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Common

# The Disillusioned Defectors

## The Risk of a Split on the Right and How to Stop It

October 2022

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## Introduction

The Conservative share of the vote has risen in every election since 1997, including in three elections since the party has been in Government. A feat unparalleled across most modern western democracies. As recently as Autumn 2021 it seemed as though Conservative dominance could well last another next decade.

But 12 months is a long time in politics, the Party-gate, Patterson and Pincher scandals led to the ousting of Boris Johnson. A long leadership contest, the cost-of-living crisis and the reaction to the 'mini-budget' have now left the new Prime Minister and her ministers lagging far behind the Labour Party in the opinion polls.

A question that will dominate the next two years is whether the Conservatives can rebuild their electoral coalition and secure a fifth term in power. The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on the challenges in doing so and suggest how they might be overcome.

Using More in Common's unique segmentation of the British public, this briefing sets out the different priorities of the four segments that voted Conservative in 2019, why such a diverse and disparate coalition voted Conservative in 2019, why they have drifted away since and what might bring them back together.

The paper also identifies a group of voters, drawn from the Loyal National segment who switched from Labour to the Conservatives at the last election, but who are now tempted to place their vote somewhere else. These 'Disillusioned Defectors' are particularly attracted to the politics of the populist right. If this group ultimately do opt for another party of the right, it would cause the Conservatives to lose a significant number of Red Wall seats to the Labour Party, without Keir Starmer needing to win a single extra vote.

The good news for the Conservatives is that the current parties of the populist right have not yet been able to capitalise on their disillusionment, the bad news is the conditions are ripe for a savvy populist party to be able to do so. As this paper shows, there is just one sure fire way to stop that from happening – a laser like focus on common-sense delivery that once again convinces this group of voters that the Government is on their side.

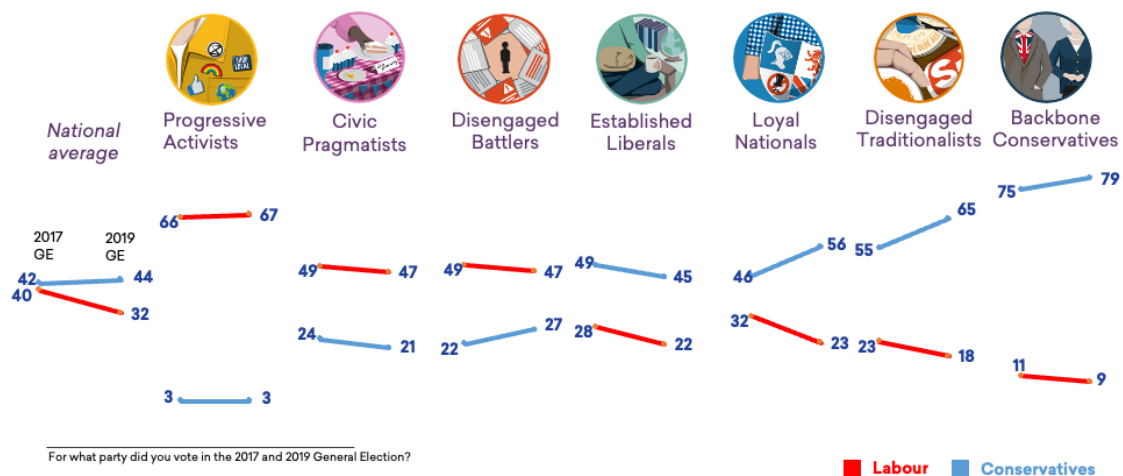
## Section 1: The Conservative Coalition – from 2017 to today

### Who are the Conservative coalition

Figure 1.0

#### Segments at the General Election

How the segments changed their votes between the 2017 and 2019 General Elections, Labour and Conservative



In 2019, the Conservatives won a convincing General Election victory. Under the leadership of Boris Johnson, they took 365 seats in parliament – their highest number since 1987, and on 42.4% of the vote, their highest vote-share since 1983. That a victory of this size occurred after the party had already been in power for nine years makes it even more impressive by historical standards.

Which groups of voters powered this victory?

More in Common has identified seven unique segments of the British population based on the public's values and social psychology. Looking at how the votes of each of these segments shifted between 2017 and 2019 helps to tell the story of that election.

Three of the British Seven segments mainly voted for the Labour Party in 2019:

- **Progressive Activists**, a highly engaged, largely urban group who are most motivated by the fight against equality and injustice and were particularly enthused by Jeremy Corbyn.
- **Civic Pragmatists**, a group who are socially and community minded but who unlike progressive activists are not politically motivated and champion compromise and consensus.

- **Disengaged Battlers**, the most economically insecure of the segments. Most focused on day-to-day survival, which means they are more disconnected than any other group. They are also the most ethnically diverse segment.

The remaining four segments mainly voted for the Conservatives, and these are the segments this briefing will focus on:

- **Established Liberals** are a socially liberal but economically right-wing group, who are most akin to Cameron Conservatives. They also serve as a good proxy for a 'Blue Wall' voter. The only segment of the Conservative coalition to have voted Remain, their support for the Conservatives actually fell by 4 points from 2017 to 2019. 45% of Established Liberals voted for the Conservatives in 2019.
- **Loyal Nationals** were the group that swung most heavily (by 9.5 points) to the Conservatives between 2017-2019. Socially conservative, but economically statist, this group best proxy the average 'Red Wall' voter. They voted overwhelmingly for Brexit (over 70%) and identify primarily as working class. Although they started drifting away from the Labour prior to 2019, this election magnified their realignment. 56% of Loyal Nationals voted for the Conservatives in 2019.
- **Disengaged Traditionalists** often don't vote but were motivated to turnout in 2019 and during the Brexit referendum. They value order, self-reliance and are generally suspicious of others. Two thirds of Disengaged Traditionalists (65%) voted for the Conservatives in 2019.
- **Backbone Conservatives** are the most solidly Conservative of all the segments, and most likely to be members of the Conservative Party. 79% voted Conservative in 2019.

Further details about the four Conservative voting segments are included in Annex A.

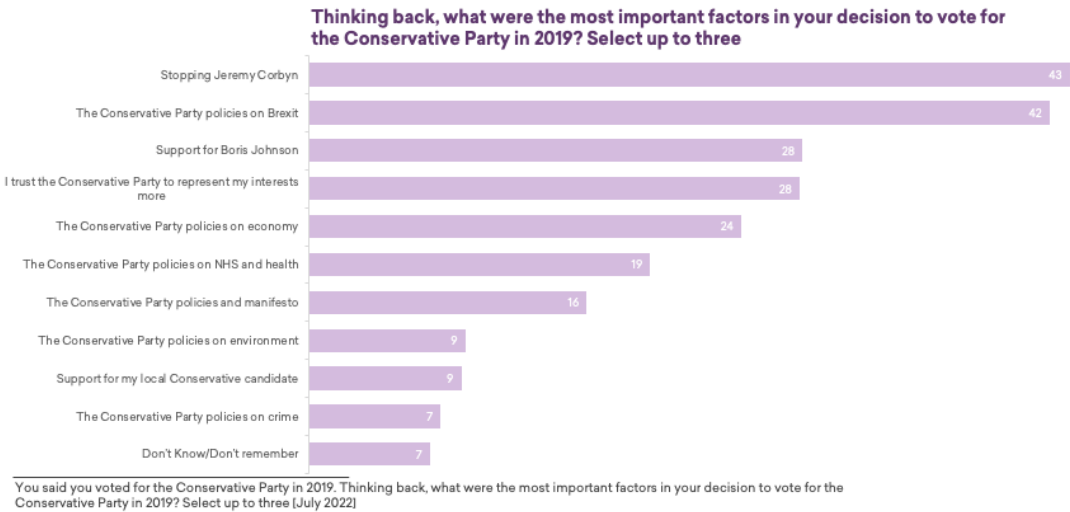
# Why did they vote Conservative in 2019

This voter coalition, and in particular Established Liberals and Loyal Nationals, are not electoral bedfellows. Why then did they come together to vote Conservative in 2019?

Figure 2.0

## Why Tory voters voted Tory in 2019?

Stopping Corbyn, getting Brexit done and the appeal of Boris Johnson best explain why Tories voted as they did in 2019



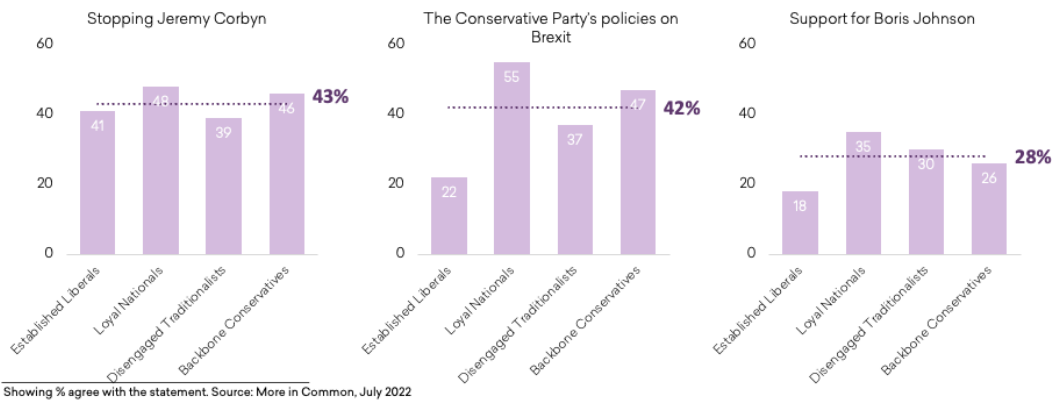
Polling of 2019 Conservative voters this summer identified three key drivers of their vote. Top of the list was stopping Jeremy Corbyn, followed by the Conservative’s policies on Brexit and their support for Boris Johnson.

Figure 3.0

## Why Tories voted Tory in 2019 – by segment

Different segments of the Tory coalition had clearly different motivations for voting Tory

Thinking back, what were the most important factors in your decision to vote for the Conservative Party in 2019? Select up to three



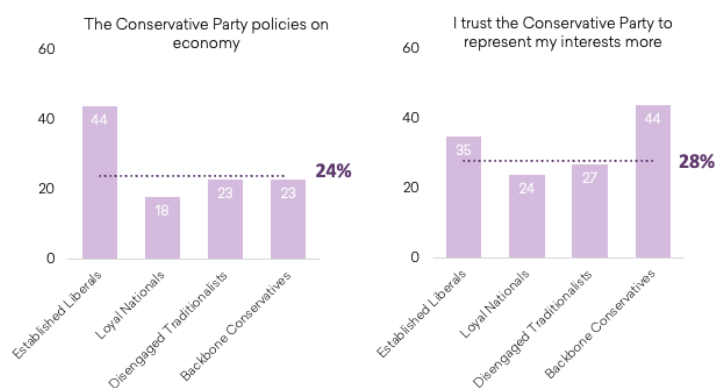
Established Liberal's reasons for voting Tory were slightly different. More than any other segment, they said it was the Conservative Party's policies on the economy that determined their vote in 2019, something that motivated just 18% of Loyal Nationals. Established Liberals were also the most likely to say that they 'I trust the Conservative Party to represent my interests more'.

Figure 4.0

### Why Tories voted Tory in 2019 – by segment

Different segments of the Tory coalition had clearly different motivations for voting Tory

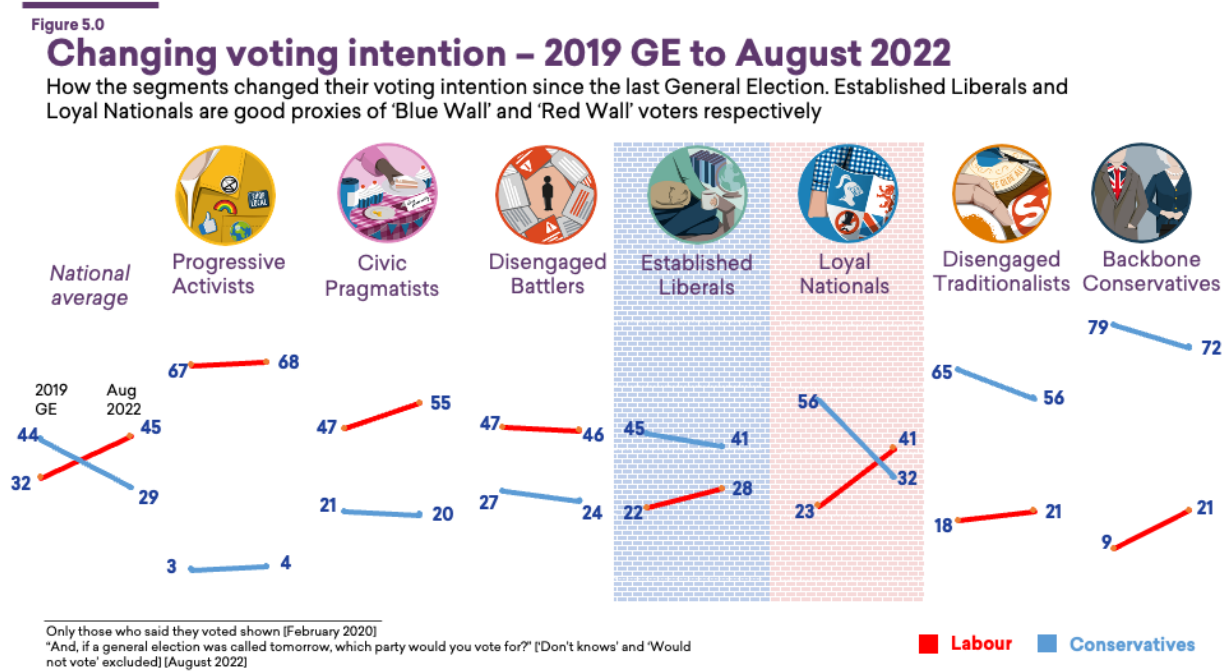
Thinking back, what were the most important factors in your decision to vote for the Conservative Party in 2019?  
Select up to three



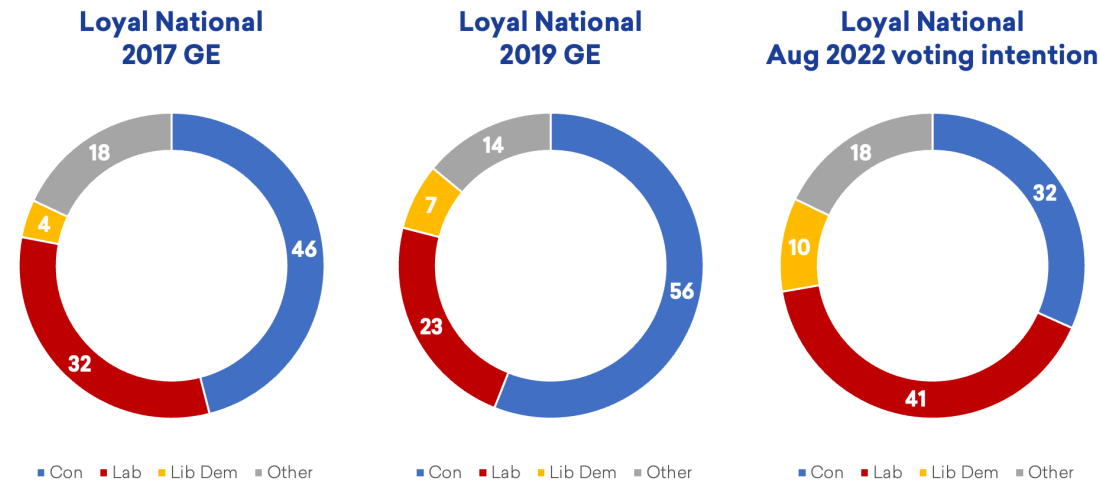
Showing % agree with the statement. Source: More in Common, July 2022

The thing that most united this unlikely coalition was strong opposition to Jeremy Corbyn. Beyond that, Red Wall voters were attracted by Boris Johnson's unique appeal alongside a desire to get Brexit done. For Blue Wall voters, it was trusting Tories on the economy that kept them in the fold (albeit to a lesser degree than in the 2017 General election). While many Blue wall voters didn't vote for Brexit in 2016, there was a sense among some that a decisive win for the Conservatives would allow the country to put the division of the Brexit years behind us.

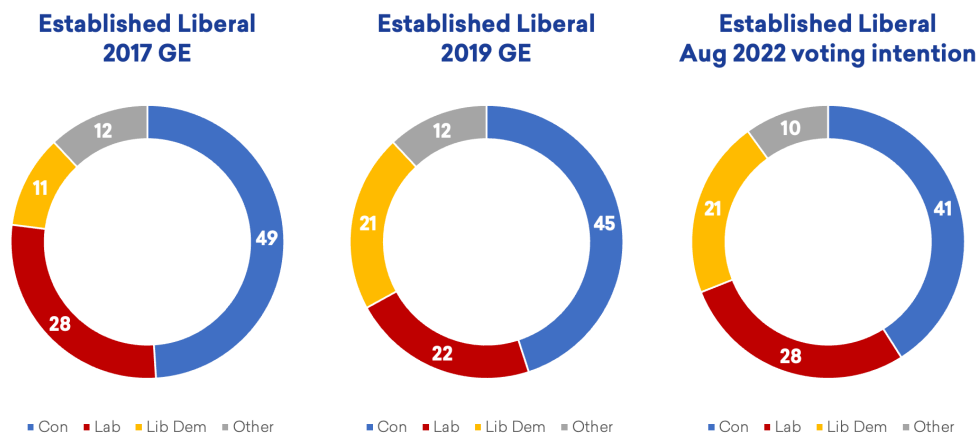
# What has happened since 2019



Despite the polling boost during the pandemic (and after the vaccine roll-out), the Conservative vote has fallen significantly over the past year. In our polling at the end of the Conservative leadership contest, the Conservatives sat on 29% of the vote – a 15-point drop since the 2019 General Election, and 16 points below Labour. Recent polling suggests the Conservative vote share has fallen even further. While the swing against the Conservatives runs across all the segments that voted Conservative in 2019, it is greatest in the two swing segments, Loyal Nationals and Established Liberals, who make up the outer flank of the Conservative voter Coalition in the Blue and Red walls.



On the morning after the 2019 General Election, Boris Johnson thanked Red Wall voters for 'lending' their votes to the Conservatives. He was right to emphasise the temporary nature of this switch. The 9.5-point swing from Labour to the Conservatives at the 2019 General Election has now been reversed. Loyal National support for the Conservatives has collapsed from 57% to 32% - a 25-point drop, and well below Labour. The next section explores in more depth the reasons for this groups' disillusionment with the Conservatives, but it has been principally driven by a perception that the Conservatives have not yet made good on promises to level up, tackle crime and stop illegal immigration, or shown they understand people's anxieties on the cost of living as well as residual anger at the 'Partygate' revelations.



Established Liberals are the other flank of the Conservative coalition, and have a very different world view to the Loyal Nationals.:

- Loyal Nationals are the segment most likely to say the world is becoming a more dangerous place, Established Liberals are the least likely to.
- Loyal Nationals are the segment who are most likely to identify as working-class, Established Liberals are the most likely to identify as middle class.
- Loyal Nationals are most likely to say they are feeling the effects of the rising cost of living, Established Liberals are the least likely to.
- Conservative support among Loyal Nationals had been growing in the run up to 2019, among Established Liberals it had been waning.

For the Established Liberals, their move away from the Conservatives was driven first by frustration at Conservative policies on Brexit, but more recently by dismay at perceived 'culture war' rhetoric. As the name implies, Established Liberals are a socially liberal voter block and as such are sceptical about policies such as the Rwanda deportation scheme and more generally spending government time and resources litigating culture wars. Established Liberals support for the Conservatives is now 5 points lower than it was in 2019, but 11 points lower than it was in 2017, suggesting their move away from their traditional Conservative voting habits continues apace.

The twin decline in support from both the Loyal Nationals and Established Liberals poses a very real challenge to the Conservatives in remaking the 2019 coalition – notwithstanding the cost of living and economic crisis. The next section explores a further risk that threatens to erode the Conservative base even further and what, if anything, can be done by the Tories to win back that support from the 2019 coalition



## Section 2: The Disillusioned Defectors

Across Europe populist parties of the far right are enjoying a wave of electoral success. With the Sweden Democrats recent surge, the triumph of Meloni's Brothers of Italy, Orban's re-election and the surprisingly strong result for Marine Le Pen in the second round of the French Presidential election, any notion that the pandemic had killed European populism has been put to rest.

Britain seems so far to be the exception, with the UK the only large European democracy without a populist far-right presence in Parliament, and the populist parties that do exist still struggle to break five per cent in opinion polls.

It's tempting then to assume Britain is immune to the forces of populism. But our research suggests that assumption is misguided. As recently as 2019 the Brexit Party were topping public opinion polls, and our latest polling suggests there is a sizeable group of voters who would be open to voting for a party of the populist right.

### Why haven't the populist right done better?

Before turning to why this might happen, it is worth considering why it hasn't happened to date. From conversations with voters and polling since the 2019 General Election three factors explain the lack of growth in support for populists.

First, as in Section one, the Conservative Party built an electoral coalition that spanned across the right, centre right and centre of the political spectrum, creating a 'big tent'. The 'People's government' approach left little room for populists to flourish and build support.

*Obviously, Boris won quite a landslide against Jeremy Corbyn, and everything that went with that, because he was going to deliver Brexit. And all the other parties were either going to have a referendum again, or completely stop it. So that brought a lot of Labour people over.*

*Jonathan, Backbone Conservative, Hitchin*

*I voted Conservative, purely on the back, not so much of Brexit for me, but it was just because Boris... I would rather Boris Johnson in charge than Jeremy Corbyn, to be honest. I have been a Labour voter in my youth...but it's not the working man's party it once was...Champagne socialists that's what I call them now.*

*Mike, Loyal National, Blyth*

Secondly, the parties of the populist right that do exist – Reform and Reclaim UK – drastically misjudged public attitudes to Covid restrictions in taking stridently anti-lockdown stances. 84 per cent of the public agreed lockdown restrictions were proportionate, with just seven per cent saying they were unreasonable. The group of voters most likely to back a populist party, Loyal Nationals, were even more supportive of lockdown restrictions – with over half giving the restrictions the highest possible level of support on a six-point scale. In being so out of sync with voters on the biggest issue to affect the country in recent times (and particularly those voters who could have been a receptive audience) populist parties of the right hampered their own prospects for electoral growth.

*I think the government aren't strong enough and they kept advising people. They kept advising people to do this, to do that. No, don't advise people. You've got to tell people what to do because the advice didn't work. Boris Johnson is too nice. He's not a dictator. He's a nice person*

– Mark, London

*Although they've put us on lockdown, I don't feel that it's been enforced as such and I think there's some people that are taking the mick with it and I just think that there's other countries that are looking at it, that are a lot more serious and I just think the consequence and, as far as people being out, I think the warning of people and then fined if they're not out for essential things, they're not being fined and I just think we're not backing up what's being said by the government.*

– Jody, West Midlands

Third, since the departure of the Nigel Farage from electoral politics the populist right has lacked a charismatic electoral figurehead. While Farage is a deeply divisive figure for many, a significant minority believe he is one of the only politicians to have the British people's interest at heart. Loyal Nationals are more likely to say that Nigel Farage is in touch with ordinary people than any of Liz Truss, Keir Starmer, Rishi Sunak, or Boris Johnson. But since his departure from the frontline of electoral politics no one has emerged to fill the gap and rally support for the populist right.

*I actually crossed the Conservative Party because of Brexit, and I didn't have much faith in Jeremy Corbyn. And my husband started leaning towards Conservatives, although we've never already Conservatives. And I just think my God, I don't want this party. And I don't want Labour. And maybe I would think looking at the independent parties because I've got no faith, whatsoever.*

– Josephine, Loyal National, Bolton North East

*He's grown on me a little bit. He's quite straight talking and he, compared with all the others, he almost seems a little bit honest. He's for the British people as well, ain't he?*

- Morgan, Loyal National, Don Valley

None of this however means that a populist party of the right could not enjoy greater electoral success in the UK. Indeed, the rise of the Brothers of Italy from 4% in 2018 to 26% in 2022 is a cautionary tale of how quickly the political weather can turn in favour of populist parties.

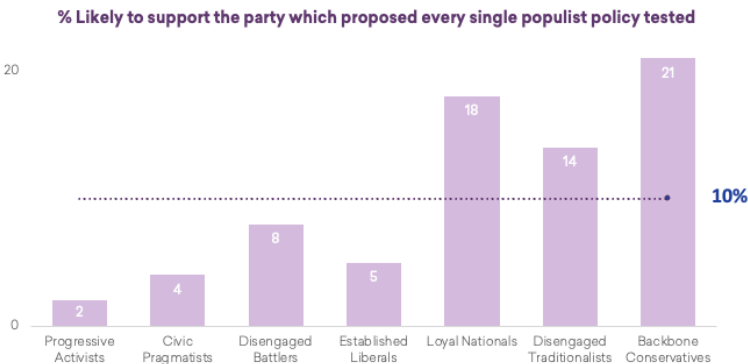
## How likely is a populist resurgence?

To assess how likely a populist resurgence is in the UK, More in Common tested a series of policies that could form the basis of a populist manifesto – the full list is included in Annex B. What we found was striking – only 13 per cent of population said none of the policies would be more likely to make them vote for a particular party, whereas around 10 per cent said all of them would. Among Loyal Nationals and Backbone Conservatives the proportion rises to almost one in five. More strikingly Loyal Nationals make up almost half of those who said they were ‘very or somewhat’ likely support a party proposing all of the populist policies. While most Backbone Conservatives will ultimately be likely to stick with the Tory Party for tribal reasons, it is that that subsection of Loyal Nationals in the Red Wall who the party most risks ceding to the populist right.

Figure 6.0

### Support for a populist manifesto

There is significant minority support among several segments that make up the Conservative 2019 coalition for all the populist policies tested in the mock manifesto in Annex A



Imagine at the next election a political party included the following policies in its manifesto How likely do you think you would be to vote for that party? Source: More in Common, August 2022

While it is impossible to judge precisely how well a populist party would perform in the Red Wall, our view is that the one in five Loyal Nationals who said they would support a party advocating all the populist policies we tested is a good proxy for the floor of support for such a party.

This sub-section of the Loyal Nationals, who we have named Disillusioned Defectors, are a uniquely unanchored group in British politics. They shook off their traditional loyalty to the Labour Party and switched to the Conservatives in 2019 but are now at risk of becoming disillusioned with the Tories. At the same time, unlike some other swing voters, they have not yet been convinced by Keir Starmer's Labour Party to return to the Labour fold.

Instead from our conversations in focus groups, it is clear they are looking for a party which is genuinely 'on their side' and which will put their interests first.

*If you work for the government, your heating bills and all that are paid through your expenses. It's not out of their pocket. We earn a wage, we pay for it out of our wage. The government don't. They get a wage, but then they claim everything on expenses, so don't actually spend their wage. So they haven't got a clue how hard it is.*

*Ellis, Loyal National, Bury North*

*I honestly think if a prime minister, no matter who it were, took a cut in expenses and on their wage, and lived off a wage that any other normal person has to, I think then they would start doing good because they'd realize how hard it is.*

*Carly, Loyal National, Don Valley*

# What would drive a populist resurgence in the UK?

Three key factors explain why these voters to consider abandoning the party they switched to less than three years ago and voting instead for a party of the populist right – economic insecurity, undelivered promises, and a loss of trust.

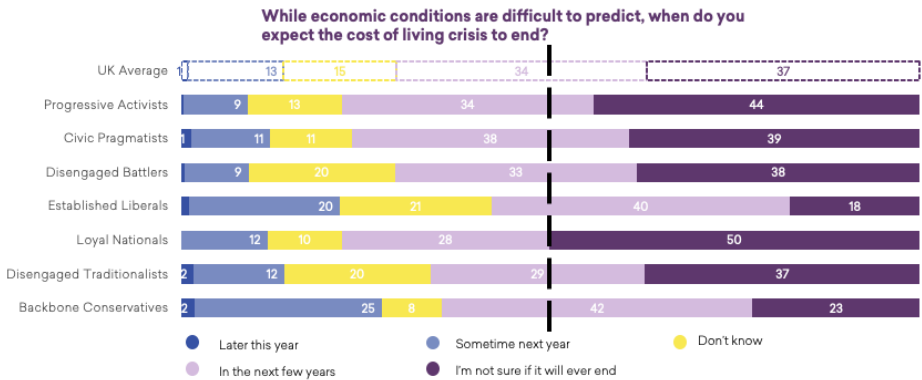
## Economic insecurity

As with almost all voters the cost-of-living crisis is the most important issue facing this group. How well the Government responds to it will, more than anything else, determine who they back in 2024. What makes the Loyal Nationals, from who the Disillusioned Defectors are drawn, unique however is that they see the crisis as just the latest economic setbacks that typifies the long-term decline of their communities and the absence of good jobs. Because of this they are the most likely to say that they don't think the current crisis will ever end, the highest of all the segments

Figure 7.0

### Pessimism over when cost of living crisis will end

Britons are deeply pessimistic. A plurality say they don't know if the cost of living crisis will ever end, including a majority of Loyal Nationals (the biggest swing segment)



While economic conditions are difficult to predict, when do you expect the cost of living crisis to end? (July 2022)

Understanding this group, it is important to recognise that they are not the poorest group in the electorate. Despite being the group most likely to say they are feeling the negative effects of the cost-of-living crisis, most will not have to choose between heating or eating. They do feel however that the current crisis has made unaffordable many of the things, beyond just surviving that make life enjoyable – family holidays, eating out, time with friends – and that they are instead living to work and working to live.

*I think for me it's like money's never been like a massive issue, I've been able to live and if I wanted to have a meal out and go on holidays, but that's kind of being taken away now so it feels like it's all work that you can't really plan for any fun and joy anymore because you're concerned that you need the money to pay bills and put food on the table.*

- Zoe, Loyal National, Stoke

*I would say it is affecting me, because I feel like obviously, I've changed from job to job, and I'm earning more money as I go from job to job, but it just feels like I'm working to pay the bills. And certain things that may be seen as luxury, is not a luxury to me. I like to go on holiday. I like to go out and eat with my friends. But now I'm having to be a bit more careful, because just day-to-day living, electricity, et cetera, is just increasing.*

*Moni, Loyal National, West Brom East*

The pressures of the cost-of-living crisis feed into a more generally held resentment. More than any other, this group feel that while people at the top of the income scale are doing quite well, and people at the bottom are being supported on benefits, those who are just about managing are left to struggle. 'Who is looking after the working people' is a constant refrain we hear in discussions with this group. That is combined with a feeling, however unfair, that many economic opportunities only go to immigrants 'rather than people who have paid taxes into the UK for a long time'.

*We get shafted left, right and centre in everything in the UK. Gas, electric, petrol, food. The government doesn't give us anything. We have to work hard. People on benefits, they're getting £650 payments. People are working hard and we're still getting no help.*

*Ali, Loyal National, Wakefield*

*"The people that are arriving on these little boats at Dover and wherever else...they're on the want, they're after something. They're all up to something. There's an ulterior motive for them to come here. They're after benefits and houses. People arriving on a boat don't want to go back. Do they?"*

*Paul, Loyal National, Dudley*

The latest round of economic uncertainty triggered by the market's reaction to the mini budget and in particular rising mortgage rates, will undoubtedly add to the sense that this group feels nothing ever goes right for them and that the Government is not on their side

*"The pound's crashed, obviously, it's massively affected banks with mortgages and stuff, etc. So it's only going to put cost of living up even more, isn't it now, I think, definitely. It's going to affect us more than it already has done"*

*Daniella, Loyal National, Don Valley*

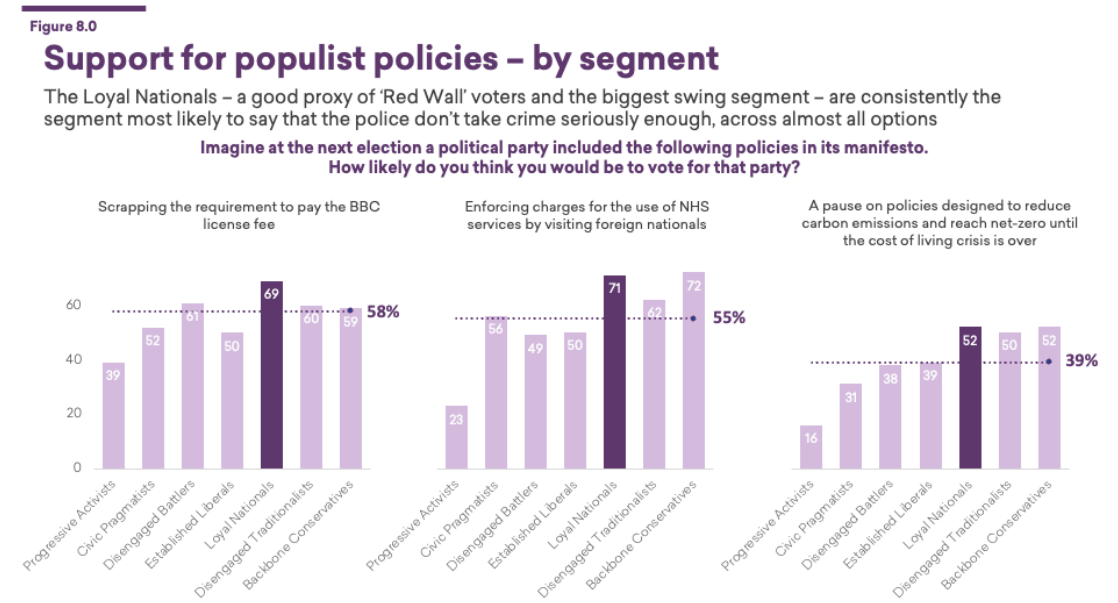
*"I don't think any decisions are going to be easy. I mean, the country is in a mess. We've just come out of COVID, we're in debt from the furlough scheme. I think she needs to start with the energy crisis for absolutely sure. Just to stop people from being so frightened. People need reassurance. And to not make promises she can't keep."*

*Mona, Loyal National, Don Valley*

*“I think it just is that they don't communicate, and things don't get rolled out properly. A lot of them say they want to do things that never actually get done.”*

*Carly, Loyal National, Don Valley*

Taken together it means this group are in the market for a new economic settlement, that rewards, as they see it, hardworking people. It is a sentiment which a party of the populist right could easily capitalise on and grow the proportion of Disillusioned Defectors among the Loyal Nationals. Part of that would undoubtedly involve direct promises on the cost of living, but our polling shows a series of other issues where the populist right could make headway, targeting what they see as unnecessary economic burdens. This includes potentially delaying net-zero, scrapping the BBC license fee and limiting the ability of foreign nationals to use public services



**Undelivered promises**

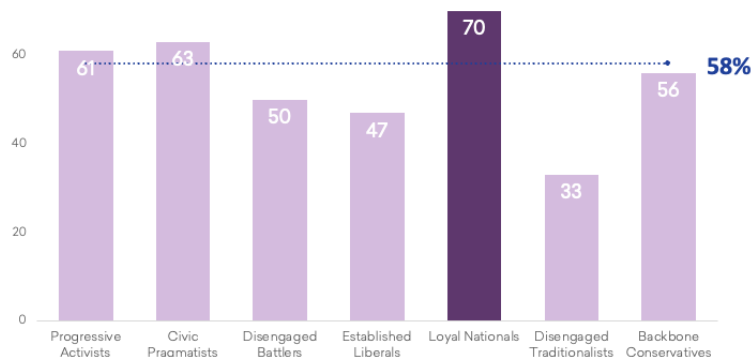
This group did not switch from Labour to the Conservatives in 2019 because of levelling up. But delivery on levelling up is what will determine whether they stick with the Conservatives beyond 2024. In fact, 70% of Loyal Nationals said that levelling up would be a top issue in deciding their vote at the next election.

Figure 9.0

## Levelling up on the ballot at next election

Loyal Nationals are most likely to consider the government delivering on levelling up to be important in deciding who they will vote for at the next election

When it comes to the next general election, how important or unimportant, will the Government's ability to deliver on its promise to "level up" the country be to your decision on what party to vote for at the next General Election? [% important]



Source: More in Common, November 2021

While most people are realistic about how long it will take to turn around communities that have been in decline for years, they do want to start seeing at least some progress now. But in over 50 focus group conversations conducted across the country over the past year we have found people are increasingly frustrated at what they see as a lack of delivery and wondering if levelling up was an empty promise. When asked to mark out of ten how well the Government is doing on delivering levelling up, Loyal Nationals give a score of just 3.5.

Part of this has been exacerbated by a sense that the new Government is less committed than its predecessor on the issue of levelling up. While Investment Zones are a clear sign that this Government is just as committed as that of Boris Johnson's to the policy, albeit with a difference of emphasis, more needs to be done quickly to communicate how this policy will benefit left behind communities

*And the other point for me would be that in general, that speech was very London-centric. He even referenced London a lot as well, and that you need for investment. I mean, what happened with levelling up?*

*Jordi, Loyal National, West Brom East*

*I haven't noticed anything or counted really anything that I would count as levelling up. Just shutting down. Yeah, things going down.*

*Moni, Loyal National, West Brom*

*I think they all talk the talk don't they, until they get into power and the proof is in the pudding. We saw it with Brexit didn't we, they told people what they wanted to hear, but then didn't deliver. I can't remember a time when it's felt as bad in this country, it feels really ominous at the moment and think it will get worse before it gets better.*

*Zoe, Loyal National, Stoke*



Levelling up isn't the only area where Disillusioned Defectors feel that the Government's delivery has so far failed to live up to its campaign rhetoric. The Conservative pledge to put 20,000 more police on the streets was a flagship offer of the 2019 campaign. But while progress has been made towards meeting that target, there is a perception that it doesn't matter because the police no longer bother to tackle crimes like vandalism and burglary. In fact, 80% of Loyal Nationals agree that when it comes to 'low-level' crime the police have largely given up. What's more, this group are by far the most likely to agree with the statement that 'the police are more interested in being woke than solving crimes'. This suggests that it is not simply that they feel the police are poorly funded but that funding is going towards the wrong priorities.

*I think the police are being made to be woke. Exactly what Andrew's just said. I know that's the military, but it's the same sort of thing. They're being made to be woke because they're going to offend. Whatever they say, they're offending somebody, aren't they?*

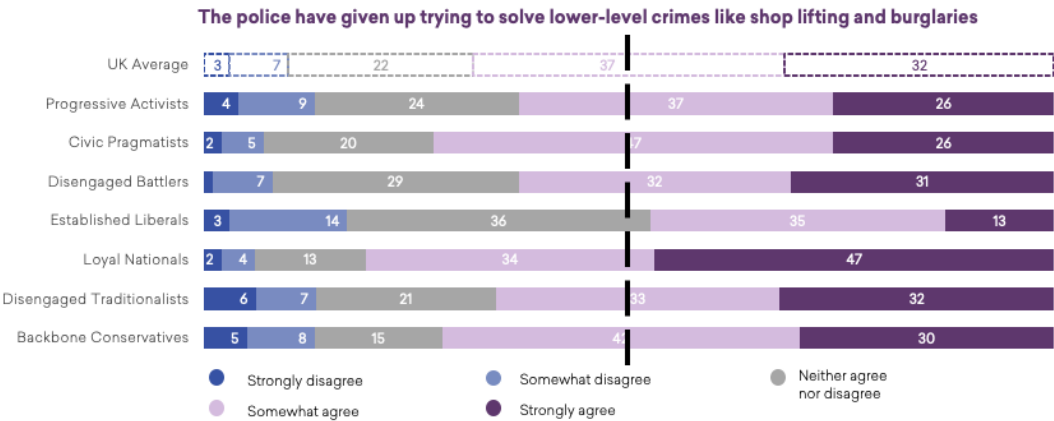
*Shelley, Loyal National, Don Valley*

The Loyal Nationals give the Government an average score of 3.3 out of 10 on tackling crime.

Figure 10.0

Frustration at police failing to tackle 'low level' crime

There is widespread frustration across the segments and particularly among Loyal Nationals that the police have given up tackling 'low level' crime like burglaries and shop-lifting



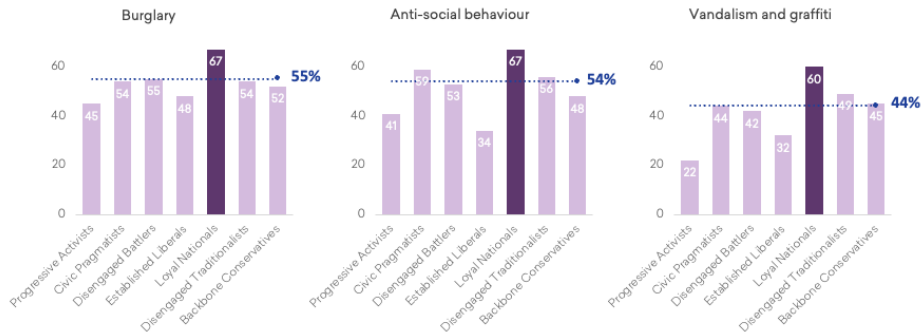
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements (May 2022)

Figure 11.0

## Red Wall voters and crime

The Loyal Nationals – a good proxy of 'Red Wall' voters and the biggest swing segment – are consistently the segment most likely to say that the police don't take crime seriously enough, across almost all options

Do you believe police take the following types of crime too seriously, not seriously enough, or with the right level of seriousness? [not seriously enough]



Do you believe police take the following types of crime too seriously, not seriously enough, or with the right level of seriousness? (July 2022)

*People are resorting to crime. And I think there's going to be a rise in burglaries and violent crime because people, their subconscious and their ego are taken a serious knock when they can't even afford to eat. And especially in places where there's borderlining sort of very affluent areas."*

*Glen, Disengaged Traditionalist, Guildford*

*If you any problem here with street crime, when you ring the police, they'll only come after two or three hours. They make excuses "We are short staffed". In the last couple of months, somebody damaged my car outside in the drive drive, smashed my windscreen and smashed my front window as well. When I rang police, they said they'd come after three hours, then didn't. They said "Oh, we are short staffed. We can't do anything."*

*Majid, Disengaged Traditionalist, Stoke-on-Trent*

*Punishments for these antisocial crimes basically just aren't good enough. I think they know they can get away with it as well. What are the police going to do?"*

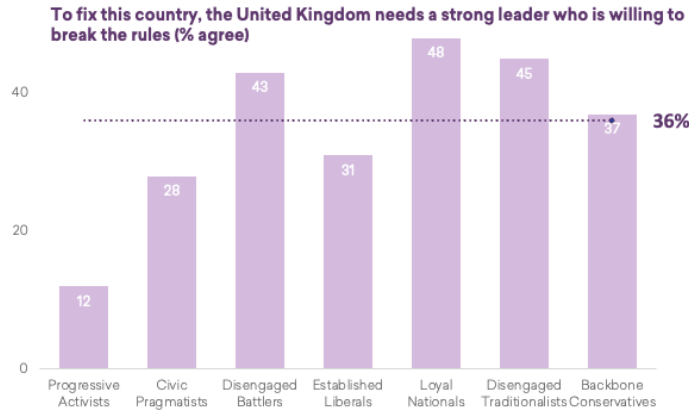
*Ricky, Stoke on Trent*

The perception that 'low-level' crime, which often involves damage to, or invasion of property, isn't being tackled, combined with their economic insecurity heightens this group's feelings of vulnerability. Indeed, they are the most likely to say that the world is becoming a more dangerous place, which in turn helps to explain why they are also the most likely to think that Britain needs a strong, rule-breaking leader to solve the country's problems

Figure 11.0

### Support for authoritarian leadership

Most Britons reject the idea that we need a rule-breaking leader, but Disengaged Groups and Loyal Nationals are more likely to agree than disagree



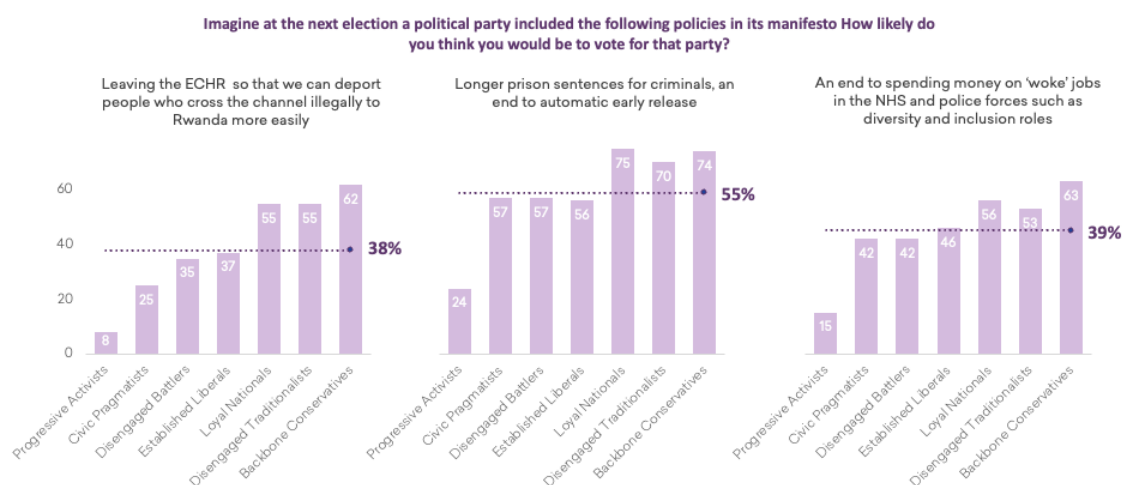
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: To fix this country, the United Kingdom needs a strong leader who is willing to break the rules. Source: More in Common, January 2021

The third area where this group feel most powerfully let down is on the issue of illegal immigration. For this group, small boats are a very real concern, feeding a perception that the UK is unable to protect its border. While this group support the Government's Rwanda scheme in principle, more ultimately think it won't reduce numbers of channel crossings than think it will. Because of that many think it will be an expensive waste of money. This leaves Loyal Nationals feeling they have heard promises to tackle illegal immigration and to break up the people smuggler gangs time and time again, and yet nothing ever happens. In fact, of all the policies where we asked Loyal Nationals to give the Government a score out of ten, it was on migration that that score was the lowest at a paltry 2.7 out of 10.

Taken together, this helps to explain why a populist party which pledges a tough stance on immigration, to leave the European Court of Human Rights, bring in tougher sentences for criminals and to cut the focus on DEI in public services could potentially attract high levels of support from this group.

## Support for a populist manifesto

The Loyal Nationals – a good proxy of ‘Red Wall’ voters and the biggest swing segment – are consistently the segment most likely to say that the police don’t take crime seriously enough, across almost all options



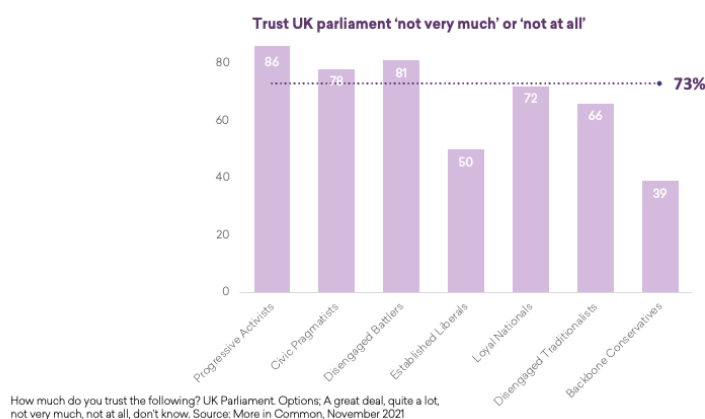
## Broken Trust

It is possible to over-emphasise the long-term impact of party-gate. Not least because the baseline of trust for politicians is already low.

Figure 11.0

## Longstanding low trust in politics and politicians

Even before partygate, trust in politics and Parliament was low



*“It’s a bit of a kick in the teeth. I mean, I’ve got a mother who’s been in hospital for nearly two years. And I think as the family, we didn’t see her for four month because they’ve had the lockdown rules. And then you find out that there’ve been parties, cheese, champagne. I mean as working class, I’ve never been to a party that serves cheese and champagne. Anyway, it’s wild.”*

Gary, Loyal National, Bolton

*"I said I think trust and government just don't go together, and they're not in same sentence and they never have been, or not for a long time anyway."*

*Eleanor, Loyal National, Wakefield*

*"I think we are all sceptical of the government, again, as we've all pointed out that there is no trust in really in politicians and it's been proved time and time again. I guess the only way I would personally be convinced is by actually seeing them build new schools, by the roads being done, more evidence-based, that level of accountability is what you can actually see. So we can see more hospitals, there's evidence that they're investing in the NHS and that waiting lists are going down, and people are able to access those services."*

*Tom, Loyal National, Wakefield*

*"Take responsibility for your actions and be honest and being honest gets you more respect. You're still going to get in trouble, but not as much trouble because you were honest straight away. We've had a few issues with some of the children at school, and that's the big message we've been sending out the last couple of weeks. I think the same goes for the government."*

*Debbie, Loyal National, Blackpool South*

But there is no doubt that the Disillusioned Defectors felt especially let down by the events in Downing Street. This is a group who were genuinely enthused about Boris Johnson, seeing him as different from other politicians, which was a major reason why they voted Tory for the first time in 2019. That enthusiasm grew when the then Prime Minister was seen to have delivered on his promise to 'get Brexit done' and many felt for Boris personally when he contracted Covid.

*I know we've all had to follow the rules and regulations. They're no different. But after what he's brought the country through, Brexit and the COVID, no other Prime Minister has had to deal with a pandemic like he's had to deal with.*

*Margaret, Loyal National, Blackpool South*

But the revelations that parties were taking place in Downing Street on his watch, and their perception that rather than owning up to what had happened excuses were made, led to many of these voters falling out of love with the former Prime Minister. This disillusionment was not limited to Boris personally, but many felt that all mainstream politicians were 'doing the same' including, even the Leader of the Opposition, despite him having been cleared in 'beer-gate'. That feeling of one rule for them, and one rule for us, has undoubtedly made this group more willing to consider populist alternatives who present themselves as being 'on the side of the people'

*Well, to be perfectly honest, all this fuss about Keir Starmer has never materialized. That's all been swept away under the carpet somewhere. So, I don't think any of them are that pristine and that. If they were going to do something like having a drink in a room, why not draw the curtains? And nobody would know the bloody difference.*

*Robert, Backbone Conservative, Guildford*

*I don't believe in any of the policies. I just think they are just out to line their own pockets.*

*- Nicola, Loyal National, Don Valley*

Figure 11.0

Who does our democracy serve?

Progressive Activists, Disengaged Battlers and Loyal Nationals strongly believe Britain's democracy is rigged

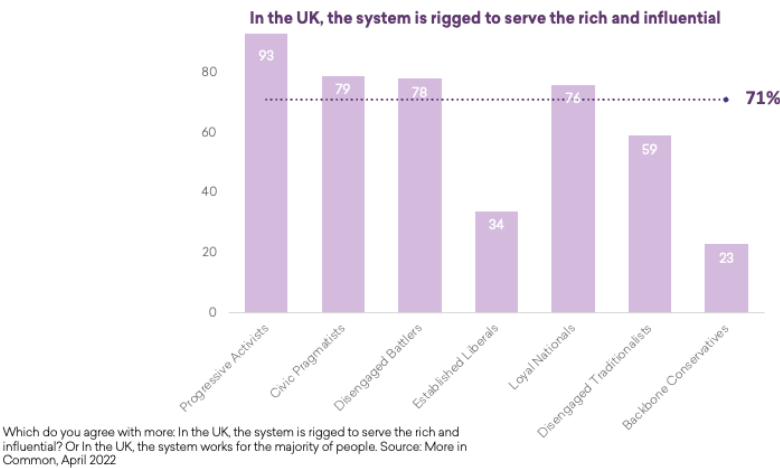
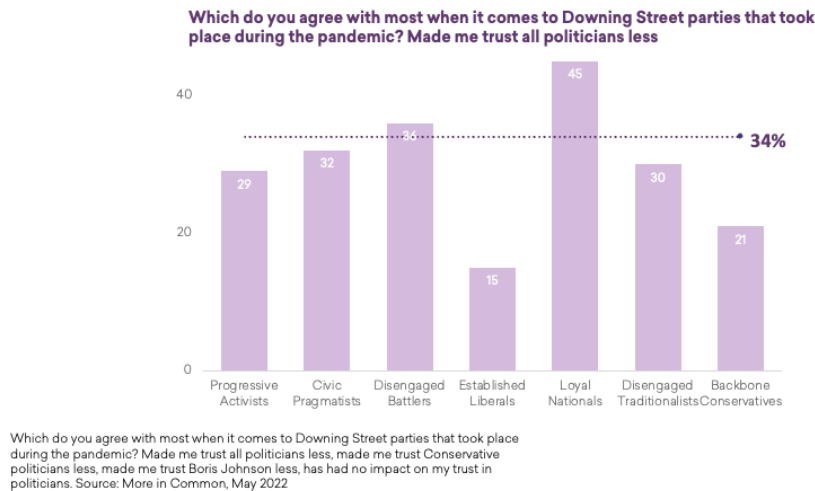


Figure 12.0

Partygate impact on trust

Loyal Nationals are the group most likely to say partygate has made them trust all politicians less



## Why not Labour?

That sense that all politicians are the same also helps to explain why this group of voters have not yet switched back to the Labour Party.

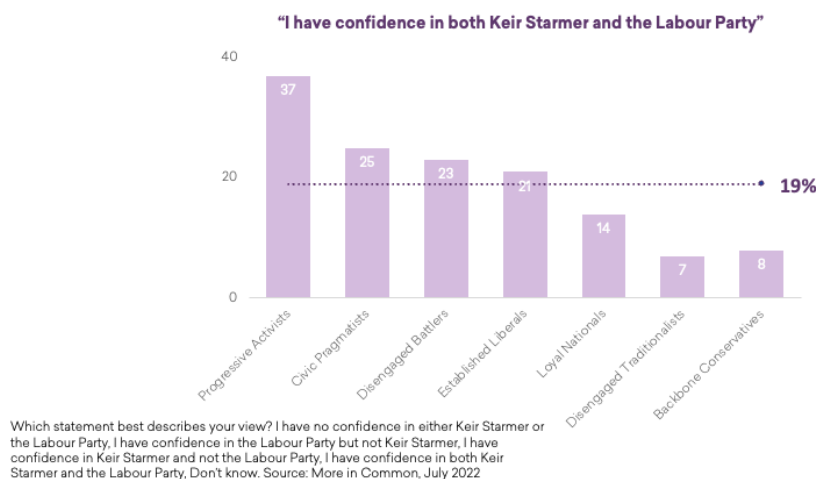
There is no doubt that the Labour Party has recovered significantly from 2019, and our polling shows them making gains across the board – particularly with the two swing segments of the Tory Coalition. If those polls are repeated in a general election the party may well be on course for a majority.

But as others<sup>1</sup> have pointed out a chunk of the decline in support for the Conservative Party comes from their voters to switching to ‘don’t know’, rather than direct switchers, and there remains a group of those voters who left Labour in 2019 which needs more persuasion to return to the fold and they are not yet convinced by Keir Starmer.

Figure 12.0

### Work remains for Labour to build trust with voters

Among the key Loyal National group, their levels of confidence in Keir Starmer and the Labour Party remain below average



The pandemic undoubtedly hampered the opposition's ability to oppose or set out extensive alternative policies, which has left many voters unsure of what the party stands for. That means even as they start to believe Labour would do a better job than the Conservatives, they don't yet have confidence that the party is on their side.

Ultimately, of course, this may not matter to Labour if the Conservatives bleed some support to a populist party and even more to Labour, the result will ultimately be the same. In a forthcoming briefing, we will consider what more Labour would need to do to expand

<sup>1</sup> Chris Curtis, Head of Political Polling, Opinium. [See link](#)

its voter base, convince more of those that it lost in 2019 to return to the fold, and deal with these voters who are disillusioned with the offers from both major parties.

*I think Keir Starmer is a lovely man, but he's most indecisive person I've ever heard. He still has not come up with any sort of policies whatsoever. Boris was a dreadful man, but he got things done. Starmer is a lovely man, but gets nothing done.*

*Mike, Loyal National, West Brom East*

*"I mean, I do vote Labour but to think he would be running the country is a bit scary"*

*Daniella, Loyal National, Don Valley*

*He's just unremarkable. He doesn't say, he just makes a noise. He doesn't actually say or commit to anything.*

*Mona, Loyal National, Don Valley*

## The electoral cost

At first reading, it might seem like the risk of a populist upsurge is just the usual mid-term blues. After all, in the run up to the 2015 General Election UKIP rose to 25% in the polls and the Brexit party topped the poll in the 2019 European elections only for there to be a Conservative landslide that same year.

But dismissing the disillusioned dissenters as mid-term grumblers would be a mistake. As highlighted in section one, the three core factors that particularly motivated Loyal Nationals to vote Conservative in 2019 – Boris Johnson, Jeremy Corbyn and Brexit – have disappeared. The disappearance of these motivators has combined with disappointment at undelivered promises on issues like crime, levelling up and illegal immigration. As a result, a sizeable proportion of Loyal Nationals now fall into the 'Disillusioned Defector' camp and the appeal to them of a populist party is more than just the usual midterm blues. This should be taken seriously.

Furthermore, the very lowest floor for the number of Disillusioned Defectors who would vote for a party of the populist right seems to be around 20% of the 2019 Conservative vote in Red Wall seats. At that level of support, the split among right wing voters would cause the Conservatives to lose over 20 seats at the next election to Labour – without Keir Starmer's Party even winning a single extra vote. Add to that a swing to the Labour Party and the electoral cost of losing the Disillusioned Defectors to a populist party could be seismic.



## Winning the Disillusioned Defectors back

What then should the Conservatives do to see off this populist threat and win back the Disillusioned Defectors?

The temptation might just be to adopt the list of populist policies in Annex B wholesale to see off the populist threat, or to fight a series of culture wars that create a wedge with the Labour Party. The danger, however, is that in doing so the Conservatives alienate the other side of their electoral coalition in the Blue Wall.

Of all the Conservative voting segments, Established Liberals who best reflect the average blue wall voter, are most likely to say that they would not support a party advocating the list of populist policies we tested.

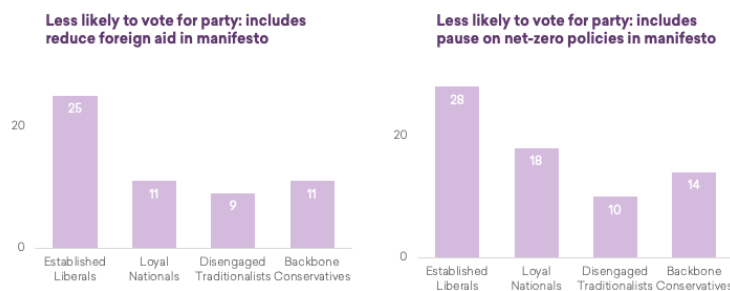
A quarter of Established Liberals say they would be less likely to vote for a party that pledged to leave the European Court. 28% say they would be less likely to vote for a party that chose to pause steps towards reaching net-zero. While 25% said similar about cutting foreign aid.

In fact, just 4.6% of Established Liberals said they would support a party that backed all of the populists the policies tested. Staving off the threat of defections on one end of the voter coalition just to bleed support on the other side would evidentially not be a serious strategy for electoral success.

Figure 14.0

### Risk of adopting populist policies

While adopting populist policies may plug the gap left by the Disillusioned Defectors, the Tories will lose votes at their other blue wall flank.



Instead, rather than trying to ape the populist right, which as successive Tory Prime Ministers have found is only ever a recipe for further demands, the party needs to respond with its own common-sense policies.

First, more than anything else the Government needs to convince voters that there is a way out of the cost-of-living crisis. The £2,500 energy price cap was a major (and expensive) intervention but too many people are still confused about what it means for them which means they are still worrying about the Winter. A major communications campaign is needed to explain to the public exactly what the £2,500 cap will mean for them this winter.

*"I'm still getting letters and emails through from my gas and electric providers explaining that it's going up and things like that, and it's not really in line with what she's said. So, it is still a worry that they are going to be still really high. I don't think it matters who is in line, I think it just is that they don't communicate, and things don't get rolled out properly. A lot of them say they want to do things that never actually get done."*

- Carly, Loyal National, Don Valley

But alongside this, if the Government is to continue to pursue its growth strategy it needs to convince these voters that they, and not just the richest, will benefit. Most of these voters care more about their own economic wellbeing than the relative distribution of wealth across society and so messages about growth can appeal to them, but the Government needs to be clear that they too will have more money as a result of lower taxes.

Second, the party needs to show that it is still serious about levelling up. If Investment Zones are to be at the heart of the refreshed policy, then the Government needs to tell the story of how these areas will help to transform neglected communities. Alongside this, green issues are one of the few policy areas that do unite the 2019 Conservative Coalition. That is not because Conservative voters are green ideologues, far from it. But most Conservative voters believe reaching net-zero is a necessity for the sake of their children and grandchildren. The opportunity here is to recognise, as Metro Mayors like Ben Houchen have done so successfully, that levelling up can be tied to the green agenda through the promotion of green jobs, investment and technology across the Red Wall.

*"I think that we should be doing more on climate. I look at all the new houses that are being built at the moment, they're flying up everywhere, and I just think the government should be making these companies so the house is a bit more sustainable in terms of they should be putting solar panels on, and you know other things that you can be doing to put in your house, that that again reduces the people's costs that are living there, so it's not you're not getting hammered every time every which way. I think there's lots of stuff we could be doing more wind farms and stuff like that."*

Mark, Loyal National, Stoke

Third, the Government need to ensure the police get serious about 'low level' crime. Suella Braverman's letter to Police Leaders in England and Wales on the need to double down on neighbourhood crime struck the right note. Sir Mark Rowley's announcement that the police will visit the site of every burglary is another step in the right direction. However much more political direction will be needed to ensure that the police's time and energy is being best directed on the issues that people care about most.

Finally, the Government needs a serious, credible plan for tackling illegal immigration. While policies such as the Rwanda scheme do command support, unless rhetoric is followed by action, they ultimately end up making disillusionment with the Government worse and feed support for populists. Pledges to leave the ECHR risk alienating the party's more liberal wing. Instead, more investment needs to be made in catching and prosecuting those responsible for people smuggling and a new settlement needs to be negotiated with France to stop migrants entering The Channel. At the same time the Government needs to build on the success of the Homes for Ukraine scheme to make community sponsorship a more widely used route for refugee resettlement, empowering communities, rather than central Government with control of resettlement.

## Conclusion

Building the 2019 Conservative Coalition was helped by a unique set of factors, ranging from the ongoing process of realignment in British politics, the overwhelming desire to bring a close to the Brexit process, added to the unique skill of Boris Johnson and the weakness of Jeremy Corbyn as politicians.

Recreating it will not be an easy task but starting to do so will first involve convincing those red-wall voters who lent their votes to the Conservatives in 2019 that they were right to do so and should do so again. Failure to do so and not only will many of these voters go back to Labour, but as this report identifies a significant number of 'Disillusioned Defectors' could turn to a party of the populist right. That could not only have profound consequences for our politics but could also be, as the Canadian General Election of 1993 showed, disastrous for the Conservative Party.

Winning back their support, will involve more than simply aping parties of the populist right – something that will repel Established Liberals in the other side of that 2019 coalition. Instead, the Conservatives should focus on a series of common-sense, common-ground policies that show they are on the side of these voters, and worthy of regaining their trust.

The Truss Government's early decisions to streamline Government policies and focus on the economy first and foremost has merits. The challenge they face now is to show that the volatility of recent weeks is a one off and to demonstrate how that economic focus will lead to an improvement in the livelihoods of ordinary voters, while still ensuring commitments on crime, immigration and levelling up are met.

The public are frustrated at the behaviour of politicians, exhausted by a series of seemingly never-ending crises from Brexit to Covid to the cost of living, and impatient about undelivered promises. The task for the Conservatives over the next two years is to show that after 14 years in power they are still best placed to answer those concerns.

## **Annex A: Meet the four Conservative-leaning segments**

The British Seven model (More in Common's population segmentation) offers a deeper perspective that goes beyond top line voting intention and demographic analyses. Our model is based on the British public's social psychology, values, and core beliefs which groups the public together using their values rather than their politics or demographics.

As such, we can do more than simply describe the voting dynamics that took place at the last election and dive deeper into understanding the starting points of these groups – making us well placed to answer why they voted as they did in 2019, why they've reacted as they have since then, and the factors that will shape where they will go next in the lead up to the next election.

This annex explores the starting points for each of these segments.

## Established Liberals - the typical Blue Wall voter

Established Liberals are an optimistic, outward looking and comfortable group who believe the world and their community is becoming a safer place. The status quo works for the Established Liberals, and as such they don't like anything which disrupts that too much. Politically speaking, they are socially liberal but economically right leaning.

They are proud of the progress that Britain has made in recent years on diversity and multiculturalism, and they want the country to continue down that path. They are 'green pragmatists' – climate and the environment are an increasing priority for this group and they want the Tories to get on with delivering net zero. They are turned off by culture war debates on both the right and the left – and want more civil and reasoned debate about issues of cultural change.

Their fiscal conservatism is increasingly clear when discussing the cost-of-living crisis with Established Liberals. They are least likely of any segment to be struggling with the cost-of-living crisis and worry that by putting the bills on the country's credit card they will ultimately end up footing the bill. When it comes to levelling up, they are more worried than other groups that resources will be directed away from their communities in London and the South East.

They are the only part of 2019 coalition that voted remain in the 2016 Referendum.

*"Definitely anybody that's got a good plan that's a long-term plan. But I just would really like it if they actually meant it and not just going to pay lip service, because they're going to get our vote. So it would be nice if there was just some trust there that they would actually do something useful, something long term, something beneficial. I would be listening intently to somebody who's got a plan that involves helping our planet so that it is still here and is sustainable for our kids when they grow up."*

*Shonagh, Established Liberal, Guildford*

*"We normally use the hot tub all over summer, this year, we just haven't even bothered getting it out"*

*Steven, Established Liberal, Reading*

*'I always try and vote because, as the other people said, it's been a family thing that's been hammered into me that you have the right to do this, so you should do it, and sometimes it does feel like you're choosing the least worst option.'*

*Aimee, Established Liberal, Wiltshire*

## Loyal Nationals - the typical Red Wall voter

Loyal Nationals are a proud and patriotic group that feels under-threat. These feelings of threat perception mean they often think about the world and the challenges facing Britain through a tribal lens – they want to know who's on their team, and who isn't. These low levels of trust are borne out of their strong sense that their communities have been ignored and left behind for years. Nevertheless, they remain immensely proud of their community and the country in generally.

Politically, Loyal Nationals are a socially conservative but economically statist group. They don't like being told what to say, or feeling the pressure to talk a certain way about things, but when it comes to economic issues (particularly issues of economic inequality) they find common cause with many progressives. Despite the fact they are not the group struggling the most in the cost-of-living crisis, they are most likely to think they are worse off than most other people. For Loyal Nationals, levelling up and regeneration in their community are the prize they won for voting for Brexit in 2016 and voting to get Brexit done in 2019, they expect to see it delivered. They are concerned about small boats and illegal channel crossings and anti-social behaviour and want the government to get a grip of these issues quickly.

*"Spend a day in our lives... I think decisions are made in government by people who don't understand what it's like at the sharp end."*

*– Miles, Loyal National, Norwich*

*"I wouldn't go to the town centre. I can't tell you the last time I did go to the town centre because there's nothing there. Everything's shut down. They're all empty shops. It's terrible. And then, the roads, there's always roadworks going on somewhere. They all seem to be at the same time, but nobody ever works on them."*

*– Emma, Loyal National, Oldham*

*"I don't have the trust or faith in politicians that I used to. I think the way they approach their role, the way they take on the responsibility that they're given - they feel as if it's almost with impunity, they can get away with anything. Politicians used to resign. Now they just are bare faced and say, well, no I've done this, and they justify why they won't resign."*

*– Aled, Loyal National, Scotland*

## Disengaged Traditionalists - the stay-at-home Tory voter

Disengaged Traditionalists are a group that values a well-ordered society, take pride in hard work and want strong leadership that keeps people in line. Disengaged Traditionalists view the world from a very literal and individualist perspective rooted in self-reliance or 'pulling yourself up by your bootstraps'. They are generally fairly suspicious of others and think we need clear and strong rules that are enforced properly.

They are less interested in the daily cut and thrust of politics, they just want the government to get on with the job of delivery in an orderly way that doesn't bother them or ask too much of them. On the cost of living, they want support directed to families like theirs in the squeezed middle and think too much support goes to those who don't work and that people don't do enough to earn their benefits. Their support for climate action depends on it being manageable and incremental – they are turned off by talk of breaking down and rebuilding the economy. They want levelling up to lead to safer and more orderly communities. Their starting points on culture war debates are socially Conservative, but there are generally less engaged in culture war debates than Loyal Nationals.

Many Disengaged Traditionalists came out to vote for Brexit in 2016 and 2019 and they rank it as the thing they are most proud of in Britain over the last 70 years.

*"I think the money's more accessible now. If you've got a Tory government and a Labour seat, which we've had on and off a number of years, and everything seems to have been on the slide, whereas all of a sudden now, there seems to be somebody's opened a tap of money somewhere. It can't do any harm, can it?"*

*– Lee, Disengaged Traditionalist, Stoke-on-Trent*

*"The park is just completely covered in glass...now and again you see it cleaned up, and then it just gets trashed again. It's not fair, really, because they're trying to sort it, but you can see money's been poured into the big parks like Hanley and stuff, but just not in the little ones. I just think it's a shame because that's where lots of people can actually get to."*

*– Laura, Disengaged Traditionalist, Stoke-on-Trent*

*"And I avoid the news if possible, because it's just depressing now."*

*– Kirsty, Disengaged Traditionalist, Manchester*



## Backbone Conservatives - the ever-Loyal Tory voter

Backbone Conservatives are a nostalgic but optimistic group. They are loyal Tory voters and are more politically engaged than the other segments – and the most likely group to be Tory Party members. They approach economic and social issues from a right-wing political and ideological standpoint, unlike other segments which are more practical in their thinking.

Backbone Conservatives think success in life depends on the hard work that individuals put in themselves and reject any ideas that the system is rigged against people. They are proud of their long-standing support for Britain leaving the EU.

They are struggling less than most other groups with the cost-of-living crisis – but they think every option should be on the table when it comes to getting serious about energy security including fracking and North Sea oil if it can be delivered quickly and cheaply. They are proud of the Great British countryside and nature preservation is the key lens through which they engage with climate questions. They like the optimism of a message rooted in economic growth across the country – but are worried about London and the South East being levelled down as a result of levelling up. On culture wars, they approach the issues from a traditional lens and reject framings that are seen to be overly apologetic or erode British history.

They are both optimistic about the opportunities for our post-Brexit future and nostalgic about some elements of the past that they think we've lost as a society.

*“People just tend to jump on the bandwagon nowadays and protest or anything and I'm not even sure what they were protesting about. It seems like it's all perpetuated by the media and spreading negative news about things, all the time.”*

*Malcolm, Backbone Conservative, Workington*

*“Things are said, and then somebody gets into power...and then actually a lot of the things that were said don't seem to happen. So I think there is things that could be improved, but I think, generally speaking, compared to a lot of countries I think we've got a pretty good [democracy], and I think it does work pretty well.”*

*Nancy, Backbone Conservative, Yorkshire*

*“If they're refugees fleeing from an awful situation, then it is bad to send them to a country like Rwanda. Sure. But as a deterrent for people who just want to come to Britain who are completely fine, who are coming over with their rich clothes and phones and everything, because there are people that are just coming to Britain, aren't there?”*

*Jonathan, Backbone Conservative, Hitchin*

## **Annex B: A potential populist manifesto**

Imagine at the next election a political party included the following policies in its manifesto. How likely do you think you would be to vote for that party? Very likely, somewhat likely, Neither likely nor unlikely, somewhat unlikely, very unlikely

- Leaving the European Court of Human Rights so that we can deport people who cross the channel illegally to Rwanda more easily
- A fight back against political correctness and cancel culture in universities
- Longer prison sentences for criminals, an end to automatic early release
- An end to spending money on 'woke' jobs in the NHS and police forces such as diversity and inclusion roles
- A pause on policies designed to reduce carbon emissions and reach net-zero until the cost-of-living crisis is over
- Reducing foreign aid so that more money is spent here in the UK
- Scrapping the requirement to pay the BBC Licence fee
- New measures to ensure that only people born women can compete in women's sports
- Enforcing charges for the use of NHS services by visiting foreign nationals



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