

Rising to the challenge: Middle-class voters and the Conservative Party



A woman walks past a sign for a polling station during the local government elections of 3rd May 2012 (Leon Neal/AFP/Getty Images)

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Executive Summary

- A combination of Britain's changing demographics and significant differences in turnout between social classes meant that voters in social classes 'A' and 'B' constituted nearly a third of the UK electorate at the last general election.
- AB or 'middle-class' voters now form a plurality of the UK electorate, having overtaken the 'C1' social class in 2010.
- The Conservative share of the vote amongst these middle-class voters fell from 56% in 1992 to 37% by 2005, even during times when Conservative support amongst other social classes was beginning to recover.
- Despite progress made by the Conservatives with middle-class males in 2010, the last election saw a further fall in middle-class female voters' support for the Party. The Conservative share of the vote amongst these female voters has now fallen in each of the last four general elections.
- Despite a collapse in middle-class support for the Liberal Democrats since 2010, the Conservatives have only very marginally benefited from this trend. Labour is now effectively competing with the Conservatives amongst middle-class voters, and could win this slice of the electorate in 2015.
- This development represents a clear danger to the Conservatives, where gains from the Liberal Democrats could be more than offset by losses to Labour in predominantly middle-class marginal seats, especially where the Liberal Democrats were in a strong third place in 2010.
- The Conservatives cannot rely on a 'materialistic' appeal in order to win back middle-class voters, who, in addition to being very concerned about the state

of the British economy, also show greater concern than the average voter that the fruits of future economic prosperity are delivered in a fair way.

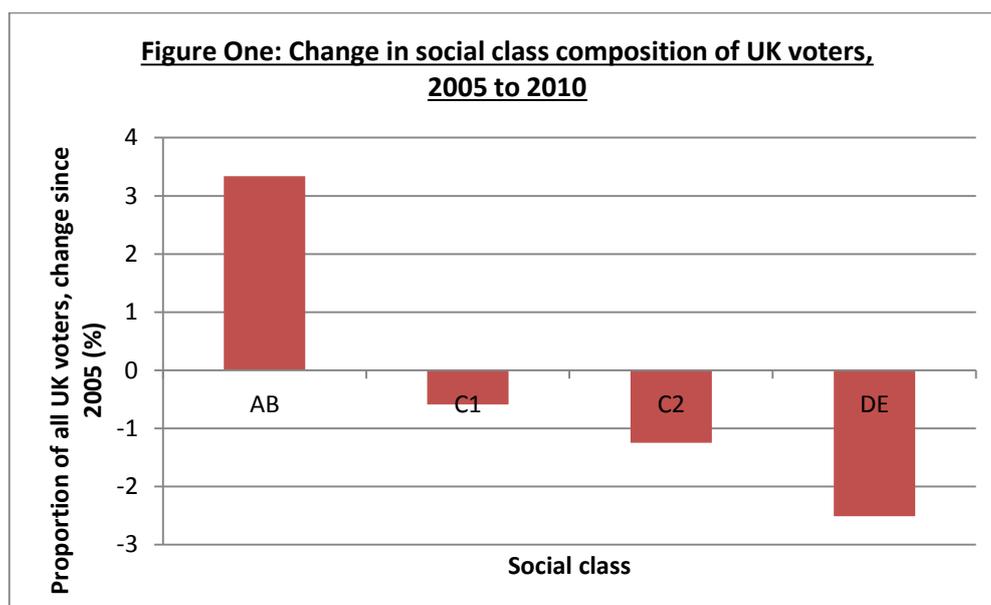
- Middle-class voters are also less likely to be concerned about immigration and crime than other social groups, and are more likely to be concerned about the health service and education.
- The Conservative Party has, since May 2011, held a lead over Labour on the economy, and tied with Labour on education and schools amongst middle-class voters.
- However, poor Conservative polling on the NHS amongst middle-class voters remains the biggest 'structural' impediment to the Conservatives regaining the electoral dominance they enjoyed amongst middle-class voters in the early-1990s.
- Although Conservative efforts to re-engage with 'striving' voters are welcome, a Conservative victory in 2015 is dependent on building a broad yet coherent 'pitch' to the country which can resonate with all social classes.

A middle-class nation¹

The United Kingdom's electorate is becoming increasingly middle-class. The 'A' and 'B' social classes, which contain managerial and professional workers, comprised 26% of registered voters at the time of the 2010 general election. This represented a 2% increase from the 2005 general election, making AB voters the fastest growing section of the UK electorate.²

The increasing electoral influence of these two social classes is enhanced by the greater propensity of registered AB voters to turn out to vote on polling day, or vote by other means, relative to other social classes. Turnout amongst AB voters was 76% at the 2010 general election, 11% above the national average and 5% higher than AB turnout at the 2005 general election.³

Taken together, the UK's changing demographics combined with significant differences in turnout at general elections between different social classes, meant that almost a third (31.34%) of actual voters in 2010 were drawn from the AB social group, a 3.34% increase from 2005. This increase meant that AB voters overtook 'C1' voters, those employed as supervisory or clerical workers, as the most preponderant social class amongst UK voters in 2010 (Figures One and Two).⁴



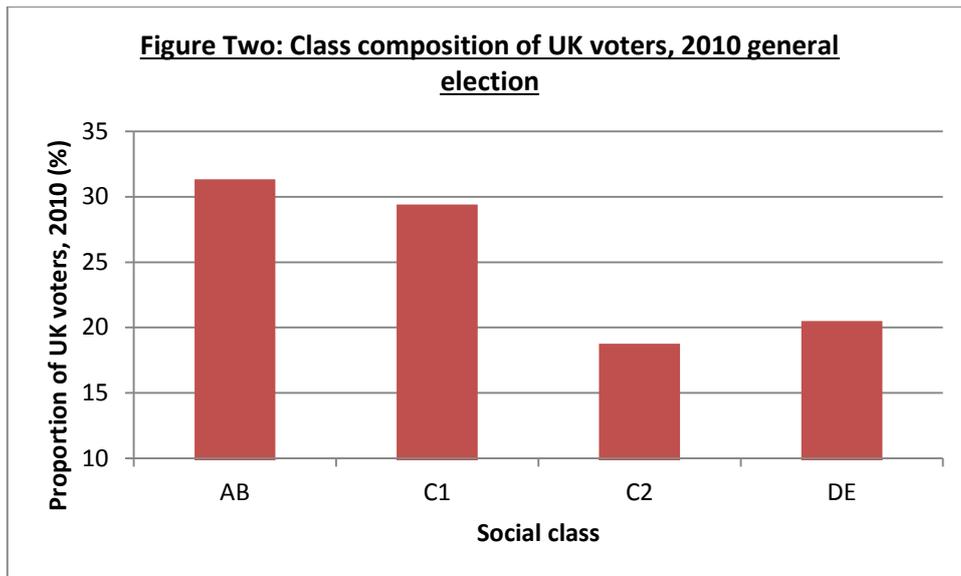


Figure Two: Middle-class voters in the AB social class now form a plurality of UK voters.

The Conservative Party and middle-class voters, 1992-2005

The top two social classes have traditionally been bedrocks of Conservative support at general elections. The last time the Conservative Party won a majority, in 1992, 56% of AB voters gave their support to John Major's government. This level of support represented a 37% lead over the Labour Party amongst these voters. However, the Conservatives' standing amongst AB voters declined significantly during the course of the 1992-1997 Parliament, with the percentage of AB voters supporting the Conservatives dropping to 41% at the 1997 general election, resulting in a much reduced lead over Tony Blair's Labour Party of just 10%.⁵

Perhaps more interestingly, the A and B social classes failed to re-embrace the Conservative Party in subsequent elections after 1997 when the Party was seeking to re-enter government from opposition. In fact, Conservative support amongst these voters actually declined further between the 2001 and 2005 general elections, falling by 2% to reach 37% in 2005. This worsening level of support represented a 19% decline in support in the thirteen years after 1992, at a time when support for the Conservatives in other social classes was beginning to slowly recover (Figure Three).⁶

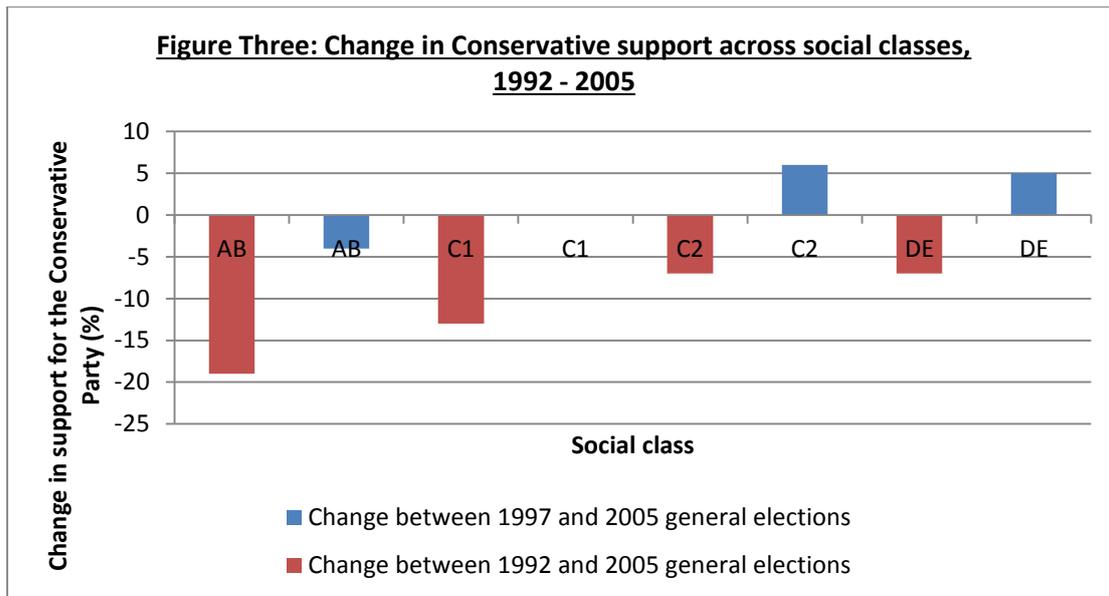


Figure Three: The Conservatives' uneven recovery in electoral fortunes amongst different social classes up to 2005.

It has been argued elsewhere by Lord Ashcroft, a former Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party who was involved with the Party's 2005 and 2010 general election campaigns, that part of the reason for this continuing decline was the strong focus which the 2005 Conservative general election campaign placed on controlling immigration, a stance which had limited appeal to the growing number of AB voters.⁷ This argument will be examined in greater detail later in this paper. Meanwhile, Conservative popular vote gains in 2005 were instead most visible within the smallest (and declining) proportion of the electorate, those classified as skilled manual workers or 'C2s.'

The Conservative Party and middle-class voters at the 2010 general election

The 2010 United Kingdom general election, fought against the background of an economic downturn caused by the 2007-2008 financial crisis and an extremely unpopular Labour government, led by Gordon Brown, saw a recovery in Conservative electoral fortunes under David Cameron, returning the Conservative Party to government after thirteen years on the opposition benches. Whilst the significant net increase in Conservative Parliamentary representation (+97 seats) represented the largest such gains for the Party at a general election since the 1930s, Conservative gains in the popular vote in 2010 were more modest.⁸

Overall, the Conservative share of the popular vote in 2010 rose by 4% to 37%, representing a national swing from Labour to the Conservatives of 5%. However, this aggregate figure masked significant disparities in the Conservatives' performance across different elements of the electorate.

The Conservatives performed best amongst relatively young voters, recording swings of 11.5% amongst both men aged 25-34 and women aged 18 to 24. In terms of social class, the Conservatives performed best amongst males in the DE social class, which comprises unskilled manual workers and unemployed persons, and women in the C2 social class. Both groups saw swings to the Conservatives of 10% or over; easily sufficient enough to secure a sizeable Conservative majority over all other parties in Parliament if repeated across all social classes.

One of the reasons that these significant swings to the Conservatives did not translate into greater numbers of votes and seats for the Party overall is because of the significantly lower turnout levels recorded amongst these groups, compared to the average national turnout. Male turnout in the DE social class and female turnout in the C2 social class were both below 60%, whilst the turnout rate for women aged 18-24 was just 39%, 26% below the national average and the lowest turnout level recorded for any group studied in Ipsos-MORI's study of the 2010 general election.

Furthermore, the swing from Labour to the Conservatives was less pronounced amongst some sections of the electorate where turnout was higher than the national average, contributing to the Conservatives falling short of gaining an overall majority in the House of Commons. The swing from Labour to the Conservatives amongst all AB voters was just 2%, less than half the national swing of 5% recorded in 2010.

However, the pro-Conservative swing recorded amongst the AB group in 2010 was all the result of a 5.5% swing from Labour to the Conservatives amongst male AB voters. Among female AB voters, there was actually a small (1%) swing *to* Labour from the Conservatives in 2010.⁹

The change in the composition of the Conservative vote by social class between the 2005 and 2010 general elections is shown in Figure Four.

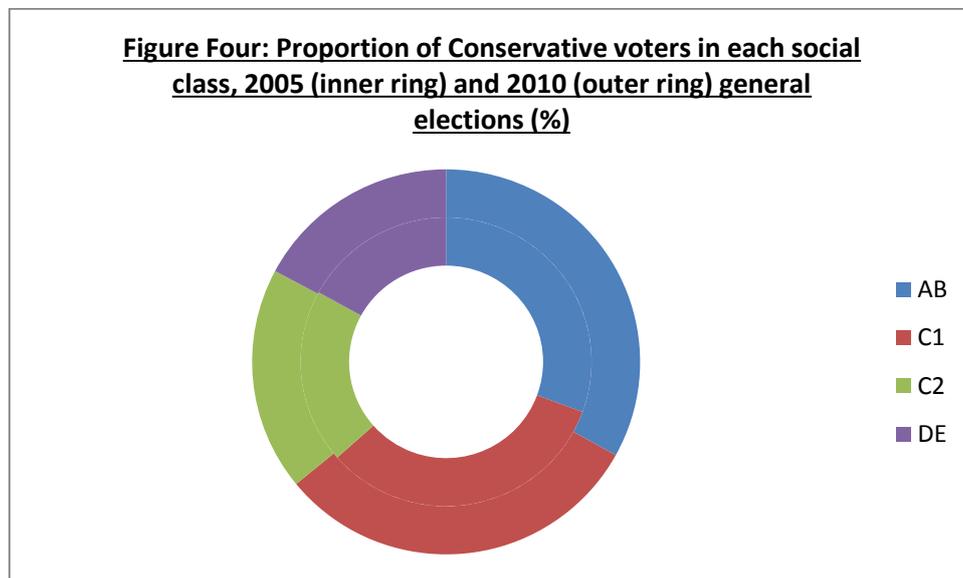


Figure Four: The proportion of Conservative voters in social classes A and B increased by 2.41% between 2005 and 2010, despite the proportion of all voters belonging to these social classes increasing by 3.34% over the same period of time.

Where did these lost middle-class voters go?

The drop of seventeen percentage points in support for the Conservatives amongst AB voters between 1992 and 2010 was to the benefit of both the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties. For example, Labour increased its support amongst AB voters by 12%, from 19% to 31%, between 1992 and 1997.

Despite falling back in terms of popular support amongst AB voters, as well as the electorate as a whole over the course of the next three general elections, Labour still managed to win 26% of the AB vote in 2010, and also won 29% of the AB female vote at the last general election, the same as it managed in 2005.

The Liberal Democrats were beneficiaries of the drop off in AB voter support for both the Conservatives and Labour between 1997 and 2005. Liberal Democrat support rose from 22% amongst all AB voters in both the 1992 and 1997 general elections to 25% in 2001, before recording 29% in both the 2005 and 2010 general

elections. Whilst AB support for the Liberal Democrats was finely balanced between men and women in 2005, by 2010 the Liberal Democrats had further increased their standing amongst AB women, with support for the Party rising to 31% amongst this group at the last general election, four points above AB male voters' support for the Party.

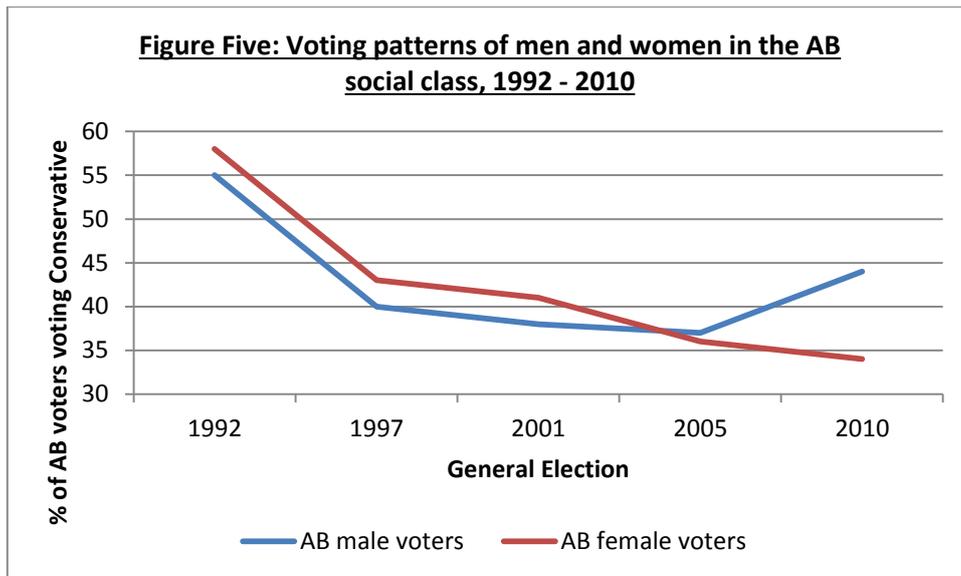
This suggests that the Conservatives' success in making up ground amongst male AB voters between 2005 and 2010, where their vote share rose by 7%, was undermined by Liberal Democrat success in continuing to 'peel off' female AB voters from the Conservatives, and exacerbated by an unpopular Labour Government's success at retaining its female AB vote from 2005.

All of this means that the Conservative share of the vote amongst female AB voters has now fallen in each of the last four general elections.

Finally, the Liberal Democrats finished ahead of Labour amongst AB voters as a whole in both the 2005 and 2010 general elections, by 1% and 3% respectively. In 2005, they were also only 8% behind the Conservatives among this group of voters.⁹

As things currently stand, one positive aspect of the growth of AB voters as a proportion of all UK voters for the Conservatives is that the growth in this social class seems to be more skewed towards male AB voters, amongst whom the Conservatives are proving better at winning back support. Whilst male and female AB voters each comprised 14% of UK voters in 2005, by 2010 male AB voters comprised 16.46% of UK voters, compared to a figure of 14.89% for AB women.

The widening gender gap in the voting patterns of AB voters since 1992 is shown in Figure Five.



Coalition politics and middle-class voters since 2010

The formation of the Coalition Government in the aftermath of the indecisive 2010 general election result has led to substantial changes in the political allegiances of AB voters, with a considerable shift in AB support away from the Liberal Democrats and towards Labour. According to Ipsos-MORI's December 2012 Political Monitor report, the Labour Party now enjoys the support of 41% of certain AB voters, a rise of 15% since the 2010 general election. The Conservatives have also risen slightly, to 41% of certain AB voters, up from 39% in 2010.¹⁰

The big electoral losers from these trends have been the Liberal Democrats, for whom AB support collapsed from 29% to 10% amongst certain voters over the first half of this Parliament, a decline of almost two-thirds.

As Figures Six and Seven show, Liberal Democrat support amongst the AB voter group has not surpassed the 20% mark since the month the Coalition was formed, mirroring the Party's performance amongst all certain voters in Ipsos-MORI's monthly Political Monitor series. As discussed above, the big beneficiaries of this decline have been Labour, who have consistently been in the 30% to 40% range amongst AB voters since late-2010, and have on several occasions overtaken the Conservatives amongst this group; in early-2011 and throughout 2012.¹¹

Figure Six: Voting intention amongst all certain voters, May 2010 to December 2012

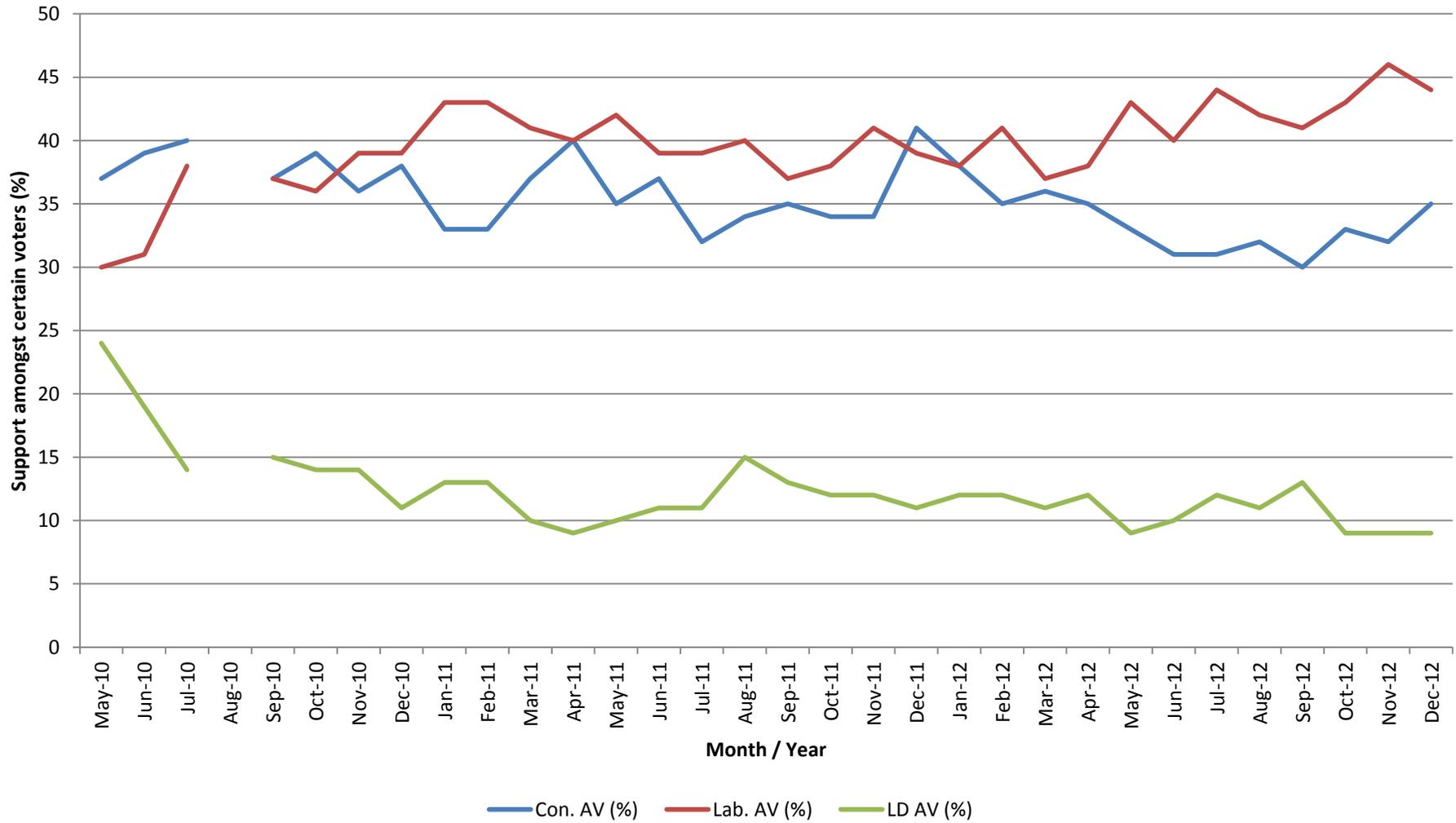
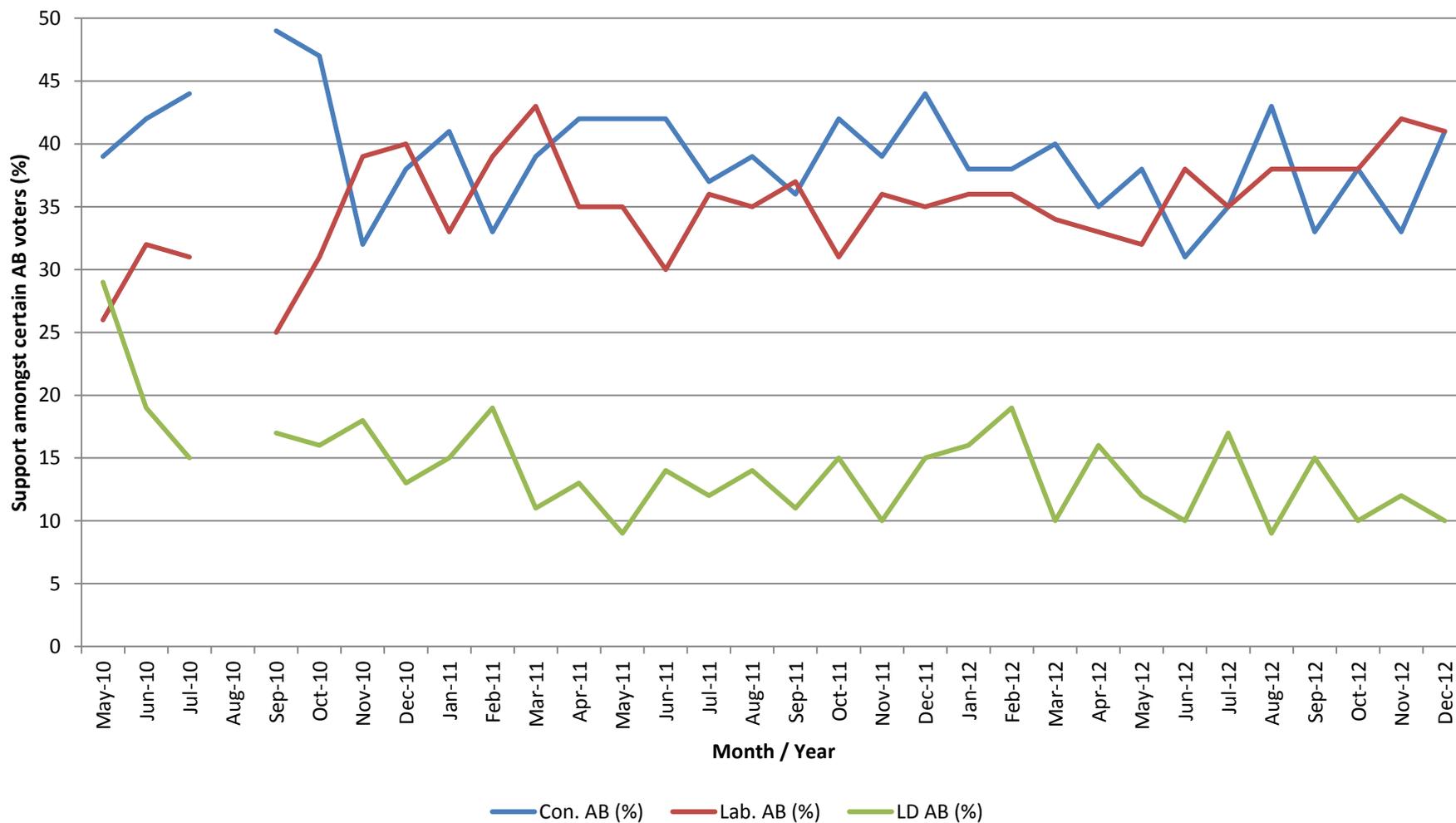


Figure Seven: Voting intention amongst certain AB voters, May 2010 to December 2012



For the Conservatives, their performance amongst AB voters since 2010 has been more mixed than the other two main parties. Whilst their support has not collapsed as the Liberal Democrats' has, they have not been the main beneficiaries of the collapse of AB support for the Liberal Democrats, despite having won this group by varying margins in each of the last five general elections. Indeed, apart from brief polling spells in late-2010 and in some months during 2011, the Conservatives have not been able to break the 40% barrier amongst AB voters, and seem to be stuck at between 35% and 40% of the AB vote; at or slightly below their 2010 level.

More importantly, the near wholesale switch of significant numbers of AB voters from the Liberal Democrats to Labour means that the Conservative Party may only narrowly win the growing AB voter group, and could even come second to Labour in 2015, even if the Conservative Party matches the 39% of the AB vote it won in 2010.

This substantial shift in the voting intentions of certain AB voters since 2010 will of course not matter as much to the Conservatives in Conservative – Liberal Democrat marginal seats, where the transfer of votes from the Liberal Democrats to Labour could allow a second placed Conservative to 'come through the middle' and win the seat.

However, the benefit of these seat gains, which cannot be taken for granted anyway due to the strength of the Liberal Democrats on a constituency-by-constituency basis in seats they hold, would count for nothing if a strong Labour performance amongst AB voters were to cost the Conservatives seats in areas where Labour is currently in second place.

What matters to middle-class voters?

In addition to their Political Monitor series which details the extent of support for political parties on a monthly basis, the polling company Ipsos-MORI also produces a monthly Issues Index, which asks voters which issues they consider to be most important and of general importance to the country at that point in time. The polling

is also broken-down sufficiently to allow for an assessment of how the priorities of respondents in the AB social class differ from the wider UK electorate. This data set is useful as it will help to identify the areas where the Conservative Party needs to be seen as most trustworthy and competent in order to win over greater numbers of AB voters in 2015. Furthermore, as was noted earlier, it has already been advanced by commentators on recent Conservative electoral performances that political parties which concentrate on salient political issues have a greater chance of winning the attention of the public and increasing their support during an election campaign.

Figures Eight to Eleven below show the importance of nine key issues for the United Kingdom both to AB respondents and also to all respondents questioned as part of Ipsos-MORI's monthly Issues Index polling between May 2010 and December 2012. The figures below sort these issues into four groups; the economy and unemployment; inflation, poverty / inequality and taxation; NHS / health and education; and finally race relations / immigration and crime / law and order.¹²

- **The economy / unemployment:** AB respondents are consistently more likely to see the economy as an important issue for the country than all respondents, sometimes by more than ten percentage points. 70% or more of AB respondents regularly name the economy as either the most important or an important issue for the UK. On unemployment, between 20% and 30% of AB respondents see this issue as important for the country, around 5% below the level seen from all respondents.
- **Inflation, poverty / inequality and taxation:** AB respondents' concern about inflation and prices varies in line with, but tracks slightly above, all respondents' concern about the issue. AB concern about inflation peaked at 19% of AB respondents naming it as important in May 2012, a month which also recorded a peak in importance amongst all respondents at 14%. AB concern about poverty and inequality also tracks slightly above overall national concern about the issue. The rise in all respondents' concern about

Figure Eight: Percentage of all respondents and AB respondents naming the economy and unemployment as important, May 2010 to December 2012

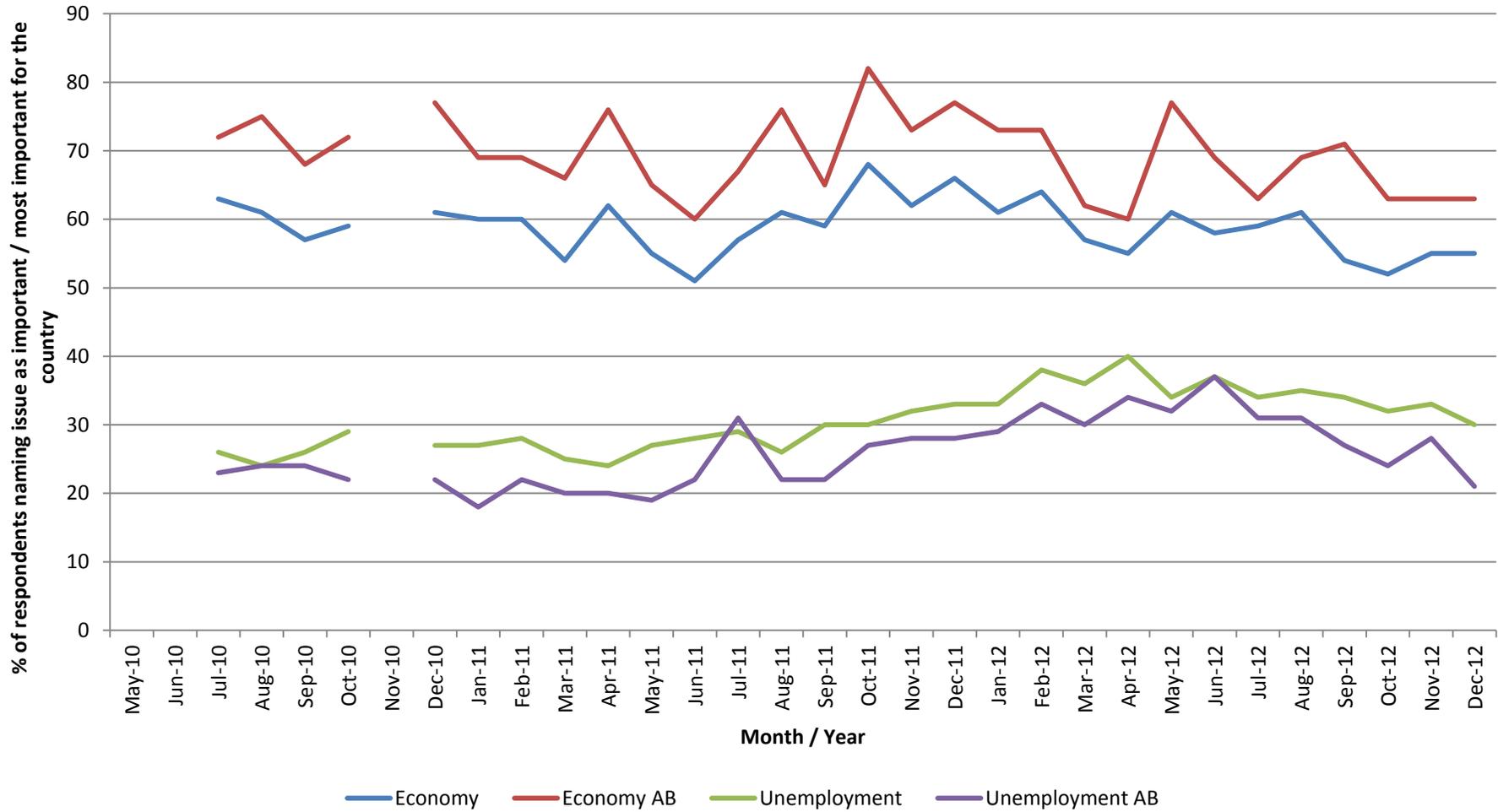


Figure Nine: Percentage of all respondents and AB respondents naming inflation, poverty / inequality and taxation as important, May 2010 to December 2012

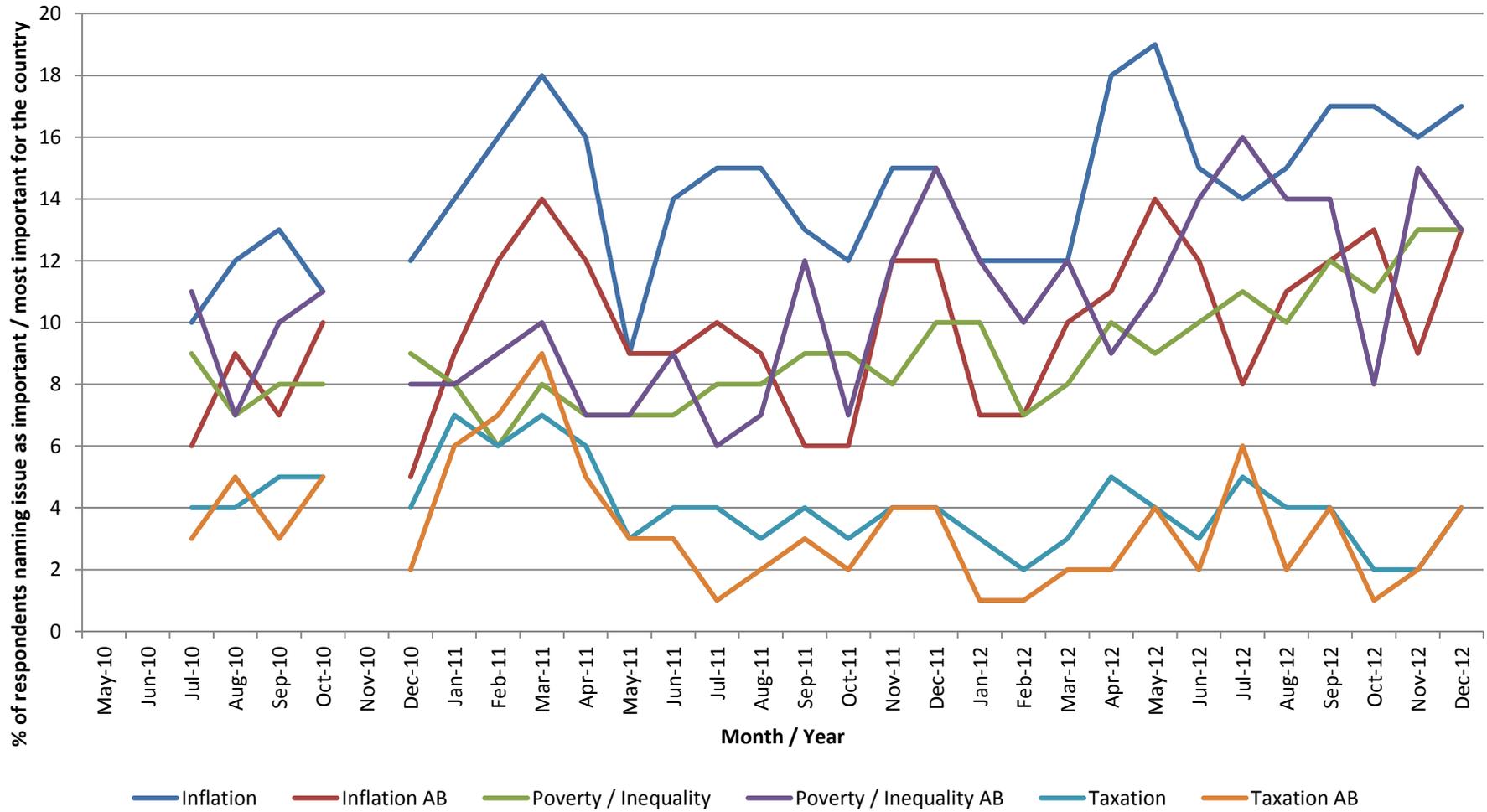


Figure Ten: Percentage of all respondents and AB respondents naming the NHS / health and education as important, May 2010 to December 2012

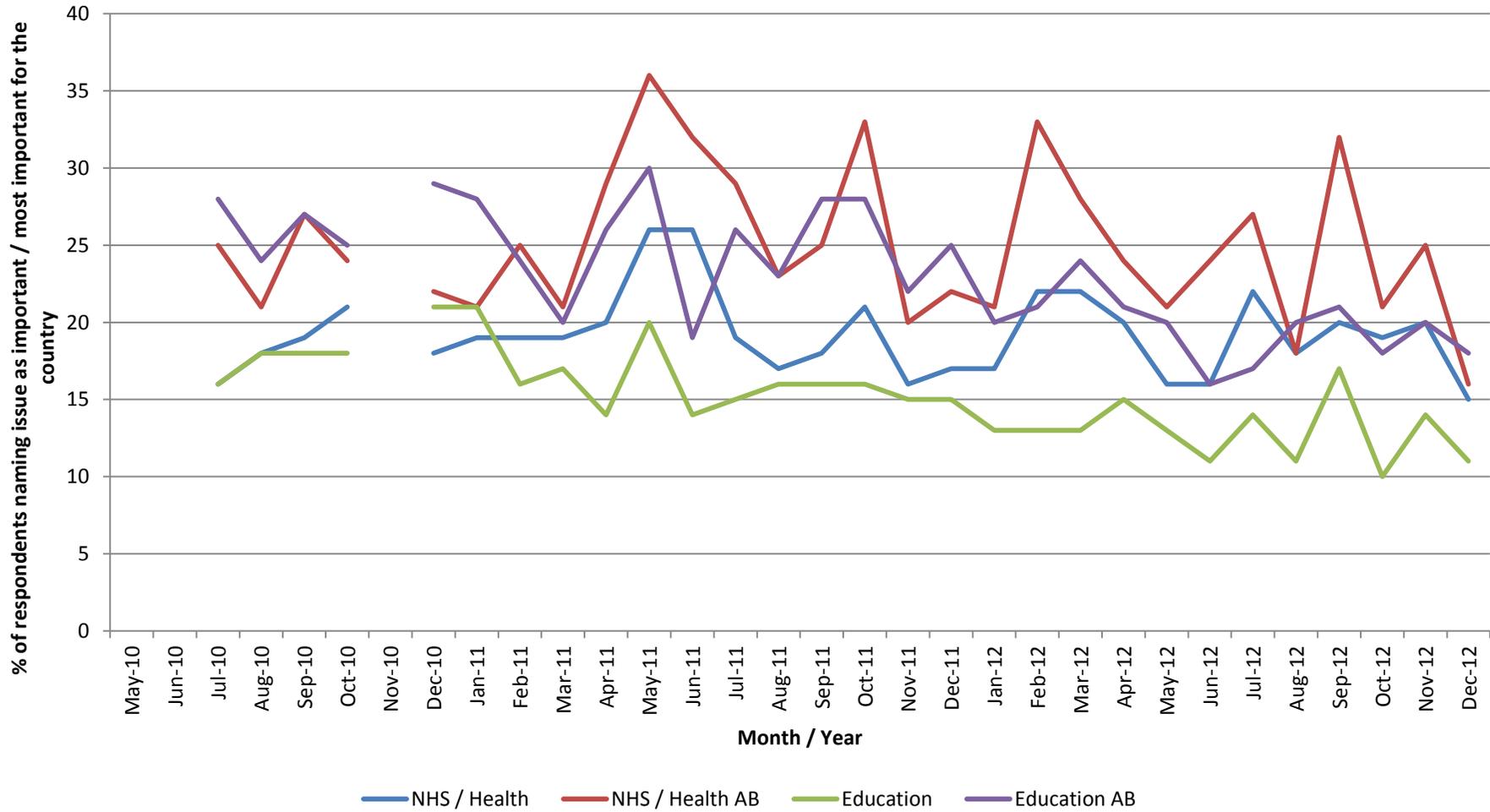
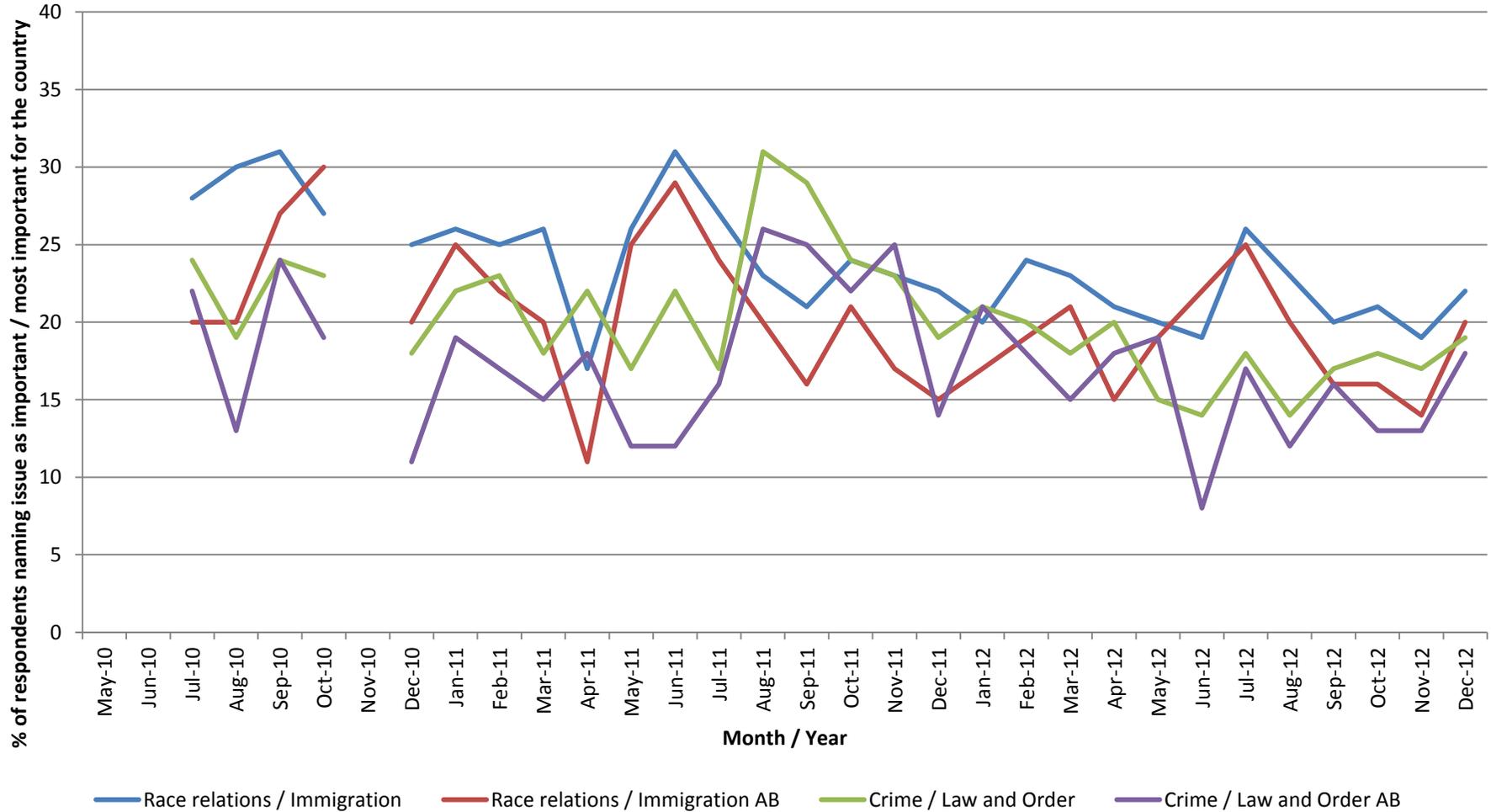


Figure Eleven: Percentage of all respondents and AB respondents naming race relations / immigration and crime / law and order as important, May 2010 to December 2012



poverty and inequality throughout 2012 was mirrored by trends in the AB group, with AB concern about the issue peaking at 16% in July 2012 compared to 11% of all respondents naming the issue as important for the country that month. Finally, AB concern with taxation actually tracks below the importance attached to the issue by all voters, perhaps surprising given the significant tax rises placed on higher earners by the Coalition Government since 2010, including the greater number of taxpayers eligible for the 40p income tax band and the limits placed on tax relief for pension contributions.

- **NHS / health and education:** AB voters are significantly more likely to consider the NHS and healthcare, as well as education, important issues for the country relative to all respondents. Furthermore, peaks in overall public concern with the NHS / healthcare are likely to be more pronounced amongst the AB social class. The four significant spikes in overall public as well as AB respondents' concern with this issue since May 2010, in May 2011, October 2011, February 2012 and September 2012, have all seen AB concern with the NHS / healthcare reach over 30% in the Issues Index, with the 'spikes' in concern seen amongst AB respondents frequently twice as pronounced as those seen amongst all respondents.

On the issue of education, AB respondents' assessment of the issue's importance is less volatile. Whilst the overall public's assessment of the importance of education issues for the country has actually declined since 2010, and settled in the 10% to 15% range during 2012, the importance which AB respondents have placed on the issue has been more resilient. Around 20% of AB respondents saw education as an important issue in the final months of 2012, a trend which has largely remained stable since the last general election.

- **Race relations / immigration and crime / law and order:** Both immigration and crime are seen as traditionally 'Conservative' issues, where the Party has for most of the last twenty years been seen as best placed to deal with each

of these policy areas. However, both are issues which AB respondents are less likely to see as important, compared to the electorate as a whole. Instead, public services, particularly the NHS and health issues, are seen as more important by AB respondents during most of the sampling period after May 2010. AB voters' concern with race relations and immigration consistently trends several percentage points below overall public concern during the period May 2010 to December 2012. A similar pattern for the issue of crime / law and order can be observed for the months prior to the riots of August 2011. Since that time, AB concern with crime has more closely mirrored overall public concern with the issue, although both AB respondents and all respondents assigned diminishing importance to the issue throughout 2012. In fact, by the end of 2012, both AB and wider public concerns with crime and law and order issues had dipped below the level of concern recorded in the months leading up to the riots.

Further data on the attitudes of AB voters has been collected by YouGov, as part of a polling exercise conducted in partnership with the centre-left magazine Progress, in order to examine how attitudes to certain policy issues varies across different social classes.¹³ The polling found that:

- AB voters were 4% more likely to support higher income tax to protect spending on public services (37% of AB respondents supported this compared to 33% of all respondents).
- AB voters were 8% less likely to support an end to all immigration into the UK (48% of AB respondents supported this measure compared to 56% of all respondents).
- AB voters were 4% more likely to support giving employees in large companies the right to elect at least one director to the company board (71% of AB respondents supported this measure compared to 67% of all respondents).

Whilst these findings do not suggest that the views of AB voters are fundamentally out of step with the electorate as a whole, they do reinforce the observation that there has been a significant de-alignment between social class and political views over recent decades, with many AB voters taking more 'progressive' stances on issues such as immigration and tax and spend than the electorate as a whole.

However, this cannot be seen as a uniform trend across all policy areas, with a greater proportion of AB respondents favouring cuts to welfare benefits for the unemployed than the average voter (54% of AB voters supported this policy as against 48% support across all social classes). This seems unsurprising given the lower than average importance which AB voters ascribe to unemployment compared to all respondents in Ipsos-MORI's Issues Index, as discussed above.

However, perhaps the more important facet of these findings is that the degree of indifference towards political issues and politics in general is less amongst AB voters than other social classes. The average proportion of AB respondents across YouGov's seven issues-based questions who answered 'Don't Know' was 9.4%, compared to 11% for C1 respondents, 14.7% for C2 respondents and 18.4% for DE respondents. The greater certainty of view on issues which exists amongst AB voters likely indicates a greater engagement with politics and public policy issues, which is further reflected in the higher than average AB voter turnout at election time. This further underlines their importance to the electoral prospects of the Conservative Party in the run-up to the next general election.

The substantial amount of data analysed above gives a good impression of how the continuities and changes in the concerns and priorities of AB voters have developed since the last general election. What emerges is a picture of a group of voters who overwhelmingly prioritise the economy and, by extension, the UK's recovery from the recent double-dip recession as the central issue in contemporary politics.

The data also shows that AB voters have, through the de-alignment of class and voting interests in recent decades, come to hold somewhat paradoxical views

towards more 'material' policy areas. Although the greater than average concern with the economy in general, as indicated by Ipsos-MORI's Issues Index, suggests a continuing alignment between class and political interests amongst the average AB voter, this social group also appears more concerned than other voters that the fruits of future economic prosperity are distributed in a fair way. However, this does not imply that an uncritical attitude towards redistribution of wealth exists amongst AB voters, as indicated by their views on unemployment and welfare benefits, but does suggest a broad concern with those in society who are less materially secure.

Two further pieces of data support this conclusion. First is the greater than average importance which AB voters attribute to poverty and inequality in general, as opposed to unemployment, in naming the issues they feel to be important for the country. Second is the voting intention trends amongst AB voters, where support for the Conservatives amongst AB voters fell by nearly a quarter between March and June 2012, in the aftermath of George Osborne's Budget which announced a cut in the top rate of income tax from 50 to 45 pence in the pound. The nine percentage point fall in AB support for the Conservatives between March and June 2012, from 40% to 31%, was more severe than the fall in support amongst all certain voters, where support for the Party fell from 36% to 31% over the same period.¹² The fact that disproportionately high numbers of AB voters, many of whom would have benefited from the top rate income tax cut, turned away from the Conservatives in this period underlines the importance of perceived fairness in economic matters amongst this group, alongside the more general desire to see improvements in the economy.

Beyond securing a sustained economic recovery, the Conservatives can best engage with this group by showing their commitment to public services, particularly the health service. Furthermore, pitches to these wealthier AB voters based on reducing the tax burden, or alternatively a 'dog whistle' style pitch which seems to belittle those less fortunate in British society, will gain little traction. In addition, crime and immigration, although recognised as important by AB voters, are, in the absence of exceptional events such as the riots in summer 2011, consistently seen as 'third

order' issues by this group behind the economy and public services. This can be seen to support Lord Ashcroft's argument, discussed earlier in this paper, that a heavy focus on immigration was one of the main reasons for the decline in Conservative support amongst AB voters at the 2005 general election.

Indeed, Ashcroft's remarks in 2005 have been further supported by an academic analysis of the Conservative Party's fortunes prior to 2005, which show just how far the Party's reputation had sunk among AB voters towards the end of the Iain Duncan-Smith leadership in autumn 2003. As Professor Tim Bale of Sussex University says in his book 'The Conservative Party: From Thatcher to Cameron,' in September 2003 "support for the Conservatives amongst this (the AB) social group was running at only 29%." Continuing, Bale notes that "It was this figure that particularly worried modernizers. Indeed it was one of their guiding principles that the Party could not construct a winning electoral coalition without majority support from this expanding part of the population – people who, especially in the younger age groups, were as concerned with quality of life as standard of living, were liberal on moral issues, and more relaxed than most about Europe and immigration, the benefits of which they felt more than other social groups."¹⁴

Winning the middle-class policy battleground in 2015

Having identified both the importance of AB voters to the Conservative Party in the future and which issues they care most about, it is now sensible to examine how the public estimate the Party's ability to handle these issues which will form the middle-class 'policy battleground' at future general elections. Examining how the trust which middle-class voters have placed in the Conservative Party on specific issues in recent months and years has varied will firstly help to identify some of the causes of Conservative opinion poll fluctuations amongst AB voters since the formation of the Coalition. Secondly, these figures will provide a useful guide to the particular issues on which the Party has to improve its pitch to the electorate prior to 2015, in order to increase its support.

Whilst no extensive data-set is provided by Ipsos-MORI covering the electorate's

political preferences on specific policy issues, such data is provided by the polling company You-Gov.¹⁵ You-Gov collects this data covering seven specific policy issues on a monthly basis, alongside the 'topline' voting intention data it compiles for The Sun newspaper.¹⁶ For polls conducted after May 2011, You-Gov have published detailed survey data online which breaks down the responses by, amongst other things, age, geographical region, and social class.¹⁷ This paper will examine those policy areas, namely the economy, the NHS, and education, where middle-class voters are in a typical month more likely to name that issue as important to the UK than an average voter.¹⁸ These areas constitute the middle-class policy battleground.¹⁹

Figures Twelve to Fourteen below show the monthly favourability rating for the three main political parties on the economy in general, the NHS, and education and schools respectively.

- **The economy in general:** Figure Twelve shows a consistent lead for the Conservatives over Labour on the economy of around ten percentage points during 2011 and the first few months of 2012, with the Liberal Democrats recording consistently negligible ratings from voters. However, a significant narrowing occurred between March and June 2012, with the Conservative lead over Labour on the economy narrowing to just one point, three months after the 2012 Budget. This went alongside the decline in both all voters' and AB support for the Conservatives in voting intention polls in the second quarter of 2012; an unsurprising fact given the high importance both all voters and AB voters attach to the economy, as seen in Figure Eight. The recovery in Conservative fortunes on the economy after June 2012 is reflected in rising Conservative support in the voting intention polls after this time. These observations suggest a strong correlation between the Conservatives building a strong lead over Labour on the economy and gaining greater support in 2015 from both middle-class voters and the electorate as a whole.

Figure Twelve: Percentage of ABC1 respondents naming each main political party as best to handle the economy in general, May 2011 to December 2012

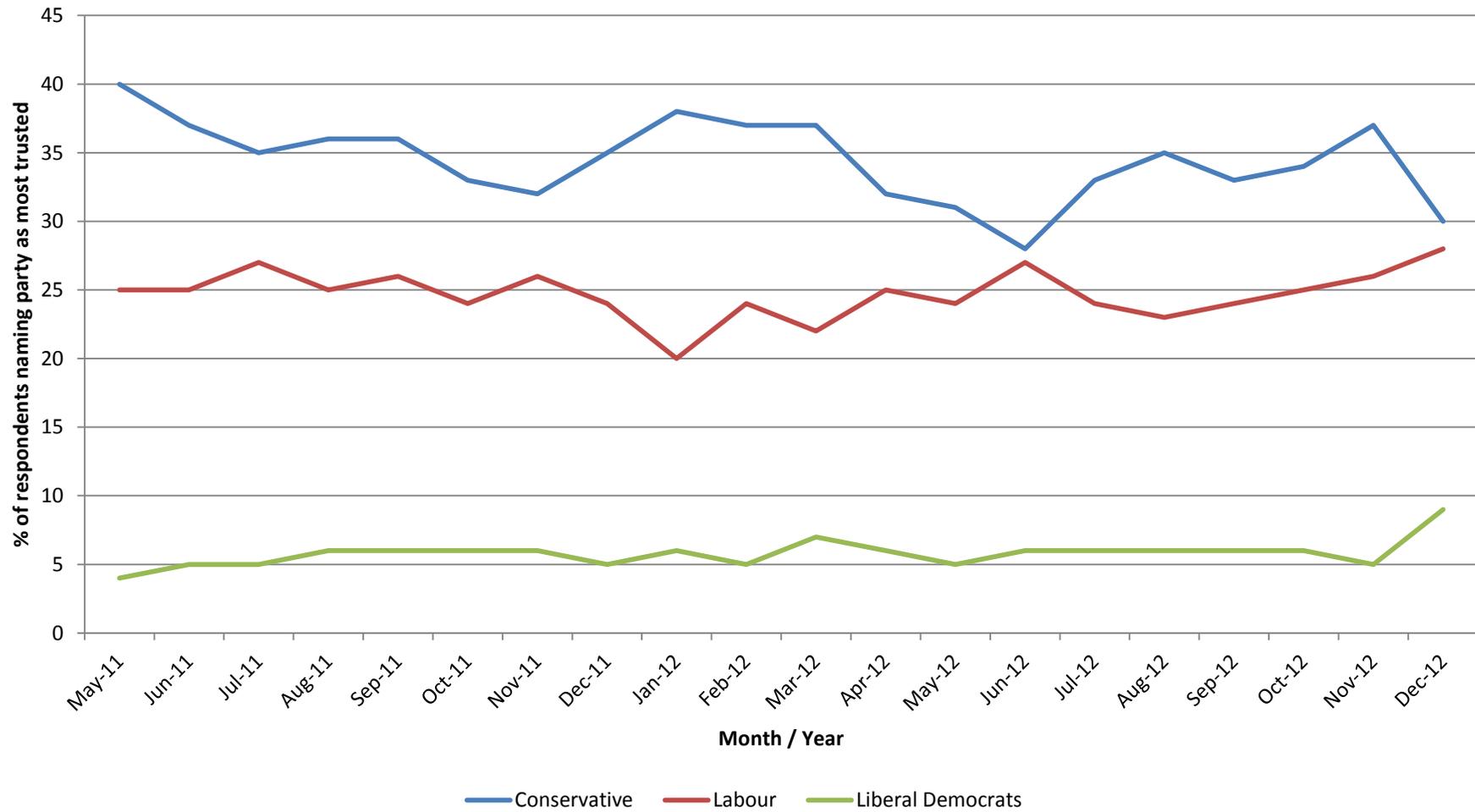


Figure Thirteen: Percentage of ABC1 respondents naming each main political party as best to handle the NHS, May 2011 to December 2012

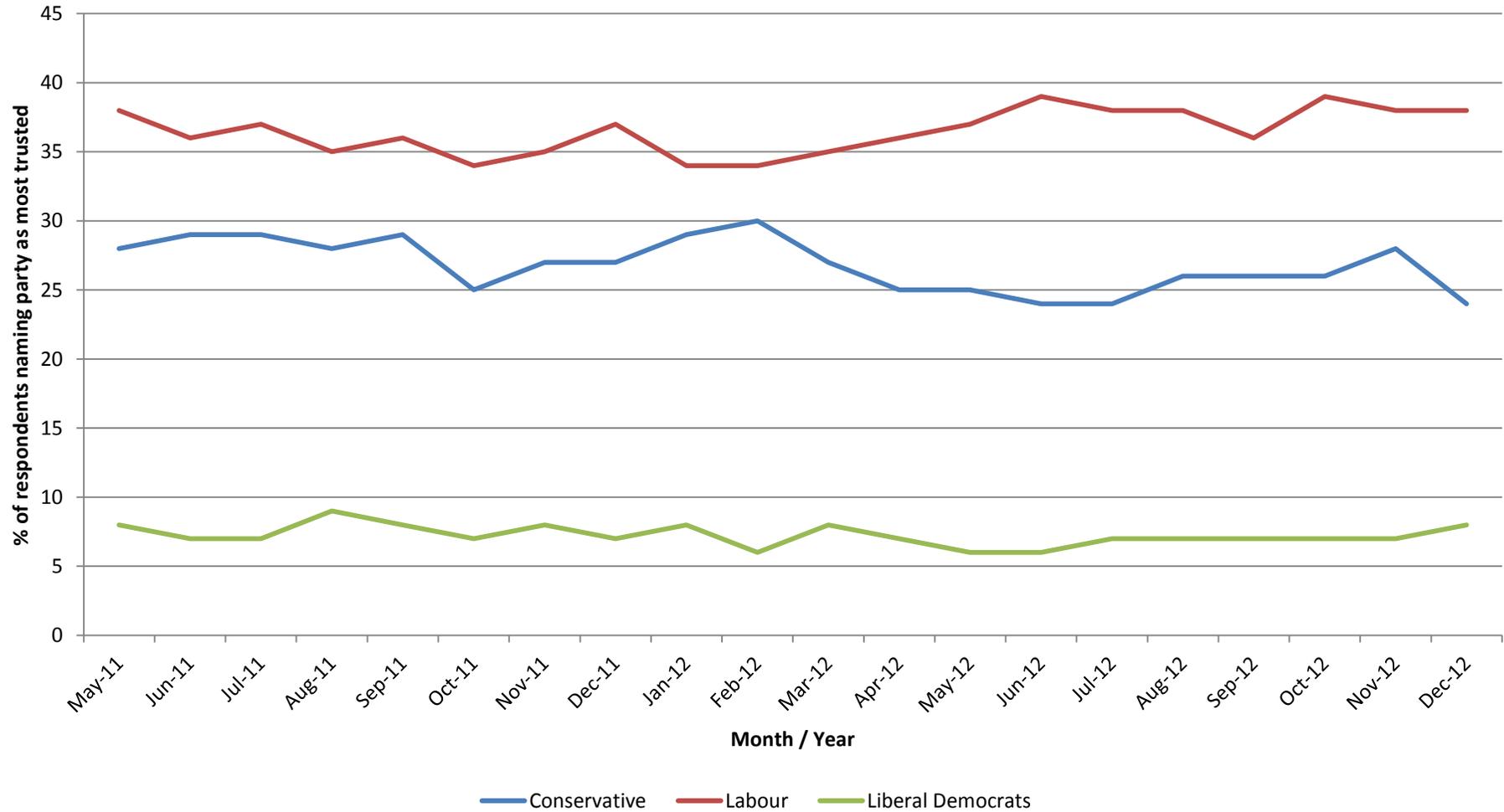
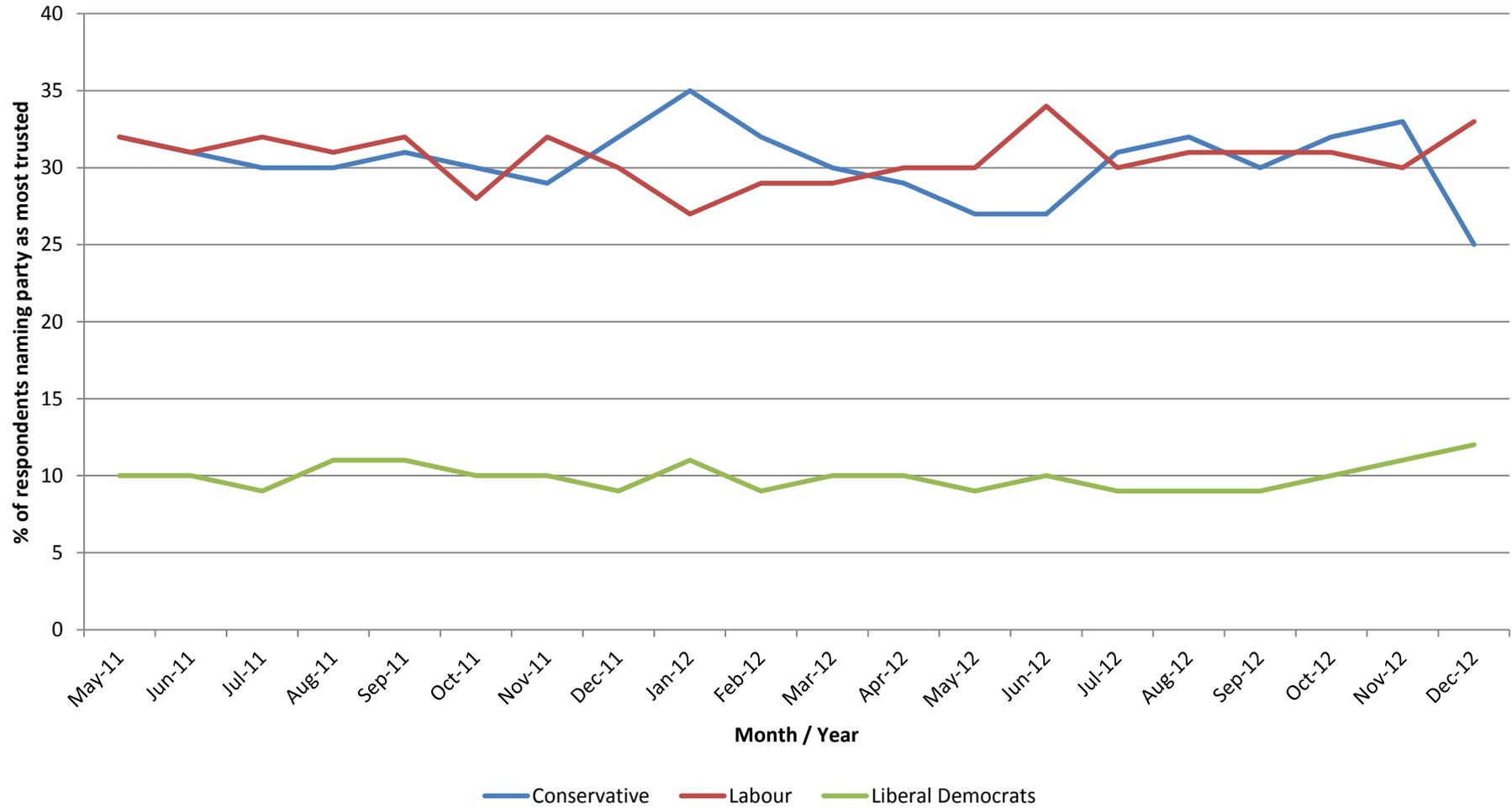


Figure Fourteen: Percentage of ABC1 respondents naming each main political party as best to handle education and schools, May 2011 to December 2012



- **The NHS:** Figure Twelve shows the difficulty the Conservative Party have had in gaining middle-class voters' trust on the National Health Service, with the Party's rating on this issue remaining steady at between 25% and 30% throughout the period May 2011 to December 2012. A steady Labour lead on the NHS, which rose to around ten percentage points after February 2012, can also be observed in Figure Twelve, at a time in which both the salience of the NHS as an issue for middle-class voters (Figure Ten) and middle-class voter support for the Conservative Party (Figure Seven) varied more significantly between May 2011 and December 2012.

This suggests that, despite the personal effort the Prime Minister has invested in associating the Conservative Party with the National Health Service since 2005, increasing the standing of the Party on this issue remains the biggest 'structural' impediment to the Conservatives regaining the electoral dominance they enjoyed amongst middle-class voters in the early-1990s.

- **Education and schools:** One area where the Conservatives have fared better, in a policy area strongly associated with the Labour Party during Tony Blair's time as Prime Minister, is education and schools. Since May 2011, Labour and the Conservatives have been tied on this issue, with around 30% of voters favouring the Conservatives and roughly the same proportion favouring Labour. Compared to the economy and the NHS, the Liberal Democrats, at around 10% favourability, do poll slightly higher on education and schools, but are still a long way behind Labour and the Conservatives.

The trends in Figure Fourteen demonstrate not only that the Conservatives can compete with Labour on public services, but also shows that legislative radicalism in a traditionally Labour policy area (as demonstrated by Michael Gove's structural reforms to the school system) does not necessarily prohibit the Conservatives performing well on the issue in question. In fact, the strong focus which Mr. Gove has placed on how his reforms will help the most

disadvantaged pupils will likely have increased the reforms' popularity amongst middle-class voters, who, as previously noted in this paper and as shown in Figure Nine, are more likely to favour policies which aim to tackle inequalities and unfairness in society, relative to the average voter. However, the Conservatives' relatively strong performance on education cannot be seen as a substitute for engaging on the NHS, particularly given the higher salience the latter issue has amongst middle-class voters (Figure Ten).

Conclusion: rising to the challenge

In concluding this paper, it is clear that the Conservative Party still has work to do in order to build the broad and deep electoral coalition necessary to deliver a Conservative majority at the 2015 general election. Conventional wisdom in the Conservative Party, particularly since the 2012 Budget, has held that the key to restoring the Party's fortunes lies with re-engaging with aspirational 'strivers', mostly C2 voters in marginal seats across the country, amongst whom the Conservatives have lost support over the past year. Indeed, several grassroots and Parliamentary groupings have sprung up in 2012 in order to further this aim. David Cameron's speech to the Conservative Party Conference in 2012 can also be seen as a shift in favour of a 'strivers' strategy.²⁰

This paper does not seek to dismiss the important work of the Party in this area. As some of the evidence analysed above has shown, C2 voters, despite the fact that they are the smallest social class within the UK electorate (Figure Two), are more often swing voters, significant numbers of whom live in the suburban and exurban marginal constituencies which almost always determine the result in general elections. Working-class support for the Conservatives has always been a pre-requisite for electoral success, particularly during the 1980s, and will remain so in future.

Instead, this paper seeks solely to make the case for recognising the importance, and the priorities, of the growing AB social class to UK general elections, both recently and in future years. In doing so, the need will become apparent for the creation of a

broad Conservative vision which can appeal to all social classes in the UK. Such a vision will necessarily embrace the concerns of many voters with mass immigration and the European Union, as well as making the Conservatives the party of economic competence and efficient public services.

The challenge for the Conservative Party over the next two and a half years is to show that reconciling these two sets of issues into one coherent 'pitch' to all sections of the UK electorate is not impossible. Furthermore, rising to the challenge promises significant electoral rewards for the Conservatives, and puts the Party's first majority election victory since 1992 firmly back in sight for the 2015 general election.

Endnotes

¹ The term 'middle class' is used throughout this paper to refer to the A and B social classes. Although this is not a universal definition of the term (most would include the C1 group under the term 'middle class' as well, see endnote 17), it is operationalized in this way throughout this paper to more explicitly differentiate between the growing AB class, and the declining C1 class (as a proportion of all UK voters).

² Ipsos-MORI (2010), '2010 Election Aggregate Analysis', <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/Aggregate%20for%20web%2010510.pdf> (last accessed: 13.1.2013); Ipsos-MORI (2005), 'How Britain Voted in 2005', <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=2252&view=wide> (last accessed: 13.1.2013).

³ Ipsos-MORI (2010), 'How Britain Voted in 2010', <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=2613> (last accessed: 13.1.2013).

⁴ Ipsos-MORI (2010), '2010 Election Aggregate Analysis'; Ipsos-MORI (2005), 'How Britain Voted in 2005', <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=2252&view=wide> (last accessed: 13.1.2013).

⁵ Ipsos-MORI (1992), 'How Britain Voted in 1992', <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=2799&view=wide> (last accessed: 13.1.2013); Ipsos-MORI (1997), 'How Britain Voted in 1997', <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=2149&view=wide> (last accessed: 13.1.2013).

⁶ Ipsos-MORI (2001), 'How Britain Voted in 2001', <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=1231&view=wide> (last accessed: 13.1.2013); Ipsos-MORI (2005), 'How Britain Voted in 2005'.

⁷ Ashcroft, M. A. (2005) 'Smell the Coffee: a wake-up call for the Conservative Party', (Great Britain: Michael A. Ashcroft) p.42.

⁸ The Conservative Party made a net gain of 210 seats at the 1931 general election. The Party's previous best post-war performance was the net gain of 85 seats made under Winston Churchill in 1950.

⁹ Ipsos-MORI, 'How Britain Voted in 1992'; 'How Britain Voted in 1997'; 'How Britain Voted in 2001'; 'How Britain Voted in 2005'; 'How Britain Voted in 2010'.

¹⁰ Ipsos-MORI (2012), 'Political Monitor: December 2012', <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3092/Ipsos-MORI-Political-Monitor-December-2012.aspx> (last accessed: 13.1.2013)

¹¹ Ipsos-MORI (2012), 'Political Monitor Archive', <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemID=2419> (last accessed: 13.1.2013)

¹² Ipsos-MORI (2012), 'Issues Index Archive', <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2420/Issues-Index-Archive.aspx?view=wide> (last accessed: 13.1.2013).

¹³ YouGov (2012), 'YouGov / Progress Survey Results', http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/c9f7xtoyb0/PCCs_results_051012.pdf (last accessed: 13.1.2013).

¹⁴ Bale, T. (2011) 'The Conservative Party: From Thatcher to Cameron', Second Edition, (London: Polity Press) p.184.

¹⁵ You-Gov (2013), 'Latest Findings In Politics', <http://yougov.co.uk/news/categories/politics/?page=1> (last accessed: 26.1.2013).

¹⁶ The issues covered in You-Gov's issues polling are; the NHS; Asylum and Immigration; Law and Order; Education and Schools; Taxation; Unemployment, and the economy in general.

¹⁷ You-Gov do not however break down the results by social class sufficiently enough to provide results for the AB social class alone. Instead, they divide their findings into those for the ABC1 classes and those in the C2DE social classes. ABC1 is a much broader (and thus imperfect for the purposes of this paper) measure of 'middle-class voters', comprising around 60% of the electorate compared to 31% for the AB group alone. However, this data is still useful in terms of providing a general indication of the responses of middle-class voters in a more general sense, compared to the whole electorate.

¹⁸ Although AB voters are more likely to see poverty and inequality as important issues for the country than the average voter, You-Gov does not conduct issue polling on this issue so it is therefore excluded from the policy battleground. Furthermore, the low salience level recorded for these issues in Figure Nine means that poverty and inequality are likely to be relatively unimportant to AB voters compared to the issues of the economy, the NHS, and education, which are included in this section.

¹⁹ Although many 'traditional' Conservative issues, such as immigration and law and order are likely to be important to middle-class voters, as they are to all voters, they are excluded from the policy battleground. This is because the large lead the Conservatives already hold in these areas means that middle-class voters who primarily cast their vote on such issues will likely already be solidly for the Conservatives. Instead, the smaller Conservative leads (or even deficits) which the Party currently has on the economy, the NHS, and education makes it more likely that improving the Conservative standing on these issues will attract the middle-class 'swing' voters from Labour or the Liberal Democrats whose support the Conservatives need to win a majority in 2015.

²⁰ Conservative Party (2012), 'Speech, Conference 2012: David Cameron', http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2012/10/David_Cameron_Conference_2012.aspx (last accessed: 13.1.2013); The 'Blue Collar Conservatism' group was launched by Conservative MPs

and activists in autumn 2012 with the aim of providing “a forum to allow for free and open discussion of policies and ideas designed to secure the support of blue collar voters” (<http://www.bluecollarconservatism.com/>).

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