

About the Bow Group

The Bow Group has three aims:

- To create new and thought-provoking research for the Conservative Party
- To provide a forum for its members to meet each other socially
- To provide opportunities for its members to meet senior Party figures to discuss the issues of the day

The Group has no corporate view, which allows it to approach each issue on its merits and with an open mind. Accordingly, the views expressed in Bow Group publications are those of the authors, and do not represent a statement of Conservative Party policy, or the views of other members of the Group.

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About the Author

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The project team also included Steve Coddington, John Owen, Brendan Kelly, Martin Williams, Francis Ingham, Damian Hinds.

The team would like to thank all the schools who invited us in, and the students who took part.

Summary

The Bow Group questioned a sample of upper sixth formers in the demographic groups that Conservatives must appeal to, to win back power. We found the following:

- The youth vote does not have a special agenda which politicians should seek to discover and pander to. The influences on their voting intentions are the same as their parents.
- The first time voter is not a left wing idealist, consumed with anger against society and full of Sixties radicalism. They are concerned about the NHS, Europe and education.
- The first time voter has no sense of ideology. He or she is a child of Blair and perhaps Major – they have no concept of the fight with Socialism and they were between 6 and 11 when the Berlin Wall fell.
- They believe in technocratic government. Those who would be best at managing public services should be in power.
- They do not believe in tax and spend policies, generally believing that better management is the key to better public services not necessarily more money.

• Methodology

We visited five schools in December 2000-January 2001:

- a fee assisted comprehensive in Harpenden
- a Doncaster comprehensive
- an independent school in the South-East
- a Kent grammar school
- a London comprehensive

We sampled each school through a focus group and a questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed by 120 people. The focus groups consisted of 15-20 people taken from the upper sixth form of each school. A member of the Bow Group led each focus group through a discussion of the key political topics and themes. The questionnaire was completed by the sample population before the focus group session in order to give the research some statistical support. Most of the questions were the same as those posed by MORI in their monthly survey. This was to ensure that unbiased questions were used and also to give us a control group (i.e. the general population) on which to benchmark our results. We are sure that our approach would suffer terribly under the slide rules of the statisticians from MORI or Gallup.

It is not a scientific sample and is certainly not a fully representative sample of first time voters.

The schools we visited inevitably sway the sample we have taken. There is bias in the fact that we only interviewed those still at school and our sample had a geographical bias centred on England. However the bias is towards the core swing voters – Middle Britain, middle class. Therefore although the sample may not be representative of the population, it may be representative of the section of the population whose votes the Conservatives need to win back. The aim of this research piece to give us an indication of this group's motivation.

Eighteen Plus: The Politics of a New Generation

- The Aim**

Much has been said and written about the Thatcher generation, however little has been discovered about those who have realised a political consciousness under a Labour government. The aim of this piece of research is to discover what will influence the first time voter in the coming general election. The political parties spend much time and effort courting the youth vote. Many politicians have spent the currency of self-respect fairly freely in often-embarrassing attempts to “reach out” to the youth of the day. This piece of research attempts to sort the facts from the stereotypes. There are votes to be won in this bloc – how can we get them and what policies do we have to adopt or adapt to get them?

- Voting Intentions**

We sought to benchmark our sample against the population as a whole to attempt to isolate the macro changes in attitude. The example has been benchmarked against the population as a whole using the MORI poll from 22 January 2001.

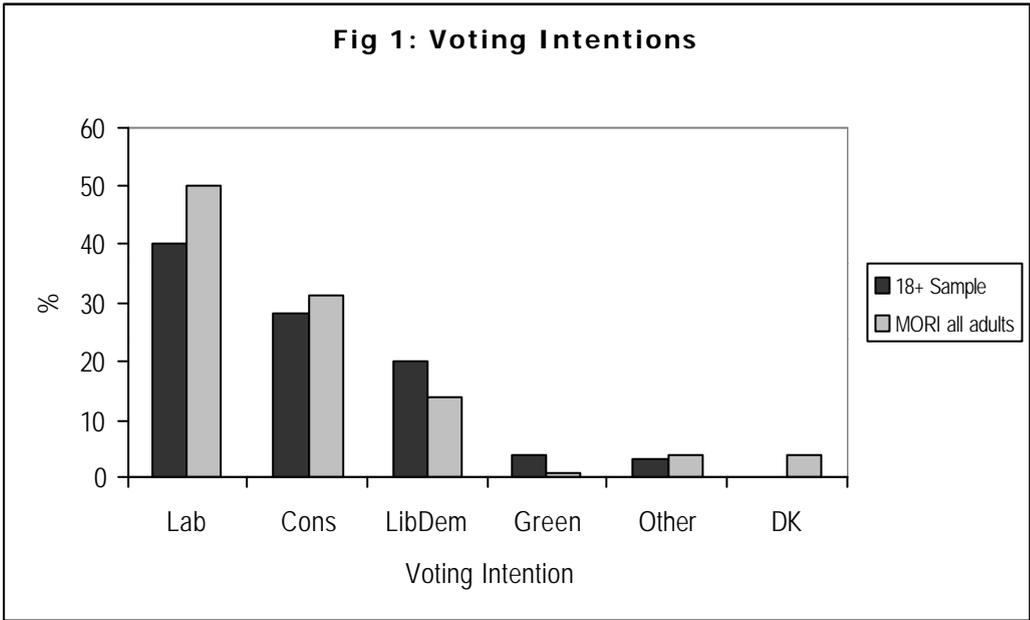


Figure 1 does show some skew towards the minor parties and the Liberal Democrats. However this skew is not as large as conventional wisdom may suggest. Our sample is reasonably balanced compared to the general population. The relatively high percentage of the sample indicating that they would vote Conservative may be indicative of the ABC nature of much of our sample. By contrast, in the London comprehensive there was not a single Conservative. However what this does indicate is that all the young do not automatically reject Conservatism and embrace the Left or minority causes. In addition to this level of Conservative support, we should note that when asked whether the Conservatives were ready to form the next government only 1 in 6 agreed. The credibility gap between voting to elect a Conservative MP and a Conservative government is still large.

• Key Themes

MYTH: YOUTH HAS A SPECIAL AGENDA ON WHICH IT DECIDES HOW TO VOTE

REALITY: THE KEY ISSUES FOR YOUTH ARE THE SAME AS FOR THE WHOLE POPULATION

The youth vote does not have a special agenda to which politicians should pander. Their concerns, and the issues that sway their vote, are the same as their parents'. In the research, our preconception was a bias towards education issues, green politics and legalisation of cannabis. In fact their views were unselfish, forward-looking and disappointingly conventional. Their immediate concerns were not issues that would have a direct effect on them, such as education, but seemed to focus on the NHS and Europe. This unselfish attitude is surprising in its altruism and in its willingness to see the larger picture. Politicians should not spend time, political capital and on occasions self respect in courting a youth vote with youth policies - there is no need and the first time voters see through this.

MYTH: YOUNG PEOPLE ARE MOSTLY LEFT-WING IDEALISTS

REALITY: WE FOUND NON-IDEOLOGICAL REALISTS WHO BELIEVE IN "WHATEVER WORKS"

The views of many people with regard to the idealism of youth still seem to be based on the events of the Sixties rather than the Nineties. The youth vote is more akin to "Men Behaving Badly" than the "Young Ones". It is the bars, rather than the lecture theatres, that are subject to sit-ins amongst today's first time voter. We noted little left-wing radicalism amongst our sample. The concept of ideology is largely alien to today's youth. We should remember that an eighteen-year-old in 2001 was six years old when the Berlin Wall fell, and eight years old when Baroness Thatcher left office. They have no concept of the struggle with socialism which characterised much of the 1980s. It is pointless to allude to an ideological battle which they will regard with as much relevance as the Corn Laws. We also found no evidence for any political thought on the ideas of freedom of the individual versus state control.

The first time voter seems to have no ideology on which to base his/her political views. This is not surprising as most people do not. They seem to see politics in a technocratic way. Which party will be better at managing the status quo? Many appear to act as if they were a shareholder in a company. They do not question its *raison d'être*, and they do not necessarily wish to subscribe for more equity. However, they do see management as a key issue and are prepared to change it if necessary. We do not believe that they are insensitive to ideological argument, but they are most influenced by their perception of management.

On another level, their lack of ideology may be due to a lack of ideology within, or communicated from, the main parties. They pick and choose policies very freely between the main parties. This may indicate a number of issues:

- the parties do not have policies which resonate to one particular theme
- votes can be swayed with the balance of favoured policies – it does not require a Damascene conversion
- personality politics will be increasingly important.

MYTH: THE YOUNG ARE MORE PRO-EUROPEAN OR THEY JUST DON'T CARE

REALITY: FOUR OUT OF FIVE CHOOSE "IN EUROPE BUT NOT RUN BY IT" OVER "AT THE HEART OF EUROPE"

Throughout the focus group sessions, and in the questionnaires, our sample saw Europe as a very important issue. A third saw it as the most important issue facing Britain today, compared with just over 1 in 10 of the general population. It should also be noted, that the young do not see the nation state as an outmoded or divisive concept prolonged by their grandparents, but an idea that is important to them.

• View Of The Political Parties

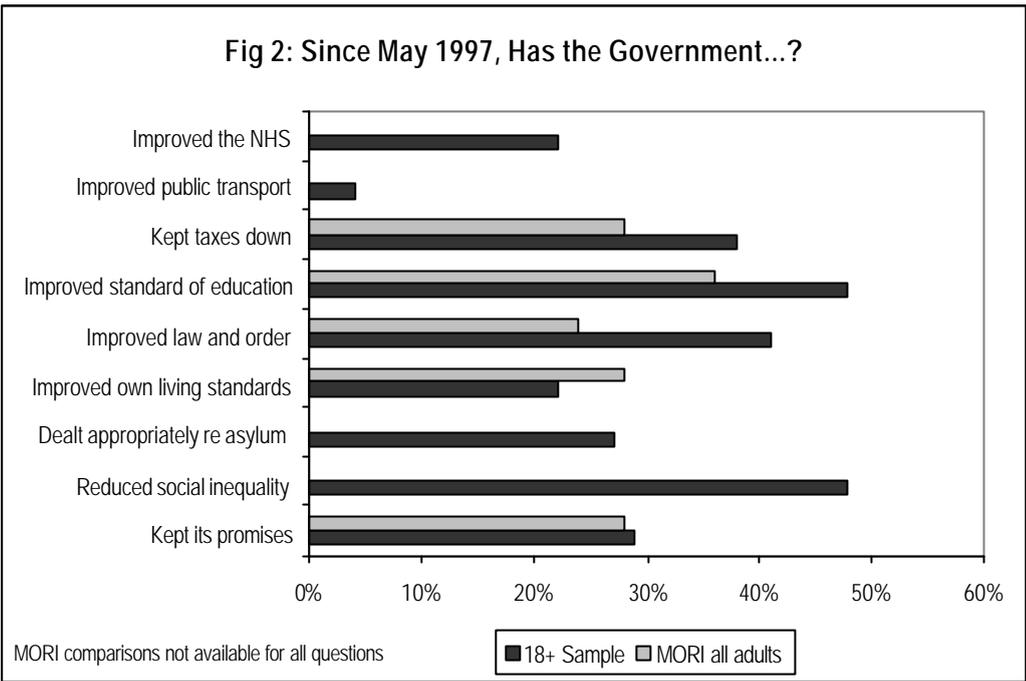
Our sample's perception of the parties, has probably only been largely formed since the last election (when our sample was only 14 years old). Prejudices which say that Labour is better on the NHS and the Conservatives on law and order, may not be as fully formed in the first time voter compared with those with experience.

The focus groups raised two common themes that will make it hard for the Conservatives to build up enough momentum against Labour. Firstly, they felt that Labour had not had time to prove themselves and thus they deserved another term of government. In some people this was allied to a belief that, although they had broken their election promises, they were honouring the commitments they had made if not the actual targets. Some did not believe that Labour had broken their promises but had not been given enough time to achieve them. Many of our sample felt that five years wasn't enough for the Government (or any Government) to implement its policies and for the benefits to flow through. Although they didn't necessarily believe that Labour had kept its promises – they hadn't really expected them to - they felt that it would take longer than four years to "put things right" and would give them the benefit of the doubt for the next five years.

Secondly, there was also a strong feeling that Labour had not made any serious mistakes and therefore did not deserve to be ejected from office. The idea that it ain't broke so don't fix it was quite strong across the groups. Elements of the focus groups were unhappy with Labour, however we are not convinced that they are disillusioned enough to reject them (see election result 1992).

We asked our sample a series of questions on their attitudes towards the parties, and compared the responses to the MORI data for the population at large. Some of the highlights from these questions include:

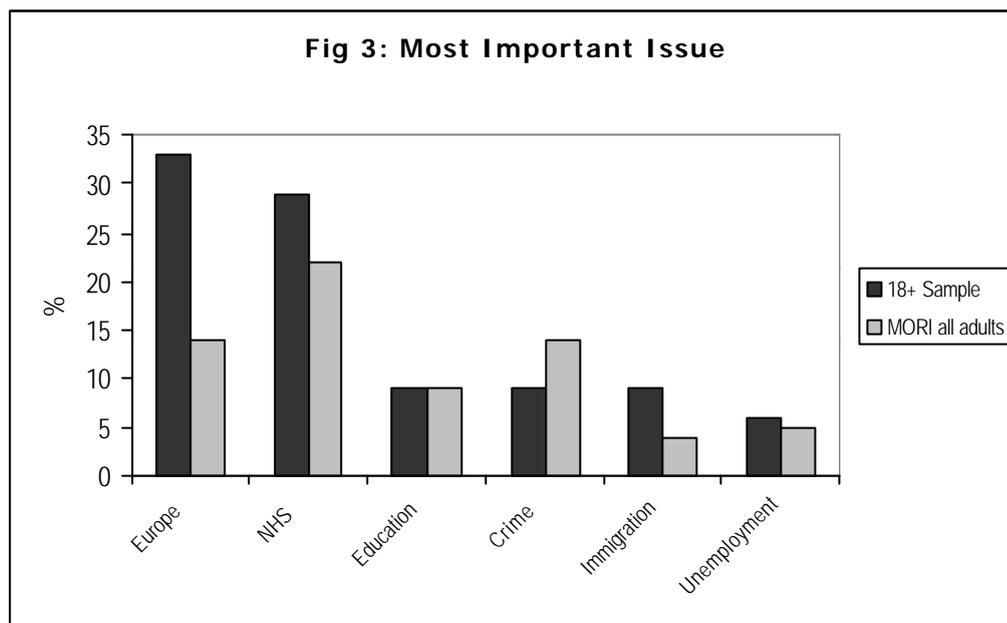
- Compared to the population as a whole the 18+ sample was more confident in politicians (of both parties) to keep their promises, and to understand the real problems facing Britain. Whether this is due to lack of experience or the optimism of youth is difficult to fathom but it is encouraging.
- The 18+ sample was more sure than the general public that Labour 'represents all classes', and that they are 'in touch with ordinary people'. In contrast, the 18+ sample accurately reflected the general public in giving Conservatives less favourable scores on these criteria.
- Labour got more of a vote of confidence in their team of leaders from the 18+ group than from MORI's wider sample of all adults; Conservatives also did better among the young people – though not by as much as Labour.
- In general, the Conservatives were generally seen to be a good Opposition however our focus groups did not feel that Conservatives had constructive policies. We believe this is why there is a disparity between those who will vote Conservative and those who believe the Conservatives are ready to form the next Government.



The views of the government among our sample differ markedly with the views of the general population, despite their similar voting intentions. It is understandable that Labour succeed on more subjective concepts, such as education, but there is a worrying belief in Labour's success with respect to law and order and taxation. The clear quantifiable increase in crime and taxation does not seem to be understood by these voters. Whether this is ignorance on their part or a failure of the opposition to communicate this message, we could not establish.

• Most Important Issues

The most important issues for our sample were the NHS and Europe. The profile of the most important issues is not dissimilar to the general population. The differences are a change of emphasis between the key issues not the introduction of new issues. As we have noted before, the first time voter has no special agenda. The first time voter thinks like the rest of the population. Middle-aged politicians should not fret that he/she is becoming out of touch with the youth vote – if he/she is in touch with the population, the youth vote should take care of itself.



No doubt, if one of the parties pledged themselves to the abolition of tuition fees they would gain votes. However, the first time voter is not a fringe or single issue voter.

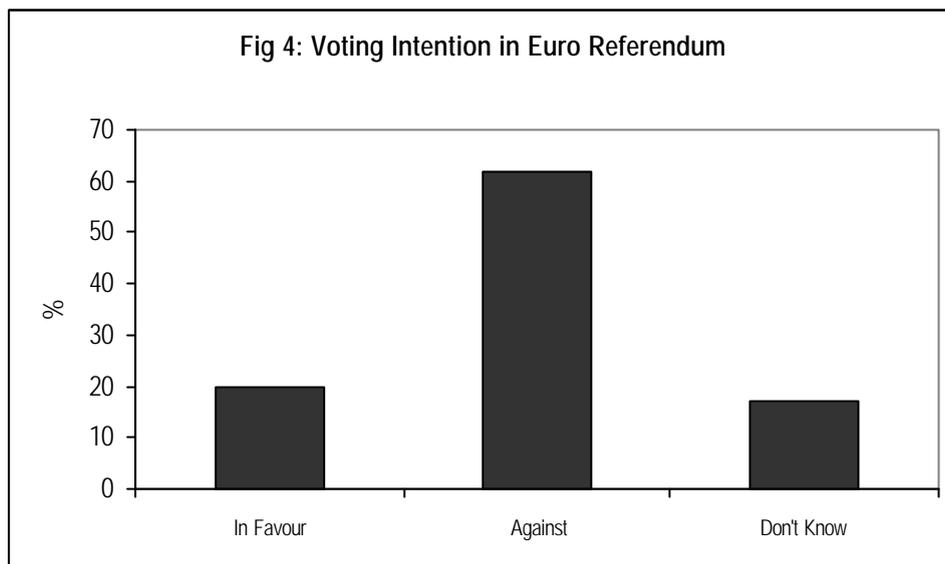
The issues that the sample believed were the most important issues were skewed somewhat towards Europe and immigration. This was also evidenced in the focus groups. The focus groups themselves were often very concentrated on a particular issue. We believe that these focus groups were skewed towards Europe due to their relative affluence and towards immigration because we visited a Kent school.

• NHS

The NHS was a key issue for these first time voters (perhaps surprising for people entering the healthiest phase of life). Interestingly, our focus groups did not believe the problems of the NHS were solely a money problem, but more a managerial problem. Although there was a general feeling that the NHS was under funded, the key problem is perceived to be bad management. Many have a great belief in the value of management and seem hesitant to spend money on a service that is not working. They didn't want to pay more for a bad service. They thought that hospitals were dirty and antiquated. They wished to consolidate improvements in the current system before further wasted investment. However, they did feel strongly about nurses' pay. Some were willing to pay more tax, if they knew that the extra money would go directly to new funds for the NHS.

The groups that we spoke with had little concept of the potential of private healthcare. They saw it only as a preserve of the wealthy and as a drain on the NHS, not something which could complement or aid it. They were very stuck on a state-must-provide mentality.

- Europe



The first time voter has an anti-single currency view at least as strong, if not stronger, than the population as a whole. 1 in 5 of our sample identified with the phrase “Britain should be in Europe but not run by Europe” over the phrase “Britain should be at the heart of Europe”. Any attempt by pro-Europeans to portray the young collectively as part of their movement would be incorrect, and wrong for Euro sceptics to accept. Euro scepticism is not confined to the golf clubs of Esher, but exists at this level of society. However, this opposition is soft opposition. Only half of those who were anti-single currency were “strongly opposed”. The theme of the inevitability of the Euro was discussed often. With a strong government campaign, we believe many of those opposed would vote for a singly currency. Any campaign may focus on the inevitability – a theme they may well identify with. For Euro sceptics to win an EMU referendum, they will have to demonstrate that not entering into the Euro will be beneficial in the long-term – not just that entering it would be harmful in the short-term.

Despite the strong Euro sceptic bias of the sample, when asked which party had the better European policy Labour was equally ranked with the Conservatives. The Euro scepticism of the Conservatives was well recognised by the focus groups. However, the pro-European views of the Labour party have been well hidden, or badly highlighted, to this group of people.

One view that was heard a number of times was that “Under Labour at least we get a choice”. These people felt that they were being robbed of their chance to say no. Labour will neutralise Conservative attacks with the riposte that they are the only party willing to listen to the people. That is an easier message to sell than explaining that Britain needs another five years for the economy to come in line and that we need to test EMU resilience over an appropriate length of time.

• Education

Education was the only area in which the focus groups felt that spending money would improve standards immediately, the key issue being class sizes. This was however tempered with a belief that management failings were partly to blame for poor standards of education. The groups were looking for parties with ideas on how to better manage education. However only a third thought that per pupil funding away from LEA control was a better method of management than the current system.

The Conservatives should note that their policies do not resonate with the very people who are closest to the system. The reasons are unclear but it seems that a mixture of innate conservatism, ignorance and state reliance is to blame. They do not necessarily associate this type of innovative policy with the Conservative Party

A theme common to that of health is that the focus groups felt that the Government had not been given enough time to implement its education policies and see the results come through. Although they did not feel that education had necessarily improved they thought that it was probably going in the right direction and they needed another five years to allow the benefits to flow through.

• Tax And Spending

Unsurprisingly the views of our focus groups were not based on the practicalities of paying tax. This makes it more surprising that the groups were not enthusiastic about solving problems by spending other people's money. On a broad basis they were not advocates of tax and spend politics. They felt that the status quo was broadly correct. A tax cutting agenda did not appeal to our focus groups but similarly any tax rises would have to be justified with *specific* spending. In the questionnaire by contrast there was a strong belief in extending government services such as health and education by increasing spending. One noteworthy point was that a third of our sample thought that Labour had kept taxes down – patently untrue but still believed.

Earmarked or 'hypothecated' taxation was an idea raised on a number of occasions – "I would pay more tax if I knew that it was going to the NHS". This has obviously not worked for the Liberal Democrats with their "1p for education". When people do their sums they don't want to pay more tax. However, it could be a useful tool of government accountability and an interesting idea to change views on taxation itself. More importantly, if you establish a more direct relationship between what you pay and what you get, the step to private healthcare opt-outs, privatised pensions and educational top-ups is that much easier.

• Other

The economy was a very strong positive for Labour. All the groups when asked what was good about the last four years of Labour government have cited the strong and stable growth of the economy. They do give full credit to the Labour Government and believe they should be rewarded for it. It will be difficult to persuade that the Conservatives laid the foundations of this growth.

Defence was an area that we did not cover in our discussions and the topic was never raised by any of the participants. Worryingly, Labour scored higher on defence policy than the Conservatives. We

suspect that firstly none of our group could tell us what these policies were anyway and secondly Labour has an in-built advantage in its current control of the Ministry of Defence.

Law and Order is another traditional Conservative policy success which failed to make an impact on our sample. There was a 30 point gap in those favouring Labour policies over Conservative policies. This was unusual seeing that our sample did not give Labour a 30 point lead in intention to vote. An equal number of our sample agreed with the Labour phrase ("Tough on crime tough on the causes of crime") over "We are too lenient on criminals". This is a slightly more liberal attitude to criminals compared to the general population and is certainly a more generous attitude to the Government than the MORI poll would suggest.

On asylum, the Conservatives have struck a chord not just with the general population but with our sample as well. Three-quarters agreed with the statement "Almost all asylum seekers are economic migrants and only want to live in a richer country. Their applications to stay should be quickly processed and they should be sent back if they are not genuine. If they genuine they should be allowed to stay". Hague also scored more highly over Blair on this issue (along with Europe his only greater score).

Transport was one area where Labour are acknowledged by almost all to be weak and the Conservatives to be relatively strong. The noteworthy view of our focus groups was that the Railways were a Government problem. They may be private however a bad rail service is blamed on the Government who don't even own any shares in these companies. For our groups, re-nationalisation of the railways was a popular concept. It is interesting to note that a bad service from BT or British Gas is not perceived to be the Government's fault but the railways are.