

# Painting the towns blue

*How the political map was redrawn  
in the 2019 general election*



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## Foreword: The best time to re-assess 2019

**A year is a long time in politics.** Twelve months after the Conservative's general election victory extraordinary events have moved the political agenda on, and now we find ourselves at a crucial turning point.

The last fundamental decisions during the Brexit transition period are being made. The new long-term relationship between Britain and the European Union will begin in 2021. With it, the political atmosphere around Brexit will pass from that which got this government elected to one which will set the tone for years to come.

With it, the coterie that helped establish this government's Brexit position has passed into political history. Dominic Cummings and the 'Vote Leave' cohort that played such a crucial role in the beginning of Boris Johnson's premiership has been replaced. With it, the government moves into a new 'life stage' with a new direction.

At the same time, there are now promises of a workable vaccine for Coronavirus. The expectation is that the global crisis, which has dominated most of the Fifty-eighth Parliament, will eventually be tamed and the challenges of a new post-Covid world will need to be tackled.

Despite these challenges, there is also ample opportunity for both the government and opposition to chart a fresh course well into the 2020s. In both cases we are unsure what this will look like and who will best respond to the changing public mood.

Most importantly, it means the present time is ideal for re-appraising what happened in the last general election. From the parliamentary gridlock of 2019, through to the extraordinary results as they unfurled, there has never been a better moment to consider how the political map was drastically redrawn, what was crucial to making it happen, and what ultimately proved to be incidental.

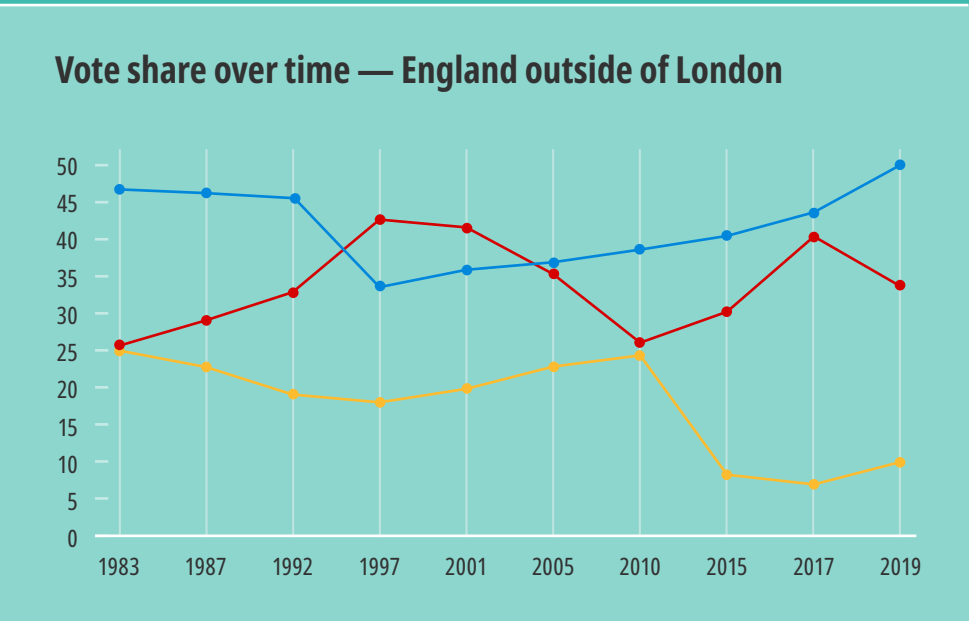
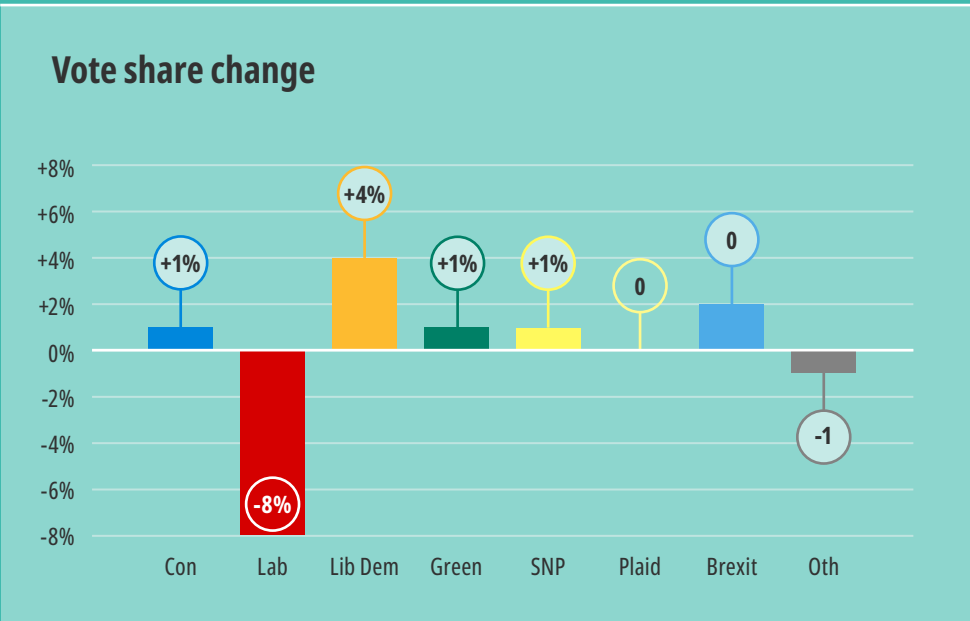
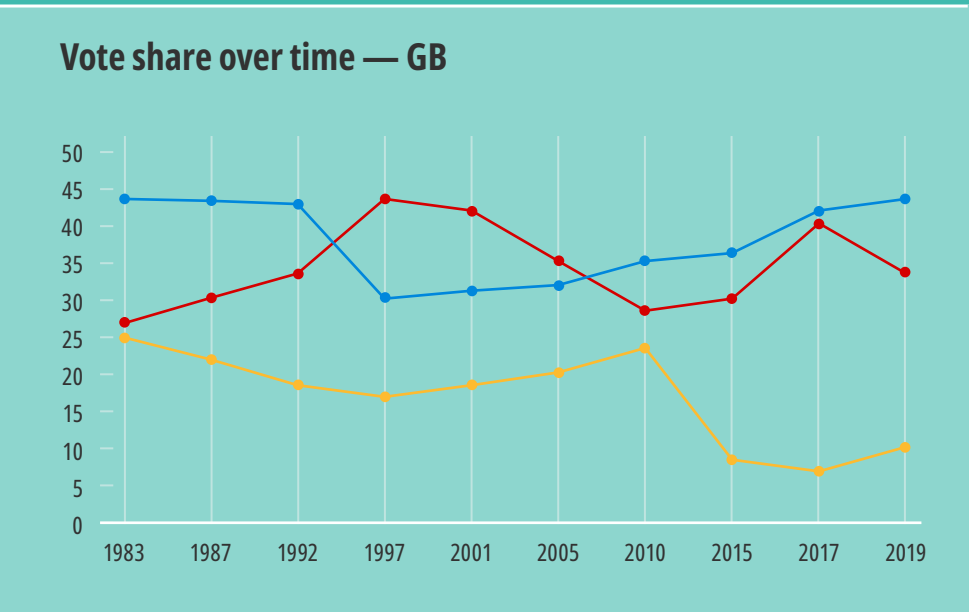
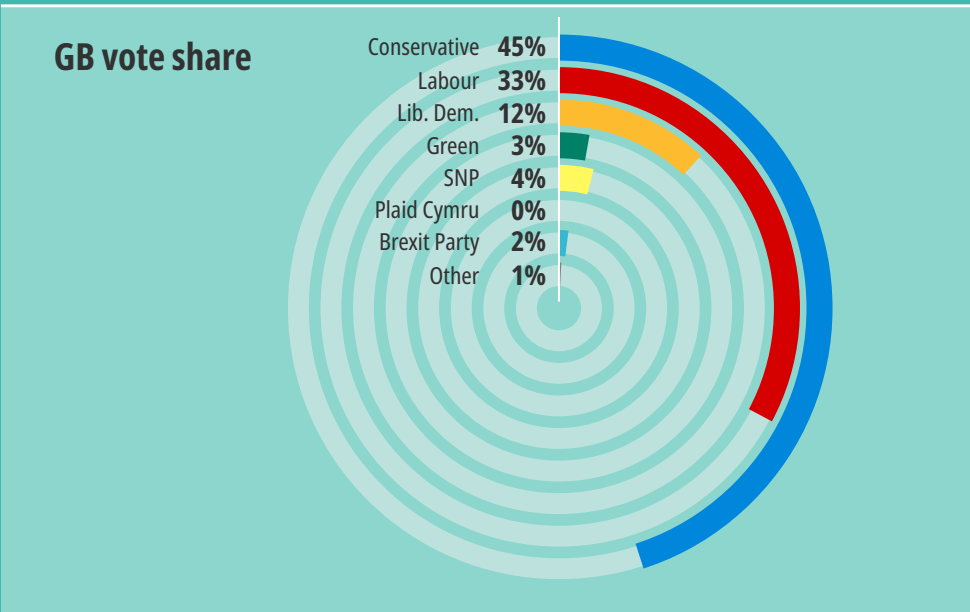
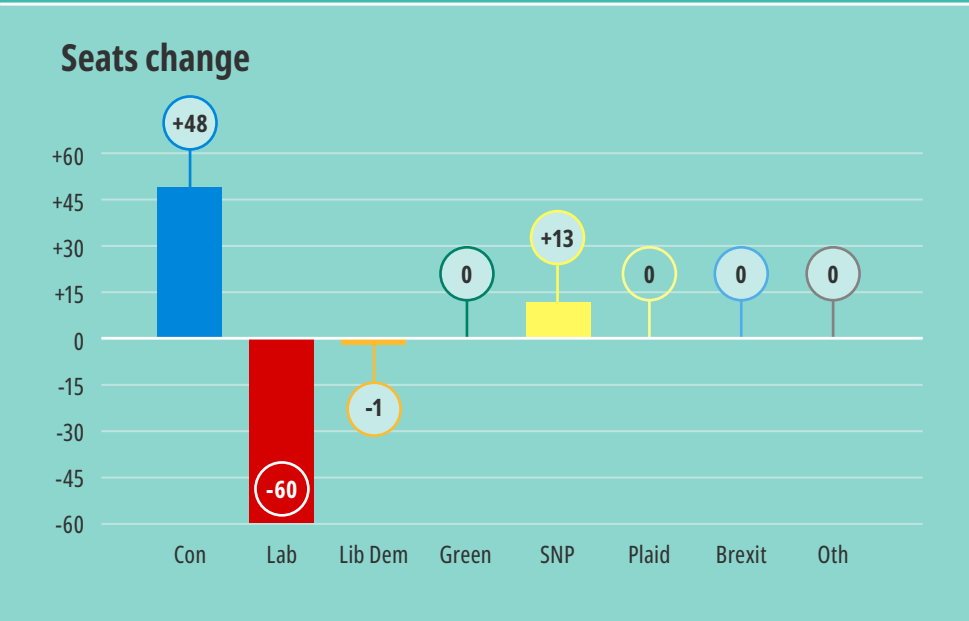
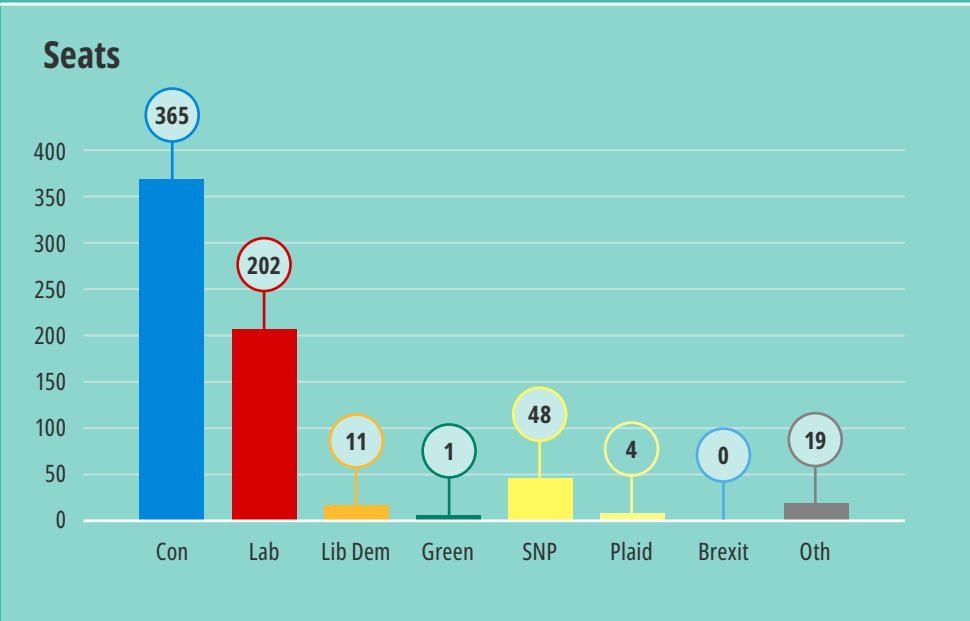
In so doing, we hope this re-examination of the autumn of 2019 will not only add to our understanding of the last general election, but also help us imagine what the next might look like.

# The winning formula

The Conservative Party won the first majority in landslide territory for any party since 2001, and the **largest Conservative majority at a general election since 1987**. Since 2001, this is the first occasion on which the UK has given one party a dominating presence in the Commons chamber with a wide lead in the popular vote.

The Conservatives won 365 seats, with Labour on 202 and the Liberal Democrats on only 11. The **Scottish National Party remain dominant in Scotland** for the third successive general election, taking 48 out of 59 seats. On the other hand, Plaid Cymru merely held onto their four seats in western and northern Wales; the party first won this tally of seats in 1992 and has been unable to do better than this since. Other small parties also failed to make any serious breakthrough.

The Green Party of England and Wales took 2.7% of the UK vote share and Caroline Lucas held her seat with a strongly increased majority, but their national performance was still well below their high watermark in 2015. **The Brexit Party's 2% of the vote was woefully short** of their performance in the European Parliament elections, and UKIP is no longer a serious force at a national level.



## The exit poll and election night

**For almost three decades a myth around the fallibilities of the exit poll has grown.** Even the late Professor Anthony King claimed on the BBC's 2005 election night programme that in 1992 it was "was completely wrong, the exit poll said a Labour government, the voters said a Tory government".

In fact, even including 1992, when the first serious UK exit poll was conducted, it has never been far off the mark. It projected that John Major would be short of an overall majority when the actual majority he did win was so slim he lost it through by-elections within five years. But in the seven subsequent elections no one has found serious fault with them.

Bang on ten o'clock Huw Edwards announced the results of the 2019 exit poll: a Conservative majority of 86 seats. Within a couple of hours, and after the first few results, the Northumberland seat of Blyth Valley declared. Labour lost more than 7,000 votes and the Conservatives won the seat for the first time since 1931 on a swing of 10%. If there was any doubt about the exit poll, it was dispelled far quicker than it usually is on election night.

It meant the recriminations came early on one side amid the almost immediate claims of victory from the other. We hope to take a more measured approach in our report looking at all the evidence, from our regular political polling to in-depth analysis of the actual votes as cast on 12<sup>th</sup> December.

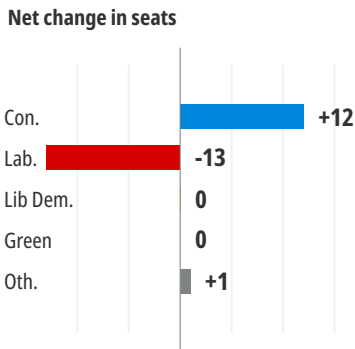
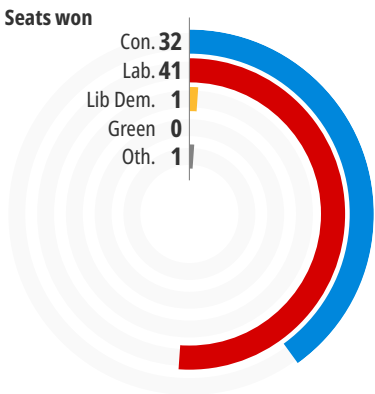
*Bang on ten o'clock Huw Edwards announced the results of the 2019 exit poll: a Conservative majority of 86 seats.*



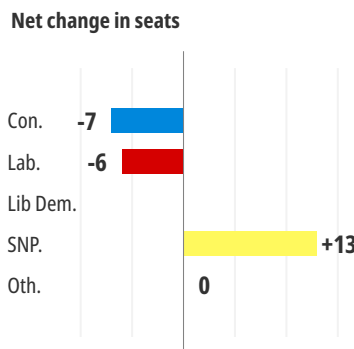
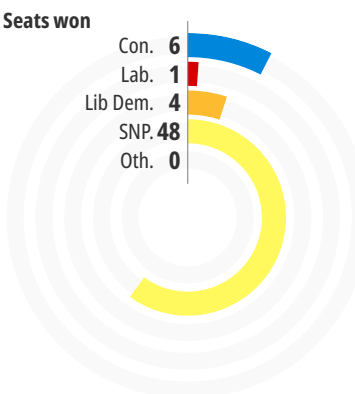




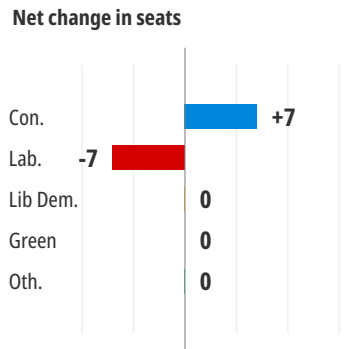
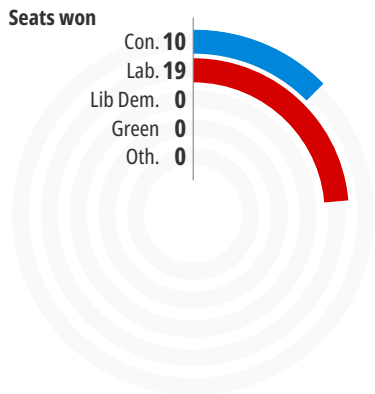
North West



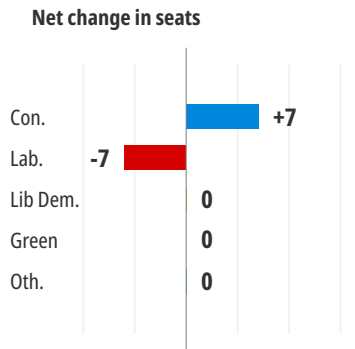
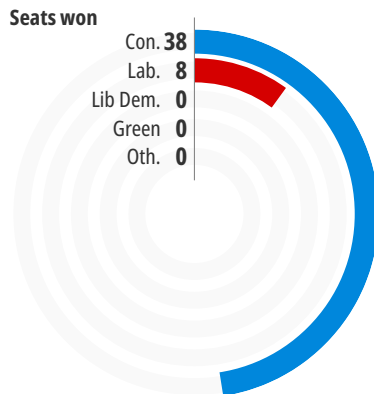
Scotland



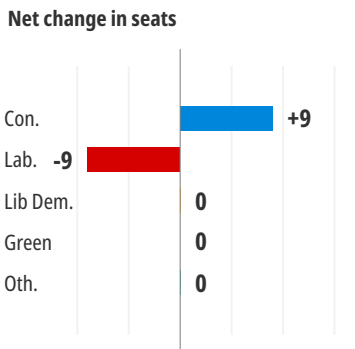
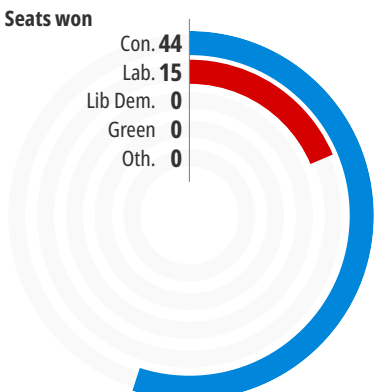
North East



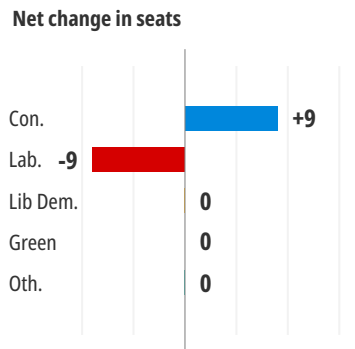
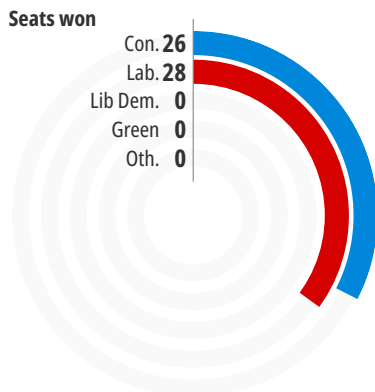
East Midlands



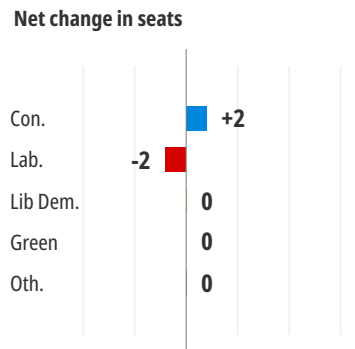
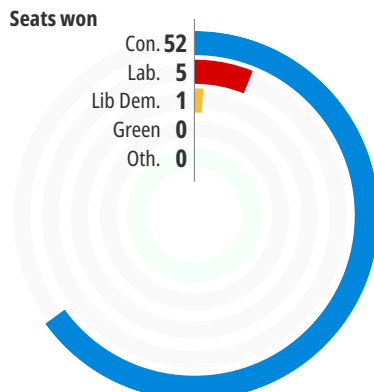
West Midlands



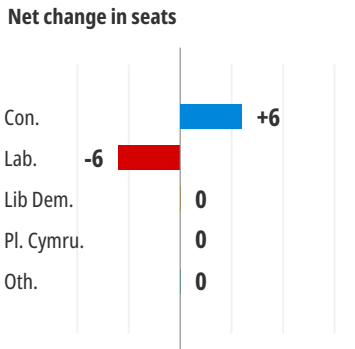
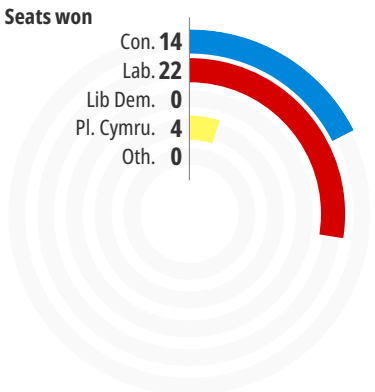
Yorkshire & Humber



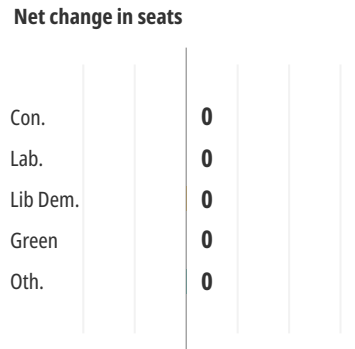
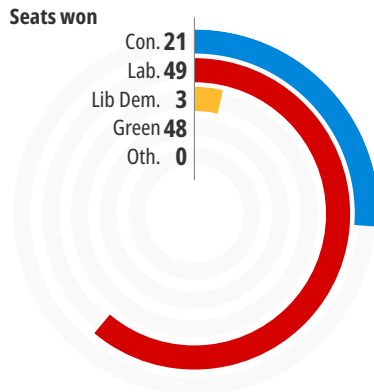
East



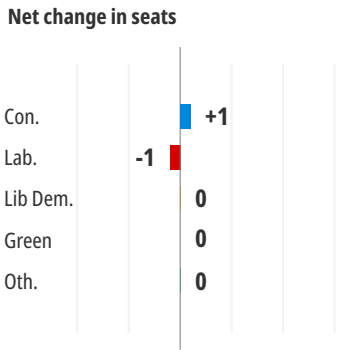
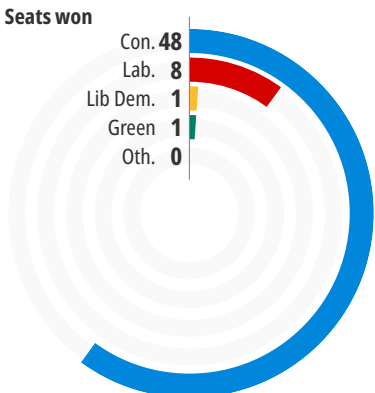
Wales



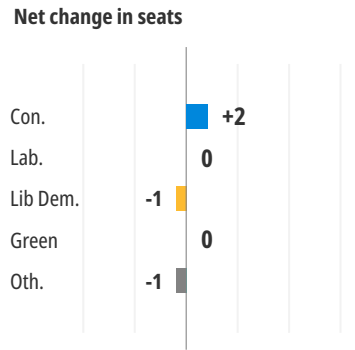
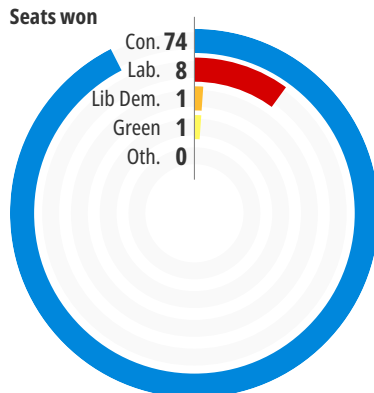
London



South West



South East



## The regional story: Provincial England against London

**Without even studying any of the underlying reasons for it, the regional picture across the UK at the 2019 general election was extraordinary.**

London has been confirmed as a Labour heartland. The capital has been diverging from the rest of England for over a decade. Since 2010, Labour has performed noticeably better in London than in the rest of the country at every general election. Despite a decade of Conservative government, the party has failed to get the largest number of votes inside the M25 for seven successive elections. As they are now 16 points behind Labour in London it seems unlikely that they will again anytime soon.

More importantly, the Conservative Party is probably uninterested in doing so. In ‘the provinces’, a rather archaic term for England outside of London, the Conservative Party performed historically well. They took almost half (49.7%) of all votes in England outside of the capital and won 324 out of the 460 seats up for grabs. This is better than any party leader of either side has been able to achieve for decades, and in terms of seats, the best since the Second World War.

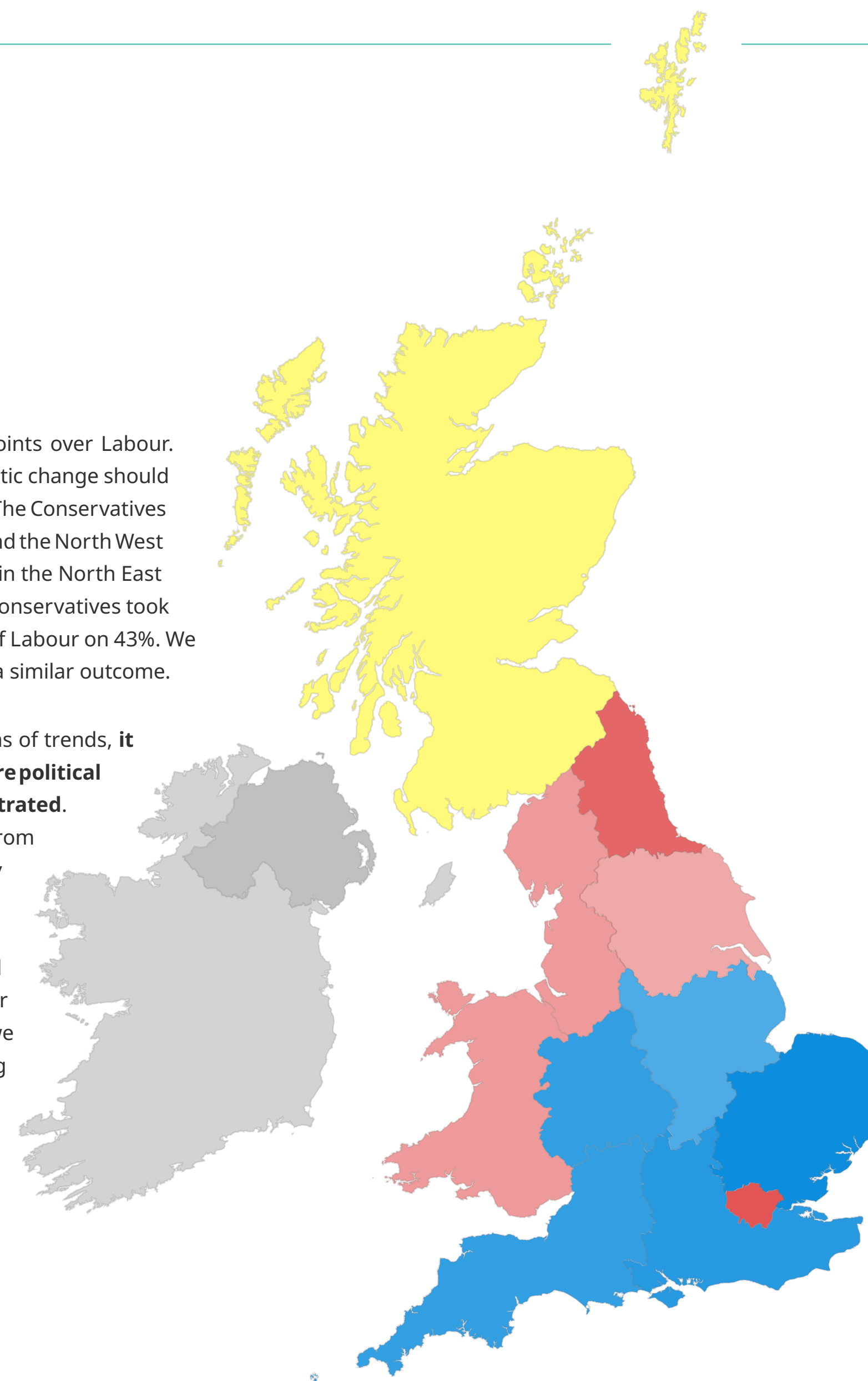
On one hand, the Conservatives did not face a collapse in the Southern heartlands, outside of notable individual examples. In the regions encompassing everything from Falmouth to Yarmouth the Tory lead over Labour was 30 points or more. Despite some concerns to the contrary, they held onto the solid base they have enjoyed, to differing degrees, since David Cameron’s victory in 2010.

On the other, there were drastic swings to the Tories outside of Southern England. Historically the Midlands looked broadly like the rest of the country. This time, the

Tories have a lead of almost 20 points over Labour. But the strongest examples of drastic change should be reserved for northern England. The Conservatives had their best results in Yorkshire and the North West since 1983, and their performance in the North East was nothing short of historic: the Conservatives took 38% of the vote, only 5 points shy of Labour on 43%. We have to look back to the 1920s for a similar outcome.

All this isn’t just interesting in terms of trends, **it has very real implications for where political and electoral power is concentrated.**

London is not simply different from the rest of the country; it is strongly pro-Labour when in every other region the Tories are competitive where they shouldn’t be and seemingly the only viable option for most voters elsewhere. For years we have talked about London ‘being another country’ and, electorally speaking, it’s hard to deny it now.





# Who switched and why?

Without a doubt Brexit played a huge role in this election. But the underlying patterns show that, in the post-Cameron era, different voter groups have become key players in our shifting electoral sands.

## The varsity line: whether or not you went to university is the new dividing line

The referendum on the UK's membership of the EU has played a crucial role in determining electoral patterns since June 2016. It marked a shift from the rather familiar economic and class-based politics beforehand, to a politics based more on societal outlook.

In both the 2019 and 2017 general elections, the Conservative-Labour swing in a constituency had a higher correlation with whether or not a constituency voted for Brexit than any other factor. But more importantly, the divide that Brexit opened up meant that a whole new set of factors became important in determining vote change. Whether or not you went to university played an important role: there was a 0.67 correlation between a better Labour performance and a higher number of graduates in a constituency. By comparison, back in 2015, there was effectively no relationship between a swing to Labour and the number of graduates in a constituency (0.04).

In short, we're not just seeing Brexit have an impact. We are seeing a widening gap in opinion between those who are highly skilled in professional and dynamic industries and the school and FE leavers who have not had the same opportunities.

## Swings disconnected from, or in spite of, economic interest

The 2015 general election gave David Cameron the first overall majority for a Conservative leader since 1992. The basis of it was winning over generally well-off areas that had not been ready in 2005 to abandon the Labour Party, which had given voters so many good years before the recession.

There are three demographic factors that played a key role in 2015 by having a high correlation to the swing to the Conservative Party important to point out: having two or more cars (0.50), high levels of home ownership (0.46) and very low levels of deprivation (0.39). Fast-forward to 2019 and the first factor now played no role in determining how large the swing to the Conservatives was (-0.01) while the second had a very low level of correlation (0.14).

More strikingly, if David Cameron's election victory was based on winning over affluent households in 2015, Boris Johnson won a comparative landslide in spite of them. In fact, low levels of deprivation in a constituency had a noticeable negative correlation with a swing to the Conservative Party (-0.40). If David Cameron won with a coalition of the comfortable, Boris Johnson won by persuading those lacking opportunities to back him.

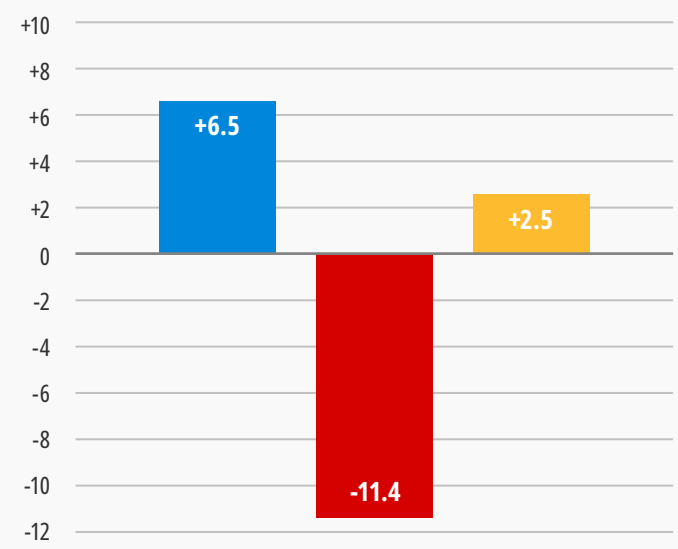
Vote share change of major parties by demographic features of constituent

Conservative  
Labour  
Liberal Democrat

Most Remain voters



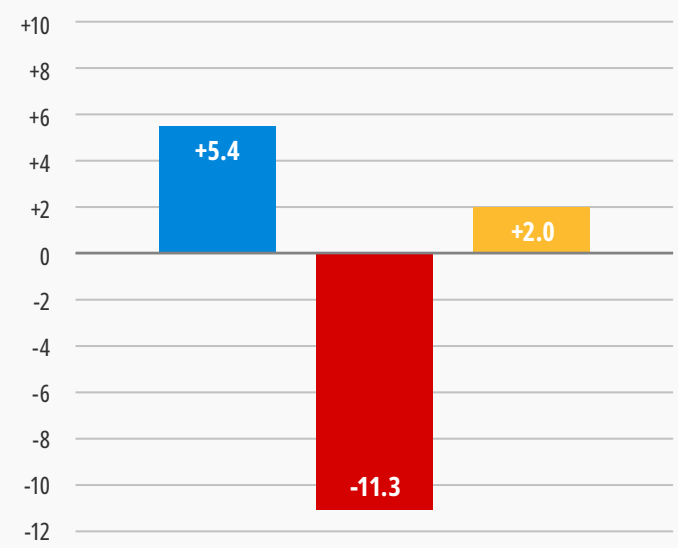
Most Leave voters



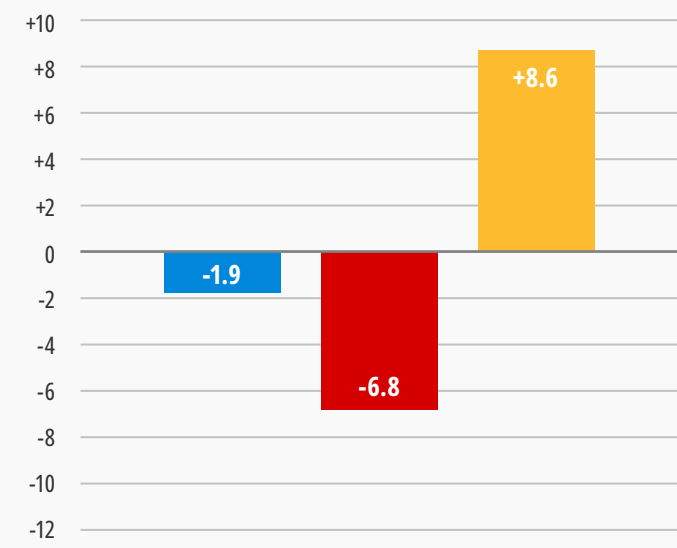
Most graduates



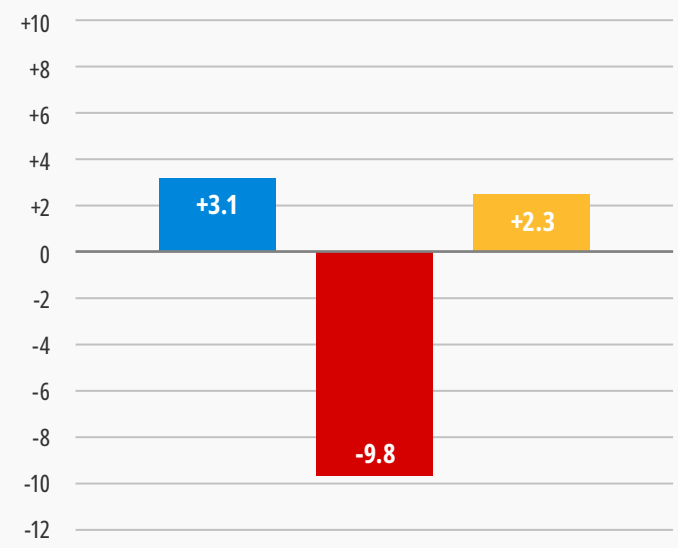
Least graduates



Least deprived



Most deprived



Constituencies determined by being those in England and Wales in the top or bottom quintile for each demographic factor.



## Scotland: the battle between the Conservatives and SNP continues

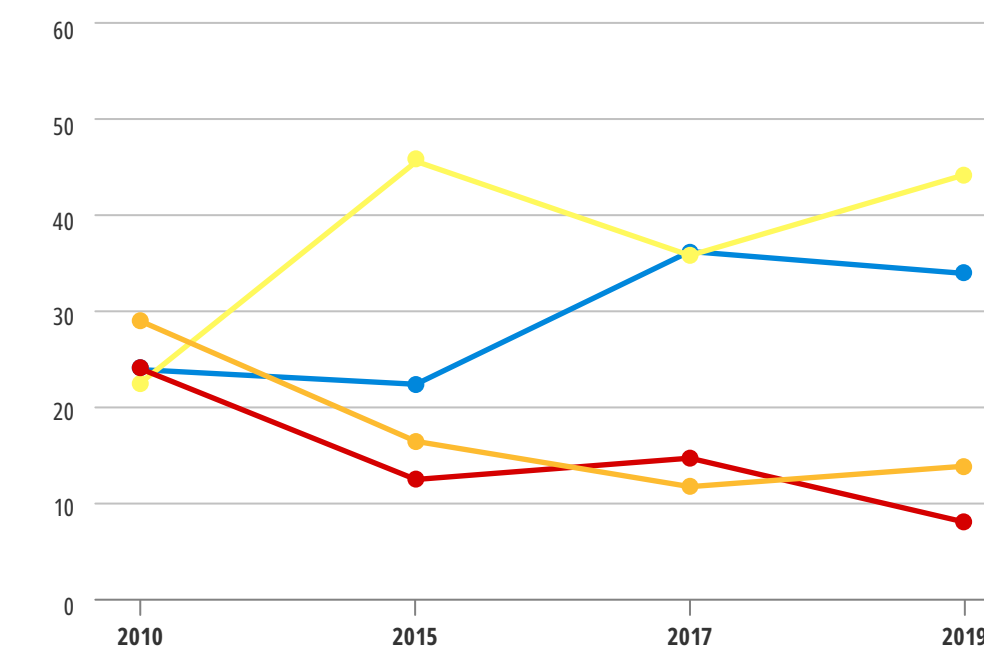
The news from Scotland in the 2019 general election is that battle lines drawn up in 2017 are still largely intact, even if the SNP did better than last time. The key divider does appear to be between urban and rural Scotland. In the urban centres north of the border Labour struggled to retake its own core voters. In the more rural areas the Conservatives have consolidated the unionist voice behind it to challenge the SNP, to varying degrees of success.

Despite Scotland's strong vote to Remain in the EU, the Conservatives did not face the collapse in vote share that the some expected. For example, in the 13 seats that Ruth Davidson's Conservatives managed to take in 2017, the party's vote share dropped only 2 points from 44% to 42%.

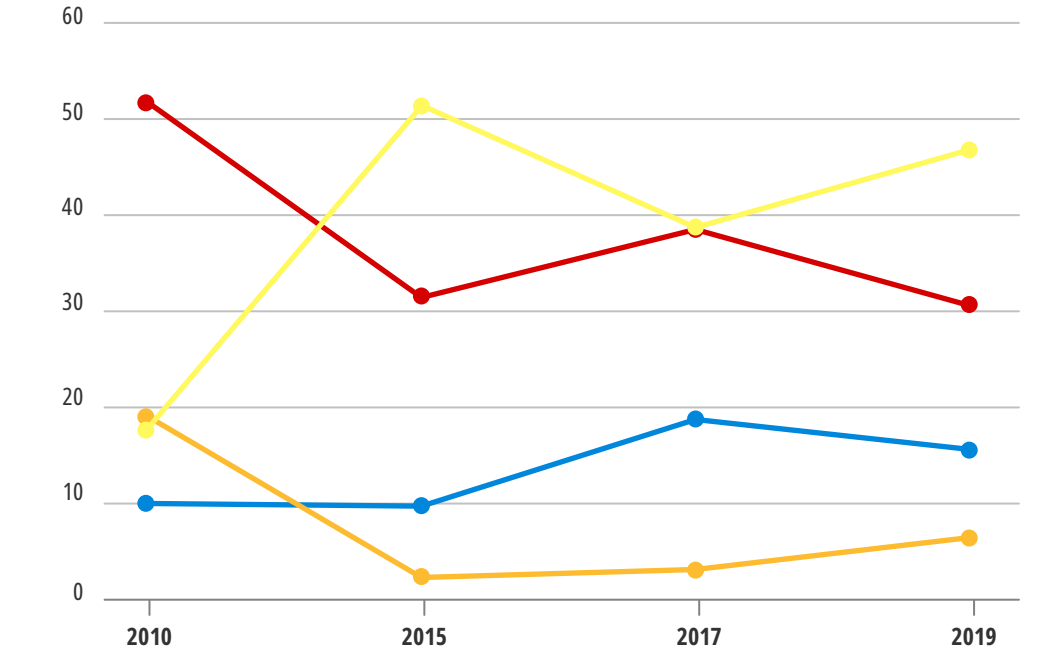
The big change taking place in Scotland appeared to be the Labour vote falling away again to the SNP. For example, in those high watermark Conservative seats Labour's vote dropped 10 points with the SNP up 9 points, losing the Tories seats they might have otherwise been able to hold. This will be little comfort to the Conservative Party, though, as it suggests that the SNP has a minimum number of votes it can call upon while Scottish independence remains a key issue that guarantees it success in a first past the vote system.

Conservative  
Labour  
Liberal Democrat  
Scottish National Party

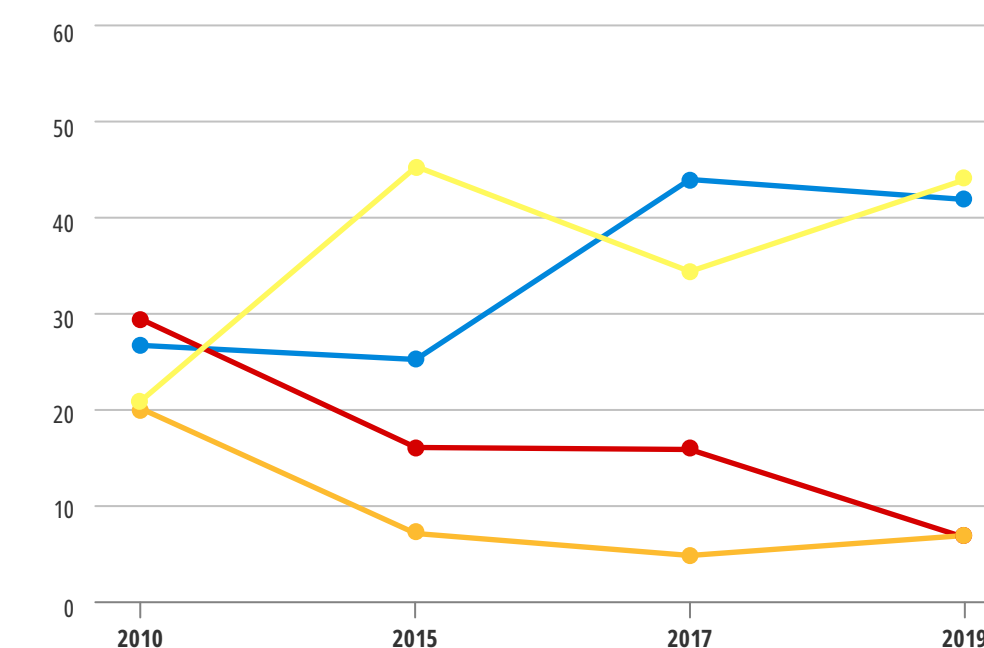
Most rural



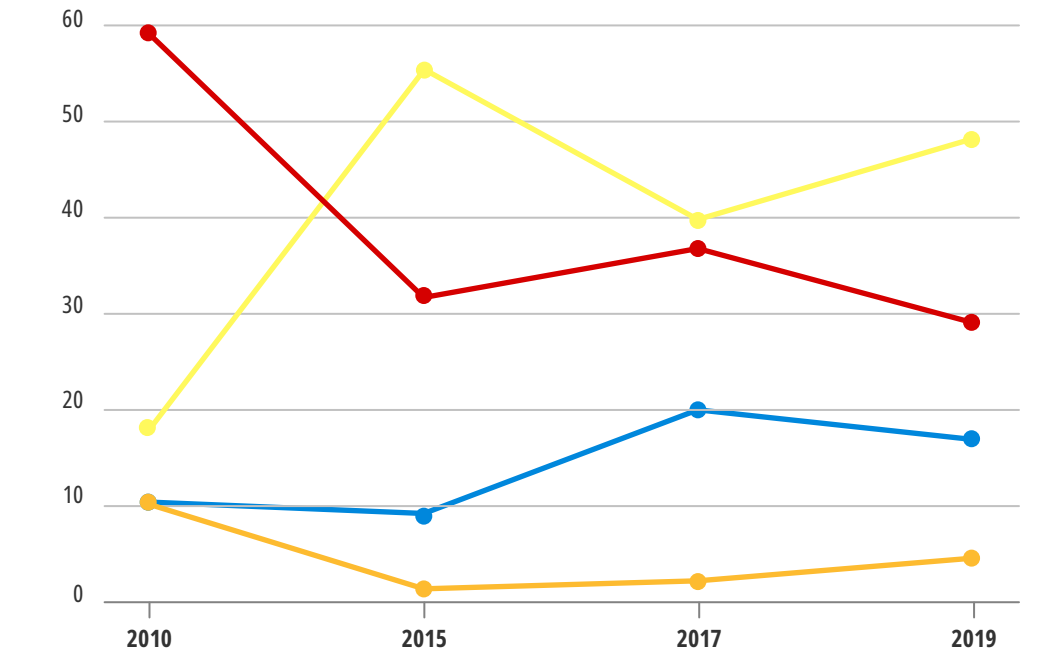
Most urban



13 seats Conservatives won in 2017



Labour's 20 strongest seats in 2010





## Labour's prospects for the next general election

Britain's electoral system requires political parties to use their votes efficiently. **It is not enough to simply win more votes; you need to win them in the right places amongst the right people** to convert that into a winning number of seats.

Labour only won 202 seats at this election, which leaves them 124 seats behind the 326 seats needed for an overall majority. This is similar to the electoral mountain that David Cameron had to overcome (who was elected to lead a party with only 198 seats), and which also faced Neil Kinnock (Labour had 209 seats when he took over). In short, it's possible to position yourself well enough to climb most of that mountain, but it is also easy to fall far short of the target.

Going into the 2010 general election, David Cameron needed to win 119 seats to reach that 326 taking boundary changes into account. The 119th Tory target in England & Wales was Barrow and Furness, which they needed a 6.3% swing to take. Labour's new equivalent is Dover. If they take Dover at the next election they will probably win an overall majority, but they will also need more than 12% swing in their favour to do so. Put simply, Labour's new leader, Sir Keir Starmer will find it twice as difficult as David Cameron did to overturn the incumbent government's majority and install themselves in power.

This is mainly a function of the SNP's presence north of the border and the continuing fallout from the days of the Coalition government. In the 1990s and 2000s dozens of Liberal Democrats had conquered traditional Tory territory, and stubbornly held onto them despite fierce Conservative attempts to take these seats back. Every seat the Conservatives could not take back from the Lib Dems was another they had to take from Labour. The 2015 general election saw this threat wiped out. At the same time it also saw the Scottish urban working class shift en masse from Labour to the Scottish National Party. Dozens of seats no one other than Labour were ever going to win, suddenly were represented by an SNP member of parliament.

This is not to disguise Labour's poor performance. Dover had a Labour MP for 13 years and the cavernous gap that now exists between Labour and the Conservative incumbent is far from atypical. There are currently 45 seats in England and Wales that Labour won in 2005 but now are more than 20 points behind the Conservatives. Not only is Labour hampered by the loss of their Scottish heartlands, they have alienated large numbers of voters in pretty standard marginal territory. It has to be said, Keir Starmer has one of the hardest jobs of any opposition leader.



# The Campaign

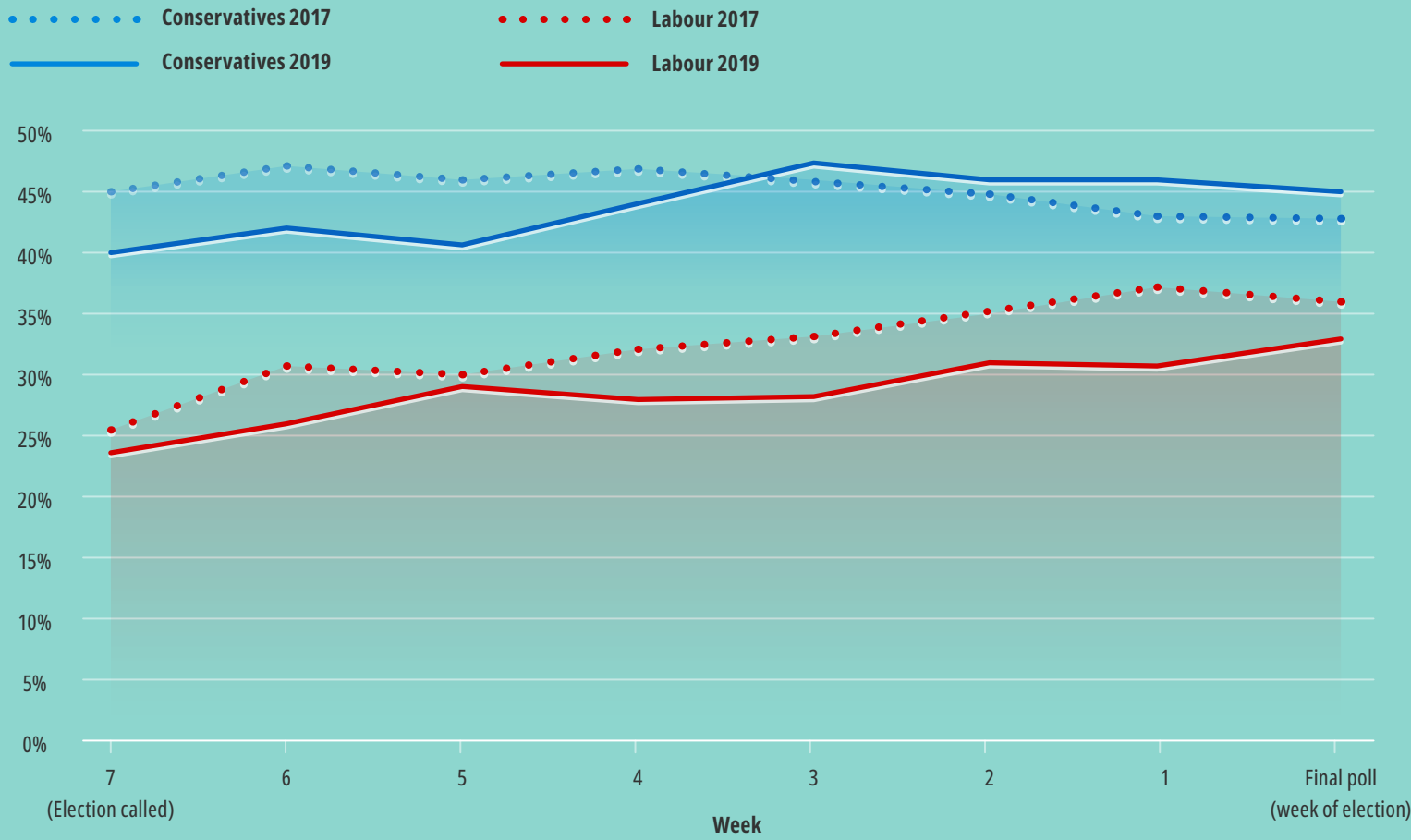


The biggest stories of the 2019 general election campaign are the ones that didn't happen. Stung by the experience of 2017, commentators (and some pollsters) expected another Labour surge and saw the Conservatives' significant early leads in this light. Similarly, an election with **two historically unpopular main party leaders** struck many as the chance of a generation for the Liberal Democrats to break through.

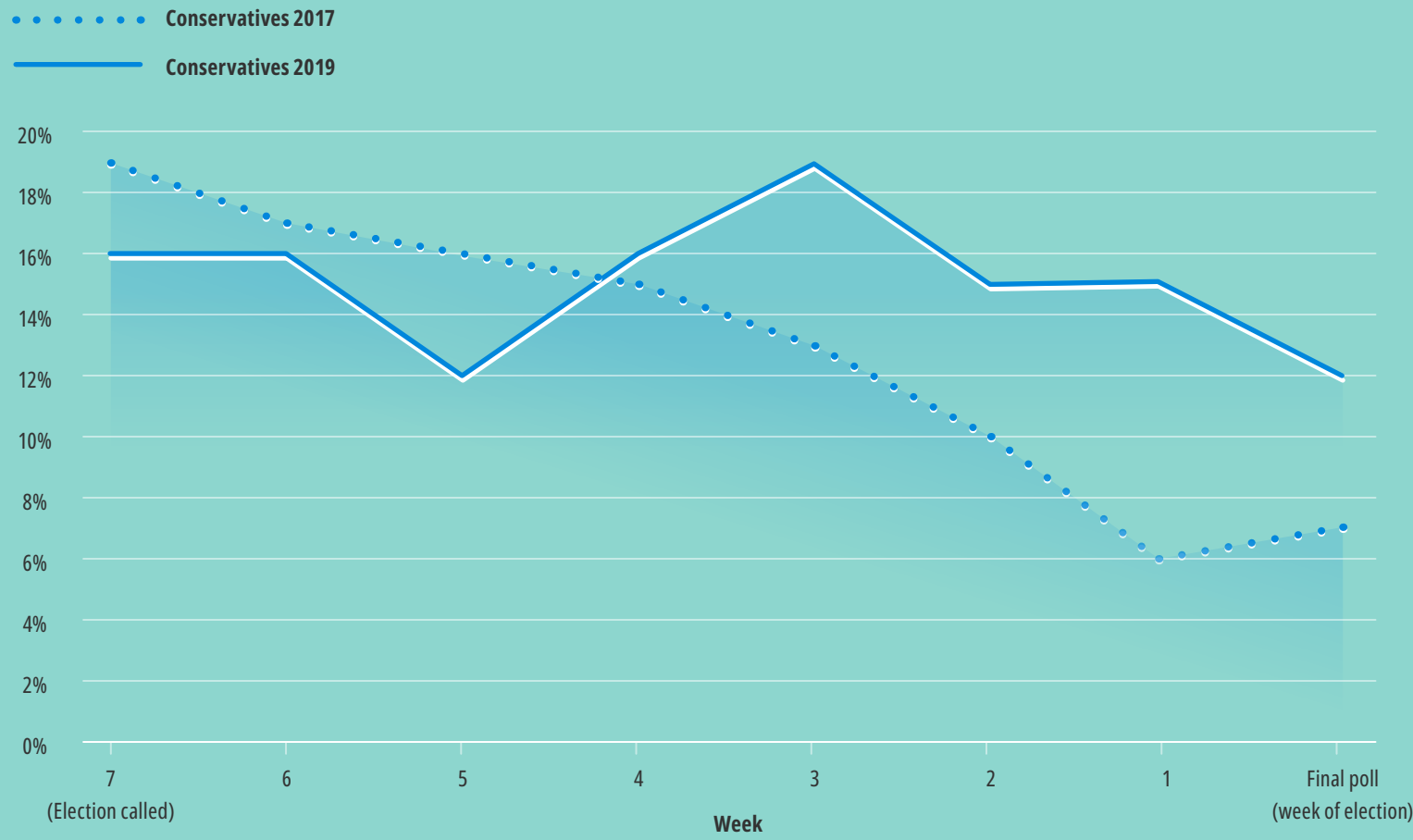
While the Conservatives did indeed begin both election campaigns with near-20 point leads, by the second week of the campaign Labour had achieved "crossover" in that **2019 Labour was now performing worse than 2017 Labour** had been at an equivalent point.

Similarly, Jeremy Corbyn started 2017 as one of the least popular opposition leaders in modern times but gradually managed to close the gap, helped in part by a decline in Theresa May's ratings. As Chapter 10 will show, an equivalent closing of the gap never happened in 2019 and instead, Labour's campaign never really got off the ground while the specific events which so benefitted the party in 2017 either failed to occur or backfired significantly.

Comparing the 2017 and 2019 campaigns

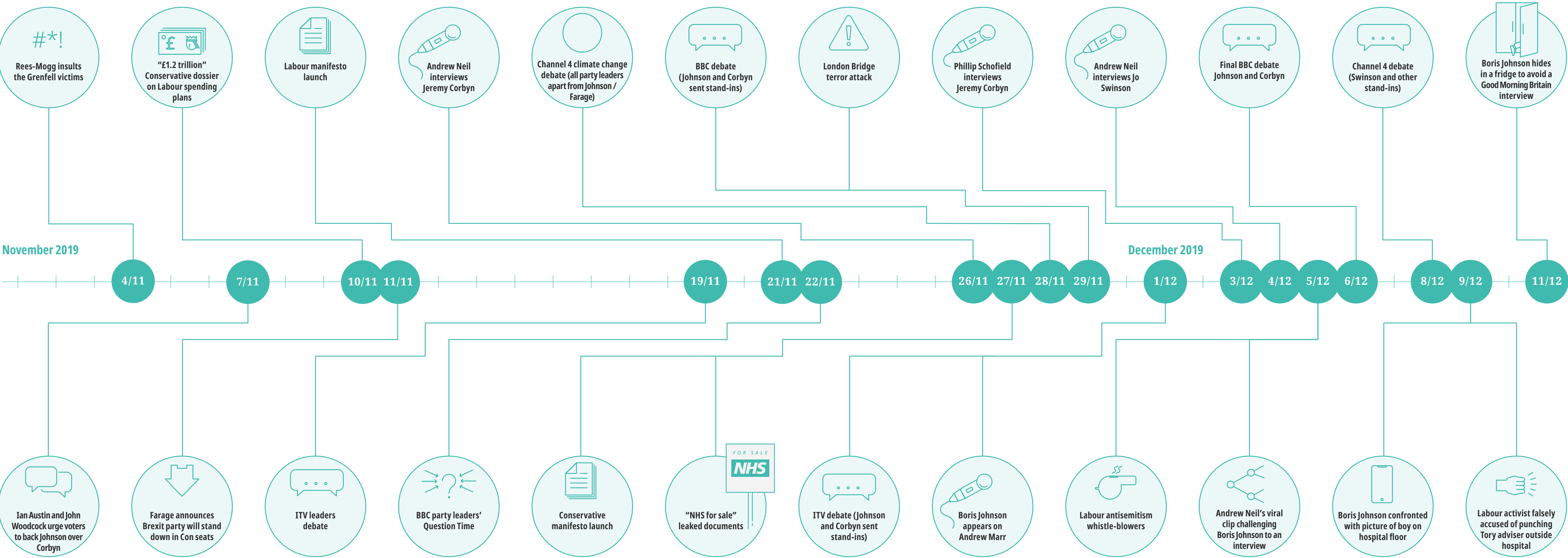


Conservative lead over the campaign





The ups and downs of the campaign





## Week one

**The campaign appeared to begin well for Labour.** The very fact of an election being called helped, as with 2017, to immediately bring some wavering supporters into the fold as their answer to the poll became less about expressing disapproval of their leader and more about choosing a government. Between 30th October and 5th November, Labour gained 3 points to cut the Conservative lead from 16 points to 12 (the Conservatives losing 1) and Jeremy Corbyn's net approval rating jumped from a catastrophic minus 40% to a marginally less catastrophic minus 35% while Boris Johnson's remained static at minus 3%.

In the same week, Jacob Rees-Mogg seemed to confirm traditional Labour voters' worst fears about **out-of-touch toffs by insulting the victims of the Grenfell disaster**. Throughout the campaign, Opinium ran an open text

tracking question asking participants in each poll what, if anything, they had noticed about the election in that week. In this open text question, Rees-Mogg was mentioned by 11% of poll respondents, more than any other issue that week and CCHQ wisely confined him to his constituency for the remainder of the campaign.

This momentum didn't last however and, in the poll conducted in the next week, the Conservative lead had reverted back to 16 points as the Tories went from 41% to 44%.



## Week two

The second week saw the Conservatives attack **Labour's spending plans as costing "£1.2 trillion"** as well as former Labour MPs (both of whom left Labour to sit as independents) Ian Austin and John Woodcock urging voters to support Boris Johnson to keep Jeremy Corbyn out of Downing Street. These however were barely noticed by voters with only 1% mentioning the story about Austin and Woodcock (or any variation thereof) and 5% mentioning spending plans in any way.

The biggest story of that week by far was the announcement by Nigel Farage that the Brexit Party would not contest any seat won by the Conservatives in 2017. At a stroke this sent almost a million votes in the Tories' direction. In our poll of that week, Boris Johnson's approval rating among Brexit Party voters was 65% while 84% disapproved of Jeremy Corbyn. There

was only one way these voters were going to go if deprived of the opportunity to vote for their chosen party, if they voted at all. Among those who, at any point in the campaign, considered voting for the Brexit Party, 53% of those that voted ended up supporting the Conservatives.

We saw the effect of this in our first poll after the closure of nominations on 14th November. Before this deadline, all participants would see the list of parties likely to be standing in their constituency (with SNP in Scotland and Plaid Cymru in Wales). After this deadline we could restrict what participants saw to only those parties actually standing in their constituency. In that first poll after making this change, the Brexit Party dropped by 3 points while the Conservatives gained 3, taking their lead from 16 points to 19.



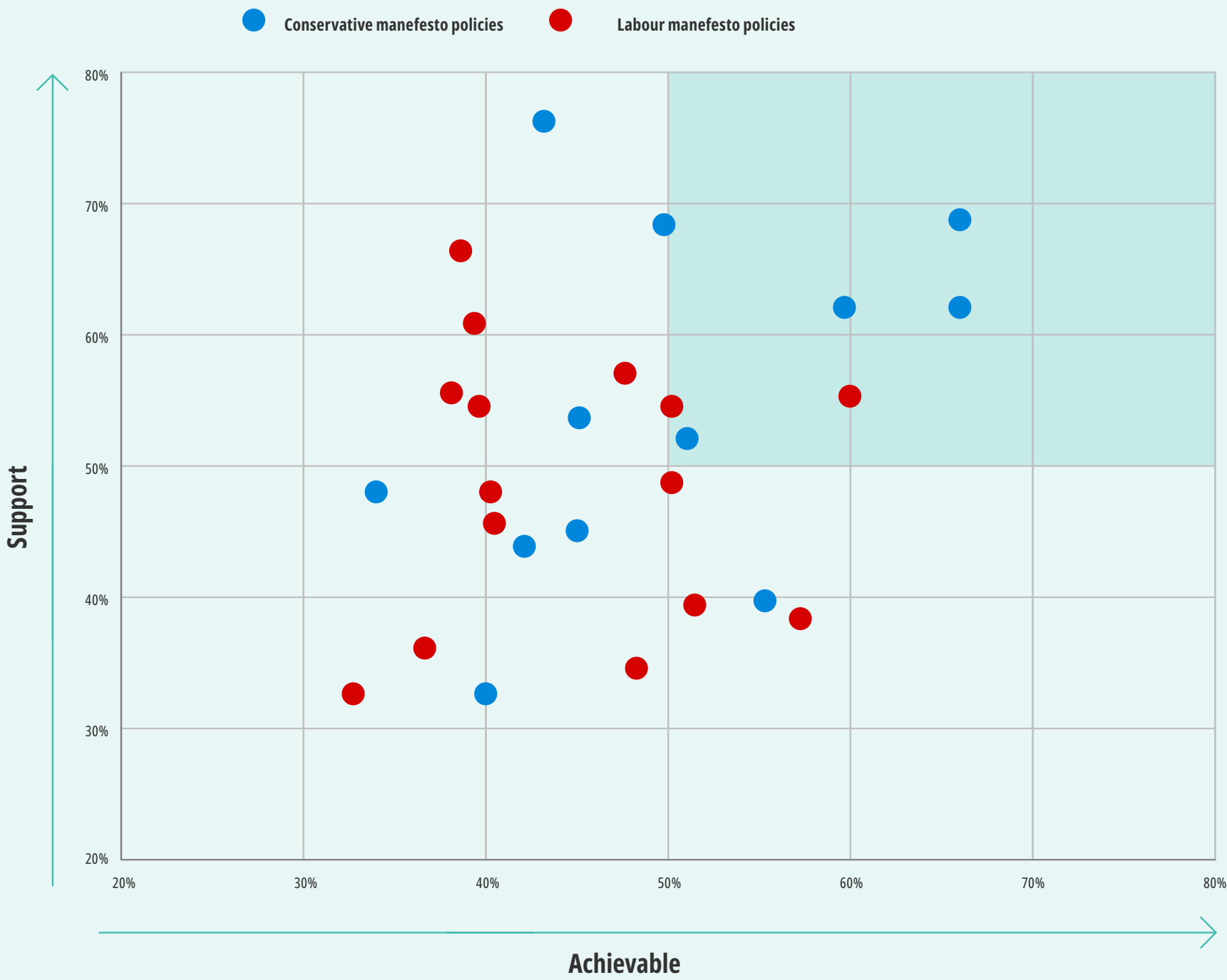
# Week three

The third week of the campaign was seen in Labour HQ as “bazooka week” as it contained two of their best opportunities to change the narrative of the election: the Johnson vs. Corbyn head to head debate on ITV on 19th November followed by the launch of the Labour manifesto on the 21<sup>st</sup>. Again, Chapter 10 will show how the debate in particular ended up being a missed opportunity for Jeremy Corbyn, but the chart below gives an idea of why Labour’s manifesto launch failed to have the same impact as its equivalent in 2017.

We tested the key policy announcements in both the Labour and Conservative manifestos, asking voters whether they supported or opposed each one and, crucially, whether they were achievable or not.

While four of the twelve Conservative policies we tested fell into the sweet spot of being popular and achievable, only one Labour policy (income tax rises for high earners) did.

While the Tories’ lead did revert to the mean of 15%, as Chapter 7 will show, the only thing that went right for Labour in “bazooka week” was how much damage Jo Swinson’s appearance on the party leaders’ Question Time did to the Liberal Democrats.

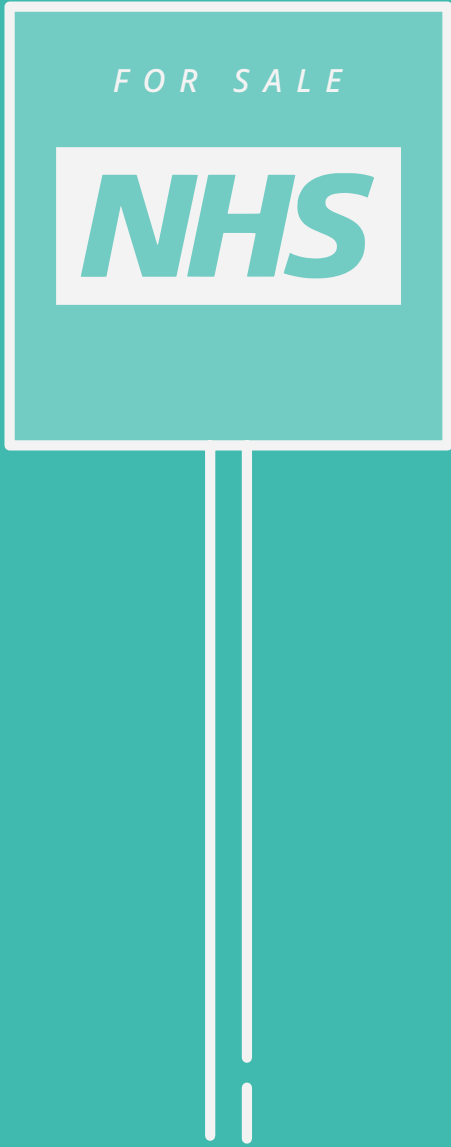




## → Week four

The other unwelcome event for Labour was how the festering sore of antisemitism was brought into the spotlight by the (unprecedented) intervention of the Chief Rabbi, and **Corbyn's subsequent refusal to apologise in his interview with Andrew Neil.**

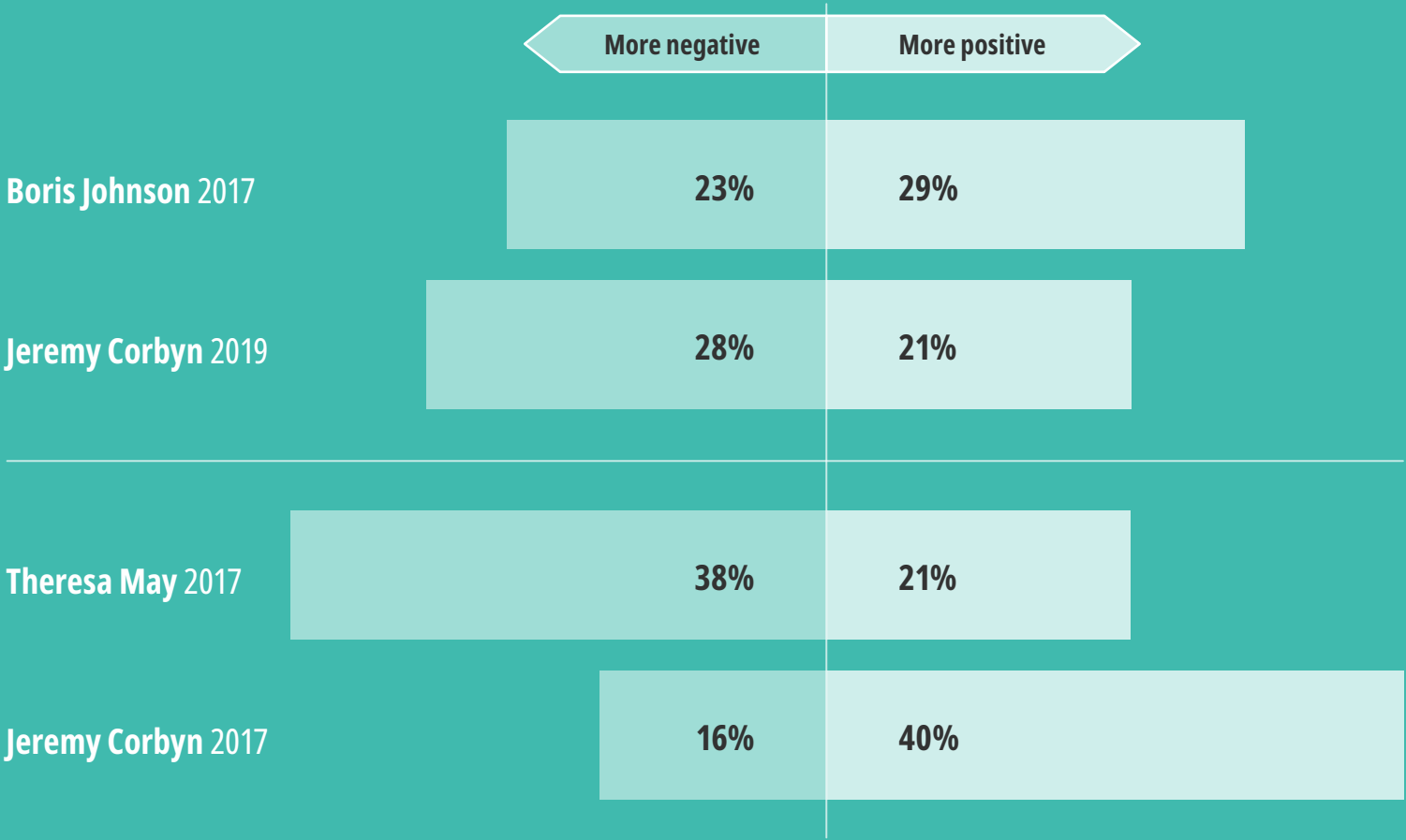
The fallout from the Andrew Neil interview dominated frontpages the next day and this cut through to voters with antisemitism being the most mentioned item in our open-text tracker (9%) with 3% mentioning the Chief Rabbi specifically. By comparison just 5% mentioned the NHS, a disappointment for Labour considering fieldwork for the poll began on the day the leaked **"NHS for sale" documents were announced by Corbyn.**



## → Week five

The penultimate week of the campaign contained plenty of moments which had the potential to shift the narrative but, ultimately, nothing changed and the Conservative lead held steady at 15 points. By comparison, at this point in 2017, voters were clear that impressions of Jeremy Corbyn had become more positive while impressions of Theresa May had worsened considerably. In 2019 the situation was much more negative for Labour.

How perception of the leaders has changed over the course of the campaign



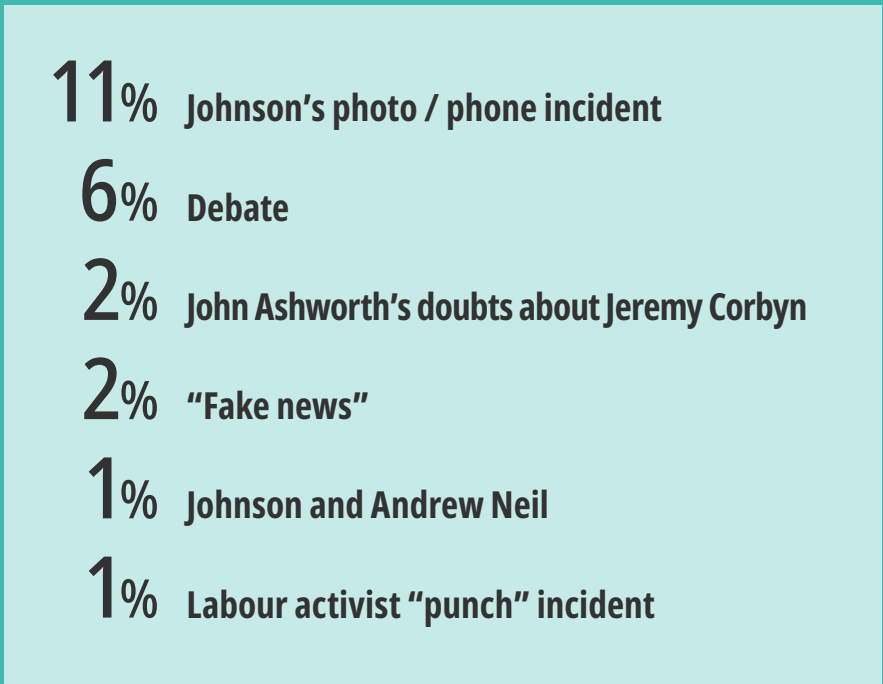
# Final week

In the final week of the campaign, Labour’s antisemitism problem came back with a vengeance when the Jewish Labour Movement’s submission to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission inquiry into the Labour party was leaked.

Andrew Neil’s challenge to Boris Johnson went viral on social media and Corbyn failed to make headway in the final party leaders’ debate on the BBC.

But the only story that really cut through to voters in our open text question was Boris Johnson’s encounter with ITV’s Joe Pike in which the prime minister was shown a picture of a 4-year-old boy lying on a hospital floor awaiting treatment and appeared to pocket the reporter’s phone.

Here is how our open text responses broke down:



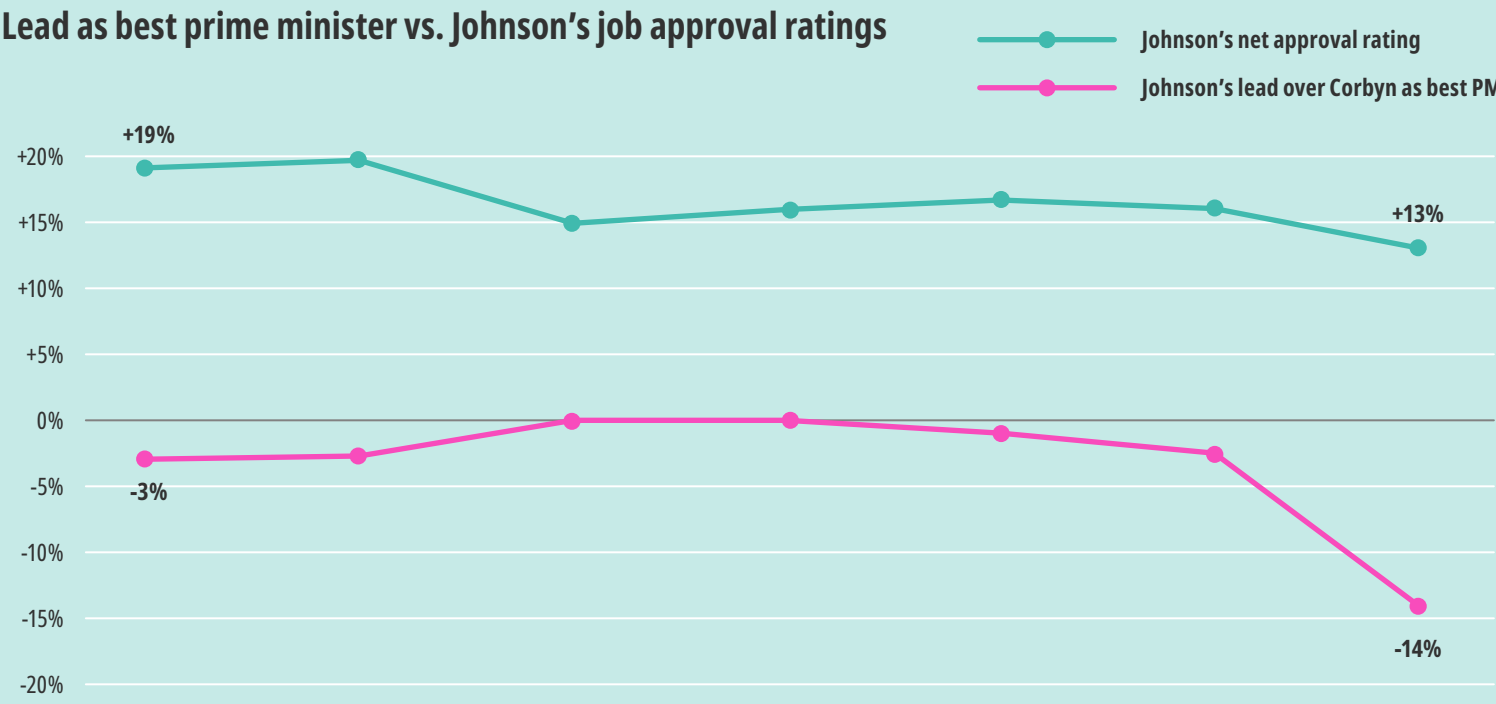
Although a low base, it is interesting that we get slightly more people calling out the photo of the boy in the hospital as fake news than calling out the incident

where a Labour activist “punched” Matt Hancock’s aid. Given that one of these incidents demonstrably was fake news while the other was not, it highlights the challenging effect polarisation and motivated reasoning has on the idea of the electorate having and sense of shared facts.

The electoral effects of this incident were beneficial for Labour but ultimately

too little too late. In our final poll of the campaign (in field from 9th to 11th December), we recorded a significant drop in Johnson’s net approval rating but a much smaller drop in his lead over Jeremy Corbyn as best prime minister.

The final poll saw the Conservatives’ lead over Labour drop from 15.1 points to 11.4 which ended up being the Tories margin of victory on election day.



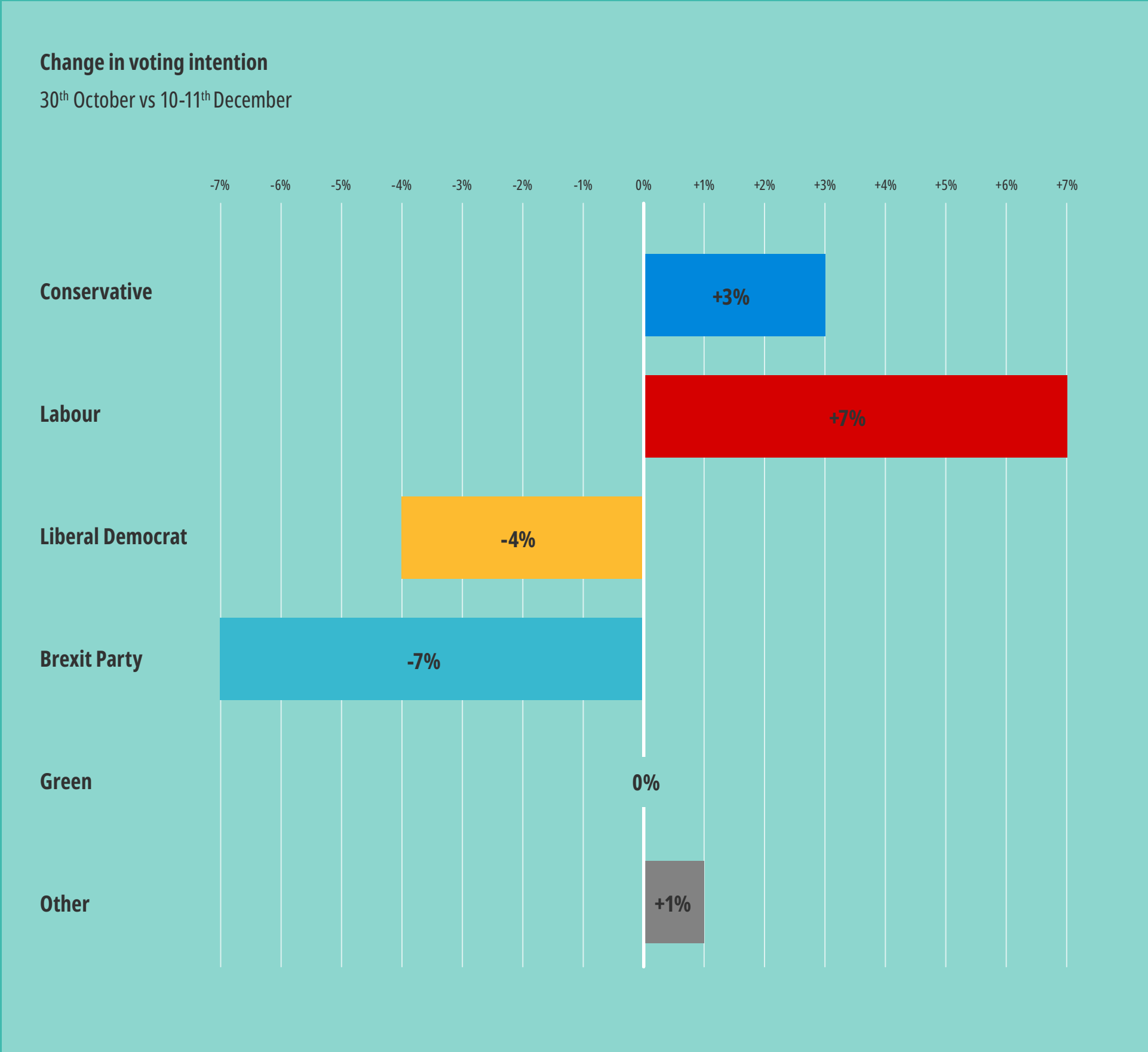


# The campaign overall

From the election being called to polling day itself, Labour gained 7 points while the Tories gained 7, the Lib Dems lost 4 and the Brexit party lost 7.

The historian Stephen Bungay describes “the ‘cock-up’ theory of war, which maintains that “the side which wins just does as little as possible, so that not much can go wrong, and waits for the other lot to cock it up.” Boris Johnson’s episode with the photo and the phone and the overall comparison with Theresa May’s error-prone 2017 campaign are stark illustrations of this and why the Tories in 2019 were right to avoid risky engagements such as the Andrew Neil interview that did such damage to Jeremy Corbyn.

Avoiding errors works as a strategy if you are already ahead but Labour began both the 2017 and 2019 campaigns far behind and had to take every risk they could to try to claw back ground. In 2017 these risks (Corbyn’s last minute participation in debates and big interviews, Labour’s manifesto leaking) largely paid off but were aided enormously by a contrastingly shambolic Conservative campaign. The story of 2019 is of this perfect storm for Labour failing to reoccur and, while they gained ground during the campaign, it was nowhere near enough to overcome the Conservatives’ initial lead.



## CHAPTER 3



# Why the Conservatives won



## The three key strategic goals for the Conservatives

The Conservatives won a sizeable majority by succeeding in dominating the Leave vote while retaining enough of its voters that backed Remain in the 2016 EU Referendum.

This sounds simple but it relied on achieving **three key strategic goals**:

- 1. Neutralise the threat from the Brexit Party*
- 2. Take large numbers of Leave voters that stubbornly stayed with Labour in 2017*
- 3. Arrest any leakage of votes to the Liberal Democrats amongst Remainers.*

**Largely speaking the Conservatives were successful on all fronts.** Barely 1% of 2017 Conservative voters switched their vote to the Brexit Party. As more of this group were planning to vote for the Brexit Party than stick with the Tories after the European Parliament election (42% vs 37% respectively), the Conservatives can be said to be

incredibly successful on this front. In the event, 94% of 2017 Conservative Leavers stuck with the party in 2019. They were the most resolute in their decision making, as seven in ten (71%) had made up their mind to back the Tories before the campaign had even started.

The Conservatives also took more than a quarter (28%) of Labour Leave voters. Leavers also abandoned Labour for a range of other parties, meaning barely half (54%) of Labour's Leave voters in 2017 backed the party this time, making their pro-Brexit seats incredibly vulnerable to Conservative challengers.

The Conservatives were least successful in preventing disillusioned Remainers switching to the Lib Dems, but even here they managed to contain the problem enough to prevent a large loss of seats. In the event, two thirds (67%) of 2017 Conservatives Remainers stuck with the Tories while a fifth (21%) switched to the Liberal Democrats. However, this 46-point lead amongst this group is up from a 30-point lead at the beginning of the campaign (59% for the Conservatives vs. 29% for the Lib Dems), enough movement to prevent the Lib Dems from seizing several seats in the South East.

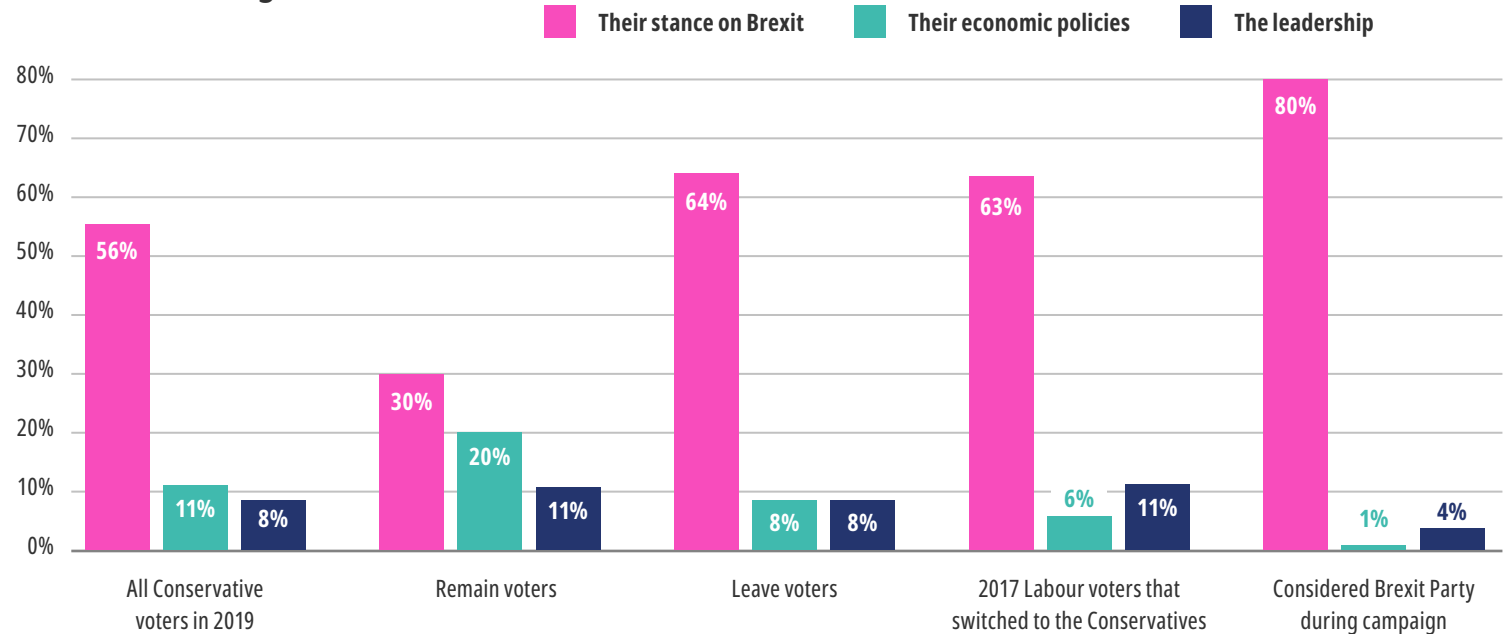
## Brexit and the Conservative victory

It is hard to overestimate the role that Brexit played in the Conservative victory, in one way or another. More than half (56%) of Conservative voters in this general election named the party's stance on Brexit as the main reason they backed the party.

The issue also directly targeted two of the key groups the Conservatives needed to win over. Of those who considered voting for the Brexit Party during the campaign but eventually sided with the Tories, over 80% named the Conservatives' Brexit policy as the reason why they voted blue. Similarly, 70% of Labour Leavers that voted Tory this time around named the Conservative Party's Brexit stance as the main reason why they switched their voters.

This is not the whole story of the Conservative-Labour battle in this election. As you will see in the next chapter, Labour lost this election because of its leadership. But if Jeremy Corbyn made his own voters look elsewhere, the Conservatives captured these votes by 'getting Brexit done'.

Reasons for voting Conservative



## The Brexit deal that capped rather than boosted Lib Dem support

Brexit still played a huge role in both a positive and a negative sense on the Conservative's other flank. The Tories' Brexit policy was the main driver of three quarters (73%) of switchers to the Liberal Democrats.

That being said, Conservative Remainers are a complicated group of voters, and the Conservative Party's very on- message campaigning around Brexit combined with the Lib Dem's revoke policy staved off a bigger loss of votes.

The first thing to understand is that not all Conservative Remainers are 'ideologically Remain' or committed to Remain over their party. On polling day half (48%) of 2017 Conservatives that backed Remain supported simply passing Boris Johnson's Brexit deal. Only a third (32%) actively wanted a cancellation of Brexit. In short, Boris Johnson securing a Brexit deal and campaigning on it (as opposed to campaigning for a 'no deal' crash out of the European Union) capped Lib Dem support amongst this group rather than boosted it.

In the actual event, 30% of those Remainers that stuck with the Tories at this election named the party's stance on Brexit as their main reason why. However, others also named the Tories' economic policies (22%) and their leadership (11%). If Brexit wasn't top of the list of issues, the measured policies in the manifesto with a little bit of selling from Boris Johnson was enough of a reason for many to stick with the Conservatives.





# Why Labour lost



## This election was lost in April

**Will we forever be doomed to fight the last election all over again, only to find out the electorate and the times have moved on?**

Labour certainly hoped their miraculous performance in the 2017 general election would be repeated: at the last election Labour almost overturned what looked like an unsurmountable Conservative lead, why should this not be possible again?

Considering the deep divisions in British politics, it is easy to imagine HM Opposition preventing a Conservative outright victory or a landslide. After all, up until April 2019 Labour was level pegging with the Conservative Party in the polls. But at no point in the last parliament did the Labour Party manage to break into a commanding lead of its own. In the event, the 2019 general election saw Labour's already losing coalition of voters fracture even further to take the party to a historic loss.

When the Conservative's failed to deliver Brexit as promised on 31<sup>st</sup> March, and then accepted a long extension on 10<sup>th</sup> April, Labour had a huge opportunity to capitalise on the implosion of the government's central policy. Instead, a series of strategic blunders meant Labour suffered the same fate as the Conservatives in the spring of 2019. Between early April and the end of May, Labour's share of the Remain vote fell 20 points (from 52% to 32%), while their share of the Leave vote almost halved (20% to 11%).

The six week talks between Labour and the government made it appear that they were enabling Brexit, confusing angry voters who hoped the party would strike the fatal blow for Britain leaving the EU. Once these talks collapsed and the Brexit Party's successful performance in the European Parliament elections provided Leave voters with a pro-Brexit option that wasn't Theresa May, they then proceeded to lose the support of their Leave voters as well.

The story of the rest of 2019 was Labour trying, but failing, to win back the millions of voters they lost in a matter of weeks. Ultimately the policies and the leadership failed to ever seriously challenge Boris Johnson, who succeeded in recovering his own lost voters and in winning over some more in a remarkably quick time.



## Labour is still the Remain party, but it is not enough to win

**Labour did have a mild success story in this election.** In the European Parliament elections, the Liberal Democrats topped the poll in many of Labour's Remain voting heartlands in London, however, it's hard to attribute a lot of this success to anything the party actively did.

From June until the start of the campaign, consistently between a fifth and a third of 2017 Labour Remainers were intending to switch their vote to the Liberal Democrats. The Lib Dems were always able to portray themselves as an effective and tempting pro-Remain option for voters against an ambiguous and divided Labour Party. The high-water mark came in late September during the prorogation crisis, when barely half (56%) of Labour Remainers were intending to stick with the party and 32% intended to vote Lib Dem.

Then the campaign got under way. The ins and outs of the Liberal Democrats issues in the campaign are covered elsewhere, but needless to say after the prorogation crisis almost every single poll showed a drip, drip, drip of Remainers back to Labour. In many cases this is despite the party's performance rather than because of it, with some just hoping to avoid a Conservative government.

Amongst those that considered the Lib Dems during the campaign but ended up voting Labour on the day, 37% did so mainly because they were voting against another party (almost entirely against the Conservatives). Four in five (78%) preferred Jeremy Corbyn to Boris Johnson, but only 45% thought he was actively a good choice for prime minister. These aren't hugely convincing numbers when you consider that these voters were the ones Labour managed to convince to vote for them.

It should also be remembered that although they clawed back some ground it does not get around Labour's failure to win back one in six (17%) of its own Remain voters from 2017. In the context of the party also shedding large numbers of its smaller Leave-voting coalition, the party's only way to prevent a Conservative landslide was to be the 'Remain opposition' to the 'Brexit government'. However, Labour was not able to successfully demonstrate it could deliver for Remain to win the overwhelming support of its anti-Brexit supporters.



# Brexit or the leadership?

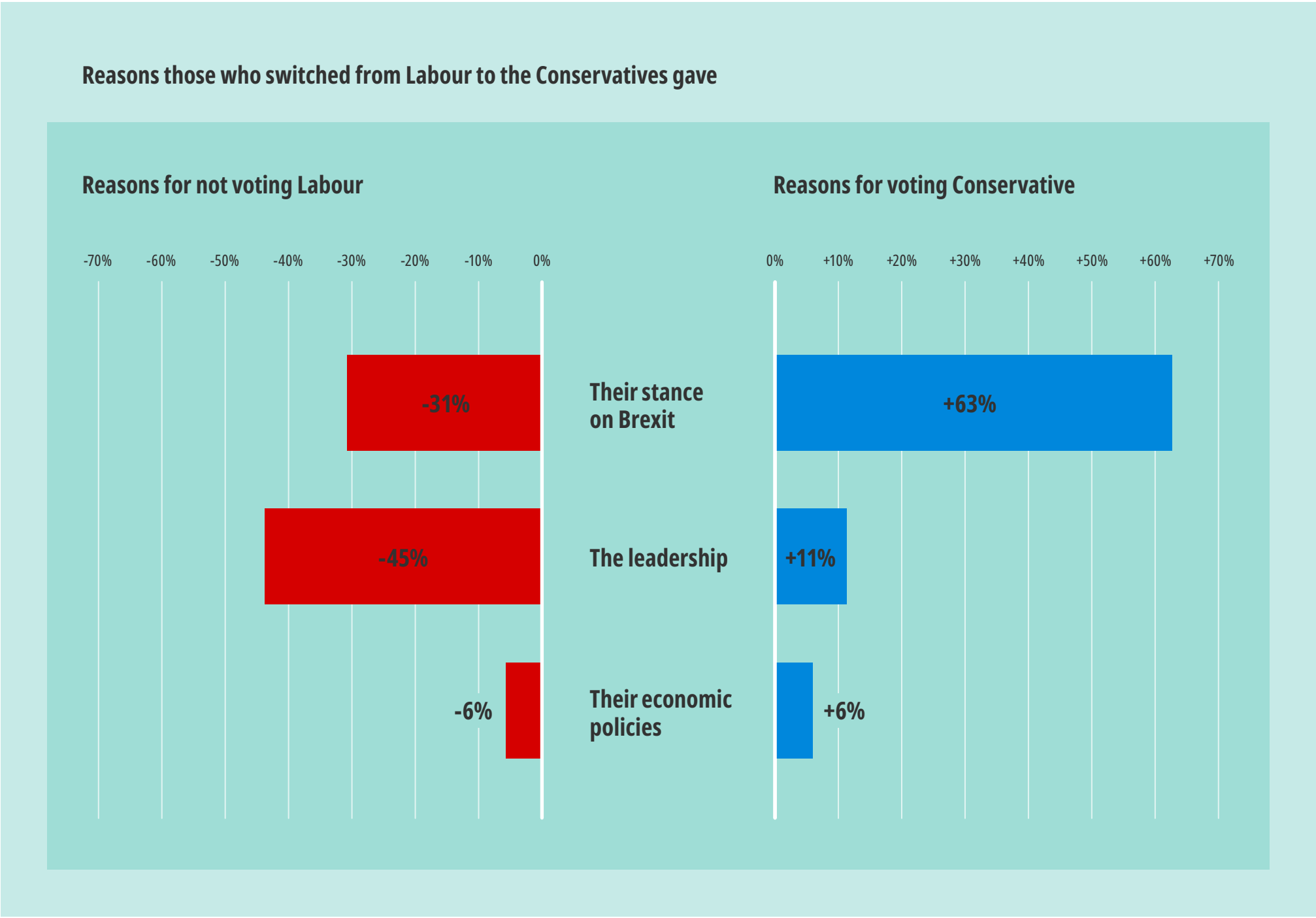
Both major parties lost voters during the course of 2019, but by the end of the summer two crucial factors made many of these movements less consequential: first, these voters never switched sides to the other major party but explored some smaller party, and secondly, to a greater or less extent they returned to the fold.

This pattern across the rest of the electorate elevated the importance of Labour Leavers, who eventually switched to the Conservative Party in large numbers. Being the only group that made this direct shift across the red-blue dividing line is what changed the electoral geography.

Yet Brexit was not the only contributing factor to Labour’s loss. Voters who directly switched from Labour to Conservative were more likely to point the finger at the party’s leadership for why they didn’t stick with Labour rather than their stance on Brexit (45% vs 31% respectively). But what is fair to say is that those disaffected voters chose the Conservative Party as their new political home because of its clear position on Brexit (63%).

In short, Labour’s leadership lost these voters, the Tories’ promise to ‘Get Brexit Done’ won them over. To some extent these are intertwined: Brexit exposed the failures of Jeremy Corbyn to answer the competing demands of his voters, and Boris Johnson’s leadership is responsible for the party’s effective black and white portrayal of the key campaign issue.

Our regular polling throughout the campaign also shows that this **disaffection with the Labour leadership was wider than just Brexit**. More than a third (36%) of those who switched had a generally negative perception of Jeremy Corbyn and a further 44% said their opinion of him worsened over the course of the campaign. On a weekly basis we asked voters spontaneously what they had heard. It appears broader criticisms of the Labour leadership, such as their handling of anti-semitism, had cut through. Whatever issue you focus on facing Labour, it’s hard to get away from how negatively this impacted perceptions of Jeremy Corbyn, freeing them up to be won over by Boris Johnson’s Conservatives.





## CHAPTER 5



# Why the Lib Dems failed to take off

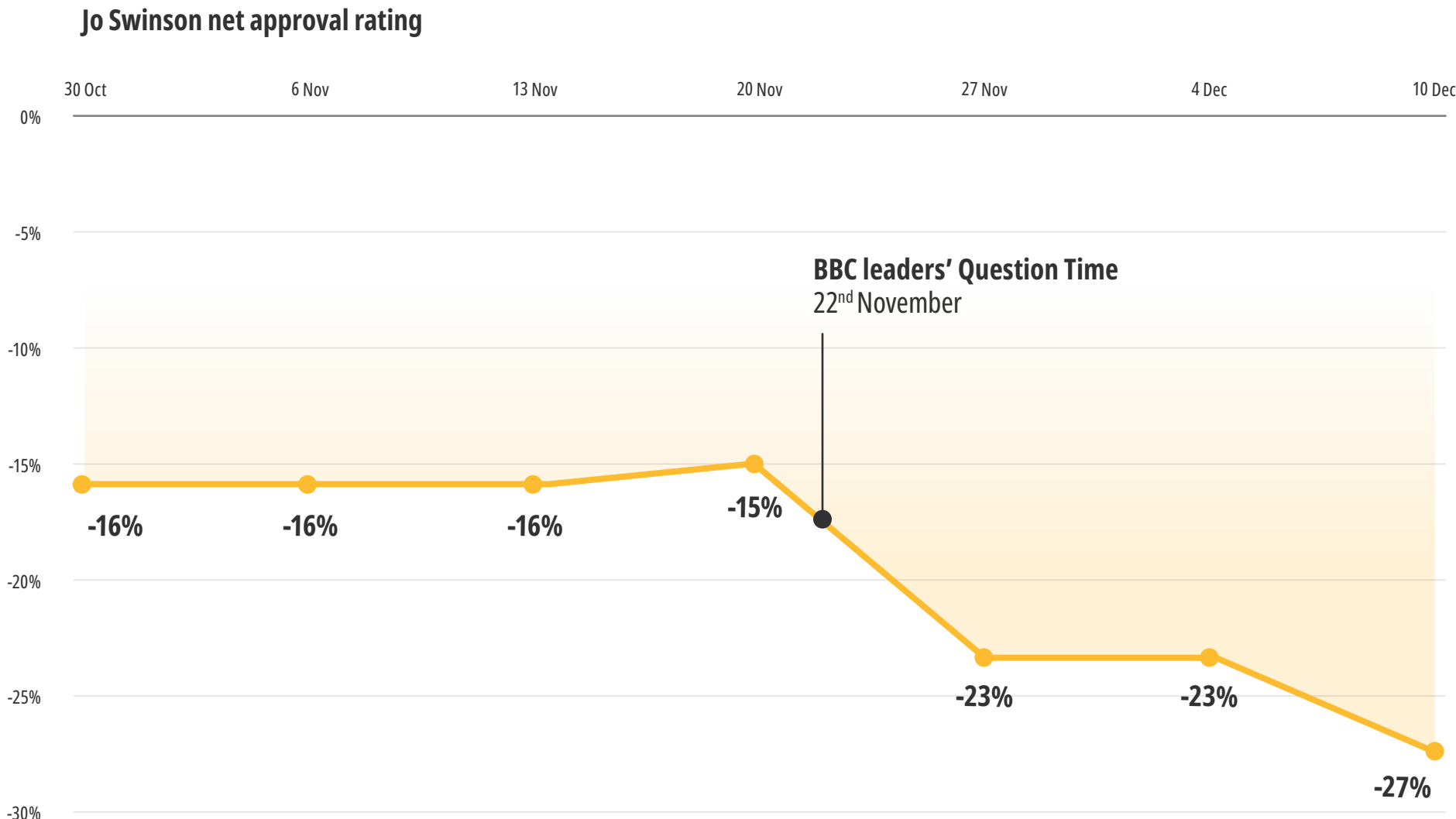


# Leadership

The failure of the Liberal Democrats in the election had much to do with the leaership of Jo Swinson. She began the campaign positioning herself as a serious contender to be the next occupant of No. 10, but ultimately ended up losing her Dunbartonshire East constituency to the Scottish National Party by 149 votes. Perhaps a reason contributing towards the failure of the Liberal Democrats can be attributed towards Jo Swinson’s poor public performances during debates and interviews.

After being excluded from ITV leaders’ debate on the 19th of November, Jo Swinson had an opportunity to make substantial inroads for her party on the 22nd during the BBC’s leader’s Question time. However, not only did this debate prove to be a missed opportunity but manifested itself as one that was actively damaging. The aftermath of the debate was starkly negative for Swinson, dropping from a -15% net approval rating pre-debate, to a -24% net approval post. Her approval rating hit rock bottom (-27%) at the most crucial time - just two days before the election.

In addition to decreasing approval ratings, when Liberal Democrat voters were asked why they voted for the party, a mere 4% cited the party’s leadership as a leading reason. On the flip side, a fifth (21%) of those who considered voting for the Lib Dems at some stage (but ultimately voted for another party) changed their minds due to Jo Swinson’s leadership.



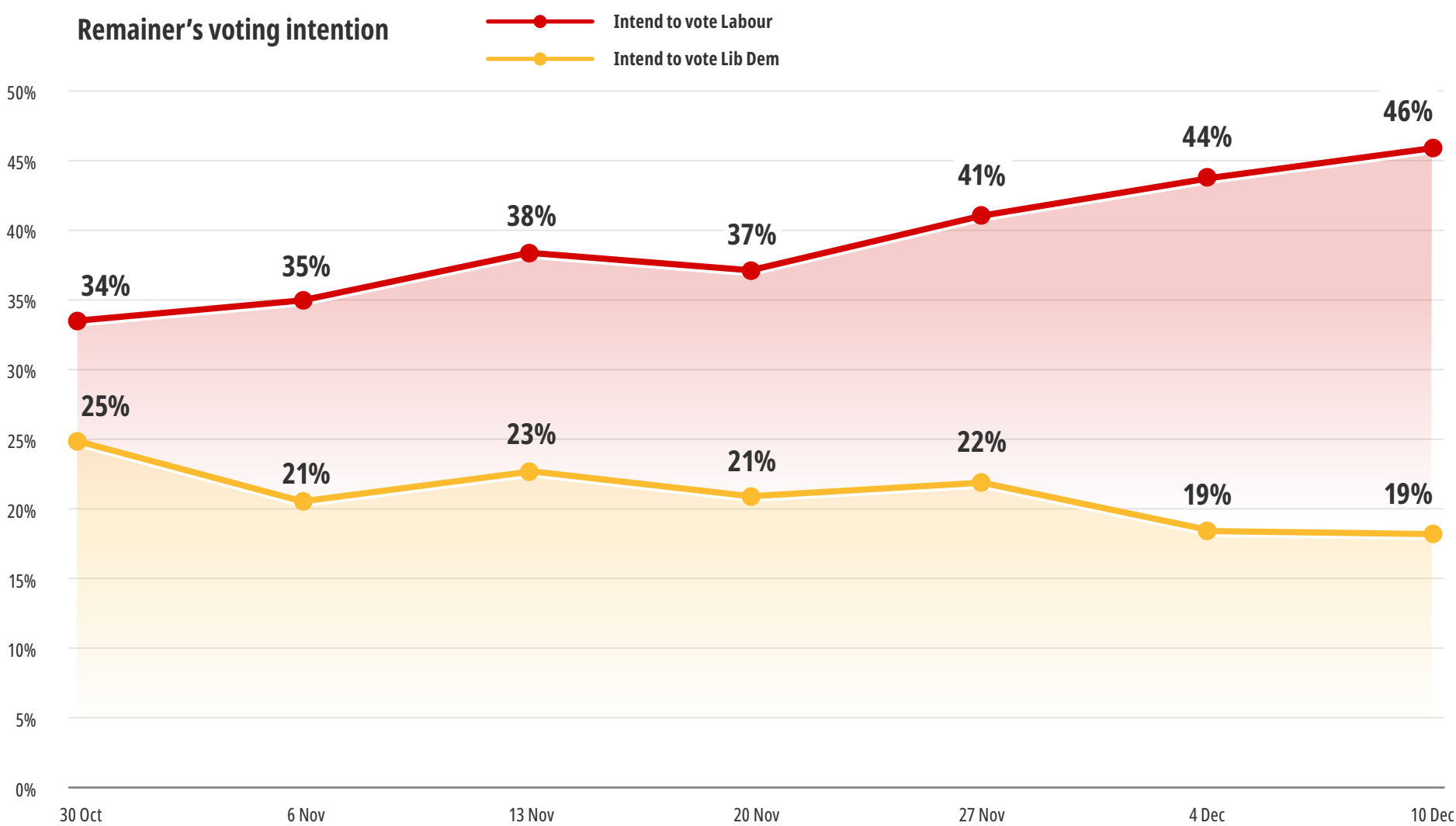


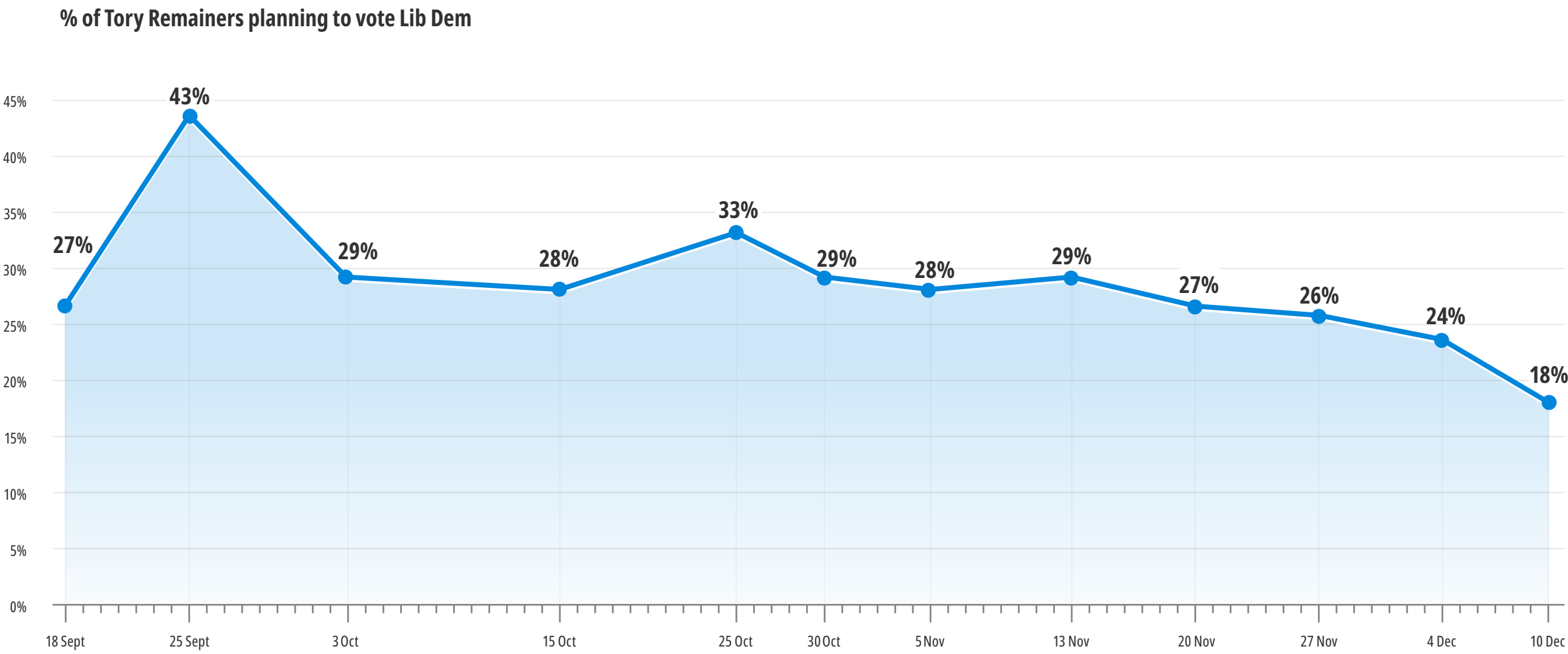
# Failure to attract the Remain vote

Another contributing factor that may explain the poor performance of the Liberal Democrats was their adamantly **pro-Remain stance, which largely failed to convince key target voters**. While this position was the leading reason why likely Lib Dem voters planned to vote for the party, Jo Swinson failed to consolidate the Remain vote, dropping from a quarter (25%) of Remainers intending to vote for the Lib Dems at the start of the campaign, to just under a fifth (19%) days before the election.

Perhaps even more damning was the fact that Labour were more successful in attracting Remain voters, despite Jeremy Corbyn publicly announcing that he would maintain a neutral stance towards Brexit if elected. It could be the case that Swinson’s promise to cancel Brexit completely overlooked the quarter (24%) of Remainers whose preferred stance was to delay Brexit until the UK were able to negotiate a new deal, which could then have been put to another referendum – a policy much more in aligned with that of Labour. This may go some distance in explaining that amongst those who considered voting Lib Dem at some point, but ended up voting for Labour, 29% decided to switch because they preferred Labour’s Brexit positioning.

Another key group that the Liberal Democrats hoped to win over were pro-EU individuals who had previously voted for the Conservatives in the 2017 general election, a group we refer to as Tory Remainers. Jo Swinson’s party placed significant emphasis on this subsection of the electorate given the fact that at one stage over two fifths (43%) suggested that they would vote for the Lib Dems. This late September surge in support came off the back of several Parliamentary failings of Boris Johnson and coincided with the Supreme Court unanimously ruling that the suspension of Parliament was unlawful. However, as the Conservative Party subsequently became more united under Johnson’s leadership, and the chance of leaving the EU without a deal diminished, the number of Tory Remainers who would vote for the Liberal Democrats progressively dropped off, with 29% indicating that they were likely to vote Lib Dem at the start of the campaign, before fizzling down to a mere 18% just before the election.





Again, Swinson’s revoke stance on Brexit proved to be counterproductive among many Tory Remainers, with the final poll demonstrating that **42% did not plan to vote Lib Dem due to the party’s stance on Brexit**. This may suggest that the early surge in Lib Dem support was perhaps more of a result of the shortcomings of the Conservative Party, and fear over a no-deal Brexit, rather than the direct appeal of the Liberal Democrats. The party’s failure to appeal to a wide variety of Remain voters is perhaps best articulated during the BBC’s Question Time, where Jo Swinson was forced to defend her party’s policy to unilaterally revoke Article 50 from both sides of the political divide.



# Following the leader

*The leadership was a key reason why voters chose the party they did, so what went wrong for Corbyn and how did Johnson win over the public?*

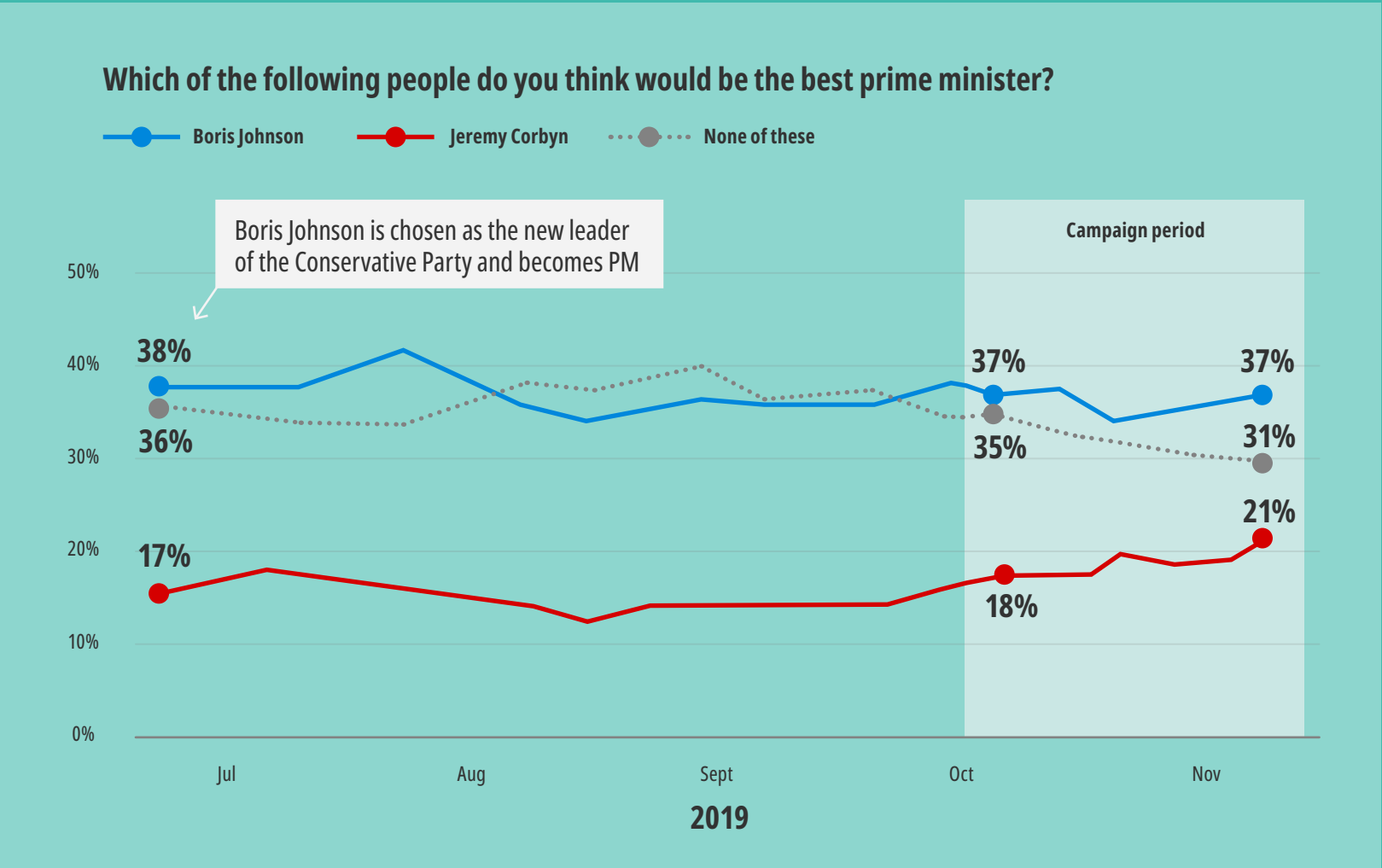
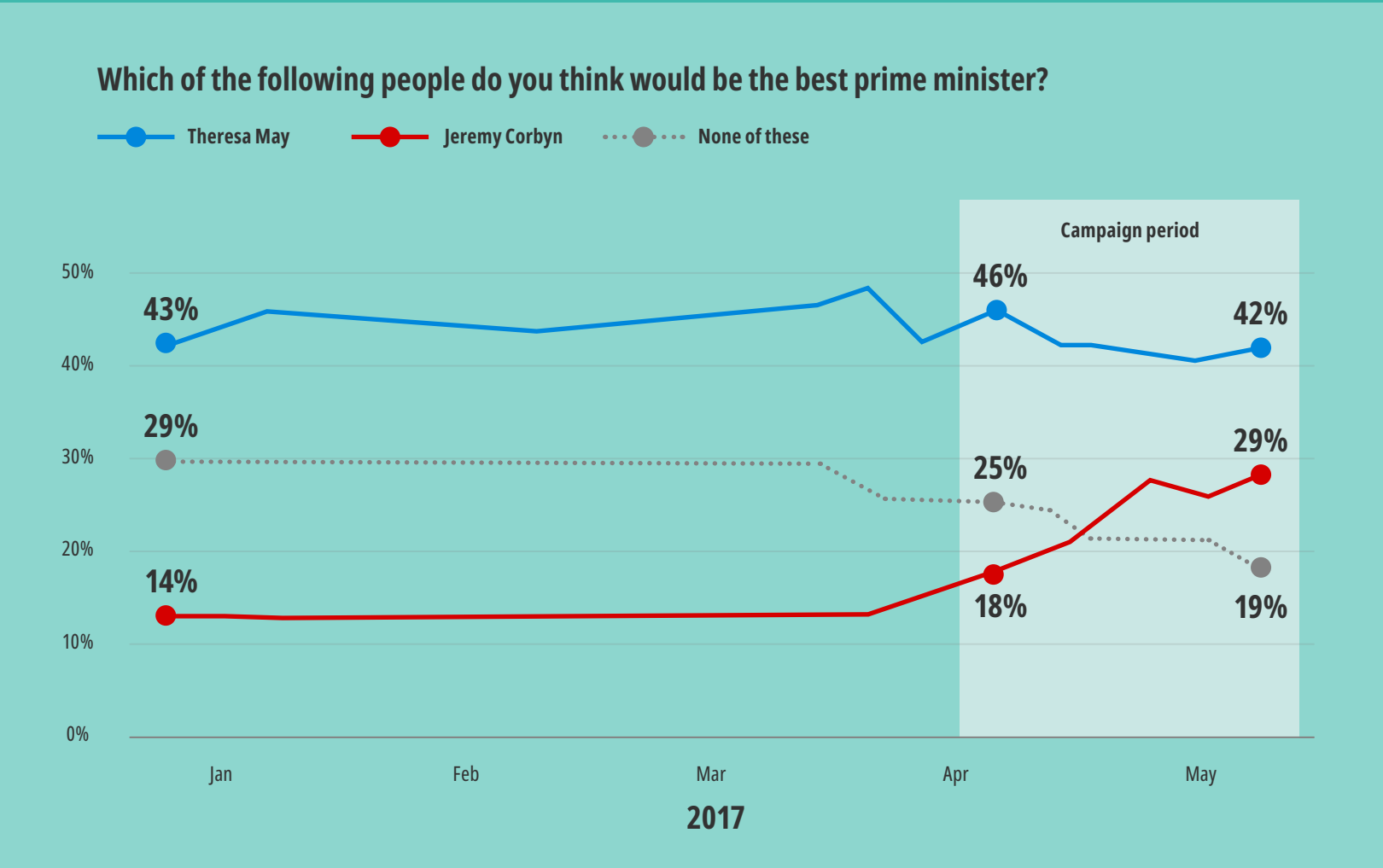
# Knowing me, Knowing you

At the beginning of the last general election, Jeremy Corbyn was relatively unknown to the public compared to his 2019 run against Boris Johnson. The stage of the 2017 general election gave him a springboard to speak unfiltered directly to voters for arguably the first time, which led to a very quick change in perceptions of him as a leader.

For example, from the moment the 2017 campaign began to our final poll before the result on June 4<sup>th</sup>, his rating as being the best prime minister rocketed over 10 points, and by the end of the month he had overtaken May on this metric.

However, quickly after those heady 2017 days where ‘oh, Jeremy Corbyn’ became Labour’s new anthem, Corbyn returned to languishing in the polls behind first May and then Johnson. When it came to the 2019 campaign period, many commentators and pollsters believed that he would again enjoy a rise in personal popularity, yet this did not materialise. Instead, this time round Corbyn’s ratings increased by a mere 3 points, ending up 16 points behind Johnson on the question of who would make the best PM. It would appear that the public, having found themselves pleasantly surprised by Corbyn once already, were less enamoured second time around.

On the other side of the coin Johnson, on whom Tory MPs had pinned their hopes to deliver not just Brexit, but now a Conservative majority as well, was able to maintain his ratings as the best PM. Starting with 37% of the public backing him as the best PM, he finished the election campaign with the exact same rating, despite suffering a small dip in the second week. In comparison to May, whose ratings consistently declined throughout the 2017 election period, this can be seen as a success for a man traditionally portrayed of as a serial blunderer by the media.





# Spot the difference

Johnson also far outstripped Corbyn on almost all leadership metrics, with the only exception being seen as ‘in touch with ordinary people’.

This posed a serious problem for Corbyn, who would need to be challenging Johnson on these metrics if he wanted to convince wavering voters that he would make the best PM.

Throughout the course of the campaign, Corbyn was again able to rely on increased media coverage to help change the public’s opinions and did so quite successfully. In fact, he significantly improved on all leadership metrics, ending higher than his opponent on ‘sticking to his principles’, ‘being in touch with ordinary people’ and being ‘trustworthy’.

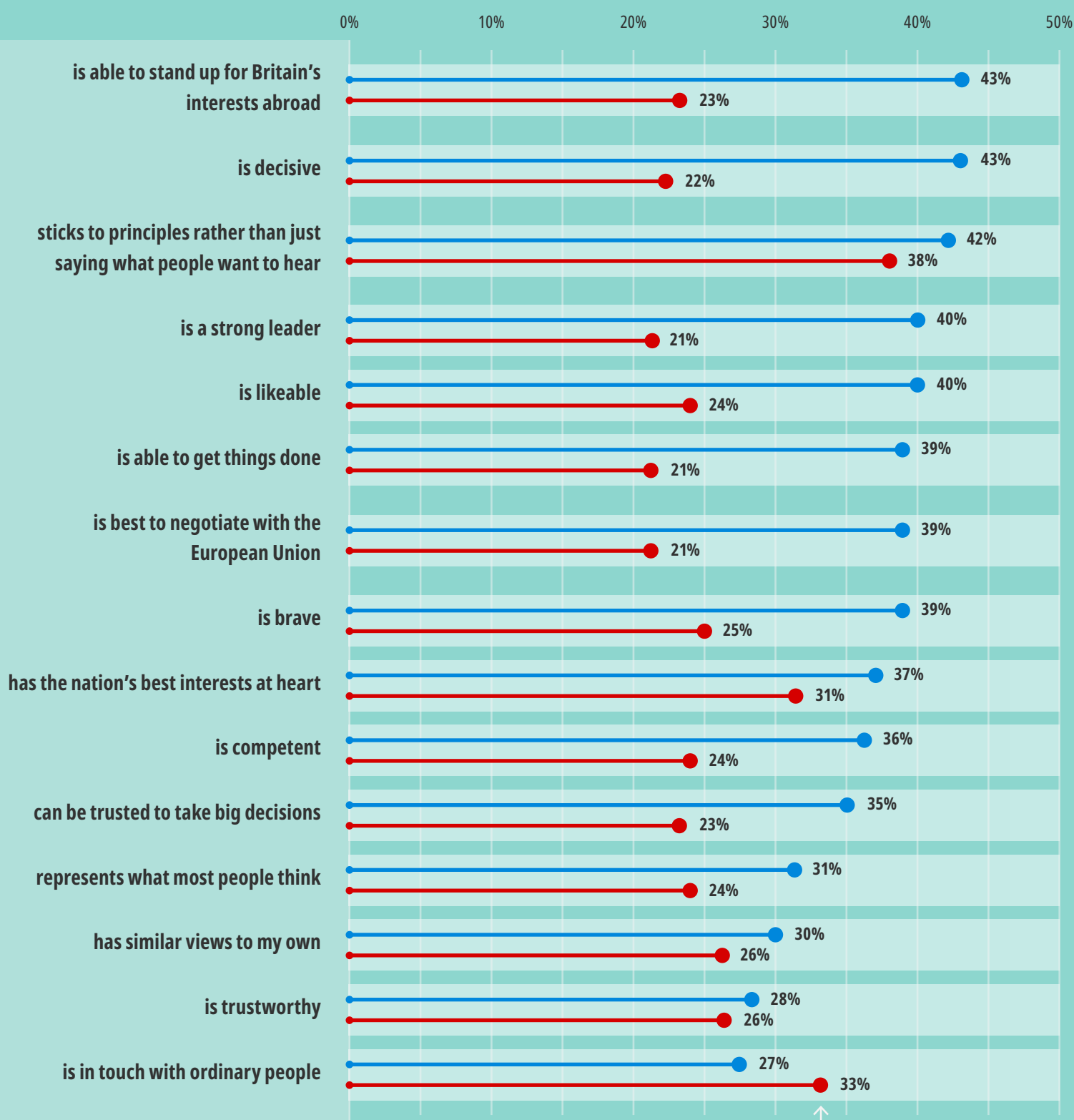
Johnson on the other hand suffered significantly worsening perceptions of himself on several fronts, particularly in being seen as ‘sticking to his principles’, ‘brave’ and being ‘decisive’. Yet these declines were on the whole not severe enough to leave him vulnerable to the public preferring Corbyn.

*Essentially, the Labour leader moved the dial, but not nearly enough.*

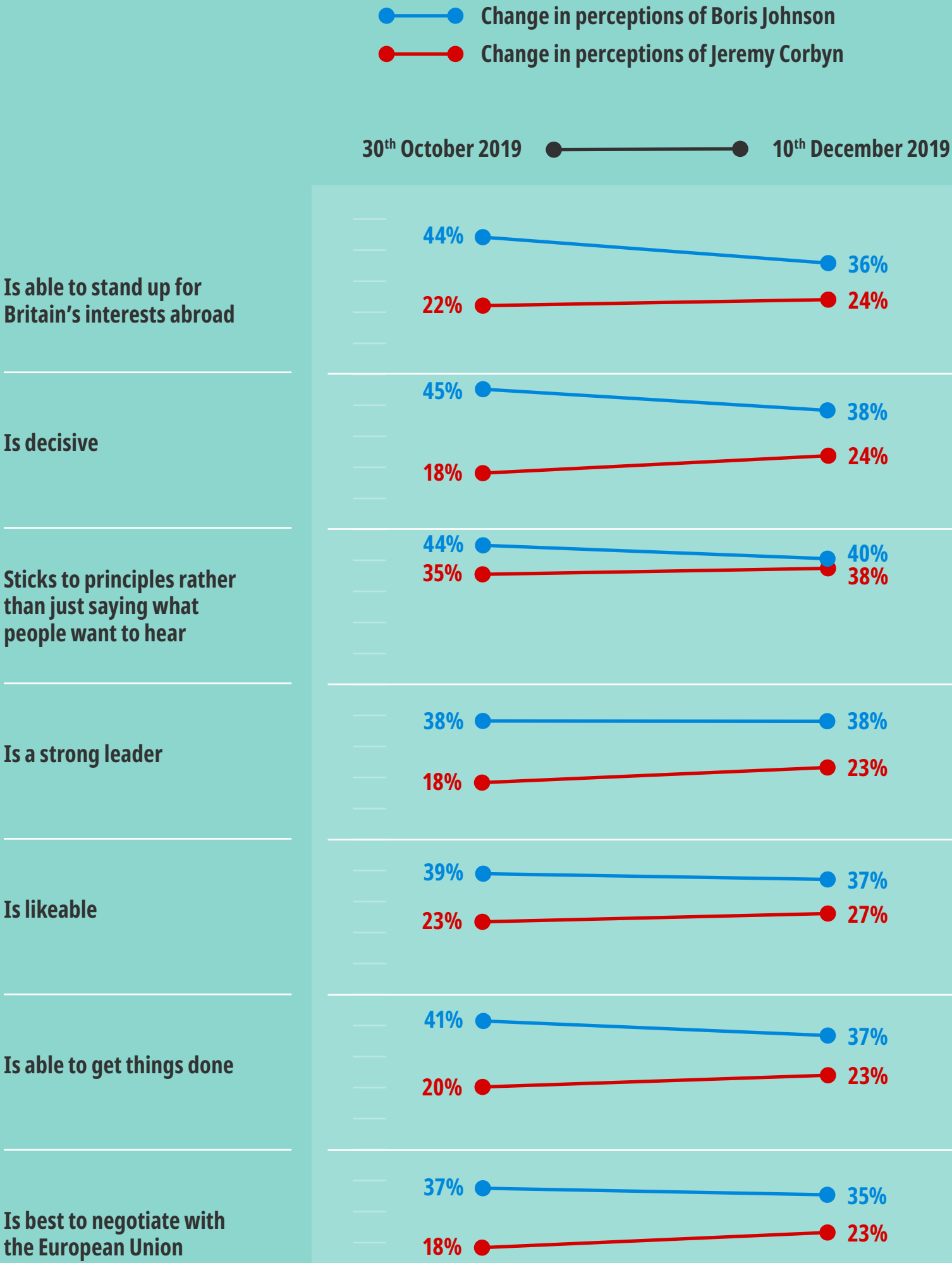
## To what extent do you agree or disagree that Boris Johnson / Jeremy Corbyn...

(Showing NET agreement – average over the campaign period)

● Boris Johnson ● Jeremy Corbyn



Corbyn only does better than Johnson on one attribute, although neither perform very well



Is brave

Has the nation's best interests at heart

Is competent

Can be trusted to take big decisions

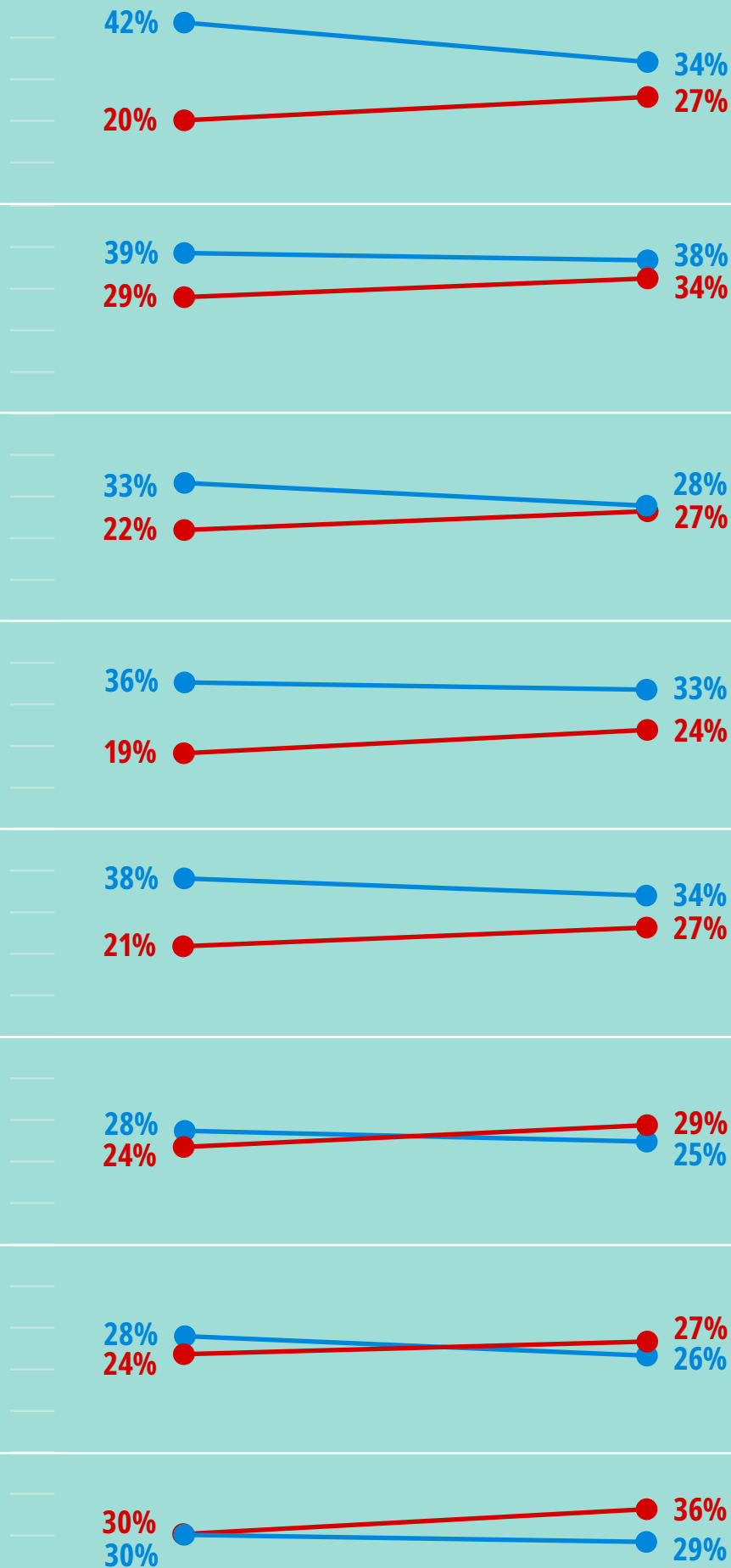
Represents what most people think

Has similar views to my own

Is trustworthy

Is in touch with ordinary people

30<sup>th</sup> October 2019    10<sup>th</sup> December 2019



# That’s debatable

The TV debates, famously skipped by Theresa May, were back with a bang in this election but oddly less consequential, with prime-time head-to-head debates between Johnson and Corbyn held by first ITV and then the BBC. Each of these debates acted as effective bookends to the campaign period, and with over 6 million people watching each, were an opportunity for Corbyn to attract the new voters he needed to win the election.

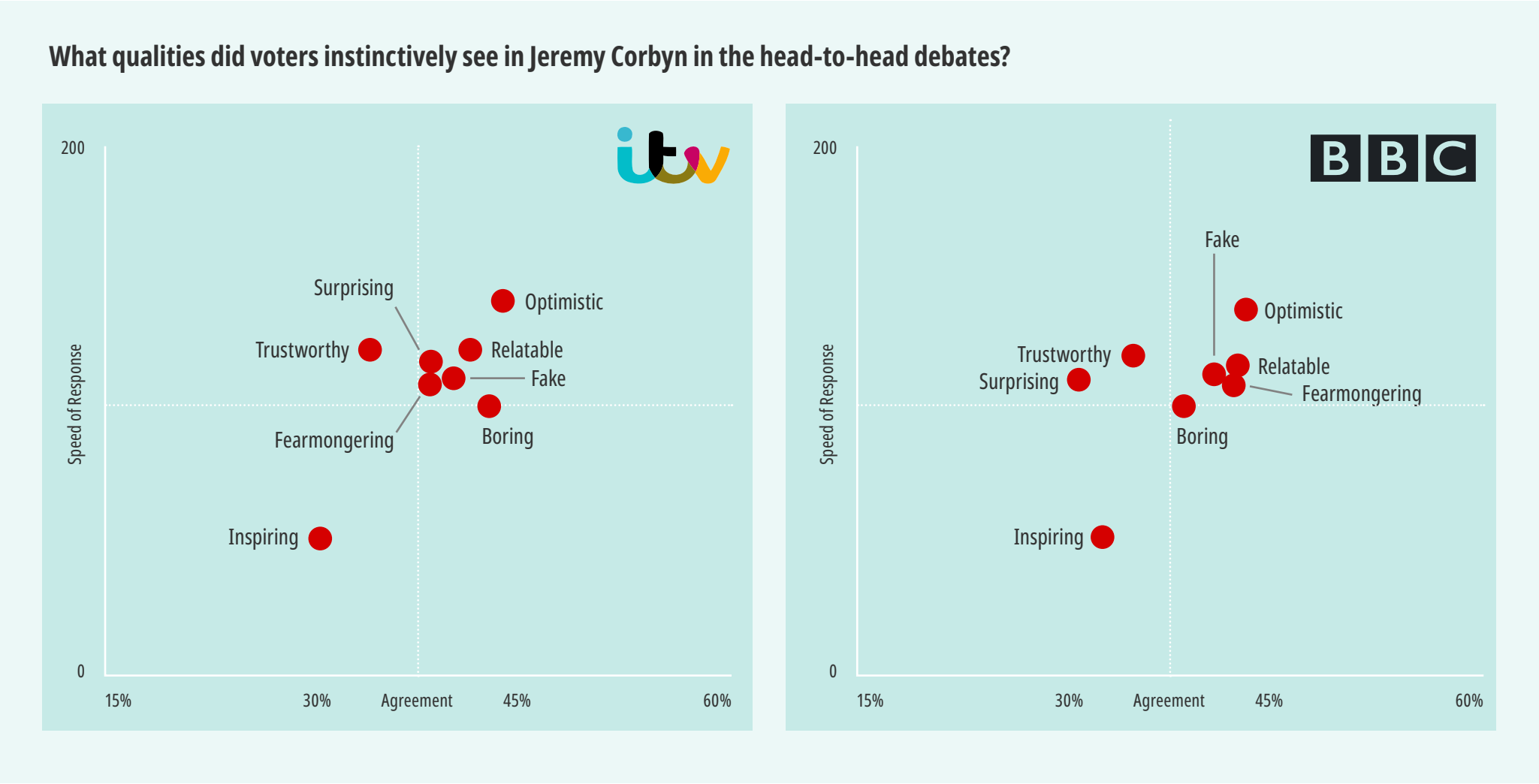
We tracked the public’s perceptions of both leaders during the debates. By playing BBC highlights of each to participants before giving their opinions, we ensured that they weren’t relying on memory, or being influenced by what they had heard second-hand about each leader’s performance.

In politics, the public often have strong ‘gut feel’ reactions to politicians which are just as important to measure as their overall perceptions. To capture this, we measured the speed at which people endorsed either politician; faster responses indicate a stronger implicit association.

## So how did Corbyn do?

Well, looking first at positive associations, he was instinctively perceived to be both optimistic and relatable. However, he wasn’t seen as inspiring and what is more, wasn’t able to significantly improve this or improve on any other positive associations in the BBC debate.

We also asked the public on each candidate’s clarity and believability during the debates. Although both Corbyn and Johnson were thought to come across equally clear and believable by the public, it is safe to say that Labour would have been hoping



that their man would match up more favourably against a person sacked from his jobs in both the Times and Michael Howard’s shadow cabinet for lying.

Furthermore, even when taking away the personal, Corbyn’s messages in the debates failed to land as likely intended: in the ITV debate, according to the public, his most resonant moments were his claim that Johnson wants to sell the NHS, but also his views on the Monarchy. Compare this to Johnson, whose top messages to cut through were his guarantee the NHS will never be for sale and his question to Corbyn over which side he would take in a second referendum. Considering that position on Brexit was a main driver of why people voted for the party they did, and Labour’s indecision on the issue, these messages proved to be very effective at consolidating the Tory vote.

To add more bad news, negative associations with Corbyn were relatively strong and deeply held, which may indicate why these also were difficult to overcome in the course of the campaign.



In comparison, Johnson was seen as more relatable in the BBC TV debate compared to his first showing on ITV, although came across as even less trustworthy and inspiring than Corbyn. It is an indictment on both politicians that whilst they were able to convey their own optimism about the future of the country under their leadership, this did not translate into inspiring active enthusiasm for either of them.

The reason why is that in the final debate both leaders were hitting the ‘fear’ button in attempts to convince voters in key marginals to not vote for their opposition. Corbyn’s most resonant message was the claim that a Tory government would negotiate with the US over access to the NHS and other public services.

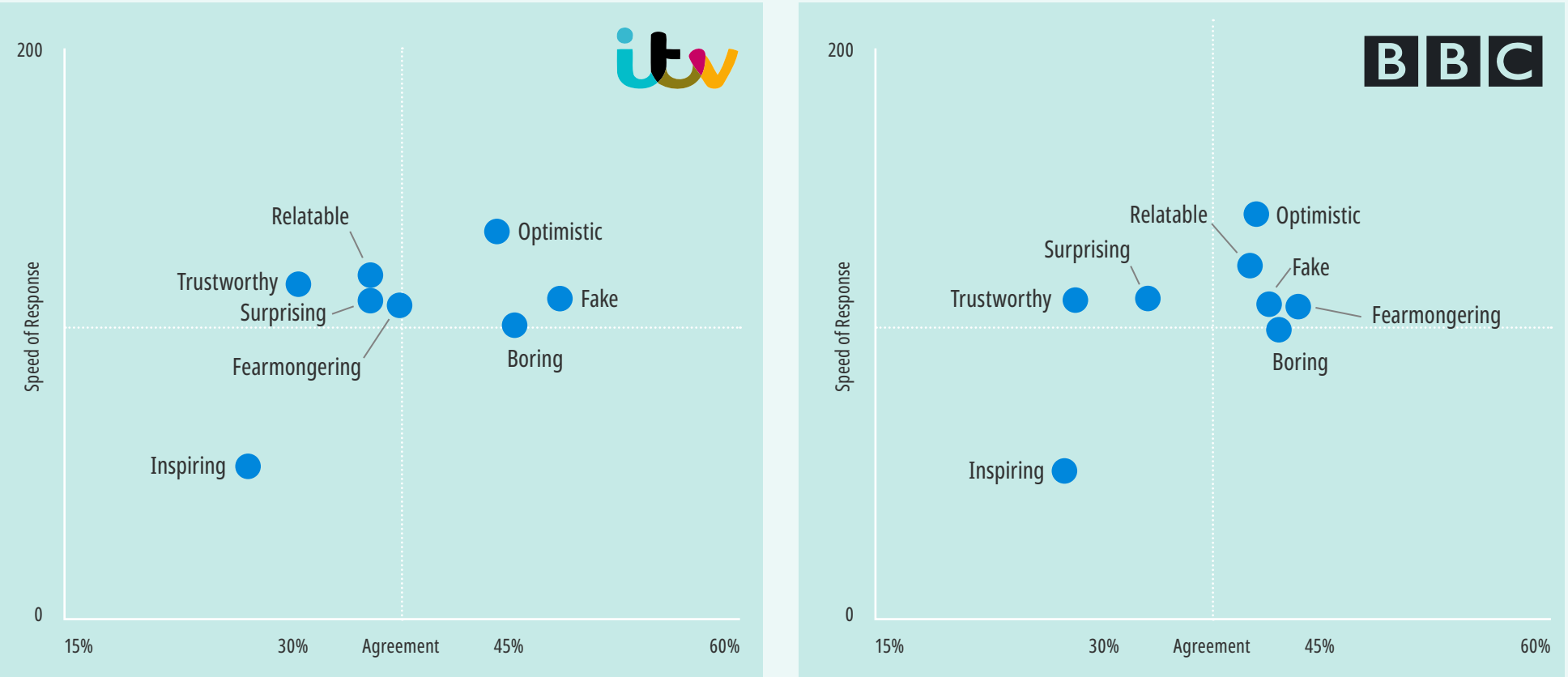
For Johnson, this was particularly picked up in the BBC debate by the public, whose **most stand-out message was the claim that Corbyn had supported the IRA for four decades.**

The scale of Corbyn’s failure to attract new voters, in particular 2017 Conservative Remainers who may have been put off by the Tories’ swing towards a hard Brexit, is made clear by the impact on voting intent after watching each debate.

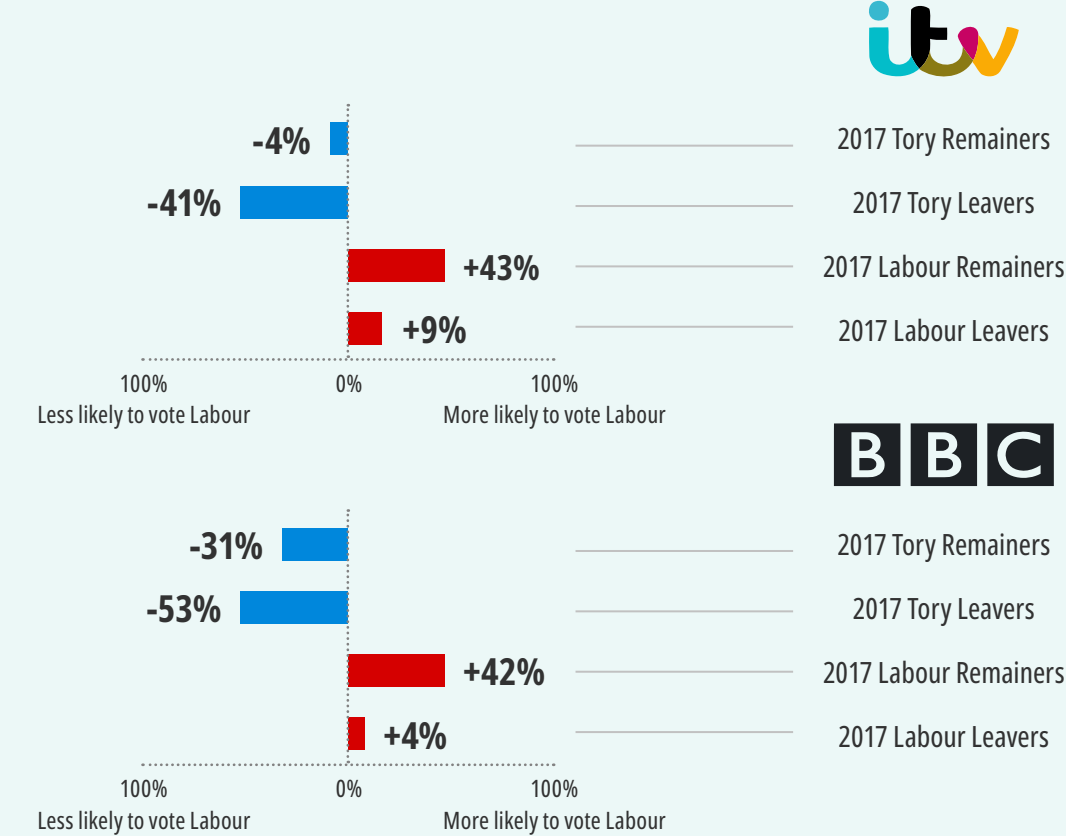
For example, after the ITV debate, Tory Remainers were only slightly less likely to vote Labour than they were before it, however by the end of the BBC debate, this had plummeted to a NET voting intent score of -31%, indicating that the performance of the two leaders in the BBC debate had the net effect of pushing this group further away from Labour. **This illustrates the large difficulty Labour had in attracting new voters to increase their vote share or even come close to an election victory.**

In comparison, Johnson’s performance debate-to-debate markedly improved, with NET likelihood to vote improving amongst both sets of 2017 Tories, thus consolidating vote share, but also with 2017 Labour voters, although this was still negative overall. Nevertheless, it highlights how Johnson managed to appeal across party boundaries during some of the most high profile points in the election.

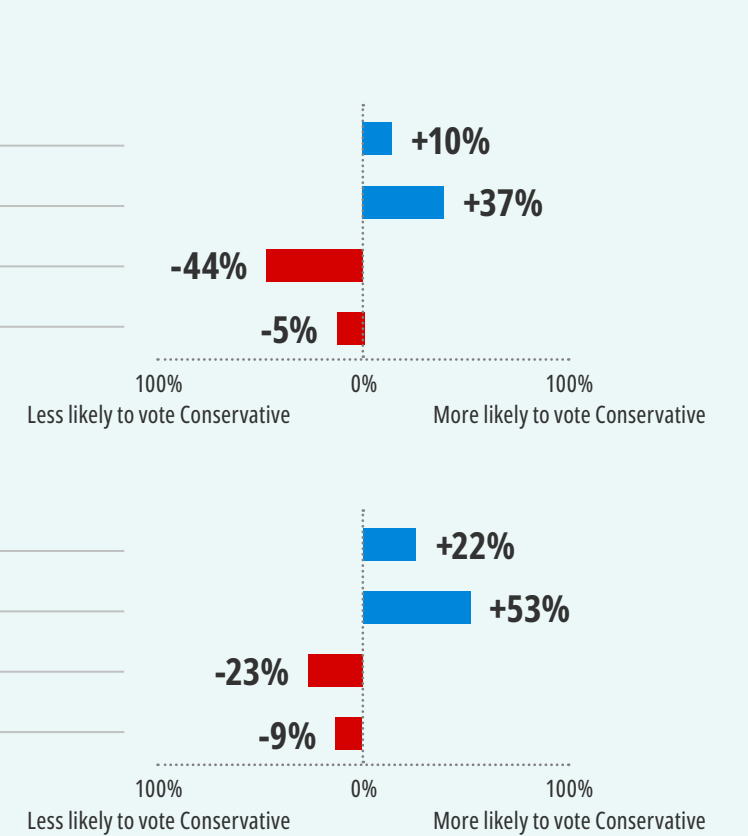
What qualities did voters instinctively see in Boris Johnson in the head-to-head debates?



Impact of the debate on voting intent for Labour  
NET likelihood to vote



Impact of the debate on voting intent for Tories  
NET likelihood to vote



*COMMENTARY*

# Brexit and the 2019 election



## Brexit and the 2019 election

The best way to assess the effect of Brexit on the 2019 general election is to look at the choices of four key voter groups:

- Tory Leavers (2016 Leave, 2017 Conservative)*
- Tory Remainers (2016 Remain, 2017 Conservative)*
- Labour Leavers (2016 Leave, 2017 Labour)*
- Labour Remainers (2016 Remain, 2017 Labour)*

**Note:** all voting intention figures in this section are from a 3-poll rolling average and include those saying “don’t know” or “would not vote”

## Tory Leavers: Brexit delayed is Brexit denied

The Conservatives entered 2019 with the support of just over half of Tory Leavers but were hammered by the sequence of Brexit extensions on March 29<sup>th</sup> and April 12<sup>th</sup> and the European Parliament elections that took place on May 23<sup>rd</sup>. From 53% of the Tory Leaver vote on 18<sup>th</sup> March, the Conservatives lost an average of 5 points per week, reaching a nadir of 22% vs. 38% for the Brexit Party on 28<sup>th</sup> May. They did not recover until Theresa May resigned on 24<sup>th</sup> July.

SEE CHART FIG 1. (PG.38) — CONSERVATIVE LEAVERS 

By the time it was clear that Boris Johnson was the favourite to succeed May, that pattern was in reverse and from June to September Tory Leavers returned to the Conservative fold at the same rate that they had been leaving it.

The act of calling the election boosted this to over 60% and Nigel Farage’s surrender on 11<sup>th</sup> November pushed them above 70%. Farage’s absence from the national conversation from that point onwards is apparent in the Brexit Party’s decline from 7% immediately after his announcement to just 2% in our final poll.



- Conservative
- Labour
- Lib Dem
- Green
- Brexit
- Other
- Don't know / won't vote

# How different electoral groups changed their voting intention in 2019

3-poll average: Leave 16 Con 17

Fig 1. — Conservative Leavers

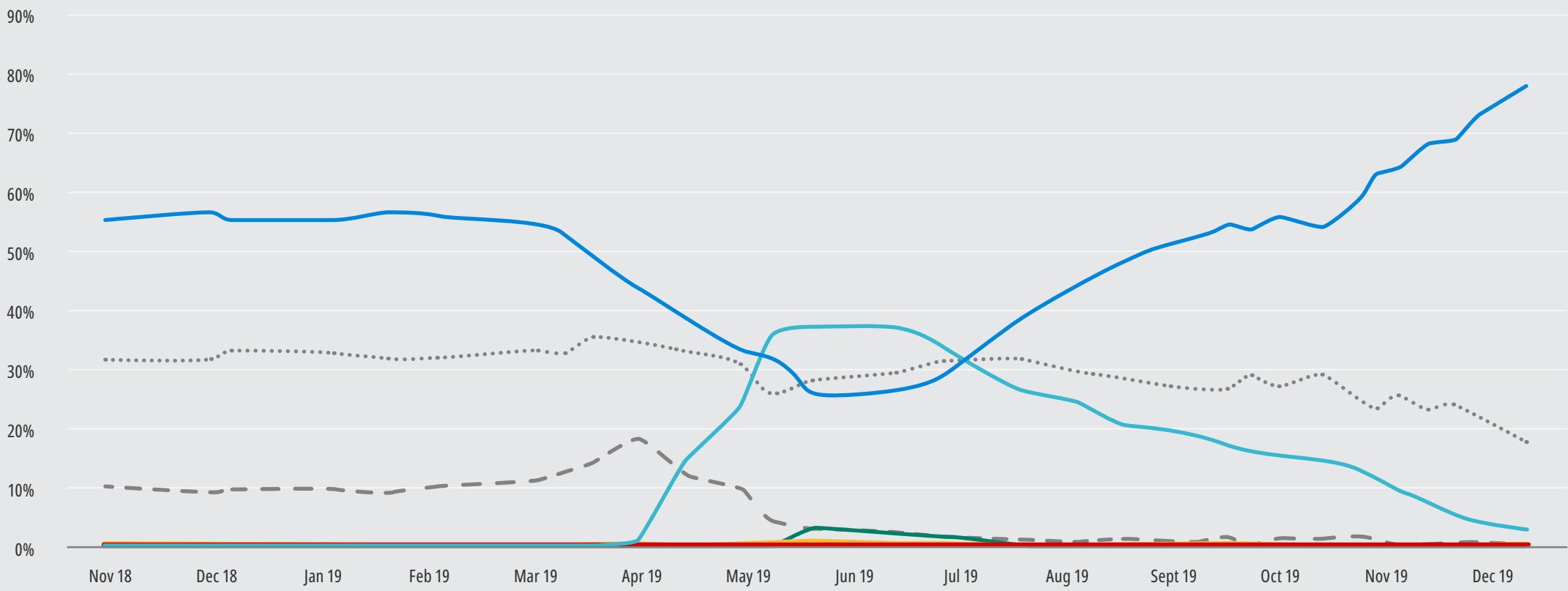


Fig 2. — Labour Remainers

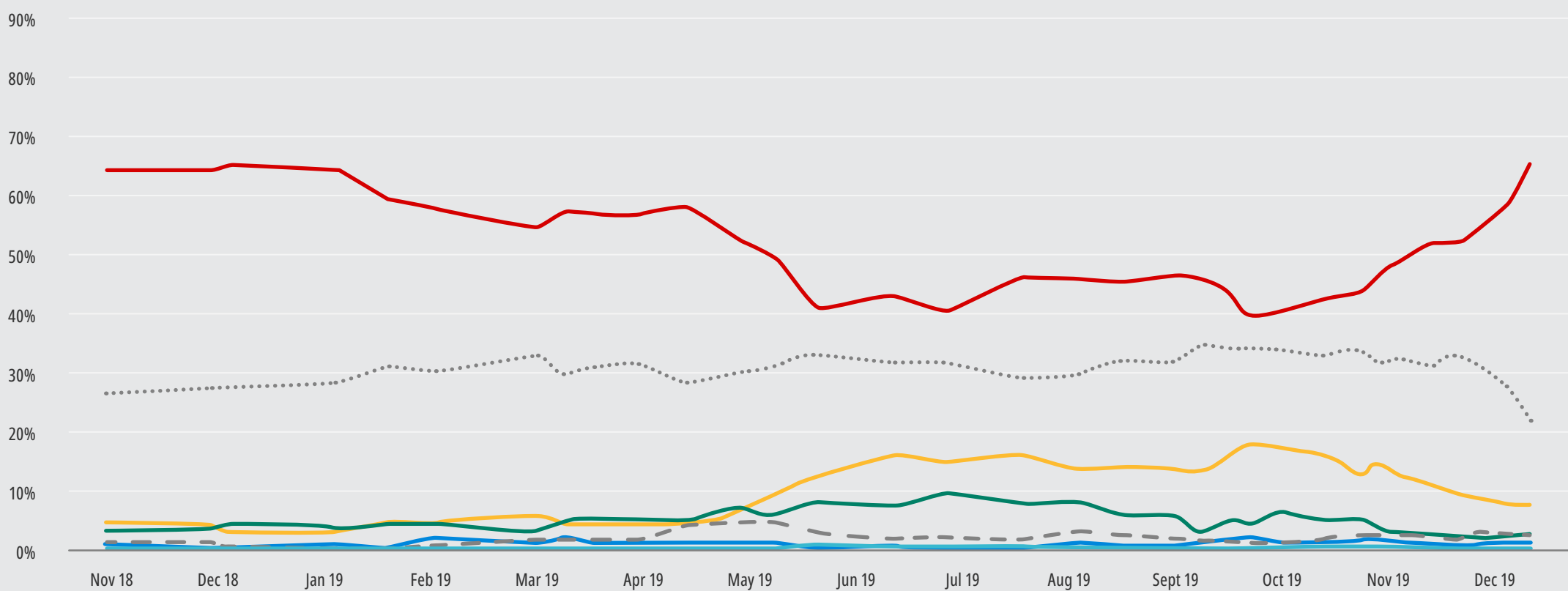


Fig 3. — Conservative Remainers

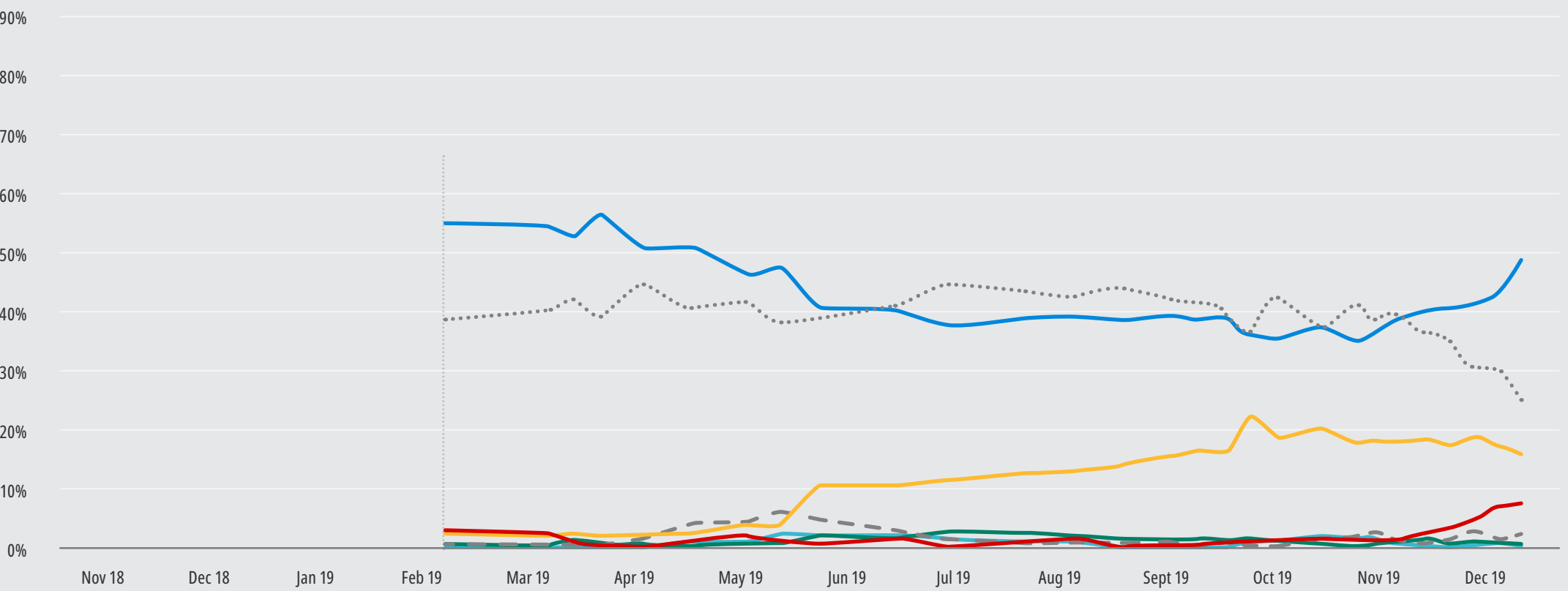
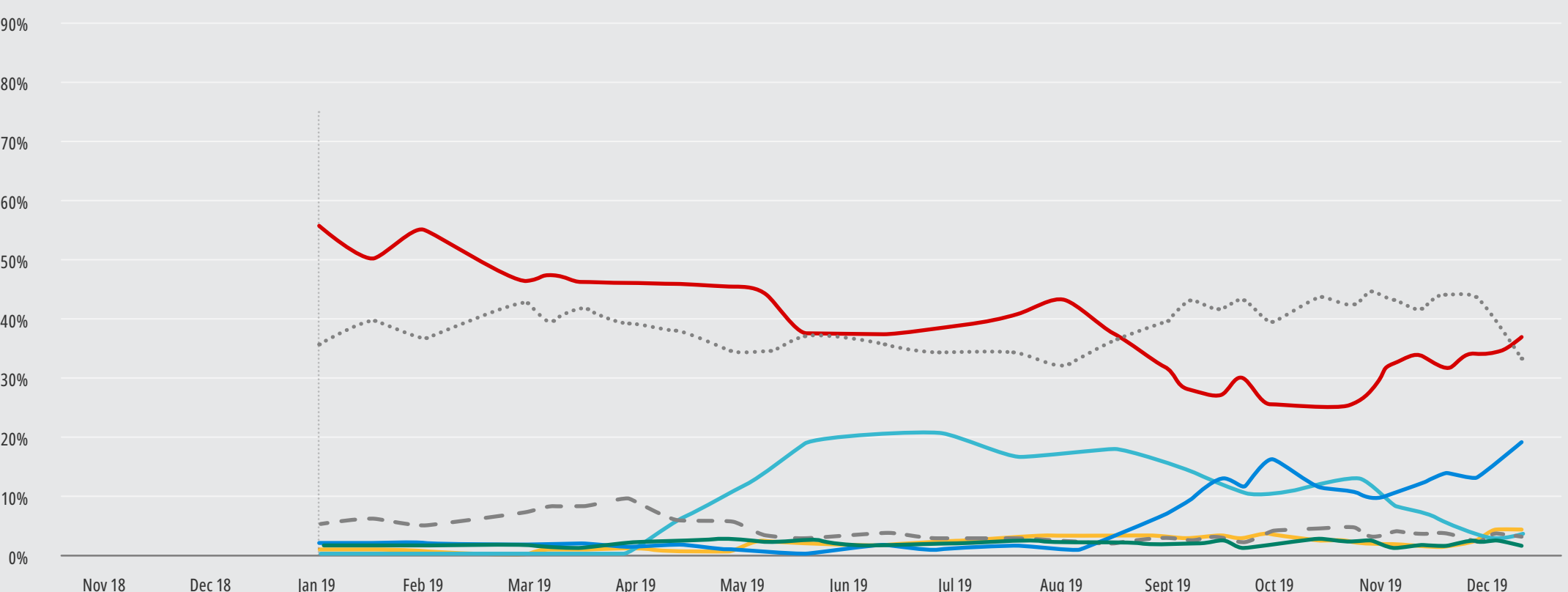


Fig 4. — Labour Leavers



# Tory Remainers: Between the devil and the deep blue sea

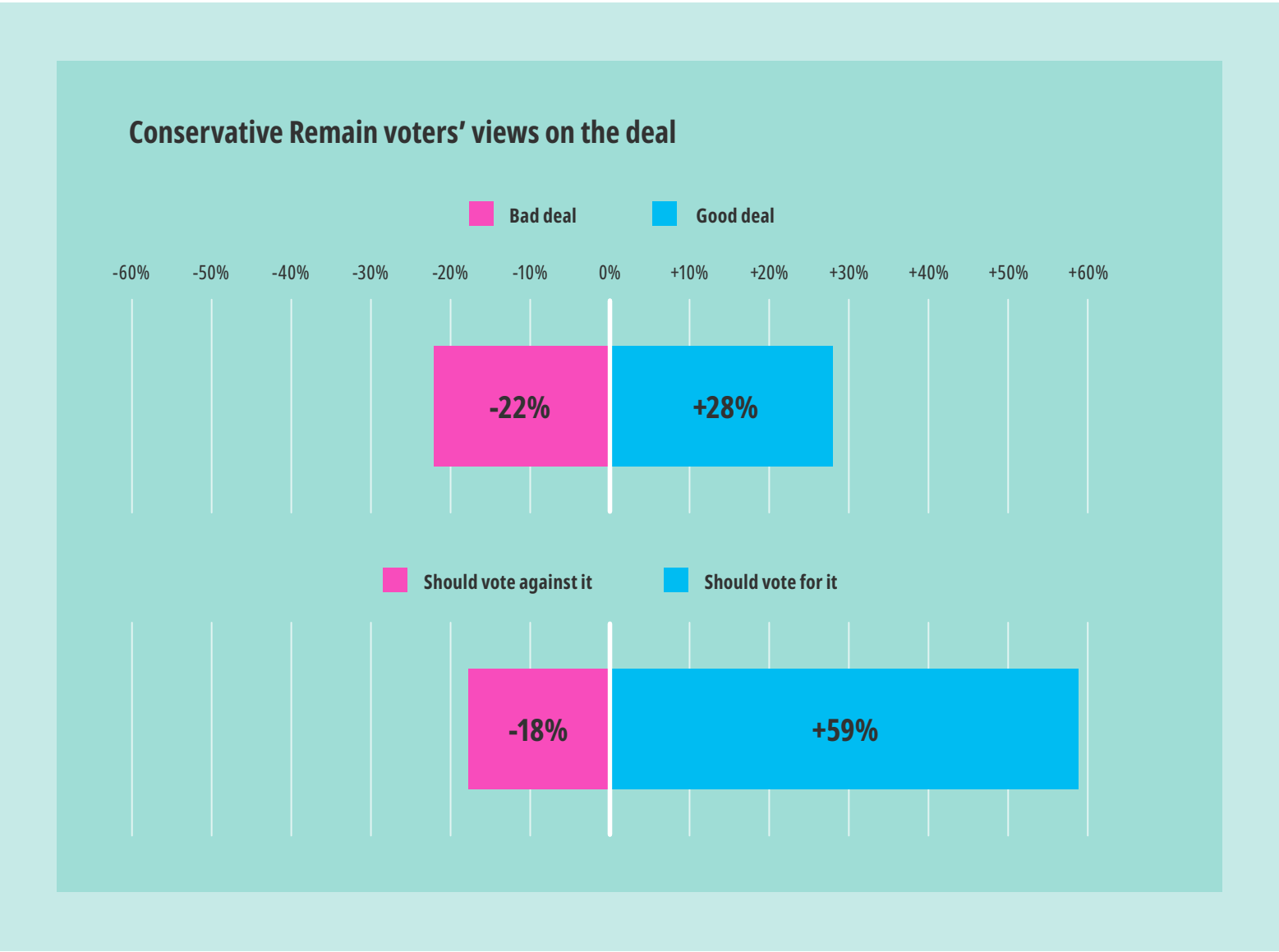
The Remain slice of the Conservative coalition were the most supportive of Theresa May’s deal and even in May 2019, approved of her performance on Brexit by 43% to 38% while Conservative Leavers disapproved by 66% to 17%.

Tory Remainers also flirted with the Liberal Democrats in the European elections but their rate of defection was nowhere near as high as Tory Leavers. Even at its peak, just after the Lib Dems’ conference and the Supreme Court judgement in September, Tory Remainers still supported the Conservatives over the Lib Dems by 37% to 23%.

Instead, Tory Remainers registered their dissatisfaction with post-July events by drifting into the “don’t know” and “would not vote” columns.

Two things kept this group from defecting to other parties in large enough numbers to make a significant impact:

The first was the fact that in October, the hardest Brexit option went from “no deal” to “Boris Johnson’s deal”. In our first poll after the deal was announced, Tory Leavers and Labour Leavers both approved of the deal (the latter albeit less emphatically) while Tory Remainers were narrowly positive.



The second was that, in a two-party system, your choice for prime minister is the leader of the Conservative Party or the leader of the Labour Party. The Lib Dems tried to counter this with frequent attacks on Jeremy Corbyn being unfit for office and a presidential-style campaign built around Jo Swinson. However, as their campaign failed to break through, the merciless logic of first past the post made it clear to Tory Remainers that their only real choices were Johnson or Corbyn. You can see clearly Tory Remainers gradually, if reluctantly, moved back to their own party and away from the Lib Dems, with a particular spike in the final week as late deciders came home.

SEE CHART FIG 3. (PG.38) — CONSERVATIVE REMAINERS



# Labour Remainers: Flirting with the Lib Dems

Labour Remain voters started to look elsewhere towards the end of January, dropping 5 points in the week after Theresa May’s deal was first defeated in the Commons. While that deal was never popular among Remainers, in our poll that week, 22% of Labour Remainers said they thought MPs should vote to pass the deal if it were renegotiated and Labour whipping against it may have alienated part of their Remain-supporting coalition.

Where Labour’s support really fell off was, as Chapter 4 details, the combination of Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May engaging in talks on Brexit coinciding with a series of second order elections which gathered their own momentum, particularly after the Lib Dems’ shock success in the local elections on 2nd May.

In our polls taken before and after the local elections, Labour’s share of the Labour Remain vote dropped from 57% to 52% and bottomed out at 41% after the European elections where it largely remained until recovering slightly to 46% after the change in prime minister.

Of this dip, while some went to the Liberal Democrats and the short-lived Change UK, many, like their Tory counterparts, simply moved to “don’t know” or “would not vote” rather than switching parties directly.

The Lib Dems’ “revoke Article 50” policy caused some movement from Labour Remainers and Labour’s lowest share amongst this group was actually the 40% they received immediately after the Lib Dem conference announcing this. However, as the chart shows, this began to decline even before the general election was called and the relentless logic of First Past the Post ground the Lib Dem vote share among Labour Remainers to just 8% by the time of the election, just 3 points above the 5% they began 2019 with.

SEE CHART FIG 2. (PG.38) — LABOUR REMAINERS 

In common with Tory Remainers and, as we will see, Labour Leavers, Labour Remainers also saw a sudden burst of last minute decision making in the final week, indicating a degree of reluctance to support the party they ultimately voted for.





# Labour Leavers: The Brexit gateway drug

Since the EU referendum, commentators have fixated on the idea of a ‘new centrist party’ to fill the gap they imagined had been left after the emaciation of the Lib Dems in 2015 and 2017 and Labour’s tilt to the left since 2015 under Jeremy Corbyn. But the real “centrist gap” in market of British politics was not “socially liberal and low public spending” but “socially conservative and high public spending” which was precisely the combination that won the referendum and which, ultimately, won the 2019 general election.

In both cases, Labour leavers were the key swing voters, and, in both cases, they voted for Boris Johnson.

In chart fig. 4 (pg.39), we can see how Labour Leavers began 2019 supporting Labour at a similar rate to Labour Remainers but see a much bigger drop between February and March around the time of the second vote against Theresa May’s deal and a similar drift towards supporting another party in May, better aligned to their Brexit preferences.

SEE CHART FIG 4. (PG.38) — LABOUR REMAINERS

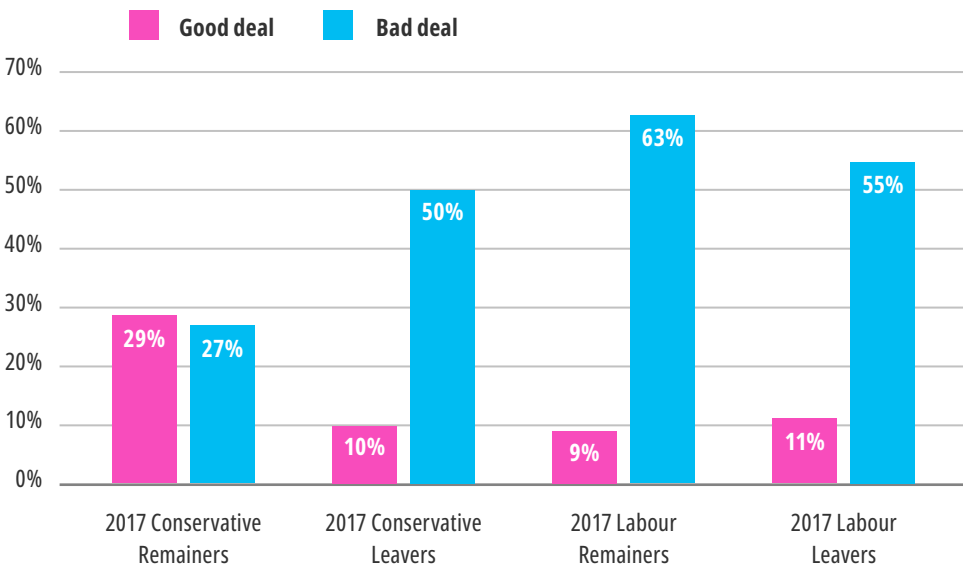
The crucial difference is that Labour Leavers were much more likely to defect than Remainers; at their lowest point, Labour was able to hold onto 40% of Labour Remainers who eventually rallied back to the party with 64% in our final pre-election poll. In comparison, Labour fell below 40% among Labour Leavers in August and never rose back above that threshold.

From the chart you can also see Labour Leavers wrestling with indecision as “don’t know / would not vote” becomes the most popular option from the beginning of September right until the end of the election campaign as we see movement from the Brexit Party to the Conservatives and some rallying back to Labour.

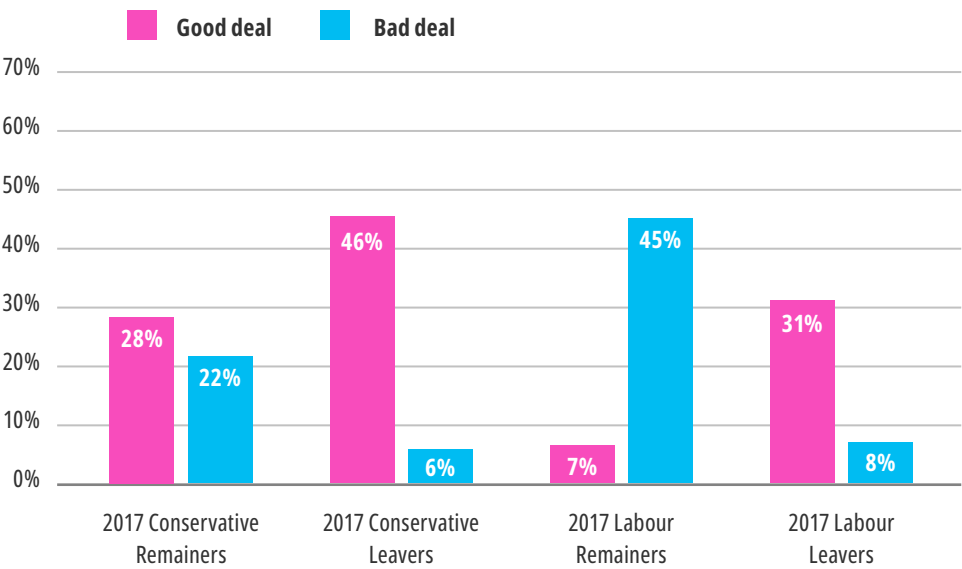
Why did Johnson succeed in converting these voters where May failed in 2017? The fact that 2019 was indeed a Brexit election was crucial.

Labour Leavers were more positive about Boris Johnson’s handling of Brexit and his Brexit deal than they were about Theresa May and her deal:

Views on May’s deal from 16<sup>th</sup> January 2019



Views on Johnson’s deal from 15<sup>th</sup> October 2019



Similarly, while they strongly disapproved of Theresa May’s handling of Brexit (11% approving and 64% disapproving in February 2019), the comparative figures for Boris Johnson in October were much more positive with 49% approving and 35% disapproving. Jeremy Corbyn in this time went from performing better than May among this group (20% approved, 38% disapproved) to far behind Johnson in October (15% approved, 64% disapproved).

# The Brexit election

No discussion of a “Brexit election” can avoid the fact that, while the country was relatively evenly divided between Leave and Remain blocs, the Leave vote was much more efficiently spread than the Remain vote. An election where the 52% voted for one party and the 48% all voted for another would result in 410 Leave seats and 240 Remain seats and a Leave majority of 170.

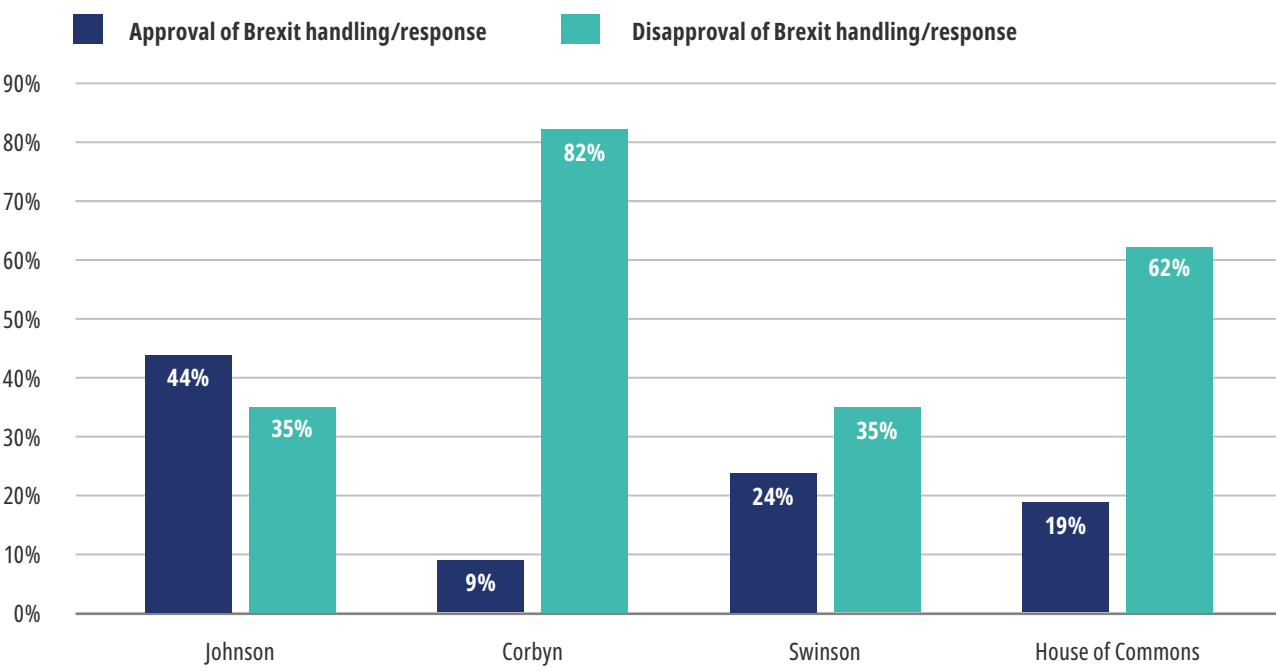
As well as this, a fundamental of both this general election, and arguably for many years before the referendum, has been the fact that Leave voters in both the Labour and the Conservative camps were more willing to directly switch party than Remain voters. Both Labour and Conservative Remainers were more likely to switch to not voting or “don’t know” than actively support another party while Leavers in both parties decamped in much larger numbers.

If only one side of an argument are prepared to behave like swing voters then it isn’t surprising that parties will cater to that and in 2017 Labour correctly judged that Remain voters weren’t going to defect to Theresa May’s Conservatives.

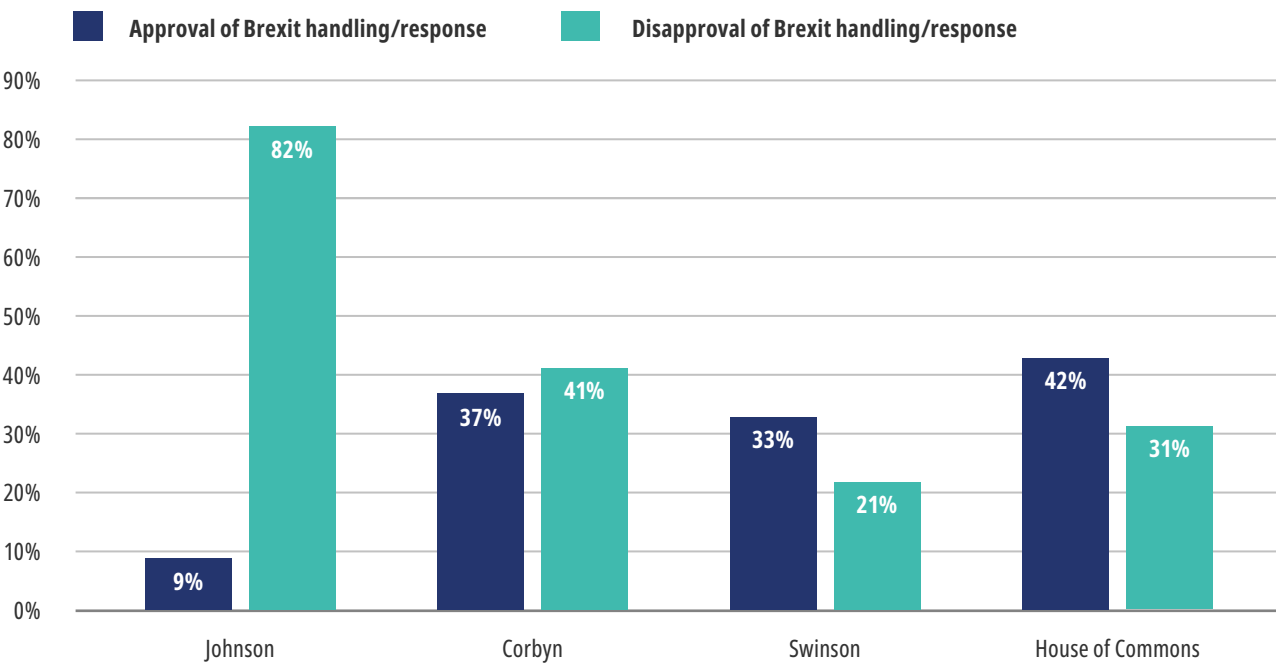
By 2019 though, particularly in the build up to the local and European elections, Remain voters had learned to make Labour earn their vote, defecting and requiring the party to move to a more pro-Remain position to keep them onside and even then, for many this was done reluctantly.

Neither Remain group had a great deal of faith in either party leader and it is striking that, in another poll from October, both were more approving of “the House of Commons” than either Johnson or Corbyn.

Conservative Remainers



Labour Remainers





The other key difference from 2017 was that that **election took place when Brexit was ill-defined** and the end of the Article 50 process still nearly 2 years away, allowing both parties to fudge on the specifics.

The crucial moment in framing the election, aside from Boris Johnson replacing Theresa May, was Boris Johnson reaching a new Brexit deal with the European Union on 17<sup>th</sup> October. Ironically, having been forced into this by the Benn Act and other parliamentary efforts to prevent a “no-deal” exit, this had **three immediate but lasting effects**:

**1** The hardest Brexit possibility suddenly changed from leaving with “no-deal” to a very hard but still negotiated withdrawal with a transition period. This immediately removed the risk of a Conservative majority for those who weren’t opposed to Brexit but were opposed to other aspects of the Johnson programme. Given that hopes of preventing a Conservative majority rested not only on Labour Leavers staying put but also Conservative Remainers voting for the Lib Dems, this at a stroke removed the reason to vote against the Tories for a large slice of this demographic.

**2** Speaking of the Lib Dems, the prospect of a deal immediately made their “Revoke” policy obsolete. Although remaining in the EU was still the most popular individual option on the day of the election, revoking Article 50 without a referendum was only palatable as an alternative to crashing out without a deal or in the context of endless negotiations to produce deals that would not pass the Commons and further extensions. Once that framing was removed,

they were trapped between advocating something unpopular even amongst Remainers (and especially Tory Remainers) and abandoning their pretence that their objective was to win a majority, admitting that in all likelihood a vote for the Lib Dems would be one to replace Boris Johnson with Jeremy Corbyn.

**3** The final effect was to frame the election between more chaos and a simple solution to it. In 2017, both Labour and the Conservatives went into the election with effectively the same Brexit position, namely “we will get a wonderful Brexit deal that will give you all the benefits and none of the drawbacks”. In 2019, discussion around Boris Johnson’s deal focused on its existence rather than its detail in comparison with Labour’s promise to negotiate a new deal and hold another referendum on it. Without a deal, the contrast between the Conservative and Labour positions would have been far less clear.

Any election this close to the end of the Article 50 period would likely have turned into a “Brexit election” in the way that 2017 did not, allowing the Tories to execute the strategy that Theresa May had failed to. However, the effect of Boris Johnson renegotiating the withdrawal agreement **allowed the Tories to maximise the advantages of being the Leave party** and the effects of split opposition and a Labour leader who was desperately unpopular among the voters who would give or deny them a majority.



*COMMENTARY*

# Identity and the 2019 election





One of the key stories to emerge from this election concerns the towns and non-metropolitan communities of England and Wales which overwhelmingly voted Tory; something that led, in part, to the collapse of the so-called red wall and the landslide defeat of the Labour Party.

As commentators have sought to explain this pattern the post-election analysis has been awash with terms like culture war, political correctness, the 'left-behinds', the 'somewheres', the 'brahmin left', and so on. Although many of these explanations and interpretations of the new political landscape differ, they share a common theme; **British society has seen a widening of the cultural divide** which, put crudely, exists between socially conservative voters and socially liberal voters. In many ways it could be argued this has replaced the class-based divisions of old.

Depending on who or what you read the gist of this idea goes a little like this: Britain has, on the one hand a group of well-educated, city-dwelling, ethnically-diverse voters who broadly take a liberal stance on issues such as LGBT+ rights, gender equality, and immigration, and on the other; a group of older, non-university educated voters based in towns and rural areas who are more socially conservative on these issues.

Additionally, and something that is crucial to this election, nationalism (whether civic or ethnic) is more common among the latter. **There are problems with reducing approximately 30 million voters into two homogenous blocs**, the picture it paints is simplistic and can overlook the nuance and diversity among voters, but there is truth in the fact that as Labour has become increasingly wedded to socially liberal values it has lost ground among people who once made up the core of its working class vote.

**In many ways this narrative is about identity.** The features which define this divide; gender, ethnicity, geography, education etc. speak to how we see ourselves and our position in our community and society. A significant proportion of voters in what were once traditionally Labour seats no longer feel the Labour Party represents their identity and were willing to take a chance, some for the first time, on the Conservatives.



## Brexit, leadership, and British identity

During this election much of this identity-divide was subsumed by Brexit, as issues like immigration and nationalism lined up behind it. For those on the socially conservative side of the aisle, who were more likely to vote Leave, **Brexit represented both a patriotic cause but also a repudiation of freedom of movement and the internationalism that Europe represented.** Unsurprisingly, it was the Conservatives that consolidated the Leave vote whereas the Labour party did little to convince Brexiteers that it had any coherent answers.

However, as we have also shown, Labour's defeat was about more than just Brexit. Leadership also played a crucial part, being the single biggest reason voters cited for not voting Labour. Our polling showed that only a quarter (24%) of the British public believed Corbyn was able to stand up for Britain's interests abroad, compared to 40% for Boris Johnson. Corbyn's past associations with members of groups like the IRA and Hamas and his response to the Salisbury poisoning made him an easy target. On a similar note, only 23% believed Corbyn was a strong leader compared to 38% for Boris Johnson. Some of the basic tenets of leadership mattered to voters in places such as the 'red wall' constituencies; among blue-collar workers who didn't vote Labour, 43% said they did so because of the leadership.

Corbyn's stance on issues related to national security, and the position in the fraught world of identity politics that many in Labour have taken, helped to fuel a perception that the Labour Party was somehow anti-British. Successful Labour governments of the past had no trouble talking about Britain and Britishness with confidence, but this has appeared more difficult in recent times. The Conservatives on the other hand, have no trouble talking in such terms and the ease with which they talk about Britishness – and, more importantly in those 'red wall' seats, **Englishness – helped them win.** It could be argued that the Labour Party needs to create **an inclusive narrative around national identity that chimes with voters without alienating the rest of its voter base** that it retrained at the general election. Doing so will be no easy task.



## What next?

Looking to other parties may provide answers; although the SNP's capture of Scotland is old news it's still of huge significance in UK politics; here is a political party that combines national identity with broadly left-wing politics (however debatable this might be in practice) to create a winning electoral formula. Similarly, Sinn Féin's resurgence in Ireland and the success of other left-wing movements in Europe can be put down to much the same strategy. However, **the success of left-wing Celtic nationalism lies with its opposition to a Union** which it frames as conservative and repressive and/or its use of national stories based in struggle and rebellion. Although the Labour Party doesn't have this luxury, it arguably, needs to find a way to talk about nationality in a positive and unifying way.

Equally, can the Conservatives expect to hold these new 'red wall' seats? **Rhetoric with a patriotic flavour and the Brexit factor may have secured these seats for now.** But when we are definitively out of the European Union (transition period and all) and if inequality and underinvestment in these regions persist this new voter base may well change their stripes again. For communities that have suffered the effects of deindustrialisation and austerity so acutely, this can only soothe the anger for so long. Far from unaware of this, the Conservatives have already started work on policies aimed at repaying these voters; the success or failure of these will be key to the future fortunes of both Labour and the Tories.





# Going to vote in 2019

# Heading to the polling stations

As people made their way to their local polling station on Thursday the 12th to cast their vote, most were heading to schools (23%) or local town or village halls (22%). Others travelled to their community centres (17%) and church halls (11%). As is often the case on election day, some pictures of the more quirky polling booths gained traction on social media, with 2% of the public making their way to these more eccentric portable polling stations.

23%



School

22%



Local town / village hall

17%



Community centre

11%



Church hall

7%



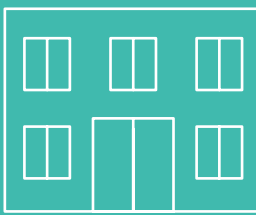
Church

7%



Local sports/ social club

4%



Library

2%



Portable office



# The effects of a winter election on voting times

Before the polling stations opened at 7am on Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> December 2019 for the general election, a third (29%) of our day of poll voters had already sent through their vote via post, with unsurprisingly older people being more likely to use this method of voting; two in four (40%) of our over 65s cast a postal vote.

Most of our voters were up bright and early, casting their votes before work or as the morning progressed. Almost half (46%) of our voters had cast their ballot by midday while a further fifth (21%) voted in the afternoon. **Traipsing to a polling station in the evening/after work was less appealing for our voters, with only 6% voting in the evening.**

You have to go as far back as 1923 for the last Christmas election, with elections typically being held in spring or summer. When the original unorthodox decision was made to hold the election in December, several commentators mentioned that this would or could have an effect on when people vote or whether they vote at all. Others claimed that the impact would be limited. Come election day turnout was 67.3%, marginally less than the 68.8% in the election held on June 2017, but yet still higher than the May 2015 election which had a turnout of 66.4%. So, it does appear that the effect of a winter election had a negligible impact on turnout.

But what about its impact on the way that people voted? It is here that we do see that holding a winter election did have an effect on the time that people decided to go and vote. While overall, the vast majority of voters (77%) said that they did not vote at a different time to how they would usually vote in a summer election, just under a quarter (23%) said that the time of year did affect the time that they voted. Half (52%) of these voters who changed the time they voted had already cast their vote within 3 hours of polling stations being open, presumably meaning they decided to vote earlier than they usually do. By midday 71% of these voters had visited their polling station.

**Young voters were more likely to be affected by a winter election;** 29% of under 45 voters changing the time they voted compared to how they usually voted in past summer elections, compared to 19% of over 45 voters. In terms of regions, Londoners (31%) were also more likely to say they had changed the time they vote due to a winter election compared to voters from other regions across the UK.



# The emotions surrounding this election

What is a healthy democracy? Surely positive emotions when it comes to voting should be a component of that that. Unfortunately, **this election primarily elicited negative emotions across all voter bases**. The strongest emotions were frustration (33%) and anxiety (26%). A feeling of anger (17%) and shame (15%) were also fairly common.

In comparison, **very few people felt positive emotions when thinking about how the general election has made them feel**. Just 4% said they felt happy, and the same proportion (4%) said they felt excited. Only 1% were delighted and only 3% felt proud. The strongest positive emotion was a feeling of hope, but even that was only experienced by 13% of voters. A further one in four (24%) felt apathetic, saying that this election has not made them feel anything.

Conservative and Liberal Democrat voters had the highest rates of feeling apathetic about this general election (25% and 21% respectively), while in comparison only 16% of Labour voters reported feeling nothing.

While negative emotions were felt by all types of voters, these emotions were not felt as strongly among Conservative, Brexit Party and Leave voters in comparison to other voters. For instance, only 5% of Conservative voters, 3% of Brexit Party voters and 6% of Leave voters reported feeling sad about the general election, while in comparison **Labour, Liberal Democrat and Remain voters were around 4 times as likely to feel sad** (20%, 23% and 22% respectively). A feeling of sadness about this general election was also fairly high among SNP and Green voters (18% and 16% respectively).

Of the top 5 emotions felt about this general election among the different groups of voters, it was only Conservative, Brexit Party and Leave voters that had a positive emotion in their list- that of hope.

Top 5 emotions felt about this general election among different groups of voters



## Reasons for not voting

What of those people who decided not to vote even though they were eligible to? We asked people in our day of poll who decided not to vote the reasons why. Again, fairly negative emotions were coming through strongly. The most common responses centred around disillusionment and tied with this a lack of trust and faith, which goes beyond just this election. **Many of these voters just seemed fed up with the way things are.**

*‘I don’t like any of the political parties- they are all untrustworthy and incompetent.’*

*‘It’s pointless, all politicians care about is themselves.’*

*‘Politicians are the main cause of the problems we have today, they are not the solution. They do not care at all about the challenges facing humanity & nature today.’*

*‘Lost my faith in democracy in this country.’*

*‘no point - they all lie and only look after themselves and not the constituents’*

*‘Because none can be trusted. None of the parties listen to the voters’*

*‘at the end of the day its all promises no action!’*

The next biggest reason for not voting was due to circumstances preventing them from casting their ballot, which included being on holiday at the time, being ill, Being housebound, and for a handful, the weather.

Many people also said that the reason they did not vote was that **they did not feel that there was a suitable candidate or party to vote for** or they did not feel represented by any of them.

Some commentators have mentioned that the delay with exiting the EU could result in people not voting because they would **feel that there is no point** as their vote is not being listened to. We found that there were only a handful of people that cited this as a reason for not voting in this election.

Others reasons for not voting including not being sure who to vote for, not having a particular candidate standing in their seat, feeling like their vote won’t make a difference, feeling there was no point due to being in a safe seat / disliking the first part the post system, not knowing enough to make a decision, not receiving a polling card, not being bothered to vote, and because they never vote.

Reasons for not voting being dominated by a feeling of disillusionment with ‘formal politics’ is not new. **Voter apathy and disengagement has been well documented**, and this issue requires a look at the wider context and the tougher questions of how politicians can go about regaining the trust of apathetic, disillusioned voters in a meaningful way.



# Making your mind up

# Many voters were undecided and many others open to changing their vote

During election periods, campaigns kick off in full swing across the UK in the hopes to convince wavering voters to vote for them. We found that through this election, **there was actually a lot of potential to convince voters, as a substantial proportion did not make their minds up until the last moment**, and some were open to changing their initial decision if they could be persuaded to do so.

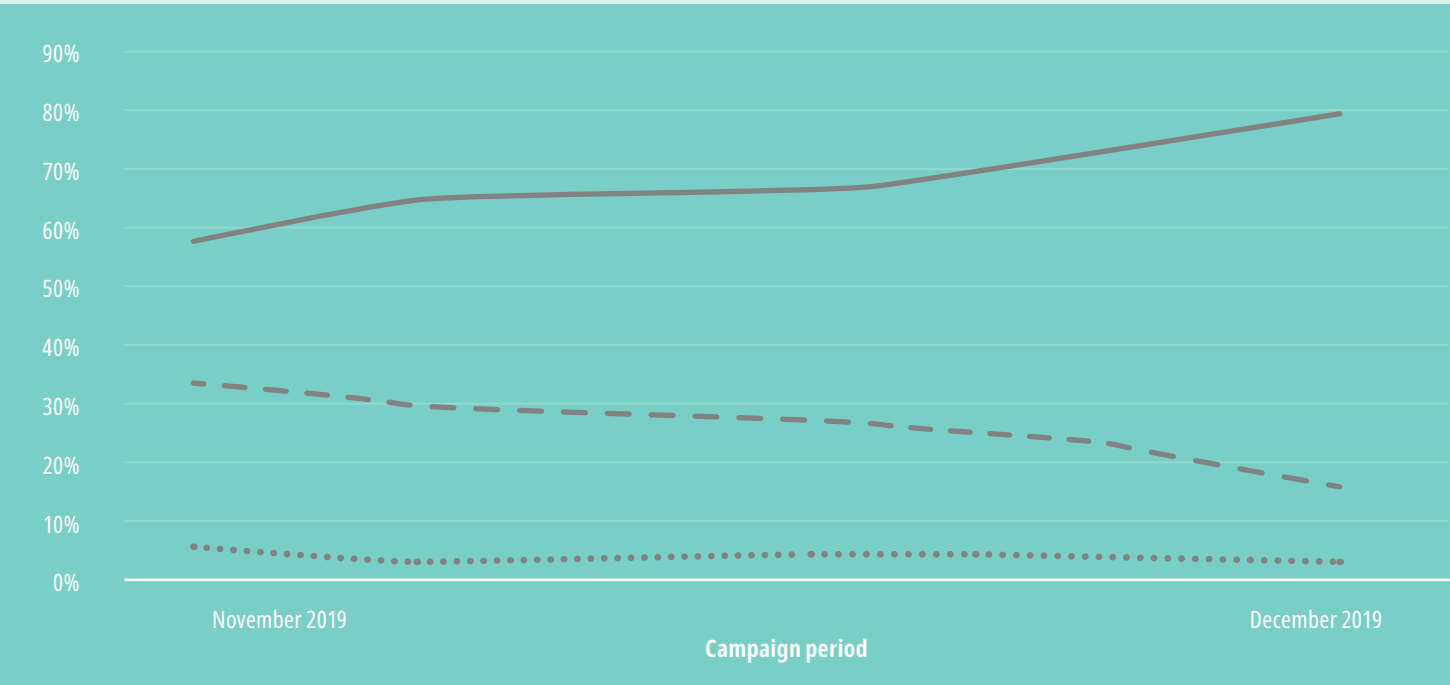
While people had firmed up their decision on who to vote for as the election period progressed, up until the week of the election itself, a significant one in five (20%) of those planning to vote who had selected a party in our voting intention said that there was **a small or good chance that they could change their vote when going to the polling station**.

In addition to these voters that could be persuaded to change their minds, there was also a fairly sizeable proportion of voters who were planning to vote but did not know who to vote right up until the last moments of the election. The number of people saying they don't know how they would vote remained pretty consistent throughout the election period at around 16-18% up until the last two weeks where it dropped to 13% and then 9% in the final week.

With Brexit as a key issue defining this election, we found that amongst 2017 Labour voters, those that voted remain were more likely to say they didn't know how they would vote as compared to those who voted Leave. On the other hand, 2017 Conservative voters who voted Remain were more likely to say they were undecided up until the last moment of the election period compared to 2017 Conservative Leaver voters, although only slightly more so. This gap being higher between types of Labour voters compared to types of Conservative voters reinforces the patterns of this election; the Conservative Party were very successful in uniting both its remain and leave voters behind them while 2017 Labour voters were much more conflicted about their party throughout.

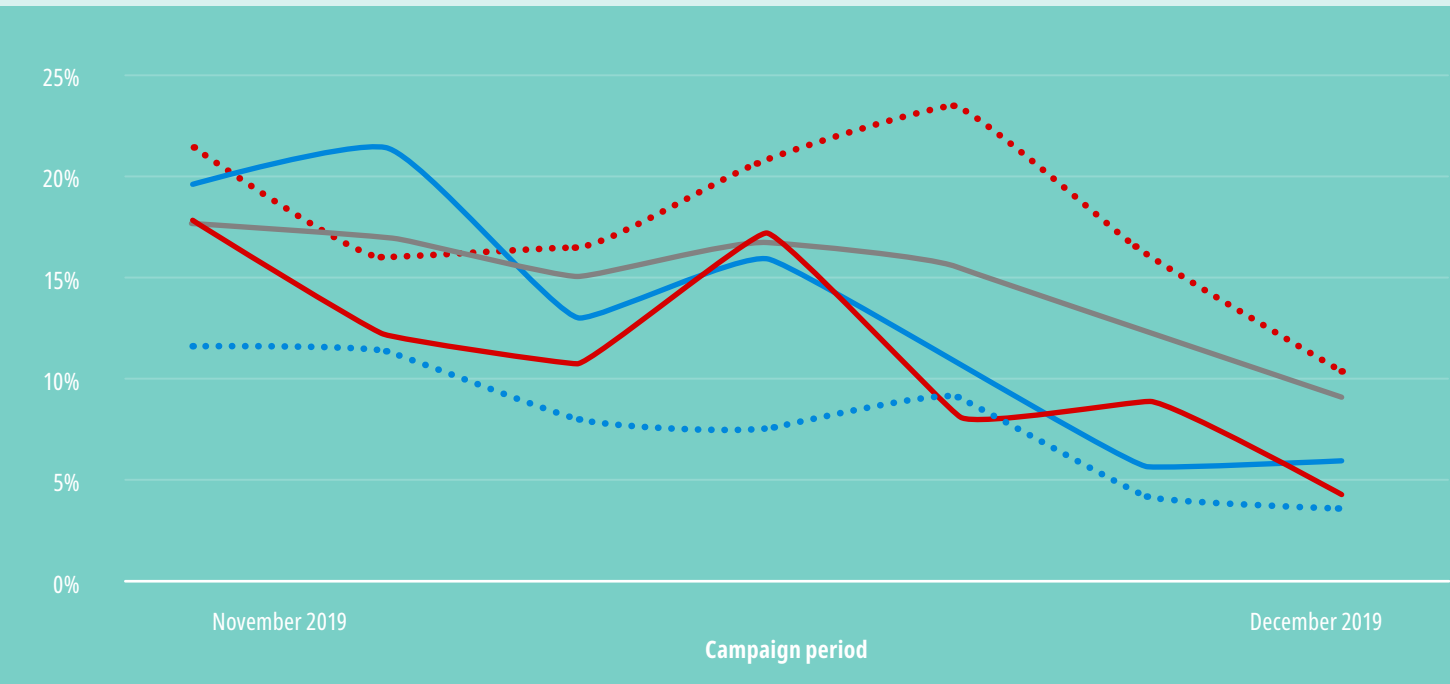
You said you planned to vote for [x] party in the upcoming general election. Would you say that you are certain to vote for that party or are you likely to change your mind between now and then?

- I will definitely vote for this party and I won't change my mind before the election
- I am very likely to vote for this party but there is a small chance I will change my mind before the election
- I will probably vote for this party but there is a good chance I will change my mind before the election



Percentage who said they might vote but don't know how they will vote

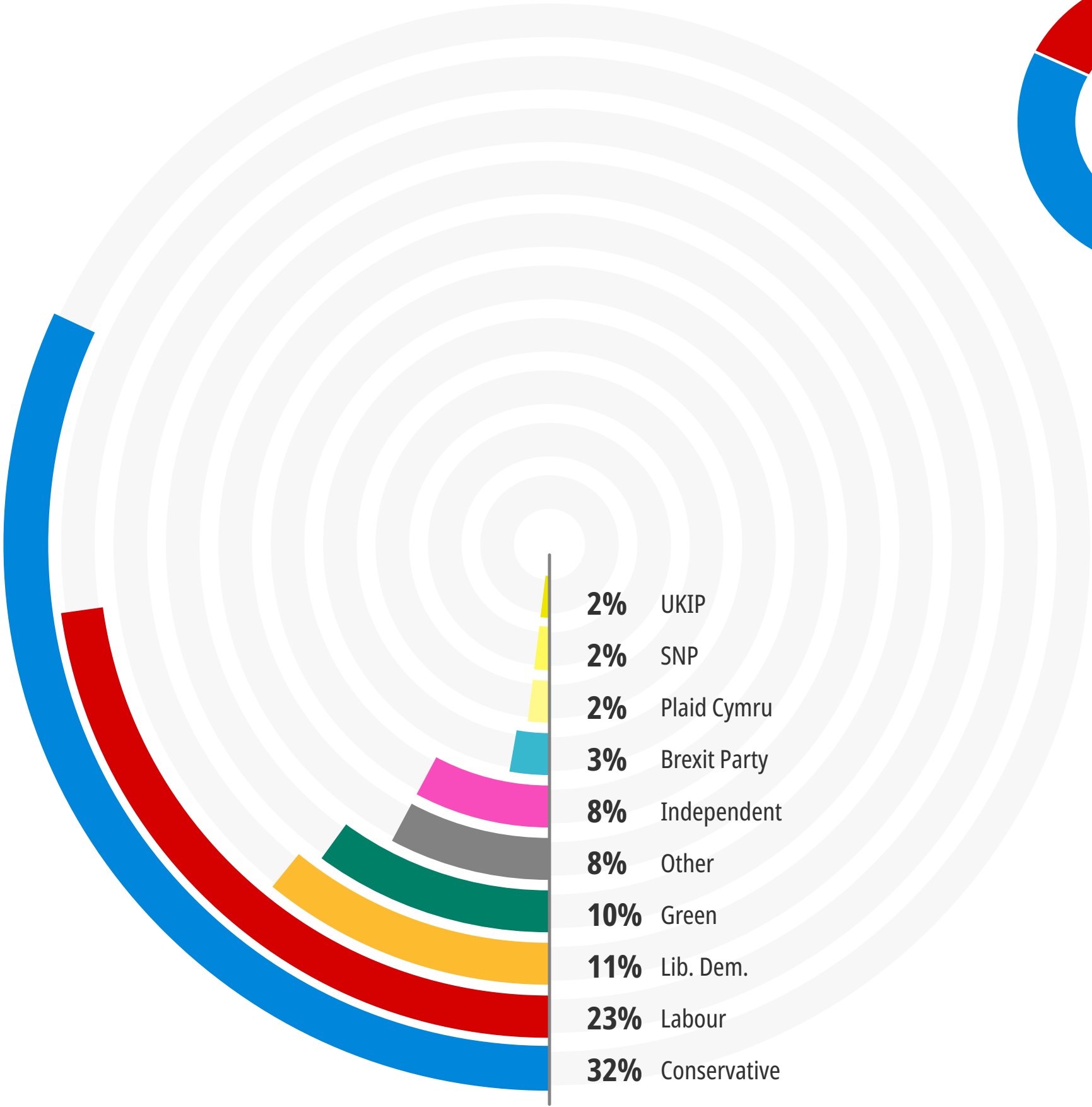
- All
- 2017 Con. Remainers
- 2017 Labour leavers
- 2017 Con. Leavers
- 2017 Labour Remainers



# How don't know voters were saying they would vote

During the election period we asked undecided voters on a number of occasions which parties they were considering voting for, and out of those which ones they were most likely to vote for. In our final poll on 10<sup>th</sup> December, a third (32%) of undecided voters were telling us that they were most likely to vote for the Conservative Party (consistent with previous times asked), with just a quarter (23%) saying they would most likely vote for Labour. The Conservative lead had already been significant through the campaign, and **undecided voters were reinforcing the story that this election was very much a Conservative win**, and that of how big a win rather than how small.

How undecided voters were likely to vote on 10<sup>th</sup> December



Total undecided voters





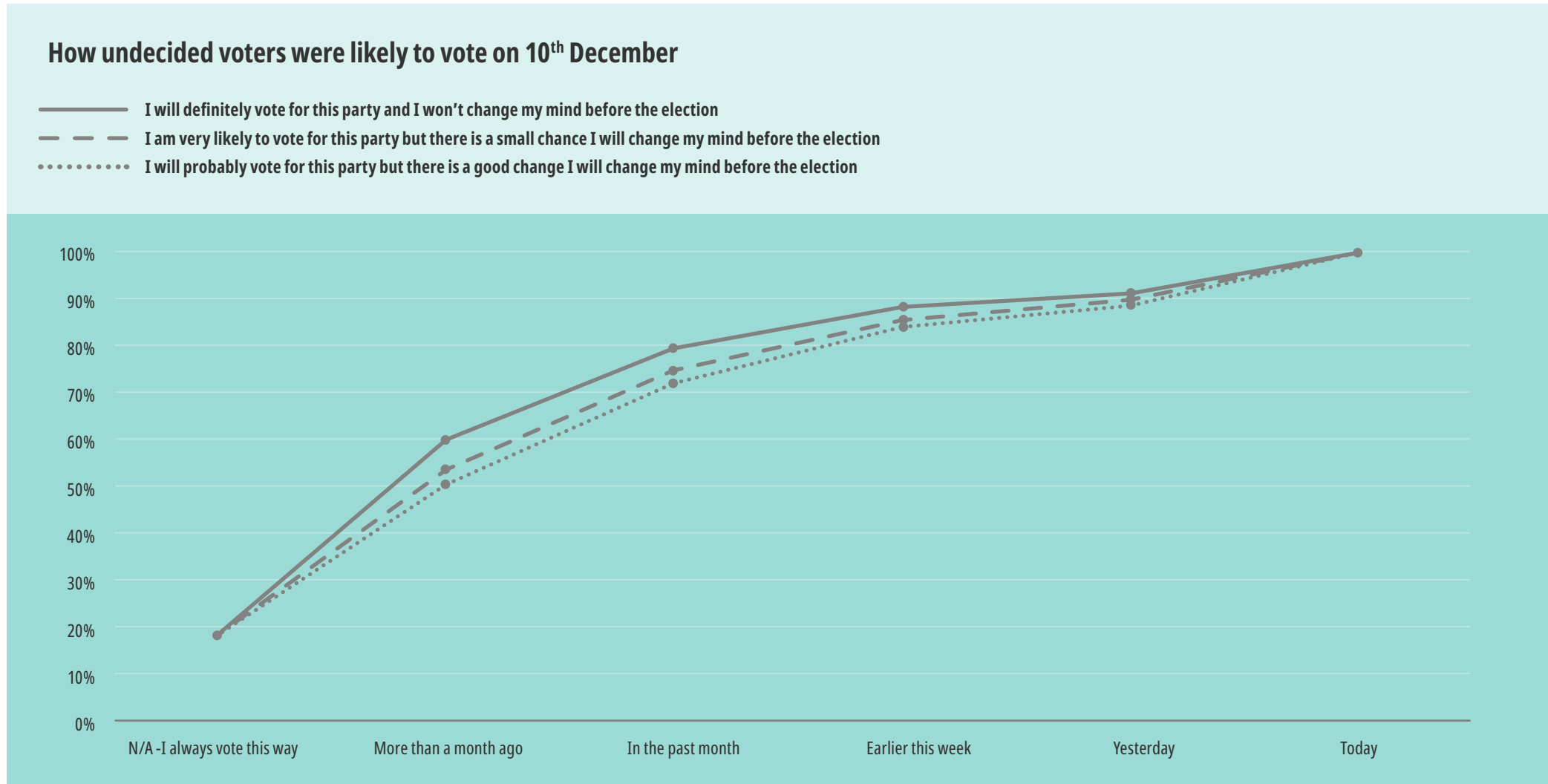
# When voters decided how they would vote

How last minute were some of the votes? In our day of poll, **one in ten (10%) said they made up their mind on Election Day itself**, while 4% made up their mind the day before. A further 11% had made up their mind during the beginning of election week.

Only 18% said that they had not needed to make up their mind as they voted the way they always voted, which again reinforces that for a large number of voters, who they would vote for was not set in stone from the outset. While there are a sizeable number of voters that did not decide until last minute, **there was still a larger proportion who made their**

**mind up relatively early on in the election and so campaigning during the beginning of election periods are still the best time to convince many voters to vote for you.** Over a third (36%) of voters made up their mind with a month to go.

Remainers were more likely to have made their final decision on who to vote for during a later stage of the election period compared to Leavers; 27% of those that voted Remain made up their mind on who to vote for in the election during the week of the election, compared to 20% of those that voted Leave. This again remains consistent with the other story of the election period. The Leave vote throughout the election period continued to consolidate behind the Conservatives, with at one point 3 in 4 Leavers saying they would vote Conservative, while the Remain vote remained more fractured between various parties, albeit consolidating slightly more towards Labour as the election period went on. However, **this slight consolidation was nowhere near enough to offset the domination of the Conservative vote share among Leavers.**



# Measuring public opinion



The 2019 general election was a daunting prospect for pollsters after a relentless year of ‘grade A’ news. 2019 started with huge defeats for the government, followed by the European Parliament elections leading us all to imagine that the old party system might finally come crashing down. It ended in a historic landslide that feels oddly conventional when seen in the context of our polling only a few months before.

Such an eventful year provided us with **several opportunities to think again about how we conduct our political polling** and how we might improve on some of our past accurate calls. Our final poll indicating that the Conservatives would take 45% of the GB vote, followed by Labour on 33% and the Liberal Democrats on 12%, proved to be incredibly accurate. In fact, it was spot on.

One thing we wanted to dispel is that this somehow means our methodology is iron clad and fixed for every future ballot. **All general elections are their own beast.** The hours spent waiting for the 2017 Labour surge to reappear in 2019, simply because it happened last time, was tedious. Assuming that polls always underrepresent the Conservatives was clearly wrong in 2017, even if it was the lesson many took from 2015. We really wanted to review the principles that we believe can be applied to reviewing how we conduct public opinion research. Of course, the outcomes of putting those principles into practice will be different at every election.





# The principles behind our 2019 methodology review

The Sturgis review into the polling inaccuracies of 2015 concluded quite simply that “the primary cause of the polling errors in 2015 was unrepresentative sampling”. Those two words encompass such a large number of issues from the way that panels are recruited all the way through to sample frames and weighting that it is simply impossible to go into all of it now.

**The lesson we took this time was twofold.**

Firstly, we should re-examine what we might not be getting right in terms of how our samples are comprised. What do we currently weight by? What could we weight by? One sample of 2,000 UK adults can’t be exactly representative of the public on 20 demographic measures, but we can ensure 10 (for example), as long as they are the ‘right’ ones.

Secondly, straightforward solutions such as weighting up the core group of one party’s supporters over another isn’t the answer. Underestimating Labour in 2017 and overestimating them in 2015 could easily be because we weren’t accounting for other sample imbalances that might be true in both cases. But finding out who these groups are is the challenge.

**In short, our approach focused on four key aims:**

1

*Having an accurate understanding of the makeup of the electorate as well as the resident population*

2

*Using the best possible demographic criteria to understand the key drivers for voting intention*

3

*Ensuring all of our political background information is accurate*

4

*Accounting for the fact that UK general elections are an aggregate of 650 constituency battles, not just one national poll*

## The resident public vs the electorate

The first change we implemented this year was to account accurately for the proportion of the public who are registered to vote. This might sound like a simplistic answer, but actually it is crucial. Only those who are registered to vote can cast a ballot. **Many others, regardless of being British residents, are simply ineligible to participate in general elections.**

For example, at the last general election the electorate totalled less than 47 million despite the adult population being over 52 million. Shockingly, this means that at the last general election **more than one in ten of the resident public could not participate.**

This has endless implications. If the aim is to achieve a representative sample, then how do we get them? We get official statistics about the mix of age, gender, ethnicity, home ownership, etc. **These all represent the resident public, not the voting public.** If we get the mix of the former correct but don't think about the latter then we will have accepted that our sample is unrepresentative in a key way before we get onto any other issue.

In terms of the raw data fall out from our sample, we underestimate the proportion of those not entitled to vote in general elections by half. Accounting for this gives a greater chance that the demographic makeup of the electorate is right when we weight to correct for any imbalances in the overall resident population.

A great example of this shift is in London, and how not correcting for it can make the overall national sample unrepresentative from a political perspective. **London makes up 13.1% of the UK's resident population, but it makes up only 11.5% of the electorate.** With London's skew towards one party and its rather unique political and demographic situation, correcting for something like this makes a big difference.

## What really drives voting intention?

Once we had planned for this, we could move onto other demographic factors.

We wanted to start with the least number of preconceptions possible. The aim is to use the right demographic criteria currently relevant in determining how people vote.

To do this we went far and wide to collect the broadest range of criteria we could possibly find – everything from car ownership to whether you hold a passport. We then asked about the same demographic criteria on a nationally representative sample alongside how participants in the European Parliament elections cast their vote. Then we simply tested an endless number of permutations we got something that gave us the right result.

It's not about weighting to the result but understanding what key demographic factors get you there.



## Accounting for false recall in past vote

We also noticed that past vote recall is far from brilliant. Roughly one in ten voters do not accurately remember who they voted for two years ago, and a higher proportion struggle with how they cast their ballot in 2015.

The only vote we tested that this wasn't true of was the 2016 EU Referendum, where survey participants had a very high degree of accuracy in remembering how they voted.

In short, we needed to find a way to take this phenomenon into account, especially for general elections. Despite how it might look on the face of it, shares of the vote for political parties from one election to the next change by incredibly small amounts. 2017 might have been drastic but the Conservative and Labour vote shares changed by a much smaller amount between 2005 and 2015.

Not accounting properly for those switching their vote but conveniently 'forgetting' they ever voted for another party has a big impact, even when we are still only talking about a small percentage of the overall sample.

## Correcting for which constituency the parties are standing in

The only change that we made during the campaign – and by change, we really mean additional stage – is only showing the parties that are standing in each constituency. But we could only do this once nominations had closed and we had a firm list of where the Brexit Party and other smaller parties were standing.

In 2017 we also suffered from larger vote shares being given to smaller parties, because we did not correct for the fact that in hundreds of seats the party wasn't standing.



# The polling team



**ADAM DRUMMOND**  
*Head of Political Polling*



**CHRIS CURTIS**  
*Senior Research Manager*



**ISABELLA COLLEGE**  
*Researcher*



**JACK TADMAN**  
*Research Manager*



**JAMES CROUCH**  
*Senior Research Manager*



**JAMES STEVENS**  
*Senior Researcher*



**JOSEPH CURRAN**  
*Senior Researcher*



**PRIYA MINHAS**  
*Research Manager*

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London

58 Great Sutton Street,  
London,  
EC1V 0DG.

research@opinium.com

New York

425 Madison Avenue,  
Suite 600,  
New York, NY 10017.

hello@opinium.com

www.opinium.com