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High esteem, low priority? Perceptions of UK universities and their importance in deciding the general election

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Only the NHS, armed forces and Royal Family are more likely than universities to be considered among the best in the world

Net satisfaction with universities has also doubled since 1991, while majorities of the population believe they produce vital research and have an important role to play in society, even if there are some areas where the public feel they could improve



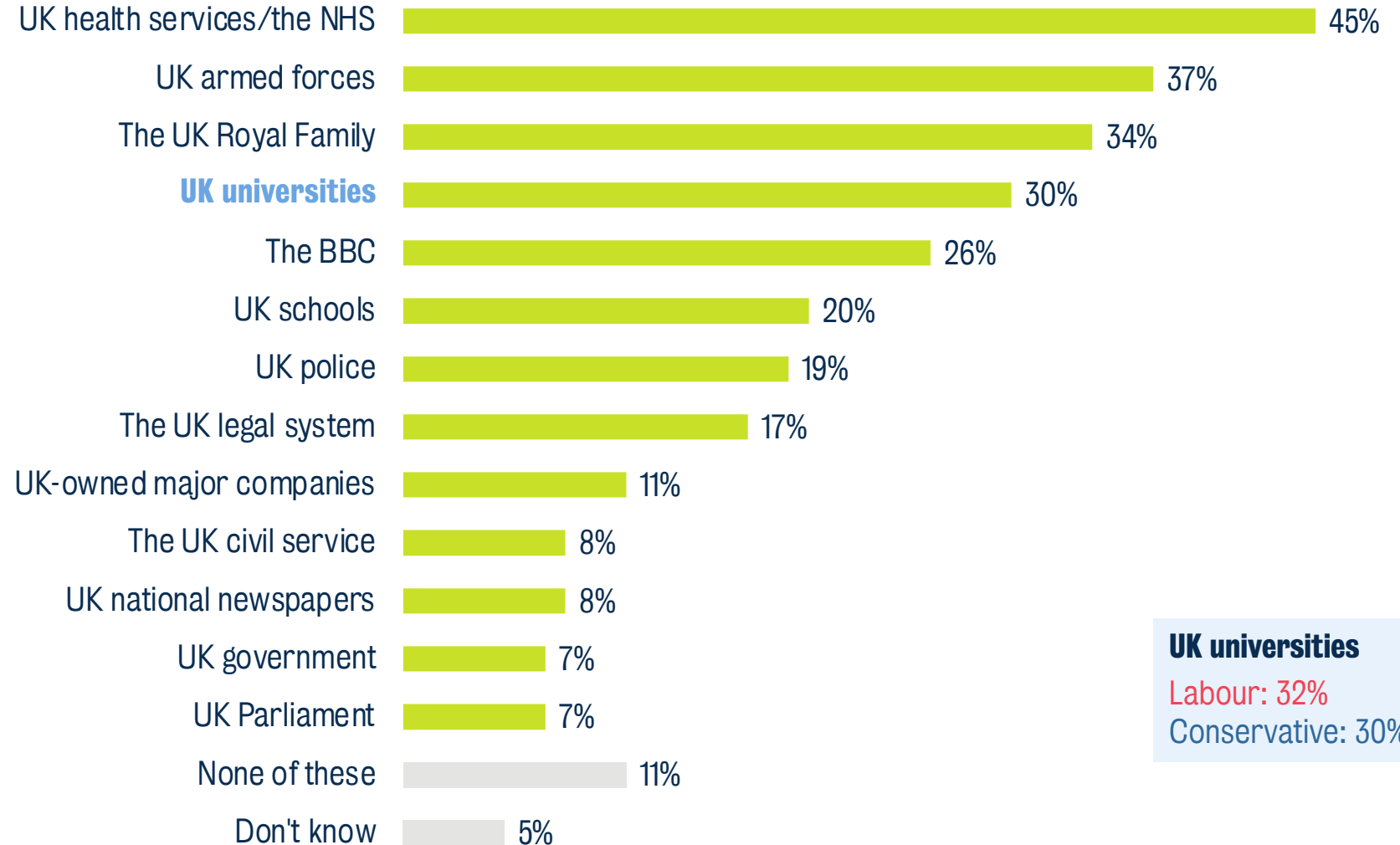
Only the NHS, armed forces and Royal Family are more likely than UK universities to be seen as world-class

Of 13 key UK institutions, only three are more likely than universities to be seen as among the best in the world – the NHS, the armed forces and the Royal Family.

Universities beat the BBC, the UK's schools, police and legal system, as well as various political institutions, on this measure of who is world-class.

And this view is shared across the political divide, with 2019 Labour and Conservative voters virtually equally likely to say UK universities are among the best in the world.

And, which, if any, of the following do you think are among the best in the world, compared with similar organisations or institutions in other countries?



UK universities

Labour: 32%

Conservative: 30%

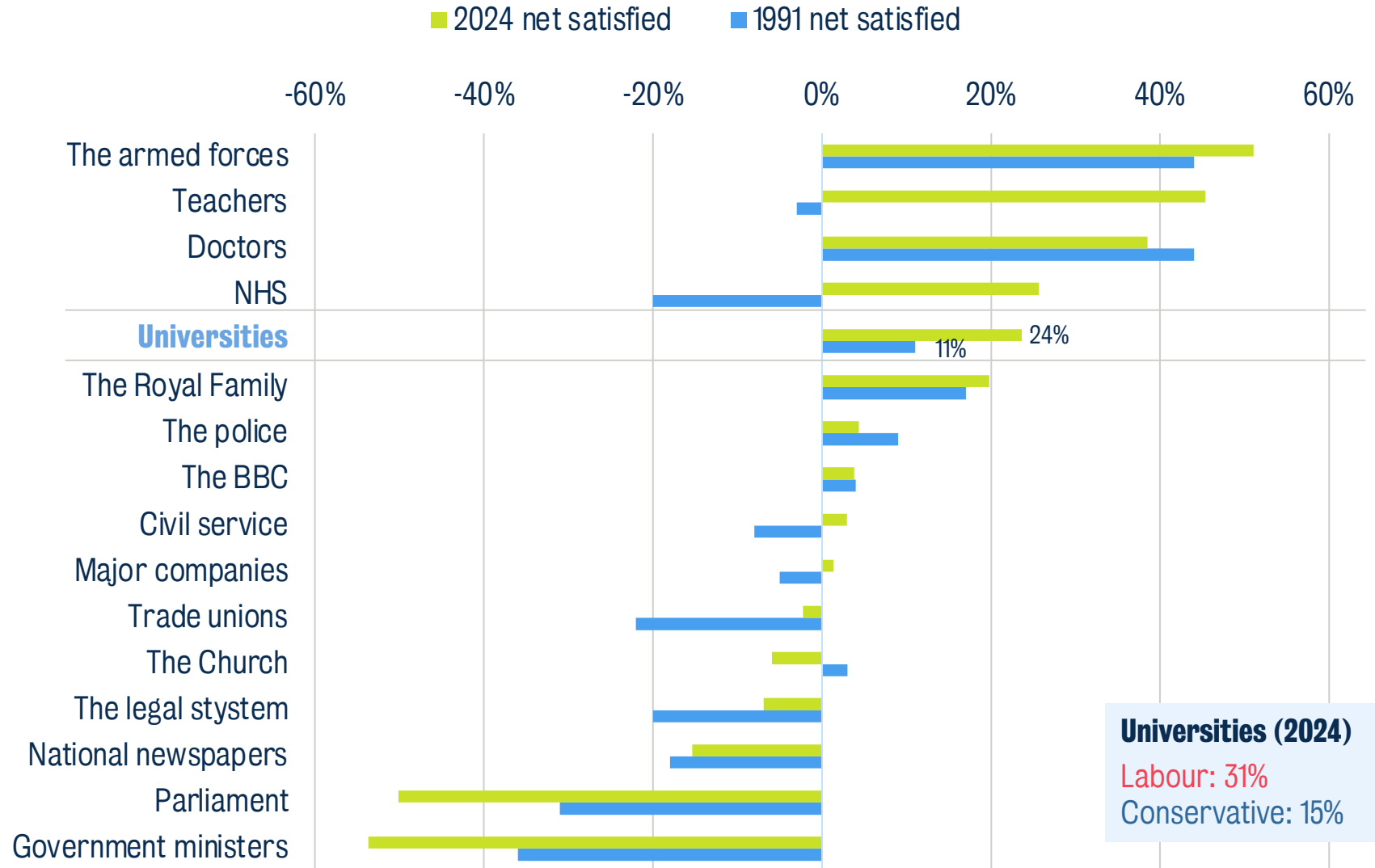
Net satisfaction with universities has more than doubled since 1991

Comparing attitudes today with those in 1991 shows there has been a considerable increase in net satisfaction with how universities are performing their role in society, from +11% to +24%, again putting universities behind only a handful of key institutions and professions.

But on this question there is a much starker political divide in views, with net satisfaction with universities twice as high among 2019 Labour voters as it is among their Conservative counterparts.

This trend also underscores how much more positive views have become of teachers and the NHS, and more negative for parliament and government ministers.

To what extent, if at all, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with how these people and organisations are performing their role in society?



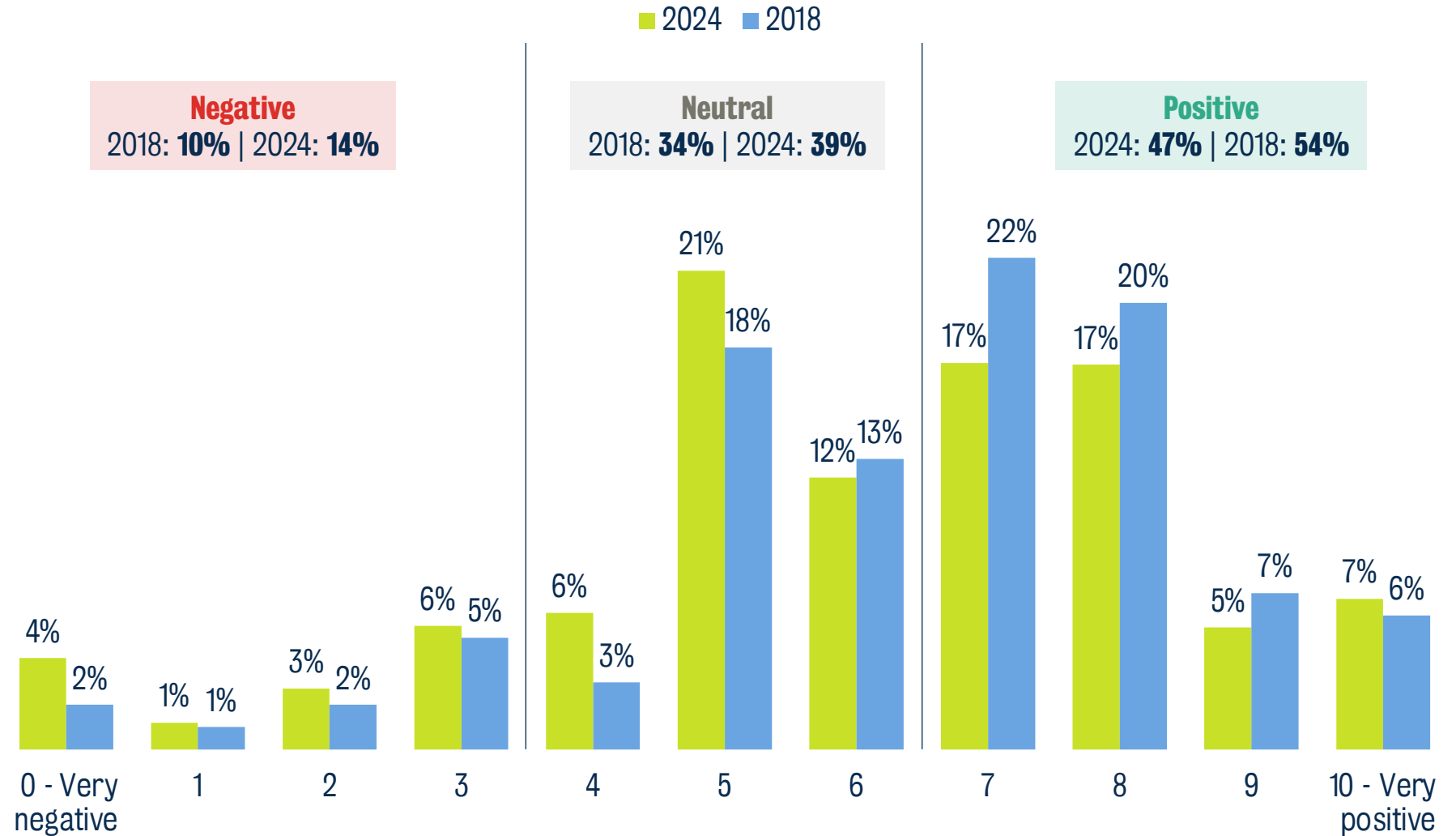
The public remain positive about universities overall, although less so compared with six years ago

Despite increased satisfaction with universities since 1991, the public are now less positive about them than they were in 2018, though few still feel actively negative towards them.

Six years ago 54% gave universities a positive rating, compared with 46% today.

The share of the public who feel negatively towards them has risen slightly, from 10% to 14%, as has the share who have a neutral view of them, with 39% feeling this way – up from 34% in 2018.

Overall, how positive or negative do you feel about UK universities?

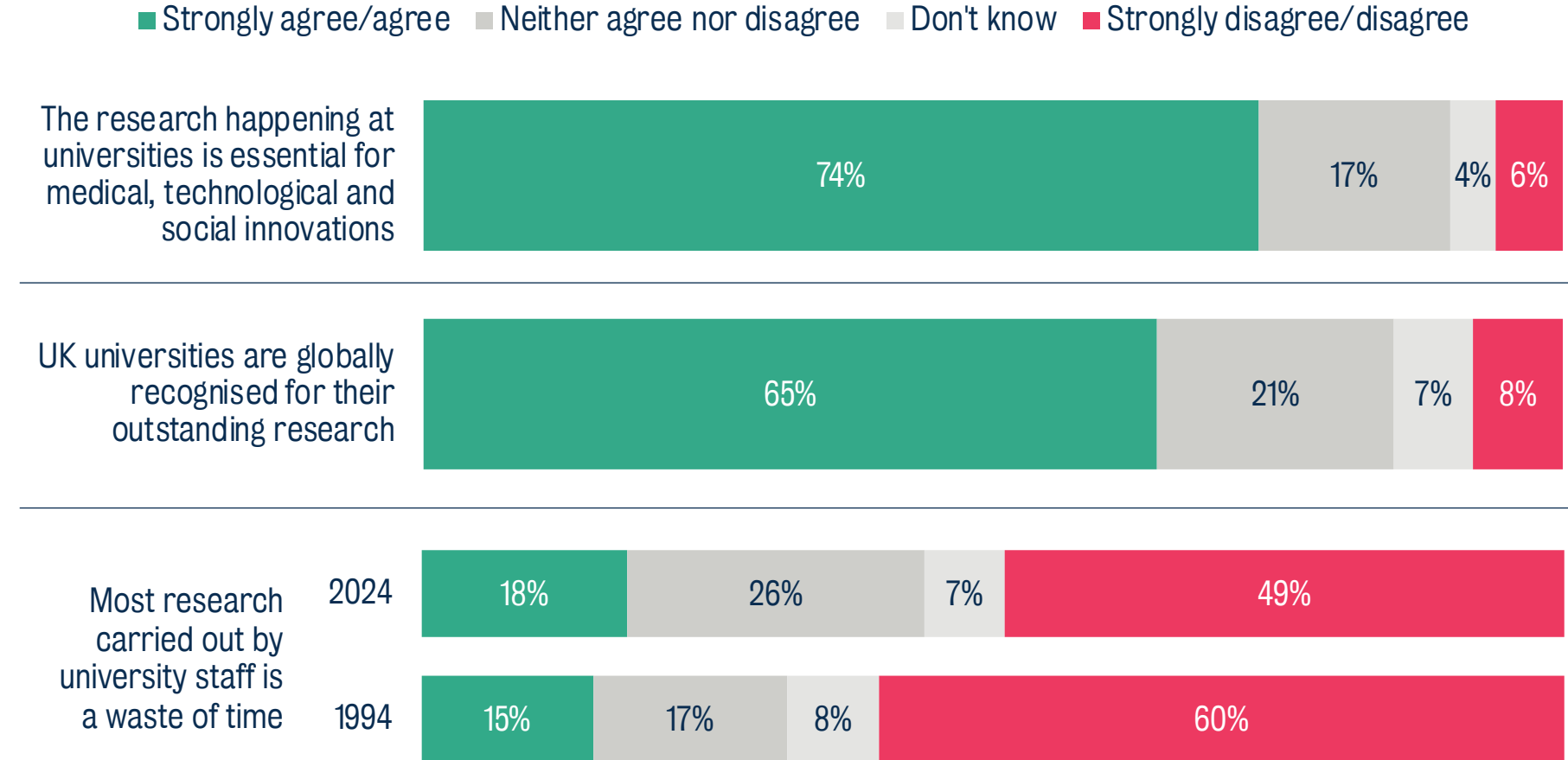


Most people agree universities produce outstanding and vital research

Three-quarters of the public agree university research is essential for innovation and two-thirds say UK institutions are globally recognised for their outstanding research, with only small minorities disagreeing with these views.

And although perceptions have worsened slightly compared with 30 years ago, the public are still most likely to disagree that the bulk of university research is a waste of time.

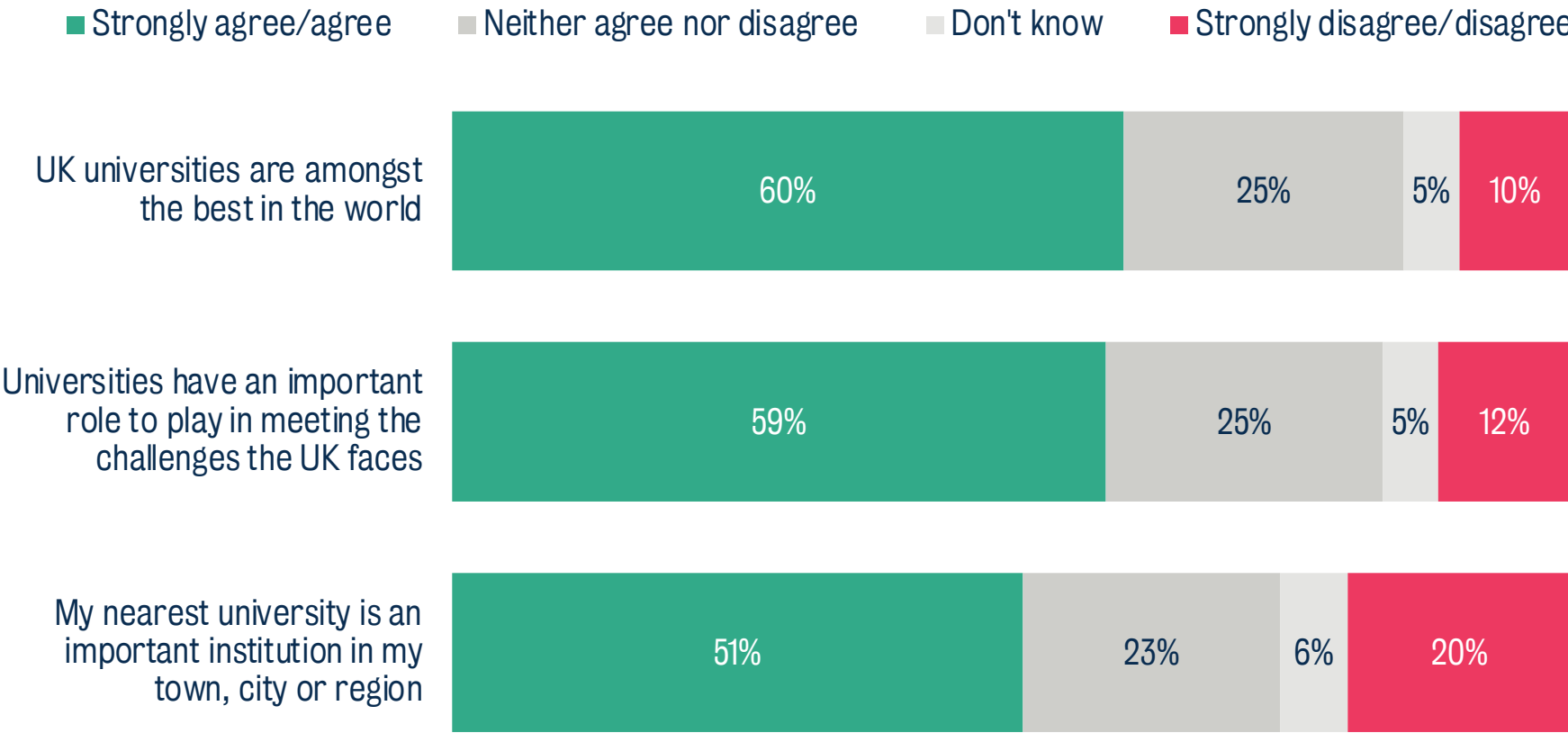
To what extent do you agree or disagree about each of the following statements about UK universities?



Majorities also think UK universities are world-leading and have important roles to play in society

Three in five people say UK universities are amongst the best in the world and that they have an important role to play in meeting the challenges the country faces, while half say their nearest university is important to their local area – around double the proportion who disagree with this view.

To what extent do you agree or disagree about each of the following statements about UK universities?

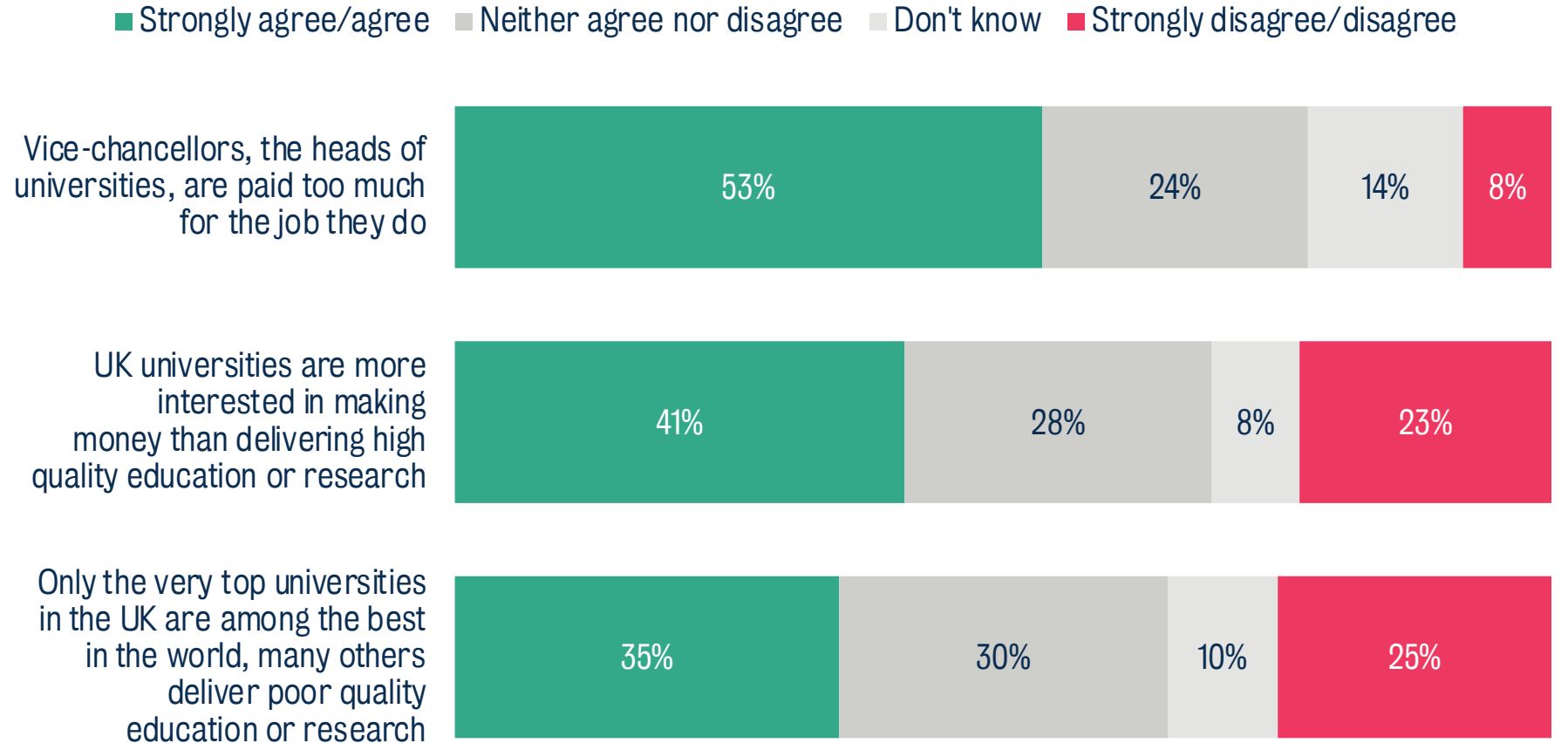


But that doesn't mean the public feel totally positive about universities

While most agree UK universities are among the best in the world, around a third feel this only applies to the very top institutions. This compares with a quarter who disagree with this view and four in 10 who don't take either position or say they don't know.

A majority also think vice-chancellors are paid too much, and the public are more likely than not to say universities prioritise making money over education or research.

To what extent do you agree or disagree about each of the following statements about UK universities?



Despite UK universities' perceived value and world-leading status, higher education ranks as one of the issues *least* likely to determine people's vote at the general election

And comparing attitudes today with those back in 1997 reveals a big decline in the share of the public who say universities will be important in deciding which party to vote for



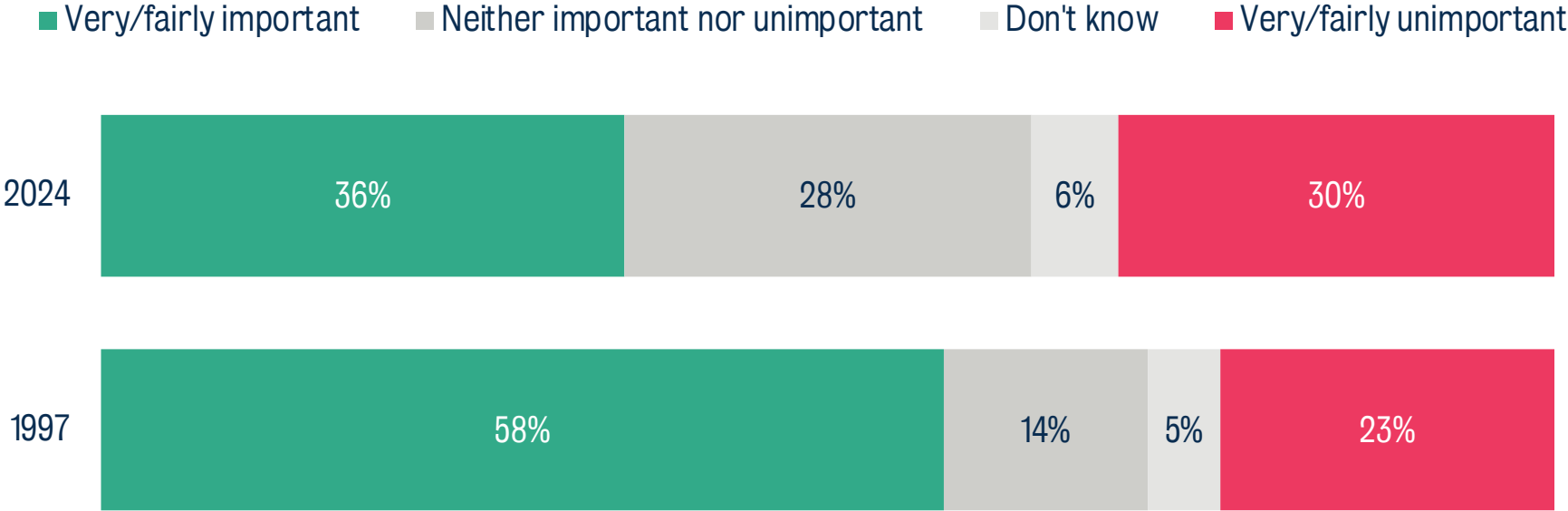
Higher education is seen as much less important in determining people’s general election vote than it was back in 1997 – but 2019 Labour voters say it’s a much bigger issue for them

Asking the public how important a particular issue will be in deciding their vote is not typically good practice, as people often overstate its salience when considered in isolation. But we followed this approach with one half of our sample in order to be able to compare responses with a previous survey from 1997.

The comparison shows that, since then, there has been a large decline in the share of the public who say higher education will be very or fairly important in determining their vote at the next general election.

However, its importance today inevitably varies among different groups, with 2019 Labour voters much more likely than their Conservative voters to say it’ll be a key consideration for them.

How important an issue would you say that higher education would be in determining which political party you will vote for in the forthcoming general election? By “higher education” we mean universities



Very/fairly important
 Labour: 44%
 Conservative: 29%

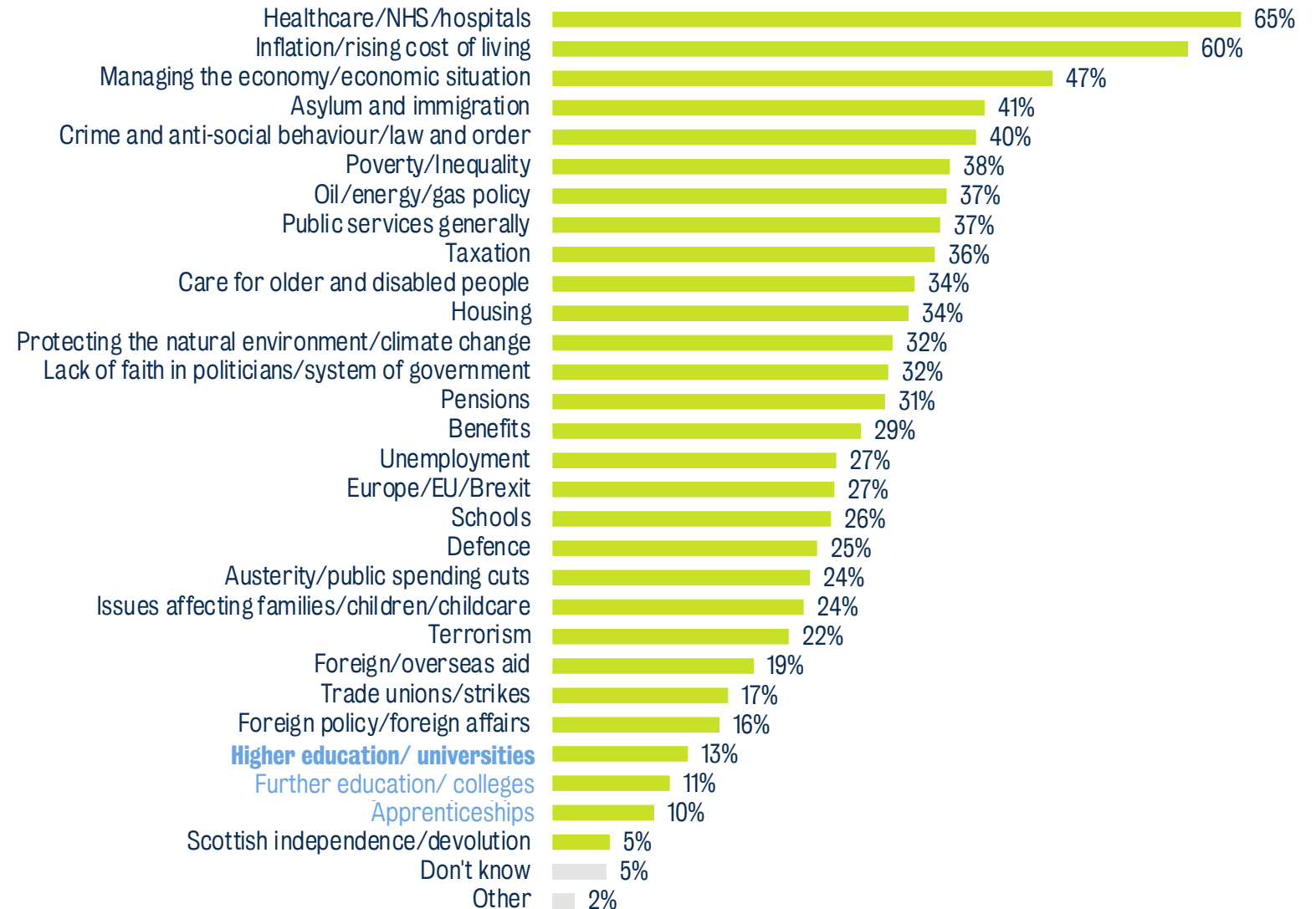
When compared with a range of other issues, higher education ranks towards the bottom of people's priorities

To the other half of our sample, we presented a comprehensive list of issues and asked them to select which would be *very* important in deciding their vote at the election.

13% chose higher education/universities – the same proportion who said it would be very important in our other split sample question.

However, when considered against a range of other issues, higher education ranks as one of the public's very lowest priorities for their vote, with people similarly unconcerned about related areas such as further education and apprenticeships.

Looking ahead to the general election that is expected to take place this year, which, if any, issues do you think will be very important to you in helping you decide which party to vote for?



The low political salience of universities may be partly related to a lack of awareness about the funding pressures they face

Of eight key institutions or groups that could be under serious financial strain, universities are least likely to be considered at risk

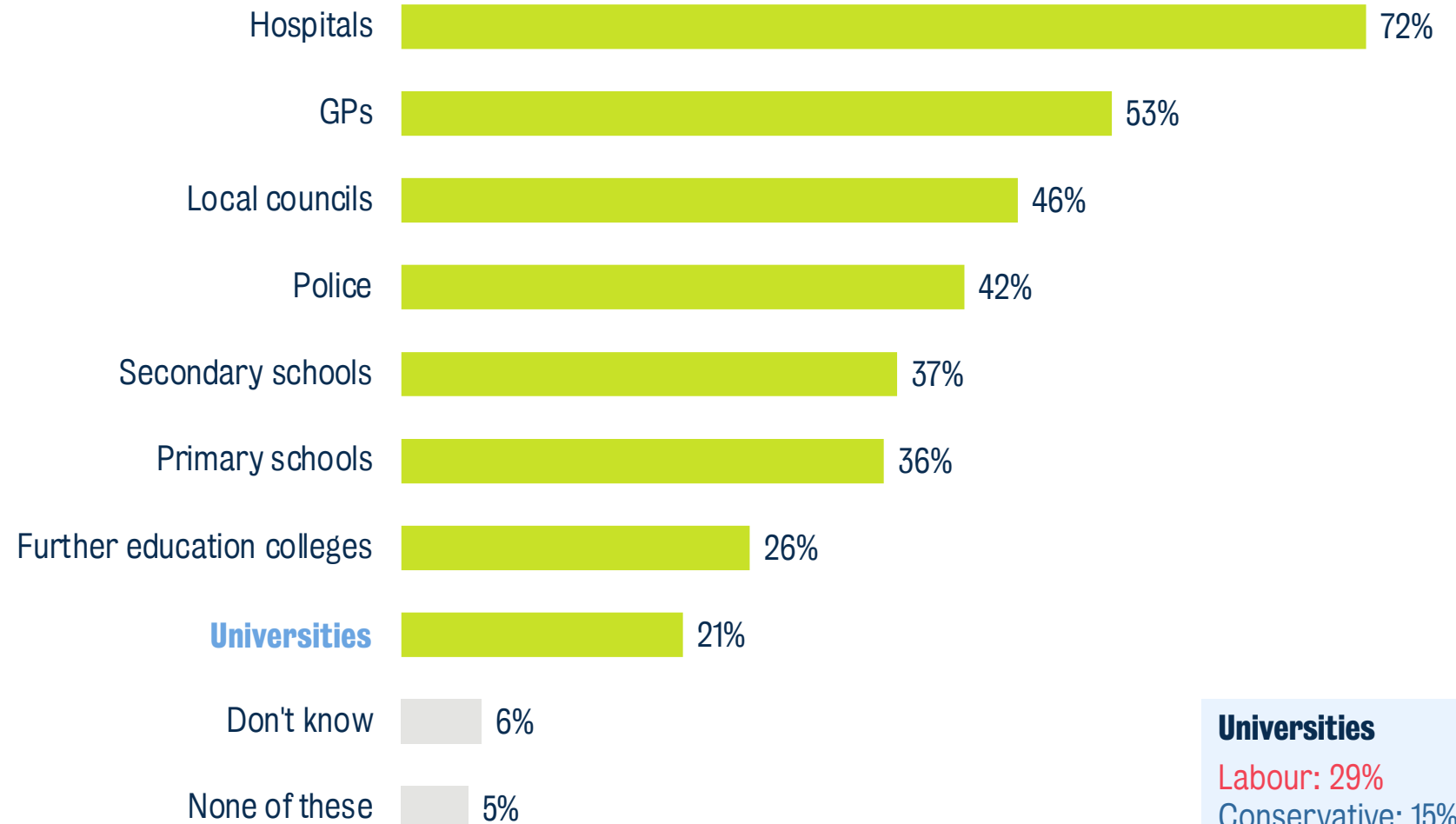


Of a range of institutions, universities are least likely to be seen as facing serious funding pressures

When presented with eight key institutions or groups that might be facing serious funding pressures, the public are least likely to recognise that universities are under threat, with awareness of the situation in higher education even lower than that among further education colleges and primary schools.

But awareness does vary by political affiliation, with 2019 Labour voters twice as likely as their Conservative peers to correctly identify that universities are under significant financial strain.

Which, if any, of the following do you think are under serious funding pressure that is resulting in services being affected or even the threat of individual services closing down?

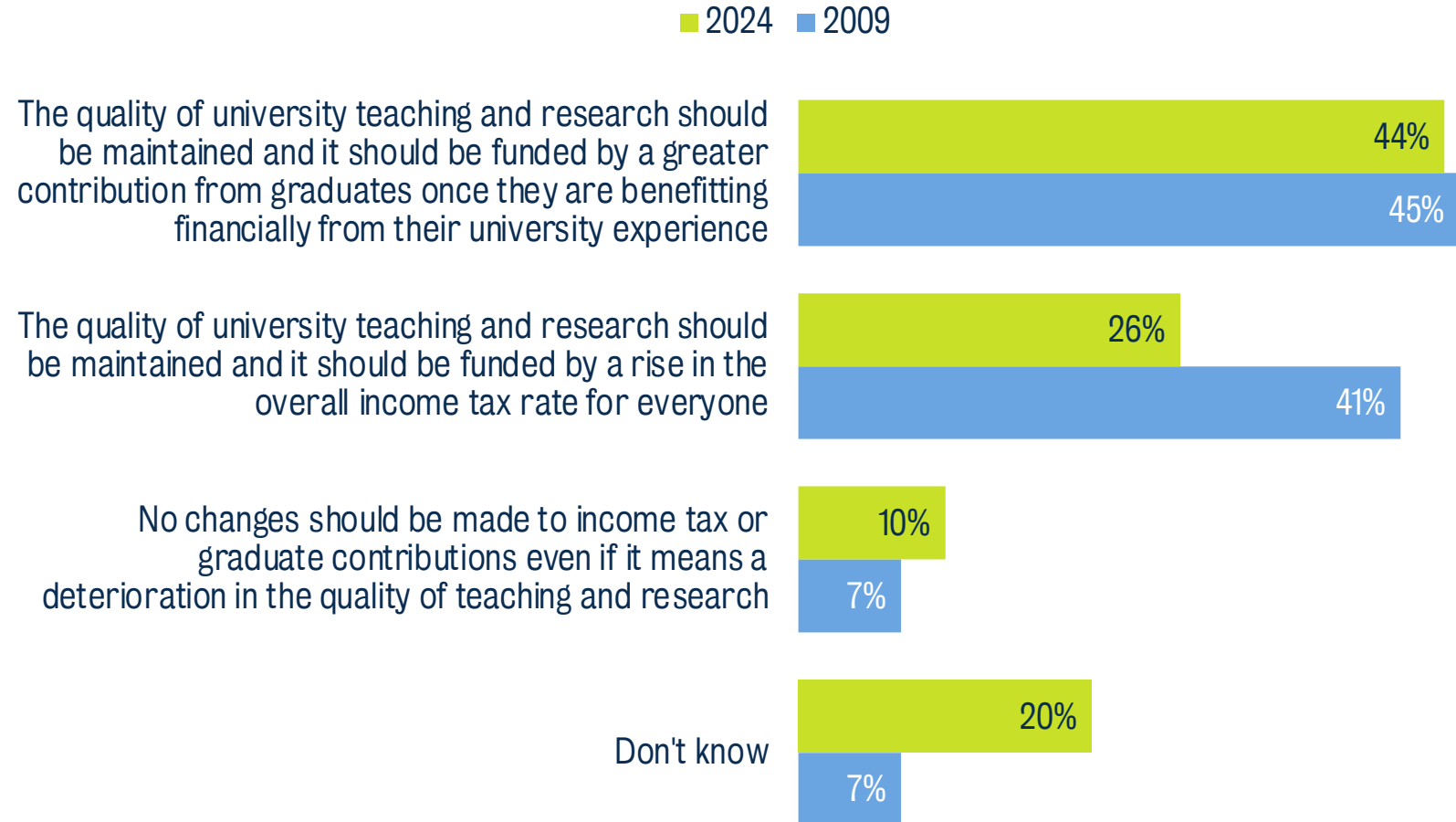


The public are most likely to favour graduates contributing more financially to help universities

When universities' funding pressures are explained to the public, a majority of 70% say the quality of teaching and research should still be maintained – with the most popular option being for graduates to make a greater contribution once they are benefitting financially from their university experience.

And the share of the population who now believe this extra funding should come from a rise in the overall income tax rate has declined considerably since 2009, while uncertainty about the best approach has increased.

Given the pressures on government finances and increasing undergraduate numbers, some people believe the current system of funding universities is not sustainable. There are several options for tackling this, but which one of the following statements do you agree with most when it comes to responding to this situation?



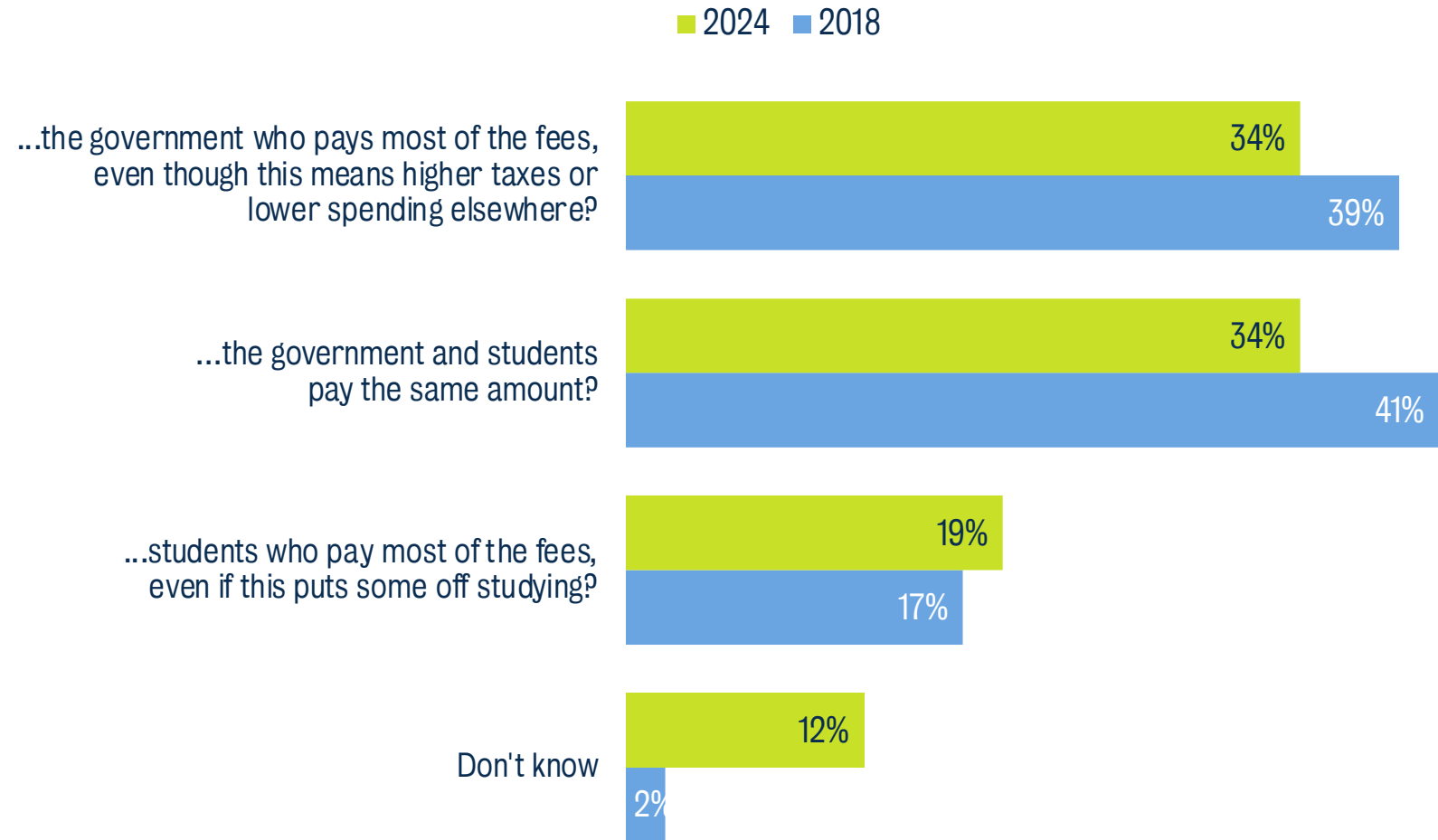
Seven in 10 people think the government should pay at least half of students' tuition fees, with few supporting the current arrangement

A third of the population think the government should pay most of students' tuition fees, while the same proportion say the government and students should pay the same amount. Taken together, this means 68% feel the government should be paying at least half of students' fees.

But there has been a decline in support for both options since 2018, with a rise in uncertainty about who should pay.

And only a relatively small proportion – one in five – say they support the current arrangement, in which students pay most fees.

Who should pay the tuition fees of students going to university? Should it be...

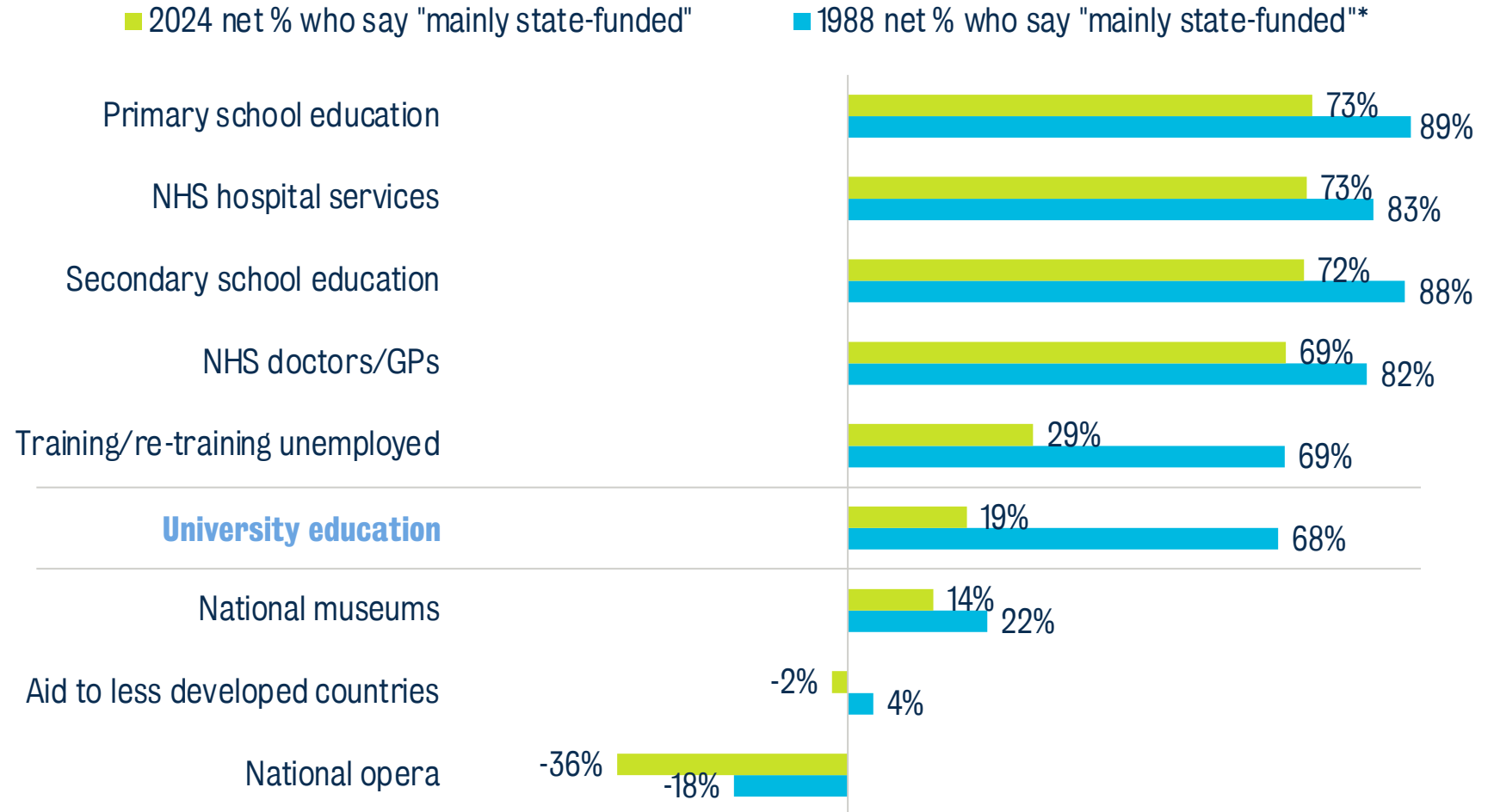


Nevertheless, since the 1980s there has been a big decline in the belief that university education should be mainly funded by the state

In 1988, net support for university education being mainly state-funded was 68%. Today, it is 19%.


This reflects a general trend where the public have become less convinced other services should be mainly state-funded – though only attitudes towards training/re-training the unemployed have shifted to the same extent as attitudes towards university education.

Below is a list of services which could, in principle, be financed either by the state or by private funding. Please select where you think the balance of state funding and private funding ought to be



But when asked to consider the prospect of mass university closures, a majority of the public say it would worry them

And it's the UK government that would overwhelmingly get the blame

A photograph of a white rectangular sign with the word "CLOSED" in bold black capital letters. The sign is hanging from a dark metal door handle by two thin, light-colored strings. The background is a blurred view through a window with a dark frame, showing a grid pattern. The overall lighting is somewhat dim, suggesting an indoor setting.

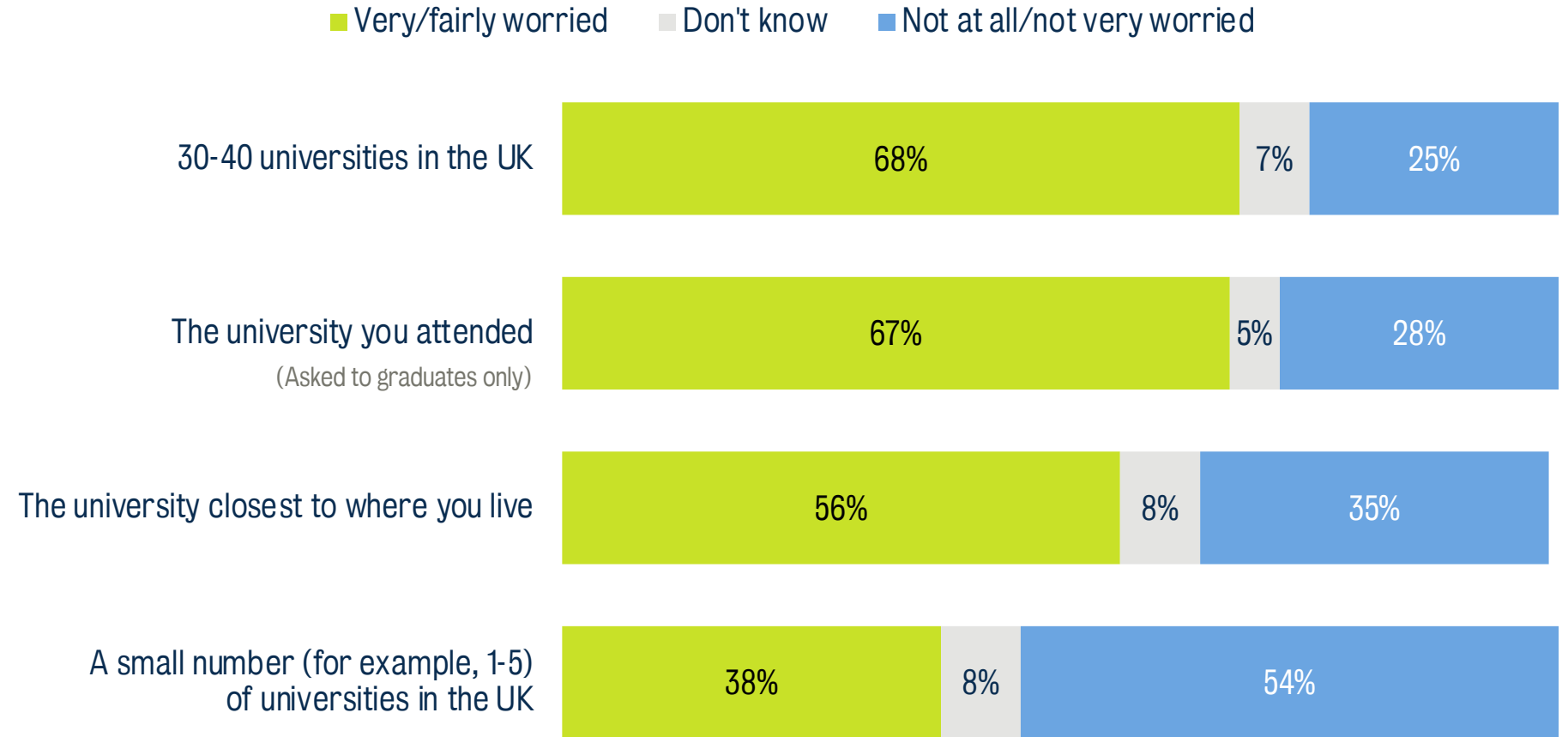
CLOSED

A majority say they'd be worried if their local university closed down, rising to around seven in 10 who would be worried if 30 to 40 institutions were to shut

Two in five people say they'd be worried if a handful of universities shut due to funding challenges, with most saying they wouldn't be concerned. But this balance of opinion is reversed when people are asked about the closure of their local university, with a majority saying they'd be worried if this were to happen.

Concern rises even further when people consider the prospect of more widespread closures: seven in 10 say this would worry them – around the same as the share of graduates who say they'd be concerned if the university they attended were to close.

How worried, if at all, would you be if the following had to close down due to funding challenges?



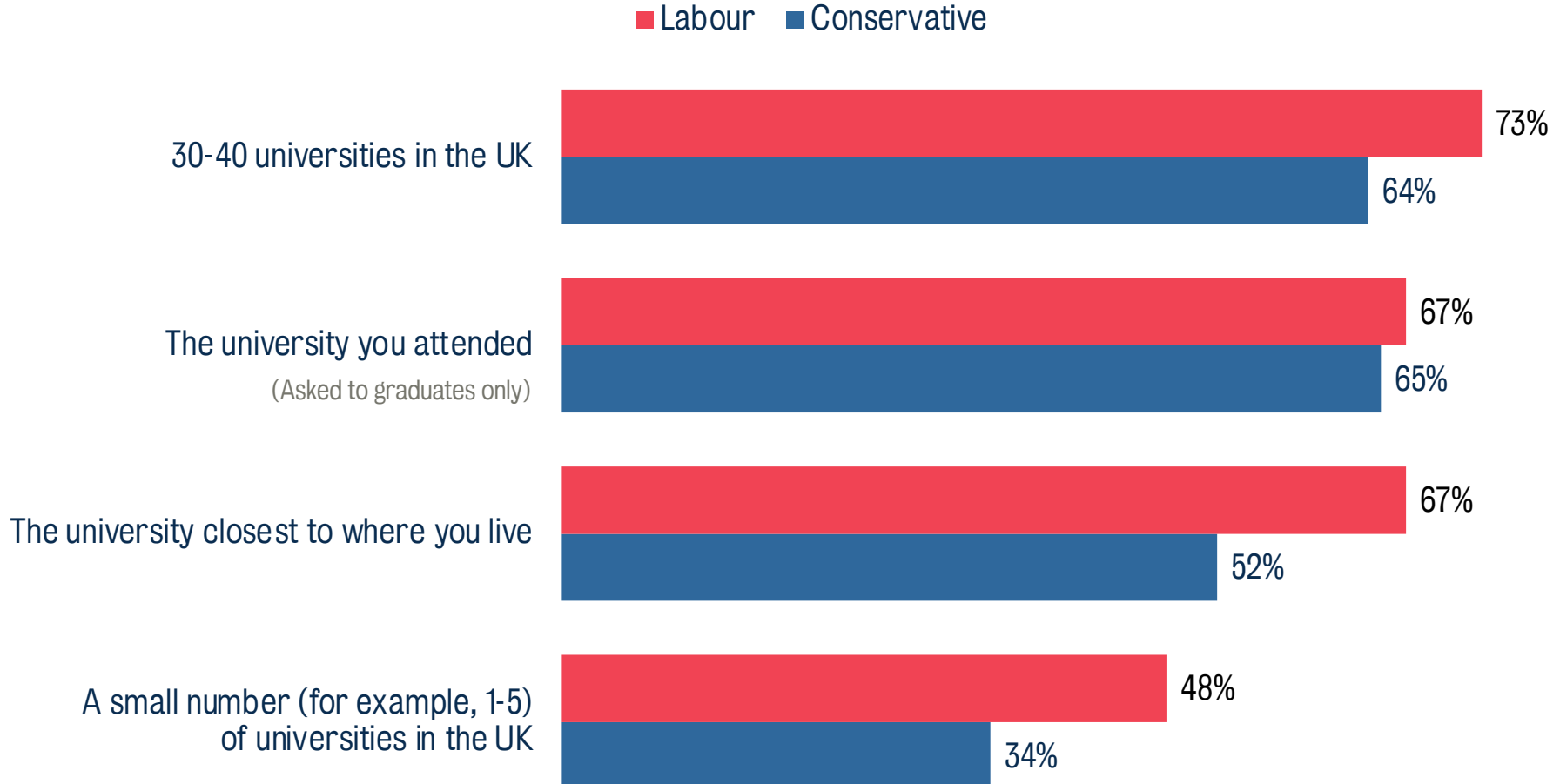
Labour voters tend to be more worried about universities shutting down – but both Labour and Conservative graduates are equally concerned about the potential closure of the university they attended

While a majority of those who voted Conservative in 2019 say they'd be worried if their local university or 30 to 40 institutions were to close, Labour voters are even more likely to say they'd be concerned, with around seven in 10 saying this would worry them.

But this political gap in concern disappears when graduates consider the prospect of the university they attended shutting down, with both sets of voters saying they'd be equally worried if this were to occur.

How worried, if at all, would you be if the following had to close down due to funding challenges?

% who say very/fairly worried



Between six and seven in 10 say they'd be worried about various potential impacts of university closures, while four in 10 say they'd be concerned about the value of their degree being affected if their university closed

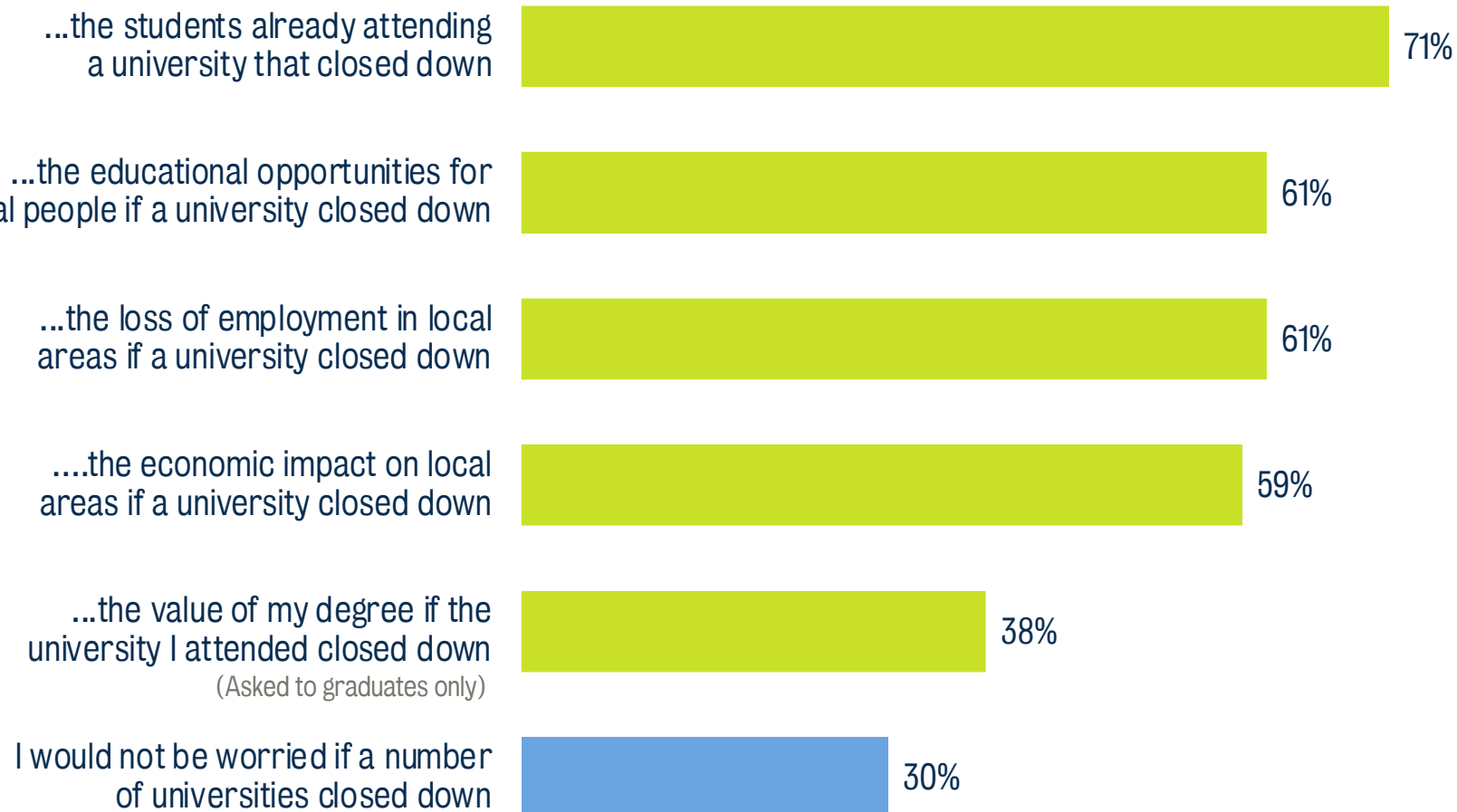
The public's greatest concern about the prospect of university closures is the students currently studying at an institution that shut down. Seven in 10 say they'd be worried about this, while six in 10 say the same about local impacts on education, employment and the economy.

Meanwhile, two in five graduates say they'd be worried about the value of their degree if the institution they attended were to close.

And three in 10 of the public overall say they would not be worried if a number of university closures were to occur.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I would be worried about...

% who strongly agree/agree



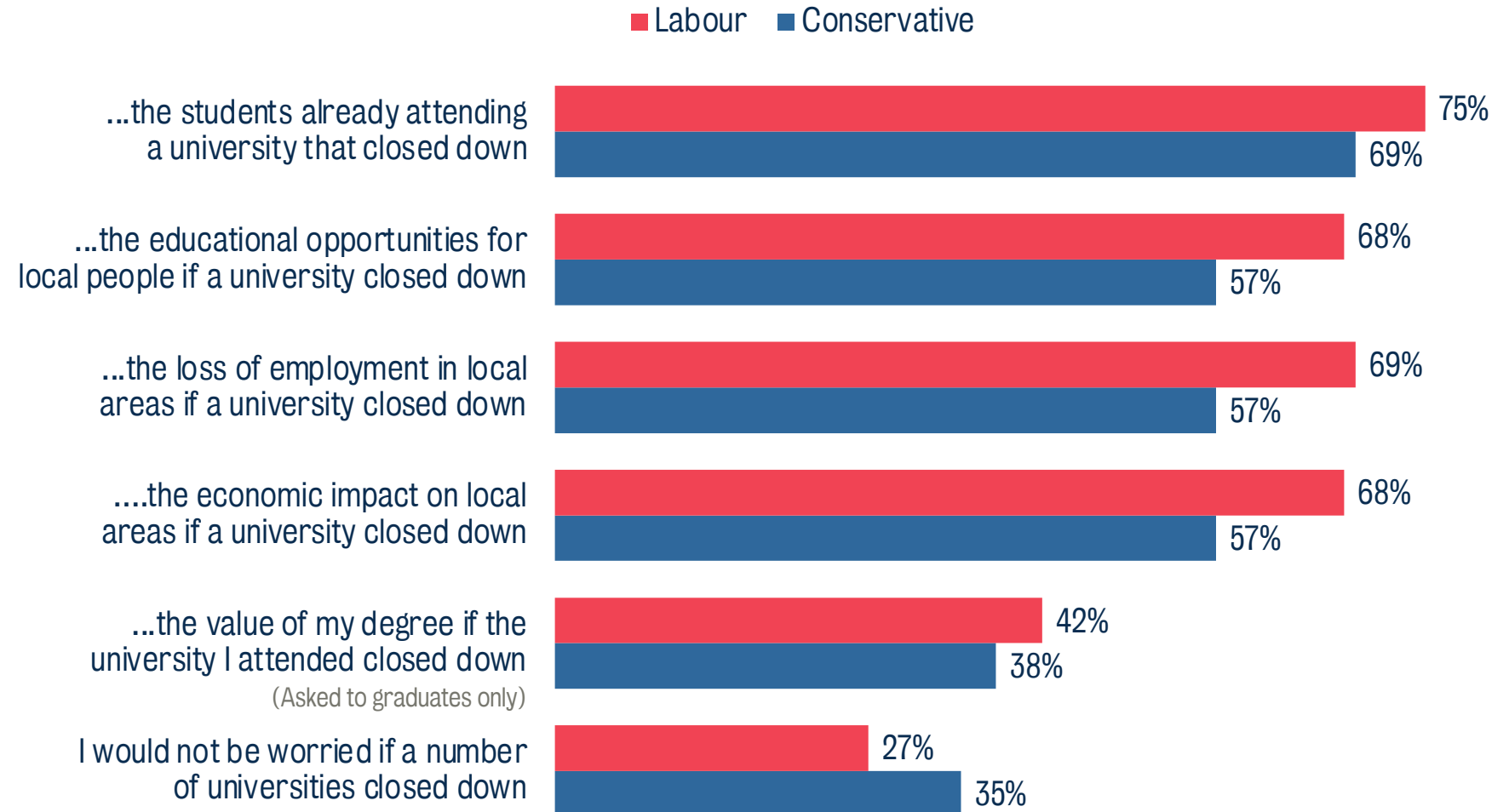
Labour voters tend to be more worried about the impacts of university closures, though majorities of Conservative voters also say they'd be concerned

Majorities of those who voted for one of the two main parties in 2019 say they'd be worried about various potential impacts stemming from university closures, with Labour voters most concerned.

But among graduates, there is virtually no political divide in concern: around two in five of those who voted for each party say they'd be worried about the value of their degree if the institution they attended closed down.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I would be worried about...

% who strongly agree/agree



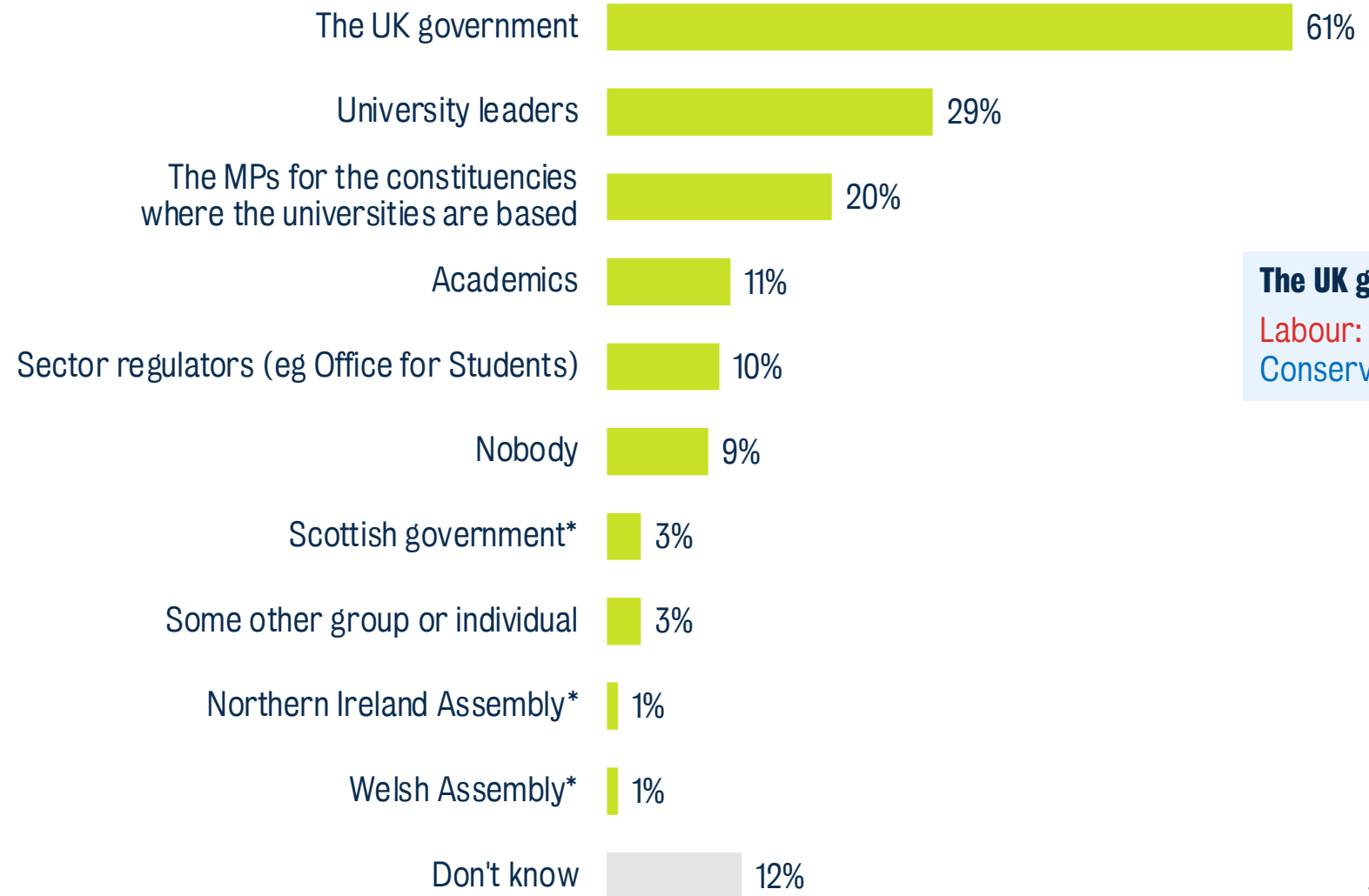
The public would overwhelmingly blame the government if a number of universities were to close

Six in 10 people say they'd blame the UK government for university closures – double the proportion who say the same about university leaders, who are next most likely to be seen as at fault.

And while 2019 Labour voters are much more likely to blame the UK government, nearly half of Conservative voters say they'd do the same – and they are still most likely to blame the government over any other group.

One in five people overall would blame local MPs, while around one in 10 would attribute university failures to academics or regulators.

If a number of universities closed over the next few years, who, if anyone, do you think would be most to blame?



The UK government
Labour: 76%
Conservative: 44%

*Asked only to respondents in those countries

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Survey details

Fieldwork was conducted via Focaldata's in-house platform, with API integration to an online panel network. Data collection took place between 1 and 9 May, with a total of 2,683 respondents from a nationally representative group of those aged 16+ in the UK completing the survey. Data was weighted by age, gender, region, ethnicity and education status.

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