

PUBLICFIRST 

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Exploring Political Sentiment in Newark

An Immersive Study



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Executive Summary

In collaboration with The Times newspaper, Public First ran an immersive research study in the constituency of Newark where we spoke to residents over a two-day period (24th-25th June) during the 2024 general election.

With a majority of 21,816 in 2019, Newark has long been a Conservative stronghold, but with the polls predicting that it may now flip to Labour for the first time since 1997, we wanted to test if sentiment on the ground reflected the polling. Our research study does not make any predictions on who will win the constituency, but rather looks to understand the attitudes of voters in an archetypal Tory seat by speaking to a representative sample of residents.

In our research, we found very little meaningful support for Labour in Newark - but very strong fundamental support for Reform. This support was drawn from a range of small-c conservative voting blocs from working-class leave voting Tories to the more traditional middle-class lifelong Tory voters. While there were many Tory-to-Reform switchers, we observed very few people who had voted Conservative in 2019 and were now voting Labour. We found that possible Conservative vulnerability depended on whether right-leaning Conservatives peeled off in big numbers to Reform, allowing Labour to come "through the middle".

As we have been finding with our research elsewhere, there was an almost overwhelming sense of disillusionment among all voting groups and demographics towards politics. This was in some way reflected in the surge we found among Reform voters, but was also evident in the number of people who were now not voting - often for the first time.



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Methodology & Data

Public First is increasingly switching to “immersive research” for our “landscape” political qualitative research, where we are after a general sense of what people think about political issues. We still run many, many focus groups and will continue to do so; they are particularly useful for message-testing and to secure responses to audio and visual matter. However, we find immersive research gives us additional insight.

In immersive research, we send researchers into particular locations for much longer periods of time than is typical: a few days, rather than an evening (typical for focus groups). The aim is to speak to people who would never engage in ordinary political research – either qual or quant – in their most natural environments and therefore to get their gut reactions to politics. Our research is data led: our researchers are guided by the analysis our data team pulls together about the location in question in advance (voting intention, demographics etc).

In this instance, Public First conducted in-depth interviews with 115 Newark residents. Our research participants were recruited in order to reflect the demographic makeup of the constituency. This included age; gender; voting history and geography. Analysis was conducted in advance by our data team, to determine the right location and target audiences within the constituency. Five researchers, led by this data analysis, spent two days (24th–25th June) holding informal, semi-structured interviews with voters across the constituency.

None of the conversations were pre-arranged; by speaking to voters in their natural environments we are able to have more authentic conversations. Given the nature of this project, it was very important to reach beyond the more politically engaged and speak to the mass of voters who would never attend a focus group or fill in an online survey. All the conversations, however, were informed by one shared discussion guide to allow for consistency and comparison. Interviews and participant demographics were tracked throughout to ensure our sample was representative of the constituency.



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Headline Findings

1 People expect Labour to win nationally, but not in Newark - and our research suggested they would be right.

Participants across all demographics were overwhelmingly disillusioned at the election campaigns, criticising both the main parties for offering what they saw as very poor options. Despite this, there was a wide recognition that Labour were expected to win nationally. This view did not extend to Newark, with many people asserting that it was a “Tory town” and that they couldn’t imagine that changing. Voters collectively were not well informed on the election. The ins-and-outs of the campaign trail and the manifestos were hazy at best. And yet time again the voters we spoke to discussed the recent betting scandal and the fact that Rishi Sunak couldn’t “afford” Sky television. Interestingly, this was mostly offered in a resigned manner, rather than in the vitriolic way the public have talked about politics and politicians in the years following Partygate.

“ I’m not going to vote Labour, but I think people [in Newark] are fed up with the way things are. ”

Woman 50s, Tory 2019 now don't know

“ Our neighbour is voting Labour, I think anything is possible at the moment the way it’s panning out. He’s [Sunak’s] made a right balls of it all. ”

Man 50s, Tory 2019 still voting Tory

“ And I wouldn’t trust Mr Starmer as far as I could throw him. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I think there’s quite a few faults with the Conservative party as well. But at least inflation is creeping down. ”

Man 50s, Tory 2019 now don't know

2 But a surging Reform could leave the Tories vulnerable to letting Labour in “through the middle”.

Frustration towards the Conservatives had left many in the constituency either voting – or at least strongly considering – Reform. Interestingly, for those who were now voting Reform, the majority expected Newark to stay Tory – but most didn’t care that their vote could mean Labour getting in. Among those who were more cautious, there were some signs that the ‘super majority’ messaging was cutting through. There was a sense here that Reform had become a bit of a ‘catch all’ for protest voters, and its coalition – although the support we found was still largely from older working-class voters who voted for the Tories in 2019, backed Brexit and liked Boris Johnson – spread well beyond just anti immigration sentiment to more moderate and middle-class and middle-aged voters. For many of these it was simply about signalling their frustration with the Conservatives’ record in office, and few spoke of any Reform policies with any excitement. Interestingly, it was common for these more middle-class voters not to mention Nigel Farage as the reason for their vote (something we hear more regularly from working-class voters).

“*It’s a protest vote. That’s all it is. And what I want to do, and I’ve thought about this, Labour are going to get in and get a strong majority: I want to send a message to Labour that people are watching and I’m hoping that they don’t get the majority that they’re going to get if we can reduce the majority and get more Reform MPs in Parliament.*”

Man 40s, Tory 2019 now voting Reform

“*I find Farage very entertaining. It’s a real temptation because he’s such a character and he says what he thinks... but you think: can he really do the job?*”

Woman 50s, Tory 2019 now Labour

“ [People in Newark voting Reform] agree with some of the things they [Reform] are saying, so do I. But I don't think you wreck the Conservative Party for the sake of two or three people with strong views, Farage - we all know about him - but they are only going to get two or three seats and wreck the Conservative Party in the meantime.”

Man 70s, Tory 2019 staying Tory

“ All of a sudden he's saying he's going to do this and that. Why didn't he do it sooner. They know it's all rubbish. But of course they're all the same, Keir Starmer too. But a vote for him is a vote for them out, which is a good thing... of course big business runs the country, not the government

Woman 40s, Tory 2019 and now not intending to vote

“ Just a wasted vote [Reform]. They're not gonna go anywhere. They're not gonna get any seats. Farage is probably the best speaker out of all of them, when he's challenged on different things, he comes over the best

Man, 60s, Tory 2019 still Tory



3 **There was total disillusionment at the political options - which might further erode Conservative hopes.**

Many people who said they have always voted, were now going to stay home on polling day for the first time. While Farage and Reform were appealing to some voters, a big group of lifelong Tories felt unable to vote Conservative, but also that there was no other party that represented them. There was deep frustration here for a sizeable minority of voters – particularly among older women – who explained they had always voted and thought it was of fundamental importance to vote, but bemoaned their choices. Many of these were open to the suggestion of a new party. The contempt for politicians was so severe and the same phrases were repeated again and again: they're "all corrupt", "all the same", "in it for themselves", and "one rule for them". This disillusionment was felt across all demographics, but most strongly with working-class voters.

“ I think we’re just gonna get to the point where it’s gonna be like, French and Russian revolution because people are gonna get angry. ”

Woman 50s, 2019 Tory now don't know

“ Apathetic... obviously because of the nature of the previous five years of government. Covid was unexpected, but then you had all the fallout from that. And then what followed on with the Conservative Party changing Prime Ministers regularly at one stage. Labour under Keir Starmer didn't particularly appeal to me either. ”

Man 70s, 2019 Tory now don't know considering Reform

“ Time for a change but are they gonna do it any better? ”

Woman 40s, Labour 2019 now undecided

“ I think they should have completely abolished Parliament, if you want. Totally. Just get rid of it. Totally. Because it’s, as we know, completely corrupt. ”

Man 40s, 2019 Tory now voting Labour

“ It’s not the Labour Party anymore. It’s nothing to do with labour anymore. It’s not the Labour Party of old. It is the new Labour Party just handed to anybody and everybody just to get the votes. ”

Male 60s, Tory 2019 now voting Green

“ I’m gonna void my ballot sheet. I’m just gonna cross it all off as a protest and say, well, you’re all as bad as each other. What’s the point? I’m a single guy. I get penalised for being a single guy. Nobody helps me out, and they all lie. I’m sick and tired. ”

Male, 60s, Tory 2019 now undecided

4 There was a lack of enthusiasm for Labour.

Many lifelong Labour voters said they'd stick with the party, but generally voters are still unsure and suspicious of Starmer. Often they struggled to explain why. Among undecided Conservative voters, he was often offered as a reason they could not vote Labour. Unusually, Angela Rayner was similarly unpopular here, particularly so among middle-class, lifelong Tories. There were few Conservative 2019 voters who said they were backing Labour, but those that were switching almost always said it was because "the country needs a change" and did not have much more to say when probed. Other Labour voters who had previously voted for the Liberal Democrats indicated they were voting "tactically" to get the Tories out. Those voting Labour tended to be younger, and the Party was particularly popular with women under 40.

“ *We've got no reason to vote [for Labour]. You vote because you want to vote because you believe in the party or the person. Someone to manage the country ... no one has convinced me yet they've got the half a package together. Certainly the Tories haven't.* **”**

Man 60s, Tory 2019 now don't know considering Reform

“ *I think he's [Starmer's] slimy. He keeps coming up with his 'mother was a nurse' and he was brought up in a council house. It doesn't matter where you were brought up.* **”**

Woman, 70s, Tory 2019 still voting Tory

“ *I don't think Rishi and the Conservatives are managing the country well, they give jobs to people which they can't justify ... I think they need a period out of office to rebuild.* **”**

Man, 50s, Lib Dem 2019 now voting Labour

“

It's time for change ... if I want to go to the cinema with the kids it's now £40 or £50. That's a lot of money for family time. We need someone who cares about the cost of living.

”

Man 40s, Tory 2019 now voting Labour

“

He (Starmer) is a Conservative in a red tie really.

”

Male 40s, Tory 2019 now undecided

“

If I had to vote tomorrow I'd vote Labour. Not cause I think 'oh great, Labour' but because I want the Tories out...

”

Woman 50s, Tory 2019 now Labour

“

I can't vote Labour. I just can't justify it, but I can't vote Conservative, so I don't know, but I've got to vote. I will vote, just [decide] on the day. But Labour, there's another one. Are they going to bring anything?

”

Woman, 50s, Tory 2019 now undecided



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5 The Conservative voters who are still voting Tory do so because they always have done.

These voters were often middle-class lifelong Conservatives, aged over 50, and many said outright they'd simply never vote for Labour. They spoke of low taxes on working people and small businesses as well as support for pensioners (as many were retired themselves). Most of these people shared the general contempt for politicians and Westminster and accepted that the Prime Minister isn't up to the job but worry that Labour and Starmer will be even worse. Although there was some warmth for the local candidate, Robert Jenrick, we found very little evidence of support for any national Conservative figures. Tory campaign messages around Labour tax rises, threat of 'super majority' Starmer not having a plan, and the "danger of Angela Rayner" have cut through with this group of engaged lifelong Tories.

“ *Out of all of them, I hope the Conservatives, because I would hate for Labour to get in. I've lived through Labour before, and pensioners at my age group that have worked all their lives and paid pensions and things and have private pensions, we're going to be penalised big time. So I don't want Labour [for] selfish reasons.* **”**

Woman 70s, 2019 Tory still voting Tory

“ *If you are a Conservative voter and you feel you've been let down by them, but you'd like to vote again in the future for them; I think if Labour get a massive majority this time they're gonna be in for a long time, I don't think you're gonna get that chance.* **”**

Man 60s, Tory 2019 now don't know considering Reform

“ I don't know if it's true or not, but I heard Labour is going to put Council tax up, and they're going to charge it by how much garden you've got, I don't know how true it is but I got told it. ”

Man 60s, Tory 2019 now don't know

“ I've never really gone that way [Labour]. And I just think we're in such a mess at the moment. And I think things are getting a bit better. So surely, we need to stick with that, to let it hopefully get better. I don't see how he's [Starmer's] gonna come in and make it all alright. ”

Woman 70s, Tory 2019 still voting Tory

“ See [Labour] is a bit of a penalty on people that are working hard, because even though people may have the money, it is very stressful ... the country's gonna come to a standstill [under Labour] ”

Woman, 40s, Tory 2019 still Tory

6 Of national policy areas, the NHS was the biggest issue on people's minds - much more than immigration

When asked what the biggest national issue was, health was front of mind and everyone had a story about how the NHS was in disarray. There was no faith here that any of the parties would be able to fix it, but people broadly felt the Tories had done a poor job of managing the health service. Immigration did come up but featured less prominently - although for a big group of 2019 Tories who were switching to Reform it was the most salient issue. Among working age voters, tax was regularly brought up as an issue, and to a lesser extent education. More locally, people felt that the town centre of the constituency was in a state of decline, and spoke of shutting shops and potholes.

“ Newark is a growing town, we've got lots of housing being built - more and more, yet we still don't have a fully functioning A&E department. ”

Woman, 40s, Tory 2019 now don't know

“ It's the health service and the doctor situation, the dentist situation. I'm lucky I've got the dentist here, but not everybody is lucky. It's all those sorts of things really, the cost of everything. ”

Woman 70s, Tory 2019 still voting Tory

“ The NHS is a bit of a mess at the moment and they've got to sort out this bed blocking problem out so they can move the people that are fit into care so they can get more people into hospital to be operated on. ”

Female 80s, Tory 2019 still voting Tory

“ We can't get NHS dentists no more. But are the doctors gonna go the same route? Because we can't get in to see a doctor anymore, seeing a doctor is getting ridiculous. ”

Man 60s, Tory 2019 now voting Reform

“ Like now the NHS, it's hit rock bottom. You can't even get into a dentist, can you now? Unless you pay a lot of money, and people can't afford it, I work two jobs so I can go on holiday...it's like, why? It shouldn't be like that. ”

Woman 50s, Tory 2019 now undecided



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