A NEW POLITICAL LANDSCAPE?

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC
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INTRODUCTION

It seems scarcely believable that only just over nine months ago a triumphant Boris Johnson was returned to Downing Street with an 80-seat majority that transformed the political map of Britain. The covid crisis has not just derailed the "levelling up" agenda and overshadowed the sunny optimism that was Johnson's hallmark until the pandemic struck: in political terms it has given the Conservatives a premature case of the midterm blues.

Many voters on all sides take a much more forgiving view of the government's handling of the crisis than the media coverage might suggest. As I found in my latest research, people spontaneously praise the furlough schemes and the speedy creation of the Nightingale hospitals. Even critics admit that ministers are doing their level best with no precedent to help guide their decisions. In my poll, the proportion saying the government had done a reasonable job in difficult circumstances matched those who thought its handling had made things worse. Boris himself has won some unlikely hearts: "He's stuck by the British people and done his damnedest to help," said one 2019 Labour voter explaining his change of heart towards the PM.

But the criticisms are many: why did we not take action sooner, people ask, at the very least by restricting flights from covid-hit countries like China? How could they expect us to take the rules seriously when Dominic Cummings is allowed to drive up and down the country without so much as a reprimand? And why are the guidelines so confusing and contradictory? And while many blame the recent rise in cases on people breaking the rules, they think they know why it happens: "One minute it's 'go back to work', then it's 'work from home'," said one Tory voter in the PM's own constituency. "It's frustrating, so I think people will just do what they want to do."

The crisis has also exposed Johnson's own apparent weaknesses, with some saying he seemed overwhelmed by a crisis that required grip and attention to detail. While 27 per cent in my poll said he was doing a good job, a further one in five said he could be a good PM under different circumstances but was not the kind of leader we needed at the moment. Some wonder whether he has really recovered from his own encounter with covid. In my poll, the words most often chosen to describe him were "out of his depth" and "incompetent."

This scrutiny is brought into sharper focus by the advent of Keir Starmer, who has made a good first impression as capable and professional leader, and one more capable than his predecessor of holding the prime minister to account. So much so, in fact, that in my poll he led Johnson by 37 to 30 per cent on the question of who would make the best PM. When we asked people how likely they thought they were to back each party at the next election, Labour and the Tories were tied – with those who had switched to elect Johnson in 2019 less sure than most Tories that they would stay with their new party. I found the Tories had lost their lead over Labour on being seen as competent, having the right priorities, being clear about what they stand for, and being likely to do what they say – crucial attributes on which they led comfortably during last December's election.

This sort of thing makes many Conservatives nervous. Despite their nasty scare at the 2017 election, Tories are no longer used to being seriously challenged by a Labour Party that seemed to have lost its political bearings.

But they need not despair quite yet. For one thing, Starmer still has a good deal of convincing to do. Though he is clearly very different from Corbyn, voters are much less sure that the Labour Party has really changed – indeed some even question how distinct the two really are, given Starmer's prominent position in Corbyn's shadow cabinet. The spectacle of him "taking a knee" also makes some former Labour voters in red wall seats wonder if he is prone to the kind of virtue-signalling gesture politics that turns them off. This illustrates Starmer's big electoral challenge: to unite Labour's new metropolitan, remain-voting base with the very different, culturally more conservative voters who backed Brexit and peeled away in huge numbers over the last two elections, feeling that the party looked down on them and ignored their views while taking their votes for granted.

But the Conservatives have a similar conundrum of their own, beyond simply making a better fist of grappling with the pandemic. This will centre on the economy – how much the government can or should continue to support

businesses and incomes once the current schemes expire and, especially, how the government's lavish but necessary spending over the last six months is to be paid for.

Last year, Johnson stormed to victory by attracting both Brexit-backing voters in former Labour heartlands and culturally different voters, including many remainers, who were not only horrified at the idea of Prime Minister Corbyn but worried that Labour would bankrupt the country. With Brexit all but done, Corbyn consigned to history and austerity all but repudiated by the Tories themselves, that will be a much harder trick to pull off next time.

Though the pandemic continues to dominate the news, and seemingly all aspects of life, it can seem as though divisions that have shaped British politics for the last four years have not been swept away. In fact, they have not even been suspended. The covid crisis has not transformed the political landscape – but it has added some new contours for the parties to navigate.

Michael Ashcroft
October 2020

METHODOLOGY

8,051 adults in Great Britain were interviewed online between 17 and 24 September 2020. Data have been weighted to be representative of all adults in Great Britain.

Full data tables are available at LordAshcroftPolls.com.

Eight focus groups were held via Zoom between 22 and 29 September 2020. Participants were recruited on the following basis:

Cheltenham and Uxbridge:
- Reluctantly voted Conservative at 2019 general election; voted remain in 2016 EU referendum
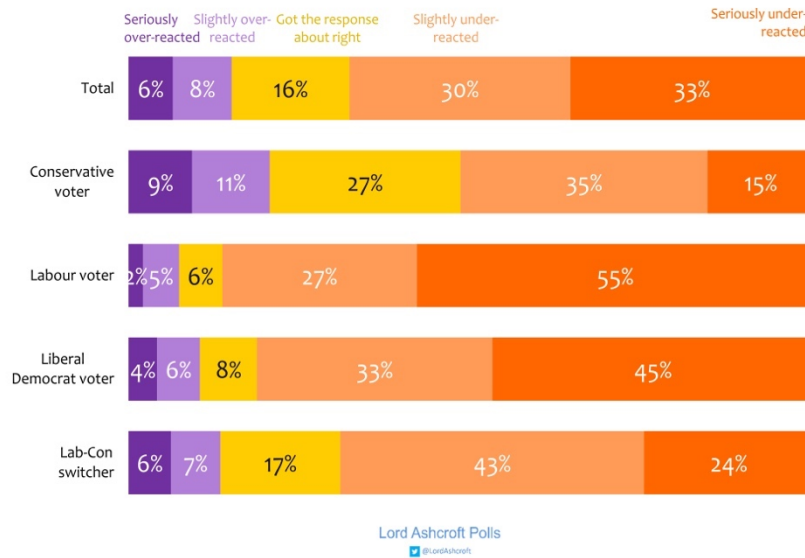- Voted Labour or Liberal Democrat at 2019 general election; voted remain in 2016 EU referendum

Burnley and Darlington:
- Voted Conservative for the first time at 2017 or 2019 general election; voted Leave in 2016 EU referendum
- Reluctantly voted Labour at 2019 general election; voted Leave in 2016 EU referendum
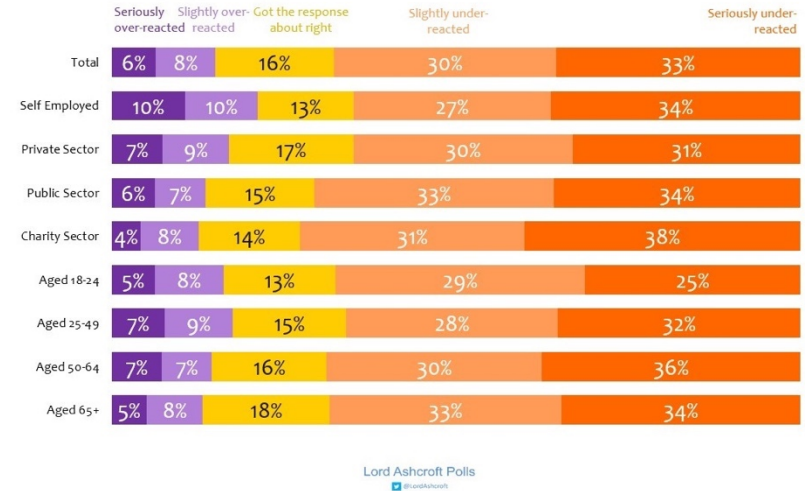
1: Politics and the pandemic

Over or under-reacted?

Overall, would you say the government over-reacted to the threat of coronavirus, or under-reacted, or got the response about right?

	Seriously over-reacted	Slightly over-reacted	Got the response about right	Slightly under-reacted	Seriously under-reacted
Total	6%	8%	16%	30%	33%
Conservative voter	9%	11%	27%	35%	15%
Labour voter	2% 5%		6%	27%	55%
Liberal Democrat voter	4%	6%	8%	33%	45%
Lab-Con switcher	6%	7%	17%	43%	24%

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Overall, would you say the government over-reacted to the threat of coronavirus, or under-reacted, or got the response about right?

	Seriously over-reacted	Slightly over-reacted	Got the response about right	Slightly under-reacted	Seriously under-reacted
Total	6%	8%	16%	30%	33%
Self Employed	10%	10%	13%	27%	34%
Private Sector	7%	9%	17%	30%	31%
Public Sector	6%	7%	15%	33%	34%
Charity Sector	4%	8%	14%	31%	38%
Aged 18-24	5%	8%	13%	29%	25%
Aged 25-49	7%	9%	15%	28%	32%
Aged 50-64	7%	7%	16%	30%	36%
Aged 65+	5%	8%	18%	33%	34%

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More than six in ten (63%), including half of 2019 Conservative voters and two thirds of those who had switched from Labour to the Tories, said they thought the government had under-reacted to the threat of coronavirus. 16% thought the government had got the response about right, and only 14% thought the government had over-reacted.

Self-employed people (20%) were more likely than most to think the government had over-reacted. Women thought the government had under-reacted by a bigger margin (52 points) than men (43 points).

In our focus groups, many said they had supported the lockdown measures but did not understand why they had not been introduced earlier – especially banning flights from countries already badly affected by the virus: "They

should have had a martial law lockdown from the beginning. They left it too late;" "It's a new thing, but they've stumbled over their feet. They didn't put much thought into it straight away, then it was too late and it was already out there;" "They're doing the best they can, but in the beginning when other countries were stopping people going in we were still letting them in, even from China;" "Test and trace should have started earlier. They were sending people back into care homes without tests in place."

"When other countries were stopping people going in, we were still letting them in, even from China."
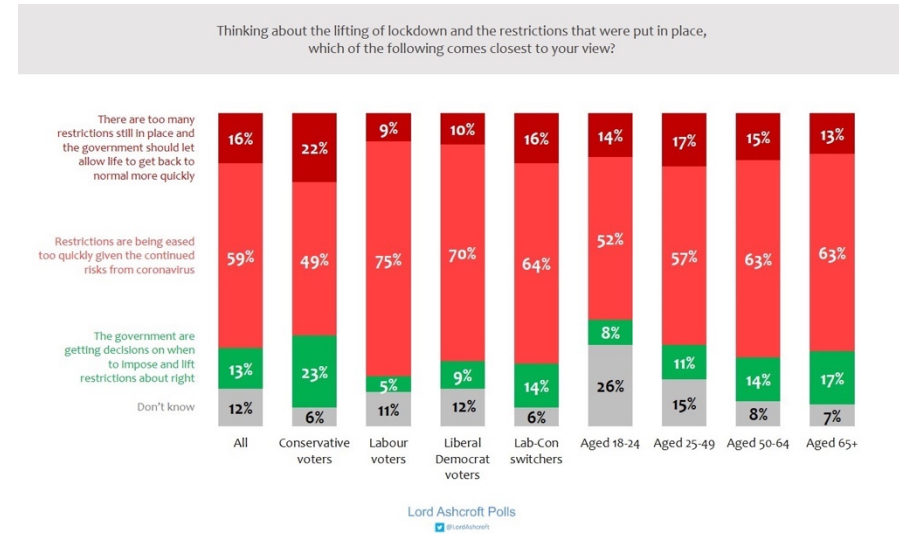
Some felt this was still a problem: "Why do they keep waiting? They decide on Friday to put things in lockdown on Monday. Does the virus not work at the weekend?"

"They couldn't win. If they'd acted earlier, it would have been 'why did you build all those hospitals?'"

A number of people took a more forgiving view of this question: "In hindsight the lockdown could have been done earlier but who could have predicted? They did what they could;" "They couldn't win. If they'd acted earlier it would have been 'why did you build all those hospitals?'"

Easing too soon?

More than half of all voters (59%), including half of 2019 Conservatives, said they thought restrictions had been eased too quickly since lockdown given the continued risks from the virus. Only 16% (but 22% of Conservatives and 21% of self-employed people) thought there were too many restrictions still in place and that the government should allow life to get back to normal more quickly.

Thinking about the lifting of lockdown and the restrictions that were put in place, which of the following comes closest to your view?

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In our focus groups there were very mixed views on the latest restrictions, including the 10pm curfew for hospitality venues and local lockdowns: "The curfews are ludicrous. Students are now hanging round outside and drinking on the streets and going back to house parties;" "It's getting silly now, it's starting to look like a dictatorship. Stopping people seeing their families, shutting the economy down, it's getting out of hand. Not even 1% of the population have got it and most have recovered. It's blown out of proportion." Some supported the new controls or thought they didn't go far enough: "The 10pm rule is good because students are going back to university, then they head home at weekends and spread it back. If we do nothing it will go up, so let's do something and see what happens;" "I understand it – when people get intoxicated, they get a bit closer;" "It seems weak, closing at 10pm. I'd ban under-25s."

"The curfews are ludicrous. Students are now hanging round outside and drinking on the streets and going back to house parties."

Asked what they thought had caused the recent rise in cases, participants often blamed people for irresponsibly failing to follow the rules: "It annoys me

when you go into shops and see people wearing masks round their chins, or not wearing them at all;" "People are not following the rules properly and social distancing, and businesses don't want to apply the rules too harshly because they will lose custom;" "There is an element of detachment. If you haven't had contact with someone with the virus, it seems like a non-existent disease and you don't see the gravity of the measures;" "A lot of people are not taking it seriously enough. It's across the board really but especially young people;" "People have got fed up. Complacency has set in;" "At the start, everyone in Asda had a mask, but now it's about 40%. I think there is a backlash now."

Many put the failure to stick to the rules down to uncertainty over what the rules were, or frustration with confusing or contradictory messages from the government once the full lockdown was lifted: "People felt frustrated, and when restrictions eased, people forgot or thought it was all over and ignored what they were asked to do;" "The mixed messaging didn't help. One minute it's 'go back to work,' then it's 'work from home'. It's frustrating, so I think people will just do what they want to do;" "People think 'I'll just see some people and it won't make any difference'. It's common to see young people in groups of about 15. Kids are in classes of 30 but they're not allowed to socialise afterwards – they don't understand why;" "It's crazy that there are different rules in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Nicola Sturgeon has got this 'one up on Boris' thing. 'If he says one thing, I'll say something else'."

*"It's crazy that there are different rules in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Nicola Sturgeon has got this 'one up on Boris' thing. 'If he says one thing, I'll say something else'."*

At the same time, there was some understanding of why the rules kept changing: "They're trying to balance health and the economy, and I understand that, but I think they tried to jump start it too quickly. I don't think they really had a plan;" "It has to be a dynamic thing. They had to get things opening up to get the economy going. The government has to play what's in front of it."

"There are more tests now than in March, so it's just scaremongering. The deaths have hardly risen but the cases are through the roof."

Some dismissed the idea of a second wave, saying the rise in positive tests was simply down to more tests being done overall: "There are more tests now than in March, so it's just scaremongering. The deaths have hardly risen but the cases are through the roof."

What's the bigger risk?
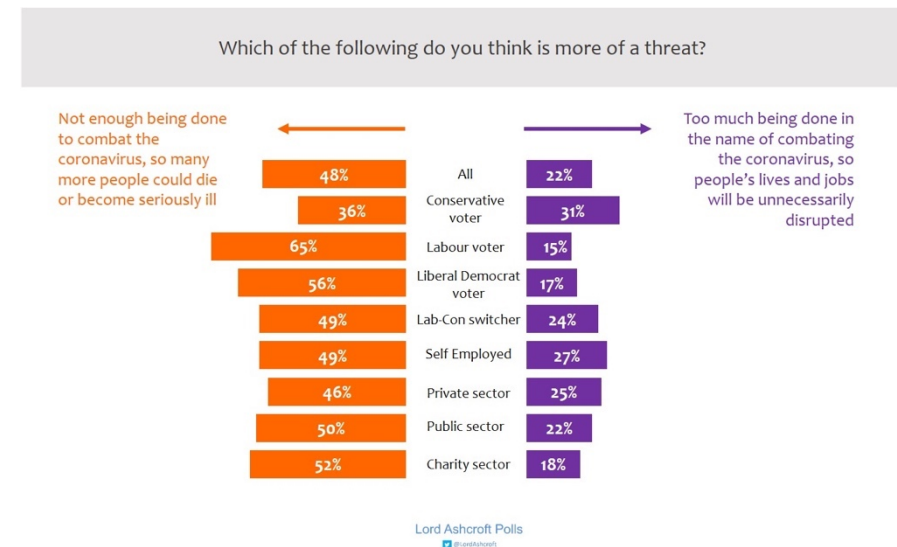
When asked what they thought was the bigger risk – not enough being done to combat the virus, or unnecessarily disrupting people's jobs and lives by doing too much – 48% thought not enough action was the bigger danger. Only just over one in five (22%) thought too much being done in the name of combating the virus was the bigger danger. 16% said neither was a risk. Conservative voters were more closely divided than most, with 36% saying not

doing enough was the bigger threat, 31% worried about too much action, and 22% saying neither was a risk.

What worked and what didn't

When it comes to the coronavirus pandemic, how well do you think the government has handled each of the following – where 0 means it has done a terrible job and 10 means it has done an excellent job?
[NB Mean scores, 2019 General Election vote]

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Asked to rate the government's handling of different aspects of the pandemic, voters have the highest mean scores for "protecting people's jobs and incomes" and "making sure the NHS has been able to cope with the number of coronavirus patients" (5.8 out of 10). The lowest marks were for "making

the right decisions at the right time" about when to impose and lift restrictions (3.4) and "communicating the rules clearly" (3.3).

These rankings were reflected in the group discussions. Asked what they thought the government had done well, voters of all parties would often mention furlough and the loan schemes: "They paid my wages for 18 weeks, so there is some good. The huge cost incurred will have to be paid for, but they paid my wages and thank God I still have a job;" "They've been trying to keep businesses going, and there's the furlough system as well. The Chancellor is looking to balance the books. It's hard, they've still got to keep the country running."

"They did a great job getting those emergency hospitals up."

"They paid my wages for 18 weeks, so there is some good… thank God I still have a job."

There was also spontaneous praise for the Nightingale hospitals, and the Eat Out to Help Out scheme (though some thought this might have contributed to the subsequent rise in cases): "They did a great job getting those emergency hospitals up;" "My family runs a restaurant so the Eat Out to Help Out scheme was good. The queues were phenomenal, I've never seen anything like it;" "I would credit the Chancellor with that, he seems like an ideas man. But it was probably too early. We were all glad it happened but in retrospect they should probably have waited a few months."

"The contradictions. It was 'don't mix, don't go out', then it's 'go to restaurants packed with people'."

As noted above, many of the specific complaints were about the timing of restrictions and easings, and what people felt were confused or contradictory messages: "The contradictions. It was 'don't mix, don't go out', then it's 'go to restaurants packed with people';" "The confusion over face masks. Day after day we were told they had no impact, then suddenly we had to wear them;" "Don't go out, do go out, don't go and see your parents but you can meet them in the pub;" "There's no consistency, and they expect people to abide by the rules but they don't know what the rules are themselves;" "There are still restrictions saying partners can't go into labour wards, but you can go into

pubs and restaurants. People don't take it seriously because the messages are mixed."

> *"There are still restrictions saying partners can't go into labour wards, but you can go into pubs and restaurants. People don't take it seriously because the messages are mixed."*

Some also felt the rules on what was and was not allowed revealed the wrong priorities: "My grandma is 90 and has been isolated for months. She sees young people going back to the pub and she's not allowed to attend the coffee mornings she used to have. They're not allowed to do things that are good for their health. People's health should be considered on a bigger scale;" "It's easy for them to say stop mixing households so it looks like they're doing something without affecting the economy."
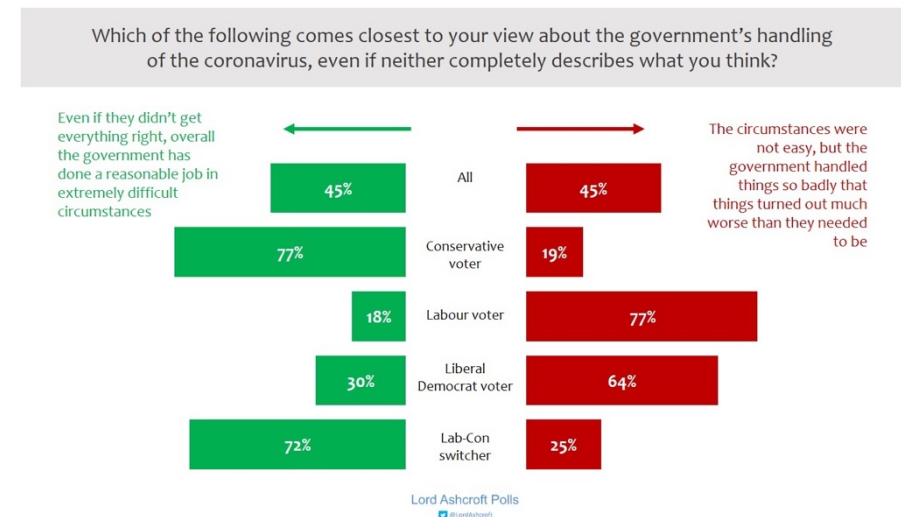
> *"Dominic Cummings… 60 million people were following the rules and they threw it back in our faces."*

In nearly all groups, people mentioned the Dominic Cummings controversy as an unhelpful event that undermined people's willingness to follow the rules: "A big mistake was Dominic Cummings not resigning because that set the wrong tone. It set an awful example really;" "People couldn't attend family funerals or see their parents in care homes, and he can swan off like that. He should have been reprimanded. You've got to lead by example;" "60 million people were following the rules and they threw it back in our faces. It was a complete piss-take."

Overall handling

The public are evenly divided as to whether, overall, the government has done "a reasonable job in extremely difficult circumstances" (45%) or "handled things so badly that things turned out much worse than they needed to be" (45%). Nearly one in five Conservative voters (19%) chose the latter option, but 18% of Labour voters and 30% of Lib Dems said the government had done a reasonable job. Women (47%) were slightly more likely than men (43%) to say the government had done a reasonable job in difficult circumstances. Those

aged 65+ were more than twice as likely to say this (61%) as those aged 18 to 25 (27%).

Which of the following comes closest to your view about the government's handling of the coronavirus, even if neither completely describes what you think?

Even if they didn't get everything right, overall the government has done a reasonable job in extremely difficult circumstances ← | → The circumstances were not easy, but the government handled things so badly that things turned out much worse than they needed to be

	Green	Red
All	45%	45%
Conservative voter	77%	19%
Labour voter	18%	77%
Liberal Democrat voter	30%	64%
Lab-Con switcher	72%	25%

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> *"It's an impossible task. I wouldn't want to do it. There have been errors made but I think they've done really well."*

In our groups, even many of those who had been critical said they sympathised with the position the government was in: "The normal everyday response is to blame the government for everything that's going on in the world and say the government is not doing what it should be doing, but we've never been in this situation before so we don't know the right response." Labour and Lib Dem voters were also ready to give the government the benefit of the doubt: "They are trying. I don't think any government could do more;" "I'm not a fan of the government and I didn't vote for them, but they're damned if they do and damned if they don't;" "I think they've done amazingly. I don't know any government that has furloughed people like we've done. What else can they do – put us into lockdown indefinitely and bankrupt the country?"

However, some were less forgiving, including some who had voted Conservative in 2019: "They're always reacting. Months in advance they could have been preparing. They took steps too late, then let everyone out so we had to go into lockdown again."

Most felt the government had tried to be guided by the science, at least in the early stages. There were some doubts that this had held true as the rules became harder to comprehend: "I don't understand why seven children can't meet but seven adults can go and shoot ducks. They pick and choose the science. So many of the rules are contradictory that the science goes out of the window;" "The problem is, there is no exact science to be led by. Different scientists have different viewpoints;" "The scientist that advised them on mad cow disease and the bird thing – he got all that wrong, and he was advising on this as well."

Some worried that the scientific advice and the restrictions that followed from it were focused too heavily on the virus at the expense of wider considerations: "It's a balance and it's difficult, but my question is: are you going to count in your statistics all the people who suffer, who have lost livelihoods, who have topped themselves, as well as those who have tragically died of covid? Will they be counted?"

"Are you going to count in your statistics all the people who suffer, who have lost livelihoods, who have topped themselves, as well as those who have tragically died of covid? Will they be counted?"

Would Keir have done better?

One third of voters (34%), but only three quarters of 2019 Labour voters, said they thought a Labour government under Keir Starmer would have done a better job of handling the crisis over the last six months than Boris Johnson and the Conservatives. Most of those who switched from Labour to the Conservatives at the 2019 election thought Starmer would have done worse (38%) or no better or worse (25%) than Johnson; only 16% think he would have done better.


If we had had a Labour government with Keir Starmer as Prime Minister handling the crisis over the last six months, do you think they would have done a better or worse job than Boris Johnson and the Conservatives?

	A much better job than Boris Johnson and the Conservatives	A slightly better job than Boris Johnson and the Conservatives	Neither better nor worse than Boris Johnson and the Conservatives	A slightly worse job than Boris Johnson and the Conservatives	A much worse job than Boris Johnson and the Conservatives
Total	17%	17%	19%	7%	15%
Conservative voter	2%	4%	26%	15%	36%
Labour voter	42%	31%		11%	1% 1%
Liberal Democrat voter	27%	31%	19%	5%	2%
Lab-Con switcher	5%	11%	25%	11%	27%

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In the focus groups, those thinking a Starmer-led Labour government would have done a better job were also in the minority: "It irritates me to hear the Labour Party chipping away. I know it's what an Opposition does, but I just wonder what any other party would do;" "It would have been pretty much the same. It's unprecedented times. They'd both be in the same position."

Blame the politicians?

Thinking about some of the problems in dealing with the pandemic – with things like testing, making sure health workers have enough protective equipment, and sorting out school exams – which of the following comes closest to your view?
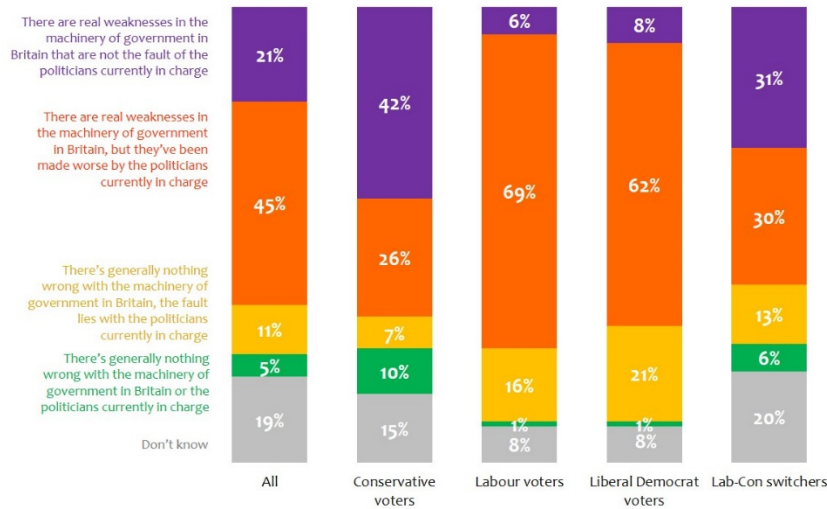
Two thirds of voters said they thought the problems in dealing with the pandemic were down to weaknesses in the machinery of government in Britain – but most of this group thought such problems had been made worse by the politicians currently in charge.

How was it for you?

Thinking about your own life over the last six months of the crisis, which of the following apply to you?
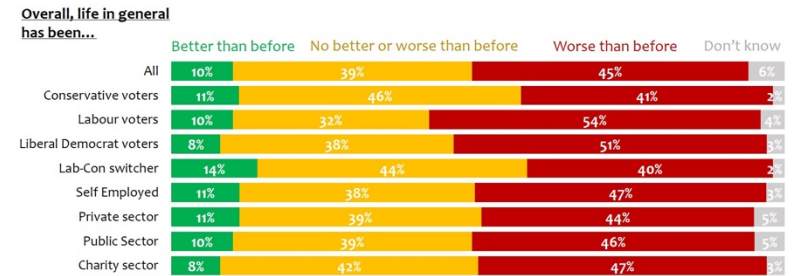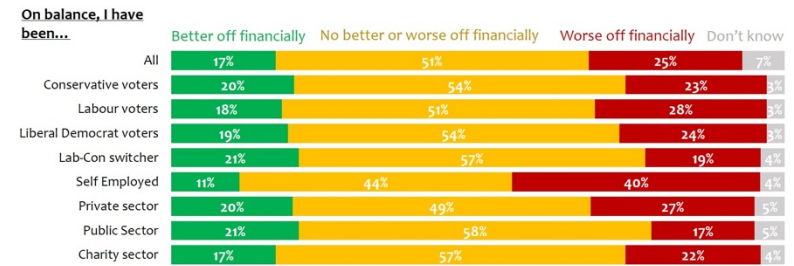
A quarter of all voters – but 40% of self-employed people – said they had been worse off financially over the last six months. However, 45% said life in general had been worse than before, with little variation between different groups.

2: In other news

Most important issues

Which of the following do you think are the top three important issues facing Britain as a whole / facing you and your family?

Issues facing Britain as a whole

All

The NHS	55%
Protecting people from CV-19	54%
The economy	47%
Dealing with Brexit in the right way	30%
The environment and climate change	23%
Education and schools	19%

Issues facing you and your family

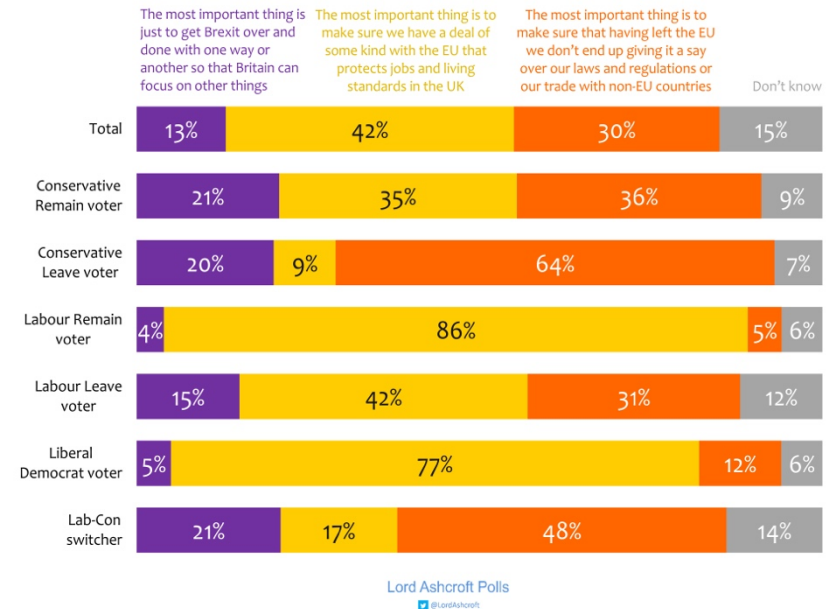|	
Protecting people from CV-19	53%
The NHS	52%
The economy	39%
The cost of living	30%
Dealing with Brexit in the right way	23%
Education and schools	23%

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Respondents named the NHS and protecting people from coronavirus as the most important issues for both the country as a whole and for themselves and their families. The cost of living was named more often as an issue for "me and my family" (coming fourth on that list overall), while dealing with Brexit in the right way was named more often as an important issue for the country.

2019 Conservative voters named the economy as the most important issue for the country; protecting people from coronavirus was the most important for them and their family. The NHS topped both lists for Labour voters.

Isn't it over yet?

As you may know, the government and the EU are currently negotiating a trade deal that would come into force at the end of the 'transition period' that began when the UK left the EU on 31 January this year and ends on 31 December this year. If no agreement can be reached, the UK will have to trade with the EU without a trade deal. Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

	The most important thing is just to get Brexit over and done with one way or another so that Britain can focus on other things	The most important thing is to make sure we have a deal of some kind with the EU that protects jobs and living standards in the UK	The most important thing is to make sure that having left the EU we don't end up giving it a say over our laws and regulations or our trade with non-EU countries	Don't know
Total	13%	42%	30%	15%
Conservative Remain voter	21%	35%	36%	9%
Conservative Leave voter	20%	9%	64%	7%
Labour Remain voter	4%	86%	5%	6%
Labour Leave voter	15%	42%	31%	12%
Liberal Democrat voter	5%	77%	12%	6%
Lab-Con switcher	21%	17%	48%	14%

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Three in ten voters overall – including 57% of 2019 Conservatives and 48% of Labour-Conservative switchers – said the most important thing in negotiating a post-Brexit trade deal was to make sure the EU did not have a say over UK laws and regulations or our trade with other non-EU countries. 42%, including

three quarters of Labour voters and referendum Remain voters, said the most important thing was to ensure a deal that protects jobs and living standards (though Conservative Remain voters were evenly divided between these two priorities). 13% of voters – including one in five Conservatives and Leave voters – said the most important thing was to get it over and done with one way or another so Britain can focus on other things.

"It's still baffling me to be honest. Are we out of it yet?"

In the groups, many confessed to having lost track of the Brexit process and to have lost interest in the subject, even if they had previously felt strongly about it: "It's still baffling me to be honest. Are we out of it yet?"; "It was all Brexit Brexit Brexit but how it's 'who gives a shit?' There are bigger things going on at the moment;" "I lost the will to live on it."

"Breaking international law makes us look like a bunch of muppets."

Few had followed the details of the most recent controversy over the Irish backstop, but remain voters were the most likely to have done so: "Our delightful Prime Minister is saying he's going to change the agreement he signed. It makes us look a bit stupid;" "I think he's just playing hardball. It will either go horribly wrong or he'll get what he wants. I doubt he'll get what he wants;" "They didn't want the EU to have a right to hold up goods going into Northern Ireland from the mainland, or something. It's very complicated;" "Breaking international law makes us look like a bunch of muppets."

As in the poll, most Leave voters in the focus groups considered it more important to have full control over UK laws and regulations than to have continued frictionless trade with the EU: "I'd rather have a clean break where we control the rules and decide who we trade with and have a choice. There's no point doing Brexit if you're not 100% in control."

"There's no point doing Brexit if you're not 100% in control."

Remainers were more likely to prioritise a comprehensive deal even if this meant the EU having some control over regulations that applied in the UK.

However, many of them – along with Leave voters – said they just wanted the saga to be over: "Get on with it. It needs to happen one way or the other. Negotiations are continuing on X, Y and Z but it just needs to end now."
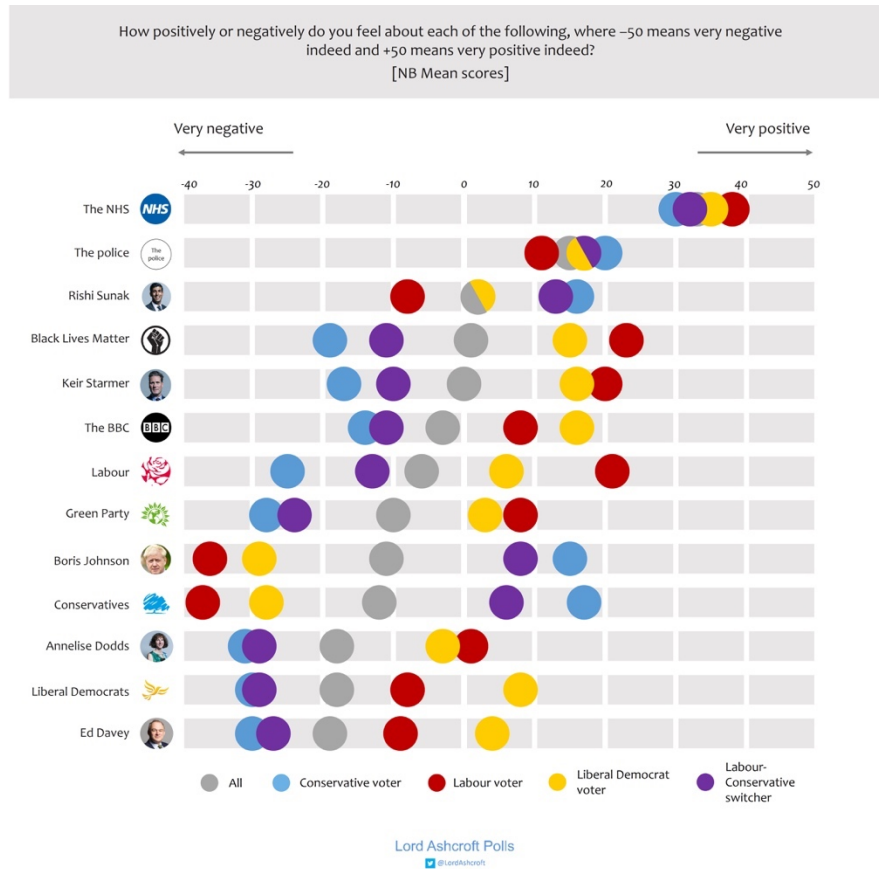
Protests

Asked what other issues they remembered from recent months, the only one spontaneously mentioned in all groups was Black Lives Matter and the surrounding protests. A very widespread view was that the subject itself was important ("It sparked a lot of conversations. It was good to shine a light on it;" "Unless you're a minority, we wouldn't know how it feels") but that conduct of the protests had been wrong, whether because they appeared to break rules on social distancing or because of violence or vandalism: "I support the right to protest but not to smash things up and set them on fire;" "I'm also disappointed in the police. They're supposed to disperse these crowds, but they didn't want to upset people. That seems to be the format of policing now;" "I think it makes people feel more racist. It needs to be discussed but things like pulling down statues are disgraceful. The media say it was peaceful but there were videos of people punching police officers."

"I'm disappointed in the police. They're supposed to disperse these crowds, but they didn't want to upset people."

Several questioned the relevance of the movement to Britain, and especially the desire to remove statues: "It should be about now and the future. Pulling down statues isn't going to do any good. We're going to bend over and allow them to take away our history;" "I don't understand Black Lives Matter. Why doesn't every life matter?" "It started in America, so I don't know why it's here. Racism in America is very different." There were also mixed views on taking a knee: "Taking a knee isn't action, it's just a gesture. If something else happens, will there be a gesture for that too?" "If you genuinely feel it, fine. I don't think people need to feel pressured;" "The best thing said about it was Dominic Raab – I'll kneel for my wife and the Queen."

3: Parties and leaders

How they rate

How positively or negatively do you feel about each of the following, where –50 means very negative indeed and +50 means very positive indeed?
[NB Mean scores]

Very negative ⟵   Very positive ⟶

Legend: All (grey) · Conservative voter (blue) · Labour voter (red) · Liberal Democrat voter (yellow) · Labour-Conservative switcher (purple)

Rows (top to bottom): The NHS, The police, Rishi Sunak, Black Lives Matter, Keir Starmer, The BBC, Labour, Green Party, Boris Johnson, Conservatives, Annalise Dodds, Liberal Democrats, Ed Davey
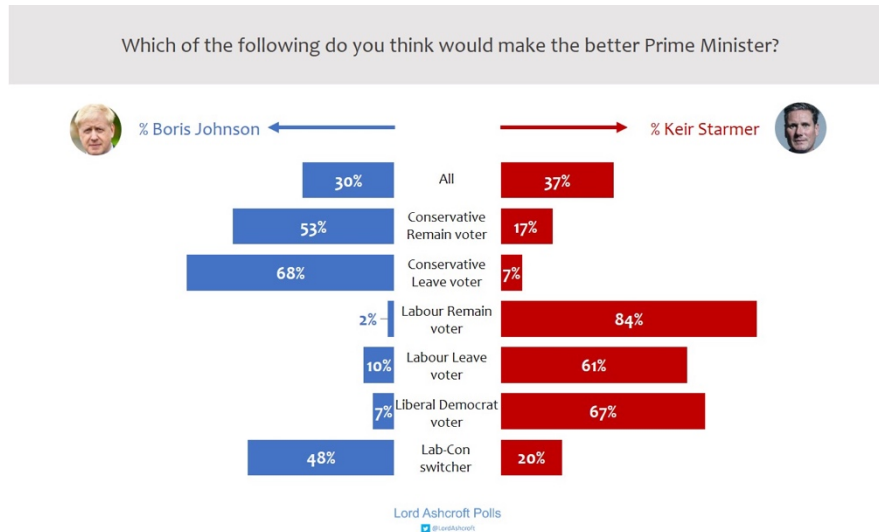
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Nicola Sturgeon was the highest rated politician among her own electorate, with a mean score of +12 among Scottish voters (and +38 among 2019 SNP voters). Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford (+3) and Chancellor Rishi Sunak (+2) were the only other politicians to achieve net positive scores. Keir Starmer received a neutral mean score of zero on a scale of -50 to +50; this is slightly higher than the Labour Party as a whole (-6). Boris Johnson (-11) and the Conservative Party (-12) received similar mean scores, as did Ed Davey (-19) and the Liberal Democrats (-18). Starmer received a higher score among 2019 Labour voters (+20) than Johnson did among 2019 Conservatives (+15). Labour-Conservative switchers gave Johnson a slightly lower score (+8) than Tories as a whole, but this was higher than the score they gave Starmer (-10). Rishi Sunak received a higher score among Labour (-8) and Lib Dem (+2) voters than Johnson. Sunak was also the only GB-wide politician to receive a net positive score among employees in both the private (+5) and public sectors (+1).

In the focus groups, Rishi Sunak was often spontaneously mentioned as having stood out during the crisis: "Rishi has stood out for me. How he addressed the public was quite reassuring. He's the most confident and competent of all of them;" "Rishi is trying novel ways to do things differently;" "He's made some very brave decisions, like furlough. I felt like I was being looked after. I think he's a star."

"Rishi has stood out for me. How he addressed the public was quite reassuring. He's the most confident and competent of all of them."
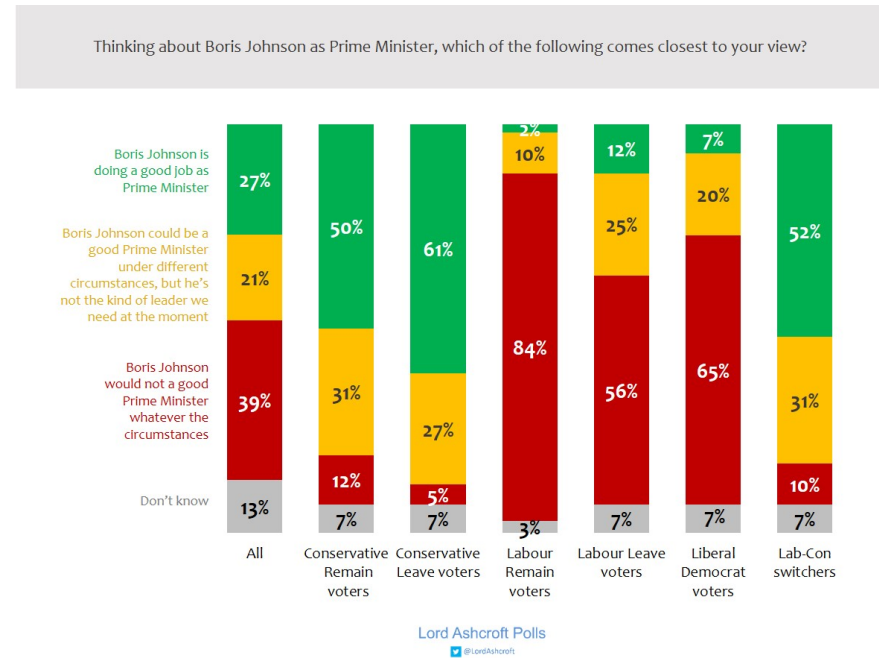
Best Prime Minister?

Which of the following do you think would make the better Prime Minister?

% Boris Johnson ← → % Keir Starmer

	% Boris Johnson	% Keir Starmer
All	30%	37%
Conservative Remain voter	53%	17%
Conservative Leave voter	68%	7%
Labour Remain voter	2%	84%
Labour Leave voter	10%	61%
Liberal Democrat voter	7%	67%
Lab-Con switcher	48%	20%

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Asked who they thought would make the best Prime Minister, 37% named Keir Starmer, 30% named Boris Johnson and 33% said they were not sure. A quarter of 2019 Conservatives said they were not sure, and a further one in ten named Starmer – who was also named by 78% of Labour voters and two thirds of Lib Dems. Labour-Conservative switchers named Johnson by 48% to 20%, with one in three saying they were not sure.

Two thirds of referendum Remain voters named Starmer, but only just over half (53%) of Leave voters named Johnson; one in three Leavers said they were not sure. Conservative Leave voters were more likely to name Johnson (68%) than Conservative Remain voters (53%).

A leader for the times?

Thinking about Boris Johnson as Prime Minister, which of the following comes closest to your view?

Boris Johnson is doing a good job as Prime Minister

Boris Johnson could be a good Prime Minister under different circumstances, but he's not the kind of leader we need at the moment

Boris Johnson would not a good Prime Minister whatever the circumstances

Don't know

|	All	Conservative Remain voters	Conservative Leave voters	Labour Remain voters	Labour Leave voters	Liberal Democrat voters	Lab-Con switchers
Good job	27%	50%	61%	2%	12%	7%	52%
Could be	21%	31%	27%	10%	25%	20%	31%
Not good	39%	12%	5%	84%	56%	65%	10%
Don't know	13%	7%	7%	3%	7%	7%	7%

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Just under four in ten (39%) said Johnson would not be a good Prime Minister whatever the circumstances. Of the remainder, 27% said he was doing a good job, and a further 21% said he could be a good PM under different circumstances but was not the kind of leader we needed at the moment.

Among 2019 Conservative voters, just under six in ten (58%) said he was doing a good job, and 27% said he could be a good PM if circumstances were different. Labour-Conservative switchers said the same by 52% to 31%, with a further 10% saying he would not be a good PM whatever the circumstances.

Preferred government

If you HAD to choose, which of the following would you prefer?
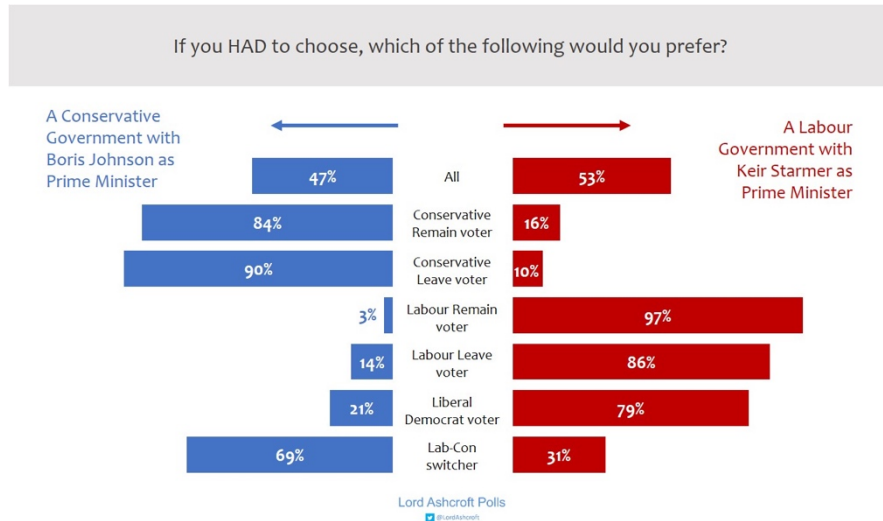
Forced to choose between a Conservative government with Boris Johnson as PM and a Labour government with Keir Starmer as PM (with no option for 'don't know'), respondents chose Labour under Starmer by 53% to 47%. Those who switched from Labour to the Conservatives in 2019 were less likely than Tory voters as a whole to say they still preferred a Tory government: 69% of them said this, with 31% saying they would now prefer a Labour government with Starmer as PM.

In a word...

From a selection of positive and negative words and phrases, those most often chosen to describe Boris Johnson were out of his depth, incompetent, stands up for Britain, dishonest, indecisive, arrogant and unreliable.
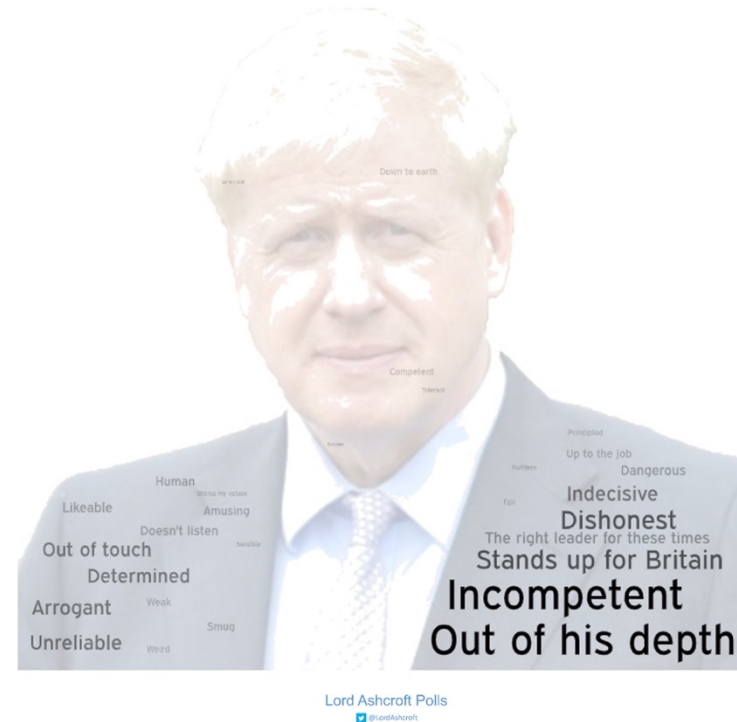
Some of these criticisms were echoed in our focus groups: "He's indecisive. 'Go to the pub,' 'don't go to the pub';" "Treading water. Overwhelmed. I don't think this is what he expected;" "Trying to please people. Goes with the flow. You can tell there's another man behind him, a more powerful force;" "Initially he did quite well, at the helm of government leading the country through difficult times. But the longer it went on the more flaky he seemed to become. I don't feel so confident in his judgment any longer;" "He doesn't seem in control, doesn't seem to have a handle on it. There is no logic."

Some were worried about the frequent imposition of new rules: "A dictator. We might as well be in Russia under Putin." ("Give over. He can't even dictate his own hairline," was the response to that.)

"The longer it went on the more flaky he seemed to become. I don't feel so confident in his judgment any longer."

However, as with the government as a whole, there was considerable sympathy for the Prime Minister's position: "He says silly things but he comes across as very genuine and that he does want to help;" "He's doing the best he possibly could. He nearly died as well;" "Initially I thought he was a bit of a joke character but at the beginning of this I felt we were in fairly safe hands. It's very difficult for them to get everything right. I think he's doing as good a job as he can in these times;" "He's in a difficult position but he's taken on the challenge so we should cut him some slack."

"My view has changed for the better. He's stuck by the British people and tried his damnedest to help."

A number of participants, including some who had voted Labour or Lib Dem at the 2019 election, said their opinion of him had actually improved during the crisis: "I wasn't a fan, but I think he's done pretty well. It's a job no-one wants right now, and I've got to respect him for what he's done;" "My view has changed for the better. He's stuck by the British people and tried his damnedest to help. He's done marvellous for the people under the circumstances;" "He's grown on me a little bit. Having covid and his reaction to it and being empathetic to the country. He hasn't shied away from it, he's tried to lead the way."

Johnson's critics did not necessarily dismiss the idea of supporting him at the next election: "Boris would have to pull something out of the bag. What will he be able to do to make us happy again and make us trust him?" "If Boris can deliver, it might be a different conversation in three- or four-years' time."

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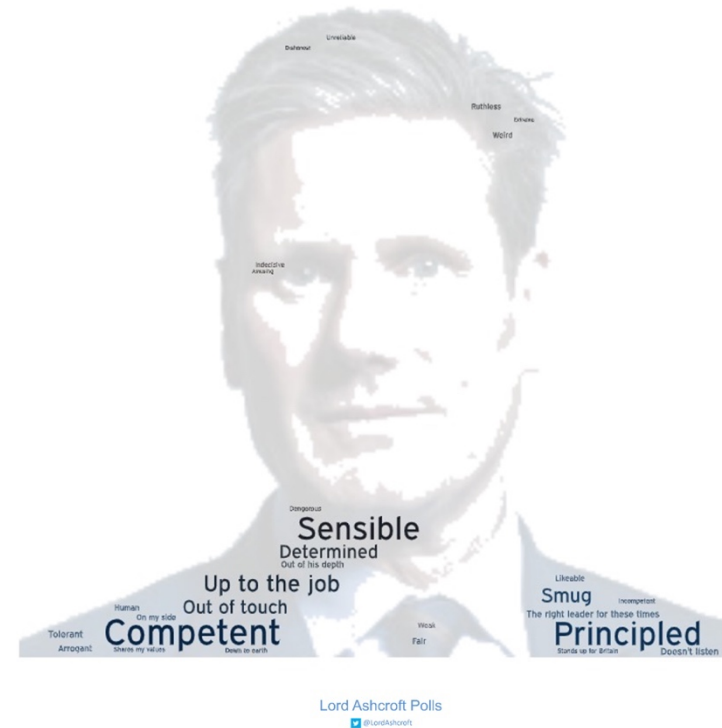
The words most often chosen to describe Keir Starmer in our poll were competent, principled, sensible, up to the job and smug – though 36% said 'don't know', compared to 10% for Johnson.

On the whole, Keir Starmer had made a good first impression on our focus group participants, however they had voted in 2019: "Talks the talk, makes you feel reassured that he's strong and knows what he wants to do. But it's easy to be in opposition – he hasn't got to deliver;" "I've been impressed.

Even today with the new restrictions he very clearly said he was supportive and it was the right thing to do. Jeremy Corbyn would have gone mad and started shouting;" "Articulate, confident. Surgical;" "He's very strong and has challenged Boris a lot. It's too early to tell but he's a lawyer so he's more of a challenge to Boris and will be able to interrogate him;" "You get the impression he has worked hard to get where he is rather than being part of some old boys' club;" "Prime Ministerial. Charming. Leadershippy;" "He's the kind of Labour leader I would traditionally vote for. Corbyn wasn't and I didn't like what he was on."

"He's very strong and has challenged Boris a lot. It's too early to tell but he's a lawyer so he's more of a challenge to Boris and will be able to interrogate him."

Not everyone was convinced, however: "He took a knee. That's the measure of the man. It shows he's weak, he will go with whatever he thinks people will like;" "I get the impression he will do whatever it takes and say whatever needs to be said to get elected. Smarmy is the word that springs to mind. He doesn't seem genuine;" "Mr Hindsight."

Thinking about Keir Starmer as leader of the Labour Party, which of the following comes closest to your view?

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All change?

Nearly six in ten voters in our poll (59%) said they thought Keir Starmer was a very different kind of leader from Jeremy Corbyn, but most of these said they thought the Labour Party as a whole had not changed much since he became leader.

"Starmer is more middle ground. People complain he's just another Tony Blair, but why is that bad?"
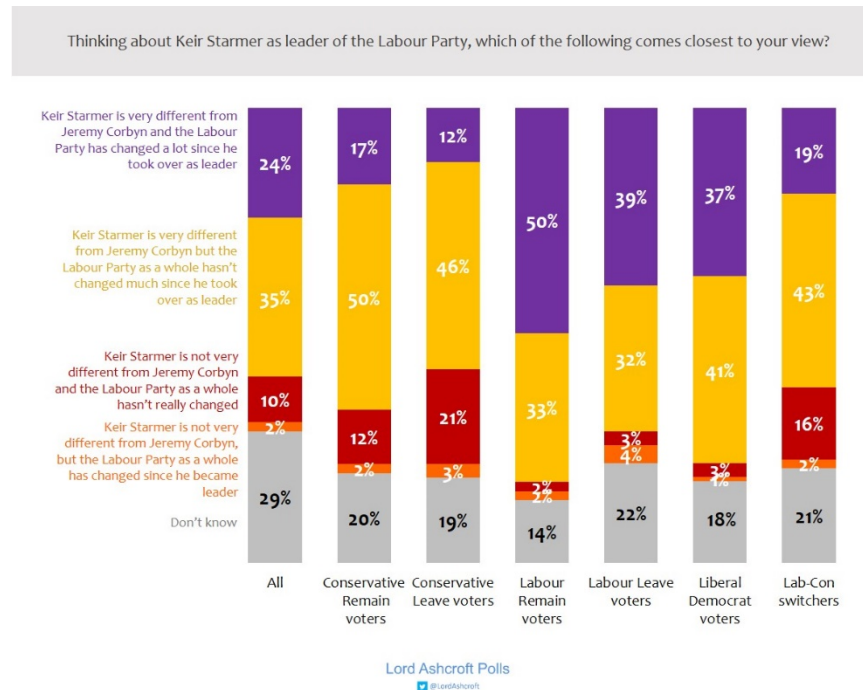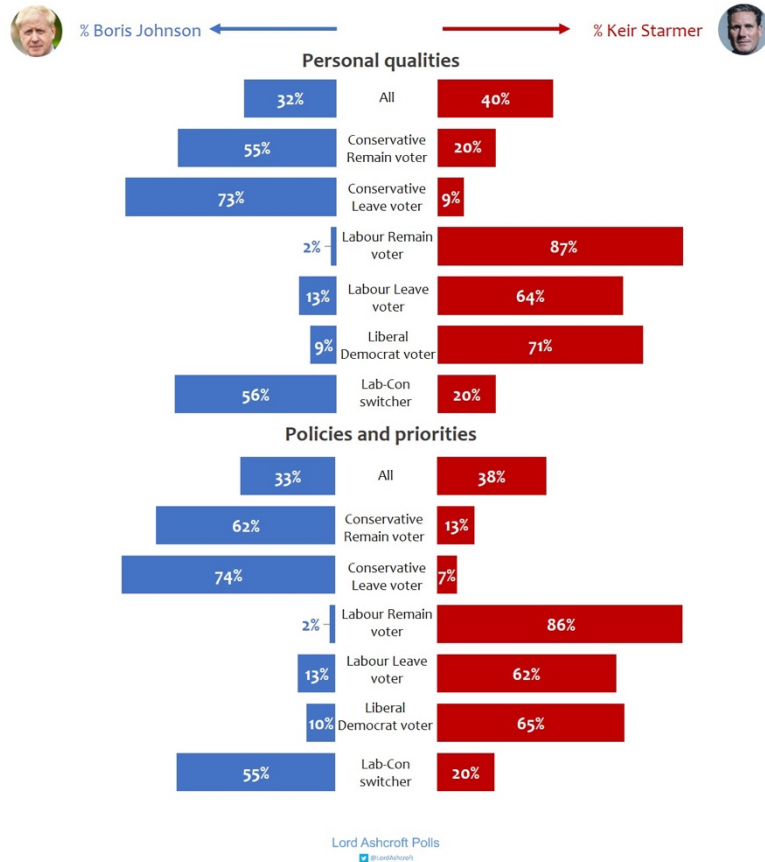
That Starmer was a very different leader from Jeremy Corbyn was also the prevailing view in our focus groups: "I'm Jewish so I'm really pleased they changed leaders. Starmer is more middle ground. People complain he's just another Tony Blair, but why is that bad?" "It's completely different. Under Corbyn they punished aspiration. Starmer is more towards the centre, more electable;" "Seems like an all-round decent guy from what I've seen so far."

"He was Corbyn's right-hand man. They were as thick as thieves."

However, some questioned how, if he was so very different, Starmer worked so closely with his predecessor in his shadow cabinet: "He was Jeremy Corbyn's right-hand man. They were as thick as thieves. He says one thing six months ago and now he changes his mind. He's a sneaky man."

Who brings what?

When it comes to the **personal qualities / policies and priorities** that we need a leader to have right now, who do think would make the better Prime Minister – Boris Johnson or Keir Starmer?

% Boris Johnson ← → % Keir Starmer

Personal qualities

	% Boris Johnson	% Keir Starmer
All	32%	40%
Conservative Remain voter	55%	20%
Conservative Leave voter	73%	9%
Labour Remain voter	2%	87%
Labour Leave voter	13%	64%
Liberal Democrat voter	9%	71%
Lab-Con switcher	56%	20%

Policies and priorities

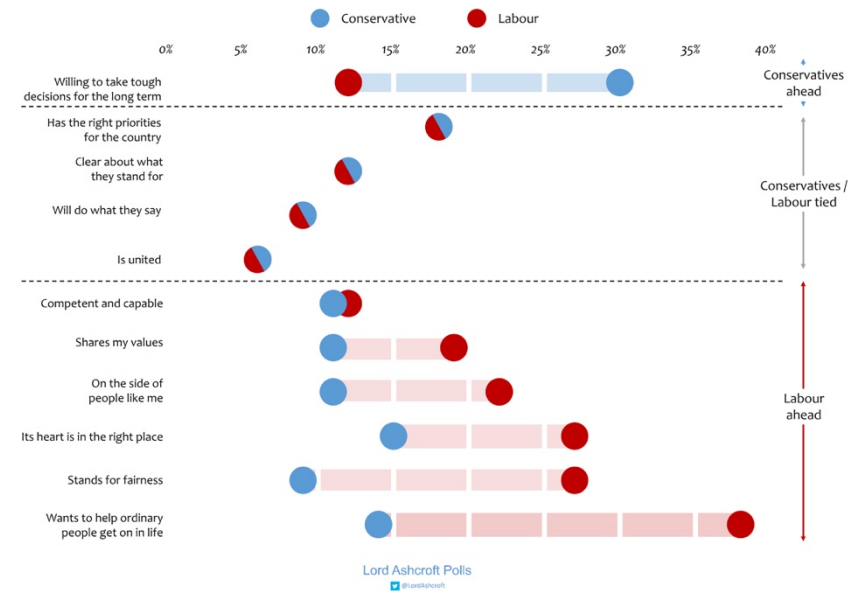|	% Boris Johnson	% Keir Starmer
All	33%	38%
Conservative Remain voter	62%	13%
Conservative Leave voter	74%	7%
Labour Remain voter	2%	86%
Labour Leave voter	13%	62%
Liberal Democrat voter	10%	65%
Lab-Con switcher	55%	20%

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Asked which leader had the personal qualities needed in a Prime Minister at the moment, voters named Starmer over Johnson by 8 points. When it came to their policies and priorities, they chose Starmer by 5 points.

Seven in ten 2019 Conservatives named Johnson on each measure, compared to just over half of Labour-Conservative switchers.

Party attributes

Here are some things people have said about the political parties. Please tick all the descriptions you think apply to each of the following parties.

Conservative ● Labour ●

		Conservatives ahead
Willing to take tough decisions for the long term		
Has the right priorities for the country		Conservatives / Labour tied
Clear about what they stand for		
Will do what they say		
Is united		
Competent and capable		Labour ahead
Shares my values		
On the side of people like me		
Its heart is in the right place		
Stands for fairness		
Wants to help ordinary people get on in life		

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Voters were asked whether various descriptions applied to each political party. The Conservatives led on one measure, being willing to take tough decisions for the long term. They were tied with Labour on having the right priorities for the country, being clear about what they stand for, and being likely to do what they say. Labour led on all other attributes, including being competent and capable. The Conservatives held a clear lead on all these measures during the 2019 election.

A long way off, but...

As things stand today, how likely would you say it is that you will end up voting for each of the following parties at the next election - where zero means "there is no chance I will vote for that party", and 100 means "I will definitely vote for that party".
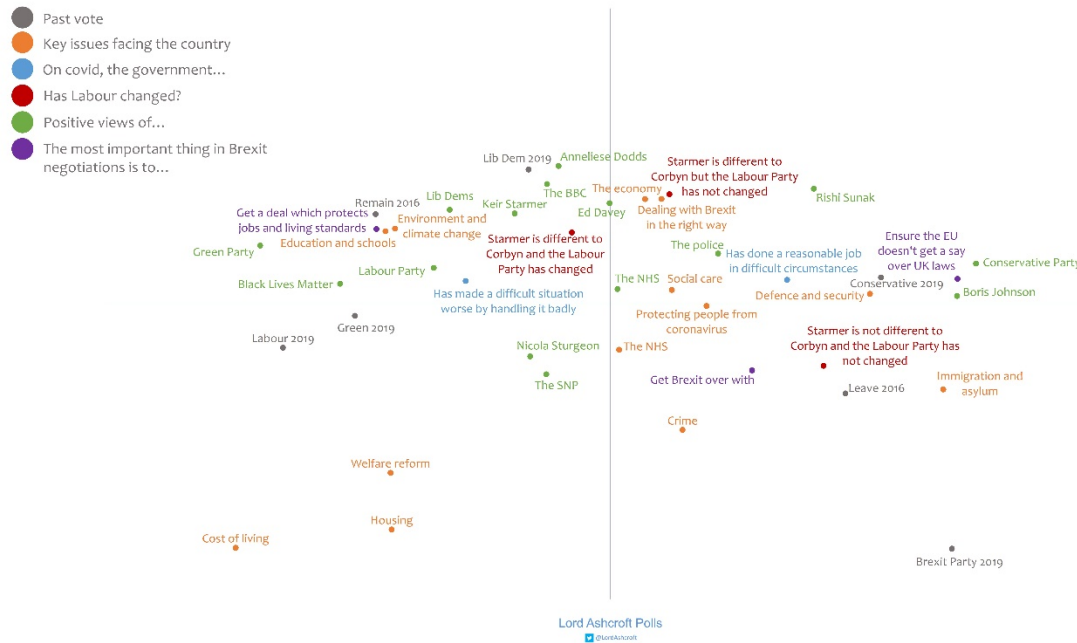[NB Mean scores, 2019 General Election vote]

Definitely not vote for that party ← → Definitely will vote for that party

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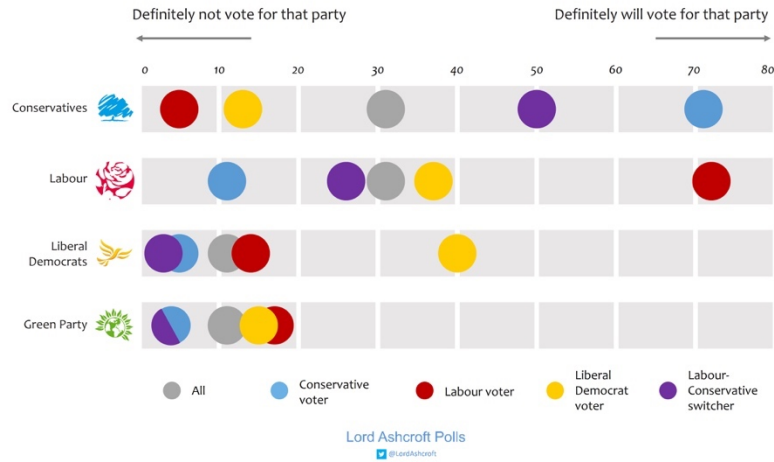
When we asked people how likely they currently thought they were to end up voting for each party at the next election, Labour and the Conservatives were tied on a mean score of 31/100. The two parties' voters were almost equally likely to say they would vote as they did in 2019 (71/100 among Tories, 72/100 among Labour voters); Lab-Con switchers gave a mean likelihood of 50/100 for voting Conservative again, and 26/100 for voting Labour. 2019 Lib Dem voters said they were almost as likely to switch to Labour (37/100) as to stay with the Lib Dems (40/100). SNP voters gave the highest likelihood of staying with their 2019 party (86/100). Self-employed people gave a higher likelihood of voting Conservative (37/100) than Labour (25/100), as did private sector employees (36/100 to 28/100). Public sector workers said they were more likely to vote Labour (34/100 to 29/100).

4: The political map

Map of Britain's New Landscape

Legend:
- Past vote (grey)
- Key issues facing the country (orange)
- On covid, the government... (blue)
- Has Labour changed? (red)
- Positive views of... (green)
- The most important thing in Brexit negotiations is to... (purple)

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Our political map shows how different issues, attributes, personalities and opinions interact with one another. The closer the plot points are to each other the more closely related they are. We see that those who think the government has made the covid situation worse by handling it badly are most likely to be found in the already non-Conservative-supporting part of the map. Those who think the government has done a reasonable job in difficult circumstances are more likely to be in broadly Conservative territory, but the view is not confined to the strongest supporters of the Tories and Boris Johnson.

The view that the Labour Party has changed since Keir Starmer became leader is most likely to be found close to Labour/Lib Dem territory, while the idea that he is different from Corbyn but the party as a whole has not changed is in the area where Labour and Tory support overlap (where they most need to make progress on this argument).

On Brexit, those who feel the priority should be to get a trade deal with the EU are very close to those who voted Remain in 2016. Leave and Tory-voting territory is where we find those most likely to say the priority is to have full control over UK laws – and those who simply want to get Brexit over with.

ABOUT LORD ASHCROFT

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

Lord Ashcroft's political works include:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Diagnosis of Defeat: Labour's Turn to Smell the Coffee

His other books include:

Victoria Cross Heroes

Special Ops Heroes

Heroes of the Skies

George Cross Heroes

Special Forces Heroes

Victoria Cross Heroes Vol. 2

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