

# Divided Britain?

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*Polarisation and fragmentation  
trends in the UK*

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September 2019

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# Executive summary

As the results of the EU referendum were announced, political leaders were quick to say that the outcome had ‘revealed a divided Britain’, and have since asserted the need for politicians on all sides to unite and ‘bring the country back together, rather than entrenching division’. But the phrase ‘Divided Britain’ has taken root in our everyday lexicon and is now frequently used to capture a growing sense of social and political polarisation in our country, driven by the national split revealed and reinforced by the Brexit vote.

Headlines warn that we are seeing a ‘more tribalised Britain’, a nation more ‘bitterly divided’ than during the miners’ strike, the poll tax protests of the 1990s and the Iraq War. Politicians refer to ‘these increasingly polarised times’ with such frequency and certainty that it goes largely unquestioned.



Too often, terms such as ‘division’ and ‘polarisation’ are used interchangeably

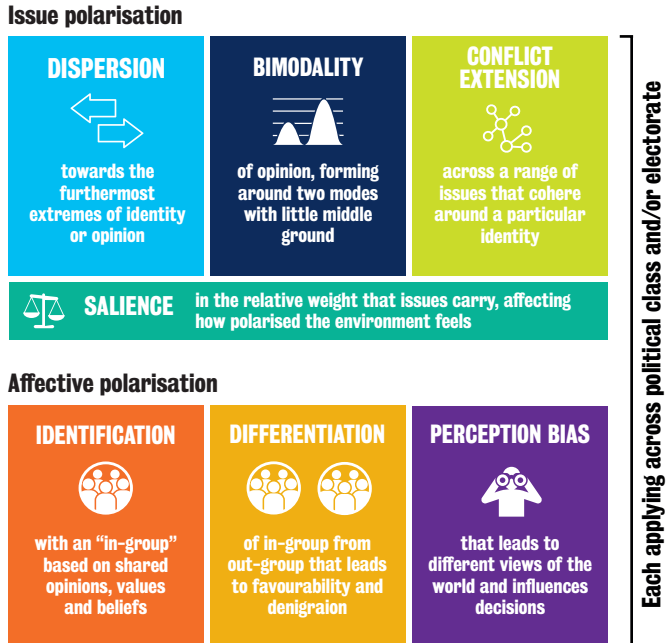
In some ways this is not surprising. Division is very clearly suggested by a near 50-50 vote in the referendum, alongside even the most casual scan of the survey evidence and fractious discussion around Brexit and our current politics.

But there is far less serious analysis of the nature and scale of the problem, based on clear concepts and definitions. Too often, terms such as ‘division’ and ‘polarisation’ are used interchangeably, accepted as synonymous and universally understandable, when they are distinct, complex and contested concepts.

Encouraging more precision in how we define polarisation and the evidence supporting it, as this report attempts to do, is not an exercise in academic pedantry. Understanding the true position and trajectory helps point to actions and avoid risks, such as talking ourselves into problems we don’t have, or missing what’s really happening and therefore overlooking likely future trends.

This report outlines conceptual frameworks that are relevant to this debate – distinguishing, in particular, between issue-based and affective forms of polarisation, as summarised in Figure 1. Using these frameworks, we then review the available evidence of polarisation in the UK (including a comparison with the US and Europe) and reflect on what this may mean for the UK’s future.

**FIGURE 1:**  
DEFINITIONS OF  
POLARISATION



## Is the UK polarising?

The United States has been the main focus of research on polarisation to date, and is therefore a useful reference point, even though the nature and extent of polarisation in the US is more contested than it first seems. UK trends are also not fully captured by a simple reading across of how polarisation has evolved there – not least because we are experiencing extremely rapid and volatile changes driven by the unique circumstances of Brexit.



## Key terms to better understand the debate on polarisation

**Issue polarisation:** the divisions formed around one or more policy positions or issues. Some also argue that, to be meaningfully polarising, issues need to be important (or ‘salient’) to a large section of the public, not just a minority of people with strongly held views.

### Key terms relating to issue polarisation

**Dispersion:** increasing distance between the furthestmost poles of opinion. This could mean that the full spectrum of opinion expands or moves toward more extreme positions, even though a majority may still hold moderate views.

**Bi-modality:** where opinions cluster around two distinct positions. These positions may not necessarily be the most strongly held or extreme opinions – there is instead simply a hollowing out of the middle ground between them.

**Conflict extension:** where opinions grow divided on a range of issue positions associated with a given identity, rather than having just one dominant issue on which each side disagrees, such as abortion or immigration.

**Salience:** the relative weight that different topics carry (ie how much people care about them). Salience is therefore greater when the mass public cares strongly about an issue, which is important because it affects how polarised the political environment feels.

**Affective polarisation:** when individuals begin to segregate themselves socially and to distrust and dislike people from the opposing side, irrespective of whether they disagree on matters of policy.

### Key terms relating to affective polarisation

**Identification** with a particular group based on a shared opinion or position (an ‘in-group), typically measured by the strength of support for a particular political party or equivalent.

**Differentiation** of the group that someone identifies with from opposing groups, which are often referred to as ‘out-groups’. This can involve associating positive traits with people who belong to the same side and negative traits with opposing groups, or actively disliking or avoiding social contact with individuals on the basis of their political identity.

**Perception bias:** where people experience the same realities in completely different ways, based on the identities with which they associate. For example, clear biases have been detected in relation to Leave and Remain identities, with those on each side having a different interpretation of the claim that the UK sends the EU £350 million per week.

## Key terms to better understand the debate on polarisation (continued)

**Partisan:** in the context of this report, partisan refers to a strong supporter of a political party or cause.

**Party sorting:** where the public switch to supporting parties that better reflect their views, or where parties adapt their policies to better reflect the position of their supporters.

**Partisan dealignment:** where a large portion of the electorate abandons its previous partisan (political party) affiliation, without developing a new one to replace it

**Party-system fragmentation:** where more parties become electorally effective, and traditional parties find it harder to achieve overall majorities.



Brexit identities have established themselves in an extremely short period of time, often surpassing traditional party identities

Unlike the US, where the electorate has increasingly sorted into two partisan identities, the UK shows evidence of long-term ‘partisan dealignment’, where a large portion of the electorate abandons its previous political party affiliation, without yet developing a new one to replace it. This fragmentation within the UK political system – and within individual parties – is important for understanding recent trends.

Three key points emerge from our review of the available evidence in the UK:

1. **The number of people who strongly identify with a political party has declined significantly, and is now far exceeded by the number who strongly identify with their side of the Brexit vote.** By 2018, only 9 per cent of the electorate said they very strongly identified with a political party, compared with nearly half of the electorate in the 1960s. In contrast, Brexit identities have established themselves in an extremely short period of time, often surpassing traditional party identities. For example, 44 per cent say they very strongly identify with their side of the Brexit vote, compared with 9 per cent who very strongly identify with their political party.



2. **People on both sides of the Brexit vote dislike the opposing side intensely even though they don't necessarily disagree with their positions on salient issues.** There is strong evidence of this 'affective polarisation', which is revealed in two ways:
  - ♦ 'Differentiation', where one side views the other side's traits as negative and its own traits as positive, or one side reduces interaction with the other side.
  - ♦ 'Perception bias', whereby people experience the same realities in completely different ways, depending on the Brexit identities with which they associate.

The extent of this affective polarisation around Brexit matches or surpasses that seen around political party identities.

3. **Evidence that the UK has become more polarised when it comes to people's positions on salient issues is much less clear.** In the run-up to the EU referendum, views were polarised on a range of highly salient issues, particularly immigration. But this issue – one of the key drivers of division in the referendum – has since declined significantly in salience, and perceptions of the impact of immigration have actually become more positive, with a narrowing of the gap in opinion between Leavers and Remainers. Added to this, there are many aspects of attitudes and identity in the UK that are converging rather than polarising, such as views on key public policy challenges such as health and social care, and on issues such as gender roles, homosexuality and racial prejudice. Evidence of 'issue polarisation' is therefore less clear-cut.



There are many aspects of attitudes and identity in the UK that are converging rather than polarising

Overall, the available evidence suggests that we are seeing a fragmentation of political support, alongside affective polarisation related to Brexit identities – and these identities are superseding people's weakening party-political ones.





Our long-standing party-political structures are struggling to capture the diverse views among party supporters

## Implications for the future

Looking forward, the current situation provides a different but still very significant challenge than the one usually presented for the UK's political system. We are *not* seeing two homogeneous blocs of diametrically opposed opinions and identities, but we could still end up with implacable conflict or political gridlock. Our long-standing party-political structures are struggling to capture the diverse views among party supporters. How the differences between these varied positions can be resolved, particularly in the context of our changing relationship with Europe, is the political challenge of our time.

Looking to the future, some initial reflections from this review of models and evidence are outlined below.

1. **We need to take more care in our use of polarisation and related concepts, as we may be mischaracterising the important changes we're seeing in the UK.** In particular, it's important to recognise that we can see affective polarisation develop in societies without a straightforward polarisation on issues, as is arguably the case in both the UK and US.
2. **Polarisation in the UK is not fully captured in a binary opposition across a single spectrum, and the focus on this increases the risk of losing sight of the big trends that led us here.** Our current political situation is not just a short-term reaction to Brexit; it also reflects the fracturing of public attitudes between economic and social dimensions over a number of decades. This is very different from the polarisation patterns seen in the US, where party supporters have increasingly aligned in their views across a wider range of divisive issues.
3. **The disconnect between political identities among the UK electorate and the party system makes the current situation extremely fluid and unpredictable.** The party-political landscape has not yet fully come to terms with the new identities that Brexit has revealed and reinforced. However, this appears to be in transition, with the changed emphasis of the new Prime Minister,



the emergence of the Brexit Party and the Liberal Democrats putting their pro-EU credentials to the fore, explicitly aligning with these new identities.

4. **The more traditional left-right political spectrum remains an important differentiator on some issues, particularly economic factors.** But there are very different concerns and motivations within each side of the Brexit debate that do not straightforwardly relate to a traditional left-right axis. This results in a very fragmented landscape of issues, which will make it difficult for any party to appeal to sufficient numbers to command a political majority.
5. **Where the Labour Party goes next on Brexit is a key decision for the future shape of the political spectrum.** The two main parties have become increasingly uneasy coalitions of supporters with a very diverse range of attitudes and identities. Until now, Labour has attempted to appeal to both Leave and Remain supporters with varied and equivocal messages on its position on Brexit. If Labour pivots to clearly support Remain (or Leave), our party system will become more aligned with Brexit identities, further solidifying this dimension into political representation.
6. **We can't be sure that the new political identities revealed and reinforced by Brexit will remain important over the coming years – but there are good reasons to expect they will.** The UK's future relationship with the EU is unlikely to be resolved quickly, and will therefore remain salient. But, more importantly, the origins of these identities, which predate the EU referendum, are tied up with a long-term party dealignment and increased concern about cultural and economic changes in the UK. And given that they represent coalitions of voters with highly diverse attitudes, these political identities are also highly unstable.



If Labour pivots to clearly support Remain (or Leave), our party system will become more aligned with Brexit identities



It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Britain is dividing, but not in the way that's commonly described

7. **Voters to some extent take cues from party platforms and leaders, so polarisation among political leaders and activists can spread to the electorate.** Changes in our political party structure and signals from leaders and the most engaged political activists are therefore important: political agency matters. How existing and challenger parties respond in terms of policy, language and whether they reinforce or attack the institutions which bind us will have a significant impact on polarisation and fragmentation in public opinion.
8. **Polarising politics can in turn affect broader social relationships.** A hostile culture of 'othering' political rivals can spill over into social relations, as we've seen in the evidence from the UK around both political party support and Brexit identities. If parties realign to more closely reflect Brexit identities, we may see a deepening of this 'affective spillover'.
9. **However, more positively, there are many issues which unite us.** Widespread support for similar priorities and government responses on health, social care and poverty, alongside large shifts in public attitudes to a range of social issues over recent decades, create a consensus which is largely absent in the US (eg over Obamacare or gay marriage).
10. **Better and more consistent data are needed to provide a greater understanding of what is happening in British society.** The categorisations that have worked in the past failed to identify and capture emerging trends. There is an increasing need for more in-depth and nuanced analyses to understand what brings us together as well as what divides us.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Britain is dividing, but not in the way that's commonly described – not into two monolithic blocs around Brexit. It has been longer in the making than that, with more dimensions. Understanding this more fully to develop approaches that bring us together is vital, to avoid further embedding social conflict and political gridlock.



# 1. Introduction

The background features a series of light blue, wavy lines that create a sense of motion and depth. A prominent feature is a grid-like pattern of thin, intersecting lines that forms a curved, tunnel-like structure, possibly representing a data flow or a complex network. The overall aesthetic is modern and technical.



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. The context

As the results of the EU referendum were announced, political leaders were quick to say that the outcome had ‘revealed a divided Britain’.<sup>1</sup> They have since continued to assert the need for politicians on all sides to unite and ‘bring the country back together, rather than entrenching division.’<sup>2</sup> But the phrase ‘Divided Britain’ has taken root in our everyday lexicon and is now used frequently to capture a growing sense of social and political polarisation in our country, driven by the national split revealed and reinforced by the Brexit vote.

Headlines warn that that we are seeing a ‘more tribalised Britain’,<sup>3</sup> a nation more ‘bitterly divided’ than during the miners’ strike, the poll tax protests of the 1990s and the Iraq War.<sup>4</sup> Politicians refer to ‘these increasingly polarised times’ with such frequency and certainty that it goes largely unquestioned.<sup>5</sup>



Too often, terms such as ‘division’ and ‘polarisation’ are used interchangeably

In some ways this is not surprising. Division is very clearly suggested by a near 50-50 vote in the referendum, alongside even the most casual scan of the survey evidence and fractious discussion around Brexit and our current politics.

But there is far less serious analysis of the nature and scale of the problem, based on clear conceptions and definitions. Too often, terms such as ‘division’ and ‘polarisation’ are used interchangeably, accepted as synonymous and universally understandable, when they are distinct, complex and contested concepts.

Encouraging more precision in how we define polarisation and the evidence supporting it, as this report attempts to do, is not an exercise in academic pedantry. Understanding the true position and trajectory helps point to actions and avoid risks, such as talking ourselves into problems we don’t have, or missing what’s really happening and therefore overlooking likely future trends.



We should question whether polarisation and division capture the full nature of the changes we're seeing in the UK

In particular, we should question whether polarisation and division capture the full nature of the changes we're seeing in the UK, or whether alternative frameworks, such as fragmentation, are also important in understanding what's happening now and what might come next. Our interest in these trends is not just to map disagreements, which always exist in political systems and are not in themselves the issue. The real risk is implacable conflict and political gridlock, where decisions cannot be made and the efficacy of democracy declines.


The following report by the Policy Institute at King's College London attempts to understand these trends. This work has been supported as part of the scoping work for Engage Britain,<sup>i</sup> a new organisation focused on tackling the UK's most complicated and divisive policy challenges. We consider various models for defining polarisation and then examine trends in the UK, informed by learning from other comparable country contexts, drawing in particular on the more established literature from the United States. The three report chapters cover:

- ♦ **Definitions of polarisation:** in particular, the distinction between issue and affective polarisation, the different elements of each and alternative models of fragmentation.
- ♦ **Evidence on polarisation and fragmentation:** starting with the US, which provides an important contrast with the UK, and including lessons from Europe.
- ♦ **Implications for the future:** we are in a particularly fluid and uncertain time, but the trends do point to things to watch for and actions we can take.

The report is not intended to be a definitive account of polarisation and fragmentation definitions and trends in the UK, but to take stock of the current evidence base as a foundation for further investigation. The Policy Institute and Engage Britain are eager to continue further discussions on the evidence and implications with a broad range of experts,

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<sup>i</sup> [www.engagebritain.org](http://www.engagebritain.org)



including through a series of events and consultations in Autumn 2019.

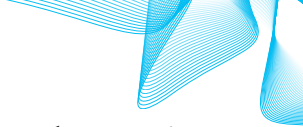
## 1.2. Method

The findings in this report are based on a rapid evidence assessment of literature on polarisation of attitudes, values, opinions or behaviours (or commonly associated terms, such as culture wars, division, fragmentation, fracturing or convergence) (for search method, see Appendix – total 65 studies). We have also considered transferable findings from a wider cross-section of studies focused on comparable countries, with a particular focus on the United States and established European democracies.

The emerging findings were tested through consultations with a range of stakeholders working on polarisation or in related fields, including:

- ♦ Alice Thwaite, Founder and Editor-in-Chief, The Echo Chamber Club.
- ♦ Alison Goldsworthy, Founder and CEO, The Depolarization Project.
- ♦ Christian Haerpfer, Professor of Political Science, Universität Wien.
- ♦ Christian Welzel, Professor of Research of Political Culture, Leuphana Universität Lüneburg.
- ♦ Douglas Alexander, Senior Fellow, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.
- ♦ Jill Rutter, Director of Strategy and Relationships, British Future.
- ♦ Joel Faulkner Rogers, Academic Director, YouGov.
- ♦ John Curtice, Professor of Politics, University of Strathclyde and Senior Research Fellow, NatGen Social Research.



- 
- Míriam Juan-Torres González, Senior Researcher, More in Common.
  - Paula Surridge, Senior Lecturer, University of Bristol.
  - Rosie Carter, Senior Policy Officer, Hope not Hate.
  - Sean Stevens, Director of Research, Heterodox Academy.
  - Sunder Katwala, Director, British Future.
  - The UK in a Changing Europe.

We are very grateful to them for testing our conceptions of polarisation and giving wider, expert perspectives on trends.



# 2. Defining polarisation

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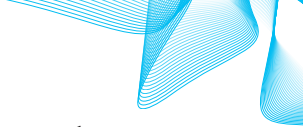
## 2. Defining polarisation

Terms such as ‘polarisation’, ‘culture wars’ and ‘tribalism’ have come into common use in Britain to describe how recent political trends have surfaced and reinforced deep divides in our population. But they are frequently used without a clear definition. In the nascent analysis of polarisation in Britain, brought on by Brexit, there has been little critical engagement or conceptual consensus on what polarisation means, whether it is the most appropriate framework and how it interlinks with other concepts such as fragmentation of support for political parties. This section considers a range of characteristics that underpin models of polarisation, including the key distinction between issue and affective polarisation, but also the different levels at which it can operate – for example, among a political class of leaders, donors and activists, or among the electorate.

As a concept, polarisation is focused on the division of attitudes ‘along a single dimension – generally along ideological lines’.<sup>6</sup> It should not be viewed as an all-or-nothing state. Instead, as James Campbell argues in *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America*, polarisation should be understood as a matter of degree. The question is not ‘Are we polarised or not?’; rather, to understand trends and implications, we should be asking to what extent we are ‘highly polarised’ or ‘relatively unpolarised’.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, Campbell argues that, while the two are often conflated, polarisation is both a *state* and a *process* of change, and that these are separate analytical concerns.<sup>8</sup> As we examine the evidence below, we’ll attempt to draw out that distinction, to understand what has really changed in both the US and the UK.

The long-standing and deeply contested debates around ‘culture wars’ in the US offer a cautionary tale on the importance of conceptual clarity: having a common understanding of what polarisation entails really matters. A review article published almost 20 years after the first



influential studies on the US culture wars appeared, concluded that much of the disagreement stemmed from a lack of consensus on what is meant by polarisation, and from the direct comparison of incompatible trends or scales of measurement.<sup>9</sup>

‘**Issue polarisation**’ has been the dominant focus of research in the US, measuring the divergence of positions on policy issues, such as abortion or immigration. Other models distinguish forms of ‘**affective polarisation**’ as a separate trend, in which individuals begin to ‘sort’ themselves socially, distrusting and disliking people from other parties, irrespective of whether they disagree on matters of policy.

In this section, we consider how polarisation has been variously defined, drawing primarily from the more established literature in the US, but updating this with recent conceptual thinking from the UK in light of Brexit. From this, we outline models of issue polarisation and affective polarisation, overlaying the distinction that is made between polarisation among the political class and the electorate.

Together, these models will inform the interpretation of trends in Section 3, to support critical reflection on the extent to which polarisation alone is an appropriate frame for understanding recent shifts in Britain.

## 2.1. Issue polarisation

Since the first landmark studies were published in the early 1990s, polarisation has primarily been understood as the difference in values and attitudes on one or more issues. A widely referenced model by DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson<sup>10</sup> defines four qualities of issue polarisation:

1. **Dispersion:** the distance between the furthestmost poles of opinion. The greater the variance, the more dispersed opinion becomes between the most extreme issue positions. This makes it harder to find compromise and build consensus.



2. **Bi-modality:** the clustering of opinion around two distinct positions or ‘modes’. This is typically visualised as the shift away from a bell curve to a bi-modal distribution (as visualised later in the report in Figures 5 and 8, where there is an increasing distance between median issue positions, creating an ideological gap between Republicans and Democrats). The greater the distance between these modes, the greater the chance of social conflict. These divides can become so fundamental and irreconcilable that it becomes hard to find common ground or compromise.
3. **Constraint:** a term used by DiMaggio and colleagues to describe the effect of creating rival value-based narratives or lenses through which people view the world, which can mask the complexity and nuance of each individual issue when considered in isolation. This is also the main analytical principle adopted by Abramowitz, who defines constraint as ‘consistency across issues’ across a given scale.<sup>11</sup> Layman, Carsey and Horowitz use the term **conflict extension** to describe a similar process, in which parties or populations grow divided on all major policy dimensions, rather than having just one dominant cleavage on which each side disagrees.<sup>12</sup>
4. **Consolidation:** the process by which particular groups of attitudes become linked to individual characteristics or identity stereotypes, forming distinct social identities (eg ‘Republicans vs Democrats’, ‘Leavers vs Remainers’). In the DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson model, consolidation of social attitudes with salient individual characteristics or identities is a potential source of social conflict.<sup>13</sup> However, in our view, this final element of issue polarisation overlaps significantly with conceptions of affective polarisation, which we outline below. We therefore believe that it is more helpful and intuitive to consider consolidation as a facet of affective polarisation.

In addition, each element in this model is moderated by issue **salience**. Salience refers to the relative weight of



Highly salient issues can seem more polarising than they really are – in reality, the distance between views may be relatively small

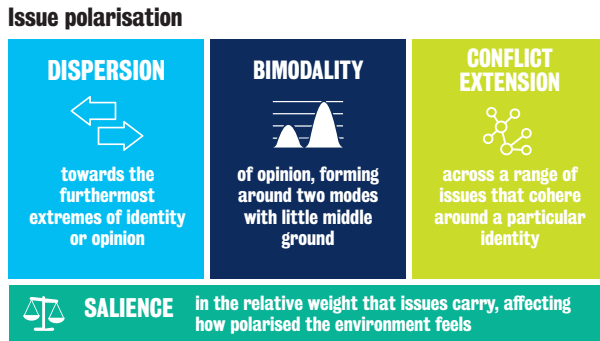
opinion that different topics carry (ie how much people care about them), affecting how polarised the political environment feels. Salience is therefore greater when the mass public cares strongly about an issue and when politicians exploit that strength of feeling.

Highly salient issues can seem more polarising than they really are – in reality, the distance between views may be relatively small.<sup>14</sup> And, some argue, to be considered meaningfully polarising, issues need to be important to a large section of the public.<sup>15</sup>

The model of issue polarisation we examine here can therefore be summarised in Figure 2:

**FIGURE 2:**  
ELEMENTS OF  
IDEOLOGICAL  
POLARISATION

Source: Adapted from DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson (1996), 'Have American's Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?'



## 2.2. Affective polarisation

Issue polarisation has been the prevailing focus of studies on polarisation and dominates established research. Yet, as a concept, it does not adequately reflect the observation that polarised groups can dislike each other intensely without showing substantial disagreement in their positions on salient issues.

This type of ‘affective polarisation’ (also referred to as ‘social polarisation’) has its roots in social identity, measured by the distance and antagonism between in-groups and out-groups,<sup>16</sup> ie a social group with which a person does or does not psychologically identify as a member.




Measurement of affective polarisation through surveys has largely focused on:

- ♦ **Feeling-thermometer** scores given to the political class and/or voters of your own and opposing parties, based on the distance between the score given to the party of the respondent and the score given to the opposing party.<sup>17</sup>
- ♦ **Trait ratings**, such as whether members of the in-group or out-group are considered to be intelligent, open-minded, patriotic, honest or generous, or hypocritical, selfish or mean.
- ♦ **Trust measures**, such as whether members of the opposing party can be trusted to do what's right.
- ♦ **Social-distance measures**, which gauge comfort in interacting or being friends with individuals from out-groups (for example, aversion to your child marrying someone from the opposing party, or willingness to form friendships).<sup>18</sup>

Strong correlations have been found between the first three types of measures. However, social-distance measures stand out as a distinct concept, speaking more to behaviour than to attitudes.<sup>19</sup>

The concept of affective polarisation intersects with issue polarisation,<sup>20</sup> but is also distinct in important ways. Polarisation of opinion is not a necessary condition for affective polarisation – in some cases, affective polarisation has been found to increase when issue-based divisions decrease.<sup>21</sup> For example, a 2016 study exploring the impact of media coverage of partisan polarisation on political attitudes found that people moderated their issue positions when they were exposed to news stories about polarised politics (in this case, focusing on capital gains); yet the same news coverage also affectively polarised the public, causing increased dislike of members of the opposition and negative ratings of them on a range of measures.<sup>22</sup>





Affective polarisation can therefore occur independently of issue positions. As Yphtach Lelkes writes, ‘partisans may dislike one another even if they do not disagree with one another’. Affective polarisation is, in fact, just as often a driver of a person’s policy attitudes as vice versa.<sup>23</sup>



Partisans may dislike one another even if they do not disagree with one another

While issue polarisation is typically predicated on the assumption that people make informed, rational choices, theories of affective polarisation rest on the premise that much political behaviour is not rational or fair-minded.<sup>24</sup> For example, the psychological and behavioural elements of affective polarisation have been associated with theories of group polarisation, which find that social separation into more homogeneous groups can have a compounding effect in polarising attitudes. In ‘The Law of Group Polarization’, Cass Sunstein argues that groups predictably shift towards more extreme positions when they have a ‘salient shared identity’ and when they meet regularly without ‘sustained exposure to competing views’. This often leads to groups collectively making more extreme decisions than the average group member would.<sup>25</sup>

In *Uncivil Agreement*, Lilliana Mason points to three elements that contribute to affective polarisation, generated by the psychological and behavioural outcomes of political social identities. The first, partisan prejudice, refers to the emergence of bias, or in some cases preferential treatment, when two groups are played off against one another. The second element, political action, manifests in the increased likelihood of a strongly identified partisan taking action to defend their group when its status is threatened. And the final element, emotional reactivity, refers to feeling emotions on the behalf of the group, such as anger or enthusiasm.<sup>26</sup>

An alternative conceptualisation, developed by Sara Hobolt and colleagues in the UK in response to Brexit identities, provides a valuable framework to understand the characteristics and implications of affective polarisation in the UK context.<sup>27</sup> Reflecting its roots in social psychology and identity theory, Hobolt et al. identify three components of affective polarisation:

- In-group **identification** based on a shared opinion.
- **Differentiation** of the in-group from the out-group, which can lead to in-group favourability and out-group denigration.
- Evaluative **bias in perceptions** of the world and in decision-making.

**FIGURE 3:**  
ELEMENTS OF  
AFFECTIVE  
POLARISATION

Source: Adapted from Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley (2018), 'Divided By The Vote'.

### Affective polarisation



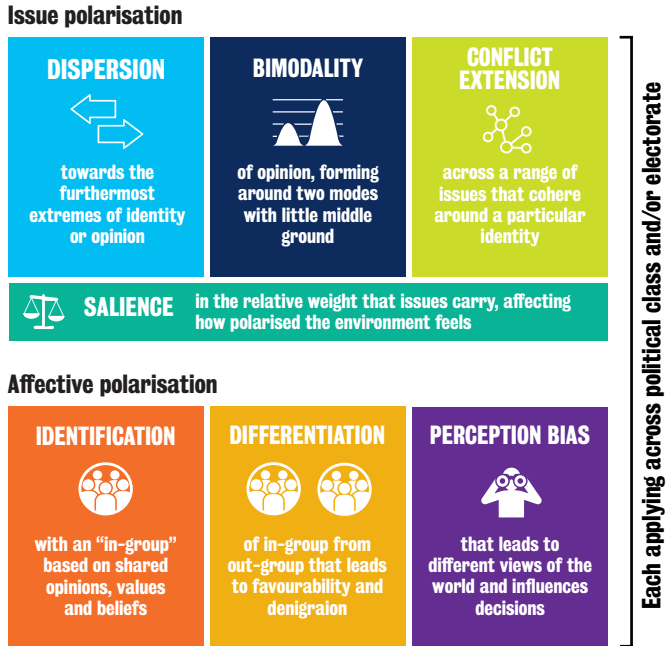
## 2.3. Political-class versus electorate polarisation

In addition to distinguishing between issue and affective polarisation, it is important to recognise that both can act at different levels of society, with a particularly important distinction made between polarisation at a political-class or general-electorate level. The main focus for analysis of the former tends to be political leaders. Given that the majority of this literature comes from the US, political-class polarisation is often measured through the attitudes and behaviours of members of the Senate or House of Representatives. However, researchers such as Morris Fiorina also extend this analysis to donors and activists.<sup>28</sup>

These distinctions are important because, as we'll see in the evidence from the US, polarisation can exist independently at each of these levels – and, more than that, one can influence the other, even though the direction and nature of these influences are often disputed.

Combining each of these types, elements and levels of polarisation, we can build a more complete summary model of the nature and connection between the different definitions, as below.

**FIGURE 4:**  
CONSOLIDATED  
MODEL OF  
ISSUE AND  
AFFECTIVE  
POLARISATION



## 2.4. Additional frameworks: dealignment and fragmentation

The preceding summary of polarisation models is important to bear in mind when we review the evidence on trends in the next section. These different elements are particularly prominent in discussions of the US evidence, and seem well suited there, even though the evidence of actual change along these dimensions is contested.

However, these concepts of issue and affective polarisation seem insufficient to understand the UK situation, in two important ways.



First, unlike in the US, as we will explore in Section 3, the UK provides evidence of long-term ‘**partisan dealignment**’ – where a large portion of the electorate abandons its previous political party affiliation, without developing a new one to replace it. This can result in greater volatility in electoral support and ‘**party-system fragmentation**’ as more parties become electorally effective, and overall majorities are harder to achieve.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, this dealignment is not inconsistent with polarisation models and theory. The focus when discussing polarisation naturally tends to be drawn to the formation of new axes and groups. But it is possible for this to occur alongside the decay of a previously dominant polarisation, which, in the UK’s case, is a left-right split across traditional party lines. We need to understand both of these directions of change to fully understand current and possible future positions in the UK.

Second, we can also see fragmentation or fracturing *within* party support in the UK, as public attitudes split along new dimensions. Traditional left-right splits in attitudes towards economic issues have been modified by a well-documented socially liberal-conservative split in attitudes towards issues such as gay marriage or abortion. Other authors have found that additional dimensions, such as nationalists versus cosmopolitans, can help further explain public attitudes. This fracturing of attitudes towards a range of policy issues has complicated the nature of the electoral coalitions which underpin existing parties and has made it increasingly difficult for a two-party system to fully represent the diversity of views in the UK.<sup>30</sup>

This is not as simple as a coherent Brexit identity acting as an additional axis to a left-right dimension and replacing an existing liberal-conservative values axis. For example, as we’ll see, there are opposing views on some issues within each side of the Leave-Remain divide that cannot be straightforwardly related to left-right splits. Instead, it seems we have a fracturing of the electorate across a number of dimensions.



## 2.5. Reflections

There is a well-developed academic literature that defines the concepts underlying polarisation and clearly outlines the variety and complexity of an apparently simple term. However, this has not prevented an often muddled discussion of the evidence in the US, where much of this thinking and analysis has originated. We attempt to unpick the US evidence first in the next section, given how much of our debate in the UK is informed by US models and readings of US trends.

In some ways, we face an even tougher challenge in the UK, where the concepts are less well known, far less data are available, and political and media discussion has played particularly fast and loose with polarisation and division as terms. We have been pushed to engage with the concept in a very short period of time, triggered by the EU referendum.

And this points to the bigger challenge: while an understanding of polarisation is important and useful in explaining trends in the UK, on its own it is insufficient to fully understand the changes we've seen, and our potential futures.

The evidence we're about to review points to two major trends in the UK: **we've become more affectively polarised around Brexit identities, while fragmenting on issues and party-political support.**



# 3. Polarisation trends

The background of the slide is a solid purple color. Overlaid on this is a complex, abstract graphic composed of numerous thin, light blue lines. These lines are arranged in a series of overlapping, wavy patterns that create a sense of depth and movement. The lines are most densely packed in the center and right side of the image, where they form a grid-like structure that appears to be curving and bending. The overall effect is a modern, digital aesthetic.



# 3. Polarisation trends

US evidence on the nature and extent of polarisation is more contested than it first seems. There is relative consensus that the US has experienced polarisation among political leaders and activists, and affective polarisation among the electorate. But differing conclusions are drawn on whether the electorate are polarising on issues, depending on the definitions and evidence bases that are used. In many ways, trends in UK attitudes have evolved very differently to those in the US. Over the last few decades, a weakening of party allegiances and a fracturing of public attitudes across economic and social dimensions has occurred, alongside the emergence of Brexit-based Leave and Remain identities.

Until recently, the public has largely viewed the distance between the positions of the main parties in the UK as converging compared with the divisions of the 1980s. While some issues, most notably immigration, have been both salient and divisive, attitudes towards many other issues, such as the NHS and a range of social issues, have shown remarkable consensus. This has not been the case in the US. While the Brexit referendum result may have crystallised some differences in attitudes which had been years in the making, the speed with which new Brexit-based Leave and Remain identities have generated affective polarisation appears far more rapid than observed in the US. This new identity dimension in the UK often rivals and surpasses partisan identities, leading to a new axis of affective polarisation.

Many of the other labels that have come into common use to describe the fault lines in the UK's population focus on binary opposition across an implied single spectrum: 'winners and losers of globalisation', the 'anywheres' and 'somewheres', the 'open' and 'closed'. This gives the impression that Britain has grown more bi-modally polarised, encouraging discussion and commentary that splits the country into two opposing, homogeneous blocs.



However, as we describe below, perceiving division along a single dimension masks the full nature of the changes that seem to be occurring in the UK, and our future challenges. Instead, we need to understand these in light of weakening but still significant partisan identities and the fragmentation of political support, within and outside the two main parties.

First, it is useful and important to put the UK in context through a fuller understanding of the actual evidence behind the long-standing debate on culture wars in the US. This helps both because it is the most developed evidence base on polarisation and so provides useful signals for us (including on how we diverge from the US), and because it informs so much of the public debate in the UK.




Perceiving division along a single dimension masks the full nature of the changes that seem to be occurring in the UK

### 3.1. Polarisation in the US

In 1991, sociologist James Davison Hunter popularised the idea that American politics had experienced prolonged and intense polarisation in his book *Culture Wars: the Struggle to Define America*. The culture wars thesis observed the growing separation between orthodox, conservative values and progressive, liberal values. The gulf between these two ideological worldviews, Davison Hunter argued, had created bitter conflict, leading to two irreconcilable tribes, deeply divided on salient and morally charged issues such as abortion, gun control, homosexuality, censorship, privacy and recreational drug use.<sup>31</sup>

As described by historian Andrew Hartman, while ‘often misremembered as merely one angry shouting match after another’, the emergence of the culture wars reflects a time of genuine transformation in American political culture, ignited by the turbulent social and political movements of the 1960s. Faced with the emergence of a ‘new America’ that was ‘more open to new peoples, new norms, and new, if conflicting, articulations of America itself’, the ideological dividing line between conservatives and liberals reflected the struggle about how to formulate this changed country. Where you sat in the culture wars divide, Hartman argues, depended on whether you thought the nation was in ‘moral decline’, separating those who believed in traditional, post-




war values, and a new, more pluralistic, secular and feminist America.<sup>32</sup>

### **Conflicting claims and evidence**

Closer examination of the culture wars thesis, however, reveals conflicting claims about the scale and severity of these divides. There is general consensus and compelling evidence that the political class has polarised over time. However, the extent to which the American electorate has polarised on issues is a matter of contention. In *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America*, political scientist James Campbell separates these conflicting narratives into three theories of ideological and issue polarisation:

- ♦ **Emerging polarisation theory** claims that political parties and activists are polarised, and that the electorate has now followed their lead, moving from being relatively unpolarised in the 1980s to highly polarised by the early 2000s. The theory has found confirmation in the work of researchers such as Alan Abramowitz, whose 2010 book *The Disappearing Center* presented evidence that the American public has grown increasingly polarised, particularly among the most politically engaged.<sup>33</sup> Campbell argues that this theory has grown in popularity, not least due to its alignment with the prevailing impression of heated division between citizens, but that evidence of a substantial increase in polarisation in recent decades is ambiguous, and lacks a clear starting point and rationale for what triggered the shift.
- ♦ **No polarisation theory** holds that the public was, and remains, primarily centrist and moderate in its values and attitudes. Some hold that it is solely political parties, activists and media who are polarised. DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson made one of the earliest claims to this theory, finding no general increase in dispersion based on a review of a range of issue items in national surveys.<sup>34</sup> Morris Fiorina has since become one of the leading proponents of this school of thought, arguing that the sorting of pre-existing ideologies into opposing parties, and the forced identification with one of these two parties, has created



the illusion of polarisation, when a large majority of citizens in fact consistently remain in the political centre.<sup>35</sup>

- ♦ **Revealed polarisation theory** – the theory favoured by Campbell – contends that the American public has been highly polarised since the turmoil of the 1960s, when conflict over civil rights and the Vietnam War left the population more ideologically oriented. The extent of this long-standing polarisation in the mass public was, however, only revealed when sorting of political parties caught up with the ideological split in the electorate towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Other historical accounts of polarisation, such as Hartman's *A War for the Soul of America*, also provide evidence for this theory. This distinction has parallels with a significant body of discussion in the UK, where the Brexit vote is seen as not causing, but revealing, long-standing and growing divisions, which have since been consolidated.

With nearly three decades of scholarship arguing across these theoretical divisions, the extent to which the American population at large has polarised in its issue and ideological orientation remains inconclusive. Where there is academic consensus, however, is on the growing partisan divide between the most politically engaged.

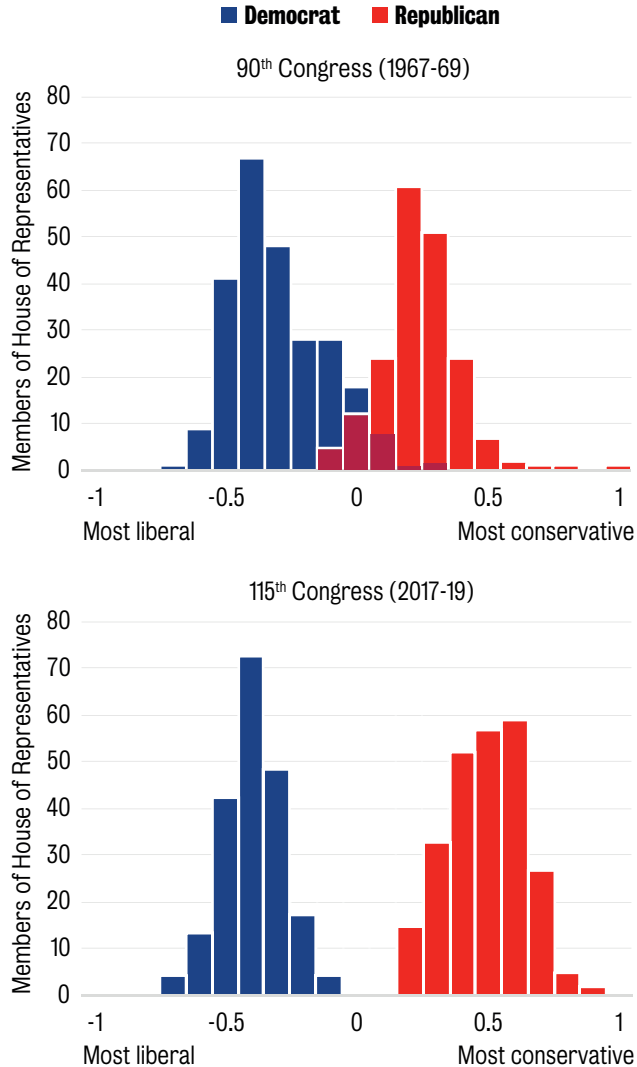


## Strong evidence of polarisation among political leaders

Views in Congress have become increasingly bi-modal. As shown in Figure 5, over the course of half a century, the ideological position of members of Congress shifted from an overlapping distribution to complete separation between the left and the right, with the most liberal Republican now falling to the right of the most conservative Democrat.<sup>36</sup>

**FIGURE 5:**  
CHANGE IN  
IDEOLOGICAL  
POSITION OF US  
HOUSE OF REP-  
RESENTATIVES  
ON A LIBERAL-  
CONSERVATIVE  
SCALE

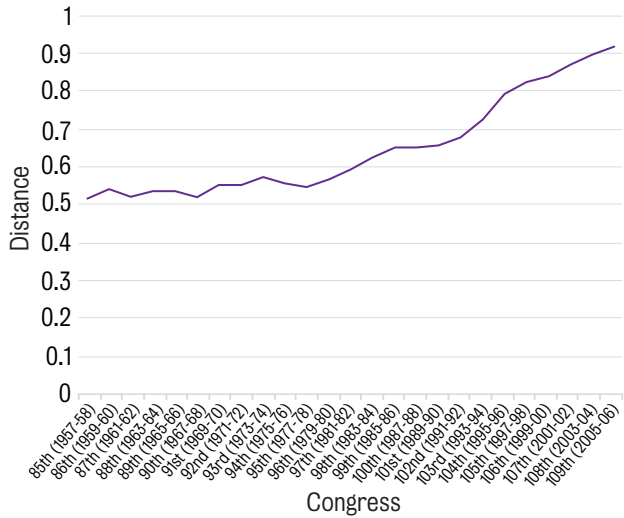
Source: Lewis, Poole, Rosenthal, Boche, Rudkin and Sonnet (2019), *Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database*. Trends derived from DW-NOMINATE first dimension estimates of member ideology. Updated and adapted from charts on ideological position of House of Representatives during 87<sup>th</sup> and 111<sup>th</sup> Congress in Fiorina (2017), *Unstable Majorities*, p. 19.



Further, as shown in Figure 6, the distance between the mean Republican and mean Democrat member of the House of Representatives grew dramatically in the 1990s and 2000s, as measured by DW-NOMINATE scores, which draw on preferential and choice data such as legislative roll-call voting behaviour. Indeed, between 1994 and 1998, the distance between parties grew to be at least as great as at any point since the late 1800s.<sup>37</sup>

**FIGURE 6:**  
CHANGE IN  
IDEOLOGICAL  
DISTANCE  
BETWEEN  
REPUBLICAN  
AND DEMO-  
CRATIC HOUSE  
MEMBERS

Source: DW-NOMI-  
NATE scores, 1957-  
2006, reproduced  
from Hetherington,  
'Putting Polarization  
in Perspective'  
(2009), p. 418.



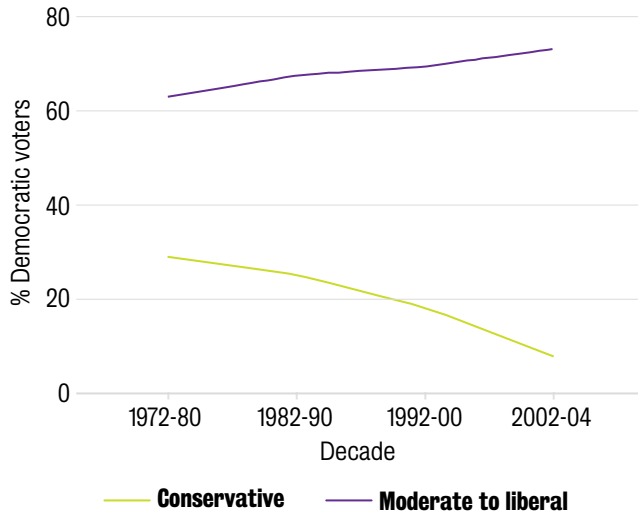
### Contested evidence on the extent and nature of polarisation in the population

When it comes to polarisation among the electorate in the US, the picture is much less clear and more contested. This is partly due to party sorting, where the public switch to supporting parties that better reflect their views, or parties adapt their policies to better reflect the positions of their supporters.

For example, there seems little doubt that there are greater differences between Democratic and Republican voters on key issues than in the past. For example, as shown in Figure 7 (over page), by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, ideologically conservative members of the electorate were predominantly aligned to the Republican party, with far fewer identifying as Democrats than in the 1970s.<sup>38</sup>

### FIGURE 7: TREND IN DEMOCRATIC IDENTIFICATION OF VOTERS IN AMERICA BY IDEOLOGY

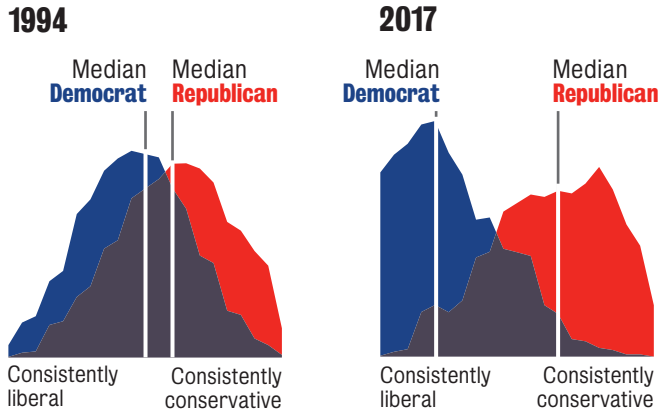
Source: Reproduced from Abramowitz (2010), *The Disappearing Center*, p. 92.



Similarly, on Pew Research Center’s basket of 10 political attitude measures – which includes preferences for the size of government, as well as attitudes towards immigration and protection of the environment – there is clearly increasing distance between median Republicans and Democrats in the last decade in particular. On this scale, the median Republican is now more conservative than 97 per cent of Democrats, and the median Democrat more liberal than 95 per cent of Republicans. By comparison, in 1994 there was substantially more overlap between the two partisan groups than there is today: just 64 per cent of Republicans were to the right of the median Democrat, while 70 per cent of Democrats were to the left of the median Republican.<sup>39</sup>

**FIGURE 8:**  
DISTRIBUTION  
OF PARTISANS  
ON A 10-ITEM  
SCALE OF  
POLITICAL  
VALUES

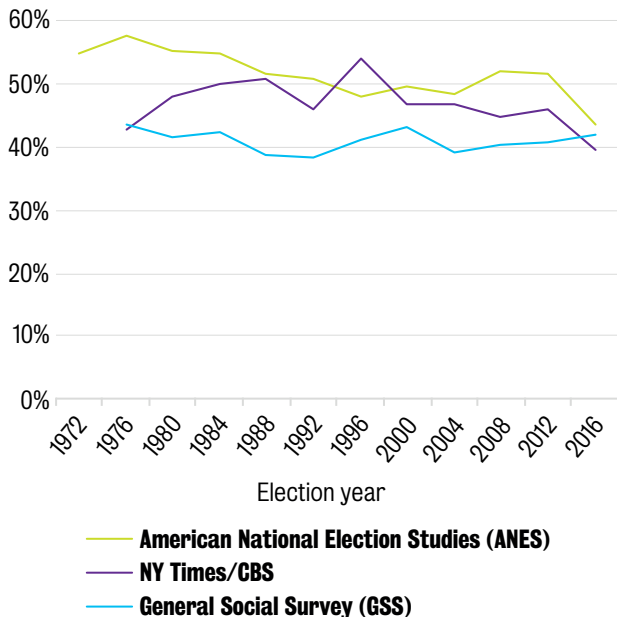
Source: Reproduced from Pew Research Center (2017), 'The Partisan Divide of Political Values Grows Even Wider', p. 12 – based on survey data conducted between 8-18 June 2017.



The nature and causes of this change are contested. For example, Fiorina shows that there has been relative stability in self-classification as moderate or non-partisan on a liberal-conservative scale: a large proportion of Americans are in the middle, and this proportion has shifted relatively little from the 1970s (see Figure 9).<sup>40</sup>

**FIGURE 9:**  
WEAK ISSUE  
POLARISATION  
AMONG  
'NORMAL  
AMERICANS'

Source: Reproduced from Fiorina (2017), *Unstable Majorities*, p. 24. Proportion of 'moderates'/'don't knows' in ideological self-classification on a liberal-conservative scale.





These two descriptions of America seem at odds, but they can be reconciled to some degree if the US public is sorting between parties, which does not necessarily require polarisation in the population as a whole (in the sense of ‘dispersion’ of views towards more extremes). Therefore, part of the apparent disagreement is because researchers are examining different dimensions of issue polarisation, where a lack of dispersion towards the extremes does not rule out a bi-modal shift in attitudes around party support, conflict extension into other issues, or consolidation into more distinct identities.

There is, however, more agreement in the US that, irrespective of what is happening across the population as a whole, an individual’s engagement with politics plays a vital role in their susceptibility to adopting more polarised attitudes on issues. For example, Abramowitz and Campbell, who both consider the American population to have polarised, highlight the greater hollowing out of middle ground among the most politically engaged members of the electorate (for Abramowitz, see Figure 10).<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, Fiorina, Hetherington, Layman et al. – all of whom advocate the ‘no polarisation’ theory – find that while the population overall is relatively unpolarised, politically engaged individuals such as donors and party and issue activists tend to hold more strongly bi-modal ideological and issue positions.<sup>42</sup>

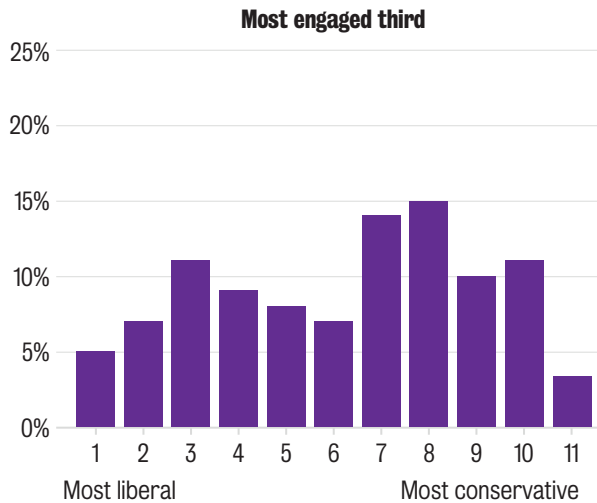
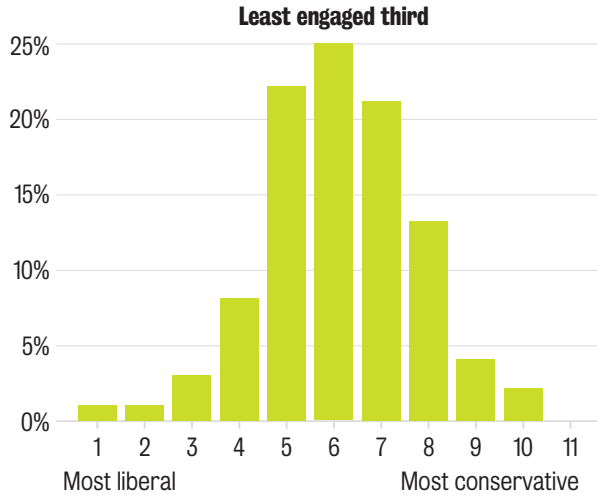
This is an important insight for the UK, where more extreme issue positions among activists on both sides of the Brexit debate and in party-political groups is not incompatible with a more stable and moderate position across the population as a whole.

A similar point is made in a more recent analysis in the US that has tried to move the discussion away from a dichotomous partisan framing of issue division. The *Hidden Tribes* report by More in Common instead argues that there are seven tribes underlying the party splits, each defined by its own distinctive combination of characteristics, based



**FIGURE 10:**  
 IDEOLOGICAL  
 DISTRIBUTION  
 ON A LIBERAL-  
 CONSERVATIVE  
 SCALE, SPLIT  
 BY LEVEL OF  
 POLITICAL  
 ENGAGEMENT

Source: Reproduced  
 from Abramowitz  
 (2010), *The  
 Disappearing Center*,  
 p. 42.



on responses to a subset of 58 core belief and behavioural questions:

- ♦ **Progressive activists:** younger, highly engaged, secular, cosmopolitan, angry.
- ♦ **Traditional liberals:** older, retired, open to compromise, rational, cautious.



- ♦ **Passive liberals:** unhappy, insecure, distrustful, disillusioned.
- ♦ **Politically disengaged:** young, low-income, distrustful, detached, patriotic, conspiratorial.
- ♦ **Moderates:** engaged, civic-minded, middle-of-the-road, pessimistic, Protestant.
- ♦ **Traditional conservatives:** religious, middle class, patriotic, moralistic.
- ♦ **Devoted conservatives:** white, retired, highly engaged, uncompromising, patriotic.

Those who hold the strongest, most polarised partisan identities – the so-called ‘wing’ groups of ‘progressive activists’ and ‘devoted conservatives’ – respectively make up just eight per cent and six per cent of the population. The remaining population, which the researchers call the ‘exhausted majority’, are less connected to partisan identities and more supportive of compromise, including 26 per cent who are disengaged from politics altogether.<sup>43</sup>

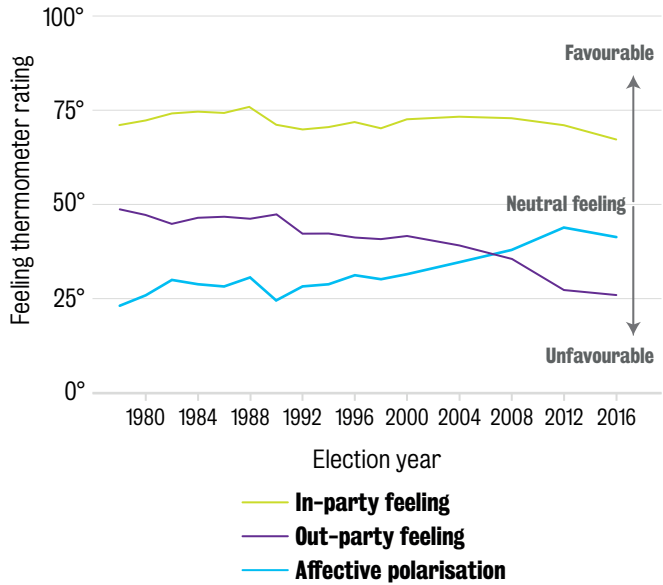
### **Consensus on greater affective polarisation**

In contrast with this contested picture of issue polarisation, there is greater consensus and consistent evidence that the US has become more affectively polarised along partisan lines.

The American National Election Study ‘Feeling Thermometer’ asks respondents to rate Republicans and Democrats on a 101-point scale from warm to cold. Analysis of these measures conducted by Iyengar et al. shows that affective polarisation has increased since the 1980s, driven by a decline in warm feelings about the other side, rather than an increase in positive feelings for one’s own.<sup>44</sup>

**FIGURE 11:  
INCREASE IN  
AFFECTIVE  
POLARISATION  
AMONG US  
PARTISANS**

Source: Reproduced from Iyengar et al. (2019), *The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarisation in the United States*, p. 132. Level of affective polarisation is calculated by the difference between mean in-party feeling and mean out-party feeling.



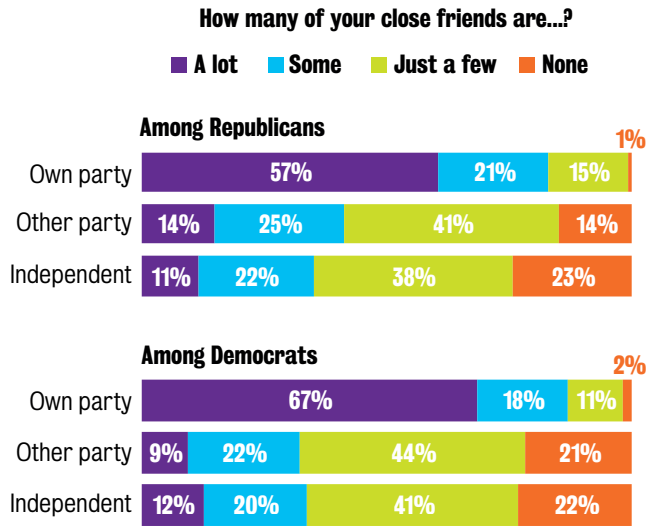
The same has also been observed in preferences to form friendships, spend time socially, or live next door to people from the same group, which relate to the ‘differentiation’ dimension of affective polarisation.

Measures reported by Pew in 2016 found that 61% of both highly-engaged Republicans and Democrats said they would find it easier to get along with an individual moving into their community if they were a member of their own party.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, as shown in survey data from 2017 reproduced in Figure 12, of those who identify with a party:

- ♦ 67 per cent of Democrats and 57 per cent of Republicans said they had a lot of close friends from their own party, compared with 9 per cent and 14 per cent of the opposing party, respectively.
- ♦ 44 per cent of Democrats and 41 per cent of Republicans had just a few close friends in the opposing party.
- ♦ One in five Democrats and one in seven Republicans had no close friends in the opposing party.<sup>46</sup>

**FIGURE 12:**  
PREVALENCE  
OF CLOSE  
FRIENDSHIPS  
BETWEEN  
OPPOSING  
PARTISANS

Source: Reproduced from Doherty, Kiley and Johnson (2017), *The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider*, p. 66, based on survey data conducted by Pew Research Center between 15-21 August 2017.

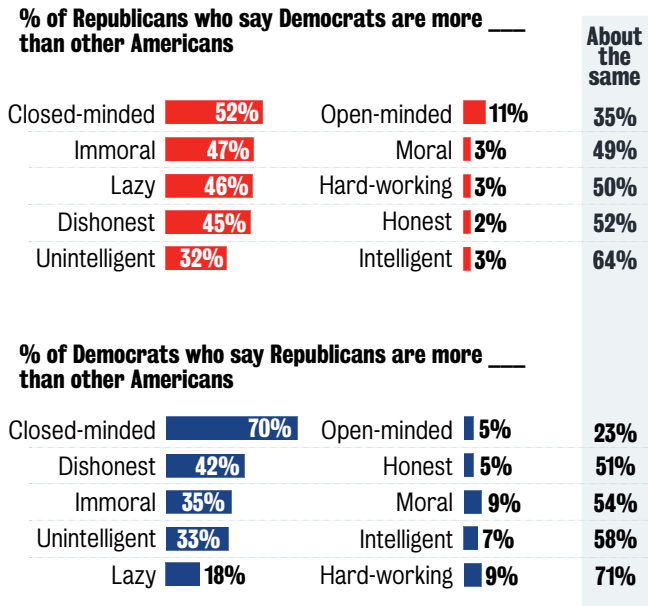


Since 2016, Americans have also become less comfortable talking politics with the other side. In 2018, 53 per cent of the American population said they found talking about politics with people with whom they disagree to be generally ‘stressful and frustrating’ – up seven percentage points since 2016 and most marked among Democrats, at 57 per cent. Only 45 per cent found such conversations ‘interesting and informative’, down from 51 per cent in 2016.<sup>47</sup>

This has also come in parallel with greater animus on trait measures. As shown in Figure 13, 70 per cent of Democrats and 52 per cent of Republicans say that opposing partisans are more closed-minded than other Americans. And conversely, just two per cent of Republicans and five per cent of Democrats say that opposing partisans are honest, and three per cent and seven per cent respectively view opposing partisans as intelligent.<sup>48</sup>

**FIGURE 13: TRAIT MEASURES OF AFFECTIVE POLARISATION**

Source: Reproduced from Pew Research Center (2016), 'Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016', p. 31 – based on survey data collected between 2 March and 2 May 2016.



Behavioural experiments have also shown that affective polarisation can generate inter-group hostilities that extend beyond the political realm, sometimes referred to as ‘affective spillover’. A range of behavioural studies conducted in the US have consistently demonstrated that partisan identities can result in rewarding co-partisans or penalising members of opposing groups in a range of non-political contexts, such as the assessment of job applications, dating behaviour, or online labour markets.<sup>49</sup>

### 3.2. The UK: affective polarisation and political fragmentation

This rich and well-established literature on polarisation in the US contrasts with a much thinner and more recent evidence base in the UK. This is not surprising, as the main fulcrum for polarisation discussions in the UK is new, driven by our relationship with Europe, in light of the 2016 EU referendum campaign and result.



Prior to the run-up to the referendum, 'Europe/the EU' barely registered with the public in salience

Prior to the run-up to the referendum, 'Europe/the EU' barely registered with the public in salience, ranking low in measures of the most important issues facing the country.<sup>50</sup> Unlike the US, where division is examined around party allegiance in a stable, long-term two-party system, we have few meaningful trends to analyse beyond the evolution of some issue positions that motivated the vote – most notably immigration. The salience of immigration grew significantly, starting in the early 2000s, during a period of rapidly rising net immigration into the UK, reaching peaks in the few years prior to the referendum, where it was regularly at the top of national concerns.<sup>51</sup> While immigration attitudes and broader cultural and economic divisions were clearly a focus for study prior to the referendum, these lacked a solid social and political expression or unifying identity prior to Brexit, which is why we do not have the same consistent base for analysis as in the US.

However, there are a number of trends and analyses that do help explain recent changes in the UK, as well as our current position and possible futures.

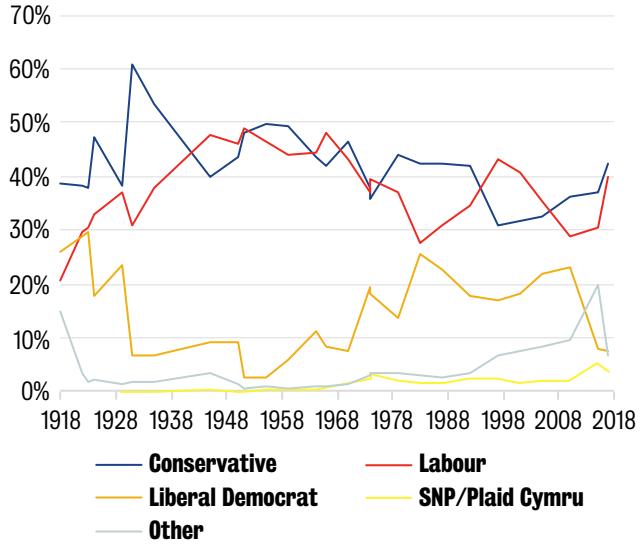
### **Growing dealignment, weakening of party-political identity and increased electoral fragmentation**

At the time, the 2017 general election result could have been used to support a case that mirrored key facts of the US experience: the dominance of the established two-party system, a division that split the voting public roughly down the middle and deep divisions in party support between demographic and geographic groups. As the trends in Figure 14 show, the combined Conservative and Labour share of the vote had increased to one of its highest levels in decades, after a period of more fragmented voting patterns.<sup>52</sup>

Not only was this a high share for the two main parties, it was clearly significantly divided across demographic and geographical lines, particularly by age. The 2017 election showed the biggest age gaps recorded in available polling (since the 1970s) between young and old in their support for the Conservatives and Labour (see Figure 15).

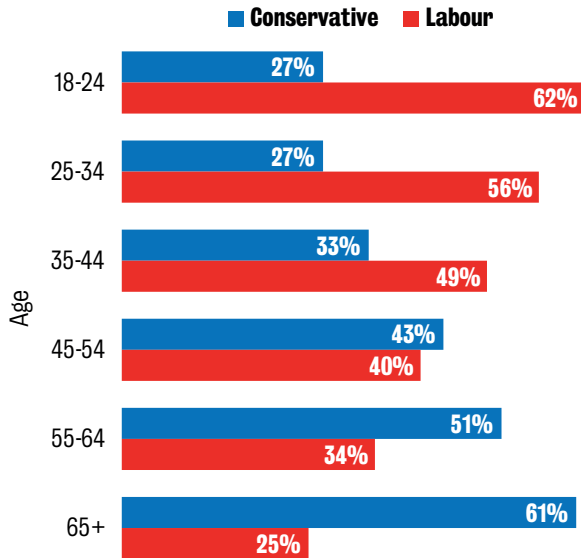
**FIGURE 14:**  
SHARE OF  
VOTE BY PARTY,  
UK GENERAL  
ELECTIONS  
FROM 1918-2017

Source: House of Commons Library, UK Election Statistics: 1918-2018: 100 years of Elections. Liberal vote share includes votes for Liberal/SDP alliance between 1983-87 and Liberal Democrats from 1992.



**FIGURE 15:**  
SUPPORT  
FOR THE  
CONSERVATIVE  
AND LABOUR  
PARTIES IN  
THE UK 2017  
GENERAL  
ELECTION, SPLIT  
BY AGE

Source: Reproduced from Ipsos MORI (2017), 'How the voters voted in the 2017 election'.



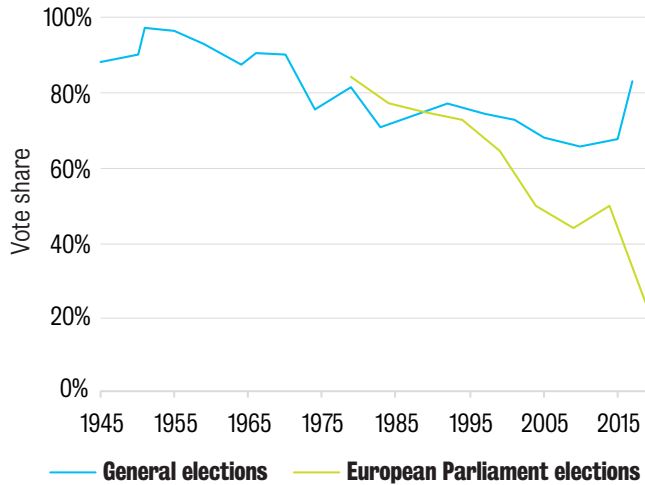


However, this now looks more like a blip than a trend, in light of the recent 2019 European elections, the emergence of new parties and increased support for other existing parties in polling since. This reflects a more fundamental underlying trend that provides vital context for emerging identities. In contrast with the US, the dominant pattern in party-political identification in the UK in recent decades has been a decline in attachment to the two main parties, as well as a decline in strength of party affiliation more generally.

Figure 16 traces the steady decline of combined vote share for the two main parties since the end of the Second World War (excepting 2017), particularly in European elections.<sup>53</sup> This longer-term view provides more support for the model of fragmentation defined in Section 2.3, which measures this as a growth in vote share for ‘other’ parties and shift towards a multi-party system.

**FIGURE 16:**  
COMBINED VOTE  
SHARE FOR  
CONSERVATIVES  
AND LABOUR

Source: House of  
Commons Library,  
UK Election Statistics:  
1918-2018.



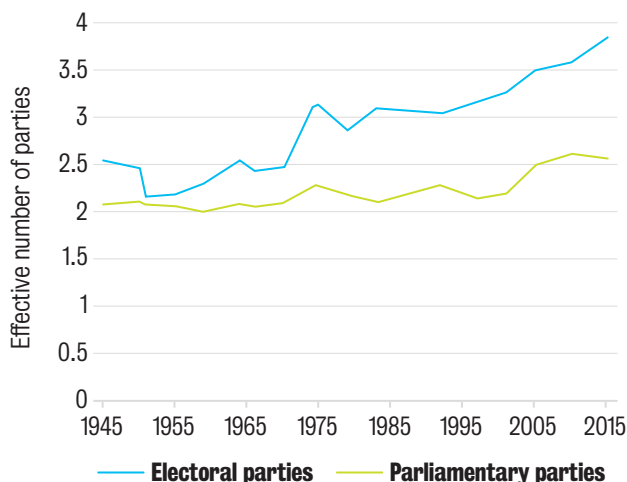
Of course, there is an important distinction in the UK between the effective number of parties in terms of vote share, and how this translates into parliamentary seats, given our first-past-the-post electoral system and the geographical spread of party support. As Jane Green and colleagues show in Figure 17, there has been much less change in Westminster representation compared with when we define effective



parties on vote share.<sup>54</sup> This also helps explain the much steeper decline in the two-party vote share in European elections in the UK, given these have been run under a proportional system since 1999, where votes for parties outside the main two are more effective – that is, are more likely to result in elected representatives for other parties.

**FIGURE 17:**  
EFFECTIVE  
NUMBER OF  
PARTIES, 1945-  
2015

Source: Reproduced from Green and Prosser (2016), 'Party system fragmentation and single-party government', p. 1305.



At the time of writing, it seems like we may be seeing a much more fundamental challenge to the two-party system in Westminster elections than in the past, and a step change in the level of fragmentation in the UK.

While we should treat generalisations from European election results with caution,<sup>55</sup> it is clear that the 2019 results marked a shift since the last election in 2014, with the Conservatives (-15 percentage points) and Labour (-11 percentage points) down substantially, while the newly formed Brexit Party (+8 percentage points on the UKIP results from 2014) and the Liberal Democrats (+13 percentage points) made significant gains.

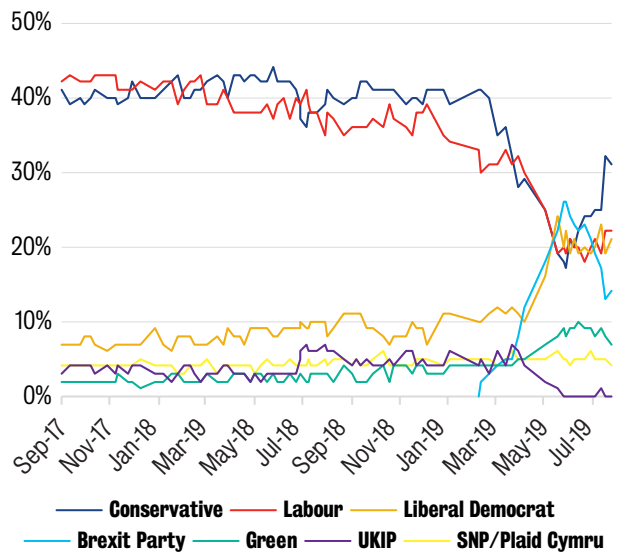
More recent polling on Westminster voting intention from YouGov, as shown in Figure 18, suggests a much closer four-way split between Labour, the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and the Brexit Party.<sup>56</sup> Of course, with such



volatile voting intention patterns, this could change again quickly. There also tends to be a decline in Conservative and Labour vote shares around European elections, followed by a drift back to the two main parties in the run-up to general elections.<sup>57</sup> However, 2019 does mark a much more significant shift: the combined Conservative and Labour vote has regularly been under 45 per cent in recent Westminster polling, which is by some distance the lowest in over 40 years of available polling, significantly below the previous low of 54 per cent recorded by Ipsos MORI in 1981.<sup>58</sup>

**FIGURE 18:**  
VOTING  
INTENTION  
TRACKER  
(YOUNGOV)

Source: [yougov.co.uk/topics/voting-intention/all](http://yougov.co.uk/topics/voting-intention/all), weighted by likelihood to vote, excluding those who would not vote, don't know or refused.  
Q: 'if there were a general election held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?'



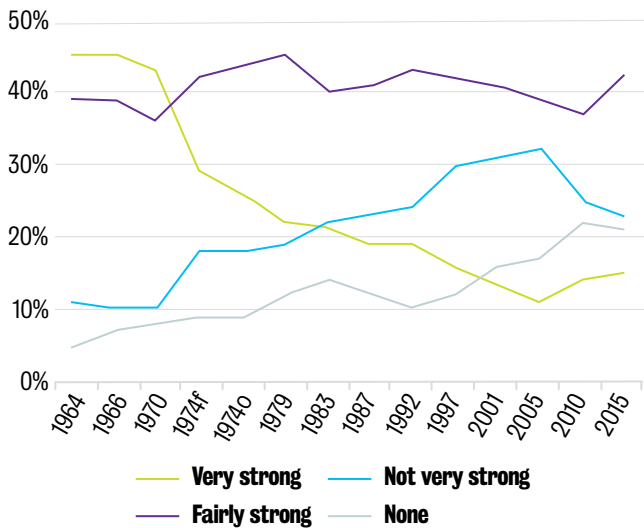
Just as Brexit did not wholly create a new axis of identity, this sudden shift in party support is not solely a reaction to the EU referendum – it has some roots in a much longer-term trend. In particular, strength of party connection has seen a significant decline in Britain over the last 50 years. As shown in Figure 19, in the mid-1960s, almost half of the population had a very strong attachment to a party. By 2015, this had dropped to just 15 per cent.<sup>59</sup> Alongside this, we have seen a fourfold increase in those who do not identify with a party at all. Those with weak or non-existent

attachments to a political party now account for just under half of the population.<sup>60</sup>

Milazzo et al. argue that this weakening of party attachment to left-right policy preferences supports the hypothesis that British citizens are more inclined to update their partisanship to match their policy beliefs, rather than taking their cue on issue positions from parties.<sup>61</sup> This has important implications for future voting patterns, if more voters feel they do not have a natural home in existing parties.

**FIGURE 19:**  
STRENGTH OF  
PARTY IDENTIFICATION,  
1964-2015

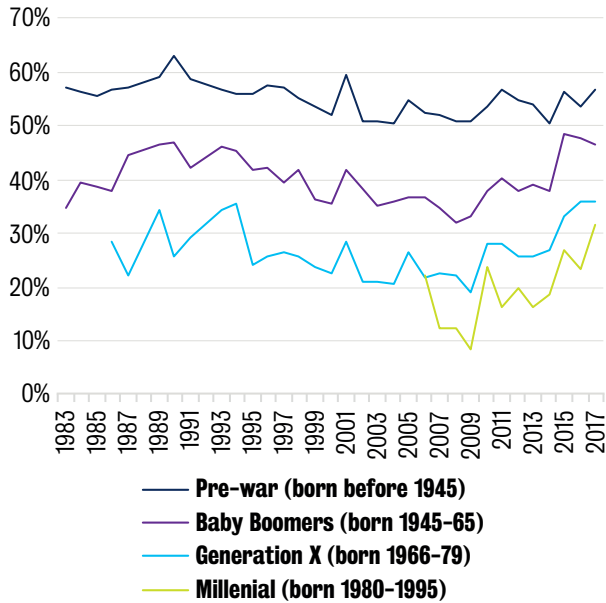
Source: Reproduced from Sanders (2017), 'The UK's changing party system', p. 107, based on percentage of people reporting very strong party identity, fairly strong, not very strong and no party identity in the British Election Study.



Moreover, as Figure 20 (over page) shows, party identification is extremely generational, with distinct levels between different cohorts that remain largely constant throughout their lifecycle.<sup>62</sup> This suggests that the downward shift in identification is largely driven by generational replacement, as younger cohorts with much lower levels of identification take the place of older cohorts. In turn, this means that future declines seem highly likely, in the absence of a major shift in political context.

**FIGURE 20:**  
GENERATIONAL  
DECLINE IN  
SINGLE PARTY  
SUPPORT

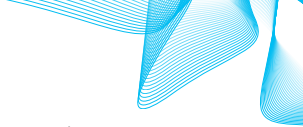
Source: Adapted from Duffy, Shrimpton and Clemence (2017), *Millennial Myths and Realities*, p. 144, based on percentage of British Social Attitudes Survey respondents who support only one political party.



### A different dimension revealed and reinforced by Brexit

It is in this context of weakening partisan ties along a traditional economic left-right axis that Brexit has given a shape and focus to a different dimension of division, along social and cultural lines.

We won't rehearse analysis of the drivers that are now understood to have resulted in Brexit in detail here, because this has been done thoroughly in several other reviews. Various studies show that support for Brexit was driven by an interplay of factors, including concerns about immigration, loss of distinctive identities, and concerns about the EU's impact on our economy and control of our sovereignty.<sup>63</sup> Support was higher among those with no or few qualifications, but this was not solely about a group of 'left-behind' voters: affluent Eurosceptics, older working class and immigration sceptics all had particularly pronounced views.<sup>64</sup>



Across much of this analysis, there has been growing recognition that the distinction between economic and cultural factors is unhelpful, and instead it is the interplay between the two that is important.

There is a long-standing set of models of ‘political dimensions’ that divide voters across two axes in a similar way: their position on traditional left-right economic issues (eg using measures such as ‘ordinary people get their fair share of the nation’s wealth’ and ‘there is one law for the rich and one for the poor’)<sup>65</sup> and their values on a socio-cultural scale. The latter dimension has proven much harder to define and is more varied between researchers and over time.

However, the Brexit vote has given a new focus to this socio-cultural dimension for researchers in the UK. Paula Surridge shows how this additional dimension splits the Labour Party, suggesting that while economic values still hold, the Left has now fragmented in its cultural values on a socially liberal-socially conservative scale (also referred to as the liberal-authoritarian scale).<sup>66</sup> Surridge measures this dimension through the following five items:

- ♦ ‘Young people don’t have enough respect for traditional values.’
- ♦ ‘Censorship is necessary to uphold moral values.’
- ♦ ‘We should be tolerant of those who lead unconventional lifestyles.’
- ♦ ‘For some crimes the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence.’
- ♦ ‘People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences.’<sup>67</sup>

This dimension is highly related to how Labour supporters voted in the EU referendum, with 86 per cent of those on the socially liberal left voting to remain and 70 per cent on the socially conservative left voting to leave. Importantly, however, Surridge’s analysis shows that these divides

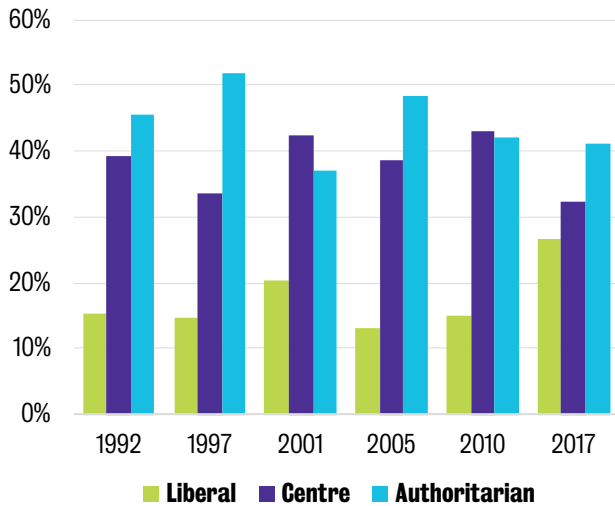


predate the EU referendum, which only revealed and reinforced a longer underlying trend.

The endurance of these divides is also reflected in the fact that divisions within left-leaning voters run way beyond our relationship with Europe: over half of the socially conservative left say that it is very important to be born in Britain to be ‘truly British’, whereas just one in five on the socially liberal left take the same position.<sup>68</sup> And as Figure 21 shows, there has been significant change in the make-up of the left, with a growing number of liberals, resulting in a more evenly divided bloc.

**FIGURE 21: THE CHANGING SHAPE OF THE ‘LEFT’ ELECTORATE**

Source: Reproduced from data supplied by author. Original source: Surridge (2018), ‘The fragmentation of the electoral left since 2010’, p. 71.



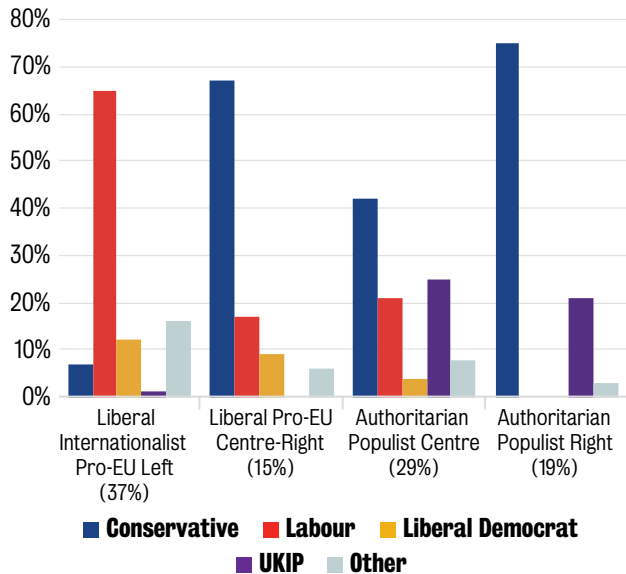
An alternative model that applies to the whole electorate, not just the left, has been developed by political scientist David Sanders. Sanders argues that this second, cross-cutting dimension can be defined by a constellation of attitudes towards Europe, immigration, human rights and Britain’s foreign policy role in the world.<sup>69</sup>

Sanders argues that measuring the nation’s values along this dimension, alongside a traditional left-right economic spectrum, reveals four new ‘political tribes’ in the UK

public: Liberal Internationalist Pro-EU Left, Liberal Pro-EU Centre-Right, Authoritarian Populist Centre and Authoritarian Populist Right. As shown in Figure 22, the Conservative Party have the most diversified support across these four groups. Labour, on the other hand, are largely dependent on support from the Liberal Internationalist Pro-EU Left, which increasingly risks losing support to the other parties, particularly the Liberal Democrats and Greens.<sup>70</sup>

**FIGURE 22: VOTE INTENTION, BY NEW 'POLITICAL TRIBES', CF SANDERS (2017)**

Source: Reproduced from Sanders (2017), 'The UK's changing party system', p. 115 – source data from 2016.



This fragmenting of the underlying values of the electorate across two or more dimensions is clearly conceptually at odds with the idea of polarisation around a single political dimension, as is the focus in the US. Instead, in the UK, the weakness of existing party connection has combined with a Brexit vote that catalysed and partially consolidated a wider set of divisions to create a distinct basis for political separation in a very short period of time. This high level of fluidity and volatility makes understanding the underlying patterns and possible future directions particularly challenging, but a new reality of a multi-dimensional, more fragmented political landscape seems to have emerged.



This appears to have two dimensions that are vital to distinguish: we are seeing a more complex fragmentation on issues and party-political support, at the same time as identity consolidation and affective polarisation around Brexit.

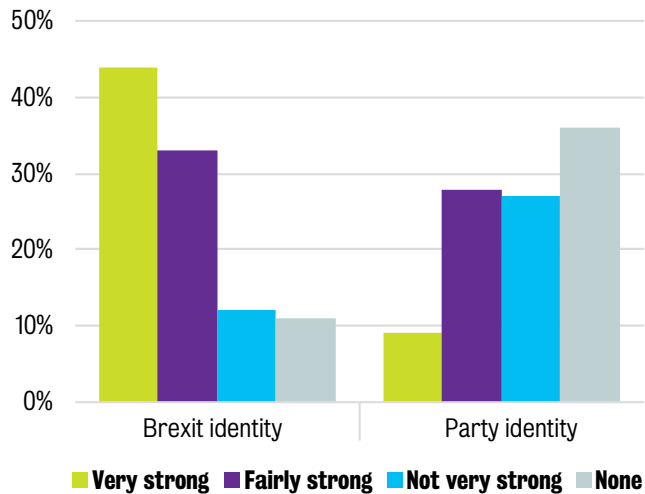
### Affective polarisation around Brexit

As outlined, one of the key concepts in affective polarisation is identification, where attitudes become linked together and form distinct social identities. There is now strong evidence that Brexit-based identity polarisation is a key trend in the UK – and, by a number of measures, is as strong or stronger than political party consolidation.

A 2018 survey by John Curtice showed that while just nine per cent of the population had a very strong partisan identity, 44 per cent identified as having a very strong Brexit identity (see Figure 23). This identification was strong on both sides of the Leave-Remain divide. This ‘emotional attachment to their cause’, Curtice writes, ‘is at least as much a characteristic of those who wish to remain in the EU as it is among those who wish to leave’.<sup>71</sup>

**FIGURE 23:**  
STRENGTH OF  
BREXIT AND  
PARTY IDENTITY

Source: Reproduced from Curtice (2018), ‘The emotional legacy of Brexit’, p. 8; source data from NatCen Mixed Mode Random Probability Panel, June 2018; British Social Attitudes.

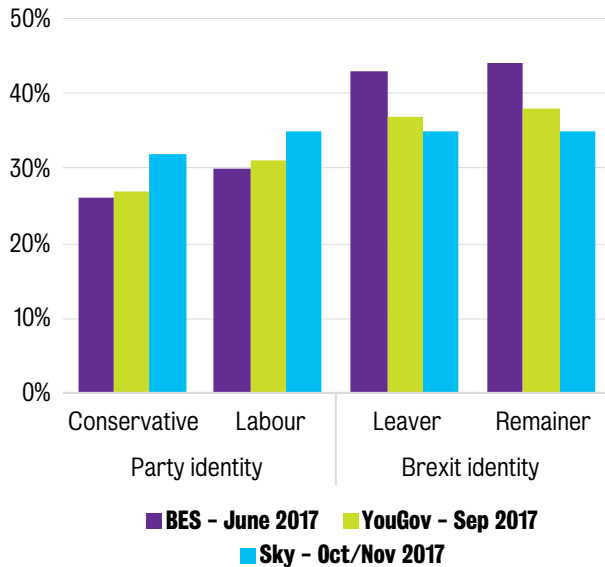




Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley also compare a range of identification measures across a series of studies. These show a more mixed picture, with party identity not quite as weak on most measures as suggested by the Curtice study and when compared with Brexit identities. But in each case, Brexit identity is a strong affective differentiator, as shown in Figure 24.<sup>72</sup> The differences in patterns between studies will in part reflect the different measures used, with the Curtice study in particular attempting to distinguish respondents' own assessment of the *strength* of each identity, not just whether they have an identity with each side.

**FIGURE 24:**  
STRENGTH  
OF PARTY  
AND BREXIT  
IDENTIFIERS

Source: Reproduced from Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley (2018), 'Divided by the Vote', pp. 12-13. Based on emotional attachment scale data on five dimensions. Higher values indicate greater agreement.



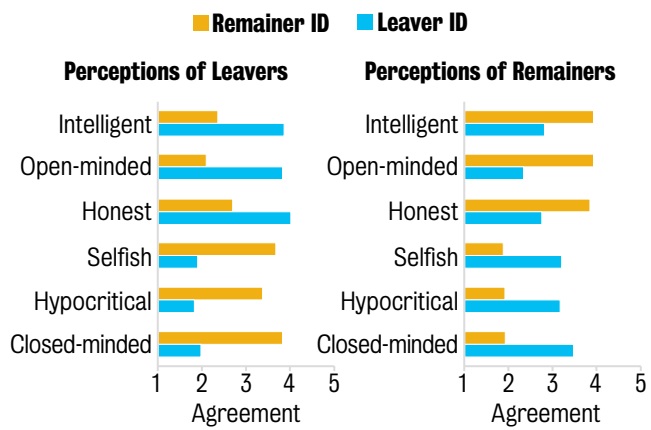
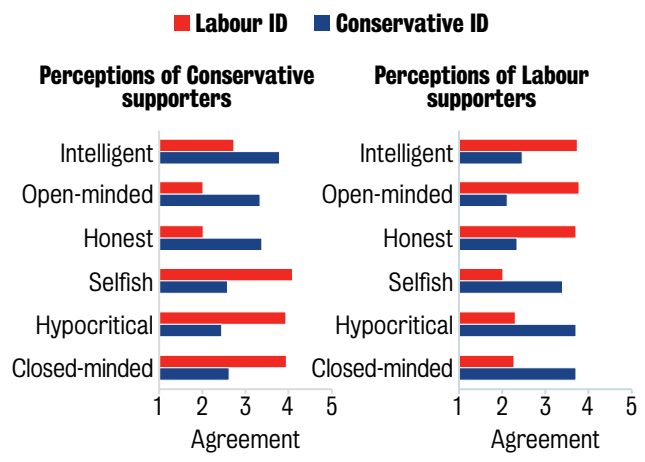
Hobolt and colleagues also draw together trait measures of differentiation, defined as in-group and out-group favourability or denigration. In the period after the EU referendum, signs of this differentiation – where one group stereotypes the other and treats them with bias – surfaced in the UK, built around Leave and Remain identities. For example, following similar trait measures used in US studies on affective polarisation, Leavers and Remainers both describe people from their own group as ‘honest’, ‘intelligent’ and ‘open-minded’. The other side, however, is



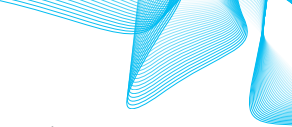
more likely to be deemed ‘hypocritical’, ‘selfish’ and ‘closed-minded’. As Hobolt et al. note, this emerging affective polarisation around Brexit identities compromises ‘people’s willingness to talk across the political divide’.<sup>73</sup>

**FIGURE 25:**  
PERCEIVED  
CHARACTERIS-  
TICS OF OWN  
SIDE AND OTHER  
SIDE

Source: Reproduced from Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley (2018), ‘Divided by the vote’, p. 17 – based on mean scores on a 1-5 Likert scale of agreement from YouGov survey conducted in September 2017.



As Figure 25 shows, there are very similar patterns seen across Brexit lines to the gaps seen for Conservative and Labour voters. Importantly, the analysis by Hobolt et al. shows that views of Leavers and Remainers are not driven by party identity (which could have been the case given the relationship between the two, with Labour supporters



more likely to have voted Remain and Conservative supporters to have voted Leave). Each of their regression models shows very large effects of Brexit identity and very weak effects of party identity on perceptions of Leavers and Remainers. The study therefore identifies a distinct basis of differentiation around Brexit identities.

A further measure of this differentiation dimension of affective polarisation is prejudice against the other side, which is captured through a number of social-distance measures in US studies of polarisation, some of which have been mirrored in the UK. For example, Hobolt et al. ask whether people would be happy to talk to people on the other side of partisan and Brexit debates, or for their children to marry someone from the other side.<sup>74</sup>

This analysis, outlined in Figure 26 (over page), shows that partisan prejudice is still more dominant in some respects, particularly in marriage, although Remainers are much closer to matching this level of partisan divide than Leavers. It also finds that, at best, only around half the population of both partisan and Brexit groups are happy to talk across the divide, and significantly fewer are happy for their children to marry someone from the other side.<sup>75</sup>

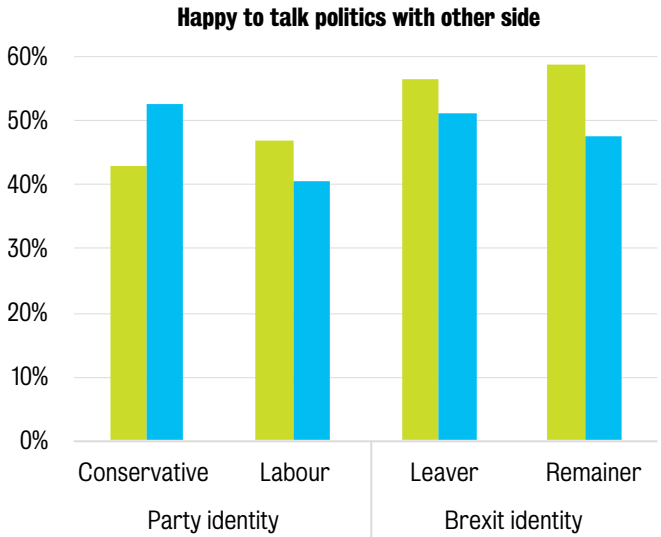
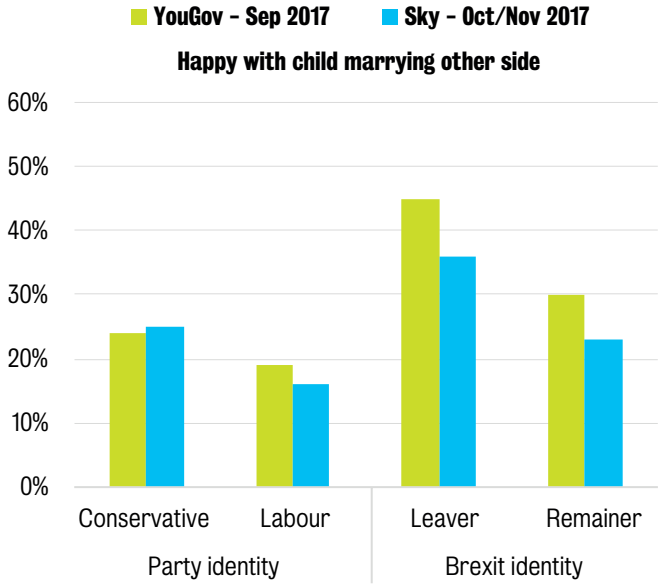
An experimental behavioural study by Murray and colleagues, produced shortly after the result of the referendum was announced, reinforces the evidence for this differentiation effect. In a mini-dictator game designed to examine pro-social behaviours in splitting an endowment between different groups, participants on both Leave and Remain sides showed clear discrimination in their treatment of in-groups and out-groups.

This tended to be motivated by negative bias towards the out-group, rather than preferential treatment for the in-group, with those who voted Remain in particular exhibiting significantly weaker levels of pro-social behaviour towards Leave supporters than vice versa. Thus, those on the losing side of the 2016 EU referendum showed weaker pro-sociality than the winners. The study found that ‘in a relatively short period of time, the EU referendum campaign



**FIGURE 26:**  
**PREJUDICE**  
**AGAINST THE**  
**OTHER SIDE**

Source: Reproduced from data tables in Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley (2018), 'Divided by the Vote', p. 18.



created new single-issue identities to rival party identities that have been established for decades'.<sup>76</sup>

The third and final element of affective polarisation is perception bias, where members of each side see objective realities differently, as a result of 'directionally motivated reasoning' or 'perceptual screens'.<sup>77</sup>

Hobolt et al. examine this through retrospective assessments of how well the economy had performed in the last 12 months. As expected, Conservative identifiers were more positive than Labour, by around half of one point on a five-point scale. However, even holding party identity constant, there are larger effects across Brexit identities, with Leavers almost three-quarters of a point more positive than Remainers. As the authors conclude: 'The effect of Brexit identity is greater than that of party identity in producing biased retrospective views of the economy'.<sup>78</sup>



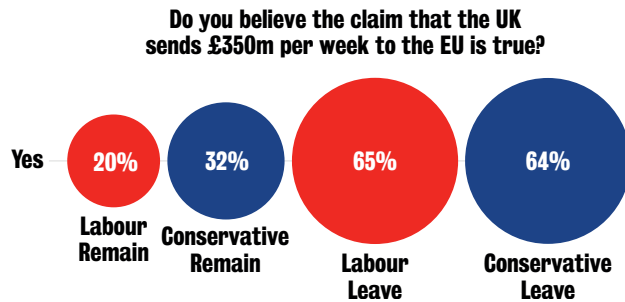
There is a clear and consistent division in perceptions of the validity of the claim that the UK sends £350 million per week to the EU

Similar biases are seen with perceptions of objective measures directly related to drivers of Brexit support, such as the impact of immigration. Leave voters are much more likely than Remain voters to think that EU immigration is related to increased crime and that immigrants take more in welfare benefits than they pay in taxes. And there is a clear and consistent division in perceptions of the validity of the claim that the UK sends £350 million per week to the EU. Around two-thirds of Leave voters believe this is true, regardless of their party support, while belief is much lower among Remain voters, again cutting across party lines (see Figure 27 over page). This has been an incredibly stable perceptual bias: the question was first asked in May 2016 and then again in November 2018, with virtually identical aggregate results and breakdowns between groups.<sup>79</sup>

There are many other examples of how these Brexit identities have remained stable over time. For example, Hobolt's analysis shows very high consistency in identification measures since 2016, among both Leave and Remain supporters.

**FIGURE 27:**  
PROPORTION  
OF PEOPLE  
WHO BELIEVE  
THAT THE UK  
SENDS £350M  
A WEEK TO THE  
EUROPEAN  
UNION

Source: 'Perils of Perception' [data], Ipsos MORI/Policy Institute. In field 28 Sep-3 Oct 2018.



### Issue and political fragmentation

Association of specific issue positions with the political spectrum appears to be fairly weak in the UK, relative to trends in the US. Research conducted by YouGov in early 2019 found a range of inconsistent issue positions in Britain along the left- to right-wing political spectrum. For example, among individuals self-identifying as right wing, over half agreed with a range of views that the population overall considered to be left wing, such as the government ‘should play a significant or dominant role in managing the economy’ (57 per cent identifying as right wing agreed with this). Similarly, those who identified as left wing agreed with positions identified as being right wing, such as ‘school discipline should be stricter’ (59 per cent) and that the criminal justice system is ‘too soft’ (55 per cent).<sup>80</sup>

The study also showed that the population in Britain generally has low levels of confidence in identifying left- and right-wing policy positions. The researchers concluded that ‘of more than 100 political views we put to people, none were identified as being specifically left-wing or right-wing by more than 53% of people’.<sup>81</sup> This suggests that the UK is far from the forms of conflict extension or sorting that some argue have split US partisans into two ideologically distinct but homogeneous camps.

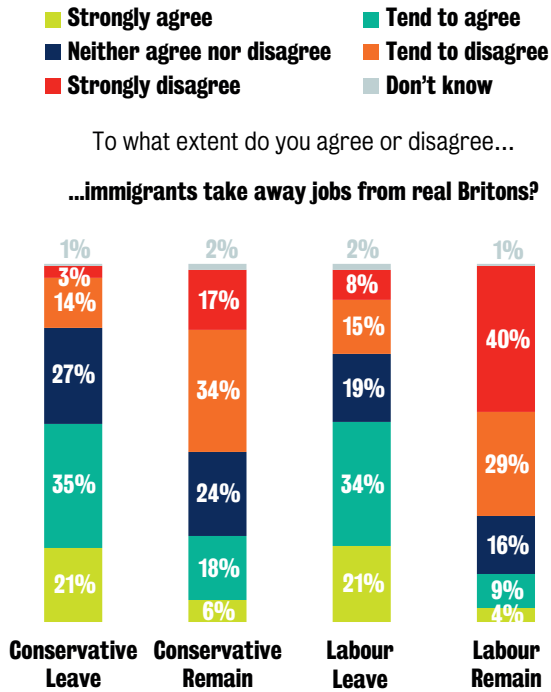
But that is not to say that traditional left-right political attachments have been entirely supplanted. These remain an important element of a layered identity, and a strong predictor of attitudes to some political issues. When we look at how Brexit identity and party support interact, we

see that different issues reveal different fault lines between groups in the UK, with broadly three types of effect.

First, there are issues where Brexit identity is the best predictor of attitudes, which tends to be on topics such as the impact of immigration, and social values like nostalgia and concern about rapid social change. For example, Leave voters are significantly more likely to believe that immigrants take jobs from ‘real Britons’ regardless of whether they are Conservative or Labour supporters.

**FIGURE 28:**  
ATTITUDES  
TOWARDS  
MIGRATION,  
SPLIT BY PARTY  
AND BREXIT  
IDENTITY

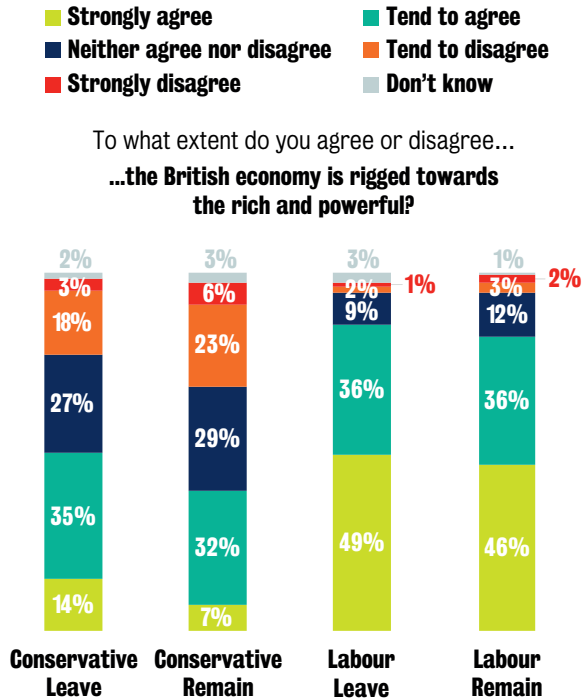
Source: Reproduced from Ipsos MORI (2017), ‘Shifting Ground’, p. 20 – survey conducted in October 2016.



However, there is a second set of issues where party-political connections are a better predictor of attitudes, and these tend to be economic. For example, Labour supporters are much more likely than Conservative supporters to think the economy is rigged in favour of the rich and powerful, regardless of Brexit vote.

**FIGURE 29:**  
ATTITUDES  
TOWARDS  
ECONOMIC  
ISSUES, SPLIT  
BY PARTY AND  
BREXIT IDENTITY

Source: Reproduced from Ipsos MORI (2017), 'Shifting Ground', p. 27 – survey conducted in October 2016.



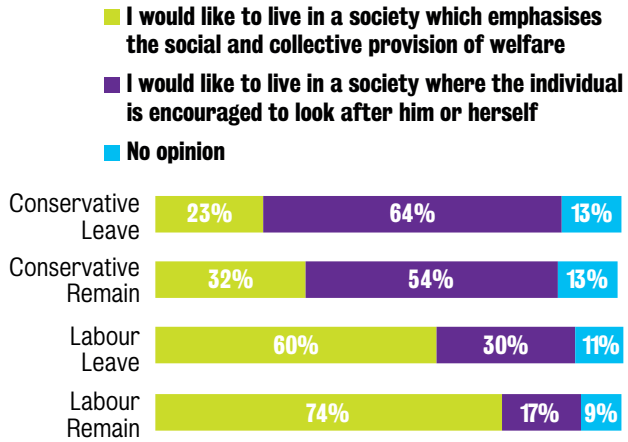
And then there is a third set of issues that appears to show an interaction between the two, running on a gradient between Conservative Leavers at one end and Labour Remainers at the other, such as on whether the ideal society is one where the collective provision of welfare is emphasised or one where individuals are instead encouraged to look after themselves (see Figure 30).

However, these interactions do not fully capture the complexity and fragmentation in attitudes and values among the electorate. In particular, Leave and Remain identities represent coalitions of people with highly diverse views, just as party identities do. Recent research has shown how Leave supporters are split roughly into thirds, between those who believe the UK should 'open itself up' to the rest of the world post-Brexit, those who think we should 'protect ourselves' from the rest of the world, and those in the middle (see Figure 31). These are very distinct views of what Brexit is for and what it will achieve.



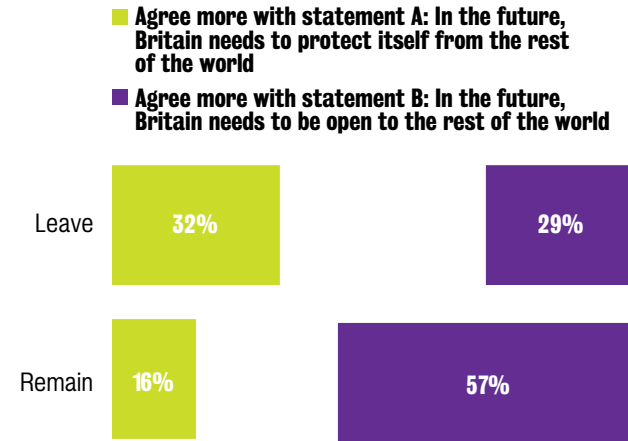
**FIGURE 30:**  
GRADIENT ON  
PREFERRED  
TYPE OF  
SOCIETY

Source: Reproduced from Ipsos MORI (2017), 'Shifting Ground', p. 29 – survey conducted in October 2016.



**FIGURE 31:**  
SUPPORT  
FOR THE UK  
'OPENING  
ITSELF UP' OR  
'PROTECTING  
ITSELF' FROM  
THE REST OF  
THE WORLD

Source: The Policy Institute at King's College London, Ipsos MORI and UK in a Changing Europe (2019), 'Global Britain?', p. 22.



Similarly, on the Remain side, only half say they actively identify with Europe, with the other half more pragmatic and instrumental in their reasons for supporting Remain.<sup>82</sup>

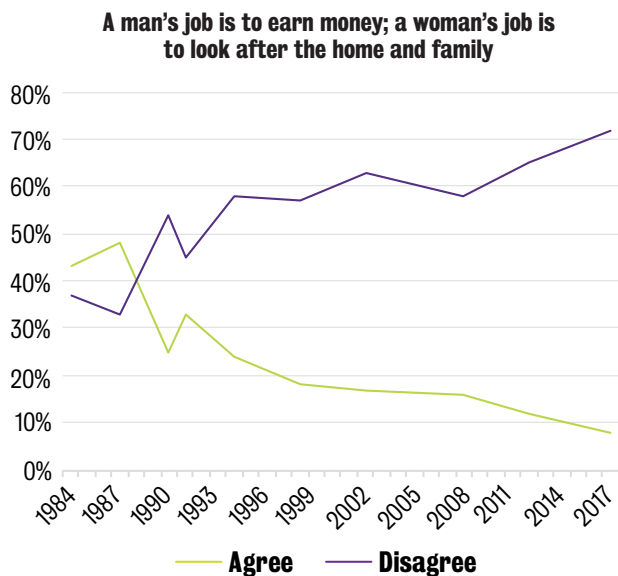
## Significant common ground, growing trust and even convergence on many measures

While we should rightly focus on the risks from this highly fragmented context, it is also important to recognise that there are a number of examples of converging attitudes on social issues in the UK.

The 2018 British Social Attitudes Survey found that divides are narrowing on a range of issues, such as sex before marriage, same-sex relationships, abortion and gender equality. As shown in Figure 32, since the mid-1980s, views on traditional gender roles have seen a marked shift, going from a topic that split the population, to one where only 8 per cent agree that it's 'a man's job to earn money' and 'a woman's job to look after the home and family'.<sup>83</sup>

**FIGURE 32:**  
VIEWS ON  
TRADITIONAL  
GENDER ROLES,  
1984-2017

Source: Reproduced from NatCen (2018), *British Social Attitudes* 35, p. 56.



Attitudes towards homosexuality also continue to converge, including a shift in the views of both older generations and religious groups towards more acceptance of same-sex relationships. Two-thirds now say that sex between two adults of the same sex is 'not wrong at all' – an increase of almost 50 percentage points over the last 35 years.<sup>84</sup>

In addition to these elements of values convergence, we are also seeing a period of stable or rising trust. Between 1998 and 2014 around 45 per cent of the public reported that they believe ‘people can be trusted’, but this increased to 54 per cent in 2017.<sup>85</sup> This suggests that we are not seeing a wholesale breakdown in social relations as a result of political division.



Rising levels of public trust suggest we are not seeing a wholesale breakdown in social relations as a result of political division

Recent research by BritainThinks in 2018 and 2019 has also identified significant common ground in public policy challenges and priorities. Most notably this includes funding for health and social care and providing better opportunities for families living in poverty, which were prioritised by people across political and values spectrums, including both Leave and Remain supporters. The research also showed a significant decline in focus on immigration among the population as a whole, and convergence between groups, as Leave supporters in particular recorded greater declines in concern than Remain supporters.

Moreover, the research showed a great deal of consistency in the preferred responses from government to some of these priorities, again cutting across party and Brexit divides.<sup>86</sup> While significant divisions remain, particularly on responses to immigration, the environment and trade policy, the research does not fit a simple narrative of a society that is irrevocably polarised on many key issues.

### **Divisions between nations?**

An important dimension often associated with polarisation debates across different countries is the strength of sub-national and regional identities, which has been linked with movements for independence and constitutional change.

For example, Lega Nord have helped to bring separatist ideas and autonomous aspirations into the political mainstream in Italy, emphasising the need to reduce immigration; threats to national and cultural identity, the economy and tourism; and risks of terrorism.<sup>87</sup> The movement has gained significant social acceptance: at the time of writing, voting intention polling puts Lega Nord at a



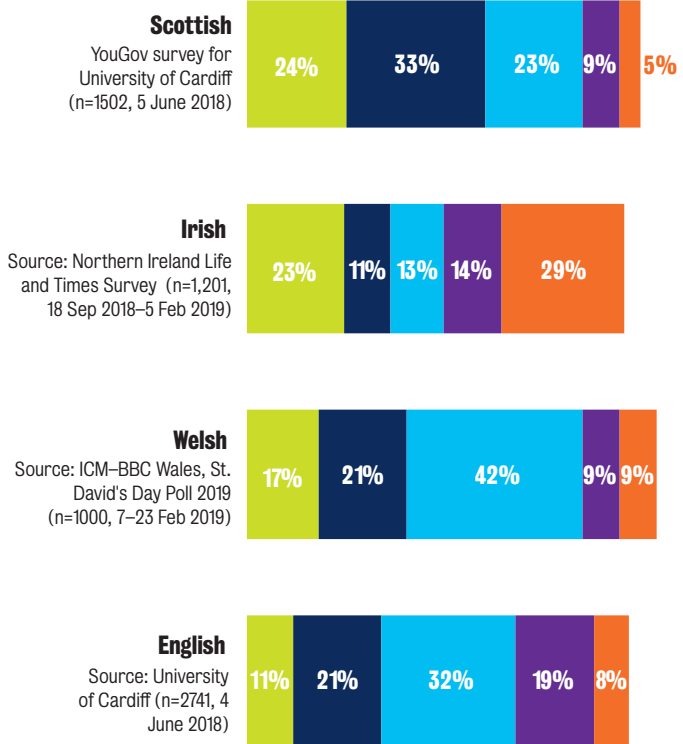
38 per cent share of the vote – 16 percentage points ahead of the closest party, Partito Democratico.<sup>88</sup>

Deeply held regional identities have also driven the Catalan independence movement. Just one in 10 people living in Catalonia now identifies as ‘only Spanish’ or ‘more Spanish than Catalan’. Of the remainder, 40 per cent have dual identity, describing their nationality as equally Spanish and Catalan; 20 per cent feel ‘more Catalan than Spanish’; and 21 per cent identify solely as Catalan.<sup>89</sup> Such identities are linked to support for secession. Individuals who identify solely as Spanish have been shown to be eight times less likely to support independence than an individual who identifies solely as Catalan.<sup>90</sup>

Within the UK, Scotland has by far the strongest national identity, relative to identification with an overarching British identity, at levels even slightly higher than among Catalonians. At 57 per cent, the combined proportion of adults living in Scotland in 2018 who identified as either ‘Scottish not British’ or ‘more Scottish than British’ was almost double that in England, with those identifying as ‘English not British’ or ‘more English than British’ collectively accounting for only 32 per cent of responses (see Figure 33).<sup>91</sup> Wales, on the other hand, has the greatest proportion of people with equally split identities, with 42 per cent of people surveyed in 2019 identifying equally as Welsh and British.<sup>92</sup>

**FIGURE 33:**  
STRENGTH  
OF NATIONAL  
IDENTITY  
VERSUS  
BRITISH  
IDENTITY  
(MORENO  
SCALE)

- English/Irish/Scottish/Welsh not British
- More English/Irish/Scottish/Welsh than British
- Equally English/Irish/Scottish/Welsh and British
- More British than English/Irish/Scottish/Welsh
- British not English/Irish/Scottish/Welsh



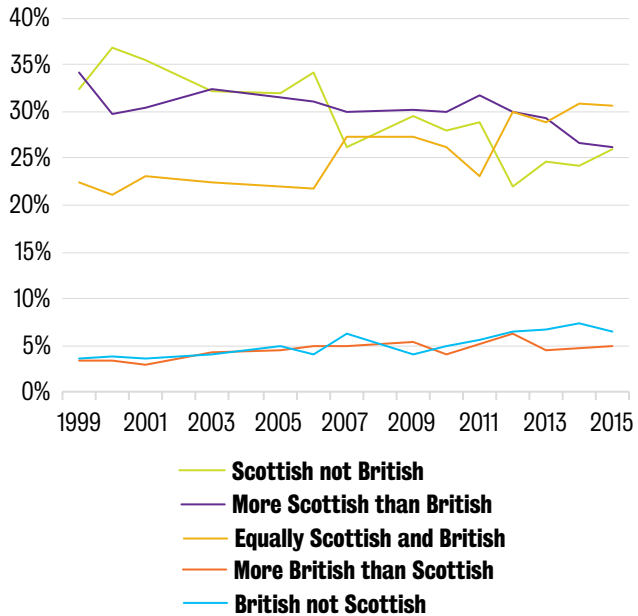
Of course, this means there is still a majority in Scotland with at least some level of British identity, as confirmed by other research. A 2018 study showed that 59 per cent of adults in Scotland identified very or fairly strongly as British. In Wales, this was 20 percentage points higher, with 79 per cent of Welsh adults identifying as very or fairly strongly British – and another 10 percentage points higher in England, at 89 per cent.<sup>93</sup>



The relative strength of Scottish national identity compared with British identity has also been relatively consistent over time, as shown in Figure 34: there have been fluctuations over the past 20 years, but no clear direction of travel towards increased Scottish identity.<sup>94</sup>

**FIGURE 34:**  
TRENDS IN  
SCOTTISH  
NATIONAL  
IDENTITY

Source: Moreno  
Question, Scottish  
Social Attitudes  
Survey.



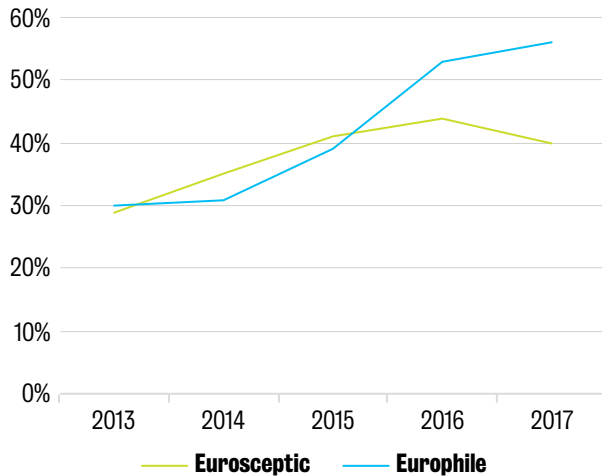
Scotland, like Northern Ireland, voted against the overall trend in the 2016 EU referendum: 62 per cent of voters in Scotland and 56 per cent in Northern Ireland were in favour of remaining.<sup>95</sup> While the results of the EU referendum did not lead immediately to significantly increased support for Scottish independence, public attitudes towards the two issues appear to have grown more intertwined since.

Prior to the EU referendum, the level of support for Scottish independence was similar among Eurosceptics and Europhiles, with 49 per cent and 44 per cent voting in favour of independence, respectively. However, as shown in Figure 35, since the EU referendum support for Scottish independence has increased among Europhiles, reaching 56

per cent in 2017, while among Eurosceptics, it dropped to 40 per cent.<sup>96</sup>

**FIGURE 35:**  
SUPPORT FOR  
SCOTTISH  
INDEPENDENCE,  
SPLIT BY  
ATTITUDES  
TOWARDS THE  
EU

Source: Reproduced from Curtice and Montagu (2018), 'Scotland: How Brexit has Created a New Divide in the Nationalist Movement', p. 14. Original source Scottish Social Attitudes Survey.



Calls for independence in the other nations of the UK are not currently felt with the same force. Only 11 per cent of adults surveyed in the Welsh Political Barometer in May agreed the nation should be independently governed – up only five percentage points since the EU referendum.<sup>97</sup> Constitutional preferences in Northern Ireland have also remained consistent over the last decade: roughly half of the population would prefer to remain part of the UK with a devolved government (albeit dropping to 42 per cent in 2018, with a parallel increase in preference for remaining part of the UK with direct rule). On average, across the last decade only one in five people in Northern Ireland show support for reunification, at 19 per cent in 2018, and even fewer support breaking away from both the UK and Ireland as an independent state, reaching a low of just 2 per cent in the same year.<sup>98</sup>

Similarly, polling in England shows much higher levels of support for maintaining the Union between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (46 per cent), than potentially risking it in order to prioritise the interests of England (29 per cent).<sup>99</sup>



## **Polarisation or fragmentation among political leaders in the UK?**


The UK does not have the same tradition or long-term evidence base on political-leader issue polarisation among MPs as the US has for the Senate and House of Representatives. This makes it difficult to identify whether the political class in the UK are more or less polarised than in the past. There are also no rigorous measures of affective polarisation, strength of identification with one's own side or differentiation from the other side. Nevertheless, it seems clear that, while there has been a well-documented, long-term reduction in voting across party lines in the US Congress as the two parties realigned and became more internally homogeneous, the recent trend in the UK has, if anything, been in the opposite direction.

There are some clear signals that seem to point to a similar fragmentation among MPs within and across party lines, as seen among the public. Most obviously, this includes increases in MPs resigning the party whip, defections to newly formed parties and regular voting across party lines on Brexit. Slapin et al. find that while rebellion is rare (fewer than one per cent of recorded votes are rebellious), since the early 1990s MPs have tended to vote against the majority of their party at least once over a parliamentary term.<sup>100</sup>

Indeed, since 2010 the UK has seen the highest levels of rebellion in the post-war era, with the 2010 to 2015 parliament seeing Coalition MPs rebelling in over 30 per cent of divisions.<sup>101</sup> As journalist Tom Clark outlines:

It was in the 1990s that rebellion began to rise in earnest. The new disobedience made John Major's life a misery, and discipline has never been restored since. Under Tony Blair, defiance of the party line rose yet again—and kept rising. Rebellions were seen on 8 per cent of all divisions in his first term, expert Philip Cowley calculates, which then rose to 28 per cent in New Labour's last spell, before rising again—to 39 per cent—under the Cameron coalition. Everyone knows the defeat of May's deal by 230 votes in January





smashed the records, but what's less appreciated is how it stands on the crest of this historic wave.<sup>102</sup>

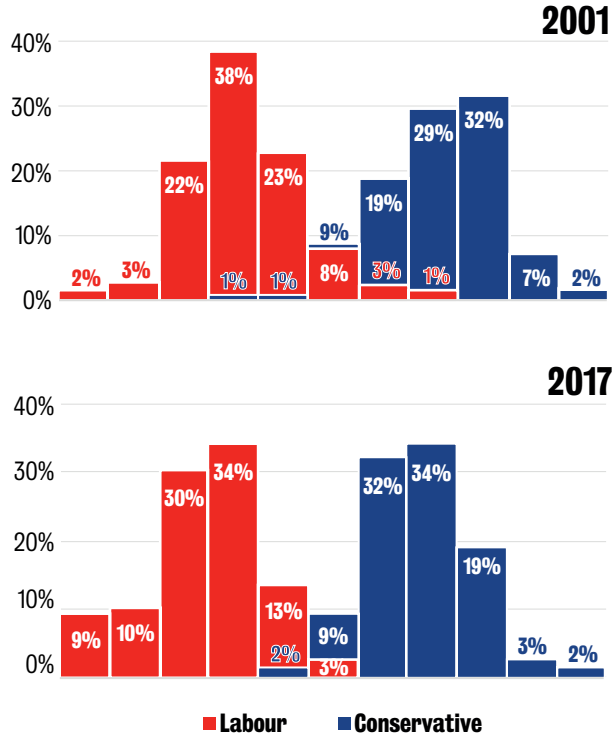
However, this tells us little about shifts in the underlying policy or values positions of political leaders. Part of the challenge in establishing clear evidence of polarisation among the political class in the UK is that previous research on MP and parliamentary candidate attitudes has tended to focus on their own assessment of their position on a left-right axis, which is understandable given this has dominated British politics.

This research paints a picture of a predictably bi-modally polarised political class. A study of parliamentary candidates in 2017 found only two per cent of Conservatives placed themselves left-of-centre, and no Labour candidates placed themselves right-of-centre. More than that, very few in either party placed themselves in the centre (just nine per cent of Conservative candidates and three per cent of Labour candidates). We therefore have a near-absence of overlap between prospective parliamentarians, the same pattern we see in the research among US political elites.<sup>103</sup>

There is no sign, however, that this is markedly different from past studies. The overall pattern is very similar to the 2001 survey, with the only shift being an increase in Labour candidates that rate themselves as the 'most left wing' on the scale (see Figure 36 over page).

**FIGURE 36:**  
LEFT-RIGHT  
PLACEMENT OF  
MP CANDIDATES  
IN 2001 AND  
2017

Source: 2001: Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski (2001), *The British Representation Study 2001*. 2017: reproduced from Campbell, Hudson and Rüdiger (2018), 'Representative Audit of Britain', p. 9. Q: 'Using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the most left-wing and 10 the most right-wing, where would you place your own views?'

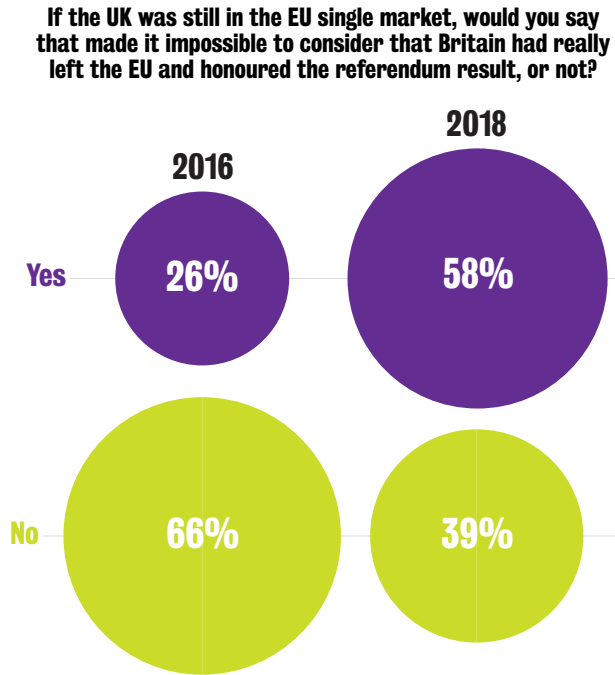


This stability is in stark contrast with how MPs' views on Brexit have shifted in a very short space of time, and how they have changed in different ways within each of the two main parties.

First, there has been a significant shift in how MPs overall interpret what would constitute ‘honouring the referendum result’. In 2016, just 26 per cent of MPs thought it was impossible to consider the UK as having really left the EU and honouring the referendum result if it was still in the single market, but this had more than doubled to 58 per cent by 2018.

**FIGURE 37: SHIFT IN VIEWS ON SINGLE MARKET AMONG MPS**

Source: ‘Members of Parliament Survey’, Ipsos MORI/UK in a Changing Europe.



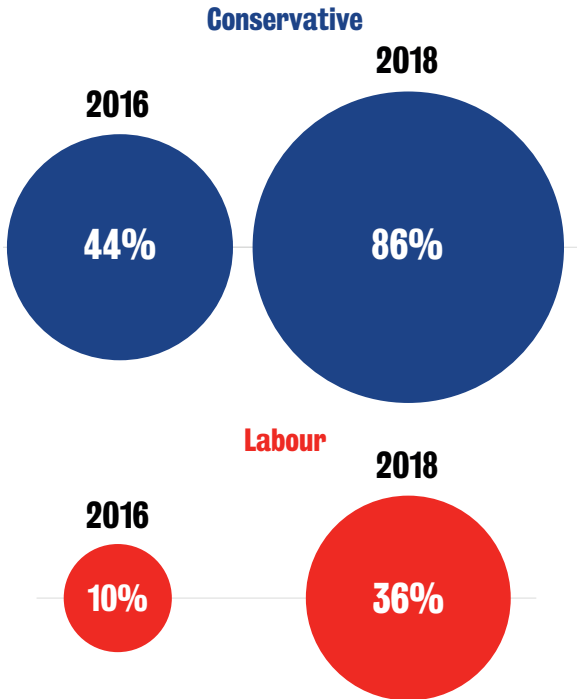
The extent of this change varies significantly among MPs from the two main parties. In 2016, 44 per cent of Conservative MPs thought that staying in the single market did not represent honouring the referendum result – but this had increased to a clear majority (86 per cent) by 2018. Labour MPs have moved from hardly any agreeing with this position (10 per cent) to just over a third (36 per cent) in the past two years. We therefore have an increased distance between the parties, but also a growing division among Labour MPs, reflecting the mixed picture of polarising and fragmenting trends we've seen more generally in this review.

**FIGURE 38: SHIFT IN VIEWS ON SINGLE MARKET AMONG MPS, SPLIT BY PARTY**

Source: 'Members of Parliament Survey', Ipsos MORI/UK in a Changing Europe.

**If the UK was still in the EU single market, would you say that made it impossible to consider that Britain had really left the EU and honoured the referendum result, or not?**

**Answer: Yes**



### 3.3. Lessons from Europe

As Matthew Goodwin recently observed, one peculiarity of Britain's Brexit moment is that it is making British politics appear more 'European' – be it through our increased fragmentation, the rise of populist parties that draw support away from centre parties, and volatility.<sup>104</sup> These dimensions are indeed seen across many states in Europe.



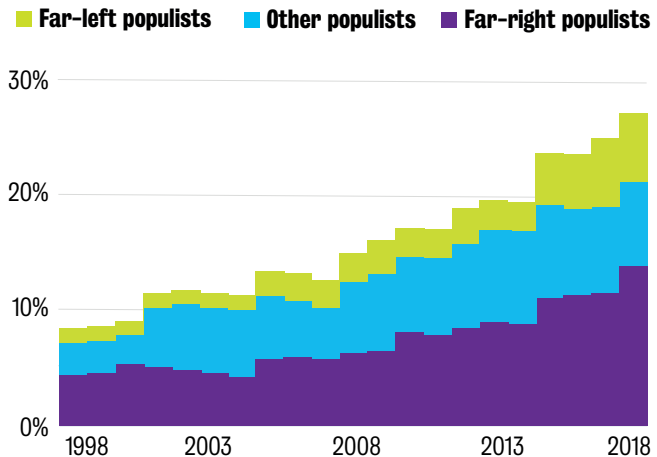
Britain's Brexit moment is ... making British politics appear more 'European'

In Germany, both the centre-right Christian Democrats and the centre-left Social Democrats have seen their support drain away in different directions, to the pro-EU Greens and the nationalist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). In the recent Spanish elections, the share of the vote won by the two traditional mainstream parties was just 45 per cent – down from 84 per cent in 2008. In total, there are seven European countries where four or more parties each won over 10 per cent of the vote in the most recent national elections – Germany, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Italy, the Czech Republic and Finland.<sup>105</sup>

The discussion of polarisation in Europe has tended to focus on this 'hollowing out' of the centre and the growing electoral share of populist parties in particular (mainly on the right, but also from the left, as shown in Figure 39). A number of different studies now show this populist share to be around or above 25 per cent across Europe.<sup>106</sup>

**FIGURE 39:** COMBINED VOTE SHARE OF POPULIST PARTIES BY YEAR FOR 31 EUROPEAN COUNTRIES, 1998-2018

Source: Reproduced from Mair et al. (2019), 'Understanding Our Political Nature', European Commission, p. 42.

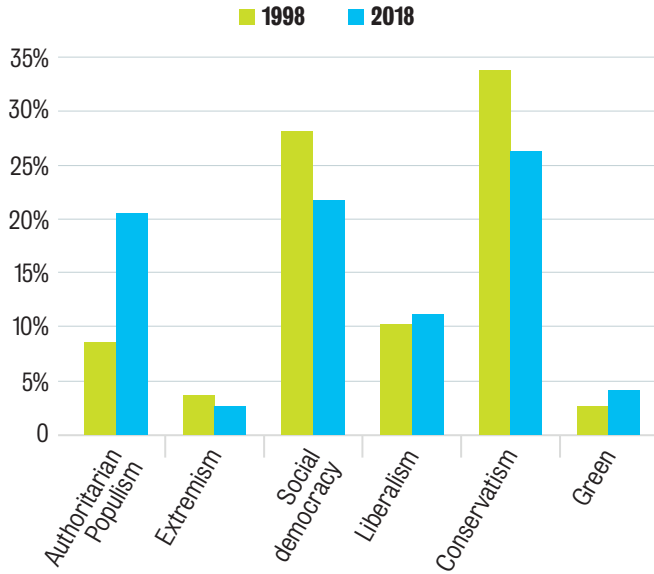




Around the continent, the pattern is that these populist votes are being drawn mainly from social democratic and conservative parties, as shown in Figure 40. This overall distribution emphasises an important point about the nature of this change. Relating it to our models of polarisation, this is clearly not the same as a simple bi-modal drifting apart. Rather, it has more in common with a dispersion model of polarisation, where the more extreme poles are growing further apart but the majority remain around the middle. This distinction may help explain the different interpretations of whether rising populism is the dominant trend across the continent, and whether Europe is really polarising.

**FIGURE 40:**  
PROPORTION  
OF VOTES FOR  
DIFFERENT  
IDEOLOGIES,  
1998 AND 2019

Source: Timbro  
Authoritarian  
Populism Index, p. 30.



There are many parallels with US and UK discussions of the drivers for these trends. For example, some see it as ‘nurtured by a conflict of ideas – the culture wars’.<sup>107</sup> A recently published report from the European Commission highlights how relatively new this is for many European countries: ‘Values clashes, which were not emerging in the rather homogeneous European societies of the past decades, have become more salient with the move towards more pluralistic societies.’<sup>108</sup>

This also relates to the ‘cultural backlash’ framing developed by academics such as Ron Inglehart and Pippa Norris, which draws on global surveys of values.<sup>109</sup> They see this form of polarisation as ‘motivated by a backlash against ... cultural changes ... far more than by economic factors. The proximate cause of the populist vote is anxiety that pervasive cultural changes and an influx of foreigners are eroding the cultural norms one knew since childhood.’

Each of these trends has a strong echo in the UK experience, with two important qualifications. First, that, as we’ve seen, our first-past-the-post electoral system means the number of parties that have become electorally effective differ from the number that become effective in parliament, at least to date.

And, second, the way that this new cultural dimension overlays the existing left-right axis varies across countries, with some in continental Europe seeing it as mostly traditional left-right concepts ‘reloaded’ – which does not seem to be the case in the UK.<sup>110</sup> For example, Pew Research Center research on populism across Europe shows that there are huge gaps between supporters of parties on the right and parties on the left on whether immigration takes jobs from the native population in countries including the Netherlands, France and Italy – but the gradient between left and right is much flatter in the UK. Instead, as we’ve seen, UK immigration attitudes are much more related to Leave or Remain support than party support.



We are not seeing evidence of issue polarisation along strong partisan lines [in the UK]

### 3.4. Reflections

A simplistic reading across of the polarisation literature and evidence from the US does not explain the current state of UK politics and society. However, it does help identify what is and is not happening in the UK: we are not seeing evidence of issue polarisation along strong partisan lines, which is the main focus of discussion around polarisation in the US. On top of this, the US literature also provides helpful models for understanding how a new Brexit dimension has formed a strong identity, rivalling and often surpassing partisan identities, leading to a new axis of affective polarisation. However, the speed with which this



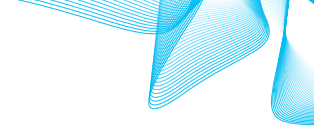
affective identity has emerged in the UK contrasts with the longer-term evolution in the US.

Similarly, the UK shares some elements of the patterns seen in the rest of Europe, particularly the emerging fragmentation of party-political support. However, there are still important differences in context, not least our distinct electoral system, which may reduce the impact of this fragmented vote on our parliament.

Of course, political decisions and agency have also had a significant impact on where different nations are today. In the US, major influences can be traced back to the 1965 Civil Rights Act that kickstarted a significant resorting of voters between the main parties, through to Newt Gingrich's championing of a more combative, less bi-partisan approach in Congress. In the UK, we have seen determined efforts by successive Blair and Cameron governments to reposition themselves towards more centrist ground on economic and social issues respectively. This may have left some sections of the electorate feeling under-represented by mainstream political parties, and each party straddling increasingly uneasy coalitions of supporters.

Looking forward, this history and current position provides a different but still very significant challenge for the political system in avoiding implacable conflict or gridlock in the future. Our long-standing party-political structures are struggling to capture the diversity in the electorate, and new parties are emerging as a result. How this wide variety of positions among the public can be resolved, particularly in the context of what our relationship with Europe should be, is the political challenge of our time. It requires more careful thinking and responses than the reductive discussions of 'Divided Britain', polarised into two opposing, homogeneous blocs, that we've largely had to date.







# 4. Implications for the future

The background features a complex, abstract graphic composed of numerous thin, glowing blue lines. These lines are arranged in a grid-like pattern that is distorted and warped, creating a sense of depth and movement. The lines appear to flow and curve, forming a structure that resembles a stylized, futuristic architectural element or a data visualization. The overall effect is a dynamic and futuristic aesthetic.



# 4. Implications for the future

The trends outlined in the previous section show the significant challenges facing the UK, not least the extreme uncertainty at a time of heightened political fluidity and volatility. This context makes it difficult to predict what's likely to happen in the coming weeks, let alone months and years.



There are many aspects of attitudes and identity in the UK that are converging rather than polarising

However, it is also important to recognise that there are many aspects of UK identity that are converging rather than polarising, and that we are coming to agreement on a number of social issues, rather than fragmenting. This includes attitudes towards gender roles, homosexuality and racial prejudice, but also key policy issues such as health and social care, and even immigration.

More global measures of the health of relations between communities – such as levels of trust – are also showing little sign of decline, despite the focus on division. It is particularly important to remind ourselves of this when media and political commentary so regularly assumes and asserts how divided we are.

However, this does not detract from the significant risks we face. Looking to the future, we outline some initial reflections from this review of models and evidence:

1. **We need to take more care in our use of polarisation and related concepts, as we may be mischaracterising the important changes we're seeing in the UK.** In particular, it's important to recognise that we can see affective polarisation develop in societies without a straightforward polarisation on issues, as is arguably the case in both the UK and US.

- 
2. **Polarisation in the UK is not fully captured in a binary opposition across a single spectrum, and the focus on this increases the risk of losing sight of the big trends that led us here.** Our current political situation is not just a short-term reaction to Brexit; it also reflects the fracturing of public attitudes between economic and social dimensions over a number of decades. This is very different from the polarisation patterns seen in the US, where party supporters have increasingly aligned in their views across a wider range of divisive issues.
  3. **The disconnect between political identities among the UK electorate and the party system makes the current situation extremely fluid and unpredictable.** The party-political landscape has not yet fully come to terms with the new identities that Brexit has revealed and reinforced. However, this appears to be in transition, with the changed emphasis of the new Prime Minister, the emergence of the Brexit Party and the Liberal Democrats putting their pro-EU credentials to the fore, explicitly aligning with these new identities.
  4. **The more traditional left-right political spectrum remains an important differentiator on some issues, particularly economic factors.** But there are very different concerns and motivations within each side of the Brexit debate that do not straightforwardly relate to a traditional left-right axis. This results in a very fragmented landscape of issues, which will make it difficult for any party to appeal to sufficient numbers to command a political majority.
  5. **Where the Labour Party goes next on Brexit is a key decision for the future shape of the political spectrum.** The two main parties have become increasingly uneasy coalitions of supporters with a very diverse range of attitudes and identities. Until now, Labour has attempted to appeal to both Leave and Remain supporters with varied and equivocal messages on its position on Brexit. If Labour pivots to clearly support Remain (or Leave), our party system will become more



If Labour pivots to clearly support Remain (or Leave), our party system will become more aligned with Brexit identities



aligned with Brexit identities, further solidifying this dimension into political representation.

6. **We can't be sure that the new political identities revealed and reinforced by Brexit will remain important over the coming years – but there are good reasons to expect they will.** The UK's future relationship with the EU is unlikely to be resolved quickly, and will therefore remain salient. But, more importantly, the origins of these identities, which predate the EU referendum, are tied up with a long-term party dealignment and increased concern about cultural and economic changes in the UK. And given that they represent coalitions of voters with highly diverse attitudes, these political identities are also highly unstable.
7. **Voters to some extent take cues from party platforms and leaders, so polarisation among political leaders and activists can spread to the electorate.** Changes in our political party structure and signals from leaders and the most engaged political activists are therefore important: political agency matters. How existing and challenger parties respond in terms of policy, language and whether they reinforce or attack the institutions which bind us will have a significant impact on polarisation and fragmentation in public opinion.
8. **Polarising politics can in turn affect broader social relationships.** A hostile culture of 'othering' political rivals can spill over into social relations, as we've seen in the evidence from the UK around both political party support and Brexit identities. If parties realign to more closely reflect Brexit identities, we may see a deepening of this 'affective spillover'.
9. **However, more positively, there are many issues which unite us.** Widespread support for similar priorities and government responses on health, social care and poverty, alongside large shifts in public attitudes to a range of social issues over recent decades, create a consensus which is largely absent in the US (eg over Obamacare or gay marriage).



It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Britain is dividing, but not in the way that's commonly described

10. **Better and more consistent data are needed to provide a greater understanding of what is happening in British society.** The categorisations that have worked in the past failed to identify and capture emerging trends. There is an increasing need for more in-depth and nuanced analyses to understand what brings us together as well as what divides us.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Britain is dividing, but not in the way that's commonly described – not into two monolithic blocs around Brexit. It has been longer in the making than that, with more dimensions. Understanding this more fully to develop approaches that bring us together is vital, to avoid further embedding social conflict and political gridlock.





# Appendix: REA search

The background features a series of thin, light blue lines that flow and curve across the page, creating a sense of motion and depth. These lines are set against a solid, deep purple background. The overall aesthetic is modern and digital.



# Appendix: REA search

The rapid evidence assessment was based on the following search and inclusion/exclusion criteria, agreed between the authors and Engage at the outset. The REA was implemented between March and June 2019.

The key research questions guiding the REA are:

- How is polarisation in public attitudes defined?
- To what extent are we currently seeing polarisation in public attitudes in the UK and how has this changed over time?
- What lessons can be drawn from the experience of attitudinal polarisation in other countries, especially the USA and other liberal/Western democracies?
- What drives attitudinal polarisation? To what extent are these drivers supported by evidence and which academic traditions are they rooted in?

## Search strategy

The search strategy drew together sources using the following approaches:

- **Searching academic databases** using the search terms outlined below, including ProQuest Social Science Database, British Library Explore, Google Scholar, Scopus.
- **Identifying grey literature** through a Google search capped at the first 200 hits, supplemented by a targeted search of the following websites: UK government publications ([gov.uk/search/all](http://gov.uk/search/all)); Pew Research Centre ([pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org)); Hope Not Hate ([hopenothate.org.uk](http://hopenothate.org.uk)); Britain Thinks ([britainthinks.com](http://britainthinks.com)).
- **Considering trends in data summaries** published by major attitudinal surveys and polling organisations,



including the British Social Attitudes Survey, European Social Survey, Ipsos MORI, NatGen Social Research, YouGov.

- ♦ **Consulting with experts** to identify sources missed in searches of material and to connect with research that is relevant to, but not currently considered in the polarisation literature.

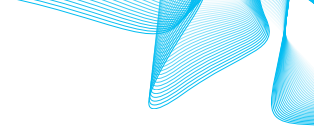
Results were capped at the first 200 hits. The search terms used were ‘Must have “polarisation” OR “fragmentation” OR “division” OR “fracture” AND “attitudes” OR “values” OR “opinion” OR “behaviour”’. A second round of search was undertaken for any new search terms that proved pertinent during the course of the review (eg ‘culture wars’, ‘affective polarisation’). Additional literature identified through citations and consultations was also considered.



## Screening criteria

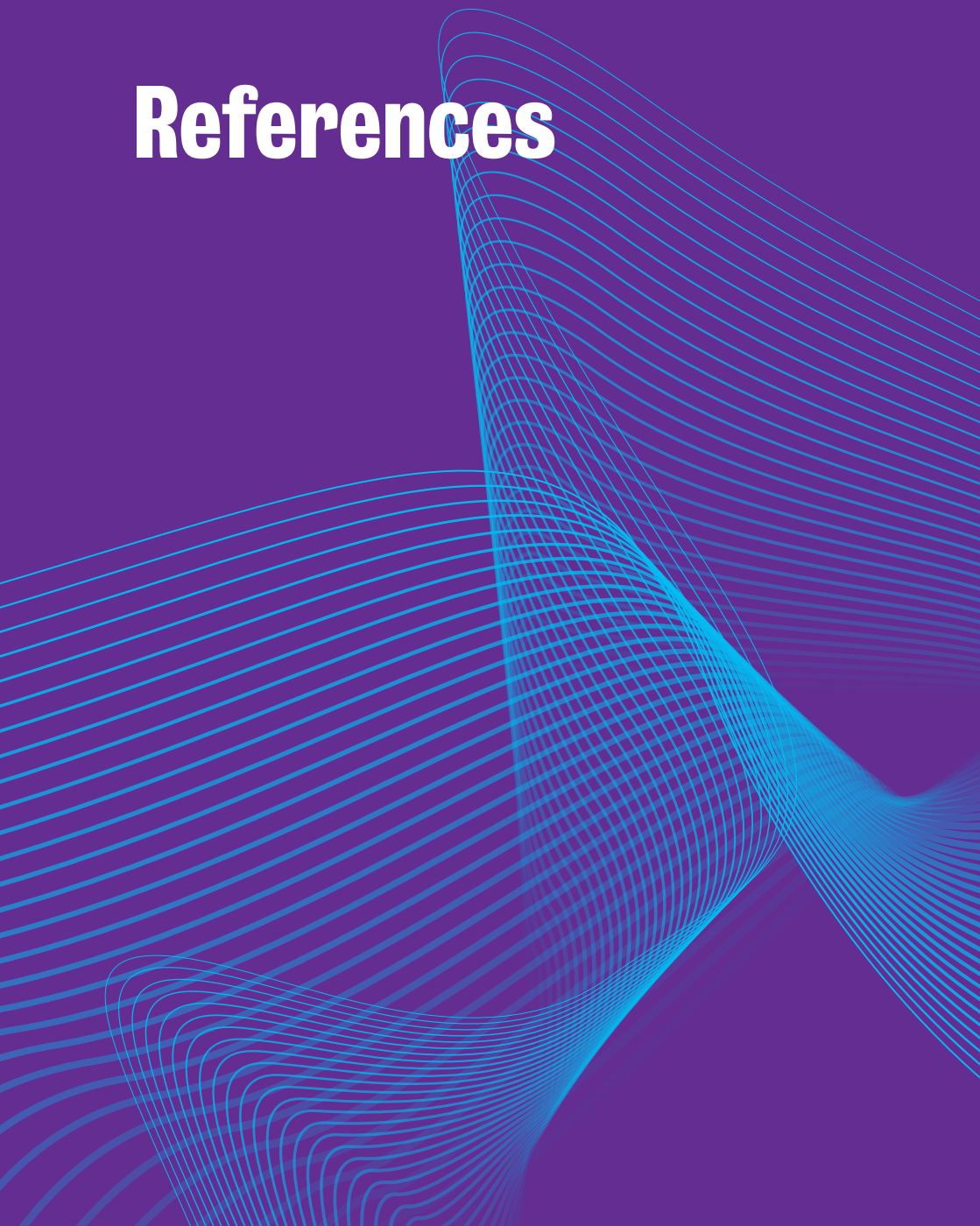
The title and/or abstract/summary of each study returned by the above search was screened and prioritised against the following inclusion and exclusion criteria.

	<b>Include</b>	<b>Exclude</b>
Participants and population	Population of the UK (including any studies that consider sub-national groupings). Other populations were considered as comparators (as described below)	Polarisation within institutions, political party systems, of socio-economic status and in news sources (unless as a driver of attitudinal polarisation)
Study type	<p>Research that directly addresses the above research questions. 'Polarisation' was defined in the broadest possible terms</p> <p>Academic studies and grey literature with a clear research process and/or robust engagement with secondary literature</p> <p>Studies published since 2009, with exceptions for select seminal texts</p> <p>Studies published in English</p>	<p>Research that does not directly address the research questions</p> <p>Studies that do not have a clear process to produce credible or reproducible findings</p> <p>Studies published before 2009</p> <p>Studies not published in English</p>
Comparators	Research that directly addresses the research questions in other liberal democracies, particularly in other European countries, United States, Australia, New Zealand	Studies not published in English





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6. See p. 16 in James E. Campbell (2018), *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press).
7. Ibid, 16-19.
8. Ibid.
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13. See DiMaggio, Evans & Bryson (1996), 'Have American's



Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?’, p. 693.

14. Hetherington (2009), ‘Review Article: Putting Polarization in Perspective’.
15. See Campbell (2018), *Polarized*, p. 95.
16. See Lilliana Mason (2018), *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
17. For example, in the US, the American National Election Survey Feeling Thermometer – which, since 1964, has measured feelings towards liberals and conservatives on a 101-point scale from cold (0) to warm (100) – has become a cornerstone for measuring how affective polarisation is evolving in the US.
18. See James N. Druckman & Matthew S. Levendusky (2019), ‘What Do We Measure When We Measure Affective Polarization?’, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 83(1): 114-122. doi:10.1093/poq/nfz003
19. Survey experiments conducted in the US show that correlation between social distance measures and the three attitudinal measures of affective polarisation are less than half that of the attitudinal measures considered on their own (see *ibid.*)
20. See, for example, Alan I. Abramowitz & Steven Webster (2016), ‘The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of U.S.’, *Electoral Studies* 41: 12-22. doi: 10.1016/j.electstud.2015.11.001
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24. See p. 15 in Mason (2008), *Uncivil Agreement*.
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  28. See p. 21 in Morris P. Fiorina (2017), *Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting, and Political Stalemate* (California: Hoover Institution Press).
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  32. Andrew Hartman (2015), *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press).
  33. Abramowitz (2010), *The Disappearing Center*.
  34. DiMaggio, Evans & Bryson (1996), 'Have American's Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?'
  35. This argument was most famously made in Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel Abrams & Jeremy C. Pope (2005), *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (London: Pearson Education). This thesis was recently revisited and reconfirmed in Fiorina (2017), *Unstable Majorities*.
  36. Adapted from charts on ideological position of House of Representatives during 87th and 111th Congress in Fiorina (2017), *Unstable Majorities*, p. 19.
  37. Hetherington does also note that the distance between median members earlier in the twentieth century, and in the 1800s was often of a similar or even larger level: this is not a uniquely polarised time, even on this measure. See Hetherington (2009), 'Review Article: Putting Polarization in Perspective'.
  38. See Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center*, pp. 91-92.
  39. Ideological positions are based on responses to 10 items, split by conservative and liberal issue positions, covering: govern-


- ment efficiency; regulation of business; government benefits and quality of life for people on low/no incomes; appropriate scale of government help for the needy; racial discrimination; immigration; ensuring peace via military strength vs diplomacy; fairness of profit made by corporations; value of stricter environmental laws and regulations; social acceptability of homosexuality. See Carroll Doherty, Jocelyn Kiley & Bridget Johnson (2017), *The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider: Sharp Shifts among Democrats on aid to needy, race, immigration*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from [people-press.org/2017/10/05/8-partisan-animosity-personal-politics-views-of-trump/](http://people-press.org/2017/10/05/8-partisan-animosity-personal-politics-views-of-trump/).
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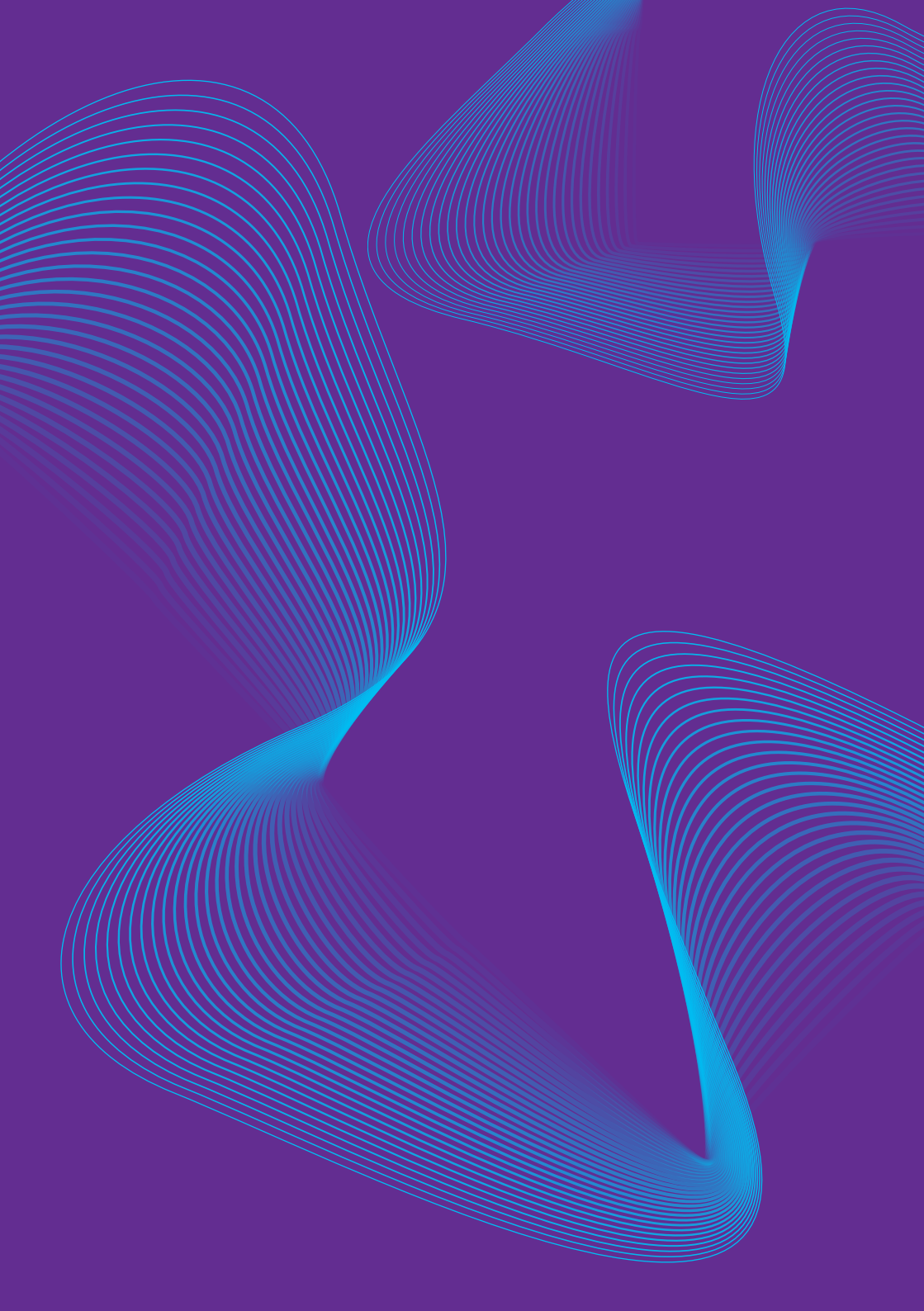
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