

Funding the Future

Article URL

Published: January 12, 2026, 5:32 pm

I share this post by Prof Tim Bale and Prof Paul Webb posted [on The Conversation yesterday](#), as it contains valuable data to understand what might happen in the UK:

By the end of July the UK will have a new prime minister. They will be chosen not by the electorate but by a group of around 160,000 members of the Conservative Party. This electorate gets to choose between the two candidates who finish first and second in a [series of votes held among Conservative MPs](#).

There has, perhaps not surprisingly, been a degree of [disquiet](#) expressed about this situation. Members of political parties are, generally speaking, more zealous than members of the public. Some argue that it might be better to leave the choice of the country's PM up to MPs. They, at least, have a direct mandate from voters. And, since governments in parliamentary systems must retain the confidence of the legislature in order to stay in office, allowing MPs to choose would at least guarantee a chain of democratic accountability from executive to electorate. That is bypassed completely when party members alone make the decision.

Such concerns are surely all the more pressing because, as our research has already shown, grassroots Conservatives can hardly be said to be representative of the country as a whole, [either demographically or ideologically](#). There are far more men among them than there are women; most of them live in the southern half of the country; they are generally pretty well-off; they are relatively old (although not quite as ancient as often suggested); they are very, very white; and they are also significantly more right wing than the average voter — whether we're talking about their economic or social attitudes.

Our new analysis, however, using data from a recent survey of [Conservative Party members](#) that was kindly provided to us by [Chris Curtis of YouGov](#), reveals something that is possibly even more worrying for critics of the process. The party members who support the clear front runner, Boris Johnson, are even more ideologically unrepresentative of British voters than are the bulk of their counterparts.

Indeed, compared to the kind of members drawn to the two contenders who, currently seem to stand the [best chance](#) of grabbing the crucial runner up spot — the environment secretary, Michael Gove, and the foreign secretary, Jeremy Hunt —

Johnson's supporters look anything but moderate.

While only around a quarter of the wider British public support leaving the EU without a Brexit deal, an amazing 85% of Johnson's supporters within the party are keen on a no-deal departure.

Can't wait for that no-deal feeling. [YouGov](#)

Some two thirds (66%) of the nearly 900 Conservative rank-and-file members who responded to the survey said the UK should leave without a deal, so Johnson supporters are extreme even by that standard. “Only” 37% of Hunt supporters would be happy with a no-deal Brexit.

Even Gove supporters are less enthusiastic about no-deal than Johnson supporters. Their man was a leading figure in the Leave campaign but only 52% of them want to leave without a deal.

Right-wing base

It's clear that, when it comes to the 39% of the Conservative grassroots who are in Johnson's camp, what the party's critics would no doubt label their extremism isn't just confined to Brexit.

Asked to locate themselves ideologically, some 42% of members overall said they were on the right — not just of British politics, but of the Conservative Party itself, making Gove's supporters (39% of whom said the same) about average. Just 15% of Hunt's grassroots supporters (who make up just 8% of the membership overall) located themselves in that space.

Party members assess where they sit on the left/right spectrum. [YouGov](#)

Johnson's supporters had no such problem: well over half of them (56%) said they belonged on the right wing of their party, with about the same proportion (58%) of them styling themselves as “fairly or very right wing”.

The impression that Johnson's supporters are very much a sub-set of a sub-set is only reinforced when we dig into the specifics.

For instance, Tory members in general are more inclined than the general public to want to cut tax and spending, so it comes as no surprise that 34% of them supported that option — one that only around a fifth of voters right now would go for. But those members backing Johnson, 40% of whom supported cuts, were twice as enthusiastic about them as those backing Gove (20.5%) and Hunt (22%). This may well solve the mystery of why Johnson's only big domestic policy so far has been his promise to cut taxes — the front runner is mobilising his base.

Johnson's base is also relatively socially-conservative. A majority (although, at 59%, hardly an overwhelming majority) of Tory members think that David Cameron's government was right to allow same sex marriage. Those supporting Gove — who has always been seen as socially-liberal and will be seen as even more so after recent

revelations [about his cocaine use](#) — are slightly more likely (at 63%) than most members to agree. Supporters of Johnson and Hunt are slightly less likely (at 54% and 55%) to do so.

However, it's probably climate change where we see the most striking attitudinal differences between those who support Johnson and those who support the others. Rather worryingly for those who regard the issue as a priority, one in five Tory rank-and-file members would like to see less emphasis on climate change. But that rises to one in four among Johnson supporters. Just under one in ten Gove supporters feels the same way, and just over one in ten Hunt supporters.

A worrying finding about climate change. [YouGov](#), Author provided
Why the difference?

Why that might be — and why Johnson's supporters seem to be so generally right wing as well as so keen on a no-deal Brexit — can perhaps be explained, not by demographics (supporters of all three candidates actually look pretty similar in that respect), but by looking at when the members who responded to the survey said they'd joined the party.

Nearly half (44.5%) of all the members surveyed said they'd become party members sometime after the 2016 referendum. Hunt's backers, 41% of whom had done the same, are therefore about average. In contrast, only a third (34%) of Gove's grassroots backers joined the party after the referendum. That suggests he draws a slightly bigger proportion of his support from those who have stuck by the party through thick and thin. Over half of those rank-and-file Tory members who are backing Johnson, however, joined the party after the EU referendum three years ago.

Signs of a UKIP influx? [YouGov](#)

We can only guess as to how many of Johnson's supporters were former UKIP sympathisers switching to the Tories; but it certainly seems possible. And, who knows, given that one doesn't have to renounce one's membership of the Conservative Party to become a [registered supporter of the Brexit Party](#), perhaps some of them hold a candle for Nigel Farage as well as Johnson.

Whether the country will be as pleased as they will be if Johnson does end up making it all the way to Number 10, however, remains to be seen.