

# The Centre Holds

Despite Elites' Attempts to  
Divide Britain in the **Culture Wars**,  
a Tolerant **Centre Ground** Prevails

*“This research reveals the decent, tolerant and ethical centre ground of the British people. We are both radical and conservative. We’re proud of our history and we care deeply about racial and social injustice. Despite talk of polarisation, we still share a meaningful sense of the common good. Like Global Future, I believe it is our duty as politicians to build this common ground in the interests of the nation and democracy.”*

---

**Jon Cruddas**, Labour MP for Dagenham and Rainham, former head of policy and author of ‘The Dignity of Labour’.

*“At a time when the debate on cultural issues can appear to be polarised and tribal, this Global Future report demonstrates that the public generally takes moderate and nuanced positions. This is encouraging news for those who believe that common ground can be found amongst a majority of the public on supposedly divisive issues.”*

---

**David Gauke**, former Conservative MP for South West Hertfordshire, previously serving as Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor.

*“In an age when the average soundbite has fallen in length from 45 seconds to 10 seconds, many people in politics, the media and social media take refuge in simplistic slogans and labelling to discuss complex issues. What this research highlights is that, as a whole, people across the UK are both capable and comfortable in talking about complex questions of race and identity, and that they still hold firm to a centre ground of tolerance, decency and mutual respect.”*

**Jesse Norman**, Conservative MP for Hereford & South Herefordshire, previously serving as Financial Secretary to the Treasury and author of ‘Adam Smith: What He Thought’ and ‘Edmund Burke: Philosopher, Politician, Prophet’.

# About *Us*

**Global Future** is a think tank dedicated to using psychology to provide fearless and original insight into the challenges facing our times. We aim to guide leaders – from businesses to politics, arts and civil society – to ask bigger, deeper questions about how we can best serve our communities.

To contact the Global Future think tank, please email Rowenna Davis on:

**[Rowenna.Davis@globalfuturepartners.com](mailto:Rowenna.Davis@globalfuturepartners.com)**  
**[www.ourglobalfuture.com](http://www.ourglobalfuture.com)**

The Think Tank is supported by Global Future Partners, which is a consulting firm advising organisations on Purpose Driven Culture Change, Leadership and Talent.

If you would like to contact the Consultancy, please email Gurnek Bains on:

**[Gurnek.Bains@globalfuturepartners.com](mailto:Gurnek.Bains@globalfuturepartners.com)**  
**[www.globalfuturepartners.com](http://www.globalfuturepartners.com)**

The report was written by Renie Anjeh & Isabel Doraisamy.

## Acknowledgements

Global Future would like to thank Gurnek Bains, Kylie Bains, Tom Baldwin, Rowenna Davis, Vicky Xian and Bryony Heard for their insights and support with this report. We would also like to thank everyone who enriched this research by sharing their views and time with us.

# The *Writers*



**Renie Anjeh** is a consultant for the Global Future think tank. He studied politics at University of Leeds and then did a Masters in Philosophy of the Social Sciences at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He has worked in public affairs and in Parliament and has written for *The Times*, *The New Statesman* and *The Spectator*, with a long-standing interest in British politics.



**Isabel Doraisamy** is a psychological researcher at the Global Future think tank. She studied psychology at The Australian National University and has lived in four different cities across Australia, South America and the United Kingdom since she was 18. As such, Isabel is concerned with the significance of our social lives, and in particular how social psychology intersects with health (mental and physical) and informs our understanding of current issues.

# Contents

<b>Foreword: Gurnek Bains</b>	<b>06</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>07</b>
<i>Section 1.</i> British People Have More in Common Than We Think	09
<i>Section 2.</i> A Reasonable and Tolerant Centre Ground Still Exists	12
<i>Section 3.</i> British People are Comfortable Discussing Identity	15
<i>Section 4.</i> Political Elites are Responsible for Exacerbating Division	17
<i>Section 5.</i> Divisions are More Complex and Nuanced Than We Think	19
<b>Conclusion: Politicians Can Strengthen British Democracy</b>	<b>21</b>

**Gurnek Bains D.Phil.**

Managing Partner of  
Global Future Partners  
and CEO of the Global  
Future think tank



# Foreword

We hear a lot about how divided we are by the culture wars, but this report reveals a very different picture under the surface.

Rather than being polarised and isolated, our research finds a surprising and reassuring sense of unity amongst the British people.

Even on the most heated of topics such as race and identity, this report finds a tolerant, ethical and even progressive centre ground holding strong.

So why do we still feel so divided? Psychology offers some insight here. We know that people judge things according to what is salient and emotionally resonant about them at the time, rather than on objective facts.

With our media and politicians constantly drawing disproportionate attention to extremes in the culture wars, it is therefore easy to forget the large and reasonable centre ground that is the majority.

Of course, perceptions matter. If we feel fellow citizens have views that are 'too far' from our own, we can become scared to have authentic and meaningful conversations with them. Our

ability to learn from each other and form a common understanding is eroded.

So, whilst this unity amongst the British people holds true today, we can't be complacent about tomorrow. With continued pressure from elites, we know that the common ground can splinter. We have seen this happen under Trump in the States, and the beginnings of such division in the UK over Brexit.

People want to feel part of a tribe, and Social Identity Theory suggests that people are inclined to view theirs as superior to others. It feeds our self-esteem and sense of belonging in an increasingly turbulent and atomised world. Politicians know they can exploit that for their own ends, as well as the press.

This report suggests that the British people want better leadership. Rather than pandering to division, our political and media leaders should more appropriately represent the decent, progressive centre ground of our people.

Leaders who have the courage to speak up for this ethical centre wouldn't just earn the respect of our citizens, they may also go a long way to help strengthen our democracy.

# Executive *Summary*

**British people have more in common than we think.** Whilst a healthy diversity of thought exists, there is strong consensus amongst the British public on many issues broadly perceived as divisive including race, gender, British history and the monarchy.

**We are proud of our history, but we want to change.** A strong majority of us (77%) believe that Britain has done good in the world, with 67% believing that it has also done damage. It follows that almost two in three of us believe that change is needed to make society fairer.

**A tolerant, reasonable, centre ground holds strong.** Despite a narrative of increasing polarisation, four in five people believe that it's important to be attentive to issues of racial inequality and social justice - the Merriam-Webster definition of 'woke'.<sup>1</sup> This includes an overwhelming majority of Leavers and Conservative voters.

**People believe that politicians and journalists divide us.** Over two thirds of voters believe that elites are undermining unity and amplifying division. We know media outlets have an incentive to sensationalise splits to grow their audiences, whilst politicians can profit from weaponising division against their opponents.

*Executive Summary continued on next page*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/woke>

**Attempts by journalists and politicians to divide the British people are dangerous because they can work.** Psychology suggests that increased polarisation arguably has less to do with significant ideological differences than it has to do with our human desire to see the group (or party) to which we belong as more favourable or moral than another to which we don't.

**The greatest predictor of opinion is whether someone voted to Leave or Remain. However, people's views are more complex and nuanced than we think.** For example, three quarters of Leavers agree it is important to be attentive to issues of race and social justice and 40% of Remainers favour current or more restrictions to immigration.

**People blame social media for exacerbating the problem.** Biased online communities create an echo chamber effect, which reinforces our own views and renders opposing ones as more and more alien. Some 71% of the British people now conclude that social media creates division.

**There is a huge opportunity – and responsibility – for political parties to lay down their arms in the culture wars and support the centre ground.** As the local elections approach, politicians and journalists should pursue a more reasonable, respectful and sensible debate. This won't just help them win, it will also make Britain a stronger and safer democracy.

*The main report starts here. The following polling research was conducted by YouGov on 6th-7th April 2022. It used a weighted sample of 2244 respondents from across Great Britain. All surveys were conducted online. For the purpose of this report the respondents have been grouped into categories. The 'Leave' and 'Remain' groups respondents based on how they voted in the 2016 European Union Referendum. Rounding decisions may impact totals.*

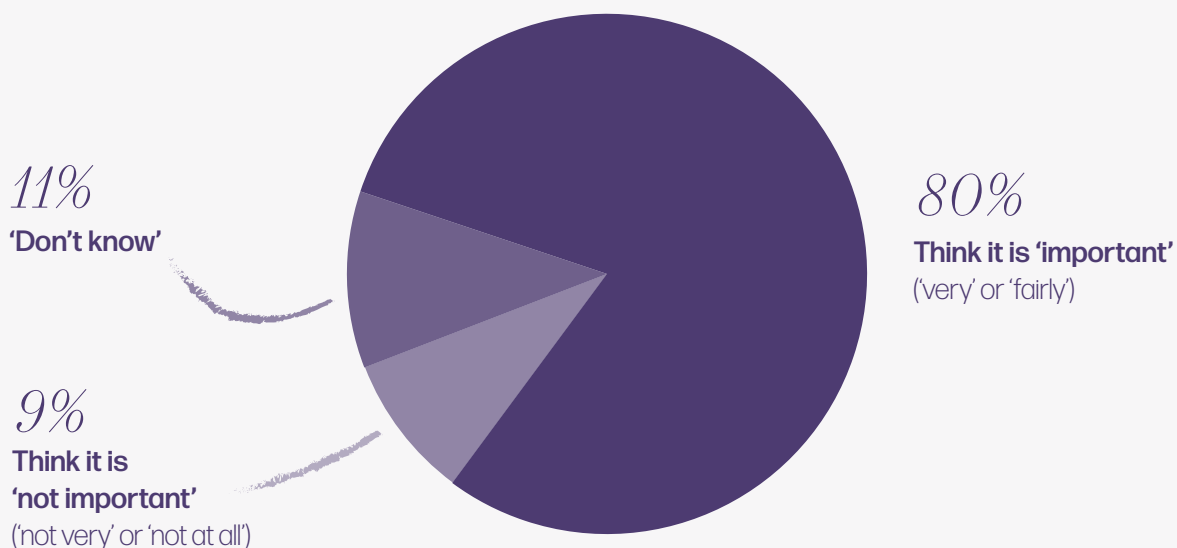


# Section 01. British People Have More in Common Than We Think

The British people care about social justice. Far from being a country with huge divisions on sociocultural issues, there is a surprising degree of consensus on key questions about British life and our institutions. This consensus is reasonable, tolerant and liberal in nature.

Four in five members of the British public believe it is important to be actively attentive to issues of racial inequality and social justice, a dictionary definition of 'woke'.<sup>1</sup>

*Figure 01:* The percentage of people who think it is important to be aware and attentive to issues of racial inequality and social justice.



*N= 2244. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample.*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/woke>

When asked about their views on British history, a supposedly controversial topic, some 77% of people believe that Britain has been a force for good in the world - but this does not equate to denialism about our past. Some 67% of us also accept that Britain has done damage. This majority remains stable across age, gender and region.

Contrary to political prejudices, we found that 74% of Conservatives acknowledge that damage has been done in our past, whilst 65% of Labour voters accept that we have also had a positive impact in the world.

There is a consensus on our future as well as our past. A clear majority of 62% think that change is needed to make our society fairer, far greater than those who wanted a revolution (15%) or no change at all (9%). There is a clear plurality for this desire for significant change across all demographic groups including gender, age, class and region.

Within this, Labour supporters (54%) are more likely than Conservative supporters (37%) to believe that 'significant' change is needed. However, contrary to stereotypes, fewer than one in five Conservatives think we need no change at all.

Table 01: Distribution of belief in degree of change across party supporters

MAKING BRITAIN FAIRER	CONS	LABOUR	LIB. DEMS	TOTAL
'A revolution is needed'	6%	25%	13%	15%
'A significant amount of change is needed'	37%	54%	62%	44%
'A small amount of change is needed'	27%	7%	17%	18%
'No change is needed. Britain is already fair'	19%	2%	2%	9%
'Don't know'	11%	11%	5%	15%

N= 2244. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample. Figures have been rounded.

The same pattern holds true for Britain's institutions. A strong majority of 68% support retaining the monarchy in some form or another, with a plurality (41%) believing that the current constitutional settlement should remain unchanged. However, there is still potential support for reform of the monarchy, with 43% of people saying they would be open to abolishing the monarchy or keeping the monarchy but reducing its responsibilities.

The fact that such a high percentage of society seem to hold simultaneously such traditional and progressive views on the makeup of British society is hugely significant. It is also contrary to many commonly held assumptions that see Conservative supporters as deeply reactionary, with Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters as staunchly radical.

## The Problem with Defining *'Woke'*

Despite its anti-racist etymology, the term 'woke' has become a controversial phrase in the culture wars. So, what does it mean?

Merriam-Webster's definition is 'aware or actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)'. Using this definition, four in five of us are 'woke'. This includes 77% of Conservative voters and 74% of Leave voters. However, many writers and academics, often critics of 'wokeness', contest this definition. Citing contemporary use of the word in the last decade by those who have self-defined as 'woke', they say it is distinct from social liberalism. Rather it describes the belief that the West is 'built on pervasive structures of oppression particularly race and gender based'. Using this definition of 'woke', just 30% of us agree.

Contrasting both definitions of woke is illuminating as it not only demonstrates the need for nuance in these debates but the need for clarity when using contested words.

Interestingly, when asked directly whether people accepted the term 'woke' to describe themselves - with no definition given - 16% said they were, 41% said they were not and 31% said they did not know what the term meant.

# Section 02. A Reasonable and Tolerant Centre Gound Still Exists

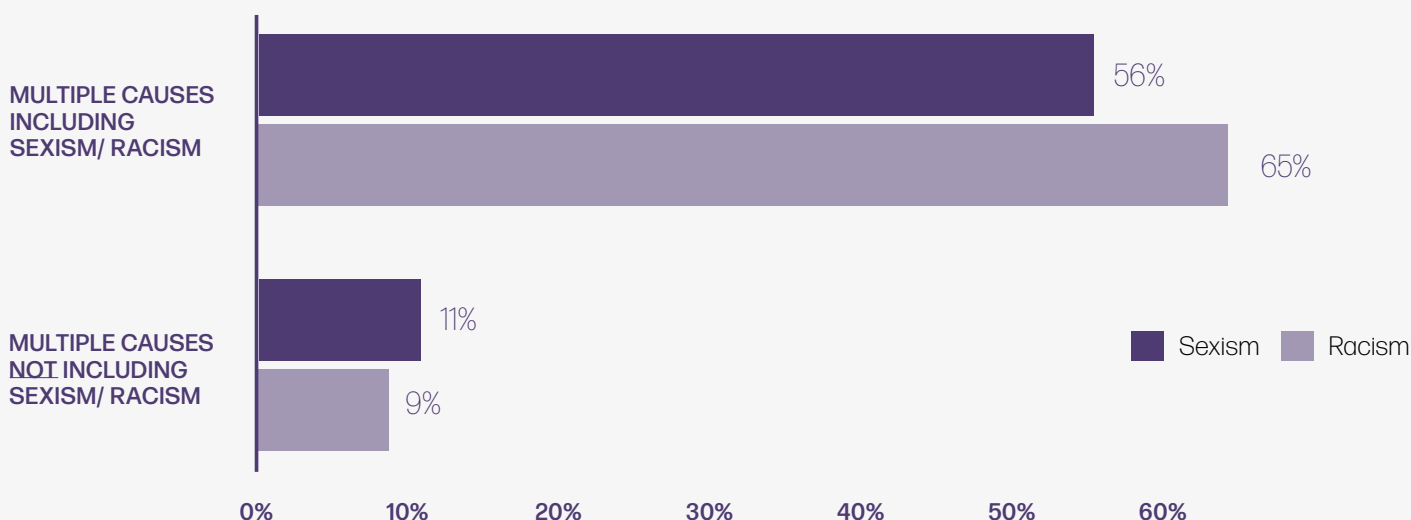
## RACE & GENDER DISCRIMINATION

One important aspect of the centre ground amongst people is a recognition of discrimination in British society, both in terms of racial and sex discrimination.

When asked whether sexual harassment is a big risk that women face, a significant majority of respondents agreed (64%). Furthermore, when asked about the gender pay gap over half of respondents (56%) said that sexism is one of many factors which account for it.

This also applies to questions about race. Two thirds of people (65%) said that racism was one of the factors that explains disparities between racial groups. Very few people dismiss racism as a factor that explains disparity between groups (9%). This runs counter to the idea that British society is in denial about issues pertaining to racial and sex discrimination.

Figure 02: Total response percentages to what explains racial disparities and the gender pay gap in Britain.



N= 2244. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample. Figures don't add up to 100 as we've excluded response percentages to 'exclusively sexism/racism', 'none of the above' and 'don't know'.

However, our views on racism and sexism are nuanced. Only three percent of us believe that disparities between racial groups are exclusively caused by racism and only nine percent of us believe that the gender pay gap is exclusively the result of sexism.

Furthermore, 68% of respondents believe that most or a fair amount of white people hold 'unconscious racial biases'. Whilst this has traditionally been considered a liberal left concept, it is now a view shared by most Conservative (61%) and Leave voters (61%). However, only 27% of people think that most or all white people have unconscious racial bias.

## SEX AND GENDER

Despite being the most fraught and most toxic of culture wars, the debate around sex and gender is another area where complexity around Britain's divisions are revealed but also where there is potential for a tolerant and sensible centre ground.

What is clear from our polling is that the public see a difference between someone who has had gender reassignment surgery and someone who has not, in regards to gender recognition.

When it is clear that the individual in question has had gender reassignment surgery, a clear plurality of 43% believe that trans women and trans men should be recognised as the gender they have transitioned to.

A further nuance comes when you look at British people's attitudes towards conscious as opposed to unconscious racism. Whilst almost one in three believe that white people have unconscious racial bias, a much smaller proportion (6%) believe that most or all white people are consciously racist. This is important because it suggests that the British public are aware of racism but also believe that intent creates a clear distinction.

*“Whilst almost one in three believe that white people have unconscious racial bias, a much smaller proportion of 6% believe that most or all white people are consciously racist.”*

However, without gender reassignment and based purely on self-identification, support for recognition falls significantly, with a plurality opposed in both cases. Only 25% think a trans man should be recognised without surgery and 24% in the case of a trans woman.

Interestingly, men are more likely to be apprehensive about gender recognition both in terms of gender reassignment surgery and self-identification without gender reassignment, despite this being a key issue for many feminists. Some 52% of men do not recognise trans women without surgery as women, compared to a plurality among women (38%) who agree.

This is illuminating because it reveals two important things in terms of British public opinion. People are supportive of gender

recognition superseding biology if it is clear that gender reassignment surgery is involved. However, this does not translate into support for self-identification.

It is also worth caveating our findings with an acknowledgement that a relatively high number of people are 'not sure' what they believe on this issue compared to other questions. Consistently about a third of respondents say they are not sure. This could reflect competing understandings – or even little understanding – of the debate around sex and gender.

This again reinforces the need for greater clarity and precision in terms of language within the discourse around these contested issues. It also further supports evidence that the public are more reasonable and nuanced in their approach.

## The *Availability Bias*

The fact that there is a noteworthy degree of consensus on issues often accepted as ideologically divisive in Britain calls into question how real or perceived divisions between the left and right really are. In psychology, the Availability Bias describes people's tendency to unconsciously 'cut corners' and draw on immediately available knowledge to reductively apply it to more complex concepts.

Understood here, it suggests that people recall recent or memorable examples of when the left and right have been more ideologically opposed, and apply them to other issues. This would increase the likelihood of incorrect or simplified assumptions being made and it is likely that politicians' and the media's emphasis on such examples exaggerate this. This is discussed further in Section 4.

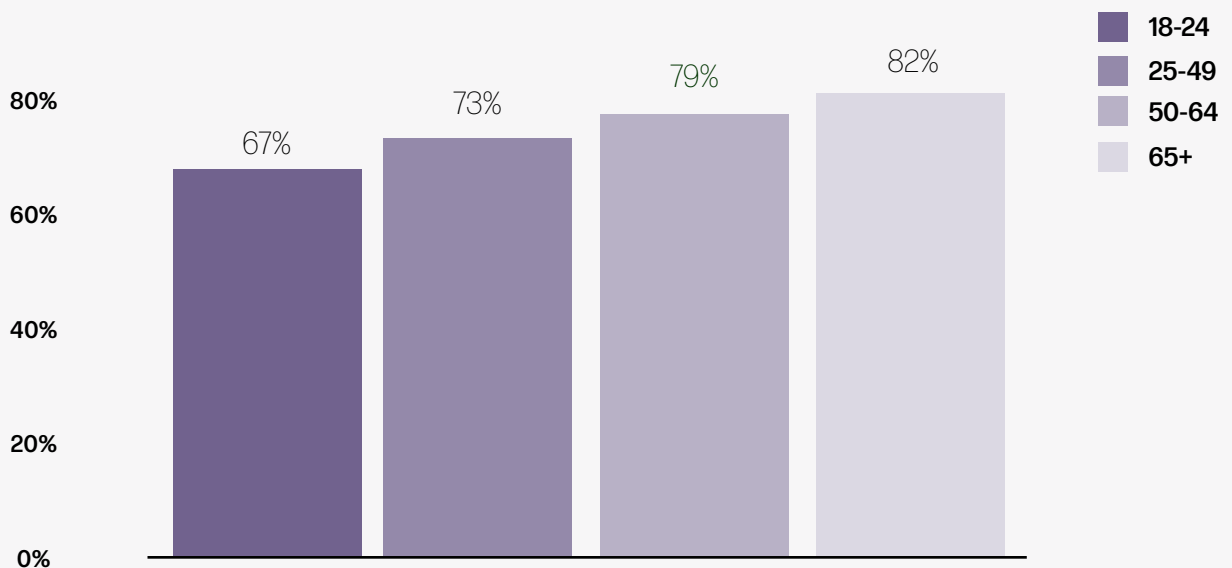
## Section 03. British People are Comfortable Discussing Identity

British people are surprisingly at ease with themselves. Contrary to national stereotypes, over three quarters of people (76%) say that they are comfortable discussing race and identity.

There is a slight drop in the majority when applied to the workplace, with 67% of people feeling comfortable discussing identity at work. This drop is unsurprising in light of the addition of structural power dynamics in the workplace.

However, given that the BITC Race at Work report in 2018 found that only 38% of the population felt comfortable talking about race then, it suggests a significant amount of progress with regards to British businesses' approach to discussing race and identity at work.

Figure 03: Percentage of people sorted by age who feel comfortable talking about identity



*N= 2244. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample.*

Our research indicates that the most significant predictor of how comfortable people are talking about race and identity is age. Interestingly, there is a positive correlation between age and comfort. We found that 67% of people between 18-24 say they are comfortable talking about race whilst 82% of people over 65 say they feel comfortable.

This could seem like an obvious relationship given that younger people are still forming their opinions let alone building confidence in expressing them. However, this is not as strong in our other questions, potentially reflecting a higher personal stake in race and identity. Business leaders and politicians should therefore continue to invest more in making young people feel psychologically safe to learn about and discuss these issues.

Political correctness has also been a controversial topic for many decades, with some people believing it to be necessary to be sensitive about not giving offence while others fear that it can restrict free speech and open debate.

There are several surveys and polls showing widespread concern about ‘political correctness’. While some research even indicates that it can make voters less likely to support left-leaning parties, this survey has not found much evidence to support this. Instead, the plurality of people (37%) are unaffected by a party being politically correct.

The fact that this plurality is seen across party lines is something for politicians to bear in mind. It may suggest that voters do not necessarily have the same level of engagement as elites and are less interested in policing language than they are in political action.

Nonetheless, our research does find that Leave voters, Conservative voters, C2DE voters and those in regional England are more likely than the rest of the British public to think negatively of a party that they perceive as politically correct. This may be something for a centre-left party which wants to occupy the centre ground to work through.

*Table 02: Impact of political correctness on party favourability according to party allegiance*

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS & PARTY FAVOURABILITY	CONS	LABOUR	LIB. DEMS	TOTAL
More favourable	14%	42%	34%	25%
Less favourable	37%	9%	19%	21%
No real difference	37%	35%	38%	37%

*N= 2244. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample. Figures have been rounded and don't add up to 100 as we've excluded response percentages to 'don't know'.*

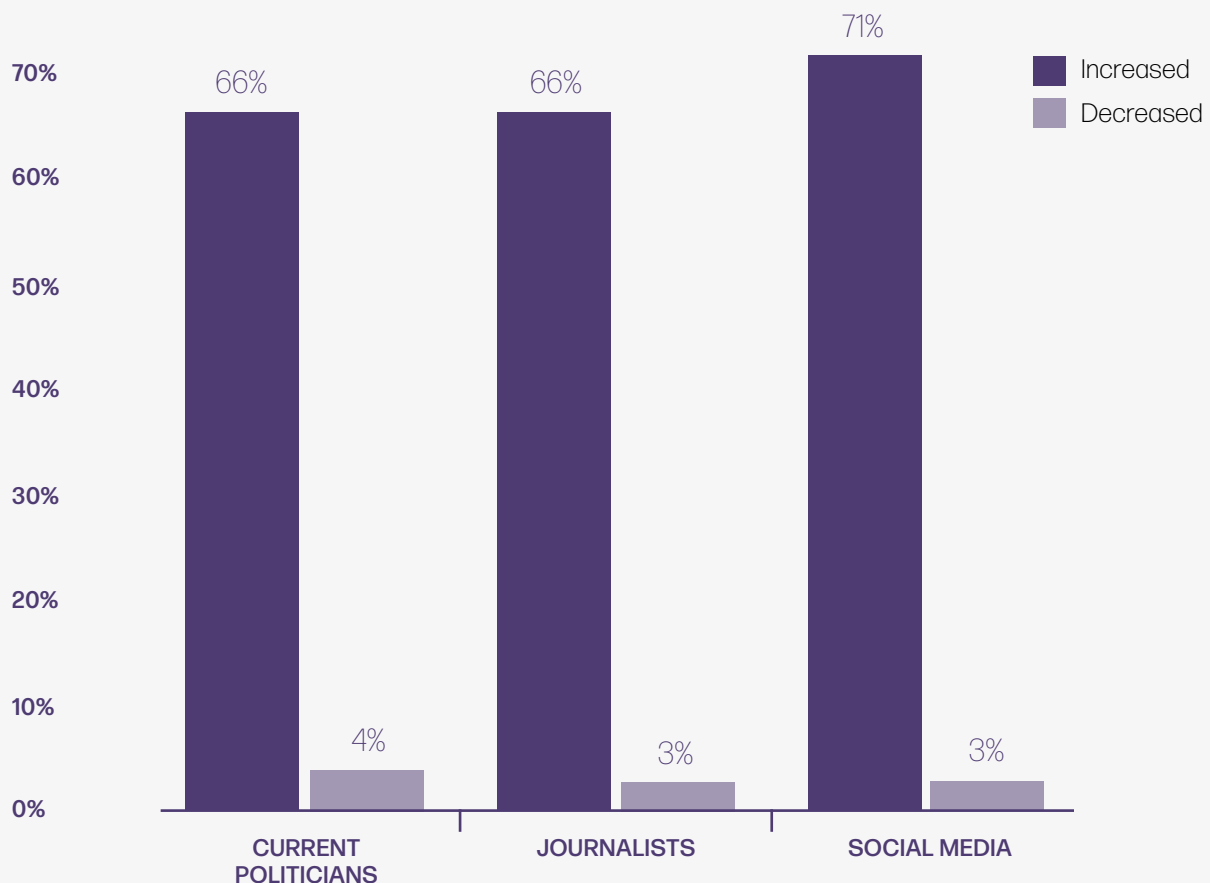


## Section 04. Political Elites are Responsible for Exacerbating Division

Whilst an overwhelming majority of people acknowledge there is a degree of division in British society, almost half of the population (45%) also think that most people tend to agree on current affairs.

However, people believe that political elites are undermining this consensus in Britain, with over two thirds blaming politicians, journalists and social media. This is evenly felt amongst different demographic groups, regardless of political allegiance, gender, age or region.

*Figure 05: Percentage of people who believe politicians, journalists and social media have increased or decreased the level of political division in Britain*



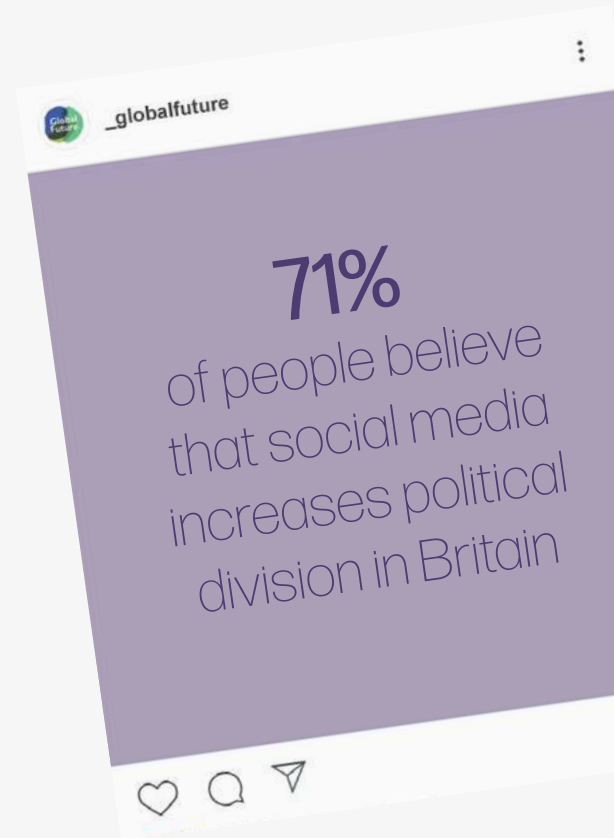
*N= 2244. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample. Figures don't add up to 100 as we've excluded response percentages to 'don't know' and 'no impact'.*

Divisive techniques of the political elite are dangerous because they can work. Where identifiable groups or political parties exist, division can escalate regardless of common ground because people are psychologically inclined to socially categorise themselves in a comparatively favourable way. In other words, people want to view a group to which they belong as socially or morally superior to others that they do not.

According to Social Identity Theory, this inclination for positive social comparison is intrinsically linked to individual self-esteem. This makes it a powerful force in which political views become identities. When political views have become inextricably linked to an individual's social identity, opposition is a threat to it. People become so motivated in this regard that if there is insufficient evidence to support the view that their group is morally superior to another, new or perceived "evidence" is created.

Of course politicians and journalists have incentives to use this. All political parties can use extreme examples to attack their opponents to create "black and white" moral binaries which force people into their own camps. Media outlets give more airtime to the most emotive stories to grow their audiences and deepen loyalties.

*“When political views have become inextricably linked to an individual's social identity, opposition is a threat to it.”*



Information bias as a result of social media is also to blame. 71% of people believe that social media increases political division in Britain, with just over half of that proportion claiming its impact to be 'a lot'. Social media algorithms are purposefully designed to show people what they want to see, which can encourage people to reinforce their own views whilst seeing others as alien and problematic.

Studies in social psychology show that often the most effective techniques in reducing tension and conflicts between two or more groups is through the realisation of a superordinate group or goal. The centre ground, which our research reveals, can provide this. If politicians and the media were to help the British people recognise this centre ground, people's political identification would not hold so much personal weight and we would have greater psychological safety to disagree more respectfully.

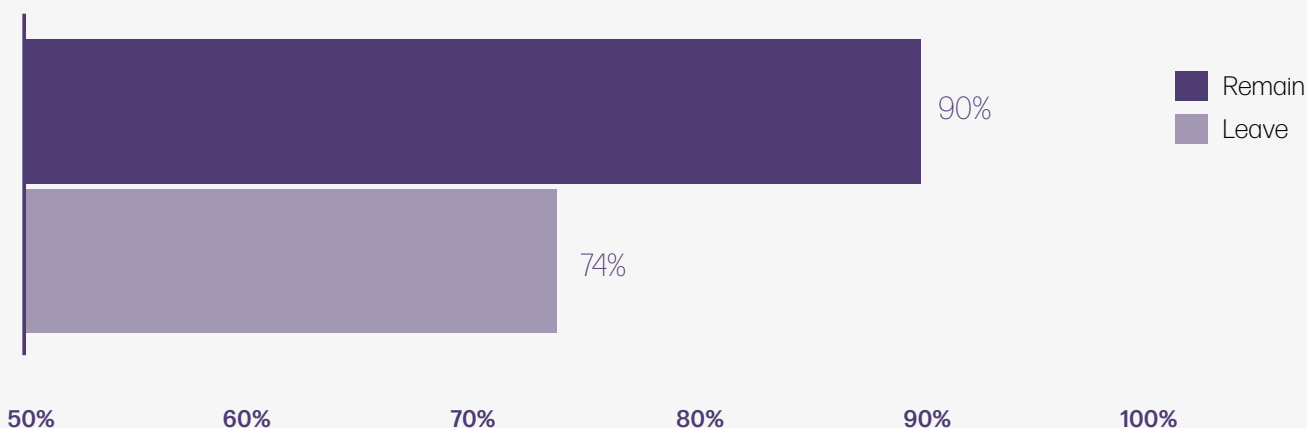
# Section 05. Divisions are More Complex and Nuanced Than We Think

The greatest predictor of opinion in our research was whether someone voted to Leave or Remain. This was a stronger predictor of opinion than class, gender, region or political party.

According to Social Identity Theory discussed above, this would make sense as it was an example of when our views on political issues became binary political identities - we didn't just vote Leave or Remain, we became 'Leavers' or 'Remainers'.

However, people's views are more complex and nuanced than we think. Our research showed that 74% of Leavers agree that it is important to be attentive to issues of race and social justice, and 40% of Remainers favour current or more restrictions to immigration. Only 8% of Leave voters favour a complete halt to immigration and just 4% of Remain voters favour open borders. Therefore, stereotypes about Leavers as racists and xenophobes or Remain voters as extreme liberals are unfounded.

**Figure 06: Percentage of people who voted Leave or Remain in the 2016 EU Referendum who think it is 'important' to be attentive to issues of race and social justice**



*N= 2244. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample. All figures have been rounded.*

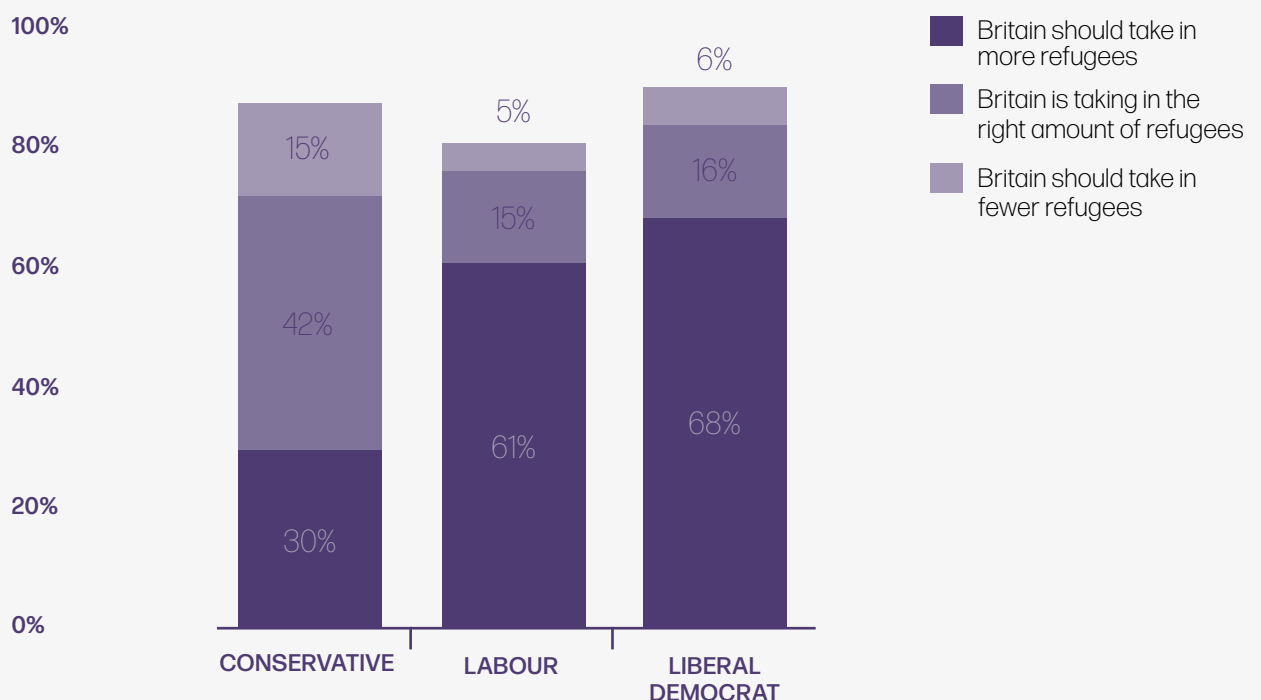
Immigration still remains a contentious issue in British political debate. In our research, we found this to be the issue with the greatest divergence in opinion. Our research finds 43% of people that there should be tighter restrictions on immigration compared to 26% in favour of fewer restrictions.

However, even on this controversial topic there is still common ground to be found. An overwhelming majority of British people (77%) believe there should be immigration into Britain but with restrictions. Only a tiny minority of people believe there should be absolutely no immigration (4%) and a similarly tiny minority believe there should be open borders (3%).

The immigration debate becomes even more complex when considered in light of responses to refugee intake. Here there is greater unity among the public in their approach to refugees, with a clear desire to help. When asked about the Ukrainian refugee intake, a plurality of 43% of society want to take in more compared to just 27% thinking we are taking the right amount. These hold true for all respondents, regardless of party support, age, gender, socioeconomic status and region.

It is true that Labour supporters are more likely to think we should accept more refugees (61% compared to the public’s 43%). However, even among Conservatives, 30% would accept more refugees compared to just 15% who would accept fewer.

Figure 06: Distribution of responses to Ukrainian refugee intake across party supporters



N= 2244. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample. Figures don't add up to 100 as we've excluded response percentages to 'don't know'.

# Politicians can Strengthen *British Democracy*

There is a clear centre ground in British politics. Despite the culture wars rhetoric, the British people share opinions on a range of issues, such as race, sex and gender and British history. Many of these areas of consensus persist across demographic groups, uniting young and old, Leave and Remain and Conservative and Labour supporters.

These areas of consensus also show a degree of complexity which challenges culture war stereotypes. Our research shows that voters' views are not predictable and many of us hold views that can be considered progressive as well as conservative (for example, most Leavers are concerned by racial inequality and social justice, most Remainers support the monarchy). This nuance in British public opinion simply does not fit politicians and media outlets' oversimplified narratives which hyper-moralise issues and deepen divisions.

We know that differences in political opinion are necessary for a thriving democracy and a free society. A degree of division serves to challenge assumptions, hold governments accountable

and encourage healthy tension within our politics. Nonetheless, we need shared common ground and mutual respect in order for healthy disagreement and debate to thrive.

Journalists and politicians on the left and right have an opportunity - and a responsibility - to dial down the culture wars and acknowledge the centre ground. As we have seen in the United States, there is the potential to seriously damage the social fabric of British society if politicians and journalists fail to step up to the task. If politicians can recognise this centre ground they will not only stand a better chance of winning the upcoming elections, they will also strengthen British democracy.



*Published in April, 2022*