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DATA INSIGHT UNDERSTANDING

UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL CHANGE IN BRITAIN

Tuning Out: Explaining Declining Turnout in Britain

What's driving falling voter participation in British politics

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RESEARCH PAPER

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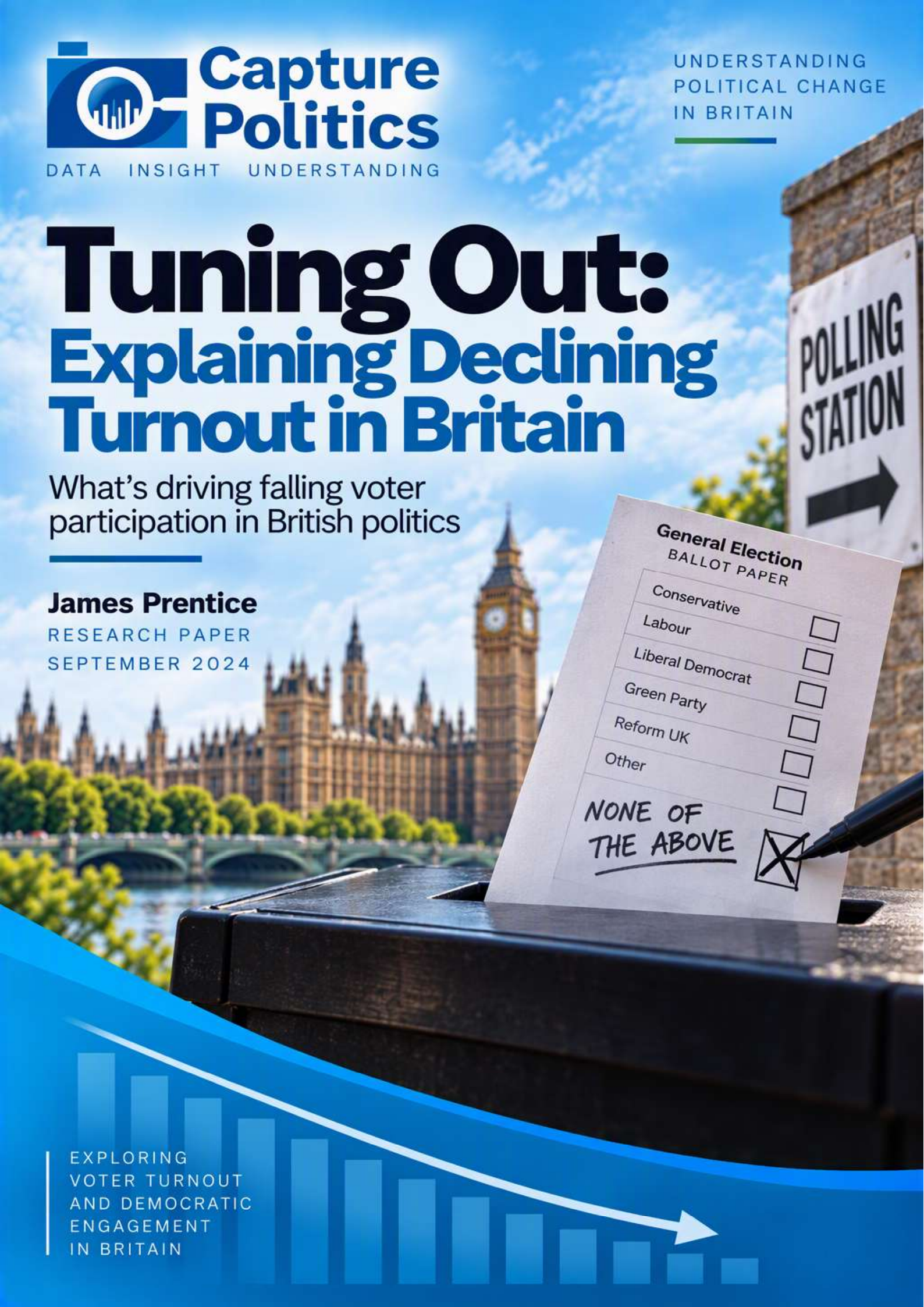

EXPLORING VOTER TURNOUT AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT IN BRITAIN

Core Findings:

This study explores the reasons behind why turnout declined in the 2024 general election. To do this, it uses aggregate data from the 650 constituency results and the demographic profiles of these constituencies to highlight common characteristics that decreased turnout. It also uses individual-level data from the British Election Study (BES) to demonstrate how these new non-voters' opinions differed from those who chose to vote. It also uses this dataset to highlight the feelings that caused more people to disengage from the political system. The study also uses regression modelling to determine what factors most caused this decrease in turnout, to provide a clear answer to the puzzle of why turnout was so low.

Ultimately, the paper argues that the main cause of the decline in turnout was individuals living in deprived communities, dependent on rented forms of accommodation, not trusting representatives or believing the political system would cater to their interests. Worryingly, there is a wider disapproval of the democratic system, meaning that the decline in turnout can't be fully explained by Conservatives staying at home or Labour voters being complacent. Most concerning, this study also demonstrates that if the public continues to perceive elected officials as abusing their power or deliberately misleading the public, this will likely only decrease engagement further.

The result of our research demonstrates the following:

1. Individuals who worked in working-class occupations and rented their accommodation in areas greatly impacted by multiple deprivation were the most likely to stop voting.
2. Constituencies Labour retained displayed the highest turnout decreases. This indicates Labour struggled to engage voters in traditional Labour-leaning deprived areas reliant on socially rented forms of accommodation.
3. The level of distrust and dissatisfaction with the political system and its representatives was a key factor in decreasing turnout.
4. The next most significant impact on decreasing turnout was a feeling that none of the parties offered the policy ideas and the vision needed to fix the many problems the country faces.
5. When an individual believed no party could competently manage their biggest concerns, an increase in disengagement occurred.
6. The theory that turnout declined mostly due to Conservative voters in Tory heartlands choosing to stay at home has little evidence supporting it.
7. The extent to which an individual approved of an individual leader or party did not produce a significant decrease in turnout.
8. The new issue of photo ID was not significant, indicating people actively chose to disengage with the political system.

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Introduction

A key but unexplored theme of this year's general election was a noticeable sense of voter apathy, leading to a large decrease in turnout. Across all constituencies, turnout declined by 7.6%. In fact, turnout declined so starkly that it has returned to a historic low, the second-lowest turnout election since the First World War. As in the 2001 parliamentary cycle, turnout now sits below 65%, meaning that over a third of voters chose not to participate. As this was a "change" election, this prompts the question of why turnout was so low and the extent to which this drop in participation impacted the election result. Also, as the 2024 General Election was a high-volatility, low-turnout contest, answering who didn't turn out and why is key to a deep understanding of the election result.

Who tuned out?

Individuals who decided to stop voting disproportionately had obtained lower than degree-level qualifications (+12%) and tended to be renters (+13%), see Figure 1. They were also likely to be younger than average, with 28% of these voters being under the age of 45 (compared to 23% of those who decided to continue voting). These people also were disproportionately female, with the population of new non-voters having more women than the voting population (+3%p). This group is also more frequently identified as being limited by a disability (+5%p). The group that had decided to stop voting also more often had voted to Leave the EU (out of those able to cast a vote in 2016). 62% had backed the decision to leave compared to 54% of the English voting population. Those who had tuned out were also more likely to come from socio-economic groupings associated with manual and working-class occupations.

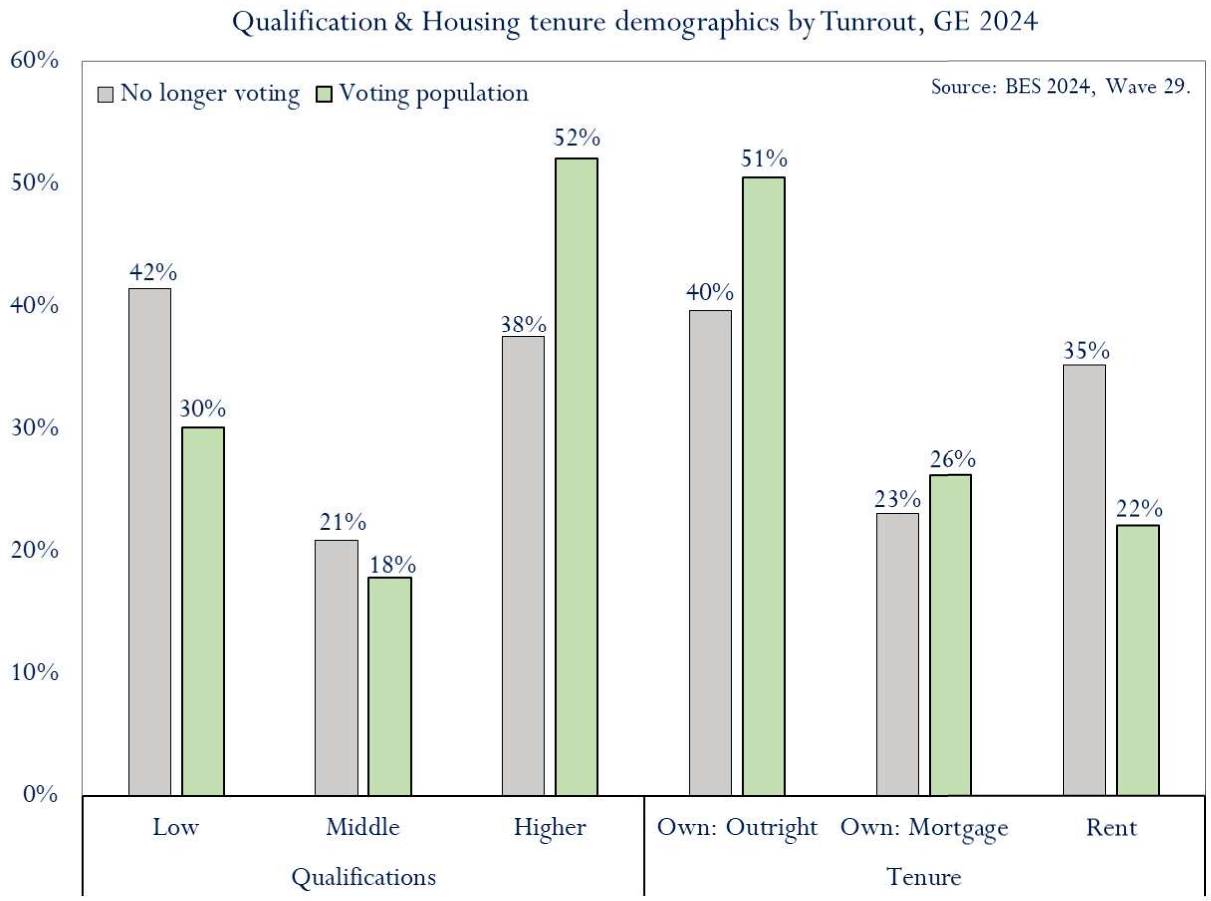

Figure 1. Qualification and housing tenure demographics by turnout status. Source: BES 2024 – Wave 29.

For instance, new non-voters were more often recorded as being from C2, D and E social class groupings than those who made up the electorate (32% to 46%). This indicates that those tuning out tended to work in more routine manual occupations - often associated with working-class groupings. This may also explain why those who disengaged more regularly worked in lower-income occupations (defined as £32,000 and below), as such social groupings tended to be based in lower-income jobs (+5%p). These individuals also tended to live in more deprived areas, as when a constituency had more than 20% of its households living in multiple deprivation, turnout declined more than the national average. Finally, in terms of their overall political outlook, such voters are mostly located in the centre ground of British politics (scoring 4-6 on an 11-point scale between left and right-wing views). Both the current voting population and new non-voters have

around 40% of voters located in the middle ground. Yet, the key difference lay in the proportion of individuals who were recorded as not being able to give clear enough answers to produce a result on where they ideologically reside. 30% of those who tuned out responded “don’t know” to enough questions for them to be recorded as having no clear ideological position. This was only the case for 12% of the current electorate, an 18% difference.

Therefore, whilst not all demographics produced clear differences, the ones that did pointed towards theories that can explain why some stopped voting. At a glance, the disproportionate slant towards individuals who voted to leave indicates that those who tuned out are disenchanted with the current political system. One consistent theme research has revealed about Leave voters is that they tend to be more dissatisfied with all political systems and distrust political representatives to a greater extent (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley, 2017). Therefore, anger towards the perceived declining quality and standards within British politics, in part, may explain the decrease in turnout. Further, the slant towards working-class lower-paid occupations also may indicate economic dissatisfaction, as those on lower incomes tend to feel inflationary pressures the most. Therefore, the poor economic returns experienced since the inflationary spike of 2022/23 may have convinced many lower-income voters that no party could deliver good economic returns. Such feelings may have also made them feel it was not worth their time to vote. Further, voters who fit into lower qualified income groupings have been shown to care more about immigration (Evans and Mellon, 2019). This indicates that these individuals may have disengaged as they believed no party could perform or would share their views on this issue.

Another story these voters allude to is dissatisfaction with the Conservative government, which caused some to cancel their participation. Individuals who

voted to leave and had lower-level qualifications were a core demographic that swung to the Tories in 2019. This swing allowed the Conservatives to win a large majority. Consequently, it could be theorised that some individuals were more likely to stop voting because they were unhappy with how the Conservative Party had behaved and performed in government. This leads to two competing theories. Firstly, it could be argued that these traits indicate voters in Tory heartlands just chose to stay at home, and this allowed Labour to win. Alternatively, it could be argued that these voters are not overly political people and are not natural voters for any party. Therefore, as these voters felt that neither the Tories nor Labour was providing the leadership and policy ideas needed to move the UK forward, they opted out. Finally, the disproportionate leaning towards renters could indicate that once-traditional Labour voters chose to stay at home. This could have occurred either through dissatisfaction with Labour or because they felt Labour would win without their support due to the media reporting the strong possibility of a Labour super-majority.

Competing Explanations

There are clearly competing explanations. These include:

1. Traditional Conservative Party voters in Tory heartlands are choosing to stay at home.
2. A belief that all parties could not deliver economically, or on their core concerns.
3. A belief that no party provided the effective leadership and vision needed to fix the country's many problems.
4. A general dissatisfaction with the political system and a feeling that no party could be trusted to hold office due to previous scandals.
5. A feeling that Labour would win easily (meaning participation was not worth the time).

Conservatives stayed at home?

"Labour won because conservatives stayed at home"

One common assumption is that Labour mostly won because traditional Conservative Party voters did not turn out because they had become so disillusioned with the government's apparent sense of incompetence and lack of ethics. This argument particularly gained strength when senior Conservative members were found to have placed bets on the day of the general election when it was highly likely they would have had inside information. It is argued that this sense of anger at using their power to financially benefit themselves encouraged traditional Tories to stay at home in Tory heartlands. This would mean that Labour would require fewer votes to win a constituency from the Conservatives, thus making it easier for them to win. However, this assumption might be wrong.

This is because analysis of constituency results indicates that the sharp decline in turnout was not mostly due to Conservative voters refusing to participate in typical key marginal seats. Instead, analysis reveals that turnout declined most sharply in areas that tend to return smaller levels of Conservative support. Turnout declined heavily in Scotland (8.3%), Wales (10%), London (9.0%), the North West (8.8%) and Yorkshire (8.4%). Further, Figure 2 confirms the argument that turnout decreased most in Labour-leaning constituencies. Whilst some seats Labour held had small decreases in turnout, these tended to be outliers, and on average, these seats displayed much higher levels of declining participation. Indeed, 75% of the seats Labour held had bigger decreases in turnout than the average of seats Labour gained.

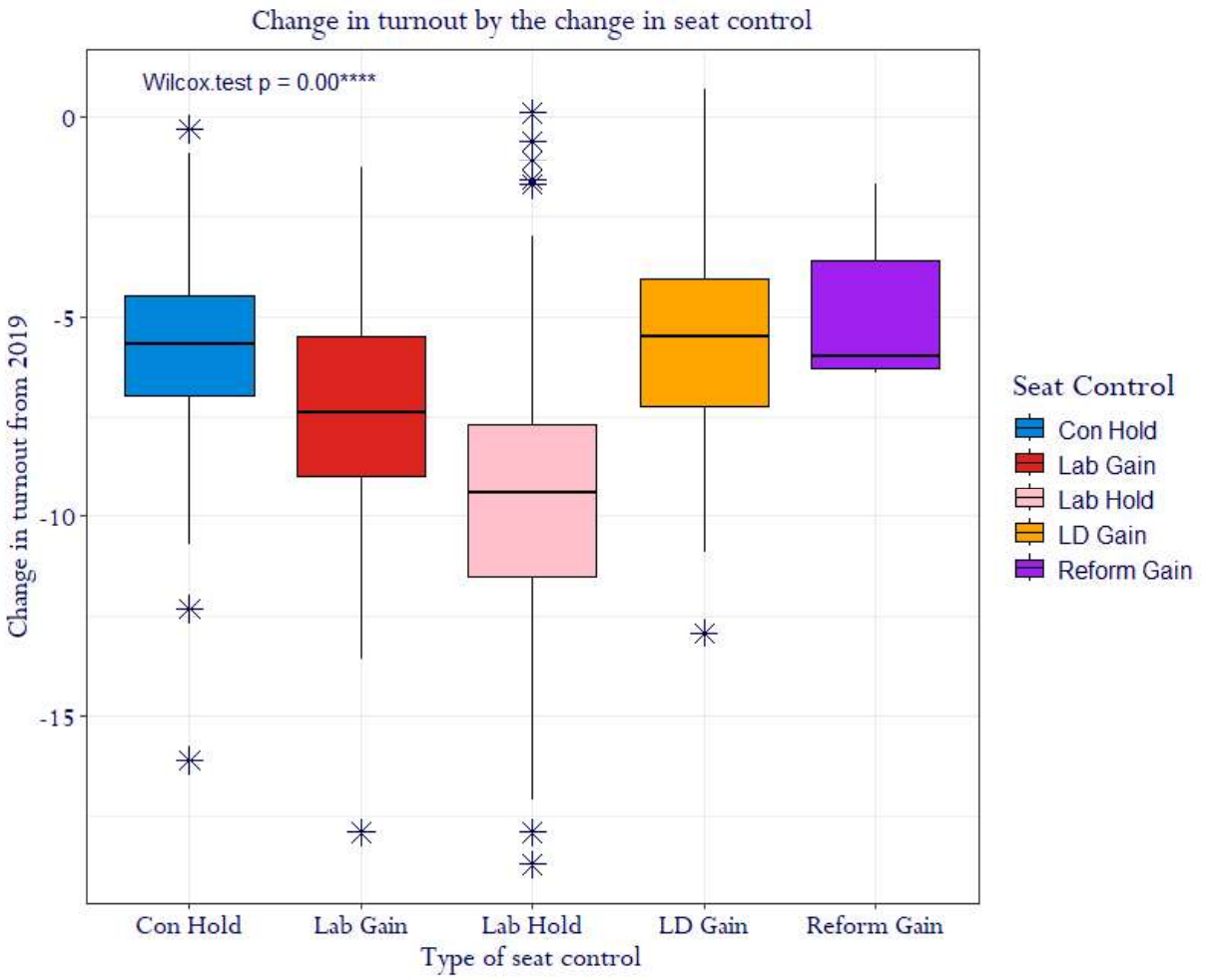

Figure 2 - Change in turnout by seat control - Seats that Labour won, the Lib-Dems gained, and the Conservatives held only. Source: Aggregate constituency results – 2024 election.

In comparison, the seats the Conservatives held experienced lower-than-average declines (less than 6%), with over 75% of these seats experiencing smaller declines than compared to the seats Labour held. This was also the case for seats the Lib-Dems gained, where over 50% of seats recorded less than a 5.5% decrease in turnout, noticeably lower than the average decline. Additionally, all 5 gains for Reform displayed lower-than-average turnout decreases. As Liberal-Democrat and Reform gains were mostly secured from the Conservatives, this again indicates that constituencies that are conservative-leaning experienced a lower decrease in turnout. This makes it unlikely that the Tories only lost due to their heartlands not turning out.

As turnout declined most in Labour-leaning areas, the narrative senior Conservative Party officials pushed out around a potential Labour supermajority may well have encouraged people to stay at home. Interestingly, if this were the case, a small number of the seats the Tories held onto may well have been saved by Labour-leaning voters not turning out because they believed Labour would form a government without their support. Instead, the above analysis indicates that, rather than staying at home, most Conservative losses can be explained by voters moving from the Tories to other parties. Therefore, as the Conservatives became mired with a sense of incompetence and unethical behaviour, this may have encouraged traditional conservative-leaning voters to seek new parties rather than causing them to disengage.

Further, if this theory were correct, you would expect to see the Conservative Party's share of the vote decreasing most in areas that suffered higher than average levels of decreasing turnout. In contrast, Labour would likely see gains in such constituencies. Figure 3 demonstrates this was not the case. The Conservative Party tended to see the largest decreases in support within constituencies that displayed around a 5% decrease in turnout, with Labour gaining the most in the same localities. Due to the large number of votes the Tories unusually secured within Labour heartlands in 2019, a large number of these new non-voters likely did vote Conservative, despite living in Labour-held seats.

Individual-level data confirms this. The 2024 British Election Study (BES) provides a sample of 1,500 people who responded as having voted in the 2019 general election but not voting in 2024. This represents 6.1% of all respondents, similar to the 7.6% decrease in turnout witnessed in the election. As not everyone admits to not voting, this is the best sample that can be found. Out of these new non-voters, 55% voted Conservative in 2019, and 27% backed Labour. This means that 7.5% of the 2019 Conservative vote and 4.9% of the 2019 Labour vote had tuned out. This means that the Conservatives lost 3.2% of the 2019 electorate and Labour lost 1.5%, meaning this only gave Labour a net gain of 1.7% of the Tories.

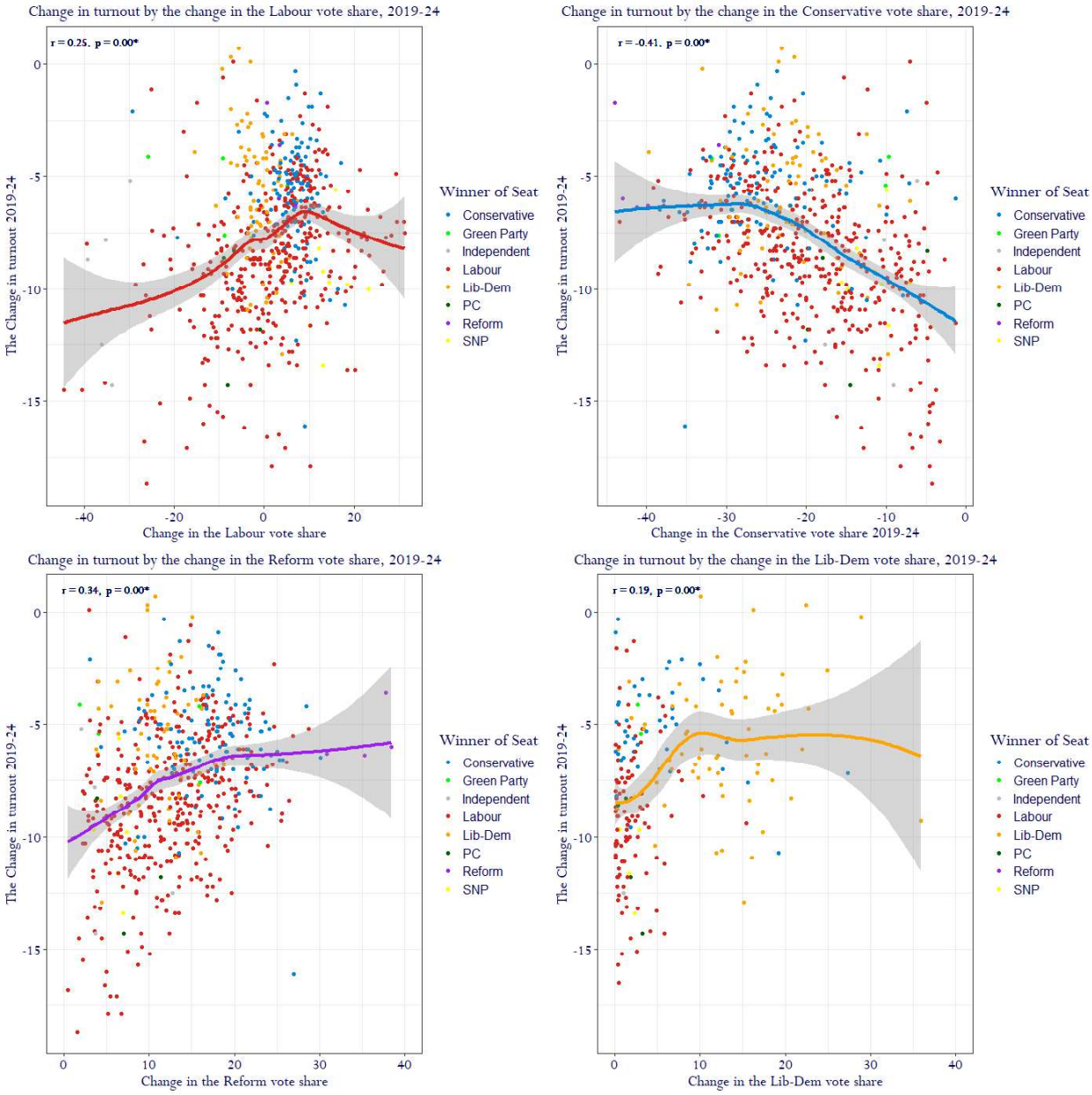

Figure 3 - Change in turnout and the change in the Labour and Conservative vote (top) and the Change in the Reform and Lib-Dem vote (bottom). Changes are between the 2019 and 2024 General Elections. Source: Aggregate results – 2019 & 2024 elections.

Notably, this meant the Tories had lost around 1,047,500 voters, with Labour losing 504,500. This means that the two main parties alone lost an estimated 1,552,000 votes simply from people who had once been voters choosing to check out.

Most importantly, this demonstrates that the net gain Labour had over the Tories of over 21% cannot be greatly explained by changes in turnout. There

may have been a few constituencies where this decline may have benefited Labour enough for them to win. But, as Labour's majority is so big, this is unlikely to have impacted the balance of power in parliament.

Further, as we shall see, it is a poor assumption to think that if these people had voted, they would have voted for the Conservatives just because they had in 2019. Indeed, as many of these disaffected voters live in Labour heartlands, this group may instead reflect the disillusioned historic Labour vote that backed the Tories in 2019 to ensure Brexit's implementation.

A belief that all parties could not deliver economically, or on their core concerns.

Interestingly, those who decided to stop voting did not have significantly different concerns from those who continued their participation. Roughly 35% of both voters and non-voters stated that they felt the country's biggest issue was the state of the economy. Immigration was the second most cited issue, with Health being the third for both groups. The only difference was that slightly more non-voters felt immigration to be the primary issue (+3%p) and slightly fewer believed health to be the most pressing problem (+3%p). Other issues, like the environment, crime and government spending, saw no major differences. Crucially, this indicates that when making assessments on competence, people who stopped participating were almost entirely thinking about the same issues in the same order.

Notably, Figure 4 shows that one similarity both new non-voters and the current voting population had is that they both doubted the Conservative Party's ability to deliver on these core concerns. Only 6% believed that the Conservative Party could deliver on these issues, indicating how those who stopped voting may not have backed the Tories even if they had decided to vote. Again, denting the argument, the Tories only lost as their most loyal supporters decided to stay at home.

Importantly, the key difference between those who chose to stop voting and the current electorate is how they perceived the parties to perform on these issues. Figure 4 shows those who tended to be much more sceptical of any party's ability to deliver. 36% stated that no party could deliver on their biggest concerns (compared to 20% of voters), and 26% didn't know which party could deliver (in contrast to the 15% who participated). Further, Figure 4 demonstrates that 62% could not identify a competent party to manage their core concerns. This indicates that the government's perceived failure to deliver positive economic returns, manage migration numbers and improve NHS service delivery may have disillusioned some voters. Therefore, it is possible that this disillusionment may be why some no longer participate.

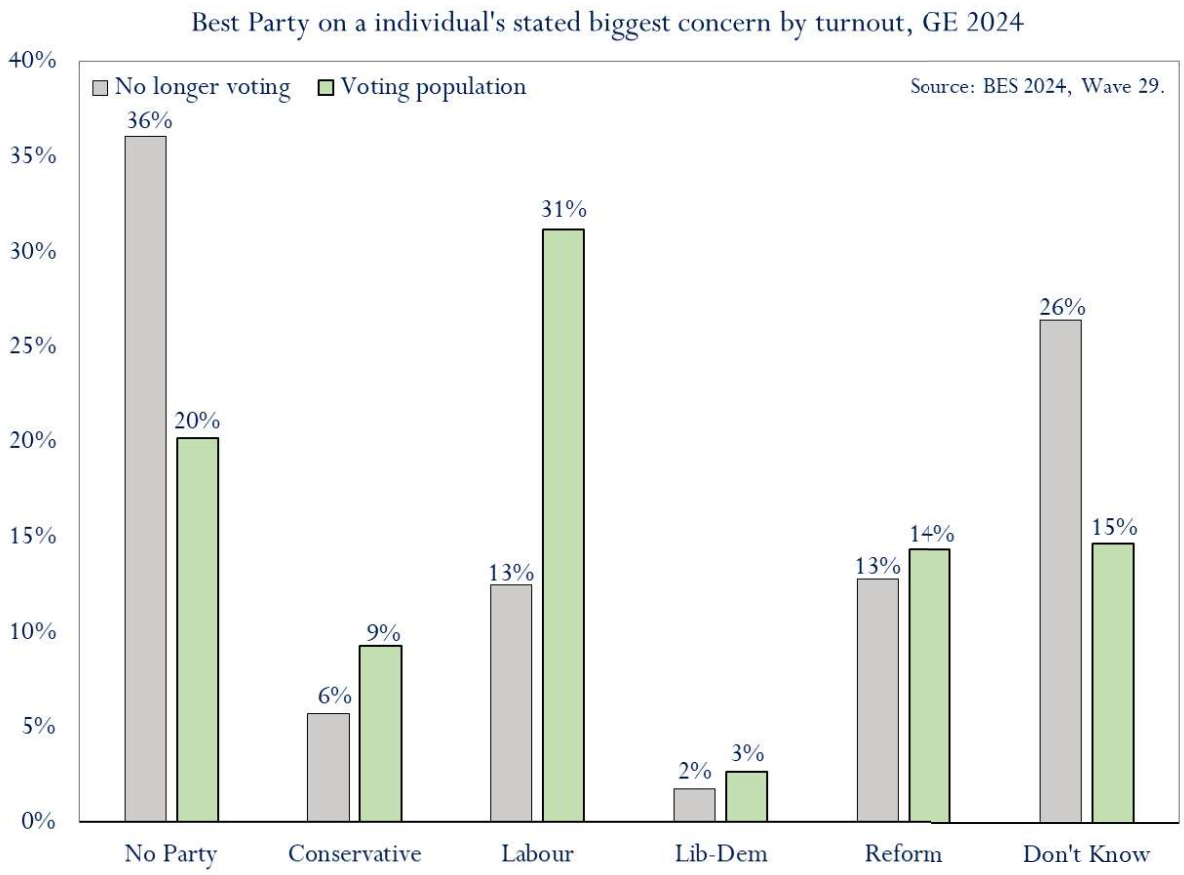

Figure 4. An individual's view on the party who performed best on their core concerns by turnout status. Source: BES 2024 – wave 29.

Additionally, another clear difference was the proportion of voters who felt Labour performed the strongest on their priorities. New non-voters less frequently stated Labour to be the party they believed was best placed to deliver on their biggest issue (-28%p). In fact, there was no party that produced a clear lead, meaning a majority of voters who opted out were unsure which party could deliver on their core concerns. This would again indicate that a perceived lack of competence by all parties encouraged these voters to stay at home. The people who stopped voting were disproportionately on lower incomes and may have been hit harder by the inflationary spike experienced post-lockdowns. Consequently, the economic hardship experienced by this group may have caused them to feel that no party could deal with such a severe crisis. Indeed, those who had decided to stop voting more often stated the economy had worsened for them on a personal level than compared to the voting population (+7%p). Further, they were also more likely to feel pessimistic about the future, with more non-voters projecting their personal economic circumstance would worsen in the next parliament (+3%p). Therefore, this indicates those who tuned out were more likely to feel that no party could perform on the issue most commonly stated to be the biggest facing the country. This possibly made some individuals more likely to feel that participating was not worth the effort, as it would not address their most immediate problems, such as the cost-of-living crisis.

Also, as these voters were disproportionately pro-Brexit and were more likely to prioritise immigration, such voters may have believed no party could effectively reduce migration. Now that Brexit has been implemented, many of these voters may have expected migration to be much more tightly controlled and for numbers to be reduced. Further, such voters would have expected the economy to have improved. Yet, as these benefits have not been realised and migration levels have increased, this may have caused voters to feel no party was capable of delivering their desired policies. This increase in migration may have particularly hit those who opted out hard, as they more frequently stated that they felt net migration levels should be

lower than compared to the current electorate (+11%p). Notably, those who decided to stop voting more consistently stated they were unsure where the two main parties stood on the issue of immigration (+15%p). This possibly indicates they felt they did not know what any future government would be able to do about the issue. This may have led such individuals to think that no party had the policies needed to address their core issues. Moreover, the increase in small boat crossings may have increased concerns over the government's ability to manage migrant flows. This could explain why over 60% of new non-voters believed that neither Labour nor the Conservatives could bring the reduction in migration most of these voters sought.

This also may have been the case for the NHS. Due to the pandemic's increasing burden on the NHS, extending the backlog considerably, many voters understandably wanted services to improve. However, as the government failed to reduce waiting lists and improve NHS outcomes, some voters may have felt no party could solve the problem. Data from the BES reinforces this theory. 60% of voters who stopped voting believed the Conservatives could not reduce waiting lists. Further, these voters were also more likely to state they felt Labour could not make progress on the issue either. They less frequently felt Labour could reduce waiting lists (-20%p) and more often reported they did not know if Labour could effectively tackle the backlogs (+13%p) than compared to the voting population. Therefore, this again indicates those who stopped voting were sceptical towards the parties' ability to resolve problems relating to their policy priorities, in this case, problems within the NHS.

Consequently, some individuals may have stopped voting because they felt that no party was competent, especially on issues they cared about. Again, the BES confirms this, with 56% of new non-voters saying they believed the Conservative Party was not competent. Further, these voters were also more likely to say Labour was not competent (+15%p). They also more frequently stated they did not know how competent a Labour government would be compared to those who turned out (+10%p). This again highlights

how those who tuned out did not perceive any party as ready to deliver on their core issues and were not convinced by Labour as being a credible alternative.

No party provided effective leadership and vision?

Another noticeable trait amongst those who had decided to stop voting was that they were much more likely to state a dislike of all the parties. Over 50% of these individuals reported a poor favourability rating for the Conservative Party. This again highlights that even if these voters did cast a vote, they may not have been inclined to re-elect the government. This again damages the argument that the Conservatives lost as their supporters stayed at home. Interestingly, even Labour, which was the most highly rated party, did not fare well amongst this group. A greater proportion of this group stated they disliked the party, with 20% fewer people giving it a favourable rating (+11%p). As these voters came from demographics that switched from Labour to the Conservatives in 2019, this would indicate that whilst these voters were disillusioned with the performance of the Conservatives, Labour had not yet convinced them enough to win their support. Indeed, it could indicate that Labour's move to the centre may not have encouraged some voters to switch back to their historic party of choice.

Therefore, although such voters may have disapproved of the policies the Conservative Party had enacted, they also appear to be cautious towards Labour's change in policy. This lack of trust in any of the parties' overall policy position may have caused a small but significant group to feel like no party was worth voting for. It also indicates how the overall image of the parties may not have appealed to these voters. The Conservatives had major policy problems amongst these voters, as their declining personal economic circumstances meant they were likely to feel like the levelling-up agenda had not been delivered. Further, the rising hospital waiting lists and delays within the NHS also likely meant such voters did not feel the Tories had delivered on their pledge to increase provision within the service.

Yet, these figures also indicate that Labour perhaps had not fully recovered after their 2019 defeat and their move towards the centre was greeted with scepticism. This might have been because these voters were not convinced Labour had changed from its previous radical left position, of which caused many traditional Labour voters to switch to the Tories. Additionally, they may not yet have trusted that their positions had changed on Brexit and immigration (their two biggest concerns). Therefore, these voters appeared to view all the parties' images poorly, indicating they did not like any of the parties' overall image and policy positions.

This dissatisfaction spread wider than just the parties' image. Voters who stopped participating also disliked all the party leaders, indicating that they felt no party provided leadership that would address the problems they frequently encountered. This was particularly the case for the two main parties. A majority of these non-voters disapproved of the leadership Sunak offered, meaning replacing poorly performing leaders was not enough to convince these individuals that the Tories could provide effective leadership. Indeed, it would indicate that the inability of Sunak to put the government on a steadier path after he took office meant these voters continued to feel the Tories were not worth voting for. This feeling existed despite many of these people having voted for the Conservatives in 2019. For instance, the continued squeeze on the cost of living may have caused individuals to think that Sunak was not capable of delivering an improvement to these individuals' personal finances. This may have caused them to believe no Conservative leader was worth voting for.

Although these non-voters were not convinced by the leadership the Conservatives provided, they were also disproportionately more likely to say they disapproved of the Labour leader. Figure 5 demonstrates that individuals who opted out were less likely to approve of Starmer than compared to the voting population (-19%p). More of these people stated a dislike of the leadership Labour was offering (+10%p), and a greater proportion indicated they were unsure of how to assess Starmer (+6%p). Therefore, this group of voters may have found it difficult to understand

what direction Starmer and Labour wanted to lead the country. Moreover, although Labour had tried to change the image of its leadership amongst traditional Labour voters who had left the party, this is one group they were not able to convince. Also, the rapid shift in the Labour leadership's position may have caused some to be unsure of how Labour would lead the country. Potentially, this left these voters feeling Starmer would not lead the country in a positive direction.

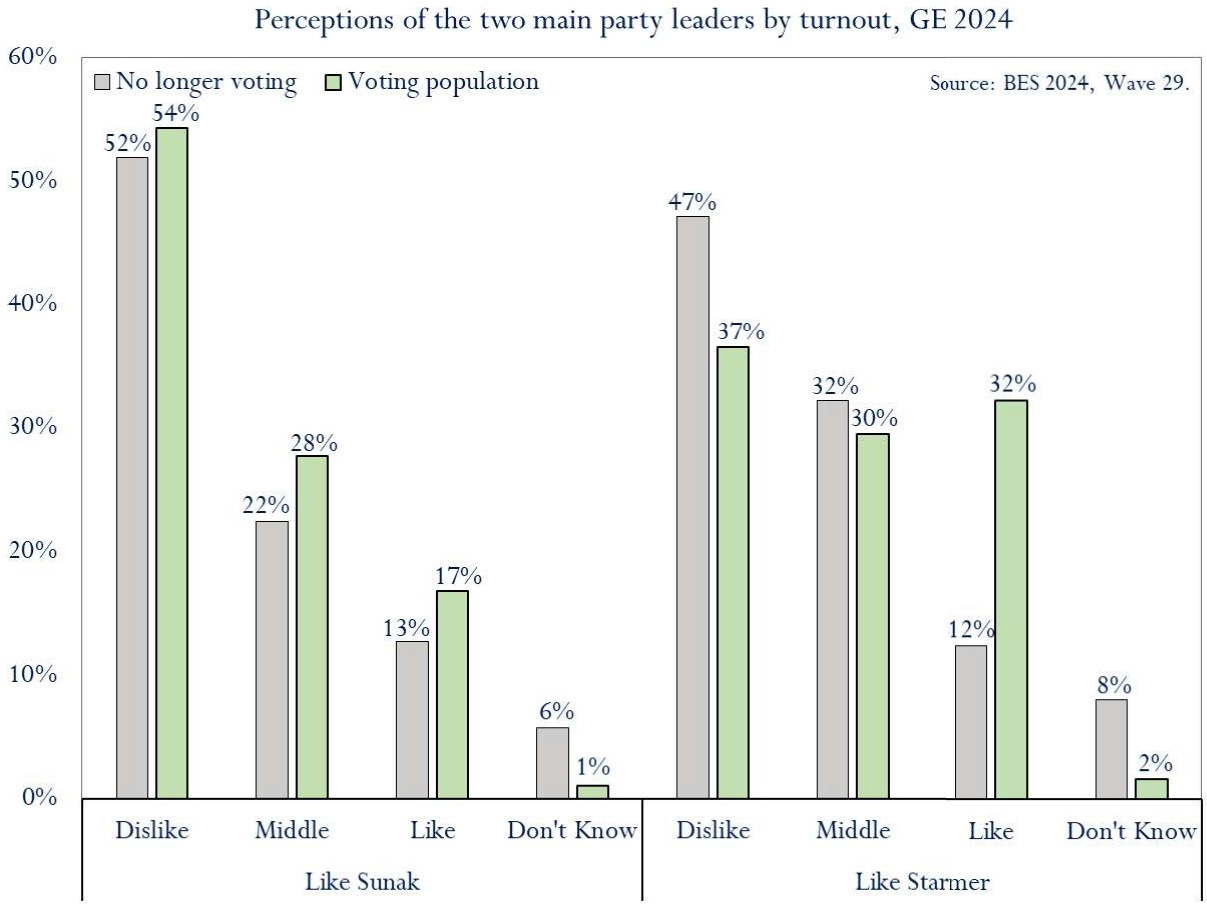

Figure 5. Perceptions of the two main party leaders by turnout status. Source: BES 2024 – Wave 29.

This concern over a lack of direction is reflected in these individuals' views on the quality of the parties' policy formation. Interestingly, those who had stopped participating viewed all the parties as not having the ideas needed to improve the country. Firstly, 60% of those who stopped participating stated they felt the Tories had run out of ideas. Consequently, as public service quality continued to decline, the economy worsened, the NHS

missed basic targets, and small boat crossings and net migration increased, some thought the government was unable to address key challenges. Therefore, even though these individuals mostly voted for the Tories in 2019, the failure to deliver may have caused these voters to believe the Tories could not deliver on the visions they had sold. Therefore, the failure to deliver the promised benefits of Brexit and the pledged levelling-up agenda may have caused these voters to believe no government could deliver the policies they valued.

This appears to be the case as these voters were more sceptical than the voting population about the parties' ability to generate policies that could address their core concerns. For instance, those who had tuned out were more likely to state that Labour had run out of ideas (+12%p). They also more often stated that they didn't know if Labour had the ideas required to improve the governing of Britain (+1%). Again, these voters are indicating they were not convinced by Labour, despite the enormous effort of the party to reform itself. Further, the move towards the centre may have made it less clear where the party stood. Importantly, this may have caused some who had voted for them in 2019 to think they did not have the policy programme to address the country's problems. This may have caused these voters to believe their issues would not be addressed, thus increasing apathy, as these individuals did not believe participating would lead to any improvements.

A lack of trust in the political system

Whilst problems around competence, leadership and policy solutions could explain the decrease in turnout, the root cause may be deeper than this. Instead, it may be about a wider dissatisfaction some people have with the state of British democracy and not having trust in its institutions to represent people or deliver. Individuals who chose to disengage were more likely to say they had no trust in any MP (+18%p), with roughly a third saying they did not trust their representatives. A greater proportion of this group

stated they were dissatisfied with the overall state of UK democracy (+7%p); see Figure 6.

Importantly, this presents a more worrying picture. These voters may be choosing to disengage not only because they thought parties could not deliver on their core concerns, but also because they did not trust the system to share their interests. Instead, this represents individuals distancing themselves from the political system entirely, as they felt that the information they would receive would be deliberately misleading. Therefore, not only were they more likely to feel parties did not have ideas to address their problems, but they also felt that any promises were likely false statements and would not materialise. Further, they may have feared the system was unable to deliver the pledges they did not trust. As these voters more often had backed Brexit, the inability to deliver the proposed benefits of Brexit may have caused some to feel that the political system was impotent and based on falsehoods. This may have caused some people to disengage as they no longer wanted to participate.

Further, the several scandals spread throughout the parliament may have caused people to distrust all political representatives and those seeking office. The several controversies surrounding politicians' behaviour may have been particularly corrosive. The attempt to protect Johnson after news broke over lockdown rule-breaching parties may have had a strong negative emotional response due to the many sacrifices people had made during Covid-19. Further, as it emerged that other senior cabinet figures (such as the chancellor) had also broken the rules, this may have intensified such reactions. As Johnson was later forced out due to challenges over lying to parliament, this again only presented stories to the public that those in high office lacked integrity and could not be trusted. As the government slowly unravelled, symbolised by Truss' collapse, this again likely only reinforced these people's belief that UK democracy was incapable of dealing with the country's many challenges. Additionally, stories during the election campaign of senior Conservative MPs using their prior knowledge of the election date to make profitable bets would have only reinforced

negative feelings. Further, as some of these individuals were previous Labour voters, Labour changing its position gradually across the parliament may have caused some to feel that Starmer was breaking his leadership pledges. Additionally, it may have caused suspicion and distrust towards Labour's pledges, as they had already changed their position considerably. Vitally, several factors could have caused 2019 voters to question the integrity of politicians and the sincerity of their policy pledges. This may have caused enough distrust and dissatisfaction to convince some individuals to stop voting. Indeed, some may have thought the choices they had were irrelevant, as they would either not be delivered or they were being presented in a deliberately misleading way.

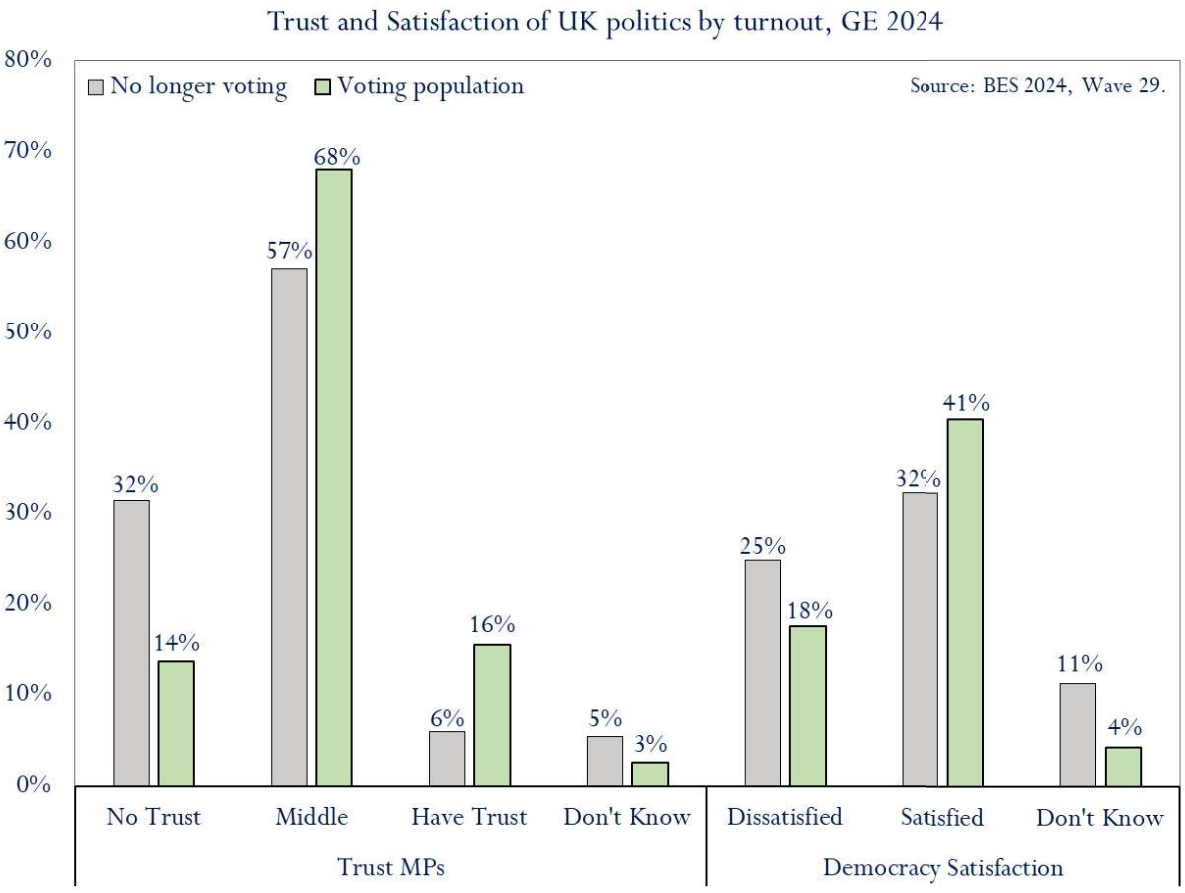

Figure 6: Trust in politics and political satisfaction by turnout status. Source: BES 2024 – Wave 29.

Why bother? Labour is going to win anyway.

Some argue that the Conservative Party's message that Labour would win a "super majority" decreased turnout. Some argue it was designed to encourage Labour voters to think the election was already decided, meaning it was not worth them turning out. It is argued that this message was communicated in the hope of minimising seat losses in some Tory heartlands. This theory is the hardest to test due to the limited available evidence on an individual's thoughts of how likely any given party is to win. Sometimes the BES asks how likely an individual thought a given party was to win an upcoming election. Yet, in the latest wave of the BES, this question was sadly not asked, meaning the theory can't be directly tested with individual-level data.

However, there are some clues at an aggregate level. The main indication that the Conservative narrative may have suppressed the vote can be seen in Labour-held seats experiencing the largest declines in turnout. Again, this indicates that Labour voters in these areas may have stayed at home. Yet, turnout declines were comparatively lower in the seats the Tories held on to, indicating they retained seats without a large decline in the Labour vote. Further, the BES shows that it is likely that in the seats the Conservatives retained, most who opted out were former Tory voters. Therefore, there is limited evidence that the Conservatives managed to suppress the historic Labour vote enough to have significantly shaped the overall result. In fact, it likely only affected the outcome of a few seats.

Specific areas that stopped voting

Drilling down into the data, it can be seen that the areas that tended to see bigger decreases were localities higher in deprivation. This indicates that, rather than the Labour vote being suppressed, it was instead a disengagement from specific types of communities.

When testing the effect of various factors on the decline in turnout at a constituency level, modelling found that three factors were consistently influential in decreasing turnout. Overall, turnout was suppressed the most in areas where Labour won, multiple deprivation was high, and the population more often resided in rental accommodation. Interestingly, although some demographic factors are insignificant when added to modelling, such as education levels and occupational class, both the level of deprivation and the proportion of the population who rent remain significant. This would indicate that turnout was not just being suppressed in Labour areas but in specific localities within seats Labour won, Labour constituencies that tended to have higher levels of deprived renters.

This finding was created when constructing a linear model, where the dependent variable measured the change in turnout from 2019 for every constituency. The model estimated the effect of the difference in the parties' vote share, the change in party control and the proportion of the population who rented on the change in turnout. It also accounted for the proportion of houses experiencing multiple deprivation and the number of people without any photo ID on a constituency's decline in turnout. Figure 7 shows that this model demonstrated turnout to decline by half a per cent with every unit increase in deprivation. This means that areas with the highest deprivation decreased turnout by as much as 4% more than the national average, making it the most influential factor in decreasing turnout. The proportion of people who rented was also significant, with high levels of renting producing a 2.5% decrease in turnout. When Labour held a constituency, this decreased turnout by 1.3% and the seats they gained produced a 0.8% decrease in turnout. The proportion of those not having photo ID was not found to be significant, indicating that these people chose not to turn out rather than not being able to.

Importantly, other factors being more significant indicate that Labour could have a problem with engaging its voting base in these traditional Labour areas. It also suggests that such a problem is bigger than the issue of Labour voters staying at home because they thought Labour would win.

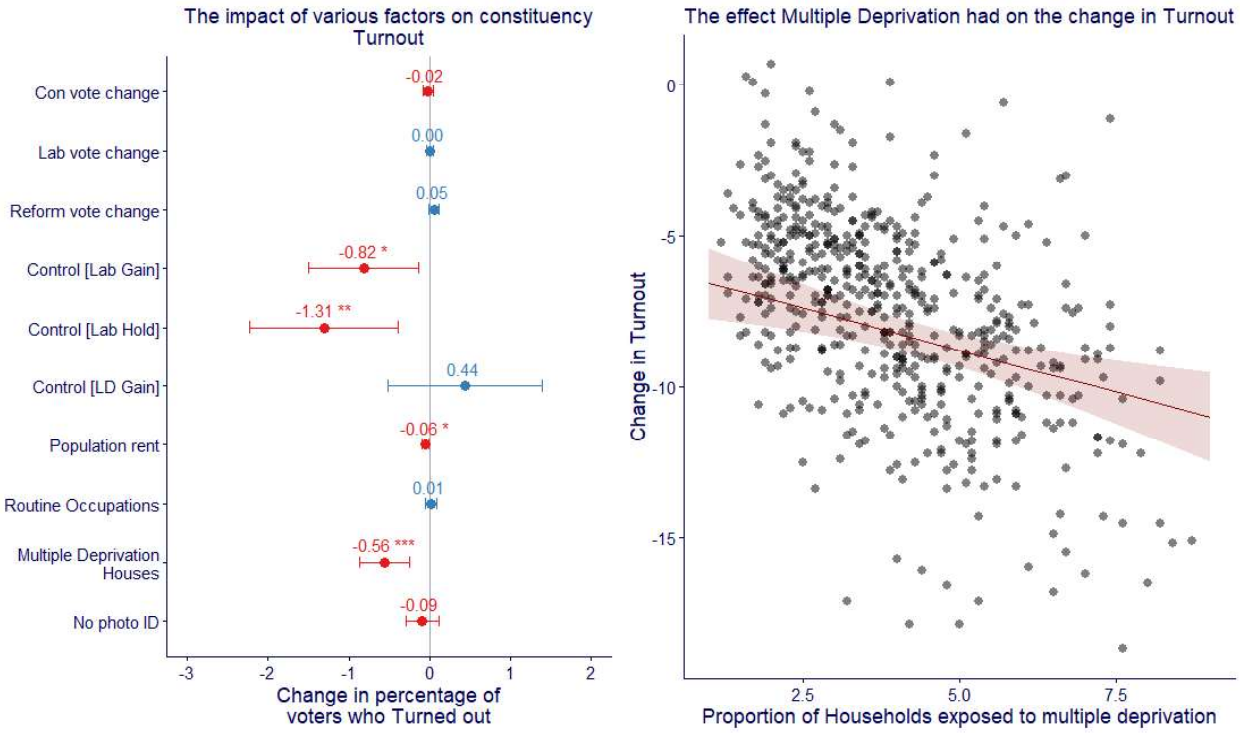

Figure 7. Model results for the effect on constituency turnout and the effect that deprivation had on turnout. Source: Aggregate election results – 2024 general election.

Labour might be struggling with this group because individuals from deprived communities may have felt the party did not have the vision needed to tackle the many challenges these communities face. As Labour drifted towards the centre in order to take voters from the Conservative Party, these voters may have felt Labour had diluted its policy offer far too much. For example, the move towards Labour proving its fiscal credibility may have caused people in deprived backgrounds to feel that Labour would not deal with the growing poverty problems such areas face. Indeed, the lack of communication from Labour on what they planned to do about deprivation likely only reinforced these voters' feelings that no party represented them and had policy solutions. Such individuals may have also believed Labour would prioritise gaining and keeping power over providing the representation and investment these communities sought. As some of these Leave voters backed the Tories in 2019 to secure investment, the failure to implement a Brexit that diverted money to these communities likely only reinforced the feeling that no party would improve deprived communities.

Additionally, areas more reliant on renting may have felt that Labour was not doing enough to protect low-income earners from further rent increases. Therefore, the overall image of Labour may have been diluted to the point where traditional Labour voters in areas of multiple deprivation felt that Labour would not seek to represent and improve such communities. Consequently, as the governing party had failed and the most obvious alternative seemed unable to improve their community, a small but notable group of individuals may have felt voting wasn't worth their time.

The most influential factors - why individuals stopped voting

From aggregate data, it is clear that the theory that turnout decreased because Conservative voters stayed at home does not have much support. Instead, it is more likely these voters resided within Labour-leaning constituencies that rarely return conservative MPs. These constituencies tended to be higher in deprivation and have a greater proportion of people renting, again a demographic historically favouring Labour more than the Conservatives. Further, although the largest group of these new non-voters had voted Conservative in the last election, this may have mostly been a one-off decision, as these voters no longer supported the Conservatives. Further, the large dissatisfaction these voters had with all parties indicates wider problems for Labour and limited evidence that these voters stayed at home only because they envisaged an easy Labour win. This all indicates that other explanations are more likely to better explain the decrease in turnout.

Throughout this study, at an individual level, three explanations behind the rise in turnout have been explored, and it is these theories that likely provide the most credible explanation. To examine which theories are the most credible explanation, a final summary model is constructed. To do this, people who voted in 2019 but chose not to participate in 2024 are given a value of 1, with all those who continued to vote being coded as 0.

This allows the study to construct a logistic regression model. From this, independent variables representing each possible explanation are included. Parties' ability to deliver on issues commonly stated to be salient is captured in the question that asked which party was most competent on the biggest issues. This theory is also captured by questions over economic performance and where the parties stood on the key economic question of redistribution. The theory that leaders of parties can explain turnout decreases is tested through the extent to which the two main party leaders were liked and were seen to have ideas. The argument that general dissatisfaction with the political system caused disengagement is accounted for by adding the questions of how much MPs were trusted and how satisfied voters were with UK democracy. Finally, demographic factors are taken into account by adding demographic variables that were found to be significant in earlier analyses. Although the BES in this wave did not supply deprivation data, it did include housing tenure and work occupation information, so these are also added to the model.

The model indicates that the most influential factor in making an individual more likely to stop voting was a general feeling of a lack of trust and satisfaction with the UK's democratic process. Figure 8 demonstrates that when an individual had no trust in MPs, they became 3.2 more likely to stop voting. As a third of individuals who would stop voting held this view, not trusting representatives can be said to be a large factor in explaining declining participation. Therefore, the scandals around the government forcing senior ministers to resign and the insider bets placed during the election campaign likely led to a decline in political participation. Additionally, the lack of satisfaction with the democratic system was a significant factor in declining engagement. As dissatisfaction increased, so too did the probability of disengaging, with people who were very dissatisfied being 3.0 more likely to tune out. Therefore, the stronger people felt that the political system would not represent them and would not work for their communities, the more likely they were to stop voting. Consequently, the failure to deliver the proposed benefits of Brexit and the

levelling up agenda (such as more investment in deprived communities) may have caused disillusionment that led to a decline in turnout.

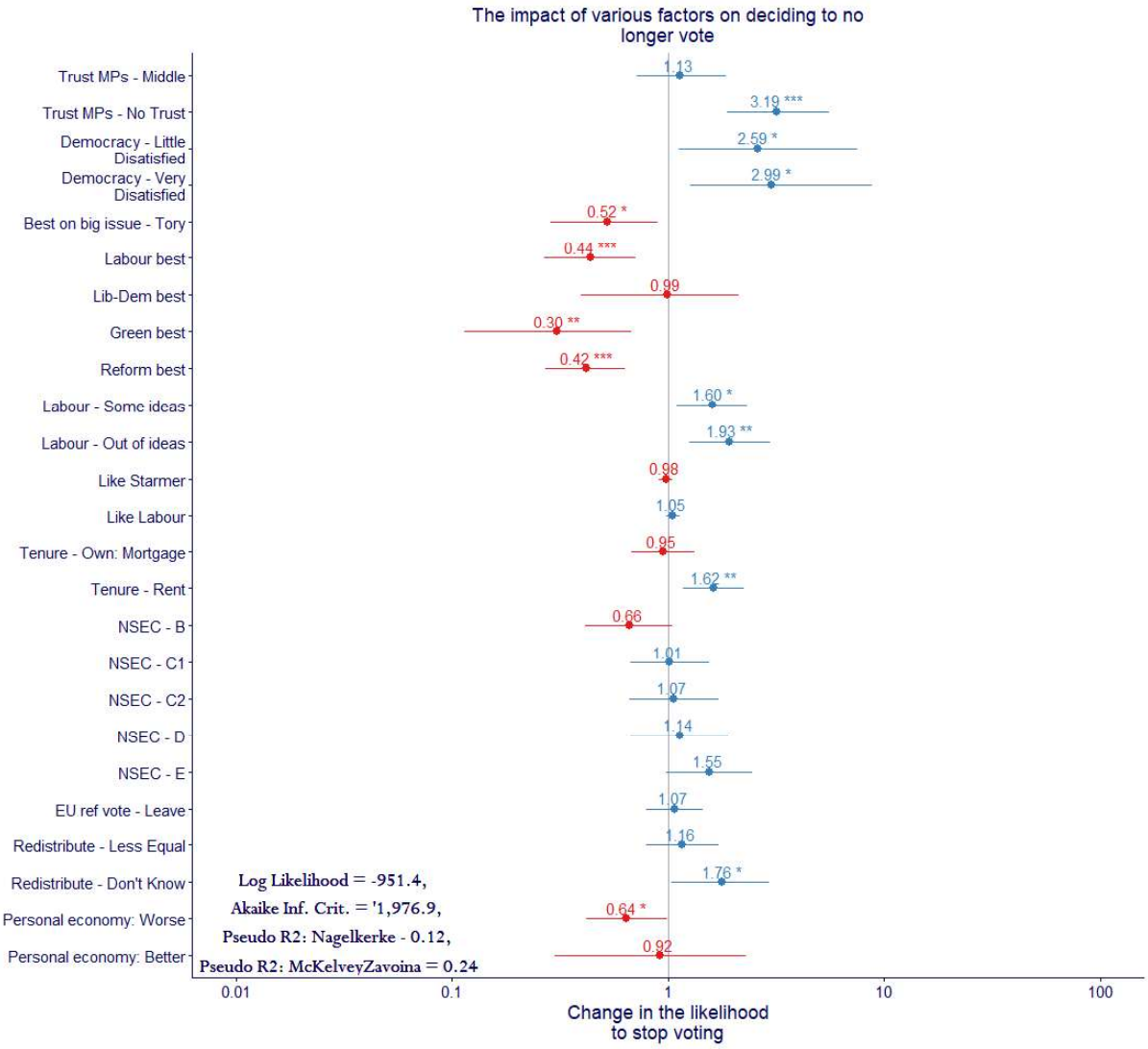

Figure 8: Model results for the effect of various factors on the probability of 2019 voters to stop voting in the 2024 general election. Source: BES 2024 – Wave 29.

The next most influential factor was the performance of parties on key issues. When the Tories or Labour were seen to perform the best on a voter's policy priorities, they were 0.5 more likely to stop voting. However, 62% of individuals who stopped voting did not feel they could identify any party to be the most competent on issues salient to them. When no party was seen as more able to handle these big issues, instead, a 0.5 increase in the probability of stopping voting occurred; see Figure 8. Additionally, when a voter felt the government had failed to improve their finances and that

their personal economic situation would not improve, they became 0.6 less likely to continue voting. Therefore, the failure to deliver economic gains due to the cost-of-living crisis likely decreased turnout.

Leadership had a more mixed influence over the election result. The extent to which the parties and their leaders were liked on an 11-point scale had no statistically significant effect on the probability of stopping voting. Yet, the view on the extent to which the parties had the policies and vision needed to address the country's many problems was significant. This was particularly the case when voters thought about Labour. When people increasingly felt Labour didn't have the policy ideas needed to address their concerns, they became increasingly likely to stop voting. Such voters became 1.9 more likely to stop voting when they perceived Labour to be out of ideas. Therefore, as the government had failed to provide leadership on a range of issues, these voters may have felt disillusioned and believed Labour also did not have the answers they were searching for. Indeed, voters who felt they did not know what policies were needed were also more likely to stop voting. For example, when a voter didn't know their position on redistribution, they were 1.8 more likely to stop voting. This indicates that some voters became disillusioned when they could not find the leadership on the issues they were most concerned about. As both the government and the likely alternative administration were seen not to provide the vision voters were searching for, this may have caused voters to feel there was no point in voting.

Finally, although the BES did not include a measure of deprivation in its latest wave, other demographic factors that could be included were significant. When an individual was in rental accommodation and they worked in routine (working-class) occupations, they were 1.6 more likely to stop voting. Therefore, this paper's modelling and analysis show that a renter working in lower-paid, insecure work who was based in a deprived area was significantly more likely to stop voting. This might have been

because these voters were more likely to feel failed economically due to the recent cost-of-living crisis. This then may have led to some being more likely to feel no party was seeking to address the problems caused by multiple deprivation.

Conclusions:

Overall, the main cause of the decline in turnout was individuals living in deprived communities, dependent on rented forms of accommodation, not trusting representatives or believing the political system would cater to their needs. These voters tended to be more likely to perceive that no party could perform on the issues they cared most about. They also more often felt no party had the ideas and vision needed to address the many problems their communities were facing. Rather than this being about a specific leader, it instead represents a wider disapproval of the democratic system. This means that the decline in turnout can't be fully explained by Conservatives staying at home or Labour voters being complacent and thinking their side would win anyway. Therefore, the decline in turnout was instead caused by a deeper-rooted negative feeling that the political system could not be trusted. It was likely compounded by a feeling that representatives were either lying to them or were just in it for their benefit.

Further, it raises the worrying trend that a small but significant group increasingly feel that the political system doesn't work for people like them. Alarmingly, they perceive that the parties do not have the policies and vision needed to effectively address their problems. As a result, this feeling that no positive change would result from the effort of going to the polling station likely decreased turnout to historic low levels. Worryingly, this study also demonstrates that if the public continues to perceive elected officials as abusing their power or deliberately misleading the public, this likely will only further decrease engagement.

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