

Polling the political center

Polling centrism and the UK political
landscape



Briefing paper

By Torrin Wilkins, January 30th, 2023

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The author



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Torrin founded Centre in 2020. In his role he has written numerous papers including one backed by an APPG made of over 260 MPs and multiple policies written by him have been adopted by political parties.

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About Centre

We are an independent non-profit foundation and cross-party think tank. Our mission is to rebuild the centre ground and to create a more centrist and moderate politics. We support better public services and a strong economy inspired by policies from the Nordic countries.

To achieve these goals, we work with people from across the UK and party politics. This includes engaging with politicians and our networks, which include academia, politics, and law.

Our work includes creating new conversations by hosting events and conducting interviews. We also produce new policy ideas to better inform debate, publish papers, and release articles. We aim to build consensus, shape public opinion, and work with policymakers to change policy.

Published by

The logo for Centre, featuring a large, stylized pink 'C' with a white dot in the center, followed by the word 'entre' in a bold, pink, sans-serif font.

Polling partner Millbank and polling by Opinium

Millbank Think Tank is a not-for-profit, cross-party, independent UK think tank. They work to ensure that better policy is being made and that it serves the interests of those it is being made for. They are proud to produce insightful analyses on what the British public is thinking, working to put their ideas to politicians, to bring about nation-changing discussion on matters important to ordinary people, and in turn, to help those working in politics get their voices heard by those they represent.

Centre Think Tank and the Millbank Think Tank are partners and will collaborate on polls to determine public opinion. We co-commissioned a poll paid for by Millbank and with a question area created by Centre Think Tank.

The polling was carried out by Opinium, a polling company founded in 2007. It is a member of the British Polling Council and has created polls for numerous universities, charities, and companies.

Polling partner

MILLBANK

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What people think,
feel and do

Foreword from former MP Stephen Lloyd

This paper offers a valuable look at how people across the UK see themselves politically. By exploring where voters place themselves on the political spectrum, it helps us better understand the range of views in our changing political landscape. This research raises important questions about how people understand and relate to political labels.

One surprising finding is that only 13% of people identified as centrists. Past polls often showed many voters placing themselves in the centre ground, so this represents a surprising decrease. One answer may be that many may hold centrist or moderate views but feel more comfortable with the term moderate, which is often seen as a key part of centrist thinking. A core reason why Centre is placing itself as both centrist and moderate is so important.

This could help explain why 37% of respondents said they weren't sure where they stood.

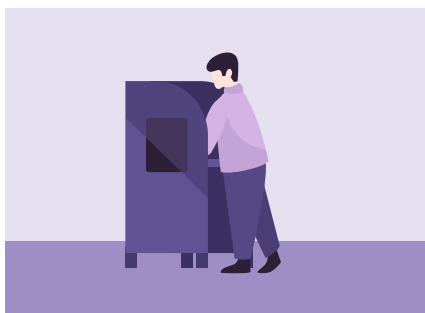
The findings offer valuable insights for political parties and for anyone interested in the views of our electorate. Like any good research into this topic, it poses many questions and provides valuable insights into the future of centrism.

A portrait of Stephen Lloyd, a middle-aged man with grey hair, smiling. He is wearing a dark grey checkered suit jacket over a light blue and white striped shirt and a red tie. The background is plain white.

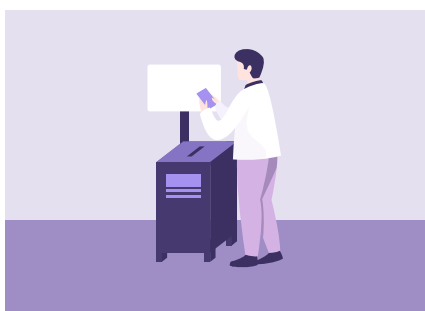
Stephen Lloyd

Former Member of Parliament
for Eastbourne

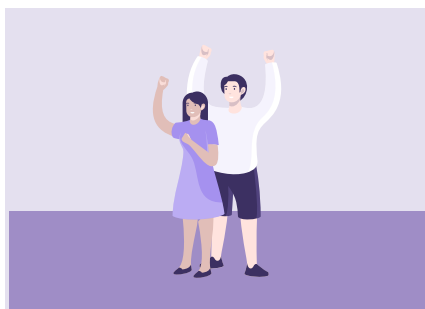
Summary



This paper includes polling produced by Opinium for Millbank Think Tank. It shows that the centre ground of UK politics, which we defined as liberals and social democrats, represents 13% of the UK population.



More broadly, the poll also explored other political viewpoints on both the left and the right. Right-wing respondents, which we categorised as Conservative, right-wing, or Libertarian, received 27% of the total weighted responses. The left, made up of socialists and left-wing supporters, only received 14%.



It is clear from this polling that centrist politicians need to reach out to those on the soft left and the soft right. It is also the case that politicians on the left and right need to reach out to those in the middle ground. In short, coalition-building is key.

Introduction

Our aim as a Think Tank, in being involved in this polling, was to understand how large the political centre is and how it fits into the broader political landscape of the UK. It will help us to understand whether it is thriving or whether the centre ground is struggling for survival in a climate of political extremes. We also wanted to understand where in the UK centrist parties, politicians, and campaigns should target and focus on.

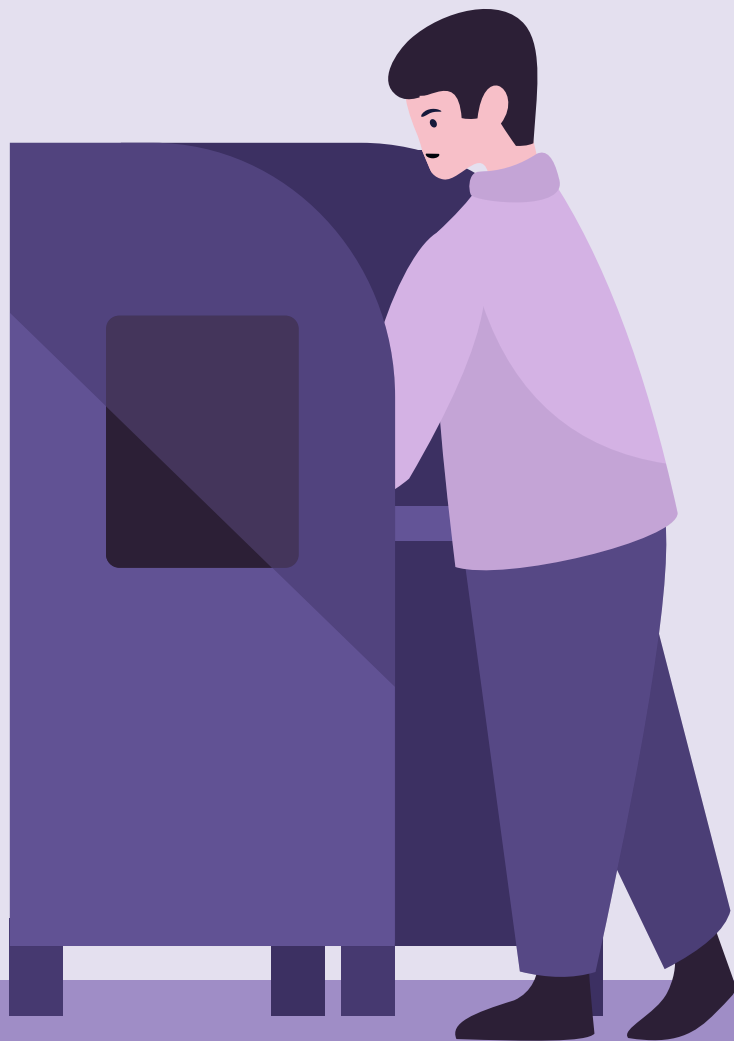
After all, the history of the political centre has seen both triumphs and collapse. Whether it is the Social Democratic Party under Roy Jenkins and David Owen, New Labour under Blair and Brown, Change UK, or the centrist politicians of today, the middle ground is always changing.

To find out the state of the centre ground today we worked with Millbank Think Tank on a poll to understand which words people associate with their political views. The statement was, "Thinking about the various political views people have, here is a list of common words and phrases. Please tick the one that you feel best describes your political views." This poll included 2000 participants and was carried out by Opinium between the 14th and the 16th of December 2022. The poll was also weighted to be politically and nationally representative.

In this paper, we break down each of the poll results to see the results by age group and UK region or state. We also assigned answers to different categories; centrist, left-wing, and right-wing. This means you can read this paper to understand how much support a specific group or a broader group such as those on the left has.

Chapter one

Polling results



The right-wing

Those on the broad right are the largest group in this poll, with 27% of respondents. Something to note, however, is that Liberal Conservatives and moderate Conservatives are likely to be included in those who consider themselves Conservative. Some of these individuals may be more likely to consider themselves as centrists rather than as right-wing.

Figure 1: Support by area

To judge the size of the right, we have grouped together those who describe themselves as right-wing at 6% of respondents, Libertarian at 2% and Conservatives at 19%.

Right wing support

Overall, 27% of people considered themselves right wing including Libertarians, Conservatives and right-wing.

27%

Conservatives

Out of those on the right, the largest group was Conservatives, which may have been impacted by those who also support the Conservative Party.

19%

18 30



Figure 2: Support by group

Conservatives

19% of respondents see themselves as Conservatives, the largest single group identified in this poll.

19%

Right-wing

Those who identify as more broadly "Right-wing" make up a smaller 6% of respondents.

6%

Libertarian

Libertarians make up just 2% of respondents, the smallest political opinion identified within the survey.

2%

The left-wing

On the left, we have grouped Socialists, who make up 6% of respondents, and those who identify as left-wing 8%. This means only 14% of respondents consider themselves on the left, which only rises to 19% if Social Democrats are included.

Figure 3: Support by area

Support for the left is highest in the more northern areas of the UK, including Scotland, the North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber. Interestingly, Wales also sees particularly low levels of support despite the Labour government there.

Overall left-wing

Overall, 14% of people considered themselves left-wing, including those who were left-wing or considered themselves socialists.

14%

Socialist support

Just 6% of people consider themselves Socialists across the UK.

6%

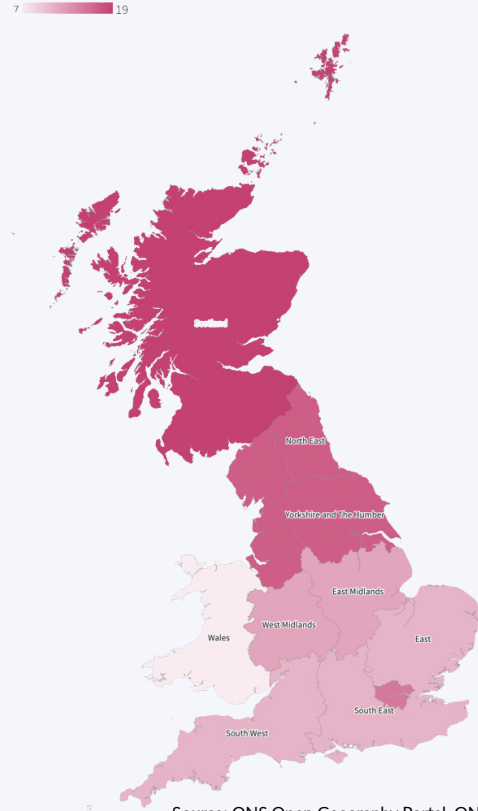


Figure 4: Support by group

Left wing

8% of respondents considered themselves left wing.

8%

Socialist

Those who identify as Socialist make up a smaller 6% of respondents.

6%

Centrism

At the moment, the centre ground makes up around 13% of respondents. We have defined the centre ground as both Social Democrats, who represent 5% of respondents and Liberals, who represent 8% of respondents.

Figure 5: Support by area

The highest level of support for centrism is in Wales and London. There is also stronger support in the south of England and the Midlands compared to northern England and Scotland.

Centrist support

Overall, 13% of people considered themselves some kind of centrist. This is made up of Liberals and Social Democrats.

13%

Support in Wales

Liberals are particularly strong in Wales, with 13% of respondents considering themselves one in the country. When Liberals are grouped with Social Democrats, 17% of people in Wales consider themselves centrists.

17%



Figure 6: Support by group

Liberal

8% of respondents considered themselves Liberals.

8%

Social Democrat

Those who identify as Social Democrats make up a smaller 5% of respondents.

5%

Environmentalists

In this poll, environmentalists are those who identify as environmentalists above all other groups. These voters are especially important with the increasing discussion around climate change and the environment. In total, 8% of respondents identified as environmentalists.

Figure 7: Support by area

The highest level of support for environmentalism is in Wales and Scotland, some of the most rural areas of the UK. The least support can be seen in the North and in London.

Environmentalists

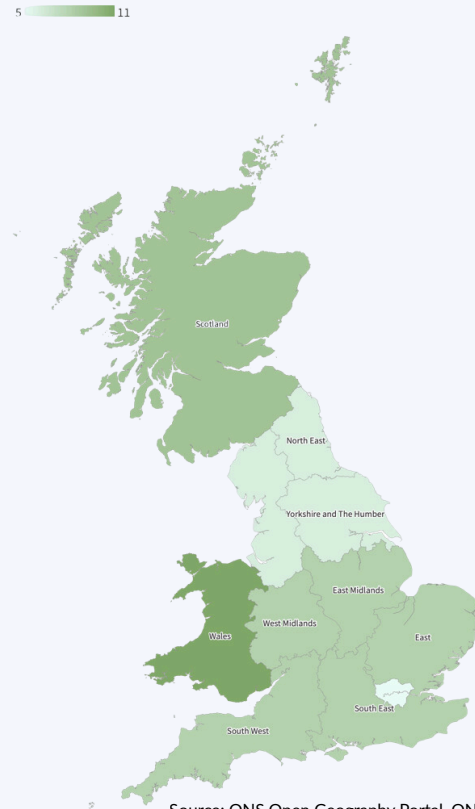
Overall, 8% of respondents considered themselves environmentalists.

8%

Support in Wales

The highest level of support for environmentalists is within Wales where 11% of respondents selected this option.

11%



Source: ONS Open Geography Portal, ONS

Do not know or undecided

These results are those who answered "Other," "Do not know," and "None of these" in response to the question. 21% of people answered with "Don't know," 16% with "None of these," and 2% with "Other."

Figure 9: Support by area

The Midlands and Northern England contain the lowest levels of those who don't know or did not select any option. The highest levels were seen in Wales, the South of England, and Scotland.

Do not know or none

39% of respondents selected "Do not know," "None of these," or "Other" as their response.

39%

Undecided in Wales

The number of people who selected these options was highest in Wales, with almost half of the respondents selecting these options.

47%

28 47



Source: ONS Open Geography Portal, ONS

Figure 10: Support by group

Do not know

21% of respondents selected "Don't know."

21%

None of these

16% selected the "None of these" option.

16%

Other*

Just 2% selected "Other" for smaller political ideologies not mentioned in the poll.

2%

*The number of people who replied is under 50 so this result is less likely to be accurate.

Chapter two

Lessons for centrists



Below are the main takeaways from this polling.

Bringing people together and coalition building. Regardless of political party or outlook, a stark reminder from this poll is how divided UK politics is. For those candidates and leaders in the political centre, they will need to bring together coalitions ranging from liberal Conservatives to Social Democrats. The same goes for those in the Labour Party and the Conservatives. Both still need to reach out to undecided and centrist voters if they are to win elections. This is true for new policies as well. To build support for policies, broad coalitions are needed if they are to stand a chance of succeeding.

We need a voting system that better represents our views. What is clear is that the public has diverse views and ideologies. It is time we adopted Proportional Representation so that these views are better reflected in Parliament.

Focusing on Wales. For centrist politicians and campaigns, Wales is an area that deserves more focus. In this poll, it was the most centrist part of the UK and could be a key region for liberal-minded politicians and campaigns. We need larger polls to see just how large liberal support is in Wales.

Conclusion

The lesson here is clear: with politics remaining fragmented, both the left and right must continue to reach out to centrists. Centrist movements and parties themselves must also remain open to those on the centre-right and the centre-left. Centrists must also look to Wales and London, where the poll shows they may have far more supporters than in the rest of the country.

Bibliography

Figures 1 and 2: Right-wing

The poll looks at how many respondents lived in a certain part of the UK and what age range they fit into. Unsurprisingly, right-wing support is low in London, Scotland, and Wales, whilst the rest of the country is more heavily right-wing. The polling also shows that the older a respondent was, the more likely they were to identify as a Conservative.

By area of the UK

Area of the UK	Conservative	Right wing	Libertarian
Scotland	16%	2%	4%
Wales	14%	2%	2%
North	20%	7%	3%
South	22%	5%	1%
London	12%	8%	3%
Midlands	20%	7%	2%

By age group

Age group	Conservative	Right wing	Libertarian
18-34	12%	6%	2%
35-49	14%	4%	3%
50-64	21%	7%	2%
65+	29%	7%	2%

The results on this page should be treated as indicative only as many fall below 50 respondents.

Figures 3 and 4: Left-wing

Left-wing support is highest in the north of England, Scotland, and Wales. When this is broken down into different areas, it is clear that in areas such as Scotland, left-wing support is higher than those identifying themselves as Socialists.

By area of the UK

Area of the UK	Socialist	Left wing
Scotland	6%	13%
Wales	3%	4%
North	7%	10%
South	5%	6%
London	6%	9%
Midlands	7%	5%

By age group

Age group	Socialist	Left wing
18-34	6%	9%
35-49	5%	10%
50-64	8%	6%
65+	5%	5%

The results on this page should be treated as indicative only as many fall below 50 respondents.

Figures 5 and 6: Centrism

Support for centrism, and more specifically liberalism, is highest in Wales. London also has a high proportion of both Liberals and Social Democrats. Younger people are more likely to be Liberals than older people. However, the reverse is the case for Social Democrats, as the older you are, the more likely you are to identify as one.

By area of the UK

Area of the UK	Liberal	Social Democrat
Scotland	4%	5%
Wales	13%	4%
North	7%	3%
South	8%	4%
London	10%	6%
Midlands	6%	5%

By age group

Age group	Liberal	Social Democrat
18-34	10%	4%
35-49	9%	4%
50-64	6%	4%
65+	5%	6%

The results on this page should be treated as indicative only as many fall below 50 respondents.

Figures 7 and 8: Environmentalists

Unsurprisingly, younger respondents are more likely to consider themselves environmentalists than older people. Those who live in Wales and Scotland are also more likely to consider themselves environmentalists.

By area of the UK

Area of the UK	Environmentalist
Scotland	9%
Wales	11%
North	6%
South	8%
London	5%
Midlands	8%

By age group

Age group	Environmentalist
18-34	9%
35-49	10%
50-64	7%
65+	4%

The results on this page should be treated as indicative only as many fall below 50 respondents.

Figures 9 and 10: Don't know

Younger people are more likely to answer "don't know" whilst Wales is the area of the UK with the most people answering "none of these" or "do not know".

By area of the UK

Area of the UK	Other	None of these	Do not know
Scotland	1%	17%	22%
Wales	0%	23%	24%
North	2%	16%	20%
South	2%	15%	23%
London	3%	20%	19%
Midlands	3%	14%	21%

By age group

Age group	Other	None of these	Do not know
18-34	2%	15%	25%
35-49	1%	15%	26%
50-64	3%	18%	18%
65+	3%	18%	15%

The results on this page should be treated as indicative only, as many fall below 50 respondents.

Company details

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Disclaimers

Millbank Think Tank does not necessarily agree with the contents of this paper but has kindly provided Centre with their polling data on this topic. Any errors or omissions are the responsibility of the author alone.

Author Disclosure Statement

Nothing to disclose.

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Centre Think Tank, 'Polling the political centre' (Bury St. Edmunds, Centre Think Tank, 2023)

Reference the website link: Centre Think Tank, Polling the political centre. Available at: <https://centrethinktank.co.uk/polling-the-political-centre/> [Accessed 00/00/0000].

Reference as a journal article: Wilkins, T. 'Polling the political centre', Centre Think Tank, 20 (2023) pp. 1-24.

If you indirectly reference or use the ideas from this paper, include a link to the paper and the name of our Think Tank.

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