

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

# Chapter 5

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# Polarisation and Division



More in  
Common

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# Chapter 5

## Polarisation and Division

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**50 per cent** of Britons feel that this is the most divided Britain has ever been

**74 per cent** think that the media often makes the country feel more divided than it really is

**3 in 5** Britons say they feel exhausted by division in politics

**71 per cent** agree that ‘for the future of our country, it is especially important that we stick together despite different views’

# Introduction

In the years following the Brexit referendum, the story of a nation divided between two opposing camps took hold as conventional wisdom in Britain. The 52-to-48 per cent division in the June 2016 referendum was seen as the culmination of a profound cleavage in society – between a younger, more educated, diverse, and cosmopolitan Britain and an older, more traditional, provincial, white, and patriotic Britain. The fact that the outcome of the Brexit referendum so surprised the former group only underscored how disconnected



**I don't feel part of a society that's so divided I couldn't have a constructive conversation with someone at a very personal level.**

*Philip, Backbone Conservative, 28, South East*



people have become. Others contested this view, arguing that the drawn-out Brexit debate was less extraordinary: merely the latest chapter in the long history of Britain's complex relationship with its European neighbours.

Like other western democracies, Britain has seen the forces of division grow stronger in recent years. A large majority feel that the country has become more divided, and half of the country believes those divisions have never been so bad.

To varying degrees, there is evidence for those sentiments. We have grown less trusting and understanding of each other and of our institutions. Our public debates have coarsened and, played out through the 24-hour digital news cycle, have become more combustible. It is so much easier now for minor squabbles to ignite major conflicts, fuelled by bellicose voices that have mastered the medium of viral social media platforms.

We are in a time when differences are magnified by a deep distrust of 'the system', widening inequality, the dynamics of social media, and a greater awareness of racial injustice. Different experiences, values, and beliefs that drive political behaviour are easier to exploit in times of uncertainty and insecurity. Disparate forces have become increasingly active and effective in exploiting such differences – incendiary media commentators, extremist groups, foreign powers, and self-serving politicians who see division as their route to power. There is every reason to expect that the intensity of these forces will continue to grow in future years.

But this study challenges the narrative of a Britain polarised and divided into two opposing camps. For most people, the lines that we often see as dividing us – the party we support, our political ideology, even our views on Brexit – are not central to our sense of personal identity. We tire of the divisive voices that overstate our differences. Most of us value our more widely shared identities, whether national – as British, English, Scottish, and Welsh – demographic, or based on other interests or passions.

Most of us see the changes of recent decades in generally positive terms, and feel proud of how Britain has become a more open, modern, and diverse society. Times have become more fractious, but on the whole we do not believe that the differences between Britons are too big for us to work together anymore. And the divisions that opened up during the Brexit years feel less relevant after we have seen how many people from all backgrounds came together to help those most in need during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The aim of this chapter is to better understand public perceptions of Britain's divisions. The chapter first examines perceptions of division. It then explores whether the UK is a polarised country or not. We find that, while there is some 'us-versus-them' division (or 'affective polarisation') between those who more

strongly associate with their Brexit identity, this is only felt by half of the population. Few of us strongly identify with a political party or dislike others just because they belong to an opposing party.

Polarisation becomes more dangerous when a division over one issue creates static identities and affective polarisation becomes entrenched. Social scientists describe this phenomenon as conflict extension: when members of the group converge across a range of issues. Fortunately, in the UK we do not yet observe conflict extension, but rather a kaleidoscopic effect. Society, as examined through the lens of the segments, is not divided into two opposing camps. Instead we come together in different formations depending on the issue at hand – much like the pieces of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope which combine in different patterns as the instrument is rotated.

This chapter provides insights into a key conclusion of this report, namely that **it is not inevitable that we continue down the path to a more divided society**. We can choose to address the fault lines in our society. We can strengthen and reinvigorate the institutions that bring us together. We can build on our common ground, rather than diminishing it. We can work to contain the forces of division, instead of unleashing them. The voices that shape our social and political debates can let those debates play out in ways that deepen our faith in democracy, rather than undermine it. This work starts with better understanding how we see our divisions today.

## 5.1 Perceptions of division

**‘I think we were a more united society. I think there’s always been differences, but I think the referendum was the really big one that just broke it open.’**

*Peter, Civic Pragmatist. 37, North West*

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A large majority of British people describe the country as divided, although there is evidence of an improvement since the Brexit years (when as many as 85 per cent described it that way).<sup>1</sup> Asked just before the outbreak of Covid-19, we found that:

- 66 per cent felt that the United Kingdom is divided – 45 per cent saying it was somewhat divided and 22 per cent saying it was very divided
- Only 13 per cent described the country as united (almost all of whom said it was somewhat united)
- 21 per cent said the country was neither united nor divided

The pandemic has had mixed effects on people’s perceptions. As Chapter 11 highlights, people often say it has shown us at our best and our worst. At this stage there is no clear public verdict. When asked whether their perceptions of the UK have changed (if at all) since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, Britons respond as follows:

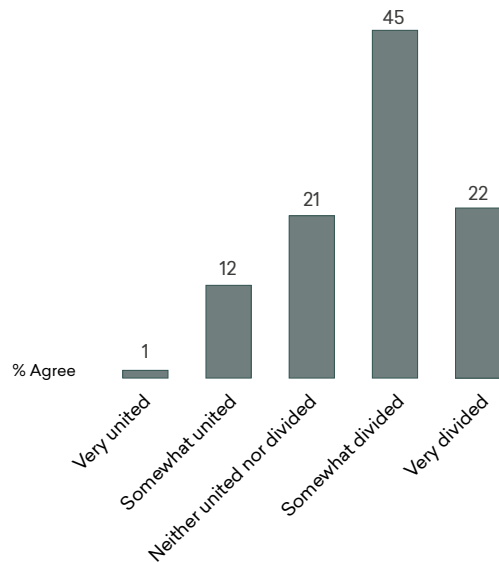
- 32 per cent feel that we are more divided than before
- 26 per cent believe that we are more united than before
- 42 per cent claim that we are neither more united than divided

Figure 5.1.

## Perceptions of division

Most Britons feel that the country is generally divided, although only a fifth feel this strongly

### Are we united or divided?



Qu. How united or divided does the UK feel to you these days? February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

If we were to draw out the three key insights from this research on division, the first would be that **the country sees itself as more divided than united – across all segments.**

The second key insight is that **perceptions of unity and division are influenced by partisan factors.** Those whose political side is in power are more likely to view the country as united, and those whose side is weaker and out of power see it as divided. There are nevertheless significant numbers of Conservative supporters who see the country as divided, and significant numbers of Labour supporters who see the country as united.

- Supporters of opposition parties are more likely to view the country as divided – a view shared by 77 per cent of Labour supporters, 87 per cent of Liberal Democrat supporters, and 89 per cent of Scottish Nationalist Party supporters.
- In contrast, 51 per cent of Conservative Party supporters see the UK as divided.
- Just 49 per cent of strong Leavers see the UK as divided, compared to 86 per cent of strong Remainers. There is far less difference between ‘somewhat’ Leavers and ‘somewhat’ Remainers (among whom 57 and 68 per cent respectively see the country as divided).
- Those who are disengaged politically are less inclined to see the country as divided, with 55 per cent of those who did not vote in the 2019 election saying the country is divided, compared to 65 per cent nationally.

The third key insight from the research is that the **population segments provide some clearer insights into public perceptions than the lens of Brexit or party identities**, since perceptions of unity and division are influenced by people’s social psychology.

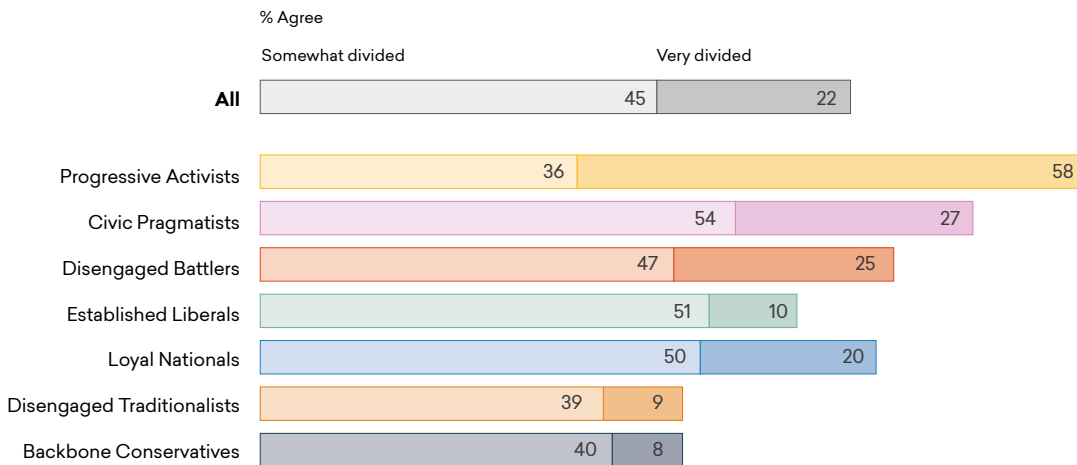
- While being on the ‘winning’ or ‘losing’ side influences people’s perceptions of unity and division, underlying psychological influences can also play a role. Despite having the highest Leave vote in the 2016 referendum of any segment (at 63 per cent, equal to Backbone Conservatives), Loyal Nationals are still more likely to perceive the country as divided than the national average. Some 70 per cent of them say this is the case. Loyal Nationals are most sensitive about divisions in their society, and this is a key characteristic of those with the highest tendency towards authoritarian values.
- Progressive Activists are outliers in that almost all see the country as divided (94 per cent), and they are the only segment for whom a majority (58 per cent) see the country as being very divided.
- The other segment whose identity is strongly tied to their ideological beliefs, Backbone Conservatives, are not outliers in the same way as Progressive Activists are. Some 48 per cent of Backbone Conservatives see the country as divided (the same proportion as among Disengaged Traditionalists).<sup>2</sup>

Figure 5.2.

## Segments’ perceptions of division

All segments view the country as divided, but to different degrees

### How divided does the UK feel?



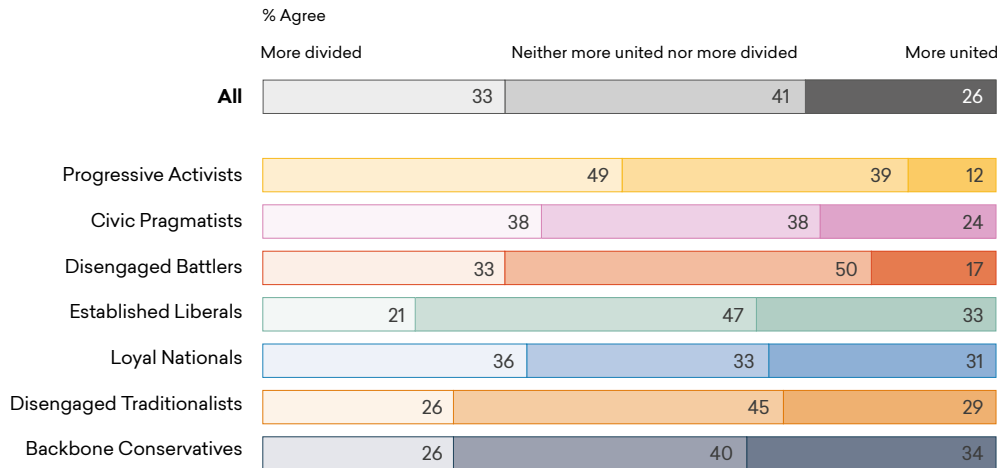
Qu. How united or divided does the UK feel to you these days? February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 5.3.

## Change in perceptions of division during Covid-19

The strongest perceptions of growing divisions are among Progressive Activists

### Have perceptions of division changed during Covid-19?



Qu. Since the Covid-19 pandemic emerged, how have your perceptions of the UK changed, if at all? Is it...? June 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

## 5.2 Are we more divided than ever before?

Just under half of Britons say that our society is more divided than at any other point in their lifetimes, compared to a quarter who say that we have been through times like this before. To better understand how people define and relate to this sense of division, we dived deeper through asking a series of questions comparing current situations to the past.

The period of deep division in living memory that is most often cited is the Thatcher era, which was marked by an extended period of political conflict, social unrest, and the realignment of the major political parties. The divisions of that era tended to follow the fault lines of capital and labour. Voting patterns reflected a persistent North-South and class divide<sup>3</sup> between Labour-supporting working class voters in the North of England, Scotland, and Wales, and Conservative-supporting middle class voters in the South of England.

**50%** of Britons feel that this is the most divided Britain has ever been

Yet today, 50 per cent of Britons feel that this is the most divided Britain has ever been, while 26 per cent say we have been this divided before and 7 per cent say we have been through more divided times.

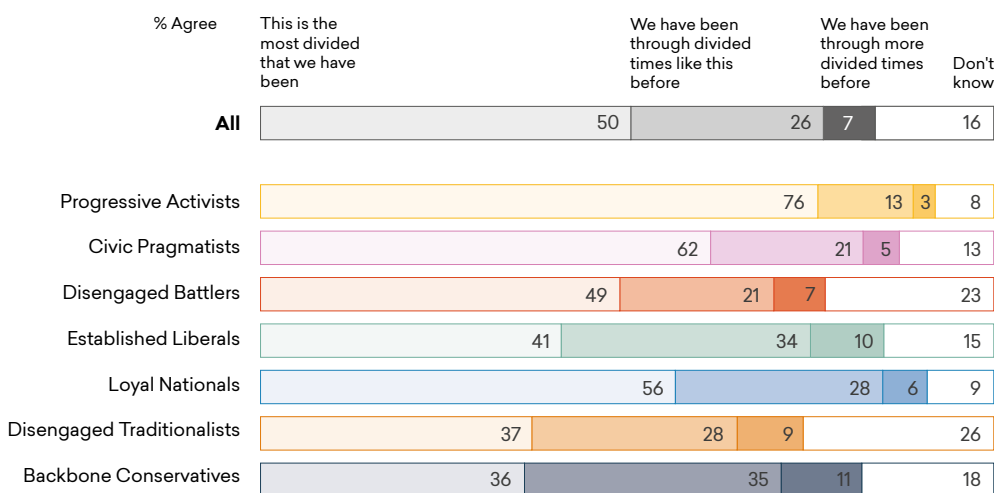
- Progressive Activists perceive the level of division more negatively than other segments.
- Other than for the oldest age group (the Silent Generation, aged between 75 and 100), for whom 13 per cent feel we have been through more divided times, there is little difference in perceptions between people based on age.
- Perhaps understandably given their youth, Gen Z (18 to 24-year-olds) are less likely than average to say that we have been through divided times like this before.
- There are mild effects for Brexit identities and partisan identities. Remainers are more likely than Leavers to say that this is the most divided we have been (62 v 42 per cent).
- 63 per cent of supporters of the Labour Party, 66 per cent of Liberal Democrats, and 68 per cent of Green party supporters believe that this is the most divided we have been, as opposed to 39 per cent of Conservative supporters.

Fresh memories are often the strongest, but there are some distinct elements to the current conflict that were less true in the 1980s. Trust in government is at an all-time low,<sup>4</sup> and faith in the capacity of our democratic system to resolve our differences was eroded by the long-lasting political deadlock between 2016 and 2019. The divisions in the 1980s were between stable identities (involving trade unions, business, a Conservative government, and Labour opposition) and played out through established institutions, whereas the current divisions are more destabilising, causing divisions within political parties, social classes, and regions.

**Figure 5.4. Perceptions of division compared to the past**

Most Britons think this is the most divided that we have ever been

**Are we more divided than ever before?**



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



## 5.3 Who do we blame for our divisions?

**‘Currently the nature of politics is dragging people apart... It looks like the more divisive politicians are, the more they remain in power. I'm not sure what quick fix there is.’**

*Farooq, Progressive Activist, 28, East of England*

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Most Britons feel a sense of exhaustion with the divisions of recent years and remain worried that those divisions might return. Asked who is to blame for division, there is common ground: political parties and social media are the main culprits. Almost half of society blames political parties for driving us apart. Every population segment ranks political parties in its top three factors, and it is only the Backbone Conservatives and Loyal Nationals who do not put them first.

The second most cited force of division is social media, the forum in which political debates now play out from one hour to the next. Every population segment ranks social media as one of the three causes of our deepest divisions other than Progressive Activists, who themselves are far more active in engaging in political debates on social media than any other group. On the other hand, Backbone Conservatives are more likely to hold social media responsible than any other group. Age plays a significant role in these perceptions, with twice as many people in the 75+ age group attributing divisions to social media than those in the 18-25 age group (58 v 27 per cent citing it as one of the three most important sources of division).

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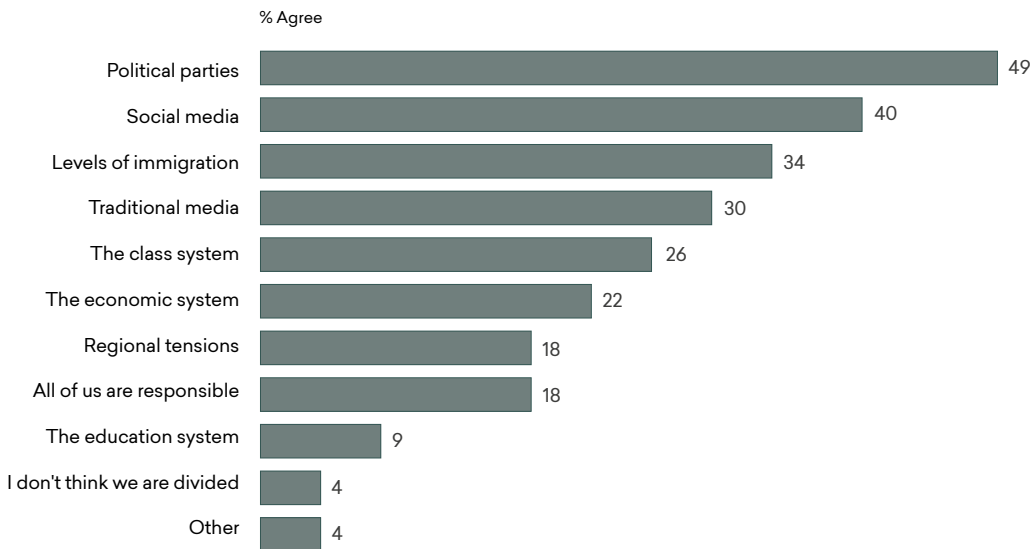
**74%** think that the media often makes the country feel more divided than it really is

Many also attribute blame to the traditional media, such as the tabloid press, which is the fourth most cited source of division. Some 74 per cent think that the media often makes the country feel more divided than it really is. While the distinction between traditional and social media is somewhat blurred, the higher blame attributed to social media reflects concerns that social media platforms are geared towards driving up division and elevating extreme voices.

Figure 5.5.

## Causes of division

Britons blame political parties as the primary cause of division



Qu. Which do you think are the causes of the deepest divisions in the UK, if any? Select up to 3. February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

**'Division is how media companies make their money, how corporations make their money. I think it's intentional. The government maybe finds it easier to keep control if we're all arguing against each other.'**

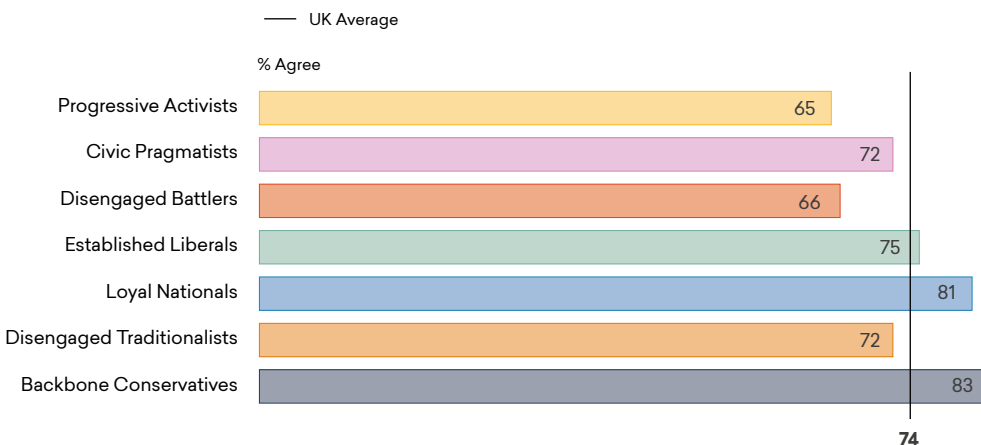
*Nick, Progressive Activist, 34, London*

Figure 5.6.

## Media and division

In all segments, a majority believes that the media exacerbates divisions

**The media makes our country feel more divided than it really is**



Qu. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about politics in the UK today? I think the media often makes our country feel more divided than it really is. February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

While there is common ground on the role of parties, social media, and traditional media in driving us apart, there are differences between clusters of segments on whether some other factors divide us.

Loyal Nationals and Backbone Conservatives see immigration as a leading cause of division. Both segments value the moral foundations of loyalty and authority highly, and worry that immigrants do not share the same commitment to the country and its rules. Perceptions about the relationship between immigration and social cohesion are further discussed in Chapter 9.

Progressive Activists and Civic Pragmatists attribute division to systemic factors such as economic inequality and the class system. The class system was named by 26 per cent of people, and the economic system by 22 per cent. In focus group conversations, people frequently cited the gap between the haves and have-nots as something that divides us. Progressive Activists and Civic Pragmatists, the two groups with the highest number of Labour Party supporters, cited the economic system as a cause of division most frequently (40 per cent and 32 per cent respectively).

Loyal Nationals stand out in this analysis for blaming both immigration and inequality (class differences and the economic system) for division. Loyal Nationals identify immigration as the primary cause of division in the country (51 per cent), just above the blame they attribute to political parties (50 per cent), but an above-average of 31 per cent of people in this segment also blame the class system.



## In their own words:



'Divisions primarily all come back to inequality... where in the UK people are born, the education that they have access to, and their background, that then goes on to influence the rest of their lives.'

*Sally, Progressive Activist, 29, South East*



'I think the main topic obviously is the government and Brexit, I think it's almost 50/50 on both subjects and people feel so strongly on either side of it... I've seen quite a few people fall out about it and friendships have ended because of the complete differences. The sides to take are very different from each other and I think at the moment since the EU referendum in 2016 it has created a huge divide in the country, which has shaped our next few general elections that we had as well.'

*Peter, Civic Pragmatist, 37, North West*



'Age definitely I think is a thing at the moment... A lot of the current issues tend to end up being like old people on one side, young people on another, on average.'

*Bradley, Established Liberal, 24, South East*



'We are divided. I mean, there's major culprits like the mainstream media. They're the ones keeping us divided.'

*George, Loyal National, 62, West Midlands*

'Well, you can talk about the economic separations first of all, I mean even on my road you have council houses, you have private accommodation, you have people who don't work, you have people who work, so there's all the income differences.'

*Molly, Loyal National, 62, London*

'I think politics is a huge division at the minute with Brexit and especially in Scotland with independence as well. I think that Scotland in some ways, you feel like you're in a completely different country. And then we were kind of for Brexit but against Brexit. And then that brought in a question of race as well which I think made Brexit more of a racial thing and that further divided things. And it started off as politics but it's kind of made its way down into lots of different things.'

*Elizabeth, Loyal National, 39, Scotland*



‘The rich seem to be getting richer. I wouldn’t say the poor are getting poorer because if you’re poor, I don’t think you can get any poorer until... you’ve got nothing.’

*Jake, Disengaged Traditionalist, 47, South East*

‘I do think there is a lot of division in regards to politics because there always will be. People, they’ll go more towards one party and they won’t look at another. I do think it’s a problem to some extent because they don’t seem to compare different parties and just see what they’re offering at that time. Just the same as when you go shopping you don’t necessarily stay at one place. You might go and shop around and find a different deal, and I think that people need to remember that.’

*Louise, Disengaged Traditionalist, 26, North West*

‘The press and the media will immediately go back in making a big song and dance about Brexit, whether you’re for or against it. You don’t know what false news is and what’s real. At the moment, I don’t trust the media for what they’re reporting.’

*Freddie, Disengaged Traditionalist, 67, South West*



‘I’ve noticed since the last General Election and the last few years there’s been quite a division between the left and the right. And it’s gone away from the middle ground a lot. There’s nothing really covering the middle ground at the moment. A lot of people are either staunch left or staunch right which does divide quite severely.’

*Paul, Backbone Conservative, 38, South East*

‘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. They won’t speak English. They stay amongst themselves and don’t try, which I find quite amazing. Because wherever you go in the world, I think if you live in a place in the world you need to try and speak their language so you can interact with them. But you see they don’t. They keep themselves very much to themselves. I don’t think that helps society in the UK.’

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

## 5.4 'Us-versus-them' polarisation

As humans, we have a need to belong. We associate with groups to fulfil that need. People have a natural tendency to see the groups to which they belong, or with whom they identify, in positive terms, while they see opposing groups in negative terms – an 'us-versus-them' phenomenon that social scientists call 'affective polarisation'. Strong animosity between supporters of different groups, whether they are based on political affiliation, opinions, or other characteristics, can turn differences on issues into divisions between people. Sorting of citizens into static identity groups serves to make citizens less tolerant towards others, in turn making social conflict more likely.

Affective polarisation undermines the health of democracies, because it undermines the trust and cooperation required to resolve differences. Over time it can lead to 'stacked identities', where a person's identification with a group results in them conforming to the group's beliefs and fighting the beliefs of the opposing group.<sup>5</sup> This phenomenon can occur along the lines of political party identities, or other groupings such as Leavers and Remainers. While the issue has been studied extensively in the United States, it has not been as thoroughly researched in the UK (though with notable exceptions).<sup>6</sup>

To analyse the extent of these in-group versus out-group dynamics, individuals in different groups were asked about their feelings concerning themselves and the 'other'. The study examined the importance of partisan and Leave/Remain identities, as well as the feelings that each group has about their in-group and the 'other', or out-group, through a tool known as the 'feelings thermometer'.<sup>7</sup>

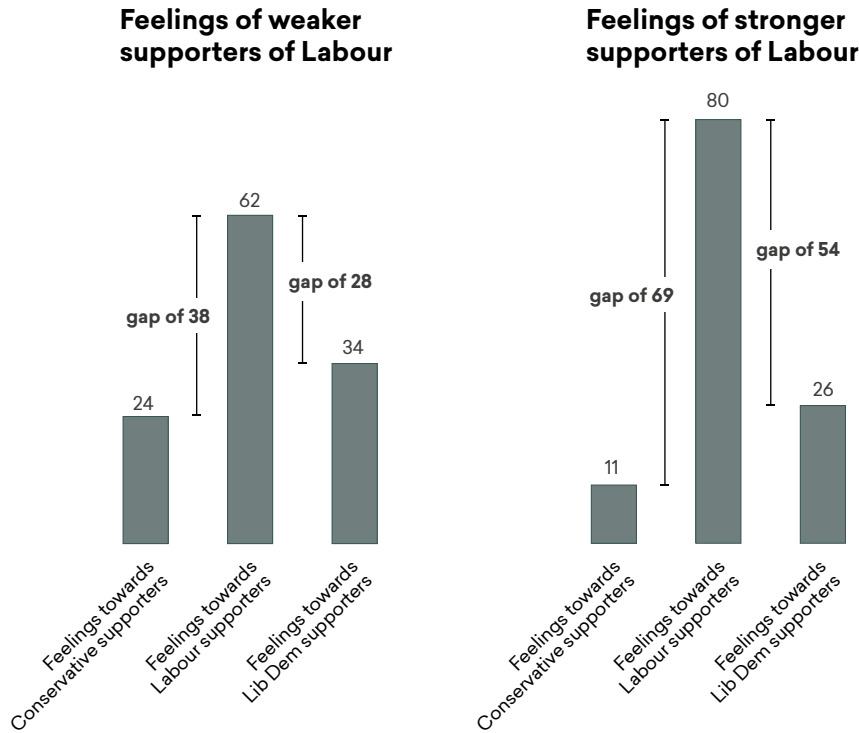
**For those whose sense of personal identity is strongly related to a political party or their position on Brexit, 'us-versus-them' dynamics play out strongly.** Compared to others, they are much warmer in their feelings toward their in-group and much colder towards the out-group. This is true for partisans of all main parties as well as for Leavers and Remainers. However, the strength of partisan affiliation and Leave/Remain identities is not equal.

- The identification that people have with being a Leaver or Remainer has become a stronger attachment for many people than any political party. Half of those who identify as either Leaver or Remainer say that this is an important identity for them. Only 32 per cent of the population says that being a supporter of their party is important to them.
- 21 per cent of Britons claim that their Leave/Remain identity is *very* important to them, more than double the number whose party identity is very important (9 per cent).
- There is no significant difference between the two sides of the Brexit division on its importance to their identities. Nineteen per cent of Remainers claim their Brexit identity is a very important identity to them (49 per cent overall important), while 22 per cent of Leavers claim it is a very important identity (50 per cent overall important).

Figure 5.7.

## Effect of partisanship on feelings towards members of other parties

Stronger partisan identities lead to greater feelings of tribalism



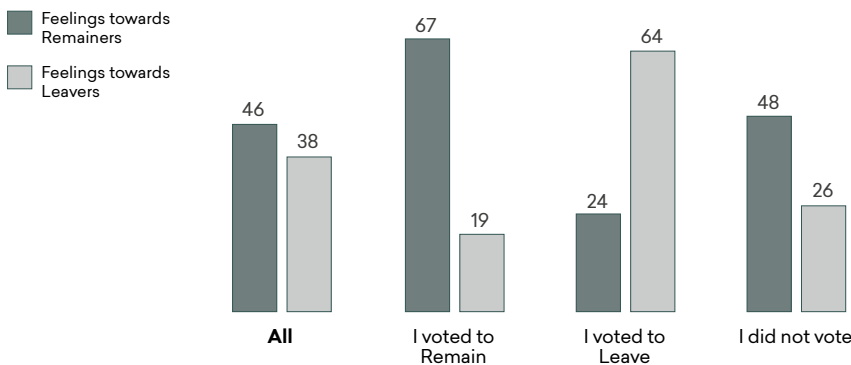
Qu. How positively or negatively do you feel about each of the following, where 0 means very negative, and 100 means very positive. February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 5.8.

## Feelings towards Leavers and Remainers

Affective polarisation between Leavers and Remainers is quite stark, but Britons generally feel warmer towards Remainers than Leavers

### Feelings thermometer Remainers/ Leavers



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.

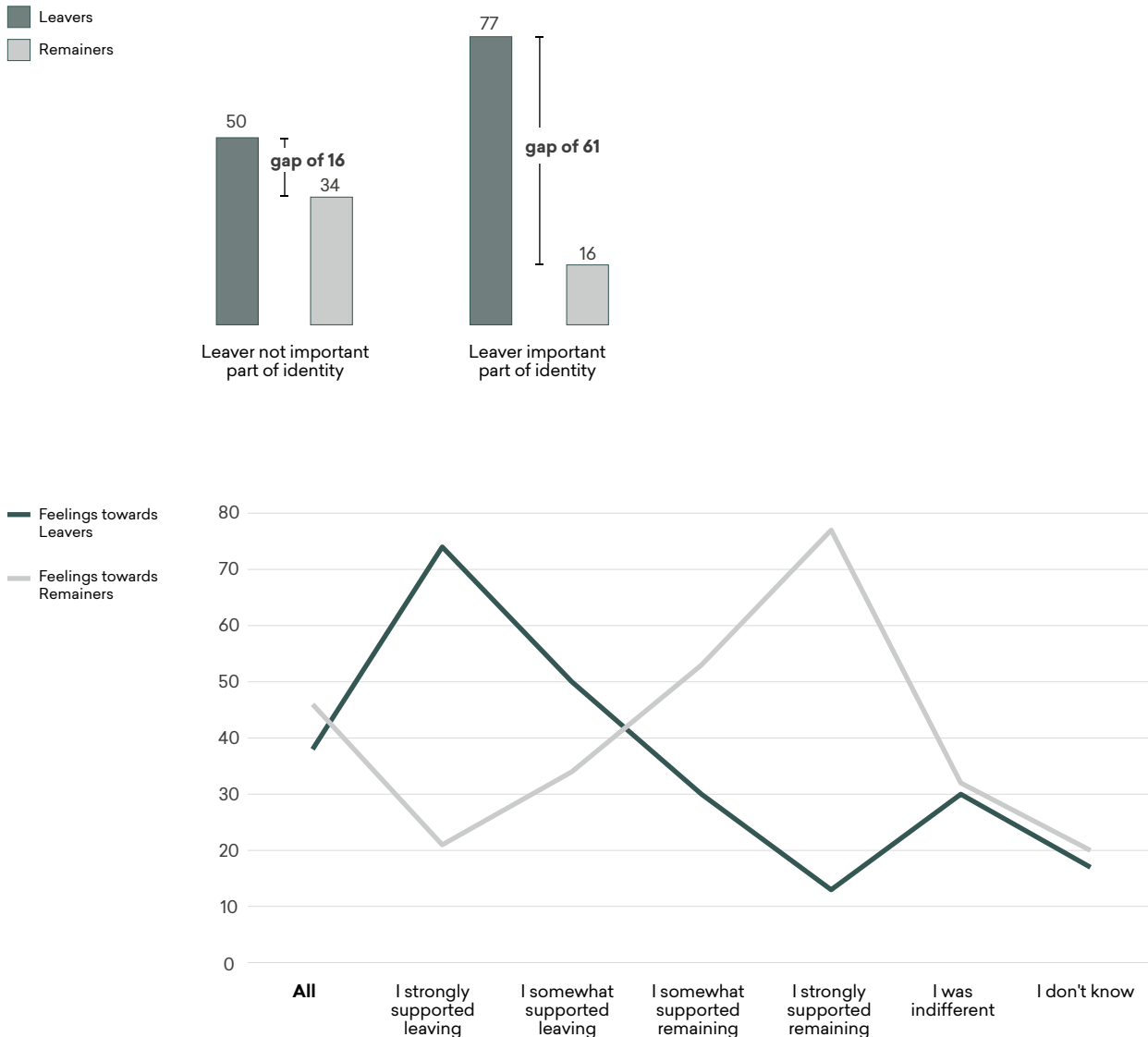
The Brexit years led to a strong ‘us-versus-them’ dynamic between Leavers and Remainers, with both viewing like-minded referendum voters more positively and viewing opponents more negatively. Among the three in ten who did not vote in the EU referendum, feelings are almost twice as warm towards Remainers as Leavers. As such, there is an eight-point gap in the warmth towards Remainers versus Leavers in the whole population. Reasons for this may be frustration with how Brexit has been handled or discomfort with the triumphalist approach of Leavers that has not sought compromise with Remainers. Our data shows that Britons favour compromise rather than conflict in politics by a ratio of more than two to one.

Figure 5.9.

## The ‘us-versus-them’ dynamic of Brexit identities

Affective polarisation is stronger for those with stronger Brexit identities

### Feelings towards Leavers and Remainers from Leavers



Attitudes towards Leavers and Remainers (via feelings thermometer) by Brexit attitude. For full question text see Appendix 2.1. Data from February 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.



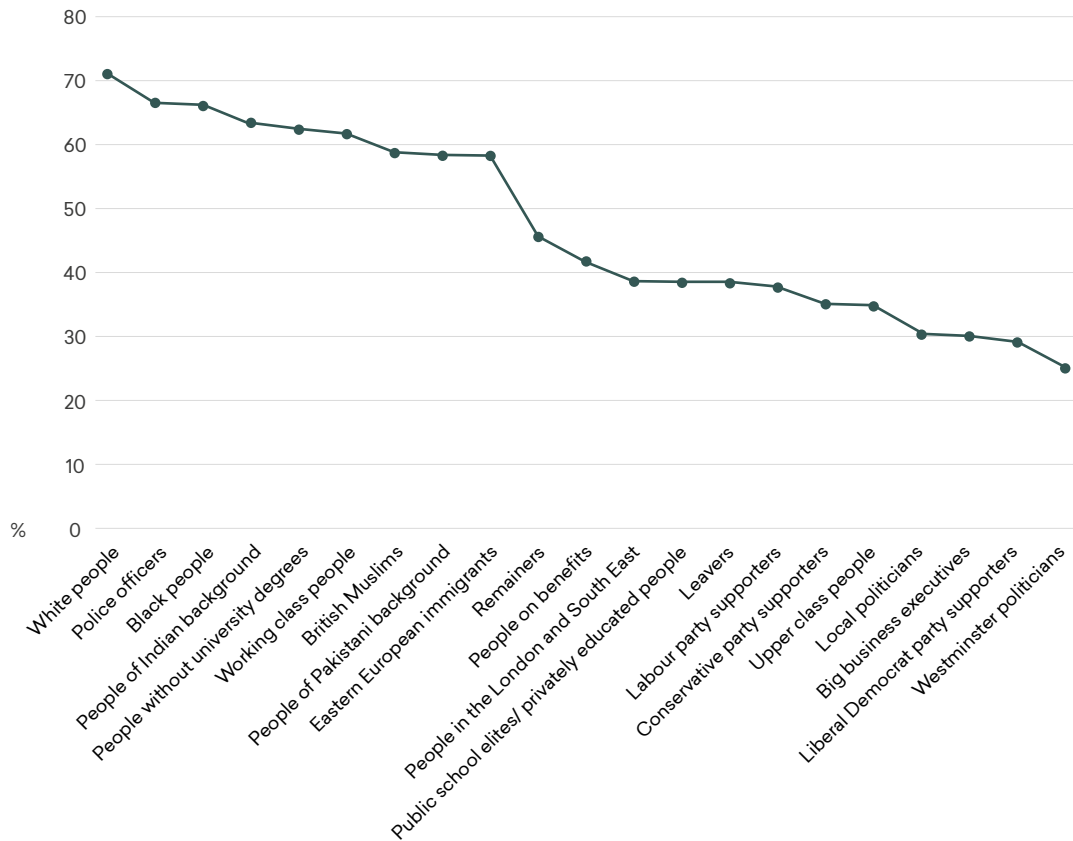
Beyond the divisions in society around Brexit, people have the least warmth towards groups perceived as powerful elites (business executives, upper class people, and public-school educated elites) and political actors (with Westminster politicians eliciting the coldest feelings). These findings reflect wider frustrations with a system that for many has lost its legitimacy. One encouraging finding is that we record only very small variations in the perceptions Britons have of others based on their race.

Figure 5.10.

## Feelings towards different groups in society

Groups associated with elitism are seen the most negatively

### Feelings towards different groups in society



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.

## 5.5 — Is the Brexit division enduring? Covid-19, partisanship, and Brexit identities

The Brexit division dominated social and political debates for four years until the 2019 General Election and the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. Stances on leaving or remaining in the EU reflected individual attitudes on not only European integration, but also immigration, the welfare state, and interpretations of what sovereignty means.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, as explored in Chapter 4, there is common ground between Leavers and Remainers on their exhaustion with division, the importance of democracy, and what makes them proud to be British. There are also shared concerns around the failings of Britain's economic system, media, and politicians.

As of September 2020, just over half of Britons say being a Remainer or Leaver is an important part of their identity; for the other half of society, it is not important. The fault line carved through society by Brexit is deep, but not all-encompassing. Even though 'us-versus-them' dynamics between Leavers and Remainers exist, people within each group do not have a static identity that coheres across a range of issues. **This kaleidoscopic effect is a strength of British society. Depending on the issue at hand, bridges exist between people who disagree in other respects.** The onset of Covid-19 made many of those divisions feel less relevant, with a strong focus on community action and showing gratitude to key workers on the front lines of fighting the pandemic and looking after others.

It is too early to know whether the pandemic will result in a lasting erosion of these divisions, or whether they will reassert themselves around Britain's post-Brexit relationship with Europe and/or other issues that map similarly to the Brexit identities. A further wave of research for this report was conducted in September 2020, shortly after internal divisions in the government had emerged over plans to breach the EU Withdrawal Agreement, and the spectre of the Brexit debate being reignited was real. This wave of research suggested that Leave/Remain identities remain salient and feelings towards the out-group have not become warmer, with barely any difference between early March and September in this regard.

The danger of the recurrence of the Leave/Remain division, or its transformation into other 'culture war' divisions, is that the division reflects much more than different views about membership of the European Union. The division between educated, cosmopolitan, urban citizens and more traditionally-minded people outside of major cities manifests itself across the world in different societies. It came to the fore with the Brexit debate in Britain, but it shows itself in other ways too. One measure of the way that the Leave/Remain division maps onto unrelated issues is the difference in pride regarding the government's handling of the Covid-19 crisis (53 per cent among Leavers, double the 26 per cent recorded among Remainers) and its impact on trust in the government (60 per cent of Remainers say that they now trust the government less, compared to 30 per cent of Leavers).

On the other hand, both Remainers and Leavers agree that we should use Covid-19 as an opportunity to make significant changes to Britain (71 and 59 per cent respectively).

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3<sup>in</sup>5

Britons say they feel exhausted by division in politics

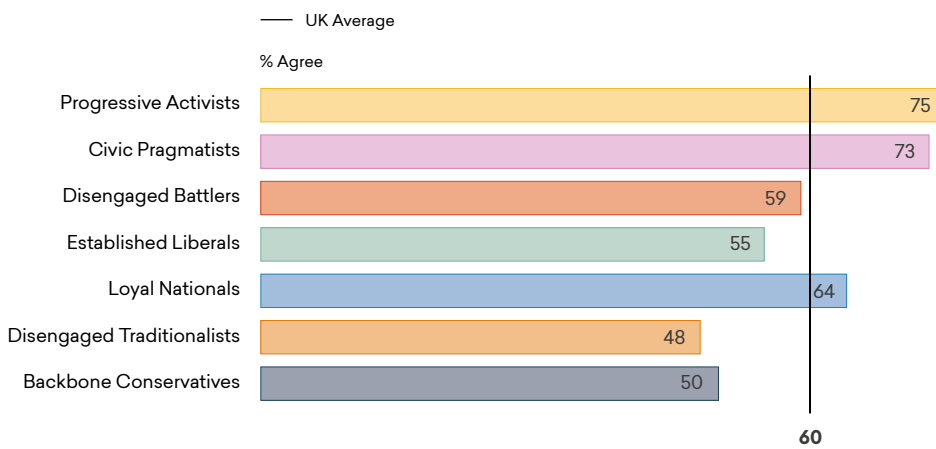
There is a clear public appetite to move beyond the Brexit division, especially among the three in five Britons who say they feel exhausted by division in politics. This is a majority that exists in all segments, except the Disengaged Traditionalists and Backbone Conservatives. Indeed, 63 per cent of people even say that they worry that our political divisions could lead to an increase in hatred and violence.

Figure 5.11.

## 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.

Britons want society to come back together after several fractious years. The surge in social solidarity in the initial lockdown period showed us the potential that we hold as a country. By June 2020 – almost half a year after Brexit formally happened, and several months into the pandemic – most Leavers and Remainers felt confident that society can come back together again. Seventy per cent of those who voted to Remain and 65 per cent of those who voted to Leave agree that ‘the differences between Britons are not so big that we cannot come together’. Most Britons want to leave the division of the Brexit years behind them and get back to rebuilding a society that has been through a sustained period of turmoil. But they are not sure that the same is true of politicians, the media, and warring tribes of social media warriors online.

## 5.6 Issue polarisation: Britain's neglected common ground

While 'us-versus-them' polarisation focuses on group identities, issue polarisation occurs when there are differences in attitudes or values in one or more issues that disperse people towards the extremes, when two poles are formed with little middle ground, or when opinions across a range of issues cohere around a particular identity.

Issue polarisation is relatively low in the UK, as recent studies such as the Political Division Index from Demos<sup>9</sup> and 'Divided Britain?' from King's College London have found.<sup>10</sup> Compared to the United States, Britain has substantial common ground on issues relating to gender and sexuality, healthcare, and racial prejudice. Even on the controversial issue of immigration, research has shown a trend towards convergence and increasing levels of support.

The British public shows a surprising level of agreement on many issues, with relatively few people crowded at opposite extremes. These include issues that were once more polarising than they are today, including equality for women, the need for action on the gap between the haves and the have-nots, the threat of climate change, and concern about extremism and hate speech. For example:

- A majority in each segment believes that climate change is real and caused by human action, with 70 per cent of the public agreeing (a further 20 per cent believe that climate change is happening but is part of a natural cycle, rather than human action).
- 73 per cent of Britons believe that cutting carbon emissions is an opportunity to create new jobs in the UK.
- 93 per cent of Britons say that a person can be British regardless of their colour, ethnic background, or accent. In no segment is there lower than 87 per cent agreement with this sentiment.

In some instances, our common ground transcends debates that can often seem polarised. For example, a majority of people are conscious of racism and 73 per cent of people think that there is a problem with hate speech in Britain. At the same time, 72 per cent believe that political correctness is a problem, and many are concerned that people are overly sensitive and judgmental towards others, especially around issues of language. For many people, these are not opposite views – they reject extremism and prejudice, but also see dangers in another extreme where some individuals set themselves up in judgment of others' language and motivations.

Similarly, opinions across a range of issues do not cohere around two large opposing groups. Instead, different segments cluster together in various formations on different issues. For example:

- Civic Pragmatists, Established Liberals, and Backbone Conservatives cluster together as higher-trust groups with a civic optimism about how society can come together and about the good intentions of others.
- On issues relating to immigration and refugees, we might find that Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists, and Established Liberals might form a cluster on one side of an argument, while Loyal Nationals, Disengaged Traditionalists, and Backbone Conservatives form the other.
- On tackling inequality, Progressive Activists, Loyal Nationals, Disengaged Battlers, and Civic Pragmatists form a cluster, though without strong opposition. From issue to issue, the segments cluster together in distinctive ways.

There are certainly issues on which Britons do not agree. This is obvious when it comes to membership of the European Union, Scotland remaining in the Union, specific immigration policies, or aspects of the anti-racist agenda (Britons agree that racism is a problem, but not on all measures to address it, especially when debates revolve around symbols rather than policy).

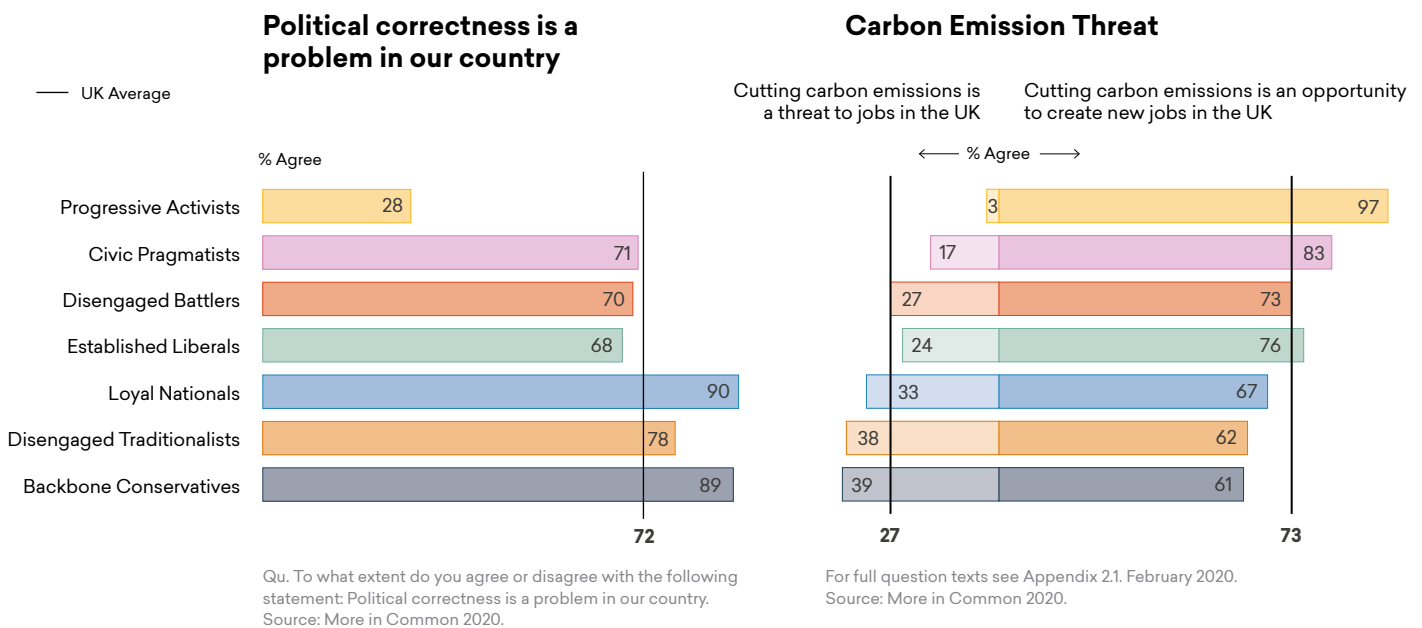
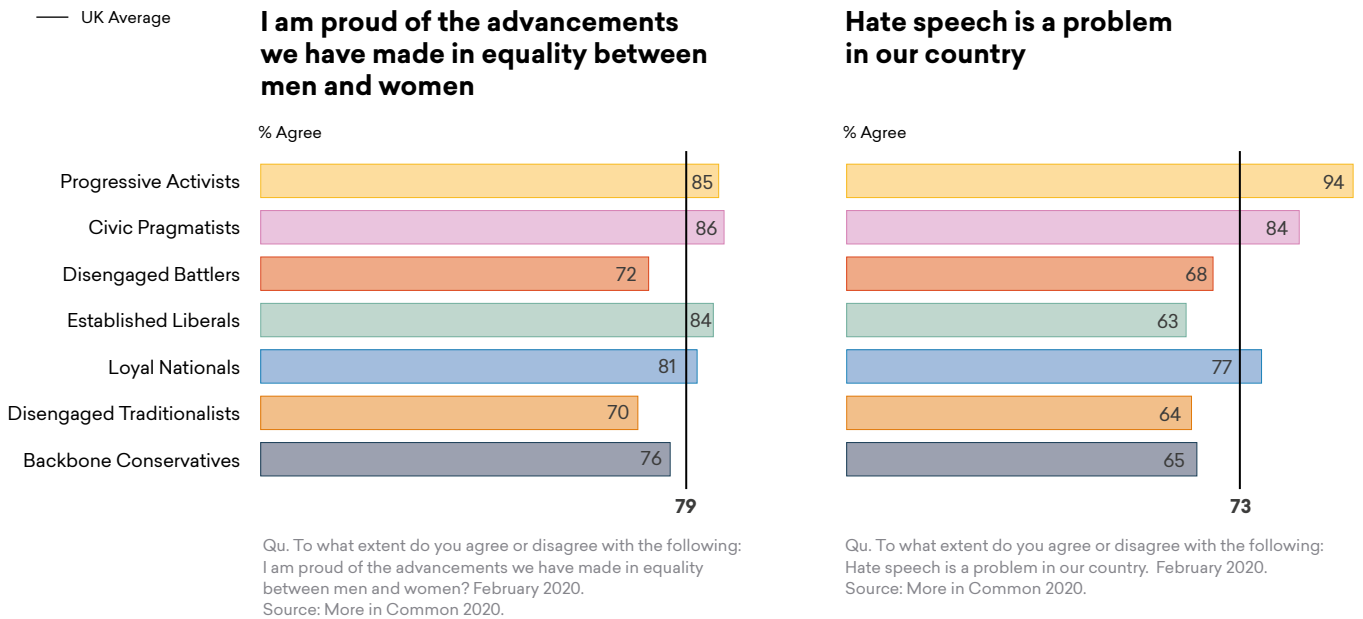
These issues can be managed in ways that elevate differences and deepen divisions, or they can be approached more constructively with a focus on common ground. Large majorities would far prefer that we focus on cooperation and compromise rather than polarisation and gridlock – indeed, 71 per cent agree that, ‘for the future of our country, it is especially important that we stick together despite different views’. As Elizabeth, a Loyal National from Dundee said:

**‘If we don’t [compromise] then we’re just standing still, aren’t we? If I don’t let other people’s opinions into my head then I’m only dealing with what I’m thinking and we’re never going to move forward that way. Progress is stopped by people who don’t ask questions.’**

Figure 5.12.

## What Britons have in common

Britons are united on a range of issues



## 5.7 Key takeaways

A key theme in this chapter has been the remarkable resilience of UK society despite a deeply divisive period. Especially when compared to the United States, partisan division in the UK is nowhere near as strong as it is across the Atlantic. While there is some affective polarisation, for instance between those who strongly feel their Leave and Remain identity, issue polarisation is weak. The differences in Britain are less like two entrenched sides opposed against the other, and more like what a child might see in a kaleidoscope. In holding the kaleidoscope to the light, and revolving the cylinder from one turn to the next,

the coloured fragments of glass reassemble and cluster themselves in different formations. The same is true of how different population groups cluster in different ways from one issue to the next.

There are two segments that stand out as being ideologically strong and more engaged than the others. First are the left-wing Progressive Activists, who are very interested in and tend to closely follow politics and current affairs. In contrast, the right-wing Backbone Conservatives, who in many ways are the right-wing counterpart to this segment, are notably less interested in politics and do not tend to have diametrically opposite views. This means that it is not accurate to talk about 'wing' groups in the UK as there are in the US, where there are two extremely hostile segments on opposing ends of the ideological spectrum, which mirror each other in their disagreement.

Divisions in Britain can to some extent be seen as a top-down or structural problem. The majority of people blame those in charge for divisions, with the heaviest blame being apportioned to political parties. Large numbers are also critical of how the media represents division and inaccurately covers stories. There is a deep distrust of politicians and a general suspicion that many politicians inflame divisions in order to further their own careers, rather than a concern for the greater good or doing what is 'right'. There is also a general disinterest in politics among the more ideologically fluid segments, with large numbers saying they find it hard to understand what is happening in Parliament. However, more closed or pro-authority segments blame immigration for the divisions in society. There is a palpable sense of victimhood in some places, with a feeling that immigration is something that is 'done' to an area without locals' voices being heard.

Although sidelined by the pandemic, Brexit has not been forgotten and those recently formed identities remain strong for half of the population. However, the strength of Brexit identities remains to a certain extent dormant. These identities could be triggered by future issues arising around Britain's relationship with Europe, they could evolve into wider 'culture wars' along similar dividing lines, or they could gradually diminish with time.

The margin of victory in the EU referendum was very close indeed, and there has clearly been some damage caused by the rise of affective polarisation among the minorities of strongly committed Leavers and Remainers. Even to the limited extent our data finds it exists, this trend is concerning. Visceral dislike of others is not healthy for any society. In such a close-run referendum, the ideal political solution would be to find a compromise that takes into account the heterogeneous reasons people voted to Leave, but also does not make those who voted Remain feel that their hopes and fears are frozen out of decisions that will quite literally change Britain. Indeed, by a substantial majority British people prefer compromise in politics.

By a ratio of more than two to one, Britons say that we need to be willing to listen to those we disagree with and show a willingness to compromise. Going forward, politicians should build on the many areas of consensus in public opinion highlighted here, and also take steps to meet the widespread public appetite for compromise across political divides. It would also be wise for the greater good of the health of British democracy to seek to mitigate against 'us-versus-them' divisions along Brexit lines, rather than seeking to stoke these up. Such approaches are crucial in order to address the public's worries and create a positive, shared vision for the future that has a place for everyone in our society.

# Endnotes

- 1 Survey conducted by Ipsos MORI for the BBC *Crossing Divides* series, January–February 2018 'BBC Global Survey: A World Divided?', Ipsos MORI, 2018 <<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/bbc-global-survey-world-divided>> [accessed 5 October 2020].
- 2 One measure of a country's vulnerability to authoritarianism is its appetite for a strong leader free of the constraints of negotiating with parliaments, bureaucracies, and sub-national governments: Yascha Mounk, *The People Versus Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018).
- 3 Charles J. Pattie and Ron Johnston, 'The Regional Impact of Thatcherism: Attitudes and Votes in Great Britain in the 1980s', *Regional Studies*, 24.6 (1990), 479–93.
- 4 National Centre for Social Research (2020), *British Social Attitudes 37: Political Consequences of Brexit* notes that the percentage that say they trust governments 'most of the time' or 'always' has fallen to a record low of 15 per cent.
- 5 The idea of 'stacked identities' is discussed in Ezra Klein (2020), *Why We Are Polarized*
- 6 Duffy and others.
- 7 James N. Druckman and Matthew S. Levendusky, 'What Do We Measure When We Measure Affective Polarization?', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 83.1 (2019), 114–22 <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfz003>.
- 8 Noah Carl, *CSI Brexit 4: People's Stated Reasons for Voting Leave or Remain*, 2018 <<https://ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/CSI-Brexit-4-People%E2%80%99s-Stated-Reasons-for-Voting-Leave.pdf>>.
- 9 Van Rens and Krasodomski-Jones.
- 10 Duffy and others.





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