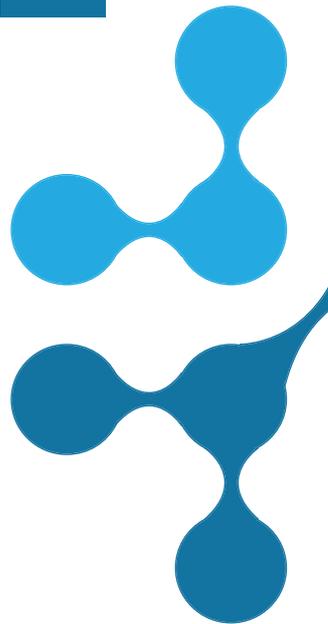


The state of health

Who won the health debate at this year's party conferences?



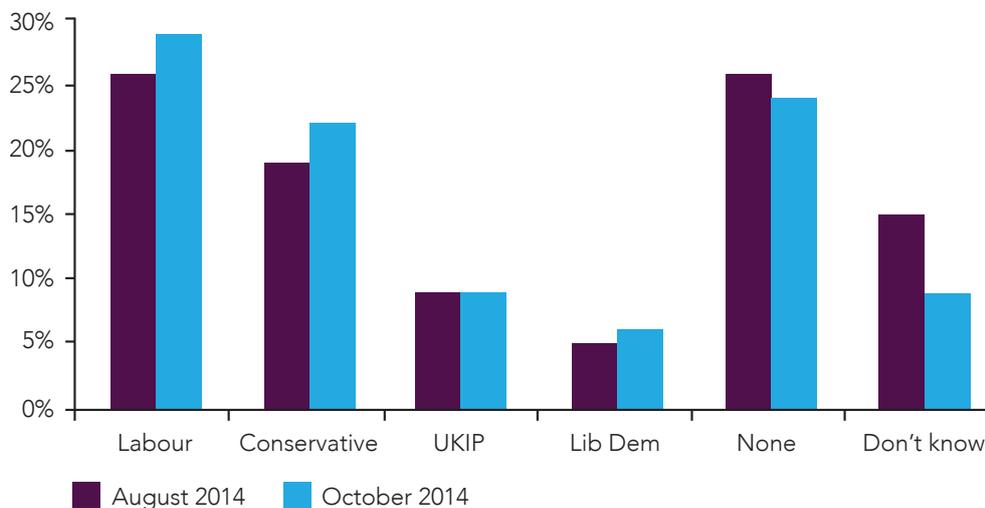
This year's party conferences marked the unofficial start of the election campaign and a chance for Labour, the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and UKIP to set out their stalls for May 2015. The NHS has consistently been one of the top three priorities for voters and a decisive issue for people walking to the polling stations. It was unsurprising, therefore, that the NHS was a centrepiece of the three leaders' speeches in Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow this year. But what impact has this had on the public's trust over their handling of the NHS and what did the public hear about what they had to say?

Incisive Health is undertaking exclusive polling on public attitudes towards the NHS, in partnership with ComRes. This briefing sets out the state of health and examines which of the four parties won the NHS debate at this year's party conferences.

Which party is trusted on health?

The challenge for the two governing parties leading into this year's conference season was to neutralise Labour's attack lines and convince the significant number of people who are undecided, or do not trust any party, that the NHS is 'safe in their hands'.

Which party, if any, do you trust to manage the NHS?



Undecided voters are starting to make up their mind

(Online fieldwork: 27-28 August 2014 and 10-12 October 2014).



Labour and the Conservatives had a small conference bounce in public trust on management of the NHS. Labour, despite a relatively 'flat' conference, improved from 26% to 29% on the public trusting them to manage the NHS. The Conservatives picked up three points while the Liberal Democrats gained one point (although they are still lagging behind UKIP).

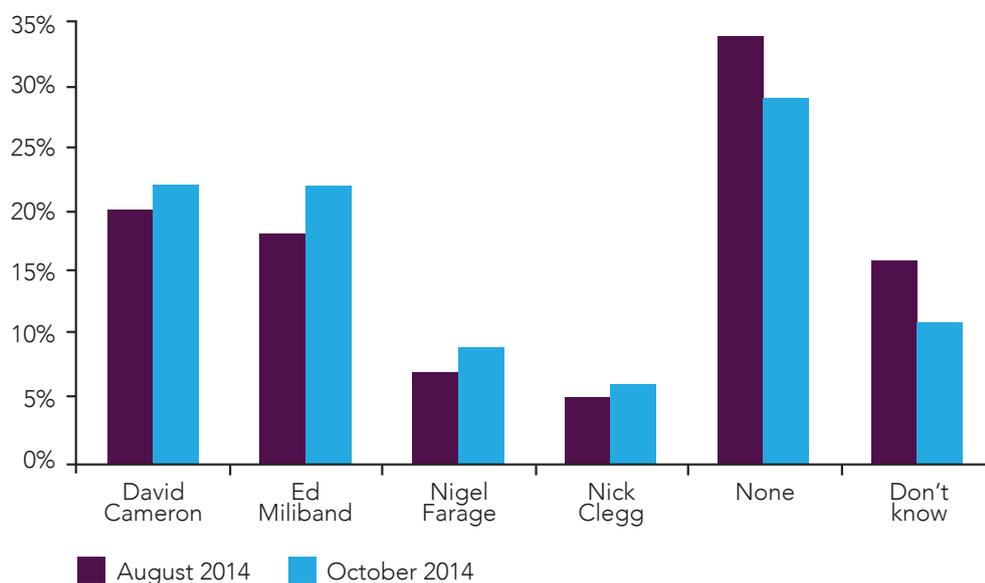
The poll suggests that people's minds are increasingly made up about the political parties. However, none of them can afford to be complacent. The 'don't knows' and those who say they trust no party still make up a third of people (34%) and will be a deciding factor on who comes out on top next May.

Which leader is trusted on health?

If health is a priority for voters, then it needs to be a priority for the party leaders too. David Cameron successfully neutralised Labour's lead on health while in opposition by seizing the agenda from his shadow cabinet and effectively articulating his personal commitment toward the NHS. Ed Miliband has yet to do the same and, consequently, has lagged behind his party over public trust in managing the NHS.

October's poll shows that Miliband has closed the gap over Cameron on the NHS. Ed Miliband will be comforted by the results following a speech that was overshadowed more by what he forgot to say than what he did say. However, people who 'don't know' who to trust, or trust none of the party leaders, still make up a significant (40%) proportion of the electorate.

Which party leader, if any, do you trust to manage the NHS?



(Online fieldwork: 27-28 August 2014 and 10-12 October 2014)



Miliband has neutralised Cameron's lead on the NHS

So, did the public hear what the parties had to say on health?

Avoiding any major national or international incidents, for one week a year political parties get the news cycle to themselves at their annual conference. Party strategists know they must make the most of this by announcing policies that will grab the attention of lobby journalists, resonate with people outside of the conference halls and, in the case of this year, build momentum going into the General Election. Health was the centrepiece of this year's announcements, but did the public hear what they were and know who said them?

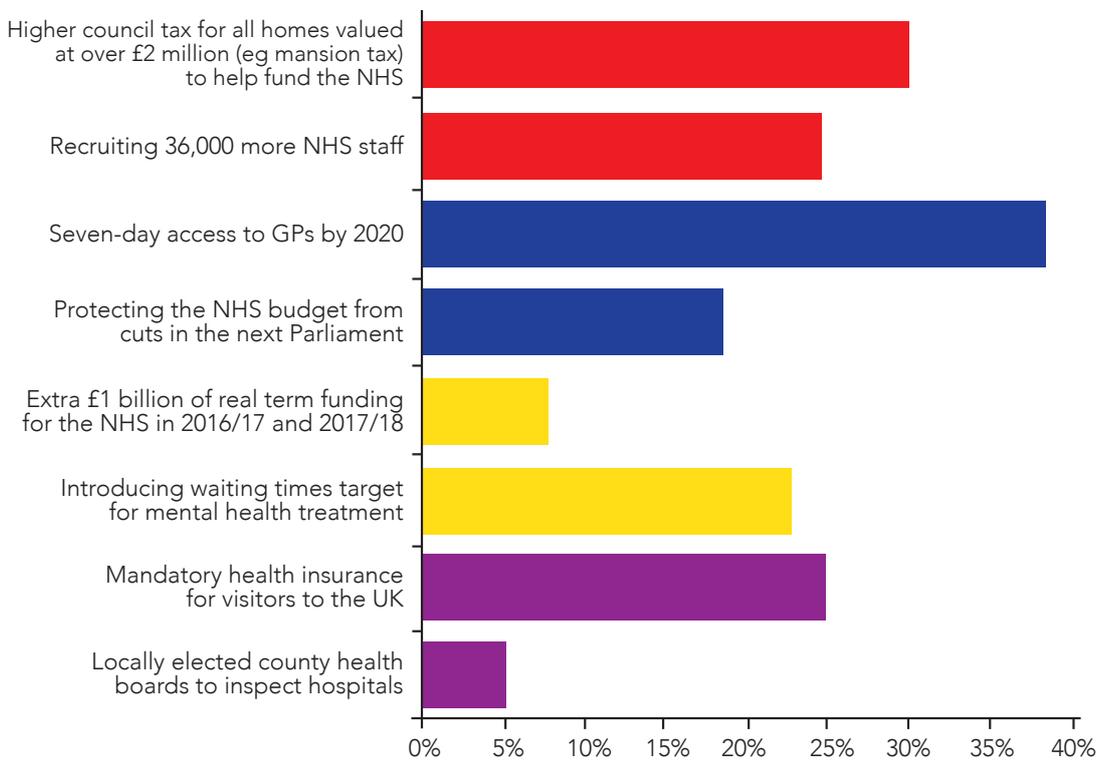
The Conservatives' GP access announcement received the most cut-through, with over a third of people (37%) correctly identifying that this policy was announced at their autumn conference. 29% of people identified Labour's announcement to increase spending on the NHS through a 'mansion tax'. One in four (25%) people identified the clampdown on 'health tourism' as a UKIP policy, slightly overtaking Nick Clegg's announcement to introduce waiting time targets for mental health treatment.

However, across all of the policies, a greater proportion of people could not identify which party announced them than could – a missed opportunity to change the minds of people who remain undecided. Over the coming months the parties will need to play to their strengths on the NHS and present ideas on issues the electorate care about. Failing to do so could cost them at this coming election.



People could not identify which party announced which policy

Public recognition of party health announcements



(Online fieldwork: 10-12 October 2014)

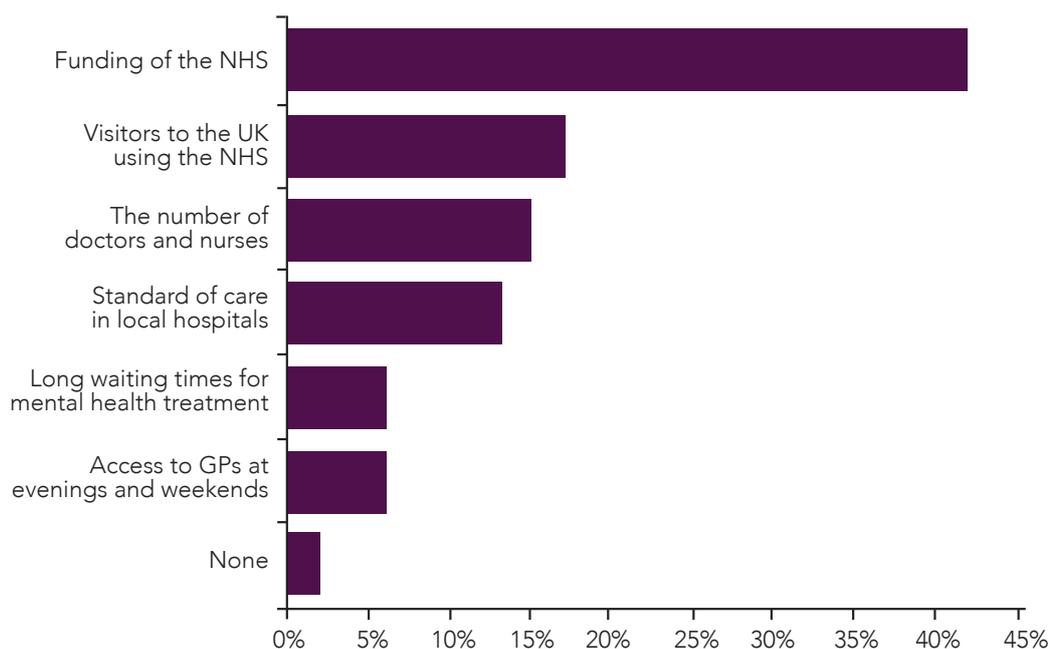
Does the public believe that the parties are addressing the most important health issues?

The success of a political announcement depends upon the public believing that it addresses an important issue of concern to them. We tested the importance that the public placed on different issues addressed by the parties during the conference season. Unsurprisingly, two fifths (42%) of people believe funding of the NHS to be the most important challenge facing the NHS today. Interestingly, people living in England, where the NHS budget has been protected, are less likely to name funding of the NHS as the most significant challenge facing the NHS compared with people living in Wales, where the budget has not been ring-fenced (41% versus 51%).

42% of people believe funding of the NHS to be the most important challenge facing the NHS today.



Which is the 'first most important challenge' facing the NHS today?



(Online fieldwork: 10-12 October 2014)

Cracking down on 'health tourism' was one of the (few) mentions health got at UKIP's conference in Doncaster and is what 17% of the public perceive to be the biggest challenge facing the NHS. It is not surprising that those who trust UKIP most to manage the NHS over the other three parties are consistently more likely to identify health tourism as a major issue. Despite both Labour and the Conservatives pushing hard on GP access over the past six months, only 6% of the public believe it to be the most important challenge for the health system.



Funding of the NHS



Visitors to the UK using the NHS



Not enough doctors and nurses

NOTE ON POLLING

ComRes interviewed 2,067 GB adults online between 10 and 12 October 2014. Some of the data have been compared with the findings from the online survey of 2,006 GP adults between 27 and 28 August 2014. Data were weighted to be representative of all GB adults aged 18+. ComRes is a member of the British polling council and abides by its rules. Full data tables are available on the ComRes website. Our polling asked the following questions:

- "Which party, if any, do you trust most to manage the NHS?"
- "Which party leader, if any, do you trust most to manage the NHS?"
- "Which of the following, if any, do you think are the most important challenges facing the NHS today?" [Options: The number of doctors and nurses; access to GPs at evenings and weekends; long waiting times for mental health treatment; funding of the NHS; visitors to the UK using the NHS; standards of care in local hospitals; none]
- "Which of the following, if any, do you think are the most important policies regarding the NHS?" [Options: Seven-day access to GPs by 2020; recruiting 36,000 more NHS staff; a higher council tax for all homes valued over £2 million (eg mansion tax) to help fund the NHS; locally elected county health boards to inspect hospitals; mandatory health insurance for visitors to the UK; protecting the NHS budget from cuts in the next Parliament; introducing waiting time targets for mental health treatment; extra £1 billion of real term funding for NHS in 2016/17 and 2017/18; none of these]
- "To the best of your knowledge, at the autumn 2014 political party conferences, which party announced each of the following policies?" [Options: same as above (excluding none of these) and don't know]