

A survey of public attitudes towards the English Defence League (EDL) reveals that there is some sympathy for the movement's values, although these supporters are very much in a minority

The Extremis Project UK team has published a survey that examines public attitudes towards the EDL. It shows that a large amount of people (25 per cent) are not aware of the organisation at all, of those that are aware a large majority disapprove and would not consider joining, and that those who are receptive are predominantly working-class men.

Despite attracting considerable publicity, the English Defence League (EDL) remains under-researched and poorly understood. While some have explored [online supporters](#) of the EDL, little is known about wider public perceptions: what ordinary citizens think about the group, its values and provocative street-based strategy.

The absence of reliable research is striking given the EDL's current plans to hold a (second) rally in Walthamstow later this month, and to enter the electoral arena by [contesting an elected police commissioner role](#) in Bedford, on November 15. To probe what the public think, Extremis Project presents the first analysis of survey data that were gathered by our friends at [YouGov](#), and based on a nationally representative sample of 1,682 British adults (a description of the methodology and full results are below). The innovative research allows us to investigate public attitudes toward the English Defence League, and which groups in society are most receptive to the movement's [anti-Islam](#) and anti-Muslim message.

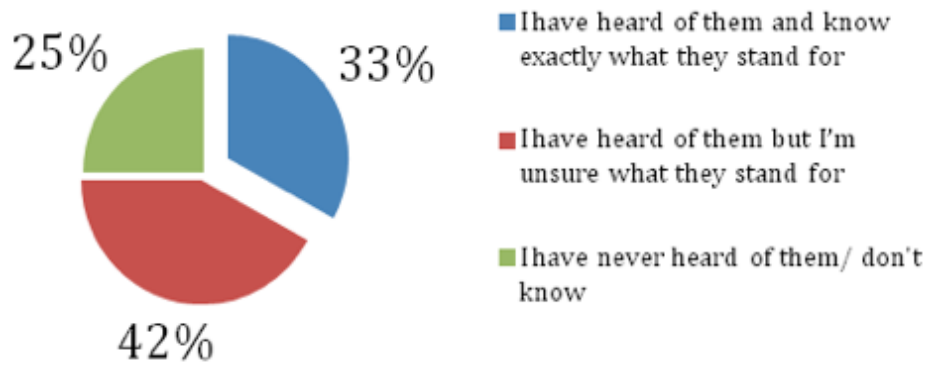
A political pariah? Public attitudes toward the EDL

Unlike elsewhere in Europe the far right in Britain has long been treated as a political pariah. Since 2001, and despite a favourable climate that has included record levels of public concern over immigration, far right groups like the British National Party (BNP) [persistently failed](#) to convince large numbers of voters that they were a legitimate alternative. But to what extent do the British public similarly view the EDL as a toxic insurgent?

Before answering this question, we first wanted to explore the extent to which the public are actually aware of the EDL, given that it was only formed in 2009 and has largely been excluded from mainstream political debate and media.

Our findings mirror this fact, suggesting the EDL has struggled to communicate its ideas to the wider public, and is far from being a 'household name'. Those who 'have heard of the EDL but are unsure what they stand for' clearly outnumber those who 'have heard of the EDL and know exactly what they stand for'. In fact, more than two-fifths of respondents - or 42% - said that while they had heard of the EDL they were unsure what the movement stands for. In contrast, only one-third had heard of the movement and were aware of its platform, while one-quarter of the respondents had 'never heard' of the English Defence League.

Figure 1: Awareness of the EDL



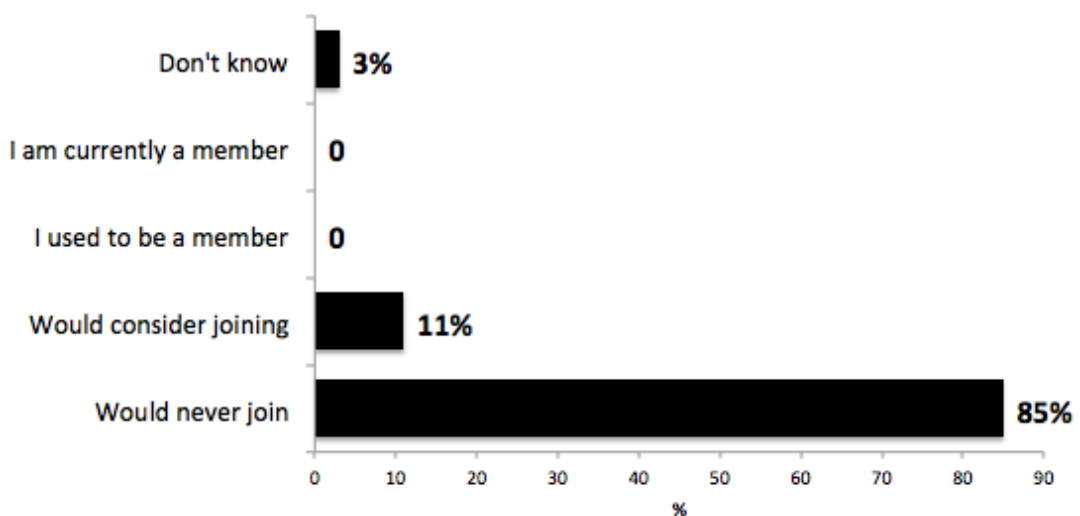
There is also a significant significant gender gap in levels of awareness about the EDL: while 40% of men had heard of the group and claimed to know what it stands for, only 26% of women had a similar level of awareness. In fact, 26% of women in the sample had never heard of the movement, which was more than two-fold higher than the equivalent figure among men (10%). More generally, those who were the most likely to have heard of the EDL and what it stands for tended to be aged between 18 and 24 years old, and based in Scotland, London and northern England.

Who is receptive? Sympathy for the EDL's values and methods

To explore whether there is public sympathy for the movement, respondents were asked a series of further questions, *but only to those who had heard of the EDL and know what they stand for* –i.e. those people in our survey who are aware of the movement and its ideas. This is because it makes little sense to ask questions about the EDL to people who have never heard of the movement. This reduced the overall number of respondents -or the sample size- from over 1,600 to 548.

How likely would these 'EDL-aware' respondents be -if at all- to consider joining the EDL? Similar to the reaction of the British public to other far right groups, we find that a clear and overwhelming majority consider the EDL to be a political pariah: almost nine out of every ten respondents -or 85%- of the EDL-aware group would 'never consider' joining. Only one out of every ten respondents –or 11%- would consider joining, while 3% said they did not know whether or not they would consider joining.

Figure 2: Would you consider joining the EDL?

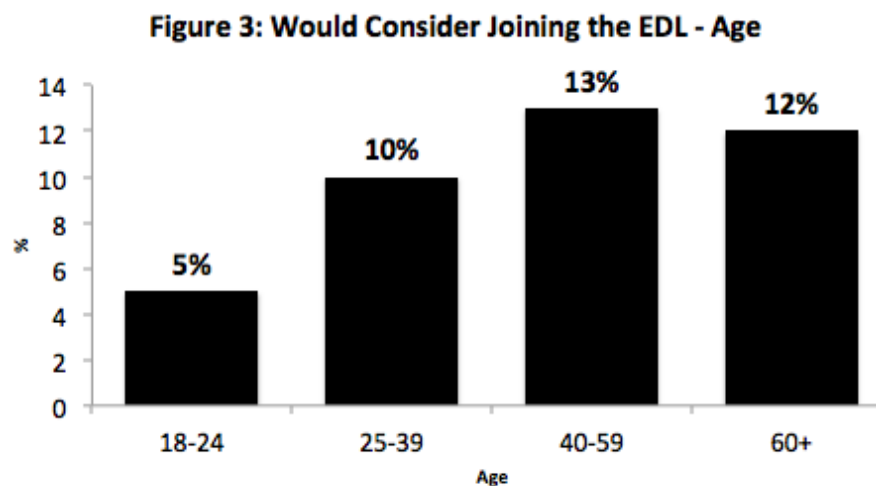


To what extent do these responses vary across different social groups? [Past research](#) on far right support suggests that those in society who are most receptive to the far right tend to be skilled manual workers, semi- and unskilled workers, and citizens who are dependent on the welfare state for their income (often referred to as the 'C2DE' social grades). In contrast, citizens from the upper, middle and

lower middle classes -who are more economically secure and tend to have benefitted from higher education- tend to be less likely to endorse the far right.

Consistent with the picture above, our results suggest that those within the C2DE categories are three times as likely as those from the ABC1 categories to consider joining the EDL: whereas 19% of respondents from the more economically insecure lower social classes would consider joining, only 6% of those in more affluent and flexible positions would consider doing so. However, in both groups those who would consider joining are only a small minority.

Also consistent with the [wider evidence](#) is the finding that men are most receptive to the EDL. In fact, men are twice as likely as women to consider joining. Turning to age, and perhaps counter-intuitively, we find that it is older respondents –i.e. those aged 40 years and above- who are slightly *more* likely than younger respondents to consider joining, although again those who say they would consider joining are very much in a small minority.

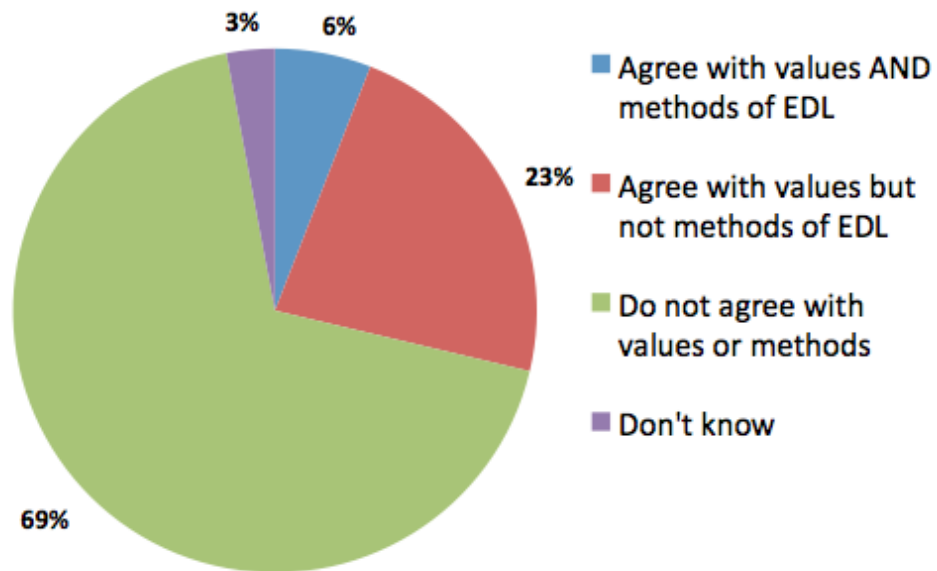


Attitudes toward the values and strategy of the EDL

To further explore these attitudes, we asked respondents whether they agree or disagree with the values and/or methods of the English Defence League. Previous [academic studies](#) have pointed to significant amounts of latent public sympathy in Britain for some of the core ideas advocated by the far right, such as reducing immigration, adopting tough measures toward minorities and more restrictive policies on law and order. But at the same time, it appears unlikely that large numbers of voters would endorse the EDL's provocative strategy of 'march-and-grow', which is often associated with violence – whether stemming from the rank and file, or [anti-fascist opponents](#).

As above, we restrict our analysis only to those citizens are aware of the EDL and its platform. Within this sample –and as expected- we find that a clear majority of respondents distance themselves from both the values *and* the methods of the English Defence League: more than two thirds -69%- said they 'do not agree with either the values or the methods' of the group.

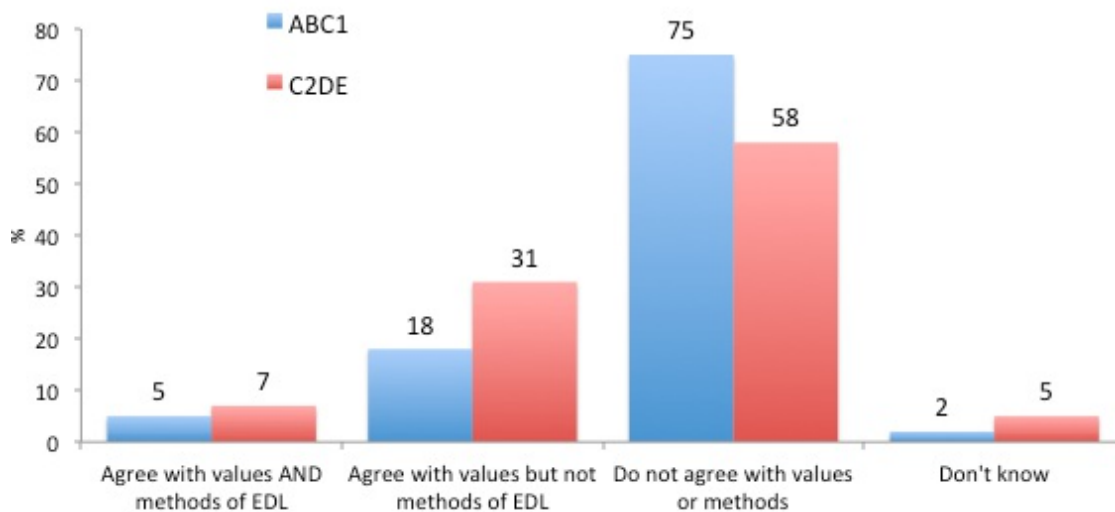
Figure 4: Views toward the values and methods of the EDL



We do, however, find some low-level sympathy for the values of the EDL but not its provocative strategy. Almost one-quarter of those who are aware of the movement and what it stands for-or 23%- 'agree with their values, but not their methods'. It should be emphasised, however, that this figure relates only to those respondents who are aware of the English Defence League, and that an overwhelming majority of citizens who were surveyed disagree with *both* the ideas and tactics of the EDL.

Mirroring the findings above, we find again that it is skilled, semi- and unskilled workers, and those on state benefits, who are the most likely to endorse the values of the EDL, if not its methods. Among those who are already aware of the movement, 31% of respondents from the working classes and those on benefits agree with the values of the EDL but not its methods, compared to 18% of respondents from the upper and middle-classes. Meanwhile, whereas 75% of respondents from the upper and middle-classes do not agree with the movement's ideas or methods, among those in the C2, D and E categories the equivalent figure is significantly lower, at 58%. It is also worth noting the regional pattern: agreement with the values of the EDL (but not its methods) is highest in northern England (27%) and the Midlands (27%) regions, but lowest in London (20%) and Scotland (9%).

Figure 5: Attitudes toward EDL values and methods by social grade



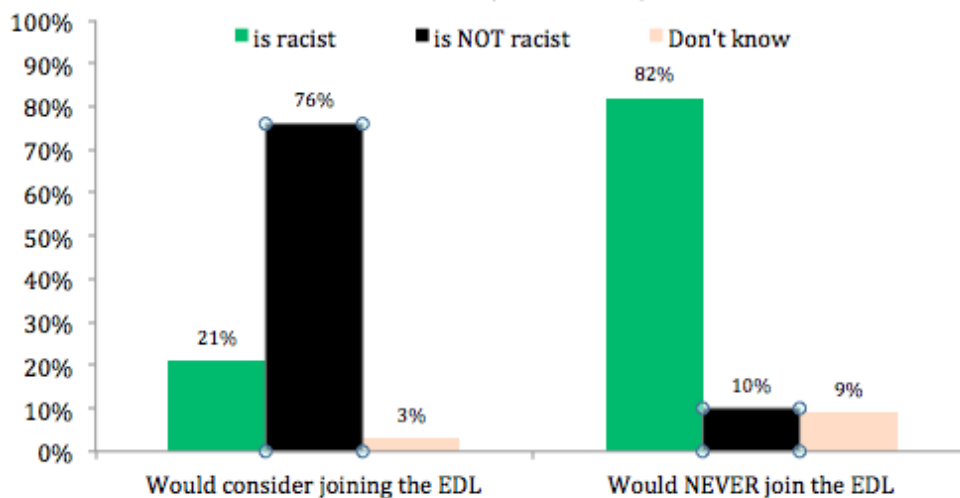
Are they racist? Public opinion on the EDL and racism

Aside from exploring public opinion of the EDL's values and strategy, citizens were also asked whether

they consider the English Defence League to be racist. Since their emergence, EDL leaders have persistently sought to distance the group from accusations of racism, claiming they are interested only in the perceived 'threat' from Islam and Muslim communities. The survey, however, suggests that large sections of the electorate remain deeply unconvinced, and perceive the English Defence League to be racist.

Almost three-quarters of respondents who said they were aware of the EDL -or 74%- took the view that it is a 'racist organization'. Less than one-fifth -or 17%- took the opposing view that the group is not racist, while 9% said they do not know whether or not the EDL is racist. As we might expect, a large majority of those who said they would consider joining the EDL -or 76%- reject the notion that the group is racist. Interestingly, however, there is also a minority -21%- who would both consider joining the EDL and accept that the organization is racist (although this is a tiny proportion of the population as a whole). This suggests, then, that for a small number of disgruntled citizens, accusations of racism are not necessarily a sufficient deterrent to joining the far right.

Figure 6: From what you know, would you say that the EDL is, or is not, racist?



Conclusions

The results above provide unique and unparalleled insight into views among the broader public toward the English Defence League, and point to five key conclusions.

The first is that only a minority of the population are actually aware of the English Defence League, and what it stands for. This suggests that while the EDL has failed to mobilise a mass base of supporters -a task that has been hampered by an outbreak of infighting- it has also struggled with the more fundamental task of simply informing large numbers of citizens about its existence and platform.

The second is that among those citizens who *are* aware of the EDL and what it stands for, an overwhelming majority do not view the movement as a credible and legitimate alternative. Rather, the results suggest that among those citizens who are aware of the movement, almost nine out of every ten would never consider joining. Unless the movement or the wider climate take a sharp turn, it looks distinctly unlikely that the EDL will extend its appeal more widely across society.

The third key message is that -while they form a clear minority- the citizens who are most receptive to the English Defence League exhibit a similar social profile as supporters of the far right more generally: they tend to be men; come from the working classes; and are spread quite widely across different age groups, with a slight bias toward the middle-aged. Contrary to conventional wisdom, we find little evidence among the small number of people who would 'consider' joining the EDL that it is only attractive to young people.

Fourth, while a large majority reject both the values and methods of the EDL, there is some sympathy for

the movement's values, although these supporters are very much in a minority. This suggests that while the EDL's provocative tactics are clearly a turn-off, the movement's anti-Islam and anti-Muslim platform has resonated with a small pool of respondents. For mainstream political parties and policy-makers, addressing these public anxieties over perceived threats from Islam and Muslim communities is clearly one challenge that is integral to countering the appeal of groups like the EDL.

Fifth and finally, the results suggest that attempts to counter racism will only go so far in terms of limiting the appeal of the far right. This is reflected in the finding that while some consider the EDL to be racist, they would nonetheless *still* consider joining the group. This indicates that while the English Defence League is opposed by large sections of the population, it may have rallied a small hardcore of followers who are simply not turned off -or indeed are attracted by- racist beliefs and discourse.

Overall, it is difficult to see the EDL significantly expanding its support base on its current trajectory. It shares a wider far-right space of which Islamophobia is a major component but its appeal is exceptionally limited – very few of those who know the group and its values would consider joining. The results of this survey suggest that the EDL's pariah status is very clear.

Methodology of the research

The survey was conducted using an online interview administered to members of the YouGov GB panel of over 350,000 individuals, who have agreed to take part in surveys. An email was sent to panellists selected at random from the base sample according to the sample definition, inviting them to take part in the survey and providing a link to the survey. The responding sample is weighted to the profile of the sample definition to provide a representative reporting sample. In other words, the figures reported above are weighted and representative of all GB adults (aged 18+). The profile is normally derived from census data or, if not available from the census, from industry accepted data. Our total sample size was 1,682 adults, and the survey was carried out online, between 10-11th September 2012.

This article was first published on the Extremis Project's [website](#)

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