

11<sup>th</sup> December 2019

# Full Fact

Research into public views on truth and untruth in the 2019 General Election

Final Report

[britainthinks.com](https://britainthinks.com)

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# 1

# Introduction

## Background and objectives

- As part of Full Fact's work on the 2019 general election, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, Full Fact commissioned BritainThinks to conduct mixed- methodology research to understand the public's attitudes towards and understanding of different campaign behaviours.
- In particular, Full Fact were interested in exploring:
  - How much of a problem voters see the misuse of facts during the campaign to be
  - Where the line lies between acceptable/unacceptable campaign behaviours
  - Whether voters are noticing these behaviours
  - How these claims are influencing voter beliefs on key issues in the UK (if at all)
- With this insight they wanted to be better able to:
  - Fact check and effectively challenge important false and misleading claims
  - Engage the public on why bad information needs to be tackled
  - Assess the harms arising from misleading campaign techniques, to inform Full Fact's policy work

# Methodology

## Qualitative strand

- BritainThinks hosted 4 focus groups in two marginal constituencies, each with 6-8 undecided voters
- All groups: mix of gender; BC1C2 socioeconomic grade, and mix of 'remainers' and 'leavers'

Chingford and Woodford Green, a Conservative-held marginal seat  
2x groups on Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> November

Crewe and Nantwich, a Labour-held marginal seat  
2x groups on Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> November

## Quantitative strand

To supplement our qualitative findings, BritainThinks hosted 9 questions on an online omnibus survey of 2096 members of the general public

- In field between 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> December 2019
- Weighted to be representative of the UK national population by age, gender, ethnicity, SEG and region



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# 2

## Key findings

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# Key findings

1

Participants are deeply cynical about all politicians and parties telling the truth - three-quarters of UK adults think that voters are being misled by false and dishonest claims in this election campaign

2

Despite this cynicism, voters do engage with statements and claims from parties and politicians, and there is evidence that statements identified as false by Full Fact are believed to be true by some voters

3

'Actively manipulating or falsifying evidence' and 'making a promise to voters they know they may not be able to deliver' are seen as the two most unacceptable behaviours that politicians/parties can engage in

4

Belief that politicians and parties are peddling untruths creates anger, resentment and voter apathy - over half of UK adults say they ignore what politicians say because they can't trust them

5

Whilst recognising the value of fact checking, public concern is broader than 'factuality', and the integrity of politicians' promises is at least as concerning

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# 3

## General attitudes towards truthfulness and lies in politics



## The entire political establishment is seen as dishonest and untrustworthy

- There is a general sense that all politicians and parties tell untruths and make false promises
  - The failure to deliver Brexit is seen as a case in point
- There is also the sense that politicians and parties are actively telling lies
  - The bus used in the Vote Leave campaign was mentioned
- Participants are deeply angry at the feeling they are being 'taken for a ride' and adopt a cynical stance in response

*"People have been there for 3 years debating Brexit and people have lost the will with it, you're exhausted and can't believe anything. You know any of the manifestoes, whichever party comes in, they might not deliver any of it."*

(Focus group participant, Crewe)

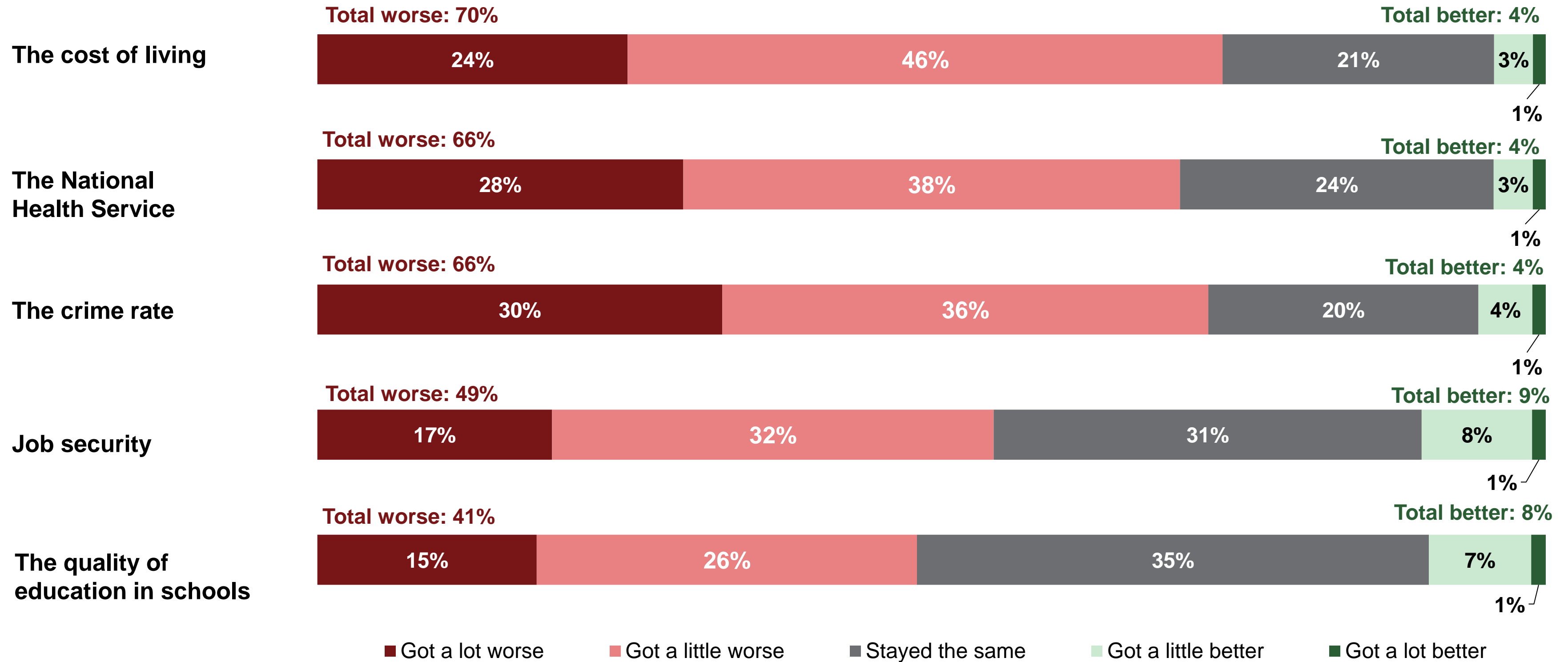
*"I'm not even interested in any of it...I don't think I've ever seen anything actually happen. If it does happen it might be five years later and then you've forgotten about it because it's five years later."*

(Focus group participant, Chingford)

*"They're all liars aren't they? I don't think any party has ever given us what we want. I put the news on and if that's on now I'll just turn it back off again."*

(Focus group participant, Crewe)

# The public think that things have deteriorated since the last election



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# This perception of decline feeds into a distrust of claims made by politicians, and the integrity of their promises

- Participants point to a decline in services and in their local area as evidence of incompetent and untrustworthy politicians not delivering on their promises
  - And as such struggle to believe them when they say things will improve in the future

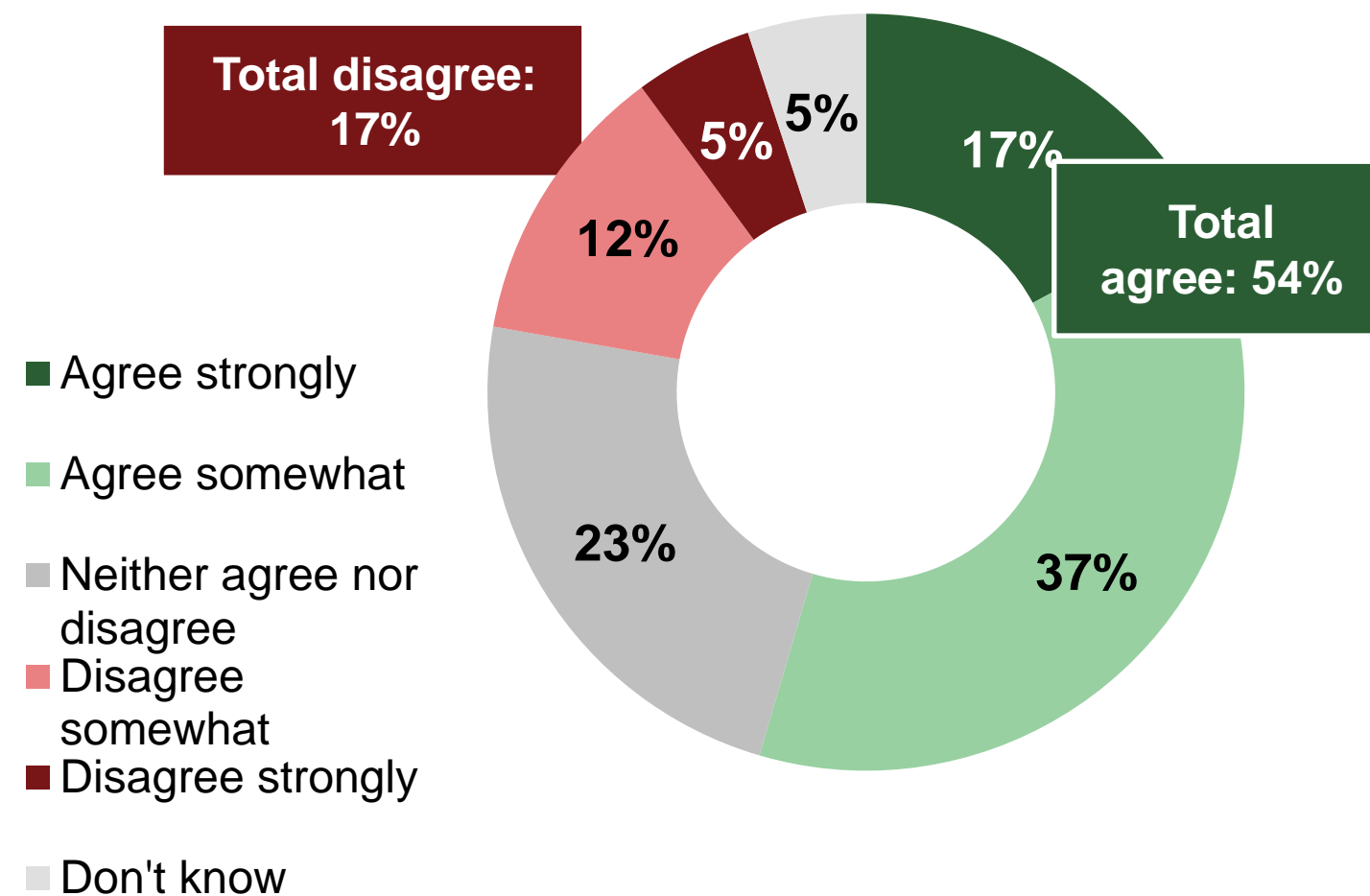
*“I’m getting really ambivalent to promises they’re making...we’ve had years of them making promises, not keeping them – politics in general, local politics, national politics.”*  
(Focus group participant, Crewe)

*“It’s a matter of trust isn’t it. If one thing they’ve said is untrue then is everything they’ve said untrue? You catch someone lying to you once, do you ever believe them ever again?”*  
(Focus group participant, Chingford)

*“Unfortunately I just think it’s all lies. Over the years and years and years all these Prime Ministers have always got the story to tell and when they come in power, you know, they don’t fulfil. Why now should we believe anything they say?”*  
(Focus group participant, Chingford)

# Over half of the public say they ignore parties and politicians because they don't know if they can trust them

*% who agree: 'I tend to ignore what the parties and politicians say because I don't know if I can trust them'*



36%

Agree that 'I have switched off from this election campaign because I do not know who to believe'

**Women (42%)** are significantly more likely to agree than men (30%)

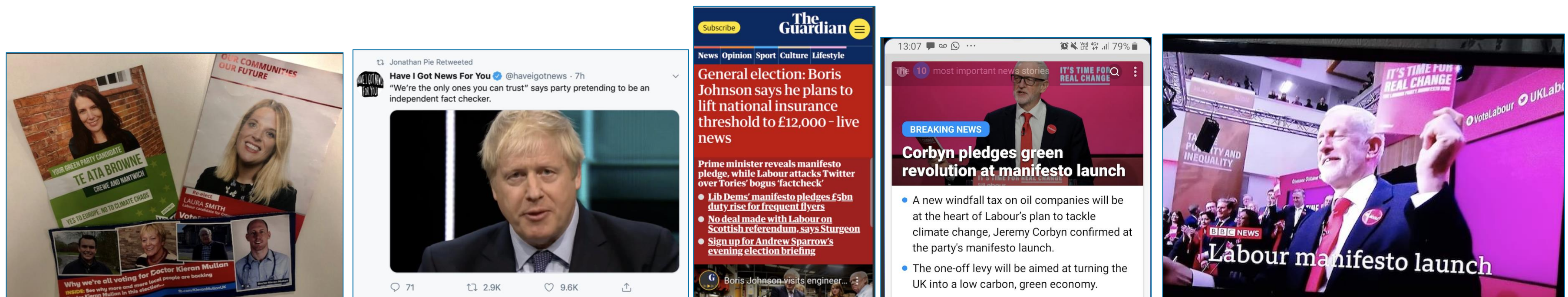
31%

Agree that 'I am worried that my own political opinions are based on false information'

**Women (37%)** are significantly more likely to agree than men (24%)  
**18-35 year olds (42%)** are significantly more likely to agree than those aged 36-55 (31%) and 56+ (21%)

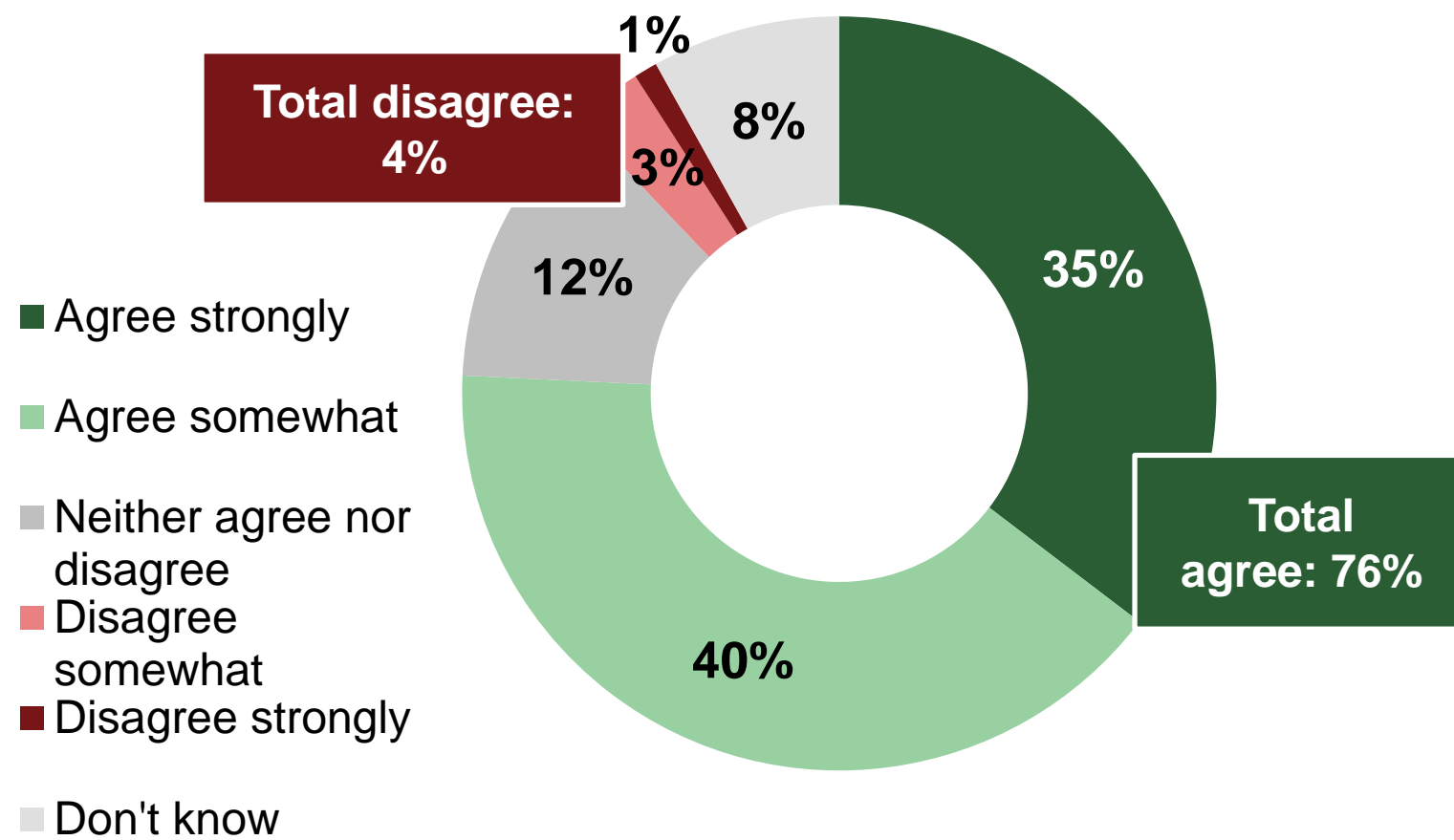
# Despite attempts to switch off, participants in the focus groups did acknowledge seeing and hearing from politicians and parties

- Participants engage with election-specific information through a range of channels, including:
  - Print and online newspapers
  - TV (including the news, current affairs programs and live debates)
  - Radio
  - Social media (including Facebook and Instagram feeds)

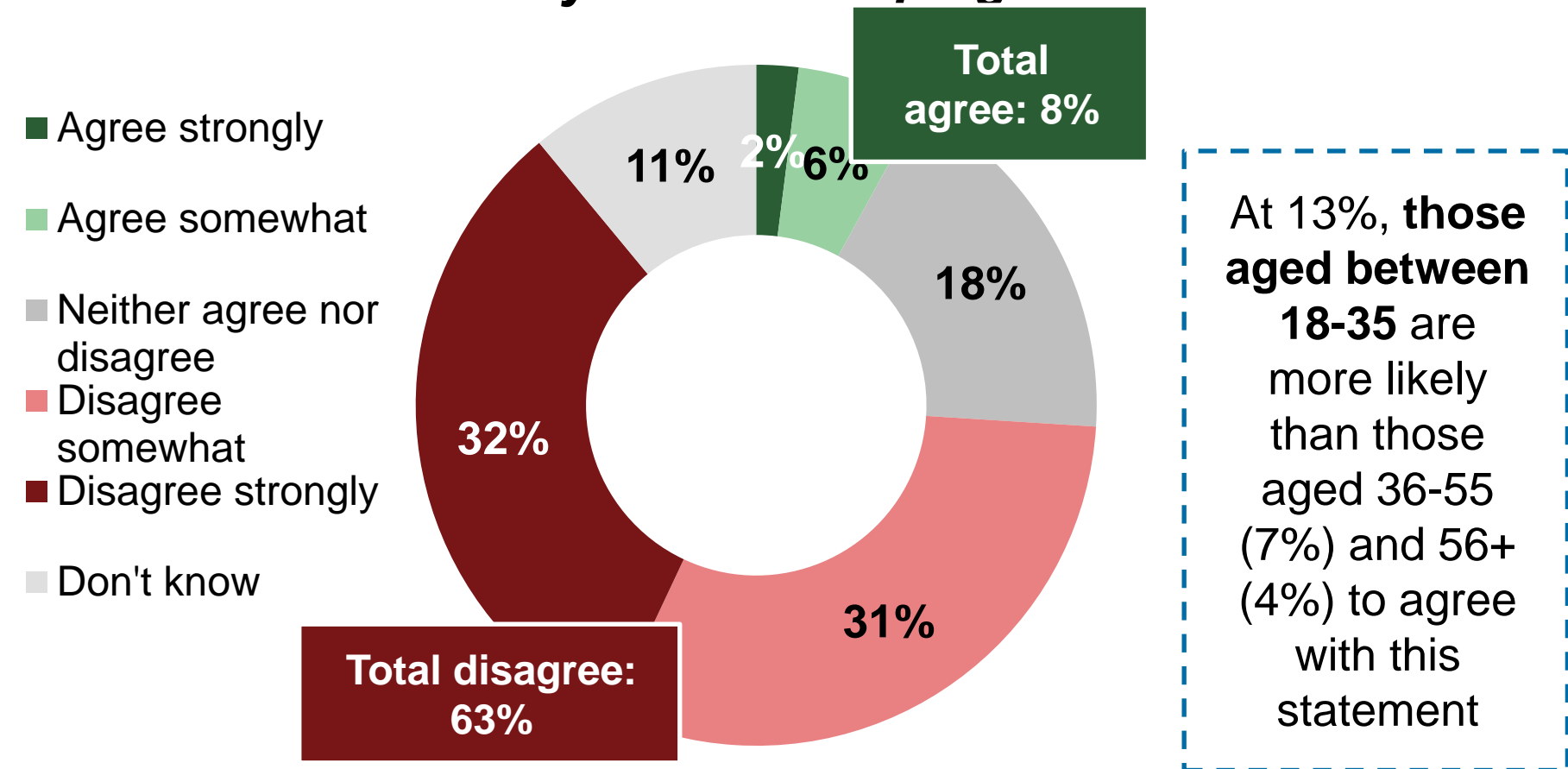


# Three quarters of the public think voters are being misled by false and dishonest claims in this election campaign

% who agree: 'Voters are being misled by false and dishonest claims in this election campaign'



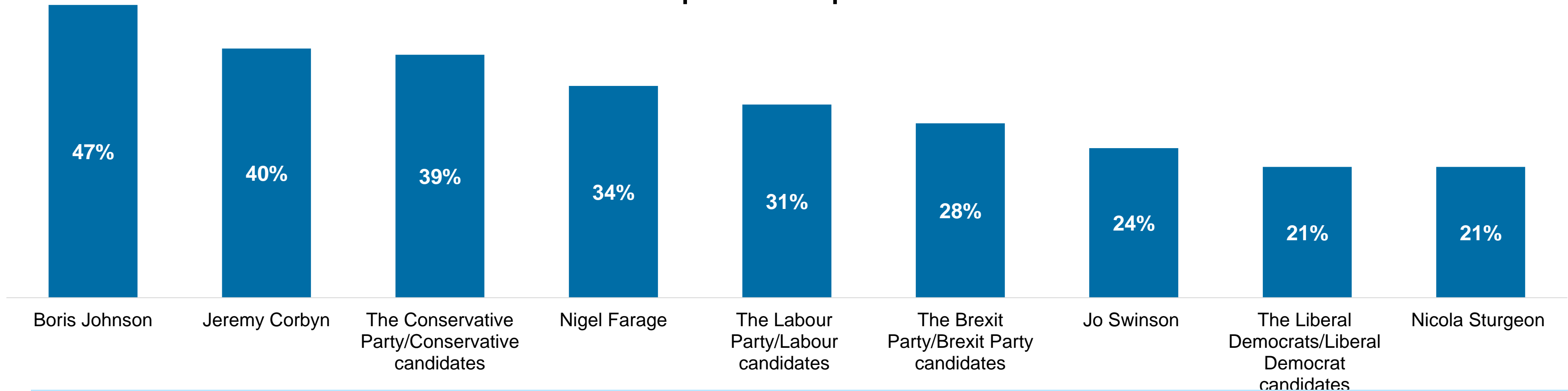
% who agree: 'I think facts have been used accurately in this campaign'



Over three quarters of respondents think that truthfulness in UK politics has got worse since the last general election in 2017 (77%), with over half thinking that truthfulness has got **a lot** worse (51%).

# All politicians are to some degree associated with untruthful and deceptive behaviour

% of respondents who have seen any untruthful or deceptive behaviour from UK politicians / parties



Qualitatively, participants describe seeing untruthful or deceptive behaviour from a range of politicians and political parties. However, participants struggle to name specific examples of types of these behaviours they have seen

## Importantly, voters are more likely to see untruthfulness in parties and politicians that they don't support, than in those they do

- Labour voters are more distrustful of Boris Johnson than Conservative voters
- Conservative voters are more distrustful of Jeremy Corbyn than Labour voters



**67%** of respondents who intend to vote Labour say they have seen untruthful or deceptive behaviour from Boris Johnson  
**25%** respondents who intend to vote Conservative

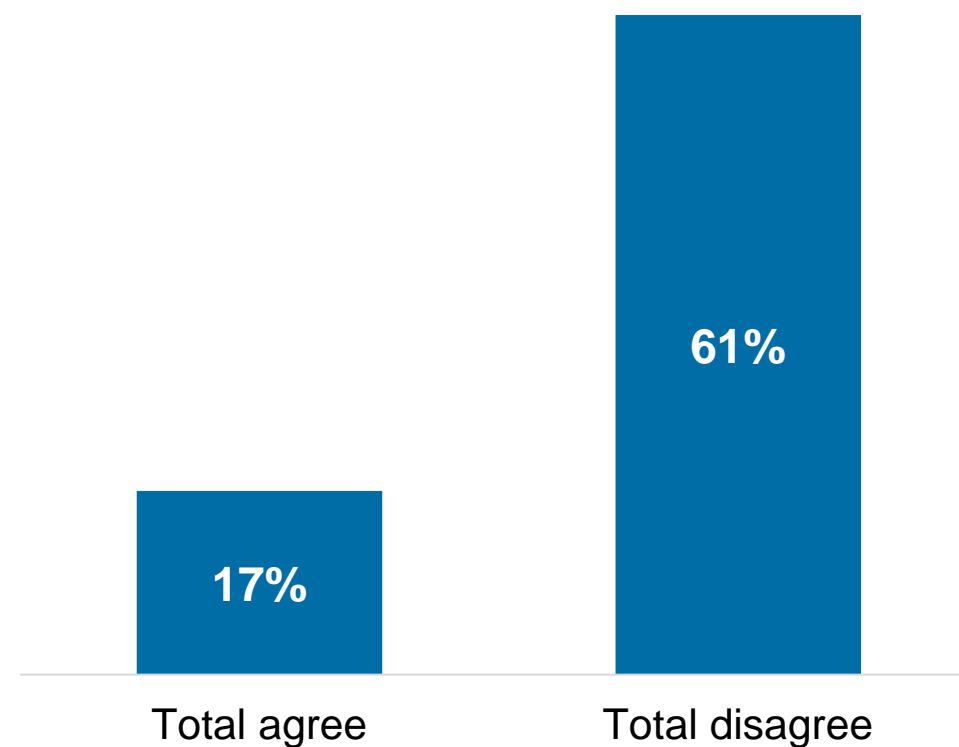


**64%** of respondents who intend to vote Conservative say they have seen untruthful or deceptive behavior from Jeremy Corbyn,  
**13%** of respondents who intend to vote for Labour



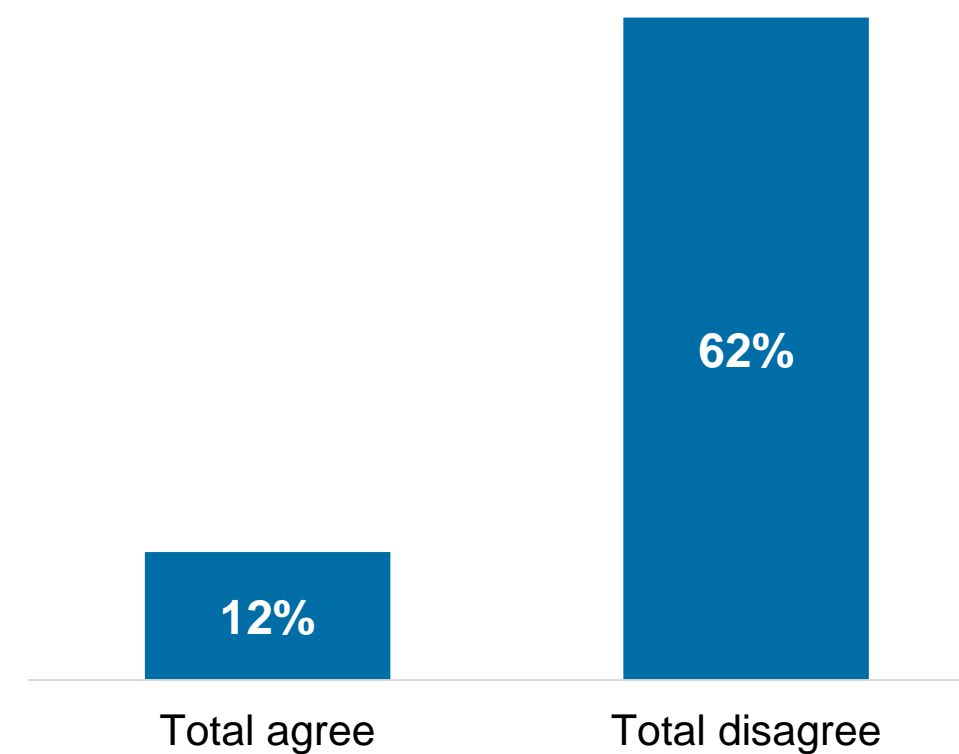
# This may partially explain why, despite high levels of mistrust, only a minority state that misleading claims impact their voting behaviour

**% who agree: 'I am less likely to vote because of the level of false and misleading claims in this election campaign'**



Over half (55%) of those who are unlikely to vote agree with this statement and 31% strongly agree

**% who agree: 'I have changed my mind about who to vote for because my original choice made untrue or misleading claims'**



Those who intend on voting for the Liberal Democrats are significantly more likely to agree with this statement (22%) than the overall sample

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# 4

## Attitudes towards untruthful behaviours

## Participants respond strongly to the idea of untruthful behaviours at a very personal and emotional level

- The idea that politicians/parties are engaging in these behaviours generates strong feelings of anger, frustration and confusion
- It feels like a personal insult to be induced to believe what someone's saying, only to realise it's untrue
- Participants in the groups spontaneously talked about disengaging from the campaign/politics more generally and feeling demotivated to vote

*"It makes me lose trust in the whole thing."  
(Focus group participant, Chingford)*

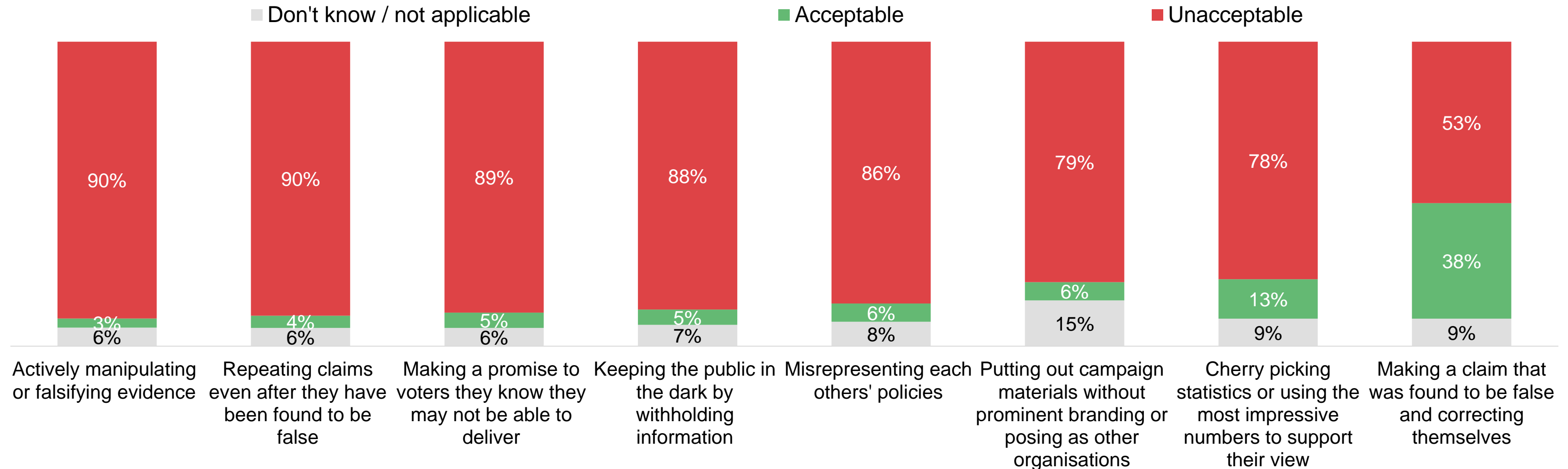
*"Everybody's very angry. People are, like I said, segregated. Wary. Confused. Fed up."  
(Focus group participant, Chingford)*

*"It's dangerous for democracy – no wonder people don't bother going and voting."  
(Focus group participant, Crewe)*

*"I reckon there'll be a higher increase of people actually not voting. I know loads of people that aren't going to vote."  
(Focus group participant, Chingford)*

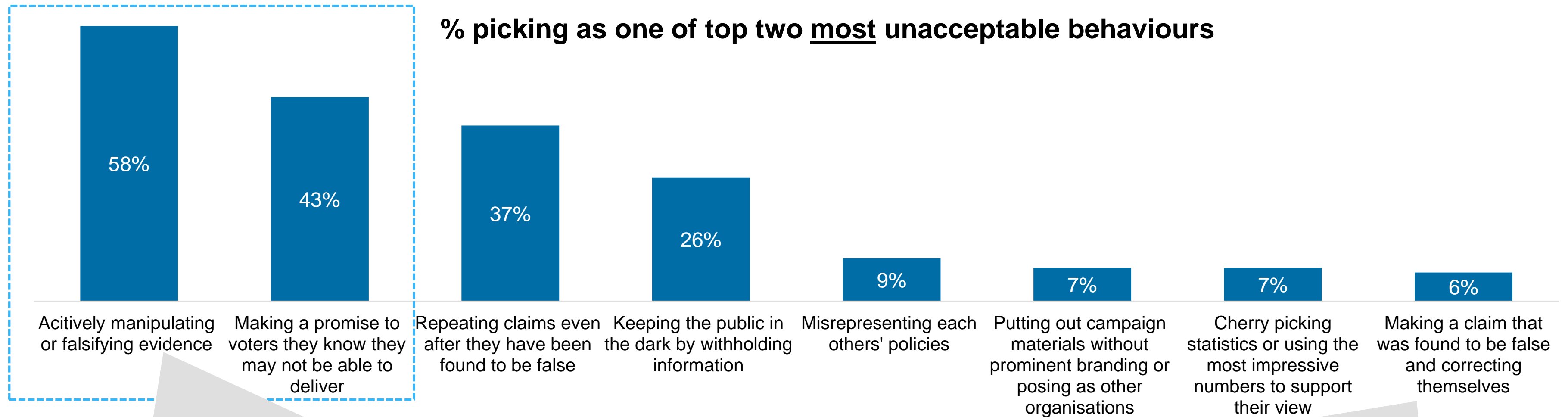
# The public are deeply critical of all types of untruthful behaviours that politicians may engage in

% of respondents who think campaign behaviours are acceptable / unacceptable



Older people are significantly more likely to think each of the behaviours is unacceptable. For example, **97% of those aged 56+** think 'actively manipulating or falsifying evidence' is unacceptable, compared to **83% of 18-35 year olds**.

# ‘Actively manipulating or falsifying evidence’ and ‘making a promise to voters they know they may not be able to deliver’ are seen as the two most unacceptable behaviours



*“I think manipulating evidence is awful...that's the worst thing you could do.”*  
(Focus group participant, Chingford)

*“If they've gone out of their way to correct themselves then that is more acceptable. But I'd think they're incompetent. If she was unsure she shouldn't have just made something up. Honesty is important.”*  
(Focus group participant, Crewe)

## The most unacceptable behaviours are those seen as morally wrong and with serious implications for the country

Actively  
manipulating or  
falsifying evidence

Making a promise to  
voters they know  
they may not be able  
to deliver

Repeating claims  
after they have been  
found to be false

Keeping the public in  
the dark by  
withholding  
information

- Participants think these behaviours purposefully mislead voters and lead to decisions being made on false pretenses, to the detriment of society and the country
- It is assumed these behaviours are more about personal gain than societal good

*“They should be in jail. If I did any of that at my work I’d be in jail.”*

(Focus group participant, Crewe)

*“It’s taking your vote away from another party that might have done something good ... It could isolate certain social groups. It could create segregation. I don’t know. It’s just a really nasty way.”*

(Focus group participant, Chingford)

## There are a raft of behaviours that are seen as problematic, but more or less the norm

Misrepresenting each others' policies

Putting out campaign materials without prominent branding/ posing as other organisations

Cherry picking statistics or using the most impressive numbers to support their view

Making a claim that was found to be false and correcting themselves

- These fall into the realm of skewing what is claimed rather than claiming something that is entirely untrue
- It is seen as expected/normal behaviour between political rival, and whilst a bit 'naughty' essentially not considered immoral
- Finally, honest mistakes are felt to be forgivable, although it does lead to some claimed loss of trust

*"Cherry picking – politicians do that anyway don't they. They're in the business of sales."*  
(Focus group participant, Crewe)

*"If they're correcting themselves, I guess that's better than lying altogether. They're redeeming themselves."*  
(Focus group participant, Chingford)

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# 5

## How the public judge the truth of political statements



## Full Fact provided BritainThinks with a series of statements to test in the focus groups and the online survey

These were a mixture of statements which had been determined to be ‘True’ or ‘False’ in advance by Full Fact

- Some statements were used exclusively in the focus groups, some exclusively in the survey, and a selection were used in both phases of research. This was decided with Full Fact upfront on the basis of what seemed most relevant to be testing with each platform and most relevant for the time at which each were conducted.

### In the focus groups

Participants were presented with each statement in turn in random order and were asked to mark whether they believed each to be true or false on a worksheet

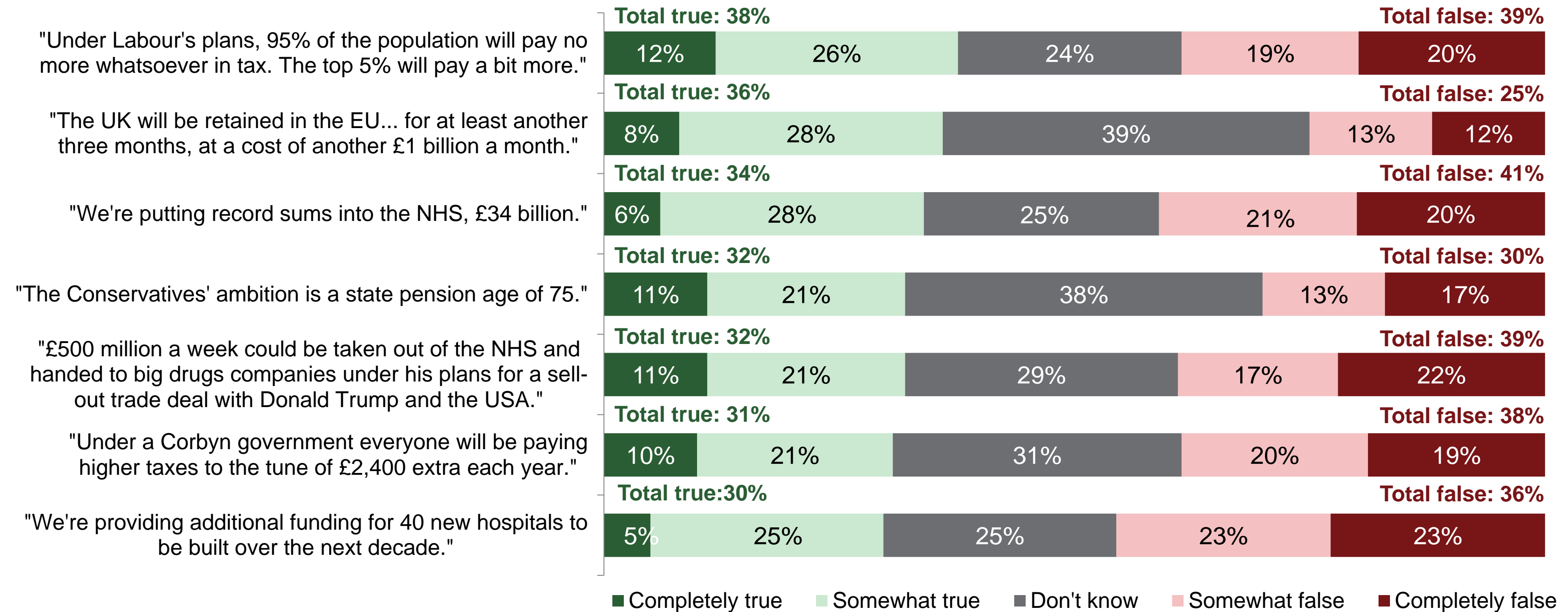
### In the survey

Respondents were asked the following, before being shown the statements in random order:

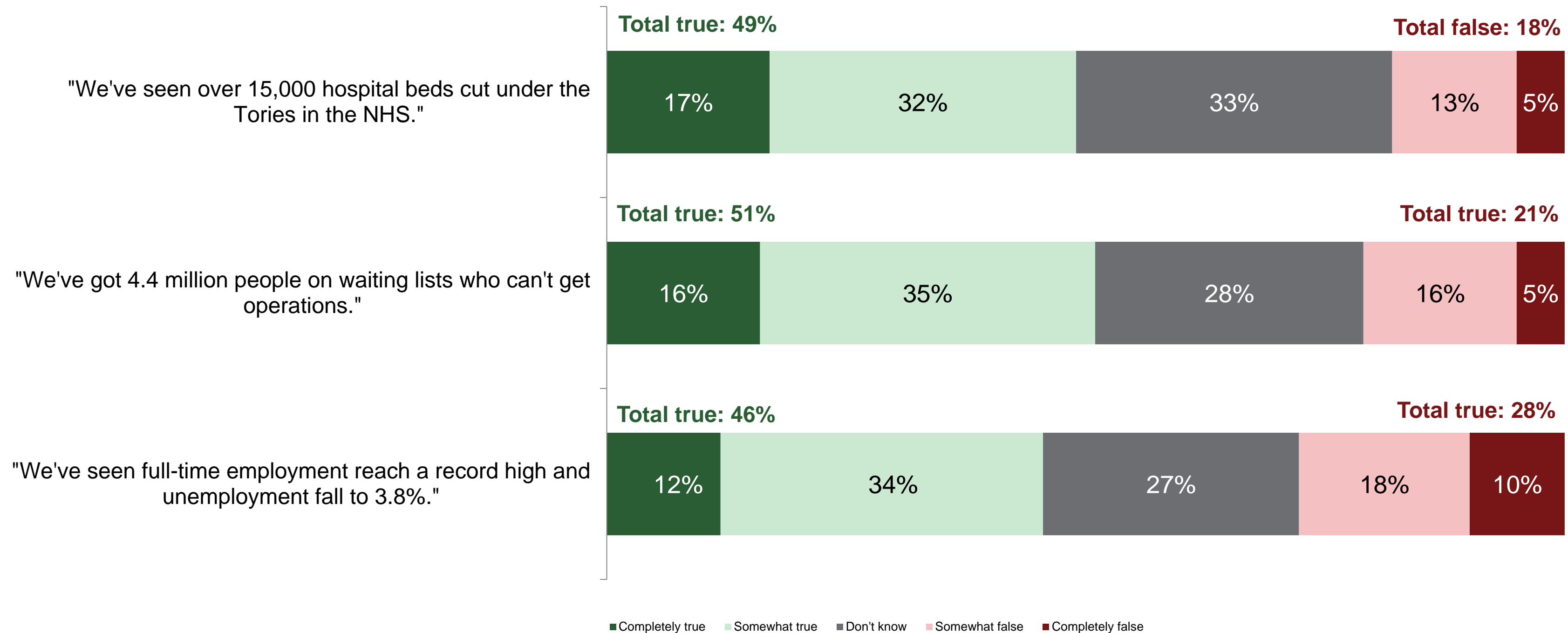
*The following claims have been made by various politicians and parties as part of the General Election campaign. Please say whether you believe each to be true or false*

*A breakdown of the statements that were tested can be found in the appendix*

# Of the false statements, at least a quarter of survey respondents thought that each was true



# And only around half of participants thought that true statements were true



## Qualitatively, participants were often likely to think that false statements were true

- Participants were sometimes surprised at how often they had marked down statements as ‘true’ on their worksheets
  - And some also expressed shock and surprise when statements they had marked as ‘true’ were revealed to be ‘false’
- In particular, all of the statements around the NHS – including false ones – were selected by most as true in the focus groups

*“NHS million hours unpaid overtime – that’s believable. It’s just the way it is now. Not enough beds and all that. There’s more work to be done all the time.”*

(Focus group participant, Crewe)

*“Let’s face it, one of the best things about this country is the NHS. (agreement) But it’s in self-destruct mode isn’t it?”*

(Focus group participant, Chingford)

## When participants were able to identify false statements as such, it was often because they felt nakedly political or clearly exaggerated

***“Corbyn’s Labour would spend £1.2 trillion over the next five years if they get elected...”***

- The 1.2 trillion figure was seen as too outlandish by almost all and quickly identified as a deliberate smear

***“Local Liberal Democrats published the following graph on their Twitter feed...”***

- Participant responses to this statement were very mixed, owing to a difficulty making sense of what this was telling them

*“How would they know how much he's wanting to spend? That's why I put false. That's before any manifestos, anything. They plucked that figure from nowhere, it's false.”*

(Focus group participant, Chingford)

*“They’re publishing the information they want you to have, but it’s not the full story.”*

(Focus group participant, Crewe)

## Despite being able to make ‘snap judgements’, overall people lack confidence in whether they think something is true or false

- There is a feeling among many that they ‘don’t know enough about politics’ to be confident in judging whether something is true or false
  - High levels of disengagement means people often do not feel informed enough to make a judgement
- Having low levels of trust in politicians and political parties people they are more inclined to distrust information, regardless of the source
- Most are also aware that simplistic statements often miss the ‘whole picture’ and may be true in some senses, but false in others

*“They’re all liars aren’t they? I don’t think any party has ever given us what we want. I put the news on and if that’s on now I’ll just turn it back off again.”*

(Focus group participant, Crewe)

# True/false judgements tend to be made on the basis of the 'broad thrust' of the statements, rather than the facts used

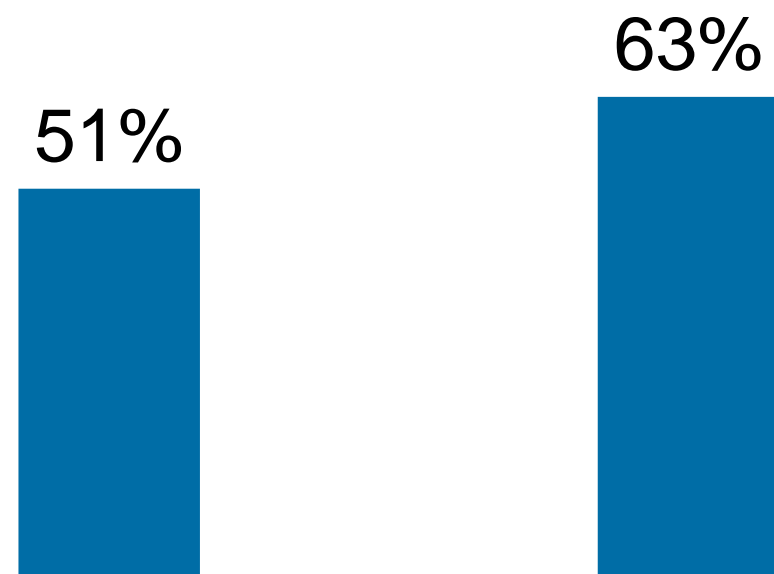
- ✓ **Having heard about the issue before**
  - Allows people to base their thoughts on 'received wisdom' and dominant narratives
  - Having seen similar statements on the issue increases believability
- ✓ **Statements tallying with their own experience**
  - Experiencing things personally strongly informs views
  - Hearing stories from friends and family are also influential
- ✓ **Having previous knowledge of the issue**
  - People have more of a 'baseline' to work to the more informed they are about an issue
- ✓ **Information that feels 'first-hand'**
  - Seeing or hearing politicians say things directly makes the believability of information clearer to judge

*"There's thousands of empty nurse positions available. I heard that. All the hospitals are understaffed because they can't fill them because of tuition fees, and you start on almost minimum wage so why would you become a nurse and have student loans when you could earn more in Tesco?"*

(Focus group participant, Chingford)

# Statements are more often believed where the message aligns with a pre-existing view, and rejected where it contradicts an existing belief

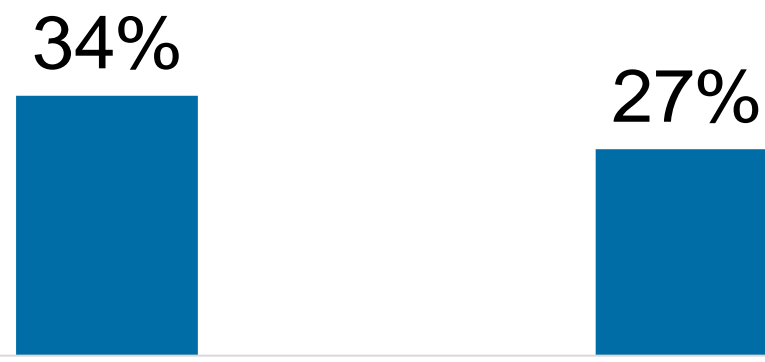
Those selecting “We've got 4.4 million people on waiting lists who can't get operations.” as ‘true’



All respondents

Those who think the NHS has got worse

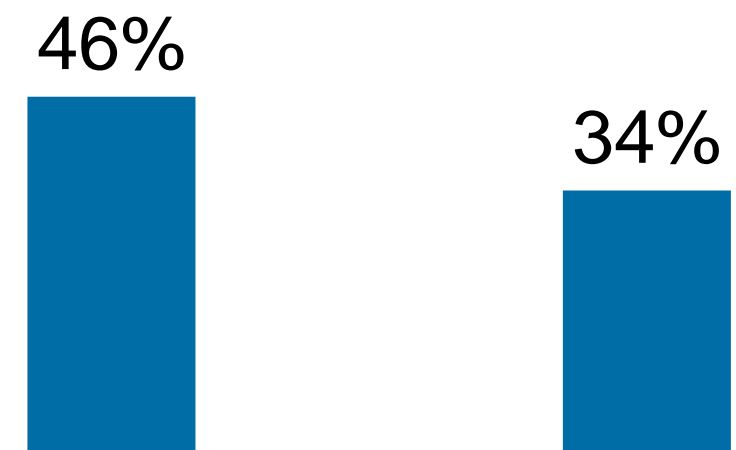
Those selecting “We're putting record sums into the NHS, £34 billion.” as ‘true’



All respondents

Those who think the NHS has got worse

Those selecting “We've seen full-time employment reach a record high and unemployment fall to 3.8%.” as ‘true’



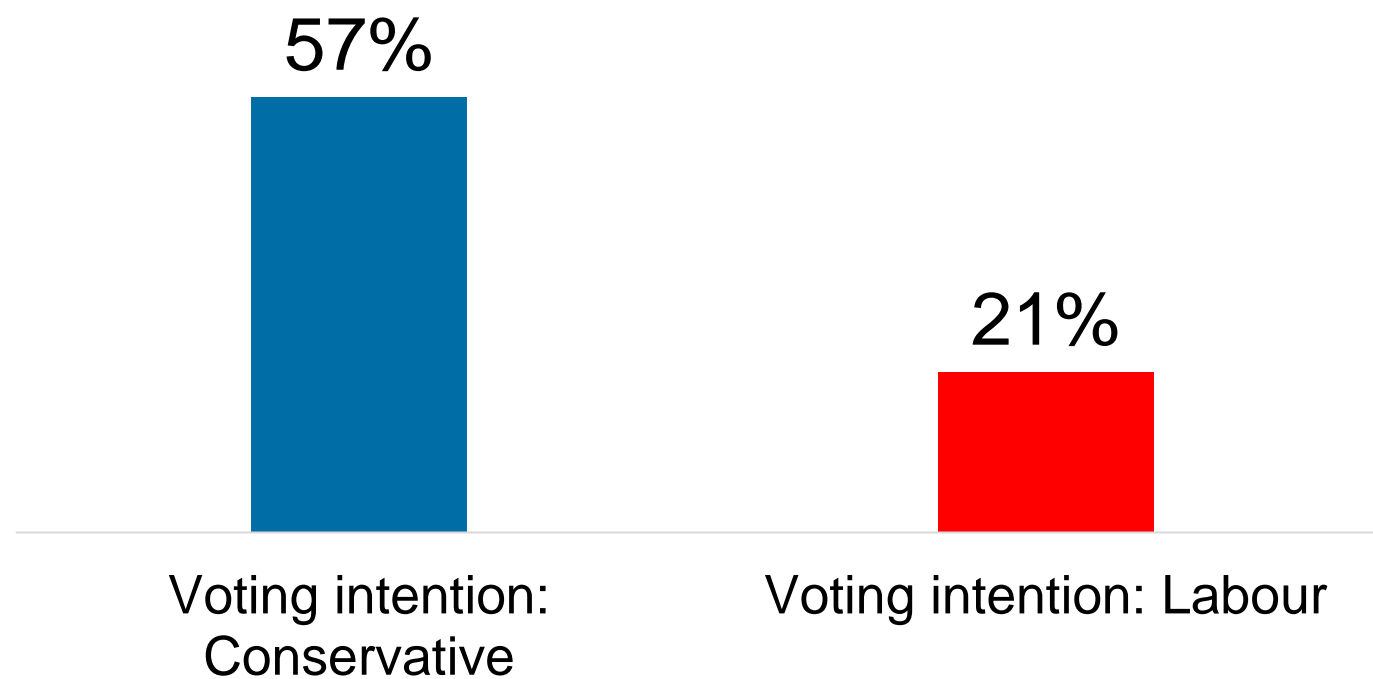
All respondents

Those who think job security has got worse

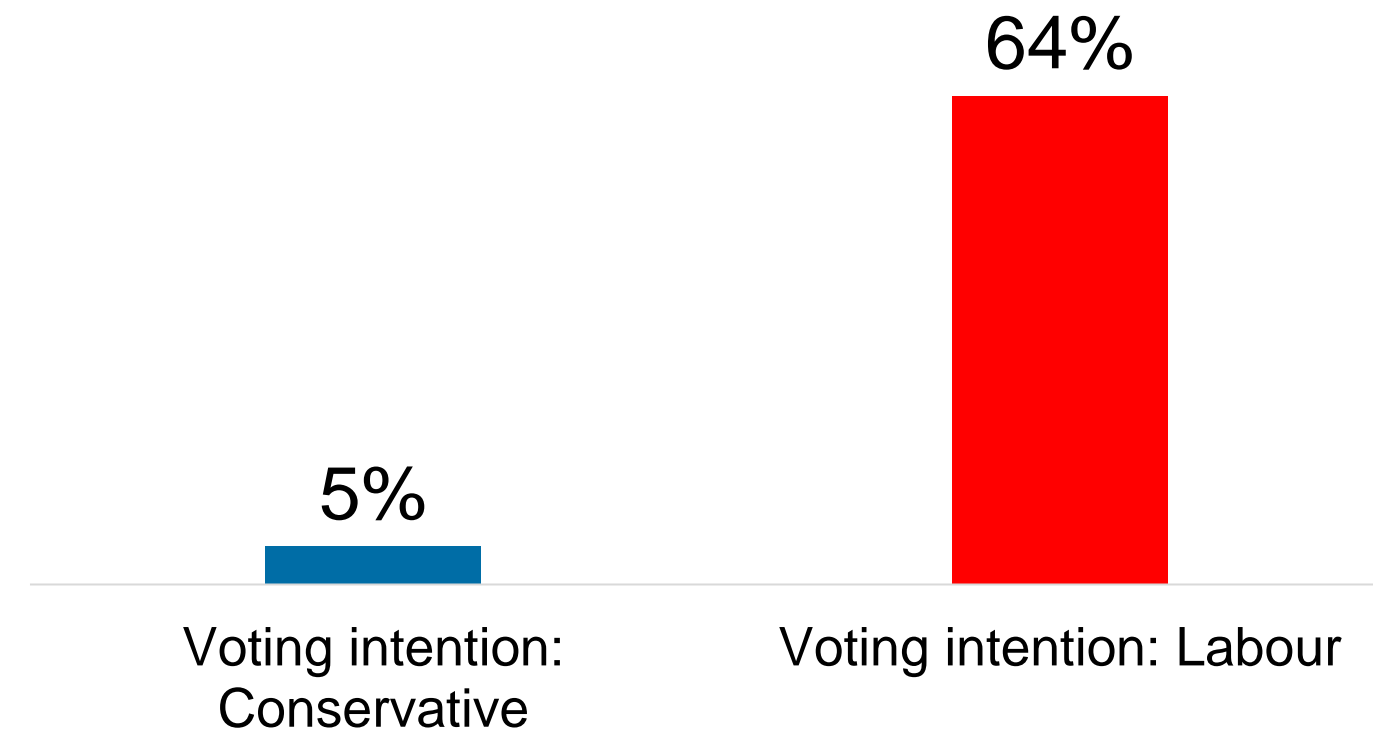


# Statements from politically aligned messengers are more frequently believed than those from other parties

Those selecting “The UK will be retained in the EU... for at least another three months, at a cost of another £1 billion a month.” (Boris Johnson) as ‘true’



Those selecting “£500 million a week could be taken out of the NHS and handed to big drugs companies under his [Boris Johnson's] plans for a sell-out trade deal with Donald Trump and the USA.” (Jeremy Corbyn) as ‘true’

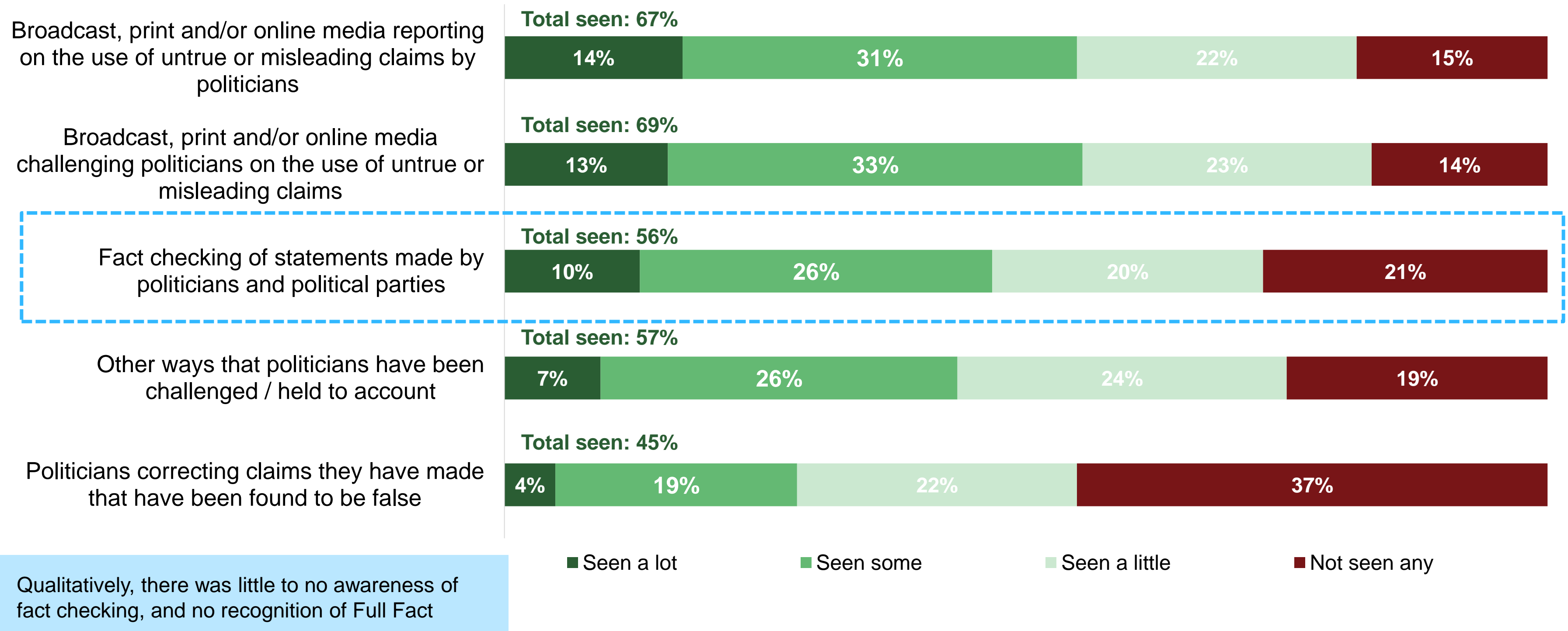


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# 6

## The role of fact-checking

# Over half of respondents report having seen fact-checking, but only 10% of those have seen *a lot* of fact-checking



## Participants can see the value in fact-checking

- Broadly, people think that having an independent organisation verifying claims is broadly good:
  - ✓ Can ensure that voters are making an informed choice
  - ✓ Hold politicians accountable for what they say
  - ✓ And potentially increase engagement in politics as a result
- It is important to note that they are unlikely to look up facts themselves, and mostly just want to know that what they are reading is factual in the first place

*“When a party writes its manifesto they should hand them over to people that will check all the facts and tell them, 'Take this bit out, take this bit out' and then we've got a manifesto with just the truth in.”*

(Focus group participant, Chingford)

*“I think it's brilliant because people should be held accountable if they're in a position of trust it should be regulated really.”*

(Focus group participant, Crewe)

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# Public concern is broader than ‘factuality’, and the integrity of politicians’ promises is at least as concerning

- Voters also care about the intention behind why politicians are making claims, and so view sticking to election promises as an important indicator of the (dis)honesty of politicians
- Because of this, there is interest in fact-checkers like Full Fact focusing on election promises, as well as specific facts

*“People have been there for 3 years debating Brexit and people have lost the will with it, you’re exhausted and can’t believe anything. You know any of the manifestoes, whichever party comes in, they might not deliver any of it.”*  
(Focus group participant, Crewe)

*“It’s all good and well all these party leaders making these promises but it’s just how much of it are they going to be able to deliver when they do come in to power? Are they actually going to keep those promises or have they got a hidden agenda?”*  
(Focus group participant, Chingford)

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# Key findings

1

Participants are deeply cynical about all politicians and parties telling the truth - three-quarters of UK adults think that voters are being misled by false and dishonest claims in this election campaign

2

Despite this cynicism, voters do engage with statements and claims from parties and politicians, and there is evidence that statements identified as false by Full Fact are believed to be true by some voters

3

'Actively manipulating or falsifying evidence' and 'making a promise to voters they know they may not be able to deliver' are seen as the two most unacceptable behaviours that politicians/parties can engage in

4

Belief that politicians and parties are peddling untruths creates anger, resentment and voter apathy - over half of UK adults say they ignore what politicians say because they can't trust them

5

Whilst recognising the value of fact checking, public concern is broader than 'factuality', and the integrity of politicians' promises is at least as concerning

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# Appendix – Tested statements breakdown

# 'False' statements breakdown

Statement	Where we tested
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>“[The Conservatives] ambition [is] a state pension age of 75.”</b>  <i>- John McDonnell, Shadow Chancellor (Labour)</i></p>	<p><i>Focus groups and survey</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>“Since 2010, social care has been slashed by £7.7 billion. Over 200,000 nurses have resigned.”</b>  <i>- David Lammy MP (Labour)</i></p>	<p><i>Focus groups and survey</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>“[Parliament has] made it inevitable that the people of this country would be retained in the EU...for at least another three months, at a cost of another £1 billion a month.”</b>  <i>- Boris Johnson, Prime Minister (Conservative)</i></p>	<p><i>Focus groups and survey*</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>“Corbyn’s Labour would spend £1.2 trillion over the next five years if they get elected – the equivalent of funding the entire NHS budget for nine years. Find out more about Labour’s £1,200,000,000,000 spending splurge here: [link]”</b>  <i>- Conservative party official Twitter account</i></p>	<p><i>Focus groups only</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Local Liberal Democrats published the following graph on their twitter feed, saying it showed that “If we work together, and back Nick Coates [their candidate] we will beat Jacob Rees-Mogg in North East Somerset.” (accompanying graph also shown)</b></p>	<p><i>Focus groups only</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Conservative party shared a video on their official Twitter account which showed Keir Starmer (Shadow secretary of state for exiting the EU) not being able to answer how Labour would renegotiate the Brexit deal</b></p>	<p><i>Focus groups only</i></p>

\*Statement wording was tweaked in the survey to read: “The UK will be retained in the EU...for at least another three months, at a cost of another £1 billion a month.” – [Source: Boris Johnson MP, Conservative Party]



# 'True' statements breakdown

Statement	Where we tested
<p><b>“We’ve seen full-time employment reach a record high and unemployment fall to 3.8%. We’re helping more people get the security of a job so they can provide for themselves and their families.”</b>                      - Conservative party official Twitter account</p>	<p><i>Focus groups and survey</i></p>
<p><b>“We’ve seen over 15,000 [hospital] beds cut under the Tories in the NHS.”</b>                      - Jonathan Ashworth, Shadow Secretary of State for Health (Labour)</p>	<p><i>Focus groups and survey</i></p>
<p><b>“We got crime down by 20% [in London]. We got the murder rate down.”</b>                      - Boris Johnson, during the Conservative party leadership contest</p>	<p><i>Focus groups only</i></p>
<p><b>“NHS staff are working over a million hours a week of unpaid overtime.”</b>                      - The Guardian, quoting research done by the Labour party</p>	<p><i>Focus groups only</i></p>
<p><b>“Last year, 78,981 operations were cancelled. These operations were either classed as urgent or were elective operations cancelled at the last minute – either on the day the patient was due to arrive in hospital or after they had already arrived.”</b>                      - Labour party website</p>	<p><i>Focus groups only</i></p>
<p><b>“Under Labour there was a 420,000 drop in the stock of social housing between 1997 and 2010. We have turned this around with a rise of 79,000 in the stock of social housing since 2010.”</b>                      - Conservative party website</p>	<p><i>Focus groups only</i></p>

# Survey-only statements breakdown

Statement	True or false?
<p><b>“We’ve got 4.4 million people on waiting lists who can’t get operations.”</b> [Source: Labour Party]</p>	<p><i>True</i></p>
<p><b>“Under a Corbyn government everyone will be paying higher taxes to the tune of £2,400 extra each year.”</b> [Source: Rishi Sunak MP, Conservative Party]</p>	<p><i>False</i></p>
<p><b>“We’re providing additional funding for 40 new hospitals to be built over the next decade.”</b> [Source: Conservative party]</p>	<p><i>False</i></p>
<p><b>“£500 million a week could be taken out of the NHS and handed to big drugs companies under his plans for a sell-out trade deal with Donald Trump and the USA.”</b> [Source: Jeremy Corbyn MP, Labour Party]</p>	<p><i>False</i></p>
<p><b>“Under Labour’s plans, 95% of the population will pay no more whatsoever in tax. The top 5% will pay a bit more.”</b> [Source: Jeremy Corbyn MP, Labour Party]</p>	<p><i>False</i></p>
<p><b>“We’re putting record sums into the NHS, £34 billion.”</b> [Source: Boris Johnson MP, Conservative Party]</p>	<p><i>False</i></p>

# Thank you

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