

**FABIAN  
SOCIETY**

# **A MATURE APPROACH**

HOW LABOUR CAN RECONNECT WITH OLDER  
VOTERS

Ben Cooper

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## About the author

Ben Cooper is a senior researcher at the Fabian Society.

## About the research

This report looks at older voters' perceptions of the Labour party and how it can reconnect with those voters.

It is largely focused on England and Wales. Labour's relationship with voters, including older voters, is different in Scotland, where the independence question often defines political identities.

This report uses 'older voters' and people aged 55 and over, and 'younger voters' and under-55s, interchangeably.

### About the focus groups

The Fabian Society held six focus groups with older, working class voters, open to voting Labour, in target seats across England and Wales. All participants were aged 55 and over, and all reported voting Labour in either the 2010, 2015, or 2017 general elections and voted for the Conservatives in 2019. Openness to voting Labour was judged on a 0 to 10 scale – with participants saying the chance of them voting Labour at the next election was 5 out of 10 or higher.

We adopted the standard social grade definition, requiring all participants to be part of a household where the chief income earner was C2DE, or BC1 if they were in manual roles but managing people (for example, as a builder with employees). If the chief income earner was retired, the occupation prior to retirement was assessed. All participants had below degree level education.

We divided the groups based on sex (three all-male groups and three all-female groups), and age (four groups with people aged 55 to 70, and two groups with people aged 68 and over).

The seats selected for the focus groups have diverse political histories and require different swings for Labour to win at the next election. The focus groups we held were:

- Sedgfield – women aged between 55 and 70
- Bridgend – men aged between 55 and 70
- Stoke-on-Trent (North and Central) and Newcastle-under-Lyme – women aged 68 and over
- Bury North – men aged 68 and over
- Norwich North – men aged between 55 and 70

- Erewash – women aged between 55 and 70

### **About the polling**

The Fabian Society commissioned YouGov Plc to survey 3,380 adults across Great Britain. The survey was carried out online. Fieldwork was undertaken between 8<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> December 2021. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

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# SUMMARY

## Context

Older voters turned away from Labour after the party left office in 2010 – and in 2019, things went from bad to worse. Between 2010 and 2019, the number of votes cast for Labour by people aged 55 and over fell by an estimated 900,000. At the same time the Conservative party gained nearly 3 million additional votes from people in this age group. Estimates suggest that there were 1.2 million fewer older voters in Labour’s 2019 voter coalition compared to 1992, despite there being nearly 5.5 million more people aged 55 and over in the population.

We will not see another Labour prime minister unless the party improves its performance amongst older voters – and unites different generations around a shared agenda. If nothing changes, the ageing of the population will lead to ever larger Conservative leads that Labour will not be able to overcome with younger voters: if the two parties were to replicate their 2019 vote share among each age group in 2024, the Conservatives would gain 420,000 extra votes over Labour simply as a result of demographic change.

Fortunately things are starting to change: this report shows how Labour is rebuilding support amongst older voters. This really matters. Over 40 per cent of Labour’s target seats in England and Wales have more than a third of the population aged 55 and over. They are much more likely to vote than younger voters; a high share currently vote Conservative; and many in this group are supportive of Labour’s core values. This makes their votes both valuable and winnable.

## Our key findings

An estimated 2 million older voters in Great Britain did not support Labour in 2019 but would consider doing so now. This is around 10 per cent of those aged 55 and over. We call them ‘Labour’s new considerers’, and they will be key to determining whether the party wins the next election.

Polling conducted in December 2021 found that:

- Labour is doing better among older voters in its English and Welsh target seats than in the country overall: 32 per cent of those aged 55 and over are open to voting Labour in these marginal constituencies, compared to 28 per cent across Great Britain.<sup>1</sup>
- Older voters were more likely than under-55s to believe that Labour had been moving in the right direction since Keir Starmer became leader.

While Labour remains behind in the polls among over-55s, the gap is no longer so large that it is an insurmountable barrier to the party winning the next election. Beneath the headline numbers there are other positive signs for Labour to build on as it moves towards the next general election. When we asked older voters about specific issues Labour led the Conservatives on 13 out of 24 policy areas, including: improving the lives of older people, increasing living standards for people like me, the National Health Service, welfare benefits and tackling inequality between different parts of the country (ie levelling-up). The Conservatives were ahead of Labour on important issues such as public finances and government debt, crime, immigration, Britain's reputation in the world, and defence.

Looking only at the older voters who are 'Labour's new considerers', Labour was preferred to the Conservatives on every one of the 24 issues. Amongst this group, there is strong support on issues where Labour is traditionally strong and weaker support for the party on immigration, defence, public finances and debt, and inflation. These are key issues that influence voting intention and connect political parties to the voters. This is where Labour needs to focus its attention, if it wants to 'seal the deal' with the 2 million older voters who are currently considering the party.

## How to reconnect

To reconnect with older voters, our polling and focus groups showed that Labour needs to rebuild trust and offer a better future, grounded in mainstream British values.

**Rebuild trust to govern** – Labour needs to:

- **Persuade older voters it has changed and cares about them** by demonstrating the party actively wants the support of older voters and speaking to their concerns and priorities.
- **Reassure on fiscal credibility and economic competence** by using every public announcement to show the party understands the importance of

responsible finances, value for money and running the economy competently

- **Provide clear and sincere leadership on immigration** by setting out how Labour will implement a system that rewards contribution, ensures control, and provides fairness.
- **Appeal to mainstream values but remember ‘woke’ debates are a distraction** by having clear lines on controversial topics but focusing on things that actually matter to older voters.
- **Demonstrate party unity without compromising on antisemitism** by utilising a wide team of Labour MPs and candidates that show how the party has changed.

**Offer a better future** – Labour should:

- **Set out a positive and unifying story about the future of our country under Labour** by providing strong leadership and a clear alternative that contrasts favourably to the current government’s lack of direction.
- **Prioritise ‘security’ in all its forms** – in the workplace, in local communities and in an uncertain world – and put this at the heart of Labour’s vision for the future. Security is a value that can unify different generations, but it requires the party to move away from the language of ‘revolution’ and ‘transformation’ without losing a sense of ambition for the next Labour government.
- **Present a progressive, credible and popular policy offer targeting older voters** by focusing on ‘signature’ policies, which are authentically Labour and can unite older voters with Labour’s current coalition. Our survey found voters aged 55 and over most wanted Labour to promise to older people: ‘improving NHS services’ (48 per cent), ‘improving social care services’ (46 per cent) and ‘keeping the triple lock on the state pension’ (40 per cent).<sup>2</sup>



# 1. LABOUR'S HISTORY WITH OLDER VOTERS

We are now over half way through the current parliament. Recent polling suggests Labour has everything to play for. The party has recently sustained a small lead in the polls, helped by the Conservatives' 'partygate' scandals and the rising cost of living.<sup>1</sup>

But Labour cannot be complacent, and it must focus its efforts on persuading older voters in particular. Labour has made some progress with older voters in recent months, but remains behind and progress cannot be taken for granted. Recent polling in April 2022 by Redfield & Wilton showed Labour polling at 36 per cent with voters aged between 55 and 64, and 26 per cent with over 65s.<sup>3</sup> The party is still a long way behind the Conservative party among older voters - which we define, for this project, as those aged 55 and over.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer's spring statement has opened up a real political opportunity for Labour to reconnect with older voters. Rishi Sunak failed to provide adequate support to many older voters, particularly pensioners reliant on the state pension, who now are experiencing a real and persistent financial squeeze. A Savanta ComRes poll in April 2022 found 89 per cent of those aged 55 to 64, and 82 per cent of over 65s, believe the government has not done enough to ease the cost of living crisis.<sup>4</sup> After a decade of the Conservatives using monetary and fiscal policy to protect the incomes of older voters, high inflation and government inaction could undermine the Conservative lead with this voter group.

Any number of things could change between now and the next election, including who the prime minister is. But one thing will remain true: Labour cannot enter government without substantial cross-generational support. Between now and the general election, Labour has to focus on reconnecting with older voters. This report sets out how older voters turned away from

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<sup>1</sup> According to Politico's 'poll of polls', as of April 2022, Labour has a 6 percentage point lead over the Conservative Party.

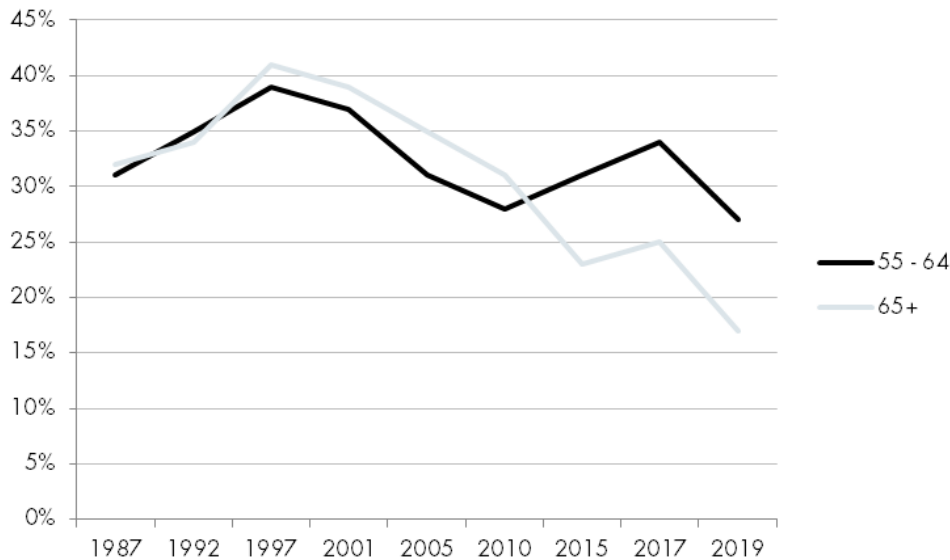
Labour after 2010, why older voters will decide whether Labour enters government at the next election, and how the party can reconnect with them.

**Older voters have been moving away from the party since it left office in 2010 – and in 2019, things went from bad to worse.**

Historically, a large proportion of older voters have voted Labour.<sup>5</sup> It is true that Labour has usually done less well with older age groups than younger adults, but until 2015 the gap was modest. At every election between 1987 and 2010, the difference between Labour's overall vote and its vote amongst 55 to 64-year-olds or 65+ year olds was never more than 4.5 percentage points.<sup>6</sup> In years when Labour did better with the general population, it also did better with older voters. Indeed, in 2010, the party actually over-performed with voters aged over 65 compared to its overall vote share (by two percentage points).<sup>7</sup>

The scale of Labour's unpopularity among older voters since leaving office in 2010 is unprecedented. Labour lost over-55s' support, while younger voters – particularly graduates – have flocked to the party. As a result support for both Labour and the Conservatives is now increasingly correlated with age. The Resolution Foundation commented that in the October 1974 general election: "30-year-olds and 70-year-olds were as likely to vote Labour as one another. Roll forward to 2017 and the 30-year-olds are nearly twice as likely to do so."<sup>8</sup>

**FIGURE 1: THE PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE AGED OVER 65 WHO VOTED LABOUR WAS MUCH LOWER IN 2019 THAN 2010**



Source: How Britain voted in the 2019 election, Gideon Skinner, Dr Roger Mortimore & Dylan Spielman. Ipsos MORI, December 2019; How Britain voted in 2017, Gideon Skinner and Dr Roger Mortimore, Ipsos MORI, June 2017. How Britain voted in 2015. Ipsos MORI, August 2015; How Britain Voted Since October 1974. Ipsos MORI, May 2010.

Labour's performance with older voters has increasingly diverged from its performance with the population at large. This was a major factor in recent election defeats. For example, in 2017, Labour increased its overall vote share by 9.9 percentage points compared to 2015, but the gap between that and its vote share amongst older voters (particularly over-65s) increased hugely.<sup>9</sup>

By the 2019 general election, Labour support amongst older voters reached a record-breaking low. Ipsos MORI's post-election estimate of how Britain voted found that:

- Just 17 per cent of voters aged 65 and over, and 27 per cent of voters aged 55 to 64 voted Labour.<sup>10</sup>
- The Conservative party had a 47 percentage point lead over Labour with over-65s and a 22 percentage point lead with those aged 55 to 64 – by far the largest recorded by the pollster since it first analysed election results by age in 1979.<sup>11</sup>
- There is no gender gap for older voters: the Conservative lead amongst those aged 55 and over was largely the same for both women and men (38 percentage points and 37 percentage points respectively). For under-

35s, women were 13 percentage points more supportive of Labour than men.<sup>12</sup>

These age-based variations in voting patterns cannot just be explained by different social characteristics of the age cohorts. Within different population subgroups, Labour was much less successful with voters aged over 55, compared to voters under 35.

**FIGURE 2: LABOUR DID SUBSTANTIALLY WORSE WITH VOTERS AGED OVER 55 COMPARED TO THOSE AGED UNDER 35 ACROSS EVERY DEMOGRAPHIC SUBGROUP**

	Gap in Labour vote between under-35s and over-55s
AB	35 pts
C1	35 pts
C2	30 pts
DE	37 pts
Degree or higher	32 pts
Other qualifications	35 pts
No qualifications	31 pts

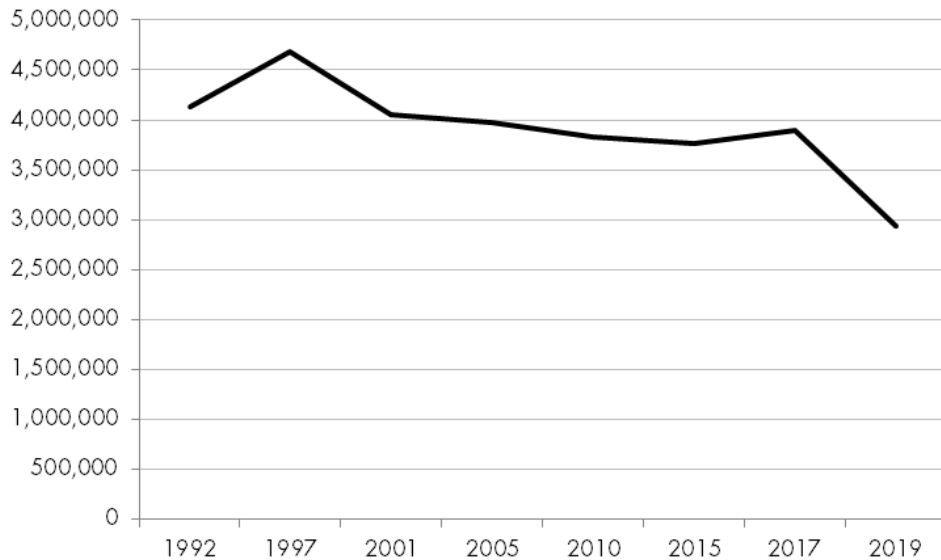
Source: How Britain voted in the 2019 election, Gideon Skinner, Dr Roger Mortimore & Dylan Spielman. Ipsos MORI, December 2019.

In terms of millions of voters, those aged 55 and over are now a smaller part of Labour's voter coalition than at any time since at least 1992. In 2019, Labour won an estimated 1.2 million fewer older voters compared to 1992, despite there being nearly 5.5 million more people aged 55 and over in the population.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These calculations rely on turnout estimates from Ipsos MORI. The methodology for calculating this changed in 2015, so turnout is not strictly comparable over the entire time period. This means our comparison between 1992 and 2019 is an estimate.

**FIGURE 3: LABOUR'S VOTER COALITION IN 2019 CONTAINED FEWER VOTERS AGED OVER 55 THAN AT ANY TIME SINCE 1992**



Source: How Britain voted in the 2019 election, Gideon Skinner, Dr Roger Mortimore & Dylan Spielman. Ipsos MORI, December 2019; How Britain voted in 2017, Gideon Skinner and Dr Roger Mortimore, Ipsos MORI, June 2017. How Britain voted in 2015. Ipsos MORI, August 2015; How Britain Voted Since October 1974. Ipsos MORI, May 2010; Population estimates – local authority based by single year of age. Office for National Statistics,

Some reasons for the growing divergence between age groups may be beyond Labour's immediate control. For example, as long as education and ethnicity are major political dividing lines, Labour will do better amongst younger than older voters, because younger cohorts contain far more graduates and people from minority ethnic backgrounds.<sup>13</sup>

While social changes undoubtedly play a role in polarisation, how political parties respond to such changes matter too. Labour has not been a mere spectator to these shifts, but instead has often made choices that have turned older voters away.<sup>14</sup> Both Ed Miliband and Jeremy Corbyn were deeply unpopular with older voters. In March 2015, 63 per cent of those aged 55 and over did not 'like' Ed Miliband according to an Ipsos MORI poll.<sup>15</sup> And two days before polling day for the 2019 general election, 72 per cent of 55 to 64-year-olds and 74 per cent of 65+ year olds disapproved of Jeremy Corbyn according to an Opinium poll.<sup>16</sup> In 2019, older voters' perceptions of Labour's leadership and competence were highly influential. Indeed, the pollster Peter Kellner argued that a belief in Labour's incompetence was a large factor in driving the choice of former Labour older voters (which he defined as over 45) to switch to the Conservatives.<sup>17</sup>

When people vote they partly think about their personal material interests too. In recent times this has added to the Conservatives' advantage with older voters. Many older age groups entered the financial crisis relatively well off, and Conservative-led governments since 2010 have been careful to prioritise the needs of older age groups, both in the choices they have made about cuts and in their wider support for asset and property owners.<sup>18</sup> And in the last year, we have seen the Conservative government announce investment in the public services that older voters are more likely to rely on (the NHS and social care), and pay for it with a national insurance increase many of them do not pay.<sup>19</sup> This has been the basis of the Conservative party election strategy since 2010.

Labour's policy preferences have influenced voter choice too. Those older voters who switched away from Labour to the Conservatives in 2019 were more pro-Brexit and more sceptical of the benefits of immigration than current Labour voters and former Labour voters aged under 45, according to Deltapoll.<sup>20</sup> Labour's stance on a second Brexit referendum and perceptions that it could not be trusted on immigration turned many older voters away from the party.

Both the 2017 and 2019 election showed clearly the future challenges for Labour if it fails to respond to older voters' preferences at the next election – the party will continue to experience low levels of support and struggle to win a majority. But there are steps Labour can take to reconnect with voters aged 55 and over.

## 2. OLDER VOTERS: THE NEXT ELECTION

### **There will be no future Labour Prime Minister without older voters.**

Labour doesn't need to win every older voter, or even a majority of them, to win the next election. But the party does need to narrow the huge gap that has opened up over the last decade.

Older voters are essential for Labour for five reasons. First, older voters turn out at elections. In 2019, 74 per cent of over-65s voted – a higher proportion than any other age group. Further, 66 per cent of 55 to 64-year-olds, and 63 per cent of 45 to 54-year-olds voted. This is a long-established pattern which we can expect to see repeated in future contests: at every election since 1992, Ipsos MORI has reported a higher turnout of 55 to 64-year-olds, and those aged 65 or older, compared to young age groups.<sup>21</sup>

Second, there are large numbers of older voters in Labour's target seats in England and Wales. In terms of age, the seats Labour needs to win at the next election (see Box 1) are very different from those it won in 2019.<sup>1</sup> By and large, the party's target seats are neither extremely 'old' nor extremely 'young', as measured in terms of the proportion of voters aged over 55 (see figure 4). But they are older than Labour's current seats: over 40 per cent of Labour's English and Welsh target seats (53) have more than a third of the population aged 55 and over – compared to just 14 per cent of seats Labour won in 2019. By targeting older voters, Labour is less likely to stack up votes in seats it already holds and more likely to win votes in marginal seats.

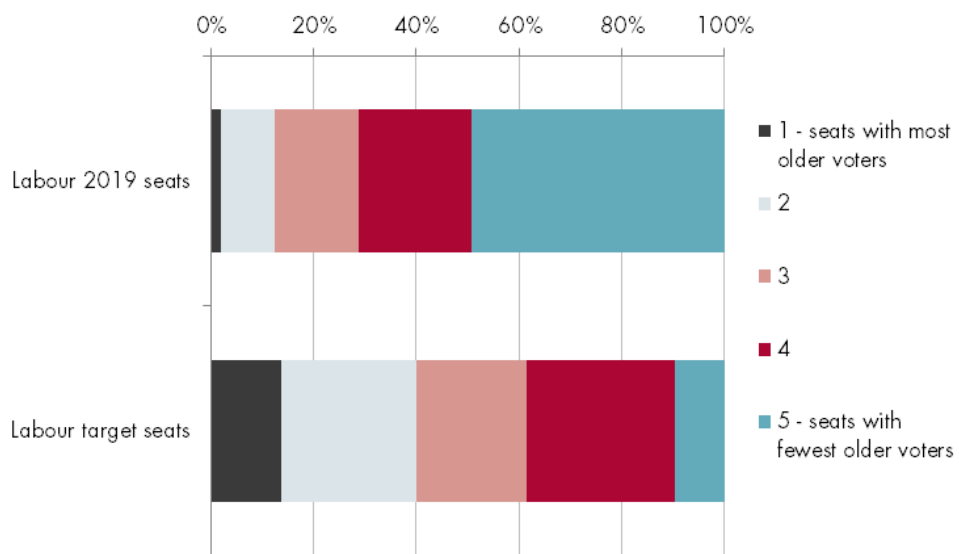
Within Labour's target constituencies 'old' and 'young' seats are scattered across the country (see figure 5). There is also little relationship between their marginality and the proportion of those aged 55 and over: target seats

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<sup>1</sup> Our analysis is based on current constituencies, but forthcoming boundary changes do not substantially change the picture.

with smaller majorities are not likely to have a lower proportion of older voters, or vice versa (see figure 6). Older voters need to be front of mind, regardless of which target seats the party chooses to prioritise.

**FIGURE 4: LABOUR TARGET SEATS INCLUDE MANY CONSTITUENCIES WITH HIGH CONCENTRATIONS OF VOTERS AGED OVER 55, UNLIKE THE PARTY'S EXISTING SEATS**

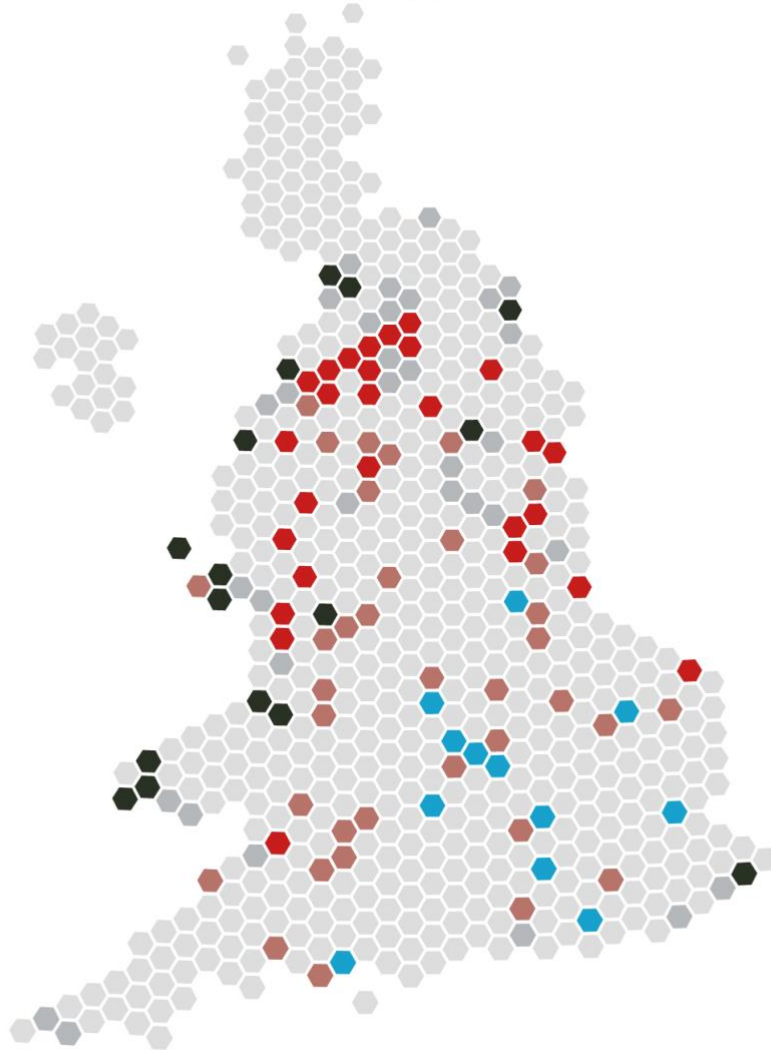


Note: Constituencies in England and Wales are divided into five quintiles, according to their proportion of residents aged over 55.

**FIGURE 5: 'OLD' AND 'YOUNG' TARGET SEATS ARE FOUND ACROSS ENGLAND AND WALES**

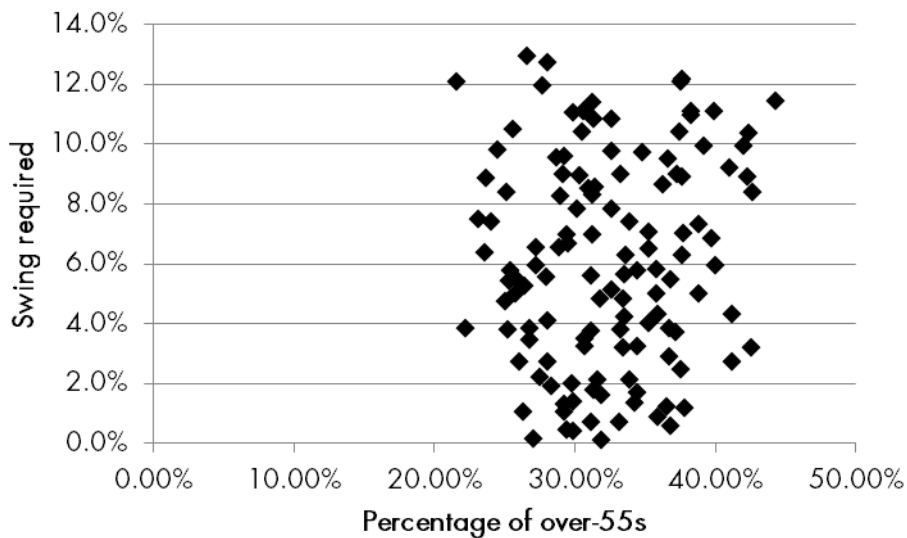


1 - seats with the most older voters 2 3 4 5 - seats with the fewest older voters



Created with Datawrapper

FIGURE 6: THERE IS NO RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE 'WINNABILITY' OF LABOUR'S TARGET SEATS AND THE SHARE OF OLDER VOTERS THEY CONTAIN



Third, older voters are growing in number. The voting power of people aged 55 and over is growing as the population ages. By 2024, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimates suggest there will be another 1.7 million adults aged 55 and over in Great Britain, compared to 2019. If they turn out to vote at the same rate as their age group did in 2019, we can estimate that there will be more than a million extra older voters at the next election.

Older voters will dominate even more in the long term. By 2050, the ONS estimates that people aged 55 and over will constitute 46.2 per cent of the population, compared to 31.1 per cent in 2020.<sup>22</sup> This is not, as some might expect, simply the effect of the 'baby boomer' generations ageing: it is a result of rising longevity in every cohort.

Fourth, older voters mainly vote Conservative. If Labour fails to improve its performance with older voters, an ageing population is likely to lead to ever larger Conservative leads that Labour either cannot win over, or cannot compensate for with younger voters. If the 2019 results for each age group were repeated, by 2024 there would be an additional 720,000 voters aged 55 and over for the Conservative party and just 260,000 for Labour in Great Britain – a net gain in this age group of 460,000 votes for the Conservative party (see figure 7).<sup>23</sup> Across the whole population, the Conservatives would gain an extra 420,000 votes over Labour.

**FIGURE 7: THE AGEING OF THE POPULATION COULD LEAD TO THE CONSERVATIVES GAINING 420,000 EXTRA VOTES OVER LABOUR, ASSUMING NOTHING ELSE CHANGES**

2019	2024	Change
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	Lab	Cons	Lab	Con	Lab	Con
Under 55s	7,330,000	5,930,000	7,250,000	5,820,000	-80,000	-110,000
Over 55s	2,930,000	8,280,000	3,190,000	9,000,000	+260,000	+720,000
Total	10,260,000	14,210,000	10,440,000	14,810,000	180,000	600,000

Note: Values may not tally fully due to rounding. Source: How Britain voted in the 2019 election, Gideon Skinner, Dr Roger Mortimore & Dylan Spielman. Ipsos MORI, December 2019; Population estimates – local authority based by single year of age. Office for National Statistics.

Older Conservative voters in Conservative-held seats are particularly important for Labour, because winning a vote from an incumbent party effectively counts twice – one vote is removed from the Tory total, and one is added to the Labour pile. And nearly all of Labour’s target seats in England and Wales are Conservative-held. The first electoral priority should therefore be to persuade former Conservative voters to back Labour.

We know this is a big ask: at each election the number of voters who switch directly between the two main parties is always relatively small. For this reason in marginal seats there is always a secondary goal – to stop people who previously voted Conservative from backing the party (by not voting or voting for a smaller party) and persuading people who did not vote Conservative to vote Labour (ie previous Labour voters, non-voters and supporters of small parties). But this tactic is harder with older voters because fewer do not vote or vote for small parties. Focusing on direct switches from Conservative to Labour is therefore more important for this age group than any other.

From the Conservatives’ perspective, there won’t be many options to compensate for the loss of any older votes Labour can win. After a decade of appealing largely to the over-55s, the Conservative Party may struggle (in the short term at least) to find voters elsewhere in the electorate to replace any that they lose either direct to Labour, or to another party or to not voting.

Fifth, many older voters share values with the Labour party’s current coalition of voters. Following the 2019 election, the Guardian’s Phillip Inman claimed the past three elections have shown ‘better-off boomers’ are unable to ‘overcome their conservatism’ to vote Labour.<sup>24</sup> But many of these voters backed New Labour between 1997 and 2010. There is strong evidence to suggest that Labour’s values are not alien to many older voters, if they are communicated more inclusively. This is particular the case with respect to the economic ‘axis’ of politics, where many older voters lean left even if they

are more socially or culturally conservative. For example, older homeowners are the voter group most likely to support more redistribution through increased tax and social spending.<sup>25</sup>

In summary, older voters are a critical constituency for Labour: they are numerous, they turn out to vote, they live in the places Labour needs to win, they mainly vote Conservative at the moment, and many share values with Labour's existing voter coalition.

#### Box 1: Winning 150 – the mountain to climb

To win a majority at the next election Labour needs to gain 123 seats (under current boundaries), requiring a swing of around 10.3 percentage points to secure a majority of one.<sup>26</sup> The Fabian Society has identified the 150 non-Labour seats where the party came closest to winning in the 2019 election. This is the pool of constituencies from which Labour's target seats at the next election are likely to be drawn.

Of those 150 seats, 125 seats are in England and Wales. They are "diverse places with diverse politics and diverse voters" and have different political histories:

- 42 are **formerly loyal Labour seats**. They were lost in 2015, 2017 or 2019 and had usually been in Labour hands for decades. This group includes seats in the north, midlands and Wales described as the 'Red Wall'.
- 16 are **swing seats** that switched between Labour and the Conservatives in the 2010, 2015 and 2017 elections.
- 34 were **lost at the 2010 election**. Labour last won these seats in 2005 before losing it as the party left office.
- 33 have **rarely or never been Labour** and either not been held by Labour before or were last won by the party in 2001.

Analyses that focus only on seats recently lost by Labour tell less than half the story: a majority of these target seats have not been held by the party since 2010 or earlier. If an election takes place after boundary changes, the exact seats the party will have to target will be different, but the sorts of places they are drawn from will be broadly the same.

### Relying on just younger voters is a risky strategy for Labour at the next election

Focusing on older voters at the next election makes sense on its own merits, but equally there is evidence that relying on younger voters (defined as under 55s) alone is a risky strategy:

- Younger adults are less likely to vote: just 54 per cent of 35 to 44-year-olds, 55 per cent of 25 to 34-year-olds and 47 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds turned out in 2019.<sup>27</sup>
- They are over-represented in Labour's current seats: figure 4 shows that just 9 per cent of Labour's target seats are in the fifth of seats in England

and Wales with the fewest people aged 55 and over. By contrast nearly 50 per cent of the party's current seats are in this category.

- There will be fewer younger adults at the next election: in 2024 there will be nearly 400,000 fewer voters under the age of 55 than in 2019, if turnout does not change (see figure 7).<sup>28</sup>

Some commentators have suggested – despite this evidence – that Labour should ‘double down’ on its reliance on young voters in the future. One high-profile commentator wrote in February 2021 that Labour should be concerned about the ‘socially progressive, economically insecure younger voters who became Labour’s electoral bedrock in the Corbyn era’.<sup>29</sup> Others have argued that attitudes and voting patterns will shift in Labour’s direction. Today’s younger voters will become tomorrow’s older voters and form a coalition with the next generation to deliver Labour a majority government in the future.<sup>30</sup>

These arguments are based on several assumptions. First, is the idea that young people have ‘emerged as a cohesive political force’ in recent years.<sup>31</sup> But younger adults are a diverse group. Many young non-graduates, particularly homeowners, have different economic attitudes compared to young graduates.<sup>32</sup> And young people, while more socially liberal on average, are less traditionally left-wing on questions of tax, social security and redistribution, compared to the average older voter.<sup>33</sup>

Second, is the idea that each generational cohort will stick with the same social norms and values that were formed in early adulthood, regardless of their age.<sup>34</sup> However the fixing of social norms and values in early adulthood does not translate into maintaining the same voting choices as individuals get older – especially since voters of all ages are more volatile today when it comes to party identification.<sup>35</sup> In the past, ageing (as opposed to differences between generational cohorts) has had a considerable impact on voter choice: many of today’s Conservative-leaning older voters supported Labour in the 1990s and 2000s. There is no reason to assume that today’s younger generation will be free from such influences.<sup>36</sup> The bonds between Labour and younger voters could be broken through a ‘middle-age switching of party allegiance’.<sup>37</sup> And Labour would continue to be disconnected from older voters in the future.

Whether Labour’s appeal to today’s young voters will continue as they age is uncertain, but even if it does, such a gamble dooms Labour to certain defeat in the short term until such effects have been allowed to play out.

## Labour is making modest steps forward with older voters

A Fabian Society YouGov survey in December 2021 found that more people aged 55 and over thought Labour was moving in the right direction (32 per cent) than the wrong direction (28 per cent). The number who said ‘not sure’ was 39 per cent. This may not be an overwhelming endorsement but significantly more over-55s than under-55s thought the party was going in the right direction, even though older voters are far less likely to be Labour supporters.

**FIGURE 8: OLDER VOTERS ARE MORE LIKELY THAN YOUNGER VOTERS TO THINK LABOUR IS GOING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION**

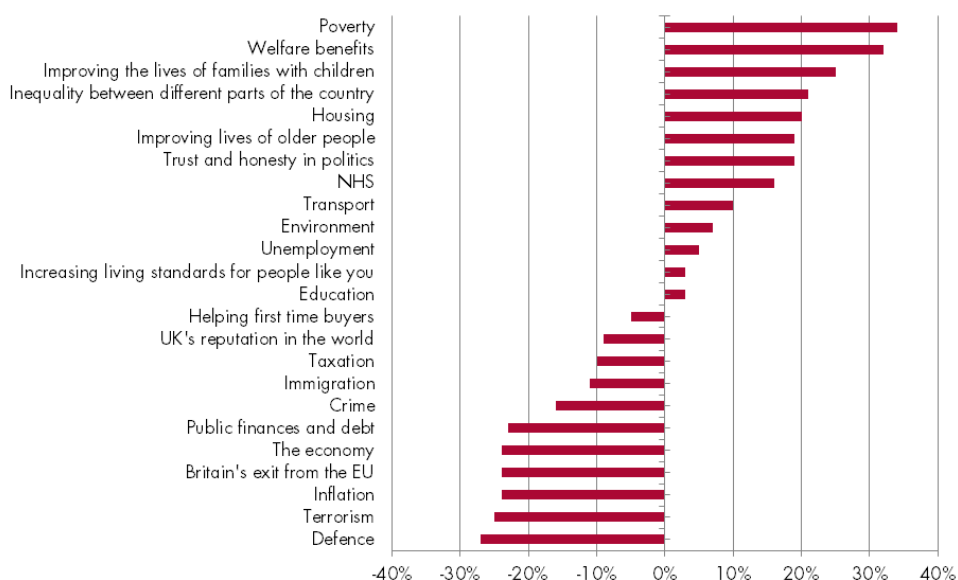
	Percentage 55 and over	Percentage under-55	Percentage all adults
Right direction	32	23	27
Wrong direction	28	28	28
Not sure	39	49	45

Question: Since Keir Starmer became Labour leader, do you think the Labour Party has been moving in the right direction or the wrong direction? Fabian Society YouGov poll, December 2021.

Our poll also asked respondents to choose whether a Labour government or a Conservative government would handle a series of 24 topics better, or whether they would be the same. Among people aged 55 and over overall, Labour led on over half (13 out of 24).

Labour led with this age group on key social policy areas (housing, education, and the NHS) and on economic topics relating to individuals and families (poverty, improving living standards for people like us, and unemployment).

**FIGURE 9: MORE PEOPLE AGED OVER 55 FAVOURED LABOUR THAN THE CONSERVATIVES ON 13 OUT OF 24 POLICY ISSUES**



Question: Here is a list of issues facing the country. Out of Labour and the Conservatives, which political party do you think would handle the following issue best, or would they be much the same? Net lead for Labour over the Conservatives. Fabian Society YouGov poll, December 2021.

By contrast, Labour was less popular than the Conservatives on issues relating to the national economy (inflation, taxation and the public finances), security (crime, defence and terrorism), and other key issues (immigration, Brexit and improving the UK's reputation in the world). These are clearly issues that are closely linked to people's party preference, because in the same poll the Conservatives had a significant lead in voting intention with those aged 55 and over (45 per cent v 28 per cent).

Nevertheless the positivity towards Labour on key questions of social policy and family living standards is notable. And while Labour is behind the Conservatives on key policy areas, even here there are many older voters who think the two main political parties would be 'much the same'. There isn't a single political issue where a majority of older voters say the Conservatives are better than Labour. On issues like the public finances, immigration and crime, this is a step forward.

### **Two million extra older voters are winnable for Labour at the next election.**

The opportunity exists for Labour to persuade a significant number of older voters, who didn't vote for the party in 2019, to do so at the next election.

Our survey found 28 per cent of over-55s are open to voting Labour (32 per cent of 55 to 64 year-olds and 25 per cent of over 65s). We define this as people who say the likelihood of them voting Labour is between 6 and 10 out of 10.

Of these potential Labour voters there are around 2 million (10 per cent of all people aged 55 and over) who did not vote for the party in 2019 and now say there is a good chance they will vote Labour.

This is the pool of older voters in which Labour must fish and in the rest of this report we refer to them as ‘Labour’s new considerers’. Of course, not everyone in this group will end up voting Labour – some will not vote, will stay with the Conservatives or will back a smaller party. But Labour should be aiming to win the support from as many of these voters as possible.

**FIGURE 10: 2 MILLION PEOPLE AGED 55 AND OVER WHO DID NOT VOTE LABOUR IN 2019 WOULD NOW CONSIDER BACKING THE PARTY**

	Considering voting Labour	Not currently considering voting Labour
Didn't vote Labour 2019	10% 2 million	55% 11 million
Voted Labour in 2019	15% 3 million	3% 700,000
Did not vote in 2019 or vote unknown	3% 500,000	14% 3 million

Question: On a scale of 0 (certain NOT to vote) to 10 (absolutely certain to vote), how likely would you be to vote for Labour in a general election tomorrow? People are treated as considering voting Labour if they gave a response of between 6 and 10 out of 10.

## Labour is ‘over-performing’ among older voters in target seats

We saw earlier that older voters are well distributed across the country with many living in marginal seats. In our poll sample, 22 per cent of people aged over 55 lived in England and Wales target seats, compared to 18 per cent of under-55s.

Importantly for Labour, older voters who would consider backing the party are also over-represented in these seats. In our December 2021 poll, the share of all over-55s who would vote Labour in an election stood at 21 per cent across Great Britain but 26 per cent in the target seats. The pool of those aged those aged 55 and over who would consider voting Labour is also higher in target seats (32 per cent) than across the country (28 per cent).



**FIGURE 11: OLDER VOTERS ARE MORE LIKELY TO SUPPORT LABOUR IN THE PARTY'S TARGET SEATS THAN THE REST OF THE COUNTRY**

	Percentage voting Labour	Percentage considering voting Labour
E&W target seat	26	32
Lost in 2015/17/19	25	28
Not recently lost	27	35
Other seats	19	28
All GB	21	28

Percentage considering voting Labour is defined as people who did not vote Labour in 2019 but gave an answer between 6 and 10 out of 10 for the following question: 'on a scale of 0 (certain NOT to vote) to 10 (absolutely certain to vote), how likely would you be to vote for Labour in a general election tomorrow?'

Interestingly, these survey findings suggest that persuadable older voters are particularly concentrated in target seats that have not been in Labour's hands recently (though caution is needed as the sample sizes are quite small). This pattern is also seen with younger age groups, indicating that Labour should not forget target seats not held since before 2010.

# 3. RECONNECTING WITH OLDER VOTERS

We have seen how Labour must prioritise older voters to win the next election. There is a real opportunity to reconnect with them and regain power with their support.

Older voters are unhappy with the Conservative party, as this chapter will show – and chapter 2 showed how many are now considering voting for Labour after rejecting the party in 2019.<sup>38</sup> But to secure the support of older voters, the party must overcome their uncertainty about whether Labour has changed for the better and can be trusted to govern. As we move towards the next election, Labour must focus on addressing their concerns and provide an alternative vision older voters can believe in – and in doing so unite different generations.

In this chapter we present conclusions about how Labour should reconnect, based on polling and focus groups conducted for this project as well as existing evidence.

## 1. Rebuild trust to govern

To win the next election, it is not just enough for the Conservative party to be unpopular with older voters. Labour still needs to prove to those who are considering the party that it can be trusted to govern in the interests of everyone across the UK. The party has already done a great deal of work to rebuild this trust with voters generally. Now, it must focus on older voters as the top priority.

### 1.1 Convince older voters that the party has changed and cares about them

Many older voters are unsure about Labour and Keir Starmer. While Starmer, in particular, is currently more popular with older voters than Ed

Miliband or Jeremy Corbyn were before the 2015 and 2019 elections respectively 39 per cent still said they were ‘not sure’ Labour has been moving in the right direction under his leadership. In our focus groups of ‘Labour’s new considerers’, conducted in November 2021, many were unclear about Keir Starmer – people said: ‘He’s not on my radar’, ‘the invisible man’, and, when asked to name a word or phrase they associated with Keir Starmer: ‘I haven’t really got one, I quite like the chap’.

When we asked our focus groups whether Labour or the Conservatives were more ‘on the side of people like you’, many participants answered in similar fashion to one individual in Bury North: “I would think with my current situation, retired, I would like to err on the Conservative side”. This was despite repeated criticism of Boris Johnson. He is a ‘buffoon’, a ‘liar’ and a ‘mess’ who ‘hasn’t delivered’ according to our focus group participants.

In discussions held during the early stages of ‘partygate’, there was a perception amongst many older voters that the wider Conservative party had otherwise changed for the better. One focus group participant in Sedgefield said: “I think it’s the first Conservative Party that has been for the majority of people and trying to turn the country round for a change.” A handful of participants also made positive comments about other Conservative ministers. One said: “I do feel more confident in the Conservatives because we do have, you know, behind Boris we’ve got, like, Liz Truss and Rishi. So, if Boris was to get the sack, we’ve got two good ones there that would come up.”

Despite events that have occurred since these focus groups, there is evidence that many of these voters would return to the Conservatives (or not vote at all) if forced to choose right now.<sup>39</sup> Labour cannot rely on Boris Johnson’s low approval ratings to shift older voters back to the party; it must actively persuade them.

Many older voters feel a historic affiliation to Labour. In our focus groups, we found favourable references to Labour historically being the party of working people, support for the NHS and public services, and Nye Bevan (amongst other past Labour politicians). But many people also thought that the party has moved away from them in recent years. A Deltapoll survey in September 2021 found voters aged over 55 were most likely to agree with the statement that the party “used to care about the concerns of people like me, but doesn’t nowadays”: 30 per cent of over-65s and 34 per cent of 55 to 64-year-olds agreed with this statement, compared to 26 per cent for all adults.<sup>40</sup>

Labour should convince persuadable older voters that the party has changed, recognising that the party has lost its way in recent years and fallen out of touch with the priorities of this group. It must dispel the impression many older voters have established at previous elections, that the party's sole focus is its new base of young voters. And the party must indicate it wants older voters' support by speaking directly and consistently to their concerns and priorities.

## 1.2 Reassurance on fiscal credibility and economic competence

Our polling suggests Labour is making some progress in showing the public that it can be trusted with the public finances. But significant concern remains among older voters who are considering voting Labour. Figure 12 shows that with older 'Labour's new considerers' (those aged 55 and over who are now open to voting Labour but did not do so in 2019) Labour leads the Conservatives on 'public finances and government debt'. But only 37 per cent of this group say Labour would handle the issue better, compared to 25 per cent who prefer the Conservatives and 27 per cent who aren't sure.

While voters do not often remember details of party policies, the shadow of the 2019 manifesto still hangs over the party with respect to economic policy. As one person open to voting Labour told us in our Bridgend focus group: "I've got to be honest, he [Jeremy Corbyn] frightened me to death. His policies were so left wing, we wouldn't have been able to afford half of them." Another said, "I think they [Labour] had this money tree that we didn't have and were just promising things that ... they couldn't deliver and it [the cost] would only pass on to us."

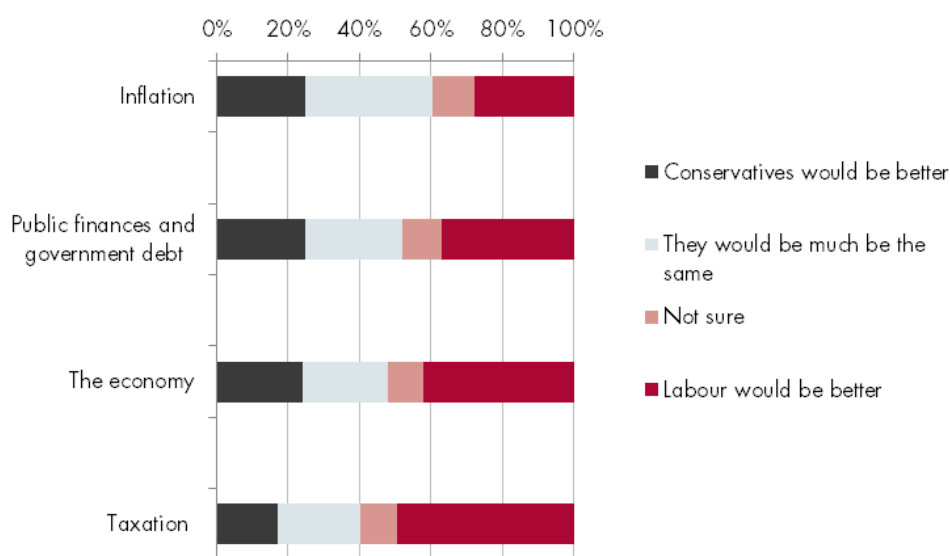
On wider economic issues, the pattern is similar: Labour appears to have made progress since 2019 but not enough to 'seal the deal' with older voters, including those considering voting for the party at the next election. In April 2022 Deltapoll reported that Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves were ahead of Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak when people were asked who would be best for the British economy. But this lead among all adults turned into a significant deficit among voters aged 55 and over (48 per cent for the Conservatives, compared to 30 per cent for Labour).<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, in our poll in December 2021, we found that across those aged 55 and over overall the Conservatives were preferred to Labour on the economy, taxation, inflation and public finances and government debt (see figure 9). Looking specifically at 'Labour's new considerers' more preferred Labour to the Conservatives on the economy, taxation and inflation – as well as the public finances (discussed above). But many remained unconvinced.

Less than half of this group thought Labour would be better on inflation (28 per cent), the economy (42 per cent) and taxation (49 per cent).

While support for the party is significantly higher with 'Labour's new considerers' than older voters overall, within this group Labour is doing worse on these issues than most others. One focus group participant suggested that Labour was 'stuck in the past' when it came to business, unable to show we 'need to succeed [when] the world's changing and we've got to change the businesses we have in the country to create jobs for the next generations'.

**FIGURE 12: ON KEY ECONOMIC ISSUES ONLY A MINORITY OF 'LABOUR'S NEW CONSIDERERS' AGED OVER 55 PREFER LABOUR TO THE CONSERVATIVES**

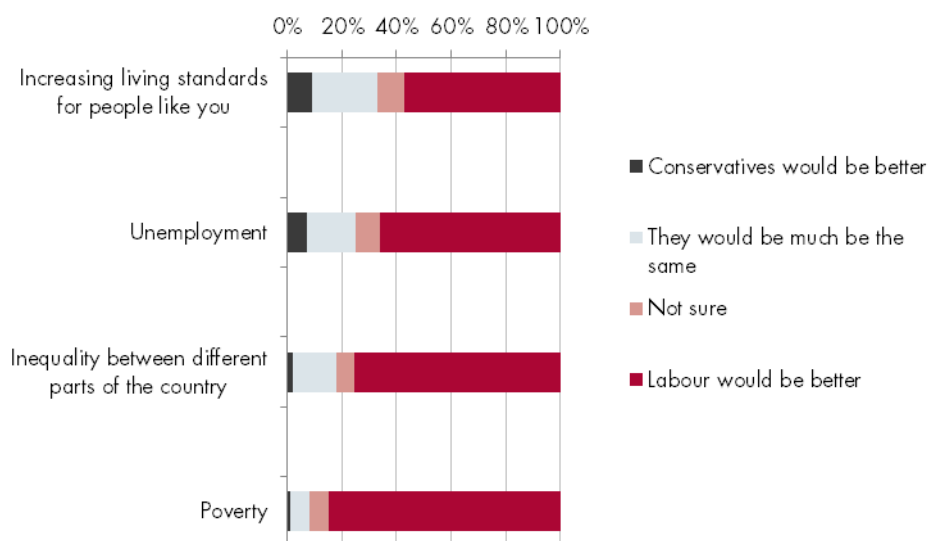


Question: 'Here is a list of issues facing the country. Out of Labour and the Conservatives, which political party do you think would handle the following issue best, or would they be much the same?' 'Labour's new considerers' are defined as people who did not vote Labour in 2019 but gave an answer between 6 and 10 out of 10 for the following question: 'on a scale of 0 (certain NOT to vote) to 10 (absolutely certain to vote), how likely would you be to vote for Labour in a general election tomorrow?'

On other economic issues, Labour is substantially ahead of the Conservative Party among older 'Labour's new considerers'. 66 per cent of these voters consider Labour better than the Conservatives on the issue of unemployment, 76 per cent on inequality between different parts of the country (ie 'levelling up') and 85 per cent on poverty. With many of these issues prominent in voters' minds when it comes to the economy, it offers

Labour the chance of a reset with older voters to show it can be economically competent at the next election.<sup>42</sup>

**FIGURE 13: A MAJORITY OF 'LABOUR'S NEW CONSIDERERS' AGED OVER 55 PREFER LABOUR TO THE CONSERVATIVES ON ECONOMIC ISSUES LINKED TO FAMILY FINANCES**



Question: 'Here is a list of issues facing the country. Out of Labour and the Conservatives, which political party do you think would handle the following issue best, or would they be much the same?' 'Labour's new considerers' are defined as people who did not vote Labour in 2019 but gave an answer between 6 and 10 out of 10 for the following question: 'on a scale of 0 (certain NOT to vote) to 10 (absolutely certain to vote), how likely would you be to vote for Labour in a general election tomorrow?'

Labour must reassure older voters on fiscal credibility and economic competence. This should not mean lowering the ambition of the party to reform the economy, so it works for everyone, young and old. Older voters, especially 'Labour's new considerers', recognise that the economy is not working. Instead, at the next election, older voters – including those considering voting Labour – will want to know how much the party's policies will cost to implement, and how Labour will pay for them. And many voters will also respect a party that is honest about the tough choices and trade-offs, and explains what it won't be possible to do. As one focus group participant told us: 'I want them to be strong enough to say... I want them to say, "no, because we can't afford it."'

Public announcements should focus on showing to older voters that Labour understands the importance of responsible finances, maximising value for

money when spending commitments are made, and running the economy competently. This is crucial, even in the context of other economic issues such as the cost of living crisis or levelling up, because Labour will only be heard on those issues if it proves it can be trusted with the public finances and the economy.

### **1.3 Provide clear and sincere leadership on immigration**

Immigration and asylum have not gone away as salient issues, especially for older voters. YouGov's regular issue tracker found in April 2022 that 36 per cent of respondents aged over 65 considered 'immigration and asylum' as one of the most important issues facing the country – behind only the economy and the NHS.<sup>43</sup>

In November 2021, when we conducted our focus groups with 'Labour's new considerers', discussions about immigration were largely focused on boats crossing the English Channel from France. Many of the older voters in our groups thought it was one of the biggest issues facing the country. For example, a participant in Bury North said "immigration is probably the biggest, pretty close to the NHS". This issue has recently returned to political prominence with the Ukraine war and the government's plan to deport some asylum seekers to Rwanda.

Participants were concerned about channel crossings for a number of different reasons, including the inability of the British and the French governments to work together to solve the problem. As one participant in Bury North said 'I have not a problem with the people that are coming over on the boats, I have a problem with the French and the British not getting together to organise a better way.'

There were also concerns about the perceived pressures that immigration is placing on public services, particularly the NHS and social security system. As one participant in Bury North put it: "Immigration, that's a big draw on the NHS funds going forward".

Looking at 'Labour's new considerers' aged over 55, 41 per cent believe Labour would be better than the Conservative party at handling immigration. 15 per cent preferred the Conservatives and 35 per cent thought the two parties would be much the same. This suggests Labour still has some way to go to convince potential Labour voters it can be trusted to handle immigration better than the Conservatives.

Labour should provide clear and sincere leadership on immigration if it wants to be trusted to govern. Other research has suggested that Labour

should set out how it will better manage and improve the immigration and asylum system, delivering a more humane system with fair rules that restores the trust of the British public.<sup>44</sup>

An ICM survey in 2018 for the ‘national conversation’ on immigration organised by British Future and HOPE not Hate found 64 per cent of older voters supported “better ways of dealing with the local impacts of migration on housing and public services”, which would “help dispel some of the concerns people felt about migration, particularly in deprived areas.”<sup>45</sup> A system that rewards contribution, ensures control, and provides fairness are important themes – and could be the basis of showing to ‘Labour’s new considerers’ how the party in government would manage migration humanely and competently.

There will inevitably be some older voters that Labour cannot satisfy on immigration while staying true to its values. But the party should not assume this includes the majority of older voters: when we conducted our poll in November 2021, only 32 per cent of older voters said they preferred the Conservatives to Labour on the issue. Many want sincere leadership from politicians and policymakers on the issue – not tough talk that ultimately does not deliver. Labour can appeal to those voters.

#### **1.4 Appeal to mainstream values but remember ‘woke’ debates are largely a distraction**

It is often argued that there is a substantial values divide between the different wings of Labour’s potential voter coalition. These fears are overstated. The British public value many things the Labour party should not find controversial: contribution and hard work, patriotism, and family life.<sup>46</sup> Appealing to these mainstream values does not just persuade older voters who did not vote Labour in 2019, but Labour considers of all ages.

Progressive strategists worry that right-wing media and politicians will be able to divide potential Labour supporters by talking-up ‘culture war’ controversies. But the evidence indicates that potentially divisive ‘woke debates’ are not major drivers of political behaviour among those aged 55 and over. In May 2021, YouGov found that 26 per cent of over-65s had heard of the term ‘woke’ and knew what it meant, compared to 63 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds.<sup>47</sup> Polling by Ipsos MORI and the Policy Institute at King’s College London in May 2021 found that there was no widespread public engagement with so-called culture wars or the issues linked to it.<sup>48</sup>



In our focus groups of 'Labour's new considerers' in marginal seats, there were a few vague references to the 'woke agenda'. But there were no mentions of issues that supposedly divide Labour from the cultural mainstream - trans rights or removing racist statues, for example. To the extent that our focus group participants had any reaction to these sorts of cultural issues, it was that they wanted Labour to have a clear position rather than fudge: it was more about showing leadership, than the specific issue itself.

Labour should have clear lines on 'woke' debates but should not be distracted. The party needs to avoid taking the bait, either from Conservatives attempting to trap Labour into talking about so-called 'culture war' issues, or from those who say Labour can only rebuild by rejecting new woke causes altogether. Instead, the party's focus should be on the priorities of older voters and rebuilding trust to govern. Our research suggests that so-called culture war issues are a distraction.

### **1.5 Demonstrate party unity without compromising on antisemitism.**

Older voters view Labour as divided. In March 2022, Opinium found that 51 per cent of those aged over 65 disagreed with the statement 'Labour is a united party'.<sup>49</sup> This matters. Research has shown that internal disagreement and disunity makes voters see political parties as less competent and able policy-makers; and that these perceptions can endure.<sup>50</sup>

The evidence from our focus groups indicated that people want Labour to be more united. When our country 'has never been more divided', in the words of one focus group participant in Sedgefield, "I can't see how you [Labour] can bring people back together at the moment" when the party is divided itself. Participants felt that a lack of unity was preventing Labour from focusing relentlessly on the priorities of voters, and showing how the party would change the country.

But voters also have strong views about antisemitism. Some MPs and commentators have suggested restoring the whip to Jeremy Corbyn to 'unify' the party.<sup>51</sup> Previous research suggests that antisemitism is not just morally repugnant, but has damaged Labour's prospects by reinforcing the party's toxicity with voters.<sup>52</sup>

'Labour's new considerers' in our focus groups considered antisemitism in the party to have been unacceptable under the previous leadership, and they welcomed the action Starmer has taken. As one participant told us, "I have

to put my hands up and say I think he [Starmer] has tried to stamp that [antisemitism] out, yes". Prioritising unity over action on antisemitism would suggest to voters that Labour has not changed and is unable to stand up for what is right.

Labour needs to demonstrate party unity without compromising on its hard line on antisemitism. When we asked older voters how they could be persuaded to vote Labour at the next election, one participant suggested that Labour's bickering politicians "really need to get together, sit round a table and say what they have to say and sort themselves out. There's no other way". Another focus group participant in Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme suggested "get some really strong people behind him [Keir Starmer]".<sup>53</sup> There is a need to utilise a wide and united team of Labour MPs and parliamentary candidates who show how Labour has changed and how it is speaking to the priorities of older voters.

## 2. Offer a better future

To reconnect with older voters, Labour needs a positive and credible political platform. The work must be done long before the manifesto is launched in an election campaign. This year the party has started to do this, by beginning to set out a 'contract with the British people'.<sup>54</sup> Going forward, Labour must offer a positive political story, prioritise security, and launch progressive, credible, and popular policies.

### 2.1 Set out a positive and unifying story about the future of our country under Labour

Huge numbers of older voters are unhappy with the status quo. An Ipsos MORI poll, in March 2022, found 55 per cent of those aged 55 and over were dissatisfied with the way the government is running the country.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, in March 2022, Ipsos MORI found just 31 per cent of those aged 55 to 64 and 41 per cent of those aged 65 and over thought that Great Britain was heading in the right direction.<sup>56</sup>

Many of our focus group participants reported feeling let down by the government. In the Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme focus group, participants said: "I think it's not so much lack of direction, I just think there's an awful lot of talk and very little action." When asked in November 2021 what one word or phrase described the Conservative party a participant in Bridgend said: "U-turns - because that's all they seem to do now is u-turn, u-turn, u-turn."

Some viewed the country as 'adrift'. In our focus group discussions, people perceived the country as going nowhere due to poor and vacillating leadership. In the words of one focus group participant: "The leadership of this country reminds me very much of sitting on a boat."

"For a few hours the tide goes one way and you all know where you're fishing, and then you have this period of an hour or so where you're wallowing around, you're not sure if you're going down tide or up tide ... We're in this middle ground at the minute where we don't know which way the tide is going, and we don't know what they're doing. We've got no direction; we've got no leadership to take the strong control of it." – focus group participant, Norwich North

But our focus group participants felt that Labour was not providing leadership or a positive vision for the country either. As one individual in our focus groups of 'Labour's new considerers' told us: "We need a leader. We need leadership in both of the parties and we're not getting it." This is backed up by survey data: in March 2022, Opinium found 44 per cent of over-65s disagreed that Labour has a clear sense of purpose.<sup>57</sup>

Our focus group participants told us:

"They [Labour] have got so much that they could do or try to do, it's so frustrating that that's the party that should be setting this all out and saying, this is what we want to do, and they're not." – focus group participant, Stoke-on-Trent (Central and North) and Newcastle-under-Lyme

I know – well, I think I know – who they [the Conservative Party] are and what they are and what they mean for me. And as I said, I don't know who Labour are anymore, and what they're about anymore." – focus group participant, Erewash

"Labour are an unknown quantity, and I'm not convinced at the moment that they would do anything different to support me." – focus group participant, Norwich North

Some 'Labour's new considerers' felt that when they did hear from Labour, the party focused too much on opposition for opposition's sake, rather than setting out an alternative to the government:

"They just seem to peck at the Conservatives all the time which in some ways is a good thing, they keep them on their toes, but I think

they need some policies of their own.” – focus group participant Stoke-on-Trent (Central and North) and Newcastle-under-Lyme

“Because all they’re trying to do, rather than coming over as, look, we’re the strong Labour party now; these are our values, this is what we’re going to work towards; they’re just trying to get one over on the Conservatives by bad-mouthing them.” – focus group participant Erewash

Several of our focus group participants called for Labour to make it clear which Conservative policies they would continue (not just say what they opposed) as part of setting out a positive vision for the country:

“I would have much respect for [Labour] ... if he [Starmer] would just agree with something that’s going on with the Conservatives and say, ‘You know what, I’m going to ... do a lot of things that the Conservatives are doing because they’re brilliant but I’m also going to add this...’” – focus group participant, Sedgfield

This public opinion evidence shows that Labour needs to set out a positive and unifying story about the future of our country under Labour that all voters, but especially older ones, want. . As one focus group participant told us: “We just need someone that we can put our trust in who’s going to build this country and make it a better place.” This would contrast favourable in the minds of older voters to the current government’s lack of leadership, its u-turns, and the uncertainty this encourages.

## 2.2 Prioritise ‘security’ in all its forms

Many older voters are feeling insecure and uncertain about the world, and their own personal circumstances. In the words of one focus group participant: “If I think of my life at the moment, I can’t think of one thing that’s actually getting better or going to get better with what I see going on in the world.” Another told us, they felt “everything changes so fast I don’t know what’s secure at the moment”. Security is a value that voters, particularly older voters, prize.

Some Labour figures, and progressive activists more broadly, often seek to use the language of radical change to describe their politics. This sits in tension with the value of security that many older voters prize. Labour must combine a message of change and progress with promise of security. This is not a paradox. It is becoming increasingly clear that we can only deliver greater security in the economy, in communities, and for the nation with

significant change. But in describing Labour's alternative the party needs to offer reassurance, not transformative disruption.

### **A secure economy**

Rising prices and high energy bills are creating a cost of living crisis for many families, increasing economic insecurity. Rising costs will weigh heavy on older voters, many of whom are on low or fixed incomes. Over three-quarters of people aged 65 and over (79 per cent) are worried about the cost of living and over half (59 per cent) expected their financial situation to get worse – more than any other age group – according to a Savanta ComRes survey in April 2022.<sup>58</sup> And this will influence older voters' perceptions of the economy: Ipsos MORI found in November 2021 that 64 per cent of 55 to 75-year-olds said that whether prices were going up was the most important influence on their view of the economy.<sup>59</sup>

Older voters' experiences of the economy can differ from those of their younger counterparts, particularly if they own their home without a mortgage and have a fixed pension income. Yet perceptions that the economy is not working for 'people like us' are often similar across the generations, offering a chance to unite older and younger voters around a shared agenda of expanding economic security.

In November 2021, our focus groups of older 'Labour's new considerers' were concerned.

*"I think we're going to see inflation really soar, and I do worry that we're going to hit the 1990s again, where inflation got high ... I think it's going to hit people ... that haven't got the money behind them; I think it's going to hit them quite hard." – focus group participant, Erewash*

*"With the ever-increasing fuel charges either domestically or transport wise, and ... a big increase in the council tax next year ... I'm concerned about the pensions not rising to get somewhere near to cover the cost." – focus group participant, Bury North*

Since the Fabian Society conducted these focus groups, the cost of living crisis has deepened with data showing inflation reaching a 10-year high. The annual increase in the state pension was set using data from the autumn which means many older voters faced a substantial financial squeeze in April – especially as the increase in inflation is driven by increases to energy and food prices, on which pensioners spend a larger proportion of their total expenditure.<sup>60</sup>

This is fertile territory for Labour. As we saw in figure 9, more older voters prefer Labour than the Conservatives when asked about their own living standards, even though the Conservatives retain a lead on broader economic questions. But Labour still has work to do in building trust with over-65s overall on this issue. Among ‘Labour’s new considerers’ aged 55 and over, 57 per cent preferred Labour on ‘increasing living standards for people like you’, while only 9 per cent preferred the Conservatives (see figure 14).

**FIGURE 14: LABOUR LEADS THE CONSERVATIVES AMONG OLDER VOTERS ON ‘INCREASING LIVING STANDARDS FOR PEOPLE LIKE YOU’**

	Aged 55 and over total	‘Labour’s new considerers’	Men	Women	55-64	65+	ABC1	C2DE
Conservatives would be better than Labour	26	9	28	24	22	28	28	23
They would be much the same	33	24	37	30	34	34	34	33
Labour would be better than the Conservatives	29	57	28	29	31	27	27	30
Not sure	12	10	7	17	14	11	11	14

### A secure community

Older voters often worry about safety in their community. When asked to identify two or three local or national issues that politicians should prioritise, lots of the participants in our focus groups of ‘Labour’s new considerers’ aged over 55 mentioned crime and anti-social behaviour.

“I’ve put local crime ... just petty things that make people’s lives misery, like breaking into cars... A lot of these crimes are just getting numbers given or something like that and no further action.” – focus group participant, Sedgefield

“The lack of visible policing in the towns [is a problem and] we’re experiencing lots of trouble and vandalism.” – focus group participant, Stoke-on-Trent (Central and North) and Newcastle-under-Lyme

Older voters are very dissatisfied with the government’s record on crime. 66 per cent of those aged 55 and over said the government had done a bad job dealing with crime since it was elected in 2019, according to an Ipsos MORI poll from December 2021.<sup>61</sup>

But Labour has not yet been able to turn this to its advantage. In our poll the Conservatives were well ahead of Labour on crime amongst everyone aged

over 55 (figure 9). Even looking at 'Labour's new considerers' only, just 31 per cent said the party would be better on crime than the Conservatives. Older voters who are considering voting Labour largely think the two political parties would be much the same. This is an area where Labour can do a lot more, building on Keir Starmer's credentials as a former Director of Public Prosecutions.

### **A secure nation**

Our focus groups took place before the Russia-Ukraine war when national security and foreign policy were not issues that were at the front of voters minds. Questions of national security rarely came up spontaneously in our focus groups, but there was a sense amongst some focus group participants that the country was on a less secure footing than in the past because of economic dependency.

In Bridgend, one participant worried about the decline in manufacturing: "We don't produce anything in this country, or hardly anything ... We don't do our own cars, etc. So I think we should try and become a little bit self-sufficient." Another participant in Norwich North suggested that Britain had been "quite happy to get cheap goods brought in from China, etc ... and we'll let somebody else worry about it later." Foreign ownership of the utilities and other assets was also raised as an issue: "[the Conservative party] privatised all our utilities and all our assets that way, and they're owned now by Germans, Americans, and I think it's a couple of French companies as well, so that's not great for us." This is a critique Labour can turn to its advantage by setting out strong, government-led industrial strategy to build national resilience.

On the other hand, Labour has a work to do to convince voters it is serious about national security with respect to defence and terrorism. In Bury North, one focus group participant told us: "I've always found the Labour party are not really interested in our security." In our polling on issues facing the country, the Conservatives had the strongest lead over Labour among those aged 55 and over on defence and terrorism. Looking at 'Labour's new considerers' only, the party has a small lead over the Conservatives. But even so, just 24 per cent of this group say they prefer Labour to the Conservatives on terrorism, and 30 per cent on defence. As with crime, most 'Labour's new considerers' say the Labour and Conservative parties will handle these issue much the same. They need to be convinced that Labour will be better.

Labour needs to prioritise security in all its forms: older voters need to be convinced that Labour values security, whether in the workplace, in local

communities, or in an uncertain world. The party needs to show that greater security is at the heart of its positive alternative to persuade older voters to back the party. A credible promise of a more secure Britain would contrast strongly with the Conservatives' failures over the past 11 years. With energy bills, Labour has already done this by linking huge price hikes to reliance on imported gas, together undermining national resilience and economic security for families.<sup>62</sup> The same approach is needed across the board.

### **2.3 Present a progressive, credible and popular policy offer targeting older voters**

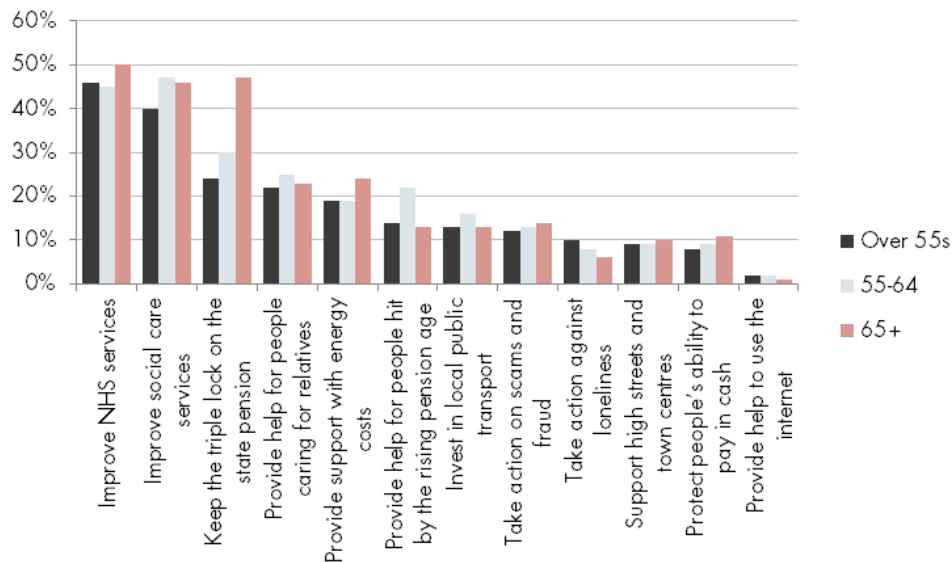
Labour has announced over 200 policies since early 2020 but few, if any, have cut through with older voters.<sup>63</sup> In every single focus group, our older 'Labour's new considerers' mentioned the need for Labour to "map out some policies of what they're going to do", "be more clear about their policies", and "come through with some strong policies but stick to them". At this point in the political cycle, an opposition party needs to offer just enough policy to make an impression. So far Labour has not succeeded in this task – in large part, of course, due to the pandemic.

Our polling asked respondents what policy they would most like to see the Labour party promise to 'improve the lives of older people in the UK'. Amongst over-55s, 'improving NHS services' (48 per cent), 'improving social care services' (46 per cent) and 'keeping the triple lock on the state pension' (40 per cent) were by far the most popular options.

Among people aged over 65 these three policy areas were of roughly equal importance. By contrast voters aged 55 to 64 were less likely to mention the state pension and were heavily focused on health and care. Interestingly, in this age group slightly more people mentioned social care than the NHS as a priority – unlike either older or younger cohorts. Voters aged between 55 and 64 were more likely to select 'provide help for people hit by the rising pension age' than those aged over 65 (22 per cent vs 14 per cent). On the other hand, people aged over 65 were more likely to choose 'providing support with energy costs' (24 per cent vs 19 per cent respectively).



**FIGURE 15: THE NHS, SOCIAL CARE AND THE PENSION TRIPLE LOCK ARE THE AREAS WHERE VOTERS AGED OVER 55 MOST WANT LABOUR TO MAKE POLICY COMMITMENTS TO OLDER PEOPLE**



Question: "Which, if any, of the following would you MOST like to see the Labour Party promise to improve the lives of older people in this country? Please tick up to three."

Our polling shows that, although Labour is less trusted overall by older voters, it is at an advantage when it comes to political debates about older people. The NHS, social care and the state pension are the issues where voters aged over 55 most want Labour to make commitments to older people, and our evidence indicates that more older voters prefer Labour than the Conservatives on these issues. The party has a clear lead over the Conservatives with those aged 55 and over on the NHS, welfare benefits and improving the lives of families with children (see figure 9). This is particularly true for 'Labour's new considerers' with 73 per cent believing Labour would handle the issue of the NHS better than the Conservative Party, 82 per cent on welfare benefits, and 74 per cent on improving the lives of families with children.

Critically Labour leads the Conservatives with older voters on the issue of 'improving the lives of older people'. Clearly this is not the main factor that motivates older voters when they decide how to vote – otherwise Labour would be ahead not behind amongst those aged 55 and over. But it should give Labour confidence that the party can prosper by making credible promises relating to older voters' lives.

**FIGURE 16: LABOUR LEADS THE CONSERVATIVES AMONG OLDER VOTERS ON 'IMPROVING THE LIVES OF OLDER PEOPLE'**

	Total	'Labour's new considerer'	Men	Women	55-64	65+	ABC1	C2DE
Conservatives would be better than Labour	18	3	17	18	14	21	17	18
They would be much the same	32	15	34	31	32	32	32	33
Labour would be better than the Conservatives	37	74	39	34	39	35	39	35
Not sure	13	8	9	17	14	12	12	14

This is part of a broader pattern, where Labour is ahead of the Conservatives amongst people aged over 55 on many social policy questions - including the environment, transport, education, and housing. For 'Labour's new considerers', our poll found that 53 per cent on the environment, 59 per cent favoured Labour on transport, 62 per cent on education, and 75 per cent on housing.

Looking at the evidence from our polling and focus groups together, the contours of a clear and practical left-wing policy agenda that can appeal to older voters starts to emerge. It includes money for the NHS to cut waiting lists, a strong plan for social care, reassurance on the state pension, more police and action on crime, improving local environments and the high street, and more secure and well-skilled local jobs in the local economy.

The 'Labour's new considerers' in our groups told us to see these things:

"I think more police certainly, at least getting back to the levels we were at before the Tory cuts during austerity, would be a big help [to persuade people to vote Labour]." – focus group participant, Bury North

"I don't think there's enough funding for mental health issues at the moment. That's what I feel quite strongly about." – focus group participant, Erewash.

"I've got grandchildren and ... I'm concerned about that when they come out of university, what on earth are they going to do because there is such a lack of jobs." – participant, Stoke-on-Trent (Central and North) and Newcastle-under-Lyme

"Everywhere you go ... I've never seen it so bad in respect of places being untidy, not kept well ... the grass gets longer, the litter gets

entangled with the grass, there just seems to be a lack of – no one seems to bother, you know, and something needs to be done about”  
– focus group participant, Norwich North

Policies addressing these issues can unite the demand of older voters for greater security with Labour’s ambition to transform the country for the better. Other studies have produced similar results. Deltapoll for the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change found in September 2021 that when people were asked about ways to improve the ‘quality of life around here’, older voters were more likely than average to support ‘more police on the streets’ and ‘better local hospitals and GP services’. They also considered ‘cheaper homes to rent or buy’ and ‘more decently paid jobs in and around our area’ to be important.

Crucially, these are things most other parts of Labour’s voter coalition want too. Too often, commentators act as if older voters don’t share progressive priorities with Labour’s younger base.<sup>64</sup> But this is evidently untrue.

Labour should present a progressive, credible and popular policy offer for older voters. This should contain a small number of ‘signature’ policies, which are authentically Labour but new and popular, with both older and younger voters. They have to speak to the wider agenda of what a Labour government is about, not just solve a particular everyday concern. Labour has started to do so with the cost of living and energy prices. Now the party must continue.

## Endnotes

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- 1 The polling figures are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 3,380 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 8th - 13th December 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).
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- 23 This is an estimate and should be treated as an approximation. It relies on several sources that have potential limitations, including the Ipsos MORI 2019 election survey. Population projections for 2024 in England, Wales and Scotland are provided by the Office for National Statistics.
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- 27 How Britain voted in the 2019 election, Gideon Skinner, Dr Roger Mortimore & Dylan Spielman. Ipsos MORI, December 2019
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