

The 2015 British General Election: Core Battlegrounds

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This report investigates the defining battlegrounds that are likely to play an influential role amongst voters in the forthcoming British General Election. The analysis draws on current public opinion data from TNS opinion, YouGov, alongside ICM in investigating the issue salience of immigration, economic perceptions and leadership competence evaluations amongst voters. These are likely to be the core issues that dominate the 2015 British General Election in the decisions made by voters at the ballot box.

i. Immigration

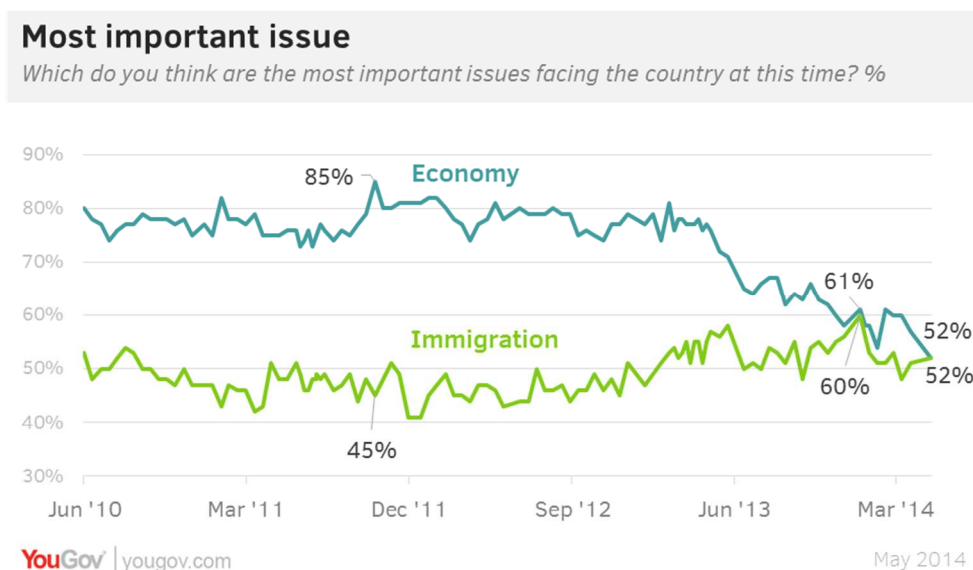
Immigration as a policy issue has increased significantly since the 2005 British General Election. Traditionally in elections, immigration has not been a salient issue come General Election time but this changed in 2001 when the election was largely dominated by domestic issues such as healthcare, law and order, education, alongside pensions and taxation. The issue of immigration alongside Brexit, on the other hand, was considerably low amongst the public in 2001.¹ Nonetheless, there has been a general shift since the 2005 British General Election. Public opinion polls conducted by the British Election Study and Ipsos MORI in 2005 highlighted the significance of immigration as the most important issue facing the country and the 2010 British Election embodied a similar trend.² The graph in Figure 1.1 below shows how immigration has gradually caught up with the economy as a core issue, and how the economy is no longer seen as the most important issue facing the country. Moreover, current YouGov polls put the NHS as the third most important issue on 33%, with both immigration and the economy on 49%.³ The salience of immigration as an issue in public opinion is clear, but what about the current party positions and who is perceived to ‘own’ the immigration issue amongst the core political parties in Britain?

¹ Cowling, David, [Opinion Polls: Movement on the issues?](#) BBC, 3rd May 2005

² Ipsos MORI, Issues Index: 1997-2006. [The Most Important Issues Facing Britain Today](#) 10th December, 2006

³ [YouGov/The Sun Survey Results](#), 5th- 6th January 2015

Figure 1.1 Most important issue facing the country



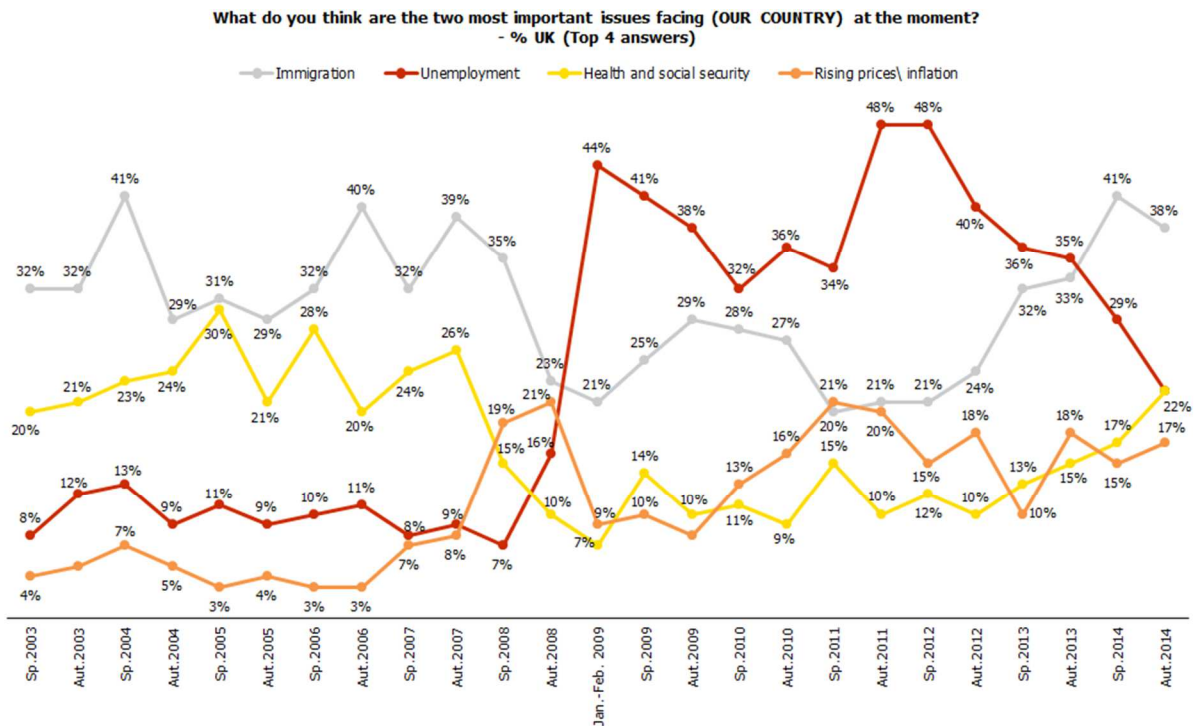
Source: YouGov

Looking outward, opinion polls conducted by the Eurobarometer have shown that the increase and salience of immigration is not just unique to the UK, but similar trends have occurred across the European Union from 2007-2013, which further highlights the importance of the issue across European Union Member States.⁴ However, Eurobarometer data shows that the United Kingdom continues to lead the way on the salience of immigration, with 38% of survey respondents ranking immigration as the most important issue facing the country. The only other country which tops this result is Malta, with 57% of survey respondents ranking immigration as the most important issue – a result which has surged with the growth of ISIS in conjunction with its proximity to Libya and Egypt.⁵

⁴ Goodwin, Matthew. *'A Breakthrough Moment or False Dawn? The Great Recession and the Radical Right in Europe'*, pp.15-39. In: Sandelind, Clara. ed. *European Populism and Winning the Immigration Debate*, 2014, European Liberal Forum and Fores

⁵ Ibid, P.28

Fig. 1.2 – Most important issues facing the UK



Source: Eurobarometer

Whilst immigration is a hot topic, a number of opinion polls have shown large differences in the public’s perceptions of which political party is best able to handle immigration and is most trusted on this issue. Evidently, immigration has formed a large proportion of UKIP party strategy and the party has predominantly focused on immigration as a strategy to win support from Labour and the Conservative Party.⁶ UKIP’s anti-immigrant stance combined with their ‘hard’ eurosceptic approach has appeared to have worked electorally in the 2014 European Parliament elections, as shown by their electoral performance. Furthermore, the salience of immigration may be more important during economic downturns, whereby the dominant ethnic-in group in society may scapegoat ethnic-out groups. Moreover, public opinion data alongside academic research suggests that UKIP is perceived to ‘own’ the immigration issue and have tapped into this large scale discontent towards mainstream political parties that is currently prevalent in British Politics.⁷

A different story however is shown for Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Labour and the Liberal Democrats have continued to fall further behind on the immigration issue in the eyes of voters. Arguably though, the Conservatives on the other hand have ceded substantial parts of the immigration territory to UKIP. However, the Conservative party has not lost as much as Labour and the Liberal Democrats have on this issue. One of the major issues surrounding the

⁶ Ford, Robert, Goodwin, Matthew. *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*. Routledge, 2014

⁷ Ford, Robert, Goodwin, Matthew. *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*. Routledge, 2014

current immigration discourse in the United Kingdom is that mainstream political parties have tended to see immigration as a no-go area and not publically debated the issue. A core example of this has been Ed Miliband and most specifically Labour's inability to appear credible on the immigration issue.⁸ YouGov polling data has shown that a large proportion of UKIP support has a core working class base, thereby suggesting that these voters may have traditionally been former Labour voters.⁹

In terms of the party positions on immigration in the United Kingdom, the following can be outlined. Arguably, a form of 'cordon sanitaire' has taken place, with mainstream political parties largely ignoring the issue in public discourse and seeking to sweep the issue under the carpet. This has exacerbated not only rising concerns amongst the British public, but enabled political parties such as UKIP to gain political capital as a result. Notable philosophers such as John Stuart Mill have outlined the importance of subjecting political ideals to rigorous empirical scrutiny, with the idea that false ideas will be debated out of public discourse over time. However, such a strategy may be too late for this General Election but it may be a way to counteract the electoral threat posed by UKIP in coming years.

⁸ The Guardian, ['Labour accused of foul play over immigration polling'](#), 2nd December 2014

⁹ Lynch, Philip, Whitaker, Richard. [UKIP is posing important challenges to the Conservatives, but as the Eurosceptic party continues to rise it faces its own dilemmas](#). London School of Economics and Political Science. May 8th 2014

ii. The Economy

Since the period of political dealignment which commenced in the 1970's, many political scientists and commentators have converged on the idea that the perceptions of the party's ability to handle the economy is integral to its success in a general election. Prior to this phase, the British political system evolved around the traditional party lines that divided the middle and the working classes¹⁰.

The Labour Party had traditionally appealed to the working classes through the strengthening and support of the trade unions and social welfare system, whilst the Conservative Party would traditionally count on the votes of the middle and upper classes by keeping taxes low and safeguarding the status quo.¹¹ However, when Thatcher came to power, the landscape shifted. The class system, which further disintegrated under the Blair government, began to slide into the background as the salariat grew in size and voters became more educated and fractured¹².

Since the mid-1970s, social class has not been a predominant factor in determining the outcome of general elections, giving way to issue based politics – a pattern that has been observed right across the Atlantic. As society became more post-materialistic, so did people's interests and this inevitably grew to be a key driver behind British elections. The performance of the economy is arguably the backbone of these relatively new ideals and it has long been considered by political scientists as one of the most significant issues at the ballot box, as shown by numerous American and British election studies.¹³ Furthermore, incumbents often gain electorally during economic good times, but declining economic conditions often result in incumbents being punished at the ballot box.¹⁴

'The economy, stupid' was one of the most famous soundbites to be taken from the Clinton campaign of 1992, and to which the campaign accredited a large part of its success in unseating Bush. However, there are several ways of evaluating the impact the economy might have on a general election. In the early days of its analysis, macro level indicators were often studied – in short this encompasses how people think the economy will fare under a given government. But as time has passed, scholars have come to agree that micro-level economic expectations take

¹⁰ Denver, David. Christopher Carman and Robert Johns. *Elections and Voters in Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

¹¹ Pulzer, Peter. *Political representation and elections in Britain*, 1967

¹² Denver, David. Christopher Carman and Robert Johns. *Elections and Voters in Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

¹³ Lewis-Beck, M. (1986). *Comparative Economic Voting*. *American Journal of Political Science* 30:315-346

See: Soroka, Stuart N., and Christopher Wlezien. *Opinion-Policy Dynamics: Public Preferences and Public Expenditure in the United Kingdom*. *British Journal of Political Science* 35: pp.655-689, 2005

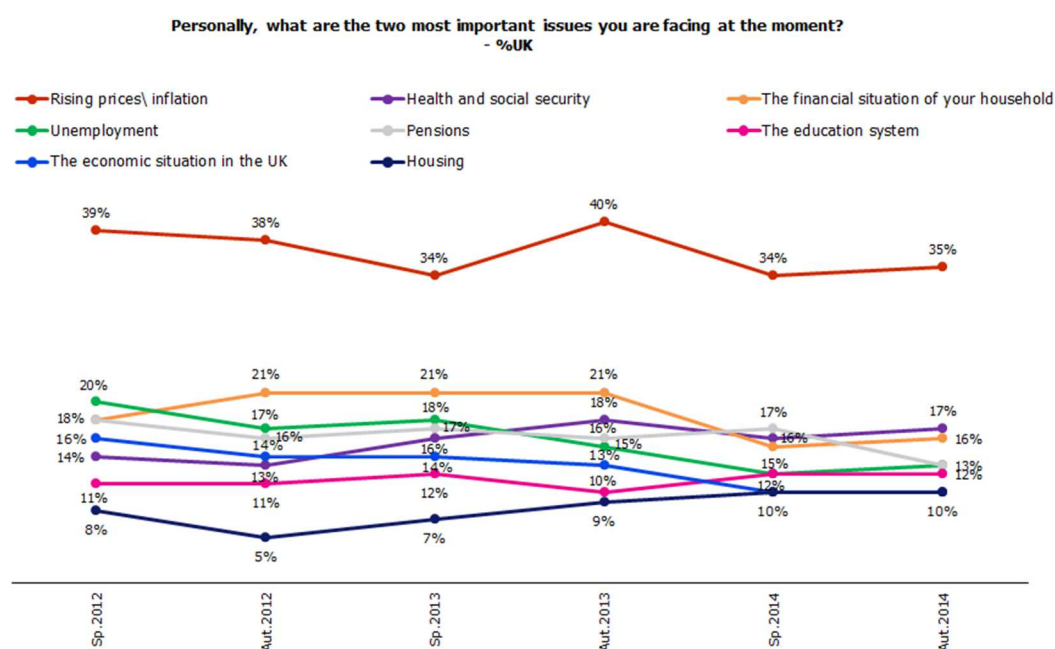
¹⁴ Hobolt, Sara, James Tilley and Susan Banducci. *Clarity of responsibility: How government cohesion conditions performance voting*. *European Journal of Political Research* 52(2): 164-187, 2012

See: Loveless, Matthew, Stephen Whitefield, and James F. Downes. *Left, Right, and Center: Party Appeals and Performance in Europe at the Onset of the Economic Crisis*, Paper to be presented at the MPSA Conference, Chicago, 16-19 April 2015

precedence, for instance how people think the economy under a given government will affect their personal economic situation. As the renowned political scientist David Sanders wrote in his analysis of the 1997 election, ‘if I am optimistic about my economic prospects, I am more inclined to seek to preserve the status quo that has produced my optimism; if I am pessimistic about my economic prospects, I am more inclined to seek to change the status quo that has produced my pessimism’¹⁵.

The economy is even more important for Britons at the moment as the UK approaches almost a decade of economic crisis. Although Christine Lagarde claims the UK economy is ‘leading the way’¹⁶, most feel that their wallets are just as light as they were five years ago. Data collected by TNS opinion for the Eurobarometer testifies this viewpoint and shows that little has changed in terms of public opinion towards inflation when people consider their own lives and personal financial situation.

Figure. 2.1 – Importance of economy, personally



Source: Eurobarometer

The market research company YouGov goes into more detail on this topic and asks respondents how they expect their household income will fare over the next twelve months. As of 11th April, British residents were split over the general state of the economy, with 31% putting

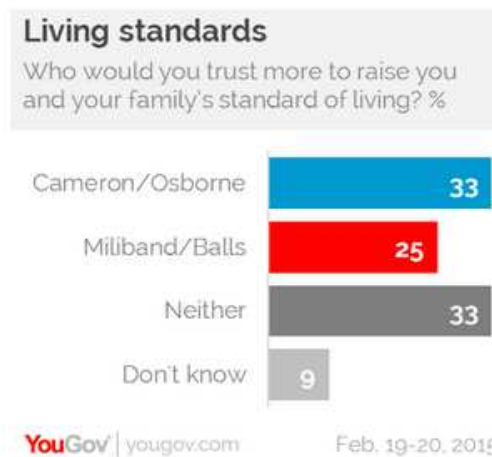
¹⁵ Sanders, David, *Economic Performance, Management Competence and the Outcome of the Next General Election*, 1996 http://ddd.uab.cat/pub/worpaper/1996/hdl_2072_1343/ICPS124.pdf

¹⁶ The Telegraph (2015) *Britain's economy is 'leading the way'* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/11349681/Britains-economy-is-leading-the-way-head-of-IMF-says.html>

it as good, and 34% bad. However, this gap widens when household income is considered, with 29% expecting it to deteriorate and 20% expecting it to improve¹⁷. On a more psychological *emotional* scale, YouGov also asked respondents how worried they are about having enough money to live comfortably over the next two to three years, to which 58% confessed they are worried, with one fifth saying they are very worried¹⁸.

The economy and its impact on real-life living standards is clearly a significant concern for the electorate. Therefore, whichever party is seen to be best placed to tackle this issue will have an advantage in May. At this point in time, polling data shows that a plurality of Britons think that the coalition government is handling the economy well (49% vs. 42% badly)¹⁹. This is quite an achievement given the circumstances, yet it still does not seem to give the Conservative party the edge in the polls. As mentioned, this could be credited to the idea that people still feel like they will be worse off in the coming years. Nonetheless, data shows that a plurality of people are still more likely to trust the Cameron-Osborne duo when pitted against their equivalents in the Labour party²⁰.

Fig. 2.2 – Economic leaders



Source: YouGov

¹⁷ YouGov opinion poll (11/04/2015) http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/oqslggwc4a/YG-Archive-Pol-Sunday-Times-results-110415.pdf

¹⁸ YouGov opinion poll (04/04/2015) http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/1s41n4wmp1/YG-Archive-Pol-Sun-results-070415.pdf

¹⁹ YouGov opinion poll (11/04/2015) https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/oqslggwc4a/YG-Archive-Pol-Sunday-Times-results-110415.pdf

²⁰ YouGov (2015), *Why the Tories are not gaining from the UK's economic recovery*, <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/02/23/why-tories-are-not-gaining-uks-economic-recovery/>

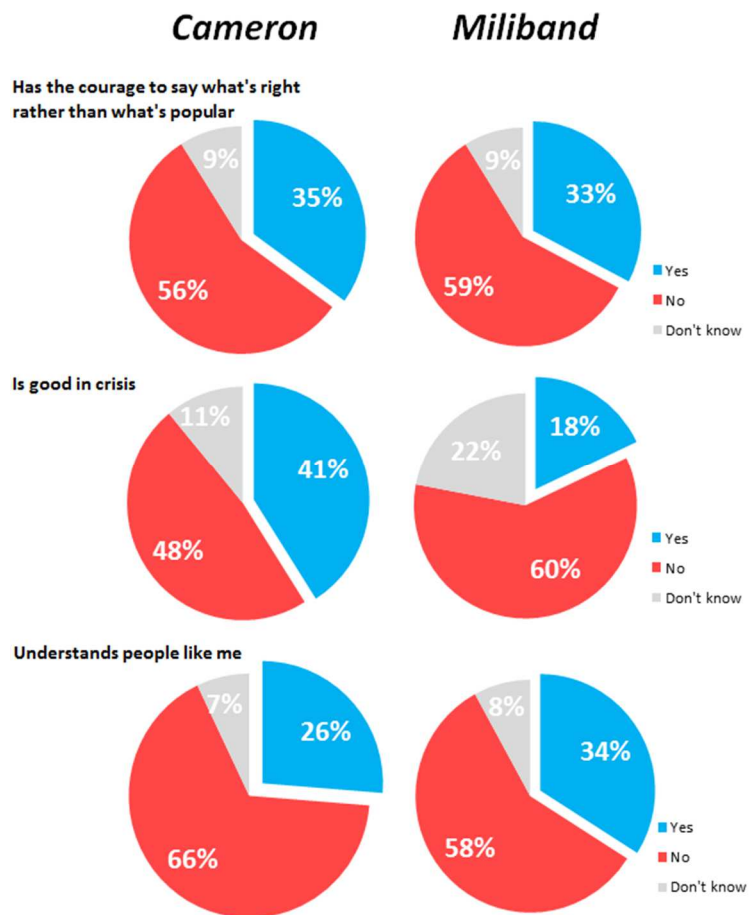
iii. Leadership

As election campaigns heat up, the presence of the party leaders in the popular media has reached almost unbearable levels. From pictures of Miliband in a hospital at the side of a mother with her newly born son to Cameron bottle feeding a lamb at a farm, it is clear that political parties give a lot of weight to physical image in the run-up to elections. All leaders now have twitter profiles and have dedicated teams that post regularly in an attempt to engage the younger cohorts. Television debates are also now the norm in British politics, only demonstrated by uproar caused by refusing to take part. In an era consumed by the media and image, the success of leadership is integral to its party's overall success.

In the last fifty years or so, 1979 proved to be the only election where the party with the perceived weaker leader entered into government. This was the year Thatcher ousted Labour's James Callaghan, a man who was preferred by the British electorate, according to opinion polls. Since then, the face of the party most valued by the public has also been the party that has entered into office. Two key contributing scholars to this area of political behaviour, Evans and Anderson, also held that Blair's weak image in 2005 cost Labour a majority in the election. They went as far as claiming that had Blair been marginally more popular, Labour could have obtained as much as 40% of the vote, as opposed to the 36% they actually received²¹.

As voters decide who they will vote for later on in the election campaign and as the electoral process becomes more and more Americanised²², the value of short-term voting factors such as the evolving party leadership will most likely continue to increase. Therefore,

Fig. 3.1 – Character traits



Source: ICM

²¹ Aff, Parliam. *The Impact of Party Leaders: How Blair lost Labour votes*, 2005 <http://pa.oxfordjournals.org/content/58/4/818.full.pdf>

²² Okoli, Ijeoma, *The Americanisation of British Politics*, 2014 http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ijeoma-e-okoli/british-politics_b_5628079.html

this leads us to the question of where the British public's loyalties lie. For most observers, the obvious answer would be Cameron. In fact, most opinion polls point in this direction.

However, ICM recently conducted an interesting study which pinpoints how voters see the main party leaders on three important character traits – honesty, adaptability, and relatability. On honesty perceptions, Cameron and Miliband scored fairly evenly with around a third of people saying that each of them have the courage to say what's right rather than what's popular. The other measures on the other hand are much more discriminant. Cameron scores much higher than Miliband on crisis management whilst Britons are slightly more likely to feel that the Labour leader understands them²³.

Which trait will be the most important and decide the outcome of this election? Given the state of international affairs and the lingering economic crisis, it makes sense to give more weight to the leader who can cope better in a crisis. According to these polls, Cameron trumps Miliband on this card by a long way. Cameron must also be aware of this as well. Cameron tried his best to steer clear of the leadership debates since his strongest hand will not be tested in this arena. Miliband relates better to the average voter and therefore has nothing to lose in televised debates. Cameron on the other hand has considerably more to lose.

Conclusion

As Miliband rules out a coalition with the Scottish National Party and Cameron the same with UKIP, there are many other factors other than those detailed in this report that will come into play. Cameron is fighting for his second term which is never easy when battling an economic crisis and with the rising support of UKIP, it will not be easy. At the same time, the surge in support for the SNP in Scotland will really hurt the Labour party's chances at securing a majority. The Liberal Democrat vote, consequently, will likely fall short of third place in Westminster making this a very uncertain and unpredictable election.

In spite of its unpredictability, this report has outlined and indicated how the political parties will fare on what are considered to be the core political battlegrounds amongst voters in the forthcoming British General Election. Drawing on a range of public opinion data, this report has shown how immigration, economic perceptions, alongside leadership competence evaluations amongst voters will sway the vote. Empirical analysis has shown that the Conservative Party has a distinctive edge over the Labour Party on economic perceptions alongside leadership competence. Yet the Conservative Party must do more to appear credible on immigration and ameliorate the electoral threat posed by UKIP. Most crucially though, whichever political party can appear credible and competent on these three core issues will have a better chance of walking into Downing Street on the 7th May.

²³ http://www.icmunlimited.com/data/media/pdf/2015_guardian_march15.pdf