Culture wars in the UK: political correctness and free speech

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Culture wars in the UK

Political correctness and free speech

The public tend to think people are too easily offended, and some groups are particularly likely to say political correctness has gone too far

Britons are relatively divided on whether people are too easily offended or if the way they talk needs to be more sensitive to those from different backgrounds. 55% tend to think people take offence too readily and 42% lean more towards believing it's important to change how they communicate.

But the public are clear that political correctness has gone too far: 62% agree with this view – three times the 19% who disagree. This is a longstanding concern, as a 2000 survey found virtually the same proportion – 65% – thought political correctness had gone too far.
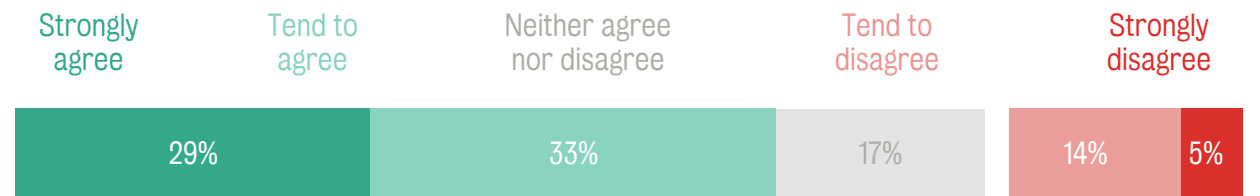
However, perspectives on this issue vary hugely by political affiliation – 88% of Leavers think we're too politically correct as a society, compared with 46% of Remainers who feel the same. And there is a similar split between Conservative (85%) and Labour (46%) supporters.

There is also a steep age gradient in views: the older people are, the more likely they are to feel political correctness has gone too far, with 76% of those aged 55 and above believing we're too PC, declining to 38% among 16- to 24-year-olds.
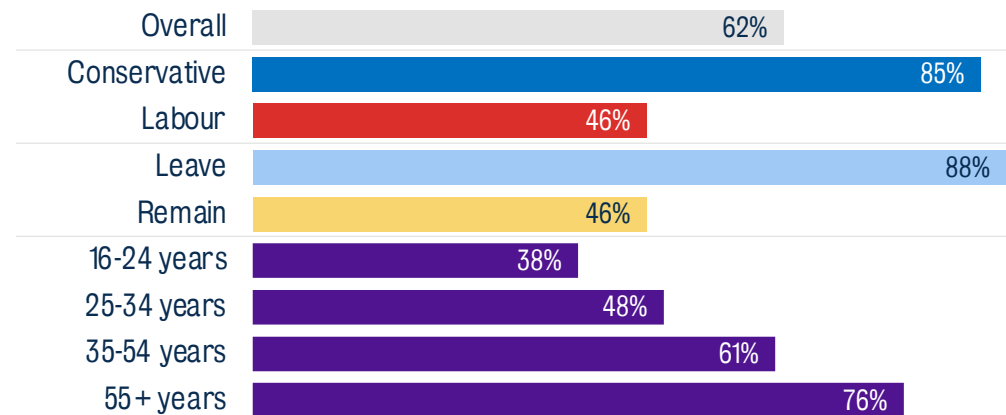
Some people think that the way people talk needs to be more sensitive to people from different backgrounds. Others think that many people are just too easily offended. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

People are too easily offended

Need to change the way people talk

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16%	8%	14%	17%	16%	12%	6%	8%
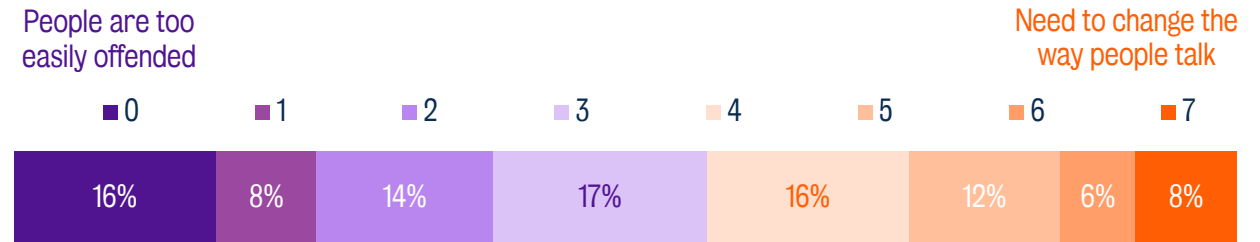
How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Political correctness has gone too far

Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree
29%	33%	17%	14%	5%

Agree political correctness has gone too far

Overall	62%
Conservative	85%
Labour	46%
Leave	88%
Remain	46%
16-24 years	38%
25-34 years	48%
35-54 years	61%
55+ years	76%

Most people say they don't feel reluctant to share their views on key topics – even ones that are potentially controversial
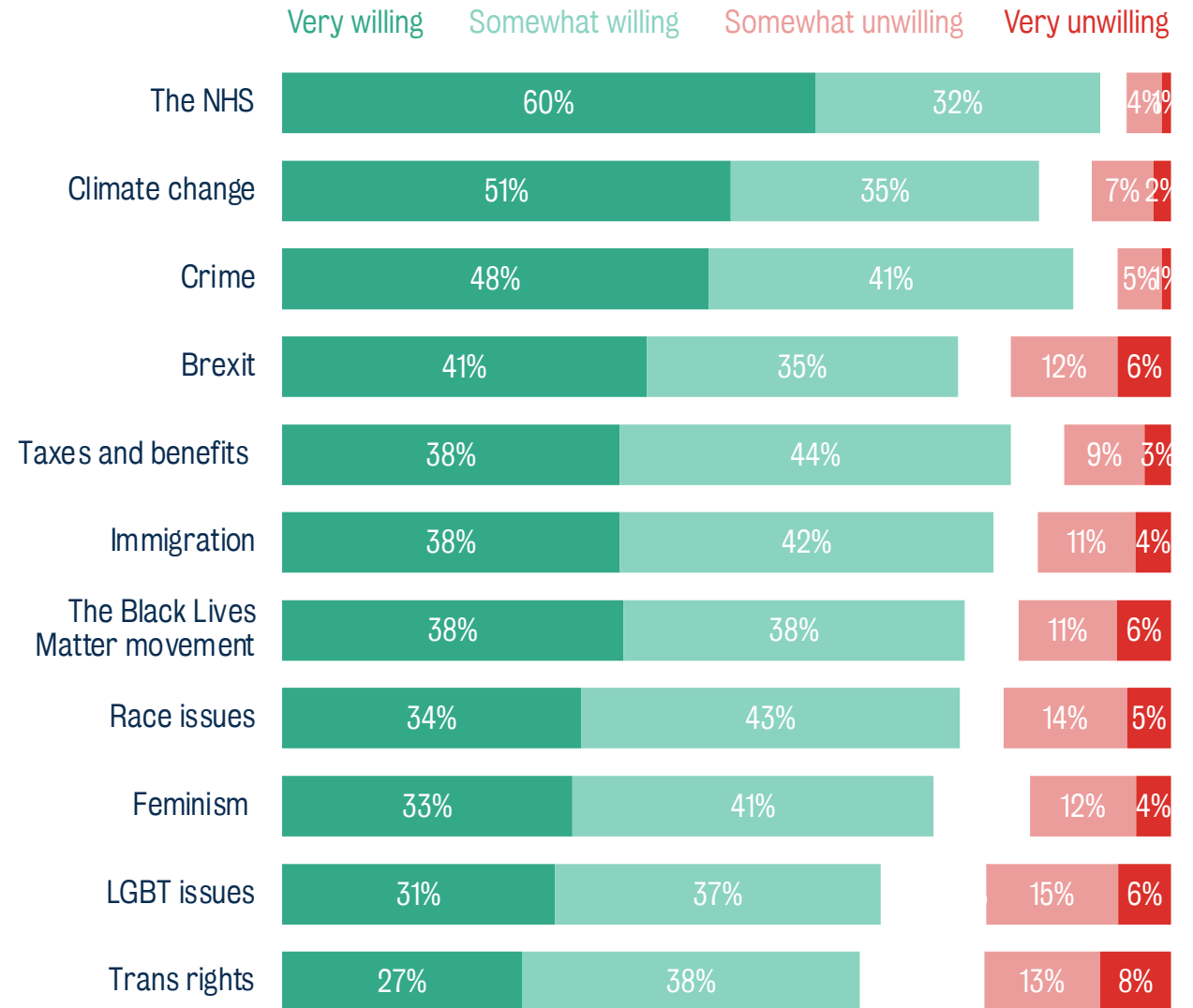
Majorities of the public say they would be willing to discuss their opinions on a range of issues – including many that are often seen as divisive – with colleagues or classmates.

For example, of all the issues asked about, the public are least prepared to talk about trans rights in such a scenario – but two-thirds (65%) are still willing to share their views on the issue, compared with one in five (21%) who say they're reluctant to do so.

There is also little difference in responses when similar issues are described differently, as illustrated by people being just as willing to talk about Black Lives Matter (76%) as they are to discuss race issues (77%).

And while notable minorities say they're *very* willing to share their views on potentially contentious issues such as Brexit (41%), immigration (38%) and feminism (33%), it is only on the topics of climate change (51%) and the NHS (60%) where majorities report being particularly content to discuss their opinions.

	Very willing	Somewhat willing	Somewhat unwilling	Very unwilling
The NHS	60%	32%	4%	1%
Climate change	51%	35%	7%	2%
Crime	48%	41%	5%	1%
Brexit	41%	35%	12%	6%
Taxes and benefits	38%	44%	9%	3%
Immigration	38%	42%	11%	4%
The Black Lives Matter movement	38%	38%	11%	6%
Race issues	34%	43%	14%	5%
Feminism	33%	41%	12%	4%
LGBT issues	31%	37%	15%	6%
Trans rights	27%	38%	13%	8%

Most people think universities should expose students to a range of views, even if they are offensive – and there is little support for "no-platforming"
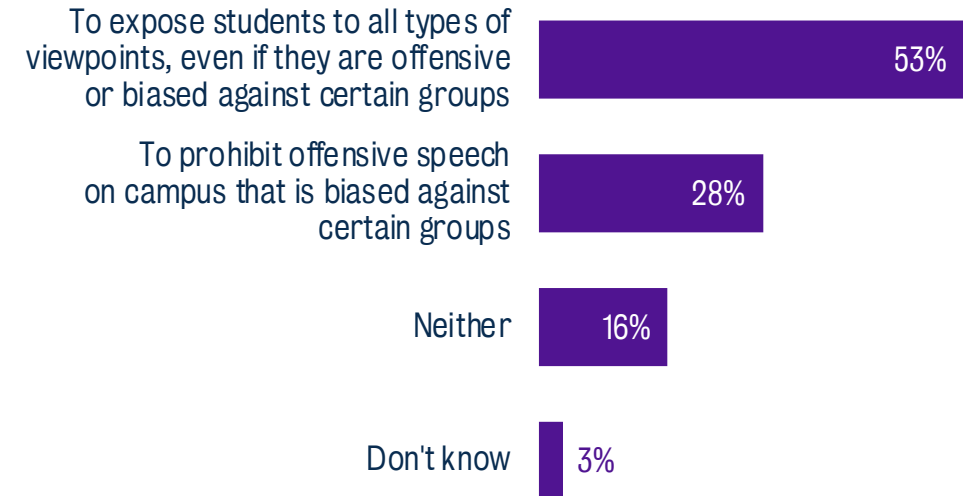
53% say it's more important for universities to expose students to all types of viewpoints, even if they are offensive or biased against certain groups – almost twice as many as the 28% who feel universities should instead ban speech that promotes such views.

And when it comes to the issue of "no-platforming" speakers with controversial views, around one in six (17%) are in favour of such a response, compared with half (50%) who are against it.

Labour supporters (27%) are nearly three times as likely as Conservatives (10%) to agree that no-platforming is appropriate in these kinds of scenarios, while people from ethnic minorities (29%) are about twice as likely as white people (15%) to support such a measure.
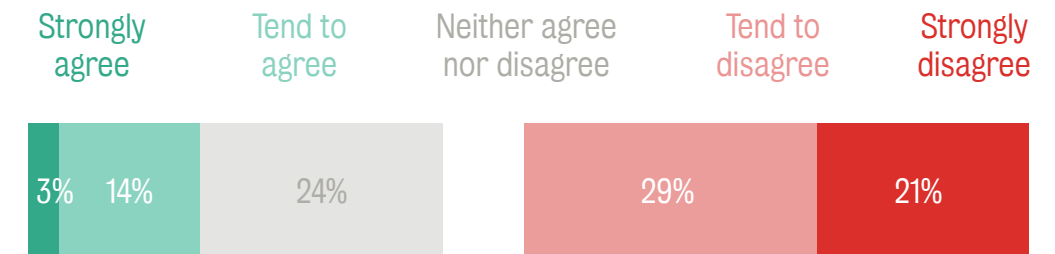
Only a minority among all age groups surveyed support no-platforming – although there are bigger variations in the extent to which people actively disagree with the practice. For example, 32% of 16- to 24-year-olds oppose the idea, compared with 60% of those aged 55 and above.

If you had to choose, is it more important for universities...

To expose students to all types of viewpoints, even if they are offensive or biased against certain groups	53%
To prohibit offensive speech on campus that is biased against certain groups	28%
Neither	16%
Don't know	3%

There have been well-publicised instances of "no-platforming" at UK universities in recent years. This involves students trying to prevent invited speakers, whose views the students believe to be unacceptable, from speaking, or disrupting the events they are speaking at.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that "no-platforming" is the right response to speakers with controversial views?
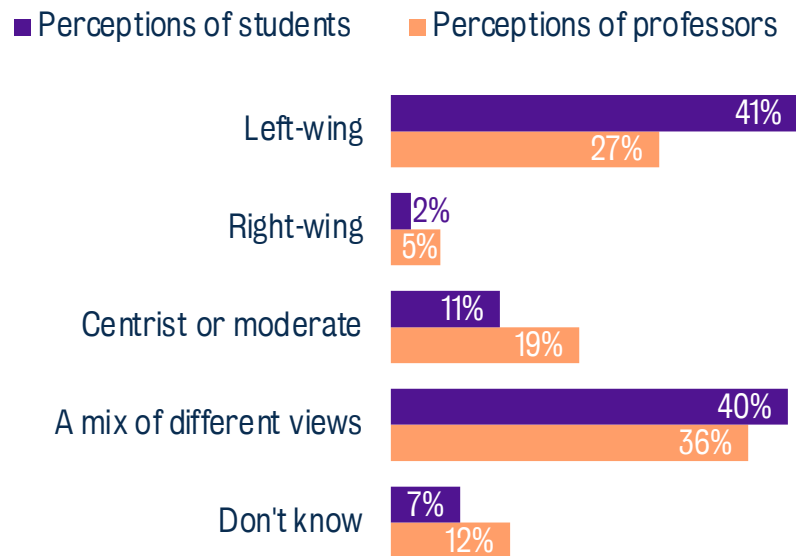
Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree
3%	14%	24%	29%	21%

There is little sign that the public see university professors as left-wing

People who have attended university are more likely to say their fellow students (41%), rather than their professors (27%), had left-wing views. And people who went to university are not much more likely than people who didn't to say that academics tend to be left-wing (27% vs 18%).
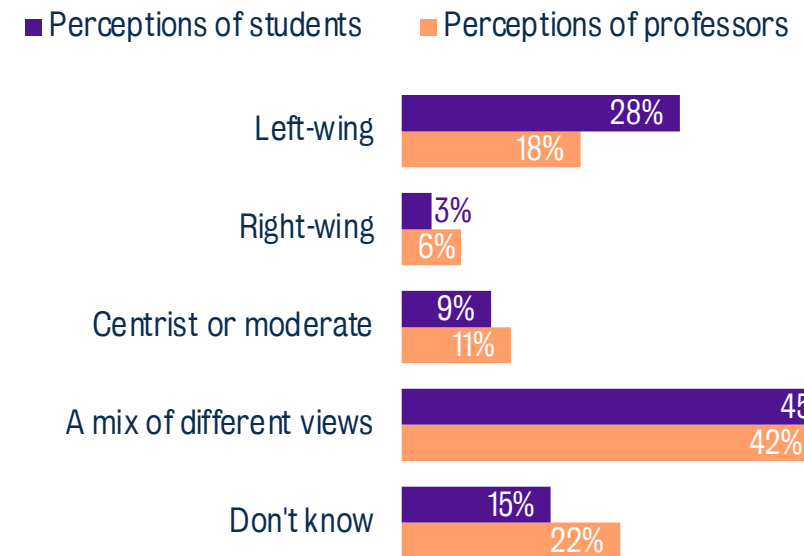
The most common view of professors is that they had a range of different political perspectives, with 36% of former students feeling this way. 19% think the academics at their university had centrist or moderate views and 5% thought they were mostly right-wing.

Among people who didn't go to university, around one in five (18%) think professors mostly have left-wing views, compared with around two in five (42%) who think they tend to have a mix of different political opinions. And people who haven't been to university are more likely to see students (28%), rather than professors (18%), as holding left-wing views. But the most common perception of both groups is that they tend not to be more closely affiliated with any one political viewpoint over another, and very few see right-wing views dominating.

Thinking about the students and professors at the university you attended, what would you say are or were the most common political views?

Thinking about the students and professors at universities in the UK, what would you say are or were the most common political views?

■ Perceptions of students   ■ Perceptions of professors

	Perceptions of students	Perceptions of professors
Left-wing	41%	27%
Right-wing	2%	5%
Centrist or moderate	11%	19%
A mix of different views	40%	36%
Don't know	7%	12%

■ Perceptions of students   ■ Perceptions of professors

	Perceptions of students	Perceptions of professors
Left-wing	28%	18%
Right-wing	3%	6%
Centrist or moderate	9%	11%
A mix of different views	45%	42%
Don't know	15%	22%

Views on whether the government should promote progressive or traditional values differ strongly by age and politics
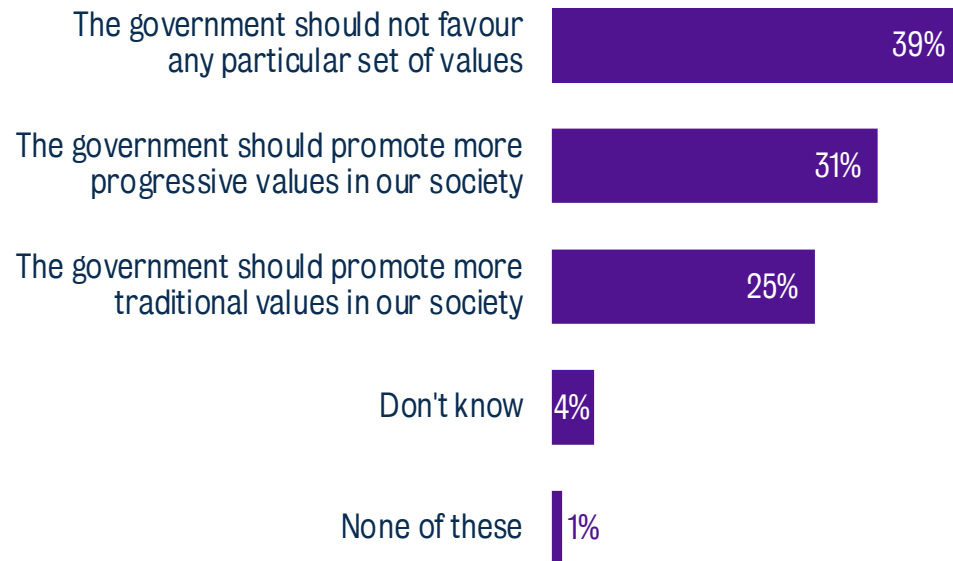
39% of people think the government shouldn't favour any particular set of values – but a majority of 56% think it should come down on one side or another: 31% say the government should promote more progressive values in society, while 25% say it should promote more traditional values.

And opinions are split largely along political and generational lines. For example, Labour supporters (45%) are around three times as likely as
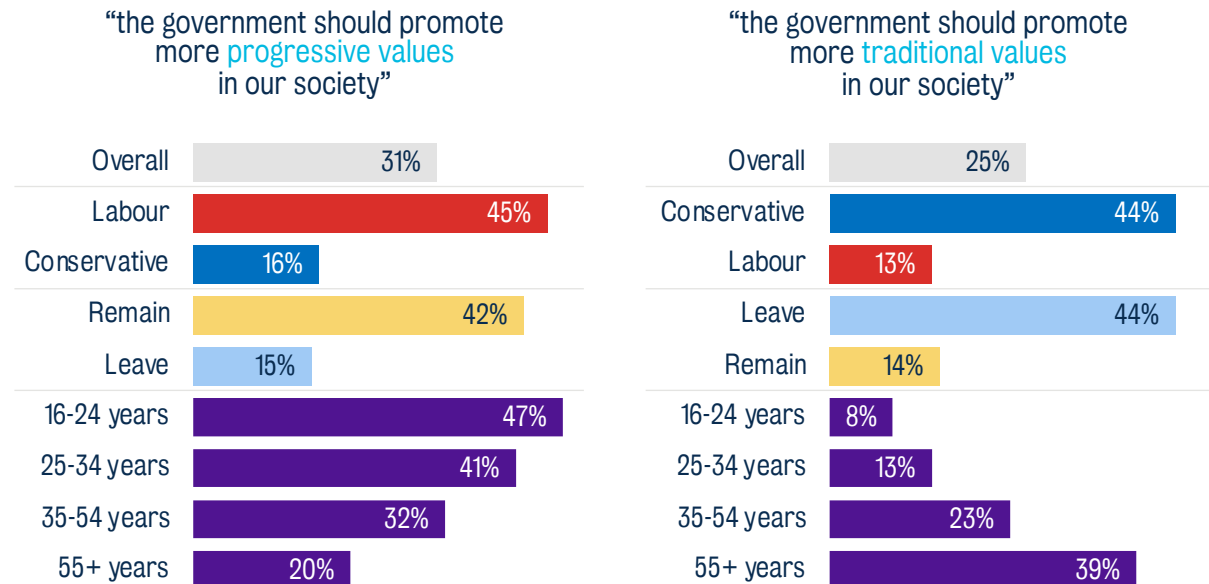
Conservatives (16%) to want the government to promote progressive values, while the situation is reversed when it comes to views on advocating traditional values.

And of all age groups surveyed, only those 55 and above are more likely to prefer that the government adopt a traditionalist, rather than progressive, approach. Around four in ten of all groups say the government should not favour any particular set of values.
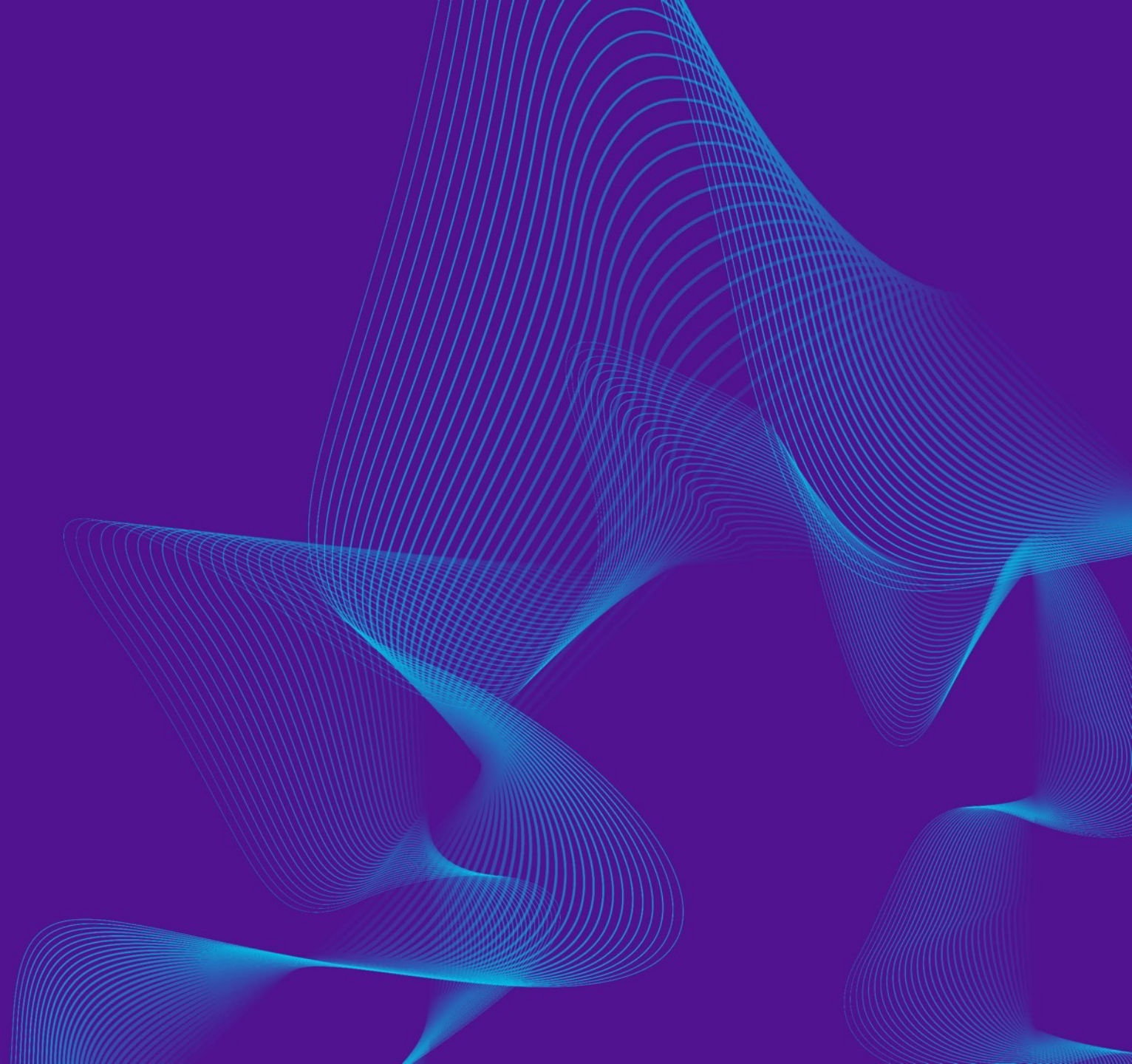
Which statement comes closer to your own view?

Statement	%
The government should not favour any particular set of values	39%
The government should promote more progressive values in our society	31%
The government should promote more traditional values in our society	25%
Don't know	4%
None of these	1%

% who say the following statements come closer to their view

"the government should promote more progressive values in our society"

	%
Overall	31%
Labour	45%
Conservative	16%
Remain	42%
Leave	15%
16-24 years	47%
25-34 years	41%
35-54 years	32%
55+ years	20%

"the government should promote more traditional values in our society"

	%
Overall	25%
Conservative	44%
Labour	13%
Leave	44%
Remain	14%
16-24 years	8%
25-34 years	13%
35-54 years	23%
55+ years	39%

Technical note

Technical note: survey

Ipsos MORI interviewed online a representative sample of 2,834 adults aged 16+ across the United Kingdom between 26th November and 2nd December 2020. This data has been collected by Ipsos MORI's UK KnowledgePanel, an online random probability panel which provides gold standard insights into the UK population, by providing bigger sample sizes via the most rigorous research methods. Data are weighted by age, gender, region, Index of Multiple Deprivation quintile, education, ethnicity and number of adults in the household in order to reflect the profile of the UK population. All polls are subject to a wide range of potential sources of error.

Ipsos MORI's UK KnowledgePanel is the UK's largest online random probability panel, providing total understanding of the UK public for businesses and organisations looking for cutting edge insight at the gold standard of online research methods. It is important because it includes both online and offline participants selected at random from every address in the UK, the first of its kind, with a single interface to eliminate modal effects and produce accurate data rapidly.

UK KnowledgePanel utilises a panel of 15,000+ participants to provide a new innovative tool for all those organisations who wish to garner greater insights into the behaviours, beliefs and attitudes of not just the UK population as a whole, but also into the specific communities which make up the UK's diverse population.

Studies completed on UK KnowledgePanel will be fully representative of the UK population including the 4% of households who are considered 'offline'. This is made possible by recruiting offline and supplying participants with a tablet, internet access and the tech support needed to get online. As a result of this approach the panel utilises a single online data collection method, with no differential mode effects – a pioneering advancement which enhances the ability to understand our society.

The UK KnowledgePanel builds on work done by Ipsos in the US on their own, which has been operating since 1999, utilising that experience and blending it with Ipsos MORI's own research and methodological expertise to produce a tool which delivers robust nationally representative data at speed. Find out more.

This study was supported by Unbound Philanthropy

Subgroups

Variable	Survey (Nov-Dec 20)	Variable	Survey (Nov-Dec 20)
Gender		**Party support**	
Male	1,386	Conservative	806
Female	1,439	Labour	669
Age		**Brexit support**	
16-24	145	Leave	860
25-34	322	Remain	1750
35-54	973	**Income level**	
55+	1,394	Up to £25,999	612
Ethnicity		£26,000 to £51,999	934
White	2,644	£52,000 to £99,999	616
Ethnic minority	164	£100,000 and above	212
Country		**Occupation type**	
England	2,124	Modern professional	924
Scotland	443	Clerical and intermediate	397
Wales	109	Senior manager/admin.	415
Northern Ireland	158	Technical and craft	158
Region		Semiroutine manual/serv.	189
North East	107	Routine manual/service	103
North West	275	Middle/junior managers	223
Yorkshire & Humber	163	Traditional professional	343
East Midlands	205	**Education level**	
West Midlands	209	Degree level or above	1371
East of England	256	Below degree level	1199
South East	387		
South West	282		
London	240		

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