



Solutions
Answers
Answers A:
Q: Results
Responses
Questions



The No Party

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As the main opposition party continues to implode, consider this: the largest and fastest-growing political party in Britain has no leader, no MPs and will be fielding no candidates at the next election. Yet over the past 40 years it has steadily gained public support. It is the No Party. Back in 1964, more than 80 per cent of voters identified with one of the political parties. Now nearly half of the electorate cannot bring themselves to identify with any of the parties.

Strong allegiance to the parties has similarly plummeted. Disaffection is even greater among the young. Out of 1,000 voters interviewed by ICM, just one person under the age of 34 described herself as a very strong supporter of the Conservative Party. The other parties did little better.

The long-term trends reflect the gradual weakening of class-based voting and a narrowing of policy differences between the two main parties, sometimes in defiance of the views of traditional supporters. It also reflects the emergence of policy issues that have cut across traditional party loyalties, particularly on the EU and the euro. The trend nevertheless points to a real problem for political parties at election time. Once they only had to worry about getting their vote out. Now they have to fret over the fickle votes of a growing band of No Party supporters.

Disenchantment with established party politics in Britain is widespread and particularly acute among No Party supporters. Four in every five think that none of the traditional parties "has any really new or attractive ideas for tackling problems in the country" and nearly two thirds think that "whichever party is in power, it makes little difference to what actually happens in the country". Partly as a result, No Party voters show little enthusiasm for the electoral process. While almost 90 per cent of people who strongly support a political party would be certain to vote in a new general election, less than a quarter of No Party supporters are sure they will bother. Traditional political parties and indeed the democratic process are both vulnerable to falling turnout and greater volatility.

If only committed supporters were to vote in any general election, the outcome could be guessed at now: another Labour victory. But the turnout might struggle to exceed 30 per cent. Clearly, unenthusiastic though they are, some unaligned voters do turn out, and it is their votes that will determine the outcome of the next election.

No Party supporters have little time for any political news. In response, the traditional parties have concentrated on the image of the leader, reducing a limited number of safe policy proposals to sound bites in the hope of getting a message across. And it is true that both are important to the final choice voters make. But what No Party supporters cry out for are new ideas to tackle the major issues that affect them. When we ask whether the way we provide health services via the NHS is in need of "fundamental review", 90 per cent agree. Similarly large numbers say the same thing about the way we tackle crime and run state education. Surprisingly, firm supporters of each political party are just as enthusiastic for a complete overhaul of these critical public services.

The problem for New Labour is that, after six-and-a-half years in government, it cannot embark on such a review without acknowledging that its policies (and the tax hikes to pay for them) have failed. They have to plead for more time and money from an increasingly sceptical electorate.

There are some interesting and potentially appealing policies around. Our research has found remarkably strong support for radical ideas such as school choice and universal health insurance to replace the NHS.

People want positive ideas from politicians and are particularly attracted to proposals that will hand the choice about which service to use to the users themselves. They think government's role should be to ensure access and standards for all, but increasingly wonder whether this means the state needs to own the entire delivery system. When it comes to law and order, there is strong support for "zero tolerance" policing, but people don't just want the Government to be tough on crime. They certainly demand a system that gives justice to victims of crime, punishes criminals and deters others. But they also want one that gives convicted criminals a real chance to break free of crime.

The Conservatives have moved towards some of these ideas, but have failed to package them as part of a compelling new political narrative. If this were a commercial market, entrepreneurs would be falling over themselves to launch a new competitor or take over a rival that they could reposition and relaunch. The winning politicians of tomorrow will be those who aim at this huge gap in the marketplace and learn how best to communicate with No Party voters. They are likely to recognise that they will be selling words and ideas, not products or services, to an electorate that is listening with only half an ear.

Like a chart-topping pop song, a successful party needs a distinctive and appealing lead singer, and interesting thoughts and ideas in the verses, hanging together with a refrain that encapsulates the main message of the song, all sung to an instantly memorable tune. Arguably, this is what Tony Blair achieved in the mid-1990s, when he positioned "New" Labour to capitalise on disenchantment with the Conservatives, after the scales finally tipped.

Can the Tories now turn the tables? That depends on whether they work out that the problem is themselves and not the Government. Labour will, in time, be seen to have failed and voters will cast around for an alternative. This means the Tories have to decide what song they want to sing, and agree to sing it in tune.

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