

DEMOS

TRUSTWATCH 2024 - Leadership election - 4th June 2024

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Over the 2024 election, Demos is embarking on a project to track trust sentiment and the impact of the campaigns. Our Trustwatch 2024 panel is a group of 32 citizens who are giving us their reactions to key moments in the campaign and how they affect their feelings of trust in politicians, the political process and democracy. They are a cross-section of society, and they include people who are engaged in politics, sometimes engaged and rarely engaged.

You can read our first paper setting out the project and initial insights [here](#).

Before and during the first live TV debates of the election on the evening of 4th June we were engaging via Whatsapp with our participants for live reactions, then immediately afterwards we held two focus groups with the panel where they shared their reactions to what they heard from Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer. What follows is the raw insights from this exercise.

1. [Pre-TV debate notes \(verbatim WhatsApp messages\)](#)

General weariness but some interest in whether Starmer can engender public trust

Sometimes Voter

- "My expectations are low to be honest. For me listening to Sunak is a waste of time. He'll evade tough questions and i'd not trust him to honestly tell me what he had for breakfast. For me this is about finding out what, if anything, Starmer has to offer and to tie down some of Labour's policies and promises (...) Starmer is more difficult to judge. I want to use tonight to form a better opinion about his beliefs and to work out how genuine he is"

Usually Voter

- "I would like some more context to what the 2 party's are offering in terms of their policies and their plans for the country. I'm not sure because I feel they may just say whatever they think the public want to say"

Usually Voter

- "Don't expect much because both politicians are unelected by the general public and are just trying to win votes"

Sometimes Voter

- "What am I expecting - a lot of talking around the topics that are of importance for our society. However I think around 75 % will be a bit of attacking each other, and then the remaining 25% will be actually coming to a point. (...) However both are great in answering questions :)"

One panellist noted that Labour were likely to win and this might affect the debate dynamic, with Sunak "in a position to promise the earth"

Always Voter

- "Dunno about that as according to the polls Labour are definitely going to win the General election. Secondly as Sunak is predicted to lose he is in a position to promise the earth to the electorate knowing full well that he won't be there to deliver or be held to account"

Another panellist was despondent but felt issues were symptomatic of the wider political system

Non Voter

- [What do you expect to get out of the debate?] "Very little/ nothing. There's nothing either of them could say that would make a substantial difference to me. [Do you think it will be useful? If not, why not?] No. The Conservative Party and Labour Party (and the others) are systematically incapable of offering anything useful to anyone. There are too many problems with the way society is structured for either of them to do what is required"
- [to what extent do you think you can trust what each leader will say] "I don't distrust them, but they are part of a broken system. They will try to score political points on each other and nothing will be achieved"

There were also positive notes about the idea of the leadership debate (before it took place)

Always Voter

- "Actually really looking forward to seeing how they appear on screen without all the PR gimmicks and PR team to help stage their press shots etc. Politics on the tv in this way could be a great way to start a conversation and invite viewers who may not have heard both candidates speak before, or seen their mannerisms etc"

Always Voter

- "1/2 I expect to learn more about the main differences particularly as far as foreign policies. I think it will be useful as it is a real chance for both to grab those voters that unsure. I do not trust politicians. I believe they will do all and say all to be elected. I think it is the nature of "trade" to be flexible in commitments and fulfilment of promises"

Non-Voter

- "As I am pretty clueless about politics (and this will be one of the first instances where I am intentionally interacting with it) I imagine I will learn a lot about the people involved and what their beliefs and pledges are. I do think it will be useful as I will learn a basic understanding of the candidates running and the process / info about the election"

Sometimes Voter

- "See exactly how the policies compare with what we see just now and how similar they are"

Usually Voter

- "I think the purpose of the debate is for each party to put to the table what they can offer to the people of Britain. I expect to see what they are offering and how they are better than each other and they need to explain why the public should vote for them. I think they will each show what they have delivered in previous years. I think it is useful to see what they have delivered in the past and how much they have kept their words is the last prior to elections. It will be useful in the sense to be able to compare them both whilst they are in the same room together and their facial expressions and tone of voices will also play a big part in how much I believe what they are promising"

Pre-debate views on Sunak and Starmer

Sometimes Voter

- "Sunak is about as disingenuous and unconvincing a politician as I've ever seen, and I say that as someone who initially warmed to him during COVID. Starmer is more difficult to judge. I want to use tonight to form a better opinion about his beliefs and to work out how genuine he is"

Always Voter

- "I can't trust Sunak, at all. He's publicly demonstrated how out of touch he is with a working class let alone middle class person's day to day life. None of what he does or says comes from a place of integrity or empathy (...) I would like to think I can trust Starmer more, which comes more from a perspective that he's very established in his position and has more consistent support from his party. (...) I don't trust either - as I said on our last call, I can't trust people I don't know - but... trusting what they say they'll deliver, I think Starmer has that trust far more from me"

Always Voter

- "Can I trust Starmer? Don't know He seems like a decent person. We'll know if soon enough when he's PM"

Non-Voter

- "Currently, I don't really know who the leaders are but I have learned to not trust previous politicians based on their personalities. I don't like how people try to win votes by undermining and slating the opposition. I feel a leader should be professional and fight their own side, not defeat their opponents by fighting and arguing"

Usually Voter

- "At the moment not fully I think they want to convince as many people as possible to vote for them only time will tell and their actions. Trust must be earned through actions nowadays when it comes to politics. I think in the past there have been too many promises broken by leaders"

Sometimes Voter

- "Don't trust either of them both break pledges"

Usually Voter

- "Both politicians have been hypocritical in the exact same way regarding their stances on Russia & Ukraine whilst ignoring or even supporting the tremendous suffering inflicted on Gaza by Israel. The fact that 26,000 children alone have either been killed or severely injured by bombs, and thousands more missing, in comparison to 600 children in Ukraine - without either of them being able to take a strong opposition to the perpetrators and continue to provide arms - to me, shows enough about how much they should be trusted to lead the people of the UK"

Usually Voter

- "I don't trust either of them right now as I'd like to hear what each of them have to say first. All politicians over promise lead up to elections and then afterwards deliver very little to what they had promised. It's hard to to trust as right now they will tell us what we want to hear to get out votes"

2. During debate (verbatim WhatsApp messages)

Around the issue of not making cuts to public services

Always Voters

- "I do not believe them. There is no way they can make any improvement to our future without serious cuts to public services"

Usually Voter

- "I don't believe this completely completely I just don't see it being feasible"

Differences in the leaders' socio-economic backgrounds

Sometimes Voter

- "Well, he just put Rishi in his place - a millionaire who does not effects of the economic of the middle class worker"
- "I'm not saying that Keith Starmer is all great - but he does seem to draw the focus that he comes from a working family"

Usually Voter

- "Makes me feel that Keir Starmer has experienced what most of this country have been through in their life and Rishi Sunak doesn't know what it feels like"
- "It makes me trust Keir Starmer more as he has been through hardship himself and knows what it feels like"

Scepticism about Starmer's background and its relevance

Non-voter

- "I don't believe Keir understands or knows what it actually feels like to experience hardship."

Sometimes Voter

- "I have heard this story from him a million times, and remembering your phone getting cut off once as a child doesn't tell me he ever suffered hardship for real"

Non Voter

[In response to question about Starmer's comments on knowing what it's like to experience hardship]

- "It changes nothing. If you have empathy you can put yourself in someone else's shoes. You don't have to have experienced something directly to understand it"
- "Starmer could have made his point by mentioning his experience and how he can relate, rather than say I can relate and Sunak is not capable. You don't need to bash the other person; focus on what you can do that is positive"

Usually Voter

- [In response to question about Starmer's comments on knowing what it's like to experience hardship] "I find him slightly more relatable however I'm not too sure about the taxing policy since that would also mean working classes would be paying a lot of more tax with the way things are it's already tough so this makes things harder which also makes me question him too"

Always Voter

- "Just because he's experienced hardship doesn't make him any more or less trustworthy (...) He was head of the DPP in a previous life (...) Very well paid position"
- "A trustworthy lawyer?"

3. Focus group summaries - held immediately after the leadership debate

Focus group 1 ('Non-voters' and 'Sometimes voters')

Most participants were frustrated with the format. They felt it went over each issue far too quickly, and that it encouraged the leader's to throw out soundbites, rather than get into the ideas. They felt it also meant both leaders were simply rebutting the other, but were never pushed to lay out their own ideas. They felt the presenter should have done more to prevent this.

The purpose of [the debate] wasn't to tell you about the issues. It was just to discredit the other one.

Some participants praised Starmer's character to some extent. One noted that he came across more empathetic at the beginning, citing Starmer's discussion about his mum being a nurse. The panellist explained how this showed Starmer connecting to the lady asking the questions and speaking about her issues. The participant said "He knows what to say in the right places".

None of the participants felt confident that either leader had a clear plan. There was particular doubt over Starmer's plan, with one participant asking "Does anyone actually know what Keir Starmer's plan is?", and many shook their heads in response.

"Conservatives definitely have more of a plan. National Service, trying to send immigrants on planes. Whether it's a good or bad thing, they definitely have more of a plan.... [Starmer] was saying 'we're going to smash the gangs', but obviously everyone wants to smash the gangs... so it seems like his solution was weak in response. It's easier to just say that, but once you get in power and start trying to do stuff like that, you'll realise it isn't as straightforward as 'we'll just smash the gangs'"

– Non-voter, London

Focus group 2 ('Always voters' and 'Usually voters, swing')

One 'Always Voter' explained that if someone was watching the debate for the first time, they felt it wouldn't make the best impression, and that it would have been good to have a slower, more substantive discussion about plans. Elsewhere, another panellist explained that while Starmer and Sunak did acknowledge challenges with the NHS, neither offered a convincing solution on the dispute with junior doctors.

An 'Always voter' spoke about how they did not like the PR/staged aspects of the debate but thought it was interesting to watch the leaders respond to audience questions.

There were mixed views on whether Starmer's emphasis on his background engendered trust. Some felt that it showed sympathy and empathy, whereas others felt that this stopped him from talking about concrete plans. A key moment for one voter was Starmer's commitment to 6,500 new teachers - this represented an emphasis on concrete, tangible promises that had been calculated before.