

April 2019

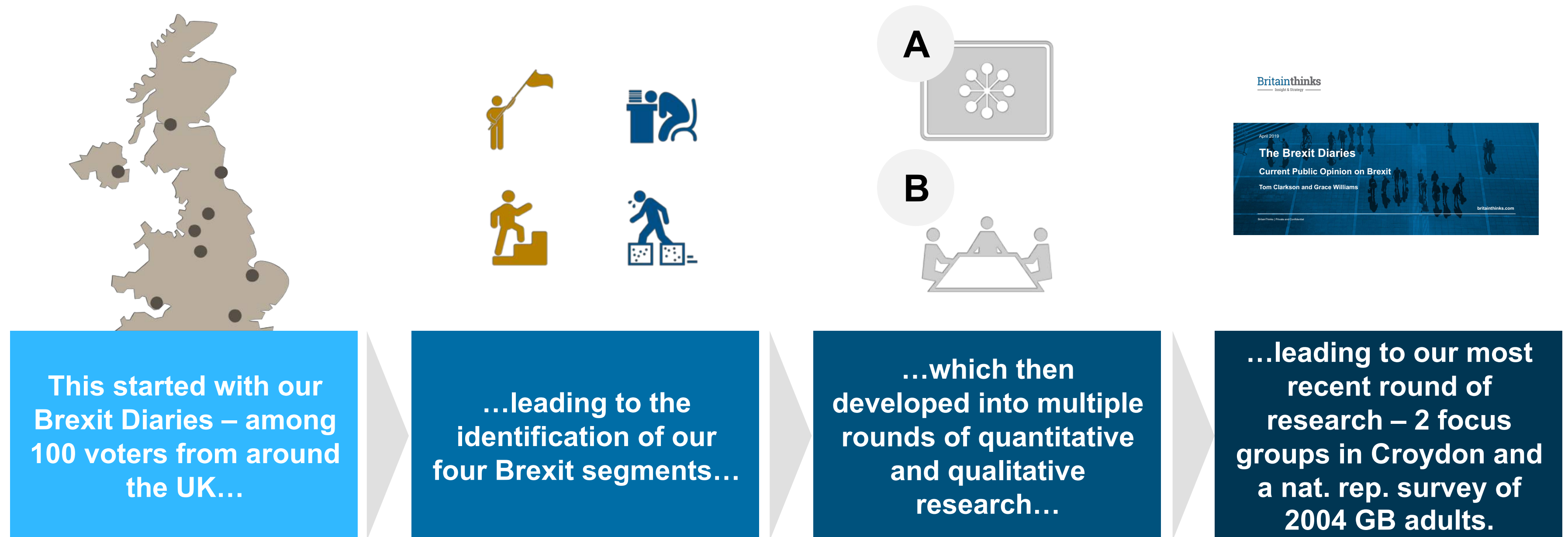
The Brexit Diaries

Current Public Opinion on Brexit

Tom Clarkson and Grace Williams

britainthinks.com

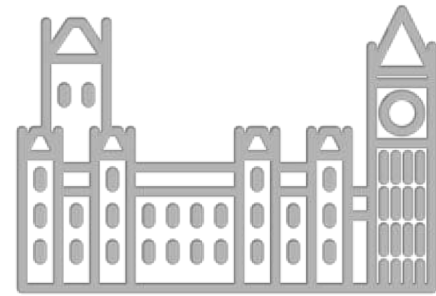
Since 2017, we have conducted extensive research on how people experience the Brexit process.



The most important findings from this research:



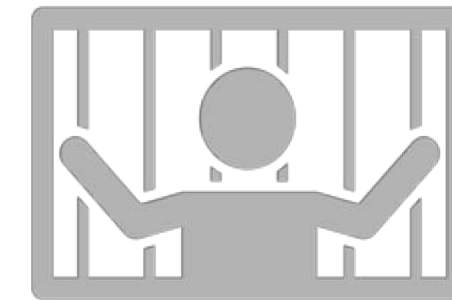
1. The public is totally fed up of hearing about Brexit – and worry about the impact on their mental health.



2. The public blames the whole political class for the mess.



3. Both main parties are now sustaining major reputational damage.



4. The public struggle to see a route out of the chaos.

1

The public is totally fed up of hearing about Brexit – and worry about the impact on their mental health.

Voters are exhausted by Brexit.

An apparent lack of progress, the feeling that we are going round in circles, and broader disinterest in politics all add up to very low enthusiasm for Brexit-related news:



83%

of the public say that they are fed up of seeing Brexit on the news every day.



"The advantage of leaving on Friday would have been not having to hear about it anymore. I don't mean that in a flippant way. It would be lovely to turn the TV on and not have to hear about it and move on."



"Everyone is fed up of Brexit coverage. I had a friend who went to NZ for a month and he said the best thing about the trip was not hearing anything about Brexit."

(Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? 'I'm fed up of seeing Brexit on the news every day' [Base: All respondents (n=2004)])

For many, the chaos feels actively detrimental to our mental health.

Focus group participants told us that Brexit was bad for their mental health, and this was backed up in our survey:



64%

of the public agree that 'anxiety about Brexit is bad for people's mental health'.

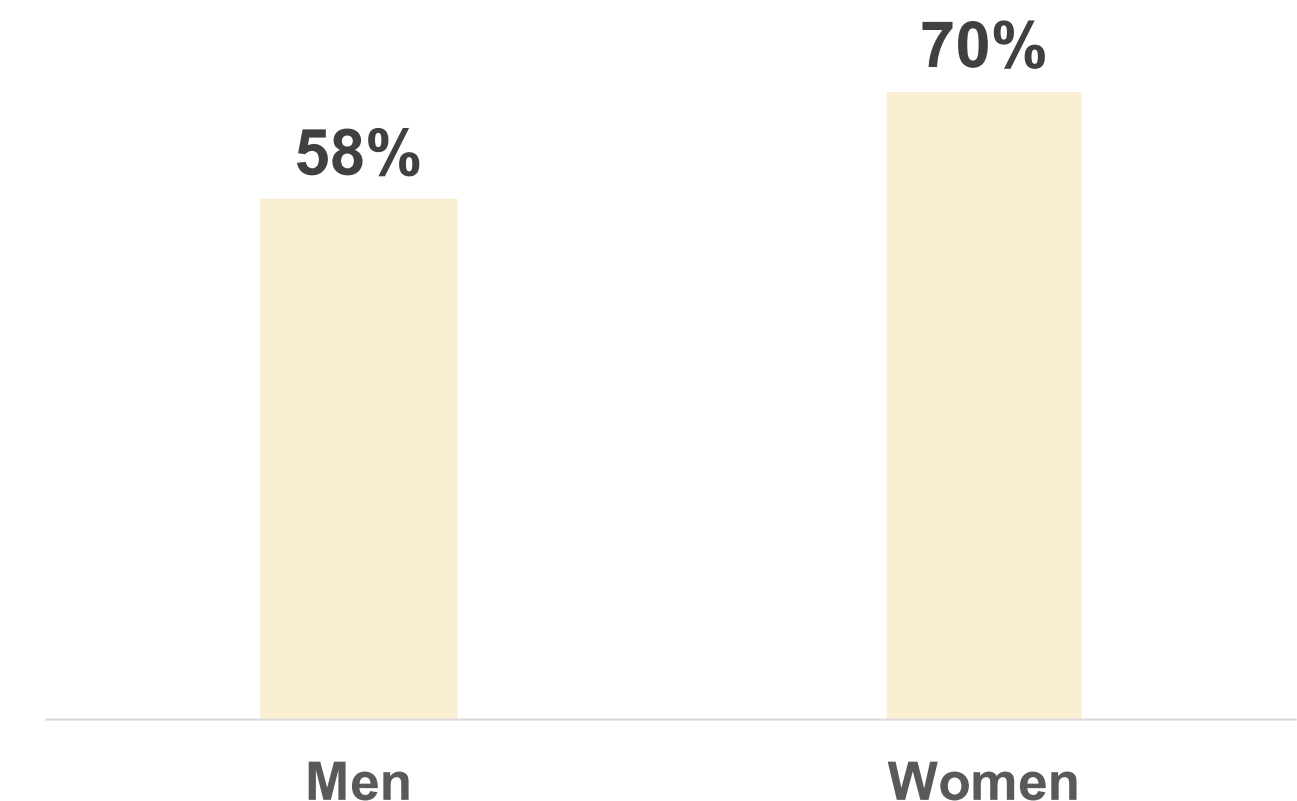
"I think it's demoralizing for people to have to put up with this... Honestly, I'd rather just leave than go through another 2 years."

"There's really not a lot to be positive about."



Concern about the mental health impact of Brexit is particularly high among women:

Anxiety about Brexit is bad for people's mental health
- Showing % who agree



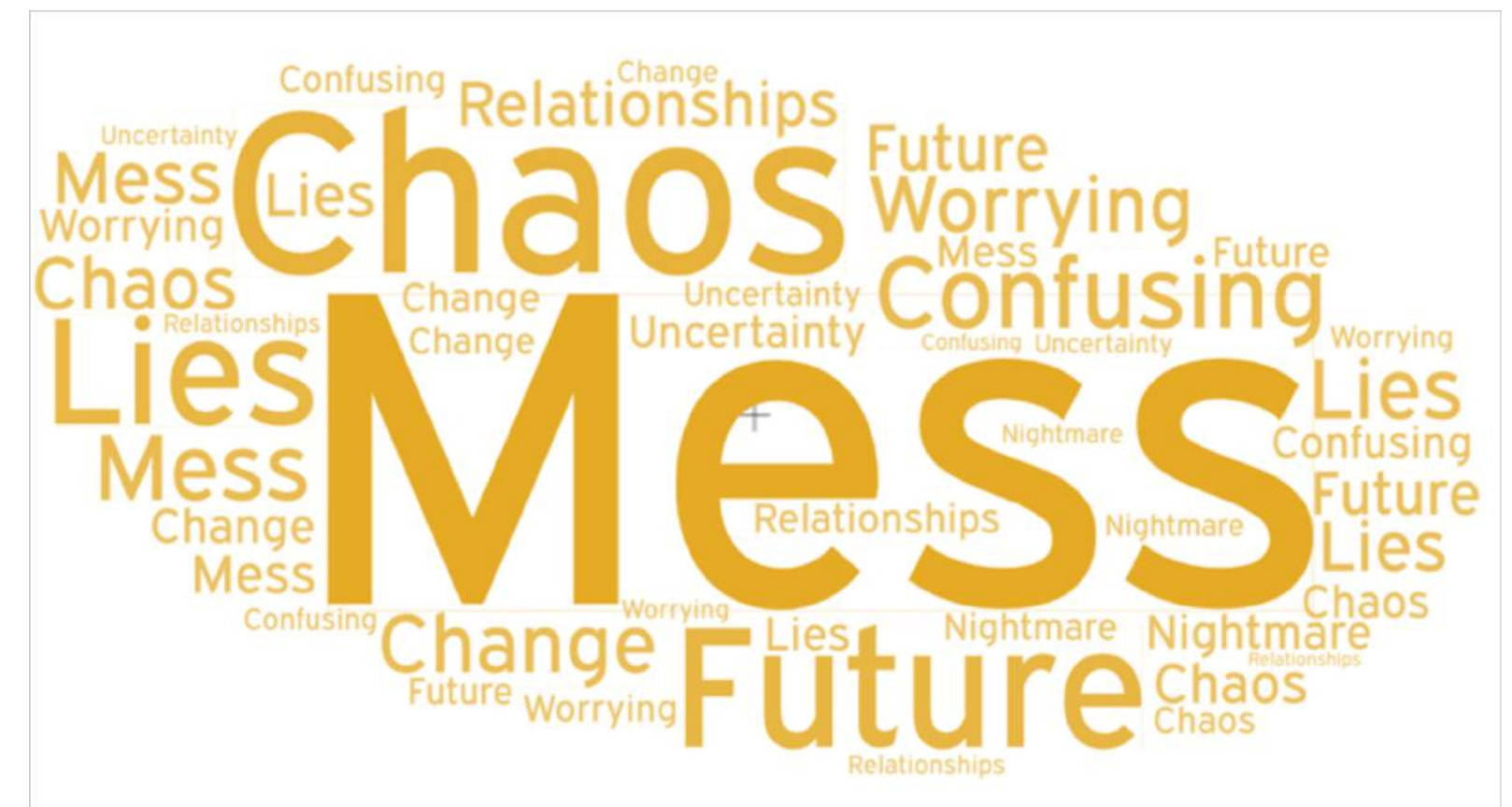
For Leavers, optimism has turned to desperation.

‘Write down the first three words that come into your head when you think about Brexit.’

March 2017



March 2019



- Negativity is driven by view that:
 - Politicians are deliberately blocking the process
 - That we will not genuinely leave



“Our politicians are just not up to it.”

Despair about Brexit is illustrated by voters' choice of backing music for the Brexit process:

'If you had to set Brexit process to music, what song would you choose?'



"The Exorcist theme tune"



"The Long and Winding Road"



"A Little Less Conversation"



2

The public blames the whole political class for the mess.

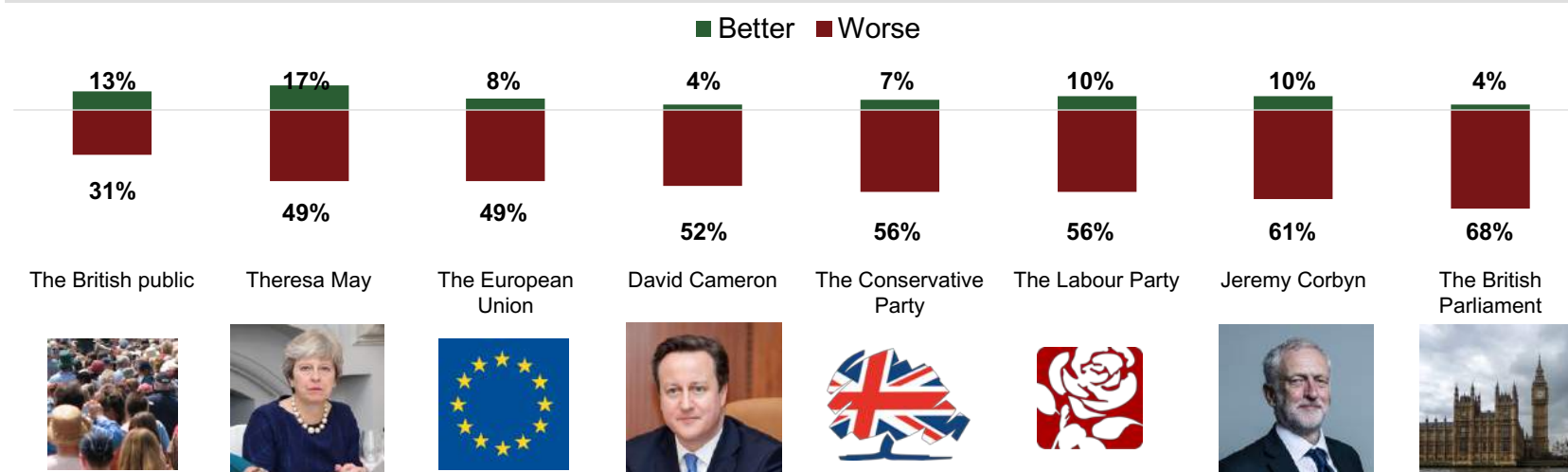
The whole of the political establishment is seen to be at fault for the current mess.

In January, we reported how public disillusionment affected the whole of the political class:

Needless to say, things haven't exactly changed two months later...

1

The UK voted to leave the EU in a referendum on 23rd June 2016. Since then, has your impression of the following people and organisations got better or worse?



2

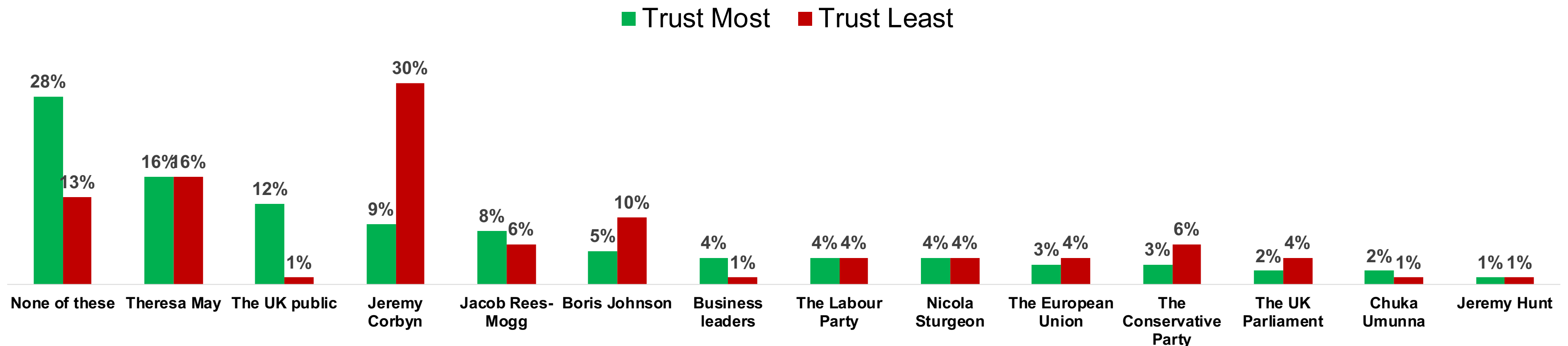
83% of the public agreed that 'the entire political establishment has failed the country on Brexit'

"All of our politicians are just not up to it. We knew they were worse than useless and they've demonstrated that they don't understand business or how to negotiate."



‘None of the above’ is currently most trusted to deliver a good outcome on Brexit:

Which of the following do you trust most and trust least to deliver a good outcome for the United Kingdom on Brexit?



This speaks to a desire for new political leadership and fresh impetus, particularly among women – where 34% (as opposed to 22% of men) selected ‘none of these’ as their most trusted option.

(Q. Which of the following do you trust most and trust least to deliver a good outcome for the United Kingdom on Brexit? [Base: All respondents (n=2004)])

Anger is generic, rather than specific:

“THEY”

Voters don't usually differentiate between Parliament and Government, or specific individuals. Their anger is driven by three factors:

1. Playing political games

Showing that politicians don't believe in Brexit or care about 'the will of the people'

"Three quarters of [MPs] didn't want to leave. They can vote, we can't. I think they will do whatever they can to scupper it."



2. Failing to take decisive action

Revealing politicians' incompetence and disregard for the public

"It's taken a lot longer than anyone thought...We've been to-ing and fro-ing for such a long time and nothing's really happened."



3. Neglecting more important issues

Showing that politicians are out-of-touch and don't understand the lives of ordinary people

"I think it's demoralising for people to have to put up with this. It's burying big issues like knife crime and the NHS – I worry these issues aren't being dealt with."



While voters don't single out any current politicians for the mess, many blame David Cameron.



"It was a political thing for him, he just threw it in the air to see where it landed. It shouldn't have been a question for the people..."

- No current MPs are felt to have done a good job on Brexit so far, **but none are regularly pinpointed as worse than others.**
- However, focus group participants repeatedly blame David Cameron for multiple reasons:
 - Calling the referendum on "too complex" an issue.
 - Running a poor Remain campaign.
 - "Throwing in the towel" when he lost.
- In January, 52% of the public said that their view of David Cameron had got worse since the referendum.

When the dust settles, could this inflict long-term damage on the Conservative brand in the same way as the financial crisis did for Labour?

3 Both main parties are now sustaining major reputational damage.

Brexit is hurting the public profile of both the Conservatives and Labour.

84%

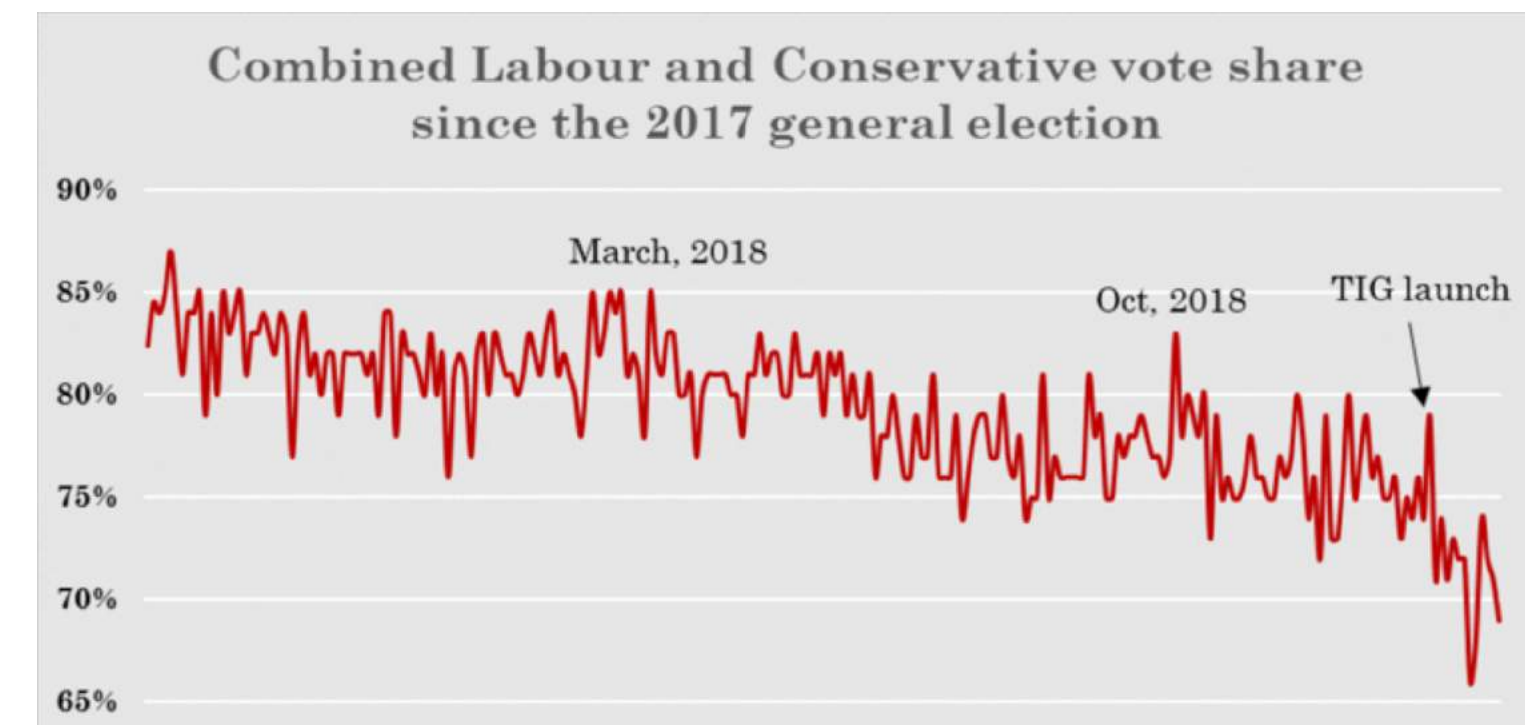
of the public say that they are not impressed with what either the Conservative Party or the Labour Party have been doing on Brexit



"None of the politicians have shown their best colours, we've not seen them in the best light. There's infighting, there's immaturity from all sides."



And there is some evidence that voters are turning away from the party as a result:



Source: @electiondata

Voters feel pity for Theresa May, but she is more trusted than many others in the Brexit debate.

- **Many respect her resilience in the face of such turmoil.**
 - However, there are frustrations with her continued returns to parliament with “the same deal”, despite it being voted down.
- **She’s also the person most trusted to deliver on Brexit.**
 - As already highlighted, 16% select Theresa May as most trusted to deliver a good outcome on Brexit – which places her first (although ‘None’ is the most popular with 28%).



“It feels like no-one is helping her – her own party want to get rid of her, Corbyn isn't helping. I have never voted Conservative but I find myself feeling sorry for her.”



“She does have sticking power to keep going but she has wasted time going back to get a vote on the same thing, and that was time we didn't have to waste.”



(Q. Which of the following do you trust most and trust least to deliver a good outcome for the United Kingdom on Brexit? [Base: All respondents (n=2004)])

But voters increasingly see Brexit as being consumed by the Conservative leadership issue.

The belief that Theresa May's actions are driven by party politics is growing.

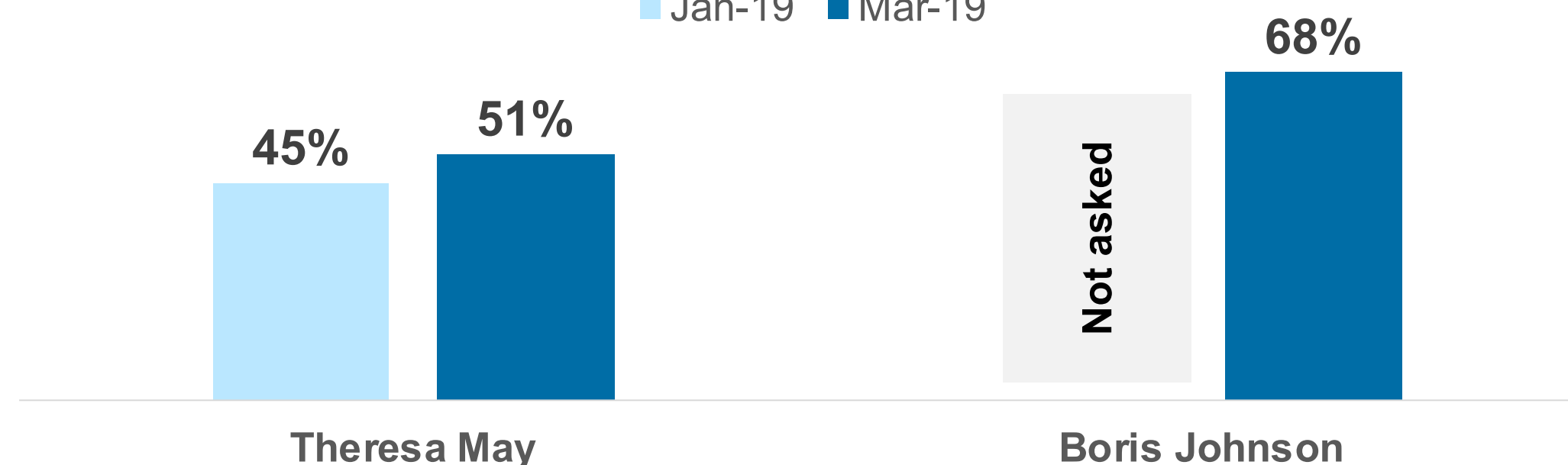
The fact that Boris Johnson performs even more poorly on this reflects that many think the Conservative Party is no longer acting in the national interest.

And this is only accentuated by the announcement that Theresa May would step down if she gets her deal through.

Voters are baffled by this.

On the issue of Brexit, xxx is more concerned about party politics than the national interest
- Showing % who agree

■ Jan-19 ■ Mar-19



"It seems silly to get her deal agreed and then step down. Why not see it through?"



"May going would cause chaos."



Labour's Brexit strategy is damaging the reputation of both the party and Jeremy Corbyn.



Previously, voters (on all sides) saw Jeremy Corbyn as a man of principle. Now, they think he is not acting in the national interest.

They think he is putting his party and his career before the country.

70%

Think he is more concerned with party politics than the national interest.

Including 57% of 18-24 year-olds.

"It seemed like he would be refreshing and new but it hasn't played out [like that]."



67%

Think he is more concerned with his own political career than the national interest.

Compared to 45% for Theresa May

"I don't feel like he's followed through with much, he's just looking to get a media headline."



Voters have little to say about the Lib Dems, with voters describing them as being “invisible” in the Brexit process.

- Both Leave and Remain voters have little to say about the Lib Dems involvement in the Brexit process so far.
- They are unsure what their stance is on May’s deal and whether they have put any amendments forward.



“It's been really quiet – haven't really heard anything from them. It's a bit sad as it could have been their chance to offer something different.”



“I don't know what they've done. I have no clue what they've put forward.”



Voters are unsure what the Independent Group stand for and what kind of impact they could make.



39%

say they don't know in response to the statement "the Independent Group offer a refreshing alternative to the Conservatives and Labour". 26% agree with this statement.

- They're seen to offer some hope to those who feel there is need for 'something a bit different' or a new centrist party.
- Most don't know much about them yet – but what they do know makes it feel like The Independent Group are a single-issue party, rather than a broader movement for change.



"They're so new, I don't know what they stand for or would want to do."

"It's like Avengers Assemble – they've united for this one issue and then they'll go their separate ways."

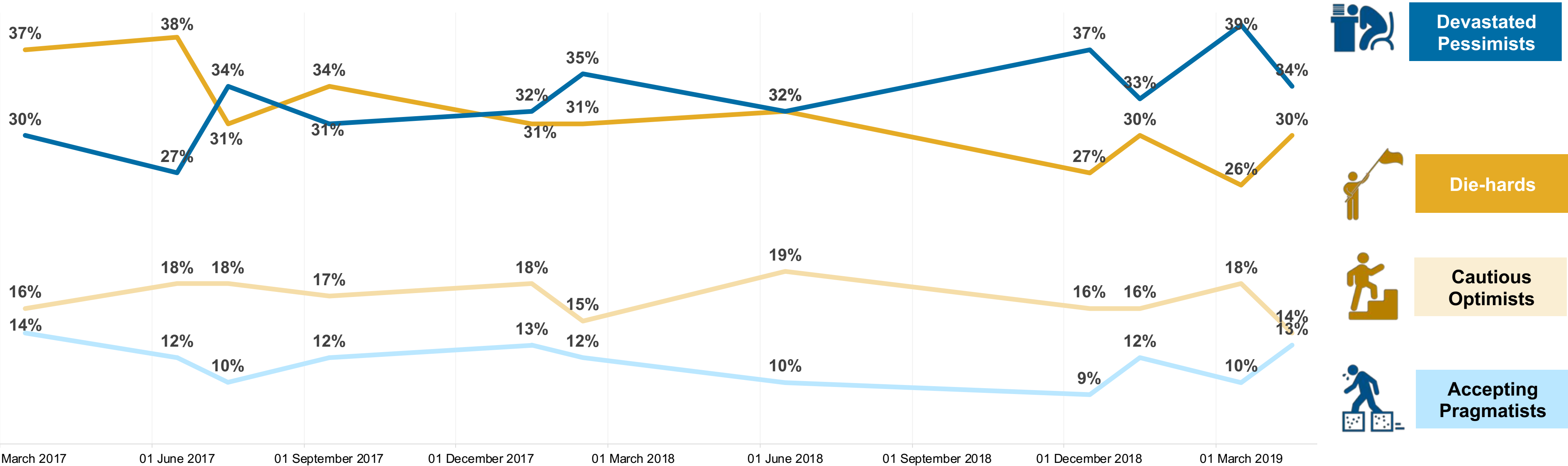


(Q. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? 'The Independent Group offer a refreshing alternative to the Conservatives and Labour' [Base: All respondents (n=2004)])

4

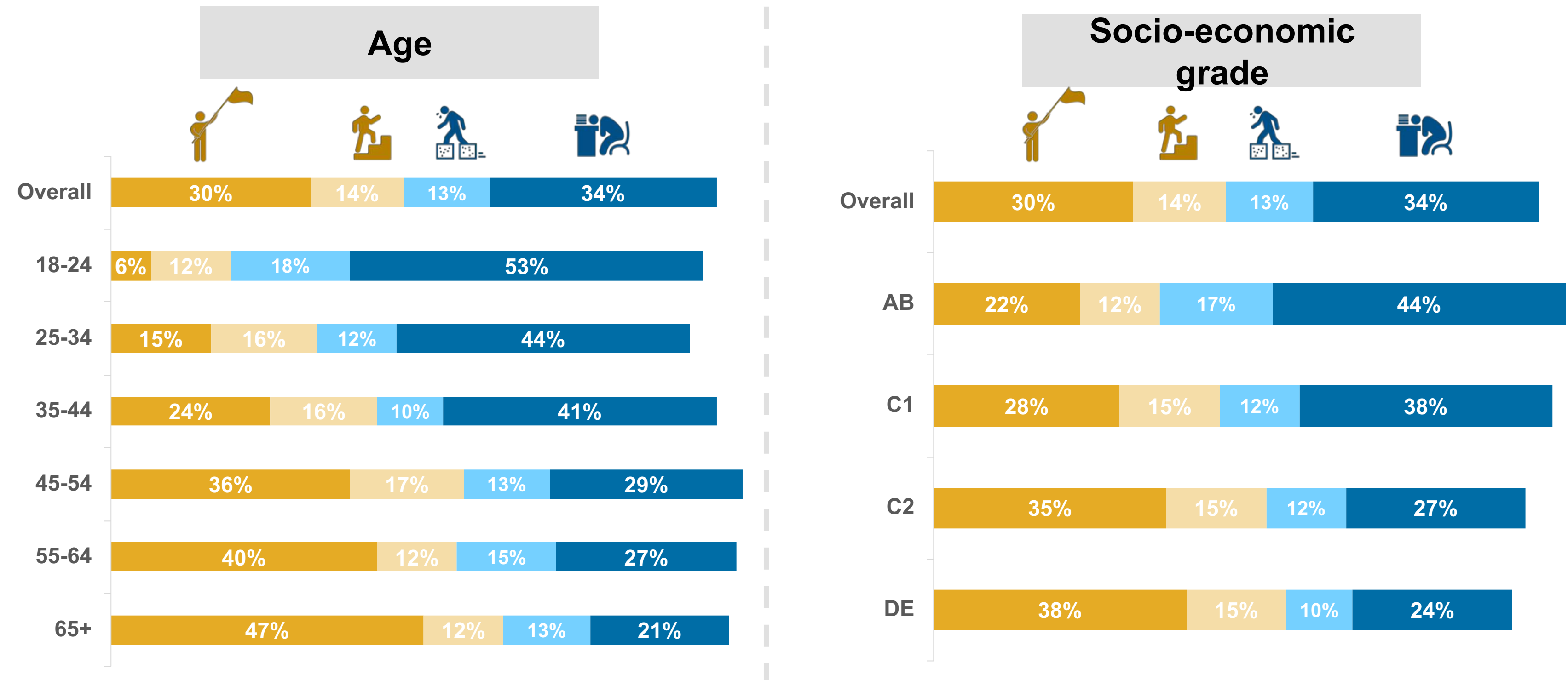
The public struggle to see a route out of the chaos.

The public hasn't changed its mind much on the fundamentals of Brexit.



(Q. In 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, in a referendum on 23rd June. Thinking about this referendum, which of the following comes closest to describing your viewpoint? [Base: All respondents (n=2004)])

Younger and more affluent voters continue to feel more despairing, while older and less affluent voters are more optimistic.



Women are more likely to feel negatively about the Brexit process, and are less likely to support a no deal exit.

Anxiety about Brexit is bad for people's mental health



58%



70%

The more I hear about Brexit, the more confusing it gets



62%



78%

I'm fed up of seeing Brexit on the news every day



80%



86%

At this stage, the best thing for Britain is just to leave the EU without a deal



53%



39%

Suddenly, a whole new set of options appear to be on the table – most of which are confusing:

Just when some were feeling more comfortable with the key concepts in the Brexit debate, they now see a dazzling new kaleidoscope of terms.

For many, it's unclear how these relate to each other or to the issues previously being discussed:

- Customs Union
- Single Market
- Norway
- EFTA
- EEA
- Switzerland
- Confirmatory Vote
- The Labour Plan
- Common Market 2.0

The ever-evolving jargon – particularly around the options now being discussed – has knocked the public's confidence around understanding the key issues:



70%

agree that the more they hear about Brexit, the more confusing it gets.

In focus groups, this currently leads to a tendency to stick to what seem to be the core options – leaving without a deal, remaining a member, holding a referendum and leaving with Theresa May's deal.

Against this backdrop, a General Election seems tangential to the key issues.

70%

of the public think that having a general election 'would not solve anything on Brexit'.



- **It does not feel like it is addressing the main issues directly** – the public think that politicians just need to “grasp the nettle” of Brexit.
- **Many think it is likely that the result would not resolve the political impasse** – i.e. it would produce a hung parliament.
- And many Leavers think that the time required to hold an election would lead to **an unnecessary delay with Brexit.**



“We'd just end up with a hung parliament [...]! It'd get even more complicated.”

(Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? 'Having a General Election would not resolve anything on Brexit' [Base: All respondents (n=2004)])

Voters don't expect us to leave the EU for a while.

- Most voters feel Brexit will still happen but are unsure when.
- Leavers are worried about any prospect of a delay:
 - There is concern negotiations could run for years – extending media coverage and neglect of other issues.
 - Others feel that an extension will achieve very little considering the progress that has been made in the last 2/3 years.



“2020, next year or so. Sooner or later we'll have to leave or May will have to resign.”



“I don't think we will ever actually leave the EU. There will be a reason why we stay. If we have another referendum I'm pretty sure we would stay.”

When reduced to the most extreme options, there's no clear consensus about what should happen next:

39%

Agree 'at this stage, the best thing for Britain is just to cancel Brexit and remain a member of the EU'.



- ***There is a huge age difference:*** 60% of 18-24 year olds agree whereas only 27% of over 65s agree.

46%

Agree 'at this stage, the best thing for Britain is just to leave the EU without a deal'.



- ***There is a huge age difference:*** Only 23% of 18-24 year olds agree whereas 62% of over 65s agree.

(Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? 'At this stage, the best thing for Britain is just to cancel Brexit and remain a member of the EU', 'At this stage, the best thing for Britain is just to leave the EU without a deal' [Base: All respondents (n=2004)])



Cancelling Brexit feels impossible without another referendum.

- **Remainers would love to stay a member of the EU, but few think this is possible.**
 - It has never been presented as an option by any of main political players.
 - Most think a referendum is necessary to overturn the original result. There is some enthusiasm for a referendum.



"It's a way out of the mess, to some degree, and both sides lied in the run up to the vote."

- **Few Leavers have abandoned their fundamental desire for Brexit:**
 - The original reasons for leaving still hold true.
 - Most don't see a positive case for remaining a member of the EU.
 - The link between leaving and economic uncertainty feels exaggerated – and, to many, it isn't clear how any economic consequences would affect their own lives.

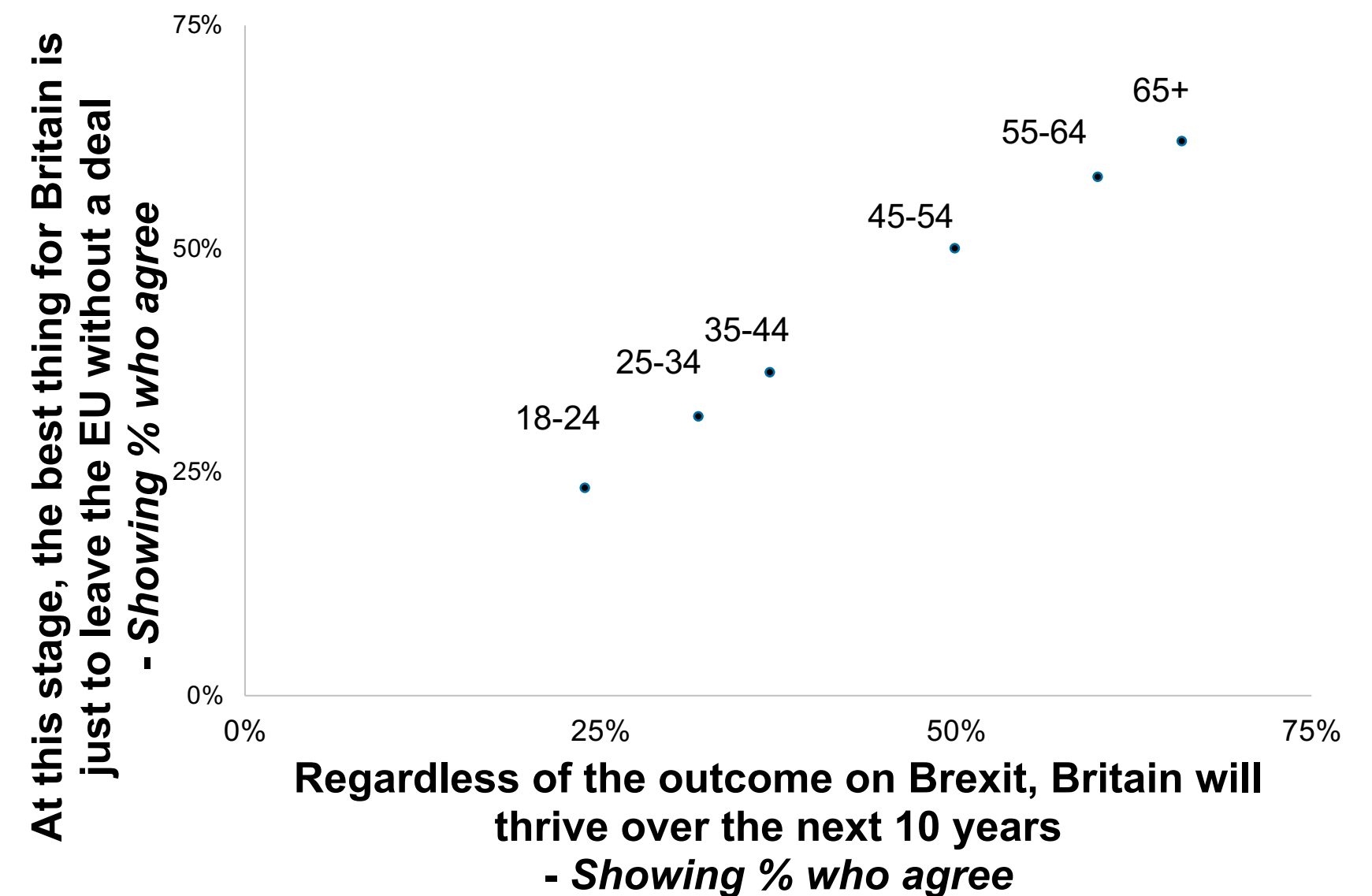


Support for leaving without a deal is closely bound up with national pride:

- **A no deal Brexit is attractive to many Leavers because it...**
 - Feels like the Brexit they voted for – “genuinely leaving”.
 - Sends the blunt message to Brussels that many have wanted to send all their lives.
 - Means leaving will happen sooner rather than later.
 - Speaks to pride in an island nation – “we can stand up on our own two feet” and “they need us more than we need them”.
 - Doesn't feel that risky.

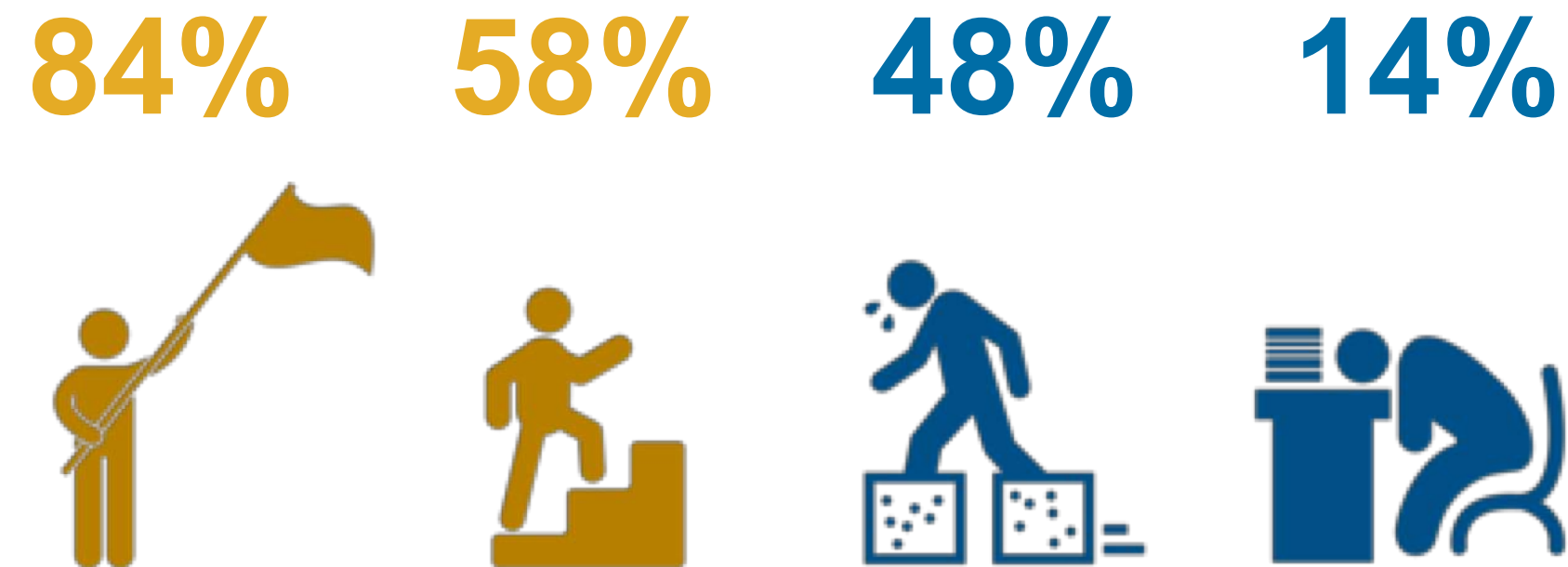
Link between national pride and support for no deal

- Showing trend by age group



Looking ahead, the same old divisions exist regarding the future prospects for Britain:

**Regardless of the outcome on Brexit,
Britain will thrive over the next 10 years**
- Showing % of each segment who agree



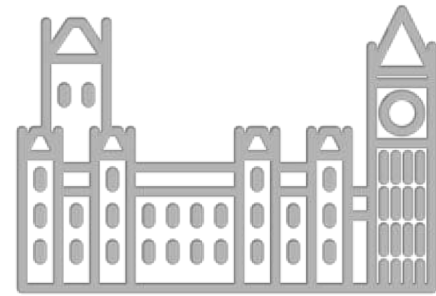
- **Men are more positive about this than women**
 - 52% of men vs 42% of women agree with this statement.
- **Older age groups are more positive than younger age groups.**
 - 66% of 65+ vs. 24% of 18-24 year-olds.
- **Less affluent groups are more positive than more affluent groups.**
 - 51% of DEs vs 42% of ABs.

Conclusions

The most important findings from this research:



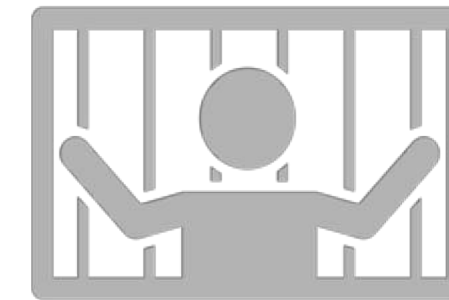
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For more information:

Tom Clarkson
tclarkson@britainthinks.com
@tomclarkson15

Grace Williams
gwilliams@britainthinks.com

BritainThinks
Somerset House
Strand
London
WC2R 1LA

britainthinks.com