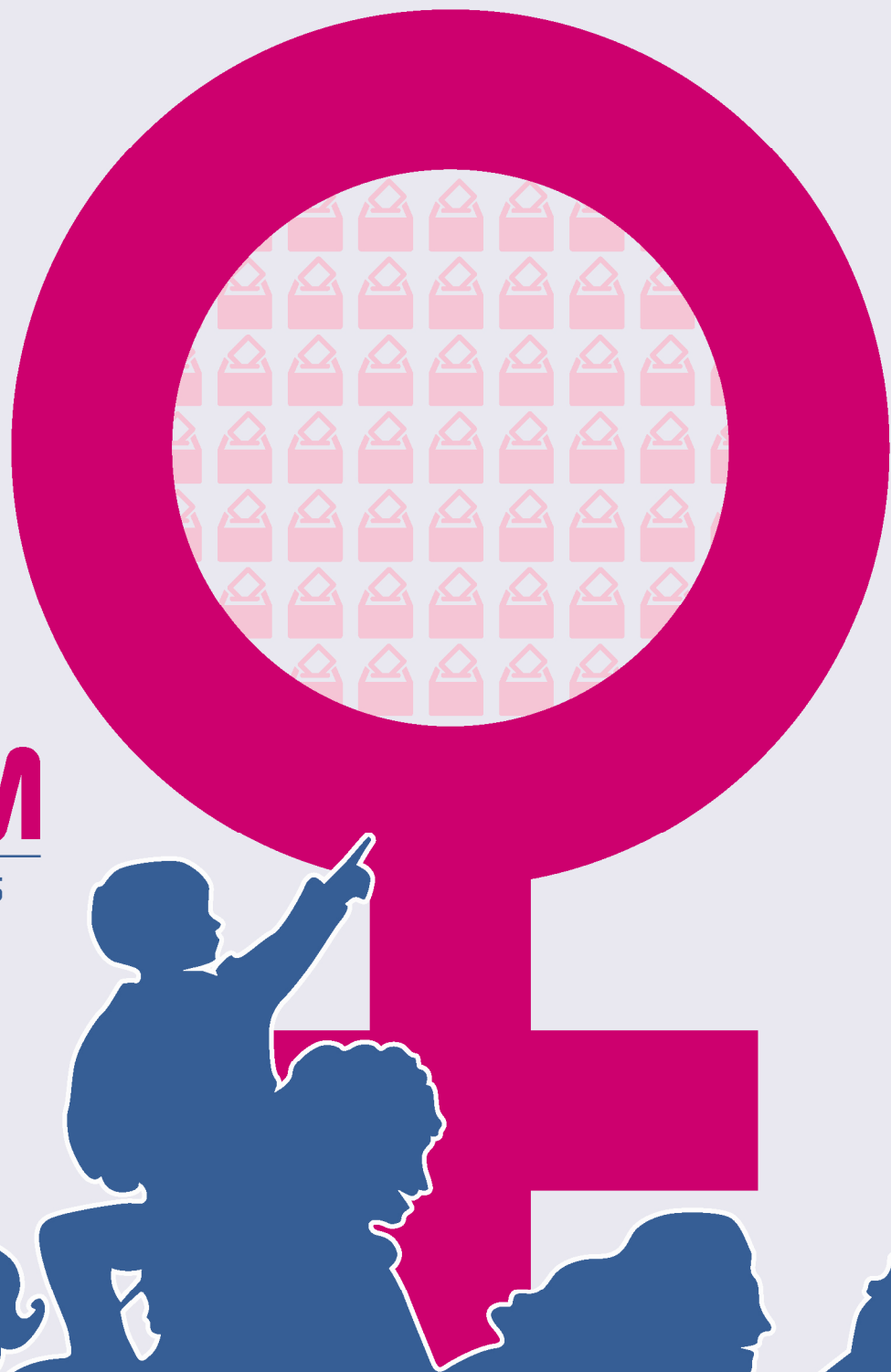


THE WOMEN PROBLEM

A MUMSNET REPORT ON WHO IS
WINNING THE BATTLE FOR
BRITAIN'S FEMALE VOTE
SEPTEMBER 2013



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1

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

If there is one long-term trend that Prime Minister David Cameron is unlikely to have missed it is this: his party's historic popularity with women has been waning over time.

In 1992, the Conservatives attracted more female votes than male ones; by 2010 – in a political battle dubbed by the press the “Mumsnet election” – this had ceased to be the case.

Mr Cameron polled a 10 point lead over Labour among men in that General Election. With women the gap was halved – to just five points.

But what drives that gender difference? And why is it that in subsequent years critics have branded the Prime Minister and his party as anti-women in both substance and style?

First came the claims that the axe of Government cuts was poised to fall disproportionately on the nation's women. And then that infamous “calm down, dear” moment – in which Mr Cameron emulated Michael Winner when addressing a female opposition MP.

Those three words flung across the House of Commons' chamber left the Prime Minister accused of being “sexist, patronising and insulting”.

Key advisers have insisted to journalists that he is no such thing, describing him instead as a feminist.

Yet one fact is undeniable: as Mr Cameron gears up for his penultimate party conference before the next General Election, he and his party's so-called “women-problem” has yet to subside. With female voters, Labour is well ahead – either because it is successfully attracting women, or because the parties of Government are driving them away.

Fresh research and analysis carried out by Mumsnet and Ipsos MORI, presented in this report, lays bare the scale of the challenge.

If things seemed bad in 2010 – they are worse in 2013. This study reveals current levels of public opinion:

- Mr Cameron's party trails the Opposition by 13-points among female voters –three times the gap among men (four points).
- 42% of women would back Labour compared to just 29% who would vote Conservative, according to Ipsos MORI's aggregation of all interviews between January and July 2013. While the Conservative share among men (31%) is similar to that among women, men are less likely to back Labour (35%).
- Among younger women – aged 18-34 – the gap widens to a hefty 25-point lead for Labour. Even with those aged 35 to 54 it is 21-points.
- The opposition are also ahead among the groups of women the Conservatives might expect to attract: the most affluent women in top level professional and executive roles, those working in the private sector and households with mortgages. The fact is that men in similar circumstances are more likely to vote Tory
- Moreover, six out of ten women are dissatisfied with the way Mr Cameron is doing his job as Prime Minister - and even more are unhappy with the Government overall.
- And when asked which party has the best policies on the economy, unemployment, education and health more women say Labour than the Conservatives. As do they when asked which party best looks after women's interests.

Could another result help explain what is going on? Mr Cameron is seen as by far the most “out of touch” with ordinary people of all the political leaders among both men and women.

But this is no time for Ed Miliband to begin the celebrations. The electoral boost is directed at his political party, and not him. Half of women describe themselves as dissatisfied with the way Mr Miliband is doing his job as Labour leader. Only a third (33%) of women are satisfied with the Labour leader – in line with satisfaction with the Prime Minister. Women are also more likely to actually like Mr Cameron than Mr Miliband. Perhaps most significantly Mr Miliband is seen as the less “capable” of the two men among women as well as men.

And the results of additional qualitative Mumsnet research, drawing on the in-depth views of around 100 women, may be uneasy reading for Mr Miliband. Time and again the Labour politician is criticised for a poor leadership style – or described as someone who has made little impression at

all. Could it be that his party's lead is more about women turning away from the Tories and Lib Dems and less about a positive step towards Labour?

As for Nick Clegg, the Lib Dem Deputy Prime Minister, the data paints a difficult road ahead. His most acute problem is the loss of young voters, according to the analysis. But Mumsnet users who backed the Lib Dems are frustrated too, arguing that Mr Clegg has failed to maintain the one characteristic they hold most dear in a party leader – integrity.

The background features a repeating pattern of light gray envelope icons on a light gray background. On the left side, there is a large white graphic consisting of a semi-circle at the top and a rectangular block below it, resembling a stylized letter 'C' or a bracket.

2

2015: THE BATTLE FOR THE FEMALE VOTE

2015: THE BATTLE FOR THE FEMALE VOTE

Mumsnet users who took part in this study say they deplore complacency among political leaders. Labour may be ahead in voting intentions, but the focus groups throw up an overwhelming sense that many remain undecided.

If politicians draw one lesson from this research it should be that large swathes of women are willing to listen and waiting to be convinced.

In 2015, the female vote will be at the heart of the electoral battle once more.

It is clear that all the parties know that. Why else has Labour has worked relentlessly to take advantage of what some call the Tories' Achilles' heel – its perception among female voters.

The idea that Government cuts come down most harshly on women has become the party's mantra – with Yvette Cooper determined to embed the idea into the mind of the electorate. Rachel Reeves – now a shadow Cabinet member – scored a political coup early on, forcing a U-turn by demonstrating how pension reforms would hit women in their late 50s most of all.

Internal polling shows the Conservatives are aware of the problem. And it is not just about policies but delivery too. Mr Cameron's slip in the Commons was followed by another incident in which he described a backbench woman MP as 'frustrated'.

Attempts to counteract the negative image are underway. Tory MPs determined to reach out to women have set up a special forum, meant to act as a sounding board for ministers on how female voters might react to policy. Strategists, meanwhile, have worked up plans to emulate Bill Clinton's mid-90s drive to win "soccer moms" by focusing on the issues they most care about. Out came reforms on adoption, sexualisation of children and safety on the Internet.

And as part of the drive the Prime Minister appointed a special adviser specifically tasked with the job of boosting female support. Her inbox has now widened to include education and childcare, an issue that has caused political wrangling between the Coalition partners.

It was this policy that Mr Clegg waded into recently in an attempt to boost his party's standing with women. He blocked Tory attempts to reduce staff ratios claiming it would not cut childcare costs. Why? Because the Lib Dems believe that pursuing family-friendly policies could be key to winning women back.

These statistics also deliver a further warning not to ignore the success of Nigel Farage's UKIP party. Although more popular among men, he has attracted a small but significant following among women voters.

This research pulls together two key studies: a quantitative analysis of voting intentions split by gender and women's views on political leaders carried out by Ipsos MORI; and qualitative data from five focus groups in which around 100 Mumsnet users provided in-depth answers and debate relating to the political leaders and parties.

It provides a wealth of information that takes us into the minds of women up and down the country. It illustrates what issues female voters care most about; how they feel the parties and their leaders are performing; and what it will take to persuade them to deliver their vote in a particular direction.

The analysis offered by the Mumsnet users who have taken part suggests they are politically astute and motivated. These are the views of a wide range of women in very different circumstances: from single professionals to stay-at-home-mothers to lone parents and working mums all trying to balance the competing demands of their lives.

Of course, they are not one homogenous group who are planning to vote en masse. But there are policies and issues that they are more likely to care about and pay interest to.

This is a chance for politicians to listen to their views. Over the next two years there will be many opportunities to engage further. It would be astute for them to do so.



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THE STATISTICS

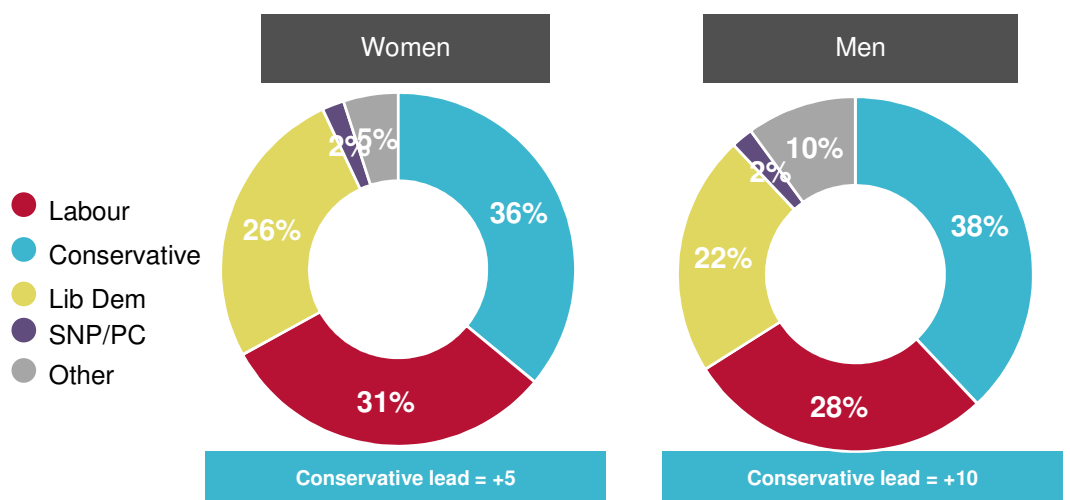
THE STATISTICS

This section of the report is based on analysis of Ipsos MORI polling research available in August 2013, consisting mostly of Political Monitor polls conducted between 2010-2013. Where relevant, data on voting intentions and some other attitudes measured regularly (satisfaction with the leaders) has been aggregated over several months to allow for more robust measurement of sub-populations¹. Estimates of voting and turnout at the 2010 General Election are based on the aggregation of all Ipsos MORI polls during the campaign, weighted at regional level to the final outcome.

1 – Overall voting trends, from 2010 to 2013

a) How women and men voted in 2010...

How women and men voted in 2010



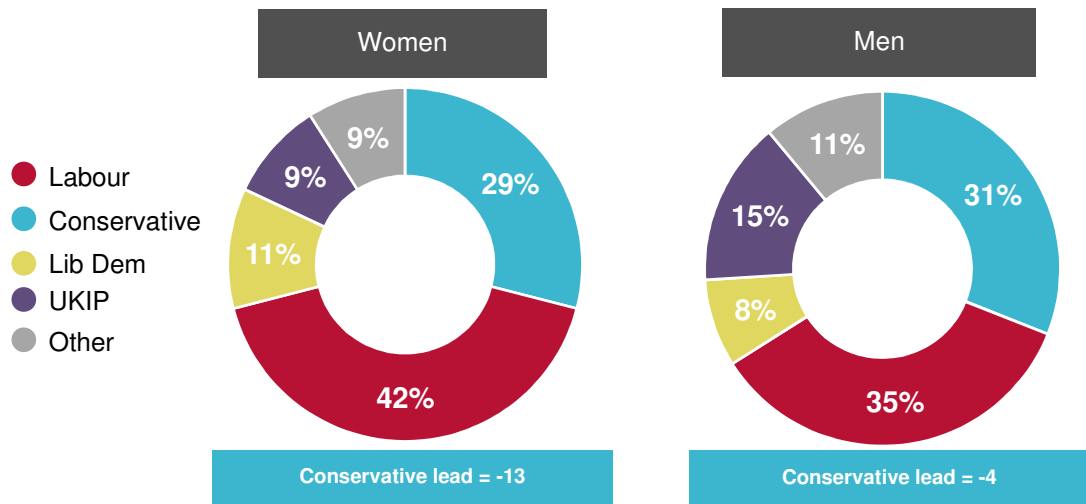
Base 10,211 GB adults aged 18+ (of which 5,927 were "absolutely certain to vote" or said they had already voted), interviewed 19 March-5 May 2010. Data weighted at regional level to the final election result and turnout as well as to the population profile

Source: Ipsos MORI election aggregates

¹ The Ipsos MORI January-July 2013 Political Monitor aggregate combines all 7,084 interviews Ipsos MORI conducted by telephone with British adults 18+ between January and July 2013 on its monthly Political Monitor survey. Data are weighted to match the profile of the population. The aggregate data allows for better analysis by demographic groups due to the greater base sizes involved.

b) How women and men would vote now...

Aggregated voting intention: January – July 2013

*"How would you vote if there were a general election tomorrow?"****All certain to vote*

Base 3,675 British adults 18+, January – July 2013

Source: Ipsos MORI Political Monitor

The most dramatic shift since 2010 is not the Conservative's share of women's vote (which has fallen by seven points exactly the same as among men) but the gap between its position and that of Labour. This has been driven in part by Labour's 11-point boost from 31% to 42%.

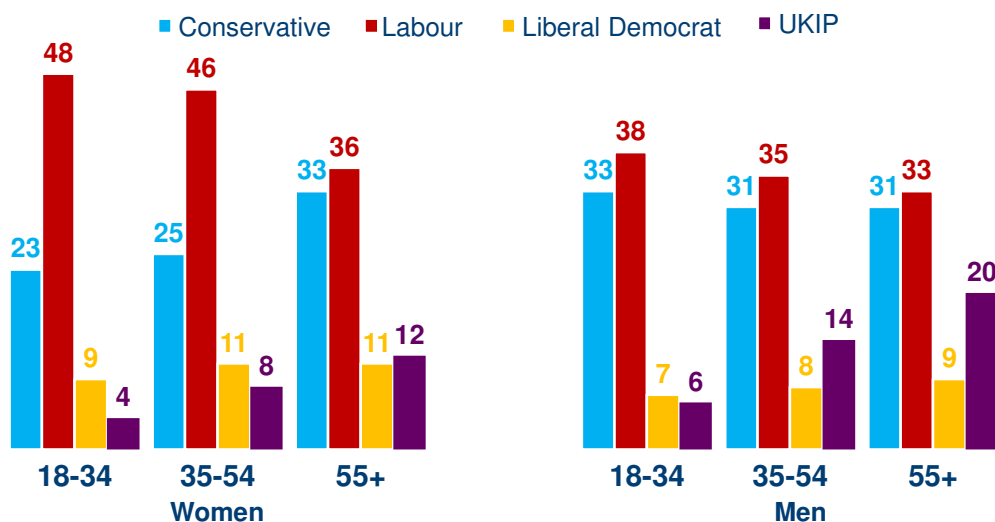
In the 2010 General Election Mr Cameron had a five-point lead with the female vote. The aggregated data across all of Ipsos MORI's interviews in 2013 suggests the Conservatives lag 13 points behind Labour in the polls among women. That is around three times the four-point gap for male voters, who are still more likely to back Mr Miliband's party but by a much smaller margin.

2 – An age-old problem

Aggregated voting intention by age - January to Jul 2013

*"How would you vote if there were a general election tomorrow?"**

**All certain to vote*



Base Aggregated voting intention of 3,675 British adults 18+ Jan- July 2013

Source: Ipsos MORI Political Monitor

The Conservative gender issue becomes much starker when broken down by age. Less than a quarter (23%) of female voters under 34 say they would back Mr Cameron's party, while almost half (48%) would vote Labour. That is a massive 25-point lead for the opposition among young women. Even the middle, 35 to 54 years, group is strongly in favour of Mr Miliband's party with a large 21-point gap. Once again, Labour's advantage among men is much less pronounced across the board. These statistics will be extremely concerning for Tory strategists (even when considering the differential turnout between older and younger women²) who will want to understand how they can lure these voters away from Labour.

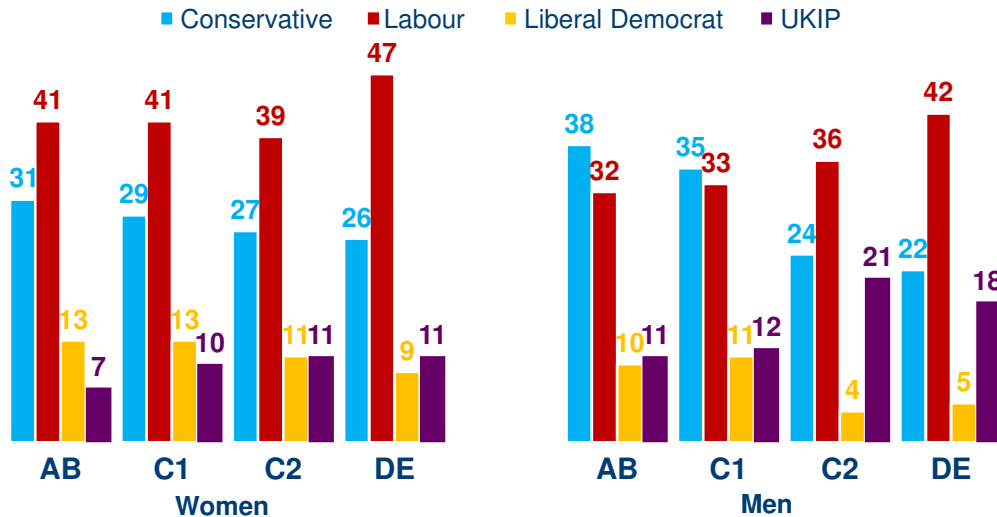
² In 2010 turnout was: 39% among women aged 18-24, 54% for those aged 25-34, 67% for 35-54, 73% for 55+

3 – A different class

Aggregated voting intention by class - January to July 2013

*"How would you vote if there were a general election tomorrow?"**

**All certain to vote*



Base Aggregated voting intention of 3,675 British adults 18+ Jan- July 2013

Source: Ipsos MORI Political Monitor

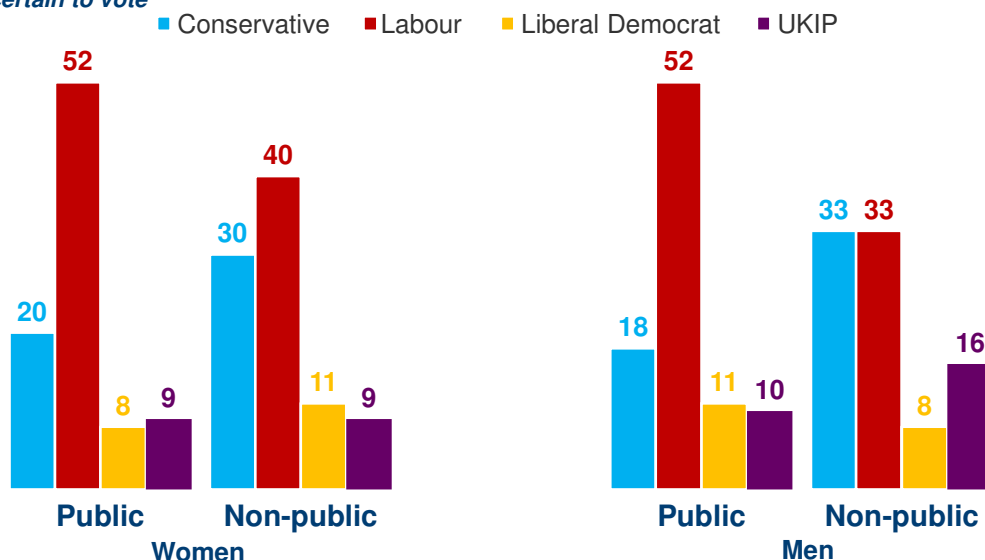
Breaking down votes by social class again highlights a gender split. The Conservatives have a clear disadvantage with women across all socioeconomic groups, trailing by 10 points (31% to Labour's 41%) among female executives, professionals and managers (known as ABs), and 12-points for other supervisory and more junior managerial roles known as C1s (29% to 41%). That is a very different picture than for men in equivalent jobs. They are more likely to back Mr Cameron's party. Lower skilled workers, the unemployed and those on benefits are all more likely to vote Labour whatever their sex.

4 – Public v Private

Aggregated voting intention by sector - January to July 2013

*"How would you vote if there were a general election tomorrow?"**

**All certain to vote*



Base Aggregated voting intention of 3,675 British adults 18+ Jan- July 2013

Source: Ipsos MORI Political Monitor

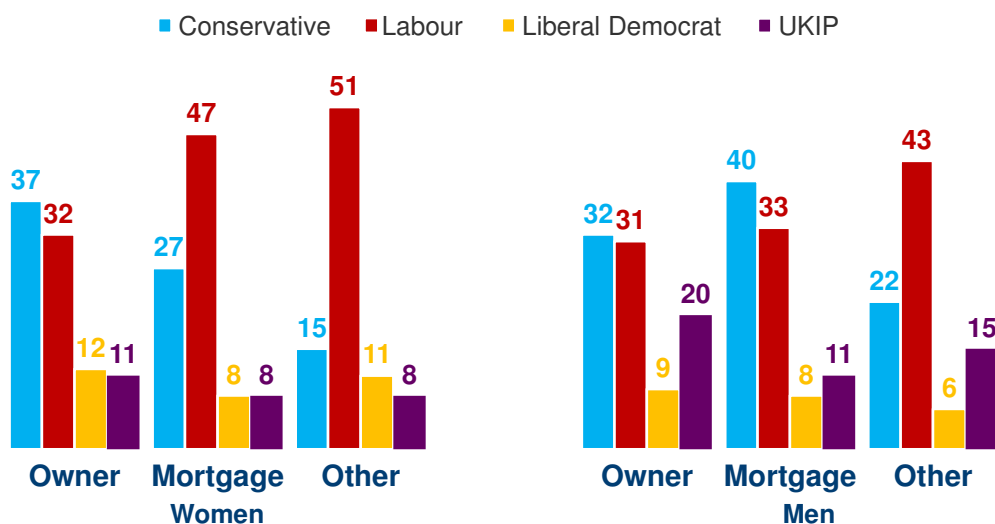
Mr Cameron can take comfort in the fact that while all public sector workers – male and female – are more likely to back Labour, his party is neck-and-neck with private (and voluntary) sector male workers on 33%. Yet once again, Labour is well ahead with the same group of women. Although 30% of them say they would vote Tory – a hefty 40% would back Mr Miliband's party. That is a solid 10-point lead for Labour with female private and voluntary sector workers.

5 – Home ownership

Aggregated voting intention by tenure - January to July 2013

*"How would you vote if there were a general election tomorrow?"**

**All certain to vote*



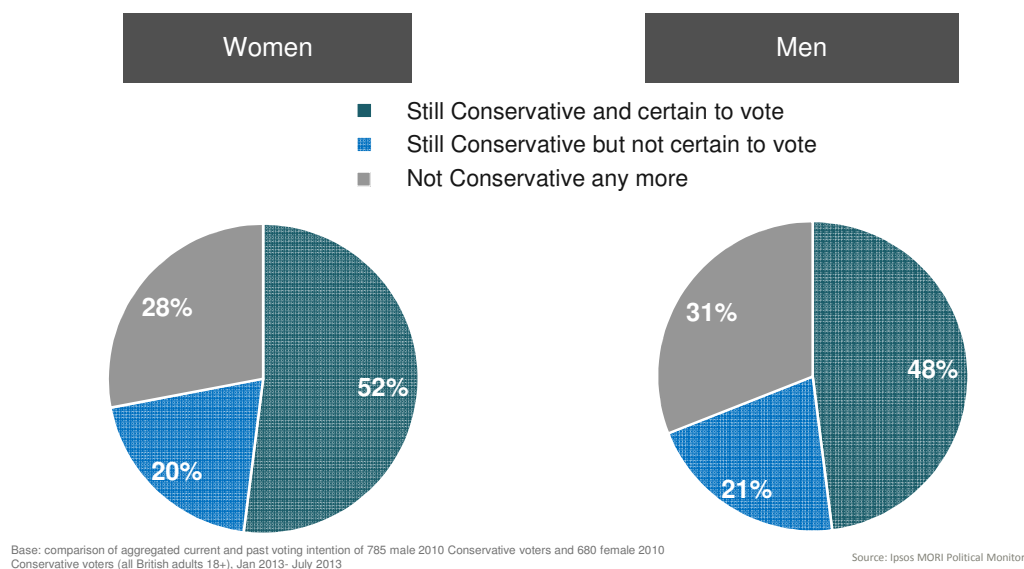
Base Aggregated voting intention of 3,675 British adults 18+ Jan- July 2013

Source: Ipsos MORI Political Monitor

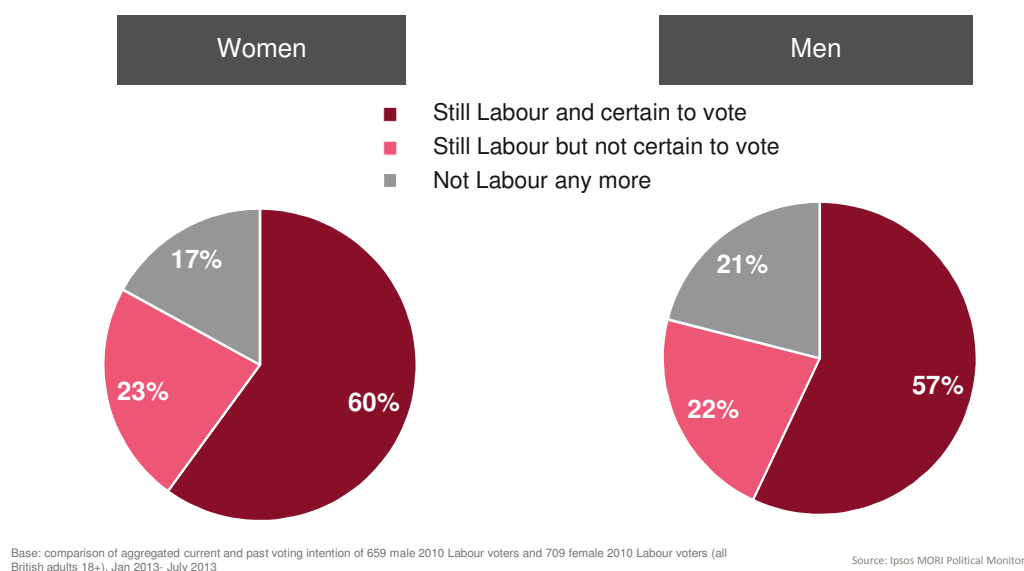
Across all the analysis there is only one sub-group of women who favour Mr Cameron's party over Labour— and it is those who own their homes outright (rather than paying on a mortgage), while their male counterparts are split evenly between Labour and the Tories. The Conservatives are however ahead among male voters who hold a mortgage. With female mortgage holders, the Conservative share has slumped to 27% (from 34% in 2010). With Labour on 47% that gives Mr Miliband's party a bold 20-point lead. That stretches to a massive 37-point for women who are renting. Just 15% of them are prepared to vote Tory.

6 – The Switchers: those who have changed their vote since 2010

Have women voters switched allegiance? Conservatives

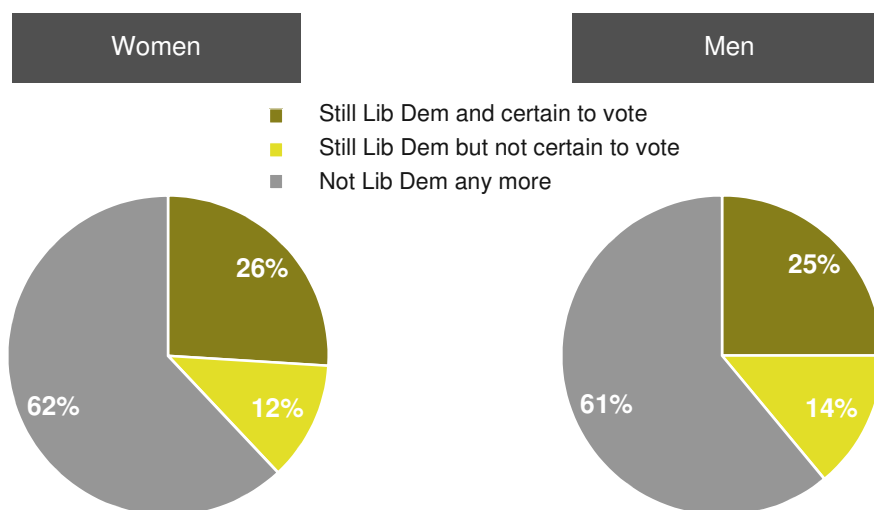
“How would you vote if there were a general election tomorrow?”

Have women voters switched allegiance? Labour

“How would you vote if there were a general election tomorrow?”

Have women voters switched allegiance? Liberal Democrats

"How would you vote if there were a general election tomorrow?"



Base: comparison of aggregated current and past voting intention of 386 male 2010 Liberal Democrat voters and 420 female 2010 Liberal Democrat voters (all British adults 18+), Jan 2013- July 2013

Source: Ipsos MORI Political Monitor

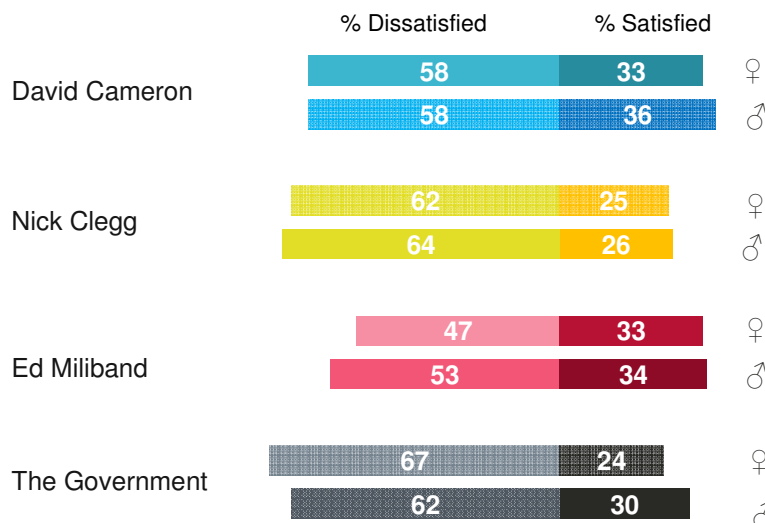
These figures will make grim reading for Mr Clegg, whose party is by far the biggest loser. More than six out of ten women who backed the Lib Dems in 2010 say they are no longer supporters (the same is true of men who voted for the Liberal Democrats in 2010). A further one in eight still back the party but are not certain to vote. Just under half of those deserting the Lib Dems say they now support Labour.

In comparison seven in ten women who voted Conservative in 2010 still describe themselves as supporters of the party, with 52% who say they are certain to vote. Some good news for Mr Cameron, then, but he still has to address why 28% of women who voted for the Conservatives in 2010 are planning to switch – 10% opting for UKIP. And he faces a Labour party in a stronger position. Eight out of 10 of its 2010 female voters are still backing the party – and six out of ten saying they are certain to vote. But opposition strategists will still want to understand why almost one in six say they are no longer Labour.

7 –The political leaders

Satisfaction ratings - men vs women

"How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way ... is running the country /doing his job as Prime Minister /Deputy Prime Minister/Leader of the Labour Party/UKIP?"



Base 3,675 British adults 18+, January – July 2013

Source: Ipsos MORI Political Monitor

These results will not please any of the leaders. Respondents were asked if they were satisfied or dissatisfied with how each man was doing their job. A net satisfaction rating is reached by simply subtracting the proportion dissatisfied from those satisfied.

The Prime Minister's net satisfaction ratings are worse among both men and women than those of Mr Miliband. While women are equally satisfied with both leaders (33%) significantly more women are dissatisfied with the Prime Minister than his opposite number.

Mr Clegg's results are poor all round, with a net rating of -37 among women and -39 among men.

The figures suggest that it could be that women are most unhappy with the Coalition Government overall. Asked to score the Government they give -43, compared to men's -32. But these statistics also provide some insight into Labour's leadership problems. While the party is polling well with women overall, Mr Miliband's satisfaction rating is -14 among women (dropping to -19 for men). Can he lead the Labour party to victory with such a poor personal rating? Certainly Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and even David Cameron, who failed to secure a majority, were polling better in the years before 1979, 1997 and 2010, according to historic Ipsos MORI data.

Moreover, Mr Miliband is seen as inferior to the Prime Minister in some key areas...

Leadership qualities

“In choosing between David Cameron, Ed Miliband or Nick Clegg which leader do you think is...”

	David Cameron	Ed Miliband	Nick Clegg	Nigel Farage
...best at understanding the problems facing Britain	24%	22%	8%	15%
...most able to deal with the challenges of the 21 st century	29%	22%	6%	8%
...most capable	36%	21%	5%	5%
...most out of touch	46%	13%	9%	9%

Base: 554 British women 18+, 11-13 May 2013

Source: Ipsos MORI Political Monitor

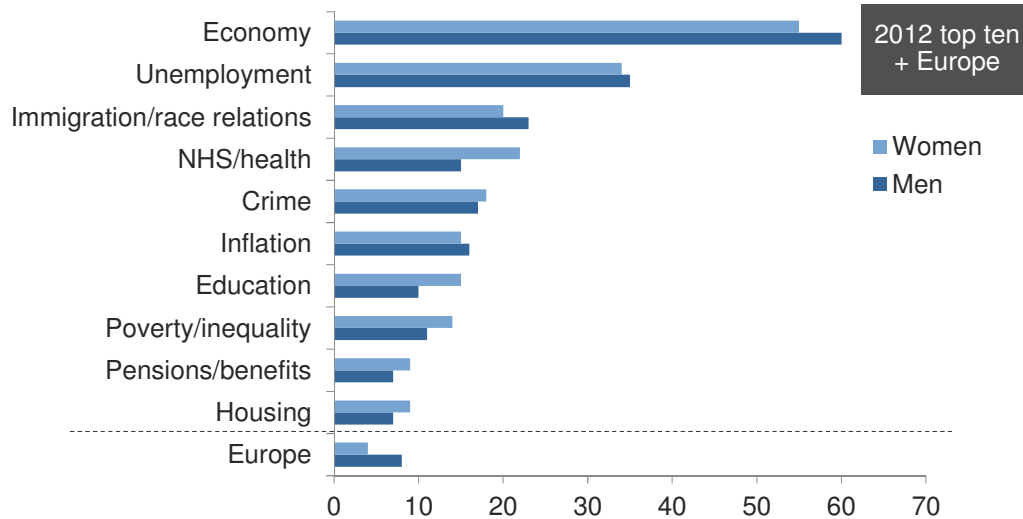
It must be worrying for the Labour party that its leader is seen as significantly less capable than the Prime Minister by women and less able to understand or deal with the challenges facing Britain. A higher proportion of women – 43% - say they like the Prime Minister than the Labour leader who scores 34% along with Mr Clegg.

They may take comfort in the fact that at least Mr Miliband is seen as more normal. Mr Cameron is described as the most out of touch leader by 46% of women and 49% of men.

8 – It's the economy... stupid

Most important issues

"What do you think are the main/other important issues facing Britain today?"



Base: 11,944 interviews with British adults 18+, January – December 2012

Source: Ipsos MORI Issues Index aggregate

Best party on...

“Which political party, do you think has the best policies on...”

	Conservatives	Labour	Conservative lead
...the economy*	22	28	-6
...unemployment	20	31	-11
...immigration	21	21	0
...healthcare	14	42	-28
...crime	27	23	-4
...education	22	36	-14
...looking after the interests of women	15	34	-19

Base: 572 British women 18+, 15-17 September 2012
 *Base: 523 British women 18+, 9-11 March 2013

Source: Ipsos MORI Political Monitor

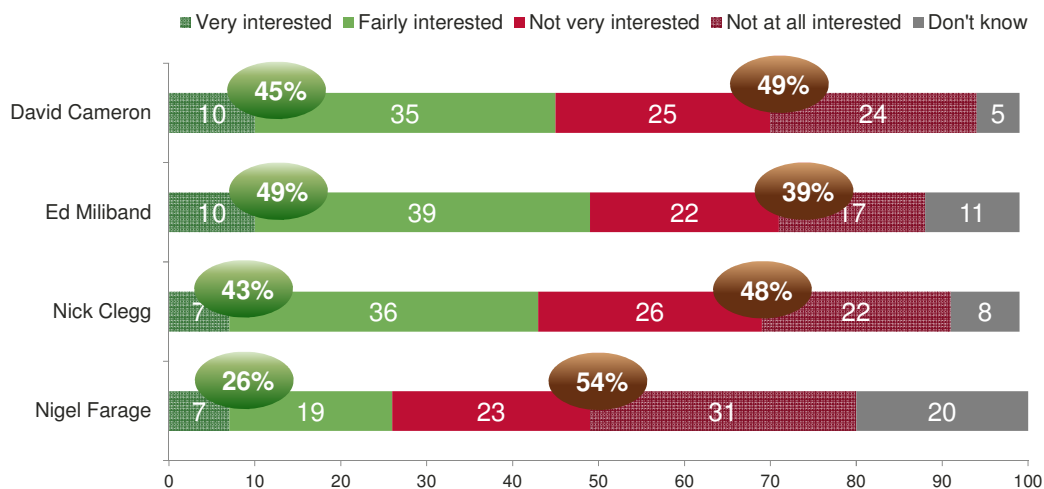
If you are wondering why women are so unhappy with the Prime Minister and his Deputy then it may be worth taking a closer look at the issue they care most about: the economy. When asked, in March 2013, which political party had the best policies on managing the economy a clear gender divide emerges. Women back Labour, and men prefer the Conservatives. Could it be that the cuts agenda has turned away female voters from the ruling parties? If so, Labour's attack of this policy as hitting women hardest may be having more impact than Mr Cameron would like.

Moreover, women rate Labour more highly on their second priority of unemployment, and give it a huge advantage on their third most important issue of healthcare. Even men give Mr Cameron's party a very low score on the NHS – suggesting campaigns claiming that it is being dismantled have hit home. Even on the next priority for women – immigration – the two parties are tied, with the Tories only taking a lead on crime. And faced with the direct questions 'which party would be best at looking after the needs of women', male and female voters agree that it must be Labour.

9 - Do the leaders care about women like you? And how would they manage on your budget?

Leaders listening to women

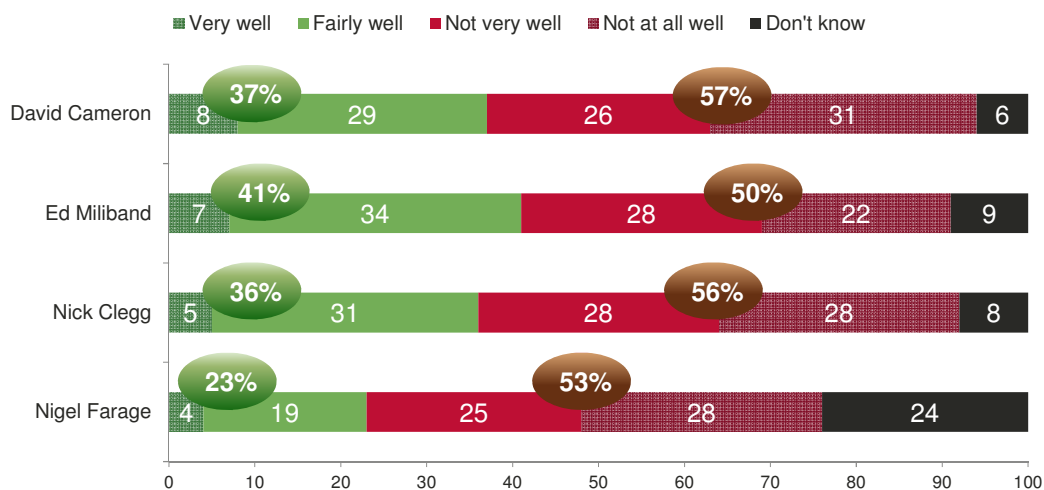
“How interested, if at all, do you think David Cameron/ Ed Miliband/Nick Clegg is with the concerns or opinions raised by women like you?”

Base: 519 British women 18+, 10th-12th August 2013

Source: Ipsos MORI Political Monitor

Leaders coping on a household budget

“How well, if at all, so you think David Cameron/Ed Miliband/Nick Clegg would manage your household finances?”

Base: 519 British women 18+, 10th-12th August 2013

Source: Ipsos MORI Political Monitor

Half or less of women believe that the three leaders are interested in the concerns and opinions of ordinary women: 49% say Mr Miliband is interested, 45% say Mr Cameron is interested and 43% say the same of Mr Clegg. This is likely to concern Liberal Democrat party officials who have tried hard to place their leader at the heart of issues believed to be seen as important to women, such as childcare.

As for whether the men could take on women's own household finances, no one receives a thumping endorsement. Mr Miliband is again slightly ahead but half of all women still believe he would not be able to do it well. This reflects the findings of the qualitative discussion with Mumsnet users set out in the next chapter that suggests women see problems with all of the leaders, and not one of them has a significantly better image than the others.



4

BEHIND THE STATISTICS

BEHIND THE STATISTICS: MUMSNET USERS SPEAK UP

To try to understand a little more about what it is that party political leaders are doing right and wrong, Mumsnet spoke in depth to around 100 of its members³. The women were divided into five focus groups based upon stated likely voting intention in a new election. There were Conservatives, Labour and Lib Dems as well as others who voted for UKIP, SNP, Plaid Cymru, independents or were undecided.

An undertone of dissatisfaction runs throughout the comments, with far more women expressing negative views of the party leaders than positive. Comments describe Government policy as unthinking (“his lack of compassion for women in caring roles is despicable”... “what he doesn’t get is me – the squeezed middle”... “I feel lost at the moment”). And behaviour is seen as unbecoming. A “gang of braying donkeys” is how one woman describes MPs in the House of Commons.

Some of the women object to female voters being grouped together, insisting that their interests are no different to men’s. Others concede that they are more focused on those policies most relevant to their families – such as childcare, health and education. All three are highlighted as key policy areas by lots of the women – although the economy still tops the list.

The Mumsnet users also launched into a debate about whether a politician’s background really matters. For many the answer is yes. David Cameron’s privileged past irks them. Similar to the Ipsos MORI results, they believe his journey from Eton to Oxford to Parliament leaves him “out of touch” with their lives. Others claim that his schooling should be irrelevant, adding that all political leaders inhabit a different planet.

³ Please note the names of Mumsnet members in this report are not their real names in order to protect their identity.

So just what lies behind the Conservative's women-problem?

The Tory switchers and child benefit...

Lyn: "I don't think he understands any issues relating to normal (not super rich) people, let alone women."

Tanya: He does "bugger all" for women like me.

Carmen: "I think the Conservatives have regressed to the old-Etonian / Oxbridge elite style of leadership with the odd woman thrown into the mix."

Edith: "I'm not sure I'm going to vote next time."

Lyn, Tanya, Carmen and Edith are four Mumsnet users who voted Conservative in 2010 but are not sure they can back Mr Cameron's party again. Listening to their views provides a little insight into Mr Cameron's predicament.

It is perhaps worth noting that at least two of these mothers have been put off the Conservatives by the same policy decision: to strip back on child benefit. Both Tanya and Carmen are stay-at-home-mothers who feel their role (which they describe as "full-time unpaid work") is undervalued. These women, whose partners earn above £50,000, lose out on at least some of the benefit while dual-workers earning up to £100,000 together do not.

Tanya, who is in her late 30s and lives with her family in the west Midlands, says she admires Mr Cameron's courage to stick to his convictions but is "appalled" by the lack of thought before policy is put into place.

Carmen goes further saying all the party leaders are "completely dismissive" of women like her. "I am a professional, educated woman who has chosen to stay at home with my children who are small. The party leaders talk about respecting those parents who make the same choice but then in the next moment turn around and completely dismiss them. It seems you are only valued if you go to work."

It seems a fairly common thread throughout the discussions.

Out of touch...

Another is that Mr Cameron is seen as out of touch with women's lives. The Ipsos MORI data and the focus groups suggest that many agree with the view of Nadine Dorries – the outspoken and controversial backbench Tory MP – who described Mr Cameron and George Osborne as “two arrogant posh boys” who would not know the price of milk in a supermarket. Does that matter?

Carmen thinks that all the political leaders would have a “wake up call” if forced to live on her family's budget while also trying to save up to buy a home in southeast England. The deposit for even a “modest house is ridiculous”, she says, leaving the family with funds for just one five day break a year in the UK so “no sunshine holiday”. “Never mind multiple trips a year,” she adds – even before the Prime Minister is pictured on his fourth holiday of the year.

Others – who did not vote Conservative in 2010 – are more forthright about Mr Cameron's background with some claiming he does not have “any understanding of life beyond his”. Rosie, a Labour supporter in her late 30s, argues that a good Prime Minister has had “some kind of a normal life”. Sharon, part-time worker in her 40s with two children in the west Midlands, agrees. “Rich, privileged, public school educated – what has he got in common with 99% of voters?” Carla, who voted Lib Dem in 2010 and lives in the south-east with her twin sons, says he is “so deeply entrenched in the old Etonian mould” that he can't relate to people like her. Josephine adds that as a northern, working class mother in the public sector their worlds could not be further apart.

But others disagree. It should be “irrelevant” according to some. Gemma, a Conservative voter, believes the comments are based on “envy” saying she doesn't care where the leaders went to school. In fact, another old-Etonian, the London Mayor Boris Johnson, receives the support of more than one respondent as a potential future party leader. And others point out that Mr Clegg has a similarly privileged background – while Mr Miliband's state schooling hardly means he has experienced financial struggles through his life.

Crystal calls on *all* the leaders to attempt to live on the £65 a week that she survives on. “If anyone would give it a go for a year – I'd vote for them!”

Opposed to austerity...

The other issue that has upset some mothers is the cuts. And while welfare is highlighted as an issue that many feel needs reform, fears are expressed by women about the Coalition playing different groups off against each other. More than one woman believes that those on benefits are being unfairly demonised.

Nancy, a woman in her late 20s living in the south-east, says she voted Conservative in 2005 because as a married mother the party's policies suited her. "By 2010 I was a single parent in social housing" and Labour seemed the right choice because of apparent Tory dismissal of women like her. Now – she just isn't sure.

Monica is in her early 30s with three children, including one with special needs. She is a stay-at-home-mother with a family income between £20,000 and £35,000. She believes Mr Cameron has "betrayed" parents of disabled children. "He said he understood; he said he had been there; he said he'd look after us; he lied."

Mr Cameron can take heart, however, from the more positive response from Mumsnet users who are planning to back his party. Liz believes he is "impressive" in Prime Minister's Questions, "arrogant, even, but not misplaced".

But not everyone enjoys the House of Commons weekly fracas.

Commons behaviour

Olivia, a former Labour voter in her 40s who is now undecided, says she despairs at the "old boys club" that gets underway in the House of Commons each week. She describes it as a "wasteland" as far as women are concerned because she cannot think of anything worse than being a female in that environment. Mr Cameron's "calm down, dear" comments have "destroyed any credibility he had with respect to women", she adds.

Others feel that the Prime Minister was joking. But there is a clear agreement that the overall tone of the Commons is unpleasant.

Ruby – a former Lib Dem voter – says the behaviour would not be acceptable in any other form of employment. “Heck, even a class of very small children would not be allowed to heckle or ridicule each other in that way our politicians carry on.”

Meanwhile, Mr Cameron is not the only leader to get a pounding.

Labour’s leadership woes

A hesitant endorsement...

Charlotte: “He [Ed Miliband] should try to get more women on board as he does sometimes speak sense.”

Toni: “Out of the three I think he has slightly more understanding but I’m not sure he truly gets it.”

Josephine: “I think he will have a better understanding of how the other half live.”

Nancy: “He seems to be the most open-minded.”

Barbara: “I think Ed Miliband is probably a feminist.”

It may be worrying for Mr Miliband that in detailed responses by more than 100 women including a number of Labour supporters those are the five most positive comments about him.

Some credit him as the most “normal” of the three leaders – in line with the Ipsos MORI data - but far more are put off by his style, dislike the fact that he took on his own brother to reach the position or – perhaps most worryingly – say they know nothing about him at all.

An all out rejection...

The worst comments, unsurprisingly, come from Conservative supporters like Jasmine who calls him “hard to like and weak at times”. She would have preferred to see his brother, David, in charge, or a younger MP like Chuka Umunna. “Just can’t imagine Ed and Ed running the country.”

Sophie goes further saying “...I don’t think they have had a decent family policy for years”. Liz says he is ill equipped to deal with the barrage of boos he faces in the House of Commons that “conjures up images of playground bullying”. “Creepy”, “faceless” and “not a contender” are other comments.

A number complain that they only ever hear the Labour leader complaining and criticising instead of presenting alternative policies. “Honestly, we could have an act-of-God disaster and he would find a way of making it Cameron’s fault,” says Liz.

Even Labour supporters are uncharitable.

Maddie says she voted Labour in 2010 but doesn’t want to join the party now in case “I become a membership statistic that appears to endorse the leadership”. She thinks every sound bite sounds like it has been prepared by a team of policy wonks. “Everything he says feels like it has been hashed over by a committee to come up with a bollocks word like pre-distribution that will make no sense to the average voter.”

She says the whole thing makes her think of the satire, the Thick of It, with “10 Ollie Reeders” agonising over every full stop.

Tammy says she will stay loyal to Labour “despite the wrong Miliband taking centre stage”.

Ed who?

And then there are those who find him invisible:

Nadia, “I cannot get any sort of feel for him”

Deirdre, “he doesn’t raise his voice enough”

Amy, “he is the one I should like the most but I barely know him”

Leah, “I struggle to distinguish between him and his brother”

Elizabeth, “I have no idea what he stands for”

Tracy, *"who even is he?"*

And on and on...

Yes Labour are doing well with women according to the headline statistics, but there is an underlying issue with the leader that needs to be addressed. Many think he lacks charisma – a characteristic they think is important in a party leader and crucial in a Prime Minister. Too many feel they can't see Mr Miliband in that key position.

The comments would suggest that some of Labour's boost in the polls is an anti-Tory and anti-Lib Dem vote instead of a more positive decision in favour of the party. Many say that all the party leaders fail to understand the issues facing women like them. And although they think Labour is most likely to look after the interests of women, they can't name the policies through which the party will be able to do that. However, many do praise Mr Miliband for boosting the female presence in his shadow cabinet. And they compare it with the poor efforts by Mr Cameron and Mr Clegg – with more than one saying they cannot name a single female Lib Dem MP.

And then the Lib Dems...

Mr Clegg's party fares poorly in both the polling and the focus groups. Many of the women taking part backed the Lib Dems in 2010 but feel betrayed. They say Mr Clegg persuaded them brilliantly in the televised leaders' debates that took place ahead of the elections. "Confident speeches, recalling the names of questioners, great intonation and authoritative body language," says Liz. But she and others now believe the party put forward a manifesto that was financially impossible to see through.

A typically harsh view is expressed by Monica, who describes the Lib Dem leader as a "snake in the grass [who] sacrificed his integrity to get a place in the leadership". His party will suffer as a result, she adds.

Some say they believe Mr Clegg did the best he did in a difficult position. "He was forced into that tiny opening between a rock and a hard place," says Caz, insisting he had no choice on tuition fees. Others are unsympathetic. "Damaged goods in terms of integrity," says Morwenna.

They can manage the economy ... but what about your household budget?

Women were asked how each leader might cope with their household finances. The answers were mixed, with a few saying they would all cope fine. The Tory's message of Labour profligacy had worked on some, who claimed Mr Miliband would splurge the money on day one and then turn to payday loans.

Others thought Mr Cameron would be shocked by their daily struggles. "He might have to give up all his holidays to Ibiza and go on £9.50 trips to Skegness like we've had to" says Chris. Food shopping might bring a "reality check" for all the leaders, according to Zoe.

Others agree. "The problem is that whatever their experiences once they get into Government they have a salary and lifestyle that is hugely different to that which most people in the country have," says Crystal. It is inevitable that they become out of touch, she argues.

Syria

We asked the women taking part in the focus groups some additional questions on Syria. They are largely united in a reluctance to see military strikes in Syria. A typical comment is "I don't know how we can sit by and watch while awful things happen... but I'm not sure starting another war is the answer either".

Both Mr Cameron and Mr Miliband gain credit. Even Labour supporters admit they appreciate the Prime Minister taking the issue to a vote in the House of Commons. "As much as I despise Cameron, I have to say he has gone up in my estimation and I respect him for putting the decision to the vote," says one.

Another, who backs the Tories, says her views are closest to Mr Miliband's because she is against "going to war on 'hearsay'".

There is no real consensus about who showed the best leadership during the debate about Syria. Some respondents credit both men. Others feel that neither did the right thing. One woman was against the strikes but thought the Prime Minister too quickly ruled out any action in any circumstances after losing the vote. "No one was asking for him to say that. I don't think anyone's covered themselves in glory here."

Towards the election

So what do women want as we edge towards 2015? Primarily, it seems, for their political leaders to comprehend and respond to the day-to-day struggles they face.

Mr Cameron, Mr Clegg and Mr Miliband may not be able to erase their upbringings but can they convince women voters that they can relate to a typical British family feeling the strain of the recession? The women questioned speak of rising food and gas bills, the sacrifice of holidays abroad, the challenges of securing childcare and the constant demands to balance family and work life. Many accept that in the current economic climate tough decisions are inevitable, but can those decisions be compassionate and fair?

The polls show that Labour has a strong lead among female voters overall, as well as on the key territories of the economy, unemployment, education and health.

So Mr Cameron has a significant task on his hands if he's to close the gap and win the hearts and minds of British women. On the plus side for him, many women remain as yet unconvinced by Ed Miliband's abilities. With 20 months to go, it's all to play for.

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