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

Chapter 1

Context and Methodology



More in
Common

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Foreword

This report is about the state of British society in the early 2020s, and the prospects for the country coming together or being torn further apart. We are in a time when one in two people say they cannot recall any time when the country has felt so divided.

Britain has gone through profound disruption in recent years. People feel exhausted with politics and disappointed in their leaders after the past five years brought them three Prime Ministers, two snap elections, a stumbling response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and interminable arguments and indecipherable processes around leaving European Union. As the long-term economic costs of the pandemic become clearer, and debates about public health strategies become more fractious, the story of a country trapped in a cycle of conflict and division risks taking hold.

Our research uncovers a different story about Britain

People are not as deeply divided as is often assumed. Like much about Britain, it is a story of nuance. There are fault lines, but wherever we probe them – such as differences of class, age, race, politics, regions, and between the nations of the United Kingdom – we also find a story of connection and commonality alongside difference. While specific issues sometimes divide us, groups in society cluster in different ways from one issue to the next. Brexit has been deeply contentious and the Leave/Remain fault line is still with us, but it is far from being a cleavage that divides society into two antagonistic camps – at least, not yet.

The image that we feel best describes our findings about British society is that of a kaleidoscope, a 19th century Scottish invention popular with children through many generations. As we hold the kaleidoscope to the light and revolve the cylinder from one turn to the next, we see the coloured fragments of glass reassemble and cluster together in different formations. The beauty of the kaleidoscope is the way that with each turn, the light diffuses those colours in ways that are different and often brilliant.

Britain's untold story is just how much common ground there is between us. Whether it is what makes us proud about the UK, our ideals for the future, or even the way we think about many of our country's most pressing concerns, as Jo Cox said in her first parliamentary speech, we have more in common than divides us. When we differ, we also have a capacity to muddle through and find compromises and solutions that might be imperfect, but keep us moving forward.

This report is titled *Britain's Choice* because we need to focus on the fact that cohesion or division is a choice that we make as a society. There are powerful forces driving people apart in societies all across the world, fuelled by entrenched issues of injustice, the tribalism of social media, disinformation, our loss of trust in institutions and the way that conflict is rewarded in media and politics. These forces of division can also become self-reinforcing.

We can make the choice not to let those forces overwhelm us, but it will require deliberate efforts. More in Common hopes that this report can help inform and inspire this urgent work.

Context

The United Kingdom entered the new decade of the 2020s feeling deeply divided. For four years, the country had seemed at war with itself. Few could decipher the technicalities of leaving the European Union, but most people shared a sense of frustration and fatigue with diplomatic negotiations and parliamentary debates which had dragged on like a grey wintry season without end. The decisive general election result in the final weeks of 2019 had brought some resolution on departing the EU. But it also left the country fractured. Only one in ten people said that they did not feel exhausted by the division in politics. By a margin of almost five to one, Britons worried that the nation's political divisions would lead to increased hatred in society. While a few were elated by success or shattered by defeat, many more just wanted to reunite and move on, but were unsure to where and how.

The coronavirus pandemic disrupted all aspects of life in Britain in 2020, confining many of us to our homes and creating a shared sense of experience otherwise unknown, except in times of war or natural disaster. It brought tragedy, anxiety, and fatigue. But in disrupting people's lives and curtailing travel and commuting, it also re-connected people to their local community and focused their attention on the contributions and needs of others in our society. Regular public expressions of appreciation for health workers marked a moment where people came together to celebrate the good in their community. Our research found changing experiences throughout 2020 as communities moved through different phases of this long, shared crisis.

This report does not tell the story of a country now united around a singular new sense of purpose, or suddenly restored faith and confidence in government and institutions. In fact, Britons score many of their institutions poorly for their response, contributing to a further decline in trust. Many of the sources of tension around the pandemic follow deeper fault lines, such as those between a centralised government in London and devolved authorities in Scotland and Wales, and between the north and south of England. But alongside debates around public health measures and the handling of the crisis, the pandemic also provided Britons with a glimpse of a Britain that they see less often. This is a Britain where the uplifting values of service and solidarity are celebrated, and where ordinary people in local communities are the national inspiration.

The story that this report tells is that there is more common ground among people in Britain than is generally understood, and there is no reason for the differences between people to cause irreparable divisions. On this point, our work confirms other social research recently conducted in the UK.¹ The story that the report tells starts with the lives of ordinary people, seeking to better understand their aspirations, fears, values, beliefs, and sense of identity. To reflect their stories, we have quoted directly from participants in our research throughout the report. Instead of focusing on their views around one specific issue, we seek to understand the connections between individuals' beliefs across a wide range of issues. Using our model of people's core beliefs, we probe the connections between individuals' beliefs across a wide range of issues – not only in the realm of politics, but also in our social attitudes and trust towards each other. Understanding those connections is essential if we are to avoid a return to the divisions that have characterised recent years.

A key contribution of this report is to try to make connections across a wide range of areas of attitudes, beliefs, and values that are too often understood in isolation from each other, and to link those to people's deeper values and their orientation towards society. The challenge with this approach is that our treatment of complex issues often feels inadequate, even in a report as long as this. We ask forbearance from readers who might be disappointed

with the brevity with which complex and important issues such as Scottish independence, northern identity, the perspectives of Black and ethnic minority British people, debates around free speech, and many other issues are addressed. We hope to contribute more in the future on many of these issues.

More in Common's research is grounded in social psychology and in understanding people's core beliefs. We use this term to describe the underlying system of beliefs, values, and identities that shape a person's experience of the world. Previous research in social psychology, behavioural economics, and neuroscience suggests that social and political behaviour is strongly impacted by people's core beliefs. We have found this to be true in our work across our other three priority countries of the United States, France, and Germany, where we have published similarly extensive studies.

The ultimate aim of this research is to identify the most effective interventions that can be applied on the ground to counter division and help build a more united and cohesive society, able to address its most pressing challenges. This report is therefore the springboard for future projects and collaborations that we hope can make a meaningful contribution towards these ends.

Methodology

This report builds on literature that emphasises the importance of values in predicting political behaviour.² These studies have proved a valuable aid to social researchers, governments, and community organisations in recent years.³ The goal of this study is to combine the insights of social psychology with the explanatory power of cluster analysis, undertaken with a very large national sample.

To ensure that this research was informed by the extensive work already published on related issues in the United Kingdom, the project began with a literature review and a series of in-depth interviews and consultations with individuals from different backgrounds: from academia, research organisations, civil society, business, agriculture, arts and culture, and community organisations.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was deployed through surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews. More in Common's internal research team worked with the global research firm YouGov, members of the European Climate Foundation's UK staff, and Climate Outreach on the survey design and fieldwork. The data generated through the initial quantitative survey was then analysed to identify distinctive clusters (or segments) within the British population, based on their core beliefs. A more detailed outline of the research methodology is set out below.

Phase 1: Consultation

This study was informed by an initial phase of in-depth interviews and consultations with academics, civil society, business leaders, community organisers, and other key institutions during the second half of 2019. These conversations helped identify the gaps in existing research findings, additional issues to explore in the research, gaps in our own knowledge, and what insights would be most useful for individuals and organisations who are working to strengthen democratic culture and social cohesion in the United Kingdom. We thank the more than 50 experts whose thoughts, insights, and ideas were incorporated into questions asked in our national survey and helped to shape the project.

Phase 2: Original Research

Quantitative polling

Four waves of quantitative research were carried out over the course of 2020 for this project. Surveys were conducted online (CAWI) by YouGov among representative samples of the adult population in Great Britain by gender, race, age, education, and geographic region. The initial survey's sample size of 10,385 was the largest of the four surveys, and all subsequent surveys were conducted among recontacted subsets of this initial group.

The first survey was conducted from 14th February to 9th March 2020 among a representative sample of 10,385 adults in Britain. For a full list of sample sizes and margins of error, please see the Appendix. The research instrument covered demographics, partisanship, ideology, moral values, group identity, political attitudes, and political and media consumption behaviours. Each respondent completed a section on one of four thematic issue areas: climate,

immigration and race, regions and inequality, and climate change and economic issues. The cluster analysis (described below) of the results of this survey was then conducted.

The second survey was conducted between 1st and 15th May among 2,010 adults in Great Britain shortly after the first weeks of the Covid-19 lockdown period, which allowed us to take stock of how the pandemic was influencing public attitudes (Britain Talks Climate, May 2020).

The third survey, conducted between 19th June and 28th June among 2,282 adults in Great Britain, provided more detailed insights into people's experience of the three months since the pandemic lockdown, as well as their views of society and concerns about the future.⁴

The fourth survey, conducted between 18th and 24th September among 2,060 adults in Great Britain, gave us an updated picture of attitudes in the country after six months' worth of restrictive measures (Britain Talks Climate, September 2020).

In-depth interviews and focus groups

We conducted several rounds of qualitative research between April and August 2020, resulting in a total of 15 online focus groups and 35 one-on-one in-depth interviews.

The initial round included hour-long one-on-one in-depth interviews and seven focus groups with individuals distributed across the seven segments identified through the data analysis discussed below. We then carried out two additional focus groups with each of the Disengaged segments in order to gain a better understanding of these two less familiar groups. These participants were recruited from the initial quantitative study conducted by YouGov.

We conducted further focus group discussions with participants of Black and ethnic minority backgrounds with a broadly representative distribution of respondents from each of the seven population segments. In addition to this, we also partnered with Averroes, a British Muslim policy think tank, and Reclaim, a youth leadership and social change organisation for additional focus groups.

All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Quotes used throughout the report are taken from the qualitative work conducted for this project. In quoting individual participants from one-on-one and group conversations, we have changed names in order to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Phase 3: Feedback

From March through to September 2020, our research team conducted a series of briefings and consultations with individuals and organisations with expertise on issues related to the project. This included experts from academia, think tanks, civil society, government departments, and media organisations. These meetings were an opportunity for our team to gain further insight on new research projects being undertaken by others, to share our initial findings, to have those initial findings interrogated, and ultimately to review and refine the project's outcomes.

Note on Northern Ireland

The goal of More in Common's project was to be representative of all ethnic, geographic, and cultural communities of the United Kingdom to the greatest extent possible. In particular, we sought to include Northern Ireland, which is often left out of UK-wide studies. Towards this goal, members of our research team visited Belfast and Derry/Londonderry in September 2019. Meetings were held with local civic leaders and community organisers, who generously shared their experiences and opinions and conducted tours of their cities.

The initial national survey conducted in February 2020 included a representative sample from all four nations: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. However, upon receipt of the survey data, we found highly unusual and self-evidently implausible distributions of responses among the Northern Ireland sample, which was collected through a separate research vendor. After extensive discussions with our fieldwork and research partners, we concluded that the Northern Ireland data did not meet the threshold for reliable data quality, did not provide a representative or accurate picture of the country, and could not be included in the study.

We examined a range of options to recollect survey data in Northern Ireland, but were unable to identify a practical solution that met our data quality standards. While we have drawn from the insights from our expert interviews in Northern Ireland, we concluded that our best solution was to focus the report on findings from Great Britain. As we feel that a study of the UK should as a matter of principle include Northern Ireland, we endeavoured to make sure it would be included. We regret this gap in the research findings, and hope for an opportunity to explore these issues in Northern Ireland in the future.

Survey content

The core beliefs model that More in Common used for the purposes of this study draws on insights from social psychology and More in Common's original research by using questions covering the following areas:

- **Group identity:** The extent to which people identify with different groups based on nationality, gender, political party, ethnicity, and other factors.
- **Group favoritism:** Views on who is favoured and who is mistreated in British society.
- **Threat perception:** The extent to which people see the world as a dangerous place.
- **Parenting styles and authoritarian disposition:** Research suggests that basic philosophies regarding people's approach to parenting may have important predictive power in explaining their attitudes towards authoritarian public policies and authority more generally.
- **Moral Foundations:** The extent to which people endorse certain moral values or 'foundations', including fairness, care, purity, authority, and loyalty.
- **Personal agency:** The extent to which people view personal success as the product of individual factors (i.e. hard work and discipline) versus societal factors (i.e. luck and circumstance).

Cluster analysis

To identify the segments of the British population described in this report, the data science team at YouGov undertook a cluster analysis exercise in partnership with More in Common's research team. Cluster analysis allows us to identify patterns in people's responses that are not captured by doing the more standard demographic and political analysis afforded by polling. In looking for these patterns in response to the questions we focused on respondents' core beliefs and group identity, to group those with a similar psychological disposition together. Cluster analyses do not establish causal relationships, but rather identify meaningful associations and commonalities. The seven segments in this study were created through a k-means solution process based on variables related to the core beliefs listed above. No standard demographic or party identification questions were used to create the segments (for more information on these identifiers, please see the Appendix).

This type of analysis has several key advantages:

- 1. Focus on core beliefs:** Instead of grouping people according to demographic characteristics, ideological labels, or party identification, we are seeking to go 'upstream' from issue-based attitudes to the underlying values and worldviews that drive those attitudes. The core belief methodology seeks to understand people according to their most basic psychological differences.
- 2. Improved explanatory insight.** Population segments based on cluster analysis can find patterns that are highly illuminating and are not captured by standard demographic and political analysis from conventional polling and research methodologies. This does not imply causal relationships, but rather identifies meaningful associations and commonalities.
- 3. Predictive power.** More in Common has undertaken national segmentation studies based on people's core beliefs in the United States, France, and Germany in the past two years. We have repeatedly found that it provides fresh insights into how people think, and can in fact be more predictive of people's views on a range of social and political issues than conventional variables such as party identification or demographics. For example, knowing the segment to which someone belongs more accurately predicts their views on immigration or inequality than their party identity, race, or gender. Put simply, understanding which segment an individual belongs to provides a better insight into their political views than traditional demographic categories. More importantly, it reveals the diversity of core beliefs within those traditional groupings.
- 4. Reducing biases introduced by respondent self-reporting.** Polling can often rely on people's self-definitions, which can be unreliable since people often hold widely differing interpretations of ideological labels. By identifying people's ideology from their responses to questions about their core beliefs rather than through self-reporting, we develop a more accurate picture of where they are located in the landscape of public opinion.
- 5. Targeted communication.** Communication is more effective when it does not just address individual issues, but instead resonates with an individual's core beliefs. By identifying population segments on the basis of their core beliefs, we can communicate more effectively with people in each segment.

Endnotes

- 1 Tessa Van Rens and Alex Krasodomski-Jones, *The Political Division Index: Pathfinding for British Democracy* (Demos, November 2019) <<https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Political-Division-Index-15.11.pdf>>; Bobby Duffy and others, *Divided Britain? Polarisation and Fragmentation Trends in the UK* (The Policy Institute, King's College London, September 2019) <<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/divided-britain.pdf>>.
- 2 Nick Pecorelli, *The New Electorate: Why Understanding Values Is the Key to Electoral Success* (Institute for Public Policy Research, October 2013) <https://www.ippr.org/files/images/media/files/publication/2013/10/new-electorate-voter-values_Oct2013_11359.pdf>; Rosie Carter and Nick Lowles, *Fear and Hope 2019: How Brexit Is Changing Who We Are* (HOPE not hate, July 2019) <<https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/fear-and-hope-report-2019-07-final-1.pdf>>.
- 3 An early example of this methodology that provided breakthrough insights was Hope Not Hate's series of studies on immigration attitudes, beginning with the 2011 Fear and Hope report written by Anthony Painter and Nick Lowles. See: <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/fear-hope-reports/>.
- 4 This survey fieldwork contained 81 respondents who had not been classified into our UK typology, which was conducted from fieldwork completed 14th February to 9th March 2020. Therefore, the sum of the segments present was 2,201, while the total number of respondents for the overall fieldwork was n=2,282.

