

October 2020

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

Executive Summary



More in
Common

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ABOUT MORE IN COMMON

The report was conducted by More in Common, an initiative set up in 2017 to build societies and communities that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarisation and social division. We work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media, and government to connect people across the lines of division. More in Common's teams in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the United States work together and share a commitment to advancing our mission. For more information please visit www.moreincommon.com.

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Executive Summary

This report offers insights into British society at a time of historic change and turmoil. The product of a large-scale national study conducted over 18 months, it concludes that while the Brexit years left the country feeling polarised, further division is not inevitable. By shifting our focus from Brexit to the kindness of others and the heroism of ordinary people, Covid-19 has helped open our eyes to a different future. Britain now faces a choice. One path leads to the deepening polarisation that is being experienced in other countries, where ‘us-versus-them’ dynamics shape national debates, causing distrust and even hate between people on either side of the divide. The other path leads to a more cohesive society where we build on common ground and focus on the issues that we agree are more important than anything else.

1

More in Common has worked with data scientists at YouGov and social psychology academics to build a model that maps the British population not according to their party, age, income or other demographic factor, but according to their values and core beliefs. Analysing a representative sample of more than 10,000 people, and conducting focus group conversations and one-on-one interviews with more than 200, we have identified **seven groups**.



- **Progressive Activists:** A powerful and vocal group for whom politics is at the core of their identity, and who seek to correct the historic marginalisation of groups based on their race, gender, sexuality, wealth and other forms of privilege. They are politically-engaged, critical, opinionated, frustrated, cosmopolitan and environmentally conscious.
- **Civic Pragmatists:** A group that cares about others, at home or abroad, and who are turned off by the divisiveness of politics. They are charitable, concerned, exhausted, community-minded, open to compromise, and socially liberal.
- **Disengaged Battlers:** A group that feels that they are just keeping their heads above water, and who blame the system for its unfairness. They are tolerant, insecure, disillusioned, disconnected, overlooked, and socially liberal.
- **Established Liberals:** A group that has done well and means well towards others, but also sees a lot of good in the status quo. They are comfortable, privileged, cosmopolitan, trusting, confident, and pro-market.
- **Loyal Nationals:** A group that is anxious about the threats facing Britain and facing themselves. They are proud, patriotic, tribal, protective, threatened, aggrieved, and frustrated about the gap between the haves and the have-nots.
- **Disengaged Traditionalists:** A group that values a well-ordered society and takes pride in hard work, and wants strong leadership that keeps people in line. They are self-reliant, ordered, patriotic, tough-minded, suspicious, and disconnected.
- **Backbone Conservatives:** A group who are proud of their country, optimistic about Britain's future outside of Europe, and who keenly follow the news, mostly via traditional media sources. They are nostalgic, patriotic, stalwart, proud, secure, confident, and relatively engaged with politics.

2

Among the segments, two are oriented towards politics (Progressive Activists and Backbone Conservatives); two are oriented towards a stable, healthy society rather than engaging in politics (Civic Pragmatists and Established Liberals.), two are characterised by disengagement – distrusting institutions, feeling more lonely and participating less (Disengaged Battlers and Disengaged Traditionalists) and one feels more patriotic, more threatened and thinks more in terms of us-versus-them (Loyal Nationals).

Our experience has found that because the segmentation is based on psychology and core beliefs, which do not change much from one year to the next, the segmentation is likely to remain relevant for years to come. What becomes important is to understand how specific segments respond to changing circumstances, rather than how the segmentation itself changes in response to changing circumstances. This is especially true in the current environment where the United Kingdom has been experiencing far-reaching changes, and further changes are likely in the coming years as the UK moves through the Covid-19 recession, repositions itself in Europe and the world, and faces the internal demands for a referendum on Scottish independence.

3

The Britain we find in this study is not divided into two opposing camps. Britons come together in different formations depending on the issue at hand – much like the pieces of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope which cluster in different patterns as the instrument rotates. This is a strength that may inoculate the UK against one of the most dangerous dimensions of polarisation, which experts describe as ‘conflict extension’ – when members of a group converge across a range of issues. Because the segments come together in different formations depending on the issue at hand, Britain is less likely to become divided as a society into two opposing camps.

- On issues of immigration and race, Loyal Nationals, Disengaged Traditionalists, and Backbone Conservatives come together, while Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists, Disengaged Battlers, and Established Liberals form another coalition.
- On issues that involve social trust and institutions, we may see Established Liberals, Civic Pragmatists and Backbone Conservatives coming together on the one hand, while on the other hand Disengaged Battlers, Disengaged Traditionalists and Progressive Activists often align similarly because of their distrust of institutions.
- On issues of inequality and economic policy, Progressive Activists, Loyal Nationals, Civic Pragmatists, Disengaged Battlers, and to a lesser extent, Disengaged Traditionalists, are united.
- There is widespread agreement on climate issues, led by a strong coalition of Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists, and Loyal Nationals.

Throughout the report, we highlight examples of how this model of seven segments helps explain aspects of our society and politics. For example:

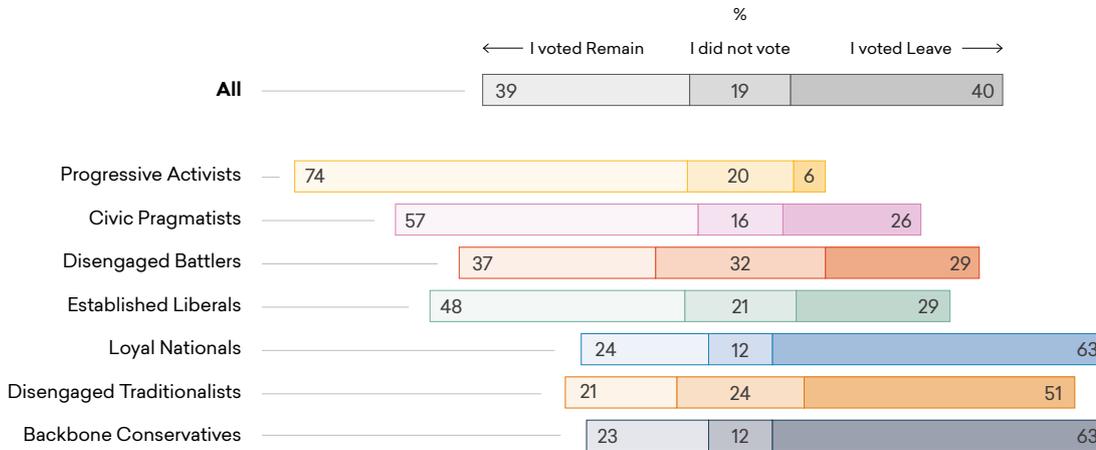
- **The way Britons voted on Brexit:** Brexit is an example of an issue where the seven groups show a range of views that is richer than seen only through the lens of partisanship. Progressive Activists are the strongest remain-supporting group on the left, Backbone Conservatives as the strongest leave-supporting group on the right – but many groups have mixed views.
- **The commanding role of Progressive Activists on social media:** Progressive Activists have strong views and take stances that sometimes put them at odds with the rest of society. They are culturally influential, and are six times more likely to post about politics on twitter and other social media platforms than any other group.
- **The different ways groups cluster on accepting inequality:** On the issue of whether we should be willing to accept that inequality is inevitable in a productive society, or whether we should always strive to reduce it, Backbone Conservatives and Disengaged Traditionalists are outliers as the only groups without majority support for always focusing on reducing inequality.
- **The different ways groups cluster on immigration:** Views about immigration are more complex than a simple yes-or-no, left-vs-right spectrum. Far more than any other segment, Loyal Nationals worry that we care more about immigrants than British citizens. On the other hand, Established Liberals reflect their more comfortable, internationalist outlook; Civic Pragmatists view this through a compassionate lens; and Progressive Activists through a strong ideological commitment to immigration.
- **Why Disengaged groups are distinctive:** Disengaged Battlers and Disengaged Traditionalists respond differently from other segments because of their low social trust and disconnection from others. While things have improved since Covid-19, they have the weakest sense of being part of a caring community, and this influences how they engage with society.
- **Insecurity and perception of threat are major drivers of attitudes:** Threat perception has a powerful influence on people’s psychology, and a key to understanding Established Liberals is how little they share the sense of threat felt by others in their society. Equally, a key to understanding Loyal Nationals is how acutely they feel threats. This helps shape distinctive views on issues including immigration, human rights, crime and welfare.

Figure 0.1.

2016 EU referendum vote

How segments voted in the 2016 referendum on EU membership

2016 Referendum Vote

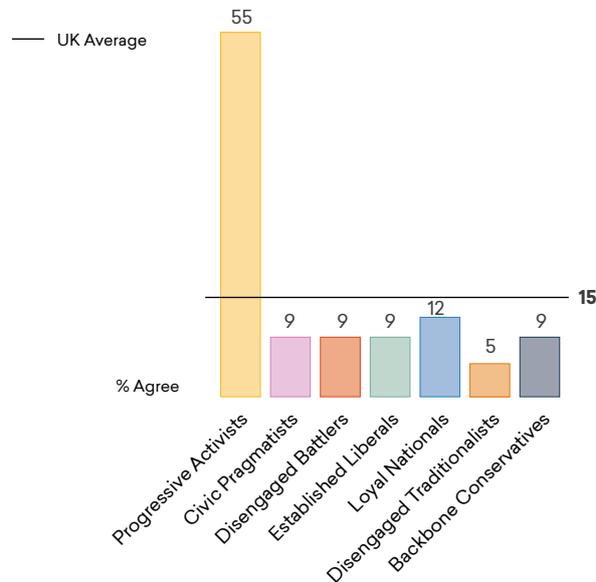


Qu. In the Referendum in 2016 on whether Britain should remain in or leave the European Union, which way did you vote, or did you not vote? February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 0.2.

Sharing political content online

Progressive Activists are a dominant voice on social media

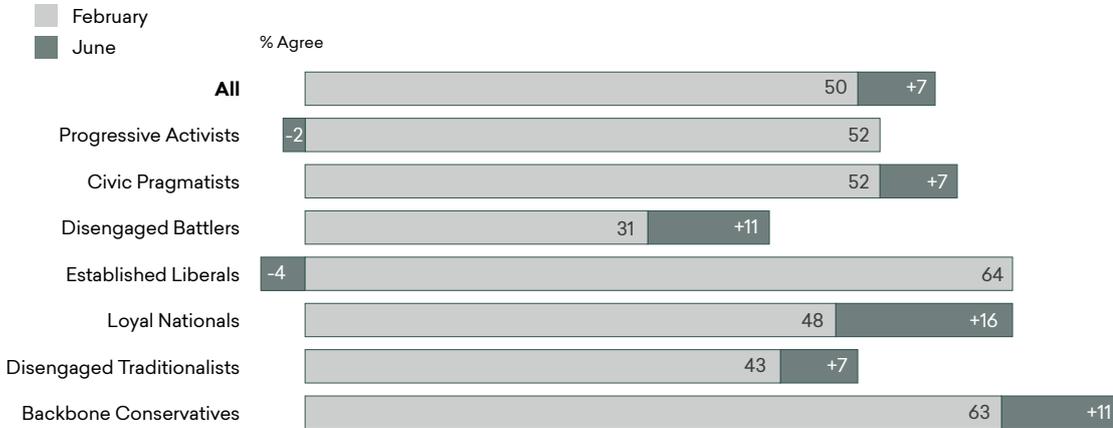


Qu. Here is a list of activities that some people get a chance to participate in and others don't. Which of the following have you taken part in in the past year? February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 0.3.

Covid-19 and community

Since Covid-19, a sense of community has increased among most of the segments



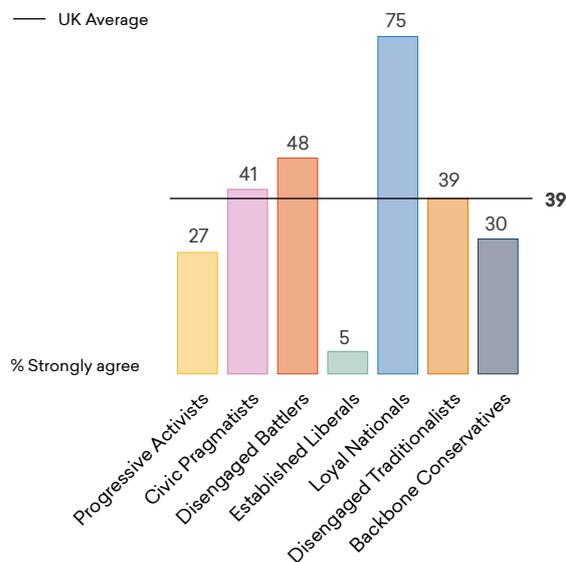
Qu. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am part of a community - people that understand, care for and help each other. February and June 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 0.4.

Perceived threat

The segments differ on the safety or danger they perceive in their local area and the wider world. Established Liberals and Progressive Activists are far less likely to believe that the world is becoming a more dangerous place. Their level of threat perception is lower

The world is becoming a more dangerous place



Qu. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The world is becoming a more and more dangerous place?
February 2020
Source: More in Common 2020.

5

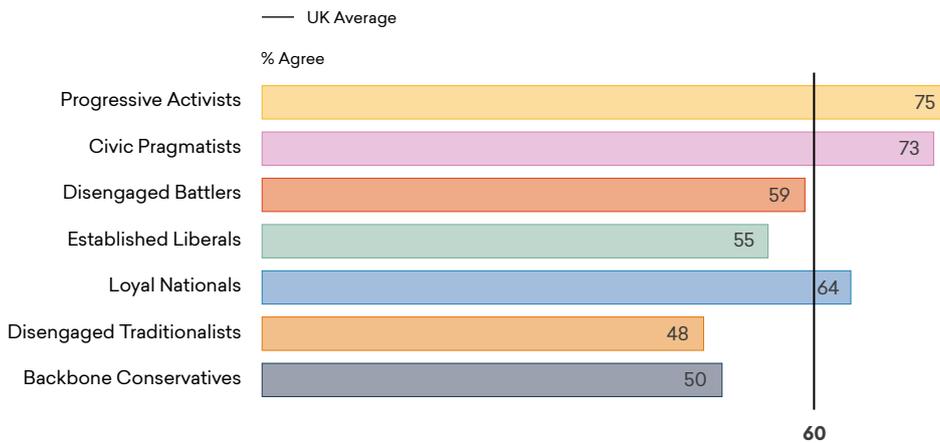
Britons believe the country is more divided than united and mostly **blame political parties and social media for division**. However, there are differences between the groups on who else they blame. Progressive Activists and Civic Pragmatists blame inequality and the class system, while Loyal Nationals and Backbone Conservatives see immigration as a leading cause of division.

Figure 0.5.

Feelings about division

Three in five Britons report feeling exhausted by the division they see in politics

I feel exhausted by the division in politics



Qu: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement about politics in the UK today: I feel exhausted by the division in politics. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

6

While Brexit divisions have largely fallen silent, they could still be reawakened. As of autumn 2020, Leave and Remain identities are still important for half of the British population - almost twice as many people for whom political party identity is important. For those whose sense of personal identity is strongly related to a political party or their position on Brexit, their 'us-versus-them' feelings (affective polarisation) to the other side are still strong and have not disappeared since the pandemic broke out.

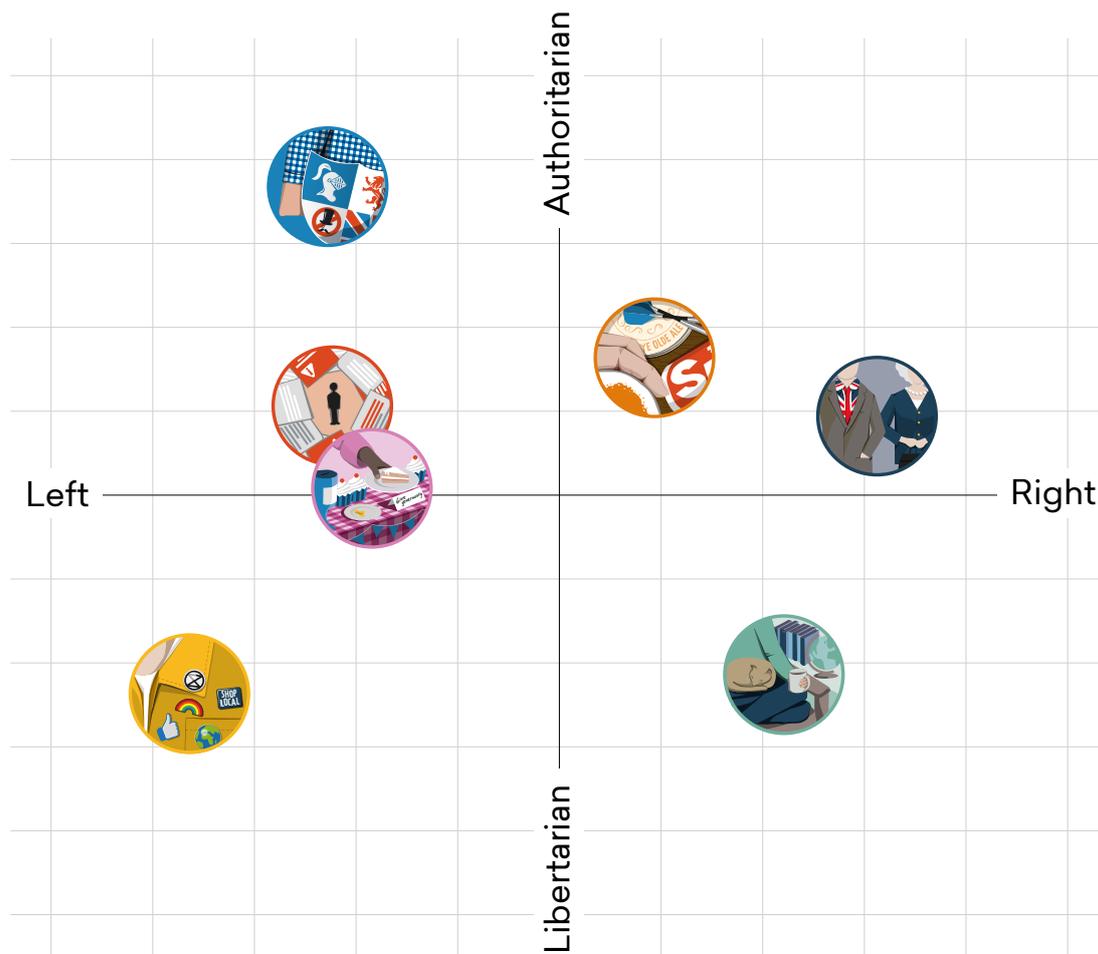
7

When asked where they line up between left and right, only 22 per cent of Britons describe themselves as left or right, while **53 per cent of Britons position themselves in the centre** (either as centre, centre-left or centre-right). At the same time, **only 30 per cent believe that left and right labels are still useful in describing people's beliefs:**

- Only those who are more ideological, Progressive Activists and Backbone Conservatives, say that left / right labels are useful.
- Groups such as the Loyal Nationals hold views usually identified with the left on inequality, and views seen as right wing on immigration, but because of this confusion they are more likely than any group to describe themselves as being in the centre.

Figure 0.6. Segments' political values

The following figure shows where our segments map across the economic left-right and libertarian-authoritarian scales



For full question texts see Appendix 2.1.4 and 2.1.5. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

8

When we look across what we often imagine as our fault lines – class, age, region and left/right values – we find far more common ground than division. For voting patterns, views on economic issues or on social issues, the correlations between class, social grade or region and people's views are weak. Between the nations and the regions, people differ on questions concerning the nations and regions (such as Scottish independence or the north/south divide) – but on other issues are largely similar. Age correlates to differences in people's views on some issues, but not others - but even when it is a significant factor, there is little evidence that these differences are generating intergenerational conflict.

9

Britons' sense of identity involves **complementary layers of British and national identity and sometimes also regional or local identities.** From England to Wales and Scotland, the proportion of people who see their British identity or national identity as important ranges from around 60 to 80 per cent. National identities are especially meaningful for people in Scotland and Wales, where British identity has less resonance. Around one in every two Black and ethnic minority people in England feel that English identity is not truly inclusive, a concern shared by around one-third of English people.

10

The Covid-19 pandemic, despite its awful consequences, also provided the glimpse of a kinder society.

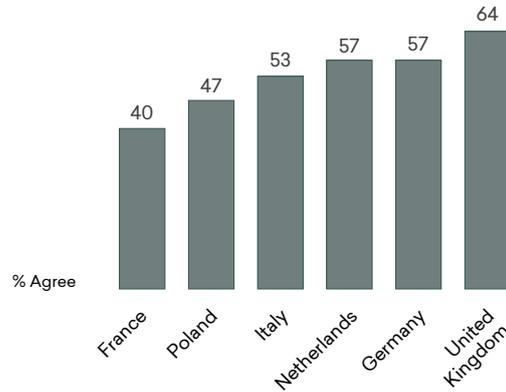
- Even before Covid, three in four people felt that Britons are generally kind, but Covid allowed people to see kindness in action.
- As a result, 58 per cent say that the Covid-19 pandemic has shown us that most people in our country care about each other – a higher number than in any similar country in our recent 7 country study.
- People feel that despite the difficulties of recent times, our solidarity has strengthened – compared to before Covid, twice as many people now believe that as a society we look after each other (rising from 24 to 46 per cent).
- Two in three people say it is important to live in an area with a strong sense of community and after months of grassroots local community connections being made, **63 per cent now feel they have the ability to change things around them** – an increase of 16 percentage points since February.
- Overall, two in three people now feel that we should seize the opportunity to make important changes in our society. But similar numbers doubt that change will happen, a 'hope gap' that reflects their low levels of trust in politicians and groups perceived as elites.

Figure 0.7.

Care for each other

Covid-19 has convinced two in three Britons that we care for each other, more than in any other country surveyed by More in Common

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown me that most people in our country care about each other



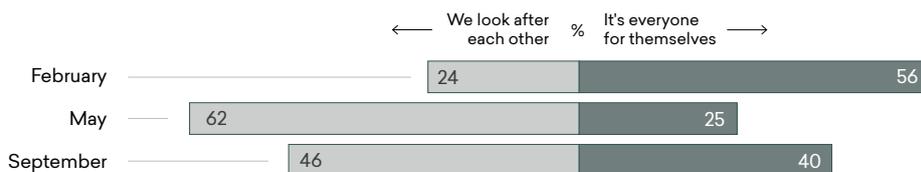
Qu: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The Covid-19 pandemic has shown me that most people in our country care about each other. June 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 0.8.

Our society: Caring or just in it for ourselves?

Twice as many now feel that we look after each other

Are we a society that cares for each other or not?



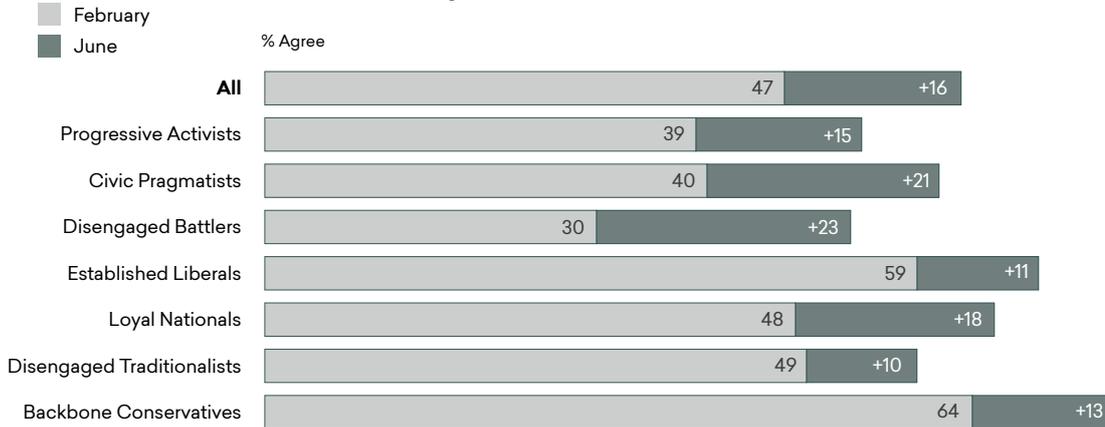
Qu: When thinking about life in the UK in 2020, which do you agree with more?
Data from February, May, and September 2020.
Source: More in Common and Britain Talks Climate 2020.

Figure 0.9.

Covid-19 and personal agency

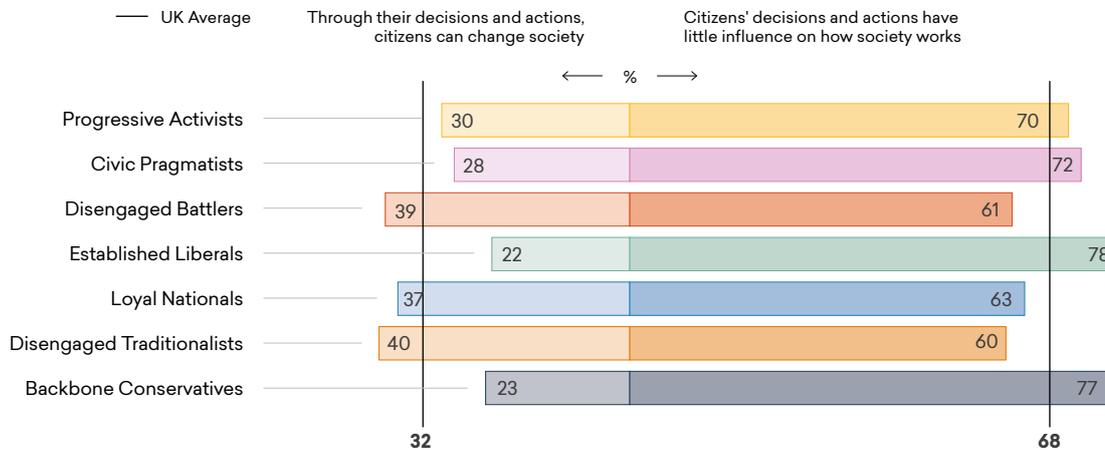
Since the pandemic, all segments have seen an increased sense of personal agency within their local communities and feel that their decisions can impact wider society

People in our area are able to find ways to improve things around here when they want to



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: People in our area are able to find ways to improve things around here when they want to. February and June 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Citizens' influence on society



Qu. Which of the statements do you agree with more? June 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 0.10.

Opportunity for change

Brits are more likely to want to seize the opportunity for change



Qu. Which of the following statement do you agree with more: We should seize the opportunity of Covid-19 to make important changes to our country. June 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

11

We find common ground in Britain on many issues, with large majorities which:

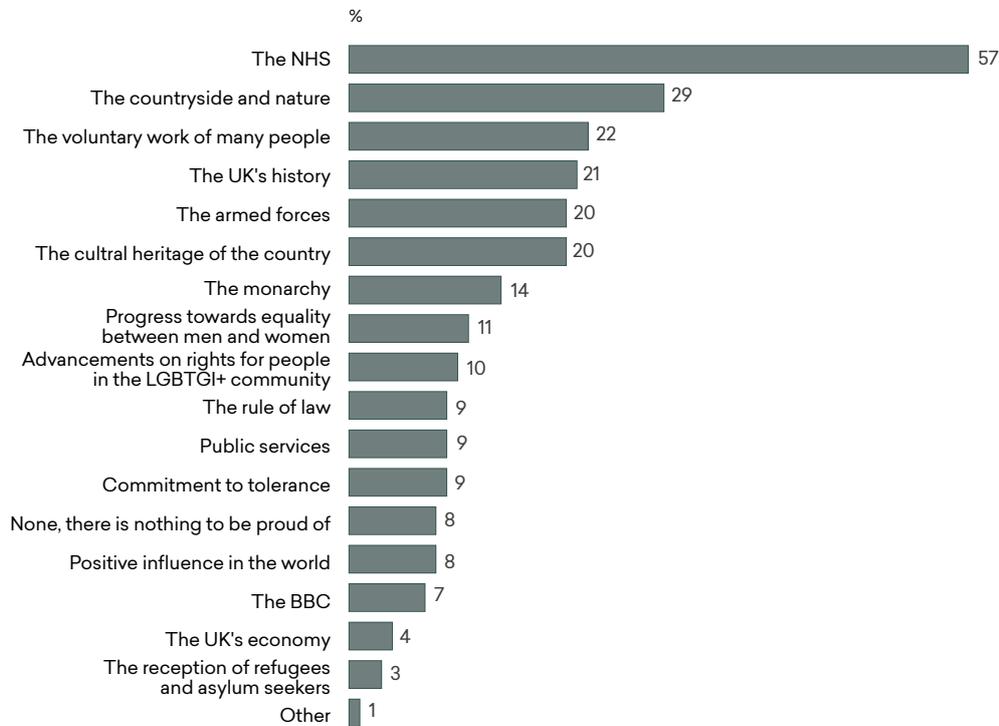
- share a sense of national pride in many similar things – such as the NHS, our countryside, and our volunteer tradition
- feel proud of Britain's progress on gender equality and becoming a more tolerant and diverse nation
- are committed to gender equality and racial equity
- believe that as a society we need to focus on responsibilities as much as rights
- believe in closing the unfair gap between the haves and have-nots, and making sure that the hard work of key workers and others is better rewarded
- want Britain to protect our countryside and lead on climate change
- believe we should strike a balance on difficult issues such as immigration
- feel decision making is too centralised in London
- want political leaders to compromise rather than just sticking to their positions and fighting.

Figure 0.11.

Pride in the UK

Britons share a strong sense of pride in the NHS, along with the countryside and the tradition of voluntary work in the country

What are you most proud of in the UK today?



Qu. What are you proud of in the UK today? Select up to 3. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 0.12.

The ideal United Kingdom

Most Britons wish for a country that is hard-working, environmentally-friendly, and compassionate

	PA	CP	DB	EL	LN	DT	BC	All
Hard-working	17%	39%	29%	46%	53%	51%	62%	43%
Environmentally-friendly	70%	57%	35%	46%	36%	25%	36%	42%
Compassionate	63%	53%	40%	39%	37%	18%	29%	39%
Honest	26%	33%	37%	33%	48%	39%	44%	38%
Tolerant	57%	47%	30%	46%	23%	19%	25%	34%
Fair	47%	40%	38%	34%	32%	23%	28%	34%
Educated	35%	32%	31%	35%	26%	26%	30%	30%
United	15%	27%	23%	21%	29%	22%	26%	23%
Polite	6%	13%	20%	15%	24%	24%	22%	18%
Patriotic	1%	5%	9%	5%	23%	21%	25%	14%
Independent	3%	7%	11%	9%	16%	18%	18%	12%
Creative	23%	13%	15%	15%	5%	8%	7%	12%
Global	21%	11%	8%	16%	5%	6%	7%	10%
Traditional	0%	2%	9%	3%	15%	15%	15%	9%
Orderly	1%	4%	6%	4%	6%	8%	9%	6%
Funny	7%	5%	5%	5%	3%	7%	3%	5%
Don't know	0%	2%	7%	3%	2%	8%	1%	3%
None of these	1%	0%	2%	0%	1%	2%	0%	1%

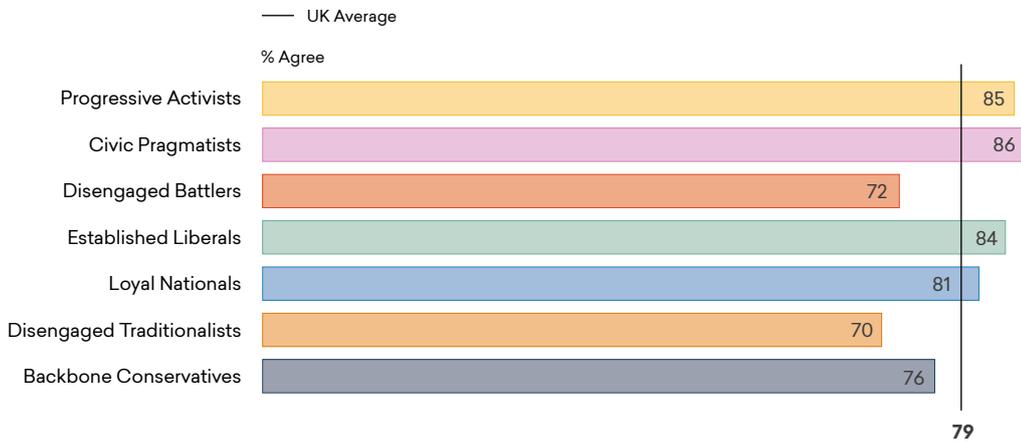
Qu. Thinking towards the future, imagine your ideal UK society. What should we be like? Please select up to four qualities. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 0.13.

Advancements in gender equality

More than 70 per cent in all Britain's groups is proud of the advancements in equality between men and women

I am proud of the advancements we have made in equality between men and women



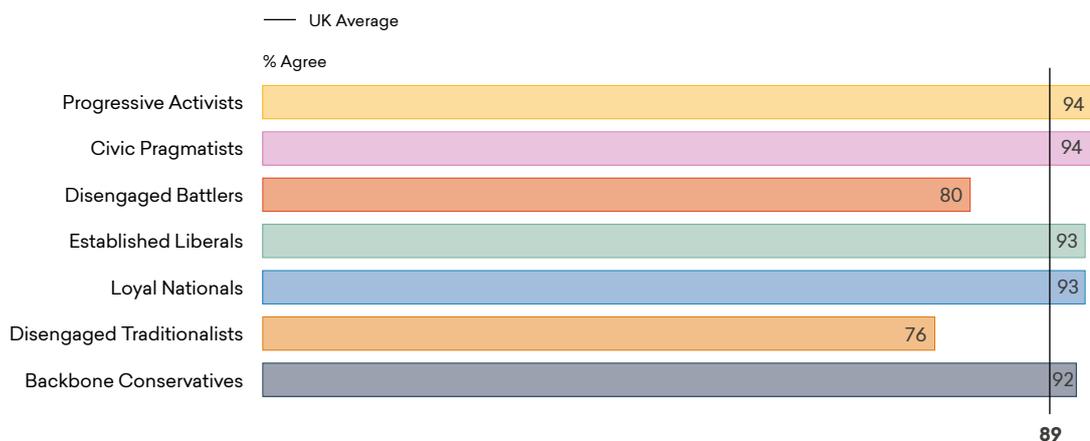
Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I am proud of the advancements we have made in equality between men and women. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 0.14.

Rights and responsibilities

Britons coincide that we need to be a society of citizens that focus both on rights and responsibilities

As citizens, we focus on our responsibilities as much as on our rights



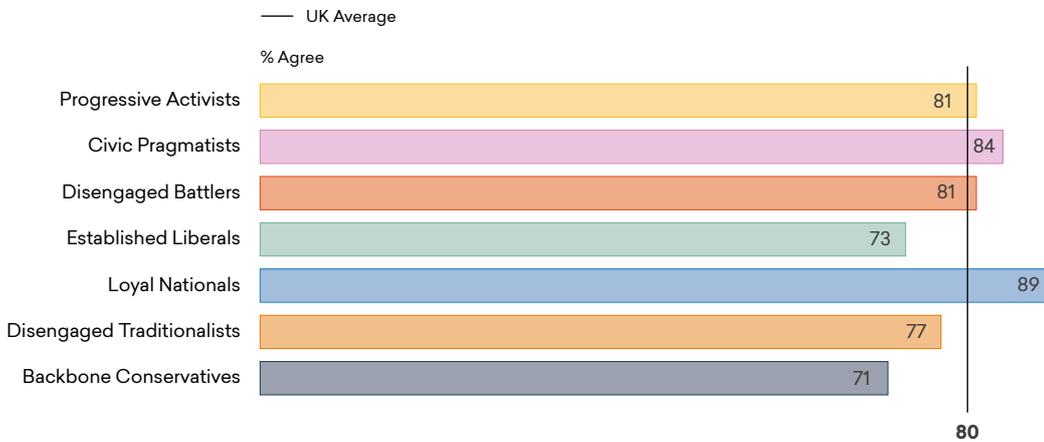
Qu. How important is it to you that the UK become a society where...As citizens, we focus on our responsibilities as much as our rights. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 0.15.

Centralisation

Common ground exists in feeling that that too much is decided in London

Too much in our country is decided in London



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Too much in our country is decided in London. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

12

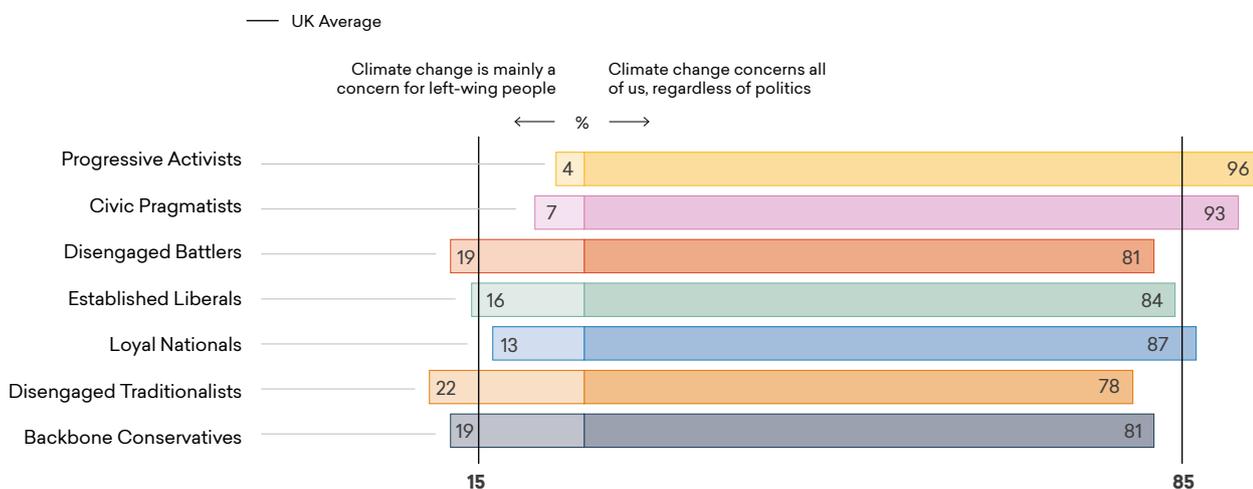
There is remarkable **common ground on the need for more action to protect the environment** and address climate change, although people discuss these issues in different ways across the seven groups. **Covid-19 has re-connected people with nature** through the experience of commuting less and spending more time exploring their local habitat. Eighty-three per cent say that they **feel more confident that we can make a difference** to lessen our impact on the environment after watching the drop in pollution during lockdown.

Figure 0.16.

Climate change concerns everyone

Britons agree that, regardless of background, climate change is an important issue for everyone

Climate change concerns all of us



For full question texts see Appendix 2.1.17. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

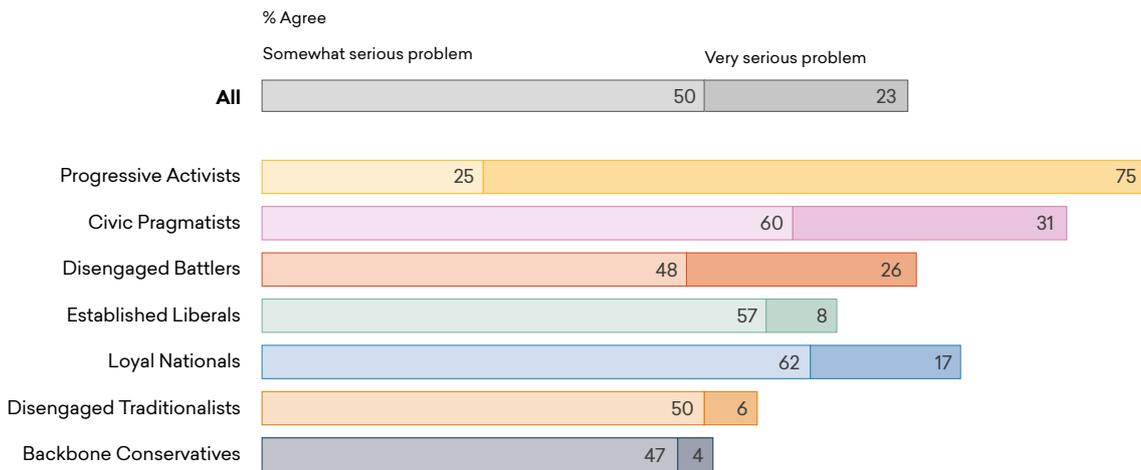
13

A majority of all population segments of society and 73 per cent of the population overall believe **inequality in the UK is a serious problem**. An **even higher majority are concerned that we focus too much on money and status**. Over 90 per cent of Britons support the principle that businesses receiving government support have a responsibility to society, such as paying fair wages, onshoring jobs, reducing carbon emissions, paying their taxes in full and not using offshore tax havens to avoid paying tax.

Figure 0.17.

Inequality in the UK

In all segments, a majority agrees that inequality is a serious problem



Qu. To what extent is inequality a problem in the UK today? February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

14

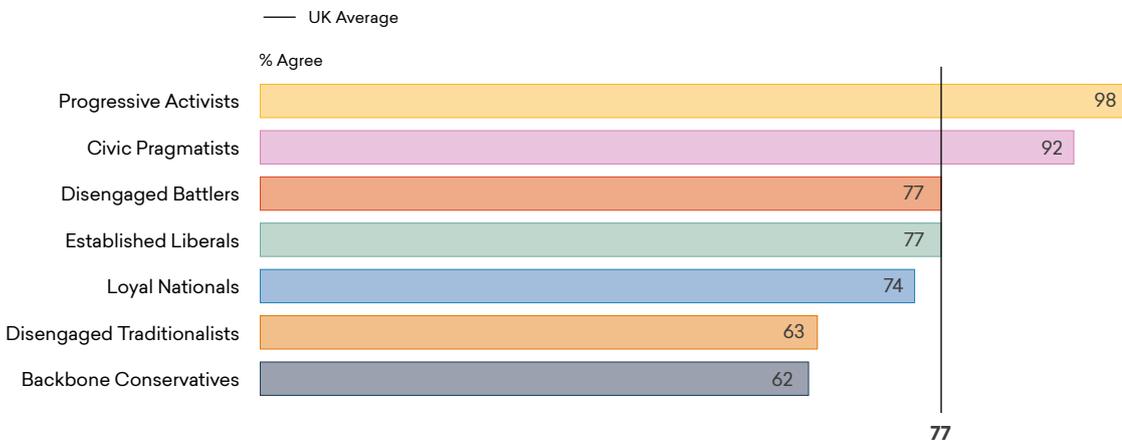
On issues of race and immigration, Britons are balancers – they acknowledge that **racism is a serious problem in the country** and 60 per cent recognise that white people continue to have advantages over people from ethnic minorities, but similar numbers do not believe that we should get stuck in debates about the wrongs of the past. Most Britons seek to find a balance between cultural diversity and openness on the one hand, while preserving our traditions and culture.

Figure 0.18.

Seriousness of racism

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

How serious is racism today?



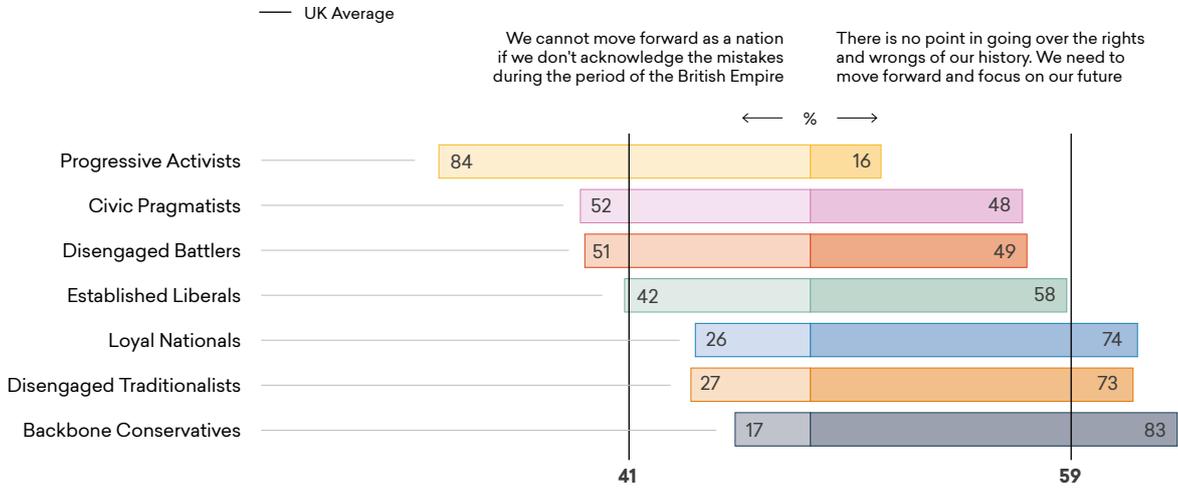
Qu. In your opinion, how serious are the following problems in the UK today: Racism. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 0.19.

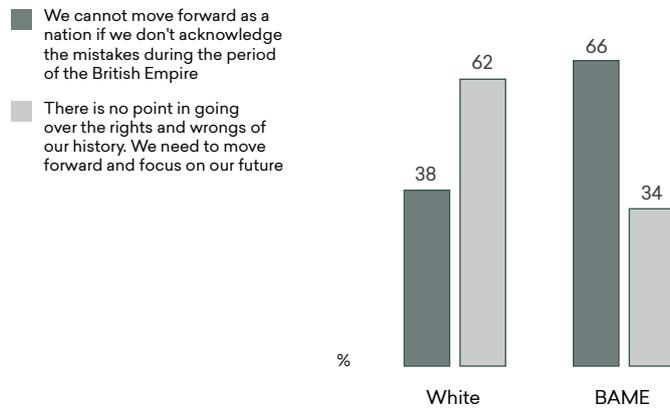
Dealing with the past

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 2.1.16 February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

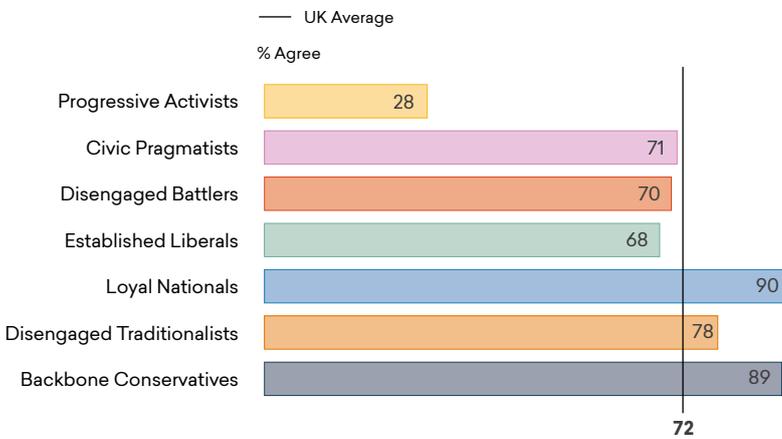
The **'false binaries' of culture wars** do not resonate with the reality of the attitudes of most of the British public. For example, 73 per cent of Britons are worried about hate speech and at the same time 72 per cent believe that political correctness is a problem.

Figure 0.20.

Political correctness

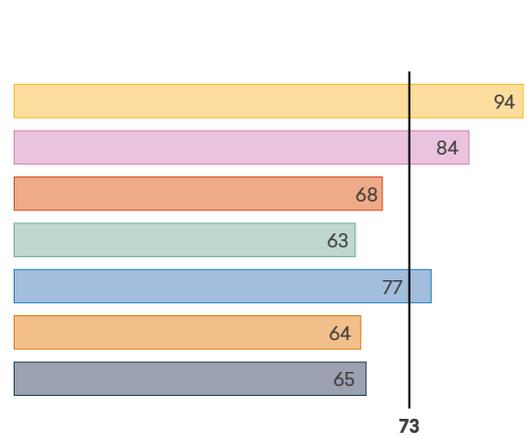
Most Britons are convinced that both hate speech and political correctness are problematic

Political correctness is a problem in our country



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following: Political correctness is a problem in our country, February 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.

Hate speech is a problem in our country



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following: Hate speech is a problem in our country, February 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.

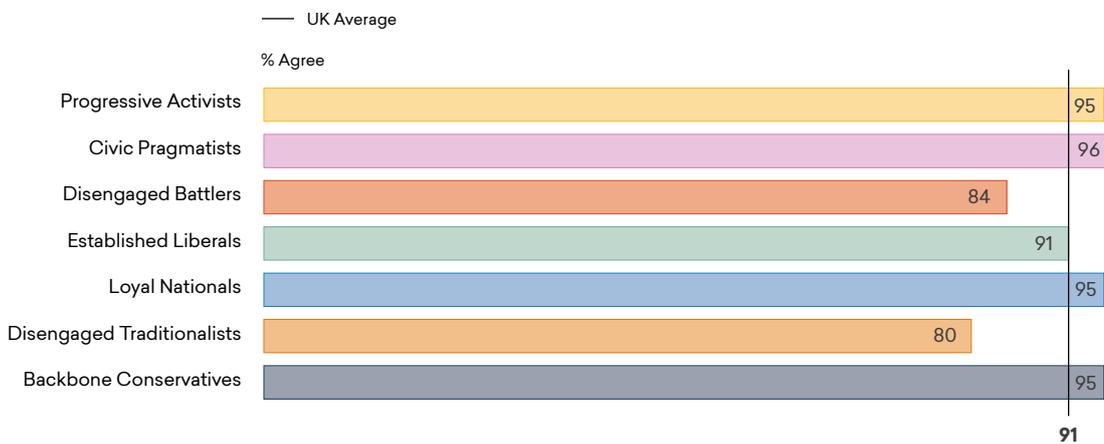
There are **powerful forces that will continue to drive us apart** – such as divisive social media, people’s loss of trust in the system, disinformation and a political ecosystem that rewards conflict. Countering those forces is not easy. But 91 per cent of us believe that just because we disagree, we should not give up on each other. Becoming a more cohesive society starts with having more respect for each other. Britain’s choice for the 2020s is whether we allow those forces of division to drive us further down the path of polarisation, or whether we focus on our shared values and common ground and build a more cohesive and united country.

Figure 0.21.

Learning to disagree

Britons believe it is important that we can disagree and still come together

We are able to disagree without giving up on each other



Qu. How important is it to you that the UK become a society where...We are able to disagree without giving up on each other. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

