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Voters' Verdict on Health: What do Conservative voters think about the role of government and businesses in shaping the nation's health?

This briefing looks at the views of the Conservative voter coalition on the role of government and businesses in shaping and improving the nation's health, particularly focussing on preventing poor health caused by tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy diets. This includes the Conservatives' current voter base and those they have been losing since the 2024 general election.

Ten 75-minute online focus groups were held between 1 and 10 June 2026 with different voter groups. Groups were defined by current voting intention and voting history. This briefing draws on the groups held with the Conservatives' key voter groups: core Conservative voters who voted Conservative in 2024 and intend to again (Core Conservative), Conservative-Reform switchers (Reform switchers) and Conservative-Lib Dem switchers (Lib Dem switchers). The focus groups were supplemented with a short online survey on key issues discussed by the groups.

Summary

Interventions to improve people's health command more support across the Conservative electoral coalition than is often assumed. Support extends across core Conservative voters and both of the groups the party has been losing since 2024, including Conservative voters who are now open to voting Reform. Conservative voters place more weight on personal responsibility than Labour voters, but they do not see health as a purely individual matter. They think the cost of living, poverty, working patterns, unhealthy food environments and commercial marketing all shape health outcomes, and that most people know what is healthy but are making choices within difficult economic circumstances.

Conservative voters support government action to help people live healthier lives, provided it is practical, proportionate and fair. Crucial to support for specific policies is confidence that they will work in practice, will not unfairly burden ordinary households and will preserve adult choice where possible. Support is strongest for action that protects children and takes pressure off the NHS. Conservative voters are familiar with the idea of a 'nanny state', but concern about it proved a much smaller factor in their support for policies than the effectiveness and fairness of the measures themselves.

There is consensus across the coalition that large corporations in the food, alcohol and tobacco industries play a significant and largely negative role in shaping the nation's health, putting profit ahead of health considerations. Conservative voters do not want these companies influencing government decision-making on health policy, and they are receptive to arguments that action to improve health means standing up to powerful corporations rather than expanding the state.

When asked if they are concerned about the impact of industries on children's health, 57% are concerned about the tobacco industry (national average of 63%), 62% the alcohol industry (national average of 58%) and 62% the food industry (national average 65%).

57% of Conservative voters want to see similar rules that limit the tobacco industry's contact with government, applied to alcohol and unhealthy food and drink companies (national average of 58%).

Views of Conservative voters

1. **Conservative voters see preventing ill health as a keyway of protecting the NHS from pressure**

Across the Conservative coalition, voters said prevention is important but not visible enough in public debate about healthcare. Lib Dem switchers were particularly explicit about prevention being the "missing middle" between everyday life and acute healthcare services. Framing messages around preventing ill health as a way of improving people's everyday lives and protecting the NHS is likely to connect with Conservative voters.

> ***"If they were supported better, there wouldn't be so much strain on the NHS. So if you had the steps in to begin with, they wouldn't be going to hospitals."*** **– Female, 30s, South Cambridgeshire, Lib Dem switcher**

> ***"I don't think anywhere near enough is done to prevent some of the health disasters that we've had."*** **– Male, 30s, Glasgow South West, Core Conservative**

2. **Conservative voters believe in personal responsibility, but see people's choices as shaped by the cost of living and the environment around them**

Conservative voters prioritise personal responsibility more than Labour voters, maintaining that adults must make informed choices and exercise self-discipline. But they think circumstances such as the cost of living, work patterns, family life and education fundamentally shape those choices. Individual agency and structural constraints are linked: the health risks are well known, yet cost and convenience often determine behaviour.

> ***"People on lower incomes, people who live in socially, economically deprived areas tend to live less healthy lifestyles and make poor choices around things like drugs, alcohol, smoking, and ready meals… Whereas in areas that are slightly more affluent, you'll find people who are better educated and people who live healthier lifestyles. So it is down to income. It's down to poverty."*** **– Male, 40s, North East Hampshire, Core Conservative**

> ***"There's enough information out there for people to make their own decisions on stuff."*** **– Male, 40s, South Cambridgeshire, Lib Dem switcher**

Conservative voters think poor health reflects practical constraints more than a lack of general understanding amongst the public of what is and isn't healthy. People generally know what is healthy and what is not, even if education could be improved, but healthier options are often more expensive. Voters said long working hours push people towards convenient, unhealthy food, while children's activities that encourage healthier lifestyles are becoming unaffordable. Conservative voters rejected the idea that unhealthy behaviour simply reflects poor decision-making, arguing instead that many people are making choices within difficult economic circumstances.

> ***"The poorer people are, the poorer their health choices tend to be… It feels almost like a luxury to be thinking about making healthy food choices."*** **– Male, 30s, Glasgow South West, Core Conservative**

> ***"Obviously there's an issue with cost of living. So obviously a lot of people will go towards cheaper food stuff, which tends to be less healthy."*** **– Male, 40s, South Cambridgeshire, Lib Dem switcher**

> ***"It's survival mode. They're living on a day-to-day basis and it's whatever the food bank's got to offer. It's not always the healthiest choice."*** **– Female, 30s, Glasgow South West, Core Conservative**

Conservative voters see health and economic outcomes as closely linked and want a balanced approach to the trade-off between growth and health. They think the current economic environment makes it difficult for the government to fully prioritise health over growth.

> ***"I think those decisions are easier to make whenever we're doing well economically. So in terms of putting restrictive policies and things like that in place for the good of the public health, it's a bit easier for people to get behind whenever there feels like there's a surplus and things are going well."*** **– Male, 30s, Glasgow South West, Core Conservative**

3. Conservative voters distrust large corporations to put people's health before profit

There is wide distrust of large food, alcohol and tobacco companies across the Conservative coalition. Voters consistently think these businesses prioritise profit over health, comply with regulations only when required, exert a negative influence over government, shape consumer behaviour through advertising and have little incentive to improve health outcomes voluntarily. Large corporations were seen as fundamentally different from smaller businesses because of their ability to dominate advertising, supermarket shelf space, sponsorship and social media.

Conservative voters described a commercial environment that works against healthy choices: big brands dominating supermarket promotions and shelf space, fast food available around the clock through delivery apps, products designed to be eaten in quantity, and marketing that reaches children through social media, streaming and mobile phones as much as through television. Big multinational companies were seen very differently from small local businesses, because their marketing budgets give them the power to shape the tastes and habits of a whole generation.

> ***"Well, obviously the larger companies have got massive advertising, marketing budgets...the influence that they're able to have from that aspect's obviously much, much bigger than the small little local companies can have, I think particularly in terms of shaping a full generations tastes and habits."*** **– Male, 30s, Glasgow South West, Core Conservative**

> ***"It's the mass advertising. It's big business. So TV is just one forum, but YouTube, the adverts on there, Spotify, the adverts on there and your mobile phone, most kids have mobile phones. So it's pumped in so many directions"*** **– Male, 30s, Thurrock, Reform switcher**

> ***"The small companies, their advertising doesn't really reach the surface because it's covered by all the big companies...the big companies will just swallow up all the ad space and probably reach all of our social media algorithms"*** **– Male, 40s, South Cambridgeshire, Lib Dem switcher**

Reform switchers were the most suspicious of lobbying and of powerful institutions influencing government behind the scenes. These voters are receptive to arguments that action to improve health is about standing up to powerful corporations rather than expanding the state.

> ***"I think lobbyists for big corporations, they absolutely should not be able to influence it, but obviously they pay enough money through backhanded deals that they get listened to."*** **– Male, 30s, Thurrock, Reform switcher**

> ***"Their number one obligation is their shareholders and profitability… Our health isn't a priority to those organisations. Profitability is a priority."*** **– Male, 40s, North East Hampshire, Core Conservative**

Given these views, Conservative voters do not want businesses in the food, alcohol and tobacco industries influencing government policymaking on health. Voters assumed corporate influence over government was already happening, through lobbying and political donations, and expressed little confidence that these businesses could contribute to policymaking in good faith. A minority thought retailers and manufacturers hold useful data and should have some input, but the prevailing view was that those with a financial interest in the outcome should not be at the table.

> ***"A lot of those companies and they have industry bodies that represent those companies, they lobby governments, they lobby governments to affect change and legislation, to affect taxation...the food industry and the drinks industry and smoking industry always pushes back and fights that."*** **– Male, 40s, North East Hampshire, Core Conservative**

> ***"They donate the money to support the government so that once they're in the power, it will help them to bend the rules to make the rules."*** **– Male, 20s, Glasgow South West, Core Conservative**

Instead, Conservative voters want decisions on health to be informed by evidence and expertise. NHS professionals, experts, nutritionists, charities and food standards organisations are the most trusted voices, and voters were clear that advice should come from organisations without financial links to industry. Conservative voters were sceptical of messages coming from politicians. Reform switchers showed particular enthusiasm for trusted, independent public-facing communicators such as Jamie Oliver, Joe Wicks and Michael Mosley, who were seen as more persuasive than politicians. Framing that leans on the voices of trusted independent communicators, experts and frontline professionals is more likely to connect with Conservative voters.

> ***"I don't think any corporate companies should be doing it. It should have independent bodies, really, and medical professionals."*** **– Male, 60s, North East Hampshire, Core Conservative**

> ***"The biggest thing is there's got to be impartiality. They can't be connected to any of these big larger organisations where you see a lot of, whether it's studies in research that's self-funded. So Coca-Cola paying researchers to be able to do large studies to come up with the results that then show favourably their products"*** **– Male, 30s, Glasgow South West, Core Conservative**

> ***"I think we're really naive to think that these companies are ever going to do us a favour or do anything out of the goodness of their hearts. They're profit driven. Even when they're forced to undertake certain things, whether it's labelling changes or whatever, they're always going to do just enough and no more."*** **– Male, 30s, Glasgow South West, Core Conservative**

4. **Conservative voters support government action to help people live healthier lives, provided it is practical and proportionate**

Conservative voters support government action to improve people's health when it is practical and proportionate. They back better education and information, support for parents and interventions aimed at children, and several pointed to the ban on smoking in pubs and the Smokefree Generation policy as examples of intervention that works. Conservative voters are familiar with the idea of the 'nanny state' and have an instinctive wariness of the state overreaching, but their position is more nuanced than outright opposition: their concern is with the practical effects of interventions rather than objections in principle. Support falls when an intervention removes adults' freedom of choice, restricts responsible consumers or increases living costs, and when it is framed as government control rather than enabling healthier choices. Several said adults should be trusted to make their own decisions. Messaging that focuses on enabling healthier personal choices will be more effective with Conservative voters.

***"I think we should be able to make our own decisions but…we've got to give people the tools and enable them to make wise choices"* – Male, 30s, Glasgow South West, Core Conservative**

***"I think there is a middle ground where you don't regulate, but you produce advice and share that and that's generally making people more aware...I think regulating is really good when things are really horrible, for example, like smoking, we know that's terrible, but that had to happen at some point."* – Female, 40s, Thurrock, Reform switcher**

***"They did the sugar taxes, they allegedly did the chocolate, they did all the smoking, whereas you can't smoke in pubs and things like that. And that actually was really, really good because it was nice to go into a pub where it's not filled with smoke."* – Female, 60s, Thurrock, Reform switcher**

***"Smoking is a good example, I think, because everybody who either smokes or doesn't smoke knows that it basically causes cancer. But actually the laws have been in place. Smoking is, they've probably been successful in stopping people from smoking, young people smoking."* – Male, 40s, South Cambridgeshire, Lib Dem switcher**

5. **Children provide the strongest case for government action on health**

Across all groups of Conservative voters and social grades, protecting children was the most straightforwardly persuasive rationale for government intervention. Conservative voters told us they support better health education for children and restrictions on marketing aimed at children, want action on children vaping and want healthier school environments.

***"I actually quite like this. I've got two young daughters and this means that nobody would be able to sell my daughter's cigarettes"* – Male, 40s, North East Hampshire, Core Conservative**

***"We do need free will. We should have our own choices. Although people can't be trusted, I think the new law they're bringing in about anyone born after 2009 can't buy tobacco products. I think I've read somewhere that's a good step forward. I don't think there'd be many people out there that would agree that smoking's healthy."* – Male, 50s, Glasgow South West, Core Conservative**

How Conservative voters responded to public health policy ideas

We showed participants three public health policies to understand the considerations that shape their views. Conservative voters judged them primarily on fairness and effectiveness.

Smokefree Generation

Conservative voters support the aims of the Smokefree Generation policy. Support was strongest when the policy was seen as protecting future generations without restricting existing adult smokers, as it is designed to do. Many doubted it would eliminate smoking altogether and thought young people might shift towards vaping and other products, with some core Conservative voters thought vaping was also a pressing problem to target. Support could be increased by demonstrating how the policy will be enforced in practice.

***"It'd be hard to police. And ultimately… It doesn't stop young people from smoking. It just means that they can't be sold to. So it's definitely a step in the right direction."* – Male, 40s, North East Hampshire, Core Conservative**

> ***"So as a smoker, I think this is a really good law because I think this is probably what we needed sometime back. I think we're all aware of there's no point in sticking on the tobacco packets like, 'Oh, smoking kills or it has X and Y chemicals because if you are addicted to it, you don't really care.'"*** **– Female, 40s, Thurrock, Reform switcher**

Minimum unit pricing for alcohol

Conservative voters have mixed views on minimum unit pricing, and their support depends on who they think will bear the cost as opposed to ideological considerations. Some liked that it targets cheap, strong alcohol bought in bulk from supermarkets while leaving pubs and restaurants untouched, and saw a benefit in encouraging people to drink socially rather than at home. Others questioned whether dependent drinkers would change their behaviour, and worried that moderate drinkers and lower-income households would pay the price. Framing that demonstrates a limited impact for most people will be important to secure greater support among Conservative voters by addressing their concerns about this policy potentially targeting moderate drinkers.

> ***"I like it, because it's not going to affect pubs and restaurants, it encourages people to go out more and have their drink there rather than having it at home."*** **– Female, 50s, North East Hampshire, Core Conservative**

> ***"They're still going to buy it regardless of how much it costs. They'll find a way to get it, even if they have to steal it. So I think this kind of thing would probably just negatively affect the rest of the public without targeting the people who are actually at harm."*** **– Male, 30s, Thurrock, Reform switcher**

> ***"I think it's a good step in the right direction. I also like the fact that it's not for drinks related in bars or restaurants...I think you're more likely to buy in bulk when it comes to going to supermarkets, et cetera. So I think that's wise as well."*** **– Male, 30s, Thurrock, Reform switcher**

Restrictions on unhealthy food advertising

Conservative voters strongly support restrictions on junk food advertising. They liked that the restrictions would protect children and take pressure off parents, and that they focus on advertising rather than banning products. Voters intuitively understood that children now see advertising in many places beyond television and expected companies to look for ways around the rules, so support depends on the restrictions reaching social media and online platforms.

> ***"I think this is a healthy level of government intervention where we're not completely ruling it out, but we're just saying that there's some measures in place…I think this is the type of incremental kind of strategy that should be put forward."*** **– Male, 30s, Thurrock, Reform switcher**

> ***"I think it's a positive deterrent, so it's definitely a good start, but the bit about brand adverts are still going to be visible in bus stops and places where children would see them. So obviously it's not a perfect solution, but yeah, it's a start."*** **– Female, 40s, Thurrock, Reform switcher**

> ***"A lot harder for the kids to beg for things that they don't see often."*** **– Male, 30s, Thurrock, Reform switcher**

> ***"As soon as they find out that something like this is coming out, it's like, right, okay, what's the next best thing that we can do to indoctrinate them in some other way?"*** **– Male, 30s, Glasgow South West, Core Conservative**

There are clear messaging implications for Conservative voters

Conservative voters are more supportive of action to improve people's health than stereotypes about the 'nanny state' suggest. Our research shows that Conservative voters support action that protects children, reduces pressure on the NHS and helps people make healthier choices. They are deeply sceptical of large corporations, trust independent experts and recognise the role of poverty, cost and convenience in shaping health outcomes. The strongest route to support is not through arguments about regulation itself, but through demonstrating that interventions are practical, proportionate, evidence-based and focused on helping families live healthier lives.

Conservative voters respond better to language around enabling the individual rather than restricting people. Messages about education, information and supporting healthier choices are generally more effective than messages about bans or restrictions.

Arguments that **put children first, talk about food and healthy eating, and emphasise the expertise and independence** of whoever delivers the message are more likely to land well with Conservative voters.

Conservative voters need to be shown that interventions are practical and proportionate. Conservative voters are generally willing to support action to improve health, but want reassurance that interventions will work, will not unfairly burden ordinary households and will preserve adult freedom where possible.

Conservative voters respond well to arguments about holding powerful companies to account. All groups distrusted large food, alcohol and tobacco companies and did not want them shaping health policy. Reform switchers in particular were receptive to framing action on health as standing up to corporate interests rather than expanding the state.

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