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A new battleground in British politics

James Vitali

Preface by Jon Cruddas and Lord Goodman
of Wycombe



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Preface

This is fascinating analysis and chimes with what many campaigners and candidates would have experienced in recent years - and not just at the most recent election.

The usual polling methodology is to study movements within the pool of active voters, rather than a pool of prospective voters who didn't vote at the last election. But Policy Exchange has studied a key cohort within an increasingly volatile electorate – the so-called 'sofa voter'. In light of the record decline in turnout in 2024, this poll considers what might well come to be seen as an increasingly important pool of voters – those who haven't participated, but who remain engaged with British politics. How parties appeal to this cohort will be critical in the years ahead.

I agree with Dr Vitali that there is an opportunity here for all the political parties if they can establish a public philosophy that appeals to non-voters and - for the party now in government - deliver on its promises to the electorate. The message for Labour in particular is clear: despite its notional strength in Parliament, Labour's majority remains fragile, and will be put under considerable pressure over the coming years. Demonstrating its ability to deliver in government will be essential not only to retaining the votes its secured in 2024, but also persuading the millions of non-voters to back them next time around.

This polling shines light on an area of vulnerability for all parties in what will be an era of heightened turbulence given the trend decline in party political affiliations, and sets out new political territory very much up for grabs over the coming years. Far beyond any consideration of electoral advantage, politicians have a moral responsibility to bring these disillusioned voters back into the democratic fold.”

Jon Cruddas

Co-leader of the Policy Exchange Future of the Left programme
Former Labour Member of Parliament
for Dagenham and Rainham

Voters in British elections are exhaustively analysed. Non-voters are scandalously neglected. This study significantly redresses the balance - and should be carefully studied by members of all political parties and none. After all, voting is the lifeblood of democracy. Non-voting threatens to drain it away. And we need to get it pumping again.”

Lord Goodman of Wycombe

Leader of the Policy Exchange Future of the Right programme

Former Editor, ConservativeHome

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The Sofa Voter: A new battleground in British politics

2.7 million 2019 voters strongly considered casting a ballot this year but stayed at home. Here's how to win them over next time around.

In the immediate aftermath of the General Election, Policy Exchange commissioned exclusive polling on perhaps the most poorly understood voter group in the country: the stay-at-home voter. Four million more people opted not to cast a ballot this year than in 2019. These results are concerning and indicate a growing cohort of people who are thoroughly disenchanted with democratic politics in this country.

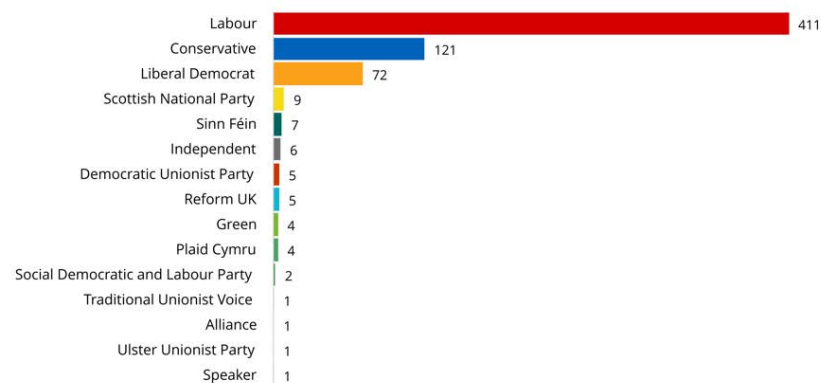
But our polling also indicates a huge opportunity on offer to the major political parties. 2.7 million of these “sofa voters”, as Policy Exchange has labelled them, strongly considered voting on 4th of July; just these non-voters could have swung the result of the election. To get them off the sofa and down to the polling station next time around, politicians must demonstrate that they are not “all the same”, that democratic governments can deliver on their promises to the electorate, and that politics can make a tangible difference to people’s lives.

Labour’s victory: endorsement or indifference?

On the face of it, the recent General Election yielded one of the most decisive election results in the post-war period. Labour has been returned with 411 seats and a majority of 174 – Labour’s largest ever barring that secured by Blair in 1997. The Conservative Party in stark contrast saw the largest fall in its vote share in history. It suffered a 10.8% swing to Labour, and lost 211 of its seats in Parliament. There could not have been a more unambiguous verdict on the record of the previous government, which we ought not to forget won a landslide just five short years ago.

2024 general election: number of seats won by party

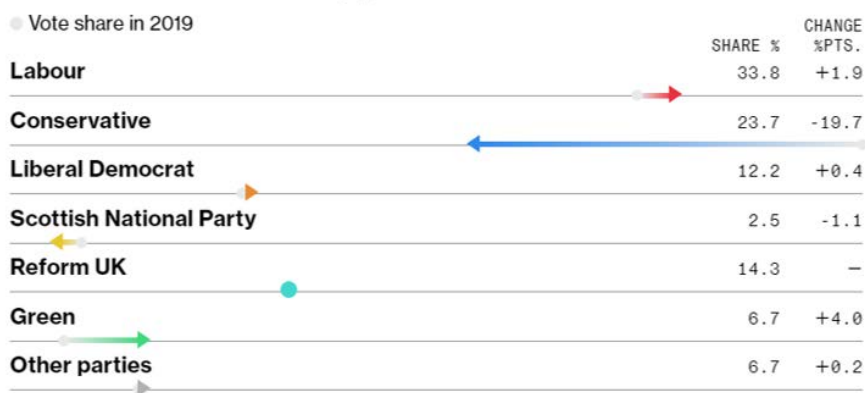
After all 650 seats declared



Source: House of Commons Library

But does this mean that the electorate has shifted definitively towards Starmer’s Labour? Far from it. Scratch the surface, and a radically different interpretation of Labour’s victory suggests itself: that though the British public were determined to eject the Conservatives (a reading substantiated by evidence of considerable tactical voting), they remain unconvinced by the prospects of the new administration.

What’s the vote share for top parties?



In the end, Labour won with the lowest vote share by any victorious party in British history, on a dismal turnout – just 60% of those eligible to vote did so, the lowest figure in over two decades, and a 7% fall on the 2019 figure. No fewer than four million people who voted in 2019 stayed at home in 2024.

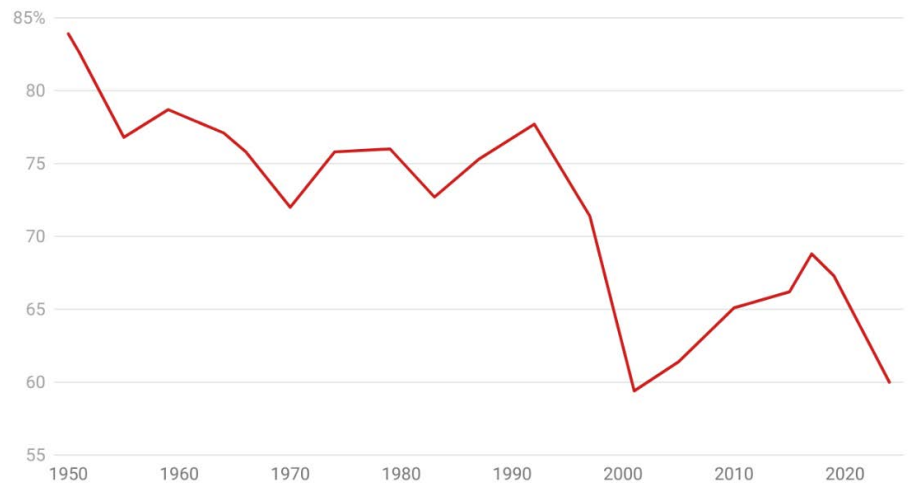
Four million people. That is a staggeringly large cohort of voters who turned out last time around, but felt unmotivated to do so this year. In fact, it is more than enough people to have made the difference between a Labour or Conservative victory on the 4th of July. You don’t need to be a psephologist to recognise that getting to know these voters – why they stayed at home a few weeks ago, what they care about – could be of immense electoral advantage in the coming years.

The “Sofa Voter”

Who is the “sofa voter”, as Policy Exchange has labelled them? He or she is likely to be a young (around 40% are younger than 34), non-graduate from the north of England. They have comparatively low political attention, and they are marginally more likely to be female. They feel a long way from London geographically, and a long way from the educated and well-healed politically.

What do they think? One thing stands out above all else from our new polling, and that is the creeping sense of malaise in British politics amongst the electorate. Sofa voters are the electoral manifestation of this disillusionment, and their numbers have been on the rise since the end of the Second World War.

United Kingdom - General election turnout, 1950 - 2024



Source: House of Commons - UK Election Statistics. There were two general elections in 1974, the average turnout of each has been taken.

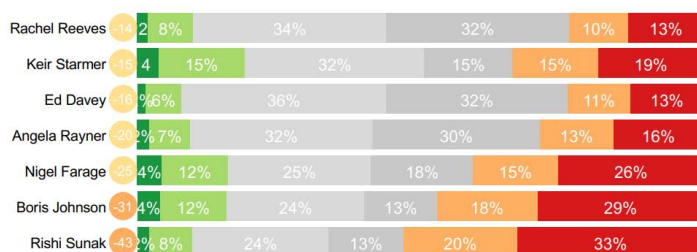
Created with Datawrapper

It is not a disillusionment borne of discontent with *particular* personalities. Sofa voters take a broadly dim view of *all* politicians. Less than half of them said they felt even somewhat positive about any political figure this year, and not just Labour or Conservative politicians either. Rachel Reeves wins out as the most popular politician on the major party front benches... on a negative 13 approval rating. Politicians are “all the same” in these voters’ eyes - and they are all similarly bad.

Those who did not vote in 2024 have very little positive to say about any of the leading political figures at the election

- Only 46% of non-voters said they felt even somewhat positive about any political figure in the 2024 UK election
- Non-voters give all political figures net negative positivity ratings. Rachel Reeves has the highest net positivity score with these non-voters at -15

How positive or negative do you feel about the following?



Q4. How positive or negative do you feel about the following?

16.

The nature of this disillusionment is systemic. It concerns British politics itself. 67% of sofa voters say Britain is broken, and 74% say that they have no faith in politics or politicians to rectify the situation. 70% think the state of our politics has deteriorated appreciably since 2019.

What do they mean when they say Britain is broken, or that politics doesn't work anymore? To be precise, their grievance is about democracy. These voters no longer believe that there is a firm relationship between how they vote, and what government will do. Two thirds say that politicians have failed to deliver since 2019.

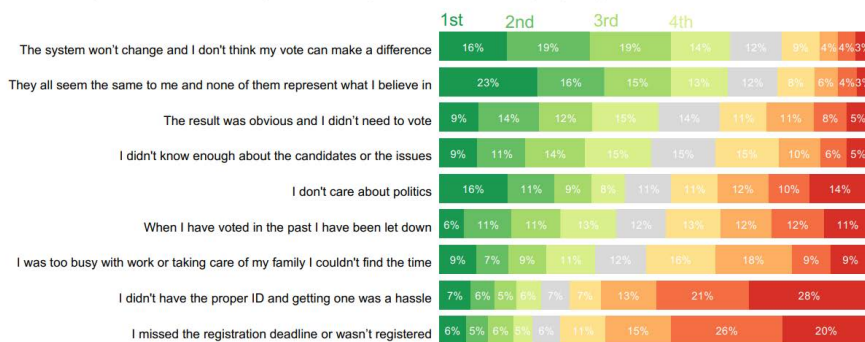
'What's the point?', non-voters ask. 63% agree that voting makes little difference to how the country is run, and only 37% think that a change in government will lead to different policies. Some of the reasons stated by non-voters for their decision to stay at home include "Because nothing will change", "I did not think it would make a difference in my constituency", and "I don't think it makes a difference who is in power, politicians are all the same".

The legitimacy of our political model depends on the idea that elections are meaningful; that voters can choose between substantively different options at the ballot box, and that their collective choice will have a material impact on government.

But British politics is coming to resemble what has been termed "spectator democracy": voters are no longer important actors on the stage in our politics who can meaningfully influence decision-making, but passive members of the audience. The problem is, they've seen this play before - and they are bored of it.

The top reason given as the reason for not voting is that “all politicians are the same” with 24% of non-voters giving that as their top reason and over half, 54%, putting it in the top three reasons

Q. Thinking about the reasons that you didn't vote please rank the following in priority order:



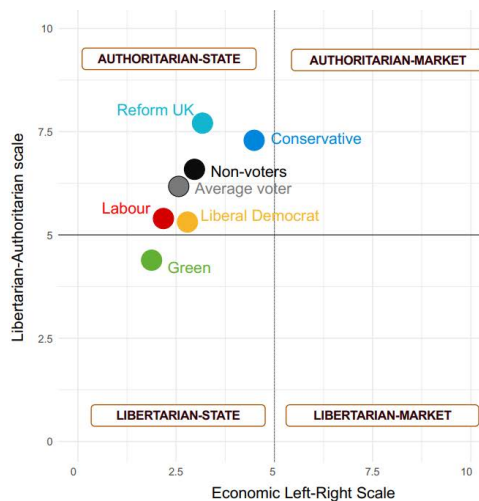
Q3. Thinking about the reasons that you didn't vote please rank the following in priority order:

The opportunity: restoring faith in democratic politics

All of this casts a fairly gloomy picture. Yet it also suggests a huge opportunity for any politician willing to speak directly to these voters. They are not a lost cause; their views and priorities are not that different from the rest of the British public. And they haven't stopped caring about what goes on in Westminster - only 16% of them declined to vote because they were uninterested in politics. But they are desperate for both a policy package that addresses their concerns and ambitions, and political leaders willing to deliver on the commitments they make to the public.

Non-voters are more market minded on economics than Labour voters, but very close to the average voter

- The average non-voter is 3.0/10 on the left-right scale and 6.6/10 on the liberal-authoritarian scale
- That compares with 2.8/10 and 6.2/10 respectively for the average member of the public
- That means non-voters are marginally to the authoritarian-right of the public as a whole



22.

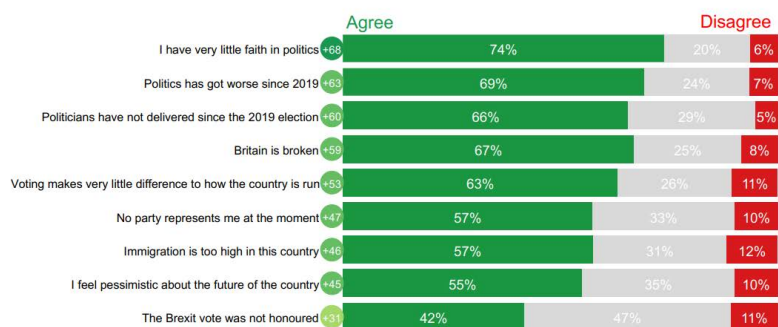
Of those stay-at-home voters this year, 14% of them said they strongly considered voting – some 2.7 million people. These are voters who want to cast a ballot but need to be given a reason to. And to gather them back into the democratic fold, our polling suggests different lessons for Labour and the Conservatives.

For this new Labour Government, the most important takeaway is how important delivery will be over the course of this Parliament. Voter allegiance is a lot more volatile today, and people no longer identify strongly with political parties in the way they used to. In the 1950s, millions of Brits were party members. Today, voters are much more inclined to shop

around for the best products on the market. And they are prepared to lend their support to parties on the condition that they deliver on particular issues. Indeed, this year saw a record number of seat change hands.

74% of non-voters say that they have very little faith in politics and 7 in 10 say that politics has got worse since 2019 (69%)

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Q4. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

16.

When voters send MPs to Parliament, they want them to make a difference. That is the basic expectation of representative democracy. But for decades now, politicians have been outsourcing authority to quangos, commissions and regulators who do not wield a democratic mandate. Often, the views and interests of these bodies diverge from those who elect the government of the day. Furthermore, a succession of laws – passed by Governments of both parties – have rendered ever more executive decisions subject to judicial review, and on ever wider grounds. And as such, the capacity of government to deliver on their commitments to the public has been vitiated, even while at the same time the state has ballooned to an unprecedented size.

The previous government blamed non-elected elements in the administrative apparatus for their inability to get the Rwanda plan off the ground, to crack down on low quality university degrees, to deliver badly needed infrastructure like prisons and hospitals. However true the analysis, though, sofa voters are entirely unsympathetic to politicians seeking to pass the buck for their failings. They want their elected leaders to take responsibility for decision-making, not to delegate or subcontract it out and wash their hands of the consequences.

As we set out in our paper *Getting a Grip of the System*, Labour can both restore faith in politics and secure a broader voter coalition for itself by repatriating power to the elected and reversing the technocratisation and judicialization of our politics. For those issues that non-voters care about the most – immigration, NHS reform, the economy – wrestling control of the system away from vested interests and placing it with ministers once again will not be easy. But it will be critical in delivering on the reforms it pledged in its manifesto. Failure to do so, particularly on immigration, will leave Labour not only vulnerable to the Conservatives, but the Reform

Party too – in fact, if voting were mandatory, 15% of non-voters would vote for Reform at the next election, compared to just 11% for the Tories.

The Conservative Party is now in a very different situation. Having been ejected from government, it is no longer able to prove its capacity to deliver, and must therefore take some rather different lessons about the sofa vote. Before anything else, it must demonstrate contrition; non-voters need to believe that it understands where it went wrong and why. Such an exercise will be necessary to earn the right to be heard again.

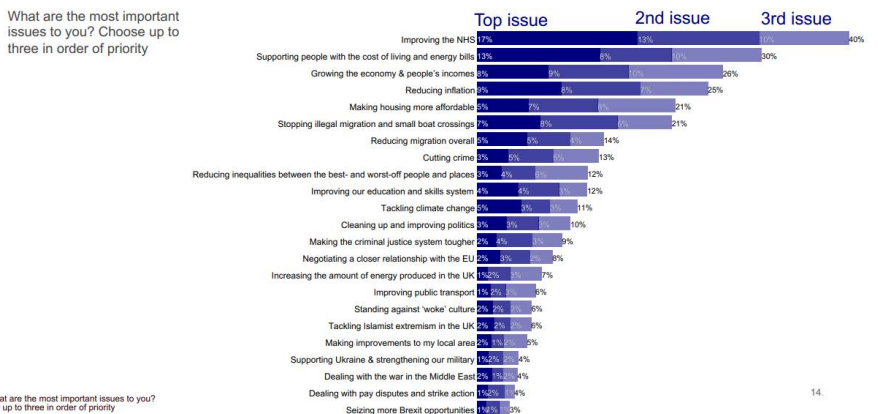
But contrition will not alone be sufficient. For on top of this introspection, the next Conservative leader must proactively convince sofa voters who abandoned the party in their droves why they should lend it their support once more.

What our polling says quite clearly is that they must offer something genuinely different to the existing status quo. A majority of non-voters think that whoever is in government will pursue broadly similar policies – policies which non-voters are manifestly unenthused by.

When politicians state the importance of appealing to the “middle ground”, what they mean is that policies should appeal to the average voter. But all too often, it is assumed that this can be achieved simply by splitting the difference between the Labour and Conservative positions. This is a fundamentally misguided view and will leave its advocates foolishly endorsing positions that bear little resemblance to the preferences of average voters. And given that the fictitious middle ground is always shifting, it is unlikely to offer a firm foundation upon which a rejuvenated Conservative Party could craft a solid, coherent political identity.

Instead, the next Tory leader should curate their pitch around a key set of issues that non-voters care about in common and commit to being less risk averse in addressing them – issues like immigration levels, the economy and the cost of living, crime, and healthcare. A representative sofa voter cites all these issues as priorities simultaneously.

Non-voters have the exact same concerns as those who voted – the NHS, the Cost of Living and the economy



Across all these areas, there seems to be a powerful common sentiment amongst the sofa vote: that the current situation is unjust. And not unjust in the sense of being unequal – almost nine in ten people did not cite inequality as one of their top three priorities – but in the sense of unfairness.

Non-voters think that the immigration system favours the well-off over the poor, and those moving to the UK over existing communities. They believe that big businesses – like the water companies - take advantage of ordinary people. They believe that there is a disconnect between what we spend on the NHS and the healthcare outcomes. They believe that the rich and the poor live by different rules. And they believe that criminals are getting off lightly. And with stories of multimillion payouts to executives of failing companies, of criminals being released early, and of migrants being put up in hotels during a cost of living crisis, who can blame them.

Restoring that sense of the fairness ought to be a priority for the next Conservative leader. And it won't pay to tack to the middle ground on delivering more broad-based prosperity, or a fairer immigration system. Sofa voters will want to know that if they vote Conservative next time around, they will get something meaningfully different.

Polling can identify areas of maximal political opportunity. But it cannot tell politicians what to do. Political leadership is about risk-taking, and by its very nature, when you take risks, the correct course of action is not known in advance. Our findings about non-voters this election shows where Labour and the Conservative Party should focus their efforts. But winning the support of such voters next time around will require boldness and a clarity of purpose which no poll or policy paper can provide.

We suggest different lessons ought to be drawn from our polling by Starmer's team and whoever goes on to lead the Conservative Party next. But there is an urgent message coming out of our research which ought to be heeded by everyone with an interest in British politics: that a growing number of people in our country feel despondent about our democracy and are dropping out of the political process.

The lifeblood of a vibrant representative democracy is an active and engaged electorate. Restoring our politics to health demands strong political leaders capable of engaging with the public and persuading them that their votes can be translated into action. For action, as always, speaks louder than words.



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Policy Exchange
1 Old Queen Street
Westminster
London SW1H 9JA

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