



Beyond the by-election: Reflections on UK politics

Focus group findings

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Introduction

Earlier this year, the UCL Policy Lab published its first investigation into public attitudes as part of its *New Account of the Political Polarisation* project. That project investigates the underlying drivers of British political behaviour in what appears to be a starkly polarised age. Drawing on new evidence from Stan Greenberg and Peter MacLeod, that report suggested that progressive voters – those tempted by Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens – had become a powerful bloc, hostile to the rise of conservative nationalism, sceptical about the United States under Donald Trump and eager for far-reaching economic and political reform.

That report also indicated, however, that many in this bloc were unconvinced by the current Labour government, led by Keir Starmer. The polling suggested that voters were drifting away from Labour and finding new homes in the Greens, Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party and, in places, the Liberal Democrats too.

The local election, Welsh Senedd and Scottish Parliament results in the spring of 2026 appeared to confirm that suggestion.

Given the centrality of this political phenomenon, we wanted to dive still further into what is going on in the attitudes and behaviours of these progressive voters. So, we asked Greenberg and MacLeod to continue their investigation with a series of in-depth focus groups across England.

These groups were hosted in places which represent the main swing seats in English politics right now. Half were conducted in the so-called “Red Wall”, where Labour lost its industrial working-class base with Brexit, where Starmer regained in 2023 locals and 2024 general election and where Reform is winning now. The other half were in the “Blue Wall”, Remain-leaning places where Boris Johnson won his majority at expense of Labour and Lib Dem, but where the

Conservatives crashed in 2024, with seats going to Labour and LibDem.

We believe that the findings are striking. It reveals voters who are far from happy, yet equally far from timid.

These voters want to see a Prime Minister tackle the immediate cost of living crisis and to tackle the long-term challenges with British politics and economy. These may seem to be separate endeavours to commentators, but for the public, they are woven together. Voters know that Britain is in a crisis, which won't easily be solved, they know not everything can be fixed at once – but they want to see a government which is willing to show they get it on cost of living and take action on what they see as a broken political and economic system. In many ways, they have made clear this demand for change at every opportunity since 2016. Whoever seizes on this demand for change could well define British politics for many years to come.

Professor Marc Stears
Director, UCL Policy Lab

James Baggaley
Head of Politics and Partnerships
UCL Policy Lab

Background and methodology

- At a turbulent time in British politics, these groups were designed to help us understand major trends in public opinion and voters' responses to potential future policy directions.
- The focus is on the large bloc of voters who consider themselves "progressive"
- All participants were likely voters (8-10 likely to vote on a 0-10 scale) and would currently vote for, or seriously consider voting for, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, or the Green Party.
- Besides standard demographic splits (single-gender; defined age and SEG ranges), we split the groups across "Red Wall" and "Blue Wall" seats.
- To represent the "Red Wall" we used non-urban constituencies in the North and Midlands that switched Conservative to Labour at the 2024 election.
- "Blue Wall" were non-urban Con-Lab seats in the South.

Date	Group	Type	Locations	Demographic
9 June	1	Blue Wall	Bracknell, Wycombe, Filton & Bradley Stoke	Men, 45-70, BC1C2
	2	Red Wall	Bolton (North, West), Bury (North, South)	Women, 25-44, C1C2D
10 June	3	Red Wall	Doncaster, Rother Valley, Scunthorpe	Women, 45-70, C1C2D
	4	Blue Wall	Basingstoke, Bracknell, High Wycombe	Women, 25-44, BC1C2
11 June	5	Blue Wall	Bath & NE Somerset, Filton & Bradley Stoke, North Somerset	Men, 45-70, BC1C2
	6	Red Wall	Doncaster, Rother Valley, Scunthorpe	Men, 25-44, C1C2D

Key findings (1/4)

Voters see problems stacking up with no prospect of being fixed: a lost, directionless country that is divided and angry

- Feelings about the state of the country are very low, with voters saying it is “broken”, “a mess”, “struggling”.
- They see major problems throughout the economy and the public realm, with services in decline, a rising cost of living, poor prospects for young people to get jobs and on to the property ladder, and little prospect of anything improving.
- Immigration, welfare and crime are all major worries that they don't see being addressed.

There is a leadership vacuum: the Labour government is seen to be aimless, having abandoned its principles and promises, and voters dismiss the PM

- People struggle to think what the goals of this government are. Some recall a few promises made at the election for a better economy, NHS, tackling immigration. They think the only actions taken have been harmful, most often citing tax increases borne by working people and withdrawal of the Winter Fuel Allowance.
- On being pressed, the National Minimum Wage increase and Employment Rights Act are seen as positives.
- However, the Prime Minister is a strongly disliked figure, seen as ineffectual and out of touch. Most participants completely dismiss him, although some have grudging approval for keeping the UK out of war in the Middle East.
- Labour's key past achievement is the NHS, while voters perceive the Blair/Brown-era governments as strong on support for children and education, for example through SureStart.

Key findings (2/4)

Not surprisingly, the broader political world shows strong polarisation. Makerfield by-election is seen as part of Labour leadership crisis

- Nigel Farage has an extremely poor reputation with this “progressive” audience: they find him dishonest, rabble-rousing, dangerous and egotistical. Several cite his intervention over the Henry Nowak case as opportunistic and needlessly provocative.
- Donald Trump is just as viscerally disliked, with these voters finding him childish, scorn-worthy for his constant boasting, and dangerous to other countries including Britain. Some say they don’t want him as a “second Prime Minister for Britain”.
- Other politicians who have recently had high profiles, in Andy Burnham and Wes Streeting, provoke less strong responses. Burnham is seen to have been a successful Mayor of Manchester (much more so by those in the region), while Streeting is less known.
- There is awareness of the by-election in Makerfield, and most have heard that it is part of a plan to make Burnham leader. They see this as risky. The messaging from Labour’s campaign is successful in showcasing a politician with a strong track record.

Participants say they want action to tackle the cost of living are welcome, which would show politicians understand people’s lives

- The most popular kinds of policy are support for energy bills and domestic solar power. This is because of the universal nature of energy, and it being a major ongoing expense.

Key findings (3/4)

Surprisingly, participants suggest they want to “change the system” as well as get immediate cost of living support

- The problems people see are fundamental: a weak economy with rising inequality; governments losing control of immigration and this having implications for housing, benefits and services; and politics that’s out of touch with ordinary people.
- Given a choice between a leader focusing solely on the cost of living, vs. one looking to change the system, a two-to-one majority of these voters choose “system change”. They report believing the system is broken and think fixing those fundamentals will ease the other challenges the country faces, including cost of living.

Political reforms show the possibility of major change to bring politics closer to people, though feel distant to some in Red Wall

- Voters welcome the idea of reforming Whitehall, devolving power, tackling political donations and abolishing the House of Lords. These issues are less engaging to some in the Red Wall as would make less immediate difference to their lives.
- These reforms show two important changes: first, capping political donations, banning foreign contributions and putting controls on lobbying would bring politics closer to ordinary people, reducing the influence of big money and insiders. Second, they would show a willingness to take on big problems and challenges, bringing change in the face of vested interests.

Key findings (4/4)

Distancing from Trump and being pro-Europe drives warmth and shows backbone

- The idea of distancing further from the Trump administration, calling out his excesses over Ukraine/Putin and climate, while aspiring to maintain strong ties with the US is received positively. Importantly, it shows backbone, while remaining professional/reasonable with regards the US relationship overall.
- Stronger ties with Europe is seen as a big positive for most of these voters. Some doubt whether this approach is wise or diplomatic.

The government's message on immigration reforms undermined by changes for legal workers and lack of credibility

- The tone and direction of travel indicated in the government's action on immigration is generally welcome among these voters. They want the system to be tighter and more controlled and think it's a good thing if that is the government's aim.
- But there are strong doubts over making life more difficult for migrants who are legally working in Britain – many see such workers as essential to life in the UK. Wage discrimination for this group is also seen as unfair.

Assessing Britain Today

The country feels loaded with problems that have little chance of getting better

- These voters are by turns angered and saddened at the state they find Britain in today.
- The most common view is that Britain is “broken” or a “mess”, with other voters flagging a lack of safety and inequalities.
- They describe a country where everything around them seems to be getting worse: the cost of living – with wages not keeping up – NHS, schools, crime rates, the justice system, housing. The sense of unsolved problems piling up can be overwhelming.
- Many refer to their hopes the 2024 election would be a turning point but report that nothing has got better.
- They have little hope for things to improve, leading to worries about their children’s lives.

I work for the NHS, I’m a carer for my dad, I’m trying to help bring my grandson up... then with us losing pensions for another few years, I just feel I’m struggling more than I’ve ever struggled in all my life. I feel overwhelmed with it all.

Woman, Red Wall

Underfunding, overpopulation, no money, cuts everywhere, no kind of light at the end of the tunnel. The health service, defense, trade, growth, everything just seems to be going backwards, creating division.

Man, Blue Wall

I work for the NHS, I’m a carer for my dad, I’m trying to help bring my grandson up... then with us losing pensions for another few years, I just feel I’m struggling more than I’ve ever struggled in all my life. I feel overwhelmed with it all.

Woman, Red Wall

One word to describe Britain (counts)



Many feel the country is divided and lacking direction

- Besides the overall mess when it comes to living standards and public services, many voters are worried the country is “lost” and “directionless”.
- They also perceive deep divisions, with the population unsettled, on edge, polarising over every issue.

Whether it be around immigration, housing, adult social care, women’s rights, no matter what topic it seems to be, there is a lot of conflict and a lot of divided opinions around it.

Woman, Red Wall

We don’t seem to have common ideas about lots of different political ideas and how to best move forward with them.

Man, Blue Wall

Even within the Labour Party, it’s all divided. They’re all backstabbing each other and somebody’s leaving and we don’t know what’s happening. And then things like that lad getting stabbed, so then you’ve got everybody against the police. There always seems to be something going on where somebody’s against someone else.

Woman, Red Wall

Labour is widely felt to be aimless and achieved little since 2024

- Participants struggle to bring to mind what the government's goals are.
- Some recall from the election that Labour aimed to stabilise the country, tackle the NHS and immigration.
- But most struggle to recall anything at all that Labour has actually done since coming to power.
- Top of mind recollections, when they come, are often negative: increased taxes, withdrew the Winter Fuel Allowance.
- Widespread view that this government has been harmful to the country on net, and that its pre-election promises were never meant to be followed.

Wreck the country. And they're succeeding... They made a lot of promises so that they could get into power and I can't think of one thing that they've actually seen through to the end.

Woman, Red Wall

I just think that they're supporting higher spending at the moment and it's just not really going the right way... Just for higher spending for taxes and say looking to go after our hard-earned money.

Man, Blue Wall

What they're trying to achieve is obviously make it a more livable state that we're in, bring the crimes down, the cost of living. But he promised a lot of things, the NHS... but nothing's come in place. Everything I feel is just, if anything, worse than what he promised.

Woman, Red Wall

It's hard to work out any of their goals really... Labour is for the working class but it seems that working class are the ones that are getting hit harder. It seems the people that are in the upper tax situation and paying higher taxes seem to be better off, but the lower class are just really, really struggling.

Man, Blue Wall

Past successes of Labour in office: NHS, tax credits, support children and education, NMW

- The emblematic Labour Party success story is the NHS, sometimes seen as part of a wider project of rebuilding and creating the welfare state after WW2.
- The Blair and Brown governments are often noted for the support given to children and families through tax credits, SureStart and more broadly support for education.
- This is also often seen as an era of economic growth and strength, enabled by it being a moderate or centrist version of Labour. The Blair government is seen to have had a decent level of control/grip/competence.
- Few spontaneous mentions of things the current government has done, but on prompting, the Employment Rights Act is seen as a genuine positive, especially parental leave, sick pay and tackling zero-hours contracts; and raising the NMW.

I thought NHS, until 2007, was brilliant. There was no waiting list or anything.

Man, Blue Wall

Bringing in the NHS.

Woman, Red Wall

Early on in Tony Blair, the education, the focus on education was good.

Man, Blue Wall

Yeah, SureStart under Blair. Fantastic. Absolutely fantastic.

Woman, Red Wall

Employment Rights Act, looking at zero hour contracts.

Man, Blue Wall

Current Politics and politicians

Britain's polarisation is evident in the distaste toward Farage and Trump

- These progressive voters show near-zero tolerance toward Nigel Farage, finding him dishonest and dangerous.
- His record promoting Brexit and willingness to stir hatred and intolerance for his own ends help create a visceral dislike.
- Donald Trump provokes similarly negative reactions, centred around his character and his actions toward Britain and other countries.
- Volodymyr Zelenskyy draws a strongly mixed reaction, with many warm toward his bravery and determination, but significant worries around perceived failure and corruption.

I'd say he's a man of principles.

Woman, Red Wall

He's there to try and do what he can for his country, but he just hasn't got the ability to get anything done.

Man, Blue Wall

I mean, he's a sex offender, but he's a president. It's just insane that he's even still allowed to be in that position.

Woman, Red Wall

Bigot.

Woman, Red Wall

Racist.

Woman, Red Wall

Toad

Woman, Red Wall

Carpet bagger. Snake-oil salesman.

Man, Blue Wall

Shit-stirrer, they used to call 'em in my time.

Man, Blue Wall

When that young lad got stabbed a couple of weeks ago, he came up straight away to the telly for a press interview about it, and I was just like, "Why are you doing that?" It's just to make him look good. I didn't like that about him.

Woman, Red Wall

Beep, beep, beep, beep.

Man, Blue Wall

Corrupt. Shifty. I don't know how he managed to get back in.

Woman, Red Wall

Despite news coverage views of Streeting and Burnham are fairly muted

- Leadership speculation has driven significant news coverage of Wes Streeting and Andy Burnham in recent months, but both have fairly unformed profiles among these voters.
- Streeting is less-known, with many having no associations at all. Those familiar with him are aware that he was Health Secretary but have mixed views of his record. His resignation is seen as a leadership attempt.
- Although not universally known, many are aware Andy Burnham is Mayor of Greater Manchester. In the region (Bolton/Bury) he's seen warmly for his record on growth and transport.
- In other regions, Manchester is perceived to have done well and he gets some credit for it.

He tried to usurp Keir Starmer a couple of weeks ago, and failed dramatically.

Woman, Red Wall

When I've listened to him, he's one politician that I think actually does answer questions and tries to put things into action a little bit.

Man, Blue Wall

Since he's been in charge over in Manchester, he has brought so much wealth and so much infrastructure and so much good to that side of the country. He's done a good job.

Woman, Red Wall

I think he's got a good reputation in Manchester, but again, I don't know that much about him.

Man, Blue Wall

I've got a son that lives in Manchester and since he's been mayor of Manchester, he's done so much and he's very popular.

Woman, Red Wall

Makerfield by-election understood as part of Labour leadership crisis

- Voters tend to be aware that a by-election is happening, and most believe that it is taking place in order to create a path for Burnham to become Labour leader.
- This is viewed as a symptom of major problems for Labour, associated with a perceived poor record in office and Starmer losing the support of colleagues.
- Besides controversy around sexist comments made by the Reform candidate on social media, almost no other news around this by-election has reached these voters.

It's going to be either Labour or Reform to win. If it's a Reform win, then I think Labour are really going to have their noses rubbed in it because Andy Burnham is being seen as the king to be elected, or not elected rather, king in waiting.

Man, Blue Wall

Is this to do with Andy Burnham getting in... And isn't this so that he can go to be Labour leader eventually?

Woman, Red Wall

Is this the same place where Vorderman wrote a letter saying why women shouldn't vote Reform?

Woman, Red Wall

Cost of Living and Political Reform

Cost of living, public services, crime, immigration and welfare are key worries

- The most urgent issues voters perceive are around the economy: the cost of living, jobs for young people and a welfare system that they don't think is working properly or fairly.
- There's a sense that ordinary working people and the poor struggle while the well-off are getting richer.
- The state of public services, especially the NHS, is a big challenge, and a range of other services come up, especially policing and justice to get on top of what they see as a major crime problem.
- Immigration is another big theme, particularly irregular migration and the money spent supporting recent arrivals.

Never thought at this stage of life, I'd be getting to the end of the month and thanking God I'm not quite in the overdraft yet, but there's nothing left, and I've never been like that and it's a worry.

Man, Blue Wall

I just think the richer are getting richer and the middle class and the poorer is getting poorer... not feeling stable in their finances, they're working day and night, it's still not covering what they need to cover.

Woman, Red Wall

The welfare thing. I think that's just got wholly out of control. The bill is just rising and they haven't got a plan to try and arrest it, sort it... And those of us that are out there still working, we're just going to feel more and more resentful for the people that are sat at home.

Man, Blue Wall

I'm worried about the younger generation. I mean, I have two granddaughters that have been through university, got degrees, got their masters. They've got nearly £60,000 student debt. They've no chance at all of getting on the property ladder.

Woman, Red Wall

Immigration is a massive thing. Whatever your stance is on it, you need to have a proper model there like they have in New Zealand, Australia, for instance.

Woman, Red Wall

Underfunding helps explain issues, but participants also blame spending choices and migration

- Asked what are the deeper, underlying problems facing the country, voters most often blame government finances and the strength of the economy.
- But this doesn't let government off the hook for its choices – many say the way money has been spent is the problem.
- Many see immigration as an underlying cause of Britain's problems due to strain on services, benefits and housing, along with concerns about crime.

The children's services across England are dealing with increasing numbers of complex cases. The demand's increasing, but the money isn't going into that. It doesn't seem to hold as much importance.

Woman, Red Wall

There is limited resource and NHS is stretched and can't get doctor's appointments, but the reason that all the taxes for everybody that's working is going up because fundamentally... you could come to the country and get a free house and get free money and live a great life.

Man, Blue Wall

Deepest problems facing Britain (counts)



Conclusions

Conclusions

- Britain is seen as having a leadership crisis. That crisis is seen to leave the UK declining and directionless with little hope of recovery. The government is seen to have a leader who is aimless and dismissed as weak, dishonest and out of touch.
- Participants see this government as not addressing the big immediate problems with the cost of living, economy, opportunity for young people.
- But underlying these issues are the perceived major problems facing Britain, including an inescapable cost of living crisis facing families, all economic gains going to the top 1 percent, the business lobbies dominating Westminster, rather than working people, and governments losing control of immigration at their expense.
- At the same time politics does not address these issues. They are in a highly polarised country, with people worried by division and deeply antagonistic to Nigel Farage and Donald Trump, who wants to be “a second Prime Minister”.
- Accordingly, there is a strong desire for systemic change in addition to action on immediate cost-of-living pressures. People want to see a leader who sees the country and politics as broken and wants to take on the system and change it.
- Progressive interventions on the cost of living are strongly welcome and would show politicians in touch with ordinary people’s lives.
- The political reforms people want centre on capping political donations and barring foreign ones.
- There is a desire for leaders to be “honest” with Trump on the need to resist Putin, support Europe, take action on climate change and not intervening in British politics.

Appendix: Written Answers

Words to describe Britain

Group 1 Men 45-70, Blue Wall	Group 2 Women 25-44, Red Wall	Group 3 Women 45-70, Red Wall	Group 4 Women 25-44, Blue Wall	Group 5 Men 45-70, Blue Wall	Group 6 Men 25-44, Red Wall
Broken	Divided	Broken Britain	Unsettled	Struggling	Broken
Mess	Conflict	Lost	Crazy	Soft	Expensive
Declining	Unsafe	Inequality	Expensive	Broken	Lost
Dangerous	Unequal	Divided	Expensive	Mess	Broken
Unknown	Unstable	Dire	Uncertain	Broken	Scary
Confused	Cost of living	Mess upsetting	Mess	Nervous	Divided
Divided		Struggling	Disjointed	Not improving	Nation
Mess				Chaos	Slow

Deepest problems facing Britain

Group 1 Men 45-70, Blue Wall	Group 2 Women 25-44, Red Wall	Group 3 Women 45-70, Red Wall	Group 4 Women 25-44, Blue Wall	Group 5 Men 45-70, Blue Wall	Group 6 Men 25-44, Red Wall
Immigration	Strain on services	Money haemorrhaging out of the country making us poorer.	Government	Debt	Division
Education	Mistrust of government. Lack of funding across all public services	Housing	Big corporations not paying taxes	Think we are losing confidence	Investment in people
No Direction Education immigration taxation	Misogyny, inequality and greed	Lack of direction from government. Inflation	Rising crime	World unrest	Not putting Britain first
Employment	Knife crime on a rise	Lack of respect	Government not following through on promises	Negative news and misappropriation of funds	Foreign trade policies.
Immigration - NHS	Distribution of funds and priority differences	Cost of living	Political views turning into riots	Economy/ governments can't solve anything/global nonsense	Reality/truth
Broken healthcare, Policing / Security, Immigration control	Public service funding	Not being able to discharge the elderly from hospital because of the insufficient care system and corridor care	National debt funding and tax rises	Resourcing/funding key services... teachers, police, mental health etc.	Disintegration of values and hence trust
Divide due to 2 tier policing and immigration		People coming to our country from abroad	Immigration	Brexit...*	
Education housing, low growth				Rising benefits and pension costs	

Most positive thing seen in the discussion

Group 4 Women 25-44, Blue Wall	Group 5 Men 45-70, Blue Wall	Group 6 Men 25-44, Red Wall
Possibly for change	Andy Burnham seems to be a modern thinker with change being an important issue for his focus.	Reform Westminster / the system
Addressing cost of living crisis relatable, feels like hes challenging the system	Seems to be more of a focus on overall hard changes rather than quick fixes. Willingness for more radical thought to make a start for positive changes.	The last statement.
Feels human and relatable, more information, good views and ideas, supporting working class, sees the current problems in labour and that changes need to be made	Looking how things are portrayed on the media, so many inaccurate things are being shared which needs to be tackled. Look at immigration and focus on the cost of living	Reform of the government / the last statement
Positive change - aware of what the country needs The attention around what needs to change	Hopefully a change of the guard will help us start to move in the right direction..	Acknowledgement of the social contract being broken with recent generations. Acknowledgement of the attack on workers
Ideas about addressing the cost of living for people. I.e. reduced energy bills / increased child benefit etc.	Be bold brave change rather than moving things around edges. that's we wanted from Starmer, lets hope Burnham can, but he does have track record in Manchester with out of the box thinking to get things done	Nationalisation of amenities.
Admits/ understands change needs to happen even when reflecting on own party	The acknowledgements to recognise we need to be friends with USA but not at any cost	Everything on the last statement covered it
Supporting working people, reducing cost of living, changing political system	The realisation seems to have landed that quick fixes won't cut it and wholesale change is required	The last statement, good to see someone willing to honestly address the real issue that most are scared to say
	I would like to focus on the optimistic statement from Andy Burnham and hope he avoids the Banana skin local election result!	Burnham's ideas seem grounded in reality and achievable, not just a politician's promises.

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

policylab@ucl.ac.uk
www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab
[@UCLPolicyLab](https://twitter.com/UCLPolicyLab)

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