

A polarising Britain? How value divides are shaping British politics

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Introduction

We live in a time of political instability. The old assurances and alliances that held in times of economic and geopolitical tumult no longer remain fixed. The bonds that drew the everyday structures of our politics together are at a breaking point. People all across the world are understandably anxious about these developments, coming as they do on the back of a range of other crises, from the Great Financial Crisis in 2008, the Covid-19 pandemic, the rapid escalation of climate crises across the planet and the pervading cost-of-living crisis.

A New Account of the Political Polarisation, the project from which this report comes, seeks to understand this moment in politics from the perspective of the British electorate. Over the last few decades, we have heard many stories about British voters, none of which have ultimately stood the test of time. In the period around 1997, we were told “history had ended” and the public had come to accept liberal globalisation, as long as it was attended by a generous welfare state. Then, there was a period, from 2010 to 2015, when a more fiscally conservative, centrist Conservatism seemed to enjoy an unrivalled ascendancy. Shortly after that, we were told that the “left behind” communities had bitten back, rejecting globalisation, large-scale migration and “woke” social values and leading, first, to the vote to leave the European Union and, second, to a majority for Boris Johnson. Each of these certainties has quickly crumbled, though, as has the electoral coalition that underpinned Keir Starmer’s election victory just two years’ ago.

Now, perhaps, we may be confronted a new phenomenon, or, rather, a reinvention of an older one: ideological polarisation.

At a time when across Europe we have seen the growth of nationalist, populist right parties that are now competitive everywhere and, of equal importance, their polar opposite. Donald Trump’s re-election has

created a new stage of populist politics, with new dynamics shaping the emergence of two large blocs with increasingly intense views.

In the study of the British electorate that follows, we find that Donald Trump’s return has had a fundamental impact on voters’ views of domestic politics. For the progressive voters, and especially voters the current government has presently lost, distaste of Trump and Trumpism seems paramount. As the focus groups conducted for this work show, progressive voters recognise the need to have a working relationship with the United States, yet they feel Britain and the government have failed to articulate core values of progressive government in the way that other politicians in Canada and Spain have managed. This is one of the foundational elements of the Prime Minister’s unpopularity with his own party’s voters; on top of this, his opposition to the Iran War has had some positive impact on voters’ view of him, but too little to overcome the fundamental anxieties.

This extends to the view of other alliances. Progressive voters would like a closer, clearer articulation of how Britain will work with allies in Europe, as well as with middle powers emerging around the world from Asia to South America.

As well as international politics, economic turmoil seems also to drive a polarisation on approaches. For progressives, there is what we might call a fairness test for those the government wish to win back. The cost of living remains central for voters, be they Labour or Conservative, and yet, for progressives, there is a need to demonstrate fairness. They want to hear a government or politics that, yes, has measures to cut bills, but also shows that those with the broadest shoulders bear the burden. This leads to wider fears about ordinary people being taken for a ride, working hard and paying more tax while tech and energy companies fail to pay their fair share.

The other striking finding is that at a time when energy prices are once again rising, this time due to the war in Iran, voters have become more polarised when it comes to the push for renewables. While Reform voters back their parties' support for more investment in hydro-carbons, progressive voters want a doubling down on the shift to renewables. How this policy continues to form a central tenet of government programme will be crucial if Labour are to regain ground ahead of the next election.

There is no hiding from the deep personal unpopularity of the current Prime Minister, only two years after he won a majority. But the analysis here suggests this is not straightforwardly about perceptions of him as a communicator or as a day-to-day leader, but rather about a failure to come to terms with our newly polarised age. Starmer's desire to find the centre-ground makes sense for someone of his generation, but it may be out of kilter with the demands and expectations of our present time. For Labour and other progressive parties, the energies of their voters are not as moderate as they once were. Similarly, for those on the right, this polarisation is defining. Owning the change that voters so clearly want, while remaining true to their beliefs on core economic questions will be crucial for both the Conservative and Reform Parties.

Donald Trump's personal star may be waning at home, yet his impact around the world and here in Britain is now only just becoming clear. Trump's consistent belief in mobilising his MAGA base and being seen as delivering for those who sent him back to the White House, along with his unwillingness to appease his opponents, speaks directly to this polarised politics.

Here in Britain, if the analysis presented here is right, understanding voters' increasingly polarised values will be crucial for any party keen to win back support and deliver the change that has so often been promised. In this new age of political polarisation, when so much is at stake, it will be the parties that deliver for those for whom they claim to speak that are rewarded the most.

Professor Marc Stears

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Sample methodology

- On behalf of Climate Policy & Strategy Associates, YouGov Blue fielded the April 2026 wave of the UK Climate Tracker, including 1,061 UK adults
- The April 2026 wave fielded from April 23 to April 27
- The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+), with results filtered to show responses for a likely electorate in a General Election.
- The survey learned from focus groups conducted in March with progressive voters and those open to voting Labour in both Red and Blue Wall seats.
- That enabled us to develop vision narratives in diverse areas. The survey respondents are asked to rate the narratives on a University of Michigan National Election Survey 100 degree thermometer scale that has been replicated in years of surveys in multiple countries.
- The survey tracks changes in surveys conducted over the last three years.
- It also includes an experiment. Respondents were asked after reading the narratives to repeat their vote and choice of party on key issues and values, including which will be the largest party of the left and right.

Key Findings

- Voters are desperate to see change in a country where three quarters say it is headed in the wrong direction. That is driven by a surge in anger about the cost of living, Donald Trump, spiking energy prices and oil companies.
- They want to see visible help with the cost of living, greater fairness with big taxes on the wealthy and high-tech giants to fund the NHS and social care and cut taxes. They also want to see a strong leader who stands up for Britain against Trump, rejoins Europe to raise living standards and uses the energy crisis to make Britain a clean energy superpower.
- The Prime Minister has benefited from disagreeing with Trump on Iran, but voters are looking for so much more. As a result, Labour's vote is stable and low at 18 percent. Labour's vote is pulled down by the three-quarters who view Starmer unfavorably. Under 20 percent say Labour is best on handling "the cost of living" and "understands the problems facing the country" and under 15 percent on who is "on your side."
- The Green Party has momentum as it edges ahead of Labour in this poll before the May elections. Twice as many voters are considering voting Green as Labour. They are attracted to the Greens' wealth tax and tax on high tech companies to fund the NHS, social care and dentistry. Voters also like taxing Amazon to help high street.
- This Labour government has tried to compete with Reform on immigration, but only 18 percent think Labour is best on the issue. And its plan is not popular with other progressive voters or those considering Labour. Only 1 percent of Reform voters say there is a fair chance they can support Labour.
- It is a good sign that Labour has made progress on being the party that addresses child poverty and 35 percent believe it will be the biggest party of the left. Andy Burnham and Gordon Brown have favorability well above Labour's current vote.
- The Labour narratives that promise notable change get well over 50 percent saying, they make them feel more warmly about Labour, sometimes 30 percent very warm. It also includes a narrative where Labour is addressing the crisis of boats and asylum hotels and winning support.
- Labour has the potential to gain more support when they respond to the affordability crisis, actions by President Trump and spiking energy bills and climate crisis.
- The "very cool" feelings about Donald Trump have surged to over 75 percent. That makes the being honest with Donald Trump the strongest Labour message.
- The surging in worry about the cost of living has elevated Labour's messages that make Britain fairer, ambitiously reduce child poverty and work to rejoin Europe.
- The spike in fossil fuel prices and Trump battling for oil and gas has disrupted the emerging worries about the affordability of the climate transition. Support for the government working to prevent climate change has rebounded, as well as support for low carbon industries. Net zero is very important to all progressive voters.
- The spike in energy prices has polarised the country on the choice of exploiting North Sea oil, but an intense plurality says do not go back to being dependent on high priced oil and gas. The climate narrative centered on that choice and promises a Britain will be a clean energy superpower is one of the strongest messages now.

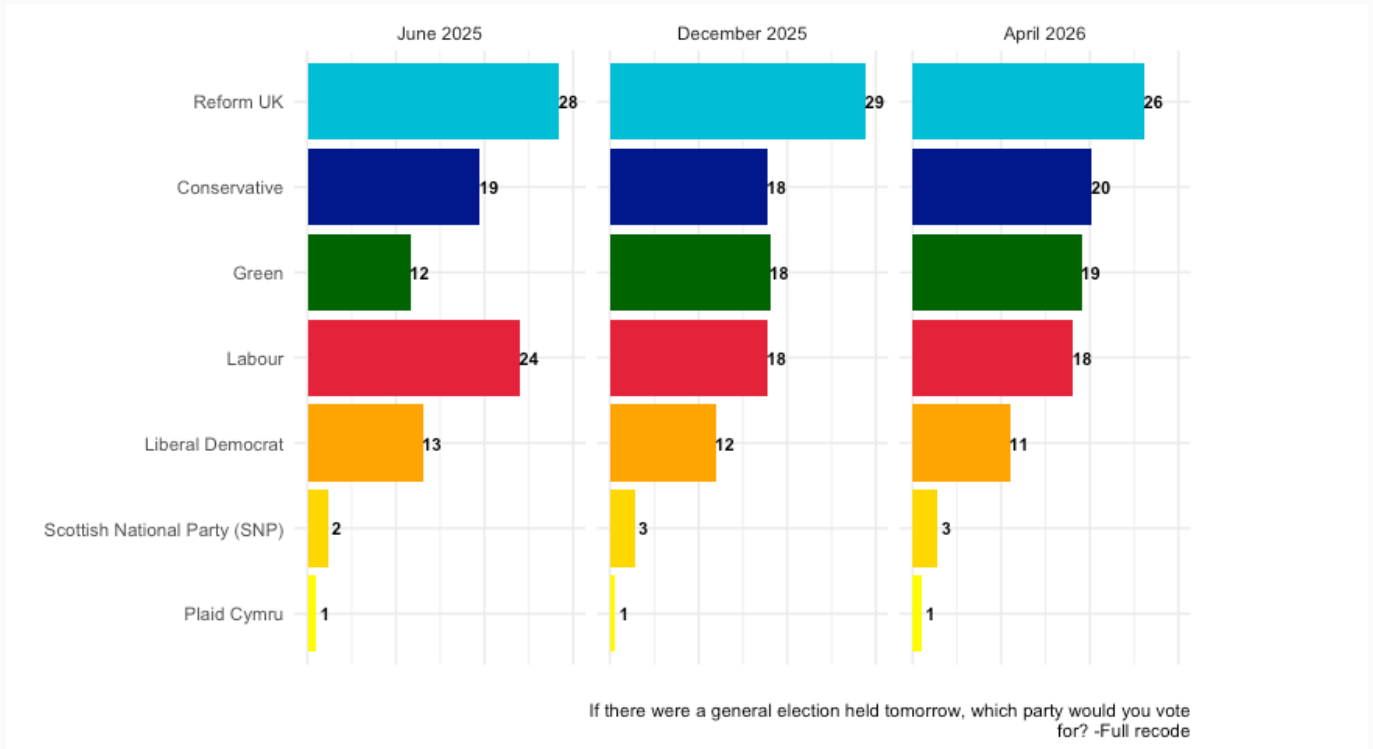
Stanley Greenberg

Principal
Greenberg Research
Democracy Corps
Climate Policy & Strategy

Government Standing

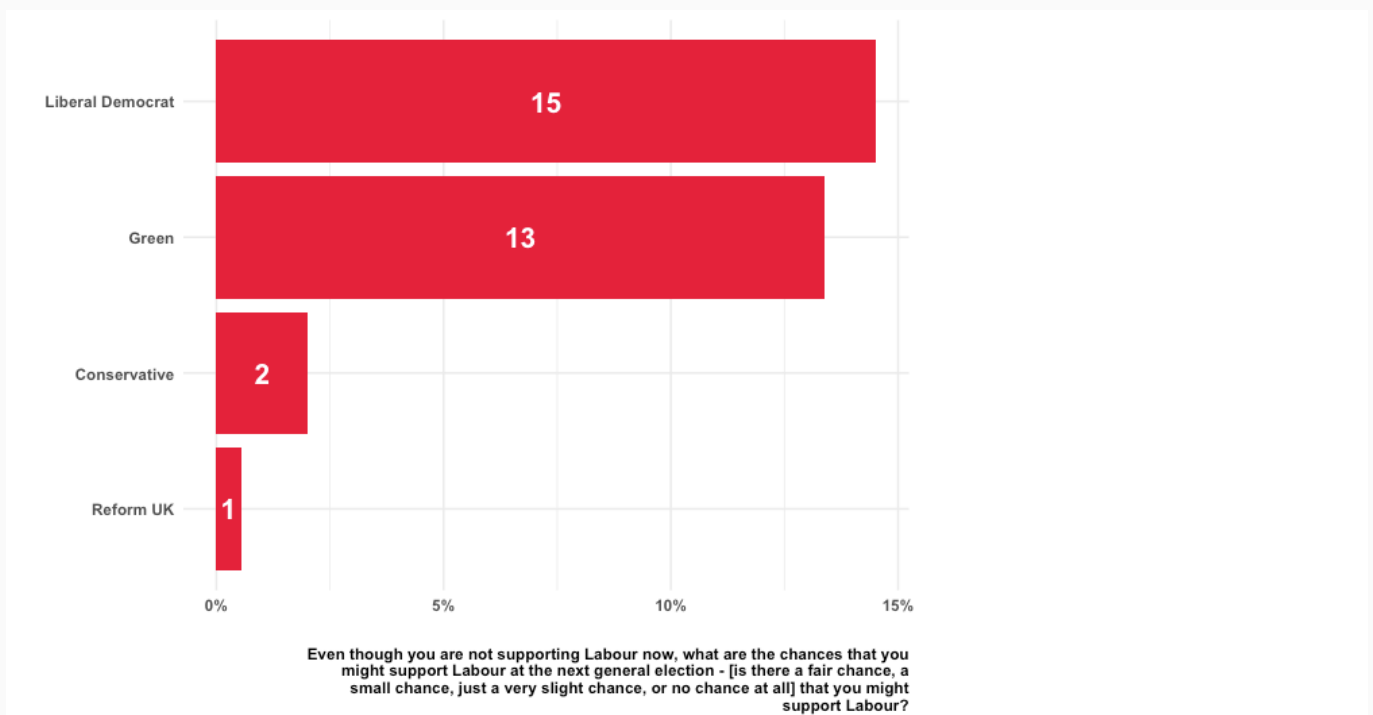
Labour vote now stable at 18 percent, though Green vote moves it ahead with likely voters

Reform vote slips



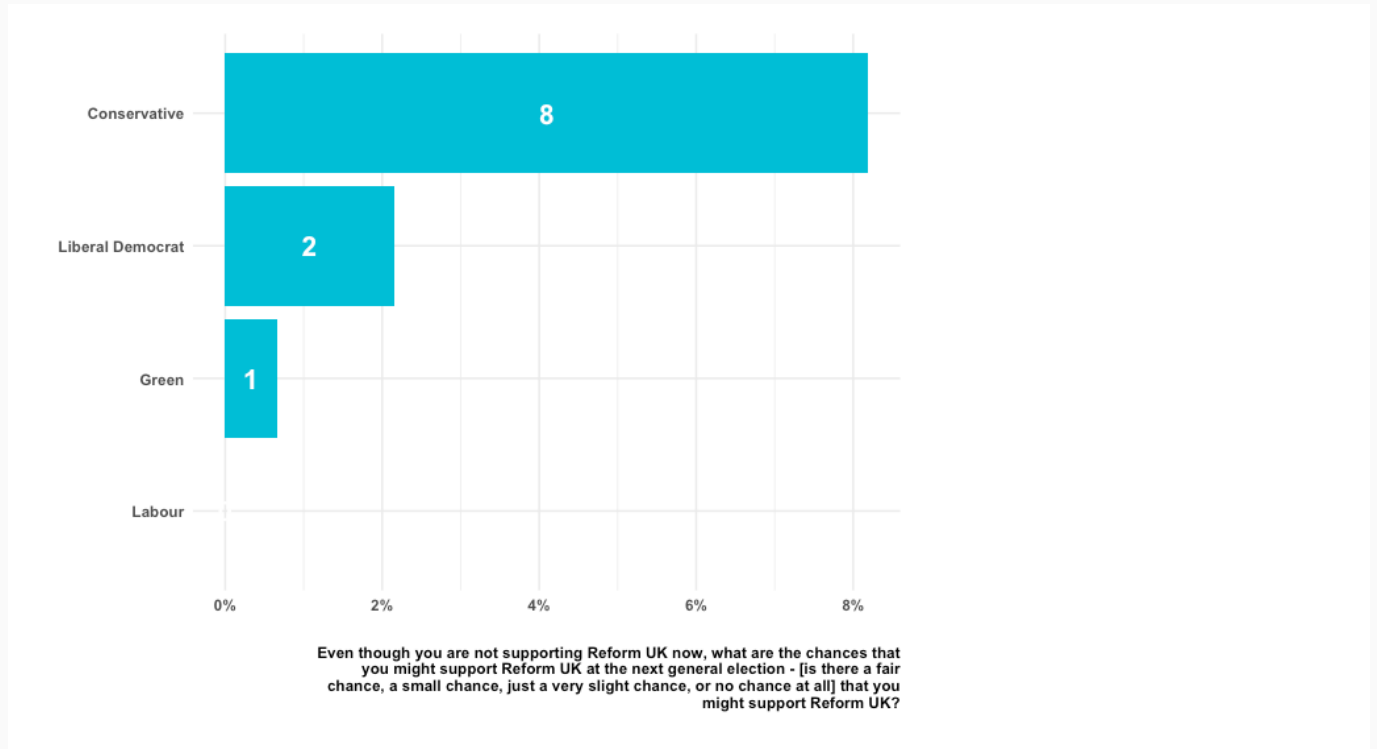
About 13 to 15 percent of progressive bloc open to Labour, only 2 percent of Reform Voters

Lib Dem voters more likely to consider voting for Labour than Greens



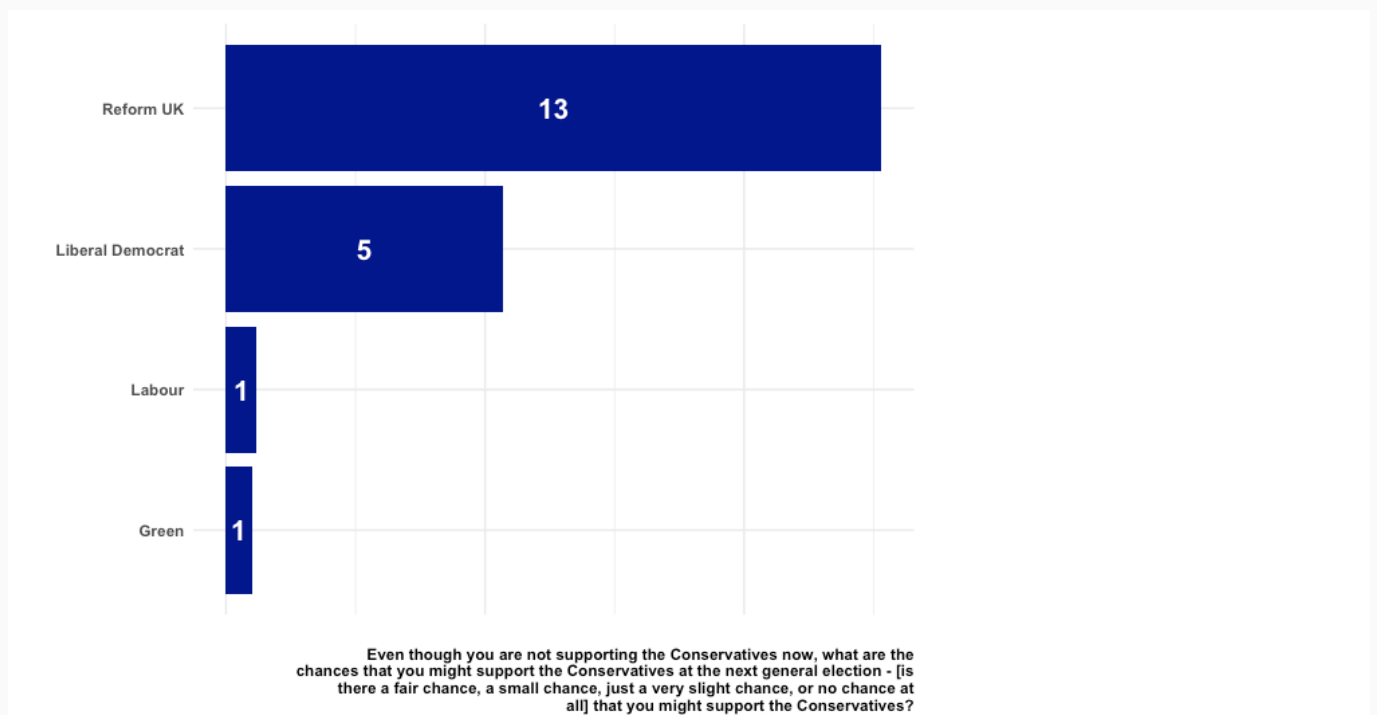
8 percent of Conservative voters are open to supporting Reform UK

Negligible left party supporters open to Reform UK



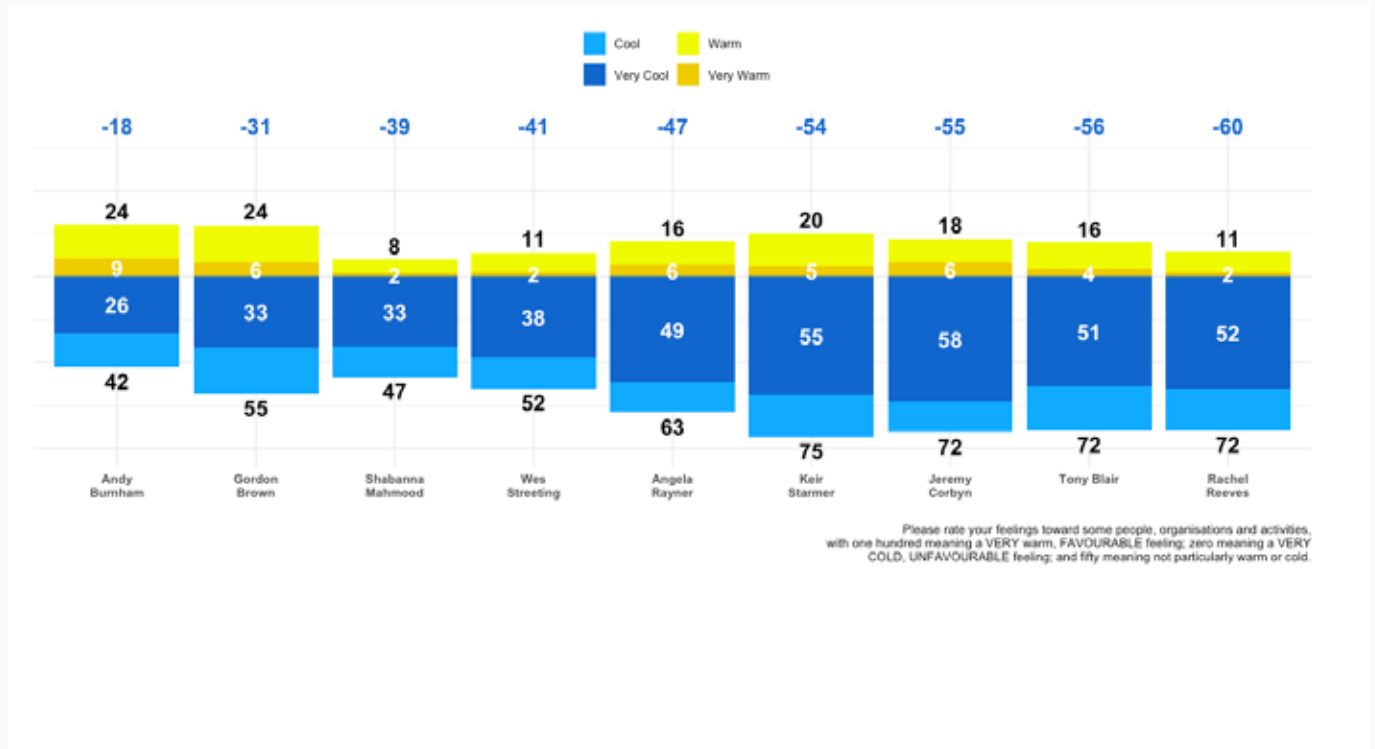
More Reform voters now open to voting conservative

Some Liberal Democrats open to the Conservatives



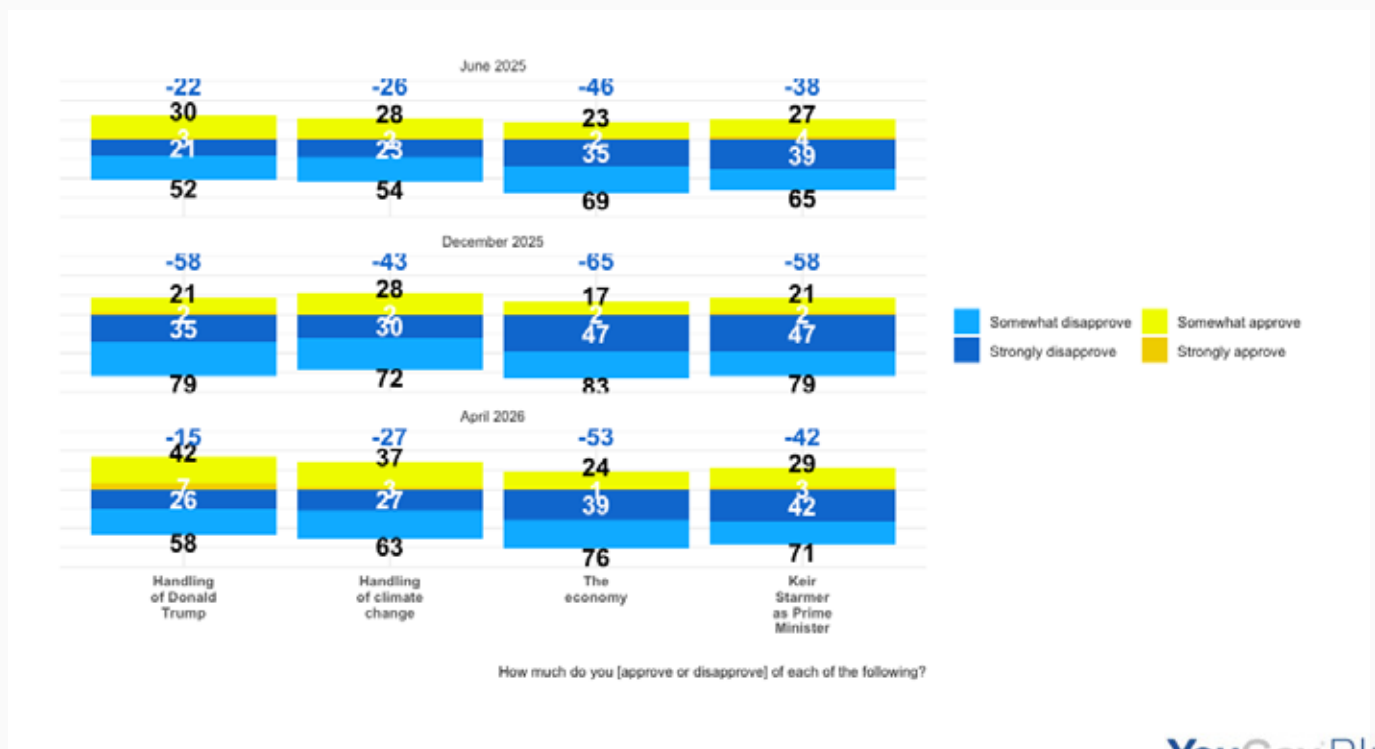
The popularity of Labour leaders

Andy Burnham viewed warmly by a quarter. Starmer viewed coolly by three quarters.



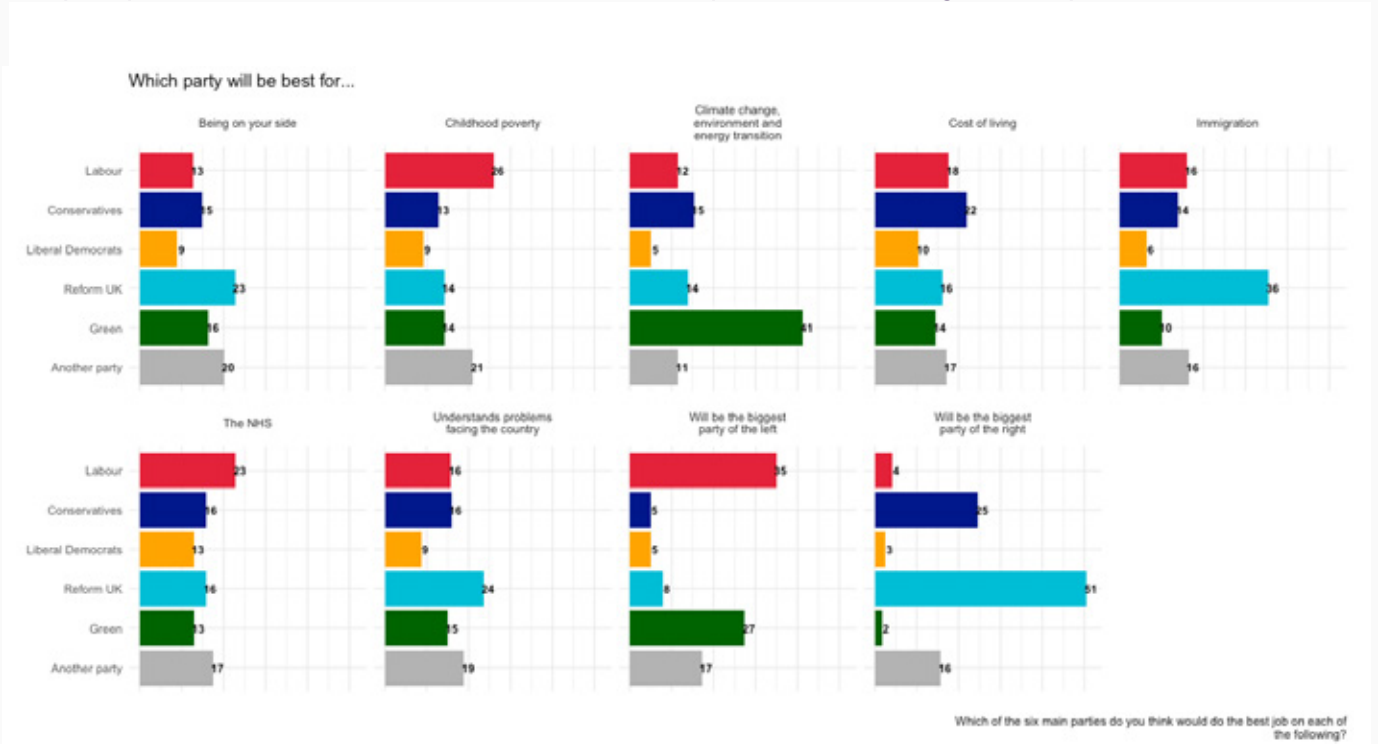
Starmer job approval led by handling of Donald Trump and climate change

Three-quarters still disapprove on handling economy.



Labour regains its lead on handling child poverty and NHS, and 35 percent think Labour will be biggest party of the left

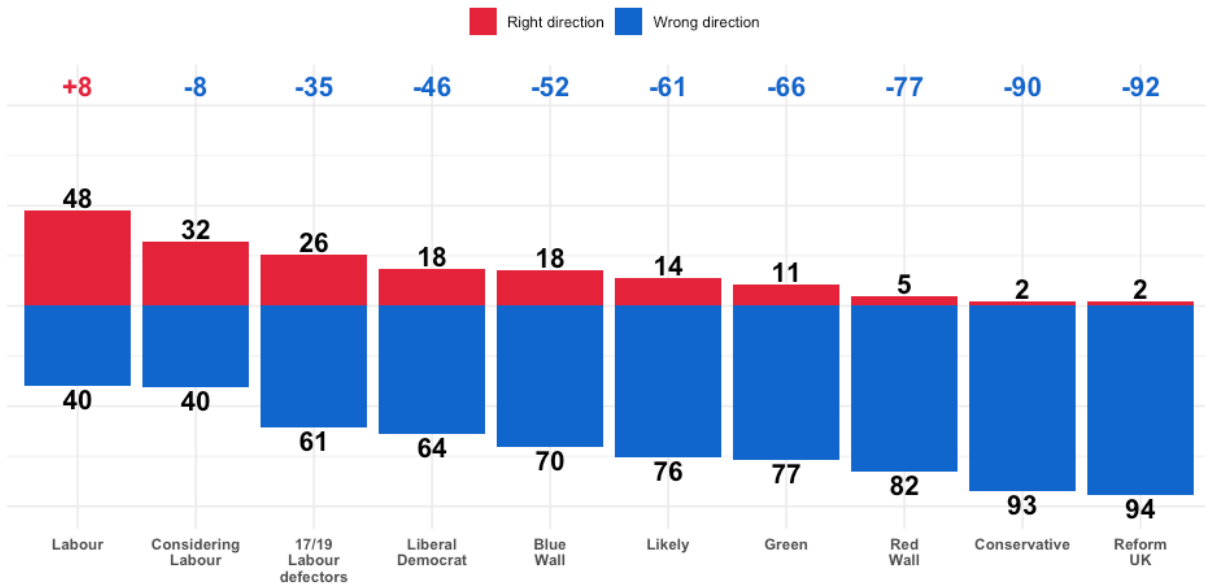
Only 16 percent think Labour understands the problems facing country



Country Mood

Wrong track at 76 percent with likely voters

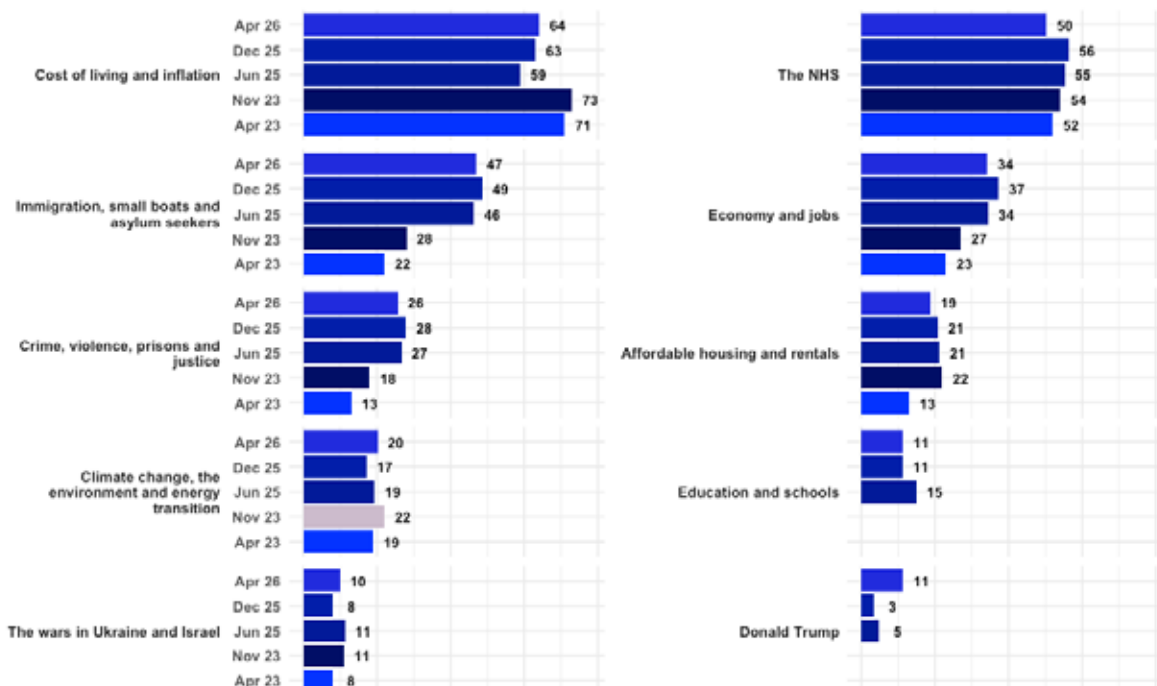
Labour voters divided on direction of country



Generally speaking, do you think that things in this country are [going in the right direction, or do you feel things have gotten pretty seriously off on the wrong track]?

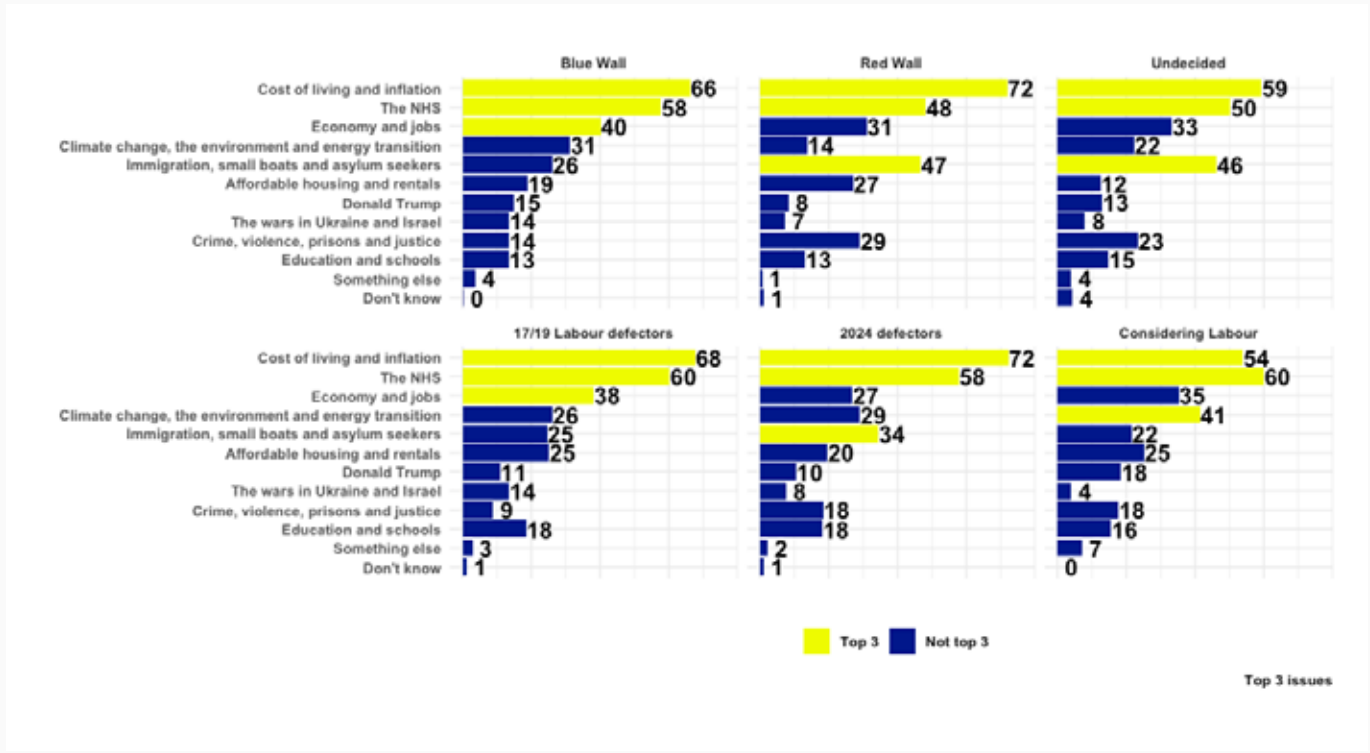
Cost of living, Trump, and climate show increased concern

Concern with NHS drops



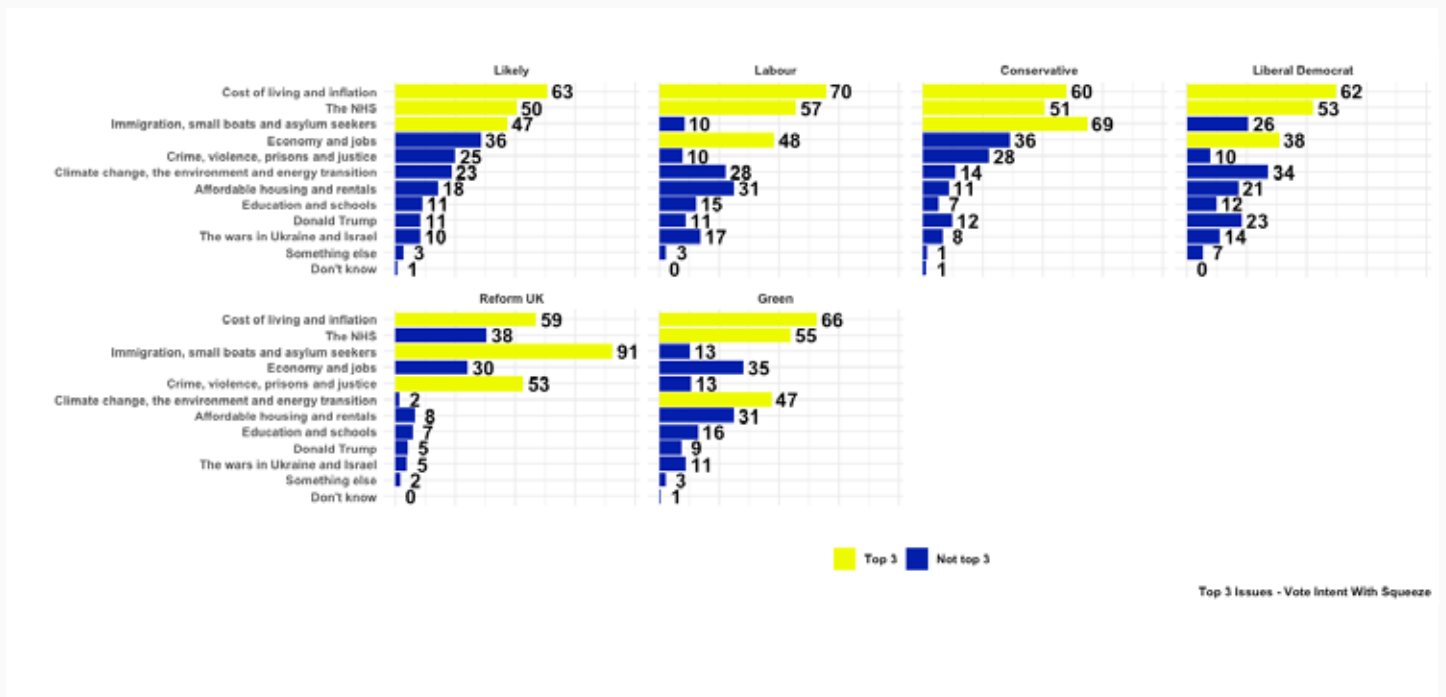
Cost of living surges to top concern in most groups

NHS is still top concern for those considering voting for Labour



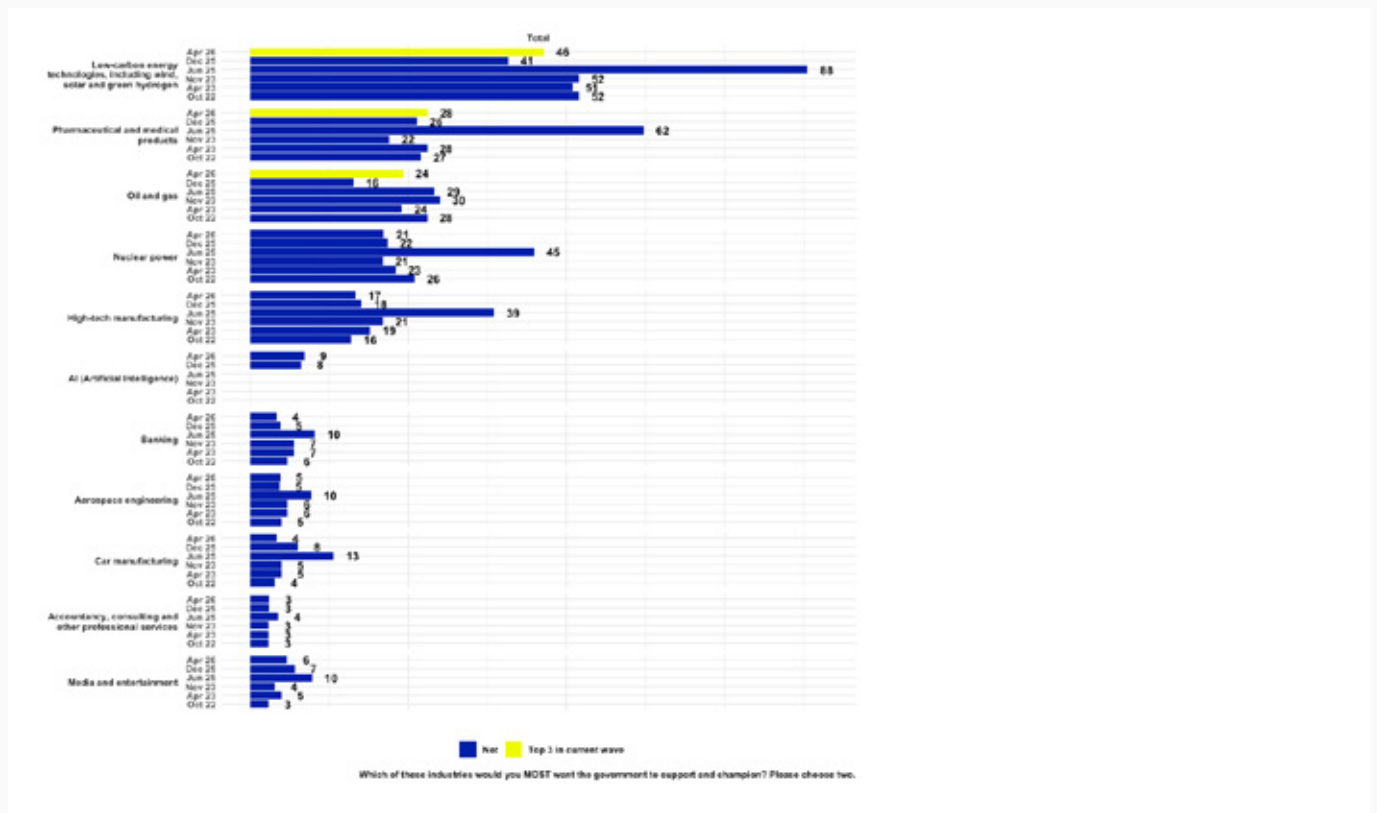
Cost of living and NHS top issues for potential voters. Climate important for Green.

Reform voters focused on immigration and cost of living



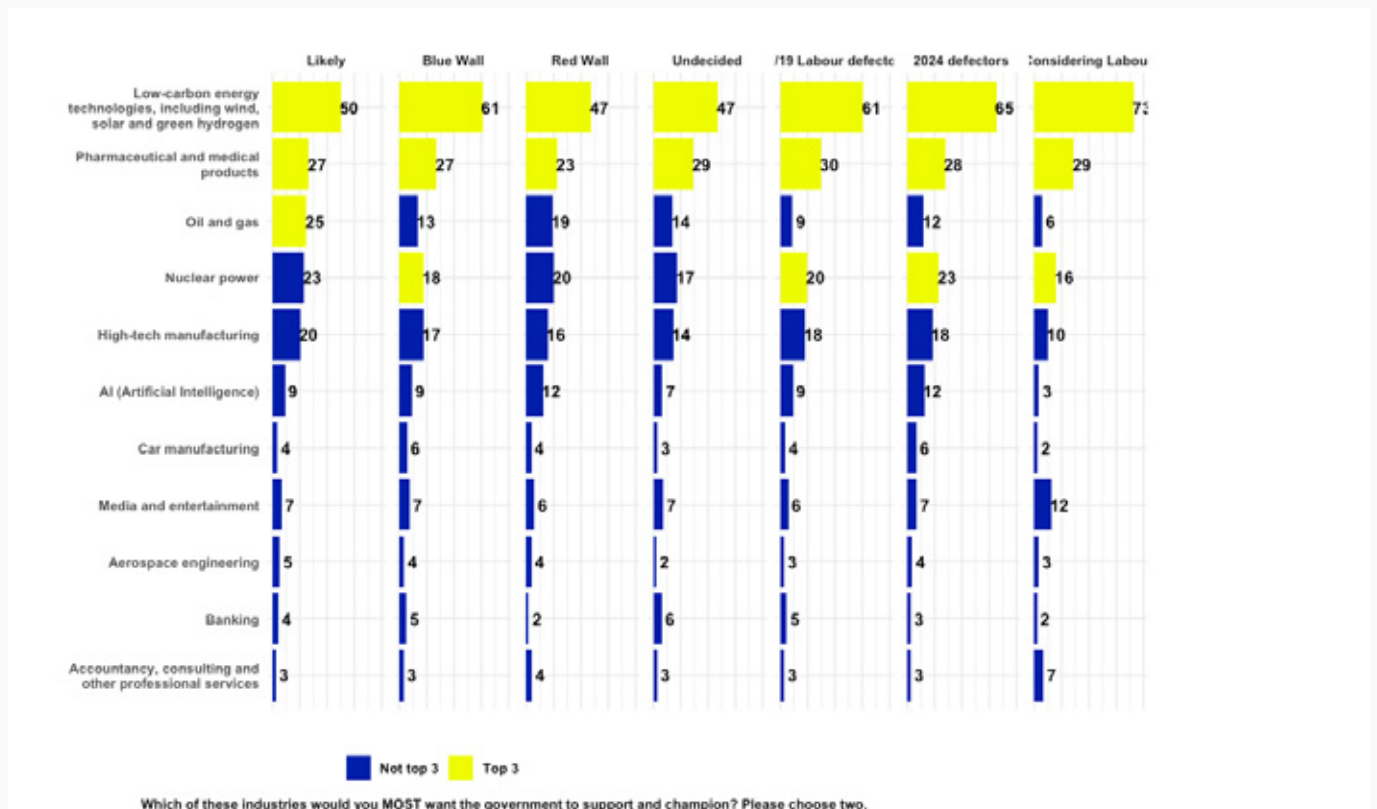
Supporting low carbon sectors moves up as top priority

Pharmaceuticals and oil and gas grow in importance



Low carbon sector strong priority for all Labour targets

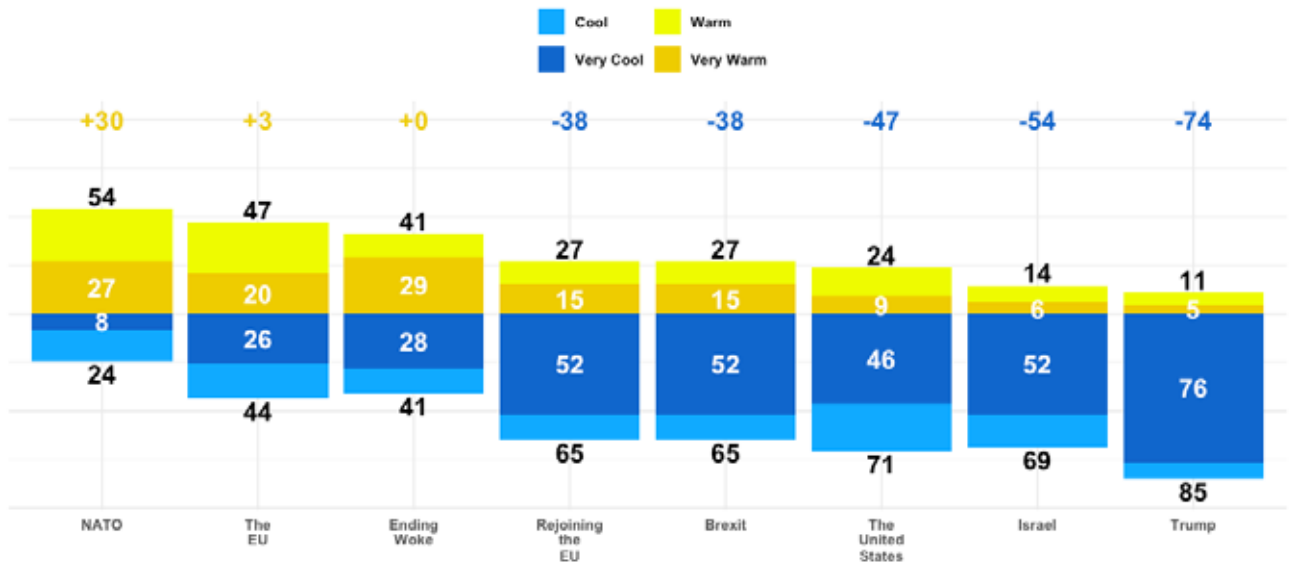
Pharmaceuticals also important



Social Dynamics

Cold attitude towards Israel, the United States, and Trump intensifies

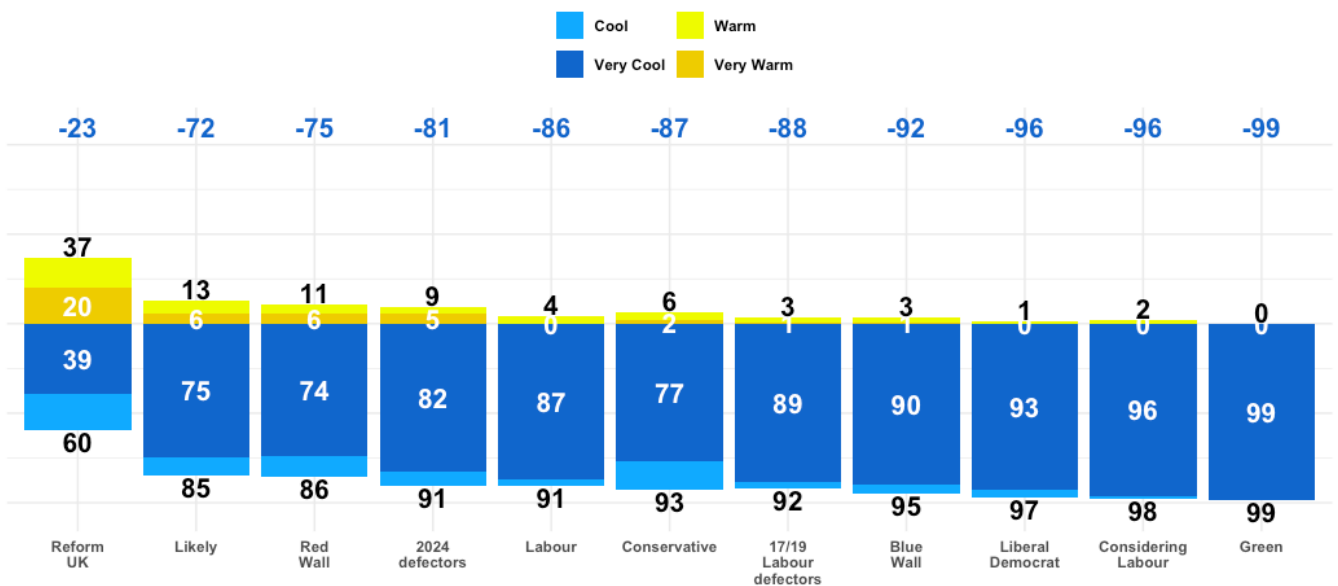
NATO, the EU and rejoining the EU see small increase in warm attitudes.



Please rate your feelings toward some people, organisations and activities, with one hundred meaning a VERY WARM, FAVORABLE feeling; zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE feeling; and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold.

Donald Trump is viewed negatively across the UK political spectrum

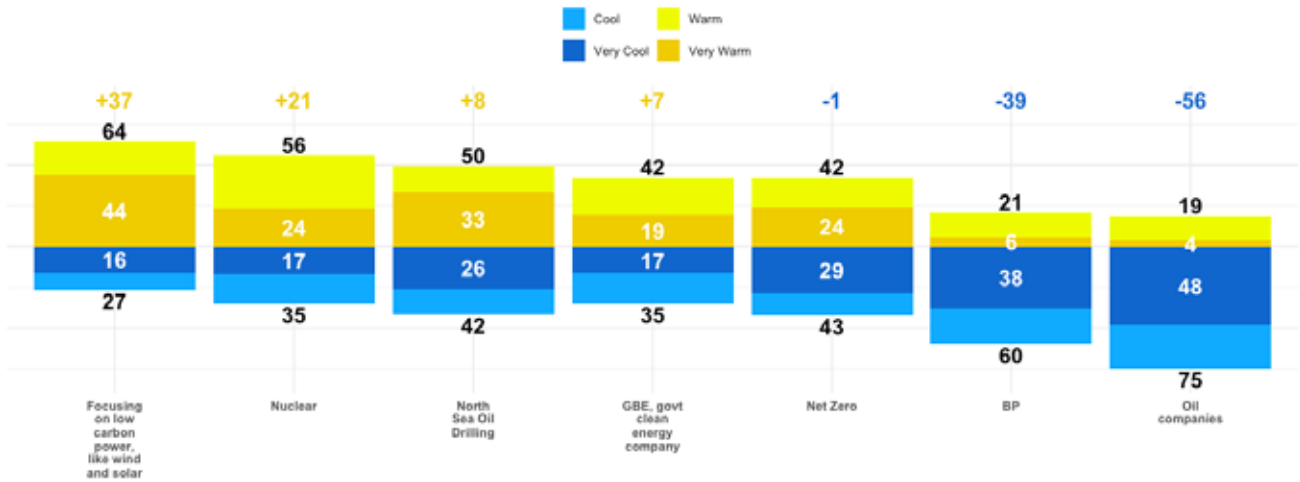
Aside from a chunk of Reform UK supporters, few UK adults approve of Trump



Please rate your feelings toward some people, organisations and activities, with one hundred meaning a VERY WARM, FAVORABLE feeling; zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE feeling; and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold.

Focusing on low carbon energy now intensely important, followed by nuclear. Oil companies at new low

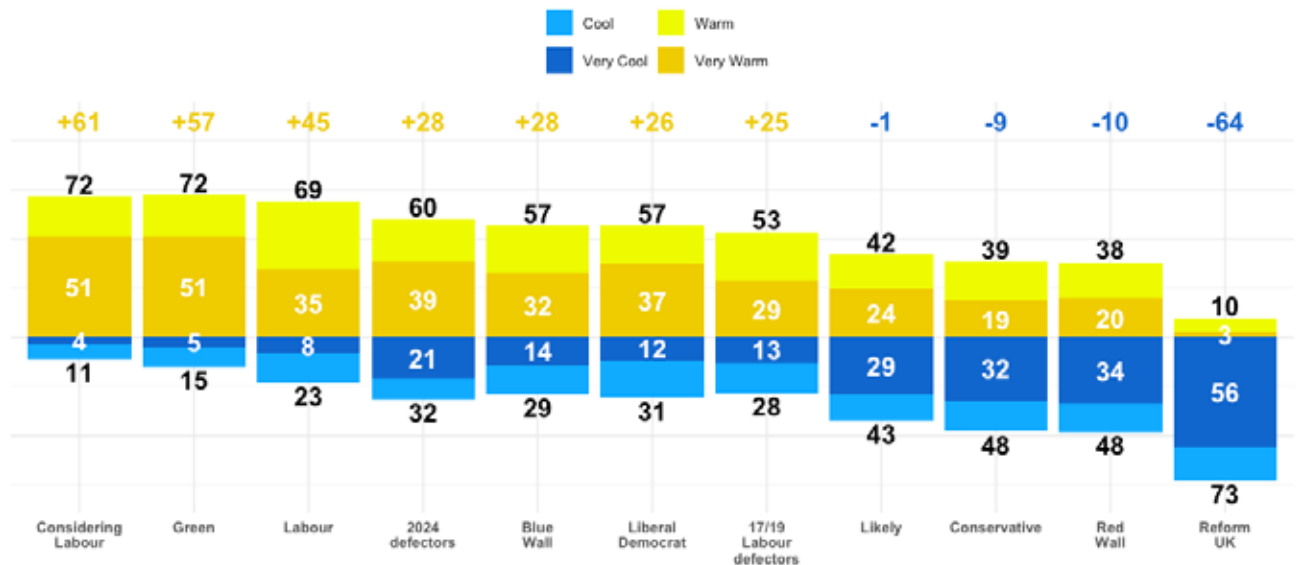
Country continues to narrowly break against net zero



Please rate your feelings toward some people, organisations and activities, with one hundred meaning a VERY warm, FAVOURABLE feeling; zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVOURABLE feeling; and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold.

While Net Zero contested, it is very important to all progressive parties, defectors and those considering Labour

Likely voters overall narrowly against of Net Zero

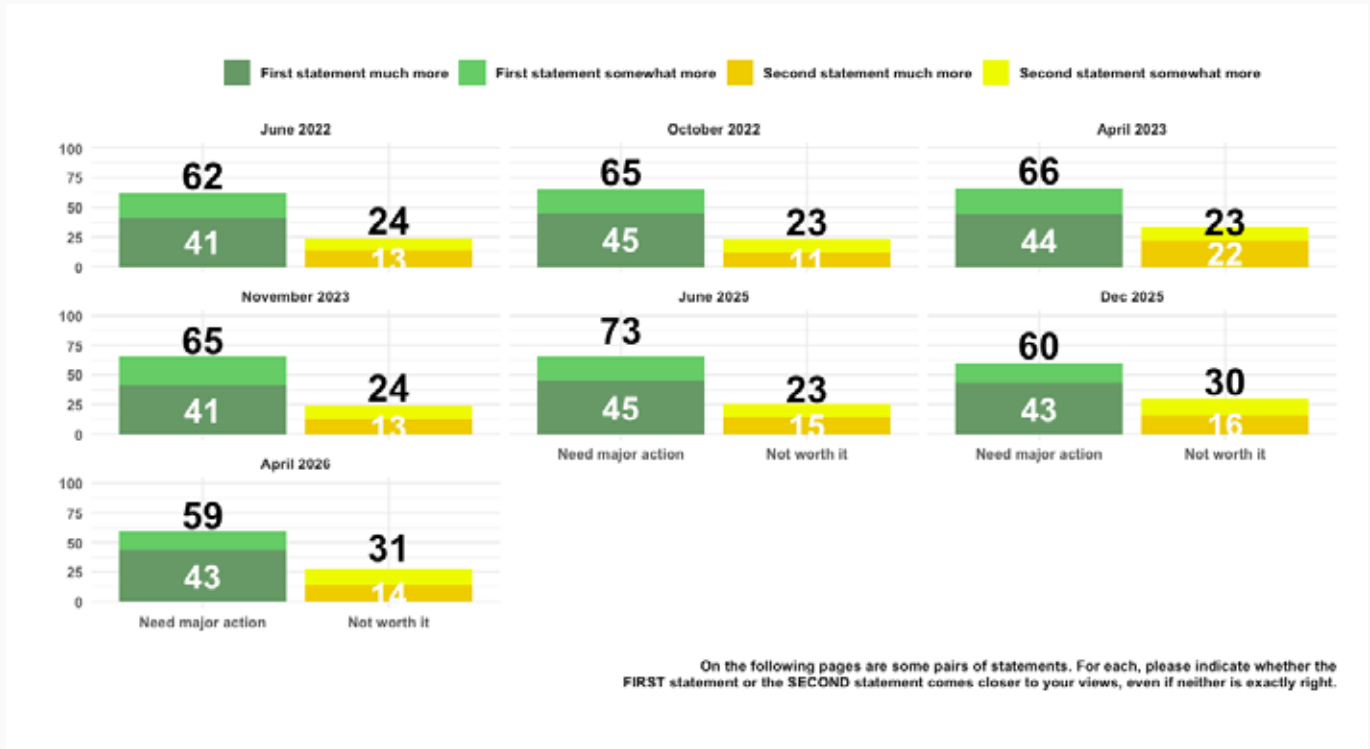


Please rate your feelings toward some people, organisations and activities, with one hundred meaning a VERY WARM, FAVORABLE feeling; zero meaning a VERY COLD, UNFAVORABLE feeling; and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold.

Climate Change

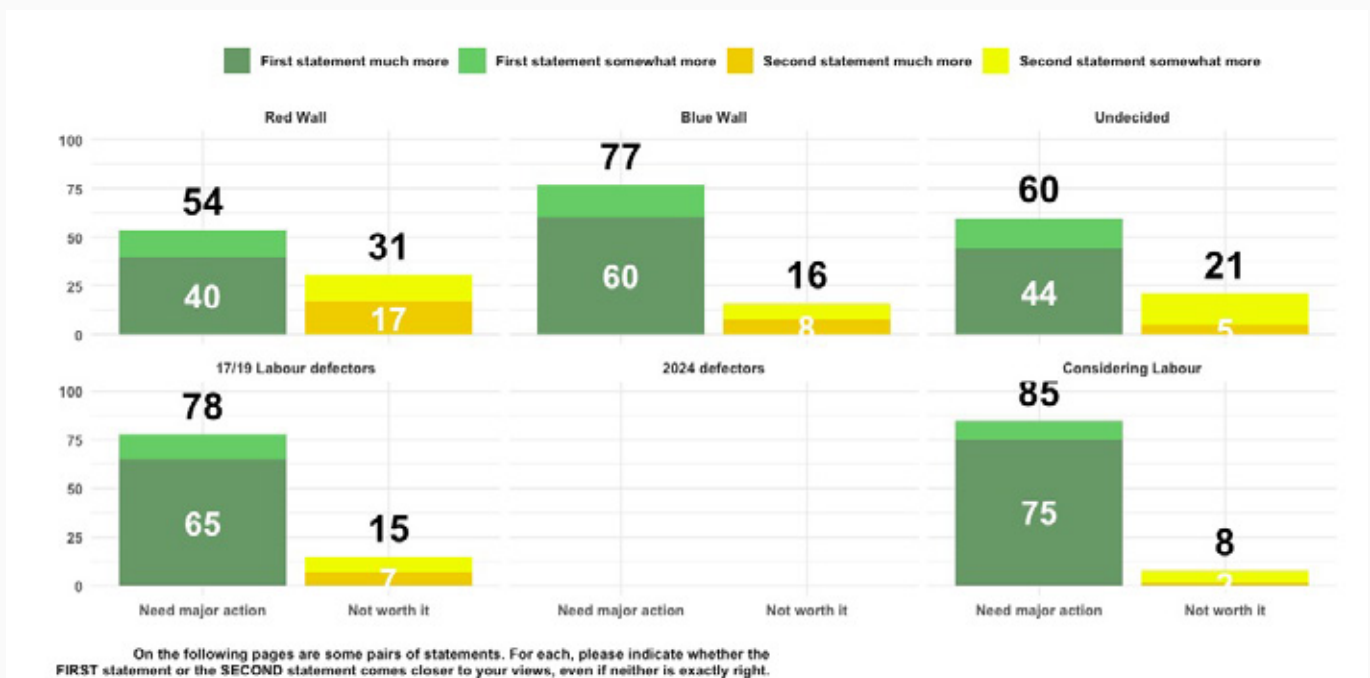
UK adults clear that tackling climate change is “worth it”, with twice as many saying major action needed

1) Climate change is a threat and we need major action to combat it. 2) The threat of climate change is exaggerated and the high cost of fixing it may not be worth it.



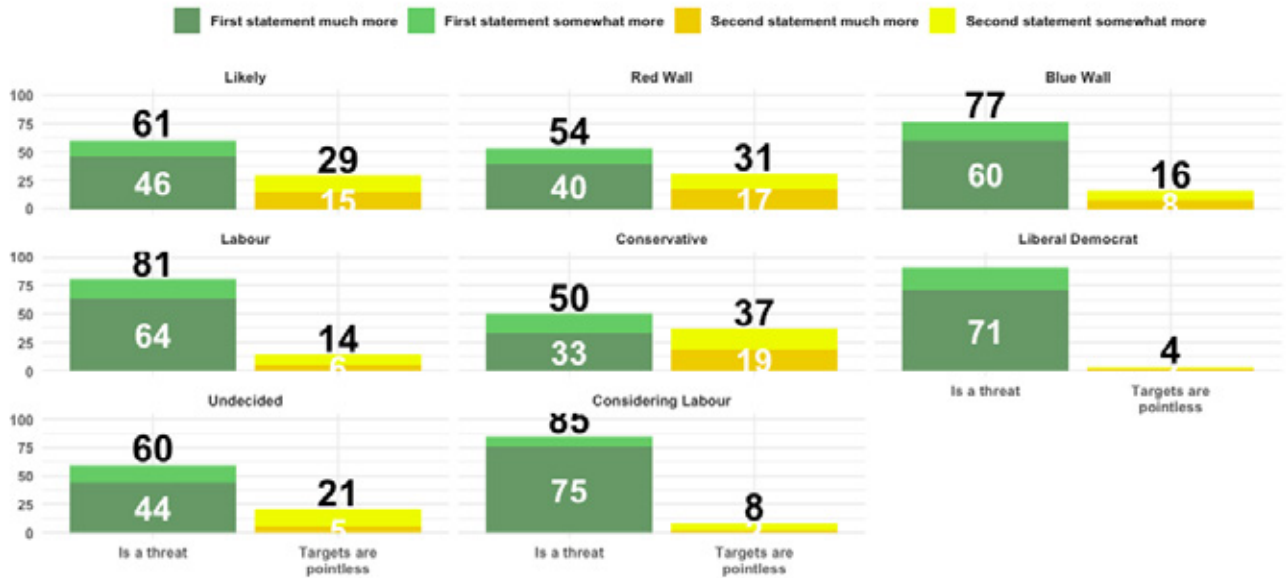
Blue Wall voters much more likely than Red Wall to drive support for climate action, but both share the sentiment.

1) Climate change is a threat and we need major action to combat it. 2) President Trump is cutting US support for policies meant to mitigate the risks of climate change and will accelerate production of oil and gas. Maintaining our climate targets is pointless.



Important to act, especially with Trump opposing, and intense support in all party targets

1) Climate change is a threat and we need major action to combat it. 2) President Trump is cutting US support for policies meant to mitigate the risks of climate change and will accelerate production of oil and gas. Maintaining our climate targets is pointless.



On the following pages are some pairs of statements. For each, please indicate whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right.

Country intensely divided on whether or not to expand North Sea oil drilling in the wake of Iran war oil Shock, with a plurality say accelerate

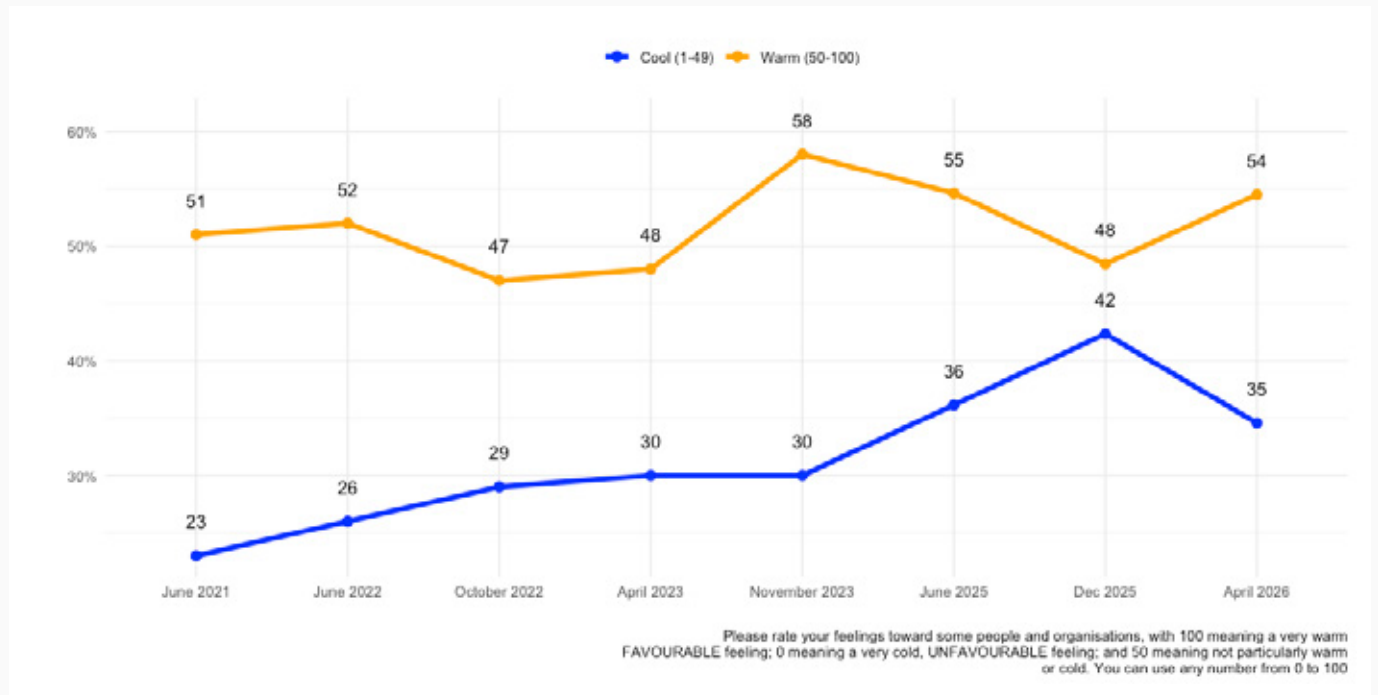
1) The spike in petrol and natural gas prices with the Iran war means Britain should accelerate its efforts to get renewable energy and not exploit new natural gas fields in the North Sea whose high price is set by international markets 2) The spike in petrol and natural gas prices with the Iran war means Britain must expand production in the North Sea to reduce imports and give us energy independence and security.



On the following pages are some pairs of statements. For each, please indicate whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right.

Support for measures to prevent climate rebounds

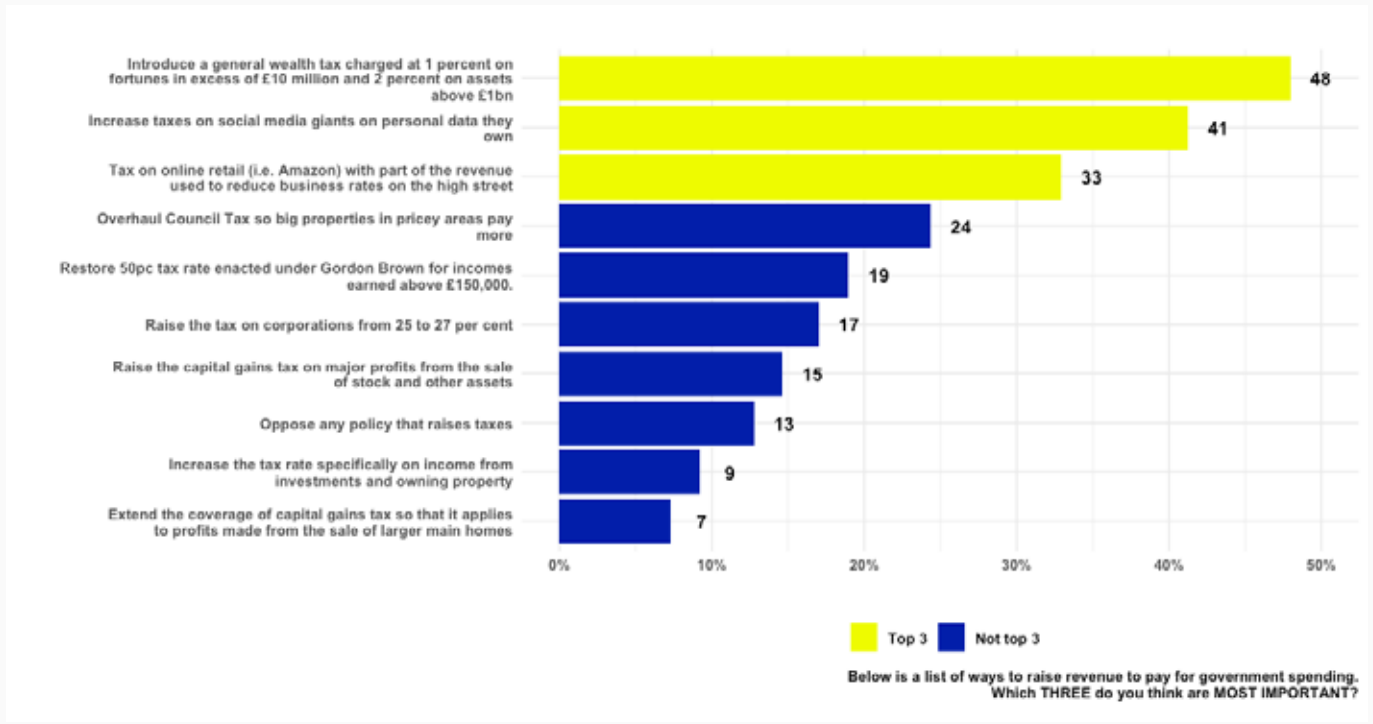
Support now in line with June 2025 levels



Raising Revenue

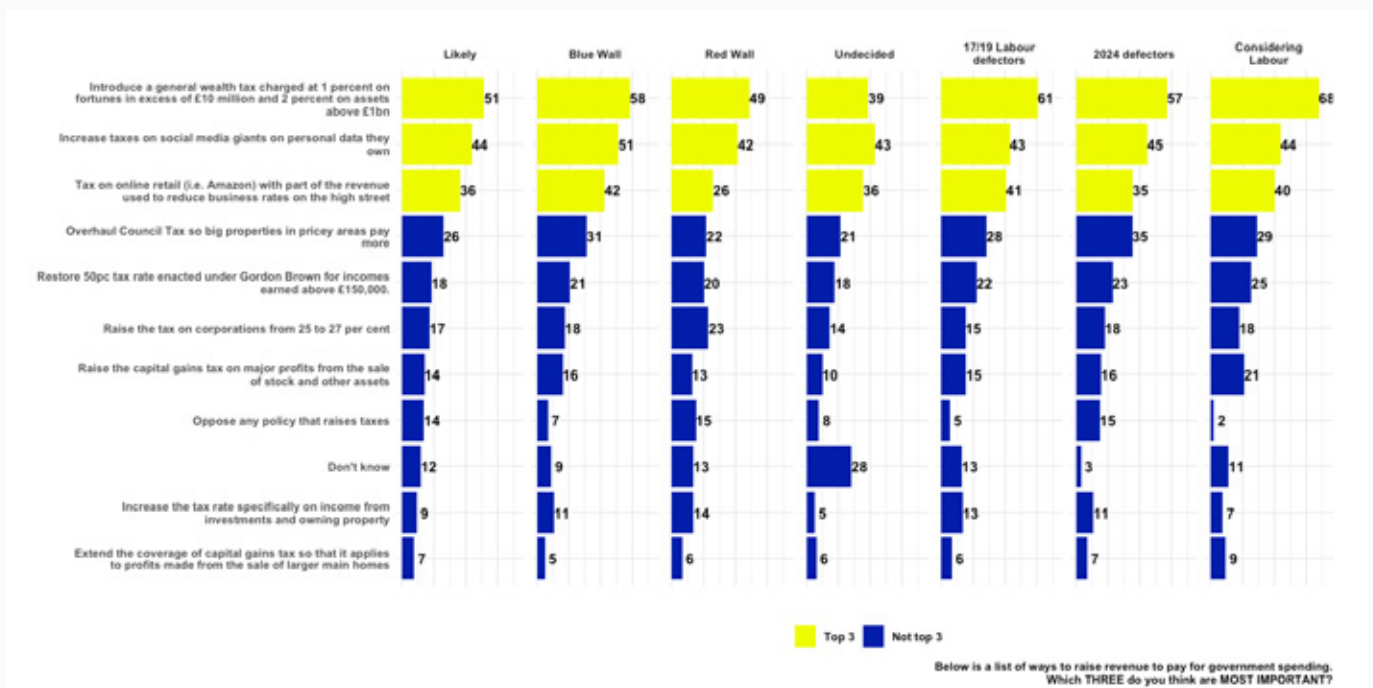
Most popular tax policy is introducing a general wealth tax on fortunes over £5 million, as well as social media giants, along with taxing Amazon to help high streets

One in five oppose any form of tax raises



Tax policy preferences generally align across key groups

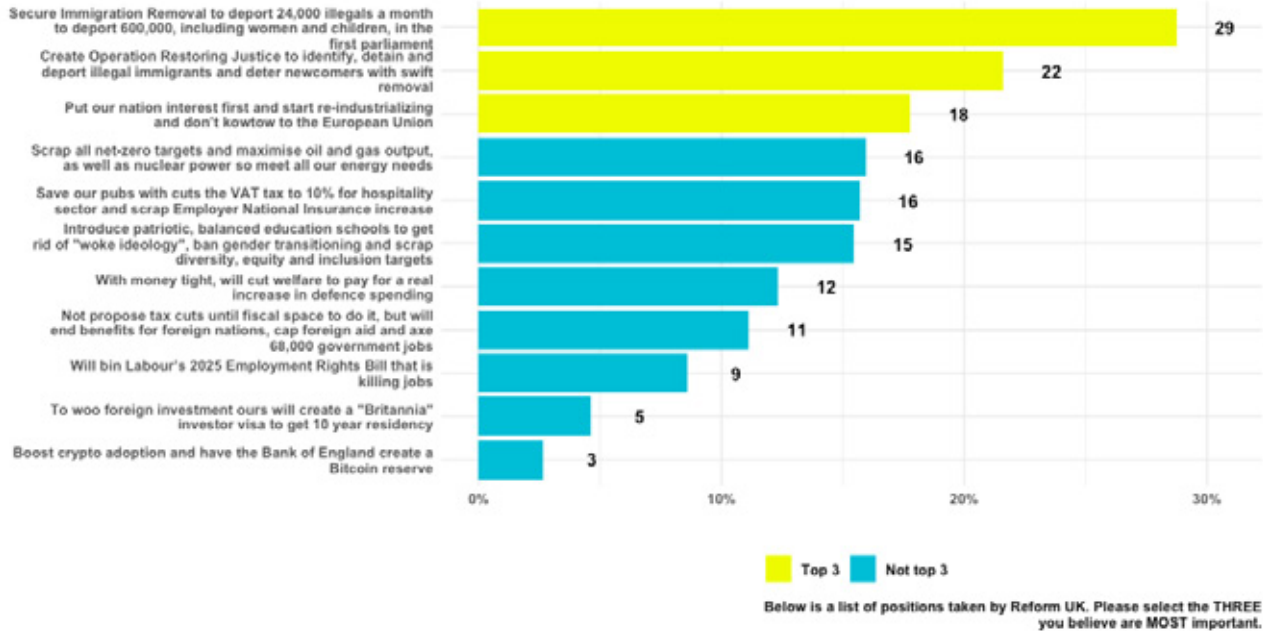
Raising taxes on Amazon to help high street also popular



Party Positions

Most important Reform policies secure large removals, including women and children, and putting nation first over EU

Scrapping net zero not a top priority



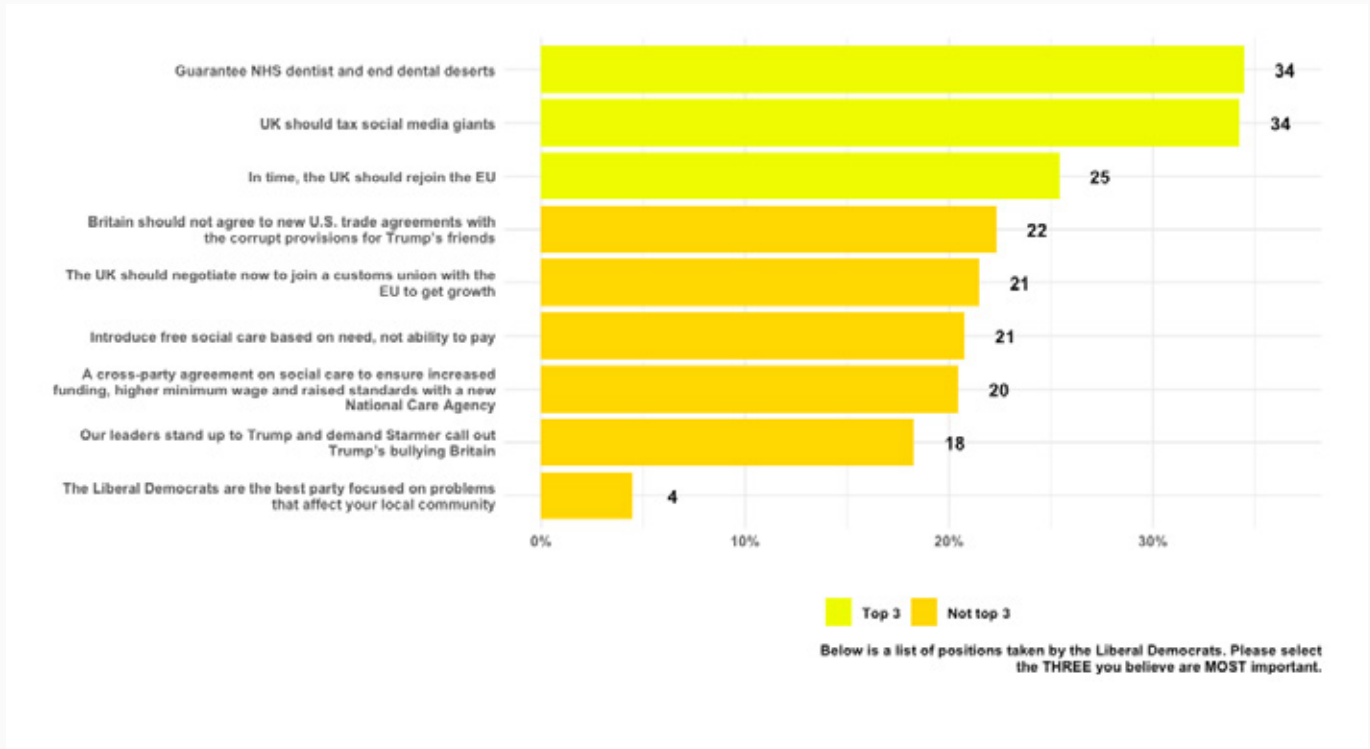
In Red Wall, top policies are deportations and a balanced education

Significant support for both deportation quotas and military operation style enforcement.



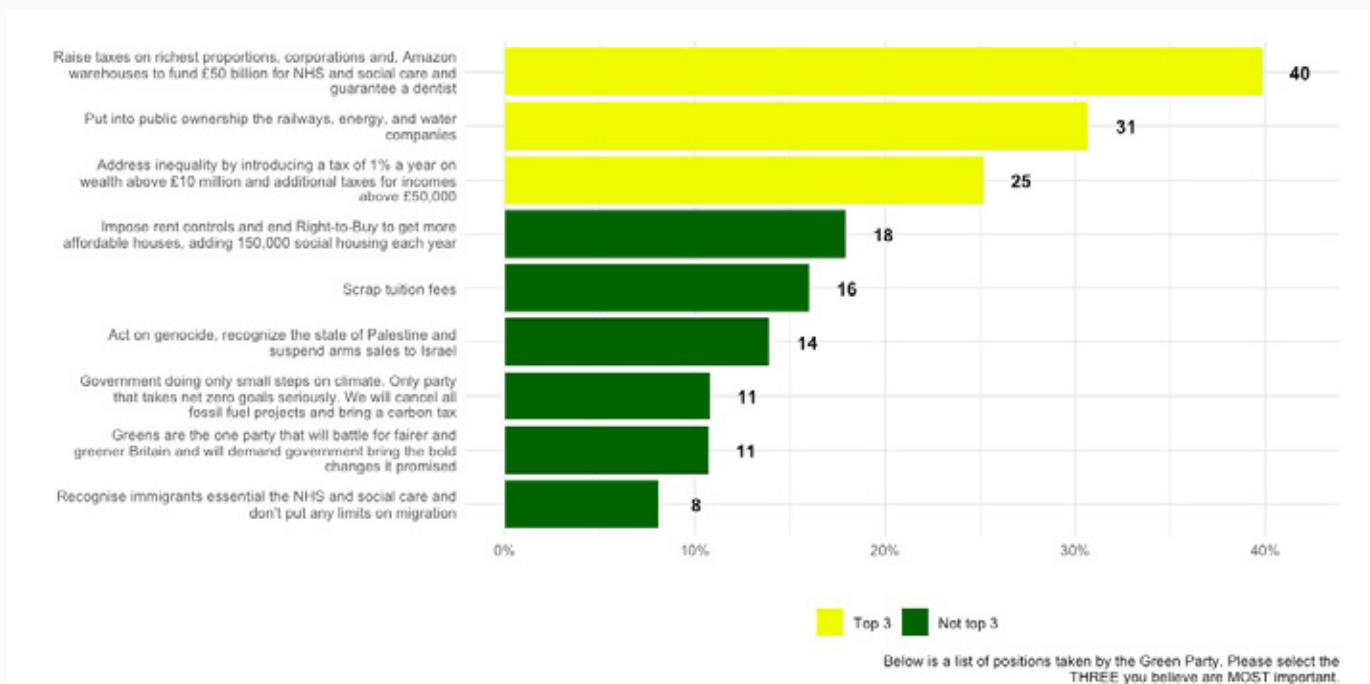
Almost 60 percent of Liberal Democrats' policies put Britain closer to Europe

Guaranteeing no dental deserts



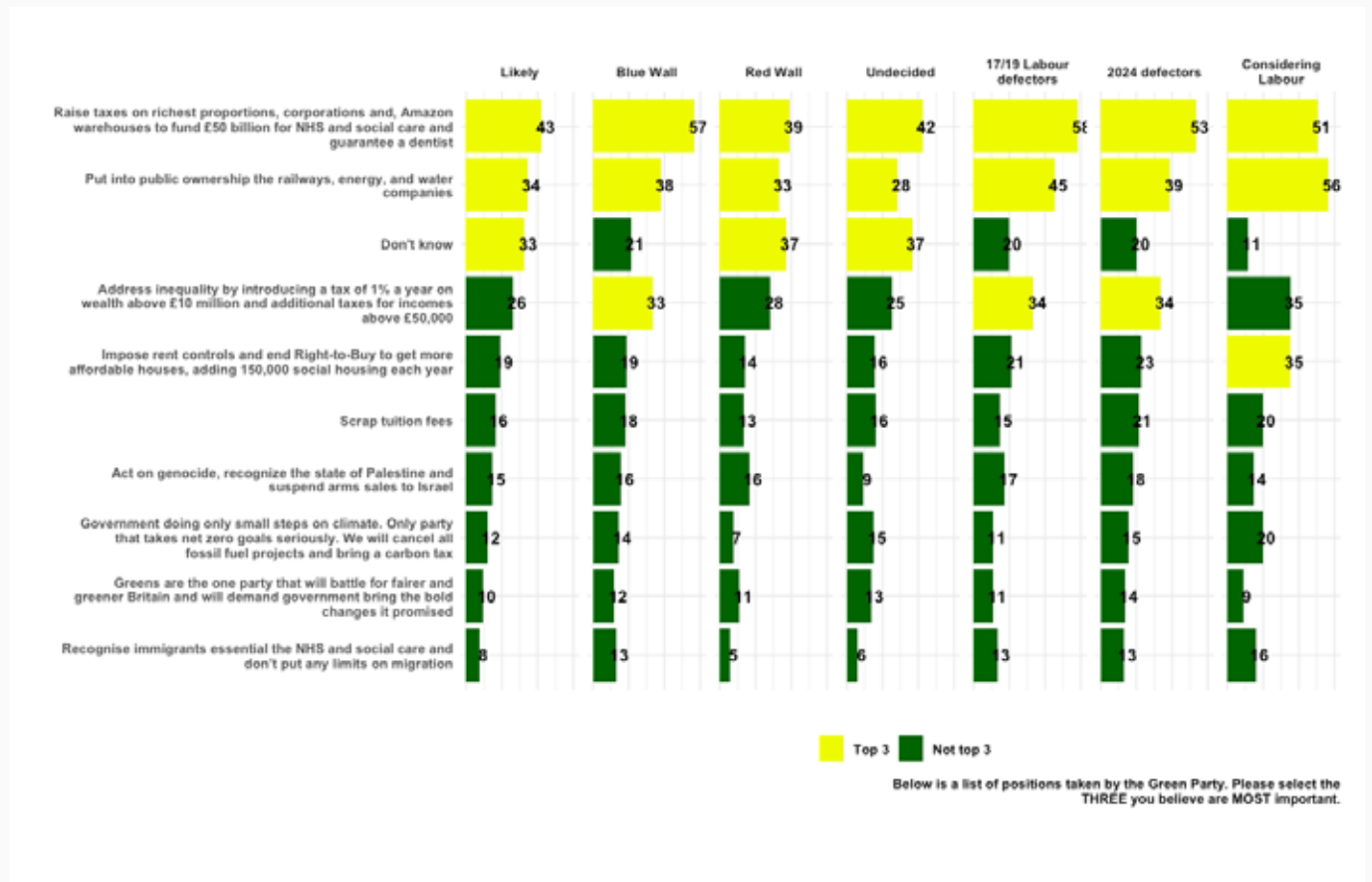
Dominant Green policies are taxing wealthy to pay for NHS, social care and guaranteed dental

Climate crisis not as central



Raising taxes to fund key government and putting more in public ownership key for targets

Wealth tax also important

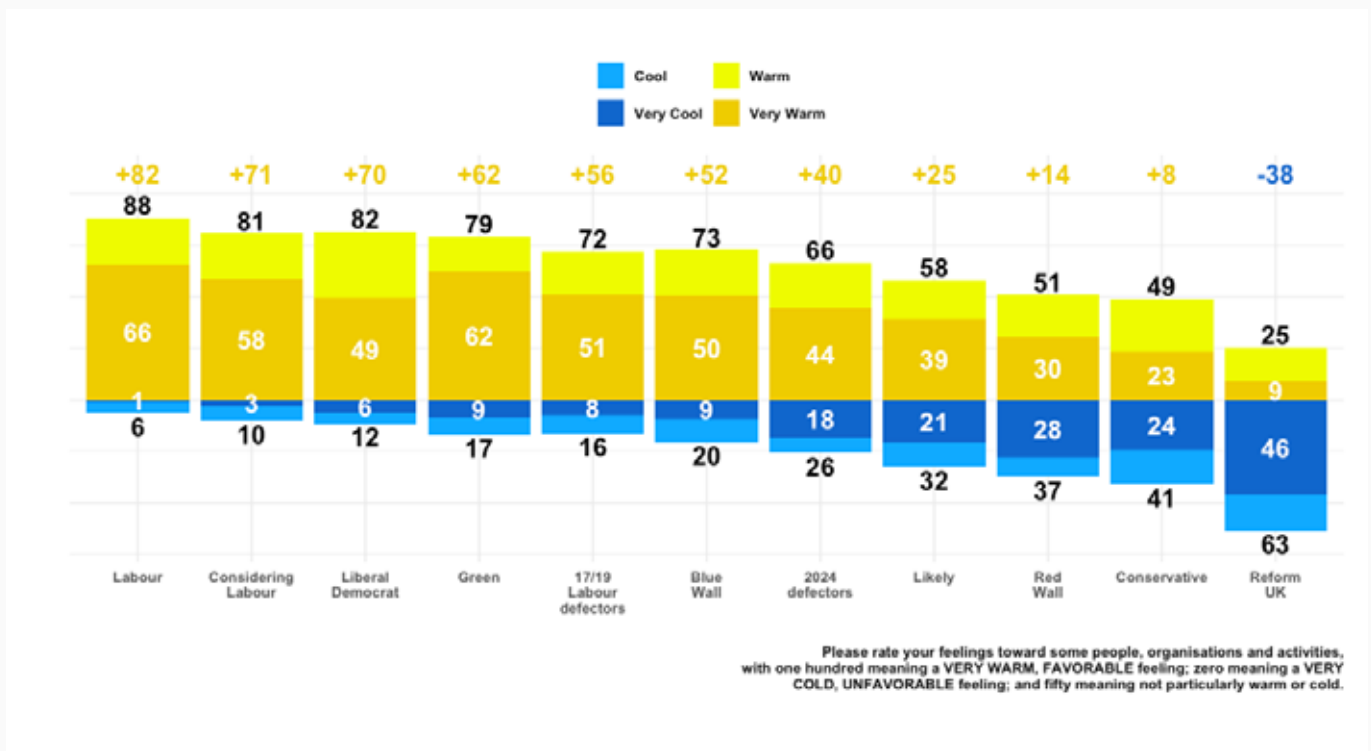


Competing Message Narratives

Progressive foreign policy message: be honest with President Trump

We must keep our long-standing ties with the United States, but Britain must be honest with Donald Trump. Our leaders must say: Vladimir Putin is a tyrant that must be opposed. We will ally with the democracies of Europe. Climate change is not a hoax. We reject the violence and divisiveness of people like Tommy Robinson, who is now hosted and funded by Trump’s MAGA groups. We oppose decisions to go to war that raise our energy prices.

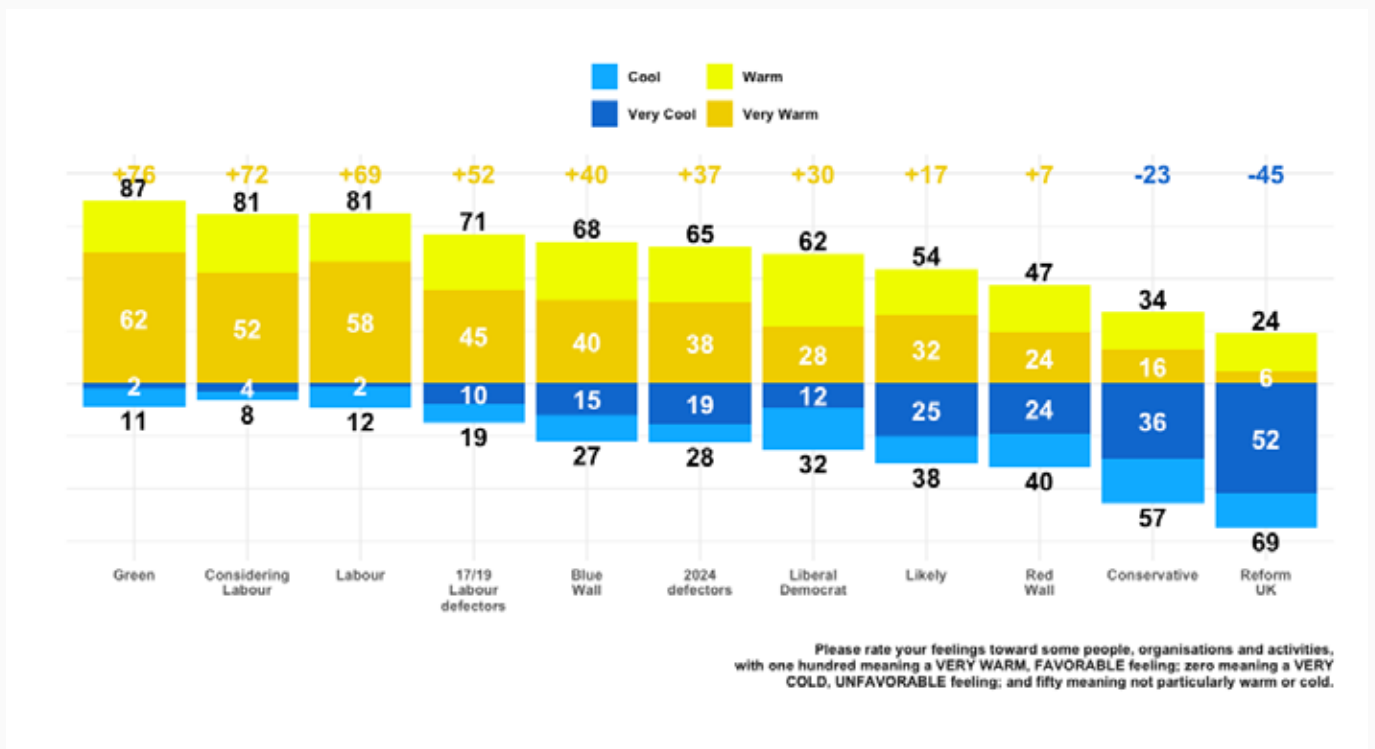
Being honest on Donald Trump produces intense positive result, including those considering Labour, Green voters and defectors



Labour message: Britain “fairer” to address cost of living

Labour must lead again on making Britain fairer to help families with the high cost of living. We will introduce a wealth tax of 1 percent on fortunes in excess of £5 million and add a fee on transactions for Amazon and social media giants. We will use it to raise tax thresholds once again with inflation and raise Child Benefit by 20% to restore its previous level under Labour. And we will cut the current 20pc rate to 10pc on incomes under £30,000. We are helping working people with the impossible cost of living.

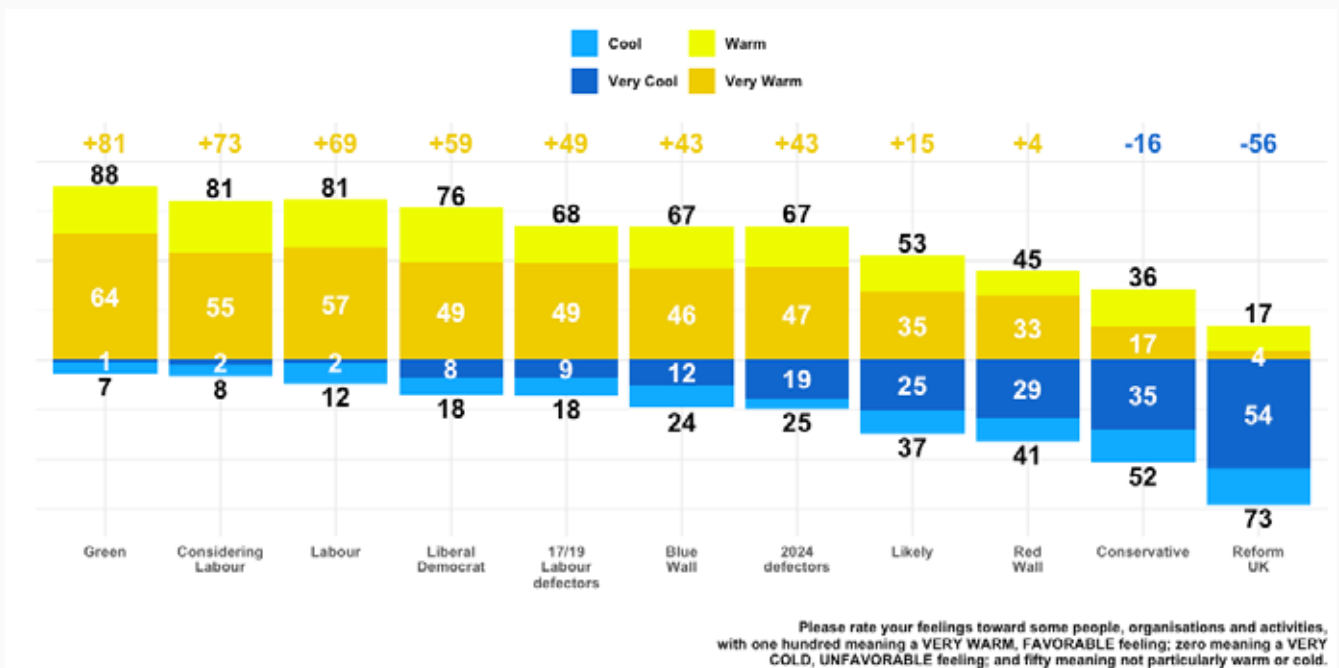
Cutting taxes on working families, raising taxes on the wealthy and tech platforms, and expanding child benefit gets 54 percent warm response; intense positive for Greens and those considering Labour



Climate message: Iran war spike means accelerate and mistake to go back to high priced fossil fuels

The Iran war and spike of petrol and diesel fuel means Britain must act to be secure and sustainable and affordable energy. That means accelerating our transition to renewable energy, efficiencies and new technology. We were right to create GB Energy, the state-owned clean power company. It is making big investments in wind power, solar, cutting-edge nuclear plants, energy infrastructure, as well as the Warm Homes Plan. It is a mistake to go back to fossil fuels whose price will jump when we have wars, like Ukraine and Iran. We are determined that Britain be a clean energy superpower.

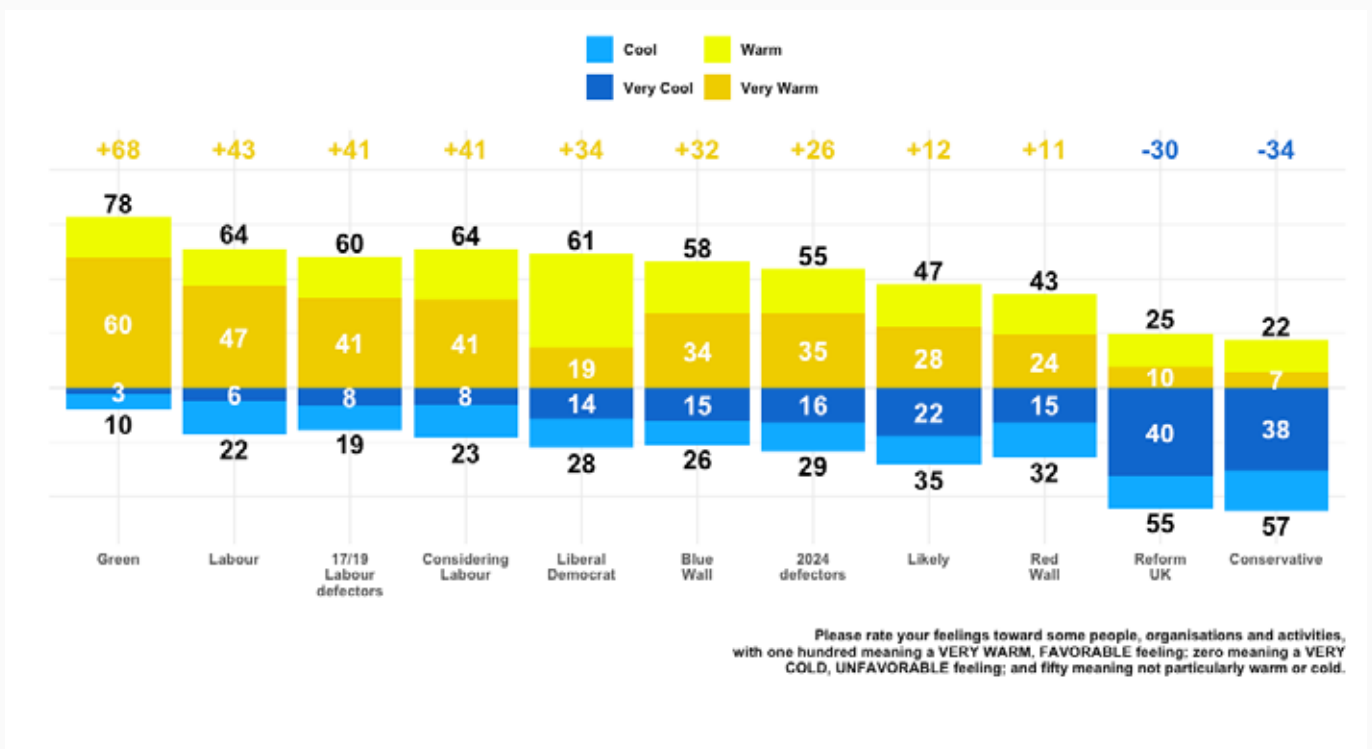
Climate message produces strong positive results with Green, Labour and Liberal Democrats and those considering Labour, while antagonizing only Reform UK



Alternative progressive message: political reforms

End Westminster’s business-as-usual and bring radical reform to deliver a Britain that works. End the current FirstPast-the-Post voting system and move to a proportional vote system that will encourage collaboration among MPs from different parties and long-term thinking. Abolish the House of Lords and create a Senate of the Nations and Regions to renew our democracy and economy. And abolish the whip system so MPs can be free to vote their own conscience and reduce power of the Whitehall bureaucracy. Cap donations to parties and bar donors from government contracts. Remove the bias against investing in the North and devolve power over skills and technical education to drive their own economic growth. Give the Regions and local government of England similar powers to Scotland and Wales. And create a culture of partnership with business to bring growth.

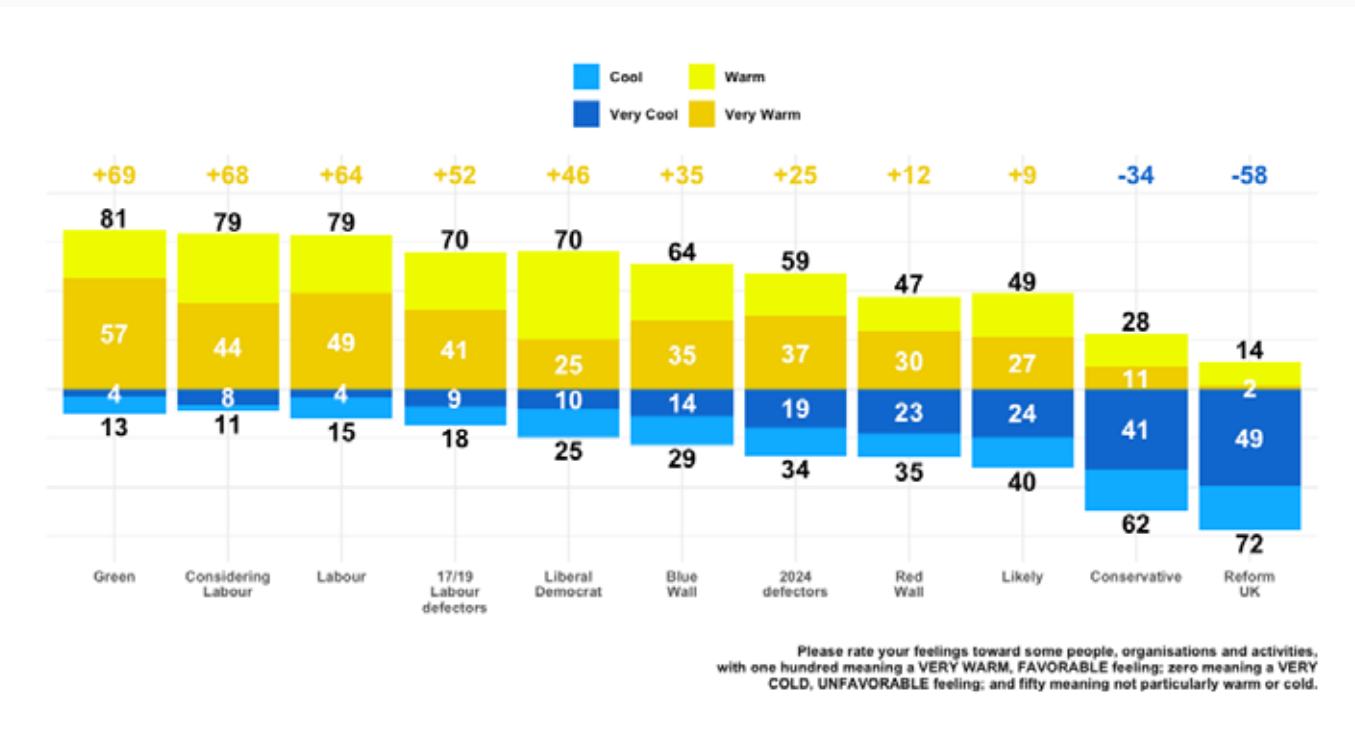
Reform message including proportional representation gets near 80 percent with Greens, over 60 percent with those considering Labour, Liberal Democrats and Blue Wall



Labour’s message: ambitious plan to tackle child poverty

The Blair–Brown governments lifted over half a million children out of poverty, but Tory austerity left 4.5 million children in poverty. Child Benefit was historically paid to all households to help with the costs of raising children, but it has since lost over 20% of its value. Some households no longer receive payments. We should restore the value of Child Benefit to its higher 2010 levels. Austerity also reduced funding for school meals. We should restore access to proper, nutritious school meals as they have in Wales and Scotland. They are part of an ambitious plan to tackle child poverty.

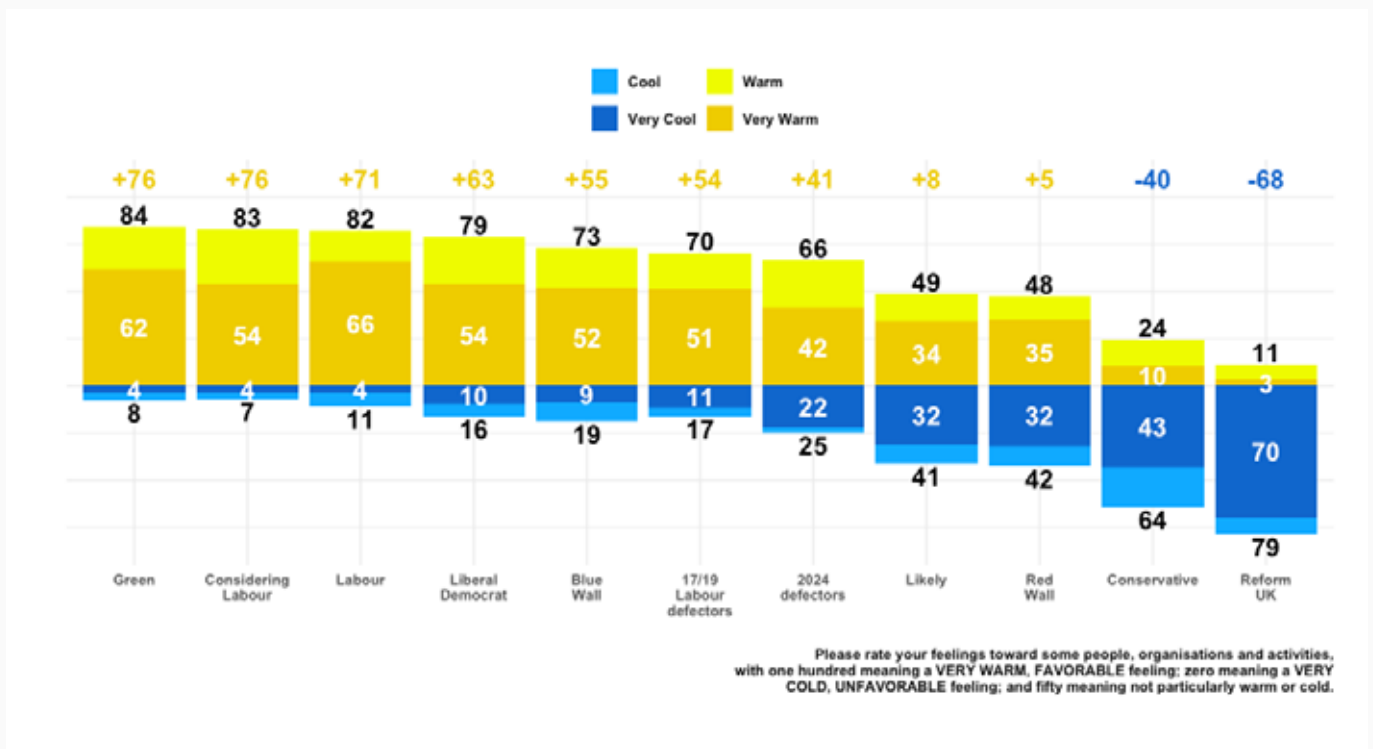
Ambitious plan on child poverty, restoring to 2010 level, half more positive about Labour, and hits Greens and progressive party supporters, as well as those considering Labour



Labour message: Brexit a mistake and rejoining EU to raising living standards and wages

Brexit and Trump’s trade war brought us falling growth and incomes and higher prices. Brexit was a mistake. We need to align rules in all sectors of the economy so we can quickly get greater growth. And we need a customs union and start to rejoin the EU. Britain must ally with Europe to build a stronger defense and raise our living standards and wages to help with the cost of living.

Calling Brexit a mistake and advocating rejoining the EU to help with cost of living gets 49 percent feeling more warm about Labour and intense response with all progressive voters

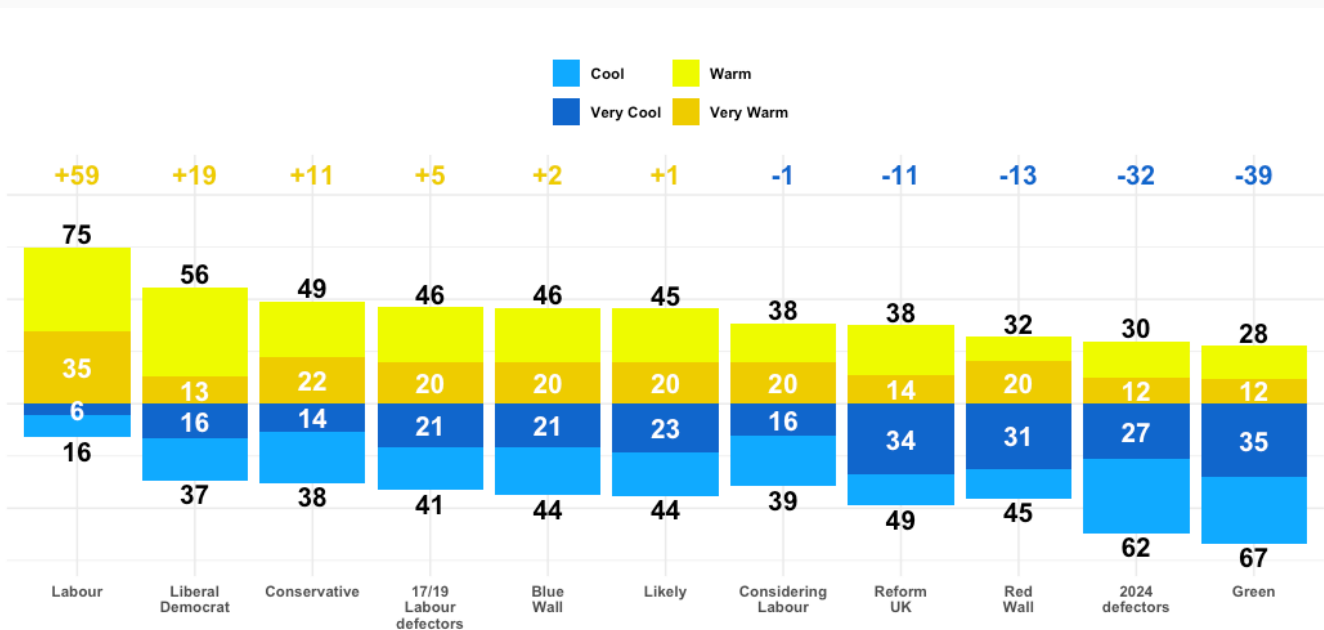


Immigration

Labour government current immigration message

We know that the government must get a grip of the refugee crisis that has left so many uncomfortable. We are frank about having stricter policies for asylum and work routes. We are doubling the standard waiting time for legal migrants to gain permanent residence from 5 to 10 years, with longer periods for those in less well-paying jobs. We are also requiring all refugees and their families to return home after 30 months if their country becomes safe. Rules for employers and universities bringing people from abroad will be tightened, with bigger fines and some people from some countries facing at least temporary bans. We're increasing the number of foreign criminals to be deported and raising English requirements for dependents seeking citizenship. We are fighting the criminal smuggling gangs here and globally to make our border secure.

Current Labour immigration approach gets positive response from Labour voters, but not in the Red wall, Greens, those considering Labour and 2024 defectors

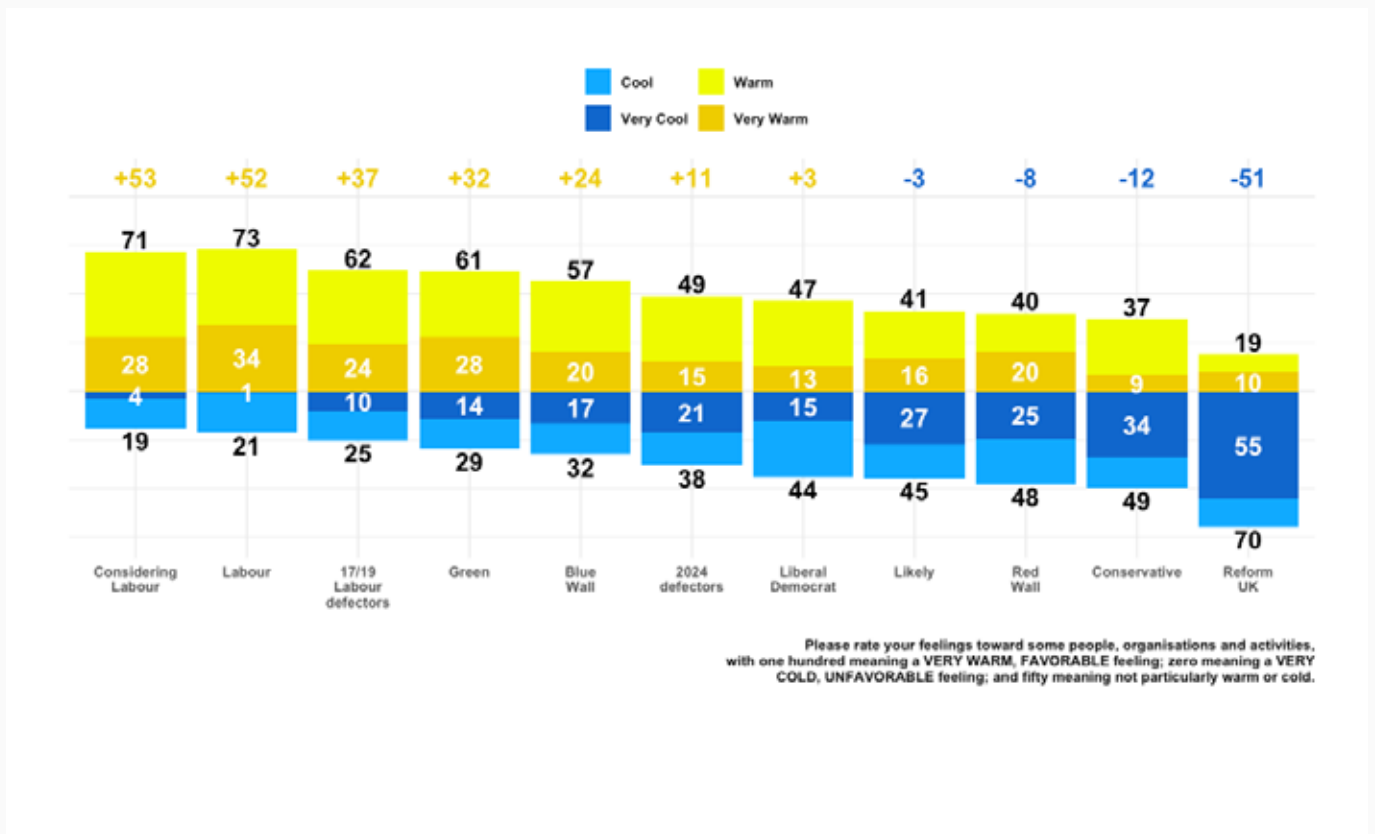


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Alternative immigration message: supporting legal refugee integration and immigration, while addressing crisis in immigration and asylum hotels

We face a crisis in immigration and asylum hotels. We have an ambitious plan that uses the quota of 10,000 to 40,000 legal refugees each year who will be vetted where they are living. They will be prioritised based on their ability to integrate into host communities and ability to learn English. Money saved from asylum hotels will be used to help. It will follow the successful examples in Britain where we integrated many more from Hong Kong and Ukraine. Britain needs legal immigrants for the NHS and social care. France has already accepted one legal refugee in and one illegal out. With Britain accepting legal, vetted refugees and the French government wanting to show it can control immigration, it will want to make a deal to police the channel and allow no boats to cross.

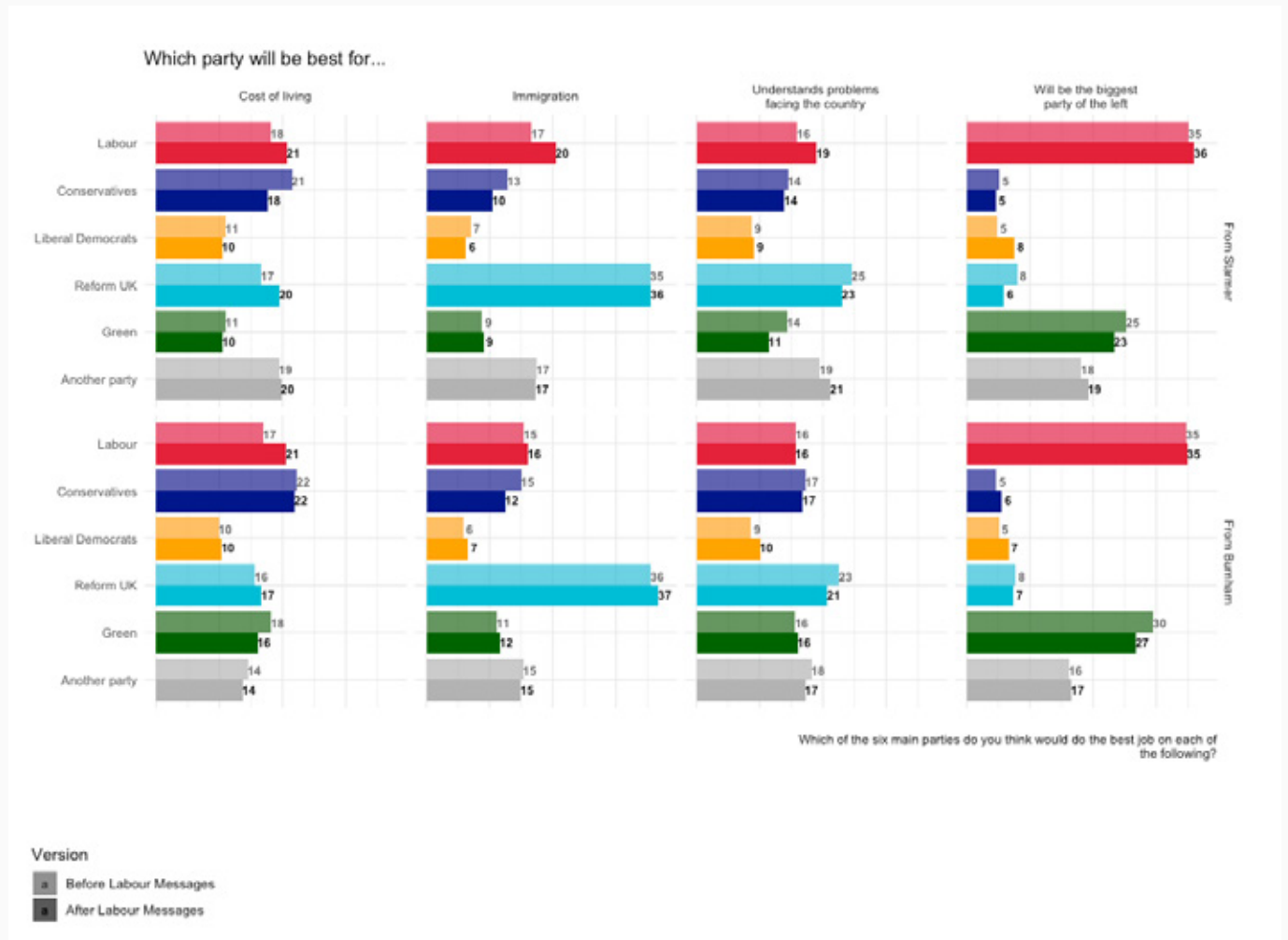
New plan gets near 70 percent warm response with Labour but also those considering Labour and near 60 percent with defectors, Greens and Blue Wall.



Impact of Labour Narratives

Messages improve Labour's standing on best to handle cost of living, immigration, and understands problems facing country

36 percent say, largest party of the left



About the Policy Lab

The UCL Policy Lab brings together ideas, individuals, and institutions in a collaborative method to understand and tackle the challenges facing communities in the UK and around the world. With diverse networks in politics, research, and communities, the Policy Lab facilitates dialogue between those addressing complex societal challenges.

If you have an idea or a challenge you're seeking to explore, get in touch with the team at

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