



# Dead Centre: redefining the centre of British politics

## FOREWORD

### Opinium

If one thing was made clear by the result of the EU referendum, it was the weakness of the traditional ‘centre ground’, defined for a generation by social and economic liberalism with a balance between commitment to the free market and social programmes to mitigate its disruptive effects. EU membership typified this, embedding liberal economics and limiting state interventions in the economy but also providing a buffer against full throated competition from the outside world in the form of “social Europe” and protections for consumers and workers.

Given the crossparty nature of the EU vote, with a sizeable block of Conservatives voting Remain and a large minority of Labour voters opting for Brexit, and the ensuing debate about what Brexit means, our understanding of the “centre” therefore needs redefining. The two main parties historically represented the interests of capital vs. labour. But if, as Tony Blair noted a decade ago, the new “left vs. right” is “open vs. closed”, are our political parties able to adequately represent both sides? We hope that this analysis by Opinium and SMF goes some way towards mapping this new reality.

### SMF

You might ask why a think-tank is polling on Britain’s political tribes and views. After all, our business is policy, not politics. But policy doesn’t emerge from a vacuum - it’s shaped by the views of the electorate, and most critically by the politicians who interpret and anticipate those views.

Our strapline is ‘ideas and analysis from the radical centre’, and after one of the most eventful periods in recent British political history, it felt like a good time to take a look at whether the centre ground really is as barren politically as it seems currently. As you will see from the analysis here, there are bright points for those in centre, not least the fact that almost half of those polled self-identify as being in the political centre. but there is much else which will give centrists, especially those on the centre-left, pause for thought, if not sleepless nights.

We hope you enjoy this snapshot and the picture which emerges of Britain’s underlying political tribes. We look forward to helping to inform the debate between those tribes, and the politicians who navigate between them, in the months ahead.

## INTRODUCTION

There was a time after last year’s general election and Labour’s move to the left when it seemed that the Conservatives would govern from the centre ground. Broadly speaking, on the basis of their manifesto and then David Cameron’s speech at the party conference in Manchester, the expectation was that they would manifest a broadly cosmopolitan, liberal and pro-market worldview while managing concerns about immigration tactically and, in a more thoroughgoing way, make some progress on social mobility.

How things have changed. Now, after a long referendum campaign focused on sovereignty and immigration, the Leave vote, the demise of David Cameron’s political project, the failure of the Liberal Democrats to mount much of a comeback and the resilience of Corbynism and Scottish nationalism, the centre looks barren.

There is a hopeful view that suggests the recent defeats for political centrists have been down to hubris (did David Cameron need to hold a referendum?) or bad technique (why weren’t the tactics on managing immigration better?). This is a hopeful view because it assumes that voters are on the centre ground. What if they’ve moved on?

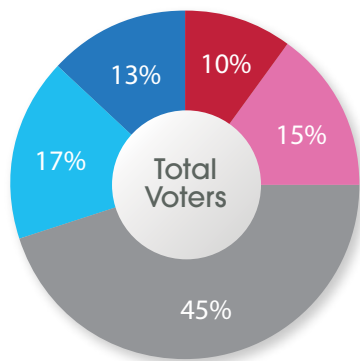
This is the question we’ve sought to answer. Working together, Opinium and the SMF carried out polling in the second half of August, asking voters to place themselves on a left-right continuum, do the same for a range of politicians and tell us their views on some top issues and policies.

This note describes our top findings and the outlook they suggest for the left, the right and the centre in politics; as well as the idea that popular attitudes no longer fit comfortably into those categories.

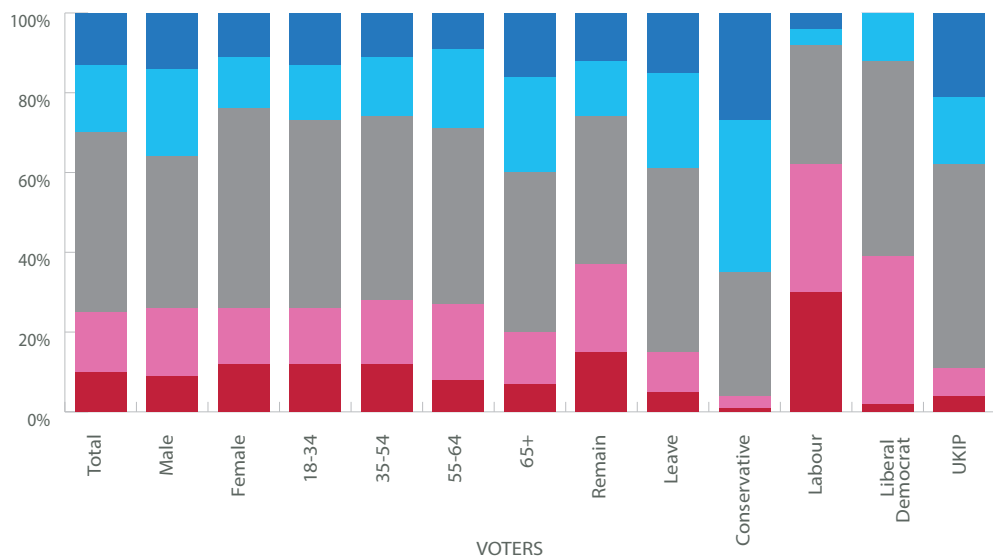


# IS THE CENTRE EMPTY?

At a headline level, the centre is thriving. Asked for their own political positioning, 45% of voters put themselves in the centre, as opposed to 25% on the left and 30% on the right.



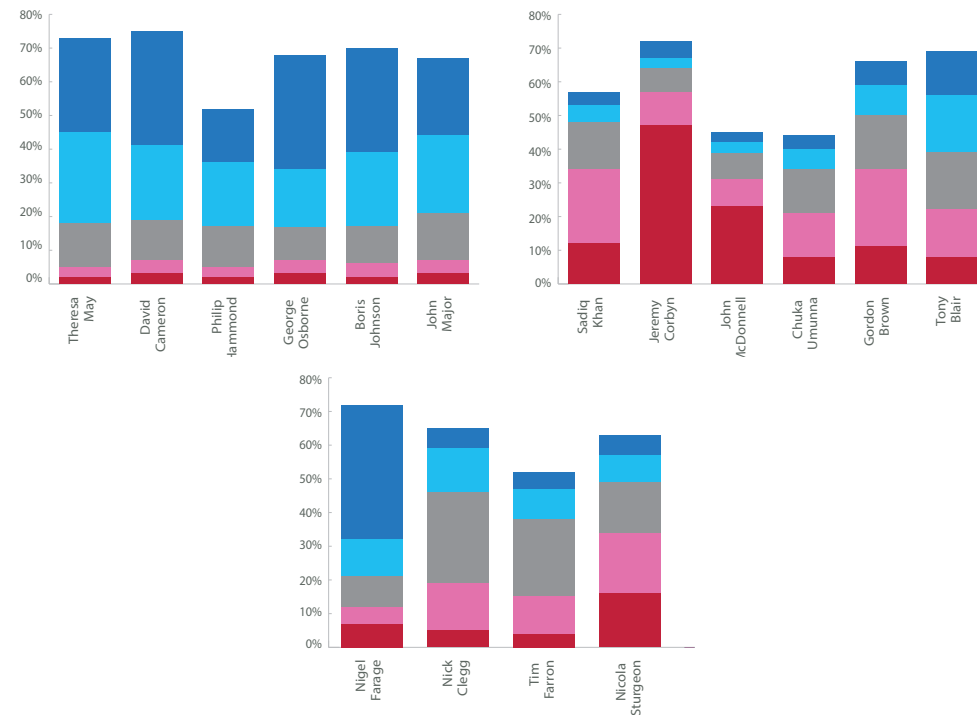
Where do you see yourself on the political spectrum?



● Left wing (0-2) ● Centre left (3-4) ● Centre ● Centre right (6-7) ● Right wing (8-10)

There is even evidence that political centrists are rising not falling. When asked to place politicians on a left-right scale, respondents identify Theresa May as less right wing than David Cameron; and the same is true for key members of her Cabinet - Philip Hammond for example is placed closer to the centre than his predecessor as Chancellor.

Where would you place each of these politicians on the political spectrum?



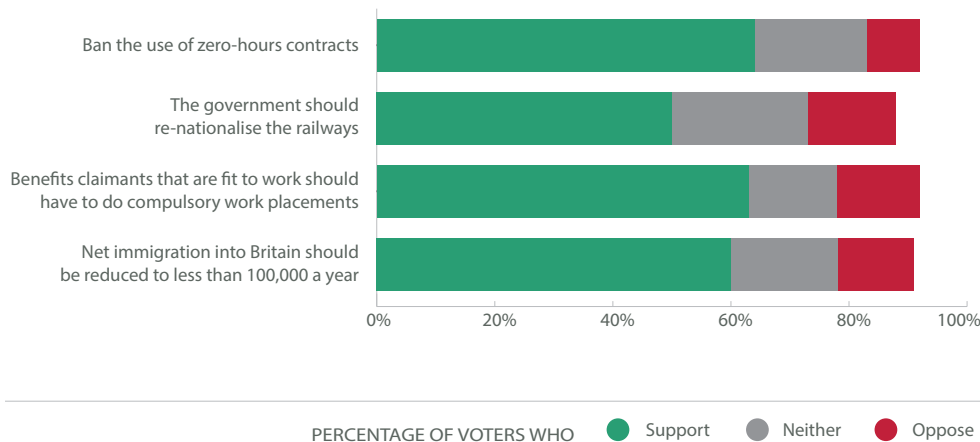
● Left wing (0-2) ● Centre left (3-4) ● Centre ● Centre right (6-7) ● Right wing (8-10)



**But this positive outlook for the centre begins to fade when we take a closer look at respondents' views on key issues and policies.**

There is firm support for many policies that would be traditionally thought of as right wing such as reducing immigration to the tens of thousands, changing human rights law, requiring benefits claimants to do compulsory work and allowing new grammar schools to be built. But this is where the categories of right and left begin to lose their value. Some of the same people who support these right wing policies disapprove of others such as allowing businesses to run some NHS services.

Equally, a number of policies that would be typically thought of as left wing - such as banning zero hours contracts or introducing a mansion tax - are supported by similar margins among our respondents as the right wing ones. And those taking left wing opinions also express right wing ones - for example, many of them want to reduce immigration too.



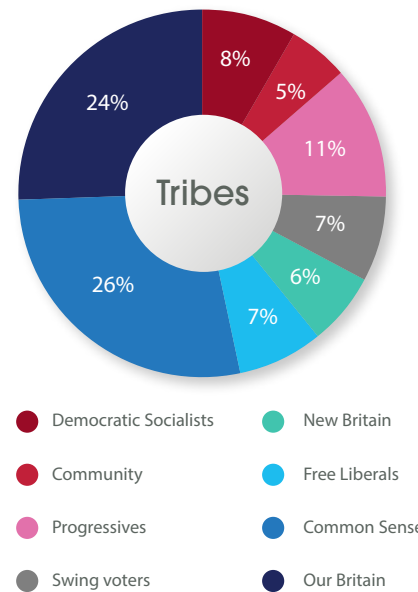
**TRIBES RATHER THAN WINGS**

Reflecting on these findings from the polling, we took a closer look at how people holding combinations of such attitudes might be grouped.

To do this, we asked people whether they supported or opposed a series of topical policy proposals, ranging from introducing a mansion tax and re-nationalising the railways to reducing net immigration to less than 100,000 a year. As well as asking about specific policies, we also showed our voters a series of more fundamental propositions and asked them to place themselves on a scale depending on whichever side they felt closer to. These propositions included: whether immigration was broadly a benefit to or a burden on society; whether "British" is a civic identity open to anyone who comes to the UK or an ethnic identity available only to those born here; whether benefits should be universal or contributory; and whether they are optimistic or pessimistic about the future.

Through a cluster analysis of the responses, we sorted the population into groups of those who share similar views, giving us eight political "tribes".

Our eight political tribes range from 'ethnic nationalists' - what we're calling the Our Britain tendency and people with more traditionally Conservative views - Common Sense in our words - on the right; through to a range of groups across the centre and the left.



**These tribes, and the divisions between them, might shed some light on the political strategies and policy choices open to the two main parties.**

On the whole, our analysis makes more cheerful reading for those on the right, than on the centre or the left. The two largest tribes, making up around 50% of the population, hold a range of traditionally right wing views, offering a solid foundation on which to aim for the 40-42% of the vote which normally guarantees a healthy majority under our electoral system. These groups share a desire to see immigration reduced to below 100k a year and were both solidly pro-Leave in the EU referendum.

Beyond these groups, voters are much more fragmented. None of the other groups approaches the size or homogeneity of these two.

In the centre, or centre-right, are 13% of voters in two groups, which we have described as New Britain and Swing Voters. They have differing views in relation to increasing income tax to reduce inequality, for instance, but their views on Europe and openness to the world are broadly in accord – they are in favour of remaining in the single market rather than restricting immigration.

At present, no party is led by a figure from these centrist groups – the days of Cameron and Blair are past. Yet our analysis suggests that the centre ground could still prove fertile territory for a leader, perhaps from the centre-right, who hoped to reap an electoral harvest by appealing to them.

On the other hand, if Theresa May continues to be identified as a centrist, even after her ‘honeymoon period’ is over, then she might add these groups to her coalition. Indeed both currently favour the Conservatives over Labour by significant margins.

To appeal to these voters though, Theresa May would have to lean more towards a ‘soft Brexit’, remaining in the single market, at the cost of tighter controls on immigration, which could drive many of the Our Britain group away from the Conservative camp, perhaps towards UKIP. There is a trade-off - in policy and electoral terms - to be made here.

For Labour, the task seems harder, even without taking into account its ongoing troubles regarding leadership. The groups in the centre, centre-left and left are smaller in aggregate terms and more fissiparous. In particular, the groups on the left are split in relation to immigration, with the Solidarity group of older and poorer voters at odds with the Progressives and Democratic Socialists. The last time an enduring, successful electoral coalition was assembled from the centre-left was before the increase in immigration which took place in the mid-2000s, and one wonders whether another can be put together while the issue of immigration retains its current salience.

## CONCLUSION

The centre is not dead, not rhetorically anyway. People are still more likely to identify with the centre ground than one of the wings in politics. This suggests that there is a dividend to be gained from identifying as a centrist.

But what should a centrist politician do in order to sustain the support of voters? From our analysis of the tribes, it is easier to hold together a winning coalition broadly speaking on the right or centre-right than on the left. It is not that the left is vanishing; though it is fragmented.

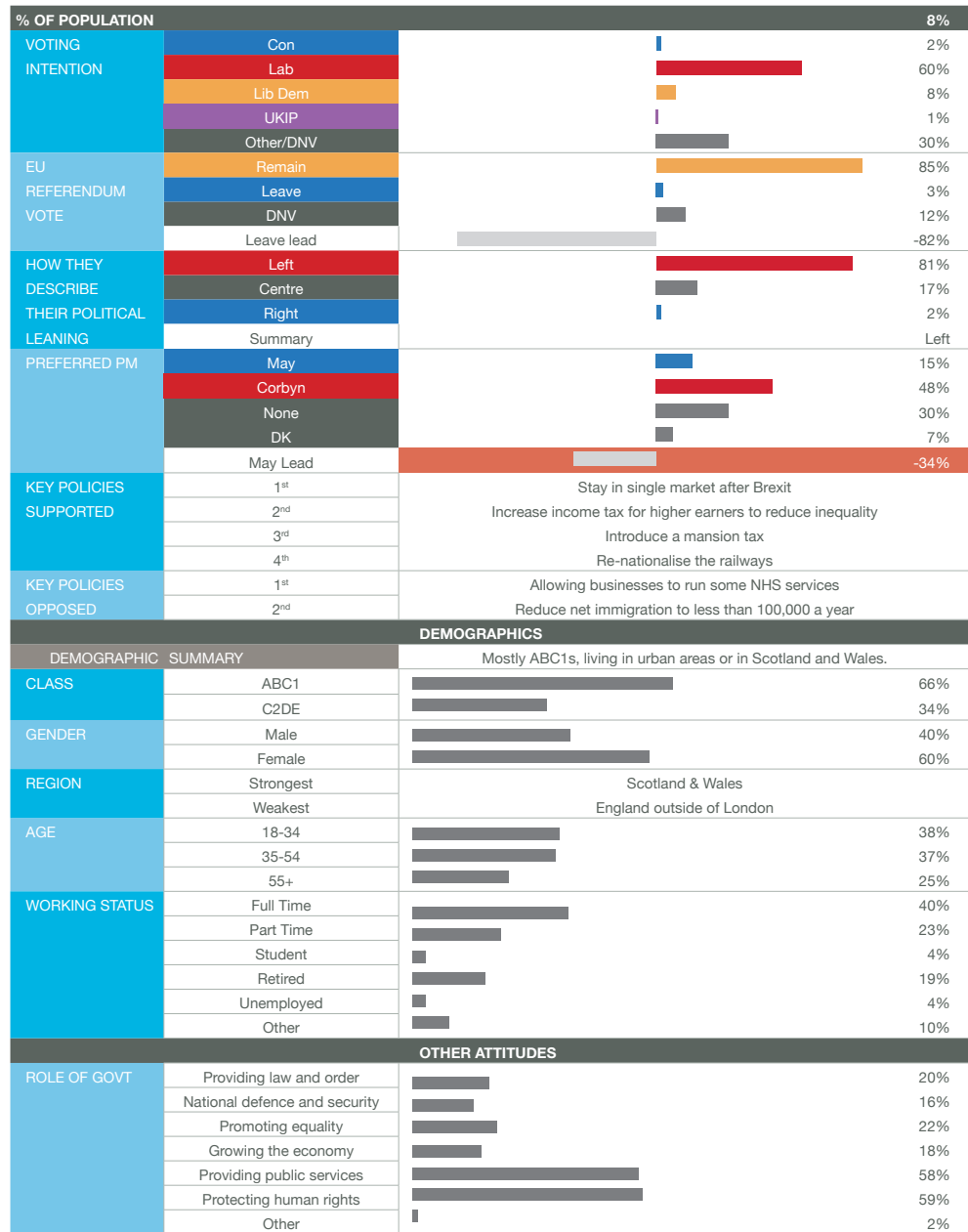
Next it will be the right that faces the same risk, most notably when politicians work out - and voters discover - what it is that Brexit means. The traditional left-right divide is overlaid with some others: open-closed; optimistic-pessimistic; and forbidding-forbearing. We found eight tribes in our analysis. In the future, there may easily be a few more.



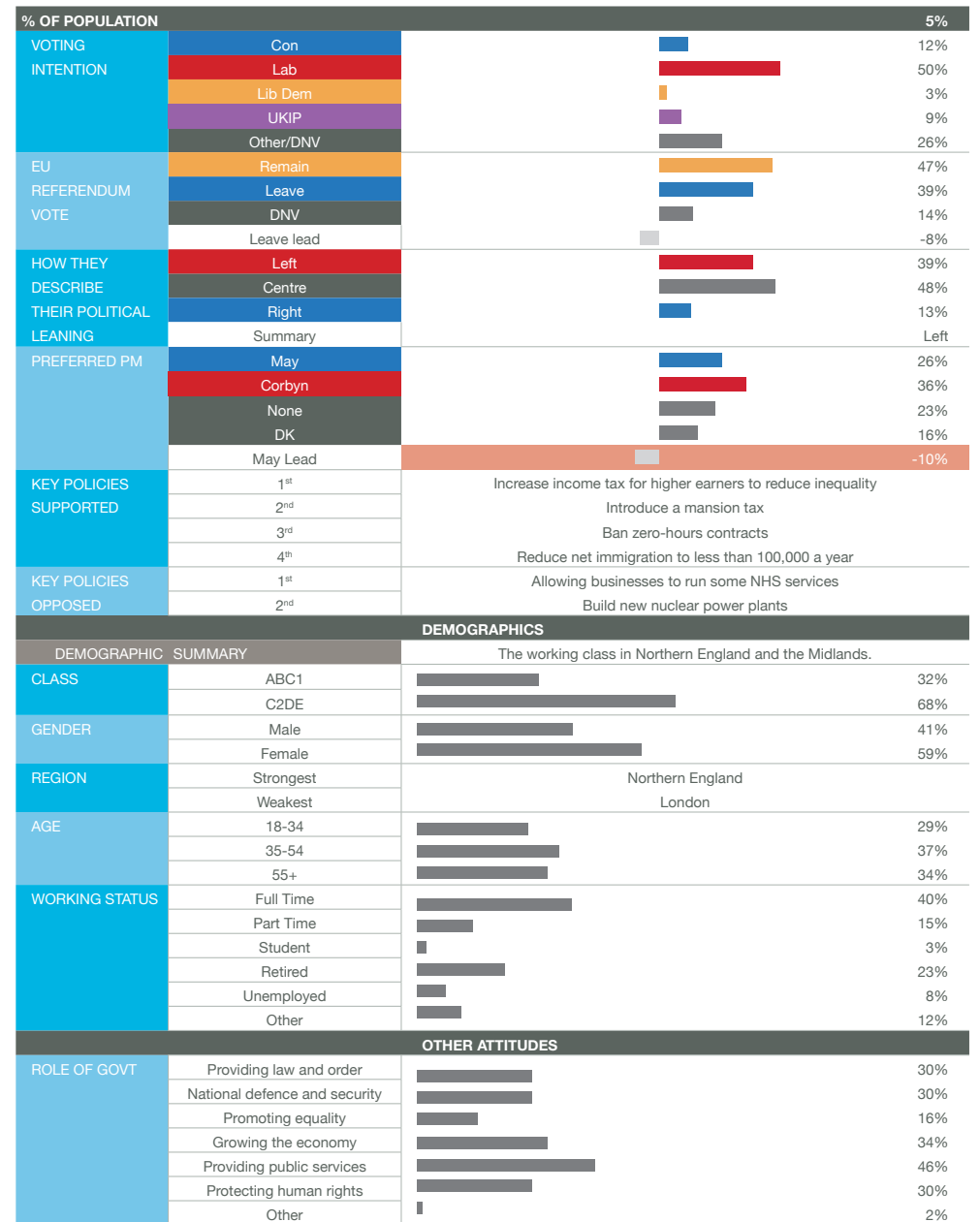
		DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS	COMMUNITY	PROGRESSIVES
SUMMARY OF VIEWS		Pro-immigration, pro-welfare state, pro-redistribution of wealth, internationalist outlook.	Redistribution of wealth, scepticism of business and capitalism. More closed off view of Britain and broadly anti-immigration.	Open, internationalist and inclusive view of Britain, comfortable with immigration. Belief in the welfare state, balanced view towards tax and the economy.
% OF POP.		8%	5%	11%
VOTING INTENTION	Con	2%	12%	22%
	Lab	60%	50%	50%
	Lib Dem	8%	3%	12%
	UKIP	1%	9%	1%
	Other/DNV	30%	26%	15%
EU REFERENDUM VOTE	Remain	85%	47%	74%
	Leave	3%	39%	12%
	DNV	12%	14%	14%
	Leave lead	-82%	-8%	-62%
HOW THEY DESCRIBE THEIR POLITICAL LEANING	Left	81%	39%	52%
	Centre	17%	48%	33%
	Right	2%	13%	15%
<b>VIEWS</b>				
IMMIGRATION	Benefit to society	94%	16%	77%
	Neither	6%	22%	23%
	Burden on society	0%	62%	0%
EU	Pro-single market	95%	20%	74%
	Neither	2%	47%	24%
	Anti-immigration	3%	33%	2%
BUSINESS	Protect workers	86%	67%	48%
	Neither	8%	33%	34%
	Make life easy for business	7%	0%	19%
BENEFITS	Benefit of the doubt	80%	57%	60%
	Neither	8%	35%	23%
	Hardline on benefits	13%	8%	17%
TAX / EQUALITY	Equal incomes	68%	73%	31%
	Neither	6%	24%	21%
	Earn what you like	26%	3%	48%
BENEFITS	Based on need	90%	52%	65%
	Neither	4%	34%	28%
	Based on contributions	6%	14%	7%
IDENTITY	Multicultural Britain	90%	20%	67%
	Neither	7%	38%	28%
	British means 'born here'	3%	43%	5%
GOVERNMENT APPROACH	Treat all fairly	97%	22%	85%
	Neither	1%	37%	14%
	Britons come first	1%	41%	1%
BRITAIN IN THE WORLD	Interventionist	70%	19%	80%
	Neither	11%	36%	18%
	Isolationist	19%	44%	2%
BRITAIN'S FUTURE	Pessimistic	70%	60%	38%
	Neither	26%	33%	50%
	Optimistic	4%	7%	12%
FAMILY FUTURE	Pessimistic	41%	61%	15%
	Neither	37%	28%	51%
	Optimistic	22%	10%	34%

	SWING VOTERS	NEW BRITAIN	FREE LIBERALS	COMMON SENSE	OUR BRITAIN
	Mixture of views. Support an equal society, internationalist outlook, hard stance on benefits, support a low tax economy.	Open capitalist economy, pro-immigration, pro-single market, supportive of a low tax economy. Business friendly, internationalist, compassionate view of society.	Strong faith in the market, little interest in socially conservative ideas. Strongly pro-business, the most opposed to the welfare state. The most personally optimistic.	Don't think of themselves as having particularly strong political opinions, despite supporting similar policies to the "Our Britain" segment. Clear preference for low tax economy, opposition to immigration.	Closed perception of what Britishness is. Anti-immigration, government should put Brits first at all costs, broadly isolationist in outlook.
	7%	6%	7%	26%	24%
	37%	56%	58%	62%	38%
	33%	2%	27%	15%	19%
	7%	6%	7%	3%	2%
	2%	4%	2%	13%	37%
	21%	32%	5%	7%	4%
	51%	66%	62%	34%	11%
	31%	26%	32%	59%	80%
	17%	8%	6%	7%	9%
	-20%	-40%	-30%	+25%	+69%
	20%	14%	18%	14%	15%
	63%	49%	23%	42%	52%
	17%	37%	60%	44%	33%
<b>IN DETAIL</b>					
	34%	74%	76%	9%	5%
	53%	6%	14%	44%	8%
	13%	20%	10%	47%	88%
	48%	77%	78%	19%	5%
	45%	6%	8%	39%	8%
	7%	17%	14%	42%	87%
	36%	32%	5%	31%	50%
	38%	4%	23%	34%	18%
	25%	64%	73%	35%	32%
	27%	35%	25%	39%	51%
	17%	7%	11%	28%	12%
	55%	59%	63%	33%	36%
	25%	11%	11%	16%	37%
	8%	0%	12%	17%	10%
	67%	89%	77%	67%	53%
	43%	42%	23%	37%	47%
	26%	6%	11%	31%	12%
	31%	53%	65%	32%	40%
	42%	81%	88%	34%	20%
	32%	4%	9%	30%	12%
	26%	14%	3%	36%	68%
	71%	89%	89%	26%	12%
	27%	1%	4%	35%	11%
	2%	10%	7%	39%	77%
	58%	88%	80%	45%	31%
	22%	3%	8%	40%	18%
	20%	10%	12%	15%	51%
	17%	27%	6%	17%	22%
	59%	1%	16%	37%	21%
	24%	71%	77%	46%	57%
	8%	25%	4%	13%	28%
	54%	0%	14%	40%	30%
	38%	75%	82%	47%	42%

# DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS



# COMMUNITY



# PROGRESSIVES

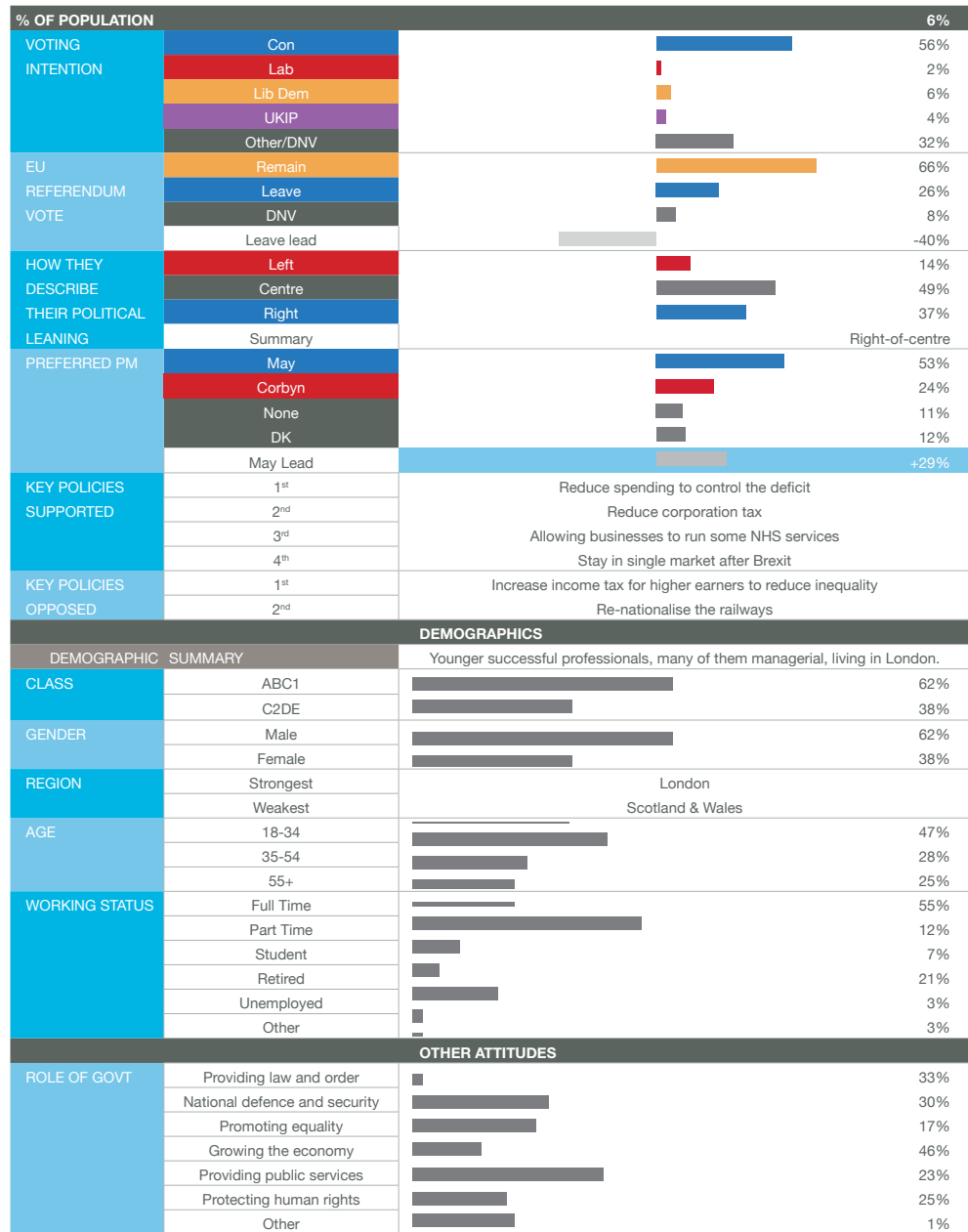
% OF POPULATION		11%
VOTING INTENTION	Con	22%
	Lab	50%
	Lib Dem	12%
	UKIP	1%
	Other/DNV	15%
EU REFERENDUM VOTE	Remain	74%
	Leave	12%
	DNV	14%
	Leave lead	-62%
HOW THEY DESCRIBE THEIR POLITICAL LEANING	Left	52%
	Centre	33%
	Right	15%
	Summary	Left
PREFERRED PM	May	43%
	Corbyn	19%
	None	24%
	DK	14%
	May Lead	+24%
KEY POLICIES SUPPORTED	1 <sup>st</sup>	Stay in single market after Brexit
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Increase income tax for higher earners to reduce inequality
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Introduce a mansion tax
	4 <sup>th</sup>	Ban zero-hours contracts
KEY POLICIES OPPOSED	1 <sup>st</sup>	Allowing businesses to run some NHS services
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Allow new grammar schools to be built
DEMOGRAPHICS		
DEMOGRAPHIC	SUMMARY	
CLASS	ABC1	A scattering of professional groups across the UK. 63%
	C2DE	37%
GENDER	Male	45%
	Female	55%
REGION	Strongest	No regional focus
	Weakest	
AGE	18-34	34%
	35-54	34%
	55+	31%
WORKING STATUS	Full Time	48%
	Part Time	18%
	Student	4%
	Retired	22%
	Unemployed	1%
	Other	8%
OTHER ATTITUDES		
ROLE OF GOVT	Providing law and order	30%
	National defence and security	24%
	Promoting equality	18%
	Growing the economy	41%
	Providing public services	48%
	Protecting human rights	33%
	Other	1%

# SWING VOTERS

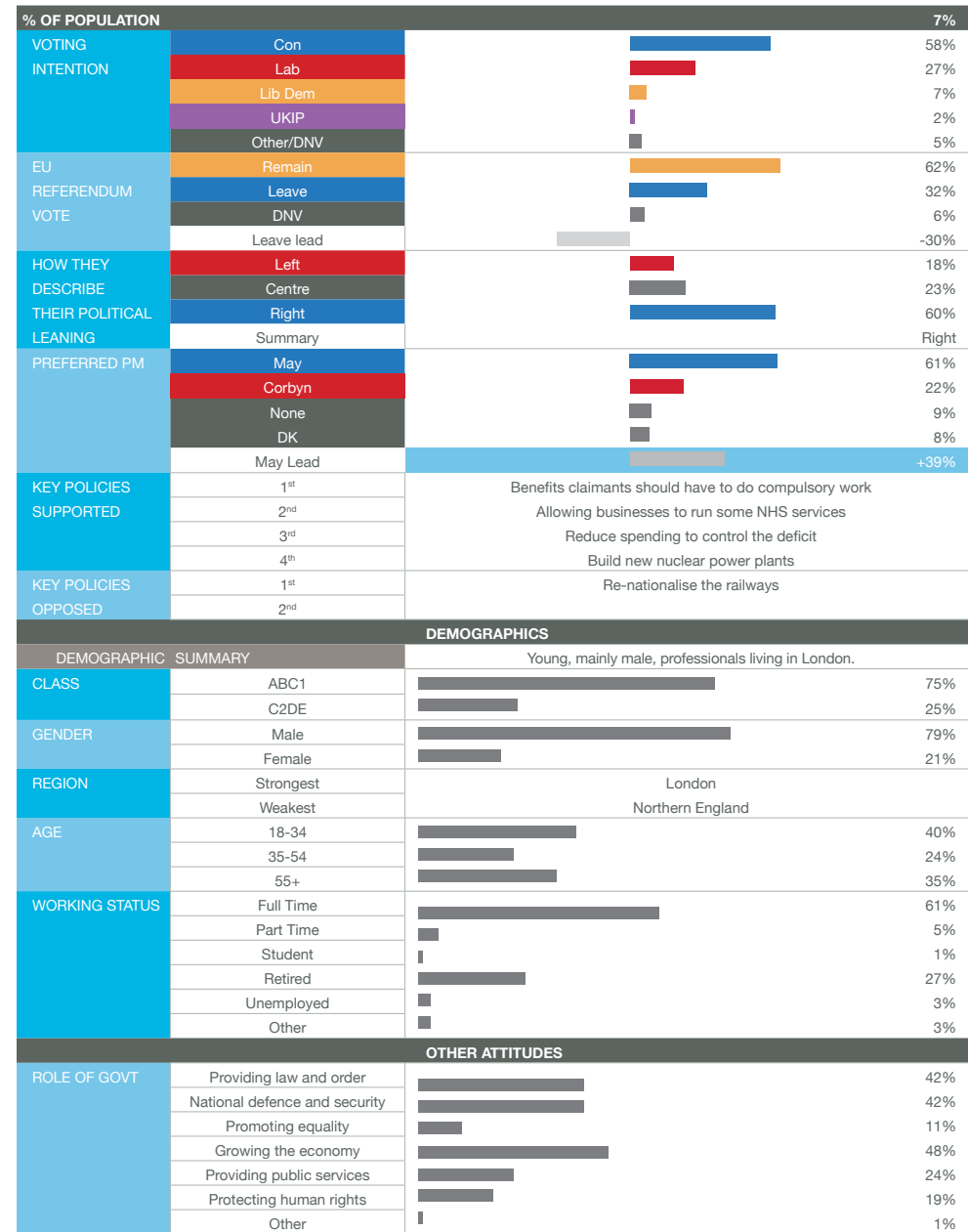
% OF POPULATION		7%
VOTING INTENTION	Con	37%
	Lab	33%
	Lib Dem	7%
	UKIP	2%
	Other/DNV	21%
EU REFERENDUM VOTE	Remain	51%
	Leave	31%
	DNV	17%
	Leave lead	-20%
HOW THEY DESCRIBE THEIR POLITICAL LEANING	Left	20%
	Centre	63%
	Right	17%
	Summary	Centre
PREFERRED PM	May	51%
	Corbyn	19%
	None	12%
	DK	18%
	May Lead	+32%
KEY POLICIES SUPPORTED	1 <sup>st</sup>	Ban zero-hours contracts
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Benefits claimants should have to do compulsory work
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Introduce a mansion tax
	4 <sup>th</sup>	Increase income tax for higher earners to reduce inequality
KEY POLICIES OPPOSED	1 <sup>st</sup>	No policies opposed strongly
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	
DEMOGRAPHICS		
DEMOGRAPHIC	SUMMARY	
CLASS	ABC1	A scattering of demographic groups spread across England outside of the capital. 50%
	C2DE	50%
GENDER	Male	39%
	Female	61%
REGION	Strongest	Nation-wide outside of London
	Weakest	London
AGE	18-34	31%
	35-54	36%
	55+	33%
WORKING STATUS	Full Time	38%
	Part Time	21%
	Student	6%
	Retired	24%
	Unemployed	1%
	Other	10%
OTHER ATTITUDES		
ROLE OF GOVT	Providing law and order	30%
	National defence and security	27%
	Promoting equality	17%
	Growing the economy	48%
	Providing public services	37%
	Protecting human rights	21%
	Other	3%



# NEW BRITAIN



# FREE LIBERALS



# COMMON SENSE

% OF POPULATION		26%
VOTING INTENTION	Con	62%
	Lab	15%
	Lib Dem	3%
	UKIP	13%
	Other/DNV	7%
EU REFERENDUM VOTE	Remain	34%
	Leave	59%
	DNV	7%
	Leave lead	+25%
HOW THEY DESCRIBE THEIR POLITICAL LEANING	Left	14%
	Centre	42%
	Right	44%
PREFERRED PM	May	71%
	Corbyn	5%
	None	17%
	DK	7%
KEY POLICIES SUPPORTED	1 <sup>st</sup>	Reduce net immigration to less than 100,000 a year
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Benefits claimants should have to do compulsory work
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Change human rights law
	4 <sup>th</sup>	Allow new grammar schools to be built
KEY POLICIES OPPOSED	1 <sup>st</sup>	Stay in single market after Brexit
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Introduce proportional representation for UK wide elections
DEMOGRAPHICS		
DEMOGRAPHIC	SUMMARY	
CLASS	ABC1	56%
	C2DE	44%
GENDER	Male	47%
	Female	53%
REGION	Strongest	Southern England
	Weakest	London
AGE	18-34	21%
	35-54	35%
	55+	44%
WORKING STATUS	Full Time	46%
	Part Time	17%
	Student	0%
	Retired	29%
	Unemployed	1%
	Other	5%
OTHER ATTITUDES		
ROLE OF GOVT	Providing law and order	45%
	National defence and security	43%
	Promoting equality	6%
	Growing the economy	50%
	Providing public services	32%
	Protecting human rights	14%
	Other	1%

# OUR BRITAIN

% OF POPULATION		24%
VOTING INTENTION	Con	38%
	Lab	19%
	Lib Dem	2%
	UKIP	37%
	Other/DNV	4%
EU REFERENDUM VOTE	Remain	11%
	Leave	80%
	DNV	9%
	Leave lead	+69%
HOW THEY DESCRIBE THEIR POLITICAL LEANING	Left	15%
	Centre	52%
	Right	33%
PREFERRED PM	May	59%
	Corbyn	7%
	None	24%
	DK	10%
KEY POLICIES SUPPORTED	1 <sup>st</sup>	Reduce net immigration to less than 100,000 a year
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	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Benefits claimants should have to do compulsory work
	4 <sup>th</sup>	Ban zero-hours contracts
KEY POLICIES OPPOSED	1 <sup>st</sup>	Stay in single market after Brexit
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Allowing businesses to run some NHS services
DEMOGRAPHICS		
DEMOGRAPHIC	SUMMARY	
CLASS	ABC1	42%
	C2DE	58%
GENDER	Male	48%
	Female	52%
REGION	Strongest	Midlands
	Weakest	London
AGE	18-34	15%
	35-54	37%
	55+	48%
WORKING STATUS	Full Time	38%
	Part Time	15%
	Student	1%
	Retired	32%
	Unemployed	3%
	Other	10%
OTHER ATTITUDES		
ROLE OF GOVT	Providing law and order	45%
	National defence and security	49%
	Promoting equality	7%
	Growing the economy	42%
	Providing public services	30%
	Protecting human rights	13%
	Other	1%



What people  
think, feel  
and do.

## About Opinium

Opinium is an award winning strategic insight agency built on the belief that in a world of uncertainty and complexity, success depends on the ability to stay on the pulse of what people think, feel and do. Creative and inquisitive, we are passionate about empowering our clients to make the decisions that matter. We work with organisations to define and resolve commercial issues, helping them to get to grips with the world in which their brands operate, by ensuring we develop the right approach and methodology to deliver robust insight, targeted recommendations, and address specific business challenges.

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**SMF**

Social Market  
Foundation

## About SMF

The Social Market Foundation (SMF) is a non-partisan think tank. We believe that fair markets, complemented by open public services, increase prosperity and help people to live well. We conduct research and run events looking at a wide range of economic and social policy areas, focusing on economic prosperity, public services and consumer markets. The SMF is resolutely independent, and the range of backgrounds and opinions among our staff, trustees and advisory board reflects this.

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