that “So called ‘green’ policies are mostly a waste of money” was highest in the North, among men, lower social groups and older people.

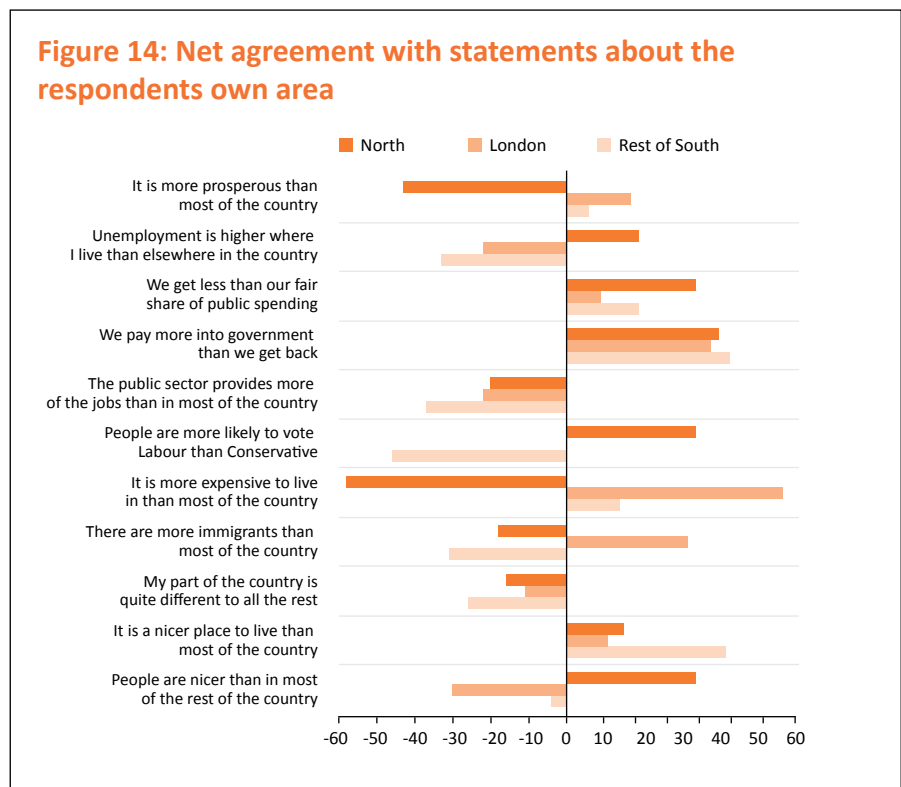
28 This sex split is reflected in other polls which look at similar issues. 47% of women support full same-sex marriage compared to only 38% of men. <http://bit.ly/AiFclZ>

While 18-24 year olds mildly disagreed (by 41%-34%), the over 60s strongly agreed (60%-32%). While Conservative voters agreed by (60%-32%), Liberal Democrats disagreed in roughly equal measure (61%-28%)

- Attitudes to High Speed 2 are similar in North and South: in the North 53% disagree that it is a good use of money, while 32% think it is. Women are more sceptical about the project than men.
- Pessimism about Britain’s future was stronger in the North than the South. In the North voters disagreed with the statement that “Britain’s future is going to be better than its past” by a margin of 60%-16%. In the South pessimism was a little less pronounced: In London and the rest of the South the figures were (53%-18%) and (51%-20%) respectively. Pessimism was highest among Labour voters, older people, and lower social classes.

Perceptions about their area

- Research has suggested that one factor which drives how people vote is their perception of how things are going in their local areas – particularly with respect to the economy. Voters also respond to how well they perceive the parties to be doing locally, and this may drive choices about voting tactically or not voting at all. In this poll respondents were asked to evaluate their area (whatever they took this to mean) relative to the rest of the country.



- People in the North feel less prosperous and perceive unemployment in their area to be higher than the national average.
- There is an interesting difference between feelings about gross and net government spending in their area. While people in every area felt their area was paying in more than it got out, people in the North were more likely to

feel their area didn't get its "fair" share of public spending. No one believed their area was more than usually reliant on public sector jobs, although people in the South outside London were particularly likely to think this.

- People in the North perceived Labour to be more dominant locally, while in the South people didn't. Londoners were exactly split down the middle.
- Londoners felt their area was expensive, while Northerners strongly did not.
- Londoners perceived there to be more immigrants than in the rest of the country. However, interestingly, London was also the region where support for the anti-immigration statement (see above) was lowest: people agreed with limiting immigration by 51%-38% in London, compared to 66%-26% in the North.
- No-one really felt their area was very different to all the rest. On balance, people in all areas tended to think their area was nicer to live in than the rest of the country: though this was particularly pronounced in the South outside London. The result of this all-things considered question was quite different to the first question about prosperity. One factor may be that people in the North are more likely to think the people in their area are nicer than average, while (sadly for them) Londoners do not.

Other factors

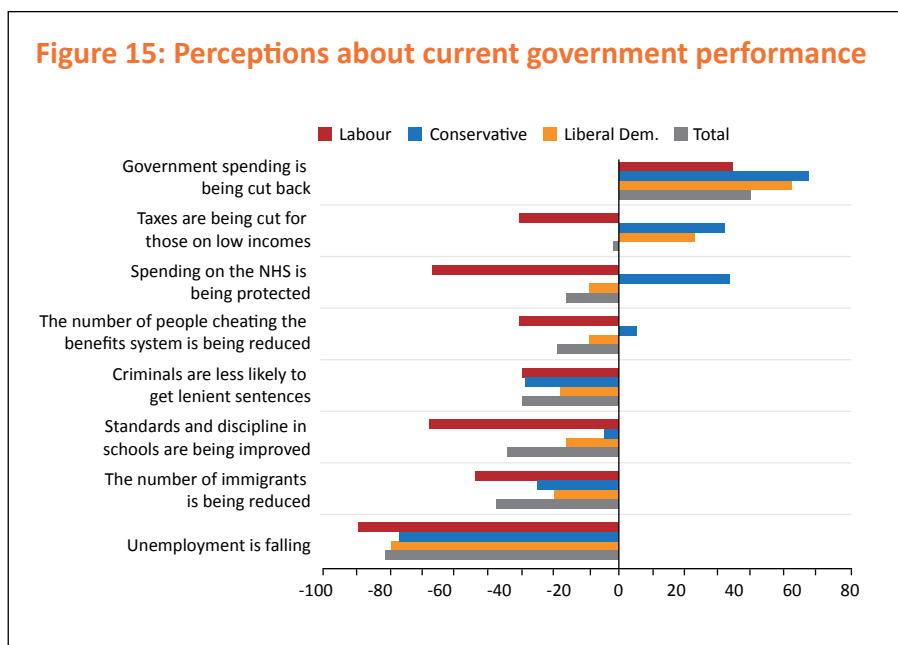
- People's perception of their area is strongly linked to their own social status: people in higher social classes feel their areas are more prosperous, and nicer to live in. They perceive their areas to have lower unemployment and less immigrants than the rest of the country.
- People in towns and town suburbs feel their area is less prosperous than dwellers in the cities, city suburbs or the countryside.
- People in villages or the countryside are the most likely to think their area is nicer to live in than the national average, and city residents are least likely to think this (though on balance they still do). The gap between the two is very large: agreement of 76%-15% compared to 46%-38%. People in rural areas are more likely to feel their area doesn't get its fair share of spending. Unemployment is perceived to be higher in urban areas and lower in rural ones.
- Older people are more likely to perceive their area as hard done by in terms of public spending, but nicer to live in.
- Agreement with the statement that in their area "People are more likely to vote Labour than Conservative" is strongly correlated with how people in each different category would themselves vote. But people can distinguish their own preferences from what is happening locally. 59% of Conservative voters in the North agreed with the statement, while 46% of Labour voters in the South disagreed with it. 80% of people can decide whether this is true or not – only 20% said they didn't know, whereas 34% of people said they didn't know whether public sector employment was higher locally.

Perceptions about how the government is doing nationally

- Perceptions about how the current government is performing vary hugely by which party respondents support. Labour voters are, unsurprisingly, much more negative about how the government is doing than supporters of the Coalition parties.

- However there is variation depending on which issue we asked about. Supporters of all the parties strongly agreed that spending was being cut back and strongly disagreed that unemployment is falling.
- Lib Dems and Conservatives agree that taxes for those on low incomes were being cut, but Labour voters disagreed. While Conservative voters agreed that spending on the NHS has been supported, Lib Dems did not, on balance, agree.
- By a small margin Conservative voters thought that welfare cheating was being reduced. But Conservatives were roughly as likely as Labour supporters to agree that criminals were not less likely to get lenient sentences. Like Labour voters, though to a lesser extent, they agree that immigration is not being reduced.
- Conservative voters were split on whether school standards were being improved, with slightly more saying they were not. But Labour voters overwhelmingly thought they weren't.

Figure 15: Perceptions about current government performance



Party perceptions

- Other opinion research seems to suggest that the main “negative” for the Conservatives is a perception that they are “the party of the rich”.²⁹ For Labour the main problem is that they are not trusted on the economy.³⁰ We initially polled the following statements, both of which a majority of respondents agreed with.

“The Conservative party looks after the interests of the rich, not ordinary people”

“The Labour party waste your money, and they can’t be trusted to run the economy”

- However, in qualitative research people also agreed with these statements, but tended to say that the statement applied to some extent to the other main party as well. So we subsequently did a separate poll to test the same statements, but with the parties reversed.

²⁹ For example, Lord Ashcroft, “Project Blueprint”, (May 2011)

³⁰ For example, Stephen Beer, “The credibility deficit” (Fabian Society 2011)

- Because these polls were not taken at the same time, but a month apart, they can't really be directly compared. For example, in the second poll with statements reversed, there are more Labour voters.
- Nonetheless, the results are interesting and seem to bear out previous research: Labour have a bigger problem on the economy, while the Conservatives are indeed seen as a the party of the rich.

Table 10: Main party negatives for Conservative and Labour

	Total	Con	Lab	Lib Dem
The Labour party waste your money, and they can't be trusted to run the economy				
AGREE	54	89	13	66
DISAGREE	34	5	81	27
The Conservative party looks after the interests of the rich, not ordinary people				
AGREE	64	27	91	73
DISAGREE	27	66	5	22
The Conservative party waste your money, and they can't be trusted to run the economy				
AGREE	45	4	78	38
DISAGREE	43	93	14	58
The Labour party looks after the interests of the rich, not ordinary people				
AGREE	28	36	13	34
DISAGREE	60	59	82	60

- 13%, or one in eight Labour voters, think the party cannot be trusted on the economy, while a quarter (27%) of Conservative voters think they are the party of the rich. While only 4% of Conservative voters think their preferred party can't be trusted on the economy, one in eight Labour voters (13%) think that now even Labour is a party of the rich, not ordinary people.

How could the parties change?

- We also asked respondents to choose a number of options from a from a list of ways in which the different parties could address their main "negatives".
- Different questions about how likely people were to vote for the party allow us to define two (overlapping) definitions of swing voters, who would consider the voting for the party, but are not certain to do so. While the rankings of the different options are similar to the ranking generated by all respondents' responses, they are not exactly the same. They are different to the preferences of those who already say they are certain to vote for the parties.
- For Labour, reducing welfare dependency and controlling immigration are the top two issues that swing voters would like the party to address to show that it would be good at running the economy. Capping bankers salaries and creating jobs come next. Options like "Announcing a number of specific areas in which it would find savings and spend less" and "Not opposing all

of the cutbacks being made by the current government” are preferred over apologies, or promises of tax cuts. The rock bottom options are announcing new spending, or tax rises.

Table 11: Things Labour could do to address concerns about the party’s economic policy

Which of the following things would most convince you that the Labour party would be good at running the economy if it returned to Government? Please tick up to three	Total	Labour swing voters	Likely but not definitely vote Labour	Definite Labour
Pledging to control spending on welfare and stop people ripping off the benefits system	39	45	46	35
Pledging to reduce immigration	32	32	31	32
Announcing a cap on bankers salaries	25	29	30	39
Announcing a plan to create government jobs for people in areas of high unemployment	18	23	21	32
Announcing a number of specific areas in which it would find savings and spend less	19	22	23	23
Not opposing all of the cutbacks being made by the current government	17	20	17	12
Announcing that it would abide by tough rules on borrowing	16	19	14	20
Announcing tax cuts	14	14	15	20
Apologising for its previous record in government	14	13	14	7
Making a clear distinction between good and bad businesses	8	11	11	13
Announcing spending increases	5	6	7	9
Announcing tax rises	3	4	5	4
None of these	13	6	6	3
Don’t know	11	7	9	8

- Looking at the Conservatives, cutting tax for low earners, reducing the cost of living and reducing unemployment are the main ways it could shake off the “party of the rich” tag. Clamping down on rip-off business, tackling poverty and raising tax on the rich come next. Increasing benefit spending comes bottom.

Table 12: Things the Conservatives could do to address concerns that it is the party of the rich

Which of the following things would most convince you that the Conservative party was for everyone, not just the rich? Please tick up to three	Total	Conservative swing voters	Likely but not definitely vote Conservative	Definite Conservative
Cutting tax for low earners	29	36	34	33
Reducing the cost of living for ordinary people	31	35	52	42
Reducing unemployment	27	32	13	5
Clamping down on business and privatised utilities that rip off their customers	28	31	21	10
Tackling the root causes of poverty like drug dependency and bad parents	20	28	14	8
Raising tax on the rich	27	23	20	15
Improving public services like the NHS and schools	21	23	21	16
Bringing the pay of top bankers under control	23	22	22	29
Introducing a tax on expensive houses (a "mansion tax")	12	13	15	24
Reducing crime in poor neighbourhoods	9	11	7	3
Enabling people in social housing to buy their own homes	5	7	3	1
Increasing spending on benefits	4	2	1	1
None of these	9	3	7	30
Don't know	9	4	12	5

How party representatives should change

- As well as achieving particular policy goals, the parties could also change the way they look and feel, particularly though changing the composition of their elected representatives.
- The poll asked respondents to choose from a list of ways that their representatives could better reflect the country.
- For both of the main parties the results are – perhaps surprisingly – quite similar. In both cases the top three priorities were to find more candidates with more real world experience, more working class MPs, and more with business experience.
- 49% of Conservative swing voters thought the party needed more working class MPs.
- For Labour, recruiting more MPs with business experience is a relatively higher priority – but still, 29% of Labour swing voters thought the party needed more working class MPs.
- As you would expect, people tended to say the parties needed more MPs from their own region. Overall, 10% thought the Conservatives needed more Northern MPs, and only 2% more Southern MPs.
- However, in the North, 31% of Conservative swing voters (and 28% of all respondents) thought the party needed more MPs from the North.

- Labour swing voters in the South are even more likely than the rest of the country to want more Labour MPs to have experience outside politics and experience of business. Of Southern Labour swing voters 46% and 35% chose these options, compared to 38% and 30% nationally.
- Londoners were the keenest to see more ethnic minority MPs for the Conservatives: 17% chose this as a priority, compared to 9% nationally.
- In reality the parties can pursue more than three of these objectives. In fact one person could be, for example, a working class businesswoman. And candidates can be selected who are local to wherever they are standing.
- Interestingly, few respondents thought things were fine as they are: only about one in five respondents thought that none of the options should be a priority.

Table 13: Conservative representatives

Thinking about the Conservative party and the background of the MPs that represent them in Parliament, which of the following do you think should be their biggest priorities in seeking to better reflect the county? Please tick up to 3	Total	Conservative swing voters	Likely but not definitely vote Conservative	Definite Conservative
Recruiting more MPs with experience outside politics	40	49	39	56
Recruiting more MPs from a working class background	40	42	43	32
Recruiting more MPs with experience of business	25	34	30	43
Recruiting more younger MPs	13	15	17	14
Recruiting more female MPs	13	11	11	12
Recruiting more MPs from the North of England	10	10	10	10
Recruiting more MPs from a middle class background	9	10	10	11
Recruiting more MPs from ethnic minorities	9	7	8	4
Recruiting more older MPs	5	5	4	8
Recruiting more MPs from Scotland and Wales	4	4	3	4
Recruiting more MPs from the South of England	1	2	2	2
None of these should be a priority	18	16	17	18
Don't know	15	8	12	6

Table 14: Conservative representatives

Thinking about the Conservative party and the background of the MPs that represent them in Parliament, which of the following do you think should be their biggest priorities in seeking to better reflect the county? Please tick up to 3

	All voters in North	Conservative swing voters in the North
Recruiting more MPs from a working class background	42	44
Recruiting more MPs with experience outside politics	36	44
Recruiting more MPs from the North of England	28	31
Recruiting more MPs with experience of business	19	25
Recruiting more younger MPs	12	16
Recruiting more MPs from a middle class background	9	13
Recruiting more female MPs	13	12
Recruiting more MPs from ethnic minorities	5	3
Recruiting more older MPs	3	3
Recruiting more MPs from Scotland and Wales	2	1
Recruiting more MPs from the South of England	1	0
None of these should be a priority	16	14
Don't know	17	10

Table 15: Labour representatives

And thinking about the Labour party and the background of the MPs that represent them in Parliament, which of the following do you think should be their biggest priorities in seeking to better reflect the county? Please tick up to 3

	Total	Labour swing voters	Likely but not definitely vote Labour	Definite Labour
Recruiting more MPs with experience outside politics	38	45	40	36
Recruiting more MPs with experience of business	30	31	30	23
Recruiting more MPs from a working class background	25	29	28	37
Recruiting more younger MPs	11	14	15	12
Recruiting more MPs from a middle class background	10	10	11	7
Recruiting more female MPs	9	10	10	14
Recruiting more MPs from ethnic minorities	7	9	7	13
Recruiting more MPs from the North of England	5	7	8	8
Recruiting more older MPs	6	5	5	7
Recruiting more MPs from the South of England	4	5	6	5
Recruiting more MPs from Scotland and Wales	2	2	1	4
None of these should be a priority	20	16	15	17
Don't know	19	13	16	16

Table 16: Labour representatives

And thinking about the Labour party and the background of the MPs that represent them in Parliament, which of the following do you think should be their biggest priorities in seeking to better reflect the county? Please tick up to 3	All voters in South	Labour swing voters in the South
Recruiting more MPs with experience outside politics	40	46
Recruiting more MPs with experience of business	34	35
Recruiting more MPs from a working class background	22	26
Recruiting more younger MPs	10	14
Recruiting more female MPs	10	10
Recruiting more MPs from ethnic minorities	8	10
Recruiting more MPs from a middle class background	12	9
Recruiting more MPs from the South of England	7	7
Recruiting more older MPs	6	5
Recruiting more MPs from the North of England	1	2
Recruiting more MPs from Scotland and Wales	0	1
None of these should be a priority	20	18
Don't know	18	12

Self-definition

Prior to the main body of polling work ,we did some test polling³¹ to try to understand how voters saw themselves, and in particular, how they responded to a number of different descriptions which are conventionally used in political life.

Table 17: Which of the following do you feel applies to you?

	Ordinary working people, trying to get on in life	Hard working families	The strivers	The squeezed middle	Aspirational people	Upwardly mobile people
Applies very strongly	40	35	13	18	10	5
Applies somewhat	38	31	36	32	32	19
Does not apply much	9	10	21	21	27	28
Does not apply at all	6	16	14	15	17	35
Don't know	7	8	15	14	14	14
Net identification	63	40	14	14	-2	-38

³¹ Total sample size was 1,751 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 13th – 14th December 2011. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

- People in the middle class are much more likely to identify themselves as being in the “squeezed middle” than people in the working class. (The word “middle” may be making people think of middle class). For this reason Conservative voters are more likely to identify with the phrase than Labour voters, despite Ed Miliband’s heavy use of the term.

- People are much more likely to identify themselves as “Hard working families” – a favourite Blairite expression – more so if they are in a couple, and less so if they are single.
- Young people were all much more likely to identify as “striving”, “aspirational” or “upwardly mobile” than older people. Older people definitely do not see themselves as “aspirational” or “upwardly mobile”.
- These factors may explain why the largest number of people identify themselves as being “ordinary working people, trying to get on in life” – this expression simply excludes less people. 84% of working class people and 74% of middle class people feel this expression applies to them.

3

Regression Analysis

- In the previous section we explored the main findings of the poll. However, as noted above, many of the different factors noted above layer up on top of one another.
- In this section we try to look at the different factors which drive political choice with regression analysis. How much impact on the way different people vote do different factors have, once you control for everything else?
- How much should we control for? Obviously ideological statements about being on the left or on the right are strongly correlated with the way people

“ Real and subjective government performance seems to have a much larger influence on voting behaviour than either the North-South gap or pure demographic factors ”

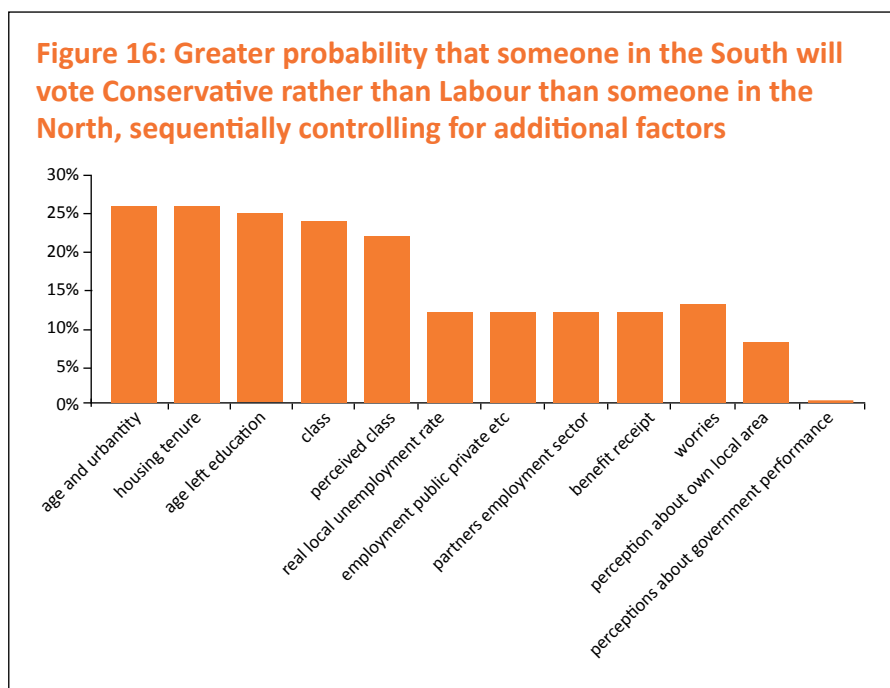
vote. This is true but not very interesting. On the other hand, if we control only for “objective” demographic factors we might miss out on important reasons why people vote the way they do in different places. How important is people’s self-perceived class, or people’s perceptions about their own areas? Or the way people assess the government’s performance on

- a number of different issues. There is a grey area between “objective” and ideological explanations.
- This kind of analysis reveals correlations rather than causation. For example, people may vote Labour because they remember that’s how their parents voted. But it may be that people remember their parents as voting Labour because that is how they vote themselves.

Explaining the North-South gap

- Sequentially controlling for more and more things about people allows us to get some sense of what the most important factors driving vote choices might be.
- Our analysis tends to bear out the “performance politics” thesis advanced by Clarke et al. Controlling for more and more demographic factors tends to reduce the size of the North-South gap in voting. But the real local unemployment rate (which we matched up to respondents) seems to be one of the biggest explanations.
- The way people perceive their own area is another (though of course this may be coloured by their own attitudes and ideology). Once we also control for differences in how people rate the government’s national-level performance on schools, hospitals, crime, jobs etc, then the difference disappears altogether.

- Real and subjective government performance seems to have a much larger influence on voting behaviour than either the North-South gap or pure demographic factors.

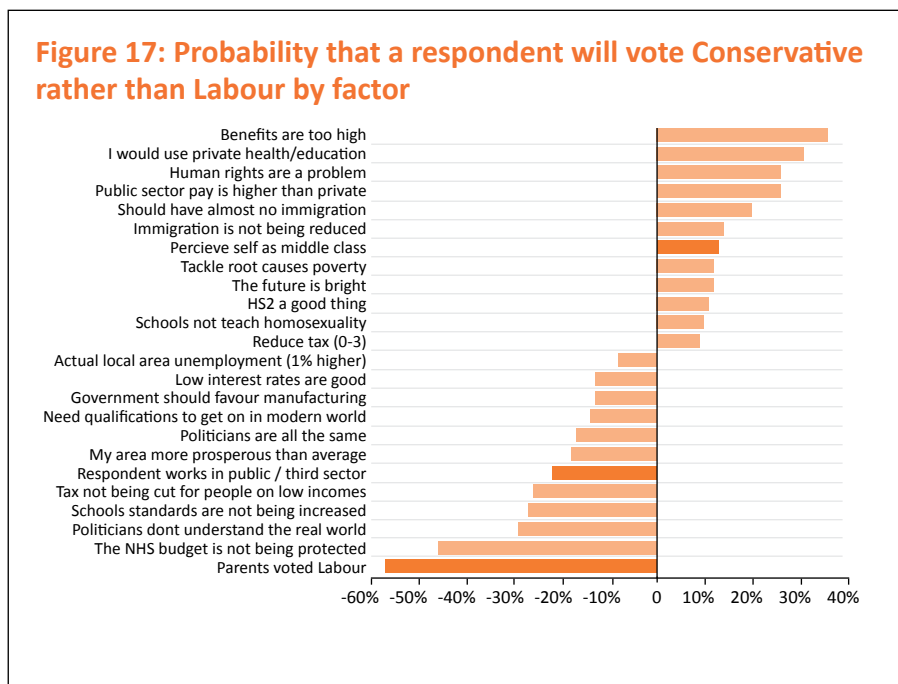


Performance politics

- We looked at all the different factors which could explain political choice. Excluding strong measures of individuals' overall ideology, we looked at how much more likely different factors were to make a person vote Conservative rather than Labour.
- The chart presents all the factors which were statistically significant and had a reasonable sample size (more than 250 people in the sample). Only 24 out of 100 variables we looked at fit both these criteria.
- The most important correlations are generally not demographic, but either based on attitudes to issues or government performance.
- In fact almost no demographic factors turned out to be statistically significant in the regression. This fits with other academic work suggesting a de-aligned electorate which "shops around" for a party to support based on performance and issues.
- Observed social class was not statistically significant, controlling for other things. However, self-perceived social class was.
- Lots of the factors most associated with Conservative over Labour voting were attitudinal. Beliefs that benefits were too generous, that there should be almost no immigration, that human rights were a charter for the undeserving, and that public sector pay was higher than private for the same work were all powerfully linked to voting Conservative.
- Beliefs that the government is not performing well were strongly linked with voting Labour: belief that the NHS budget was not being protected, schools not improved and taxes not being cut for people on low incomes.

- Interestingly, “anti-politics” attitudes are strongly correlated with Labour. This may be because the idea of “politicians” is somehow more associated with the government rather than opposition, or simply because people who want change are likely to be dissatisfied with the status quo. We would ideally need to repeat the same analysis during a period of Labour government to test this.
- But there are some reasons to think there may be a more permanent link between Labour voters and anti-politics sentiment. As noted above, people are more likely to say that Labour “used to” represent people like them. Comments in the focus groups (below) reinforce the sense that the decline of working class representation among Labour party MPs may have left a group of “classic” Labour voters feeling disenfranchised.
- There is a strong correlation between Labour voting and support for manufacturing over other sectors.
- Working in the public sector rather than private is one demographic factor which we looked at here which has a strong correlation with Labour voting. Unsurprisingly, how people remember their parents voting is strongly linked to their own voting preferences.
- It might seem odd that people who perceive their area to be more prosperous than the national average should be (even other things equal) more likely to vote Labour. However, this may be a double edged statement: agreement could reflect a belief that things elsewhere are worse than they appear from the local area.
- Most strikingly of all, there is a very strong correlation between vote choice and the real local unemployment rate in the respondent’s area. Where local unemployment is 1% higher, controlling for all other factors, respondents are 8% more likely to vote Labour rather than Conservative.

Figure 17: Probability that a respondent will vote Conservative rather than Labour by factor



4

Qualitative Research

- After receiving the initial results of the poll, we carried out a round of qualitative research to try to add to our understanding of the results.
- Policy Exchange carried out four groups near Birmingham and Manchester. The groups were professionally recruited as follows:
 - Group 1: Soft Tory voters
 - Group 2: Soft Labour voters
 - Group 3: Middle class: mix of soft Labour and soft Tory voters
 - Group 4: Working class: mix of soft Labour and soft Tory voters
- However, despite the different compositions of the groups, in practice the different groups' responses turned out to be quite similar.
- All four groups had the same structured discussion. It covered:
 - A “warm up” discussion about the main party leaders
 - Local issues in their neighbourhood and nearby city
 - The top things the poll had identified as voters priorities for themselves and their families: energy bills; taxes; the cost of living; unemployment; crime; quality of life and transport
 - “Fairness” and the idea of something-for-something.
 - Views on the representativeness of the MPs who represent the different parties
 - A discussion of the main “negatives” of the parties as identified by the poll
- Qualitative research – particularly on this small scale, can obviously never have the precision of quantitative research. However, it did allow people to raise points we had not considered, and allowed us to understand more about our results. People often slid between topics, and even onto topics we hadn't planned to talk about – often revealing interesting connections.

1. Party leaders, the parties and anti-politics

- Each group warmed up by talking about the three main party leaders. In keeping with the prevailing anti-politician sentiment noted above, reactions to all three were more negative than positive, though there was some praise as well as the shower of criticism.
- They were all accused of “not living in the real world”. Attitudes to all were quite similar: “David Cameron isn't any more posh than Ed Miliband. They're cut from the same cloth, with slightly different views” according to one participant. As well as having similar backgrounds, the leaders tended to behave in the same way, breaking promises and behaving in a typically “political” way.

- Most participants had a sense that old, stable patterns of class based voting had broken down, at the same time as the parties had become more similar.

The Conservatives

- The people who become Conservative MPs are said to have a “Public school background,” be, “Eton boys, or Oxford, Cambridge” and to have “family money”, perhaps be “business orientated” and maybe even a family history of political involvement. A parliamentary seat may even run “in the family”. One participant noted that “They’ve got more women in there haven’t they?”
- The Conservatives are believed to promise toughness, but not always deliver: “They’re supposed to be tough on law and order and I’d like them to be tougher. If that’s what they put themselves forward as.”
- While there was general agreement that the Conservatives looked after the rich not the poor, one participant felt this view was “a bit outdated”

Labour

- A large number of participants felt that Labour politicians today were more privileged and now came from a similar background to the Conservatives:

“They’re very, very similar to the Conservatives. They’re not a great deal different. They’ve both got money. Blair comes from a wealthy background, as do a lot of others as well. I think they’re very, very similar.”

“Tony Blair, Ed Miliband, we’re getting more into the private school type – it’s not so working class anymore.”

- According to the participants Labour MPs today were: “Oxbridge graduates... But traditionally they weren’t were they?” Labour “used to be working people but now they’re just full of talking aren’t they?”
- Labour “Doesn’t represent the people the party was set up to represent. But that’s because if it was representing those people it would never get into office. Everyone’s fighting for the middle ground so everyone’s trying to appeal to the middle ground.” To become a Labour MP “You spend your time at Oxford then spend time being a research assistant for someone in parliament.” ... “It’s all out of a book isn’t it?” ... “The lifestyle of these people who live in poverty, who they say they’re fighting for, they’ve never been to these places, they’ve never even lived half of what other people have done. It’s all out of a book.”

The Liberal Democrats

- While Nick Clegg was abused as much as the other two main party leaders, there was also sympathy for the idea that he couldn’t always get his way as the minor party in a coalition:

“I don’t think they’ve had an opportunity to break any promises, they haven’t been in a position to fulfil them or otherwise really.”

- Even on tuition fees “they’ve not been in a position where they can do that, they’re in a coalition and have got to come to a consensus in a coalition and presumably that’s one of the things that had to go.”
- They are perceived as local, and “well into green and recycling.” But it wasn’t clear to all participants what they stood for, and a number thought that they were effectively told what to do by their larger coalition partners.

Mrs Thatcher

- While Margaret Thatcher was a polarising figure, more participants had positive things to say about her than negative. The mix of positive attitudes are to do with a perception that she was tough, clear, and would stand up to other countries:
- “She knew what she was talking about... at least when she made a decision she did it... sending in the SAS... no nonsense... I wish she was back in power... She was as hard as nails. She wouldn’t let anyone tell her what to do... She was brilliant... She would not have let any of the European countries dictate to us how we should run our lives.”
- A number of participants implied that they would like a return to “conviction politics”, something they associate with her.

2. The Cost of Living

“Everything’s just so expensive, the price of living, you can never make ends meet.”

Female participant, Manchester group

“You know, you go shopping and you’re trying to cut your costs but your ends don’t meet anymore. I’ve found over the last 12-18 months I’m increasing my overdraft to make ends meet. When’s it going to stop, I can’t keep doing this. And I won’t have a credit card.”

Female participant, Manchester group

Participants believed that politicians did not understand people’s struggles with the cost of living because they were insulated from it by wealth, expenses and unfair perks: “They’re not the ones who need to worry about it!”... “they get expenses”... “them government officials are still not going to pay the same amount of tax.”

There were several different important elements to the cost of living squeeze.

Energy bills and fuel

- Not everyone agreed that bills had gone up but many people thought they had gone “through the roof”. They were “gobsmacked” by the price of energy and fuel. Energy firms were making huge profits and their directors getting huge bonuses.
- Participants perceived a baffling array of different energy tariffs – in fact *deliberately* baffling so that people can be conned into paying too much. This is seen as “kidology” and they (the energy companies) “don’t broadcast the fact that you can fix them”. This complexity is seen as one of the negative effects of privatisation. Overall, privatisation, green taxes and rising foreign prices were the main explanations of high and rising bills.

- On green taxes one participant said: “I see the need for it but the green tax element is a laudable prospect but put your own house in order first. And when they’re opening coal fireplaces in China every week what use is us.”
- Petrol was expensive too because of politicians “creaming off taxes”. This was seen as unfair because you “can’t do without your car”, and not understanding this was seen by several participants as a classic way in which politicians were not in touch.
- This discussion led on to conversation about the environment, which prompted mixed feelings. Several participants liked the idea that they are “doing their bit”. But, they wonder, will it make any difference, given that the US and China are “not trying”? Discussion about environment in turn slid into participants talking about bins – people have “four bins” and “hate it”, and think the system is stupidly complex. Again, while participants “feel as though you are contributing something” by sorting their own rubbish, one voiced fears that down at the tip, they put it “all in the same place”, and their good work is undone.

Debt, housing and generational fairness

- While our polling found many people worried that their children would struggle to get on in life, in the focus groups people mentioned several different reasons why this might be so. In one of the Manchester groups people mentioned housing and debt as big issues.

“Our children won’t have the same lifestyle we had, no way.”

“Yeah they’re not going to be going abroad once a year on a family holiday.”

“When I left university, I didn’t come out with thirty thousand pounds of debt. I had an un-contributory pension, I bought my first house, and the state provided me with a 100% mortgage for goodness sake.”

“We’d probably need what you paid for your house as a deposit now.”

- A participant in the Manchester group also raised the high costs of childcare:

“They’re constantly increasing so less people will be able to go back to work – it’s not worth going. But then they can’t afford to live. Where’s it all going to end?”

Tax

- Council tax is seen as too high and unfair. In one group a participant said that “I think the council tax is a financial burden, it’s too much and we don’t see anything, if I go to the hospital I’m not happy with what I see there, you take my bins which I appreciate but I don’t see much else.” Meanwhile, “The council offices are really plush, they’ve just been done up.”
- The rise in VAT has stung, and was particularly noticed by participants in their shopping:

“Well the VAT was 15% wasn’t it, they lowered it to 15% and it’s now back up to 20%. Five per cent is a massive, massive impact for everyone, no matter what way you look at it. . . . Yeah your food bill is absolutely horrendous – we can’t get our food bill down now under £100 it’s just ridiculous.”

- Tax changes were complex, and some gains were easily cancelled out by other rises:

“I get better income tax this year, however it’s lowered the earning threshold for working tax credit to pay for my child care so I’ve lost £85 per month there, and I’m not gaining £85 per month in income tax.”

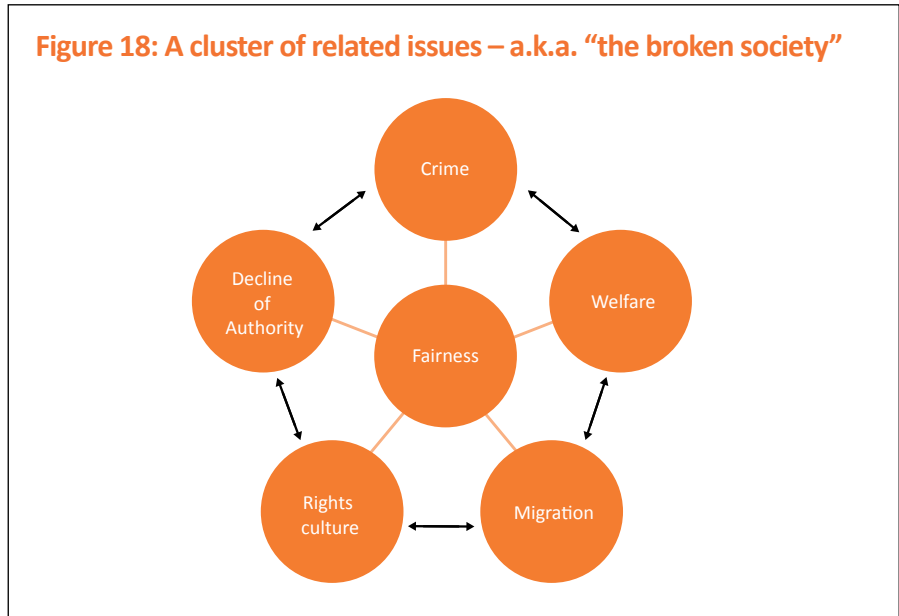
3. A cluster of issues: Crime, the decline of authority, welfare, the “rights culture” and immigration (a.k.a. “the broken society”)

- When prompted to talk about whether Britain was a fair country, participants talked about a cluster of issues which they clearly feel are related.
- Because these topics seem to be linked in people’s minds, conversation slides easily back and forth between them. Crime is linked back to the benefits culture. Also to the decline of authority: a number of participants were quick to say that kids these days “answer back” to teachers. The criminal justice system seemingly lacks authority too: If criminals are caught “nothing will be done”. The Government seems powerless to even deport terrorists because of human rights legislation. There is a sense that people “know their rights” too much. “Do-gooders” and Human Rights from Europe are seen as blocking that tough action on crime that people want. Meanwhile various groups of immigrants are seen as more likely to be on benefits, and also favoured in terms of public spending.³² And so on.
- Participants in the groups not only seemed to link each of these issues together, but there was a sense of unfairness about each of them, which linked all of them together.
- Participants floated “National Service” as a solution, though they also suggested it might not be realistic or right for everyone. Some participants suggested the disappearance of uniformed officials in public life – “Parkies” and bus conductors – was lamented.
- While this cluster of frustrations has clearly been building for a while, an extra level of pessimism now prevailed in the groups because even people they thought might do something about it, the Conservatives, were not seen really doing enough, and seen as being held back by a thicket of rights, judges and do-gooders.
- On immigration the tone is particularly bleak, with a feeling that it is “too late” and that perhaps some tipping point has been passed. Never mind controlling immigration: “what about all the ones that are already here?” “The horse has bolted”. One group argued that changing direction would be very hard now. You’d have to “bring the army in”. Cameron “pitter patters around it” but his actions suggest he won’t challenge it: he is “cutting things for the middle class”, not welfare recipients.

³² Attitudes to immigrants are not all negative though – Polish people and Eastern Europeans are seen as hard working, and the fact that they can all get jobs proves that there is work available if you are prepared to take it.

- Given the chance to vent about such subjects, participants seemed to relish the chance to let off steam. There seemed to be a feeling that they had been allowed to talk about a set of subjects some considered had been made almost taboo.

Figure 18: A cluster of related issues – a.k.a. “the broken society”



(a) Crime

- There was a near universal view that both the criminal justice system and our society were too soft. The police “can’t do anything”. It is so soft now that “they love it in prison” – in fact “they try to get in” – and they can get degrees and the like while they are there. Criminals think “ASBOs are a trophy”. Participants suggested answers were to make prison something that was feared again. In schools they could bring back the cane and national service, or some kind of army “boot camp” for people on benefits. Phenomena like “binge drinking” also reflect certain groups of people having “too much money”. This reflects a seemingly widely shared view that Britain over recent decades has enjoyed economic progress, but a decline in morals, civility, authority etc. It was unfair because there were normal people” living in fear, while criminals don’t have the same fear. People are worried to intervene because they might get killed or arrested. On human rights “they” were “talking about doing something about this” but cases like Abu Hamza suggest that that nothing has changed.

“My mum works in a school and she gets kids... she’ll say, you can’t do that because when you go to high school you can’t get away with that. She’ll get the kids saying back to her well I’m not going to stay at high school – well, you’ll not be able to get a job – well, I don’t want a job, and like the attitude is because it’s like kids being raised by kids, because they get everything given to them and there’s not every any kind of consequences to anything, so they will just do whatever they want... and it doesn’t really matter anyway ‘cos [they think] I’ll just get looked after anyway... If I get knocked up I’ll get a house, you know there’s not any consequences to anything.”

Female participant, Manchester

(b) The decline of authority

While once you didn't get "lip" in schools, one participant noted that parents now complain to the school if their children are told off. Once upon a time uniformed officials would give kids "a clip around the ear" and be backed up by parents. Now teachers and others are "not allowed to do anything", "nobody respects authority any more", there is a "fundamental breakdown in society". "When they brought out no smacking children that was absolutely ridiculous". "We used to get smacked on the hand with a ruler, now you can't touch them". The rights culture, the weakness of the criminal justice system and "do-gooders" are linked by participants with this apparent decline.

“ There was a near universal view that both the criminal justice system and our society were too soft. The police “can't do anything” ”

“The other day there's a kid that's not allowed in the shop I work in, and I said to him, please leave the shop. [and he says] Eff, blind, I can. No you can't, please leave the shop. So he eventually went out of the door, and as I went out of the shop to go past him, because he was blocking the doorway, I touched him. 'Oh that's it, you've assaulted me, I'm going to have you done' This is what you get all the time, this is the attitude – we can do what we want, you don't matter. The fact that you're paying the taxes that are keeping me in dole money to buy my scratch cards, to buy my cigarettes, to buy my booze... I can do what I want when I want, because nothing happens.”

Female participant, Manchester

(c) Welfare

- There was a very strong distinction between welfare for ordinary working people on the one hand, and a separate culture of feckless welfare dependency on the other. There were “working people” and “benefits people” who had little in common.
- According to one participant:

“It seems to be hard working, honest families are suffering ... People on benefits are far better off than us, because their benefits haven't changed, whereas we're having pay cuts, we're losing jobs, we're losing benefits, losing child tax credit. People on benefit, their income is still exactly the same.”

- There was a clear unfairness in the system in so far as hard working people were not rewarded for paying into the system. Workers made redundant had to run down their savings or move back in with parents, while for those in the welfare subculture money and social housing was provided seemingly unconditionally.
- Welfare claimants were perceived as a whole other culture from the working culture: a class where, “They're getting up at 12, opening a can of lager, rolling a spliff and watching Jeremy Kyle.”
- There were several mentions of the TV programme “Shameless”. One participant believed that, “They're given money, they're given houses, they're given benefits, whilst the rest of us are having money took off us, jobs lost.”

- Poor areas are regarded as different to all the rest. “The mentality of the people” means that money gets wasted. They get new things, but it “just gets vandalised”. This was unfair: “where’s our community centre?” Their councillors, who have their “fingers in the right pies” get them a bigger share of spending. Such areas are “like Shameless”, and the people there “probably think that TV programme is “like real life”. They “don’t know any better.” What could be done in such areas? There had been some inroads made into local “no go areas” by getting rid of “bad pubs”, using barbed wire and anti-vandal paint.
- Certain things show the system is all wrong: “why are we paying child benefit to Polish people, and the winter fuel allowance going to people in Spain.” Stories about people sending their benefits back to other countries were raised several times.

(d) Immigration

- “Why are we having to let everyone in?” ... “We’ve got enough universities”. Politicians’ failure to control immigration in the face of self-evident public hostility was almost baffling. Perhaps, one participant argued, politicians were “in too deep” and couldn’t admit that things had got “out of control”. Who is to blame? “The EU, because you can’t not let them in” according to one participant. Both Birmingham groups blamed the EU for making it hard to control immigration.
- All the groups mentioned Australia’s immigration system positively and many people had some anecdote about it. You had, said one, to do three months voluntary work to get citizenship. “You have to learn things [about Australia] by rote”. In general “you have to offer their country something”. You have to have “qualifications and money in the bank”. And the Australians are tough too: while in Britain we are “so frightened, so politically correct”, the Australians just “stop the boats”. There was no mention of UK politicians talking about a points based system. While “we were promised a test... what happened to that?”
- Immigration was also linked to culture: “we celebrate St Patricks and Ramadan, but not St George’s”.
- Politicians favoured seen by several participants as to favouring minorities. “They sit in nice big houses in the countryside saying we are a multicultural society , they don’t live in the real world.” “We’ve become the underdog”. Some would prefer a more assertive lead culture: “we should be proud to be British” (or maybe English) and “sing the national anthem” as they do in other countries. “How much English history is taught in schools?” Kids don’t know their own history. Likewise, some think that “inside the house you can do what you like, but outside” you have to comply with British norms.
- There was also unfairness in so far as minority communities consumed more resources. “that’s where our taxes go”. Amid the terraced houses they’ve put up “a big gold building”. But “you’d not be able to put up a church in Saudi Arabia”. Perhaps, one suggested, we too should say simply “No, sorry, this is England”. At present unemployed people “they’ve got a British passport and can’t even speak the language”
- Various participants felt there was a taboo on discussing this subjects, and were unhappy about this: “There are a lot of interesting emails going round...

we are going to be in a minority by 2050". It was argued that politicians in ethnic minority areas are and so won't condemn what goes on (e.g. during the riots). In fact one participant thought, "we are all being suppressed."

(e) The rights culture

- "Rights" were seemingly part of participants explanation for all kinds of social ills: welfarism, a lack of control over immigration, the decline of discipline in schools.
- In one of the Birmingham groups people were particularly incensed about Britain having to "release" foreign terrorists because of human rights concerns:

"First of all they commit a crime in this country – I don't agree with having to keep these people in prison, sod them back off to their own bloody country."

"What about the one they're just kept here and has cost us thousands of pounds."

"Not that one with the funny hand?"

"The one... the terrorist. They won't send him back, they're keeping him."

"I volunteered to be the hangman but they wouldn't take me." [laughter]

"This one's a terrorist and he's being released, they don't believe they should send him back to his country so he's staying here. He's dangerous."

"That wraps it up what the government are like - you've hit it on the nail"

"Exactly. They're gutless, spineless and backless."

"Got to protect his human rights... well - what about the rights of the people he terrorised? I want to hang them all."

- According to one participant, "Nick Clegg's particularly one who doesn't want anyone to have their 'human rights' violated."

4. Conclusions – comparing the qualitative and quantitative research

- The qualitative research seemed to flesh out and match with the findings of our quantitative research.
- Voters were cynical about politics. They felt economically squeezed, and that increased their anger about the perceived unfairness of the broken society.
- They think the conservatives are from privileged backgrounds, but think the same is increasingly true of Labour.
- They call for tougher policies on crime, welfare and immigration, but are sceptical about whether any politicians will deliver this for them.
- They perceive the coalition as a mix of parties with quite different views, which is frustrating, but also leads them to excuse the parties involved from not doing all the things they said they would.
- They claim to want more conviction politics, and have (at least now after the passage of time) more rosy memories of Mrs Thatcher.
- While broadly authoritarian, people were not right wing or particularly free market.
- While they are sceptical about privatisation and business, they are also pragmatic about the economy.

Politics and policy are intimately connected. Understanding what different voters want, and why, is pretty complicated. From day to day politicians and policy makers use conventionally understood terms which reflect their understanding of the electorate. We think we know what we mean when we talk about parties competing for the “centre ground”, or what the “aspirational working class” is, or the “north-south divide”. But do we? Ideas about the electorate reflect different generations of academic research - including some long defunct ideas. Society is always changing, and with it, so does academic research and polling evidence. This report is an attempt to update our maps.

How should we understand geographical differences and the urban/rural divide? Is there really a north-south divide, and if so why? What are different voters’ policy priorities? How do they think the parties should change?

To answer these questions this project brings together existing opinion research, and uses an extensive polling exercise, regression analysis and qualitative research to try and improve our understanding of public policy, and the geography of political attitudes in Britain today.

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