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Backfire

Culture Wars and the General Election



More in
Common

38Degrees people power change

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Foreword

A glance at newspaper headlines on any given day shows the increasing regularity with which culture wars are being employed by politicians – from across the ideological spectrum – as a campaign tactic. But with a general election looming, what do voters actually think when they see this on the leaflets that come through their letterbox, or hear this in the rhetoric of candidates' words? What difference does it make to the way that the general public – rather than pundits, commentators and those of us who are “extremely online” – view politicians? And how does it affect voting intentions? These are the questions we sought to answer through this research, commissioned by 38 Degrees and which builds on More in Common's previous work exploring the broader societal dangers of culture wars in the UK.

The experiments and conversations that formed this research make voters' verdicts clear: there is a very real risk that politicians using culture wars will backfire electorally. Most voters want a campaign focused on their everyday concerns with parties vying to fix a country that feels broken to many – whether on NHS, cost of living or the immigration system – rather than abstract or confected cultural debates that feel far away from the issues that matter most to people. Voters are cynical about politicians' rationale for exploiting cultural issues for political gain, and many see their attempts as inauthentic. The overwhelming view of the voters we spoke to was that culture-war approaches were a reflection of weakness and desperation, rather than a demonstration of strength.

This might not be surprising to many of us, but in the heat of an election campaign with a fiscal backdrop that makes major public spending pledges unlikely, and where newspapers need to be filled and activists motivated over a long campaign, it's easy to lose sight of how most voters approach these big issues. But politicians should understand this: if you chose to play the culture wars campaign card, you are doing this to speak to political activists and your core base, not the general public or undecided voters. This report makes clear that the idea that using this language as a way to, for example, lock in support from 2019 Red Wall voters is simply false.

The learnings from this research emanate beyond politicians and strategists – we say there are questions and lessons for those covering the campaigns. Over-indexing on culture war stories and campaign tactics might drive clicks in the short term, but risks greater disengagement in the long term as voters, viewers and readers are turned off and their cynicism of politics is further increased as a result.

Backfire: Culture Wars and the General Election

None of this is to say that politicians shouldn't discuss or debate contentious issues or that campaigners should shy away from ensuring the causes they care about are on the agenda. Labelling everything that people disagree on a 'culture war' is equally unhelpful. Instead the clear message from the public is that they want difficult issues to be discussed in a way that points to solutions and genuinely informs the public. They also want to make sure that the balance of campaigning activity focuses on those issues that most matter to people's day to day lives.

Having worked on election campaigns over many years, we both know there are valuable insights in this briefing paper that provide some pause for thought for political campaigners and election strategists.

The public expect reasoned and passionate debates about major issues affecting the future of this country, rooted in their day-to-day experiences in their lives – they don't want imagined or imported problems which artificially divide the country in two dominating an election campaign about the future of our country.

Luke Tryl (UK Director, More in Common) and Matthew McGregor (CEO, 38 Degrees)

About More in Common

More in Common is a think tank and research agency working to bridge the gap between policy makers and the public and helping people in Westminster to understand those voters who feel ignored or overlooked by those in power. Our British Seven segmentation provides a unique lens at understanding what the public think and why. We've published groundbreaking reports on a range of issues from climate and refugees to culture wars to crime. We are a full-service research agency offering polling and focus group research and are members of the British Polling Council.

About 38 Degrees

38 Degrees is a community of more than a million people who - in a moment away from their busy days - take small actions on issues they care about, which all add up to something bigger, a movement for a better Britain for everyone who calls our country home.

A Britain where we all get a fair chance in life and where the place we were born, or the area we live in, doesn't decide that chance. Where we protect our planet and hold those in power to account for doing the same, and where we are treated, and treat one another, with respect. We come from all walks of life; we're nurses, taxi drivers, parents, shopkeepers, pensioners and more.

- **We live in every part of the UK:** There are hundreds of 38 Degrees supporters in every single UK constituency.
- **We vote for all parties and none - but convincing us matters:** in 96 UK constituencies, the number of 38 Degrees supporters is higher than the local MP's majority.
- **We unite the Red Wall and the Blue Wall:** Our supporters live - and vote - in the areas watched most closely by politicians. There are 125,744 38 Degrees supporters in key Red Wall seats, and 179,413 in the most vital Blue Wall constituencies.
- **We chip in to make change:** Over the last year, people from every single UK constituency have contributed money to make our eye-catching tactics a reality.

About the British Seven segments

This report uses our [British Seven](#) segmentation to categorise participants. This is a psychographic, values-based segmentation of the British public which in many cases is more predictive of beliefs on certain issues than other demographics. The seven segments are:

Progressive Activists: A passionate and vocal group for whom politics is at the core of their identity, and who seek to correct the historic marginalisation of groups based on their race, gender, sexuality, wealth, and other forms of privilege. They are politically engaged, critical, opinionated, frustrated, cosmopolitan, and environmentally conscious.

Civic Pragmatists: A group that cares about others, at home or abroad, and who are turned off by the divisiveness of politics. They are charitable, concerned, exhausted, community-minded, open to compromise, and socially liberal.

Disengaged Battlers: A group that feels that they are just keeping their heads above water, and who blame the system for its unfairness. They are tolerant, insecure, disillusioned, disconnected, overlooked, and socially liberal.

Established Liberals: A group that has done well and means well towards others, but also sees a lot of good in the status quo. They are comfortable, privileged, cosmopolitan, trusting, confident, and pro-market.

Loyal Nationals: A group that is anxious about the threats facing Britain and facing themselves. They are proud, patriotic, tribal, protective, threatened, aggrieved, and frustrated about the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Disengaged Traditionalists: A group that values a well-ordered society, takes pride in hard work, and wants strong leadership that keeps people in line. They are self-reliant, ordered, patriotic, tough-minded, suspicious, and disconnected.

Backbone Conservatives: A group who are proud of their country, optimistic about Britain's future and who follow the news, mostly via traditional media sources. They are nostalgic, patriotic, proud, secure, confident, and engaged with politics.

More information about the segments can be found in Annex A.

Section 1: Culture Wars Backfire at the Ballot Box

Political strategies based on 'culture wars' have a clear logic and attraction for political campaigners. With little money in the public coffers to make bold spending pledges, hyperbolic culture war claims and dividing lines appear to offer a costless way to secure headlines and dominate the media agenda. For political parties, culture war debates can also act as a rallying cry for activists, providing the impetus for the base to get involved in leafleting, door-knocking and other campaign activities. For all parties, culture wars offer a way to distract from scrutiny – about their record in the case of the Conservatives, and to deflect scrutiny from their plans for Government in the case of the Labour Party.

However, pursuing culture wars is not costless – either for society at large or more narrowly for partisan interests. In fact, analysis of public opinion suggests that pursuing a culture war election would in fact be more likely to harm the main political parties than to help them. For almost all voters – including the swing voters and undecided voters who will determine the outcome of the next election – an election campaign fought in the style of a culture war is likely to backfire at the ballot box.

This research by More in Common commissioned by 38 Degrees finds that while a culture war strategy may excite the base, it is unlikely to attract many new voters and risks alienating swing and undecided voters who will determine the shape of the next Parliament.

Understanding the electoral risks of culture war election strategies starts by acknowledging what does and does not constitute a culture war. Culture wars are not heated debates about policy – the public expects politicians to have reasoned and passionate debates about major policy issues. Debating gender identity or the future of our immigration system is not engaging in a culture war – the public expect politicians to discuss, scrutinise and address these issues seriously. These debates can also touch on issues that are deeply important to many people – issues of fairness, justice, respect and dignity, and which shape our identity as individuals, as communities and as a nation.

Instead, culture wars emerge when people try to trivialise or weaponise these issues, focusing on imagined or imported problems such as banning drag shows, or renaming infrastructure – and prosecute these debates in ways which are deliberately incendiary and designed to create wedges rather than find solutions. Presenting these debates as a battle of two irreconcilable worldviews

doesn't resonate with voters, nor does it do justice to the actual important issues at stake and rarely moves things forward.

How politicians navigate these debates matters. Politicians who seek to weaponise important debates to create outrage, fail to engage in good faith on the merits of a policy debate, or take an overly unkind approach to any particular debate are unlikely to find favour with voters. Creating culture war divides to appeal to the already highly-engaged leaves the wider public concluding that politicians have their priorities wrong. And for this election in particular with the cost of living crisis looming large, NHS waiting lists dominating the agenda, and rhetoric on tackling channel crossings not having lived up to the reality, a measured, deliverable approach on the bread-and-butter issues is what the public most expect and want to hear.

I used to listen to Prime Minister's Questions... it's like listening to the Muppets. You wouldn't believe that those people are running our country, the way they barrack each other and things like that. It is disgraceful really.

Mark, 60, Wokingham

Rather than saying 'what do we need to do to look after the population' – that is their responsibility – it's so much posturing and point scoring and one-upmanship that actually the business of doing what needs to be done, particularly longer-term initiatives that won't necessarily bear fruit and win them points within a current term of government – no one's interested.

Richard, 56, Wokingham

The risks of a culture war election strategy

Electoral strategies based on culture wars have the potential to backfire on both Labour and the Conservatives. The risks are two-fold. First, culture wars lead to voters "tuning out" from political debates that do not reflect their priorities, driving further cynicism in politics. Second, culture war strategies risk alienating the very voters that both main political parties need to win over in the lead up to the general election.

Risk 1: Voters tune out

An election strategy based on culture wars is more likely to cause voters to "tune out" of political debates, further increasing cynicism in politics. Voters perceive the focus on niche dividing-line issues as a distraction from their

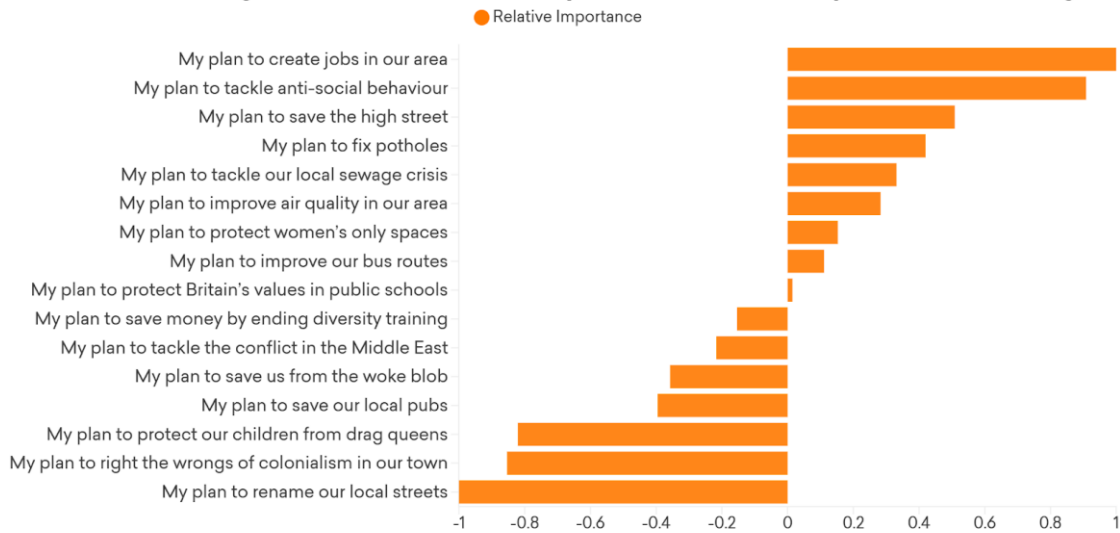
priorities. This in turn makes it more difficult for political parties to effectively communicate their core messages on the issues that matter most.

A MaxDiff experiment highlights the risk of voters “tuning out” when faced with these issues. In this experiment, the public are presented with a series of different campaign leaflet headings – some more traditional policy issues, some more focused on cultural wedges – and asked which they would be most interested in reading further.

The results are stark. The public express by far the greatest level of interest – and desire to read on – when presented with headlines about candidates’ plans for tangible, community-focused issues such as job creation, tackling anti-social behaviour, and revitalising the high street. Conversely, the public are significantly less interested in reading on when presented with leaflet headlines concerning cultural debates, such as renaming local streets, addressing the impacts of colonialism, or limiting children’s access to drag queen shows.

Figure 1

You have received the following leaflets from your local candidates for Parliament. Based on the titles of the following leaflets, which of them are you most and least likely to continue reading?



The pattern holds across each of the British Seven Segments, with some small issue-by-issue differences. The plan to “protect Britain’s values in public schools” was less important to left-leaning segments that traditionally make up the Labour coalition, but prioritised more by right-leaning segments which traditionally vote Conservative. The plan to “tackle the conflict in the Middle East” was more enticing to the Progressive Activist segment, but resonated less

among other segments. However, **there was a consistent desire to read on when presented with leaflets that focused on tangible everyday concerns such as jobs, anti-social behaviour and the high street.**

These results reflect focus group conversations with the public. While many voters say they are unlikely to read any material from the political parties until closer to the election, they add that leaflets focused purely on divisive culture war issues are likely to be immediately “thrown in the bin.”

Presented with hypothetical Conservative and Labour culture war-style leaflets in focus groups, the public are more likely to say that they reflect desperation or that the parties don't have anything important to talk about. This pattern holds both for a hypothetical campaign leaflet from Labour about the renaming of Tube lines in London and a hypothetical campaign leaflet from the Conservatives attacking woke culture.

[They] should be campaigning on getting Britain booming again - the country is part broke and there are far bigger issues to be writing and campaigning about. So if I got that rubbish in my letterbox, it would go right into the bin.

Philip, 56, Wokingham

Why aren't you concentrating on the big issues? It's so low down on my priority of what I want done in the country. I'd read the first bit and then they'd be both in the bin.

Janette, 59, Wokingham

They'd both be in the shredder and the only possible effect would be maybe I'd want to stay at home and not vote for anyone if those were the options.

Richard, 56, Wokingham

These findings suggest that by prioritising what many voters perceive as niche cultural issues, candidates and campaigners risk actively turning away voters and missing valuable opportunities to convey their core policy platform and offerings.

Risk 2: Alienating swing voters

The second risk of pursuing a culture war-led campaigning strategy is that it may actually alienate the voters that parties need to win over (or hold on to) in

this election – swing voters who’ve changed their mind since the last election and undecided voters.

A Randomised Control Trial experiment illustrates these risks. In this experiment, respondents are randomly exposed to one of several different campaign message variations: a culture war-style message from the Conservatives, a culture war-style message from Labour, an economy-focused message from the Conservatives, a health-focused message from Labour, and a control group who saw no message. The full text of each message is included in Annex B.

Figure 2



After reading the assigned message, respondents are asked about their likelihood of voting for the Conservative or Labour party. A response of seven out of ten or higher is taken to mean they are very likely to vote for that party, and response of three out of ten or below is considered to mean that someone is very unlikely to vote for that party. Participants are randomly allocated to the different groups, meaning any difference in responses between groups can be attributed to the impact of the message itself.

The risks for the Conservative Party

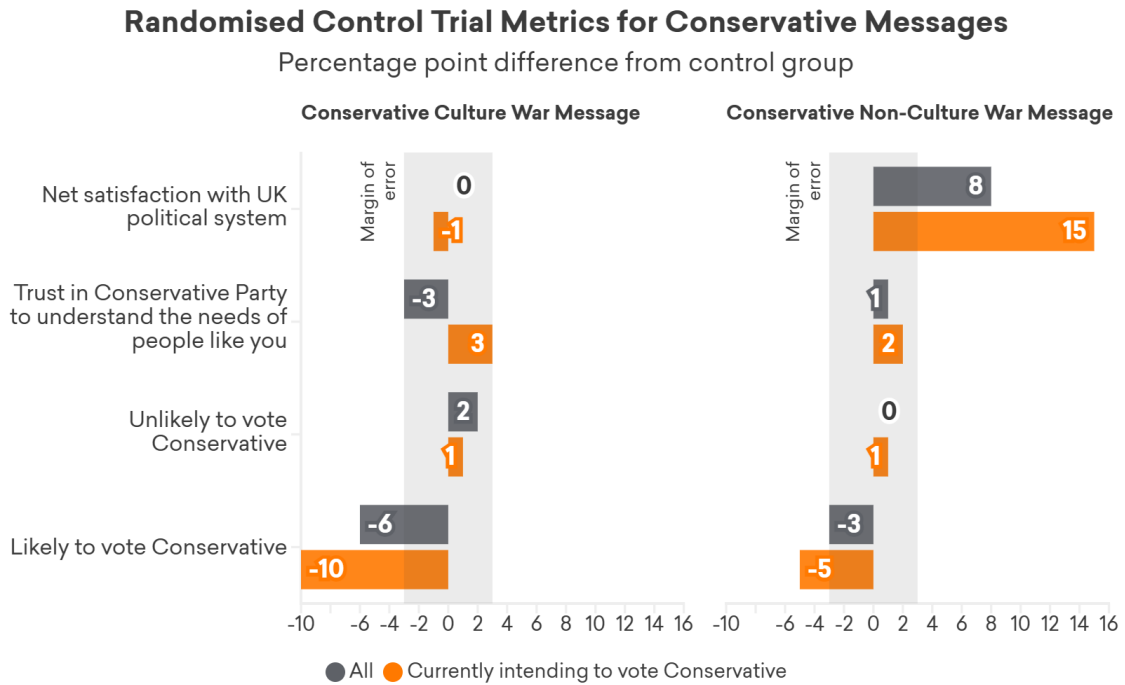
A culture-war focused campaign message from the Conservatives dampens enthusiasm for voting Conservative, even among their current supporters. The Randomised Control Trial experiment shows that the Conservative culture war message leads to a six percentage point decrease in being likely to vote Conservative compared to the control group.

Among those who are currently intending to vote Conservative, in the control group who are shown no message, 90 per cent say they are very likely to vote Conservative. However, this decreases to 80 per cent among those who are exposed to the Conservative culture war message, a ten percentage point decrease.

While these changes may appear small, marginal movements in likelihood to vote can have a big impact in an election context. According to YouGov's April 2024 MRP, there are currently 44 seats where the leading party is less than two percentage points ahead of their closest competitor – 37 of these seats are currently held by the Conservatives.

The Conservative economic message had no statistically significant effect on likelihood to vote for the Conservatives – voters expect the party to have a plan to address issues like inflation and unemployment and are not likely to reward them for doing their job in this regard. Although there are no immediate electoral benefits to the Conservatives relying on a solely economic message, it does lead to an eight percentage point increase in net satisfaction with the UK political system - and a 15 percentage point increase in net satisfaction among those currently intending to vote Conservative, than those who are not exposed to such a message.

Figure 3



Source: More in Common, March 2024

The risks for the Labour Party

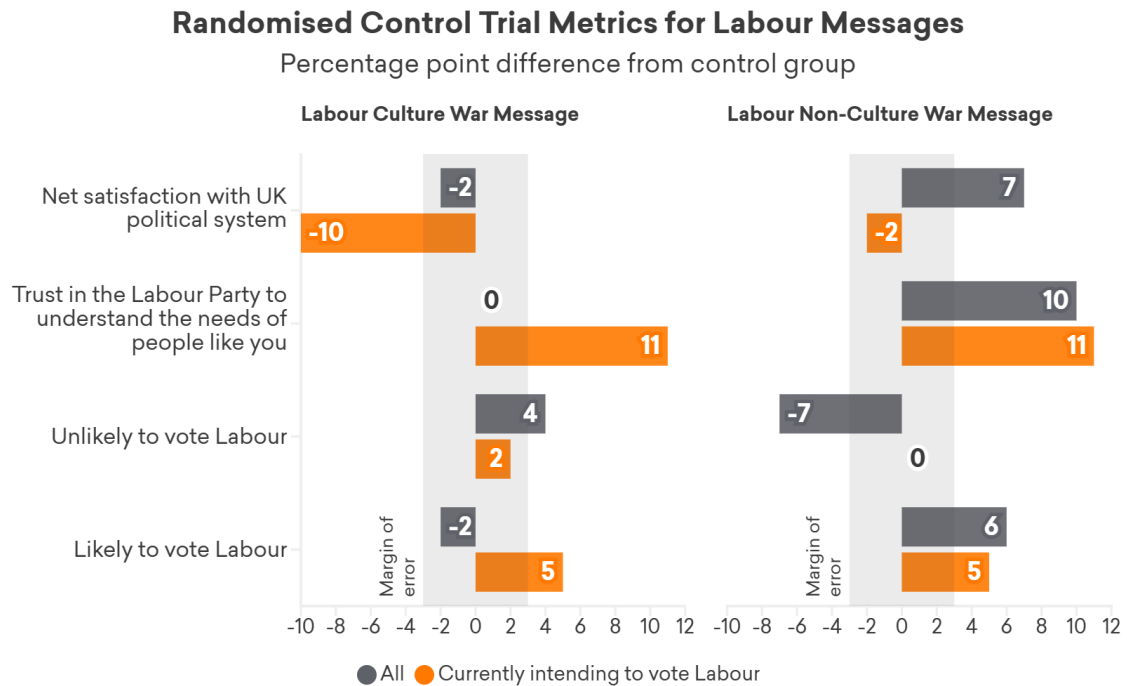
The Randomised Control Trial shows that being presented with a culture war-style message from the Labour Party leads to a five percentage point increase in being likely to vote for Labour among those already intending to vote Labour. However, across the electorate overall, the opposite is true; there is a four percentage point increase in being unlikely to vote for Labour.

This captures the risk of a culture wars strategy that can resonate well with a party’s base – while political parties may see increased enthusiasm from their core supporters, they open themselves up to the risk of losing crucial swing voters outside of that core.

Conversely, a Labour message focused on health sees a seven percentage point decrease in being unlikely to vote for Labour and a six percentage point increase in being likely to vote for Labour. This message also results in a ten percentage point increase in trust for the Labour Party - and an six percentage point increase in trust among those who are not currently intending to vote Labour. This suggests that by prioritising core messaging on protecting public services, Labour may be able to assuage concerns among those who are not natural

Labour supporters – whereas more divisive culture war messaging alienates those outside of the base.

Figure 4



The risks and opportunities for both parties

This experiment finds that both parties are penalised by voters for adopting culture war approaches.

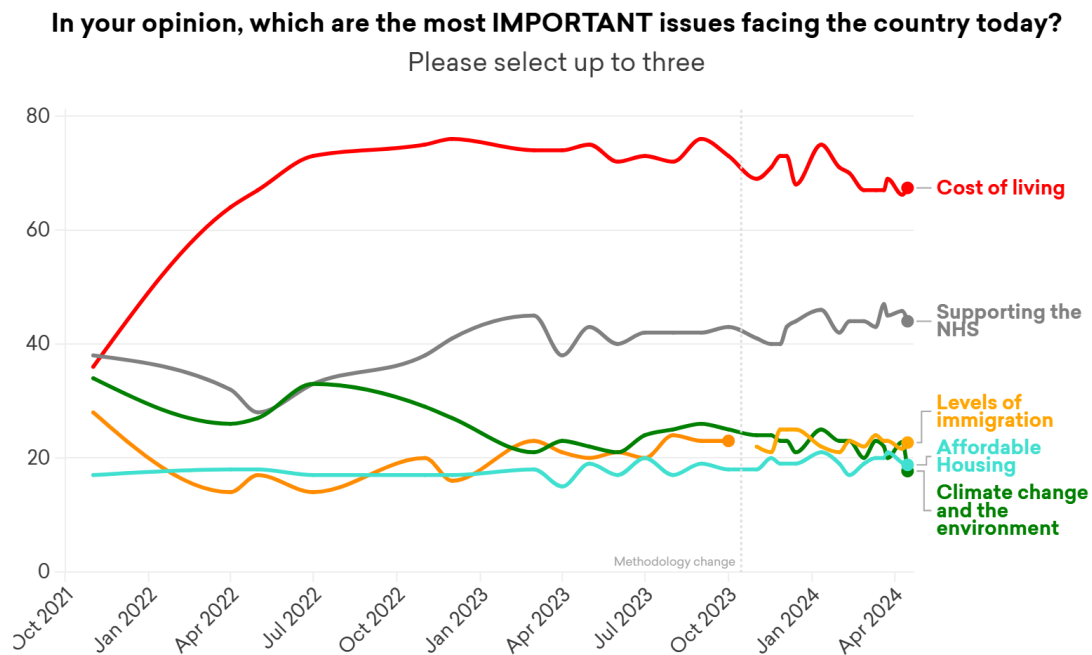
Labour was rewarded more for public-service focused NHS messaging. NHS messaging leads to an increase in likelihood to vote Labour among more traditionally Conservative voting segments – including the typical Blue-Wall Established Liberal segment and more traditional Backbone Conservative segment. The competency benefit of appearing as a “government-in-waiting” is likely to be part of the appeal to these voters, alongside reflecting their concerns about the NHS – which sits as the second most important issue to the public, after cost of living, with every single segment.

While culture war messaging from Labour appeals to its ideological base, it alienates voters at the edges of the Labour coalition who will determine the scope of any Labour victory. For Labour to gain a workable majority in

Parliament, it needs a broad coalition of voters spread efficiently in seats across the country rather than amassing votes among its base concentrated in a smaller number of constituencies. Focusing on bread-and-butter NHS messaging rather than more divisive culture war messaging will help Labour have a more efficient spread of the vote across the country.

The Conservatives do not see an immediate uplift in likelihood to vote Conservative by focusing on their core economic messaging, however unlike the culture war messaging they also do not see any negative impact on the public's likelihood to vote for them. From focus group conversations this lack of immediate credit for talking about the economy is rooted in the fact that the Conservatives are the incumbent party and as such "the economy is their responsibility". However, that doesn't mean that the Conservatives can afford to stop talking about the economy, given its central importance to the public. The cost of living is consistently the highest issue of public concern – and has been for the past two years. If the Conservatives are to have any hope of electoral recovery it is likely to be rooted firmly in an economic recovery that the Party is able to take credit for. As the Randomised Control Trial shows, culture war messaging is likely to undermine their ability to do so and distract from that core strategy.

Figure 5



Section 2: Why don't culture wars work electorally?

Attempts by politicians to use cultural divides often fail to win over more than a very narrow swathe of their own most ardent supporters, and either fail to move or alienate a broader portion of the public. Swing voters and undecided voters – who both of the main parties need in order to form a majority – often aren't attracted by a focus on these more culturally-charged and divisive issues.

Three reasons explain why culture war strategies fail to engage voters. First, many voters are cynical about politicians' rationale for exploiting cultural issues for political gain, and many see their attempts as inauthentic. Second, voters see politicians' engaging in culture war debates as a sign of desperation and lack of seriousness – while many participating in culture war debates might see it as an opportunity to project strength, many voters see it as a sign of weakness. Third, culture wars don't land with the public because voters are more worried about day-to-day concerns such as the cost of living and the NHS, and want a sober debate about issues such as levels of migration.

Beyond electoral politics there are broader reasons why culture wars fail to resonate. First, it is clear from conversations with the public that the terminology and language used by participants in culture wars are poorly understood. Second, most of the public don't instinctively connect a bundle of issues under a "culture war umbrella" – and instead consider individual issues on their merits. This is a product of the fact that most Britons do not have "stacked identities" and as such what they think about one part of a cultural debate is not necessarily predictive of how they think about other elements of other cultural debates.

Reason 1: Voters see through inauthentic engagement in culture war debates

Most people do not think politicians engage with cultural issues authentically and instead view their rhetoric and campaigning tactics as "playing to the crowd" or "jumping on the bandwagon". When material of politicians talking about culture war issues was shown in focus group conversations, most participants did not see it as reflecting what they really thought. Instead, the politicians motivation for talking about the topic was most often viewed as a tactic to fill the space when they had nothing else to say.

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It looked like [Rishi Sunak] was playing to a crowd and that does seem to be quite old fashioned... I think that [coming out as transgender] must be a very difficult process to go through... so to almost belittle people who've made certain choices and dismiss it is very disrespectful.

Richard, 56, Wokingham

I think that often they use tactics to try and distract us and I'm often wondering – so while we're all looking that way following all the scandal that's going on, then part of me always thinks, 'well, what are we being distracted from? What are they hiding?'

Lauren, 37, Wokingham

It's like hot potato politics. It's a statement that's getting made to polarise the population where maybe certain areas of the country will vote a certain way to that statement. And it's like a cheap way to try and win somebody's vote.

Gareth, 52, Blyth

I personally feel like this immigration issue is just being used as a divide and conquer tactic and as a distraction issue while they're getting away with all the other stuff behind the scenes that they're doing.

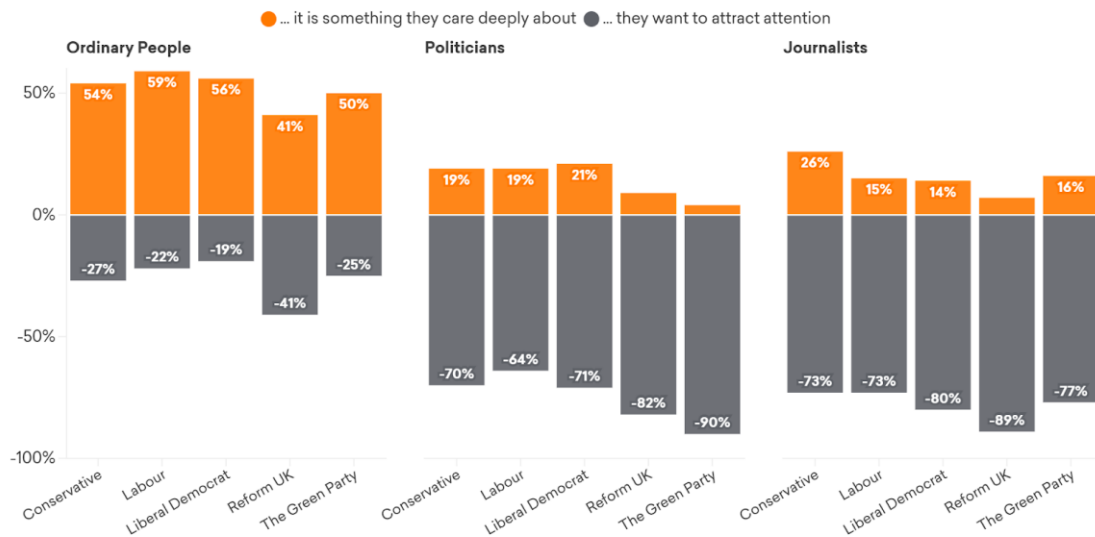
Chris, 42, Calder Valley

The public overwhelmingly believe that politicians and journalists who talk about divisive issues do so because they want to attract attention (66 per cent and 70 per cent respectively). The same is true of the public's view of those politicians and journalists who push "diversity" issues (63 per cent and 69 per cent). That contrasts with ordinary people talking about divisive issues or pushing diversity – in this case, most of the public think they do so because it is something they care deeply about (51 per cent and 45 per cent).

Figure 6

Which of the following comes closest to your view?

Ordinary people / Politicians / Journalists usually talk about divisive issues because...

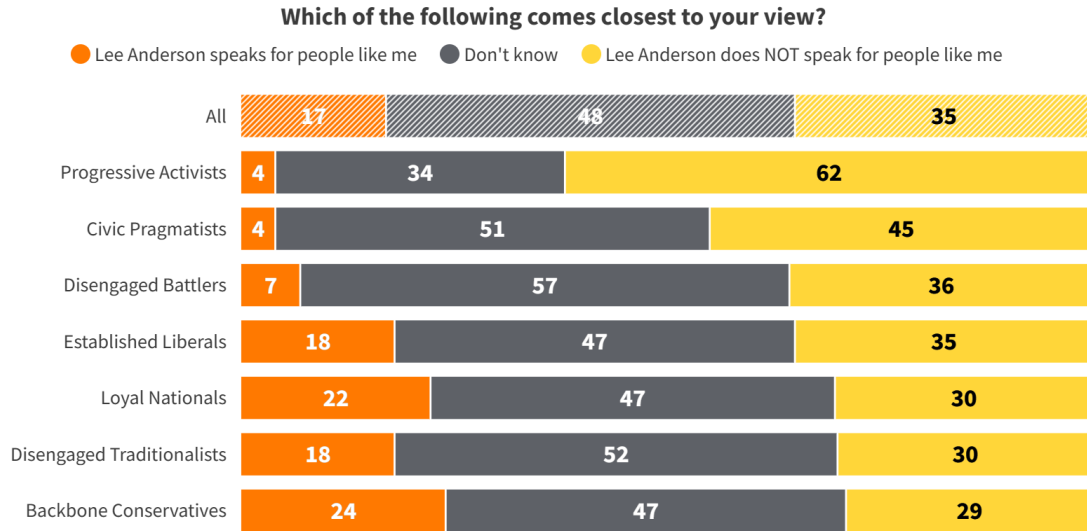


Source: More in Common, March 2024

Voters view politicians' engagement on these issues through a cynical lens. In a low-trust environment the public don't believe politicians are looking out for or speaking up on behalf of them and their interests.

It is sometimes assumed by commentators that those politicians who use the most inflammatory language or who seek to make culture wars part of their brand are the closest to public opinion. However, this is rarely the case in reality. Lee Anderson – the Reform UK MP – is a case in point. Anderson is well known for having boycotted the 2021 Euros over footballers taking the knee and for other comments suggesting London mayor Sadiq Khan is controlled by Islamists or that nurses should not need to use food banks. He has also often been held up as an example of an MP who speaks for ordinary working people. However, only 17 per cent of the public say that Lee Anderson speaks for people like them. Even among the Loyal National segment, (the group of voters who best reflect the socially conservative but economically left-leaning group who switched from Labour to the Conservatives in 2019 delivering their victory in places like the Red Wall), only 22 per cent say Anderson speaks for people like them. **Rather than being an authentic “voice of the people”, most voters – including those in the Red Wall - are more likely to say that divisive figures like Lee Anderson “don't speak for them.”**

Figure 7



Source: More in Common, March 2024

Instead, when asked about the ideal qualities for a politician (either a party leader or local member of parliament), the public place a far greater premium on their representatives being “trustworthy” and showing “honesty” and “integrity.” These are qualities which many voters do not see reflected in politicians adopting a more culture war approach.

Figure 8

In one or two words, what qualities do you think are most important for a politician [who leads a national party // in your local area] to have?



Reason 2: Culture wars make politicians seem desperate

Voters from across the political spectrum believe that adopting culture war tactics is a sign of desperation. In conversation the public expressed frustration that when politicians choose to focus attention on issues like renaming streets or banning drag shows it is a sign that politicians had little else left to talk about.

In a focus group conversation in the Spring of 2024 with 2019 Conservative voters in Calder Valley (half of whom were undecided and half of whom had switched to Labour), participants were shown a [Conservative campaign advert](#) on crime and ULEZ enforcement in London. Most participants viewed the ad as a sign of desperation from the Conservatives (including the American narration) and many found the claims such as ULEZ enforcement leading to “empty streets” across London to verge on the ridiculous.

I think it's desperate...they've focused on London because it's the only thing that they can do. It's just trying to put the fear up people and that's totally the wrong way to do it. Why are you trying to scare people? You're supposed to be trying to win voters... Why are they trying to reverse it and put fear in people when they should be selling the good that they can or will do.

Dan, 38, Calder Valley

I think it was used as a scare tactic, definitely. And it's just trying to put fear into people and then saying the streets are completely empty, but if you go to London, the street's are not completely empty at all.

Rachael, 33, Calder Valley

Like I said, it's just a scare tactic, isn't it? It's just like what the other ones said... the streets aren't going to be empty in London. So it's a bit pointless really, a bit ridiculous.

Naomi, 31, Calder Valley

This reflects a broader trend from our focus groups that instead of being a projection of strength from politicians, voters see culture war tactics as a sign of political weakness or that politicians have run out of ideas.

It would seem that the Tories have thrown in the towel and they've got nothing left to talk about, but they do have power. They can cut taxes if they wanted to, that could be a vote winner, they could implement a few other policies just to keep people happy. But I don't think campaigning gay rights is going to get people coming to the polling station, saying, yeah, yeah, yeah, look at me. I'll be blue. Barking up the wrong tree here... leave it for the Looney Party, which is what they've now become I think.

Philip, 56, Wokingham

Reason 3: Day to day concerns matter more

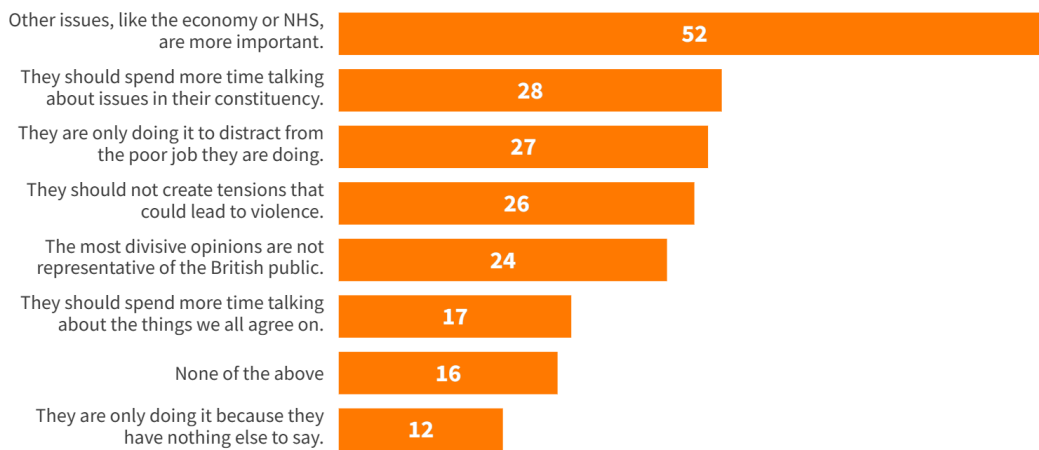
Culture war debates also backfire with the public because they want politicians to focus on issues which the public view as more important. This desire for politicians to focus their time and efforts on issues such as the economy or the NHS rather than more divisive and tangential cultural debates is driven by the relevance these issues have to people's day-to-day lives. For most people, issues like renaming streets or banning drag shows are peripheral, compared to

action to tackle rising supermarket prices or ensuring that those who need a GP appointment can get one.

Figure 9

Below are a set of arguments for why politicians should not speak about potentially divisive social and cultural issues. How convincing, if at all, do you find the following arguments?

Politicians should not speak about potentially divisive social and cultural issues because...



I think that there are much more pressing issues that could be dealt with... we could be progressing like changes like the economy, like the NHS, like immigration, like knife crime – I just can't see how that's come to the top of the list.

Lauren, 37, Wokingham

Culture wars fail to resonate beyond electoral politics

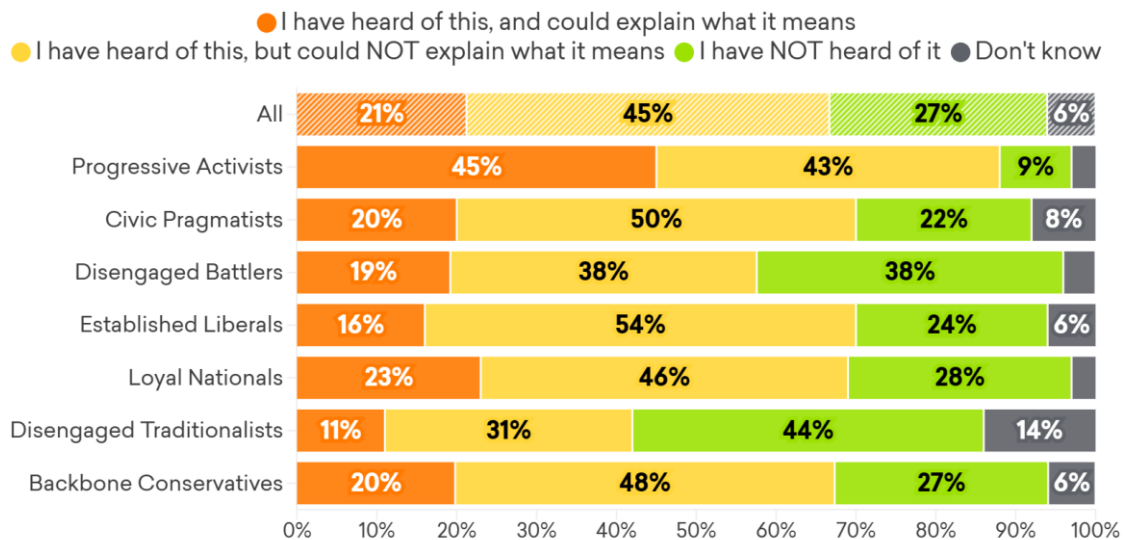
The limited appeal of culture wars goes far beyond electoral politics. More in Common has [written extensively about why culture wars fail to resonate with the broader public](#). Most people are not engaged in the specifics of these debates, and do not understand the terminology used in these debates. Most people also do not connect culture war issues under a monolithic “culture wars umbrella” and take a blanket liberal or conservative stance; instead, most people consider each issue on its merits. Unlike in the United States, what

Britons think about one cultural debate is not necessarily predictive of how they think about other cultural debates.

“Culture wars” is a term that is widely known but poorly understood – politicians may misunderstand the public mood because of this disconnect in language. Knowledge of culture wars is highest among the Progressive Activist segment (who are highly politically engaged and take part in online debates) – among all the other segments, only around one in five people can explain what a culture war is. Most of the public also do not think that terms like “woke” are helpful in understanding political debates.

Figure 10

How familiar are you with the term ‘culture wars’?



Source: More in Common, March 2024

While the public don’t consider culture war issues under one umbrella term, they are more likely to see a “cancel culture” across a range of issues and areas, and are worried about being too critical of others, regardless of the issue at hand. The public are more likely to say that people losing their jobs for their past mistakes is a step too far (41 per cent) as opposed to a valid form of public accountability (34 per cent). Previous [More in Common research with the University of Oxford and UCL Policy Lab](#) has shown that the majority of the public believe it is unhelpful to criticise people for making mistakes on diversity issues as it is more likely to make them feel embarrassed or stupid.

In focus group conversations, there was a sense among many participants that people nowadays are too easily offended and cancel others too quickly. This

made participants across groups feel uncomfortable and occasionally resentful. Campaigners and politicians should work to create an environment where people aren't afraid to ask questions or respectfully (and even forcefully) express their opinion about controversial issues. Avoiding culture war dynamics does not mean taking issues off the table, but instead ensuring they are discussed in ways which help reach solutions rather than promoting division.

We're a soft touch unfortunately, we need to do some serious changing of our rules, but people are too soft, they just won't do it – they'll upset someone, they've got to get the balance right and you can't say this, you can't do that. We're too soft I'm afraid.

Mark, 60, Wokingham

I think things have changed for the better. The government I think are still a little bit behind. But my issue with it is people nowadays are just finding any reason to be offended.

Matthew, 48, Wokingham

It's like if you don't agree with everything it's automatically like, 'oh well you just must hate everyone then.' ... You've just got to be so careful about what you say in any sort of setting these days, people can find anything to be upset about.

Erin, 25, Blyth

For many people, even the notion of a culture war basket of issues is an alien concept. Unlike those who are very highly engaged, most of **the public don't view culture wars under a single umbrella to which they take a single conservative or liberal approach. Instead they approach them on an issues-by-issue basis.** Many people will take a position one way on a particular culture war issue, and lean the other way or not care at all about a different culture war issue. The lack of stacked identities means people are more likely to approach each debate on its merits and to be suspicious of those who take a single unbending ideological line across issues.

One of the mistakes that advocates for culture war electoral strategies make is failing to recognise that the public are much less partisan than most political campaigners, and most of the public's partisan political identity is much less important to the way they see the world than other parts of their identity – such as their family or work.

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These dynamics play out in specific cultural debates in the UK – from dealing with racial injustice and Britain’s history to debates about gender identity. While people are slightly more likely to support “taking the knee” to protest racial injustice than not (34 per cent support, 32 per cent oppose), Britons are much less likely support renaming streets and landmarks to celebrate diversity (23 per cent support, 44 per cent oppose) and paying reparations to descendants of slaves (24 per cent support, 41 per cent oppose).

There are also a range of opinions on gender identity issues which reveal the nuance within issues. Protecting single sex spaces is an issue which most people support (76 per cent support, 6 per cent oppose) and permitting transgender women to participate in women-only sport is something which doesn’t command public support (63 per cent oppose, 15 per cent support). However, the public are more evenly split on the use of a transgender person’s preferred pronouns (39 per cent say it’s a form of basic decency and respect, 35 per cent say it compels speech that can go against your personal beliefs, and 26 per cent say they don’t know). This nuance is also reflected in focus group conversations where participants take an issue-by-issue approach to the gender identity debate – trusting professionals to make evidence-based decisions in health, sport and education, rather than seeing the debate as a political football.

As I said about trans, it’s not a subject that should really be discussed as part of the politics I don’t think - it just makes you wonder whether or not the people that’s making these decisions have been in that situation themselves or had any family experience to understand it fully.

Simone, 53, Blyth

Section 3: Moving beyond culture wars

Public opinion suggests that electoral strategies centred on culture wars are unlikely to be an effective vote winning strategy at the ballot box. How then can candidates and activists avoid falling into the rhetoric and campaigning tactics that might generate headlines and excite the base but leave the rest of the electorate feeling cold? The following recommendations are a starting point to help campaigners better navigate cultural debates and better reflect the public's values and viewpoints in the process.

Recommendation 1: Talking about the issues that matter most to the public

Polling and focus group conversations show that when it comes to the public's priorities the same issues emerge repeatedly – the cost of living, NHS appointments and waiting lists, levels of immigration, the environment and crime. More abstract or niche culture war debates are not as relevant to voters who are facing real challenges in their day-to-day lives.

In focus group conversations, voters express frustration with politicians pushing culture war issues because the list of challenges Britain faces is too great to be sidelined by a focus on what they felt were confected debates. None of that is to say that cultural issues don't matter, or that there aren't very real debates to be had and issues to be worked through on topics like gender identity or addressing the legacy of colonialism. But often these issues will not be best dealt with through trying to create electoral wedges. Instead, politicians need to ensure they get the balance right – in both doorstep conversations with voters and broader manifestos and policy platforms, the everyday concerns of the public should be front and centre.

Would [culture wars] sway my decision on what party to vote for? No, it wouldn't... I need a lot more than that, need a lot more about the manifestos of what they're going to try and do.

Gareth, 52, Blyth

I would vote for someone that I thought was going to affect my life and I'm not sure how the naming of a London Underground line would change my life at all. And I don't even think the transgender vote would change my life.

Steven, 42, Blyth

There's much more important issues going on in the UK than that. So I would be looking at how they were going to fix the economy, how they were going to help poverty, how they were going to help sort homelessness, those kinds of issues would sway it for me.

Leigh, 45, Blyth

I think there's more important things going on that people should be more aware of. For example, the NHS, if that's going to go down, then most of the country's going to go down, then the debt that you're going to get into for paying for your healthcare, it's going to go on a worse spiral than a culture issue. A culture issue doesn't really matter compared to the bigger problems that people have.

Rachael, 33, Calder Valley

Recommendation 2: Keep it local

The public express a preference for and are more likely to read campaigning material which focuses on local priorities and making people's every day better. Leaflets focusing on culture wars are more likely to be thrown in the bin.

Localising national policy platforms is a well-trodden campaign strategy and with good reason – the public want to hear how they and their communities will benefit, whether that's improving the local high street, attracting a new local dentist or tackling vandalism of community parks.

The public are much more positive about their local area than Britain as a whole. In previous More in Common research, when asked to describe Britain in 2023 in a word, the public's overwhelming response was 'broken'. When asked to describe their local area in a word, the public's responses are much more positive. Localising campaigning also provides an opportunity to unlock that optimism against a broader background of cynicism.

Recommendation 4: Take an issue-by-issue approach

Unlike other countries such as the United States, Britons tend not to have “stacked identities” where their position on one issue is highly predictive of their position on a different issue. Instead, most of the British public approach cultural debates on their individual merits rather than defaulting to a liberal or conservative ideological binary. Activists and highly engaged partisans are the exception here, and their ideological rigidity can jar with public expectations.

That tendency to adopt an issue-by-issue approach even on debates which fall in the same area – for example, someone might oppose removing statues of those involved in the slave trade from the town centre, but might be more supportive of efforts to ensure the English curriculum includes authors from a more diverse range of backgrounds.

Politicians and activists should try to do the same, not by avoiding talking about contested cultural issues altogether, but instead approaching them as individual issues with tailored solutions for each.

Recommendation 5: Demonstrate decency

Even when Britons have strong defined views on social issues, they still want these issues to be approached fairly and with kindness and compassion. When politicians forget this they tend to fall on the wrong side of public opinion – forgetting that for much of the public, being tough does not equate to being unkind, nor do the public want to see debates personalised and trivialised.

Two recent examples of campaigners and politicians getting this wrong include Suella Braverman calling homelessness a “lifestyle choice” and the Labour Party’s campaigning materials using images of Rishi Sunak to suggest he was personally responsible for child murderers evading proper justice. In both cases, conversations with the public found that they felt politicians had crossed a line of basic decency and kindness towards others, and felt less well disposed to them as a result.

Politicians will better engage the public, particularly on more divisive issues, if they do so in a way which is seen to align with the rules of fairplay. In the case of the Sunak crime posters, attacking the Conservatives on crime is clearly fair game and something you would expect from a political party – but laying

individual blame for sentencing at the feet of the Prime Minister, and using his image to do so, is not.

Voters in Loughborough react to Suella Braverman's comments that homelessness is a lifestyle choice

I think maybe 99% of them probably do not want to live like that. So I don't think that was a good comment to make and I think that would be a bit degrading for the people who are struggling to pay the bills and therefore having to be homeless.

Harvinder, 52, Loughborough

I don't think she even believes it herself. She's been out there for a job to whip up a few fires basically, I don't think she believes everything she says on immigration, but she's that pit bull.

Ollie, 32, Loughborough

Voters in Erewash react to a [Labour attack ad](#) on Rishi Sunak

For me it kind of makes me lose respect for the Labour Party because it looks desperate like they're trying to do anything because Labour never wins does it? So to me looks really desperate that they're just sort of trying to throw anything at the wall to see what sticks because they're trying to discredit him so then it makes them look better. But it's just, because like everyone said, it's not up to him, is it? He's not the jury, he's not the crown court. Nothing to do with him is it? So it just kind of lacks credibility and it kind of makes anything else that they put out not to take it very seriously because there's obviously no substance to it.

Shawn, 34, Erewash

I think it's totally inappropriate to say that and I think its shock tactics to me it strikes it very, very bad...they haven't read the situation at all.

Julie, 45, Erewash

Recommendation 6: Create space for debate

Some of the issues that fall under a culture war banner genuinely involve difficult topics which touch on issues of identity, pride, justice and respect.

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People's notions and conception of these issues may well be contested and it is wrong to suggest that they should be entirely removed from the political arena, or that the solution to culture wars is "no debate."

Being seen to attempt to "silence" particular groups or to dismiss concerns as either zealous or bigotry are unlikely to command public support and build public trust. A better approach is to attempt to bring people onto your side by engaging in a good faith debate rather than excluding them from the conversation.

Political campaigners can both role model and actively create an environment that is conducive to civil debate on contested issues. Avoiding personalising debates, bundling together disparate issues, or creating false binaries – while engaging with arguments on the merits – is far more likely to lead to better resolutions of contested debates and help tackle public cynicism.

We come from a democracy where we try to talk about things, we try to negotiate things. - when a cultural war starts going down the road of the winner take all mentality there's no sort of common ground, it's 'I'm right or I'm wrong' and it's kind of black and white.

Gareth, 52, Blyth

It doesn't always have to be right and wrong and black and white, just be open-minded and listen to people's opinions.

Chris, 42, Calder Valley

We would probably 95% agree on so many things and 5% disagree and it's that 5% that they are focused on and highlight and make you hate each other.

Matthew, 46, Calder Valley

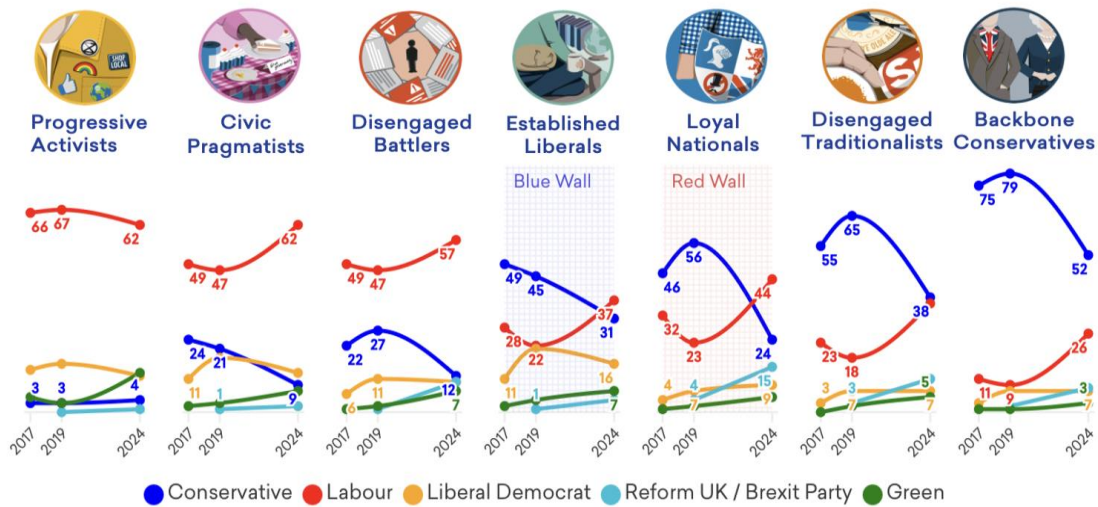
Annex A: British Seven Segments

In pursuit of a more evidence-based understanding of how we find common ground on polarising issues, More in Common launched the Britain's Choice project in 2020. This project centres its analysis of issues on the values, identity and worldview of Britons, captured in seven population segments through a methodology designed in partnership with data scientists, social psychologists and other experts. It integrates insights from six dimensions of social psychology that shape the way that people see the world and orient themselves towards society. This mapping has been carried out using multiple waves of quantitative and qualitative research, building on the approach used by More in Common in other major western democracies. The six areas of social psychology are:

- **Group identity and tribalism:** the extent to which people identify with different groups based on nationality, gender, political party, ethnicity, and other factors
- **Group favouritism:** views on who is favoured and who is mistreated in society
- **Threat perception:** the extent to which people see the world as a dangerous place
- **Parenting styles:** research suggests that basic philosophies regarding people's approach to parenting can have predictive power in explaining their attitudes towards public policies and authority more generally
- **Moral Foundations:** the extent to which people endorse certain moral values or 'foundations', including fairness, care, purity, authority, and loyalty
- **Personal agency:** the extent to which people view personal success as the product of individual factors (i.e. hard work and discipline) versus societal factors (i.e. luck and circumstance)

The 'British Seven' segments are often more useful in understanding people's views across a wide range of issues than standard ways of categorising people, such as their voting history, partisan identity or demographic characteristics such as age, income, social grade, race or gender. Understanding the specific 'wiring' of each of these groups 'upstream' allows us to better understand and predict how they will respond to different sets of issues 'downstream'.

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Progressive Activists

A passionate and vocal group for whom politics is at the core of their identity, and who seek to correct the historic marginalisation of groups based on their race, gender, sexuality, wealth, and other forms of privilege. They are politically engaged, critical, opinionated, frustrated, cosmopolitan, and environmentally conscious.

Progressive Activists are often outliers on values – unlike other groups, they primarily see the world through the moral foundations of care and fairness and have much lower reliance on the moral foundations of purity, loyalty and authority. Compared to other groups, Progressive Activists feel less threatened in the world and in their community. They consider that outcomes in life to be more defined by social forces and less by personal responsibility. Although they are a higher-earning segment, many of them consider this to be down to good luck than individual effort. They have the lowest authoritarian tendencies of any group.

Civic Pragmatists

A group that cares about others, at home or abroad, and who are turned off by the divisiveness of politics. They are charitable, concerned, community-minded, open to compromise and socially liberal. Civic Pragmatists have a similar values foundation to the Progressive Activist group in prioritising care and fairness, but they channel their energies into community and voluntary work, rather than political activism. They are also set apart from Progressive Activists (and some of the other segments) by their higher-than-average levels of threat perception.

Disengaged Battlers

A group that feels that they are just about keeping their heads above water and who believe their struggles are the result of an unfair, rigged system. They are insecure, disillusioned, disconnected, overlooked but also tolerant and socially liberal. They are a low-trust group with a tendency to ignore civic messaging (they are joint most likely to have not been vaccinated for Covid-19). Their overarching sense that the system is broken drives their disengagement from their communities and the broader democratic system with which they see 'no point' in engaging.

Established Liberals

A group that has done well with an optimistic outlook that sees a lot of good in the status quo. They are comfortable, among the more privileged, cosmopolitan, trusting, liberal, confident and pro-market. They have low authoritarian tendencies and the lowest threat perception of any segment – which is reflected in their broad support for diversity, multi-culturalism, and sense that their local community is neither dangerous nor neglected.

Loyal Nationals

A group that is anxious about the threats facing Britain and themselves. They are proud, patriotic, tribal, protective, threatened, aggrieved and frustrated about the gap between the haves and the have-nots. They feel the 'care' and 'fairness' moral foundations more strongly than other groups. Their key orientation is that of group identity – belonging to a group (and particularly their nation) is important to Loyal Nationals. This strong in-group identity shapes their equally strong feelings of threat from outsiders. This in turn can drive their support for more authoritarian, populist leadership.

Disengaged Traditionalists

A group that values a well-ordered society, takes pride in hard work and wants strong leadership that keeps people in line. They are self-reliant, ordered, patriotic, tough-minded, suspicious, and disconnected. They place a strong emphasis on personal responsibility, are mindful of others' behaviour and rely much more on individual rather than systemic explanations for how people's lives turn out. When they think about social and political debates, they often consider issues through a lens of suspicion towards others. They value the observance of social rules, order, and a British way of doing things, but don't play an active role in their communities – they are the least likely to eat out, visit museums or go to local libraries. They often have views on issues but tend to pay limited attention to current debates. Disengaged Traditionalists are similar to Loyal Nationals in their more authoritarian predisposition.

Backbone Conservatives

A group who are proud of their country, optimistic about Britain's future, and who keenly follow the news, mostly via traditional media sources. They are nostalgic, patriotic, stalwart, proud, secure, confident, and relatively engaged with politics. They want clear rules and strong leaders and rely heavily on individual explanations for how life turns out, with this shaping how they respond to questions about deprivation and discrimination in society.

Annex B: Randomised Control Trial Messages

Respondents were randomly allocated to one of the following campaigning messages as part of a Randomised Control Trial test:

	Conservative	Labour
Culture War	<p>Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said:</p> <p>“The next general election is going to be fought on taking our country back from the woke mob who have taken over. These people have gone mad, trying to tell us that we are a racist country, that we should be ashamed of our past, that we can’t criticise anyone or anything.</p> <p>“The Conservative Party won’t stand for this, which is why we are going to spend this campaign reminding people that if the Labour Party wins, they are going to tear down our statues and erase our history.”</p>	<p>Labour Leader Keir Starmer said:</p> <p>“The next general election is going to be fought on taking our country back from the racist and classist elite who have taken over. These people have gone mad, trying to tell us that we can’t be who we want to be, that minorities do not have a place in this country, that our diversity makes us weaker.</p> <p>“The Labour Party won’t stand for this, which is why we are going to spend this campaign reminding people that if the Conservative Party wins, they are going to let white supremacists take over.”</p>
Non-Culture War	<p>Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said:</p> <p>“The next general election is going to be fought on protecting the progress we have made on tackling inflation. We’ve seen great improvements, but the Labour Party are threatening that progress with their unfunded spending plans.</p> <p>“The Conservative Party won’t stand for this, which is why we are going to spend this campaign reminding people that if the Labour Party wins, the economy is going to suffer.”</p>	<p>Labour Leader Keir Starmer said:</p> <p>“The next general election is going to be fought on protecting the NHS. We should be proud of our national health service and everything it does for us, but the Tories have let it suffer from criminal underinvestment.</p> <p>“The Labour Party won’t stand for this, which is why we are going to spend this campaign reminding people that if the Conservative Party wins, they are going to run our NHS into the ground.”</p>
	Control: No message	

Annex C: Methodology

Quantitative Research

- Fieldwork dates: 19-20 March, 2024
- Sample size: n = 2,027
- Population effectively sampled: Adults in Great Britain (excludes Northern Ireland)
- Interview method: Online
- Weighting method: The data is weighted on several measures – age and sex interlocked, education, ethnicity, and region - all to nationally representative proportions. In addition, it is also weighted by 2019 General Election vote (of registered voters).
- Full data tables can be found at:
<https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/polling-tables/>

Qualitative Research

- Focus groups were held online in the following locations:
 - **Wokingham, February 2024** – All 2019 Conservative voters – a mix of intending to vote Liberal Democrat, Labour and Conservative at the next election. All from More in Common’s Loyal National segment. Mix of ages, genders, socio-economic background and ethnicities.
 - **Blyth, February 2024** – 2019 Conservative voters who now intend to vote Labour. All from More in Common’s Loyal National segment. Mix of ages, genders, socio-economic background and ethnicities.
 - **Calder Valley, April 2024** – 2019 Conservative voters – half now intending to vote Labour, half undecided. Mix of ages, genders, socio-economic background and ethnicities.

Additional insights were used from More in Common’s focus groups conducted in 2023.



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