



BRITAIN'S **PARTY MEMBERS**

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01 Introduction: about the party members project

Party membership may have fallen from the heights it reached in the 1950s, but it remains absolutely vital to the health of our representative democracy. Also, as we have seen with the surge of new members, first, into the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn and, more recently, into the Greens and Reform UK, people still do want to join parties. This is despite the common wisdom that, these days, members no longer matter.

Members, we argue, *do* matter – for all sorts of reasons. They contribute significantly to election campaigns and party finances. They are the people who pick party leaders. They constitute the pool from which parties choose their candidates. They help anchor the parties to the principles and people that the members came into politics to promote and protect. They may even have a say on whether a party goes into government, at least in the event that no one party achieves a majority. This is currently a distinct possibility given the fragmentation of Britain's party system.

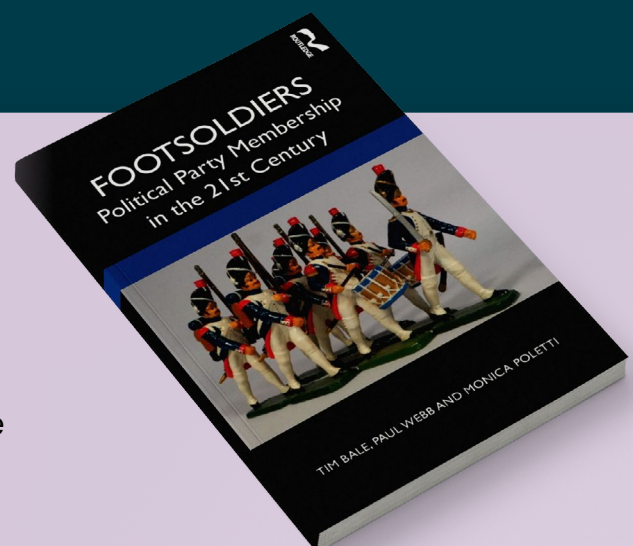
Since just after the 2015 general election, and with funding from the UK's social science research council, the ESRC and, latterly, Research England, and with the help of YouGov, we surveyed the members of the country's political parties.

The surveys, which are from 2015, 2017, 2019 and 2024, give us a unique insight into the UK's party members. In this report we rely on the findings of fieldwork conducted just after the last general election.

In the pages that follow, we focus on who Britain's party members are, their ideologies, identities, role in campaigning, and their views on leadership. We also explore their attachment to their own party and what they feel about other parties – something that may play a part in what happens should the next general election result in a hung parliament, the result of which would require parties to team up, either in a formal coalition or a looser arrangement.

Although we will also be putting a version on our project's webpage (esrcpartymembersproject.org), we thought – just as we did with our [Grassroots pamphlet](#) in 2018 – that it would be handy to produce a print copy that can be easily read and passed around. We hope, however it comes to you, that this document might kick off a worthwhile discussion at ward, branch or association meetings. Feel free to share and/or copy it, and to come back to us to discuss or dispute our findings. We're all ears (or eyes) at partymembersproject@gmail.com.

Should you want to read about party membership in more detail – and from the parties' points of view as well as the members themselves – you might like our book, [Footsoldiers: Political Party Membership in the 21st Century](#), available on Amazon and other online bookstores.

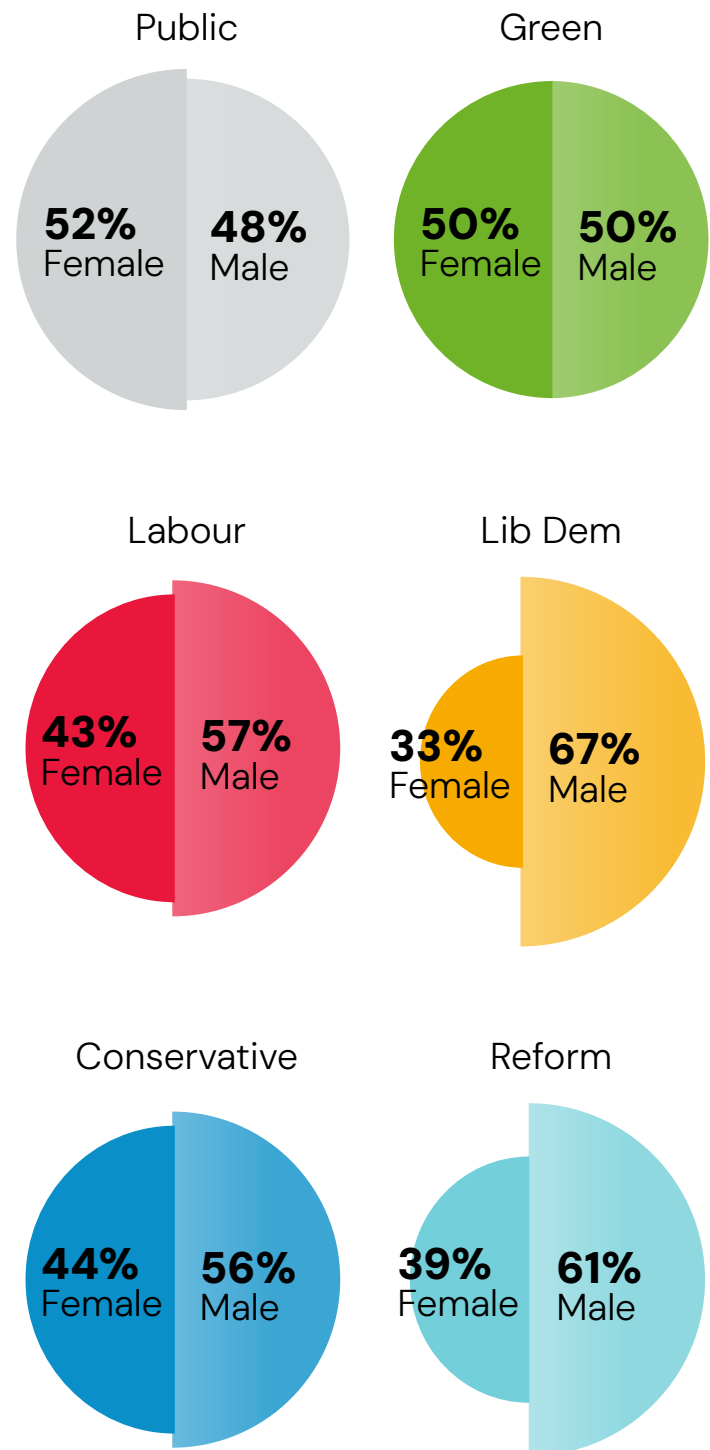


02 Who are the party members?



Given that only around 2 per cent of Brits belong to a political party these days, anyone who's made the decision to join one is, almost by definition, unusual. The question is: how unusual? In what ways do the members of the five parties we focus on differ from the general public and from those who simply vote for the parties rather than join them? It's also worth asking whether party members are pretty much alike, irrespective of which party they belong to. Or are there obvious, systematic differences between the members of each party?

Figure 1: Most parties' members skew male



Let's start with gender.

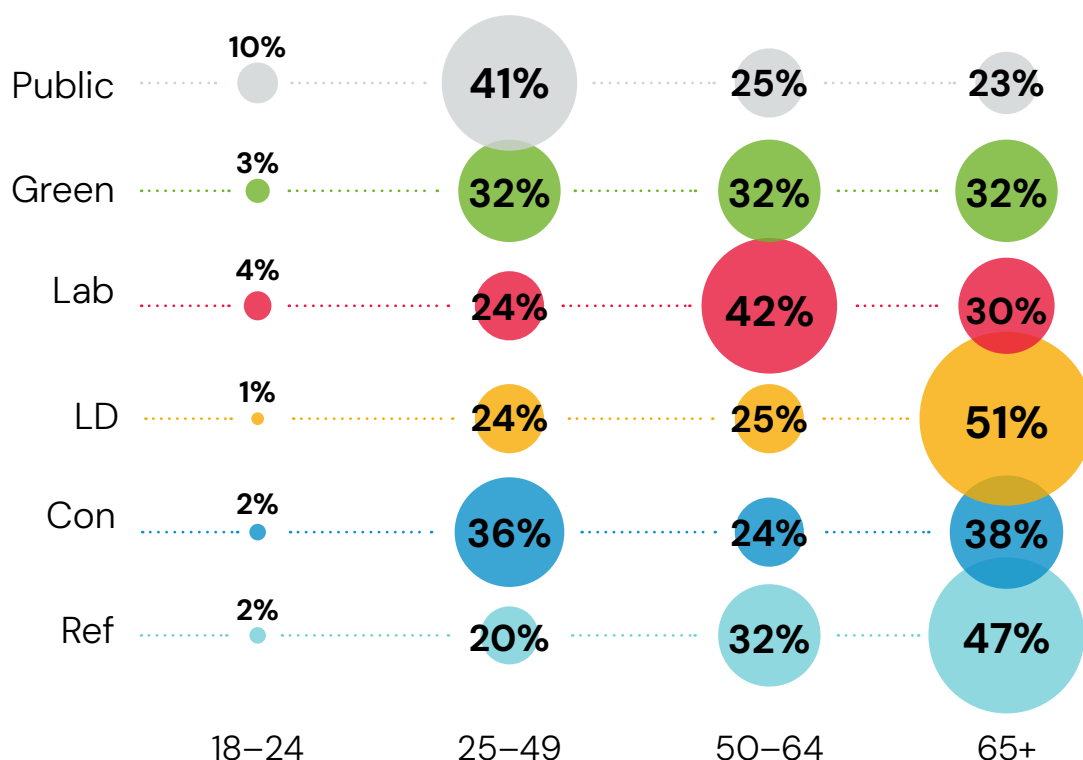
In the population as a whole, women slightly outnumber men – largely because they tend to live a little longer. This is reflected in our voter sample. When we look at our samples of party members, however, two things are immediately obvious (Fig 1).

Firstly, significantly more men than women belong to Britain's political parties. Secondly, with one exception, that applies to the membership of left-wing as well as right-wing parties. Only the Greens can claim to be truly gender balanced. At the other end of the ideological spectrum, Reform UK (and, to a lesser extent, the Conservatives) clearly have something of a 'woman problem'. That said, it is striking that the membership of the Liberal Democrats (hereafter, Lib Dems), who, right now at least, can reasonably be thought of as on the centre-left, skews very strongly male. This is something the party seriously needs to think about.

Age

Joining a political party is much like voting; it's not a young person's game (Fig 2). Perhaps that will change with the founding of a new left-wing party by Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana, or the election of the 'eco-populist' Green leader, Zack Polanski. There aren't many Gen Z-ers (or even millennials) in the membership of the five parties we look at. In none of these parties does the proportion of 18–24-year-olds rise above 4 per cent, compared to nearly 10 per cent in the adult population.

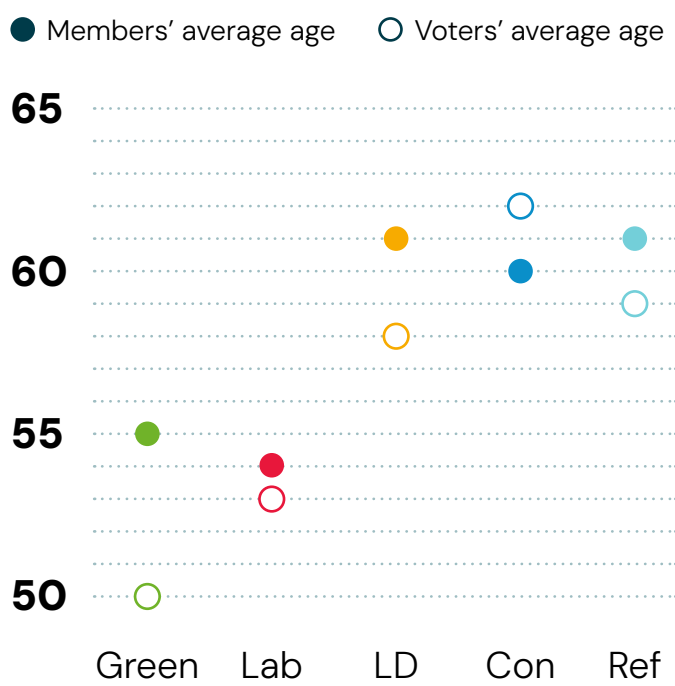
Figure 2: Parties aren't attracting many young members



None of this means, of course, that every one of Britain's party members is a boomer or Gen X-er. But most are. Once again, though, there is a big difference between Green and Labour members, on the one hand, and those who belong to the Conservatives and Reform UK, on the other. Take the figure for those aged 65 and over. For Labour and the Greens, the proportion of pensioner members is not so far off that in the adult population as a whole, at around 30 per cent. In contrast, more Conservative and Reform UK members fall into that category. As for the Lib Dems, it is actually half.

Averages can be misleading, but they can still tell a story. And in the case of the UK's parties, the averages suggest that the bulk of members are middle-aged. If we calculate the (mean) average age for membership of each party (Fig 3) we find some variation, but not much. Taken as a whole, Britain's party members are, on average, 56 years old, although Green and Labour members are, on average, around five years younger than their counterparts in other parties. With the slight exception of the Greens, there isn't much of a mismatch either between a party's members, on the one hand, and its voters, on the other.

Figure 3: On average, parties' members are fifty- and sixty-somethings – but then so are their voters



Class

If it is true to say that most party members are middle aged, then even more of them are middle class. True, more Brits than many assume (and some 57 per cent of our voter sample) fall into the ABC1 category (working or having worked in managerial, professional or supervisory roles), compared to just 43 per cent we can classify as C2DE (manual workers and beneficiaries).

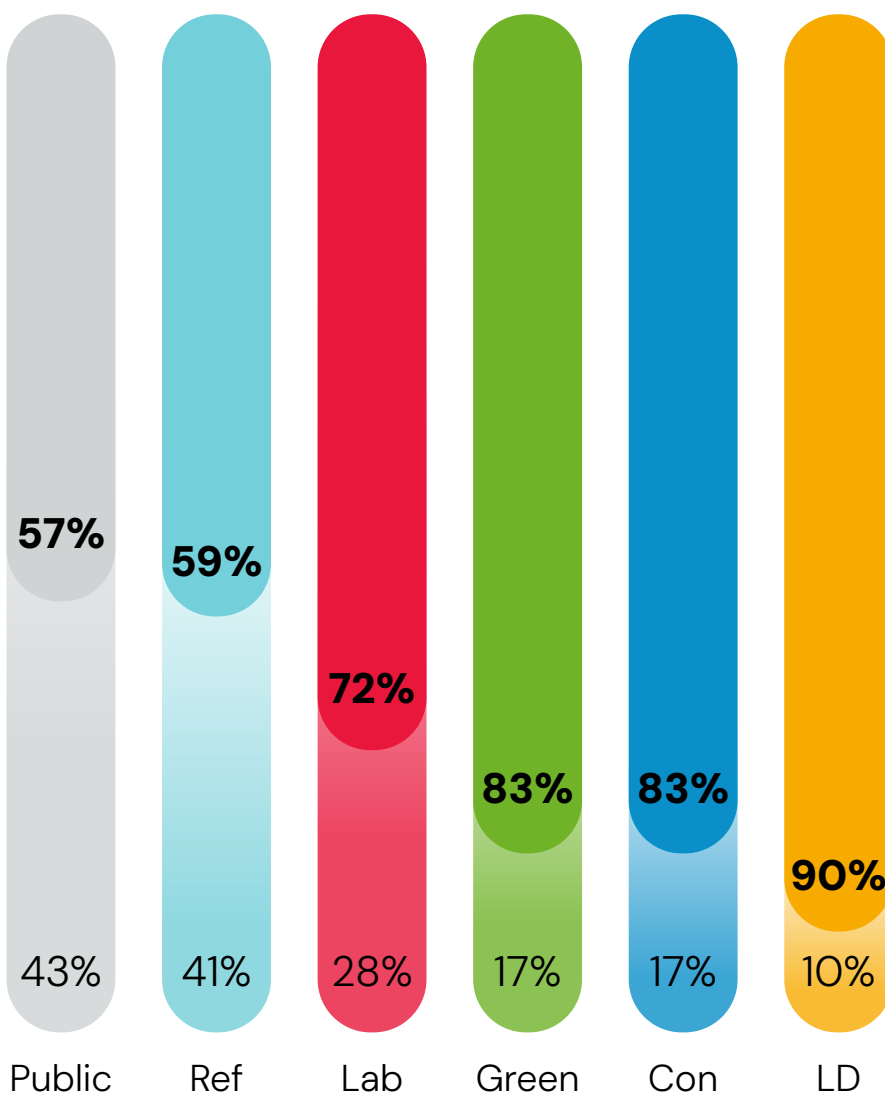
But the proportion of ABC1s (middle class) amongst the members of the country's political parties is significantly higher, at around 80 per cent, rising to 90 per cent for the Lib Dems. The proportion of C2DEs (working class) is consequently much lower (Fig 4).

Indeed, the only party that matches the class profile (strictly speaking, the 'social grade' profile) of the country as a whole is Reform UK, further boosting its claim to be the party of 'the people'.

Figure 4: Party members are overwhelmingly middle class – with one exception, Reform's

Middle class

ABC1



Working class

C2DE

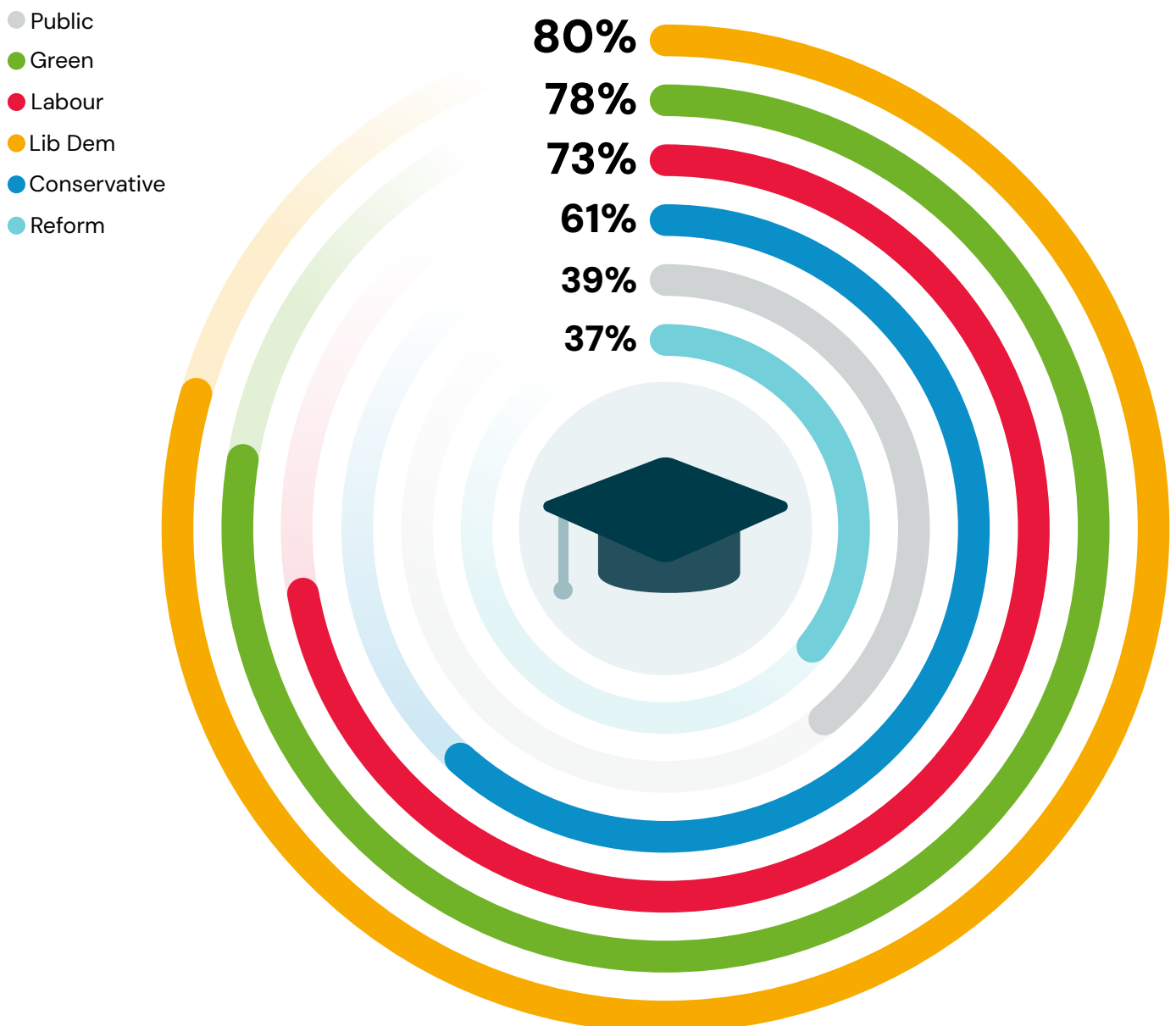
Education

Middle-class children have historically been more likely to go to university than those from working class families. This is something that, sadly, is still true (albeit slightly less so) today. Partly as a result, people who belong to political parties are more likely to be graduates than the rest of the population. If they belong to one of the parties on the 'progressive' side of politics, between seven and eight out of ten members have been to university. The membership of the Conservative Party appears more representative of the general public on this score, which may be surprising given that Conservative members tend to be older and, therefore, would have been in their

late-teens and early twenties when fewer people as a whole went to university. It may be the case, however, that this age effect is partly cancelled out by the overwhelmingly middle-class nature of the party's membership.

What really stands out, though, is how few Reform members are graduates (Fig 5). Education is now one of the most obvious differentiators between those who vote Green, Labour and Lib Dem, on the one hand, and those who vote for Reform (and to a lesser extent the Conservatives), on the other. It should, perhaps, come as no surprise, then, that the same goes for the country's party members.

Figure 5: Members of the 'progressive' parties are most likely to be graduates, Reform members much less so



Ethnicity

Britain's ethnic minorities are significantly less likely to turn out to vote at elections than the rest of the population. They are, it seems, even less likely to join one of the country's political parties. Interestingly, there is very little difference in this respect between the 'progressive' and right-wing parties (Fig 6). Members of the latter may be slightly more likely to be white British but very few members of the former come from ethnic minorities. Given the UK is only likely to become more multicultural over time – already some 18 per cent of the population are from an ethnic minority – this is clearly a deficit that all parties need to address.

Figure 6: Ethnic minorities aren't well represented in party memberships

Lib Dem



Green



Labour



Conservative



Reform

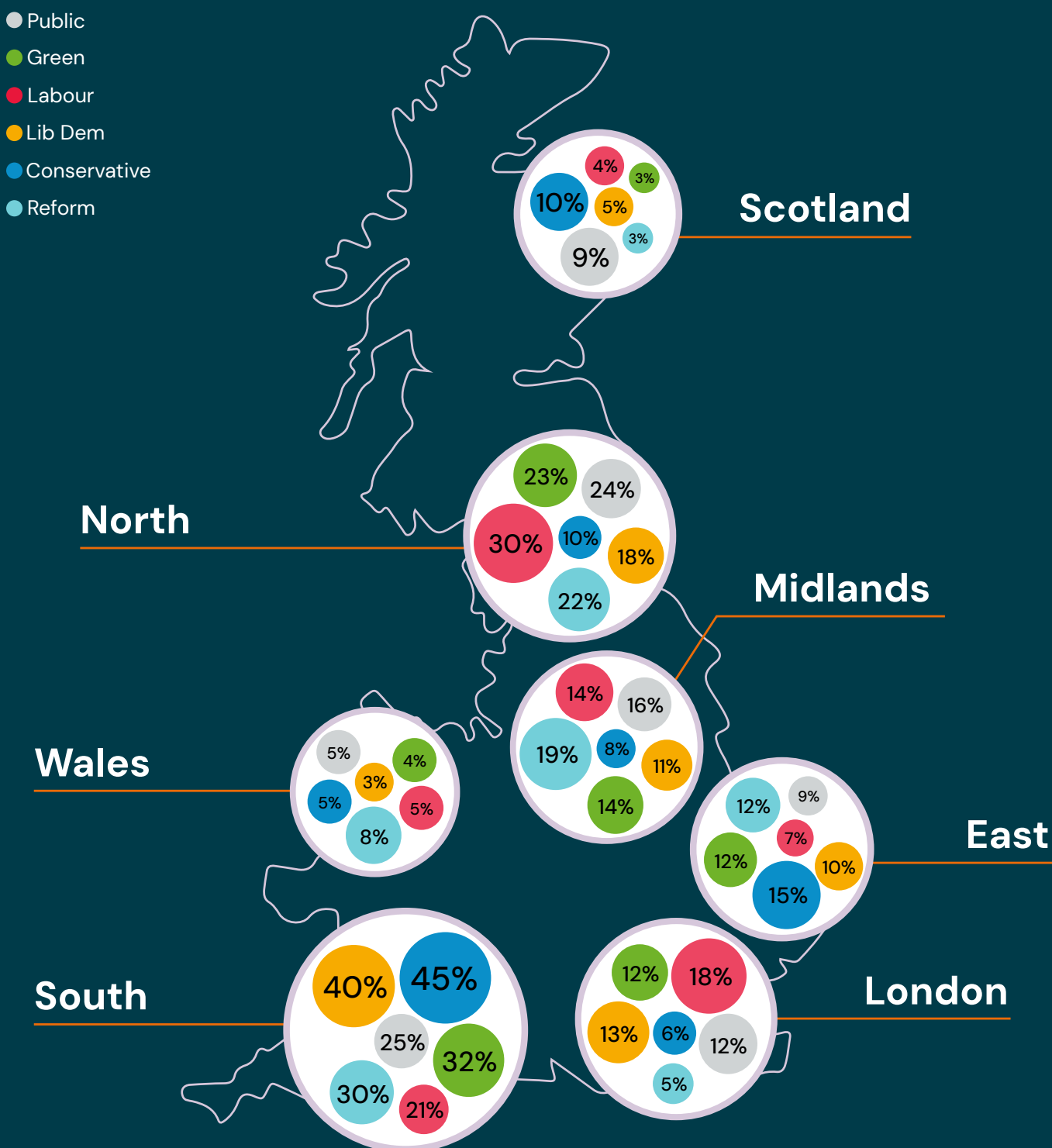


Region

In terms of where members live (Fig 7), Reform and the Conservatives recruit a fair proportion of their members from Scotland and Wales, which bodes well for upcoming elections to the Welsh Senedd and the Scottish Parliament. As for England, the Lib Dems (and to a lesser extent, the Greens) appear to be the most 'southern' parties when it comes to membership. This is perhaps not surprising when we look at the distribution of their vote in 2024.

Reform can claim to be rather more representative than the other parties of the UK, geographically speaking. This is true in the sense that relatively few of its members are from London and the South East, and relatively more of them are from the Midlands and the North, if compared with members of other parties.

Figure 7: Party members come disproportionately from Southern England



03 Ideology, issues and identity



The idea that the entire country is engaged in, even consumed by, some kind of 'culture war', is overblown. There is no doubt that topics such as Europe, immigration, feminism, net zero and the nation's history (and in particular its imperial legacy) loom larger than when elections were more often than not dominated by debates about the economy, tax and spend, and public services. Nor can there be any doubt that opinion on those more 'cultural' questions is often highly polarised, with parties on the left and centre-left tending towards social liberalism and those on the right tending towards what some label as 'authoritarian' or, at least, socially conservative world views. This polarisation is obvious when we explore the views of parties'

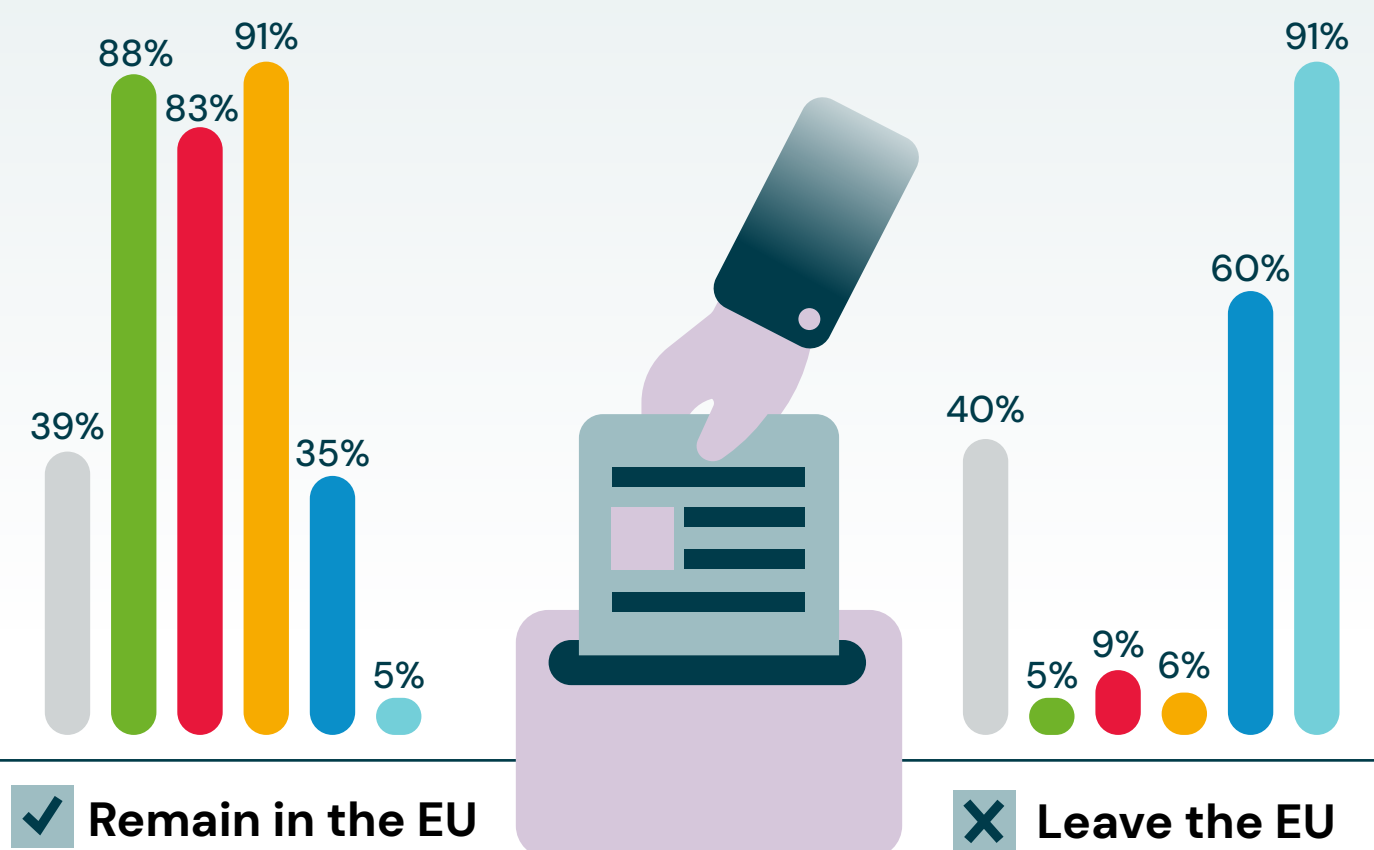
voters. It is even more obvious when we examine the views of their members.

European Union

Let's start with Europe, if only to note the obvious – namely that hardly any members of the Greens, Labour and the Lib Dems voted 'Leave'. Eight or nine out of ten voted 'Remain' (Fig 8). The same proportion of Reform members voted 'Leave' and, although support for Britain's withdrawal from the EU among Conservative members was significantly lower than among Reform members, it nevertheless represented a healthy majority.

Figure 8: Party members' 2016 Brexit vote: two tribes

Public Green Labour Lib Dem Conservative Reform



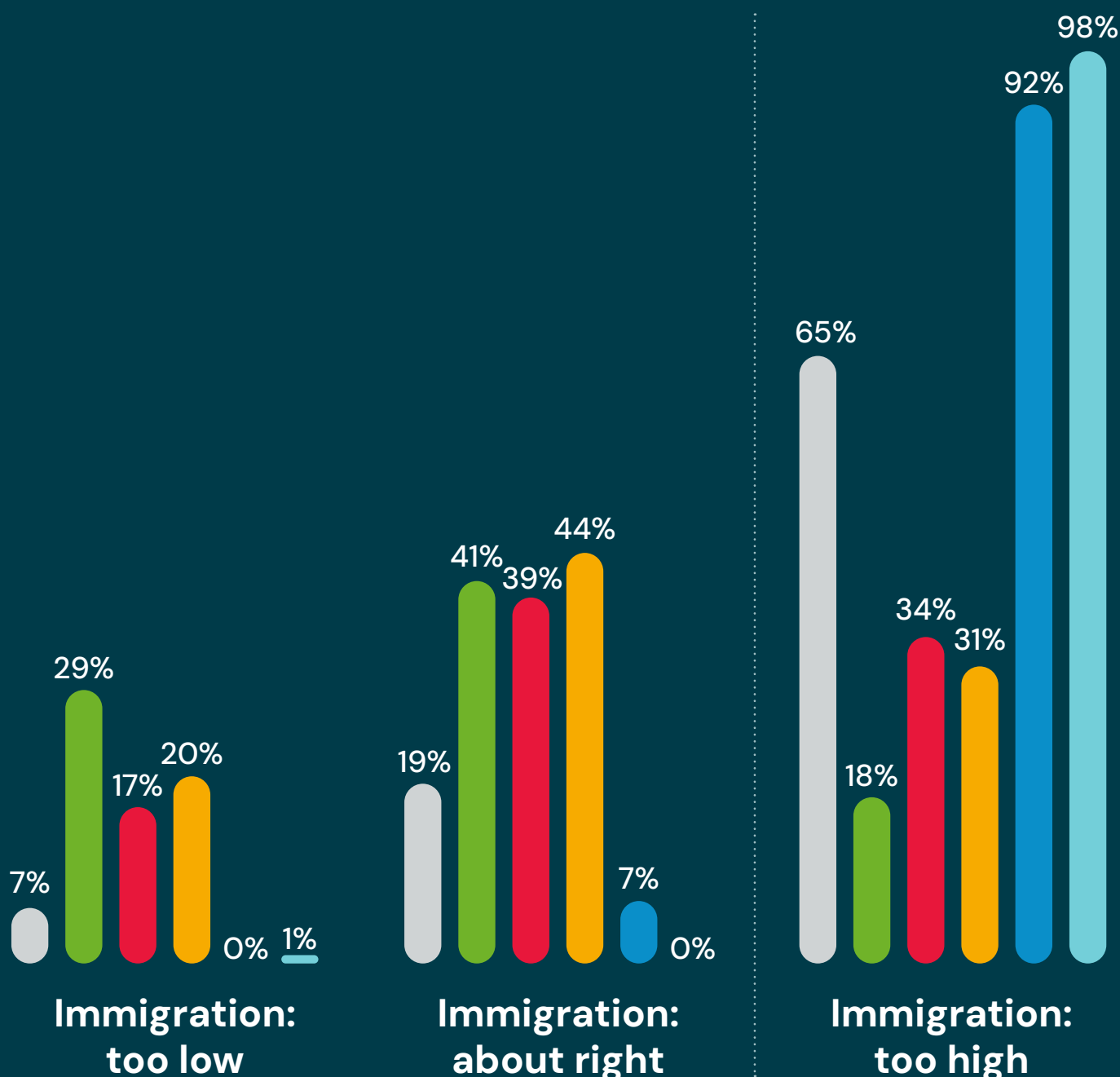
Immigration

On immigration, we asked party members whether they thought the numbers entering Britain over the last ten years had been 'too high', 'too low' or 'about right'. Once again, the difference between the answers from members of the 'progressive' parties – the Greens, Labour and the Lib Dems – and their right-wing counterparts are glaring (Fig 9). This is true even if people who voted for those first three parties take a rather less permissive attitude

compared to the attitudes of party members. Fewer than a fifth of Green Party members believe immigration to have been too high in the last decade. Around a third of Labour and Lib Dem members feel the same way. Among people who've joined the Conservatives and Reform, however, negative attitudes toward immigration are near-universal and, in both cases, even more negative than those displayed by voters.

Figure 9: Party members and immigration: two tribes again

● Public ● Green ● Labour ● Lib Dem ● Conservative ● Reform

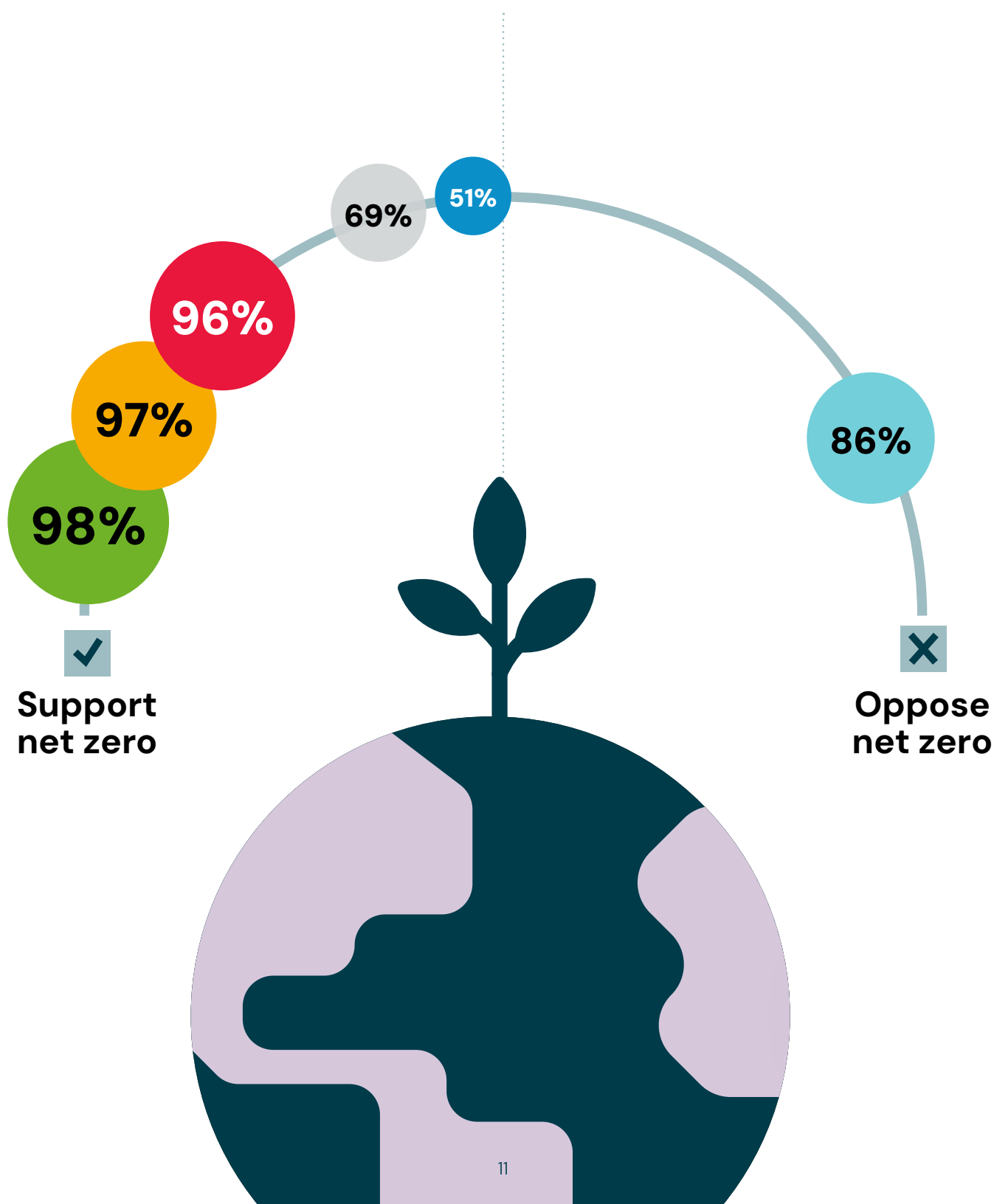


Net zero

Attitudes toward the government cutting carbon emissions to reach net zero are similarly polarised (Fig 10). The only difference is that support for the policy is almost as strong among Green, Labour and Lib Dem voters as it is among the party members. Meanwhile, Reform, and especially Conservative, voters are more sympathetic to it than commonly supposed.

Figure 10: Reform members are out of step with the public on net zero

● Public ● Green ● Labour ● Lib Dem ● Conservative ● Reform



Views on women’s role in society

It is not uncommon nowadays to read about backlashes against advances made by women over the last few decades. While we didn’t ask about this specifically, we did tap into it indirectly by asking whether members (and voters) agreed with the idea that men and women each have different roles to play in society (Fig 11). Big differences emerge between party members of the three ‘progressive’ parties and their counterparts on the right. There may be more agreement than we might imagine among

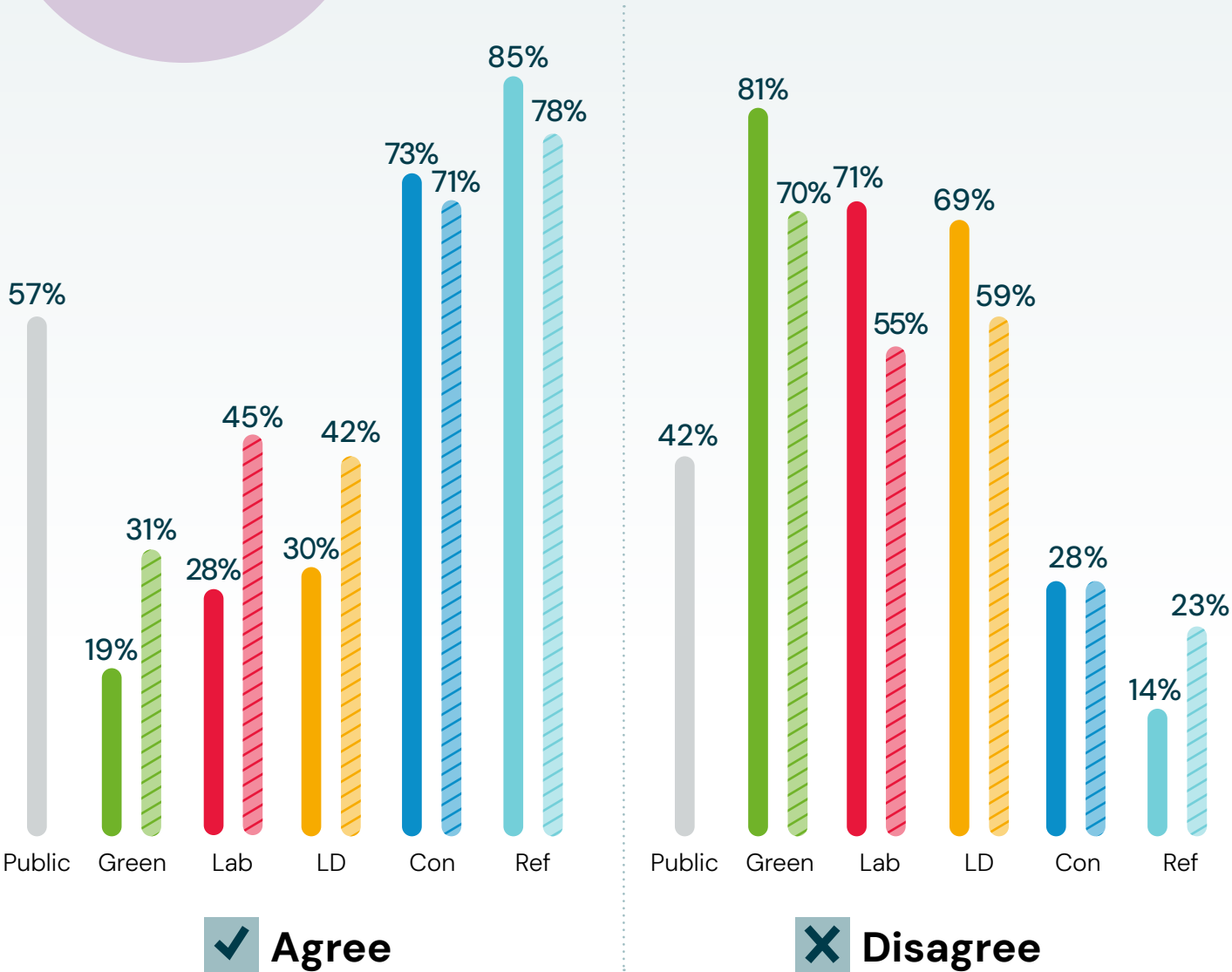
members of (and even more so, voters for) the Greens, Labour and Lib Dems; but it is obvious that a majority don’t like the idea of ‘separate spheres’. When, however, we look at Conservative, and especially Reform, members, the polarities are reversed. Reflecting the views of voters, over seven or eight out of ten of them respectively think men and women have different roles to play. What the female politicians who seem happy to be called ‘Farage’s fillies’ think on this question would be fascinating to know.

“
Men and women have different roles to play in society.”

Figure 11: Progressive parties’ members and voters are considerably less keen on the idea of ‘separate spheres’

Percentage of responses who agree with the statement

● Members’ responses ● 2024 voters’ responses



Views on Britain's history

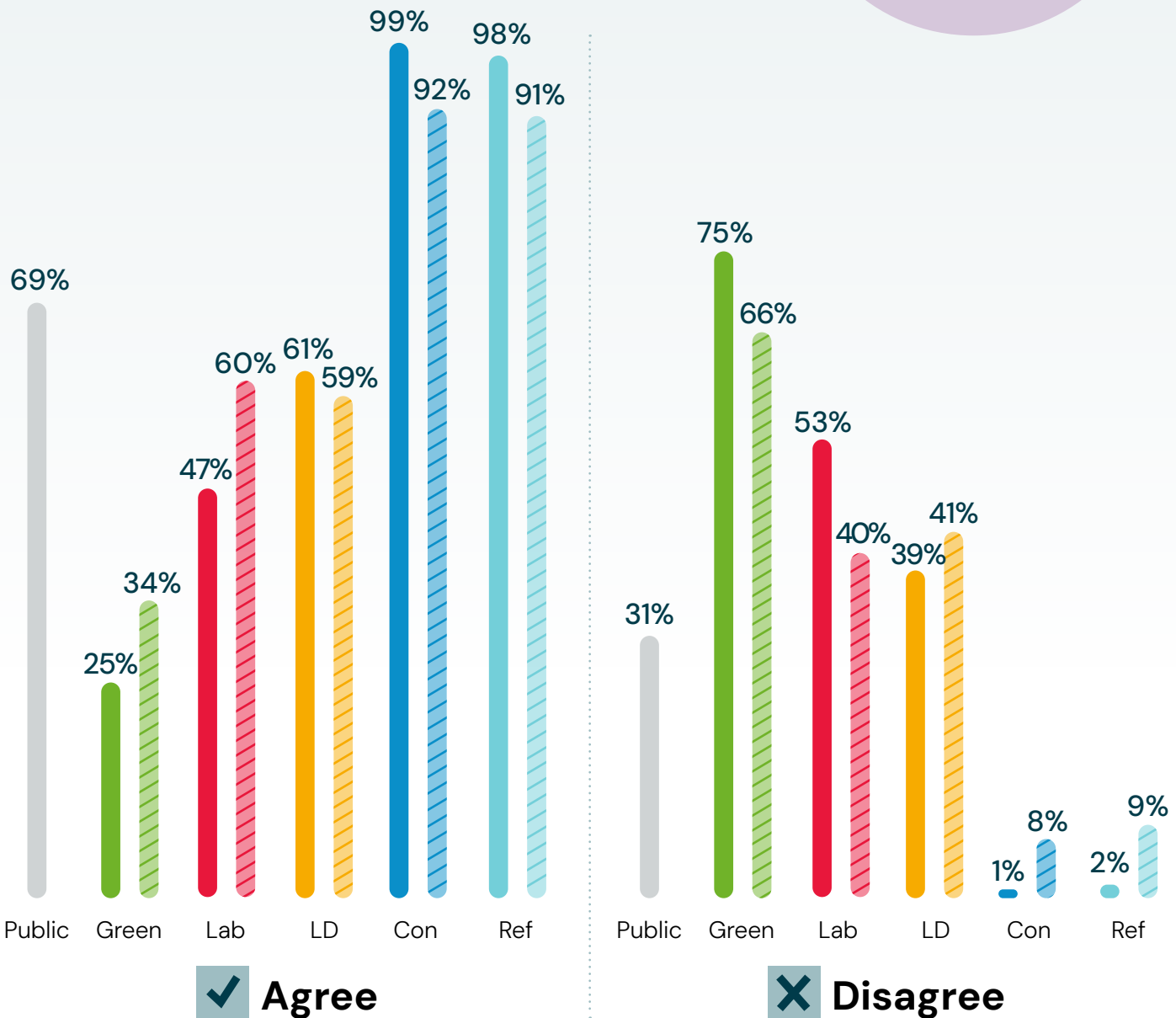
Attitudes to Britain's supposedly glorious, or else shameful, past also feature heavily in the so-called culture wars. So we asked whether party members (and voters) felt proud of their country's history (Fig 12). Again, the responses were highly polarised, although on this occasion Labour members were markedly more positive

(perhaps because their party has played a fairly large part in creating twenty-first century Britain) than their Green counterparts. This contrasts widely with those who belong to or simply vote for the Conservatives and Reform UK. Virtually all of them expressed their pride in the nation's past.

Figure 12: Conservative and Reform members and voters are exceptionally proud of their country's history

Percentage of responses who agree with the statement

Members' responses 2024 voters' responses



Government tax and spending on public services

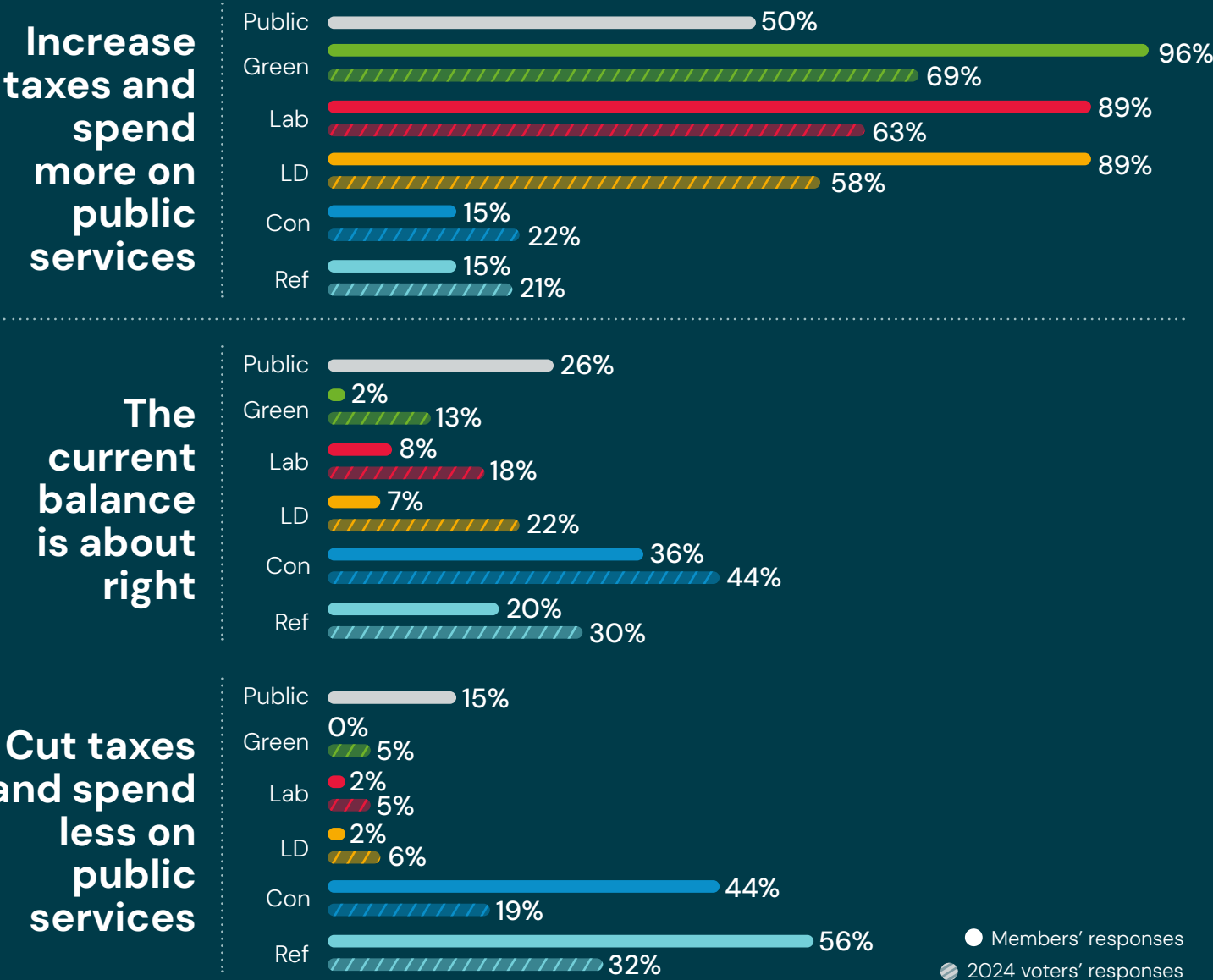
Our focus on cultural issues shouldn't lead us to ignore so-called left-right issues completely of course. This is something we tapped into in a couple of ways.

First, we asked members (and voters) about tax and spend (Figr 13). We asked whether they felt that the government should increase taxes and spend more on public services, cut taxes and spend less on public services, or did they think the current balance was about right? Again, members' attitudes varied in the expected direction. Members of (and to a lesser extent voters for) the Greens, Labour and the Lib Dems were overwhelmingly likely to think that the government should be spending more, with hardly any of them thinking that taxes and public services should be cut.

Conservative members' responses were slightly more divided, possibly because that party has recently been in government. A much bigger proportion of Tory voters and members were inclined to think things were about right, although, at least as far as Conservative members were concerned, tax-cutting was still the most popular option.

Reform members' responses, however, were, in some ways, the most interesting. While it is often suggested that members and voters of that party are less keen on a smaller state than their Conservative counterparts, our results suggest otherwise. Indeed, both Reform members and voters were significantly more likely to want to see cuts than their Conservative equivalents. Many of Farage's followers, then, are no less Thatcherite than he is.

Figure 13: A big divide on tax and spend – and Reform members are even keener on cuts than their Conservative counterparts



Left vs right

Second, we asked people to define themselves on a left–right scale, and they – the members in particular – were not reluctant to nail their ideological colours to the mast (Fig 14).

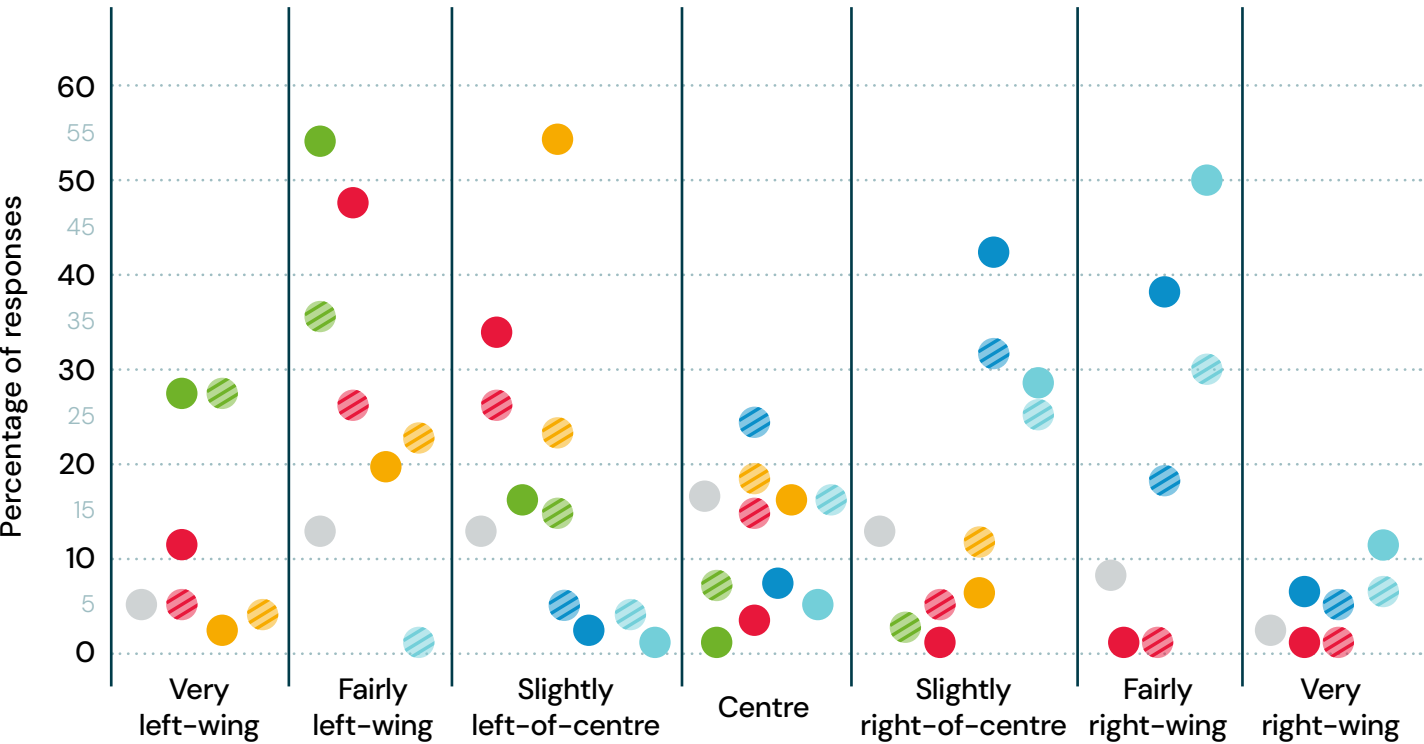
Eight out of ten Green members, for instance, declared themselves to be very or fairly left wing, although Labour members (a third) were rather more inclined than their Green counterparts to call themselves ‘slightly’ left wing. This was a designation chosen by just over half of the Lib Dem members, under a fifth of whom chose to locate themselves in the centre.

Predictably enough, Conservative and Reform members rejected any idea that they might be on the left, and even in the centre, with 45 per cent of the former and 61 per cent of the latter saying they were ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ right wing. That said, the proportion of Conservatives who saw themselves as ‘right of centre’, at 43 per cent, was significantly higher than the equivalent (29 per cent) at the grassroots of Reform.

Once again, voters followed the same pattern as members, but in slightly less pronounced fashion.

Figure 14: Party members and voters are in no doubt where they stand on the left–right spectrum

Percentage of responses who agree with the statement

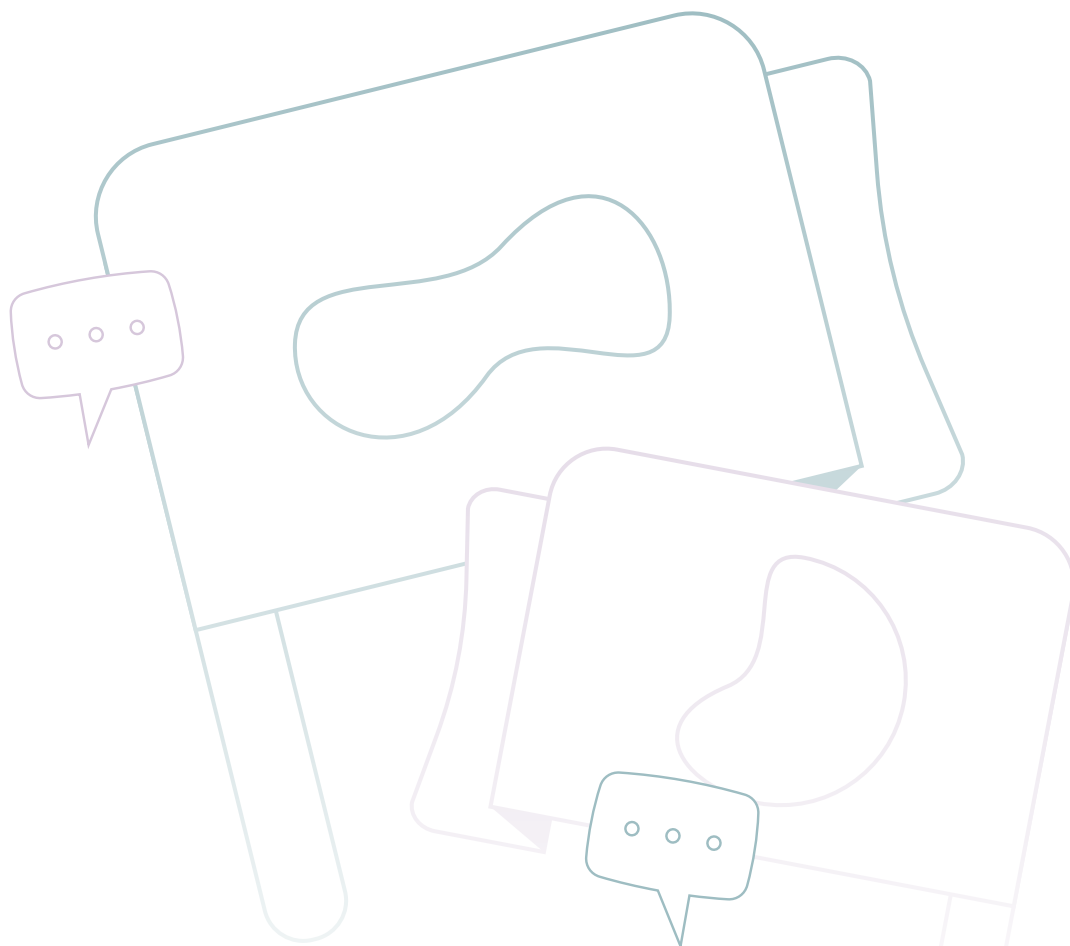


“Where would you place yourself on the scale of ‘left’, ‘right’, ‘centre’?”

Finally, we should note that, for all the talk of 'culture wars' – and, indeed, the extent to which some party members and voters long for, firstly, a strong leader willing to break the rules, and secondly, intensely dislike other parties – there is little or no indication that the arguments between them will ever turn physical.

Over a quarter of Green members and nearly a third of Green voters – despite supporting a party with a longstanding reputation for pacificism – told us that political violence can 'in certain circumstances' be justifiable. But amongst members (and voters) of other parties there is very limited support for this suggestion.

Still, we need to take polarisation seriously. Otherwise, the divisions between the members of our political parties risk becoming irreconcilable. Wherever political identity and cultural allegiance converge to reduce, or even eliminate the space for compromise, democracy is in serious danger.



04 Campaigning: activism analysed



Party members are often referred to as 'activists'. Big mistake.

Even at election time, when party members could be most useful, an awful lot of them do nothing – absolutely nothing – for their party. And our research suggests that might be true for more and more of them, although this partly depends on which party, and which activities, you look at.

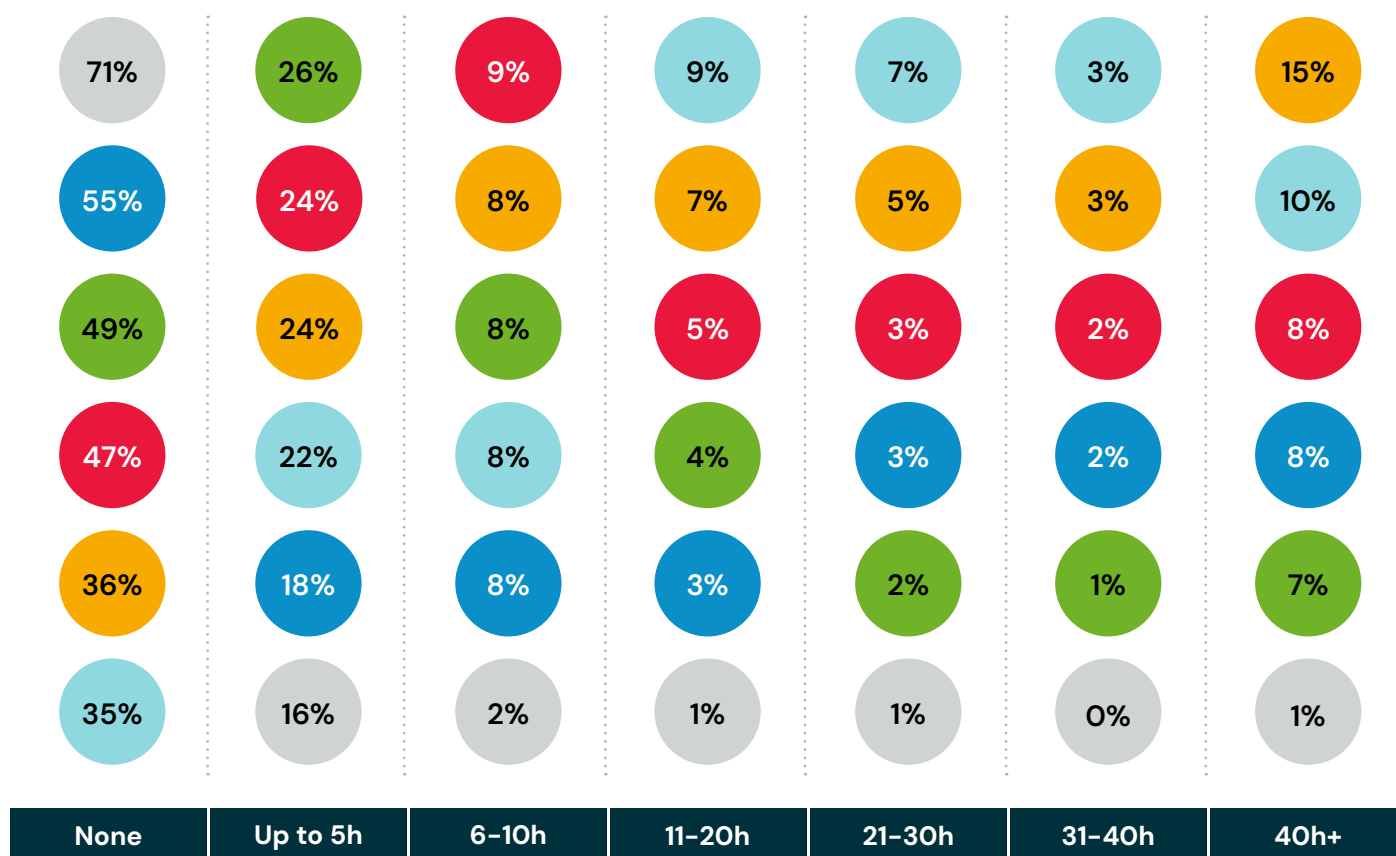
The Conservatives, it would seem, have the most to worry about. Far more of them (indeed, over half of them in 2024) spent no time at all lending

a hand at the 2024 general election – this at a time when members of some of the other parties actually did a little more than they'd done back in 2019. That said, if we use those who said they devoted more than forty hours to helping out in 2024 as a proxy for the parties' hard-core activists, then the Conservatives didn't fare as badly as we might suppose. For example, just under 10 per cent of the Labour Party's members qualified as hard-core activists and even in the Lib Dems the figure was only 15 per cent (Fig 15).

Figure 15: Party members aren't necessarily activists – and the hard core of activists is pretty small

Percentage of respondents who gave up their time during the 2024 election

● Public ● Green ● Labour ● Lib Dem ● Conservative ● Reform



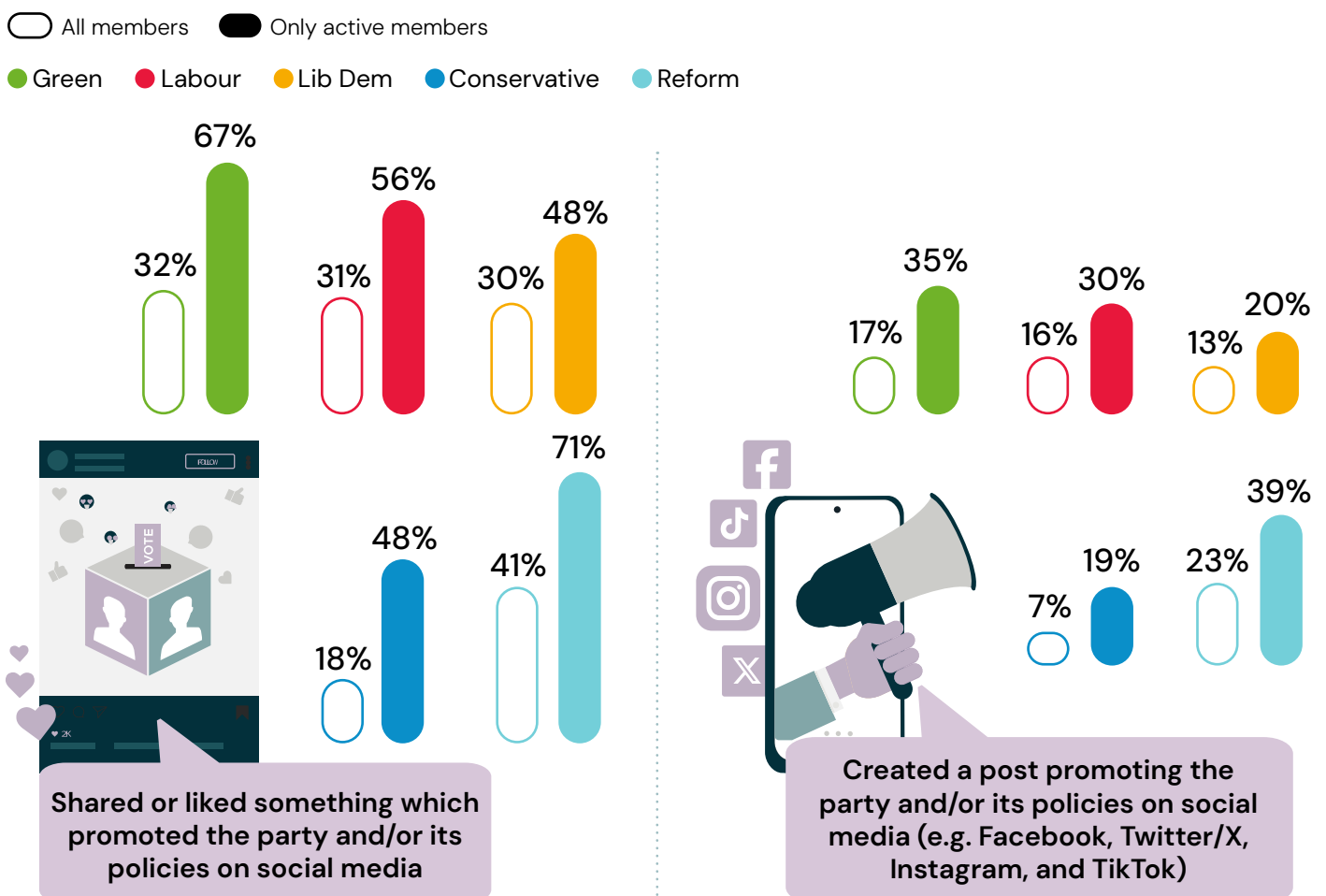
Social media

There is much talk these days about ‘social media’ elections. It’s undoubtedly true – especially if you look at where parties spend their money – that a lot of campaigning is done online these days. Some of it, as least as far as most members are concerned, is passive, although there are some members who are more actively engaged online.

Of those who spent at least some time campaigning (only active members), fewer than half the Conservative members said they: ‘Shared or liked something which promoted the party and/or its policies on social media’ (Fig 16). Looking just at members who said they spent some time campaigning, the same can be said of the Lib Dems. Even Labour members didn’t do that much in this respect. Of those who devoted some time to helping their party online, the figure was two-thirds for Green members. An even greater proportion of Reform UK members shared or liked content. This is confirmation, perhaps, that many of Nigel Farage’s supporters are, indeed, ‘extremely online’.

Of those party members who did at least something for their party at the election, Reform members, like the Greens, were also more likely than their counterparts in other parties to tell us that they had ‘Created a post promoting the party and/or its policies on social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, and TikTok).’ Again, in this respect as in others, the Conservatives (and the Lib Dems) were way behind. Indeed, if we look at the Conservative membership as a whole (in other words, including those who said they’d done nothing for their party at the election) then a mere 7 per cent fell into this category. In truth, however, most of the other parties have little to write home about in that respect, with only Reform members, taken as a whole, clearing the 20 per cent barrier – and, even then, only just.

Figure 16: Conservative and Lib Dem members aren’t as active online as they might be

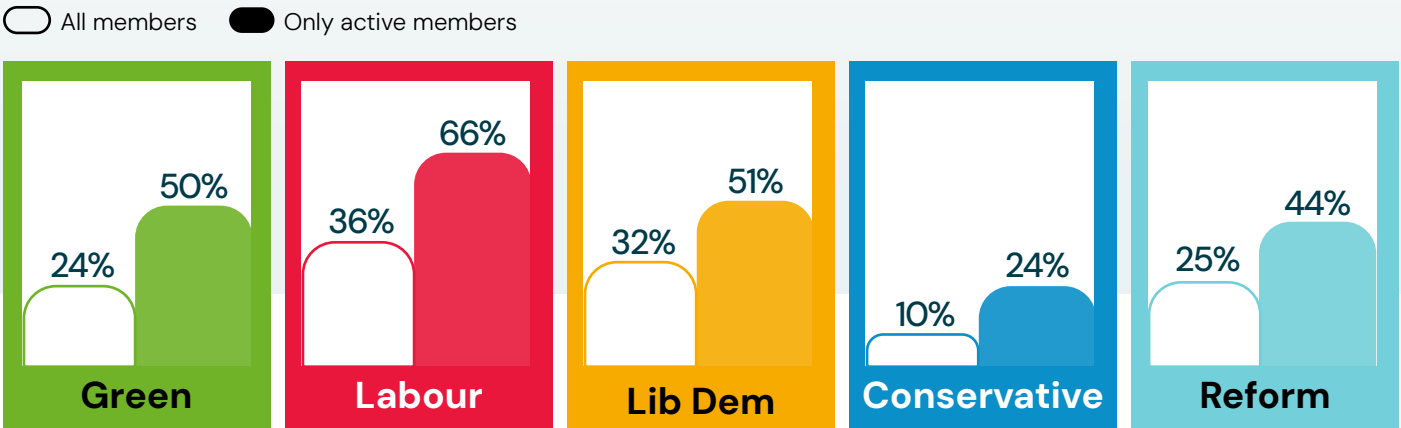


Posters

Old-style campaign activities haven't completely died a death of course (Fig 17). At the least intensive end of things they could potentially do for their party, some members – particularly from Labour – are still willing to put up a poster. Of Labour members who said they'd spent at least a little time campaigning at the election, two-thirds had done so, as had around half of Green and Lib Dem members. Reform members weren't that far behind, either. Again, though, the Conservatives

finished last, with only a quarter (even including those who said they'd done something for the party) being prepared to figuratively nail their colours to the mast. This is possibly due to the sheer unpopularity of the government that lost office in 2024. If we zoom out to look at all the party's members rather than just those who said they'd done something during the election, the proportion of Conservative members displaying a poster falls to just 10 per cent.

Figure 17: Conservative members are particularly shy about showing their colours
Percentage of party members who “displayed an election poster”

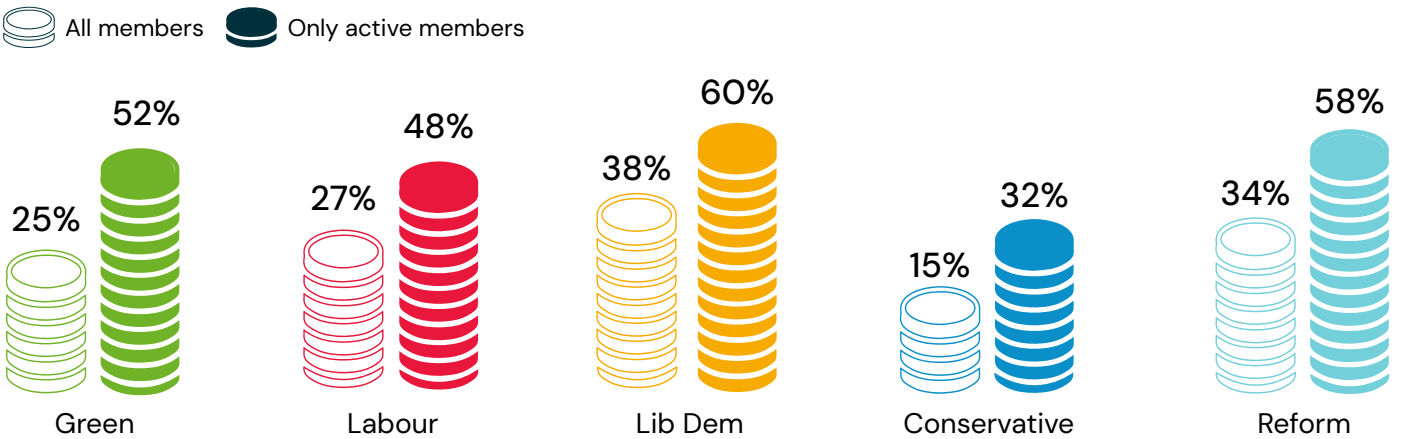


Donations

Conservative members were also much less likely than their counterparts in other parties to dip into their pockets to help the party out at election time (Fig 18). Perhaps for fear of throwing good money after bad (a concern that affected the party's wealthier funders, too, causing it to run short of

funds towards the end of the campaign), and taking members as a whole, only just over one in six of the Conservative membership made a donation to their party during the election. This compares to around one in four Labour and Green members and one in three of those belonging to Reform or the Lib Dems.

Figure 18: Conservative members are less likely to donate than their opponents
Percentage of party members who made a donation to their party during the election



On-the-ground campaigning

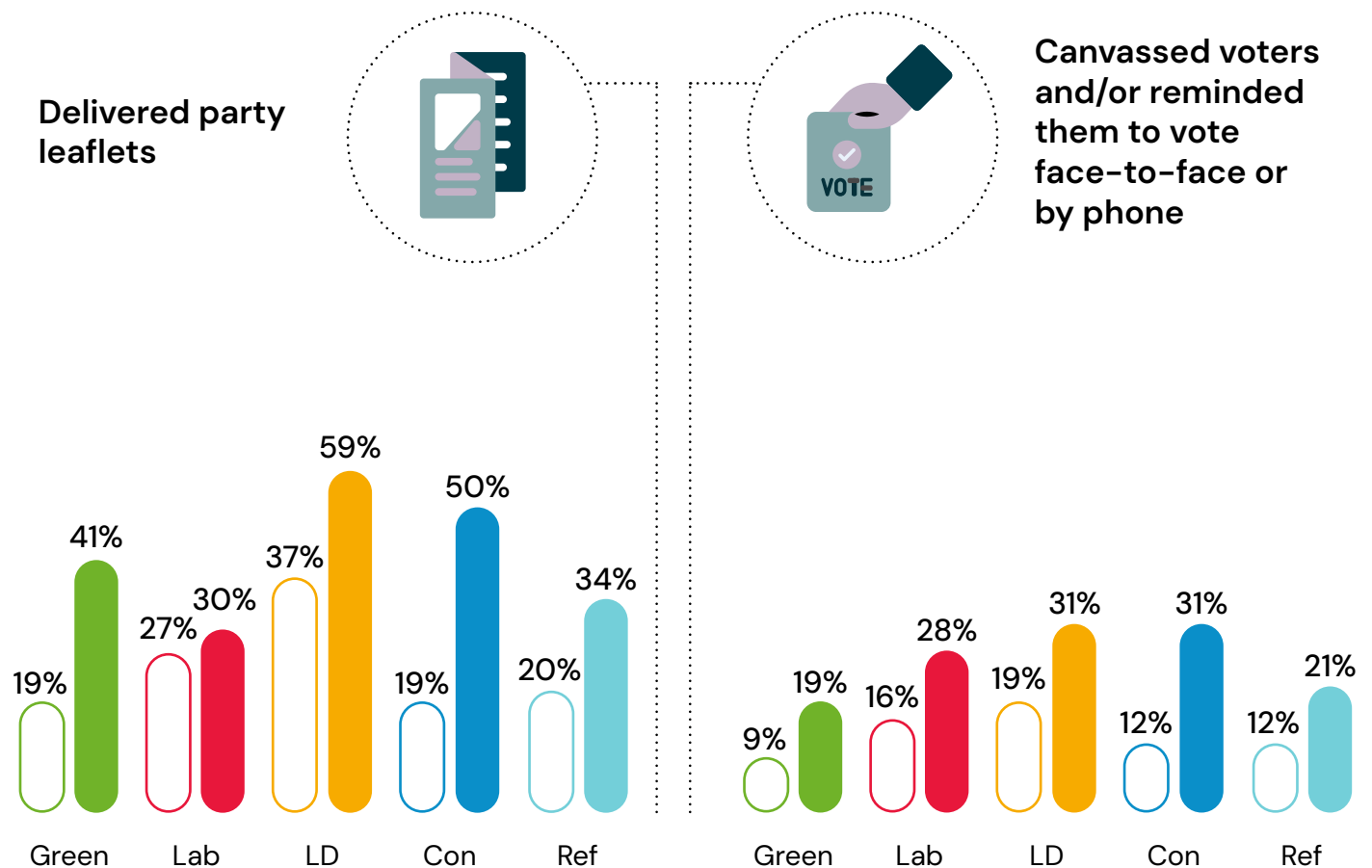
If we turn to those activities that are most associated with on-the-ground campaigning, namely, delivering leaflets and canvassing voters (either on the doorstep or on the phone), it is again clear that the Conservative Party was unable to persuade its members to do as much as the other parties that (in 2024 at least) were its main rivals (Fig 19).

Also, given the fact that some of the constituencies the Conservatives lost were lost in part because of the intervention of Reform UK candidates, it is worth noting that Nigel Farage's followers, already relatively active online, were by no means completely inactive offline either.

Perhaps the main takeaway, however, for the Lib Dems at least (famously focused, as they are on leaflet deliveries), is that (taking members as a whole) their members were far more likely to take part in that activity than their counterparts in other parties. Well over a third of Lib Dem members told us they had pushed paper through the nation's letterboxes – a proportion that rises to well over half if we consider only those members who told us they put in time during the election on behalf of the party. If such activity makes a difference, at least in a tight race, then the party may well hold on to many of the big gains it made in Conservative territory in 2024.

Figure 19: Lib Dem members still love to leaflet, but Green and Reform members aren't so keen on canvassing

○ All members ● Only active members



05 Leaders and leadership



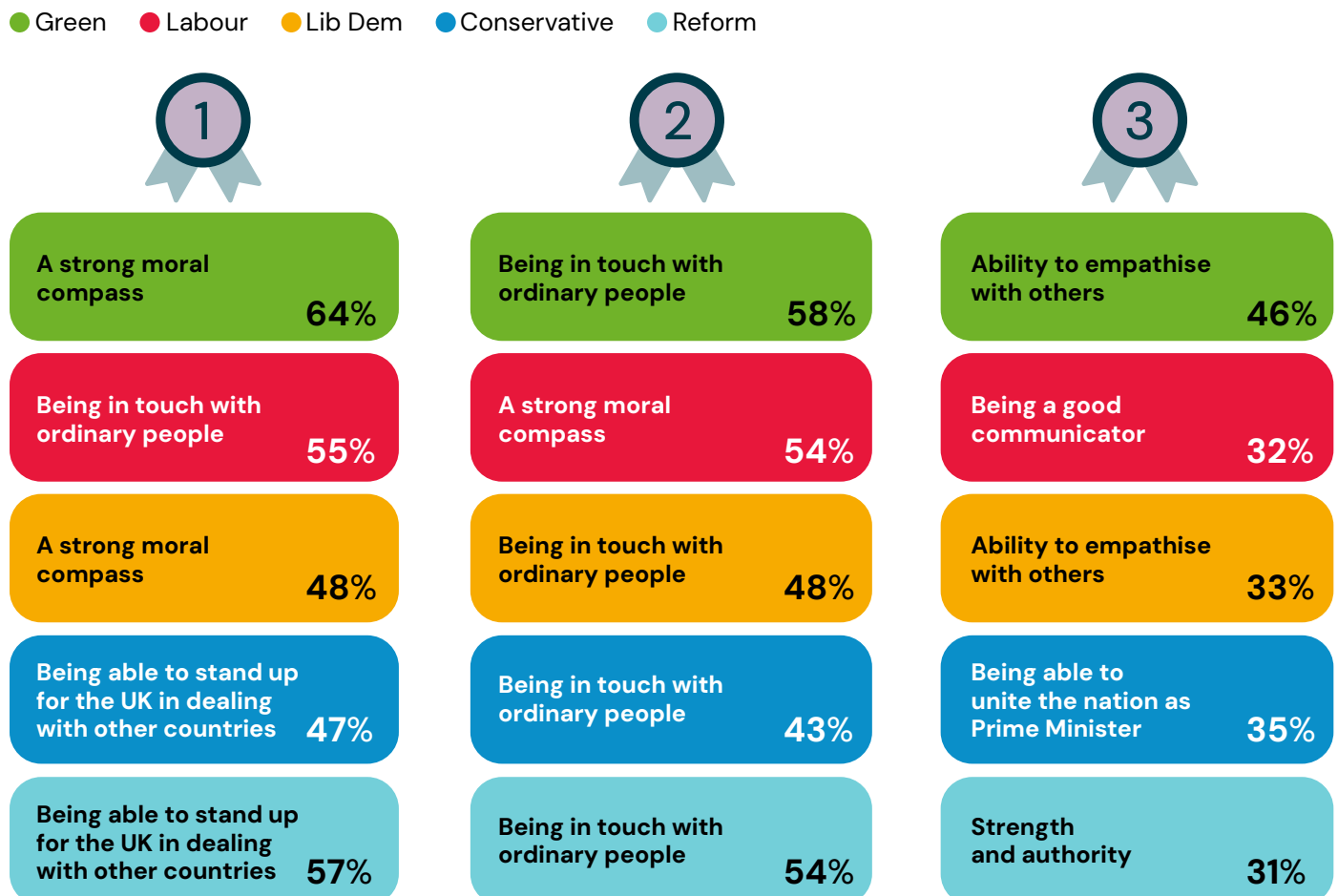
Leaders are at least as important to members as they are to voters.

Leaders set the tone and direction of the party. Unless somebody pays a good deal more attention to politics than is generally the case, even for most members, the leader operates as the face of, and maybe even a proxy for, the party as a whole. But what exactly people look for in a leader is an open question, and one that, as we shall see, varies considerably.

We asked voters and party members which qualities they thought are important for a leader to possess, asking them to pick their top

three from a list (Fig 20). Perhaps unsurprisingly, amongst the electorate as a whole, 'being in touch with ordinary people' came in first, with just over half of them nominating it in their top three, although, interestingly, fewer than one in ten picked 'appealing to the average voter'. This is something, incidentally, that was also true of most party members. After that, just over four in ten picked 'a strong moral compass' and three in ten picked 'being able to stand up for the UK in dealing with other countries'.

Figure 20: What **voters** want from a leader depends on which party they support
The top three qualities 2024 voters think are most important for a leader to possess



Each of the electorate's top three picks also appeared among the top three qualities selected by party members, but by no means uniformly (Fig 21). Members of parties sometimes described as 'progressive' (the Greens, Lib Dems and Labour) were much more likely to want leaders with a strong moral compass, whereas their Conservative and Reform counterparts were more likely to value being able to stand up for the UK – a quality that was put in the top three by (at most) one in ten of the 'progressives'. Indeed, only 3 per cent of Green members (clearly internationalist to their core) put 'standing up for the UK' in their top three, with 'ability to empathise with others' (picked by 45 per cent) rated as far more important. This is a quality that very few Conservative, and especially Reform, members seemed to think much of.

There was, of course, some crossover. 'Being a good communicator', for instance, was clearly important to Green, Lib Dem, Conservative and Reform members, albeit not in equal measure.

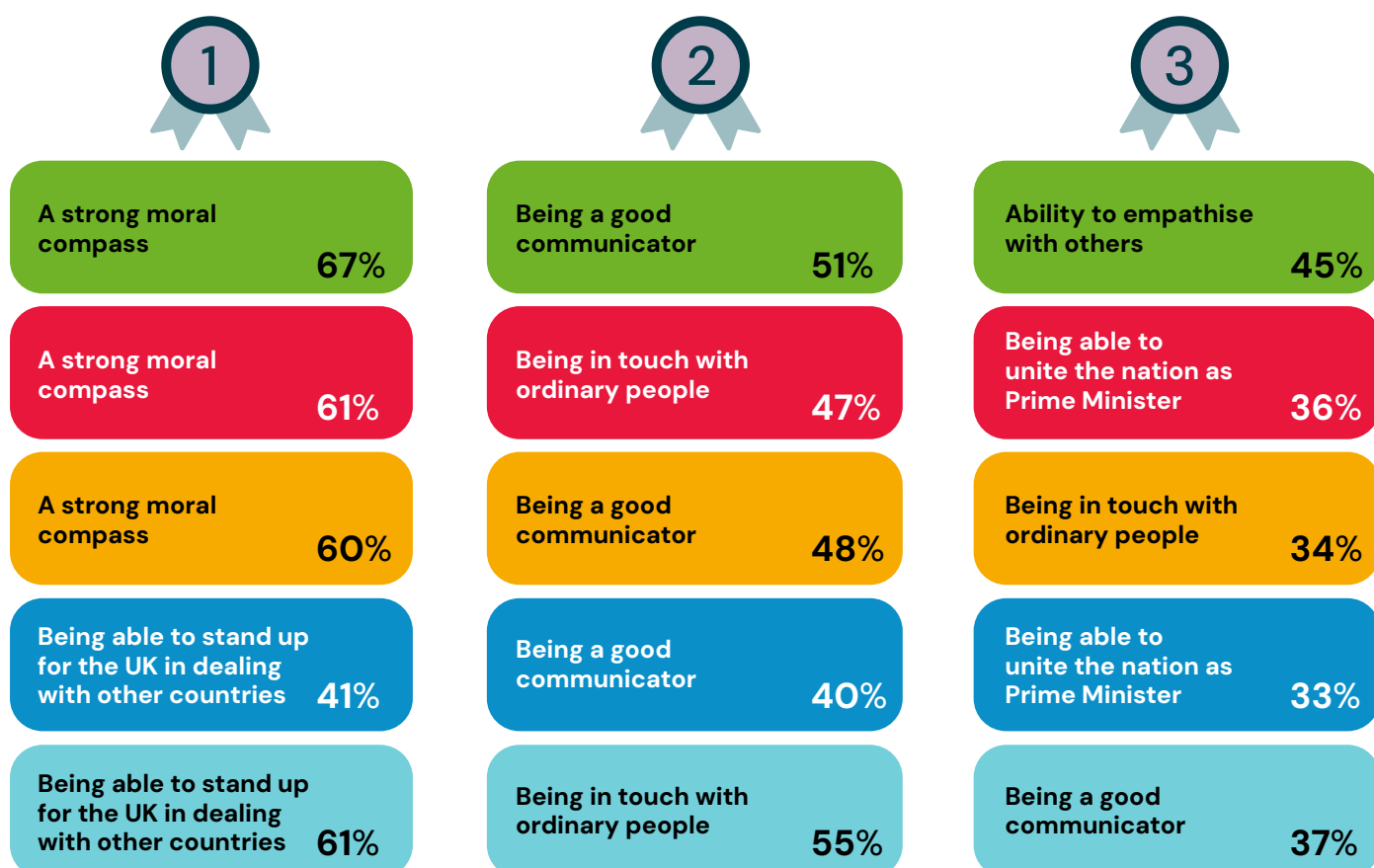
Being in touch with ordinary people made it into the top three of the members of Labour, the Lib Dems and Reform – perhaps predictably given the latter's self-appointed role as their tribune. It's also notable that members of the two parties that have supplied the UK's premier for the last 100 years – Labour and the Conservatives – were the only ones to name, in their top three, 'being able to unite the nation as prime minister'.

The correlation between the choices of the members and the voters of each party was reasonably high, with 'moral compass' appearing in the top three of those who voted Green, Labour and Lib Dem and 'standing up for the UK' being the top pick for those who voted either Conservative or Reform UK. As for other qualities, 'strength and authority' (which was the third most popular choice for Reform's voters) was also noticeably more likely to be chosen by members of (and voters for) right-wing parties than members of (and voters for) left and centre-left parties.

Figure 21: Progressive and right-wing party members want different things from their leaders

The top three qualities party members think are most important for a leader to possess

● Green ● Labour ● Lib Dem ● Conservative ● Reform



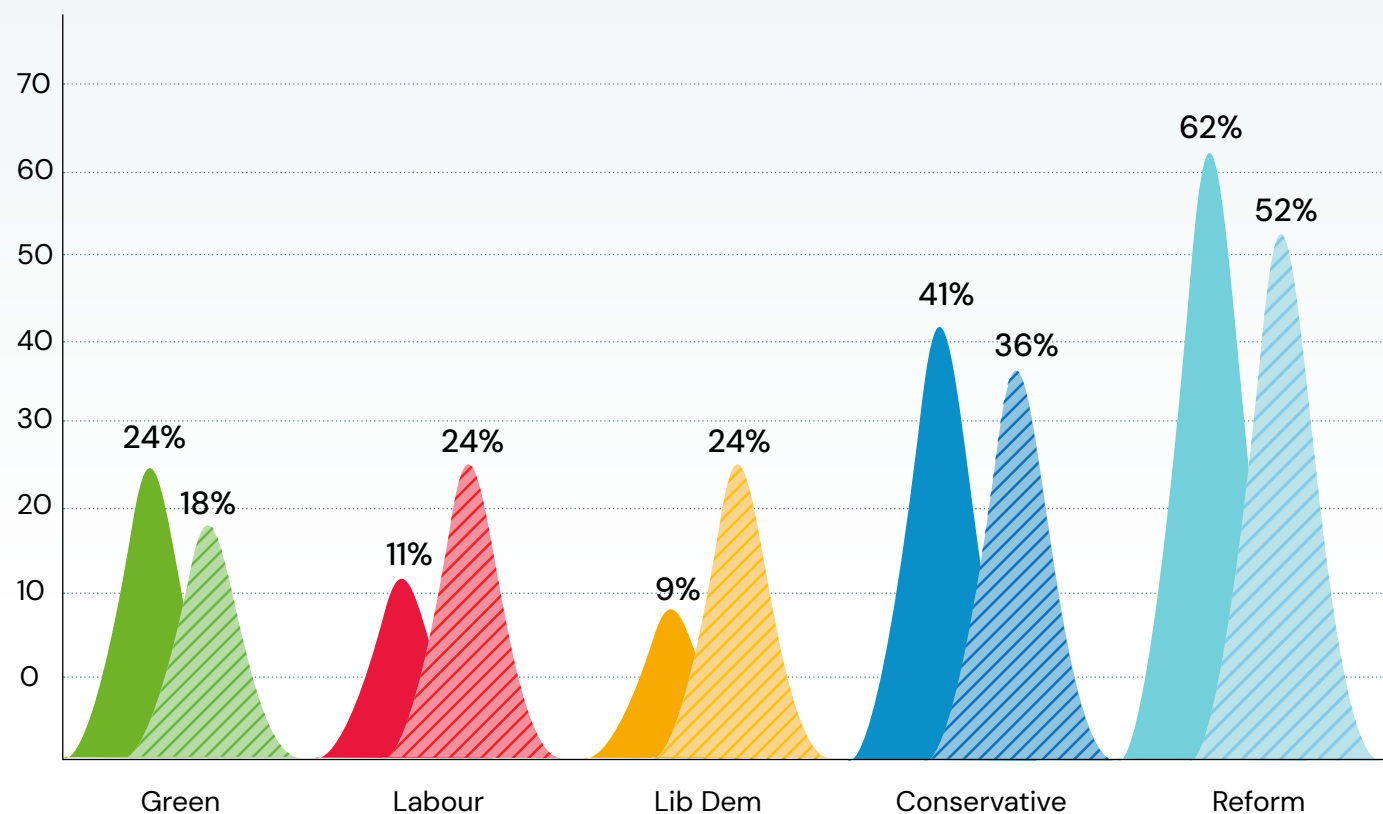
This makes sense when we look at whether party members (and their party's voters) agreed or disagreed that 'Britain needs strong leaders who are prepared to break the rules in order to get things done' (Fig 22). Green, and especially Labour and Lib Dem members (and their voters), were, like the public in general, much more likely to disagree than agree on this point whereas things were evenly balanced when it came to the Conservative Party. However, those who vote for

and belong to Reform UK take the opposite view, with six out of ten of its party members agreeing and only two out of ten disagreeing on the issue of strong leaders. Were Nigel Farage to become prime minister, then, his supporters are unlikely to be any more worried than Donald Trump's should he decide that the normal checks and balances, and even the rule of law, don't apply.

Figure 22: Right wing party members are much keener on strong leaders who break the rules

Percentage of responses from party members who agree with the statement

Members 2024 voters



“
Britain needs strong leaders who are prepared to break the rules in order to get things done.”

If we delve even further into members' views on leadership by looking at their responses to survey items designed to tap into the so-called dark triad personality traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, subclinical psychopathy), we once again see a marked difference between Green, Labour and Lib Dem members, on the one hand, and Conservative and Reform UK members, on the other (Fig 23).

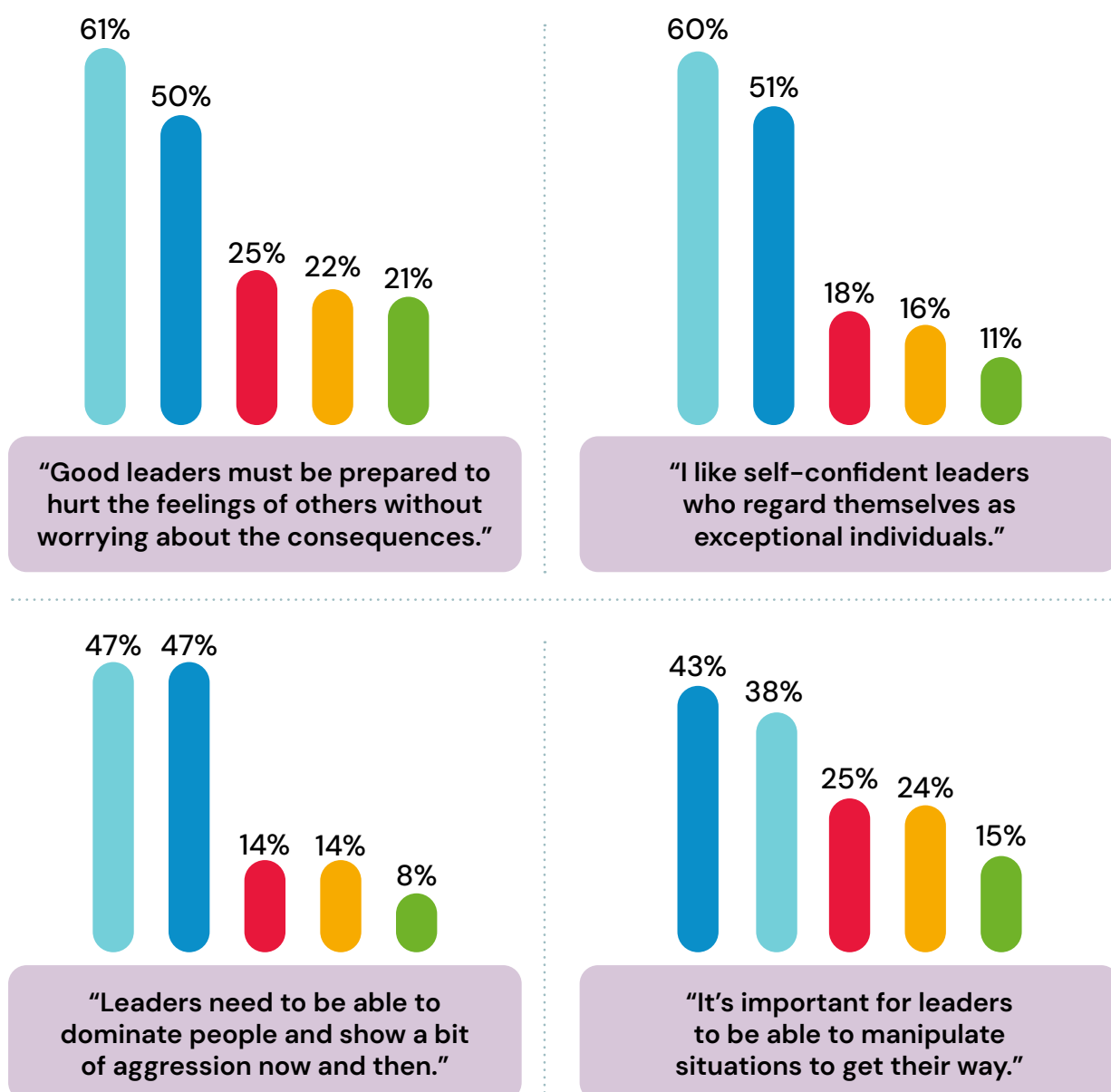
Reform members, in particular, but also a fair few Conservative members, are far more likely to support leaders who are manipulative,

self-confident, dominant, aggressive and prepared to hurt people's feelings without worrying about the consequences. There are limits, however. The vast majority of Reform members, for instance, share the distaste that members of other parties have for leaders who use lies and deceit, even if they are rather less bothered about leaders taking revenge on those who cross them. All in all, and again recalling Donald Trump's appeal to his MAGA fans, Nigel Farage is pretty much the ideal leader for those who join (or merely support) Reform UK.

Figure 23: Right-wing party members are far happier with 'Dark Triad' leaders

Percentage of responses from party members who agree with statements involving leaders with dark triad personality traits: narcissism, Machiavellianism, subclinical psychopathy

● Green ● Labour ● Lib Dem ● Conservative ● Reform



06 Attraction and repulsion



Party members aren't necessarily as blindly loyal to their parties as many imagine.

Indeed, our research has previously shown a surprising amount of movement between parties – more often than not between the Greens and Labour and between the Conservatives and Nigel Farage's parties.

That said, membership involves, or at least implies, a degree of identification with the party to which someone belongs, over and above that felt by people who merely vote for it. This is true even if (as our research has previously shown) those people often do a fair amount for their preferred party at election time.

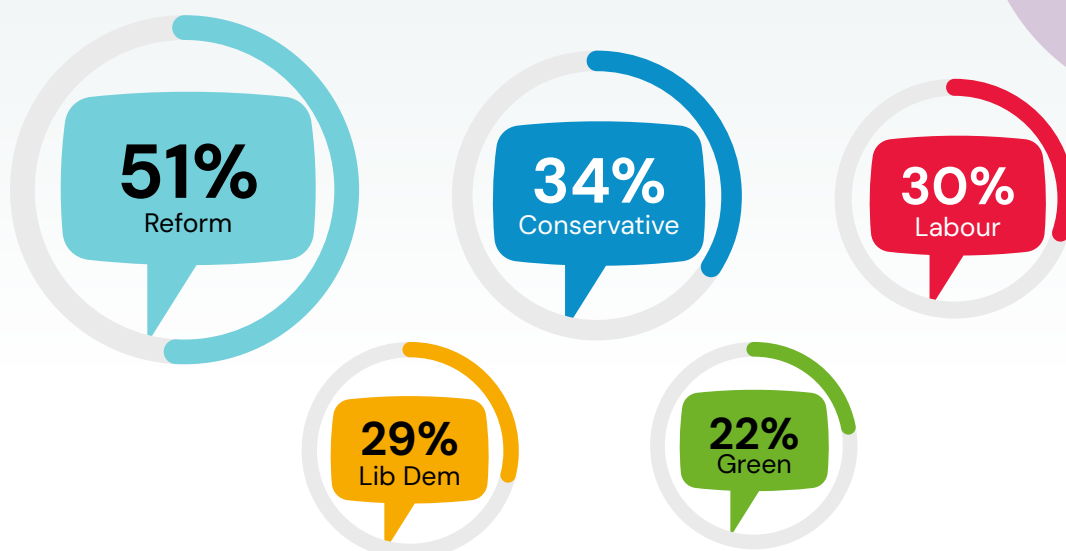
How connected, then, do members feel to the party they belong to? Just how partisan are they? And what does that partisanship mean for the way they feel about other parties? Are the other parties all seen as just as bad as each other, or are there some that are particularly disliked?

We tried to ask these questions in a number of different ways. Firstly, we asked about the extent to which 'when people criticise my party it feels like a personal insult' (Fig 24). What we found was that for most members of most parties, that wasn't the case, although there was normally a hard core (ranging from a fifth to a third) for whom, to coin a phrase, 'the political was personal'.

There was one party, however, whose members proved to be exceptions to the rule. Just over half of Reform UK members said they would be personally insulted were someone to criticise their party.

Figure 24: Reform members take criticism of their party far more personally

Percentage of party members who agree with the statement



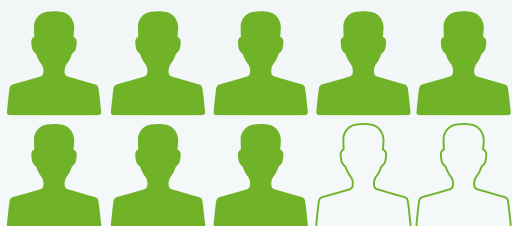
“
When people
criticise my
party, it feels
like a personal
insult.”

For most party members (including Reform's), however, their membership produces a more positive sense of fellow feeling. Apart from Conservative members, who were rather more ambivalent than members of other parties on this score, around eight out of ten members agreed that 'When I meet someone who supports my party, I feel connected with this person' (Fig 25).

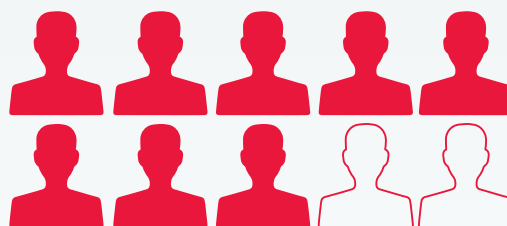
Figure 25: Conservative members are more ambivalent towards supporters of their own party, compared to other parties

Around eight out of ten members of most parties agree with the statement

**“
When I meet
someone who
supports my party,
I feel connected
with this
person.”**



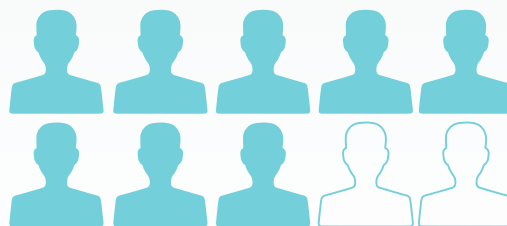
Green



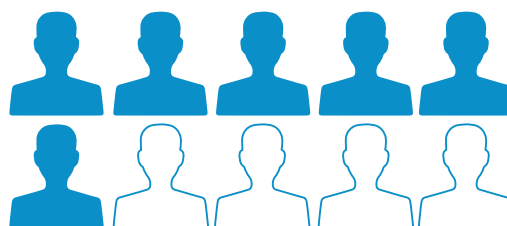
Labour



Lib Dem



Reform



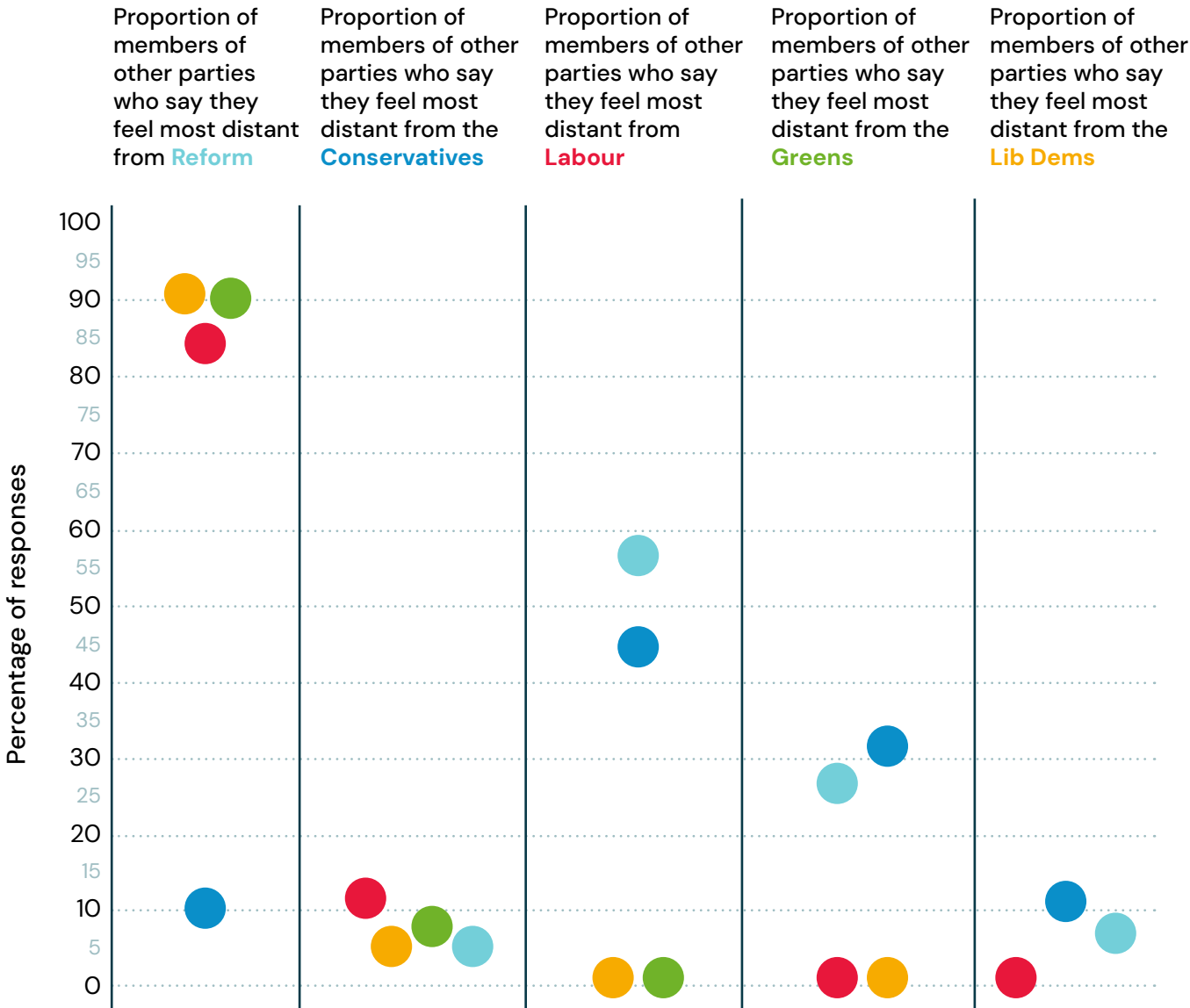
Conservative

Inevitably that sense of connection has a flipside – a degree of what political scientists call ‘negative partisanship’ – namely, dislike (for some this borders on disgust or hatred) of who or whatever is seen as ‘the other side’. Such feelings are not uncommon. Just over eight out of ten of the general public seem willing to name the party they feel most distant from. Just over half of those people agree that ‘when people criticise this party, it makes me feel good’ and that ‘when I meet somebody who supports this party, I feel distant from this person’. It does seem, however, as though those who vote for the so-called ‘progressive’ parties are more likely to agree with these statements than those who vote for their right-wing counterparts (Fig 26).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, such feelings are even more evident (and stronger) among party members than they are among the general public. Members were even more likely than voters to be able to name the party they felt most distant from, and their answers are instructive.

Opinion among Reform and Conservative members was more divided, although Labour was clearly their common bugbear, followed some way behind by the Greens. But for Green, Labour and Lib Dem members, there was absolutely no doubt about it: as far as nine out of ten of them were concerned, Reform UK was public enemy number one, and they were more likely to feel good when people criticised it.

Figure 26: Members of the three ‘progressive’ parties feel far more distant from Reform than they do from the Conservative party

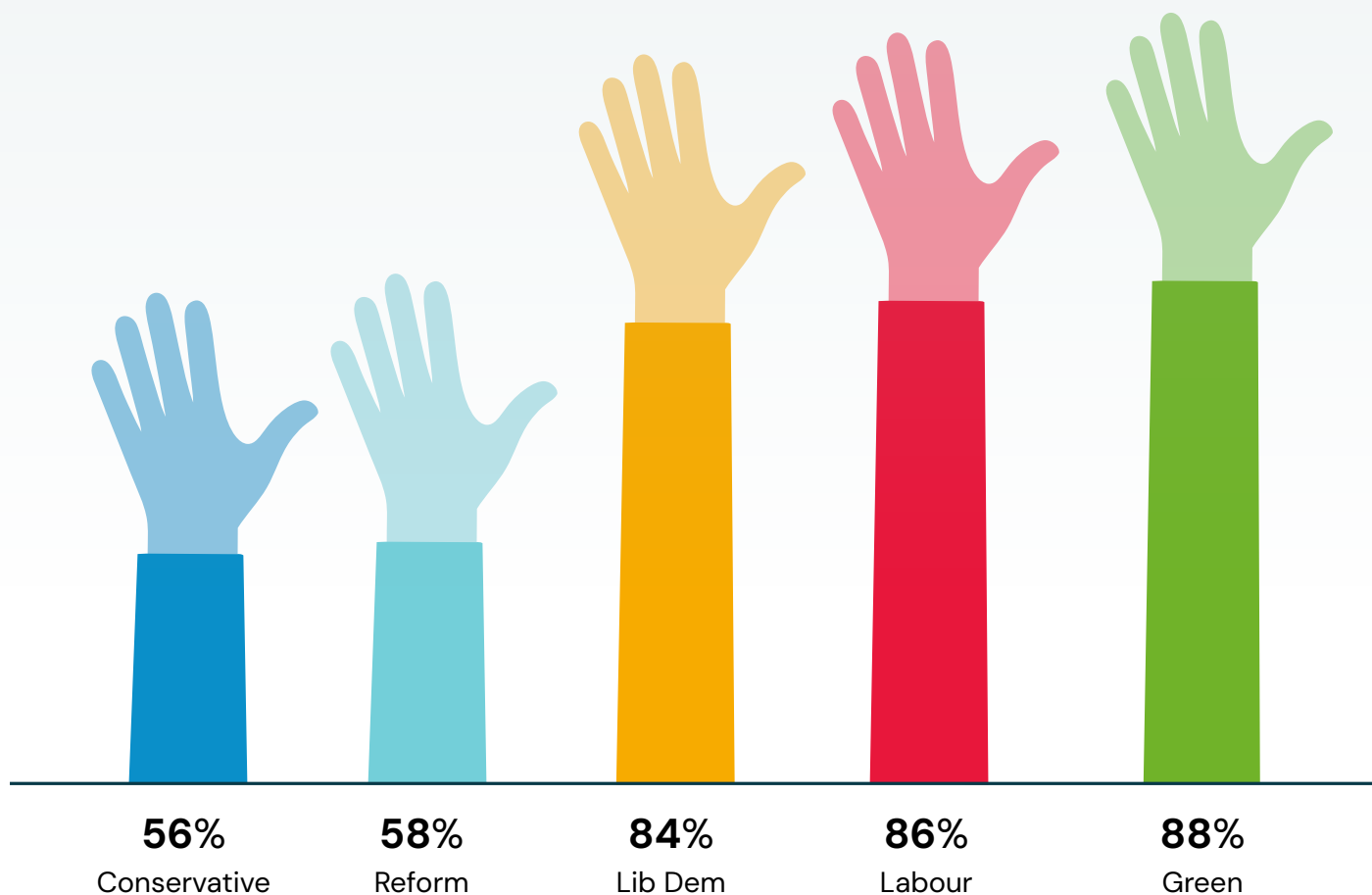


Significantly, since it, once again, strengthens the argument that Britain is developing into a two-bloc party system, only one in ten Conservative members named Reform and only one in twenty Reform members named the Conservatives as their enemy. Despite this, members of both parties seemed, in the main, opposed to the idea of a merger.

As for how they felt about other parties, close to six out of ten Conservative and Reform members told us they felt distant from someone who supported the party that they themselves felt furthest away from (Fig 27). However, Green, Labour and Lib Dem members felt even more strongly on this matter than their Reform and Conservative counterparts: the proportion of them saying the same thing wasn't far off 90 per cent.

Figure 27: Conservative and Reform members aren't so bothered if someone turns out to support the party they feel most distant from

Percentage of responses from party members who agree with the statement



07 Conclusion



Although joining a political party isn't for most Brits, we shouldn't see those who do as a strange species, utterly unlike the rest of us. They just happen to have a stronger interest and faith in politics and often rather more pronounced (but not necessarily extreme) views.

Even though it is true, as we show, that party members are not particularly representative of the population as a whole, they are part of that population nonetheless. Given the way that they have over candidate and leadership selection, as well as the effort some (if not all) of them put in at election time, they remain a vital part of the political landscape, at least as far as our democracy is concerned.

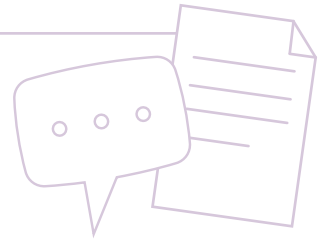
But while members have that in common, our research shows that there are often very pronounced differences between the members of different parties, whether it concerns how they think about issues or what they think about their own and other parties or leadership.

What comes over most strongly, however, is that we increasingly appear to be seeing not just five parties but two blocs – something that, as the [British Election Study has recently shown](#), also appears to be true in the case of voters. On the one side, we have the members of the so-called 'progressive' parties (the Greens, Labour and the Lib Dems). On the other, we have the members of the Conservatives and Reform UK. There is still variation within the blocs, but there is, in all sorts of ways, something of a gulf emerging between them.

Seen negatively, this suggests a worrying degree of polarisation. Seen positively, it suggests that the fragmentation of the party system may not make coming up with a stable government (albeit one vehemently opposed by whichever bloc doesn't make it into office) as hard as some imagine. If members matter to party leaders – and our research since 2015 suggests to us that they do – then those who belong to parties in either of those two blocs could well support the kind of post-electoral (and even, perhaps, pre-electoral) pacts that may make coalition formation, should it prove necessary, easier.

A coalition may not prove necessary, of course. At the time of writing, observers seem convinced that Reform UK will win an overall majority. If that does come to pass, we hope that those same observers won't give all the credit to the party's leader, Nigel Farage. Reform's members didn't make him leader, but their efforts may well help to make him prime minister. Also, if he doesn't make it to Downing Street, then the leaders of those parties determined to stop him will, at least in part, have their own footsoldiers to thank.

08 Appendix and acknowledgments



With the help of YouGov, we surveyed thousands of party members in the weeks immediately after the 2024 general election, as follows:

- Conservatives: 1,067
- Labour: 1,003
- Lib Dems: 894
- Greens: 732
- Reform: 570

We also surveyed 2,003 members of the public, asking them, wherever applicable, many of the same questions.

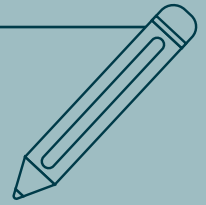
Please note that percentages in the figures do not always sum to exactly 100%. Sometimes this occurs simply because we have left out respondents who answer 'don't know' and sometimes it occurs due to 'rounding errors' produced when converting numbers with decimal places into whole numbers.

We would like to thank YouGov for all their help and Research England for helping to fund the survey. We would also like to thank Queen Mary University of London for funding the production of this report.



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BRITAIN'S **PARTY MEMBERS**

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