

Public perceptions of Keir Starmer's performance suggest he has yet to produce a clear narrative of both the COVID-19 crisis and his leadership



Farah Hussain and **Karl Pike** use new polling findings to shed light on Keir Starmer's performance in opposition. They show how unconvinced the public is of his 'constructive opposition' strategy.

When Keir Starmer was elected leader of the Labour Party in April 2020, he committed to an approach of 'constructive opposition' during the pandemic. He characterised Labour's approach in these terms again in August 2020, and this strategy has been much discussed since. Has Starmer delivered the right balance between avoiding both 'opposition for opposition's sake' and appearing absent from critical political debates?

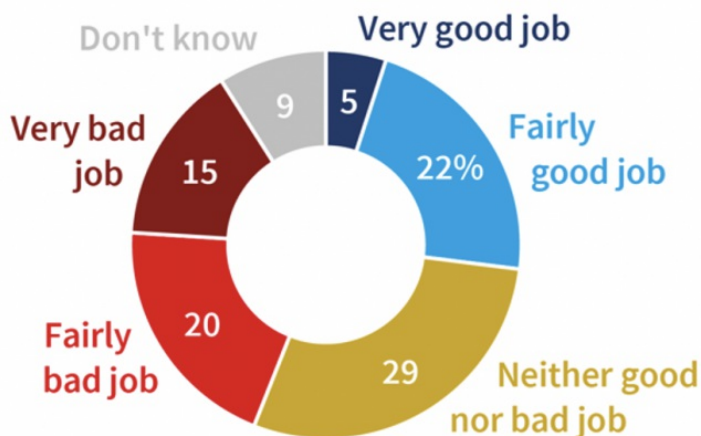
We tested public perceptions of Starmer's performance as leader of the opposition, in particular the approach of 'constructive opposition', for a large survey we commissioned from Ipsos MORI about the public's future policy priorities, and attitudes to politics and governance during the pandemic. We defined 'constructive opposition' as 'comments and questions that have a useful purpose in getting the government to do its job better'. In other words, an approach that doesn't criticise for what appears to be political advantage, but rather in furthering the 'national interest' and improving outcomes – not far from how Starmer elaborated on the approach himself in his speech upon being elected as Labour's leader.

For Starmer, the results are at best mixed. The largest group of people (35%) believe that he has done either a fairly or very bad job at 'constructive opposition'; 29% think that he is doing neither a good nor bad job; while 27% think that he is doing either a fairly good or very good job.

Figure 1: Public views on Labour's 'constructive opposition' approach

During the Covid-19 pandemic, do you think the Leader of the Labour Party, Keir Starmer, has done a good or bad job at providing 'constructive opposition' – in other words, comments and questions that have a useful purpose in getting the government to do its job better?

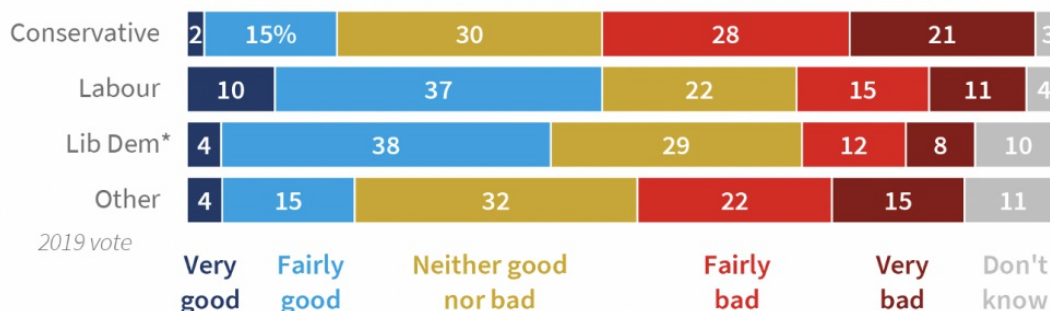
Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021.



There is, of course, a big difference among 2019 Conservative and Labour voters – 49% of 2019 Conservative voters opted for a fairly or very bad job, while 48% of 2019 Labour voters opted for a fairly or very good job. Even so, the response of 2019 Labour voters is hardly a strong endorsement for this approach.

Figure 2: Views on Labour's 'constructive opposition' approach by 2019 vote

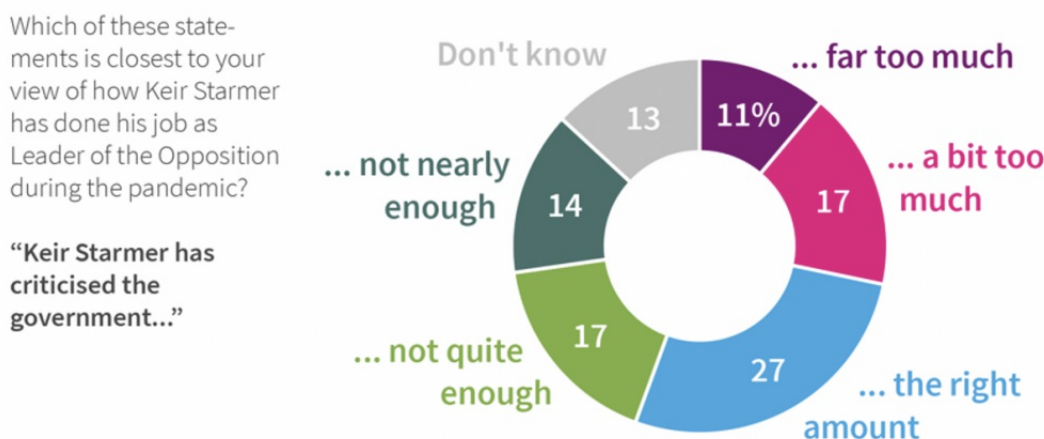
During the Covid-19 pandemic, **do you think the Leader of the Labour Party, Keir Starmer, has done a good or bad job at providing 'constructive opposition'** – in other words, comments and questions that have a useful purpose in getting the government to do its job better?



Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120. *Sub-sample size below 100.

We also asked about perceptions of whether Starmer has criticised the government too little, too much, or has got the balance about right. The results indicate a clear dilemma for the Labour leader. Opinion is deeply divided: 27% of people said that he has criticised the government broadly the right amount; 29% (rounded total) that he has been a bit or far too critical; and 31% say that he has not been quite or nearly as critical as he should have been.

Figure 3: Views on Keir Starmer's criticism of the government



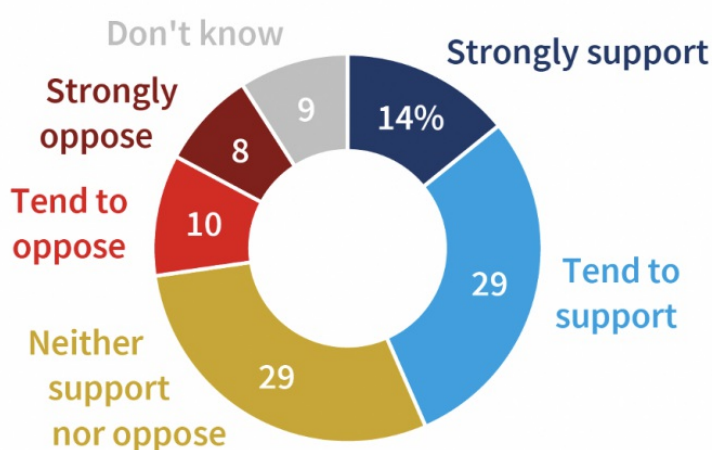
Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021.

In terms of 2019 voters, the ‘Starmer dilemma’ is particularly obvious. The Labour leader needs to win back some of the votes of people who opted for the Conservatives in 2019, while holding on to Labour’s 2019 voters. Yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, both groups have very different views on Starmer’s approach to holding the government to account: 53% of 2019 Conservative voters judged that Starmer attacked the government too much, while 50% of 2019 Labour voters believed there had been too little criticism of the government’s handling of the crisis.

What do people think, in principle, to the opposition being more formally involved in decision-making, compared to ‘normal’? We asked about this too, as a way of testing the common wisdom that in a time of crisis, people want to see politicians work together more. Only 18% of people tended to be opposed or were strongly opposed to this idea, compared to 43% tending to support or strongly supporting it. At least in principle, more of a role for opposition parties in decision-making during the pandemic is not unpopular.

Figure 4: Totals for support/opposition to more opposition involvement in decision-making

How strongly, if at all, would you support or oppose **opposition parties in the UK Parliament being given more involvement in government decision-making than normal** until the pandemic has been dealt with?



Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.

What does all of this mean for Starmer's strategy up to this point, and in the future? It is hard to disentangle people's perceptions of Starmer, of Labour, and of the particular approaches he has pursued up to this point. And the very nature of a dilemma means these are difficult choices for the Labour leader, where a balance is hard to achieve. Starmer of course needs to see Labour growing in popularity, and will want to see a negative impact on the Conservative party over recent allegations of 'sleaze'. Yet he doesn't want to appear opportunistic, picking fights with the prime minister needlessly – something Boris Johnson has tried to argue Starmer has been doing. Earlier this year, in a February speech, Starmer sought to address criticisms of his approach, connecting what he sees as effects of the pandemic made worse by the state of the nation and past Conservative policies. Yet this kind of intervention, and argument, has been rare.

So far, the perceptions of the public suggest he is yet to produce a clear narrative of both the crisis, and his leadership. With the government experiencing an apparent [boost](#) in the opinions polls due to the successful vaccine rollout, Starmer can make a reasonable case that this period was never likely to be an electoral breakthrough moment for Labour. But with the public unconvinced of his strategy so far, Starmer may need to rethink his approach over the next year.

About the Authors



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