

Roadmap to Hope: How to bring back hope to working-class voters in an age of insecurity

CLAIRE AINSLEY
OCTOBER 2023

POLLING
STATION
→



Roadmap to Hope: How to bring back hope to working-class voters in an age of insecurity

CLAIRE AINSLEY

OCTOBER 2023

FOREWORD BY WILL MARSHALL, PPI PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER

This century has witnessed a populist revolt against long-dominant political parties across the democratic world. It's rooted in working-class discontent with seismic economic and cultural shifts that have bred a profound sense of social dislocation and insecurity.

This phenomenon challenges governing parties of the left and the right. But it poses a special test to progressive and centre-left parties that have traditionally championed the economic prospects and moral outlook of ordinary working people.

The new populists offer working-class voters a refuge in old ideas: ethnic nationalism, nativism, and protectionism. Conservative parties have tried to compete by co-opting these themes. Liberal and progressive parties have deplored the populists' illiberal and authoritarian tendencies while failing to grasp their valid fears of not being heard.

Now, however, we seem to be arriving at a new moment of centre-left ferment, with progressive parties back in power or governing coalitions in the United States, Germany, Australia, Spain, and Portugal, and with UK Labour poised to return to power.

These developments are heartening, because the liberal democracies need a reinvigorated centre-left to turn back the tide of reactionary nationalism that has swept much of the world over the past decade. To reinforce these trends, the Progressive Policy Institute has set up its Centre-Left Renewal Project, headed by Claire Ainsley, formerly a top policy adviser to Labour Leader Keir Starmer.

It's modelled on the centre-left dialogues of the late '90s and early 2000s, which PPI and its Labour counterparts helped to organize. These grew into a mutually supportive crossfertilization of ideas and political strategies that buoyed centre-left leaders and parties around the world.

In that spirit, we offer Claire's important new report, 'Roadmap to Hope'. It presents new political and public opinion research that sheds light on the hopes and aspirations of working-class voters and how Labour can win them back.

Its centrepiece is a new YouGov poll that provides further confirmation of public fatigue with 13 years of Conservative rule, while also highlighting Labour's economic and cultural vulnerabilities. We believe it offers a timely policy roadmap for the party and as Starmer capably steers Labour in new and radically pragmatic directions.

While allowing for significant differences in political structure and culture, reaching out to working-class voters is essentially the same challenge facing President Joe Biden and the U.S. Democrats heading into next year's crucial national elections.

Democrats are locked in a virtual political tie with a Republican Party still dominated by a vengeful and lawless Donald Trump. Like Labour, the Democrats must expand their coalition to build bigger and more enduring governing majorities. Reconnecting with their working-class base is an electoral and moral imperative for both parties.

As 'Roadmap to Hope' suggests, that will entail making working-class voters a new economic offer. What's needed is a new deal that rewards people who work hard and play by the rules with new and abundant economic opportunities. It's time for a post-populist economics that stops addressing working-class voters as victims and instead speaks to their aspirations for the skills they need to participate in shaping a new economy.

PPI also has commissioned a YouGov poll of working-class voters in the key swing states likely to decide next year's US elections. Our aim is to illuminate why those voters give Biden low marks on managing the economy, and what Democrats can do to rekindle their economic optimism and hopes for a brighter future.

Our US poll also will explore how the cultural left has associated Democrats with unpopular positions on crime, immigration, race, and gender ideology, and schools. This reality reflects tensions within the Democratic coalition between educated elites with cosmopolitan values and working-class voters – non-white as well as white – who have a more moderate to conservative outlook.

While the cultural gulf seems wider in the United States than Britain, 'Roadmap to Hope' also underscores the need for centre-left parties to offer common-sense answers to crime and immigration rather than staying silent and ceding these vitally important issues to conservatives.

Such findings are in line with Starmer's belief that major Labour reforms in economic policy and public services must go hand-in-hand with empathy and respect for traditional working-class values. As he said at last May's Progressive Britain conference,

"We can seize the opportunities of tomorrow and make them work for working people. But this ambition must never become unmoored from working peoples' need for stability, or order, for security."

We at PPI are both impressed and encouraged by Starmer's steady progress in freeing his party from hard-left dogma and returning it to the centre ground of UK politics. That bodes well for the next election, and the larger project of reuniting progressive parties with working-class voters around the world.



Roadmap to Hope: How to bring back hope to working-class voters in an age of insecurity

CLAIRE AINSLEY

OCTOBER 2023

INTRODUCTION

For many people, the economic and political turbulence of these past few years have made it a whole lot harder to achieve their hopes and dreams.

Every time inflation rises or mortgage costs escalate, the choices available get much more limited. Whether it's buying a new home, retraining for a job you really want, or booking the holiday you've worked so hard for. The deal whereby if you work hard and do the right thing, you can achieve what you set out to, seems broken through a combination of failing markets, creaking public services, and politics unable to rise to the challenges of our times. This sense of insecurity – not knowing what the future holds – now seems semi-permanent.

This deeper-rooted belief that our governments don't work in the interests of ordinary people has fuelled the rise of right-wing populism in many of our nations, which despite some recent success of centre-left parties, continues to gain ground. Even where right-wing populists remain at the margins, their effect on mainstream politics and society is being felt. And where the centre-left has won power, it is proving difficult to achieve more durable electoral majorities amongst a fragmented electorate, under siege from the scare tactics of the right.

The only way out of this is for the political centre-left to present and deliver a more unifying, compelling, and credible alternative to the extremities and their mainstream copyists,

rooted in the hopes and dreams of ordinary people.

In January 2023, the Progressive Policy Institute launched a new project on the political renewal of the global centre-left. This report shares comparative analysis of centre-left voters, and how electoral strategies can build more sustainable coalitions.

The politics of a winning centre-left isn't the triumph of reassurance over hope; it is reassurance so that people can realise their hopes and dreams again. The centre-left needs to reclaim hope and aspiration as well as offering security and reassurance, and in so doing, bring hope back to the many millions who deserve to have their faith restored.

Voters in the UK and beyond are looking again at what centre-left parties have to offer. But progress will only turn into lasting success if once in government, our parties are judged by voters to have met their economic, social and cultural needs and interests. This report, and PPI's work, is in service of that goal.

SUMMARY

- With a UK general election on the horizon, the UK Labour Party is currently leading the Conservatives amongst all social classes and age groups except the over-65s. Labour has made considerable progress with working-class voters since its election defeat in 2019, and is on course to turnaround its historic decline amongst this group – but Labour's lead is much narrower with working-class voters than the wider electorate, with a large proportion yet to make up their minds who to vote for.
- Despite winning a majority of working-class voters in 2019, the UK Conservatives are haemorrhaging votes amongst this group, particularly those of working age. Only 44% of working-class voters who voted Conservative in 2019 say they will vote for them next time. And 74% of those polled describe the Conservatives as not close to working-class people, strongly associating them with wealthy individuals and big business.¹
- Working-class voters remain a critical part of a winning electoral coalition. New comparative analysis of the electoral prospects of centre-left parties in the US, UK, Europe, and Australasia shows that far from the base of social democratic parties moving uniformly to middle-upper earners, those on low to middle incomes still tend to form the social base for winning centre-left parties around the world, with the exception of the Democrats in the US whose base has shifted to college graduates in particular. Many face a common challenge in winning working-class voters, without whom stable governing majorities are unlikely.
- Working-class voters said they felt they got less in return for working hard than they did a decade ago, and felt young people today would be worse off than their parents' generation because they felt the deal whereby if you worked hard you could get on in life had broken down. Those voters who are feeling more optimistic about the year ahead are more likely to vote Conservative, however, there are far fewer of them than those who are pessimistic. Working-class voters believe almost everything is going to get worse, including all the Prime Minister's pledges.

- Overall economic concerns and policies to address them, such as controlling energy bills and inflation, are much more important to working-class voters than cultural issues that have gained disproportionate media attention. However, tackling illegal immigration and crime are highly salient for working-class voters in particular.
- The centre-left can lead a politics and programme to re-make the deal for working people, with reforms to hardwire our economy and society to operate in their interests. Practical ideas to re-make the deal for working people include:

1. A relentless focus on raising wages for those on low to middle incomes.
2. Stabilise supply and costs of essential goods and services.
3. Open up housing investment to the next generation.
4. Reform school education to become the driver of progress.
5. Replace 'one rule for them' with 'same rules apply' to restore a basic sense of fairness and order

CENTRE-LEFT VOTERS: THE GLOBAL PICTURE

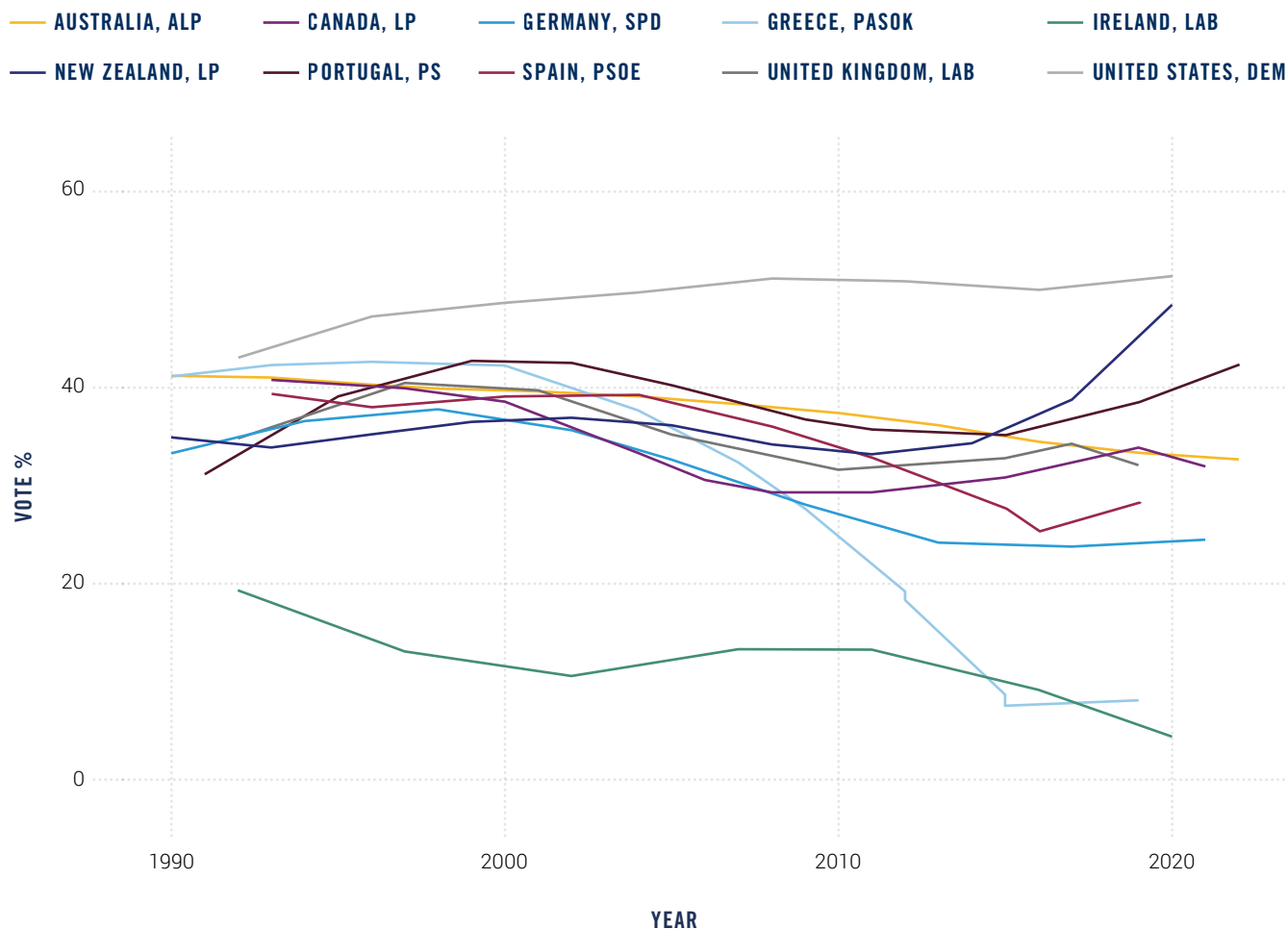
The electoral challenges facing the Labour Party are not unique to the UK. Across all developed democracies, centre-left parties are seeking voter coalitions in more volatile and fractured electorates, as their traditional voting base changes composition and allegiance. Following a period of high popularity around the turn of the century, centre-left parties in almost all developed democracies have seen a decline in their vote share, more dramatically after the political, economic, ideological, and cultural fallout of the 2007-08 financial crisis.

Where electoral systems have allowed the creation of new parties, some centre-left parties have almost completely folded and new parties have emerged, from the political right and left. Across Europe, the rise of the populist right continues apace, posing a central challenge to the liberal consensus that dominated the pre-financial crisis era. Even in democracies whose electoral systems have remained largely two-party, including the US and UK, centre-left parties have suffered the electoral consequences of the political de-alignment of their working-class base.

At the same time, trust in government is declining globally, but especially in the slower-growing economies. Only 37% of people in the UK say they trust government to do what is right, in the US just 42% and in Australia, 45%; compared to faster-growing economies like Singapore, where 76% trust the government to do what is right.² It is clear there is deep disillusionment with mainstream parties and politicians that transcend traditional party lines, but hurts the centre-left at least as much as it hurts the centre-right.

FIGURE 1. SHARE OF THE VOTE AMONG SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES BY COUNTRY, 1990-2022

(SOURCE: OLIVER HEATH FOR PPI FROM PARLGOV DATA, 2023)³



Whilst traditional Western democratic societies have become more fragmented through deindustrialisation and the changing nature of the economy, along with social developments including the changing role of women in society, technology, communications, and migration, parties seeking to form governments have always needed to form electoral coalitions to get into power. The dynamics of changing electoral bases may be different, but the challenge of stitching together different interests to get into government is not new.

For the British Labour Party, who have only been in power for 30 years of the last 120 years compared to the UK Conservatives, this has always been a broad alliance of working-class voters with more social-liberally middle-class voters, reflected in its founding origins of the trade union movement and socialist societies.

For the US Democrats, whilst they currently hold the US Presidency and just control the Senate, their declining vote share amongst working-class voters and places means they face a much narrower path to victory. Combined with their declining support amongst Hispanic voters and

an electorate not confident that the country is on the right path, the Democrats face significant challenges ahead of the 2024 Presidential election.

The US and UK also share electoral systems that require the Democrats and the Labour Party respectively to form grand electoral coalitions. Whilst neither have suffered the electoral squeeze on their left flank that social democratic parties have with proportional representation systems, the pressure on mainstream parties to adopt leftist strategies is evident. Whilst some of this has a benign effect on working-class support, some of this agenda does not speak for or to those voters.

Electoral systems will naturally shape the electoral strategy that the centre-left chooses. The centre-left vote can be maximised where it seeks to build an electoral coalition between a broad working-class base (not just traditional working-class) and bridge to more middle-class, socially-liberal voters.

THE VOTER BASE FOR WINNING CENTRE-LEFT PARTIES

So what can we learn about the electoral appeal of the centre-left from where it is winning? New comparative analysis of the electoral prospects of winning centre-left parties in the US, UK, Europe, and Australasia by Professor Oliver Heath for PPI shows that their voting base broadly remains low-to-middle income voters, with the exception of the Democrats whose base has shifted.⁴

There are specific challenges in the electoral support for the Labour Party in the UK and for the Democratic Party in the US, compared to centre-left parties in Europe and Australasia. Both Labour and the Democrats enjoy higher

support amongst young people than those who are middle-aged or older, but this is particularly stark for Labour in the UK which has much lower support amongst older voters. The comparative analysis with Europe and Australasia is important as it shows this is not a uniform feature for other centre-left parties. Other comparator countries are much more evenly balanced across the age groups, even when younger voters are slightly more favourable to their centre-left.

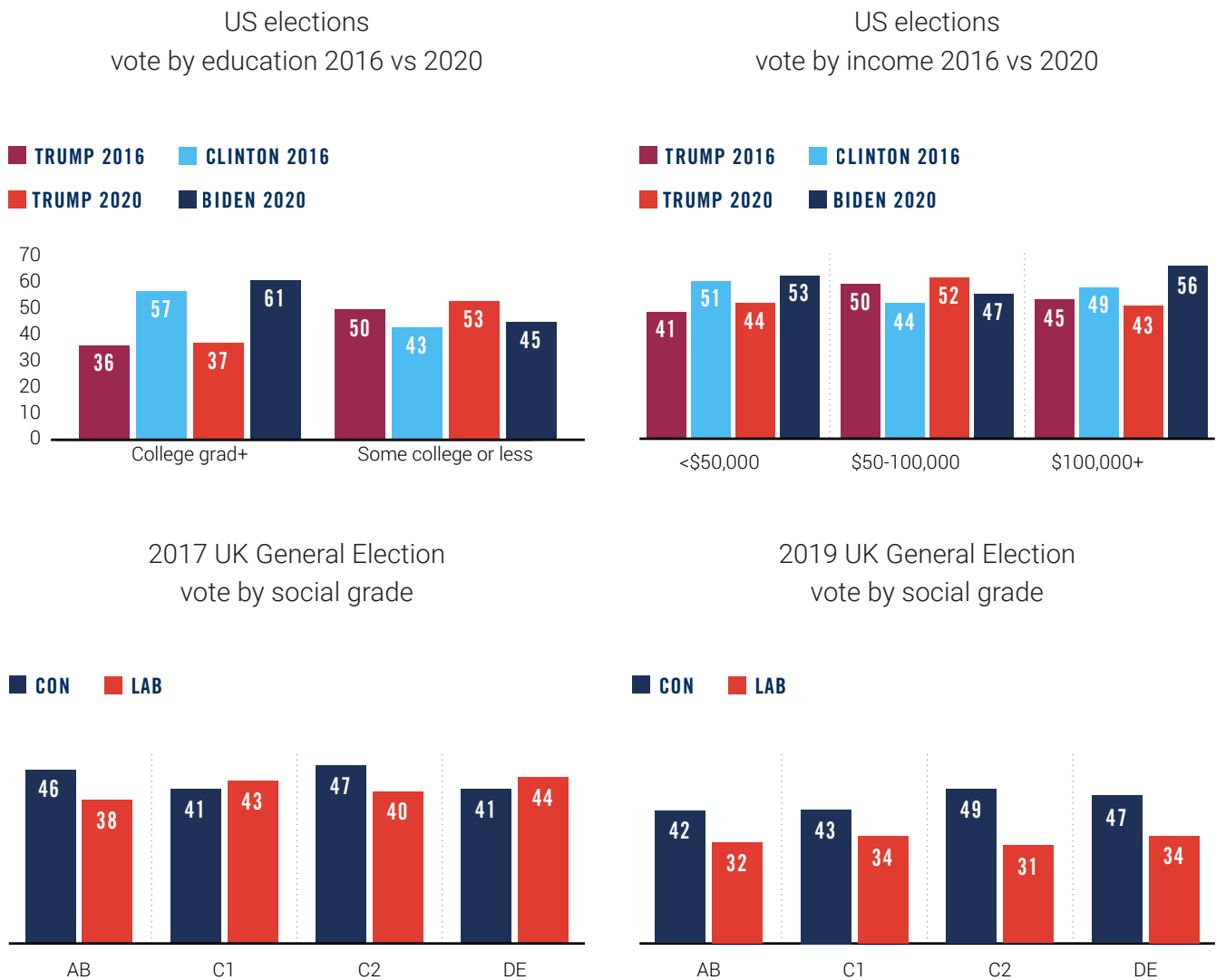
The US has the most pronounced gap in support amongst non-graduates compared to graduates (16 pt gap). The UK also has higher support for social democrats amongst graduates than non-graduates (9 points). This is by no means a uniform picture as several centre-left parties command greater support amongst non-graduates (Germany, Denmark, Portugal) or the difference is not so pronounced (Australia, New Zealand, Canada).

There is no sustainable coalition either in the US or the UK that does not have working-class support. Neither the Labour Party nor the Democrats can win or maintain power without putting working-class voters at the centre of their election strategy – and we know Biden and Starmer get this which is why we have seen them both appeal directly to working-class voters.

The Democrats in the US and the Labour Party in the UK have had an electoral problem with working-class voters, built up over a long period. But it is a misread to categorise the victories of the populist right in Europe, and their knock-on movements in the UK and the US like Brexit and Trump, as simply the revolt of working-class voters against the established social democrats. Only a small proportion of working-class voters

in western Europe support the radical right, and the radical right has taken votes from the mainstream right as well as from social democrats.⁵

FIGURE 2. CLASS VOTING IN MOST RECENT US AND UK ELECTIONS
(SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH TRUST, US, 2020; YOUNGOV, UK, 2019)



The Labour Party is starting to recover its position with working-class voters from a disastrous election performance in December 2019, where it polled behind the Conservatives amongst working-class voters by 15 points (33 Labour vs 48 Cons)⁶ and with it, lost a number of historic constituencies which voted Conservative for the very first time. Now the position has flipped with Labour ahead of the Conservatives amongst working-class voters, but this is due in large part to the collapse in support for the Tories. Middle-class (ABC1) voters are coming over to Labour more quickly. This is not surprising – working-class voters who put their faith in the Conservatives for the first time in 2019 have peeled away from them relatively rapidly, so it may take more time for them to come across to Labour. With a likely general election on the horizon, it shows there is progress for Labour with working-class voters and certainly all to play for before the polls.

The Democrats' support amongst predominantly white working-class voters has fallen dramatically since 2012, is now dropping amongst Hispanic working-class voters as well, and even amongst black Americans, especially men.⁷

The breakthroughs needed with working-class voters, non-graduates, and in UK Labour's case, older voters, will not come unless there is a visible and sustained re-tilting towards those voters by the centre-left.

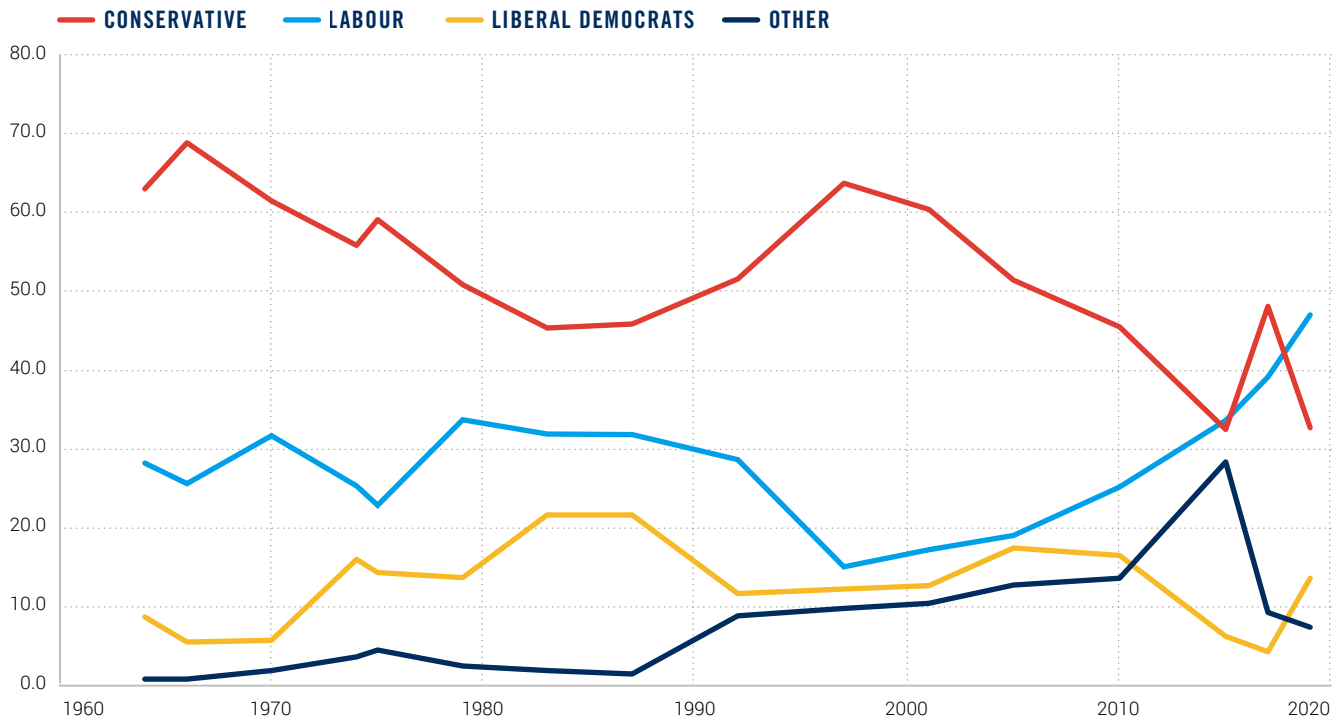
That requires a politics and political renewal based on shared values aimed at depolarisation, building common interest, and an economic settlement that raises living standards for ordinary working and middle-class people, addressing the tensions created by globalisation and technological change.

UK WORKING-CLASS VOTERS IN FOCUS: ATTITUDES AND PRIORITIES

Because of the centrality of working-class voters in British politics in constituencies right across Britain, PPI commissioned exclusive research from YouGov to establish the current positions of the political parties with working-class voters ahead of the next UK General Election. By 'working class', we mean the contemporary definition of working class which includes those on low to middle incomes, less likely to be in graduate professions, in every region and nation, multi-ethnic, which was measured by income and education; rather than solely the traditional working class, which is an important but shrinking part of the electorate.

Whilst Labour's declining position with British working-class voters came into full view in the 2019 general election, with the fall of the 'Red Wall' of constituencies in the North of England which historically voted Labour but voted Conservative for the first time in 2019, Labour's working-class vote has been declining since the early 2000s. Although the nature of what it means to be working class has changed as the British economy underwent significant restructuring, the creation of millions of low to median paid service sector jobs created a 'new' working class, which together with its historic predecessor, forms a substantive part of the electorate.

FIGURE 3: WORKING-CLASS POLITICAL PARTY SUPPORT 1960-2020⁸
(SOURCE: OLIVER HEATH FOR PPI FROM BRITISH ELECTION STUDY DATA, 2023)



Far from social class fading as an identity, the latest British Social Attitudes survey confirms that being working class continues to be a meaningful identity in Britain, even if working-class voters have become less aligned to the Labour party. In 1987, 46% identified without prompting as middle or working class. In 2015, around the same percentage still did so. When asked if they were one or the other, in 2021, 52% said they were working class while 43% indicated they were middle class.⁹ If anything, class awareness has increased over time, with the proportion saying they don't belong to any class dramatically falling in recent years.

VOTING INTENTION

Current opinion polls amongst all voters show the Labour Party with a consistent 15-point lead ahead of the Conservatives,¹⁰ which if translated into a general election, would put Labour in government after winning its first election since 2005. Our poll of working-class Britons fielded in September 2023 shows a Labour lead of 6 points, narrower but still ahead, with Labour on 25 compared to the Conservatives on 19. But one in three working-class voters say they would not vote (15%) or don't know (18%) who to vote for. The qualitative responses to our survey amongst the undecided show a deep disillusionment with politics and all the parties, and voters wanting to know more about what both parties would do for them. The proportion who don't know what the Conservatives' policies

or positions are is roughly the same as Labour's, indicating that this about how those voters are not being reached or engaged in politics, than being specific to one party.

Despite the Conservatives winning a majority of working-class voters at the last election, only 44% of those who voted Conservative in 2019 now say they will vote for them next time. 12% say they would support Reform UK; 9% say they will vote Labour; but a large proportion (21%) say they now don't know who to vote for.

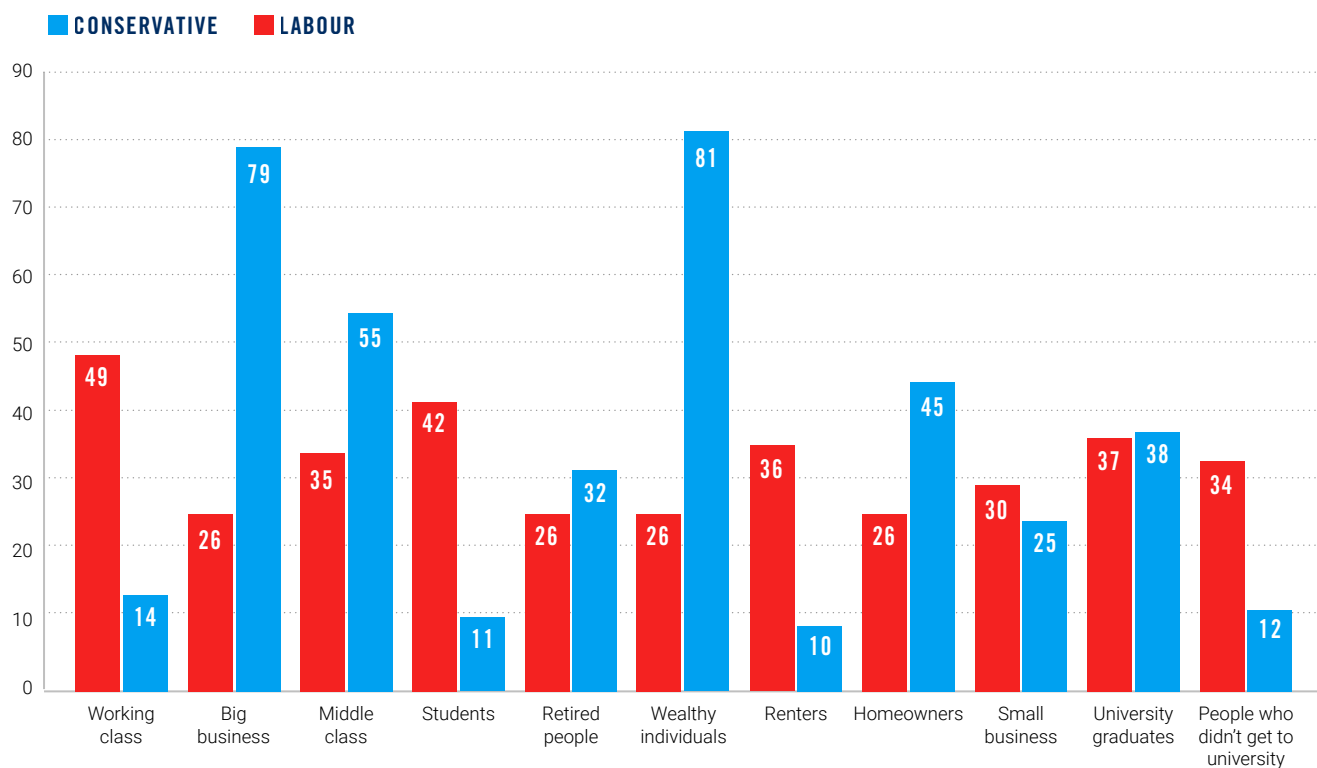
Of those working-class voters who have not firmly committed to voting for either party, they are fairly split between Labour (18% lean towards Labour of those who don't 'definitely' say they will vote for a party) and the Conservatives (15%).¹¹ However, of those who voted Conservative

in 2019, 28% are more inclined towards the Conservatives compared to 8% who are more inclined towards Labour, with 57% who say they definitely won't vote Labour. Working-class voters are much more likely than the general population to say they definitely won't vote Labour or Lib Dem – but are most likely to say they definitely won't vote Conservative.¹²

GROUP IDENTIFICATION

Perceptions of social and political group identity matter for political parties, as voters assess their alignment to groups as well as weighing up their policies, politicians, and interests. Our survey tested contemporary social group perceptions of Labour and the Conservatives, and overall found working-class voters placed Labour with a more balanced representation of social groups.

FIGURE 4: SOCIAL GROUP IDENTIFICATION OF THE CONSERVATIVES AND LABOUR BY WORKING-CLASS VOTERS
(FIGURES ARE FOR THOSE WHO SAY PARTY IS 'CLOSE' TO THAT SOCIAL GROUP. SOURCE: YOUNGOV FOR PPI, 2023)



The Conservatives have a more defined image than Labour in relation to social groups (a higher proportion said they didn't know how close Labour were to these groups, compared to the Conservatives for whom they were more certain about where to place them). Working-class voters said they perceived Labour as close to working class people (49% close vs 33% not close), but were clearer that the Conservatives are seen as close to wealthy individuals (81% vs 6% not close) and big business (79% close vs 8% not close); and not close to working-class people (74% not close vs 14% close), people who didn't go to university (68% not close vs 12% close), and small businesses (59% not close vs 25% close).

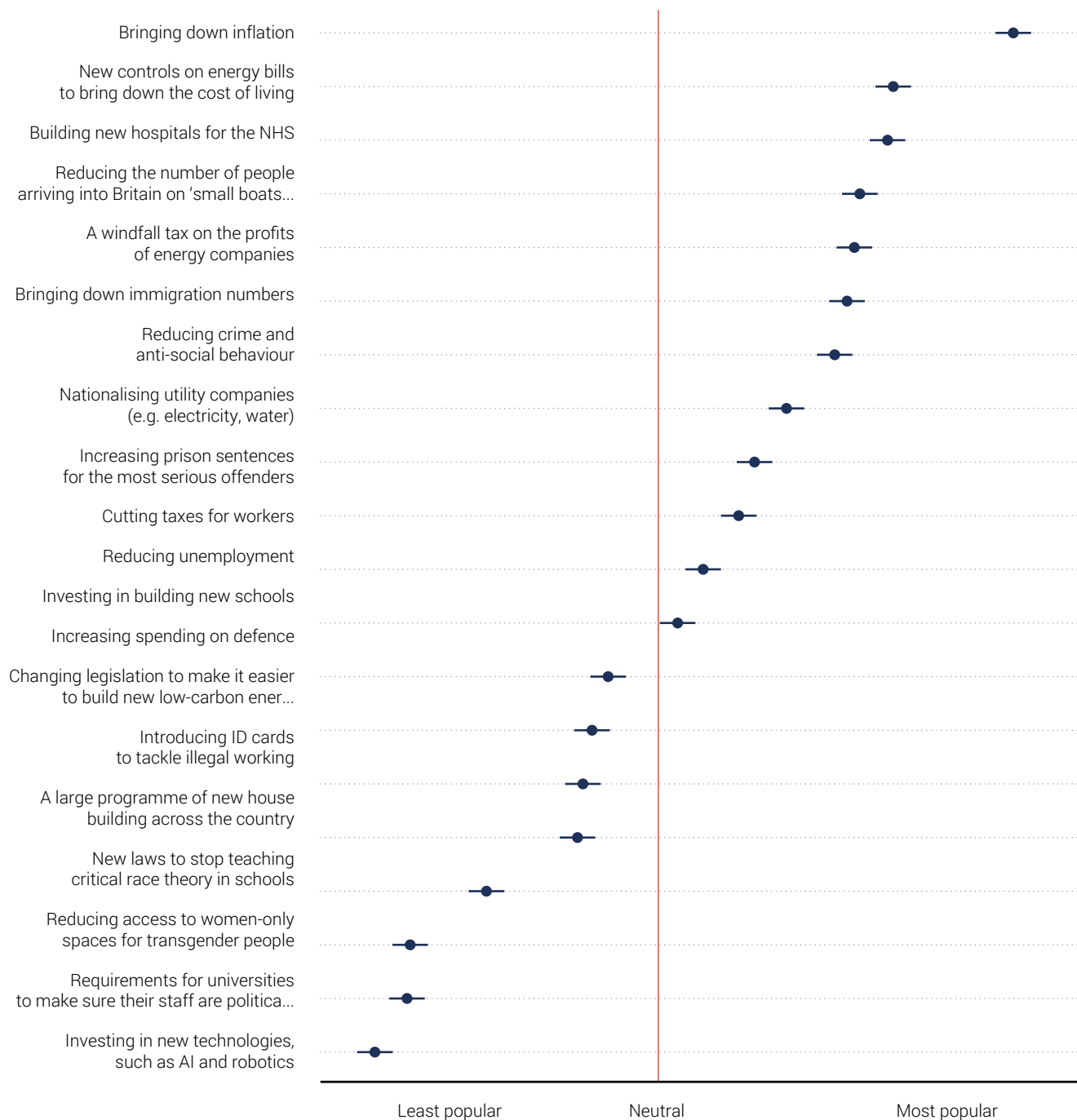
POLICY PRIORITIES

In common with the general public, working-class voters prioritise inflation and the cost of living as the most important issues facing the country. Immigration and asylum is second overall, and is the top issue for those who voted Conservative in 2019 and those who intend to vote Conservative at the next election. It is also the second most important issue for those who voted Conservative in 2019 and who say they are likely to vote Labour, suggesting that Labour is making headway with working-class voters who prioritise immigration as well as the economy and health. The environment and climate change feature as a top six issue for working-class voters, showing climate is an issue that voters care about across social class, income and education; but it is less important to working-class voters in every nation and region than the cost of living, the economy, health and immigration. Crime is also a top six issue, particularly so for working-class voters in England and those who voted Conservative at the last election.

Beyond establishing the most important issues for working-class voters, and their policy priorities to address those issues, we wanted to explore the extent to which economic and culture issues matter to voters. To that end, YouGov presented a representative sample of working-class British adults with 20 policy options, from which they were asked to pick up to five that they would 'most like the government to prioritise', and up to five that they would 'least like the government to prioritise'.¹³

Overall economic concerns and policies to address them, such as controlling energy bills and inflation, are much more important to working-class voters than cultural issues that have gained disproportionate media attention. However, tackling illegal immigration and crime are highly salient for working-class voters.

FIGURE 5: POLICY PRIORITIES OF WORKING-CLASS VOTERS
(SOURCE: YOUNG FOR PPI, 2023)



Working-class voters are more sceptical about the parties' handling of their most important issues. Whilst the national polling puts Labour ahead on who would be best at handling almost all important issues, working-class voters say Labour and the Conservatives are more level on who would handle the economy best (24% each, 24% 'don't know' and 18% say 'none'); on managing inflation (24% Cons best vs 22% Labour best); and on immigration (19% Lab vs 18% Cons with 48% saying 'none' or 'don't know'). Again, unlike the national polling, working-class voters are evenly split on whether Britain was right or wrong to leave the EU: 44% opt for right to leave, 44% wrong to leave.

We asked working-class voters about their views on the pace of change on climate, immigration, and technology.

Most respondents were positive about investing in new technologies such as AI if it can be done in a way that doesn't lead to large reductions in jobs available to working people.¹⁴ However, voters did not see investing in technology as a policy priority compared to other important measures to lower costs, manage the economy, and lower crime.

More working-class voters said the government is not doing or spending enough to try and reduce carbon emissions (34%), compared to those saying they are doing too much (25%), or getting the balance about right (16%), showing the awareness of climate action across all social groups. That said, they have a clear view when it comes to who pays: 53% agreed that it is important to combat climate change but "people like me should not be paying the cost of policies to reduce global carbon emissions", whilst 16% said they would be prepared to pay some costs and 19% said they do not believe climate action

is necessary.

Responses were fairly divided on whether immigration is good or bad for the country, with about a quarter saying immigration is neither good or bad for the economy, culture, or life in general. Overall working-class voters were more negative than positive on the effects of immigration, in relation to the economy, culture, and life in general in Britain. Scots, younger working-class voters, Remainers, Labour and Lib Dem supporters tended to be more positive towards the effects of immigration.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Working-class voters said they felt they got less in return for working hard than they did a decade ago, and felt young people today would be worse off than their parents' generation. When we asked them why they felt the next generation would be worse off, the responses made it crystal clear that they felt the deal whereby if you worked hard you could get on in life had broken down. They cited rising costs from energy to food, to the cost of housing, to lack of good job opportunities that made enough to save. A handful mentioned immigration, but the vast majority spelt out wages, higher costs, in particular housing relative to wages, as the reasons why they felt prospects for the future were worse.

"Because at least our parent's generation knew that there would always be employment and if they left one job they could literally walk into another, whereas today 1 in 3 working people are a month away from losing their homes if they become unemployed."

Whilst people were evenly divided over whether they thought they were personally better or worse off than their parents' generation, they thought working people as a whole were worse off (46%, vs 26% saying working people better off than their parents' generation). 59% tended to agree that you get less in return for working hard than you did a decade ago, compared to 12% who said you get more in return.

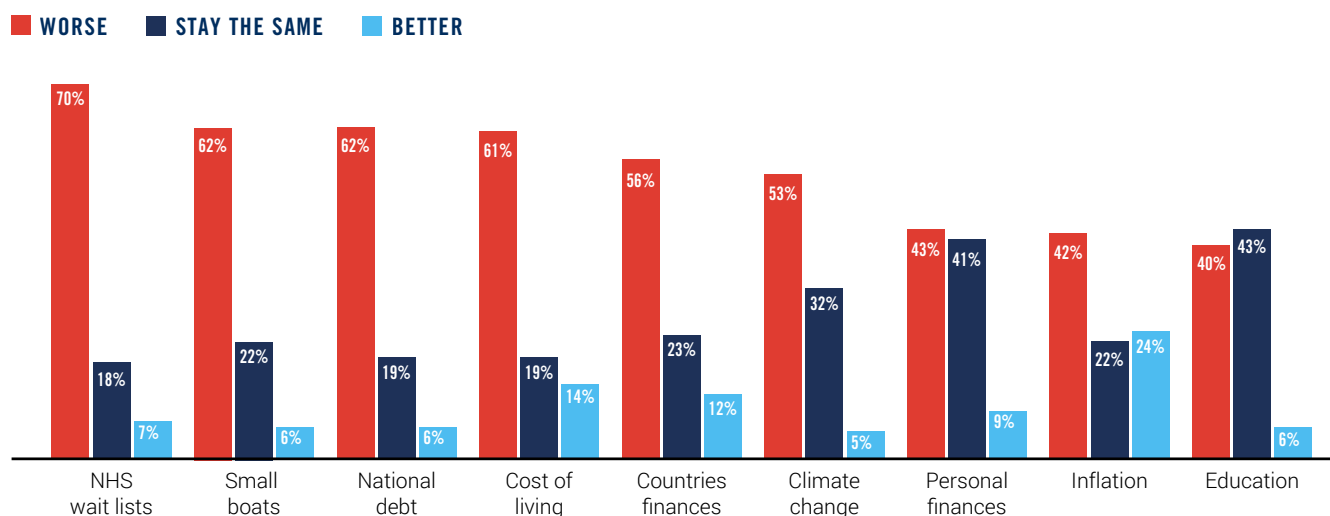
“Because the average wage is lower comparative to the current cost of living compared to previous generation(s)”

On a personal level, money or debt (34%) were the biggest problems for the voters in our survey, followed by poor physical health (32%), poor mental health (27%), then by rising crime in their local area (22%).¹⁵ Most voters who identified one or more concerns felt there was little they could do to improve their situation, be it money or debt problems, poor health, or finding a job for those not employed. Many have little faith in government to have an effect on them – nearly half said government had no or not very much influence on their everyday life.

“Both my parents had really good jobs. They had 2 children. I have 3 children and because of domestic violence am a single parent. I was a qualified dental nurse and always worked. In 2000 I was diagnosed with colitis which makes working nearly impossible.”

As voters look ahead to the next year with a general election looming, they believe almost everything is going to get worse: the rate of inflation, the cost of living, NHS waiting lists, climate change, their personal financial situation, the number of people arriving in small boats, the level of national debt, and the country's financial situation. This includes all the areas the current Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has pledged to take action on. Those intending to vote Conservative – only one in five of our working-class voters – were feeling more optimistic about the rate of inflation and the country's financial situation; illustrating just now much the performance of the economy will matter, as always, in the months before voters head to the polls.

FIGURE 6: VIEWS ON WHETHER IMPORTANT ISSUES WILL GET BETTER OR WORSE BEFORE THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION
(SOURCE: YOUNGOV FOR PPI, 2023)



Re-making the deal: how to bring hope back to working-class voters in an age of insecurity

The only path to sustainable, durable governing majorities for the centre-left is to win substantive numbers of working-class voters, as part of a wider electoral coalition with middle-class voters. The comparative analysis of the US, UK, Europe and Australasia shows that there isn't a wholesale shift towards higher income, more educated voters, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to unify a governing bloc in more fragmented electorates. Swings towards the political centre-left are occurring where the political right has lost support, and as voters are taking another look centre-left parties, they're asking what they stand for today.

The answer, rooted in the hopes and dreams of working people, has to be to advance a political and policy programme to re-make the deal that if you work hard you can get on in life. Rising costs, not just recent rocketing prices of energy and food, but long-term costs, in particular housing; combined with stagnating wages and jobs without good prospects have left many working people wondering what the future holds. People want to know their hard work is going to be rewarded, that there is a basic fairness to the economy. It is essential to the continuing legitimacy of the society and democracy we have built. But right now, many people don't feel that basic fairness exists and they don't trust governments to actually deliver the change they have voted for. This really matters for Labour, as it seeks to reassure and inspire voters who are not feeling optimistic about the year ahead.

At the same time, the era we are entering is more uncertain than it has been for a long time.

The centre-left has to build a programme that addresses people's material, personal and psychological security – financial security, free from crime, reliable public services, strong national defence, stable costs and supply of essential goods and services, controlled and managed immigration – as the foundation of better prospects for tomorrow.

A better tomorrow for working people will not happen by accident, but by design. As well as addressing immediate needs, politicians have to come good on the promise to re-make the deal with longer-term reforms to hardwire our economy and society to operate in the interests of working people. This is a task suited to the politics of the centre-left, which rejects the failed approach of unfettered markets, and embraces the innovation and dynamism of open economies.

Practical ideas to re-make the deal for working people

1. Relentless focus on raising wages for those on low to middle incomes

Rewarding work is the cornerstone of improving living standards for working people. Action can be taken on the jobs people are currently in through increases to the minimum wage, progressive pay schemes to increase salaries at the lower to mid end of pay scales,

rewarding work over wealth through the tax system, making work more accessible for those with caring responsibilities, disability or health conditions, strengthening workers' collective bargaining and trade union access to workplaces. The creation of new jobs in growth areas such as technology, renewable energy and healthcare represents the opportunity to bake-in progression and advancement so that these industries offer good, well-paid jobs with the chance to get on. Opportunities to retrain and skill up for the jobs of the future could be made much easier for the existing workforce as well as for young people, and level the playing field between non-graduates and graduates.

2. Stabilise supply and costs of essential goods and services

Traditional mechanisms to control overall inflation are insufficient to deal with the price volatility of essential goods and services that we have experienced in recent years. Wage growth will be eaten up by rising costs unless government gets a grip of securing supply lines for essentials, and acts on the biggest drivers of higher costs for households. Governments have made sporadic efforts to tackle the supply of essentials but these are often reactive and inefficient, rather than as part of a long-term strategy to drive down prices. Energy, food, housing, transport and childcare costs will require different approaches – boosting secure production in the case of energy and food; housing, transport and childcare require significant domestic investment in new partnerships between the public and private sectors with the goal of affordability for consumers.

3. Open up housing investment to the next generation

Home ownership is becoming out of reach for the next generation, particularly for young people without wealthier older relatives to help fund deposits and provide accommodation whilst saving. Government needs more courage and imagination to make home ownership a reality for young people of all backgrounds. Increasing supply includes reforming planning laws, and new state-market solutions to incentivise the creation of low-cost homes. It is also an opportunity to divert private investors away from housing as a retirement or wealth creation investment, and into investment which supports public policy goals such as housing schemes for low-cost home ownership, or renewable energy.

4. Reform school education to become the driver of progress

Every young person deserves the chance to succeed, and know that it is their hard work and talent which will get them on in life. But fewer of them believe that to be the case these days. Improving our education system so that it better equips all young people for the future is vital in restoring that belief, as well as for our country's competitiveness and productivity. It is time for an overhaul of our curriculum and assessment to modernise what and how children learn for the world they will be living and working in, and to give parity to academic and vocational routes to success. The opportunities available to the most advantaged should be opened up to every young person, with access to high-quality programmes of creative and challenging activities to broaden the horizons and possibilities of all young people.

5. Replace 'one rule for them' with 'same rules apply'

The breaking of Covid rules by No.10 offended people's natural sense of what's right and wrong. It reinforced a sense that others – the rich and powerful in particular – can get away with not playing by the same rules the rest of us have to. This needs to come to an abrupt end. Politicians have to take the lead in applying the same rules in conduct matters, without exception; but more importantly, restore a basic sense of fairness in society, particularly to ensure that crimes are investigated promptly, and criminals prosecuted and punished. Government should not be afraid to tax excess profits where companies are not passing the benefit onto consumers; and make sure that UK taxes are paid in full.

Tackling the criminal gangs responsible for illegal immigration is vital as part of a strategy to restore order to the national borders.

People are looking to politicians to have practical and credible solutions to the challenges they face. They recognise there are limits to how much we can tax and spend our way out of today's problems, and want to hear fresh ideas that will make a difference to their lives.

The opportunity facing the centre-left is to be the dynamic force that brings back hope to working-class voters, so that they face the future with optimism about the prospects for themselves and the next generation. That is the spirit of progress, and a task that falls to this generation of centre-left parties to fulfil.

ABOUT THE CENTRE-LEFT RENEWAL PROJECT:

The rise of radical right-wing populism has upended the old, left-right structure of Western politics and deeply polarized our societies. Its hallmarks include hostility to immigration and cultural pluralism, globalization, big business and international institutions for collective problem-solving. The transatlantic community needs a strong centre-left to stand as a bulwark against these illiberal and anti-democratic forces.

PPI's new Project on Centre-Left Renewal resumes our long-running conversation with centre-left parties in Europe and around the world. Its purpose is to exchange ideas, strategies and tactics for making centre-left parties more competitive and improve their governing performance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Ainsley is the Director of the Project on Centre-Left Renewal at the Progressive Policy Institute. Prior to joining PPI, Claire was the Executive Director of Policy to Keir Starmer, Leader of the Opposition and U.K. Labour Party. Claire also served as the Executive Director of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, where she led JRF's work on the social and political attitudes of people with low incomes. She is the author of "The New Working Class: How to Win Hearts, Minds and Votes," which was published in May 2018.

Notes and References

- 1 All UK polling figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,022 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 14th - 18th September 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB working class voters (aged 18+), measured as non-university educated, household income below £40,000.
'Question': Some people describe political parties as being close to particular groups in society. Thinking about the LABOUR/ CONSERVATIVE party, we'd like you to say how close they are to the following groups in society? YouGov poll of working-class voters GB adults for PPI, fieldwork 14th - 18th September 2023.
- 2 Edelman Global Trust Barometer, 2023
- 3 Source: Data from ParlGov (supplemented with election data on US Presidential elections) Döring, Holger, Constantin Huber, Philip Manow, Maike Hesse and Alexandra Quaas. 2023. Parliaments and governments database (ParlGov): Information on parties, elections and cabinets in established democracies. Professor Oliver Heath for PPI. Available at: <https://www.parlgov.org/>
- 4 Professor Oliver Heath analysis for PPI 2023
- 5 'Left Behind by the Working Class? Social democracy's electoral crisis and the rise of the radical right' Abou-Chadi, Mudde, Mitteregger, FES 2021
- 6 'How Britain Voted' YouGov analysis of the 2019 General Election, 17 December 2019
<https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/26925-how-britain-voted-2019-general-election>
- 7 'Woke isn't enough: what the Democrats must do to win back black voters' Markose Butler, The Hill, 17 February 2023
<https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/3863135-woke-isnt-enough-what-democrats-must-do-to-win-back-black-voters>
- 8 Methodological note: this analysis is based on the British Election Study Internet Panel data. However, different studies have found differing levels of class voting in 2015 and 2017, with each of the British Election Study Internet Panel, British Election Study face-to-face survey, British Social Attitudes, and Understanding Society giving a somewhat different picture so this should be used as illustrative of how the Conservatives and Labour party support has changed over time, pending a synthesis of information from these other sources.
- 9 Figures from Heath, O. and Bennett, M. 'Social Class', British Social Attitudes, National Centre for Social Research, 2023. The researchers note that after 2015 the methodology of data gathering changed, so 2015 has been cited for the comparative question, rather than more recent data. <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-09/BSA%2040%20Social%20class.pdf>
- 10 For example, YouGov voting intention tracker 26-27 Sept 2023 puts Labour on 45% and Cons on 24%, Savanta Com Res 29-Sept-1 Oct Lab 46% and Cons 27%.
- 11 Question: 'On the following scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is "I definitely will not vote for them" and 10 is "I will definitely vote for them", how likely or unlikely are you to vote for each of the following political parties [Labour/ Conservatives] at the next general election? Likelihood to vote for one or other party derived from those putting 6 or above on the scale (excluding 10, which is 'I will definitely vote for them').'
- 12 41% of the general population say they definitely won't vote Cons, compared to 46% of working-class voters; 23% of the general population say they definitely won't vote Lab, compared to 38% of working-class voters; and 25% of the general population say they definitely won't vote Lib Dem, compared to 43% of working-class voters.
- 13 Max-Diff analysis produces a statistic for each policy tested: namely, a single figure representing the overall popularity of the policy. This is measured as the sample mean for 'most' subtracted by the sample mean for 'least'.

Notes and References

- 14 Question: 'Please indicate which of the following statements comes closest to your view? The government should accelerate development of new and emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, even if it reduces the number of jobs available to working people (7) The government needs to invest in new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, but only if it can be done in a way that does not lead to a large reduction in the number of jobs available to working people (50) The government should stay away from the development of new and emerging technology such as artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics because they are a threat to jobs and livelihoods of working people (29).
- 15 Question: 'Below is a list of problems or issues which people may face in their day to day lives. From this list, do any problems or issues apply to you personally right now? Please tick all that apply. 'From the following list of problems or issues you told us you face in your life right now, to what extent, if at all, do you personally feel there are things that you yourself can do to help solve them?' (Only shown to those who clicked the option in the previous question).



The Progressive Policy Institute is a catalyst for policy innovation and political reform based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock.

Founded in 1989, PPI started as the intellectual home of the New Democrats and earned a reputation as President Bill Clinton's "idea mill." Many of its mold-breaking ideas have been translated into public policy and law and have influenced international efforts to modernize progressive politics.

Today, PPI is developing fresh proposals for stimulating U.S. economic innovation and growth; equipping all Americans with the skills and assets that social mobility in the knowledge economy requires; modernizing an overly bureaucratic and centralized public sector; and defending liberal democracy in a dangerous world.

© 2023
PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE
1156 15th Street NW
Ste 400
Washington, D.C. 20005

Tel 202.525.3926
Fax 202.525.3941

info@ppionline.org
progressivepolicy.org