Chapter 4

Our Changing
Political Landscape

More in
Common

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83 per cent of Britons think that 'politicians don't care what people like me think'

84 per cent of Britons agree that living in a country that is governed democratically is important to them

But by a margin of **55 to 45 per cent**, most Britons feel dissatisfied with the way that democracy works in the United Kingdom today

Just 1 in 3 Britons who see themselves as a supporter of a specific party describe themselves as strong supporters

Only 32 per cent say that being a supporter of a political party is an important part of their identity

50 per cent say their Brexit identity is an important part of who they are

Introduction

This chapter seeks to understand the changing landscape of British democracy in the early 2020s – our mixed feelings about democracy, the extent to which we identify with political parties, the Leaver/Remainer division of recent years, and whether we are becoming more defined by negative feelings towards those with different views. These are each key elements in understanding the extent of polarisation and division as the United Kingdom moves into a new era, reshaped by Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, and a deep recession.

The Brexit years left Britons feeling increasingly anxious about the country's deepening divisions. In the next chapter, we focus in greater detail on what has underpinned these perceptions of division, and the prospects for those divisions being healed or becoming more entrenched. It is politics, more than anything else, that Britons blame for the growing divisions of recent years. For that reason, we focus on the landscape of British politics in this chapter.

The mood of British society and politics changed with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Only weeks after the 2019 General Election had brought at least some degree of resolution to an extended period of political conflict around Brexit, the national focus shifted towards a collective effort in the face of a public health emergency. The sharp divisions that had played out during the long Brexit years paled against the backdrop of Covid-19. Although the feeling of social solidarity was strongest in the first weeks of lockdown, there has been a sustained change in perceptions of our society, with the proportion saying that we live in a society where people care for each other (rather than one where everyone looks out for themselves) almost doubling. But risks remain that some of the fault lines that widened during the Brexit years might be reopened, a concern reflected in our conversations across Britain.

This chapter assesses some of the larger and longer-term dynamics behind the changes in how politics has played out in recent years: the deepening dissatisfaction with the system of British democracy, new fractures within parties, and more frequent expressions of antagonism towards the political 'other'. It examines evidence for how enduring the Remainer versus Leaver division may be in the future. The chapter draws on the distinctive experiences and reflections of Britain's seven population segments, along with both conventional and innovative ways of analysing people's core beliefs, to better understand this changing landscape.

The United Kingdom is experiencing something different from simplistic narratives of rising polarisation or declining trust in parties and democracy. Unlike in the United States, there are few issues on which Britons divide into clearly-defined and opposing camps. Trust in political leaders is low, but not much lower than it has been for decades; after all, an enduring element in British attitudes towards politicians is a healthy scepticism. What is changing is more complex.

4.1 Division, distrust, and disenchantment

Democracies are based on the contest of competing ideas. Conflict between opposing views is reflected even in the physical layout of Westminster's parliamentary chambers, long an inspiration and a physical embodiment of democracy to the world. Disagreement is not a dysfunction of democratic culture – it is at the heart of a healthy democratic culture.

Yet there is something different about the divisiveness that Britain has experienced in recent years. Some 50 per cent of Britons told us in early 2020 that Britain was 'the most divided that we have been'. Only 7 per cent felt that we have been through more divided times before. Those perceptions were shaped by years of division and disruption, which saw two successive parliamentary terms each lasting only two years, as well as the elevation of Jeremy Corbyn and Boris Johnson, two party leaders widely perceived as polarising even within their own parties. These political changes have in part reflected changes in society, but they have also re-shaped society in their own image.

What has changed is that we no longer just mistrust politicians, but we have begun to perceive our society as deeply divided. The research undertaken for this study has echoed past findings that levels of trust in politicians are low, but the trend towards widespread distrust is a well-established feature of British society.[1] Those who support the current government report higher levels of trust, but baseline levels of trust and optimism are low across all of society.
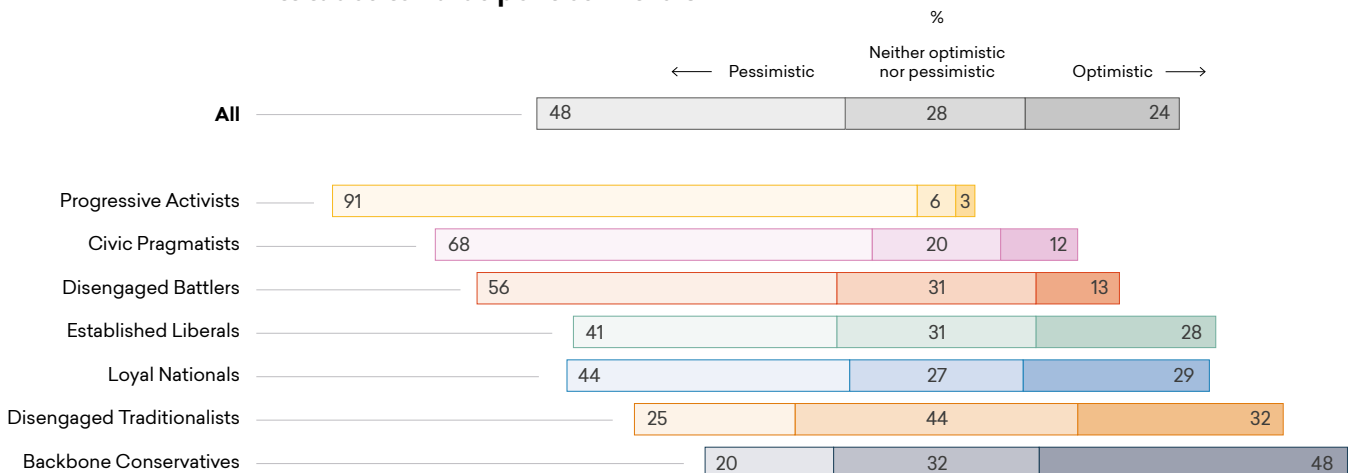
Individual perceptions of the state of democracy and politics are similarly influenced by the success or failure of parties or specific agendas with which individuals identify. Nearly half of Britons (48 per cent) felt pessimistic about the state of politics in early 2020, compared to just 24 per cent who were optimistic. While perceptions are more negative among groups least likely to have voted for the government, even among those who voted Conservative in the 2019 General Election slightly less than half felt optimistic; indeed, this was even true of the Backbone Conservatives segment. Within that segment, only those who identify as strong Conservative Party supporters were strongly optimistic (73 per cent compared to an average of 48 per cent for all Backbone Conservatives), reflecting the larger insight from this study: that the small proportion of the population with a very strong political identity is often rather different to the rest of the population

Figure 4.1.

Feelings towards politics in the UK

Most segments feel more pessimistic than optimistic about the state of politics in the UK

Attitudes towards politics in the UK

	Pessimistic ⟵	Neither optimistic nor pessimistic	Optimistic ⟶
All	48	28	24
Progressive Activists	91	6	3
Civic Pragmatists	68	20	12
Disengaged Battlers	56	31	13
Established Liberals	41	31	28
Loyal Nationals	44	27	29
Disengaged Traditionalists	25	44	32
Backbone Conservatives	20	32	48

Qu. How would you describe your attitude towards politics today in the UK? February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Partisanship similarly influences the perceptions of politics in Scotland. The most optimistic views of Scottish politics are held by Progressive Activists, and the most negative by Backbone Conservatives. In Scotland, the majority of Progressive Activists support the Scottish National Party, currently in government. Those supporting the party in power tend to have a more optimistic view of politics as a whole.
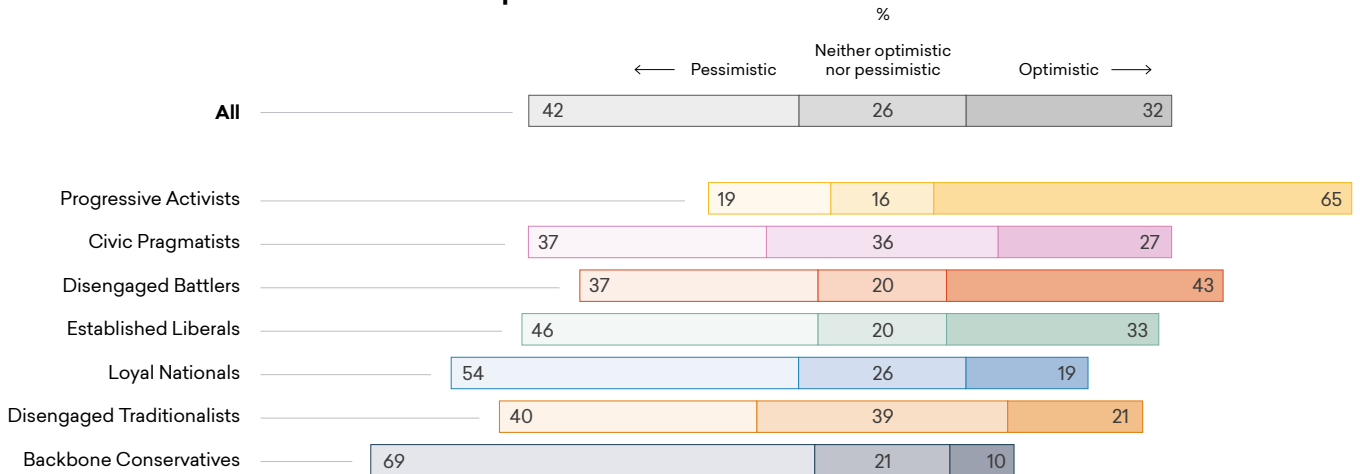
Among the Scottish public, pessimistic views outnumber optimism about the state of politics, but more narrowly than for the UK overall (42 to 32 per cent).

Figure 4.2.

Feelings towards politics in Scotland

The margin of pessimism to optimism in Scotland is narrower than in the rest of the UK

Attitudes towards politics in Scotland

%

	← Pessimistic	Neither optimistic nor pessimistic	Optimistic →
All	42	26	32
Progressive Activists	19	16	65
Civic Pragmatists	37	36	27
Disengaged Battlers	37	20	43
Established Liberals	46	20	33
Loyal Nationals	54	26	19
Disengaged Traditionalists	40	39	21
Backbone Conservatives	69	21	10

Qu. (Scottish respondents only) How would you describe your attitude towards politics today in Scotland? February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

While committed partisans interpret the current state of politics through the lens of their political identities, more significant is the finding that, before Covid-19, negative sentiment outnumbered positive sentiment by two to one. Another indicator of dissatisfaction with politics is the overwhelming majority who do not feel represented in today's politics. Some 83 per cent of Britons feel partially or strongly that 'politicians don't care what people like me think'. This sentiment transcends partisan differences, and it was rising even before the onset of Covid-19 in every segment. Although this sentiment is especially strong among the Disengaged Battlers and Loyal Nationals, a majority of all groups share this view – even among Established Liberals, the segment least likely to feel uncared for by politicians.
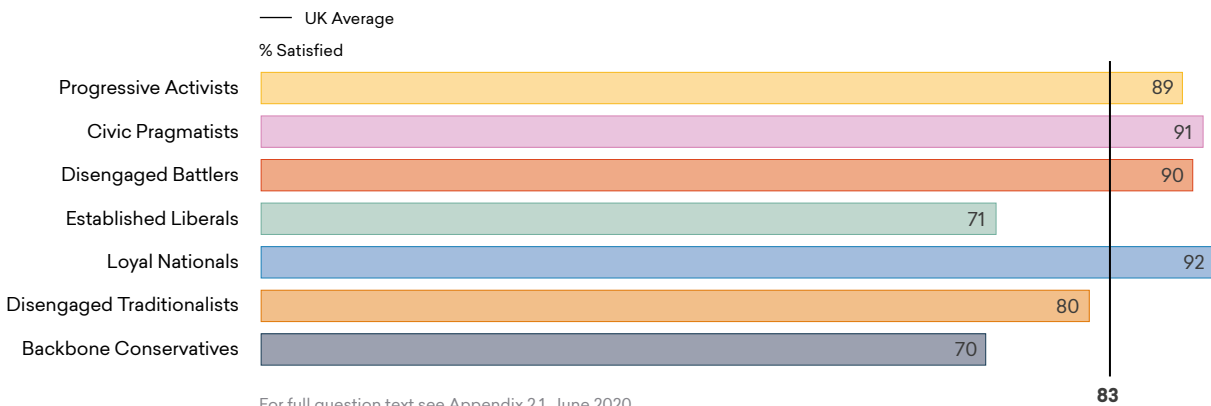
83%

of Britons feel partially or strongly that 'politicians don't care what people like me think'

Figure **4.3.**

Politicians' care

A majority in all segments feel unrepresented in today's politics

Politicians don't care

—— UK Average

% Satisfied

Segment	Value
Progressive Activists	89
Civic Pragmatists	91
Disengaged Battlers	90
Established Liberals	71
Loyal Nationals	92
Disengaged Traditionalists	80
Backbone Conservatives	70

83

For full question text see Appendix 2.1. June 2020.
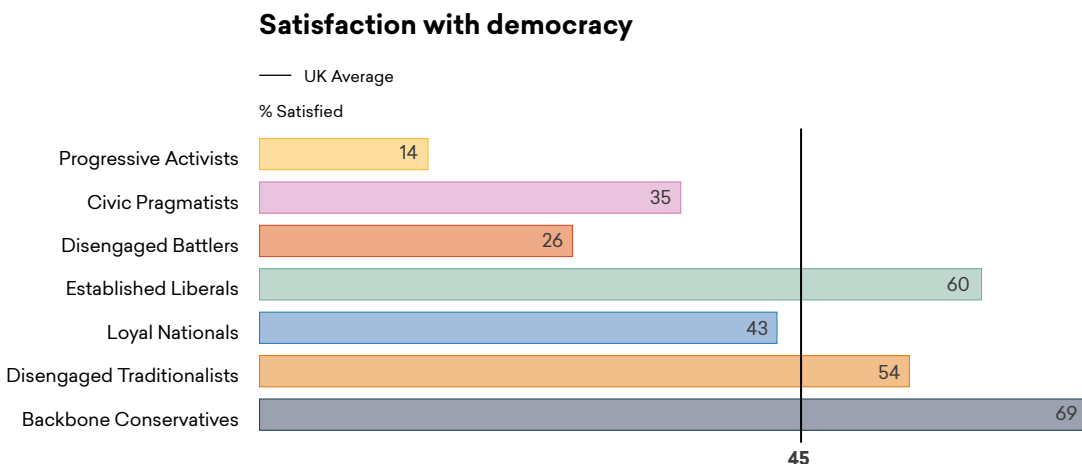Source: More in Common 2020.

55%

feel dissatisfied with the way that democracy works in the United Kingdom today

These frustrations are reflected in the finding that most Britons – by a margin of 55 to 45 per cent – feel dissatisfied with the way that democracy works in the United Kingdom today. This is comparable to More in Common's findings on dissatisfaction with democracy in the US (45 per cent), Germany (52 per cent), and France (56 per cent). As with other questions about perceptions of the state of politics and society, partisan identities play an important role in differing perceptions, with especially large majorities of Progressive Activists feeling dissatisfied. In contrast their partisan opposites, the Backbone Conservatives, feel most satisfied. One surprising finding is that the Disengaged Traditionalists are above average in their satisfaction and are more likely to be satisfied with the way democracy is working than dissatisfied – an unusual result for a disengaged segment of the population, perhaps reflecting that changes since the Brexit vote in 2016 have made people in this segment feel more heard and respected.

Figure **4.4.**

Satisfaction with democracy

Most segments are not very satisfied with the way democracy is working in the country

Satisfaction with democracy

—— UK Average

% Satisfied

Segment	Value
Progressive Activists	14
Civic Pragmatists	35
Disengaged Battlers	26
Established Liberals	60
Loyal Nationals	43
Disengaged Traditionalists	54
Backbone Conservatives	69

45

Qu. How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in the UK? June 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

In their own words:

'I don't really trust politicians, only because a lot of the type of politicians you nowadays have are career politicians. I don't genuinely believe they're there to make a difference or to improve the lives of ordinary people. They're there to make a name for themselves, to be known, to have their names in history. And a lot of the time, a lot of them, I don't actually believe they have values. I can't tell what their values are. So it's very hard for me to connect with them.'

Omar, Progressive Activist, 35, London

'I think too many politicians are in it for themselves...'

'Yes. They're in it for their career rather than the cause.'

Lucy, 40, Scotland and Beth, 32, London
Progressive Activists Focus Group

'It does seem that the higher up people are in political parties and political systems, the less I feel that I can trust them.'

Ahmed, Progressive Activist, 27, South East

'I think we have to be sceptical... I don't think [politicians] would actively try to hurt us, but I think they'd usually put monetary value before the population.'

Peter, Civic Pragmatist, 37, North West

'I think for the past few years, the past tens of years, we've been hearing more and more the mantra of, 'they're all the same'. And I think to a certain extent this is true...They promise you the world until they get into power. Because that's the object of the exercise.'

William, Disengaged Battler, 76, North West

'I think they have an ulterior motive in a very difficult job. I think their job is to do the best they can with the local area, but they obviously can't please everyone, but they try and say things that can be relatable to everyone. So I think that's part of their job.'

Michael, Established Liberal, 39, South West

'I trust scientists more than I do politicians. I just think politicians are, putting it nicely, arseholes.'

Megan, Loyal National, 56, South West

'I'm very sceptical of politicians because they tend to tell you what they want to just get voted in as that party and then it always seems to be broken promises and it never seems to be, oh I'll help you with that and then it kind of falls through, oh I haven't been able to sort it out.'

Olivia, Disengaged Traditionalist, 38, West Midlands

'I think they do their best. It seems that they can talk a good job, say what they're going to do, but when it comes to doing it, it's another matter. It's not perhaps they don't want to, it's just they promise more than they can fulfil.'

Patrick, Backbone Conservative, 76, North West

4.2   Shared commitment to democracy

'There are moments when I wonder if we actually understand what democracy really is because there are moments when I feel we don't really have it. But our system is certainly a lot better than the dictatorial system.'

Jessica, Civic Pragmatist, 60, South West

Despite their deep disenchantment with politics, British people remain committed to democracy as a system of government. Belief in the idea of democracy is common ground among Britons. More than four in five of us say that living a country that is governed democratically is important, with 56 per cent strongly agreeing. Agreement is strongest among the more socially liberal segments (Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists, and Established Liberals). But even Disengaged Traditionalists, the group with one of the lowest levels of commitment to democracy, are far more likely to agree than disagree. Commitment to democracy is even more powerful as a uniting identity for English people, as discussed in Chapter 7.

Over 4 in 5 Britons agree that living in a country that is governed democratically is important to them

Some aspects of British attitudes towards democracy are not obvious. Belief in the importance of living in a country governed democratically is highest among more liberal population segments and also among older people. The age group least committed to the abstract idea of democracy as a form of governance is those aged 18-24 (at 69 per cent),[2] who tend to be more committed to liberal principles than the rest of the population but are distrustful of institutions. In general, young people are slightly more dissatisfied with how democracy is working in the UK today, as More in Common has also found in other western democracies.[3]
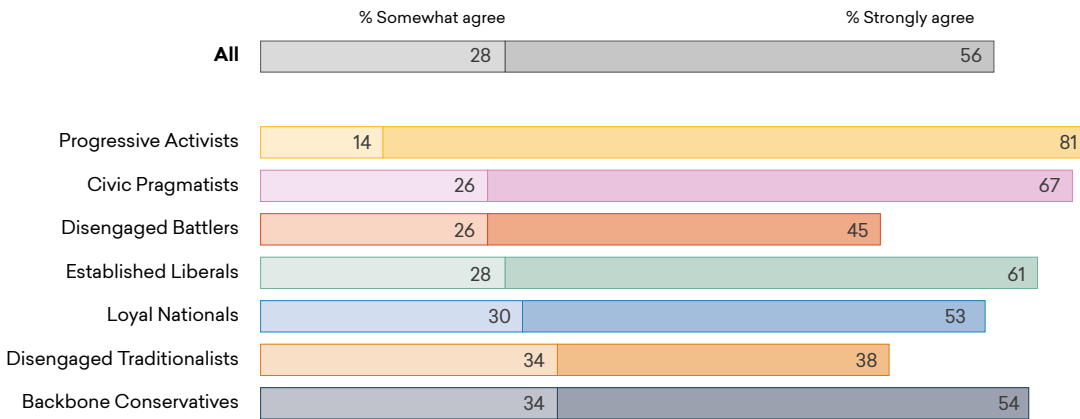
The lowest confidence about the importance of living in a democracy is found among the two Disengaged segments, especially among younger age groups within those segments. Among Disengaged Traditionalists, 72 per cent overall believe that living in a democracy is important, but only 61 per cent of younger Traditionalists (those under 45) share this view. Among the Disengaged Battlers, 71 per cent overall believe that living in a democracy is important, with slightly lower agreement among younger Battlers (66 per cent). These findings point to the value of understanding the two Disengaged groups, rather than looking only at groups on the left and the right, to understand the dynamics of British democracy in the 2020s.

Figure **4.5.**

Importance of living in a democracy

Despite being the least satisfied with the way democracy works, Progressive Activists are the most likely to say that living in a democratically governed country is important to them

Living in a country which is governed democratically is important to me

% Somewhat agree   % Strongly agree

	% Somewhat agree	% Strongly agree
All	28	56
Progressive Activists	14	81
Civic Pragmatists	26	67
Disengaged Battlers	26	45
Established Liberals	28	61
Loyal Nationals	30	53
Disengaged Traditionalists	34	38
Backbone Conservatives	34	54

Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Living in a country that is governed democratically is important to me. February 2020.
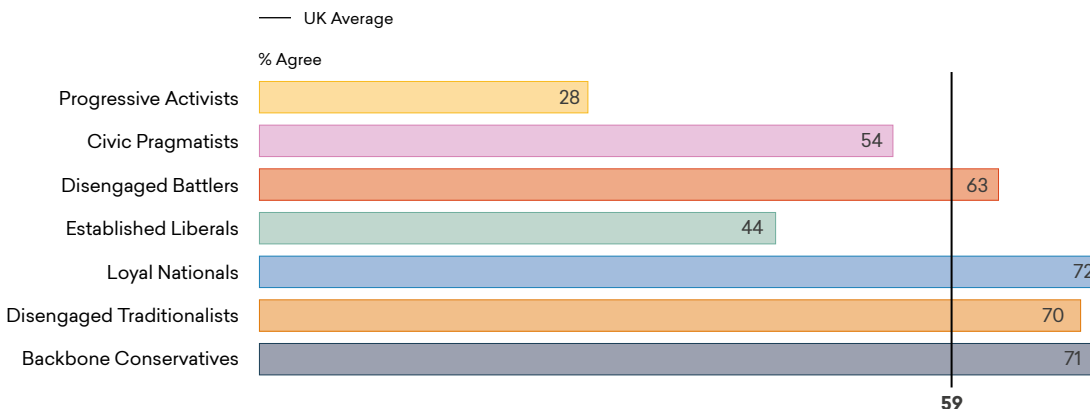Source: More in Common 2020.

Democracy has many different meanings to people, and its populist, majoritarian form can be antithetic to liberal democratic values, as scholar Yascha Mounk has persuasively argued.[4] One test of how far support of democracy reflects a commitment to the rule of law or to a more populist 'strong man' style of government is to assess the extent to which people believe that the country needs a strong leader, who is willing to break the rules to fix things. Population segments with stronger authoritarian leanings are more likely to express support for this sentiment.

Figure **4.6.**

Tendency towards authoritarian leadership

Desire for a more authoritative style of leadership has increased since the pandemic hit, even among groups with the most liberal instincts

The UK needs a strong leader who is willing to break the rules

—— UK Average

% Agree

	% Agree
Progressive Activists	28
Civic Pragmatists	54
Disengaged Battlers	63
Established Liberals	44
Loyal Nationals	72
Disengaged Traditionalists	70
Backbone Conservatives	71

59

Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: To put the UK in order, we need a strong leader who is willing to break the rules. June 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

In Britain, some 59 per cent of the population indicate support for a 'strong man' style of leadership, with more than 70 per cent support among the Backbone Conservatives, Loyal Nationals, and Disengaged Traditionalists (for comparison, after almost four years of President Trump in the United States, in 2020 some 44 per cent said America needed this style of leadership). Commanding leadership – with less democratic process, fewer compromises, and a willingness to ignore norms – has a particular appeal in times of heightened anxiety, promising a more ordered society.

The need for enforcement of rules was one of the most salient public conversations during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Even while the public debate focused on arguments against restrictions on individual freedoms, public concerns remained weighted more strongly towards the need for stronger enforcement of public health rules. People felt more action should be taken against irresponsible members of the public who could be contributing to the spread of Covid-19 through their refusal to comply with public health advice on face masks, social distancing, and other actions.

'I think the government aren't strong enough and they kept advising people. They kept advising people to do this, to do that. No, don't advise people. You've got to tell people what to do, because the advice didn't work.'
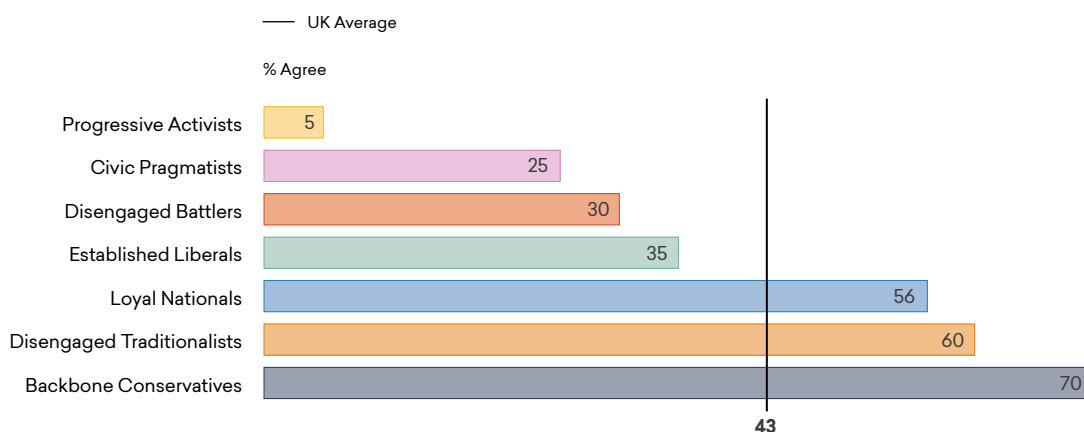
Nigel, Disengaged Traditionalist, 45, London

Figure 4.7.

Should government have more power to make decisions?

There are clear differences of opinion on whether the government should be able to make decisions with more or fewer constraints once it has been voted in, with Progressive Activists and Backbone Conservatives each at one extreme of this issue

Once a government has been voted in, they should have much more power to make decisions with less constraints

—— UK Average

% Agree

Group	% Agree
Progressive Activists	5
Civic Pragmatists	25
Disengaged Battlers	30
Established Liberals	35
Loyal Nationals	56
Disengaged Traditionalists	60
Backbone Conservatives	70

43

Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Once a government has been voted in, they should have much more power to make decisions with less constraints. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

4.3　Weakening party identification

'When I was younger, I'd vote for Labour and obviously over the years, as I've got older, I'm, oh no, it's the Conservatives and now I'm like, oh God, they're all just as bad as each other.'

Olivia, Disengaged Traditionalist, 38, West Midlands

A common feature of more divided societies is that groups of people come to identify themselves more strongly with political parties, and against others who support alternative parties. Yet despite the growing perception of division within the UK, British voters have become increasingly detached from political parties over several decades (reflecting trends in Europe but not the US). While almost half of Britons reported a very strong attachment to a political party in the mid-1960s, research in 2015 found that only 15 per cent reported feeling this way.[5] The findings in this report confirm that for most people (68 per cent), while they see themselves as a supporter of a party, this is not an important part of their identity.

1 in 3 Britons who see themselves as a supporter of a specific party describe themselves as strong supporters
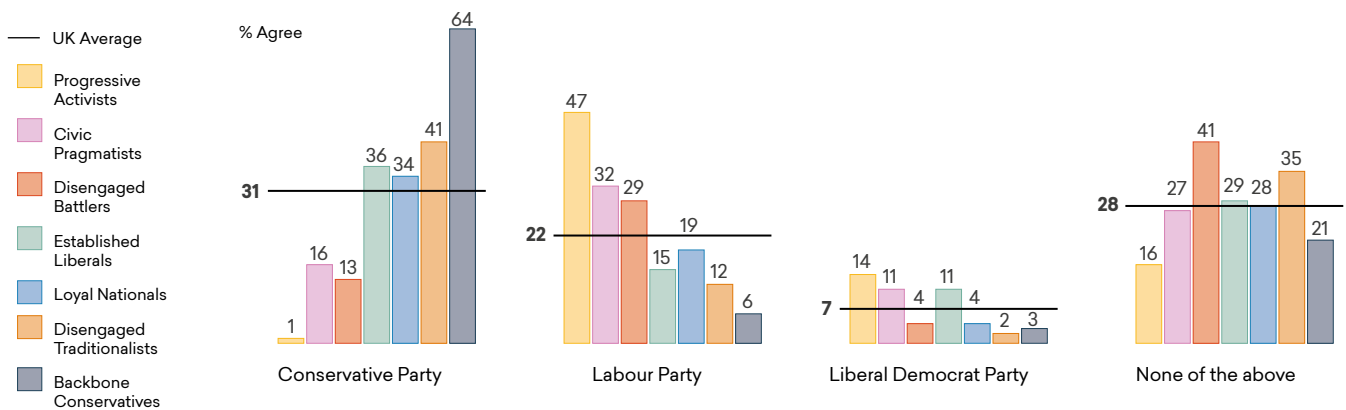
In our focus group conversations, few people cited their political identity as being central to who they are, especially unprompted. Just one in three Britons who see themselves as a supporter of a specific party describe themselves as strong supporters. Indeed, 'none of the above' is more popular than all but the governing Conservative Party. Even for the Conservatives, only one segment showed a majority support. The Disengaged segments again stand out on the question of party identity. They are the two groups most likely to support 'none of the above'. But even those segments most aligned with particular parties do not generally consider their support for the party to be 'strong'. For both Progressive Activists and Backbone Conservatives – the two groups with the strongest political identities – around half say that their support for a party is 'not very strong'.

Figure **4.8.**

Identification with a political party

The Disengaged segments are least likely to identify with a political party, whilst the most ideological segments (Progressive Activists and Backbone Conservatives) are the most likely to have a partisan identity.

Identification with a political party

Qu. Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a [...] supporter. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Britain presents a sharp contrast to the binary polarisation in the United States, where partisan identities are deeply entrenched. Compared to Americans, political party attachment plays a much weaker role in British people's sense of identity.
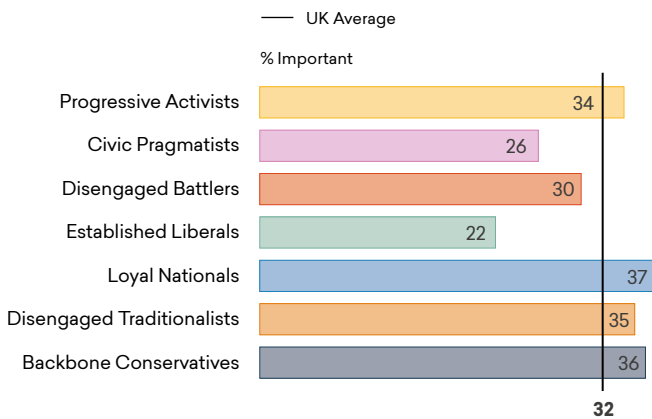
– Among those who identify with a political party, only 32 per cent say that being a supporter of a political party is an important part of their identity, compared to 67 per cent of Americans (and only 9 per cent say it is very important, compared to 31 per cent of Americans).

– Another measure of the importance of political parties to people's sense of personal identity is whether people say that they have a sense of pride in their party. Only 43 per cent in Britain say so (compared to almost twice this number in the US, in research for a report being published by More in Common in late 2020).[6]

Figure 4.9.

Importance of party identity

Importance of party identification is relatively low for
most segments

Importance of party identity

—— UK Average

% Important

Progressive Activists	34
Civic Pragmatists	26
Disengaged Battlers	30
Established Liberals	22
Loyal Nationals	37
Disengaged Traditionalists	35
Backbone Conservatives	36

32

Qu. How important to you are each of the following parts of your identity: Being a […] supporter? February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

The weakness of party attachment in Britain is reflected in both the low levels of attachment and the relatively small variation between segments in the importance they attach to their party identity and their personal sense of pride in that identity. Perhaps this reflects the fact that today's political parties reflect the political fault lines of a different age, and do not map to the differences in people's core beliefs today. Even for Backbone Conservatives and Progressive Activists, who have the strongest party attachments, they are only slightly above average levels. The weakest levels of party identity are among Established Liberals and Civic Pragmatists.

4.4 Brexit identity: disappearing or dormant?

'I was a Remainer but as time went on, I just wanted it to stop. It was the issue of every day and I was getting up to here with the whole thing. I just wanted it over. And now we've got something new and it seems to be forgotten. Are they still working at it? Is it still going on? What is happening?'
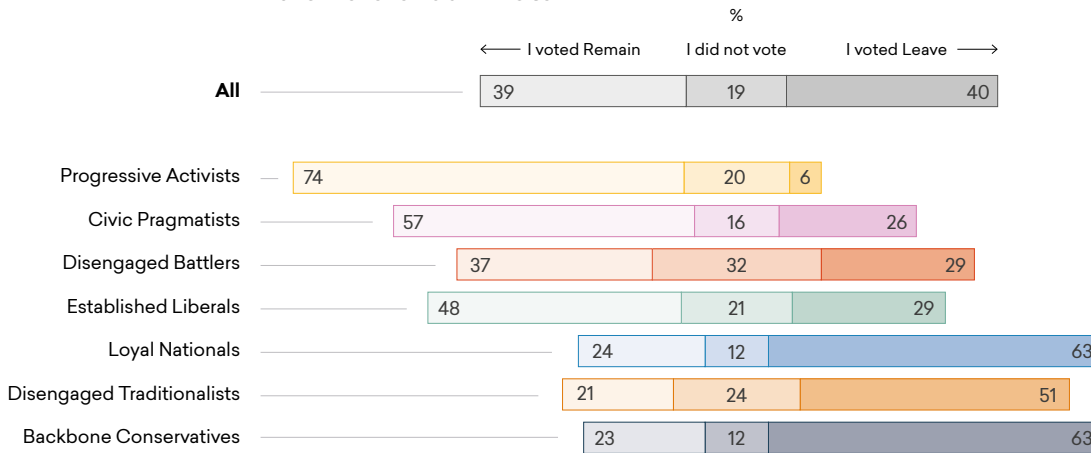
William, Disengaged Battler, 76, North West

In comparison to the weak sense of party attachment felt by most people, a striking finding of research conducted during the Brexit years was that Britons had begun identifying more strongly with being a Remainer or Leaver than with the party they vote for.[7] This raises the question of whether the Leave/Remain cleavage is an enduring fracture in British politics, and whether some kind of division around analogous values and identity could become more important than left/right divisions. Such a cleavage would shape future debates and could even potentially re-sort the composition of Britain's political parties.

Figure **4.10.**

2016 EU referendum vote

How segments voted in the 2016 referendum on EU membership

2016 Referendum Vote

%

⟵ I voted Remain | I did not vote | I voted Leave ⟶

Segment	Remain	Did not vote	Leave
All	39	19	40
Progressive Activists	74	20	6
Civic Pragmatists	57	16	26
Disengaged Battlers	37	32	29
Established Liberals	48	21	29
Loyal Nationals	24	12	63
Disengaged Traditionalists	21	24	51
Backbone Conservatives	23	12	63

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.
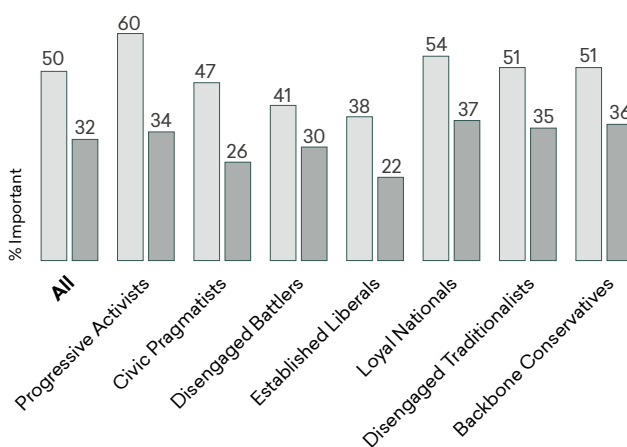Source: More in Common 2020.

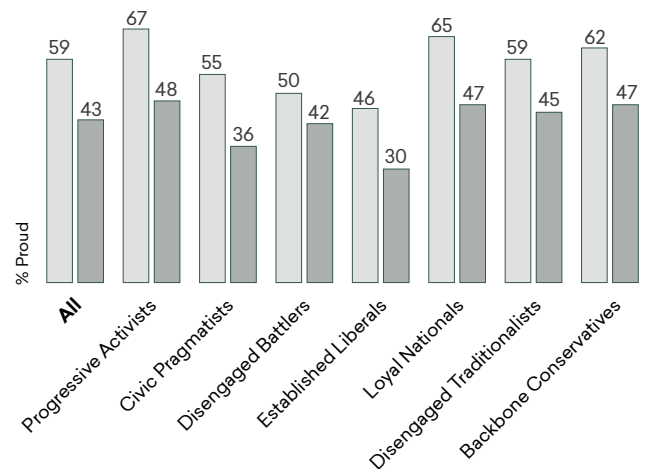Figure **4.11.**

Brexit identity versus party identity

Underscoring just how much Brexit became an issue of identity, Britons attach much more importance and pride to being a Leaver or Remainer than to their party affiliation

■ Remainer/Leaver
■ Party identity

Importance of Brexit identity versus party identity

% Important

Segment	Remainer/Leaver	Party identity
All	50	32
Progressive Activists	60	34
Civic Pragmatists	47	26
Disengaged Battlers	41	30
Established Liberals	38	22
Loyal Nationals	54	37
Disengaged Traditionalists	51	35
Backbone Conservatives	51	36

Pride in Brexit identity versus party identity

% Proud

Segment	Remainer/Leaver	Party identity
All	59	43
Progressive Activists	67	48
Civic Pragmatists	55	36
Disengaged Battlers	50	42
Established Liberals	46	30
Loyal Nationals	65	47
Disengaged Traditionalists	59	45
Backbone Conservatives	62	47

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

Analysis shows the greater strength of Brexit-related identity among Remainers rather than Leavers. Progressive activists overwhelmingly identity themselves this way. They are not only most proud of their Brexit identity, but also most likely to attach importance to it (and far more than to their party attachment). The other two segments that mainly supported the Remain cause, Established Liberals and Disengaged Battlers, are the least likely to attach importance or pride to their Brexit identity – highlighting the difference among Remainers between Progressive Activists and other segments. Among Leavers, Backbone Conservative, Loyal Nationals, and Disengaged Traditionalists all attach less importance and less pride to their Brexit identity than Progressive Activists.

Progressive Activists are similarly unusually strong in their views on the Brexit debate, with 86 per cent saying they strongly supported remaining. This contrasts to just 54 per cent of Backbone Conservatives who strongly supported leaving. This may reflect the way in which defeat in a political debate can entrench a group's attachment to a cause, but it is not mirrored among the other Remain-supporting segments (Established Liberals, Civic Pragmatists, and Disengaged Battlers).

There is no question that the Brexit debate is unusual in the extent to which it engaged British people's identities, disrupted established patterns of party support (especially in the 2019 General Election), and affected how British people understand their political identities. It is especially striking that the two Disengaged segments attached greater significance to their Brexit identities than some other segments (in particular, the Established Liberals, who on most measures show significantly higher levels of engagement). The Leave campaign was especially effectively at engaging people who had otherwise been detached from politics, tapping into their sense of frustration with the system and their feelings of not being represented by the political establishment.

The question for the future is the extent to which this identity-based division will endure, and whether cultural debates, for example, can be used by partisans to reinforce group identities between these opposing sides. The evidence from this study suggests it is not inevitable that the Leaver/Remainer division should become entrenched once the issue of Britain's relationship with the European Union becomes more normalised in a post-Brexit environment. In reality, there is much common ground between Leavers and Remainers, whether it comes to their frustrations with life today or aspirations for the future, and even on questions about politics itself:

–   Beyond politics, Leavers and Remainers have many common sources of pride, as Chapter 11 discusses. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, both ranked the NHS as their greatest source of pride in Britain (63 per cent of Remainers and 52 per cent of Leavers).

–   Some 87 per cent of Remainers and 88 per cent of Leavers agree that 'living in a country that is governed democratically is important to me'.

–   Some 83 per cent of Remainers and 80 per cent of Leavers agree that 'politicians don't care about people like me'.

–   Over three-quarters of Remainers believe 'the system is rigged to serve the rich and influential', and a majority (57 per cent) of Leavers believe the same.

–   A majority of Leavers (54 per cent) and Remainers (68 per cent) say they feel exhausted by division in politics.

–   Large majorities of both Leavers and Remainers say the media makes the country feel more divided than it really is.

The shifting importance of Brexit identities since 2019 reflects the changing salience of the Brexit debate since the 2019 General Election. Brexit-related debates receded from public attention in the months after the pandemic, although differences among political actors resurfaced around government plans to legislate to breach commitments in the EU withdrawal agreement. As those debates took place again in September 2020, 55 per cent of Britons said their identity as a Remainer or Leaver still had importance to their identity.

If debates around Brexit are reopened – around Britain's trading relationship with the European Union, for example – those divisions in the community might return, but our conversations across Britain in 2020 found little appetite for a resumption of hostilities among the vast majority of Remainers and Leavers. A greater risk might be a reawakening of some of the differences in underlying values between Remainers and Leavers, for instance around some other future conflict of culture and identity. This risk is explored in greater detail in Chapter 6.

In conversations throughout 2020 for this study, many people said they worried about divisions returning in the future – half the population told us in September that Covid-19 has made them concerned about political division getting worse, while only a small minority were not concerned about this. In qualitative interviews for this report, many participants reflected with sadness on their experience of divisions during the Brexit years, with the intensity of those public debates affecting relationships with friends, family members, and others in their community. Both Remainers and Leavers felt that Brexit drove a wedge through society, and that they experienced others' resentment, anger, or disgust for their views:

Peter

'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. There's always been political differences, but I think the really big one has been the Brexit one because people feel so passionately about it.'

Interviewer:
Do you feel passionately about it as well?

Peter

'Yeah, a little bit. I try not to let it come into my day-to-day life. I do have my own strong opinions on it. More because like I said before the possibility of it affecting my daughter's medication. I think that's why I feel so strongly about it. But I try not to… Especially now it's technically over, I try not to let it come into relationships with other people because I've seen what it can do. I've seen how it can bring formally strong friendships down.'

Peter, Civic Pragmatist, 37, North West

'It made me feel like I was just being very quickly judged and that everyone just assumed what I believed because of the way I voted. There's lots of reasons why I voted that way and I can see why people would vote remain. Didn't feel annoyed about people that did that [laughs], but then I just remember if I mentioned how I voted that people would get quite angry at me, or would almost feel quite violent towards me.'

Rose, Established Liberal, 28, South West

For many in the study, the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that the divisions of Brexit could be overlooked, as people came together to support one another in a time of crisis:

'I think this is a big opportunity to put everything behind us. I'm against Brexit a hundred percent but I think it's time to just look beyond that and pull forward now. This current situation really has pulled us further away from what Brexit would look like, this is more like well we've really got to deal with bigger issues like putting the economy back together once this is all over… I think it's high time we unite to be even stronger than ever.'

Ray, Loyal National, 44, London

'It has seemed that people have forgotten that whole debate and that whole opposition to each other. I think Covid has taken everyone's minds off it and I think that in many ways has helped to heal some of the divisions, certainly some of the resentment I felt towards other people. I think I had started to feel definitely that I was a Remainer, some people I knew were Leavers and, yeah, it really made it difficult for me to associate with them anymore and things like that. Now I feel like certainly a lot of my feelings on the matter have been resolved because just being reminded that people don't need to identify purely as that, that people can work together despite it.'

Declan, Established Liberal, 27, West Midlands

Past divisions could be awoken from their dormancy, but most want to move on from the division and dysfunction of the Brexit years. However, while people want the country to move on from those divisions, they are not sure that it will. Confidence weakened during the course of the pandemic.[ii] Early on, more people agreed than disagreed that 'Covid-19 has shown us that no matter how divisive the debate around Brexit was, as a society we can pull together'.

However, our data from September 2020 (Figure 4.12) shows that Britons now doubt we can pull together. Among the segments, only a slight majority of Backbone Conservatives continue to believe this is possible.
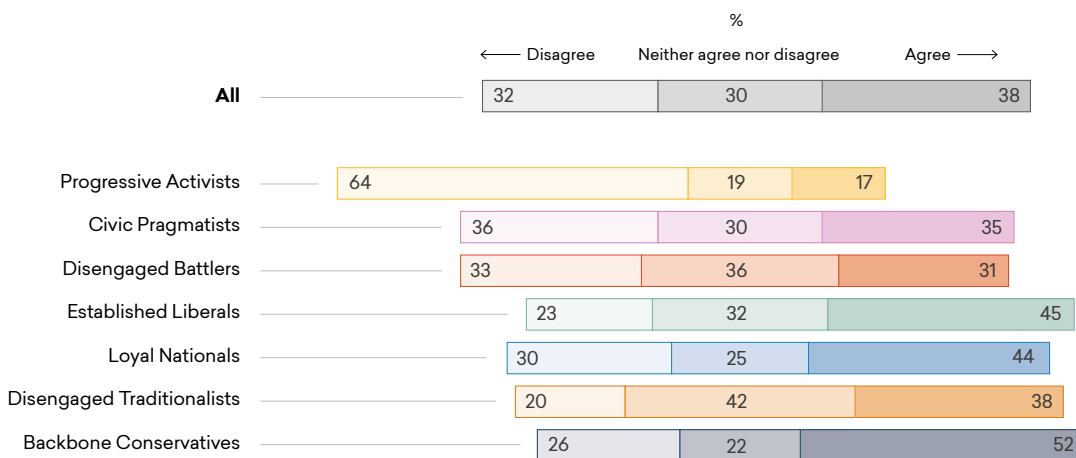
This finding perhaps reflects uncertainty about whether political leaders and influential media voices genuinely want those divisions to heal, and also demonstrates how the mention of Brexit prompts a sense of pessimism among Britons that we can genuinely overcome the division it has caused.

Figure 4.12.

Covid-19, Brexit, and pulling together as a society

Britons are less sure that we can move on from the divisiveness of the Brexit years as it starts to return to the forefront of people's minds

Covid-19 has shown us that no matter how divisive the debate around Brexit was, as a society we can pull together

%

	← Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree →
All	32	30	38
Progressive Activists	64	19	17
Civic Pragmatists	36	30	35
Disengaged Battlers	33	36	31
Established Liberals	23	32	45
Loyal Nationals	30	25	44
Disengaged Traditionalists	20	42	38
Backbone Conservatives	26	22	52

Qu. To what extent do you agree with the following statement? Covid-19 has shown us that no matter how divisive the debate around Brexit was, as a society we can pull together. September 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020..

The Brexit divide has left scar tissue, but it is far from insurmountable. The common ground to be found across the Leave/Remain divide, and the strength of people's desire to move on from the conflict, mean that the UK is not doomed to a repeated and intensifying cycle of division along those same fault lines. But if political leaders intentionally frame future debates in 'us-versus-them' ways around national identity in order to re-ignite those conflicts, Leave/Remain divisions could evolve into a more enduring fracture in British politics and society (for further analysis into affective polarisation – on 'us-versus-them' dynamics – between partisans and Leavers/Remainers see Chapter 5).

ii   The percentage of agreement/disagreement in September 2020 was 38-32 per cent, and in June 2020 66-25 per cent.

4.5 — Key takeaways

We entered the 2020s with Britons perceiving the country as deeply divided after the Brexit years. Feelings of sadness, disappointment, and frustration towards politicians lingered, alongside weakened attachment to political parties, whom people hold partly responsible for years of seemingly futile conflict. It was unsurprising that the successful campaign in the 2019 General Election was the one with the clearest commitment to end the division of the Brexit years, even if it was short on the details of how that might take place.

Despite its painful and tragic consequences, the Covid-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for people across Britain to come together in the face of a common threat, and this sense of reuniting provided a clean break for many after the conflict of the Brexit years. Although the social solidarity that was mobilised in the wake of the first lockdown wore down over time, across all segments there is a strong hope that we do not return to the divisions of recent times – alongside anxiety that this could happen.

It is not inevitable that the divisions of the Brexit years should again open up. Britain is less polarised than is often assumed. We remain committed to democracy and to its necessary compromises. We are not fractured along the fault lines of deep partisan identities or issues, and do not harbour deep hostility towards each other based on the parties we support.

But beneath people's identities as Leavers and Remainers, there are real fault lines and differences in core beliefs, discussed in the next chapter. The nature of these differences helps explain why those identities have not entirely faded. Re-establishing trust and reconnecting people across the lines of past divisions is vital if the 'us-versus-them' divisions of recent years are to heal. As this report shows, there is much common ground on which to do this work.

Endnotes

1   For example, Ipsos MORI's Veracity Index first found in 1983 that government ministers and politicians were only trusted to tell the truth 16% and 18% of time respectively; 35 years later, similar numbers of 22% and 19% were recorded: *Trust: The Truth?* (Ipsos MORI, 2019) <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2019-09/ipsos-thinks-trust-the-truth.pdf>. The most recent data from the British Social Attitudes survey on trust, published in 2015, showed that 17% trust governments most of the time, echoing a finding of 16% in 2009, but around half of the 38% who trusted governments most of the time in 1986: John Curtice and Rachel Ormston, *British Social Attitudes 32* (NatCen, 2015) <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38972/bsa32_fullreport.pdf>.

2   Onward's 2019 research found similar results on commitment to democracy: *The Politics of Belonging* (Onward, 2019) <https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Politics-of-Belonging-Deck-v.4.pdf>.

3   *The New Normal?* (More in Common, 2020) <https://www.moreincommon.com/newnormal/>.

4   Mounk.

5   Duffy and others.

6   Forthcoming 2020: *American Fabric: Finding our Shared Identity* (More in Common).

7   *Brexit and Public Opinion* (The UK in a Changing Europe, 2019) <http://ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Public-Opinion-2019-report.pdf>.