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# Democratic disconnect?

## Feelings of powerlessness among the British public

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Faculty of Social Science and Public Policy

September 2025

# About this study

This study explores feelings of powerlessness, overall in Britain and among key groups. It updates long-term trends, some going back to the 1980s, as well as adding new questions on the perceived responsiveness of public and private services.

One theory for part of the explanation for declining faith in how our democratic system is working and the lack of optimism for the future is that people feel increasingly powerless over key aspects of their lives and the decisions made on their behalf.

This study explores these perceptions and paints a worrying picture. While there was never a “golden age” of the public feeling particularly more powerful, at least over the last 35 years, we are seeing declines in some areas, and an extremely low sense of control among particular groups, not least among Reform UK supporters and those who do not vote.

We’ve also seen a collapse in belief that public services, in particular, will respond to complaints, reflecting a broader decline in faith in public services seen in other studies.

## Fieldwork

### 2025

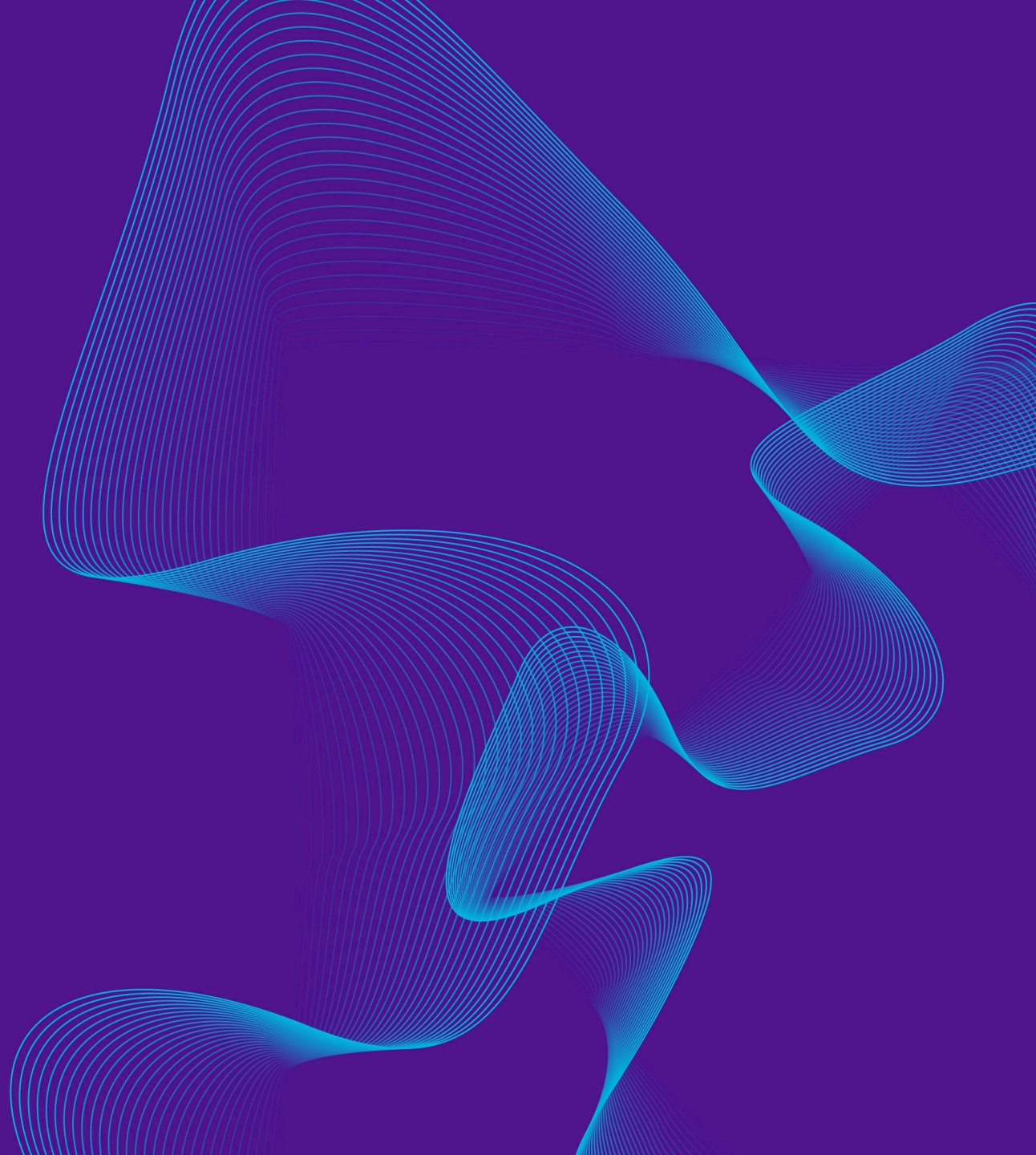
Ipsos interviewed a representative probability sample of 2,185 British adults aged 16+, via the online Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel. Data was collected between 3-9 April 2025. Data is weighted to the profile of the population. All polls are subject to a wide range of potential sources of error. For further details see the appendix.

### Other years

Trends are taken from a range of different sources: Ipsos (then MORI) archives; the Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement; and the People’s Panel run by Ipsos for the Cabinet Office 1998-2002. Previous surveys were carried out face-to-face, using a mix of quota and random probability sampling methods. Because of the change in methodology since then (with 2025 data collected through a random probability online panel), trends should be interpreted with some caution.

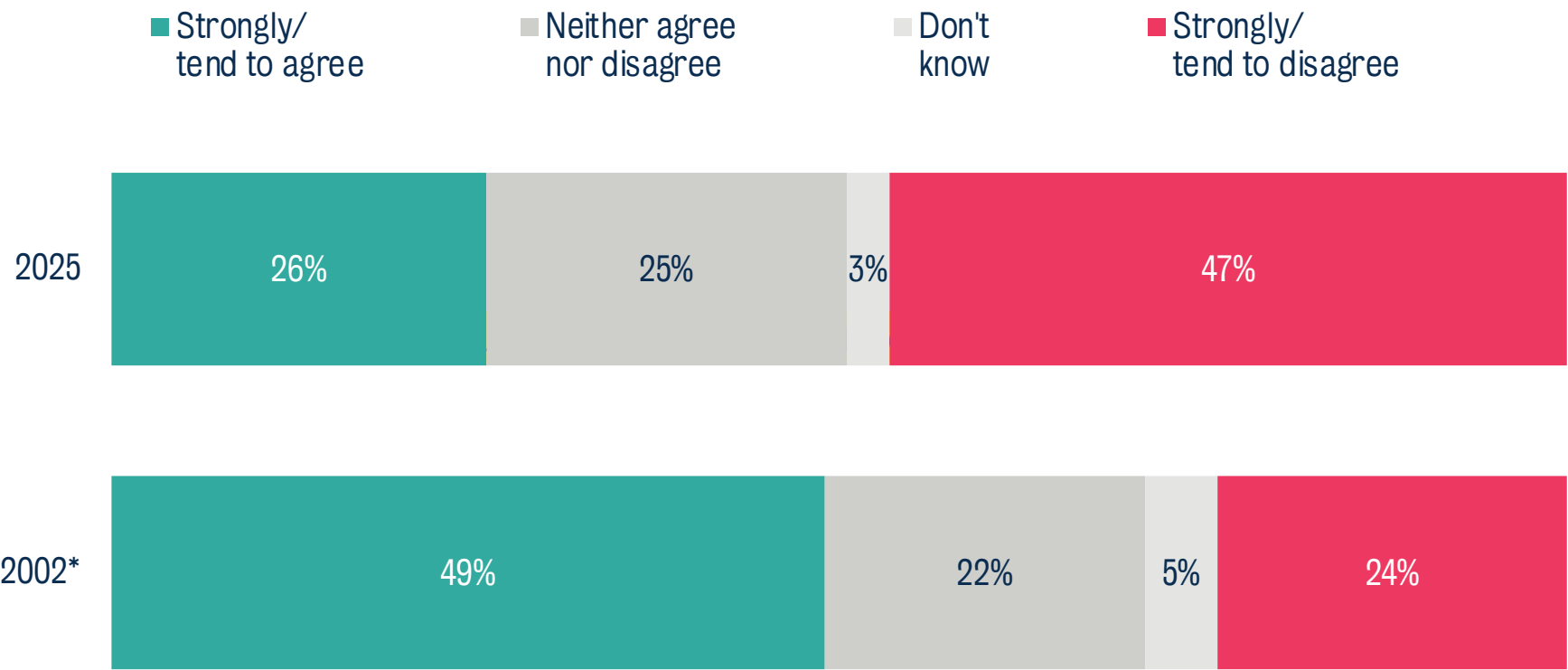
## **Public and private services**

There has been a big decline in the belief that public services will listen to complaints, while local councils are viewed as negatively as private landlords for putting people's interests first



# The share of Britons who feel most public services are ready to listen to complaints has almost halved over the last 23 years

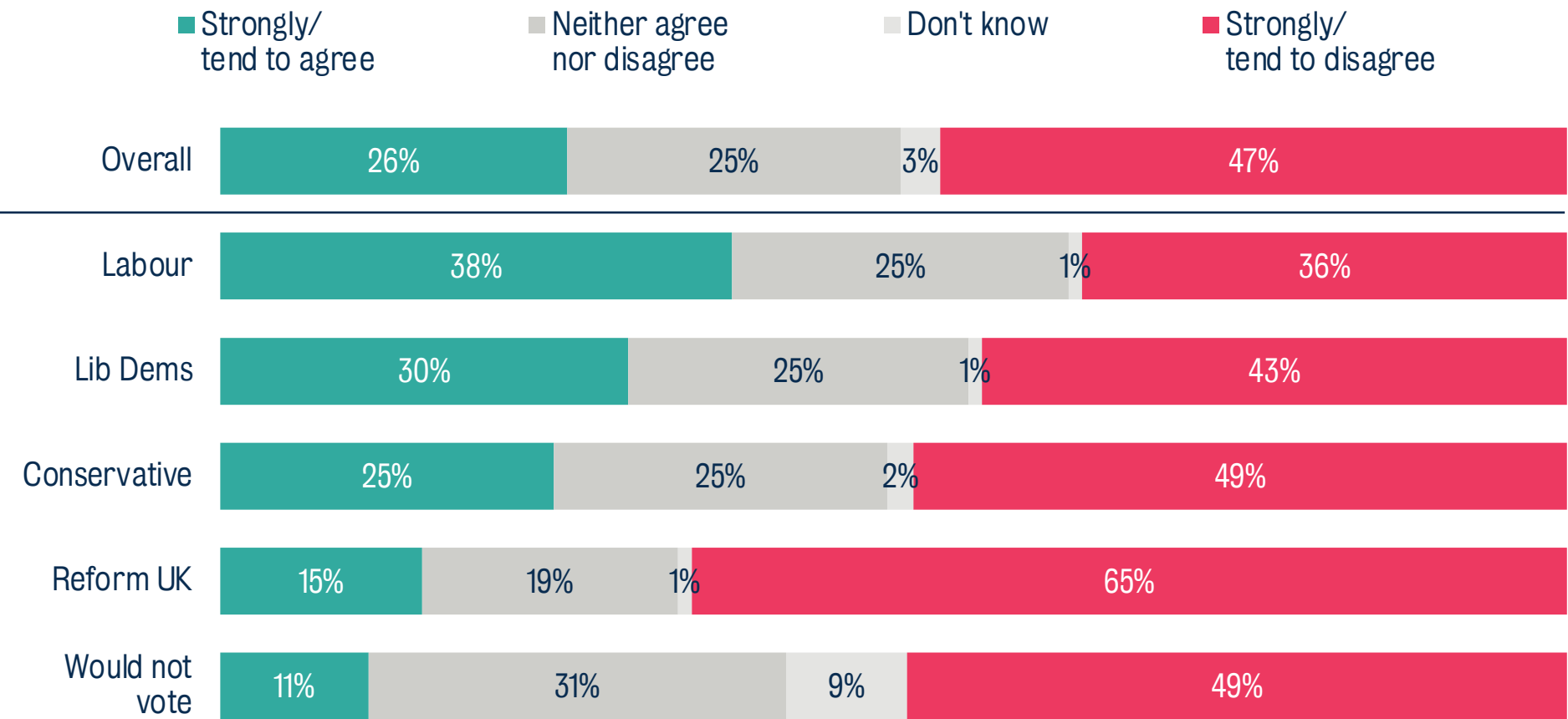
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: **Most public services are ready to listen to complaints**





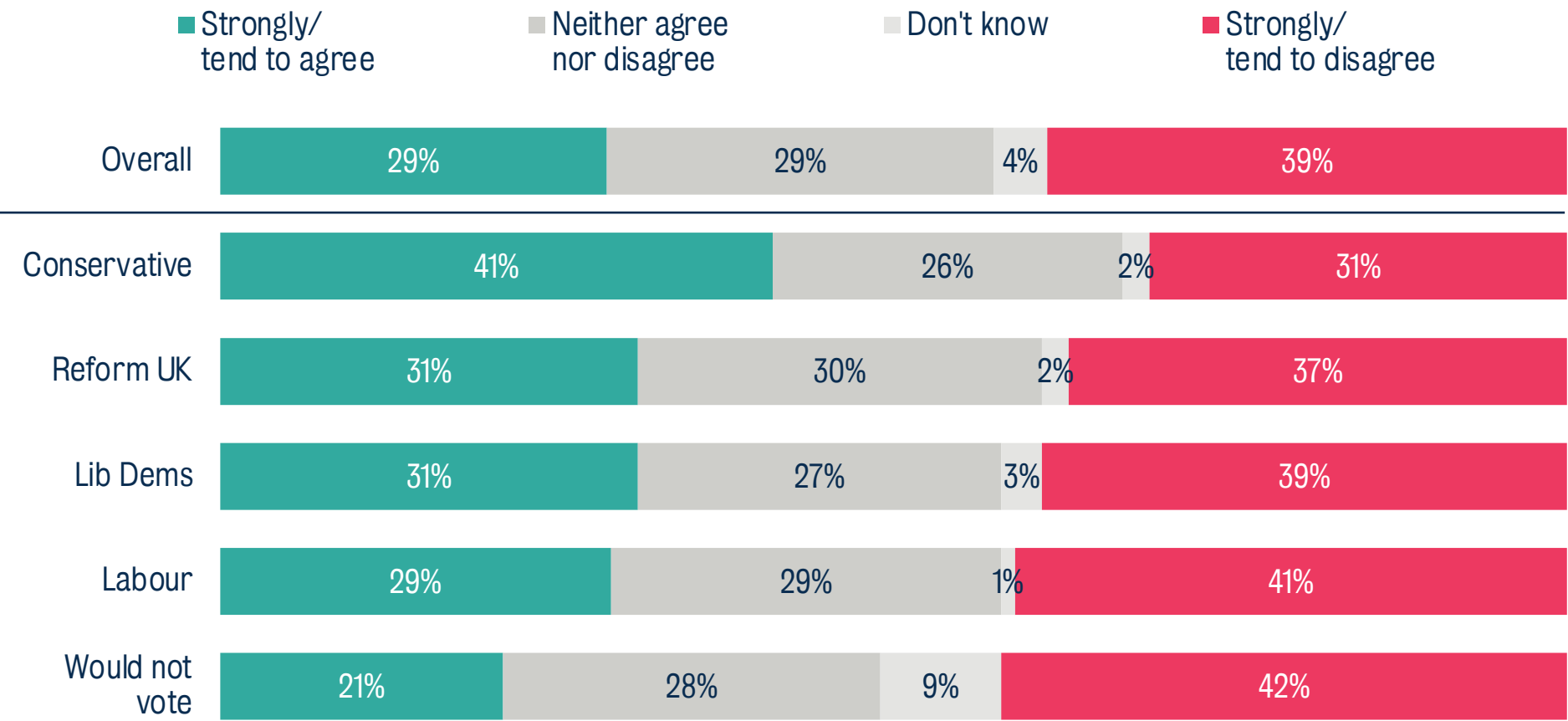
# Two-thirds of Reform UK supporters feel most public services are not ready to listen to complaints – far higher than supporters of other major parties

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: **Most public services are ready to listen to complaints**



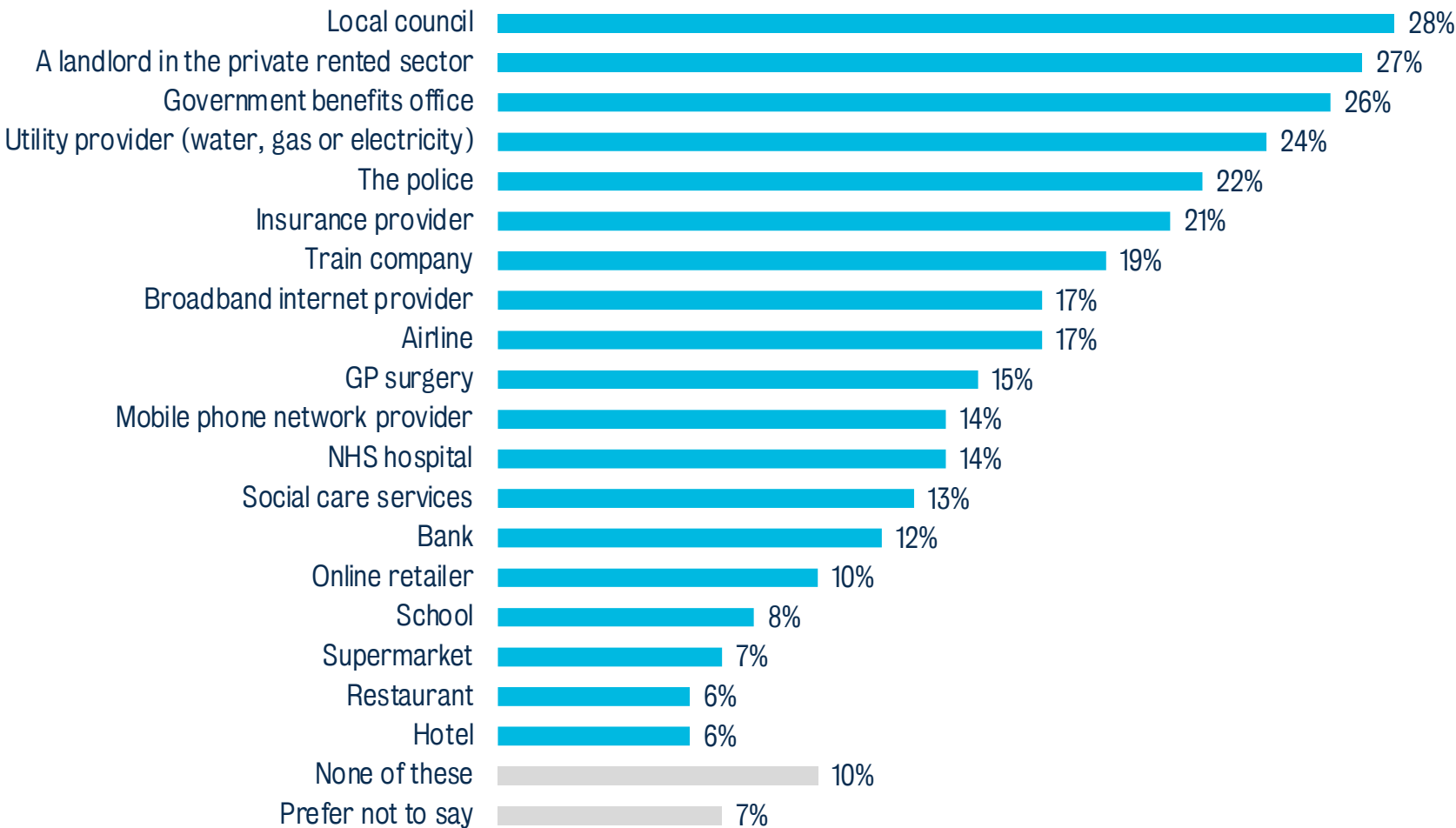
# The public have a slightly less negative view of private companies' willingness to listen to complaints, with Conservative supporters most positive

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: **Most private sector companies are ready to listen to complaints**



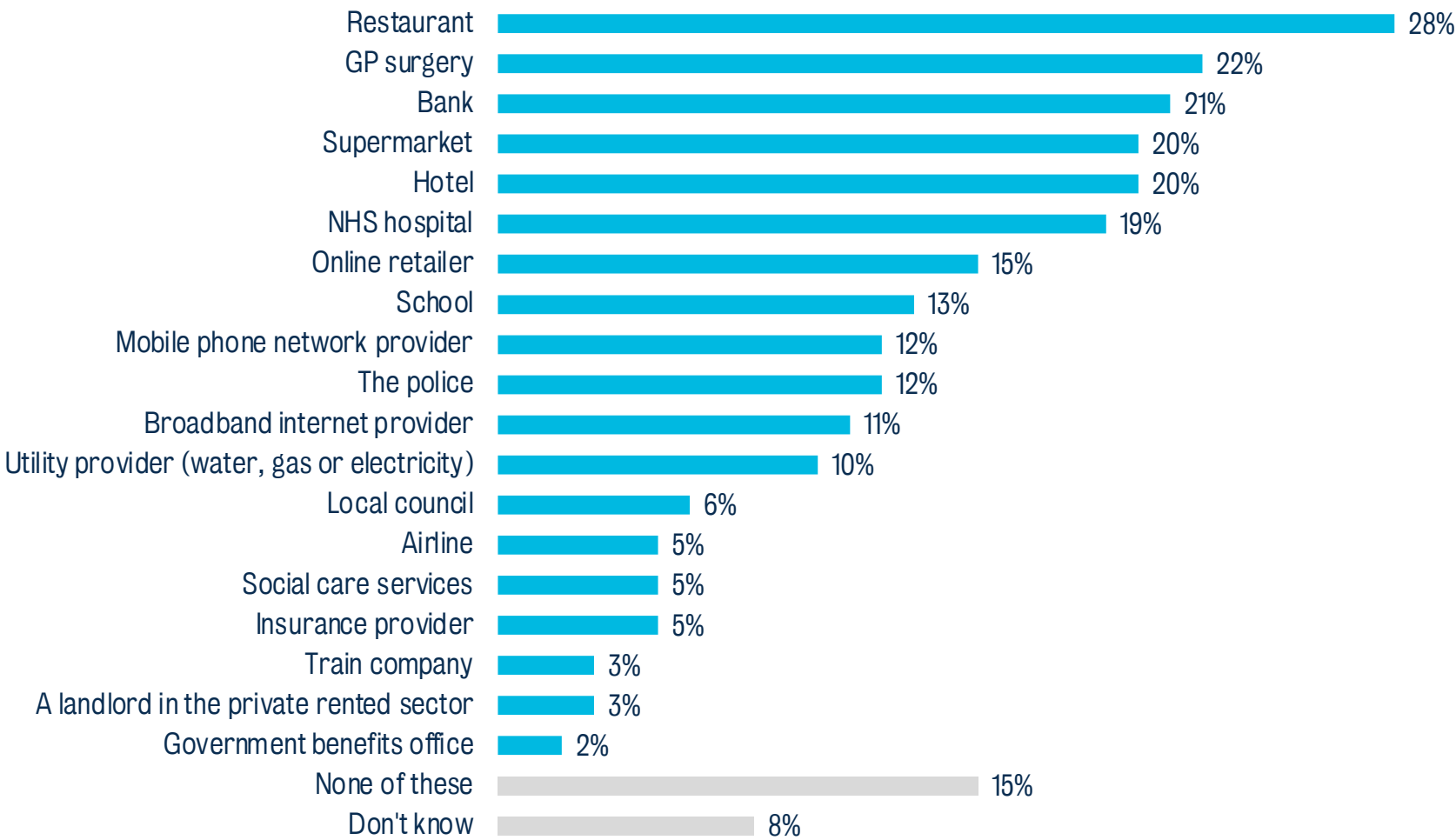
# Those seen as least likely to put people’s interests first in case of a problem are local councils, private landlords, government benefits offices and utility providers

Imagine you had a problem with a service. Which, if any, of the following services do you think would be **LEAST** likely to put your interests first in resolving the problem?



# Restaurants come top among services seen as most likely to put the public's interests first when resolving a problem, followed by GPs, banks, hotels, supermarkets and NHS hospitals

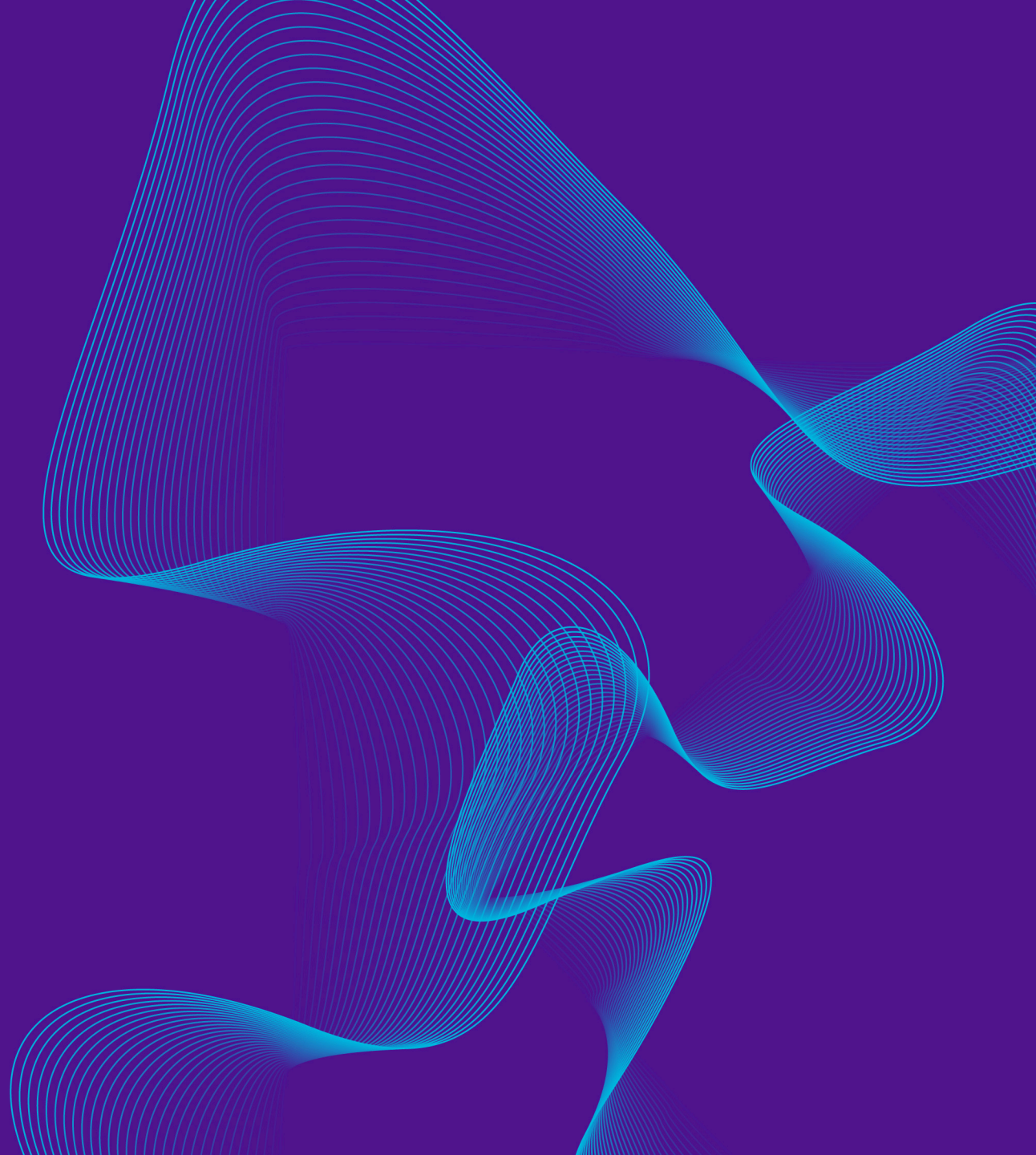
Imagine you had a problem with a service. Which, if any, of the following services do you think would be **MOST** likely to put your interests first in resolving the problem?





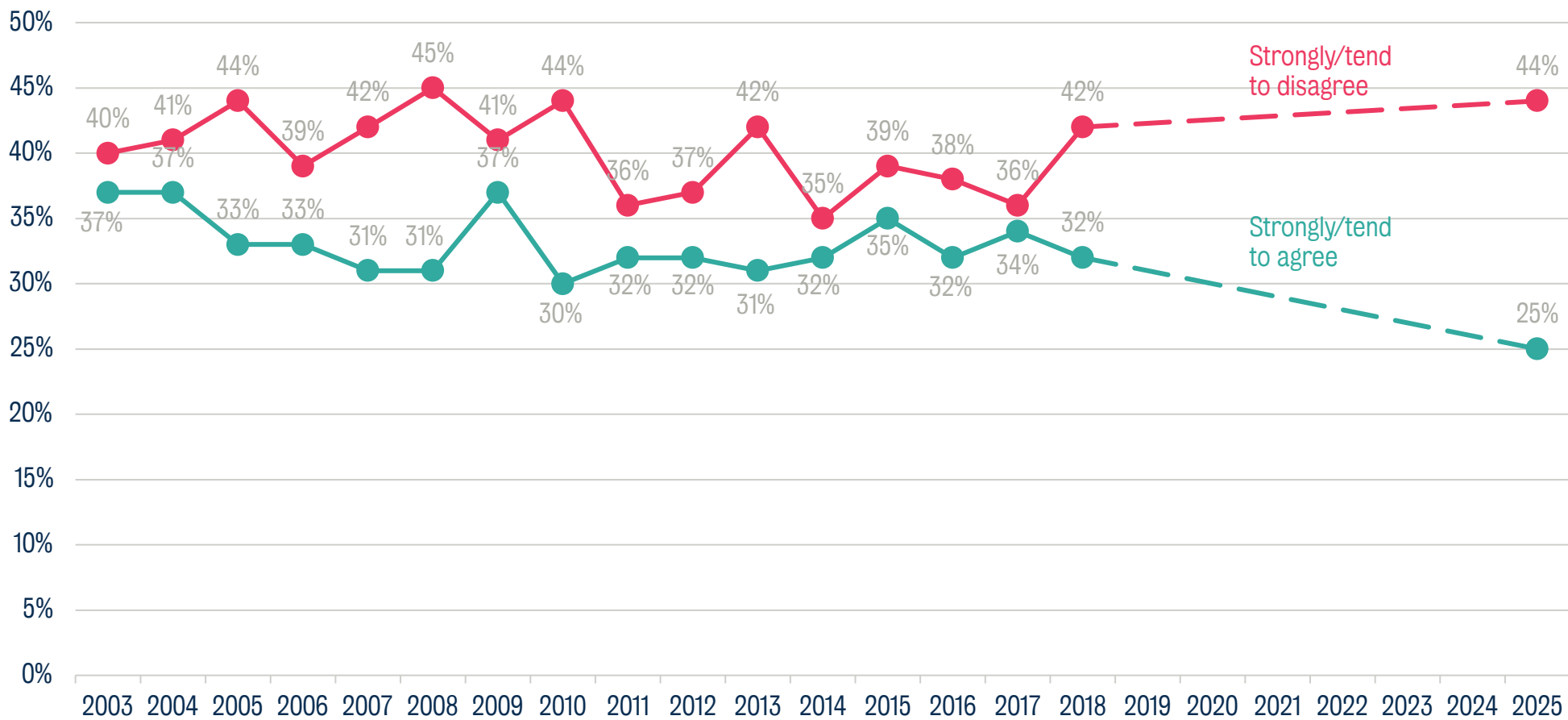
## Perceptions of political influence and decision-making

Trends reveal that while there was never a “golden age” when the public felt particularly powerful, some measures have worsened, and there is now an extremely low sense of control among particular groups, not least among Reform UK supporters and those who do not vote



# One in four people agree when they get involved in politics, they really can change how the UK is run – down from one in three back in 2018

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:  
When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the UK is run



Base: 2,185 GB adults, age 16+ , interviewed via the Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel, Fieldwork dates 3-9 April 2025. \* Trends should be interpreted as indicative only due to changes in methodology. 2003-2018 data from Hansard Audit of Political Engagement, representative quota sample of c1,200-2,000 face-to-face interviews each year with GB adults aged 18+

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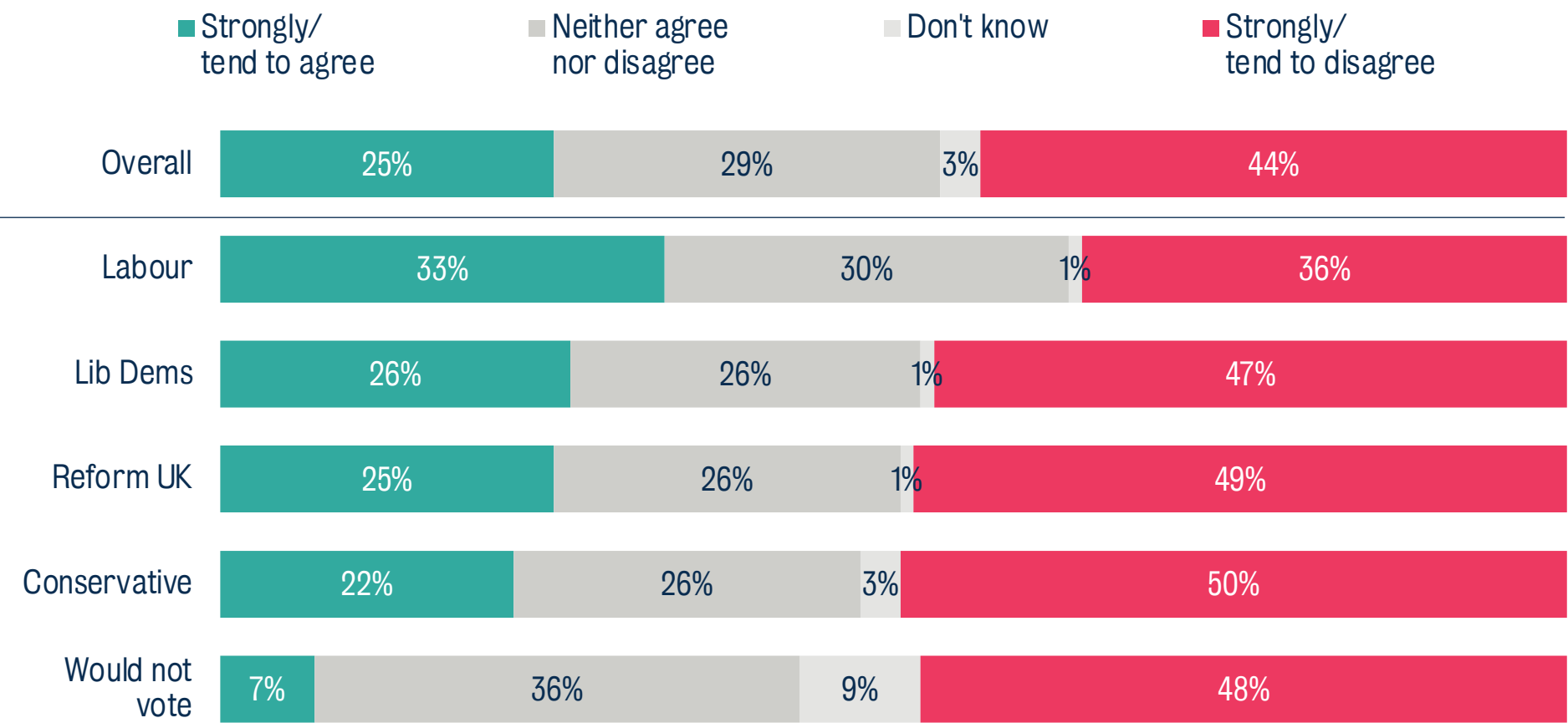
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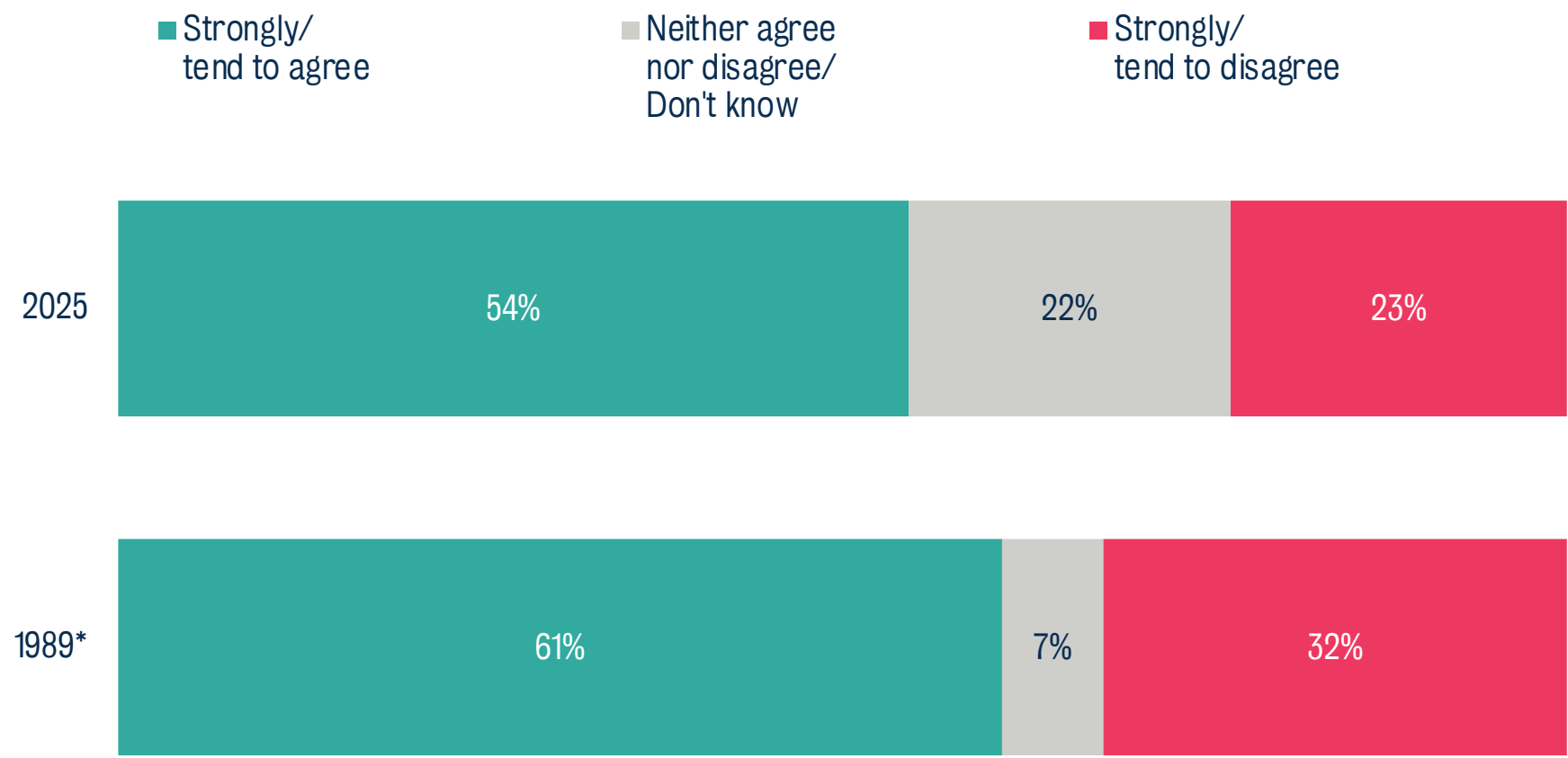
# Labour supporters are split on whether they can change how the UK is run through involvement in politics, while supporters of other parties and non-voters are more doubtful

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:  
**When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the UK is run**



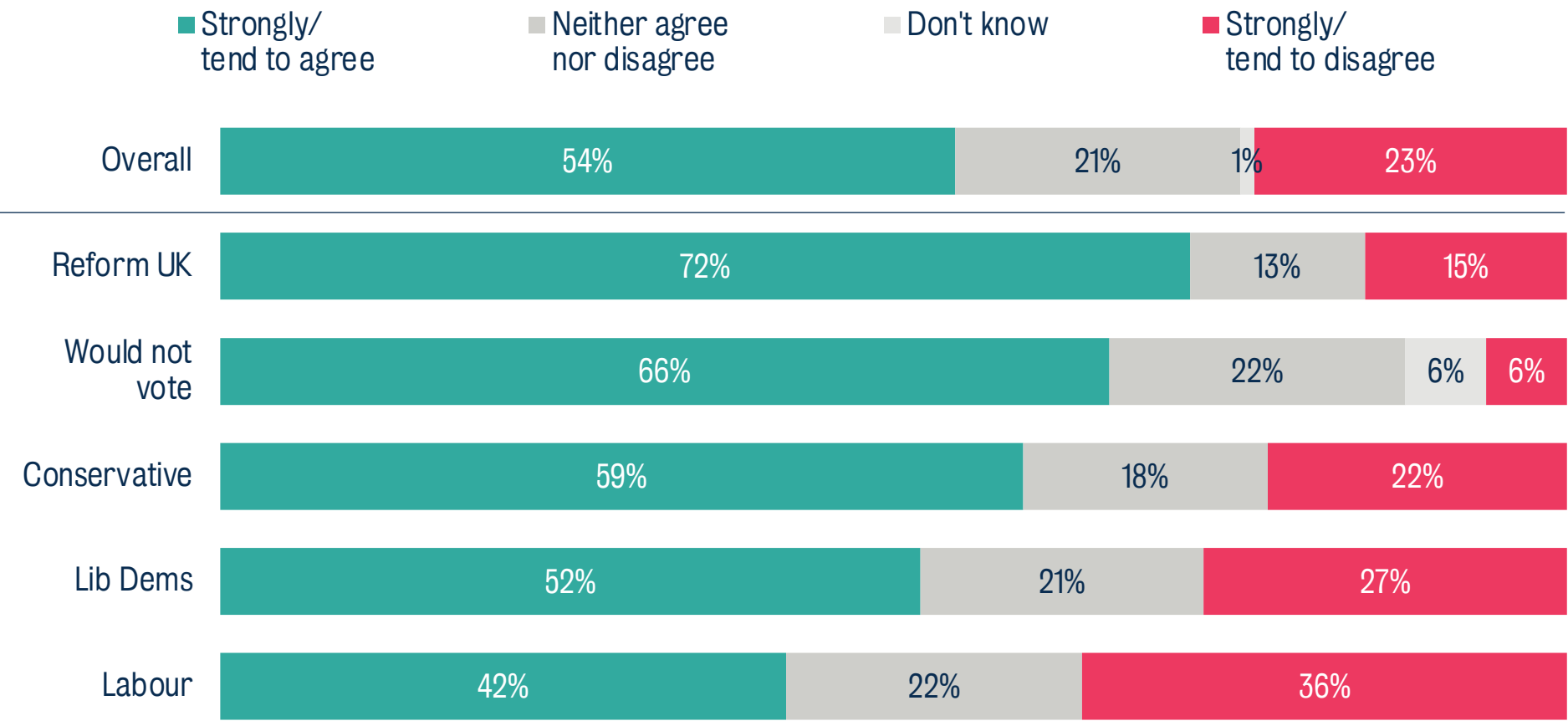
# Just over half the public say people like them are powerless to change things in Britain. This is slightly lower than in 1989, though fewer disagree with the statement as well

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: **People like me are powerless to change things in this country**



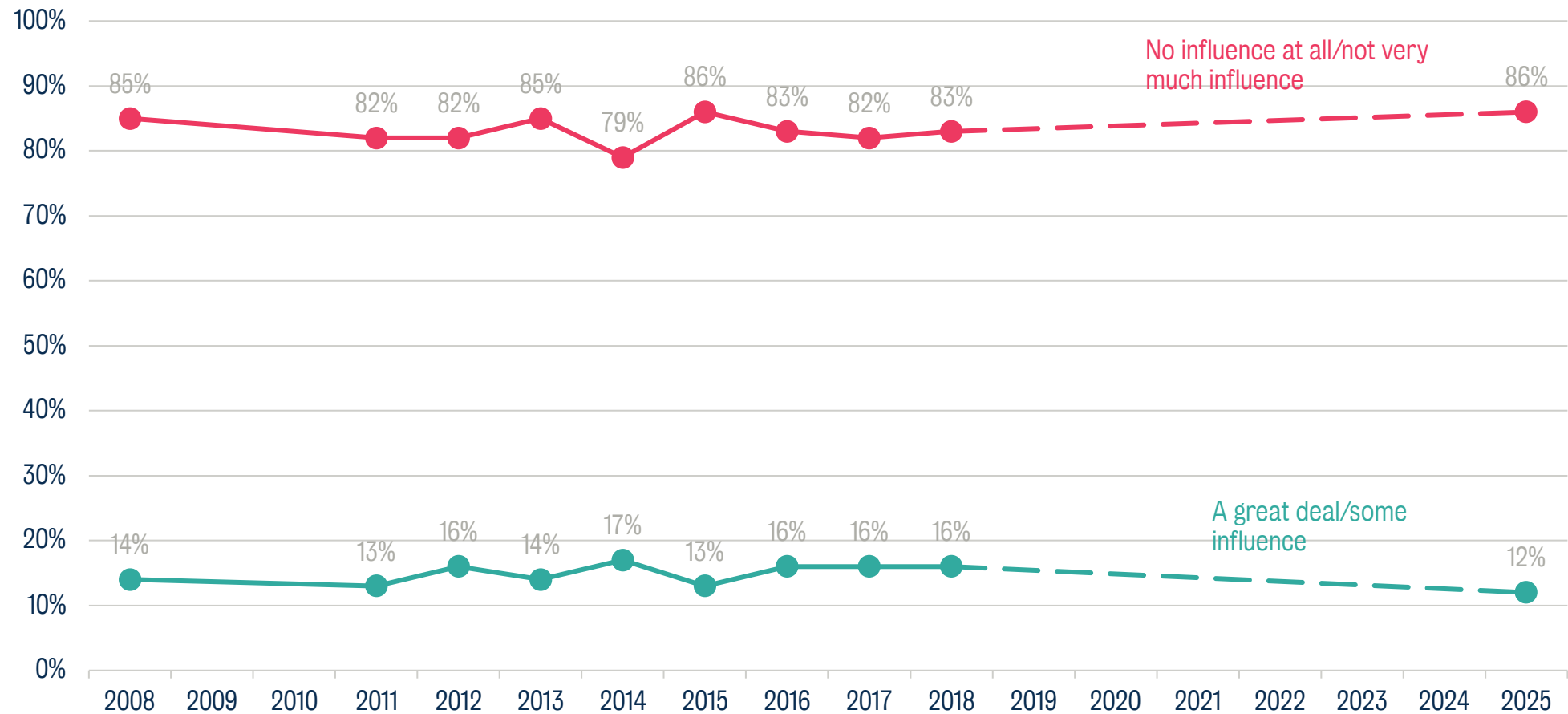
# Reform UK supporters are by far the most likely to say they are powerless to change things, followed by those who would not vote

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: **People like me are powerless to change things in this country**



# 86% of the public today feel they have no or little influence over national decision-making – broadly in line with the pre-pandemic average

How much influence, if any, do you feel you have over decision-making in the country as a whole

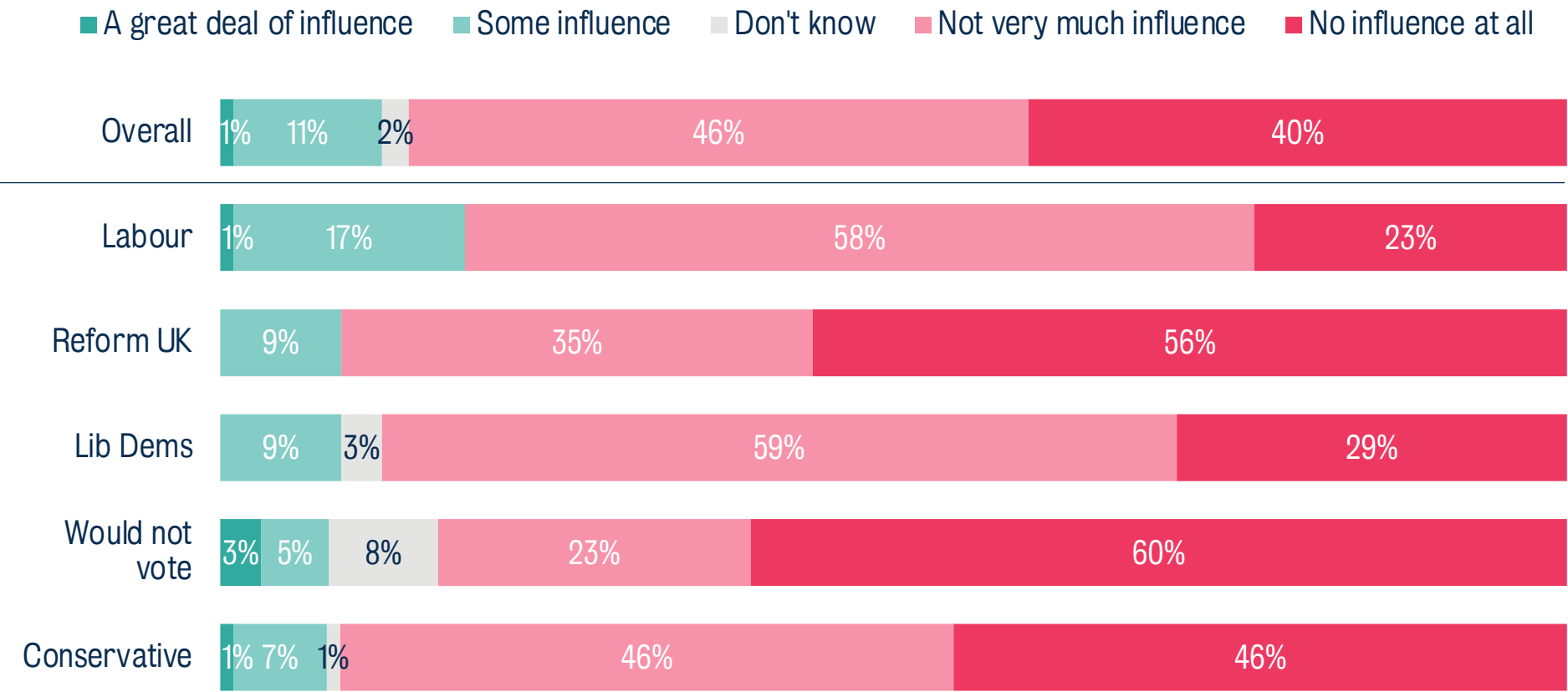


Base: 2,185 GB adults, age 16+ , interviewed via the Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel, Fieldwork dates 3-9 April 2025. \* Trends should be interpreted as indicative only due to changes in methodology. 2008-2018 data from Hansard Audit of Political Engagement, representative quota sample of c1,200-2,000 face-to-face interviews each year with GB adults aged 18+



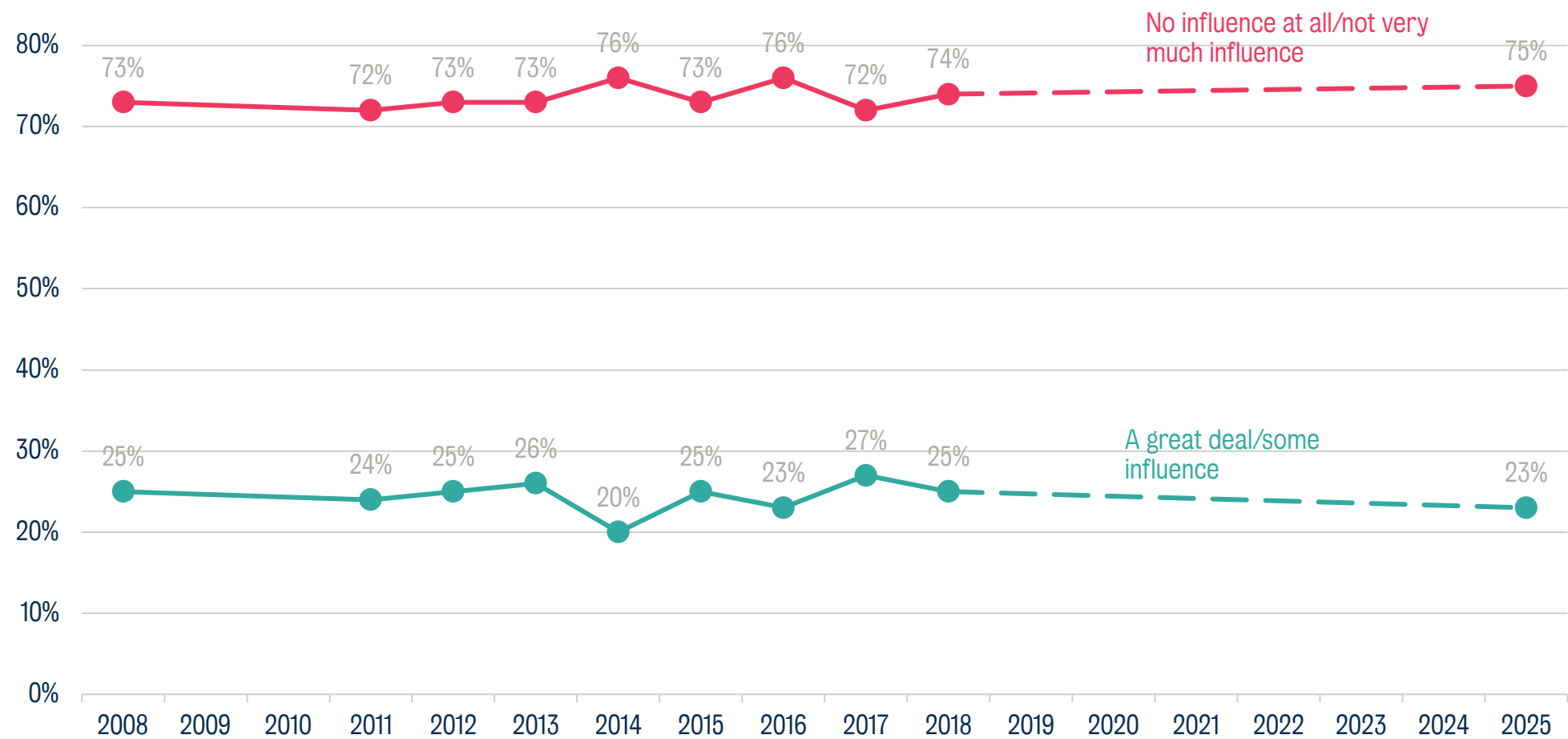
# Only 12% of Britons feel they have at least some influence over national-decision making, with Reform UK supporters and non-voters most likely to say they have no influence at all

How much influence, if any, do you feel you have over decision-making in the country as a whole



# Around one in four people feel they have at least some influence over decision-making in their local area, with little change in views since 2008

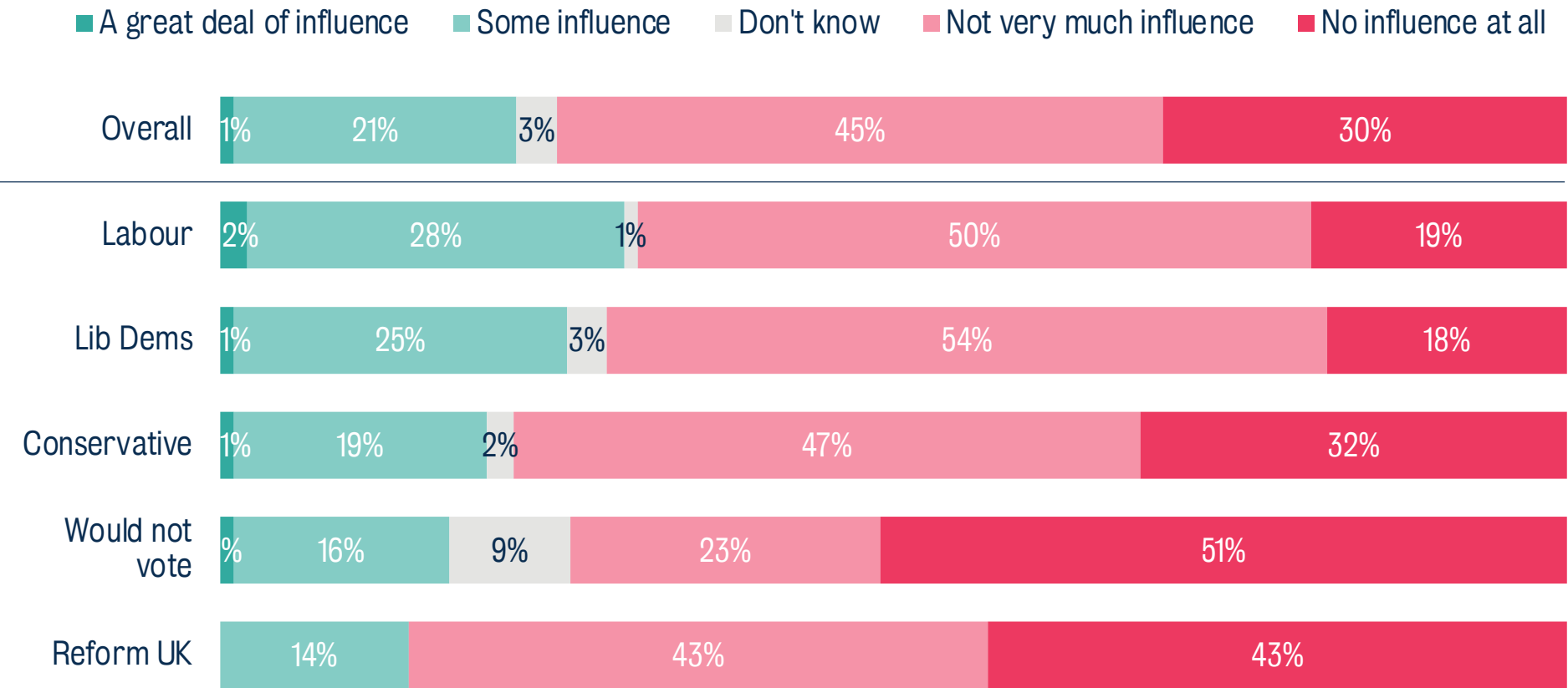
How much influence, if any, do you feel you have over decision-making in your local area?



Base: 2,185 GB adults, age 16+ , interviewed via the Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel, Fieldwork dates 3-9 April 2025. \* Trends should be interpreted as indicative only due to changes in methodology. 2008-2018 data from Hansard Audit of Political Engagement, representative quota sample of c1,200-2,000 face-to-face interviews each year with GB adults aged 18+

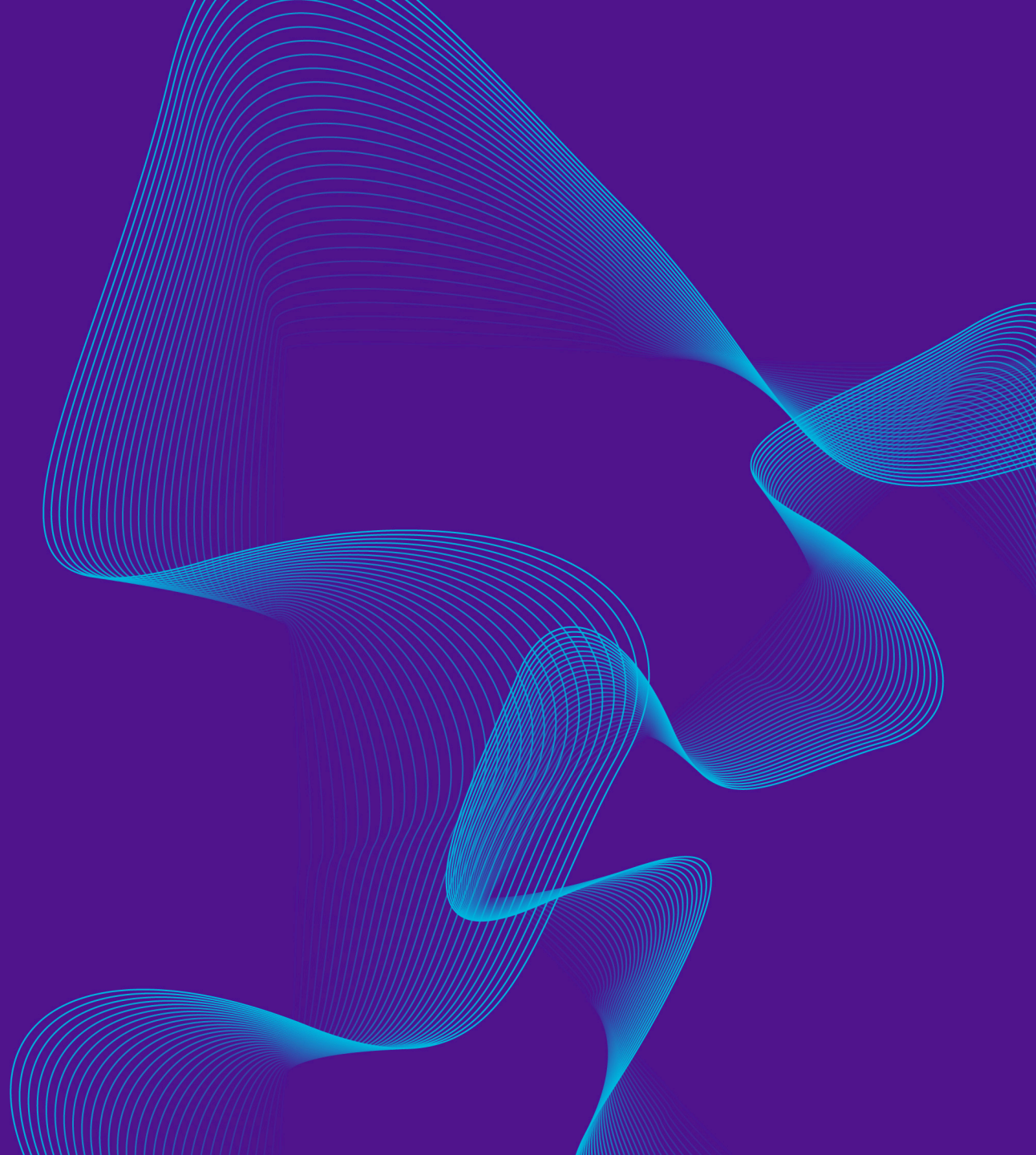
# Reform UK supporters and non-voters are most negative about their role in local decision-making – between four and five in 10 feel they have no influence at all

How much influence, if any, do you feel you have over decision-making in your local area?



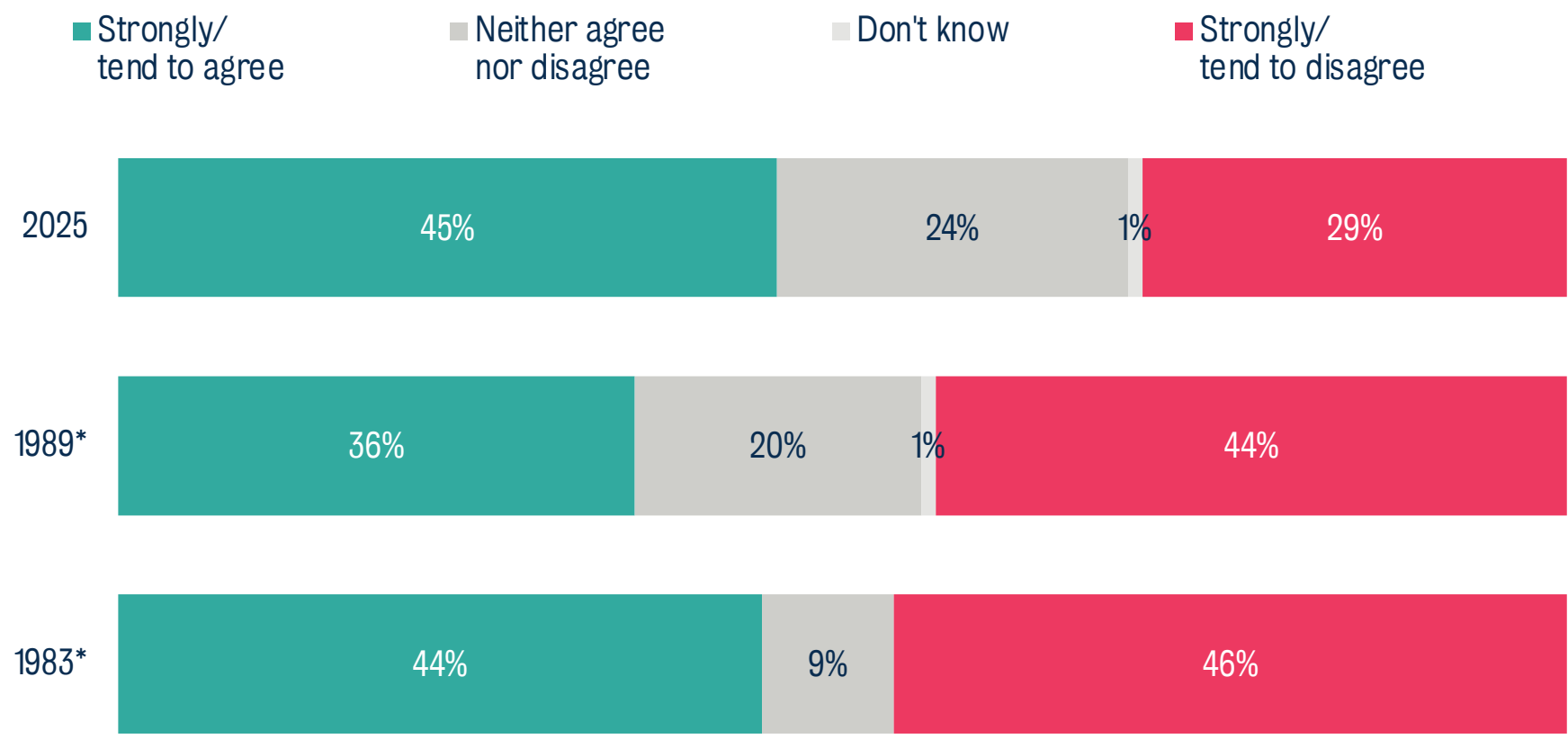
# **Influence over things that happen to people**

Nearly half the public today feel they have little influence over the things that happen to them, with Reform UK supporters notably most likely to hold this view



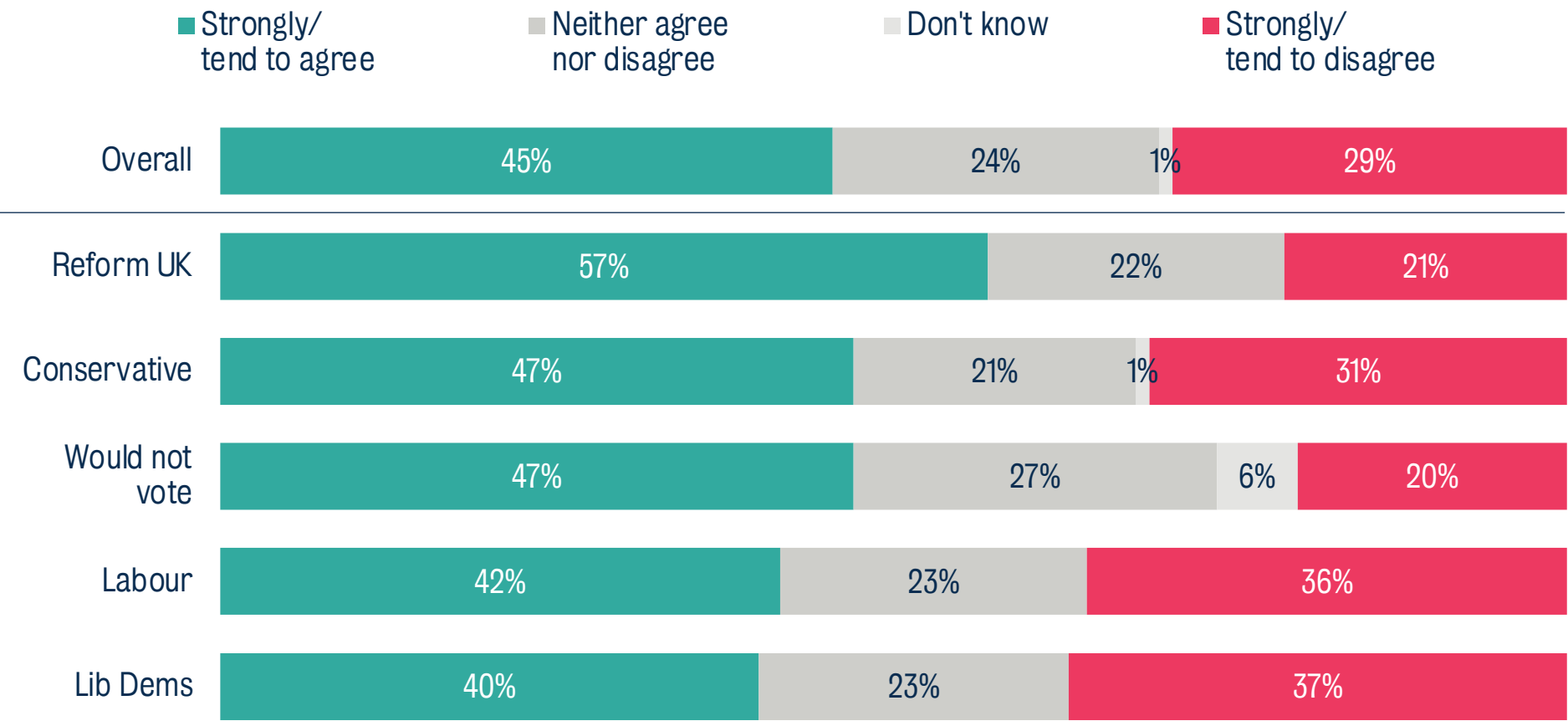
# Just under half the public feel they have little influence over their lives – similar to opinion in 1983 but higher than in 1989. Unlike back then, there are now far fewer who disagree with this statement

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: **I feel that I have little influence over the things that happen to me**



# Reform UK supporters are the only group where a majority feel they have little influence over the things that happen to them

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: **I feel that I have little influence over the things that happen to me**

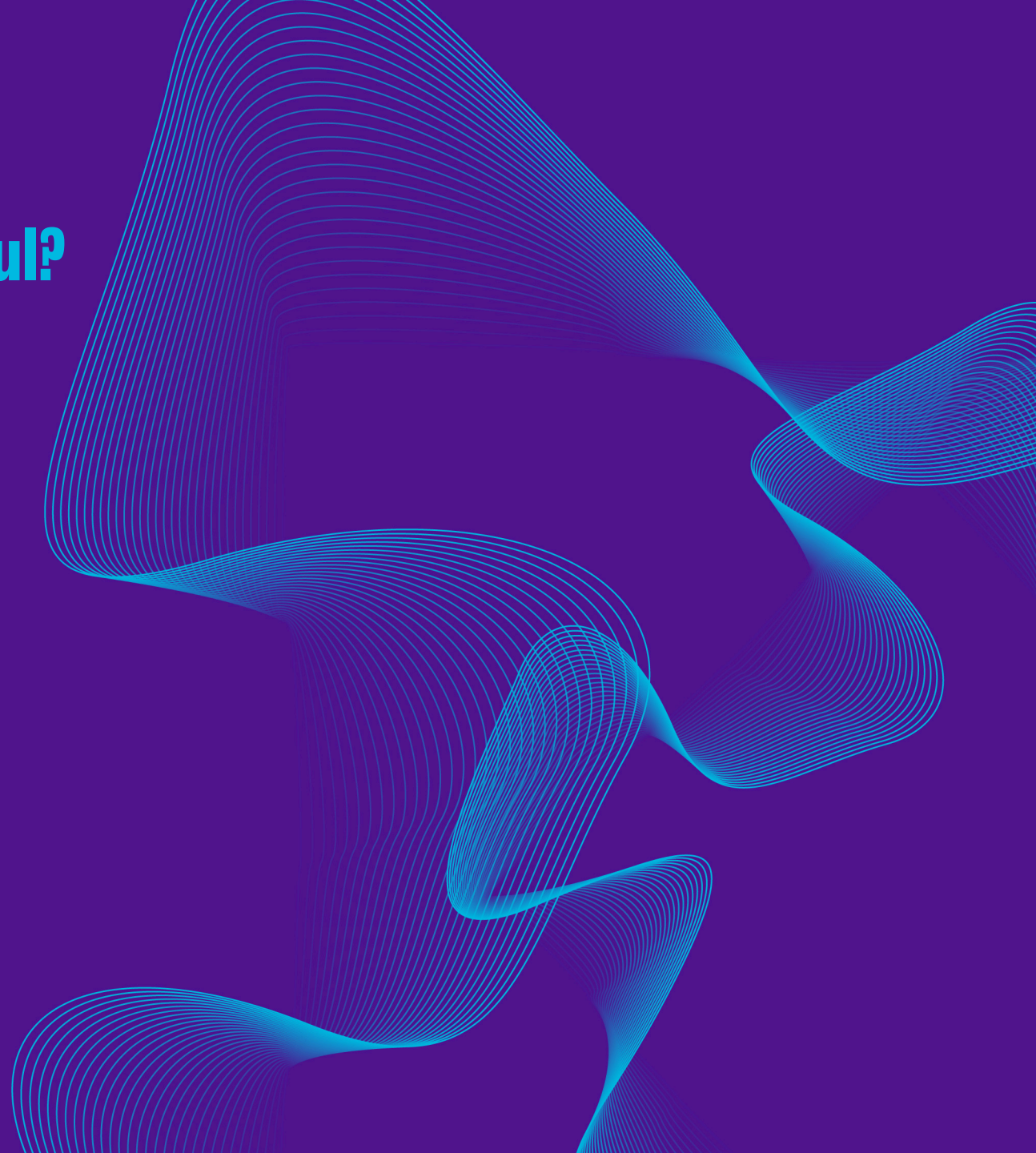




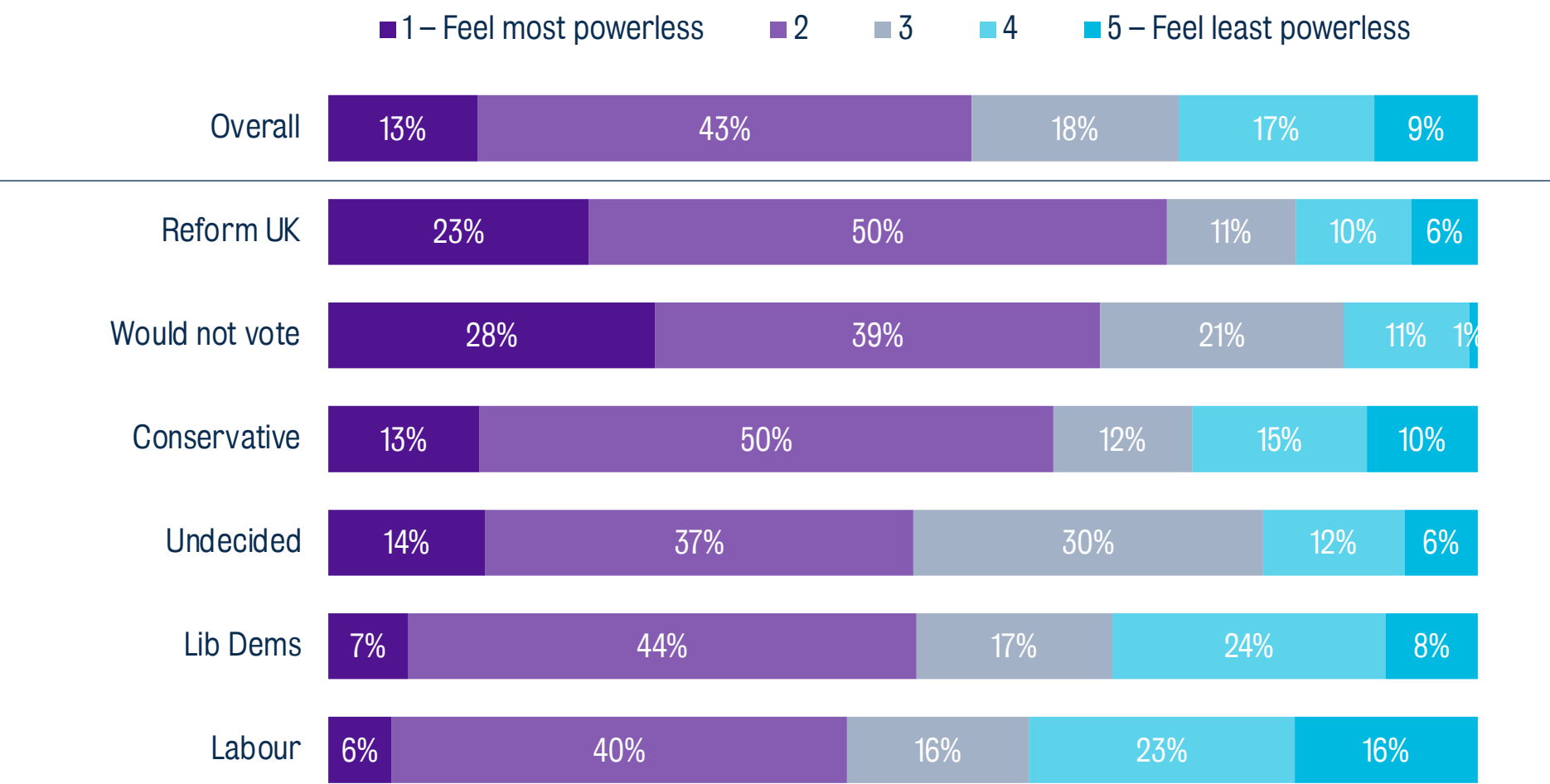
## Who feels most and least powerful?

An index based on the average agreement with three statements\* shows that, while most demographics have a large group who don't feel very powerful, relatively few see themselves as totally powerless – although there are differences by ethnicity, income, education and political support

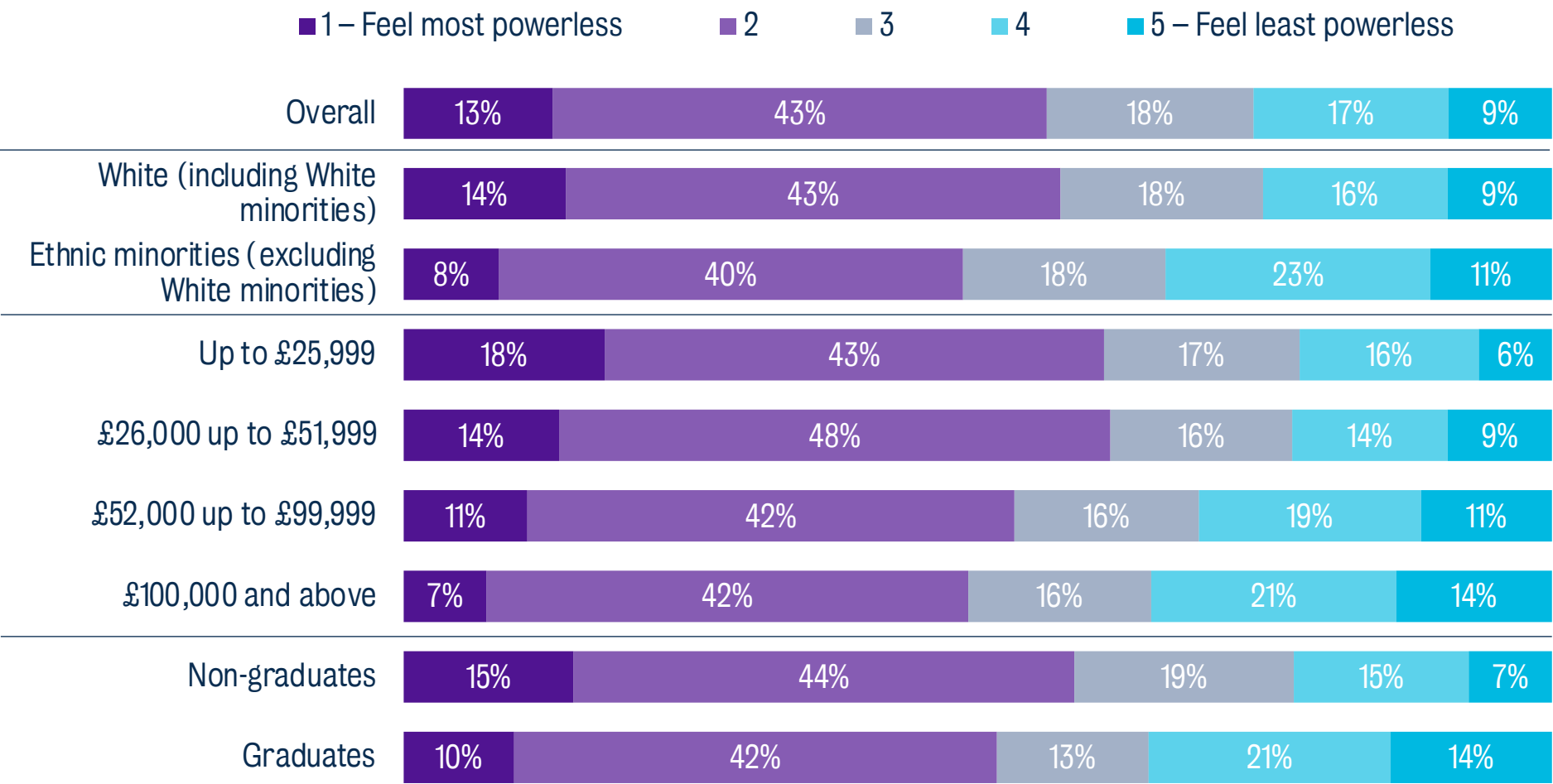
*\*I feel that I have little influence over the things that happen to me; people like me are powerless to change things in this country; when people like me get involved in politics, they can really change the way the country is run (reversed)*



# Reform UK supporters rank highest for feelings of powerlessness in the index – although those who say they wouldn't vote for any political party have the largest share who feel most powerless



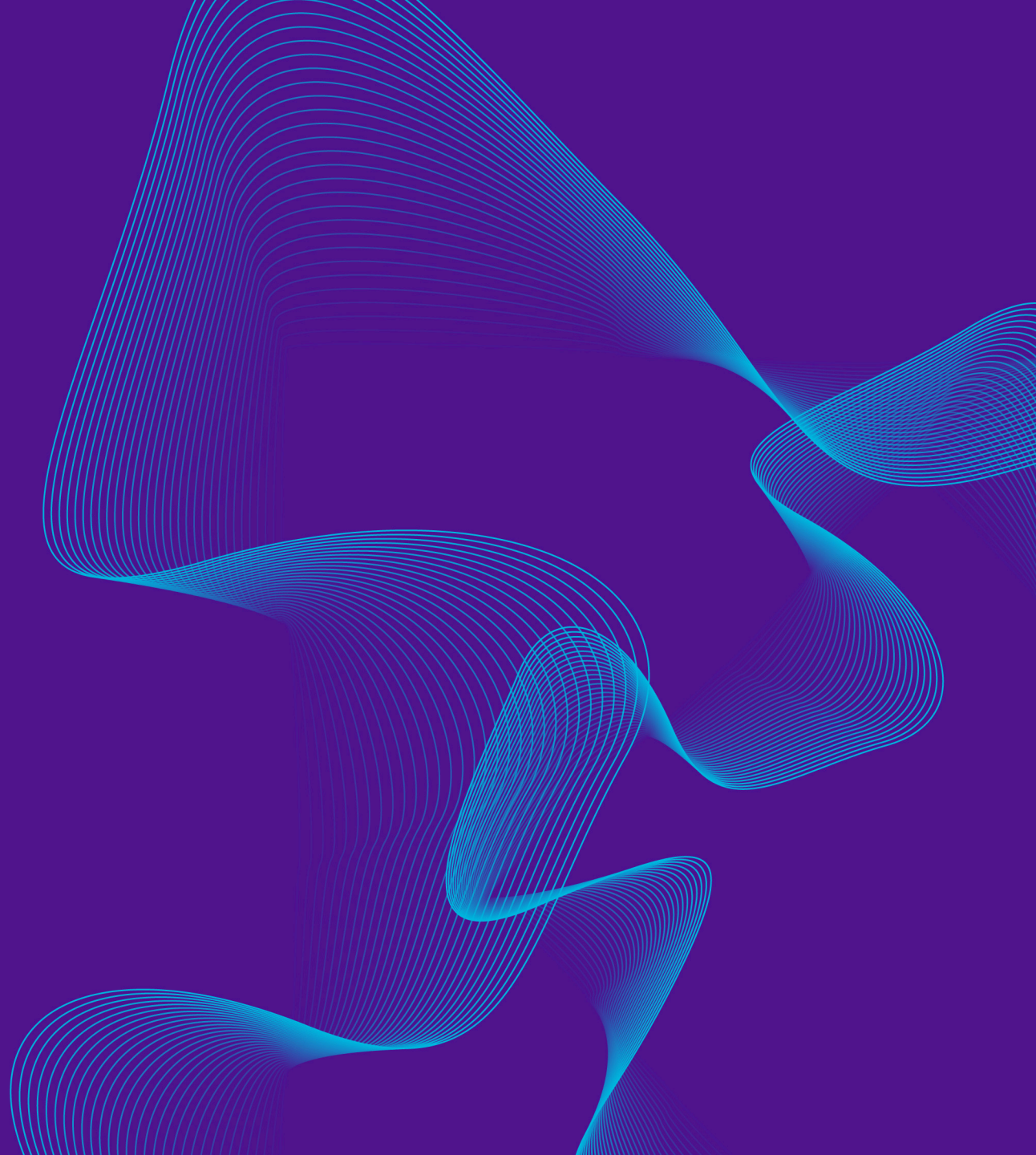
# People belonging to ethnic minorities are slightly less likely to feel powerless than White people, while perceptions of power also differ by income and education levels





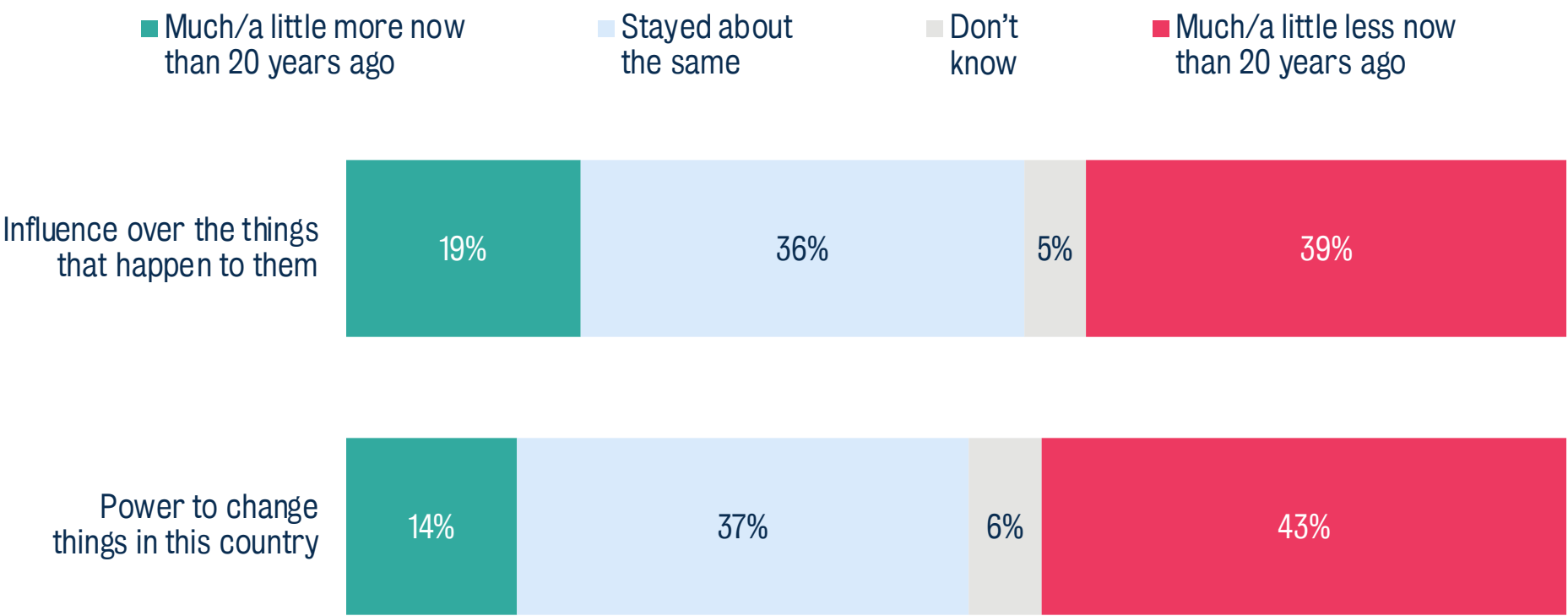
## Changes in perceived power and influence

Few believe their power has increased over the past two decades – but young women stand out as most likely to feel they now have greater influence



# The public are relatively split on whether their power and influence has diminished or stayed the same compared with 20 years ago, but only one in five or less think it's improved

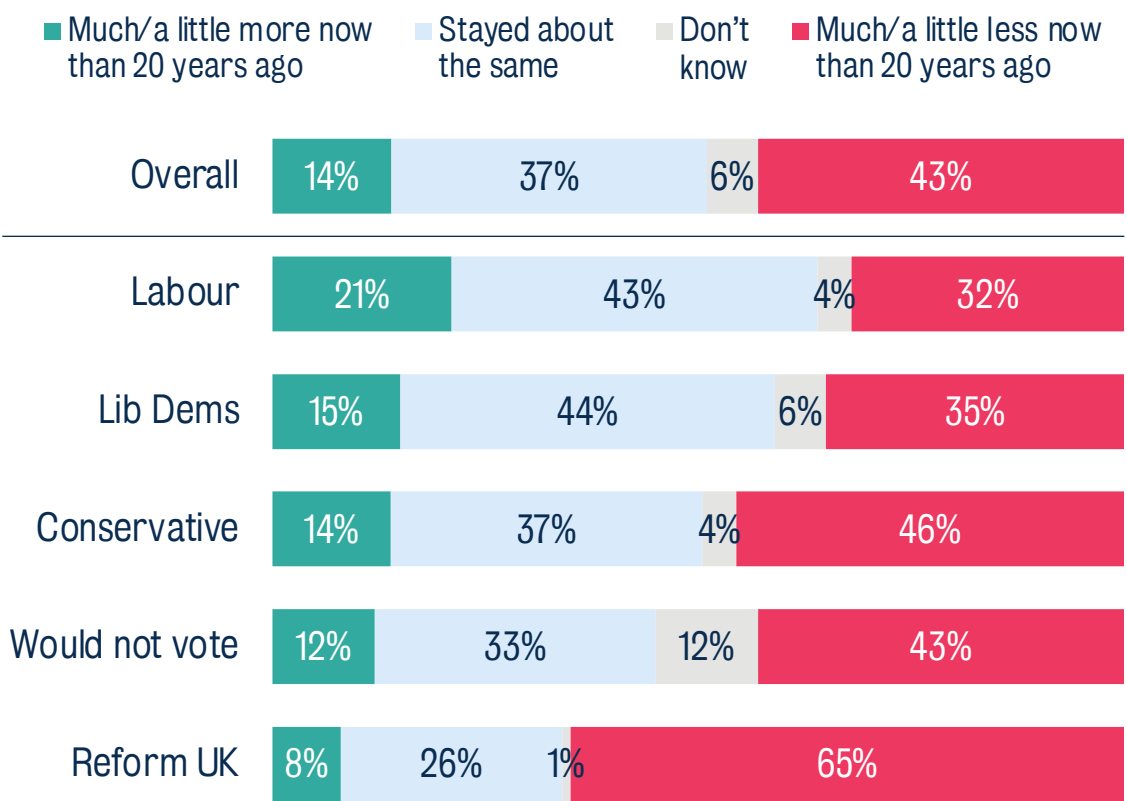
Thinking about the last 20 years, do you think that people like you have more or less of each of the following now than they did 20 years ago, or is it about the same?



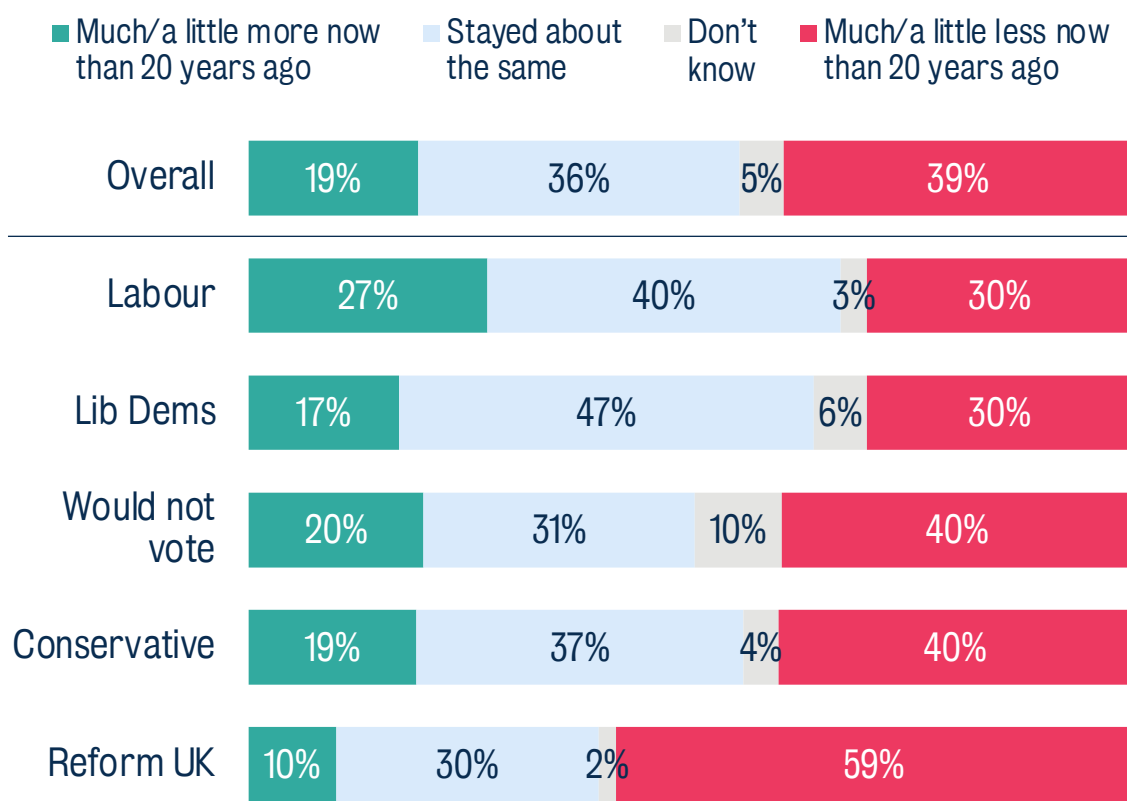
# Reform UK supporters are the only group with majorities who feel their power to change the country and influence over their lives is worse than it was 20 years ago

Thinking about the last 20 years, do you think that people like you have more or less of each of the following now than they did 20 years ago, or is it about the same?

## Power to change things in this country



## Influence over the things that happen to them

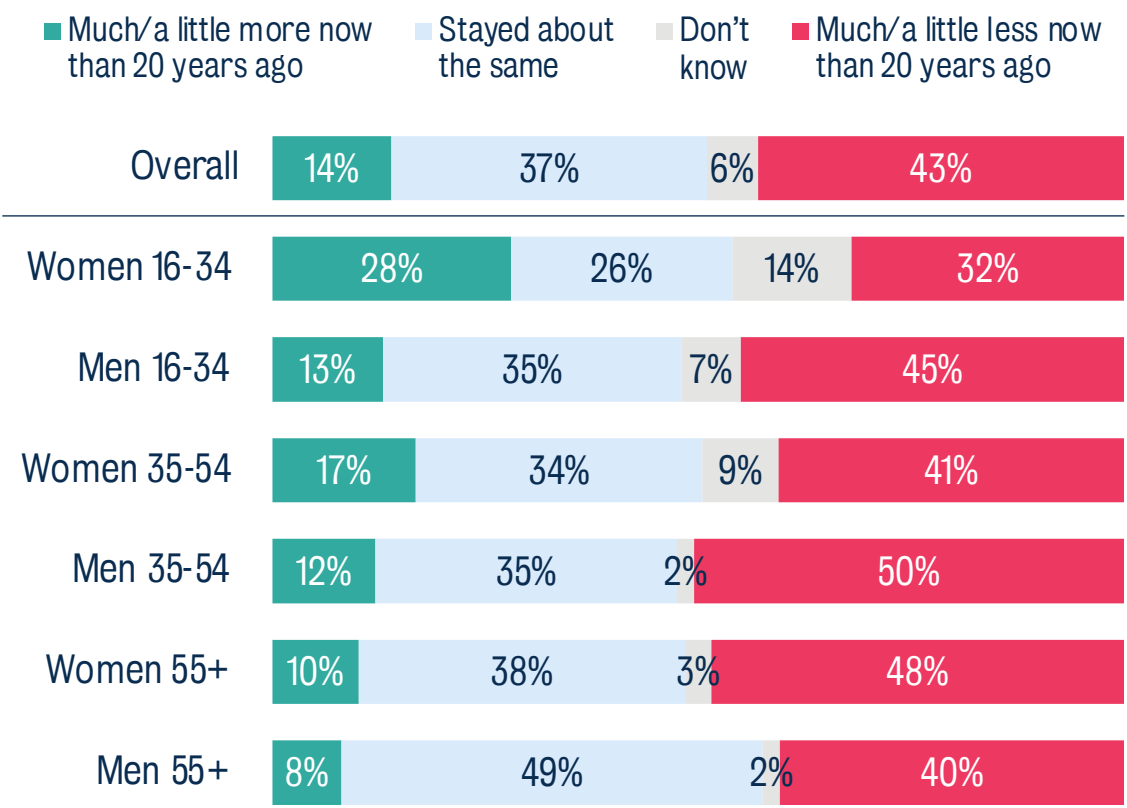




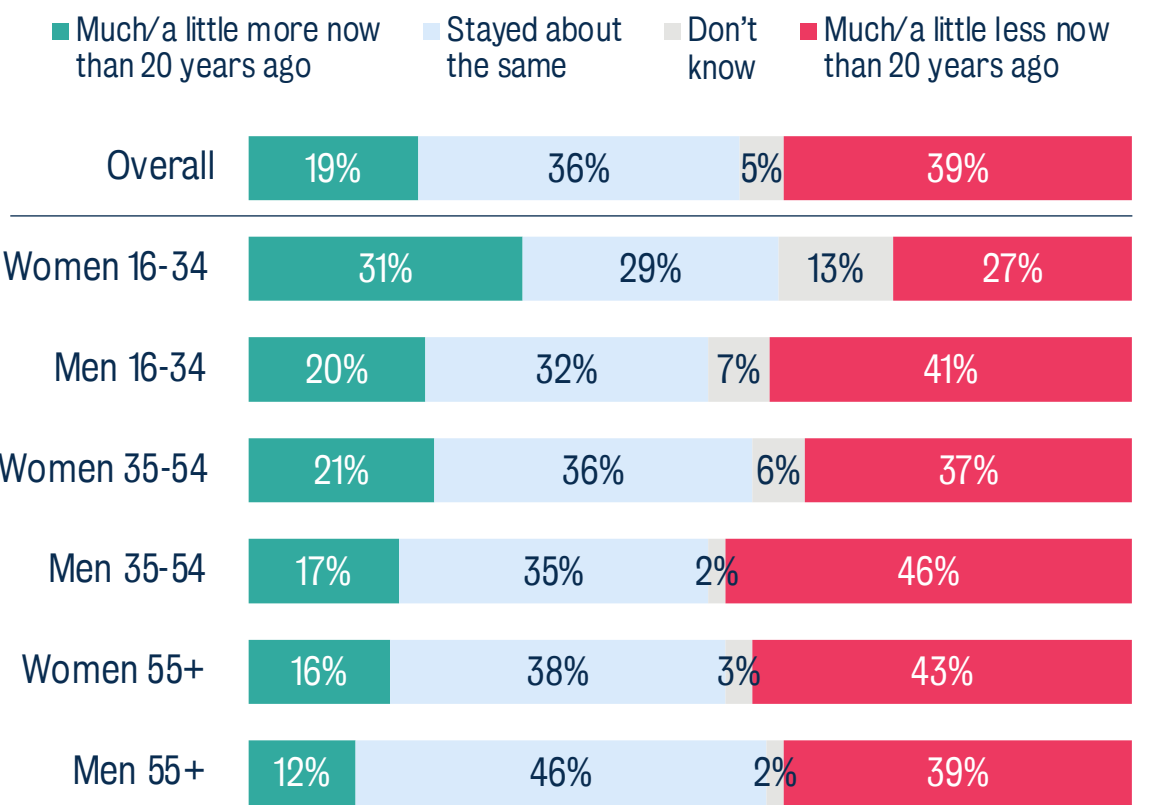
# Young women stand out as most likely to feel they have more power and influence than 20 years ago

Thinking about the last 20 years, do you think that people like you have more or less of each of the following now than they did 20 years ago, or is it about the same?

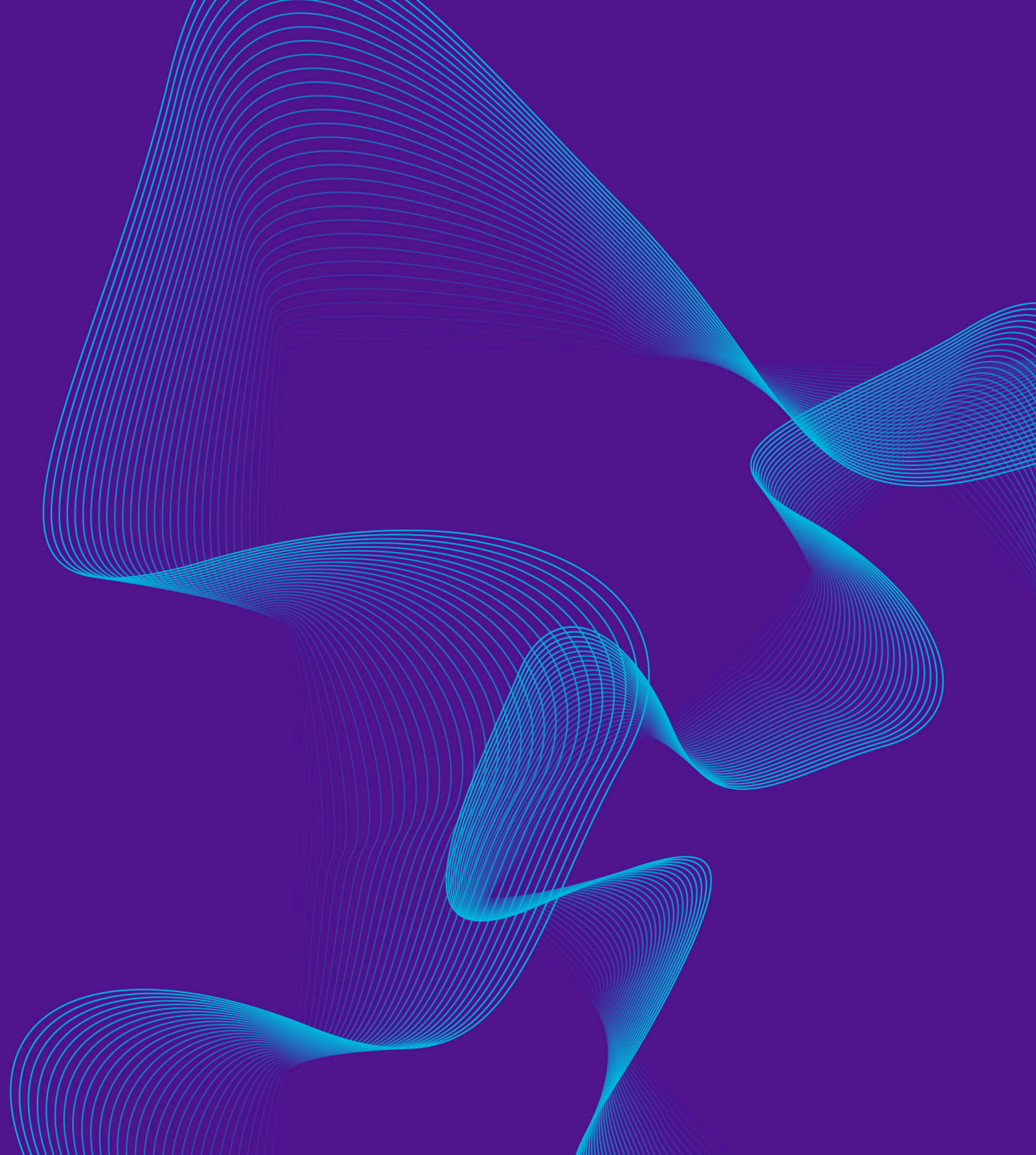
## Power to change things in this country



## Influence over the things that happen to them



# Technical details



# Powerlessness index: methodology

- Index created as an average agreement score across three statements in Q1: “I have little influence over the things that happen to me”; “People like me are powerless to change things in this country”; “When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way the UK is run” (reversed).
- Answers scored as 1 for strongly agree to 5 for strongly disagree (don't knows are treated as neutral answers – score 3).
- The average scores were then divided into five bands:

Band	Score from 1 (strongly agree to all statements) to 5 (strongly disagree to all statements)	% of total sample
1 – feel most powerless	1 to 1.67	13
2	2 to 2.67	43
3	3	18
4	3.33 to 3.67	17
5 – feel least powerless	4 to 5	9

# Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel

The research for this study was conducted using the Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel. As the UK's largest online random probability panel, it provides a robust and representative sample of the population.

The panel consists of over 25,000 members, recruited using random probability address-based sampling, considered the gold standard in UK survey research. This approach ensures that every household in the UK has a known and non-zero chance of being selected to participate, minimizing bias and ensuring the panel accurately reflects the diverse UK population.

To maintain the panel's integrity and inclusivity, Ipsos provides tablets, internet access, and technical support to digitally excluded households, allowing them to participate in online research. This reduces differential mode bias and maximizes the potential of online research to deliver comprehensive insights into UK public opinion.

The findings presented in this report are based on responses from a nationally representative sample of 2,185 GB adults aged 16+ drawn from the Ipsos UK Knowledge Panel, surveyed between 3-9 April 2025. Data are weighted to match the profile of the population. All polls are subject to a wide range of potential sources of error.



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