

| Labour Leaders Since 1980 | How did they become leader? | Policy Positions | What wing of the Conservative Party did they represent? | Context | How did their leadership end? | How aligned is this leader's ideology to the current leader? |
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| Margaret Thatcher (1975-1990) (Prime Minister 1979-1990) | Successfully challenged Ted Heath to the leadership of the Conservative Party following their defeat in the 1974 General Election. | Tax: Advocated lower taxes and reduced state intervention, placing strong emphasis on supply-side economics and deregulation. Law & order: Promoted a tough stance on crime with increased police powers and strict sentencing. Europe: Sceptical of further European integration, wary of supranational governance diminishing national sovereignty. Health: Introduced market-oriented reforms in the NHS, focussing on efficiency and curbing state expenditure. Education: Endorsed reforms that increased competition and choice, encouraging a greater role for the private sector. | New Right - A champion of free-market liberalism and conservative principles. | Thatcher was regarded by many as nothing more than a talking horse candidate when she challenged Ted Heath to the leadership of the Conservatives. As leader of the party she moved the party to the right, rejecting many of the traditional one-nation positions the party had long held. Her move further to the right and growing euroscepticism would later prove her undoing. | Resigned the leadership after failing to win a leadership contest on the first ballot after a challenge from Michael Heseltine. | Alignment: Strong Tax: Strongly aligned. Thatcher was a free-market advocate, significantly cutting taxes and reducing government intervention. Law & Order: Aligned. She took a tough stance on crime, policing, and public order. Europe: Mixed. Though she was initially pro-European Economic Community (EEC), she became increasingly sceptical of European integration. However, she would not have supported Brexit in the way Badenoch does. Health: Somewhat aligned. She introduced internal market reforms to the NHS, similar in spirit to Badenoch's approach. Education: Aligned. She supported greater parental choice and introduced measures to promote competition in education. Overall: High alignment, though Thatcher was more pragmatic on Europe. |
| John Major (1990-1997) (Prime Minister 1990-1997) | Elected leader of the party (and PM) to replace Margaret Thatcher after she announced she was withdrawing from the leadership contest. | Tax: Supported moderate tax reductions with a focus on fiscal stability, balancing free-market policies with social responsibility. Law & order: Advocated a balanced approach, combining firm law enforcement with community initiatives. Europe: More pro-European than Thatcher, overseeing the Maastricht Treaty while remaining cautious of over-integration. Health: Continued moderate reforms in the NHS, emphasising efficiency and fiscal prudence. Education: Promoted reforms aimed at raising standards (such as created Ofsted) and expanding parental choice. | Centre-right: A pragmatic conservative blending traditional values with moderate modernisation. | Major's background was highly unusual for a Conservative, although this was used effectively by the party once in office. Margaret Thatcher endorsed Major as the person to carry on her legacy, although he soon showed himself to have a more moderate and collegiate style than his predecessor. Despite winning the 1992 election, the Conservatives looked increasingly tired in office as the 1990s rolled on, and were now faced with a popular and charismatic opposition leader in Tony Blair. | Resigned as party leader following defeat in the 1997 General Election. | Alignment: Weak Tax: Less aligned. While Major was not against tax cuts, his government introduced some tax increases and had a more centrist economic approach. Law & Order: Aligned. Major pursued a tough stance on crime and introduced the 'Back to Basics' campaign on social values. Europe: Not aligned. He was a strong supporter of the European project, signing the Maastricht Treaty. Health: Less aligned. The internal market reforms of the NHS continued, but with a more cautious approach. Education: Somewhat aligned. Major supported parental choice but was less radical in approach. Overall: Significant differences on Europe and tax policy, with some overlap on law and order. |
| William Hague (1997-2001) | Defeated Ken Clarke in the third ballot to replace John Major as Conservative leader following the landslide defeat in the 1997 election. | Tax: Favoured lower taxation and reduced government intervention, while maintaining fiscal responsibility. Law & order: Emphasised the modernisation of law enforcement and robust measures against crime. Europe: Supported European integration to an extent, though always with a focus on protecting national interests. Health: Advocated for a mixed approach in the NHS, combining public provision with market-inspired reforms. Education: Supported reforms such as the expansion of academies and greater parental choice. | Centre-right: Represented a moderate, one-nation conservatism with a pragmatic policy approach. | The devastation of the 1997 election result saw many potential successors to John Major. Hague's leadership could be said to have steered the ship, but this was insufficient time to regain the ground lost to New Labour. | Resigned after the 2001 General Election in which the Conservatives failed to make any significant dent in Labour's landslide majority. Later served as Foreign Secretary in David Cameron's cabinet. | Alignment: Moderate Tax: Aligned. Hague was a tax-cutter and favoured free-market principles. Law & Order: Aligned. He advocated for a tough stance on crime and immigration. Europe: Somewhat aligned. He was a strong critic of the single-currency and campaigned against the euro. He voted and supported Remain in 2016. Health: Somewhat aligned. He was critical of excessive government control in the NHS but did not propose radical reforms. Education: Aligned. He supported school choice and competition. Overall: Fairly aligned, though Hague lacked the opportunity to implement policies in government. |
| Iain Duncan Smith (2001-2003) | First leader elected under new rules which gave a say to the party membership. Narrowly finished in top two of parliamentary party vote in a close three-way race before winning 60.7% of membership ballot to become leader over Ken Clarke. | Tax: Campaigned for lower taxes and reduced government spending in line with free-market principles. Law & order: Staunchly promoted a tough, no-nonsense approach to law and order. Europe: Eurosceptic; critical of EU bureaucracy and overreach, advocating strongly for national sovereignty. Health: Supported significant NHS reforms incorporating competition and privatisation element. Education: Favoured increased school choice and the introduction of market mechanisms to boost standards. | Right-wing: Aligned with Thatcherite economic policies and a robust law and order agenda. | Iain Duncan Smith's leadership battle with Ken Clarke highlighted the schism the party faced over the question of Europe. Despite his success against one of the party's 'big beasts', his lack of charisma remained a problem for him throughout his tenure as leader. Although the party made gains in the local elections, these were seen as being in spite of IDS, not because of him. | Forced from position in October 2003 when he lost a confidence vote of Conservative MPs. Later served in David Cameron's cabinet as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. | Alignment: Strong Tax: Aligned. He was committed to tax cuts and limited government intervention. Law & Order: Aligned. He was a strong advocate of tougher policing and stricter immigration controls. Europe: Aligned. He was highly Eurosceptic, opposing deeper European integration. Health: Aligned. He supported NHS reform, including market-oriented measures. Education: Aligned. He advocated for greater parental choice and competition in schools. Overall: A close ideological match with Badenoch. |
| Michael Howard (2003-2005) | Elected unopposed to succeed Iain Duncan Smith. | Tax: Maintained a commitment to low taxes and fiscal discipline, though with a less radical approach than some predecessors. Law & order: Prioritised strict law and order measures with an emphasis on enhanced police powers and tougher sentencing. Europe: Held sceptical views on further EU integration, underlining the importance of national sovereignty. Health: Focused on improving NHS efficiency through a balanced mix of public and private initiatives. Education: Supported reforms aimed at raising educational standards while preserving traditional structures. | Centre-right: A traditional conservative with a strong emphasis on law and order and fiscal responsibility. | Regarded as an experienced former minister and 'safe pair of hands', Michael Howard spent his time as leader reimposing discipline within the Conservative Party, removing controversial candidates and the whip from MPs considered to be out of step with party policy. Howard was able to put some pressure on Labour over their policy in the Middle East, but the party continued to be regarded as being out of step with modern society and attitudes. | Resigned as party leader following the 2005 UK General Election in which the Conservatives gained 33 seats, but nowhere near enough to challenge Labour's majority. | Alignment: Moderate Tax: Aligned. Howard was in favour of lower taxes but more cautious than Badenoch. Law & Order: Strongly aligned. He was known for his tough stance on crime as Home Secretary. Europe: Somewhat aligned. He was a Eurosceptic but not an outright supporter of Brexit. Health: Less aligned. He did not propose radical NHS reform. Education: Aligned. He supported parental choice and higher standards. Overall: Alignment on law and order but more cautious on other policies. |
| David Cameron (2005-2016) | Elected leader of the Conservatives in October 2005, despite only having been an MP since 2001. Won both the ballot of MPs and the membership. | Tax: Advocated a balanced law and order agenda, modernising policing alongside social inclusion measures. Law & order: Advocated a balanced law and order agenda, modernising policing alongside social inclusion measures. Europe: Initially pro-EU, later shifted to address growing Euroscepticism within the party – a transition that culminated in the Brexit referendum. Health: Supported increased NHS funding coupled with efficiency reforms and measured privatisation. Education: Endorsed reforms such as the expansion of academies and enhanced parental choice to boost standards. | Centre-right: A moderniser who blended traditional conservatism with social liberalism and market-oriented reforms. | Heralded as the 'heir to Blair' given his youthful complexion and modernising influence on his party, Cameron worked hard to adopt more progressive social and environmental attitudes. The coalition government he headed caused some resentment amongst his backbenchers given the influence of Lib Dems on policy, but Cameron remained popular and was able to secure a majority in 2015. His failure to address the issue of Europe came to a head with the 2016 referendum. | Resigned in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit referendum, during which he campaigned heavily to remain in the EU. Later served as Foreign Secretary in Rishi Sunak's cabinet. | Alignment: Weak Tax: Partially aligned. Cameron reduced some taxes but took a more centrist economic approach. Law & Order: Mixed. He prioritised social justice initiatives over a hard-line approach. Europe: Not aligned. He was initially Eurosceptic but supported remaining in the EU. Health: Less aligned. He increased NHS funding but did implement some market reforms. Education: Aligned. He introduced academy schools, increasing choice and competition. Overall: Limited alignment, particularly on Europe and law and order. |
| Theresa May (2016-2019) | Elected leader of the Conservatives following Cameron's resignation. Won an overwhelming majority of the parliamentary party vote. Vote of party membership was cancelled after her opponent, Andrea Leadsom withdrew. | Tax: Emphasised fiscal responsibility, maintaining moderate tax policies within an overall austerity framework. Law & order: Prioritised a robust law and order agenda, with increased support for policing and tougher sentencing. Europe: Focused on negotiating Brexit, adopting a pragmatic approach to severing ties with the EU. Health: Aimed to protect the NHS through targeted funding, although fiscal pressures limited extensive reforms. Education: Supported education, including arguing for an increase in the number of grammar schools, albeit with less prominence than other policy areas. | Centre-right: A pragmatic and cautious Conservative, particularly shaped by the challenges of Brexit. | Theresa May's premiership began a lot sooner than expected following the withdrawal of Andrea Leadsom. Her entire period in office was dominated by the fallout from the Brexit referendum and trying to secure a deal with the EU that was acceptable to Parliament. Her decision to hold an election in 2017 cost her a majority in parliament, giving even greater influence to her backbenchers. | Resigned as party leader following the failure to win support for her Brexit deal. | Alignment: Weak Tax: Less aligned. May was not focused on tax cuts and advocated more state intervention. Law & Order: Somewhat aligned. She was tough on law and order but had a complex immigration policy. Europe: Somewhat aligned. She pursued Brexit but in a pragmatic, compromise-driven way and was a remain supporter before the referendum. Health: Less aligned. She was not a major proponent of NHS marketisation. Education: Partially aligned. She supported grammar schools and school choice. Overall: Some alignment but major differences on economic policy and Brexit approach |
| Boris Johnson (2019-2022) | Elected with a majority of support of both MPs and the party membership. | Tax: Advocated for tax cuts and economic stimulus measures, with a strong focus on boosting growth. Law & order: Emphasised a robust law and order stance, often using populist rhetoric to rally support. Europe: Championed Brexit, prioritising national sovereignty and a decisive break from EU institutions. Health: Pledged increased investment in the NHS, though policy outcomes combined populism with fiscal pragmatism. Education: Promoted reforms to modernise education, including greater school autonomy and increased parental choice. | Right-wing populist: Combined traditional Conservative values with a nationalist, populist outlook. | A hugely popular and well-known figure, Johnson's elevation to the premiership was seen as almost inevitable once May announced her intention to resign. Having regained a Conservative majority in the House of Commons, he quickly pushed through his Brexit deal. The COVID-19 pandemic would dominate the second half of his premiership, as would a series of scandals which severely damaged his credibility. | Resigned the leadership in 2022 amidst several scandals which triggered numerous resignations from his government. | Alignment: Moderate Tax: Not aligned. Johnson raised taxes significantly despite his free-market rhetoric. Law & Order: Aligned. He supported strong policing and strict immigration controls. Europe: Strongly aligned. He was a leading Brexiteer (however his depth of belief in leaving the EU is debated). Health: Less aligned. His government expanded NHS funding rather than pursuing reform. Education: Somewhat aligned. He supported free schools and academies. Overall: Strong on Brexit and law and order, but weak alignment on tax and health. |
| Liz Truss (September-October 2022) | Elected leader with the support of 57% of the party membership, despite finishing second to Rishi Sunak in a vote of MPs. | Tax: Proposed significant tax cuts and supply-side economic policies aimed at stimulating growth. Law & order: Supported robust law and order measures, with less emphasis on broader social reforms. Europe: Adopted a hardline Brexit stance, emphasising complete national sovereignty and distancing from EU regulation. Health: Advocated market-oriented reforms in the NHS, focussing on efficiency and competition. Education: Favoured education reforms that increased choice and competition, reducing the role of state control. | Right-wing/Neoliberal: Strongly committed to free-market policies and populist economic reforms. | Truss' radical agenda was roundly rejected by the markets, leading to the unravelling of her plans in a matter of days. The death of Queen Elizabeth II the day after she was appointed prime minister probably prolonged her premiership quite significantly. | Resigned following growing discontent with her economic policies and the resignation of her chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, following the negative reaction to her mini-Budget. Truss' premiership is the shortest in British history, lasting just 50 days. | Alignment: Strong Tax: Strongly aligned. Truss pursued aggressive tax-cutting policies. Law & Order: Aligned. She supported a robust stance on crime. Europe: Strongly aligned. She was a firm Brexiteer. Health: Somewhat aligned. She supported NHS reform but did not develop detailed policies. Education: Aligned. She promoted choice and competition. Overall: One of the closest ideological matches to Badenoch. |
| Rishi Sunak (2022-2024) | Elected unopposed in the second leadership election of 2022, having finished runner up to Liz Truss the first time round. | Tax: Advocates responsible fiscal management with a balanced approach to progressive taxation, cautious on tax increases while ensuring stability. Law & order: Supports a balanced law and order agenda, investing in modern policing measures while upholding traditional values. Europe: Focuses on pragmatic post-Brexit relations with the EU, prioritising trade and cooperative frameworks. Health: Committed to investing in the NHS, with plans for modernisation and efficiency improvements. Education: Endorses increased investment and measured reforms to address inequality and raise standards. | Centre-right: A pragmatic, technocratic conservative with a balanced approach to fiscal and social policy. | Sunak was seen as a 'safe pair of hands' following Liz Truss' brief tenure in office. As the fifth Conservative prime minister in six years, the party's credibility was in ruins. Moreover, he was facing a more confident Labour Party under Keir Starmer. Sunak's personal wealth (and that of his wife's family) was constantly used to portray him as out of touch, which he did not always deal with effectively. | Resigned as party leader following the party's landslide defeat in the 2024 General Election. | Alignment: Moderate Tax: Partially aligned. He reduced some taxes but prioritised fiscal responsibility over deep cuts. Law & Order: Aligned. He maintained a firm stance on policing and immigration. Europe: Aligned. He was a Brexit supporter but pragmatic in approach. Health: Less aligned. His policies were more focused on funding rather than reform. Education: Somewhat aligned. He supported grammar schools and school choice. Overall: Aligned on Brexit and law and order, but less so on tax and health. |
| Kemi Badenoch (2024-Present) | Elected leader in the autumn of 2024, following Sunak's resignation. Badenoch was the most popular candidate in the final round of voting by MPs, and won 57% of party membership. | Tax: Favouring low taxes and limited government intervention, consistent with free-market principles. Has also suggested that all options need to be considered around benefits (including pensions) in terms of affordability. Law & order: Advocates a strong stance on law and order, with a focus on robust enforcement and strict immigration control. Europe: A firm Brexit supporter, prioritising national sovereignty and reducing EU influence. Health: Endorses reforms to enhance NHS efficiency by blending public provision with market-oriented approaches. Education: Supports reforms to increase parental choice and competition, aiming to raise educational standards. | Right-wing: Combines free-market economic policies with socially conservative positions and a strong nationalist stance. | Badenoch finds herself in a similar position to the one William Hague was in after the 1997 general election. She had made a deliberate point to stress that policy would be developed slowly, although has sought to portray herself as a formidable opponent of Starmer's Labour Party. | | |