

The state of health

How the NHS will shape political debate in the run-up to the next General Election

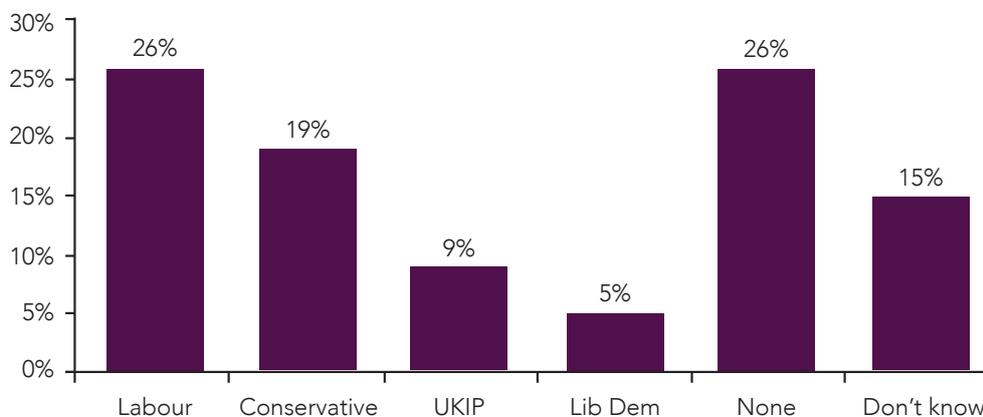
The 2014 party conference season will see each party fire the starting gun for their pre-election campaign. Polling shows that the NHS (42%) is one of the top three priorities of the electorate in marginal constituencies,¹ along with keeping down the cost of everyday items (47%) and immigration (44%). Therefore health will not be an issue that the political parties can avoid; in order to achieve electoral success, they will need to convince voters of the appeal of their policies on the NHS – and that they can be trusted to deliver them.

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 the questions that politicians will need to answer between now and May.

Which party is trusted on health?

When it comes to trust on the NHS, Labour has a historic advantage and this has not changed. During the last Parliament the Conservatives may have managed to neutralise health as a vote winner for Labour, but they never made a breakthrough. A combination of noisy and messy reforms, a slow down in health spending and the inevitable events that beset any government, has seen the historic order of things reasserted.

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



(Online fieldwork: 27-28 August 2014). Bases: Scotland (195); England (1,698); Wales (113)

Leadership for Labour on the NHS should not be confused with overwhelming support. As many people state they trust no party on the NHS as state that they trust Labour. Two fifths (41%) of the public either say they don't know who they trust or that they trust no party. In the run-up to May 2015, health is still very much up for grabs.

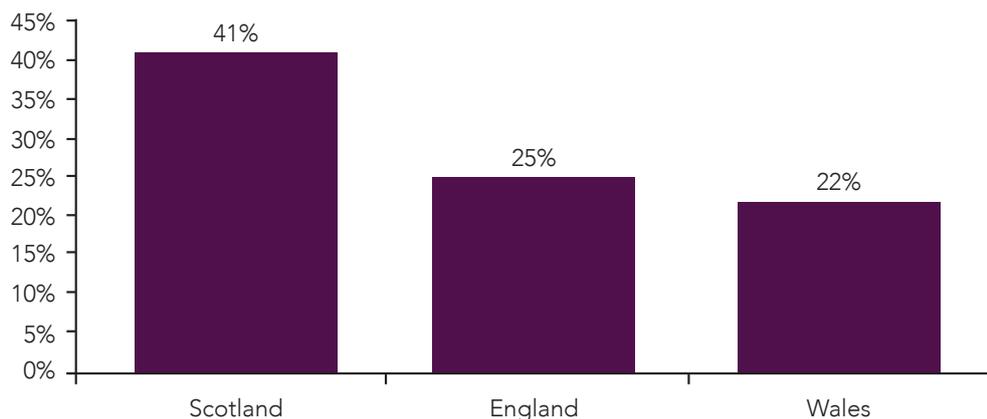


Labour retains its historic advantage on the NHS

For the Liberal Democrats, there is much ground to be made up. An example of the challenge they face is that they currently lag behind UKIP – not a party known to place much emphasis on its health policy – on trust to manage the NHS.

In the last few weeks of the Scottish referendum campaign, health received increasing prominence as an issue, with the 'Yes' campaign seeking to establish fears over NHS 'privatisation' as a key reason to vote for independence and 'No' arguing that separation would mean cuts. What is striking is that the Scottish public are by far the most disillusioned with the political choices available to them on health. Two in five say they do not trust any political party to manage the NHS.

Percentage of voters trusting no party to manage the NHS by country



(Online fieldwork: 27-28 August 2014). Bases: Scotland (195); England (1,698); Wales (113)

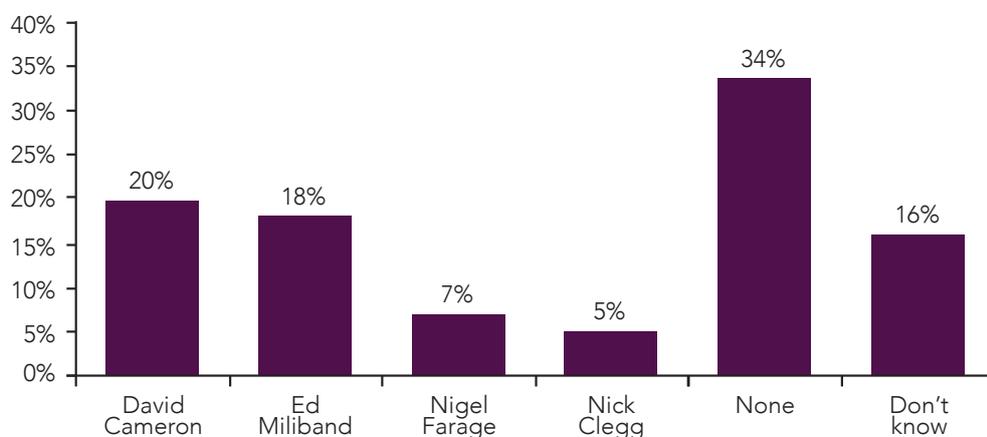


Two in five Scots do not trust any political party to manage the NHS

Which leader is trusted on health?

If Labour's lead on health remains substantial, then the situation is rather different when it comes to its leader. Whereas trust in David Cameron to manage the NHS is broadly the same as that in his party (20% compared to 19%), Ed Miliband is significantly outperformed by Labour as a whole (18% compared to 26%).

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



(Online fieldwork: 27-28 August 2014)



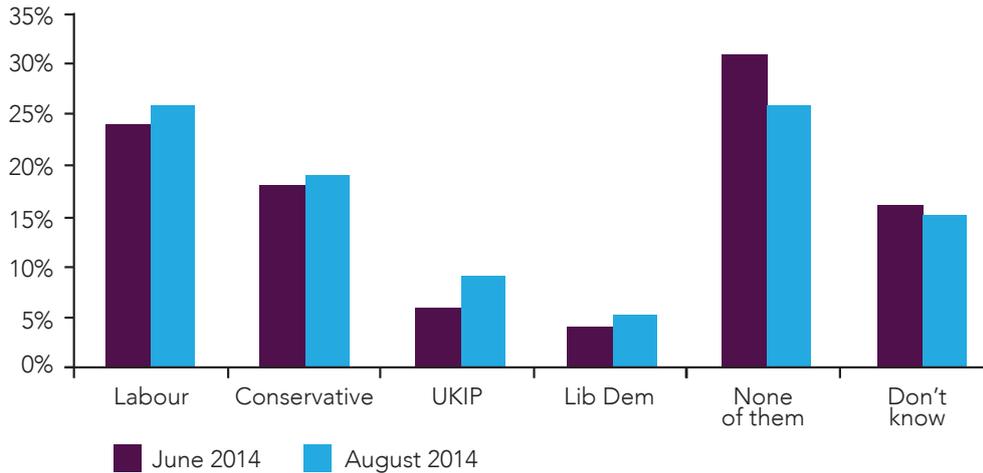
David Cameron outperforms Ed Miliband on trust to manage the NHS

Aside from Prime Minister's Questions, where health has been a focus for the Labour leader, Ed Miliband has – to date – not adopted a high profile on NHS issues, instead leaving health to Andy Burnham and his Shadow Health team. This is in contrast to the profile that he has sought on issues such as cost of living.

Has any party made progress over the summer?

Despite both the Conservatives and Labour setting out summer 'campaigns' on the NHS (Labour through 'The Choice' and the Conservatives through a blizzard of announcements on issues such as cancer, hospital car parking and hospital food), neither side has succeeded in making a significant breakthrough with the public. All the parties have seen modest improvements in trust on the NHS. A similar pattern is seen in trust in party leaders.

Change over the summer in which party, if any, do you trust most to manage the NHS?



(Online fieldwork: 25-26 June 2014 and 27-28 August 2014)

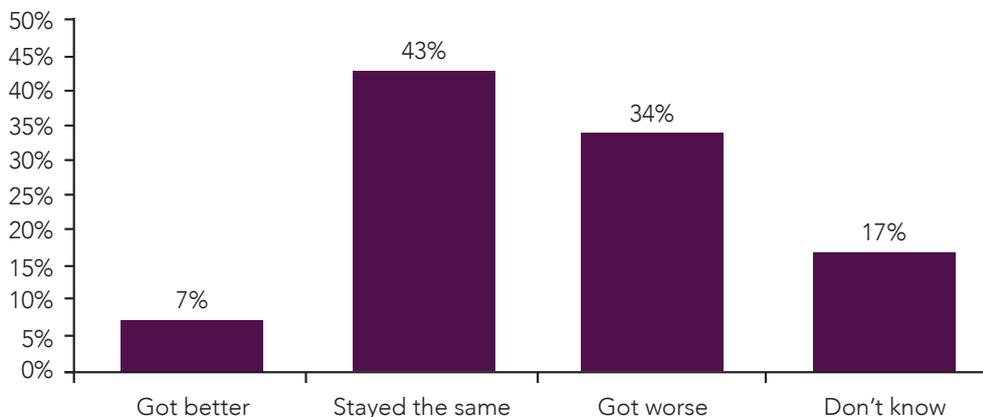


No party has made a breakthrough over the summer

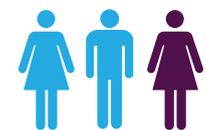
Does the public think the NHS has got better or worse?

A third (34%) of the public feel that standards of patient care in the NHS have got worse over the past year, compared to only 7% who say standards have improved. This is perhaps unsurprising given the focus that the Secretary of State for Health himself has placed on exposing quality failures.

Standards of patient care in the NHS



(Online fieldwork: 27-28 August 2014)

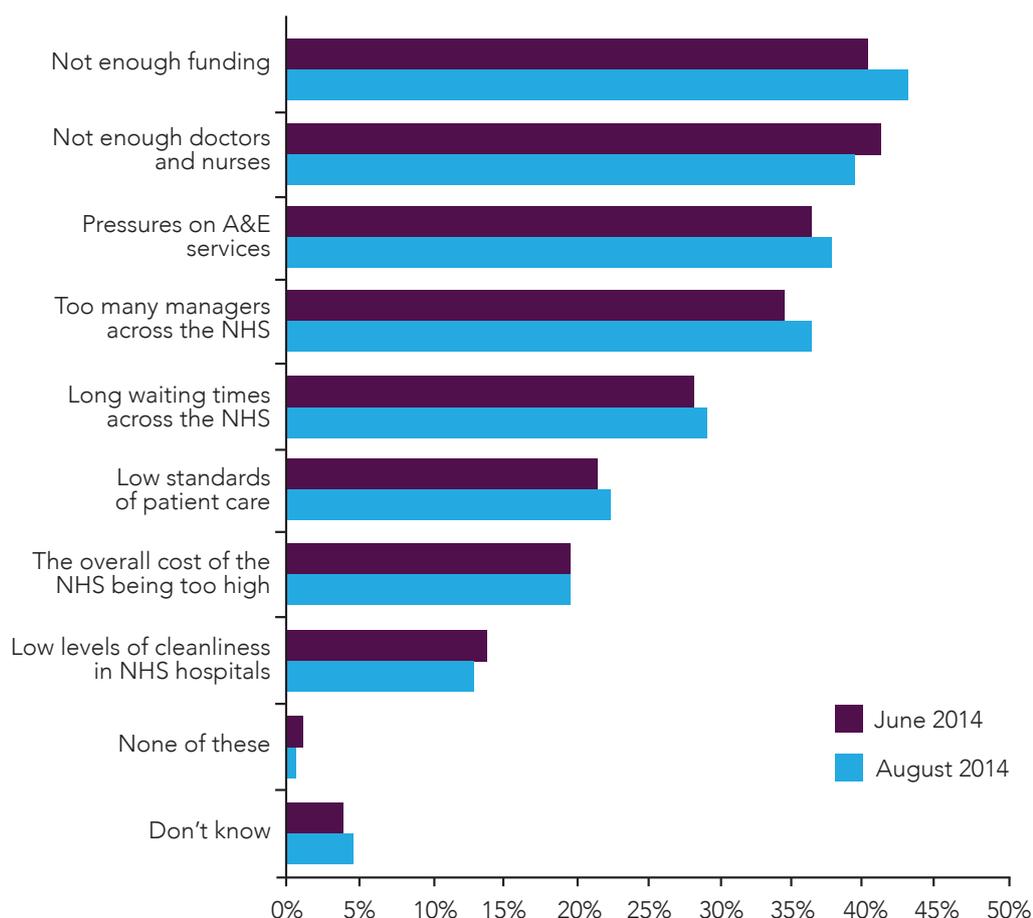


A third of the public feel that standards have got worse over the past year

Which issues matter to the public?

In terms of issues that may appeal to voters, the British public identify four main challenges facing the NHS: not enough funding; not enough doctors and nurses; pressure on A&E services; and too many managers across the NHS. Although perceptions of these challenges have remained broadly stable since June 2014, it is interesting to note that not enough funding has moved up from second to first place.

Which of the following do you think are the most important challenges facing the NHS today?



(Online fieldwork: 25-26 June 2014 and 27-28 August 2014)

Adults over the age of 65 have different perceptions of the NHS, when compared to the population as a whole. They are *more likely* to think that not enough doctors and nurses (49% against an average of 42%); pressures on A&E services (52% against 40%); and too many managers across the NHS (62% against 39%) are the most important challenges. Conversely, this age group is the *least likely* to identify the challenge most widely perceived by the public as a whole – not enough funding (31% against 46%).

Those who trust Labour most to manage the NHS are consistently more likely than those who trust the Conservatives or UKIP to think that not enough funding is a key challenge facing the NHS today (56% of those who trust Labour most select this in their top three, compared with 41% of those who trust UKIP and 28% of those who trust the Conservatives most).

In relation to funding, the Guardian recently reported our finding that half (49%) of the British public now say they are willing to pay at least 1p extra in income tax to support the NHS – a figure which rises to 60% amongst only those who express an opinion.^{2,3} It remains to be seen whether any of the parties will take on this challenge.



Not enough funding



Not enough doctors and nurses



Pressures on A&E services



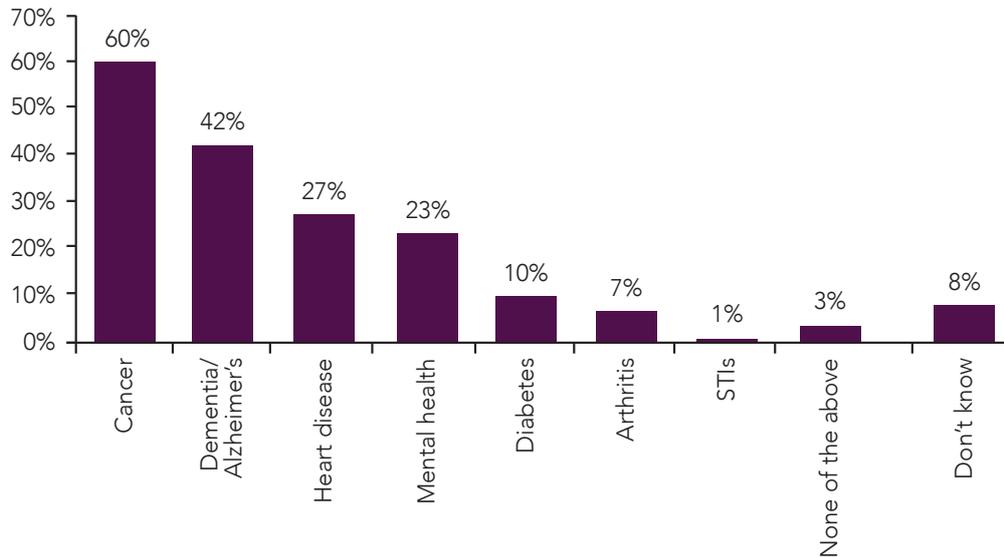
Too many managers across the NHS



49% of the British public are willing to pay at least 1p extra in income tax to support the NHS

When asked to consider how they might allocate an additional notional amount (in this case £100 million) of NHS resources, the public clearly prioritises cancer (60%) over other conditions. Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease is the next most prioritised (42%), followed by heart diseases (27%) and mental health (23%).

If the NHS had £100 million extra to spend a year, which two, if any, of the following health conditions should it prioritise giving funding to?



(Online fieldwork: 23-24 July 2014)

There will always be a debate on whether public perceptions about which diseases should be prioritised should be reflected in policy. However, these findings do provide a guide as to the areas of policy that may resonate the most with voters.



Cancer and dementia are the diseases which resonate most with voters

**What does the state of health mean for the parties?
And what can they do about it?**



Last chance for Ed to show his NHS credentials

Mike Birtwistle

The reason why Labour strategists want to make the NHS the centrepiece of their election campaign is obvious. The Party retains its historic lead on the NHS, an issue always near the top of voters' priorities and one whose salience tends to peak near elections.

Yet the NHS is not a straightforward win for Labour. Our exclusive polling shows that as many people say they trust no party on the NHS as say they trust Labour. Most worryingly for Ed Miliband, the public's trust in him personally to manage the NHS lags some way behind trust in his party. Indeed trust in Miliband is lower than trust in David Cameron.

This is worrying for party strategists. Labour may be leading in the polls, but the margin is nowhere near as wide as they would like. Events in Scotland show that Labour – and its leader – continues to struggle to convince people even in its heartland. Ed does not yet look prime ministerial. Trust, even on core issues, remains a weakness.



Trust in Miliband on the NHS is lower than trust in Cameron

Labour's conference provides a platform to demonstrate his commitment to the NHS and the personal priority he would place on improving it. If he does this correctly, he can use the issue to shore up wider public trust in him as a leader. If Labour is to put health at the heart of the election battle, then Ed will need to lead the charge.

The task is pressing and it is not one that can be devolved to his health team in the way that other policies have. Nor is it a mission that can be accomplished simply by railing at the Conservatives. Instead he needs to set out in personal terms what he would change and how it would benefit the public; abstract discussions about privatisation alone will not cut it; those who are opposed to the Health and Social Care Act are (by and large) in Labour's camp already. He must not confuse applause lines in the conference hall with cut-through in the country.

Now is not the time to speak wonk. Announcements need to mean something to ordinary people. Think postcode lotteries, not predistribution. For a party that has been focused on health systems and processes, this will be a shift from Labour's recent comfort zone.

Funding for the NHS will be a dominant theme on the fringe. On this, Ed will be receiving two strong but opposing sets of advice. Both sides of the argument already appear to be making their case through the media – hardly a helpful sign of party discipline. Although it may have lost the element of surprise that is so critical to successful party conference announcements, promising a tax rise would demonstrate his personal commitment to the NHS in a manner that few other policies could match; if you are going to fight a bruising battle on tax, then you may as well fight it on your territory. Yet conventional wisdom – seared into Labour's psyche since 1992 – says that the Party never wins elections by talking about tax rises.

The advice he takes on tax will of course go a long way to defining the battle lines for the next election. However, this dilemma cannot be used as an excuse for Miliband to delay setting out his stall on health. Labour's week in Manchester provides perhaps his last opportunity to do just that.

Will the Conservatives pick the right fight?

 **Bill Morgan**

For parties in Government, conference announcements that actually make a difference to our daily lives have three characteristics. First, they are evidence-based – meaning, broadly speaking, that some problem has been identified which is susceptible to policy intervention. Second, they are capable of being implemented – meaning that a decent chunk of the civil service stands ready to adopt them. Third, they are funded.

An announcement on the NHS of this type is unlikely to characterise the Conservative Party conference this year. For a start, party conference announcements tend to come from the locker of evidence-free policies which are designed to deliver votes rather than change. And this in turn means that they are received by the NHS with a 'not invented here' mindset, impeding their implementation. But the most important reason is that there is no money this year – or at least, no money of the recurrent kind needed to make a policy stick.

There will, of course, be some kind of an announcement. Though it is unquestionable that the Conservatives are now actively pursuing a policy of minimising the 'salience' of NHS issues, there is a difference between attempting to relegate the importance of a particular electoral battleground and vacating it entirely. Multiple polls show that the NHS continues to be important to voters' hearts – as it always has – and our exclusive polling shows that, though Labour may have a lead on the NHS, Ed Miliband enjoys no such lead over David Cameron. There is, particularly amongst the party leaders, plenty to fight for.

”

Ed must not confuse applause lines in the conference hall with cut through in the country



”

An NHS conference announcement will indicate the ground on which the Conservatives want to take the fight to Labour

Without much money to play with, though, we can be sure that the impact of an NHS conference announcement will be limited. Its usefulness will be in indicating where the Conservatives want to take the fight to Labour. An announcement on cancer would demonstrate a desire to continue to take comfort in the Cancer Drugs Fund. Further announcements on health tourism or hospital inspections may be designed to please lobby journalists. An announcement on access, given the NHS's performance over the summer, would be brave.

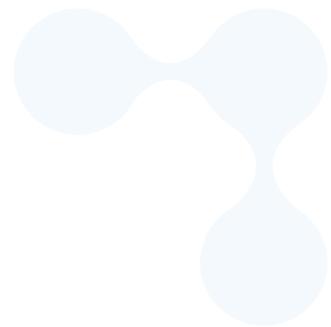
Predicting the exact content of a conference announcement is a mug's game; advising from afar on what it should be is far easier. My own recommendation springs from a belief that if a tracker poll on the NHS had existed over a sufficient period of time – and its historic absence is one of the reasons why Incisive Health now commissions its own – then I am confident that the vast majority of the public would at once be fearful of the NHS being privatised, and critical of its inefficiency. And they would trust Labour with avoiding the first – and the Conservatives with addressing the second.

Regardless of whether this assessment of the parties' aptitudes is true – or even whether the public's worries are justified – I suspect that just as Labour's charges of 'privatisation' stick with the electorate, Conservative charges of 'Labour waste' do the same. And, here, official statistics – of hotly-debated accuracy, admittedly – back the Conservatives in their efforts on the doorstep. NHS managers are down. NHS productivity is up.

Which is why I would be arguing for a party conference announcement which both points to this track record and allows the Conservative Party to showcase its anti-waste credentials. Promises of procurement reviews, a 'bonfire of the quangos' and further cuts in administration costs are all things which could be (re?)announced at Conference at little cost and perhaps littler impact – but which would help to define the parameters of the battle over the NHS over the coming months. If there is to be a fight on the NHS, after all – and our poll shows that there will – then the Conservative Party needs to stand on the ground where the electorate has the most sympathy with it.

”

The Conservative Party needs to stand on the ground where the electorate has the most sympathy with it



Are we with Nick on health?

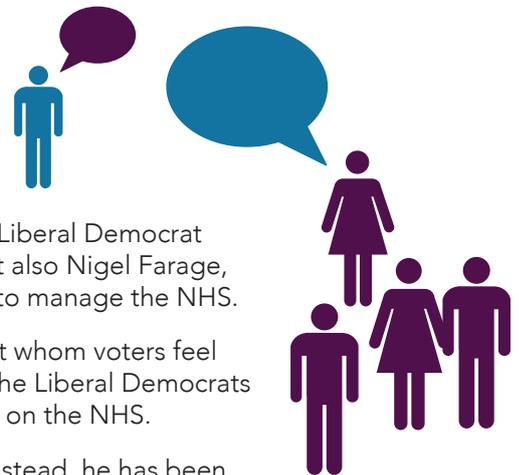
 Sarah Winstone

Our polling makes for dismal – but not unsurprising – reading for the Liberal Democrat leader. Nick Clegg trails not only David Cameron and Ed Miliband but also Nigel Farage, with just 5% of respondents choosing him as the party leader trusted to manage the NHS.

This is consistent with wider national polling on the party leader about whom voters feel most positive (or rather, least negative). But it is also symptomatic of the Liberal Democrats broadly – and their leader specifically – lacking a compelling narrative on the NHS.

Nick Clegg has never made health a personal campaigning priority. Instead, he has been content to leave health to the guardianship of two Ministers of Care and Support who served since 2010: Norman Lamb and his predecessor Paul Burstow. Both walked the fine line as Lib Dem ministers in a Conservative-controlled department, seeking ways to carve out territory without rocking the boat too much (with varying degrees of success). Both brought expertise to their health brief, each having served previously as shadow health secretary. And both enjoyed considerable goodwill from the health community – particularly Burstow, who described the role as his 'dream job' (and who continues to be a thorn in the side on social care issues).

But, given the salience of health as an election issue, Clegg has decisions to make. Firstly, is health something that Liberal Democrat voters care about? And, if so, should he insert himself into the story?



”

Nick Clegg has never made health a personal campaigning priority

The party will need to find clear routes to get cut-through. It will be hard to present them-selves as curbing the worst excesses of Conservative-driven structural healthcare reform.

Rather, they are likely to go back to the core Lib Dem themes, present in the recently published 'pre-manifesto'. Integration and localism – with a “legal obligation” to pool resources for health and social care. Championing the disadvantaged – with the commitment to a Carers Bonus and the introduction of Patient Premiums for GPs working in disadvantaged areas. Fairness and ‘parity of esteem’ – with mental health being one of the few areas where Nick Clegg has been vocal on health. They have also committed (responding to findings from earlier Incisive Health polling) to “undertake a thorough review of NHS costs and funding to ensure long-term stability for the NHS”.

Meanwhile, there is the nagging question of how to reclaim territory from UKIP and the other minor parties. UKIP seems less likely to go as hard on health as immigration or Europe, but has clear calls on curbing health tourism and extending GP opening hours. Meanwhile the NHA Party will be fielding candidates in high profile and marginal seats, including disability rights campaigner Naveen Judah in Nick Clegg’s Sheffield Hallam constituency.

Policy papers on public services (including the NHS) and the ageing society will put health in the spotlight at Lib Dem conference. If there is one advantage for Clegg, it’s that for once his conference is last of the three and he can see the reaction to the other parties’ calls. Usually Lib Dem conference enjoys the last blast of summer sun. This year, there may be a distinctly icy chill in the air.



There is a nagging question of how to reclaim territory from UKIP and the other minor parties

NOTE ON POLLING

ComRes interviewed 2,006 GB adults online between 27 and 28 August 2014. Some data are compared with the findings from the online survey of 2,021 GB adults between 25 and 26 June 2014. Additional data from the online survey of 2,070 GB adults between 23 and 24 July 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 of the following do you think are the most important challenges facing the NHS today?” [Options: Not enough funding, not enough doctors and nurses, pressures on A&E services, too many managers across the NHS, long waiting times across the NHS, low standards of patient care, the overall cost of the NHS being too high, low levels of cleanliness in NHS hospitals, none of these, don’t know]
- “Over the last 12 months, would you say that standards of patient care in the NHS have got better, stayed the same or got worse?”
- “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?”
- “If the NHS had £100 million extra to spend next year, which two, if any, of the following health conditions should it prioritise giving funding to?”

REFERENCES

- 1 ComRes poll for Incisive Health, 27-28 August 2014
- 2 Incisive Health, *Tax and Health: Are politicians now out of step with public opinion?*, August 2014
- 3 Guardian, *Half of voters happy to pay more tax to fund NHS – poll: Public’s willingness to pay extra tax to help the NHS reaches highest level in over a decade*, August 2014

