

October 2020  
Britain's Choice:  
Common Ground and  
Division in 2020s Britain

# Chapter 9

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# Race and Immigration



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## Race and Immigration

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**93 per cent** believe that any person can be British regardless of their colour, ethnic background, or accent

**3 in 4** acknowledge that the UK has serious problems with racism

**60 per cent** recognise that white people continue to have advantages over people from ethnic minorities

**54 per cent** worry that ethnic, racial, or religious minorities will suffer more than others due to Covid-19

**62 per cent** believe that immigrants make efforts to integrate into British society

**63 per cent** feel comfortable expressing their views on race and racism

**77 per cent** feel pressured to speak a certain way on subjects to do with immigration and immigrants

**62 per cent** believe that Muslims are often unfairly treated with suspicion due to prejudice

# Introduction

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Divisive public debates around immigration, race, and national identity have been prominent in Britain during the past decade, as in many other countries. Immigration was a major factor in the 2016 referendum on Brexit, with the 2017 British Social Attitudes survey concluding that the most powerful explanatory factor for the result was attitudes towards immigration.<sup>1</sup> Leave campaigners argued that departure from the single market and the European Union would give the UK control over immigration policies and especially the rights of foreigners to work in the country. The decline in concern about immigration in the UK since 2016 provides further evidence of the importance of this issue to the Brexit vote.

This chapter provides insights into debates on race, immigration, and British identity through the lens of the seven segments. These debates have the potential to create deeper social fractures if characterised in the ‘us-versus-them’ terms which occurred during the Brexit debate. However, polarisation into opposing camps is not inevitable, since most people hold mixed views about immigration. The public debate about immigration is also an opportunity to project an inclusive story of identity that speaks to those mixed views and to people’s core beliefs. More in Common’s work on immigration and national identity issues in the United States has demonstrated the potential for ‘balanced’ messages to resonate across population segments and transcend debates that are often falsely framed as either/or choices.<sup>2</sup>

The findings reported in this chapter support the conclusions of recent studies, such as those from the British Future think tank, that most Britons are ‘balancers’ on questions of immigration and integration. Most people have some concerns about integration (for example, relating to the pressures that migration can place upon under-funded public services and community infrastructure), while recognising its benefits to the economy and culture and also rejecting racist or discriminatory policies.<sup>3</sup>

Across a wider range of national identity issues – including Britain’s legacy of empire, integration of migrants, and the place of British Muslims – people seek to find a balance between cultural diversity and openness on the one hand, and the preservation of traditions and the homogeneity of the national in-group on the other. Although there are strident voices in tabloid and online newspapers and on social media, most people are not concentrated at either end of the spectrum on these issues. Within the population segments, Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists, Disengaged Battlers, and Established Liberals tend to place a higher value upon openness while Loyal Nationals, Disengaged Traditionalists, and Backbone Conservatives place a higher value on the unity and homogeneity of the in-group.

## 9.1 Attitudes towards national identity and race

The **diversity of modern Britain is a cause of pride** for the overwhelming majority of British people, with 70 per cent saying that they feel 'proud that we are more embracing of people of diverse religions, races, and sexual orientations than before'. These findings reflect a high level of acceptance of Britain's increasing diversity, with 13 per cent of the population being non-white in the last census.<sup>4</sup> Based on the voting patterns of the 2019 General Election, pride in Britain's diversity among supporters of the major political parties was as follows:

- 59 per cent of Conservative voters
- 83 per cent of Labour voters
- Over 80 per cent of Liberal Democrat, SNP, and Green voters
- 54 per cent of Brexit Party voters
- Only 7 per cent of the population strongly disagreed with this sentiment

**93%** agree that any person can be British regardless of their colour, ethnic background, or accent

The baseline proposition behind an inclusive understanding of British identity is that any person can be British regardless of their colour, ethnic background, or accent. This proposition has almost universal acceptance, with 93 per cent agreeing of these 63 per cent agree strongly. Just 2 per cent strongly disagree. Majorities of supporters for every political party strongly agree. Among the segments, the lowest level of agreement was still 87 per cent (among Disengaged Traditionalists).

**3 in 4** acknowledge that problems of racism are serious in the UK

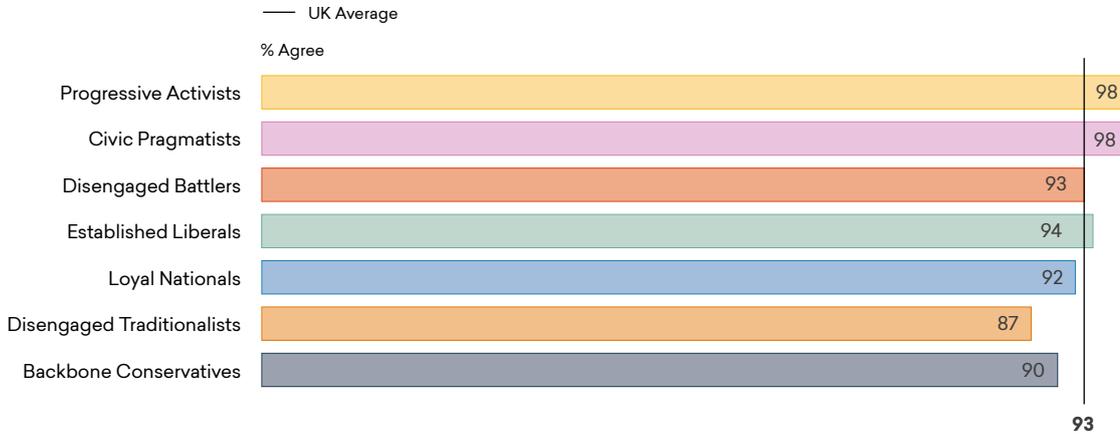
Three in four Britons acknowledge that problems of racism are serious in the UK, with significant agreement among every segment and exceptionally high agreement among Progressive Activists and Civic Pragmatists, reflecting the extent to which anti-racism values are for many people in these segments part of their personal identity. Anti-Semitism is also seen as a serious problem by 61 per cent of Britons. Noticeably, attitudes towards anti-Semitism are most mixed among Progressive Activists. They are in line with the population average in saying that anti-Semitism is a serious problem, but are also the most likely segment to say that anti-Semitism is not a serious problem in the UK (with 32 per cent holding this view compared to 26 per cent of the wider population).

Figure 9.1.

## Britishness and race

Almost unanimous agreement that being British is not a matter of race

**In the UK, a person can be British regardless of their colour, ethnic background, or accent**



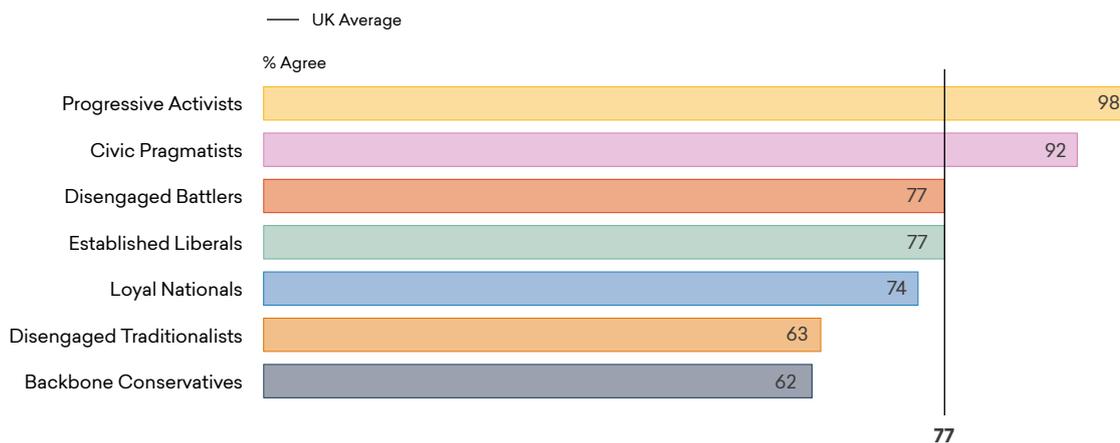
Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: In the UK, a person can be British regardless of their colour, ethnic background, or accent. February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 9.2.

## Seriousness of racism

All segments acknowledge the serious problem of racism but vary on strength of agreement

**How serious is racism today?**



Qu. In your opinion, how serious are the following problems in the UK today: Racism. February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

**60%** recognise that white people continue to have advantages over people from ethnic minorities

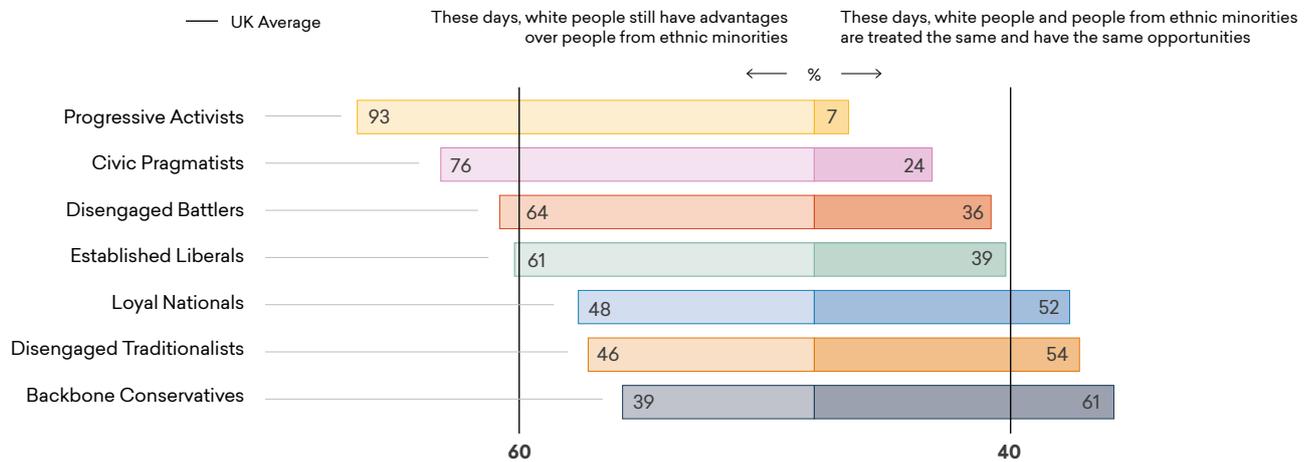
In the same vein, most Britons also recognise that white people continue to have advantages over people from ethnic minorities. Sixty per cent feel this is the case, but this number conceals big differences among the segments that are replicated across an array of questions relating to race and immigration. Ninety-three per cent of Progressive Activists and three-quarters of Civic Pragmatists are convinced of the existence of white privilege in the UK. A majority of Backbone Conservatives, Disengaged Traditionalists, and Loyal Nationals are more likely to feel that 'white people and people from ethnic majorities are treated the same and have the same opportunities', although substantial minorities disagree.

Figure 9.3.

## White privilege

Most Britons recognise the existence of white privilege

### White privilege



For full question texts see Appendix 2.1. February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

In qualitative interviews, the notion of white privilege came out most strongly when talking to Loyal Nationals. This reflects their heightened sensitivity to in-group and out-group dynamics, and their feelings of being part of a threatened group. Accusations of privilege are especially jarring to them, because they feel besieged and often say that they live in areas that have been neglected for a long time. Many Loyal Nationals feel strongly that they have never experienced any advantages in life, so the idea that they are privileged seems alien to them.

*Interviewer*

*So, do you feel that white people in the UK are marginalised? Do you think they're treated unfairly?*

*George*

**'Not necessarily unfairly, but the way things are portrayed you know? I mean according to some people they're still living in the slave trade era, you**

**know if you're white you're racist, if you're a white male you're racist. No, we're not. I mean I'm not a privileged white male. I've never been privileged in my life.'**

*George, Loyal National, 62, West Midlands*

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When asked about treatment of immigrants, Loyal Nationals are almost twice as likely to feel that society cares more about immigrants than British citizens (79 per cent v 43 per cent average).

*Emily*

**'People always say white males are privileged but I don't believe that.'**

*David*

**'There we go again.'**

*Oliver*

**'The ethnic minority.'**

*David*

**'Yes. Racism again, isn't it? There it goes. White privilege. White and privileged. You get black people that are privileged. You get Asians, Indians.'**

*Ammar*

**'Correct, yes. Totally agree.'**

*Emily*

**'I think it's just down to money.'**

*Loyal Nationals Focus Group Conversation*

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Public debates around national identity and race occur in response to external events, rather than in the abstract. We identified two such moments during the course of 2020: the Covid-19 pandemic and the response in the UK to the widespread protests in the United States that were sparked by the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis. These were opportunities to both gauge overall public attitudes and to better understand the different responses among the seven segments.

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**54%**

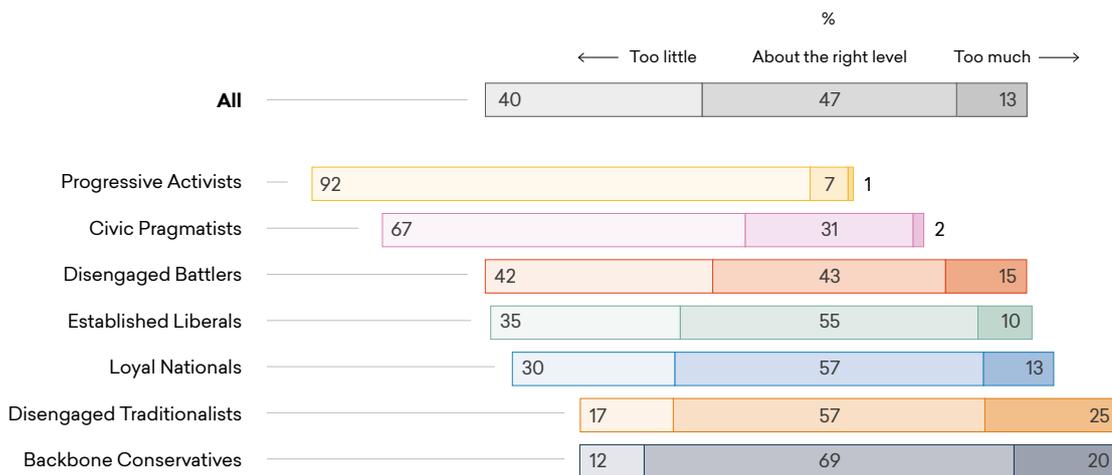
of the British population is worried that ethnic, racial, or religious minorities will suffer more than others from the Covid-19 crisis

In connection with the impact of Covid-19 on Britain, numerous media reports highlighted the way in which minority communities felt a disproportionate impact from the pandemic. On this issue, the results demonstrate that people in Britain are ‘balancers’. Fifty-four per cent of the British population is worried that ethnic, racial, or religious minorities will suffer more than others from the Covid-19 crisis. Around half of the population feel that government support for ethnic minorities has been ‘about the right level’. However, three times as many say it has been too little than say it has been too much (40 v 13 per cent). There is a much greater distribution of opinion among segments on these issues, but views generally do not simply polarise between two opposing sides. Even among the most opposed group, Disengaged Traditionalists, only one in four feels that too much is being done to help ethnic minorities.

**Figure 9.4. Covid-19 and ethnic minorities**

Segments vary in how much they think government has cared for ethnic minorities during the pandemic

**Government care for ethnic minorities during the Covid-19 pandemic**



Qu. Please indicate how much the UK government seems to care about the following groups in its response to the Covid-19 situation... The government cares about this group: Ethnic or racial minorities. June 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.

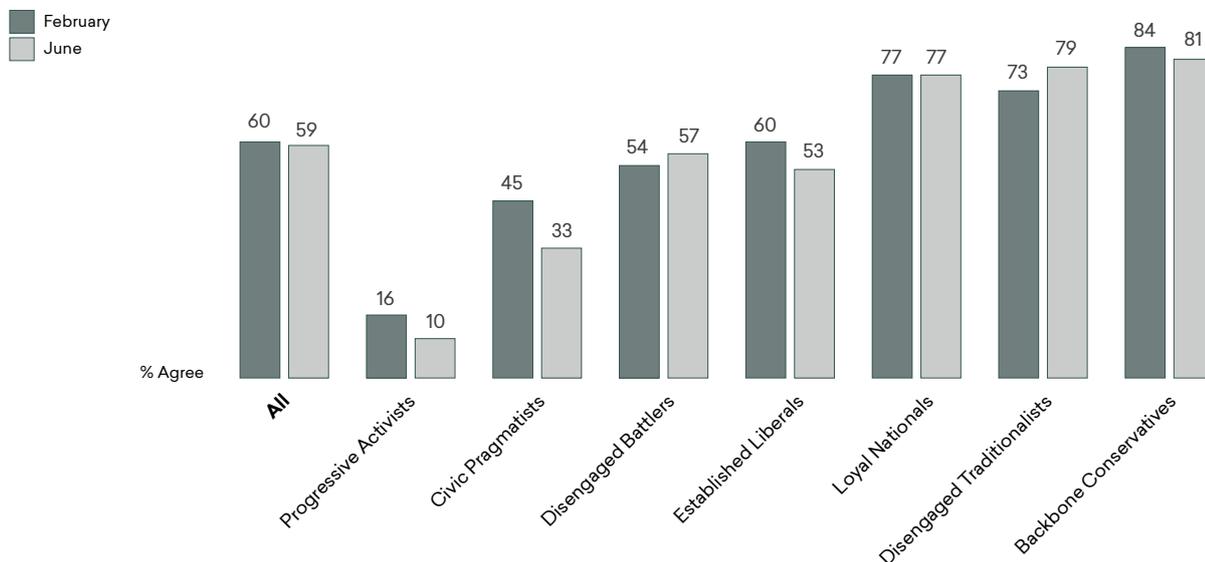
The racial justice protests and civil unrest unleashed in the United States in May 2020 rippled across the world in the weeks that followed, making issues of racial justice more prominent in the UK. We re-fielded a question asked earlier in the year to see whether the racial reckoning in the United States had affected public attitudes in Britain – in this instance, on the question of whether most people do not take issues of racism seriously enough, or whether there is too much sensitivity about things to do with race. Asked in March 2020, opinions were split 60-40 towards the view that we are too sensitive about things to do with race. When the same question was asked in June 2020, after the protests and the toppling in Bristol of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston, the overall outcome was almost unchanged (at 59 to 41 per cent). However, within the segments, a small polarising effect took place: a higher proportion of Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists, and Established Liberals felt racism is not being taken seriously enough, while a higher proportion of Disengaged Traditionalists and Disengaged Battlers felt that we are too sensitive about race.

Figure 9.5.

## Dealing with issues of race

Segments have differing views around how we deal with racism

### Many people nowadays are too sensitive about things to do with race



For full question texts see Appendix 2.1. February and June 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

In focus groups in March 2020, when asked a series of questions to identify the biggest dividing lines in society and if there were any groups that faced particular disadvantages, few raised issues of race. Once prompted, many recognised that people from minority backgrounds are over-represented among economically disadvantaged groups, but the issue was not prominent in people's minds.

In focus groups in July 2020 it was clear that the protests had prompted many people to think more about British society and the experiences of black and ethnic minority Britons. One of the most commonly expressed sentiments shared by participants of all backgrounds is that the UK has changed from the era where racism and prejudice were overt and widespread, and is now a more open and inclusive society. Several felt that Britain's progress should be better recognised before people started criticising. Many acknowledged Britain's need to learn from the mistakes of the past, but also balanced this sentiment with feeling that it is important for the country not be stuck in the past and to focus on the future.

In conversations conducted specifically with ethnic minority British participants, the reality of racism in parts of society was more widely recognised, although participants tended to think of racial differences as just one layer of people's identities, alongside other factors such as regions, accents, income, education, gender, and Brexit identities. The picture that emerged from these conversations was that black and ethnic minority British people feel pride and a sense of belonging in being British, while many also retain other layers of identity reflecting their cultural heritage. People feel that racism still exists in our society, but, as one participant remarked, prejudices have 'moved from being outrightly spoken to being underneath'. Several felt that education is part of the answer, and that racism should be addressed in schools. All groups felt the government should be focusing on dealing with the current health and financial crisis as its priority.



## In their own words:



'I'm all for justice in every walk of life, but what our ancestors did, we can do nothing about and how much have we got to keep saying sorry for something we had no control over? There shouldn't be any racial hatred or social injustice in this country now and we need to tackle that. But we need to tackle it together.'

*Gavin, Disengaged Traditionalist, 67, West Midlands*



'I think it's political correctness gone mad a little bit, to be honest. I think we've tipped the scale too far the other way. I think it's right to highlight the issue because I think there is an issue and I think it's quite deep seated in this country, and I think not from the mass population but there is a minority that do have issues with race and immigration and it always comes out when you start talking about politics. But I think we have gone too far the other way. And I think Black Lives Matter, I understand it and I get it, but everybody matters. I think the country has made massive strides forward with this issue over the last twenty, thirty, forty years. It really has... [Racial history] does seem to have got itself into the curriculum a bit more. I think race and history in particular is being taught in a way that is probably better than it was, from what I can see. But I think there's still a lot to do in terms of how we bring generations up. It's what they're taught and what they know that generally forms opinion.'

*Max, Disengaged Battler, 43, East of England*

'I think that's one thing that has been sensationalised a little bit by the media. I think in the UK it's not really something that's as big a problem as it is in other countries. That's just how I see it, but we don't really have that in York. I don't know if other cities do. I think also, you can't learn from your mistakes if we're not allowed to talk about the mistakes and if we're just going to forget them. If we pull down statues and things, then that history is gone. A friend of mine said the other day, it would be nice is if they just changed the plaque and put, "this person had slaves" and we can all just learn from that and learn from our mistakes.'

*Natasha, Disengaged Battler, 31, Yorkshire and the Humber*



'Kids in school need to be taught the history. They need to know what has happened. They need to know how Britain became an empire. How Britain became a country. How the United Kingdom became a kingdom. They need to know about the wars. They need to know those who fought with the British people because some people are ignorant. That's the truth. They don't really know. They think probably Britain became a nation on its own, that it just became powerful. They need to know people from India, people from Africa fought in the Second World War for Britain... Then they will understand that they need to probably appreciate each other. Because some people still have this belief that some people are superior over others and it has to be so, but when you really understand more of the Commonwealth and what happened then I think part of the problem is solved.'

*Kwame, Disengaged Traditionalist, 40, London*



'I think a lot of the people that came out for the riots for Black Lives Matter, where no-one was socially distancing, were there to pick a fight or for the drama as opposed to actually believing in it.'

*Kelly, Disengaged Battler, 39, North West*



'What's gone is gone. We can't change it. I think a lot of people are using the race card and the slave card as a way of trying to get something over the rest of us. We can't change what's happened, and history is there to hopefully remind you of where people have done things in the past, so you learn from history so you don't repeat it again.'

*John, Disengaged Traditionalist, 61, East of England*



'I think action is needed. We've spoken about diversity enough; we've had protests enough. It's actually action. When my daughter does not see anybody that looks like her in the government, in the judiciary, in any aspect of the police or anywhere that there is any kind of authority, what can we give our children as a highlight that this is possible for you? The action is required to get these people in the right places, to be role models, to be there to make the change in the first place. They have to break the barriers to get there. And unfortunately, it's not talking that's needed anymore.'

*Farida, Civic Pragmatist, 47, Scotland*



‘On the topic of Black Lives Matter, I think I’m a little bit sceptical. I feel like it could be a little bit tokenistic because on my social media at least, there are a lot of people posting black squares, a lot of people posting empty hashtags, like hashtag activism, and I didn’t see a lot of action. So, I was a little bit sad that people thought that posting a black square was all they needed to do, when I think there’s a lot more that they need to do.’

*Gio, Disengaged Battler, 41, South East*



‘It’s only been since George Floyd’s death that I’ve had to really think about what racism is. For me, I think I’ve learnt that racism means that you’ve got a sense of superiority combined with power... My son is twenty-three and he said to me – and I was shocked because I didn’t know because up until then I did not believe in positive discrimination – he said his sixty-year-old boss admitted to him that if he saw somebody looking a bit foreign on the application forms, he’d throw them in the bin. To me, that really hurt me because I just thought, okay, my son happened to get in because his name is [English sounding] but if he had a different name, his application form would not have even been considered. That really hurts me.’

*Maya, Loyal National, 57, London*

‘I think deep down we can all be racist. I am Indian and I am Muslim and I admit that a lot of times I feel like I have some sort of racist feeling inside me. It might not be towards the race in particular but maybe towards that one person. So, I do believe that racism is a given. It’s what we do with that, that I think makes a difference. If inside of us we have some sort of feeling but that makes no difference in the way we treat someone else, then so be it. We can all feel the way we feel. It’s our right. But we shouldn’t be affecting people’s lives that way.’

*Priyanka, Loyal National, 47, North West*



‘I think racism has always existed and will continue to exist. I think world events recently have just brought it to the fore, but it’s always been there, and I don’t think it’s going away. But it’s good that we’re talking about it.’

*Li, Disengaged Traditionalist, 41, East of England*

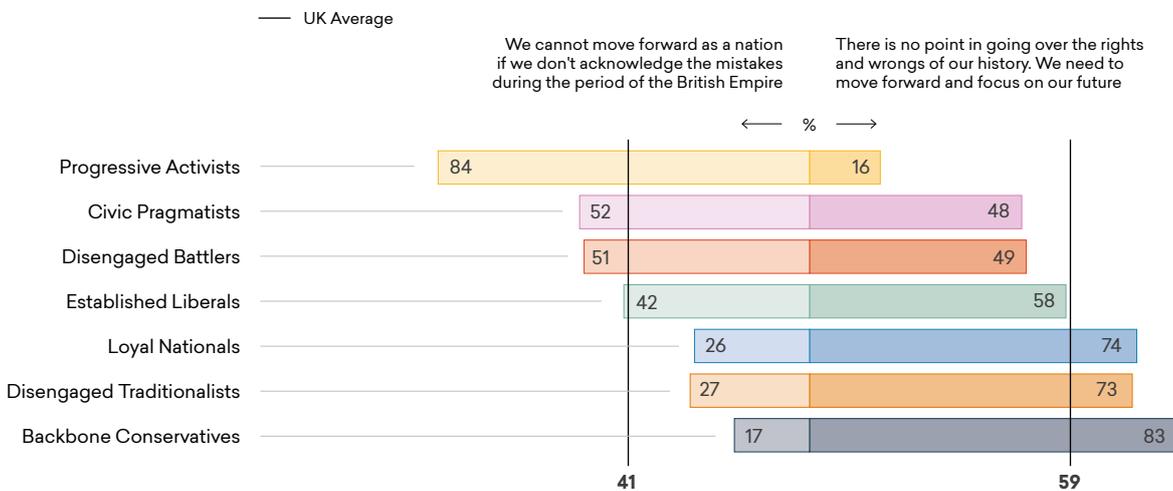
One dimension of debates on British identity and race is how the country wrestles with its imperial history, and whether specific issues need to be acknowledged and addressed in order for the country to move forward. The comments from focus group participants reflect mixed views on whether Britain needs some kind of reckoning with its past. BAME participants, many of whom have personal histories bound up with the legacy of empire, more often feel that Britain needs to tell itself a more complete story, even if most still see British history in broadly positive terms.

Figure 9.6.

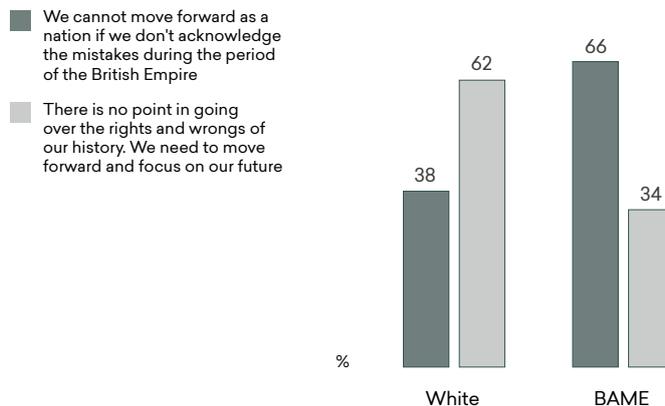
## Dealing with the past

A majority believes we should focus on the future, not the past

### How should we deal with our country's history?



### How should we deal with our country's history?



For full question texts see Appendix 2.1. February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Our focus groups demonstrated how nuanced conversations about Britain's past can play out in practice. In a particularly interesting discussion with an ethnically mixed group of Disengaged Traditionalists, participants voiced a range of different and varied grievances with the way the recent debate on race and Britain's past

had been confronted. The tension tended to be with how we move forward, rather than whether injustice continues to exist (there was a general level of recognition that injustices have indeed existed, and some discrimination remains). Indeed, participants were receptive when minority voices in the group voiced their opinion that history needed to be taught properly, despite strong reactions that there was nothing we could do to change that history and that we could not be held responsible for past actions. While it is true that 59 per cent of Britons feel that we should focus on our future rather than go over the rights and wrongs of our history, our research shows that this does not equate into a desire to ignore history. In fact, there is willingness to learn and incorporate that into part of moving on.

## **Race, immigration, and public discourse**

Through More in Common's work on issues of immigration, race, and public perceptions across several countries, one concern frequently voiced is that it is difficult to discuss these issues without being judged by others. People fear being judged or seen as prejudiced. Believing that others view themselves as superior to you, or you inferior to them, leads to psychologically powerful feelings of resentment or betrayal.

This study has found a significant difference between how people in Britain feel when talking about racism, and how they feel when talking about immigration – possibly reflecting the fact that there is much greater disagreement on the latter.

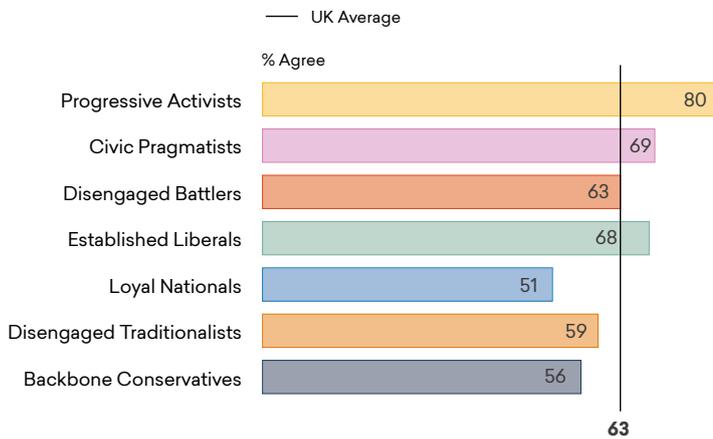
- 63 per cent of British people feel comfortable expressing their views on race and racism, while some 37 per cent of British people feel uncomfortable expressing them. Most people in all segments say they feel comfortable expressing their views, with the greatest confidence being felt by Progressive Activists, whose views on racial justice are an important part of their identity. In contrast, the most discomfort is felt by Loyal Nationals, who are more likely to feel that they are less protected by the government than ethnic minorities are.
- In contrast, 77 per cent of Britons feel pressure to speak a certain way about subjects like immigration and immigrants, with high levels of agreement across segments, even among Progressive Activists who are often outliers on these issues. Loyal Nationals and Backbone Conservatives report feeling this pressure most acutely, although in our experience of interviews and focus group conversations, they often brought up their opinions on these issues without any prompting. The tension for people in these groups seems to be between speaking about topics that are most important to them, and hiding what they fear to be unpopular opinions.

Figure 9.7.

## Expressing views about race and immigration

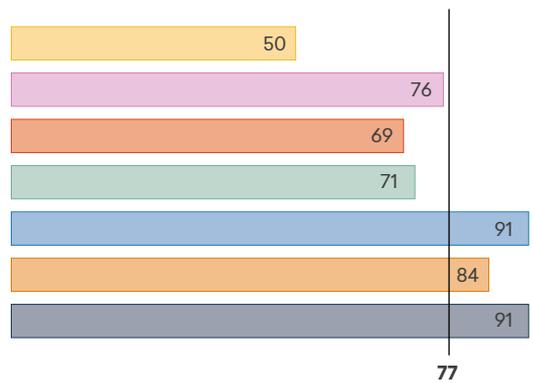
A majority of all segments generally feel comfortable expressing views about race and racism, but most feel there is pressure when it comes to speaking about subjects such as immigration

### I feel comfortable expressing my views about race and racism



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I feel comfortable expressing my views about race and racism. February 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.

### There is pressure to speak a certain way about subjects like immigration and immigrants



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: There is pressure to speak a certain way about subjects like immigration and immigrants. February 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.



### Moderation of Loyal Nationals focus group

#### How do you feel about life in the UK today?

##### Megan

'I'm originally from Plymouth which isn't too far from me, where I am now. But I tend to get on with anyone and everyone but we have found that over the years, obviously, there's more mixing – not like London where Anne is; there's a lot of multi-race there – ours has really been over the last ten years that we've started to get multi-racial people in. And the little place that I came from in Plymouth was very negative about that. Obviously, I'm not. I'm a very open person but it's a shame because I was brought up in a place where we all worked together. I mean, you could go out and leave your front door unlocked.'

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*David*

‘The thing to say about London, looking at multiculturalism, how many Londoners live in London? Not many Londoners actually live in London... Where I live here, it’s mainly Polish. But you get the Romanians fighting with the Polish. It’s nothing to do with us English at all.’

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*Emily*

‘A lot of people are bringing their own wars here.’

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*David*

‘Yes, you’re right. They’re bringing their wars here.’

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*Loyal Nationals Focus Group*

‘Well, everyone’s using the card. It’s like throwing the racist card. Everybody. You look at somebody wrong and it’s, you know, is it my colour? Is it this? Is it that? I think people walk around on eggshells. Everything, everybody these days is a hate crime. Like, you can’t tell a joke. It’s a joke, it’s a bit of banter. But no, you can’t do that anymore. I have to really think hard about what I’m going to say.’

*David, Loyal National, 48, West Midlands*

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‘You can try with some of the champagne socialists and middle class left wingers, yeah, but it doesn't get anywhere, you get shut down or de-platformed, or they try to belittle you and things like that. If people are willing to have a proper discussion then fine, you know? I mean I'm not saying I'm right all the time, I'm not right most of the time but I'm willing to listen, but it has to work both ways you know?’

*George, Loyal National, 62, West Midlands.*

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*Moderator*

*To what extent do you think we’re united or divided as a society?*

‘There is such a huge divide in British society, I think, sadly. And I think the fact that we allow so many immigrants in, or did, doesn’t help the society.’

*Michelle, Backbone Conservative, 78, Yorkshire and the Humber*

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## 9.2 Perceptions of immigration and division

While there is a substantial consensus on many issues relating to race in Britain, there is less consensus on immigration. In overall terms, the UK has experienced a sustained trend towards more positive public perceptions of the impact of immigration. However, concerns about immigration played a decisive role influencing the vote to leave the European Union in 2016. While the issue of immigration has diminished in salience in recent years, public opinion reflects the characterisation of Britain as a nation of ‘balancers’ that has already been referenced.

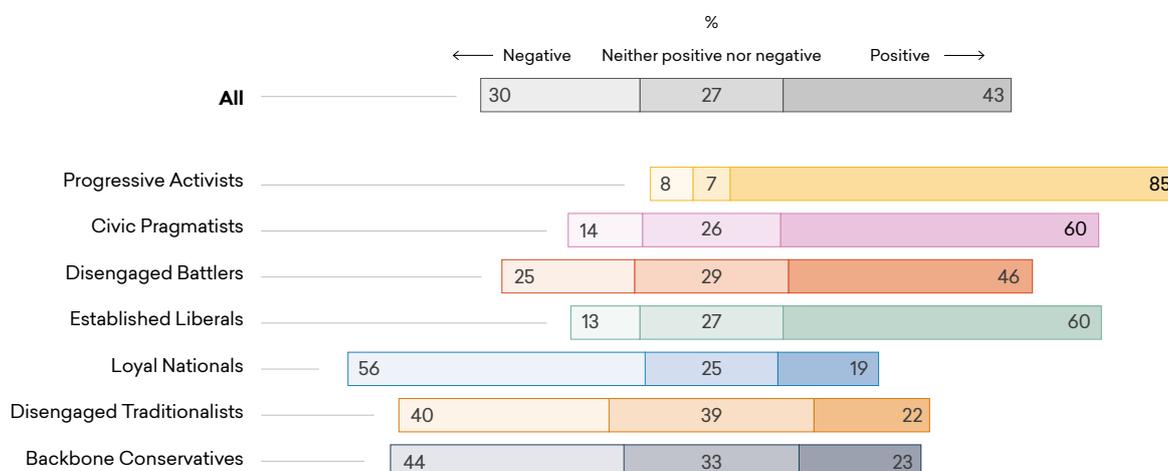
Asked in general terms about the impact of immigration, 43 per cent say that it has been positive, 27 per cent negative, and 30 per cent neither. There are significant divergences among the segments.

- The socially liberal Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists, and Established Liberals view immigration positively. Progressive Activists are far more emphatic than any other group in their pro-immigration sentiment, with almost three times as many ‘very positive’ than even Civic Pragmatists.
- There is cluster of segments that holds more negative sentiments about immigration and which represents one half of the overall population: Disengaged Traditionalists, Loyal Nationals, and Backbone Conservatives.
- Even so, only Loyal Nationals have a majority that thinks the impact of immigration has been negative. This shows that even among the immigration-sceptic segments, opinion is mostly not stridently anti-immigration, but instead reflects mixed views.

### Figure 9.8. Immigration impact

Segments vary on how positively or negatively they see immigration

#### Impact of Immigration



Qu. Would you say immigration currently has a positive or negative impact on the UK? February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

One of the central concerns about immigration raised by the immigration-sceptic groups is that it contributes to division in society. When asked about the causes of division in the UK, 51 per cent of Loyal Nationals and Backbone Conservatives cited immigration, as did 42 per cent of Disengaged Traditionalists. The core beliefs of these three segments are well above average on the moral foundations that measure loyalty to the country and respect for authority. They worry that immigrants have different loyalties to the locally-born population, and respect different traditions. These three groups also perceive threat more strongly than other groups. This is especially true for the Loyal Nationals, who feel most threatened and deprioritised when compared to immigrants. When these values are activated, even when individuals also value care and protection, they are more likely to think in terms of an ‘us’ and a ‘them’, and prioritise the national in-group over immigrants who are identified as the out-group.

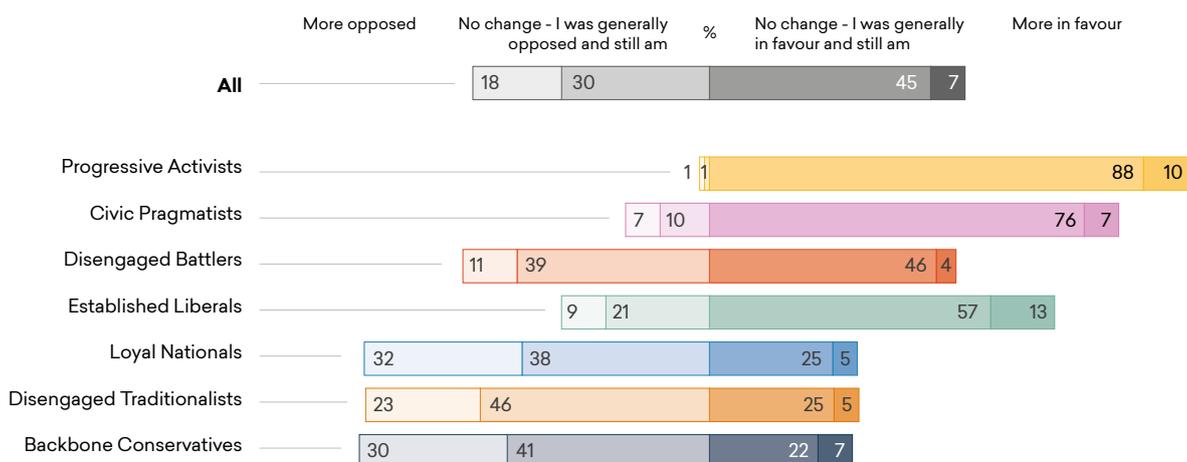
There has not been a change in attitudes towards immigrants during the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, while the pandemic has resulted in stricter border controls in many countries in order to control the spread of the virus, in the UK its effect on both border controls and public attitudes has been much less than seen elsewhere. Of the seven major western countries surveyed by More in Common in mid-2020, the UK experienced the smallest shift in sentiment against immigration, with 75 per cent saying their views had not changed since the start of the pandemic. This confirms other research showing that attitudes towards immigration mostly remained relatively stable in 2020, demonstrated in work by the Policy Institute at King’s College London and the think-tank British Future.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 9.9.

## Immigration and Covid-19

Attitudes towards immigration do not seem to have changed since the pandemic began

### How views have changed about accepting migrants into the UK since the Covid-19 pandemic began



Qu. Since the Covid-19 pandemic began, how have your views changed about accepting migrants into the UK, if at all?  
 June 2020.  
 Source: More in Common 2020.

Six in ten people in the UK believe that immigrants typically make an effort to integrate into UK society.

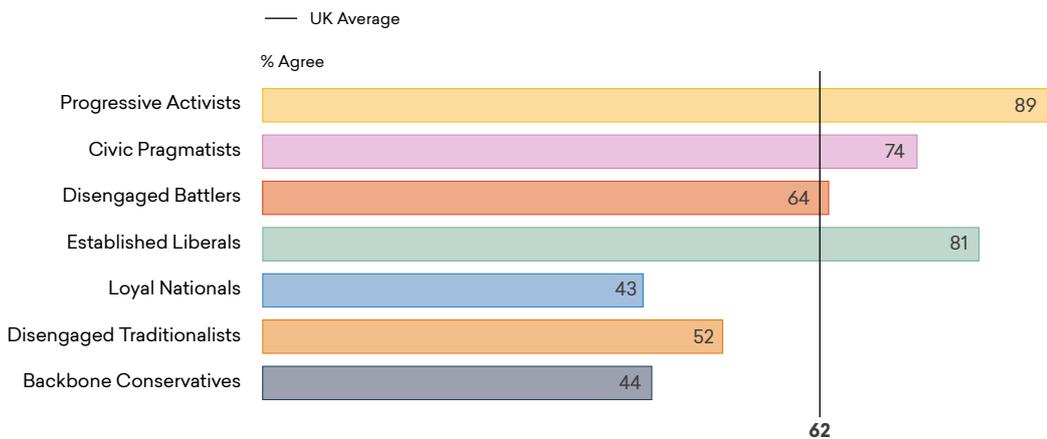
- Progressive Activists and Established Liberals, groups that are more outward looking and comfortable with multiculturalism and diversity, are very confident that immigrants want to become a part of British society (at 89 and 81 per cent respectively).
- Large majorities of Civic Pragmatists and Disengaged Battlers agree with this notion.
- There is greater doubt among the three more sceptical groups, with 57 per cent of Loyal Nationals and 56 per cent of Backbone Conservatives believing that immigrants do not make an effort to integrate. However, it is significant that even among the segments that are most sceptical of immigration, a sizeable minority believe that immigrants do make efforts to integrate.

Figure 9.10.

## Immigrants and integration

Segments vary on how much they think immigrants make efforts to integrate into society

### Most immigrants make efforts to integrate into British society



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Most immigrants make efforts to integrate into British society. February 2020.

Source: More in Common 2020.

These apprehensions often reflect concerns that minority communities become insular, and that immigrants do not seem to want to integrate with others in their local communities.

*Interviewer*

*Do you think there are people who come to this country and integrate, or not? Could they do more?*

*Molly*

**'I think they could do more, definitely. I don't think they integrate fully, I think they tend to stick to their own people really. They like to stick to their own people from back home or their own friends. I don't think they integrate very well.'**

*Molly, Loyal National, 62, London*

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Many in these three groups believe that being a good person involves patriotism, contributing to your local community, respecting British traditions, and fitting in with others. Because they feel that many immigrants do not share a commitment to their local community (outside of their ethnic group) or to British traditions, they are worried about the effect of immigration. Because these beliefs are core to who they are, members of these segments are very unlikely to change their beliefs. Nevertheless, their perceptions of immigrants may change when their experiences show them how hard many immigrants try to integrate.

In the absence of such experiences, people in these three segments are vulnerable to thinking in terms of 'us-versus-them'. More than three-quarters of people in each of these groups believe that, in our society, we care more about the rights and interests of immigrants than of our own citizens. A lower proportion – less than half – believe that we care too much about immigrants (although this still means that more members of each segment say that we care about the right amount). This contrasts with Progressive Activists and Civic Pragmatists, who have the opposite belief, that immigrants are portrayed unfairly in the media and are poorly treated.

*Interviewer*

*So, are you saying there are groups of people that or categories of people that face more obstacles than other in the UK?*

*Maria*

**'Definitely. Definitely. One hundred percent. Immigrants for example, like, it makes me so cross the way that immigrants have been treated in this country. They've come here to help us. They're not scroungers like what they keep saying but that's what the tabloid press wants to churn out, to scapegoat. It's infuriating.'**

*Maria, Progressive Activist, 25, East of England*

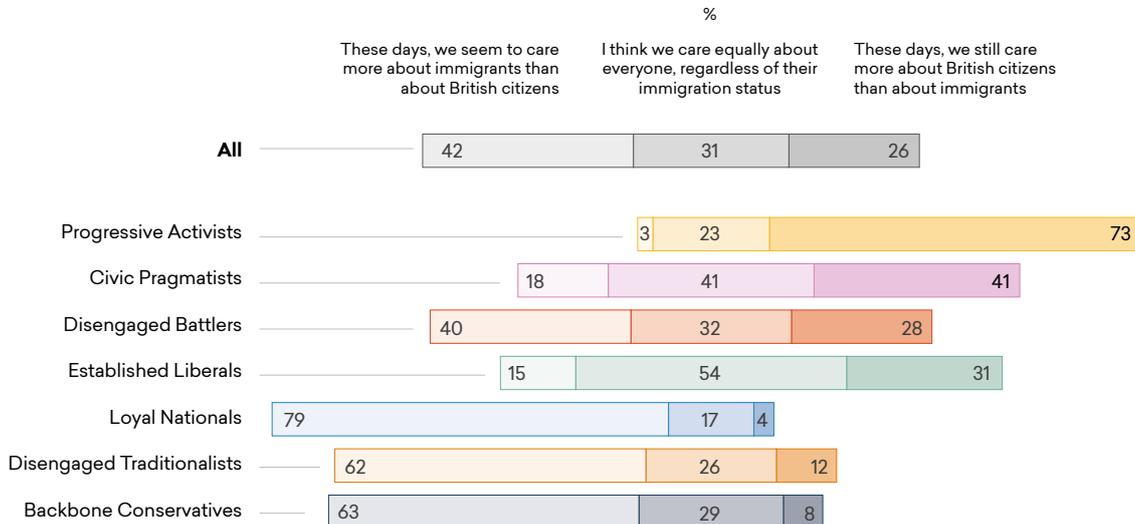
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Figure 9.11.

## Feelings of victimhood towards immigrants

Segments vary in how much they think we as a country care for immigrants compared to British citizens

### Care for immigrants



Qu. Which do you agree with more? February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Just under half the population says that we care more about the rights and interests of immigrants than about British people. This is a view that is especially pronounced among Loyal Nationals, Disengaged Traditionalists, Backbones Conservatives (and to a lesser extent Disengaged Battlers) who share a greater priority on respect for authority in their psychology.

## 9.3 Core beliefs and attitudes towards immigration

More in Common's work on immigration and national identity in the United States revealed how attitudes to immigration correlate with core beliefs. People with differing underlying psychologies subconsciously approach topics related to immigration from a different vantage point. In the US, we found that attitudes about immigration are closely associated with the authority moral foundation.<sup>6</sup>

In the UK, we observe similar results, as attitudes towards immigration correlate closely with feelings about British identity, the extent to which people value the moral foundation of authority, underlying authoritarian tendencies, and levels of threat perception.

For a person who relies more on the authority foundation, events or news related to immigration tend to act as a trigger to that foundation, thus activating this person's sense of respect for authority and the perception that it might be under threat. Authoritarianism relates to the cognitive need for oneness and sameness, also tied to the likelihood that an individual struggles to cope with change. Those with stronger authoritarian tendencies, who in the UK belong to the Loyal Nationals, Disengaged Traditionalists, and Backbone Conservatives segments, are more inclined to view immigration negatively, as they likely connect (even if subconsciously) immigration to a threat to the in-group.

Those with a higher level of threat perception are far more likely to believe that immigration is having a negative impact on the UK. This psychological architecture manifests in fears of becoming a minority.

*Interviewer*

*Maybe we could just start with any reflections on how you see the world around you, the community around you. Has either changed for the better or for the worse?*

*George*

**‘Well in a lot of respects it's changed for the worse, because we seem to be controlled by a minor religion, or it's supposed to be a minor religion in this country but we seem to be bending over backwards for it. And you can't mention it because you're classed as phobic.’**

*George, Loyal National, 62, West Midlands*

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Despite the fact that census statistics identify five out of six people in the UK as white British, just under half of the white British participants in the study (47 per cent) are worried about becoming a minority in the UK. This includes absolute majorities of the Loyal Nationals (73 per cent), Disengaged Traditionalists, and Backbone Conservatives. This contrasts with the Progressive Activists, who are not at all concerned about becoming a minority. Disengaged Battlers, who tend to be more positive on immigration than the other Disengaged segment, are more evenly divided.

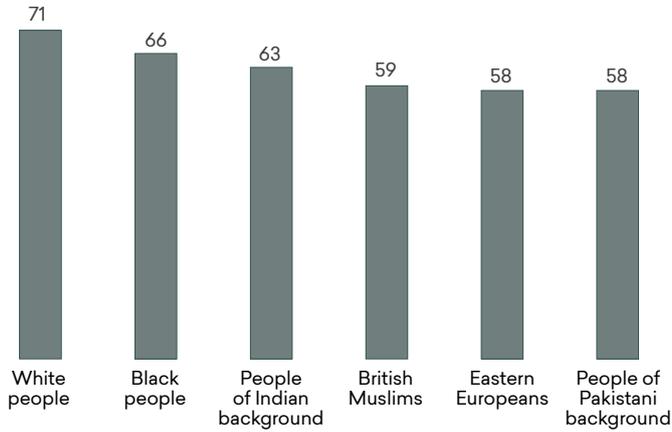
Differences in attitudes towards a variety of issues related to immigration, however, are not projected onto feelings towards different groups within the population. The temperature test of Britons' attitudes to groups of different ethnicities, or with migration backgrounds, reveals warm feelings of 58 or above (on a scale of 1-100) towards all of them. While imperfect, feelings thermometers are a useful tool to measure sentiments through a proxy question. These are much warmer than the feelings towards politicians, the wealthy, or to groups perceived as elites (see Chapter 8). The warmth that Britons feel toward black and white people is very similar (although Progressive Activists feel coldest towards white people and Disengaged Traditionalists and Backbone Conservatives show the biggest gap in feelings of warmth towards black people relative to whites). The feelings thermometer also reveals that some Britons have greater worries about Muslims, attitudes that will be analysed in the section below.

Figure 9.12.

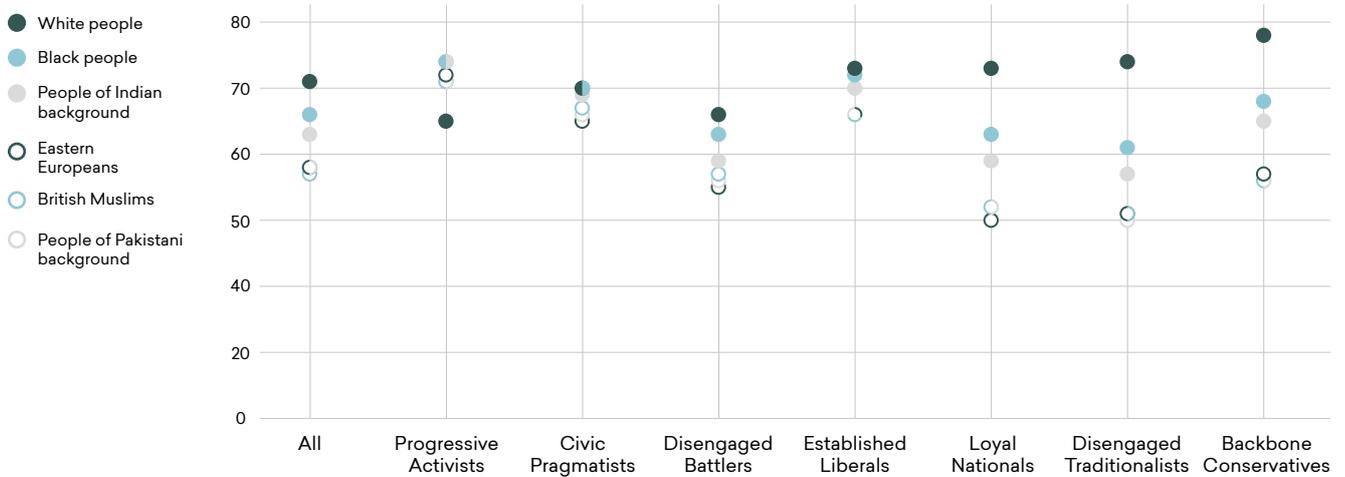
## Feelings thermometer towards different ethnic groups

Attitudes towards immigration do not seem to affect feelings towards minority groups. Majorities in all segments feel warm towards these groups

### Feelings towards different groups



### Feelings towards different groups by segment



Qu. How positively or negatively do you feel about each of the following, where 0 means very negative, and 100 means very positive. February 2020.

Source: More in Common 2020.

## Attitudes towards Muslims and Islam

The segments which are more sceptical about immigration are also more likely than other groups to worry that British Muslims do not integrate into British society, because they perceive their values to be different to those of the rest of the population. This view is held by half of the British population. These views are not driven by security concerns (90 per cent of Britons believe that most Muslims in the UK do not support terrorism) but rather by cultural anxieties.

Disinformation plays an important part in people’s perceptions of groups such as British Muslims who feel unfamiliar to them. For example, Research by Hope Not Hate in 2019 found that 35 per cent of Britons believe that there are ‘no-go zones’ in the UK with sharia law which non-Muslims cannot enter. Many also believe in the so-called ‘Great Replacement’ conspiracy theory that immigration into the UK is part of a secret plan to make Britain a Muslim-majority country.<sup>7</sup> These anxieties are reflected in the fact that more than 70 per cent of Loyal Nationals, Disengaged Traditionalists, and Backbone Conservatives feel that Muslims are more protected than the rest of society.

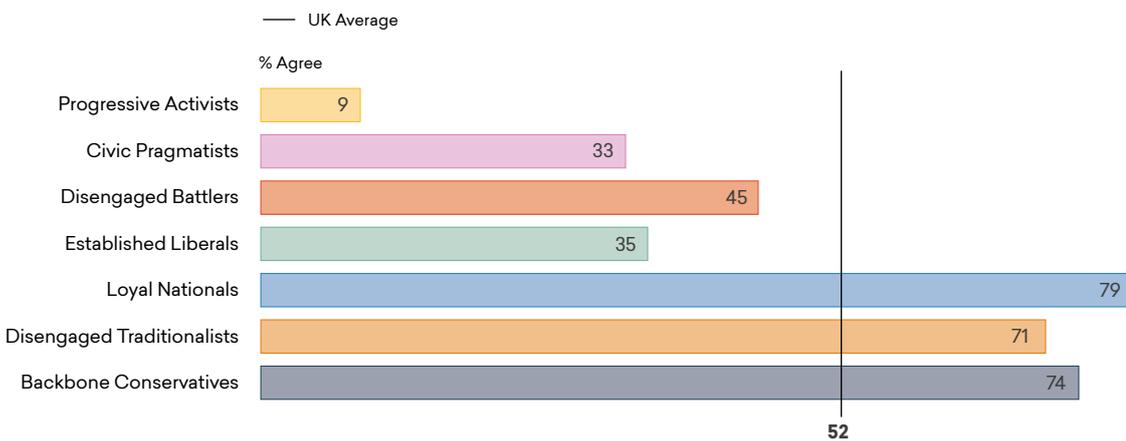
At the same time, Britons acknowledge that Muslims are often unfairly treated with suspicion due to prejudice. Sixty-two per cent share this view, while only 17 per cent say that this is not the case.

Figure 9.13.

### Protection of the rights of Muslims

‘The segments most sceptical about immigration are more likely to believe that Muslims are given special rights

#### These days, people seem to care more about protecting the rights of Muslims than the rest of the community



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: These days, people seem to care more about protecting the rights of Muslims than the rest of the community. February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Our conversations with British Muslims reflected very different perspectives that contrasted with the views of sceptics – of people who felt proud of their British identity but sometimes found it hard to fit in and feel accepted. Many reflected on feeling unwanted, and grappled with how to reconcile their love and appreciation for the UK, with experiences of hostility. They also reflected on the confusion of not feeling like they belonged in any other place (and literally not knowing any other country) but not always feeling fully accepted in their own society.



## British Muslims: in their own words



‘When you have that sort of, what I consider to be a lethal cocktail of the media and society demonising a particular group because of actions that are happening elsewhere around the world. And just ascribing that to individuals that live in the UK. That can make – even though you may feel like a belongingness, and it's the only thing that you know, living in London, born in London, went to school in London – it can make you feel threatened. It can also make you feel alienated within the only country you know. You can't go back home. You can't go anywhere else. Because you don't even know anything about it. You don't even have a home there. You don't even know anyone over there. But the people that you considered to be your sort of fellow citizens are the ones that are sort of demonising you and making you feel unwelcomed in your own country, that you consider to be your own country.’

*Omar, Progressive Activist, 35, London*

‘Yes, I think it is for me being a black Muslim and I'm female, it can be quite hard sometimes as well. Obviously, that's not the government's fault, but there could be more tools to educate people.’

*Zahra, 18, Progressive Activist, London*



‘I think living in the UK is a privilege. If you compare to all the places in the world where you could have been born, or you could be right now.’

*Rashida, Civic Pragmatist, 39, London*

‘British society in general? I love it. I've lived not just in London, but in other parts of England as well, like Manchester. And everywhere I go, I guess, the British society stays with me. And that's what's kept my good manners intact and things like that. So, when I think of British society, that's what I value from it. But apart from that, I just feel like I fit into British society more than any other society I've been around.’

*Hasan, Civic Pragmatist, 42, London*



‘When you think of Sadiq Khan being the Mayor of London... If a Muslim, working class background, Pakistani or Indian – I’m not sure – man can get to the Mayor of London, then of course I feel valued. I’m the same background. If they value him to be the mayor, then I feel valued too. I’d say I’ve always felt a level of belonging to British society given that I was born and raised here and I was schooled here. So, there’s no other place I could really identify with in a major way. However, in even saying that, I think there’s a recognition, almost an awkwardness, of whether it’s completely British or not. And I think no matter how much one wants to feel completely British, there is a level of almost it’s not going to be 100% British, coming from my background that is.’

*Anwar, Established Liberal, 29, South East*



‘I’ve been in this country for so many years. I kind of thought that I knew where my place was in this society. But Brexit, initially kind of changed everything. You know, friends of mine that I went to university with 20 years ago, some of them have actually left and they were kind of, not brown-skinned people. I’m talking about Italian and Spanish friends who no longer felt welcome. And I thought if they’re feeling like this, because they don’t visibly look any different. What about me now, as a brown person?’

*Yasmeen, Loyal National, 50, London*

## Key takeaways

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The demographic composition and cultural makeup of British society has changed significantly in recent generations. This has taken place alongside other far-reaching changes in work, technology, communications, and in social values, creating a sense of uncertainty and instability for many. These changes have made issues of identity and belonging more prominent in recent years, in the United Kingdom as in other societies. This context of change and anxiety makes Britain more vulnerable to narratives of division, which create a false sense of 'us-versus-them' within our society.

As Britain navigates difficult challenges in the 2020s, we will face continuing threats from efforts to fracture our society around issues of race, immigration, and identity. More is needed to develop our resilience to those threats, but we can build on some strong foundations. Public opinion in the United Kingdom remains strongly committed to inclusion, with an almost universal acceptance that anyone can be British, regardless of their skin colour, ethnicity, or accent. Alongside a shared sense of pride in Britain's rich and diverse history, most people also recognise that history is complicated. Indeed, part of our sense of pride in the United Kingdom today is the way that the country has changed, becoming a more diverse nation that no longer tolerates racism and discrimination as in the past.

Britain is a nation of 'balancers' on the issues of race and immigration. Four in five Britons agree that serious problems of racism still exist, and three in five feel that white people still have advantages over ethnic minorities. At the same time, three in five also worry about our society becoming too sensitive about things to do with race, just as a similar number worry about the country becoming stuck in debates about the past when we need to focus on the future.

Even within the seven population segments revealed in this report, we find within those segments a tendency to balance rather than go to extremes. Four segments (Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists, Disengaged Battlers, and Established Liberals) are consistently more likely to believe that racism is a problem and that ethnic minorities are marginalised in the UK. They are more sympathetic to the concerns of ethnic minorities and more likely to feel that we need to make amends for the British Empire. Among Loyal Nationals, Disengaged Traditionalists, and Backbone Conservatives, a majority see these debates as divisive and want to move on from them. People in these segments are more sceptical of the benefits of immigration and often hold more negative perceptions of Muslims, whom they perceive as an out-group.

While some groups emphasise the importance of patriotism and tradition, and others openness and diversity, the differences between segments are less stark than we have found in many other national contexts. Even among the segments which consistently hold the strongest views on immigration issues, conversations with people in these segments often reveal nuance, openness, and the need to find a balance between opposing arguments. Nevertheless, extra care needs to be taken when managing issues on which public attitudes are more evenly divided and there is a clearer division in views among the seven segments – for example, on the concerns of about the 'traditional' white population becoming a minority, and on perceptions of whether society cares more about protecting Muslims' rights than those of others.

To avoid future debates on national identity, race, and immigration becoming divisive, we need to avoid the situation where nativists assume that support for immigration is also support for displacing traditional white British cultures and communities, and cosmopolitans frame opposition to immigration as racist or white supremacist. Public debates on these issues can be less divisive and more productive if they avoid 'us-versus-them' narratives, and instead engage the values, concerns, and motivations of different segments, rather than others' characterisations of them. More in Common plans to do more work in this area, building on the insights discussed in this chapter.

It is not inevitable that Britain will become more deeply divided on these issues. The large majority of people do not see issues of immigration in starkly polarised terms. Nor do policies around immigration and racial equity fit into simple binaries. Immigration policy always involves balancing complex factors that include different types of immigration intake, criteria for those programmes, opportunities for transition between categories such as temporary and permanent, obligations on applicants, and policies relating to integration. The balanced perspective of most people is that immigration is a positive for Britain, but that immigration programmes need to be managed competently and fairly, and also that more should be done to ensure the integration of new arrivals into British society and manage the impacts upon public services. This is true even among those who feel that policies have been out of balance in recent years.

# Endnotes

- 1 Roger Harding, *British Social Attitudes 34 Key Findings: A Kind-Hearted but Not Soft-Hearted Country* (NatCen, 2017) <[https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39195/bsa34\\_key-findings.pdf](https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39195/bsa34_key-findings.pdf)>.
- 2 *Speaking to Core Beliefs in Immigration* (More in Common, 2019) <<https://www.moreincommon.com/media/qdwpkoux/pdf.pdf>>.
- 3 Jill Rutter and Rosie Carter, 'National Conversation on Immigration', 2018 <<http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-report.National-Conversation.17.9.18.pdf>>.
- 4 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/ethnicityandnationalidentityinenglandandwales/2012-12-11>
- 5 Kirstie Hewlett and others, *Has COVID-19 Reset the Immigration Debate?*, 2020 <<http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Immigration-Attitudes-and-COVID-Slides.pdf>>.
- 6 Hawkins and others.
- 7 Carter and Lowles, *Fear and Hope 2019: How Brexit Is Changing Who We Are*.

