Outrage, Offence and Common Sense
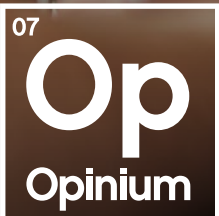
Public Opinion on Political Correctness in the United Kingdom

Sophia Gaston

FOREWORD

This analysis paper presents the results of a survey designed and conducted as a joint project between Opinium Research and social researcher Sophia Gaston, on the subject of political correctness.

Note: This research is intended to capture longer-term trends taking place in our societies. The survey at its heart was conducted prior to the European elections, and therefore does not reflect the emergence of the Brexit Party. Given our understanding of the distribution of voting behaviour during these recent elections, we can expect that these voters' preferences are captured in the views of UKIP and Conservative voters expressed within this survey.

About the Author

Sophia Gaston

 Sophia Gaston is a social and political researcher, who conducts international projects on public opinion, specialising in both qualitative fieldwork and quantitative analysis. Sophia's work is especially focused on social and political change, populism, the media and democracy - with a focus on threats to governance in Western nations. She is the Director of the British Foreign Policy Group, an independent think tank focusing on advancing knowledge and debate around Britain's international affairs. She is also a Research Fellow in the Institute for Global Affairs at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and an Academic Fellow at the European Policy Centre in Brussels.

CONTEMPORARY DEBATES ON 'POLITICAL CORRECTNESS'

Author's note

Despite its acute lack of a common definition, 'political correctness' has come to stand at the heart of the existential debates playing out within liberal Western democracies – a critical underpinning of both the rising levels of political partisanship and seething social tensions transforming our public sphere. Reaching a fever pitch in the digital age, it preoccupies all facets of the political spectrum, with libertarians, liberals, social activists, conservatives and populists all claiming a stake.

While it can feel as though it cuts to the very heart of the contemporary culture wars, political correctness is not a new phenomenon – indeed, its roots lie in the ironic counter-movements of the Left in the 1970s, and it has been a mainstay of debates around the American higher education system since the late-1980s[1]. Nonetheless, its centrality to political and social debate feels especially salient in this moment of heightened political dysfunction across the West.

There are a number of critical social and demographic developments underpinning the heated discussion around political correctness. The coming-of-age of the Millennial generation, which now rivals the previously dominant Baby Boomers as the largest cohort in many Western nations[2], has created fertile ground for dynamic social activism on a scale not seen since the 1960s. Having grown up in an era where the empowerment of many groups long-excluded from the mainstream has become part of the social fabric, many Millennials regard liberalising moments as a part of their DNA. In turn, having reached retirement age, many once-radical, now comfortable Baby Boomers feel an instinctive pull to defend the system that they helped to build and have benefited from.

The rise of social media has also added a tremendous degree of fuel to the fire in the 'culture wars' between progressives and conservatives, enabling reports of individual incidents of conflict to spread like wildfire through international communities of outrage. In the online space, anonymity affords protection for speech that falls outside the realm of acceptable discourse; equally, mobilised groups of protest can move swiftly to tear down those whose transgressions rise above the parapet. Emotional content – whether positive or negative – is the grist to the social media mill, and the debates around political correctness, sensitive as they are to issues of existential importance to all sides, provide the perfect fodder.

On a structural level, the expansion of the role of the state in arbitrating public and private social behaviour has been critical to liberating women and other previously disadvantaged groups from second-tier status. Over three decades of seismic progress, Western societies have embedded the rights, representation and empowerment of such groups in legislation, in institutional and company policies, and also in our shared expectations of social conduct. We have dramatically broadened the legal purview of hate crimes, harassment and social harm, with a view to overcoming long-established barriers to participation. While citizens generally support these legal frameworks[3], the civic enforcement of the social 'ecosystem' around them – crudely, the 'grey area' outside of legal accountability – is the space where conflict germinates.

'Political correctness' is not a new phenomenon.

The contemporary debates about political correctness reflect the shifting dynamics at play between the Left and the Right, liberals and conservatives, in Western political systems. While once the Left sought to subvert normative standards of discourse and the institutions that upheld them, they now often find themselves standing on the defensive frontline. This about-turn partly reflects the success of progressives in mainstreaming liberalism, the protection of rights and the empowerment of disadvantaged groups within political cultures. Having become the architects of the dominant doctrine, they are now forced to guard against it.

Conservatives argue that liberalism's foundational, Enlightenment values, have come into conflict with progressives' contemporary values of identity recognition.

Their hyper-consciousness of pluralism and intersectionality, and their acute sensitivity towards perceived transgressions without acknowledgement of intent, can in fact encourage illiberal responses – for example, 'shutting down' debate or favouring censorship. In return, liberals contest that only through a taking a tough line with universal enforcement, will we begin to provoke the deep level of psychological, sociological and political change needed to encourage a more egalitarian society.

Their symbolism as bastions of liberal thought means university campuses have become the ground zero of debates around political correctness, and particularly for criticisms of acts of 'liberal illiberalism'. Outrage coagulates around incidents of academic censorship – whether stories of speakers being 'no-platformed' on university campus for their 'offensive' or 'dangerous' views, or academic staff losing tenure or fellowships, due to contemporary or past indiscretions. Many of these specific scenarios have been complex in nature, others less so, but all have been squeezed into the binary framework of current discussion around this deeply polarising issue.
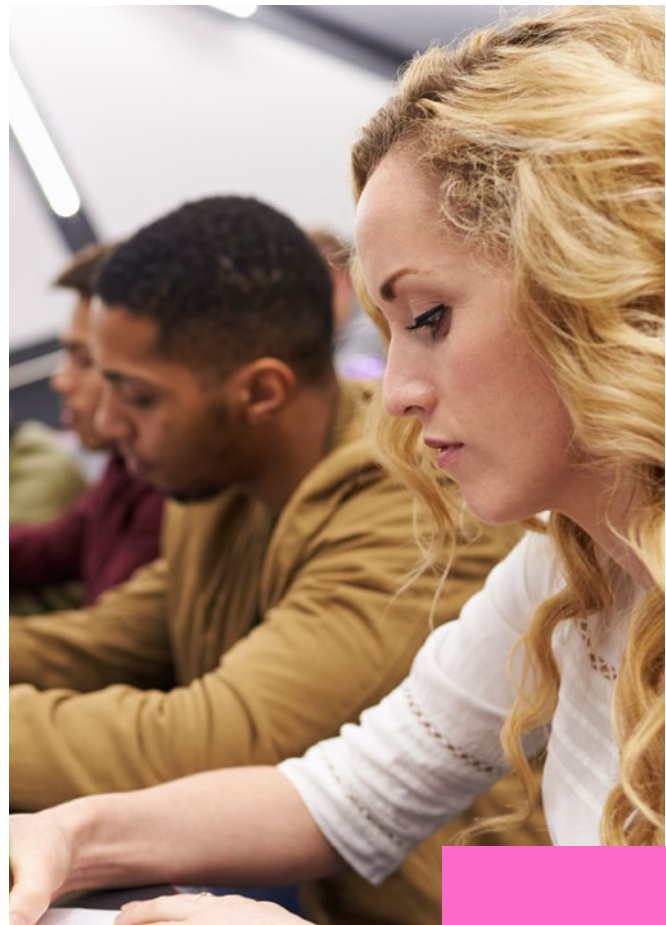
In response to what they see as a 'suffocating' culture of political correctness suppressing freedom of thought in universities, Republican strategists in the United States now speak openly about their desire to build an entirely new system of further education that would focus on promoting 'conservative' principles of scholarship[4].

Universities also find themselves particularly implicated in these debates as institutions that play a critical role in shaping our understanding of, and relationship to, our history. The Western trajectory of social liberalism has encouraged us to revisit past wrongs, and to reconsider many of the foundational aspects of our advanced democracies in the cold light of modern mores. Statues and monuments to great men of the past now stand as shameful reminders of the crimes of slavery, the suppression of women, the achievements forged on the back of human abuse and degradation. The debates around political correctness ask us to consider whether their ongoing presence act as barriers to us moving forward as societies – a reflection of our enduring instinct to praise the ends and not the means – or whether they should they continue to stand for their immense historical significance, and for their capacity to reinforce the mixed origins of our contemporary societies.

The growing awareness of the discrimination experienced by minority groups has also contributed to the development of a 'safe space' culture, which intends to draw boundaries around physical or conceptual spaces, and ensure that they are free from stress and harm for their inhabitants. For those who feel they need to go through life constantly adjusting or repressing their true selves due to the constraints of social judgement, these safe spaces can represent an oasis of belonging. Critics of safe spaces, however, regard them as emblematic of a liberal culture that shields citizens from challenging concepts and viewpoints.

Amongst ordinary people, many of the concerns I hear expressed in my focus groups across Europe about political correctness stem from fears about the pace and nature of change taking place in our societies, and the permissive attitude of politicians towards these. They perceive a sense of lawlessness, of fluidity and changeability, which feels threatening in its ever-expanding scope – the stress of constant adaptation to the new boundaries of civility. The empowerment dividend of political correctness does not feel evenly shared; for those who do not consider that they had power in the previous hierarchy, but perhaps a sense of belonging or security, this new landscape appears to bring others up while they stagnate or fall behind.

The debates around political correctness ask us to consider whether their ongoing presence act as barriers to us moving forward as societies.

There is broad recognition of the gains that have been made by eradicating the overt sexism, racism and prejudice that was commonplace in times past: nobody wants to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Nonetheless, when compelled to draw the line between the capacity of political correctness to act as a force for good or a force for bad, the words 'common sense' inevitably cry out. Yet, as our societies become increasingly diverse, across many levels of demographics and lived experience, finding the common heart of common sense too becomes fraught. Moreover, in an age of populism, common sense also takes on an exclusionary nature, implying that citizens themselves are more capable of adjudicating on such issues that policy-makers, scientists and other experts who may build their case on evidence or broader social concerns.

The debates around political correctness operate at the sharp edges of the fragility and fragmentation plaguing our contemporary societies and our political cultures.

They tell us much about the distribution of both cultural and institutional power, where social liberalism has been deeply felt or remains shallow, and the successes and failures of political change management.

Many of the great social achievements of human history that define what we like to think of as our great Western culture have been forged through struggle and conflict, and have only been made possible through the efforts of visionary leaders who championed ideas that broke the mould of social hegemony and political logic. Particularly in a time where a sense of national community feels difficult to conjure, we should not be surprised that this period of accelerated liberalism is encountering resistance, and that the gains it hopes to achieve can be perceived to be asymmetrically distributed. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise all voices in these debates and to consider how change can be managed more inclusively.

This analysis paper seeks to add some empirical basis to our understanding of this deeply complicated subject in modern Britain, and the myriad related issues around our social and political dynamics that the political correctness debate conceals. Overall, it finds a country united in unexpected ways, and deeply polarised in others – with clear dividing lines around age, gender, socio-economic status and political affiliation. The weight of feeling across society on the issues at the heart of political correctness suggests that discussions about the boundaries of acceptable language and behaviour, and the delicate balance between civil liberties and social protection, will continue to play an important role in Britain's political life for some time to come.

Sophia Gaston, 2019

THE SURVEY

To better explore the pulse of UK public opinion on this sensitive issue, I partnered with pollsters Opinium to conduct a nationally representative survey of British adults. The survey focused on four core strands of public opinion:

- The balance between civil liberties and protecting society from harm;

- Assessments of a range of statements about political correctness itself;

- Word association assessments of a range of controversial statements about race, gender, identity and class, all of which had the propensity to be deemed to be 'politically incorrect'; and

- Assessments of the same statements as 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' opinions to hold.

We then undertook further analysis of three significant demographic variables – gender, socio-economic grade and voting intention – alongside the variable that had revealed itself to be most consequential as a predictive determinant of responses: age.

Below I present the results of this analysis, question by question, highlighting the spread of responses across the full spectrum of demographics – including age, gender, region, and voting intention.

KEY FINDINGS

- When forced to make a choice, Britons are divided in their instincts between protecting society from harm and protecting civil liberties. Around a third of the population favours one approach or the other, with a fifth of the population unsure and 13 per cent finding no merit in either.

- The majority of British citizens (53 per cent) believe 'ordinary people/society as a whole' should be responsible for adjudicating the boundaries of acceptable language and behaviour, followed by 17 per cent who want government to take the lead.

- A majority of Britons agree that political correctness:
    - sometimes goes too far and exceeds common sense (76 per cent agree)
    - is eroding the expression of Britain's values and traditions (58 per cent agree
    - helps politicians to avoid having to address important sensitive issues (ie. integration) (55 per cent agree)

- But deep polarisation is evident around the more positive statements, as to whether political correctness also:
    - helps to create a fairer society by enabling more citizens to feel comfortable and participate to their fullest extent (40 per cent agree to 28 per cent disagree)
    - is a small price to pay for a more equal society (35 per cent agree to 30 per cent disagree)
    - protects people like me (26 per cent agree to 35 per cent disagree)

- When asked to make assessments about the nature of controversial statements on race, gender, class and history, a clear majority of Britons consistently believes these to be 'reasonable' positions, and defends the right for civil disagreement on the subjects, even if they do not agree with their sentiments. This suggests the desire for quite expansive boundaries of social debate.

- The two exceptions – particularly a statement around same-sex adoptions, but also to some degree a statement women's family role – indicate that the issues of gender equality and homosexuality are two areas where Britons are more comfortable to see political correctness as a positive force.

- The most significant demographic characteristics in determining attitudes towards political correctness are age, gender, socio-economic background and political affiliation.

- Men tend to be more defensive of free speech than women, who are generally more concerned about protecting society from harm. The gender disparities on the issue of political correctness are most acute between the older generations.

- Socio-economic background is only really significant in shaping views on political correctness for under-35s; for all other Britons, age is a more significant factor than their class background.

- Nonetheless, it is those from higher social grades who care the most about political correctness – whether to passionately defend it or rail against it.

- The most consistently libertarian and anti-political correctness voters support UKIP or the Conservative Party, and voted Leave in the EU Referendum. Labour voters are broadly the most likely to defend political correctness and favour social protections.

- Tremendous divides exist between older and younger generations of Conservative voters on these issues: younger Tories much more similar, and more liberal, in their views to other young Britons than their elder counterparts in the party.

The full survey results and demographic distinctions are outlined in the section below.

FULL RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Which of the following statements best describes your view?

'It's more important to protect all citizens from harm, even if it sometimes means limiting freedom of speech' or 'it's more important to protect free speech, even if it sometimes means exposing some citizens to harm'.

When forced to make a choice, Britons are divided in their instincts between protecting society from harm and protecting civil liberties. Around a third of the population favours one approach or the other, with a fifth of the population unsure and 13 per cent finding no merit in either.

Civil liberties vs. protecting citizens from harm

34%	33%	13%	20%
It's more important to protect all citizens from harm, even if it sometimes means limiting freedom of speech	It's more important to protect free speech, even if it sometimes means exposing some citizens to harm	Neither	Don't know
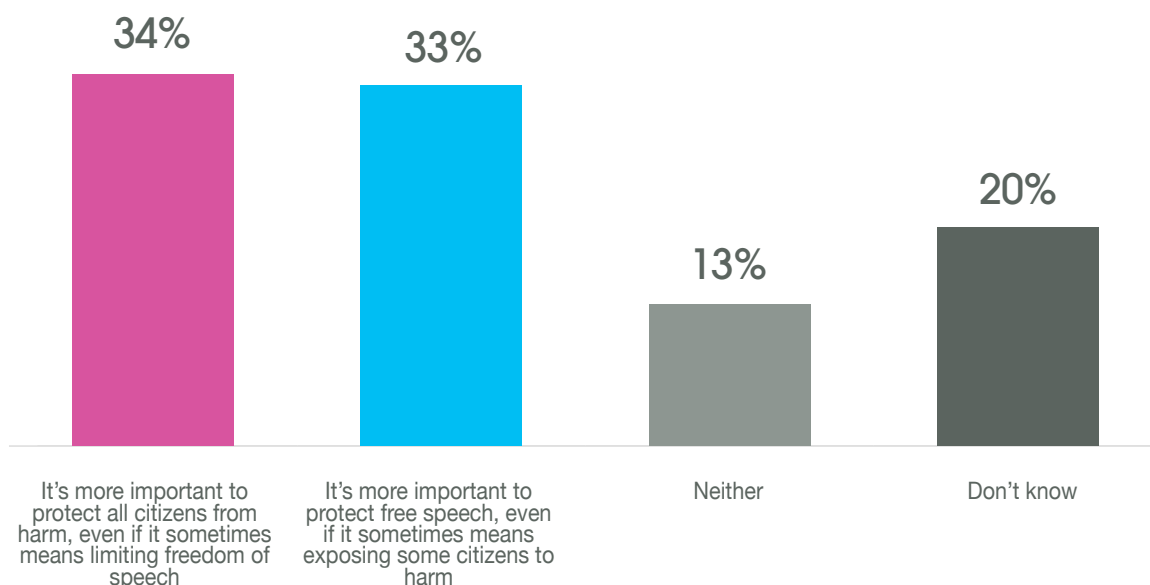
While men and women tend to be quite equal in their preference for buttressing society from harm, men are distinctly more likely to preference freedom of speech as an absolute – at 40 per cent to just 26 per cent of women. The young are similarly more inclined to favour civil liberties than the older generations, at 26 per cent of 18-to-34-year-olds to 17 per cent of those over 55 years.

Significant regional distinctions can also be observed: 43 per cent of those in the North East of England favour protecting society from harm, compared to just 30 per cent of Londoners and 24 per cent of the Welsh. By contrast, 45 per cent of Londoners preference civil liberties, compared to just 26 per cent of those in Yorkshire and the Humber and 29 per cent of their neighbours in the South East.

Considering socio-economic status, the clearest divergences are on the question of freedom of speech – with those from higher groups (ABC1) seven percentage points more likely than those in lower groups (C2DE) to preference civil liberties, and nine percentage points less likely to not have a clear view.

Comparing Conservative and Labour voters, we can see that Conservatives are considerably more likely to favour civil liberties (42 per cent to 30 per cent of Labour voters), somewhat less likely to favour safeguarding (35 per cent to 39 per cent of Labour voters), and more likely to have clear views on the issue either way (only 12 per cent unsure to 20 per cent of Labour voters).

Curiously, at 45 per cent, Liberal Democrat voters are the most likely to favour protecting society from harm over protecting civil liberties. UKIP voters are somewhat less pronounced in their views than Conservatives, with 40 per cent favouring civil liberties and 35 per cent favouring safeguarding.

Turning to the EU Referendum, noticeable differences can be observed between those who voted to Leave and those who voted to Remain.

Those who voted to Remain were 10 percentage points more likely to preference protecting society from harm (40 per cent to 30 per cent), while those who voted to Leave were more likely to preference protecting freedom of speech (40 per cent to 29 per cent).

Who should decide the boundaries of acceptable language and behaviour?

Despite the large suite of options presented to respondents, on the question of who should define the boundaries of acceptable language and behaviour, a clear position emerges. There is a consensus view amongst the majority of British citizens (53 per cent) that this should be a collective exercise amongst 'ordinary people/society as a whole'. A further 17 per cent of citizens felt comfortable that the Government should lead on this responsibility. The same percentage were unsure, and small minorities of five per cent and less were split between the police, civil society and charities, and the media.

Who should decide the boundaries of acceptable language and behaviour?

Category	Percentage
Ordinary people/ society as a whole	53%
The government	17%
The police	5%
Civil society and charities	4%
The media	2%
Other	2%
Don't know	17 %
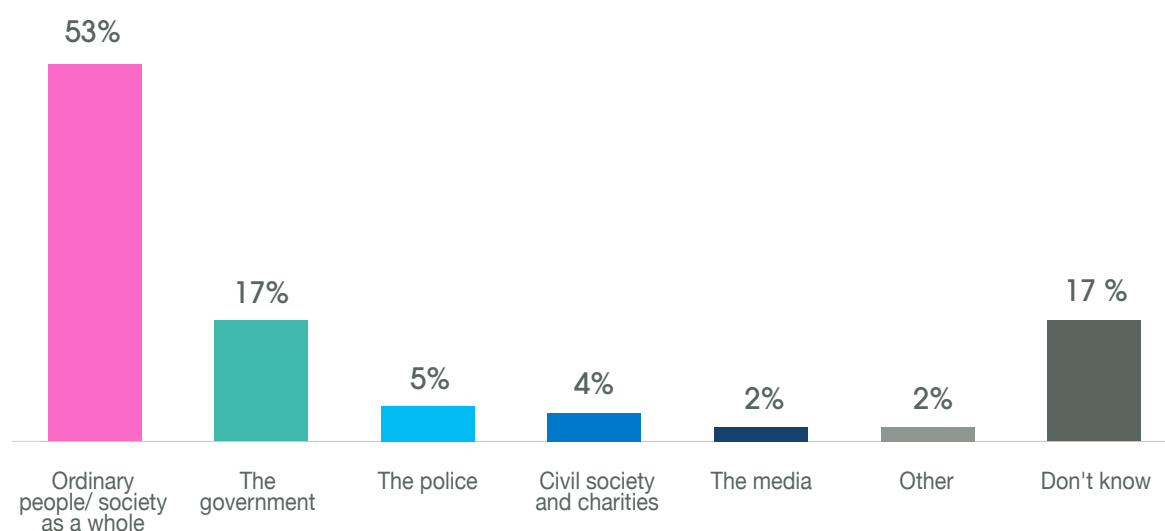
Women appear to be more mistrustful of the government on this issue, with only 12 per cent supporting state-led mediation, compared to 21 per cent of men. Similar differences can be seen between those in higher (21 per cent) and lower (13 per cent) socio-economic brackets.

Profound distinctions are evident between age cohorts on this question. Those over 55 years are much more likely to support social arbitration over discourse and behaviour, at 65 per cent, compared to 51 per cent of 35-to-54-year-olds and 39 per cent of 18-to-34-year-olds. They are in turn less likely to favour the state playing the leading role, at 13 per cent, compared to 19 per cent of each of the younger generations. Almost twice as many under-35s (23 per cent) said they were unsure about who should govern language and social actions than over-55s (12 per cent).

Some regional disparities are also found in the results.

Residents in Northern Ireland (62 per cent) and the East of England (58 per cent) are most supportive of citizens and society acting as the definers of acceptable boundaries, while residents in London (25 per cent) are distinctly the most supportive of government taking this role.

At 63 per cent, SNP voters are the most supportive of society acting as definers, followed by Conservatives (57 per cent), UKIP voters (52 per cent), Labour voters (48 per cent) and Liberal Democrats (44 per cent). Again, rather curiously, Liberal Democrats are the most likely to favour Government leading in this role, at 29 per cent – a solid 10 percentage points more likely than voters for any other party.

Leave voters in the EU Referendum are also more likely to believe that society should be self-governing on this issue – at 59 per cent to 48 per cent of Remain voters – while Remain voters were more likely to favour government leadership, at 22 per cent to 13 per cent of Leave voters.

There is a clear correlation between those likely to favour protecting free speech over protecting society from harm, and those who support society leading on the arbitration of language and behaviour – indicating these are connected as part of a more libertarian mind-set. Similarly, those who favour protecting society from harm are more likely to also favour government leadership on the definition of acceptable boundaries.

Opinium Research

Judgements on political correctness as a positive or negative concept

When citizens were presented with a range of different statements about political correctness itself, some benign and others more pejorative, both consensus positions and clear polarising arguments emerged.

In summary, the consensus positions are:

- Political correctness sometimes goes too far and exceeds common sense (76 per cent agree)

- Political correctness is eroding the expression of Britain's values and traditions (58 per cent agree)

- Political correctness helps politicians to avoid having to address important sensitive issues (ie. integration) (55 per cent agree)

The polarising statements are:

- Political correctness helps to create a fairer society by enabling more citizens to feel comfortable and participate to their fullest extent (40 per cent agree to 28 per cent disagree)

- Political correctness is a small price to pay for a more equal society (35 per cent agree to 30 per cent disagree)

- Political correctness protects people like me (26 per cent agree to 35 per cent disagree)

The consensus positions had considerably lower proportions of respondents who did not take a position – ie. 'neither agree nor disagree' – than those which produced polarising results.
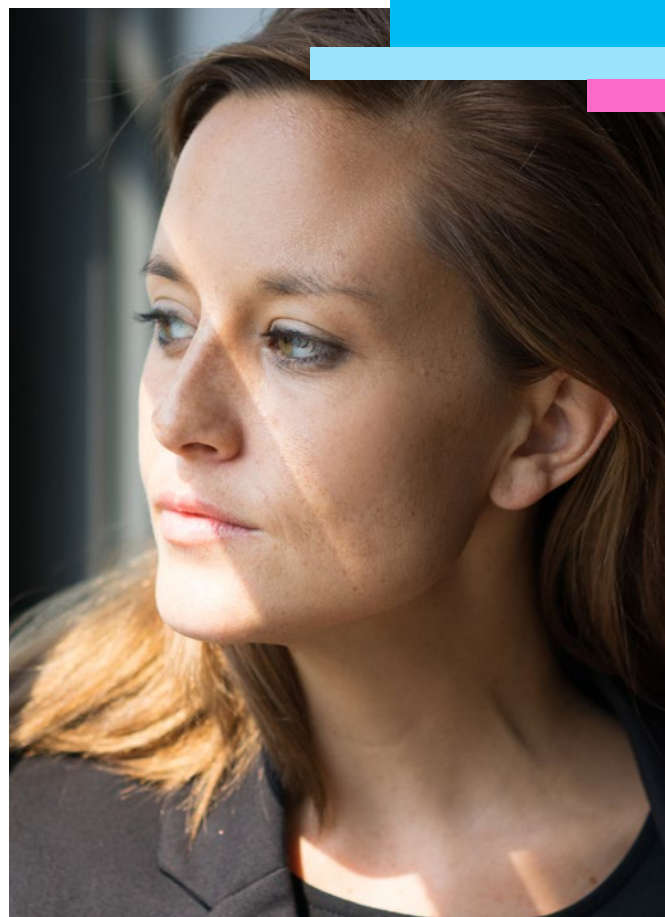
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

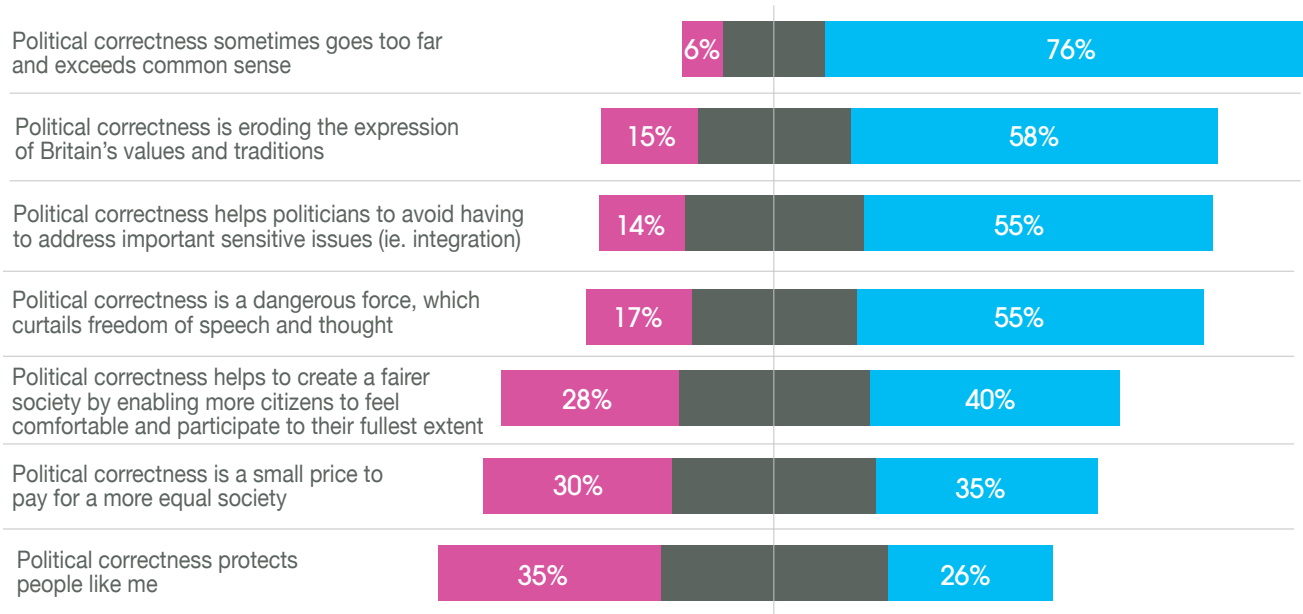| Statement	Disagree	Agree
Political correctness sometimes goes too far and exceeds common sense	6%	76%
Political correctness is eroding the expression of Britain's values and traditions	15%	58%
Political correctness helps politicians to avoid having to address important sensitive issues (ie. integration)	14%	55%
Political correctness is a dangerous force, which curtails freedom of speech and thought	17%	55%
Political correctness helps to create a fairer society by enabling more citizens to feel comfortable and participate to their fullest extent	28%	40%
Political correctness is a small price to pay for a more equal society	30%	35%
Political correctness protects people like me	35%	26%

'Don't know' responses have been excluded to aid readability

● Disagree   ● Neither Agree/Disagree   ● Agree

Political correctness sometimes goes too far and exceeds common sense

Almost half (45 per cent) of Britons strongly agree with this statement, meaning it is the most emphatically supported position tested in the survey.

Nonetheless, despite its widespread support, some distinctions can be observed between different demographics. 85 per cent of over-55s agree with this statement, compared to 65 per cent of under-35s. Regionally, 96 per cent of those in Northern Ireland and 84 per cent of those in the North East of England agree, compared to 66 per cent of the Welsh and 71 per cent of Londoners.

While no significant differences are evident between social grades, there are clear divisions on this point between political affiliations. 85 per cent of Conservatives agree with this statement, of whom 56 per cent strong agree, compared to a still-substantial 68 per cent of Labour voters, of whom 32 per cent strongly agree. Liberal Democrat voters are strongly supportive of this statement, matching the Conservatives on 85 per cent. Curiously, only 74 per cent of UKIP voters agree with this statement, with around 18 per cent ambivalent.

While there are 15 percentage point differences between Leave and Remain voters on this subject – at 85 per cent and 70 per cent respectively, a full 60 per cent of Leave voters 'strongly agree' with the statement, compared to only a third (33 per cent) of Remain voters.

Political correctness is eroding the expression of Britain's values and traditions

Overall, 29 per cent of Britons strongly agree with this statement, with a further 29 per cent 'somewhat' agreeing. 15 per cent of the population either disagrees or strongly disagrees.

Political correctness is eroding the expression of Britain's values and traditions

- 58% — Agree
- 24% — Neither agree/disagree
- 15% — Disagree
- 3% — Don't know
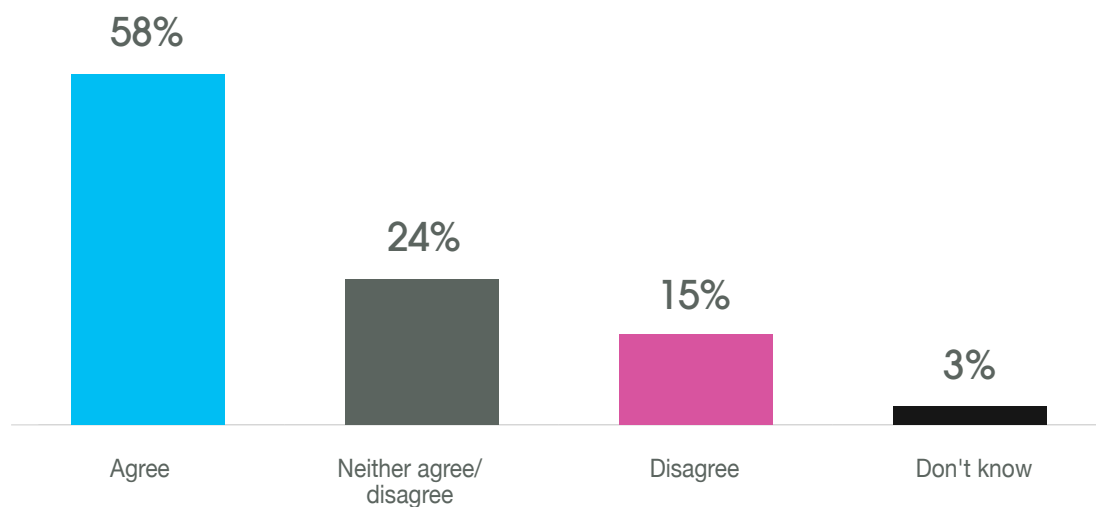
Again, older Britons tend to be more likely to agree with this statement: 67 per cent of over-55s agree, compared to 47 per cent of under-35s. Residents in Northern Ireland (69 per cent), the South West (67 per cent) and the North East (66 per cent) are most likely to agree, compared to residents in the East of England (52 per cent), the West Midlands (53 per cent) and London (54 per cent).

Slight distinctions are evident between social grades, with 61 per cent of those in the C2DE group (lower socio-economic) agreeing with this statement, compared to 55 per cent of those in the ABC1 group (higher socio-economic).

Much more significant are the gulfs between political parties, with 79 per cent of UKIP voters and 75 per cent of Conservatives agreeing with the statement, compared to just 44 per cent of Labour supporters and 34 per cent of Greens.

The gap is also profound between Leave and Remain voters: 76 per cent of Leave voters agree that 'Political correctness is eroding the expression of Britain's values and traditions', compared to 44 per cent of Remain voters – a 32 percentage point difference.

Political correctness helps politicians to avoid having to address important sensitive issues (ie. integration)

Of those who agree with this statement, 21 per cent 'strongly agree' and 34 per cent 'somewhat agree'. Only 14 per cent of the population disagrees, with 28 per cent ambivalent.

Political correctness helps politicians to avoid having to address important sensitive issues (ie. integration)

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree/disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
21%	34%	28%	11%	3%	3%
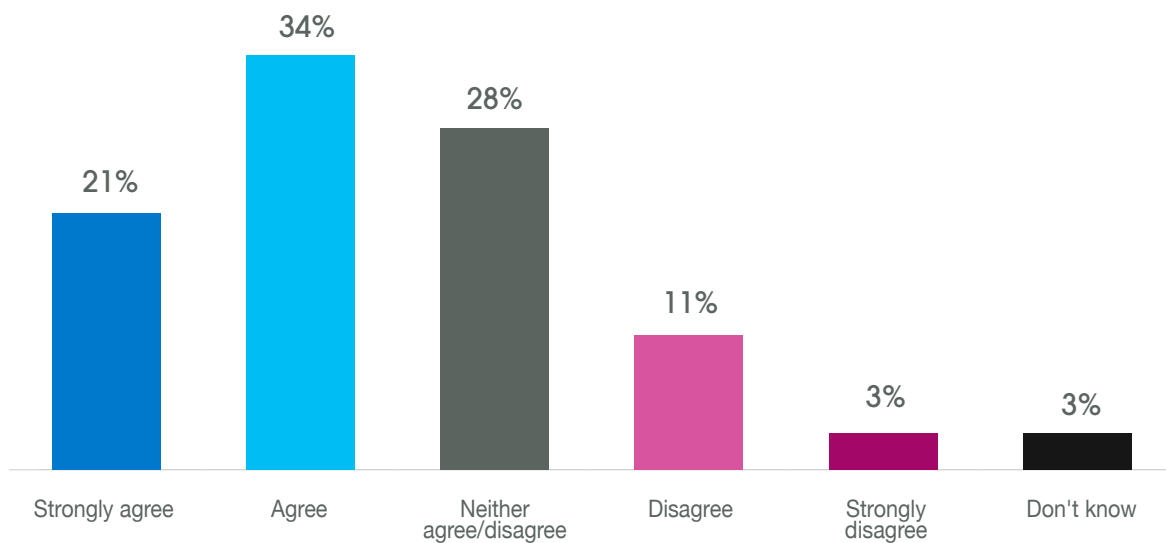
The inter-generational gaps on this question are less profound, with 62 per cent of over-55s agreeing, compared to 53 per cent of under-35s. Residents in the South West and North West (60 per cent respectively), with residents in Yorkshire and the Humber somewhat less likely to agree, at 52 per cent. At 58 per cent to 52 per cent, those in the ABC1 higher socio-economic group are slightly more likely to agree with this statement than those in the C2DE lower socio-economic group.

70 per cent of UKIP voters agree with this statement, followed by 64 per cent of Conservatives and 49 per cent of Labour voters. While Leave voters are more likely than Remain voters (65 per cent to 48 per cent) to agree, the gap isn't as profound as on some other questions – perhaps related to the relatively smaller differences between socio-economic groups.

Political correctness is a dangerous force, which curtails freedom of speech and thought

A majority of Britons (55 per cent) agree with this statement – one of the boldest and most forthright tested within the survey – and 17 per cent disagree, with 28 per cent unsure or ambivalent.

At 63 per cent, Britons over 55 years are more likely to hold this position than under-35s, of whom 46 per cent agree. Residents in Northern Ireland (70 per cent), the North West (63 per cent) and South West (61 per cent) are the most likely to agree with the statement, compared to 50 per cent of residents in the East of England and 51 per cent of Londoners.

At 54 per cent for ABC1s and 55 per cent for C2DEs, there are no distinctions to be clearly observed between social grades on this question. Political affiliation, however, is important. 63 per cent of Conservative voters agree with this statement, compared to 44 per cent of Labour voters. An astonishing 79 per cent of UKIP voters agree, compared to just 27 per cent of Greens.

Profound distinctions are clear in terms of citizens' vote in the EU Referendum: while 43 per cent of Remain voters agree, 26 per cent disagree with this statement. This compares to 70 per cent of Leave voters who agree, and only eight per cent who explicitly disagree.

Political correctness protects people like me

Turning to the openly benign assessments of political correctness, this statement conjures support from around a quarter (26 per cent) of the population, but is emphatically rejected by a larger proportion – 35 per cent. A similar percentage of Britons (36 per cent) neither agree nor disagree; an unusual level of ambivalence that suggests mixed feelings on this subject – perhaps acknowledging that they do not personally feel 'protected' but do not want to compromise its value to others. For those who reject the statement outright, it's clear that political correctness is not seen as a universal good, but rather as a 'special', unevenly applied social instrument that supports certain groups, potentially at the expense of others.

For those who reject the statement outright, it's clear that political correctness is not seen as a universal good.

Significant age disparities can be observed on this question. 38 per cent of young people believe they are protected by political correctness, compared to only 15 per cent of over-55s. Similarly, while an astonishing 45 per cent of Londoners personally feel protected by political correctness, only 19 per cent of those in the East of England, and 22 per cent of those living in the North West or the West Midlands share this view.

While a similar percentage of ABC1s and C2DEs reject the statement, a much higher (31 per cent to 20 per cent) proportion of higher socio-economic Britons agree with it than those from lower socio-economic groups. On the surface, this is a curious finding, because political correctness is intended to safeguard the vulnerable groups lacking power in society. However, much of the disparity between the groups can be explained by the higher proportion of C2DEs reserving judgement on the issue. These findings indicate that political correctness most actively championed and defended by those from more comfortable socio-economic backgrounds, even if it does indeed reap benefits for citizens in other classes.

The voters most likely to agree with this statement support the SNP in Scotland (38 per cent), followed by Labour voters (35 per cent), and – curiously – UKIP voters (32 per cent). The least likely to agree are Plaid voters (12 per cent), also curiously, Green voters (23 per cent), and Conservative voters (25 per cent). These two unexpected results from UKIP and the Greens are tempered when examining those who expressly reject the statement, with UKIP voters considerably more likely than average (46 per cent) to not feel protected by political correctness, and Greens voters in turn less likely (31 per cent) to reject it. Overall, we can see a high degree of complexity in responses on this question, with fundamentally mixed narratives and a consistently sizeable group sitting on the fence.

Overall, we can see a high degree of complexity in responses on this question.

Starker differences can be observed between Leave and Remain voters. Almost twice as many Remain voters (34 per cent) believe that political correctness protects them compared to Leave voters (18 per cent), and the percentage point gap between them grows even larger when it comes to those who distinctly disagree – 26 per cent of Remain voters do not feel protected by political correctness, compared to 47 per cent of Leave voters.
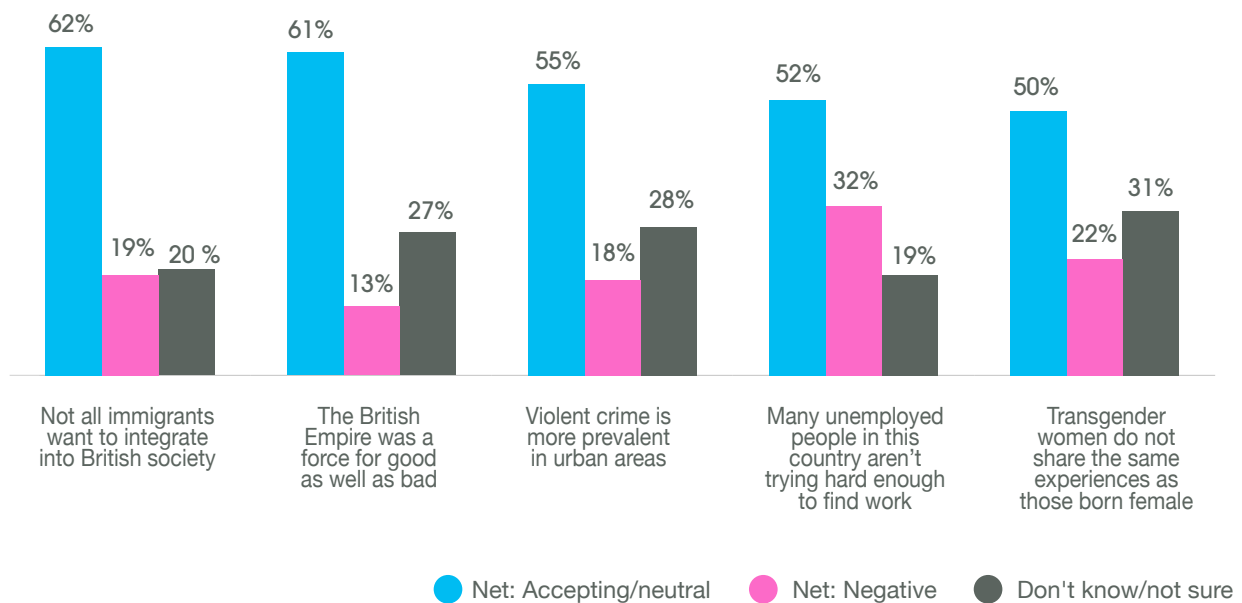
Subjective assessments of controversial statements

Survey respondents were asked to assess a range of potentially provocative or polarising social statements as either 'hateful', 'offensive', 'reasonable', 'sensible', 'ignorant' or 'harmless'. Half of these classifications were positive or neutral, and the other half were pejorative in tone. The statements were selected to reflect a range of different contemporary social 'battlegrounds' around family roles, gender, immigration and class – all of which speak to nascent and entrenched political/values divides.

The statements were:

a) Transgender women do not share the same experiences as those born female

b) All White people are inherently racist to some degree

c) Same-sex couples should not be allowed to adopt children as it might damage their development

d) Violent crime is more prevalent in urban areas

e) Women are better suited to raising children than men

f) High levels of immigration are eroding British culture, values and traditions

g) Affirmative action and quotas mean people more deserving of a place can miss out

h) Many unemployed people in this country aren't trying hard enough to find work

i) Not all immigrants want to integrate into British society

j) The British Empire was a force for good as well as bad

Overall, despite their provocative nature, the majority of the statements were primarily assessed as being 'reasonable' in nature. The most commonly chosen classification for statements C and E was 'ignorant', while statement B was deemed to be 'offensive' by the largest group of Britons.
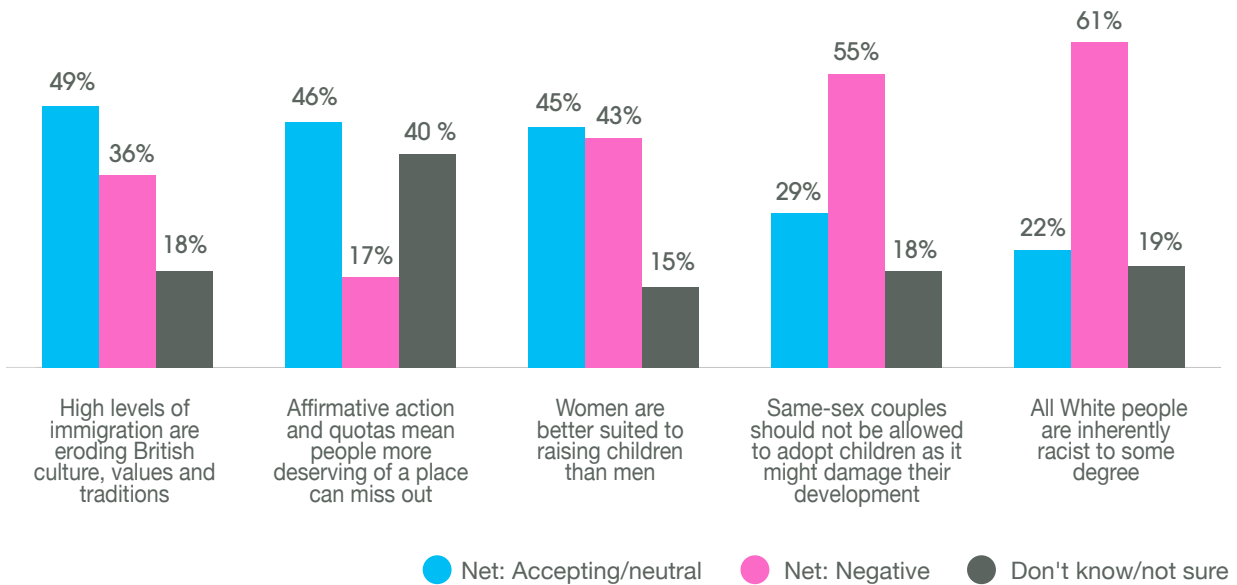
Assessments of controversial statement

Not all immigrants want to integrate into British society
- Net: Accepting/neutral — 62%
- Net: Negative — 19%
- Don't know/not sure — 20 %

The British Empire was a force for good as well as bad
- Net: Accepting/neutral — 61%
- Net: Negative — 13%
- Don't know/not sure — 27%

Violent crime is more prevalent in urban areas
- Net: Accepting/neutral — 55%
- Net: Negative — 18%
- Don't know/not sure — 28%

Many unemployed people in this country aren't trying hard enough to find work
- Net: Accepting/neutral — 52%
- Net: Negative — 32%
- Don't know/not sure — 19%

Transgender women do not share the same experiences as those born female
- Net: Accepting/neutral — 50%
- Net: Negative — 22%
- Don't know/not sure — 31%

● Net: Accepting/neutral ● Net: Negative ● Don't know/not sure

Looking collectively at these findings, we can draw a number of conclusions that provide valuable insights into the public mood underpinning the fractious debate around political correctness. The first of these is that the broad consensus position across the country is for a relatively wide Overton window on social issues – perhaps more open that has been represented by the media-political Overton window. While, considering the broader context of public opinion polling on these issues, which can be quite variable, it is safe to assume that a proportion of those who assessed these statements as 'reasonable' do not entirely agree with their sentiment, there is clearly a relatively strong commitment towards the right to disagree in a civil manner.

Secondly, the two statements deemed to be 'ignorant' reflect the advancements of social liberalism in the area of gender and sexual equality, over the past two decades in Britain. Indeed, the statement regarding adoption is the most widely rejected, with 55 per cent of Britons denouncing it, and only 29 per cent sharing this opinion. Moreover, 16 per cent felt this statement to be 'hateful' – the most emphatic condemnation offered, with no other statement arousing such a high degree of emotive denouncement. By contrast, the statement on women's natural propensity for child-rearing is considerably more divisive, and in fact a slight plurality of 45 per cent to 43 per cent are inclined to agree rather than disagree. Nonetheless, it is clear there is a larger and more active community willing to challenge the traditional imagining of a women's 'natural' family role than many of the other issues.

Assessments of controversial statement

High levels of immigration are eroding British culture, values and traditions
- Net: Accepting/neutral: 49%
- Net: Negative: 36%
- Don't know/not sure: 18%

Affirmative action and quotas mean people more deserving of a place can miss out
- Net: Accepting/neutral: 46%
- Net: Negative: 17%
- Don't know/not sure: 40 %

Women are better suited to raising children than men
- Net: Accepting/neutral: 45%
- Net: Negative: 43%
- Don't know/not sure: 15%

Same-sex couples should not be allowed to adopt children as it might damage their development
- Net: Accepting/neutral: 29%
- Net: Negative: 55%
- Don't know/not sure: 18%

All White people are inherently racist to some degree
- Net: Accepting/neutral: 22%
- Net: Negative: 61%
- Don't know/not sure: 19%

● Net: Accepting/neutral ● Net: Negative ● Don't know/not sure

The statement as to whether White Britons are 'inherently racist' clearly provoked the most hostile responses, with 61 per cent rejecting the statement, compared to 22 per cent who received it favourably. At 39 per cent, the proportion of Brits who regard this statement as 'offensive' thoroughly eclipses the response to all other statements.

Beyond the statement regarding women's role in the family, the only other statement that came close to what could be described as contentious is statement F regarding immigration. While almost half of Britons (49 per cent) agree with this statement, 36 per cent denounced it as 'ignorant' or 'offensive'.

Finally, we can also identify the questions around which there is scope for a substantial degree of public education. While contemporary British society can feel deeply divided, this survey suggests that many Britons are relatively hesitant to express their opinions on these issues. The proportion of the population unsure as to their view peaks at 40 per cent on the issue of affirmative action, 31 per cent on the issue of transgender and female differentiation, 28 per cent on the question of violent crime and 27 per cent on the legacy of the British Empire.

a) Transgender women do not share the same experiences as those born female

We can observe very few gender differences on this statement, with men and women broadly agreeing that it is a 'reasonable' (34 per cent men vs. 33 per cent women) and 'sensible' (22 per cent men vs. 17 per cent women) statement. Women were somewhat more likely to condemn the statement as 'ignorant' (16 per cent to 11 per cent), and men were slightly more likely to be unsure on the issue (32 per cent to 29 per cent).

The young are at least 10 percentage points more likely to take a negative reaction to this statement than their older counterparts (31 per cent of under-35s, compared to 21 per cent of 35-54-year-olds and 17 per cent of those over 55 years). Residents in the Midlands, London and Scotland appear the most likely to take umbrage with this statement, with those in Northern Ireland the least inclined to see it in a negative light.

63 per cent of UKIP voters, 55 per cent of Lib Dem voters, and 51 per cent of Conservatives, agree with this statement, compared to 45 per cent of Labour voters and 43 per cent of SNP voters. The gap between Leave voters (54 per cent) and Remain voters (57 per cent) is relatively modest.

b) All White people are inherently racist to some degree

The statement as to whether White Britons are 'inherently racist' clearly provoked the most hostile responses.

Women are more likely to find this statement 'offensive' than men (42 per cent to 35 per cent), who are around five percentage points more likely to consider it 'reasonable' or 'sensible'. Britons over 55 years are more likely to find it offensive than those under 35 (42 per cent to 33 per cent), who are 12 percentage points more likely to regard this statement as 'ignorant'. Only six per cent of Britons overall consider this statement to be 'harmless'.

Substantial distinctions can be observed, however, between different regions. More than a third of Londoners (34 per cent) agree or have a neutral reaction to this statement, compared to just 14 per cent in the South West and North East. 70 per cent of Britons in the North West and South West have negative reactions, compared to 53 per cent of Londoners and residents in Yorkshire and the Humber.

c) Same-sex couples should not be allowed to adopt children as it might damage their development

Overall, this statement was rejected by Britons as 'ignorant' or 'offensive', however some significant distinctions can be observed between demographics. At 63 per cent to 46 per cent, women are considerably more likely to assess this statement negatively than men – with almost twice as many (33 per cent to 17 per cent) of women describing it as 'offensive'. While 37 per cent of men assessed it to be 'reasonable' or 'sensible', only 22 per cent of women shared this view.

Less considerable, but still significant, were the distinctions between age groups, with under-35s 10 percentage points (58 per cent to 48 per cent) more likely to condemn the statement. Residents in the Northern Ireland (38 per cent) and London (37 per cent) – two areas really converging in their social views – were the most likely to agree with the statement, and those in the East of England, South West, Wales and Scotland the most likely to reject it (all at 57 per cent).

No major distinctions are evident on this issue between social grades, however quite sizeable differentiation is observed by party affiliation. 50 per cent of UKIP voters agree with the statement, followed by 42 per cent of Conservative voters. This contrasts sharply with SNP voters (12 per cent) and 21 and 22 per cent respectively of Labour and Liberal Democrats. Looking at those who reject the statement, we can see 72 per cent of Liberal Democrats, 69 per cent of SNP voters, and 65 per cent of Labour voters, compared to 47 per cent of Conservatives and, interestingly, 46 per cent of Greens. Only 36 per cent of UKIP voters disagree with this statement.

At 65 per cent to 45 per cent, Remain voters are much more likely to reject this statement than Leave voters.

d) Violent crime is more prevalent in urban areas

This statement assesses perceptions as to whether urban areas, are more prone to violent forms of crime – a fact borne out by official statistics[5]. It was included for three principal reasons: firstly, given the UK's ethnic minority groups are also concentrated in urban areas, to identify whether the rising concern regarding the knife crime epidemic in London was fuelling racial prejudice and fear; secondly, to compare and contrast British perspectives on what can be regarded in the United States as a form of proxy racism; and finally, to identify the extent to which statements of indisputable statistical fact can, through the aforementioned inference, be judged as carrying a level of offence that outweighs their factual value.

Overall, 55 per cent of Britons agree with this statement, with 18 per cent actively disagreeing and a quite considerable proportion of 28 per cent – disproportionately comprised of women and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds – unsure. Interestingly given its statistical accuracy, around 10 per cent of the population believe this statement is 'ignorant'.

Unique amongst all the statements tested in this survey, no significant distinctions can be observed between age groups. However, some relatively large differentiations are clear between regions. On the frontline of the knife crime crisis affecting our largest city, Londoners are the most likely to agree with this statement, with those in the North East and Scotland (both at 49 per cent) the least likely to agree. Nonetheless, at 28 per cent, Londoners are also the most likely to emphatically reject the statement, with a fifth finding it to be 'offensive' or 'hateful'.

Liberal Democrat (68 per cent), UKIP (65 per cent) and Conservative (60 per cent) voters are most likely to agree with the statement, with the views of other groups of voters (and especially non-voters) affected by their lack of certainty on the matter. While 52 of Labour voters agree, they are 10 percentage points more likely to say they are unsure than Conservative voters.

e) Women are better suited to raising children than men

This statement provided one of the most polarising responses amongst the population, with 45 per cent in agreement and 43 per cent in dispute. At 50 per cent to 39 per cent, men were more likely than women to agree, although the proportion rejecting the statement was almost identical. Overall, women were most likely to see the statement as 'ignorant', and men to see it as 'reasonable'.

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Age plays a fundamental role in the formation of views on this subject, with only around a third (34 per cent) of under-35s agreeing that women are 'better suited' to raising children than men, compared to 42 per cent of 35-to-54-year-olds, and 56 per cent of over-55s.

The statement received the greatest degree of support in Northern Ireland (62 per cent), Yorkshire and the Humber (52 per cent) and the North West and London (50 per cent respectively). Support was weakest in the East of England (36 per cent), Scotland and the North East (both 38 per cent), although in the case of the North East, this reflected the disproportionate degree of unsure respondents.

Perspectives on this issue were consistent between social groups, but distinctly polarised between political parties. The most likely to agree with the statement are UKIP voters (67 per cent) and Conservative voters (55 per cent), compared to 42 per cent of Liberal Democrats, 37 per cent of Labour voters, 32 per cent of Greens voters and just a quarter (23 per cent) of SNP voters. Turning to Brexit, 52 per cent of Leave voters agree with the statement, compared to 39 per cent of Labour voters.

f) High levels of immigration are eroding British culture, values and traditions

This statement captures a clear issue of dynamic contention amongst the British people. Almost half (49 per cent) of Britons agree with this statement, with more than a third (36 per cent) disagreeing. The most frequently chosen word association overall was 'reasonable', followed by 'ignorant'.

At 53 per cent to 45 per cent, men are more likely to agree with the statement than women. Larger distinctions still can be observed between age groups, with 38 per cent of under-35s agreeing, rising to 48 per cent of 35-to-54-year-olds, and 57 per cent of over-55s. On balance, under-35s are more likely to reject the statement than agree with it (41 per cent to 38 per cent).

At 54 per cent, residents in the East of England are the most likely to agree with the statement, followed by those in Yorkshire and the Humber and the North West (both on 52 per cent). The views of residents in Wales and the North East are depressed by the disproportionate degree of unsure responses. Those least likely to agree are in Scotland (44 per cent), Northern Ireland (45 per cent) and the South West (47 per cent). Northern Ireland, Scotland (both on 44 per cent) and London (41 per cent) stand out as the most likely to reject the statement.

Looking at social grades, no major differences are observed in those supporting the statement, however those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be unsure (22 per cent to 15 per cent), and those from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to emphatically reject the statement (41 per cent to 30 per cent).

This topic plays into considerable polarisation between the political parties. Those most likely to agree with the statement are UKIP voters (76 per cent) and Conservative voters (64 per cent), compared to 39 per cent of Liberal Democrats, 37 per cent of Greens, 32 per cent of Labour voters and 31 per cent of SNP voters. Exactly twice as many Conservative voters agree with this statement than Labour voters. This gulf increases further between Leave (67 per cent) and Remain (32 per cent) voters.

g) Affirmative action and quotas mean people more deserving of a place can miss out

While 46 per cent of Britons agreed with this statement or regarded it as 'reasonable', compared to just 17 per cent who rejected it outright, there is clearly a significant education gap on this issue, with 40 per cent of the population unsure – rising to 45 per cent of women.

Those over 55 years of age are around 10 percentage points more likely than under-35s to agree with this statement, although the age cohort differences are less pronounced than on other topics. Regionally, those most likely to agree are those in Wales, the North East and West, and the East and West Midlands – all around 52 per cent. With the smallest percentage of 'don't knows' (31 per cent), Londoners are split 49 per cent in agreement to 21 per cent rejecting the statement. Their neighbours in the South East are much less likely (39 per cent) to support this notion, but are 15 percentage points less likely to be sure either way.

Broadly, those with higher socio-economic backgrounds have higher levels of certainty on the subject – perhaps ironically given the nature of the groups most likely to benefit from affirmative action.

At 61 per cent, UKIP voters are the most likely to agree with the statement, followed by Conservative and Liberal Democrats on 52 per cent – compared to 44 per cent of Labour voters, 39 per cent of Greens and 35 per cent of SNP voters. At five percentage points, the gap between Leave and Remain voters (49 per cent to 44 per cent) is one of the smallest of all the issues.

h) Many unemployed people in this country aren't trying hard enough to find work

At 52 per cent, a majority of Britons agree with this statement, with 32 per cent disagreeing and 19 per cent unsure. The most commonly chosen word to assess the statement, by 40 per cent of the population, is 'reasonable'.

This topic is clearly received in a distinct manner from those focusing on race, gender and sexuality. Differences between genders on this issue are negligible, and those aged over 55 years are only six percent more likely than under-35s to pass an accepting or neutral judgement.

Nonetheless, regional differences are most distinct than for other issues, with the 61 per cent of those in the South West agreeing with the statement, compared to just 43 per cent of those in the North East. Distinctions between party affiliations are also considerable, with 74 per cent of UKIP voters and 65 per cent of Conservatives agreeing with the statement, compared to 49 per cent of Liberal Democrats and Greens, and just 38 per cent of Labour voters. At 68 per cent, Leave voters are 11 percentage points more likely than Remain voters to believe that unemployed Britons aren't actively seeking work.

Interestingly, however, almost no differences can be observed in the perspectives of those from higher and lower socio-economic groups – likely because those entirely out of work represent a relatively small proportion (around 10 per cent in 2016) of the 'working class' social classification[6]. Previous research has demonstrated that negative attitudes towards the unemployed and welfare recipients more broadly (ie. welfare chauvinism) are often most acutely felt amongst the working classes[7].

Interestingly, almost no differences can be observed in the perspectives of those from higher and lower socio-economic groups.

i) Not all immigrants want to integrate into British society

This question produced an unexpectedly significant consensus position, with 62 per cent of Britons in agreement, compared to just 19 per cent actively in disagreement. Men are somewhat more likely than women (67 per cent to 58 per cent) to agree, although this largely reflects the fact that women are less likely to be certain on their response.

The distinctions between age groups are relatively modest: 57 per cent of under-35s agree, compared to 65 per cent of 35-to-54s and 64 per cent of over-55s.

More dramatic, however, are the differences in perspectives between regions. In the North West and the East Midlands, the proportion in agreement jumps to 73 and 71 per cent respectively. Areas with much lower levels of agreement tend to exhibit disproportionately high 'don't know' figures – such as in the North East, where this rises to 32 per cent of the population, compared to a national average of 19 per cent. London is one of the areas with the smallest proportion of undecided respondents, at 13 per cent, and 65 per cent of its residents agree that 'not all immigrants want to integrate into British society', with 27 per cent of residents (the highest proportion in the country) in disagreement.

Turning to social grades, we can see that middle class ABC1s are more likely to agree with the statement, at 65 per cent, than their C2DE working class counterparts, at 58 per cent. This may well reflect the fact that many immigrants will fall into the lower socio-economic bracket.

Finally, looking at political affiliations, we can see that the gulfs between parties so evident in many other questions are suppressed, largely due to the consistency of the high levels of agreement. The gap between the proportion of Conservative and Labour voters who agree with the statement, for example, closes to just 10 percentage points, with the former on 66 per cent and the latter on 56 per cent. The split between Leave and Remain voters is similar, with 68 per cent of Leave voters in agreement compared to 60 per cent of Remain voters.

j) The British Empire was a force for good as well as bad

This statement does not appear to be as received with a high degree of controversy amongst the vast majority of Britons, with 61 per cent in agreement, just 13 per cent actively in disagreement, and a significant 27 per cent unsure. The differences between age cohorts, however, are dramatic, with 46 per cent of under-35s in agreement, compared to a staggering 75 per cent of over-55s – who themselves lived through the time of Empire.

At 71 per cent, those in the North West and Northern Ireland appear the most favourable towards the legacy of Empire, and also the most convinced in their views. A high degree of uncertainty pervades the rest of the country, dampening views both for and against the statement. Similarly, while ABC1s are somewhat (65 per cent to 58 per cent) more likely to be in agreement than C2DEs, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are 10 percentage points more likely to be uncertain about the issue.

It is clear that the issue of the Empire is a lightning rod for Conservative voters, of whom 79 per cent agree with this statement, followed by 69 per cent of UKIP voters and 68 per cent of Liberal Democrats. Nonetheless, half of Labour voters and Green voters also agree that there is a mixed legacy to the Empire, with only SNP voters (45 per cent) falling to a plurality rather than a majority. Both Labour and SNP voters are the least certain about the merits of this statement. At 71 per cent, Leave voters are also more likely to agree with the statement than Remain voters – although at 59 per cent, they too are in broad agreement.

Defining the boundaries of 'acceptability'

With respondents having made a range of subjective assessments regarding the statements, we then subsequently asked them to consider them specifically within the framework of 'acceptability'. The same statements were shown once more, and respondents were required to determine whether or not they were acceptable opinions to have – moving beyond their own personal judgements to a decision about their social value or harm.

It is clear from this table summarising the responses, with 'don't know' responses excluded, that Britons broadly have quite a high bar for deeming statements to be 'unacceptable'. Yet, at the same time, and particularly when we juxtapose these findings against the subjective word associations from the previous part of the survey, we can see the tension points of language adjudication and the complexity of the political correctness debates in the fact that there are statements deemed to be 'unacceptable' for distinct reasons.

For example, while some statements may be judged as reinforcing negative or limiting stereotypes, others are judged to be ignorant and without basis in fact. It may also be the case that some of the respondents who deemed particularly statements to be 'unacceptable', also regard them to be somewhat or entirely truthful – yet consider their expression to be harmful. Moreover, the diversity of the statements – which were specifically designed to capture a range of differing perspectives – indicates that the vast majority of Britons, to some extent, recognise the concept and even the personal benefit of mediating language.

Statement	Acceptable	Unacceptable
Not all immigrants want to integrate into British society	69%	15%
The British Empire was a force for good as well as bad	62%	14%
Violent crime is more prevalent in urban areas	58%	18%
Many unemployed people in this country aren't trying hard enough to find work	56%	29%
High levels of immigration are eroding British culture, values and traditions	53%	31%
Transgender women do not share the same experiences as those born female	49%	25%
Affirmative action and quotas mean people more deserving of a place can miss out	47%	17%
Women are better suited to raising children than men	45%	41%
Same-sex couples should not be allowed to adopt children as it might damage their development	28%	54%
All White people are inherently racist to some degree	24%	60%

Opinium Research

A focus on three demographic splits

While age was consistently identified as a key influencing factor in perspectives on this issue, we also wanted to see how age interacted with three other demographic characteristics we also found to be significant: namely, gender, social grade, and political affiliation. This would enable us to determine the degree to which age is both tempered and strengthened by these other variables – for example, Conservative voters were consistently one of the groups most likely to agree with many of the statements, but would young Conservatives prove an exception to the rule? Which of these factors was more dominant in shaping perspectives – ideology and partisanship, or age?
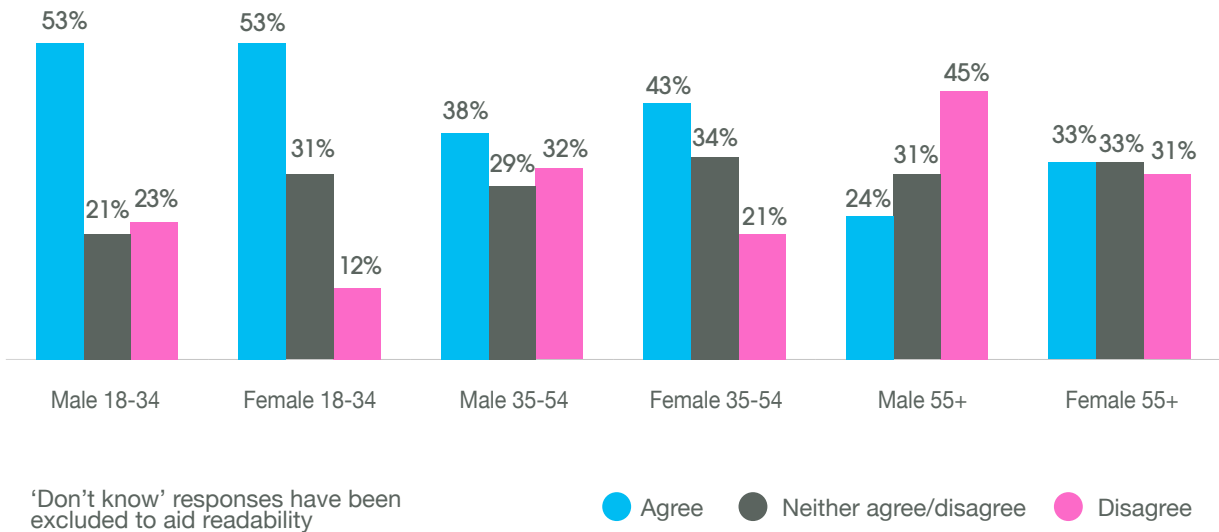
Age and Gender

When asked to choose between two statements – 'It's more important to protect all citizens from harm, even if it sometimes means limiting freedom of speech' OR 'It's more important to protect free speech, even if it sometimes means exposing some citizens to harm' – we can observe some fascinating interactions between age and gender. Across all cohorts, we see 40 per cent of men favouring free speech, compared to 25, 29 and 23 per cent of women respectively in the three sequential age groups. This suggests that, on this issue, gender is a more significant factor in the formation of opinions than age.

On the question of who should be responsible for setting the boundaries of acceptable language and behaviour, we can also see gender playing a crucial role, particularly amongst the young. Young women are more likely (28 per cent to 19 per cent) to be unsure on this question than young men, and young men are almost three times more likely to favour the government taking this role. Amongst 35-to-54-year-olds, the percentage gap between men and women favouring the government as the adjudicator drops to seven, and then narrows to just four percent amongst the over-55s.

When asked to assess the controversial statements, we can see this gap between younger men and women reflected in the responses to the topic, 'Political correctness helps politicians to avoid having to address important sensitive issues (ie. integration)', with young men 11 percentage points more likely to agree with this than women. However, for almost every other statement, the gender disparities can be most clearly observed between men and women in the older generations.

"Political correctness helps to create a fairer society by enabling more citizens to feel comfortable and participate to their fullest extent"

Male 18-34: Agree 53%, Neither agree/disagree 21%, Disagree 23%
Female 18-34: Agree 53%, Neither agree/disagree 31%, Disagree 12%
Male 35-54: Agree 38%, Neither agree/disagree 29%, Disagree 32%
Female 35-54: Agree 43%, Neither agree/disagree 34%, Disagree 21%
Male 55+: Agree 24%, Neither agree/disagree 31%, Disagree 45%
Female 55+: Agree 33%, Neither agree/disagree 33%, Disagree 31%

'Don't know' responses have been excluded to aid readability
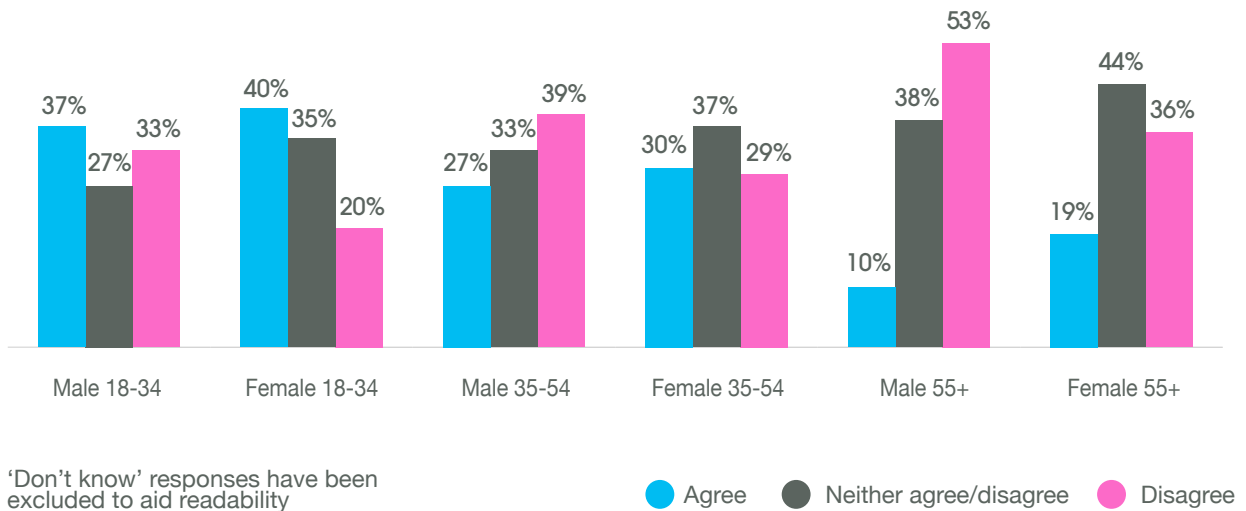
● Agree   ● Neither agree/disagree   ● Disagree

For example, while age is the most significant variable in determining responses to the statement, 'Political correctness helps to create a fairer society by enabling more citizens to feel comfortable and participate to their fullest extent', we can see a nine percentage point gap between men and women aged over 55 years on this question – with women more likely to agree. The gap widens slightly further to 10 percentage points between older men and women on the statement, 'Political correctness is a small price to pay for a more equal society', and to 11 points for the statements, 'Political correctness is eroding the expression of Britain's values and traditions' and 'Political correctness is a dangerous force, which curtails freedom of speech and thought'.

"Political correctness is a small price to pay for a more equal society"

Male 18-34: Agree 41%, Neither agree/disagree 32%, Disagree 25%
Female 18-34: Agree 47%, Neither agree/disagree 35%, Disagree 12%
Male 35-54: Agree 38%, Neither agree/disagree 29%, Disagree 32%
Female 35-54: Agree 38%, Neither agree/disagree 34%, Disagree 24%
Male 55+: Agree 21%, Neither agree/disagree 27%, Disagree 51%
Female 55+: Agree 31%, Neither agree/disagree 36%, Disagree 30%

'Don't know' responses have been excluded to aid readability

● Agree   ● Neither agree/disagree   ● Disagree

With women one of the groups that have benefited most significantly from shifting social mores and new codes of language and behaviour, it is clear that many women of the Baby Boomer era recognise the windfall, however small, from the protections and empowerment that have been extended to their sex. Nonetheless, we should caution that this consciousness does not necessarily apply to an individual level – when asked whether political correctness 'protects people like me', right across the population, the percentages who agree with this statement are extremely low. It is true that twice as many women over 55 years agree with this statement than their male counterparts, but this only represents just under a fifth of their age and gender cohort in total.

"Political correctness protects people like me"

'Don't know' responses have been excluded to aid readability

● Agree   ● Neither agree/disagree   ● Disagree

Social Grade and Age

Our deeper analysis reveals that social grade is only a significant factor in shaping viewpoints on these issues, compared to age, when it comes to the younger generation. Broadly, for those aged over 35 years, their age is a more important determinant in their attitudes towards political correctness than their socio-economic background.

On the question of who should define the boundaries of acceptable language and behaviour, young people in higher social grades are three times as likely to believe the government should arbitrate, and young people in lower social grades almost twice as likely to be uncertain as to whom should hold this responsibility. When presented with the statement, 'Political correctness helps to create a fairer society by enabling more citizens to feel comfortable and participate to their fullest extent', only 43 per cent of under-35s in lower socio-economic grades agree, compared to 60 per cent of their more prosperous counterparts – a trend also replicated in response to the statement, 'Political correctness is a small price to pay for a more equal society'.

Importantly, however, young people with low socio-economic backgrounds are not only less likely to believe that political correctness has been a force for good, but also less likely to rail against it. For example, 58 pe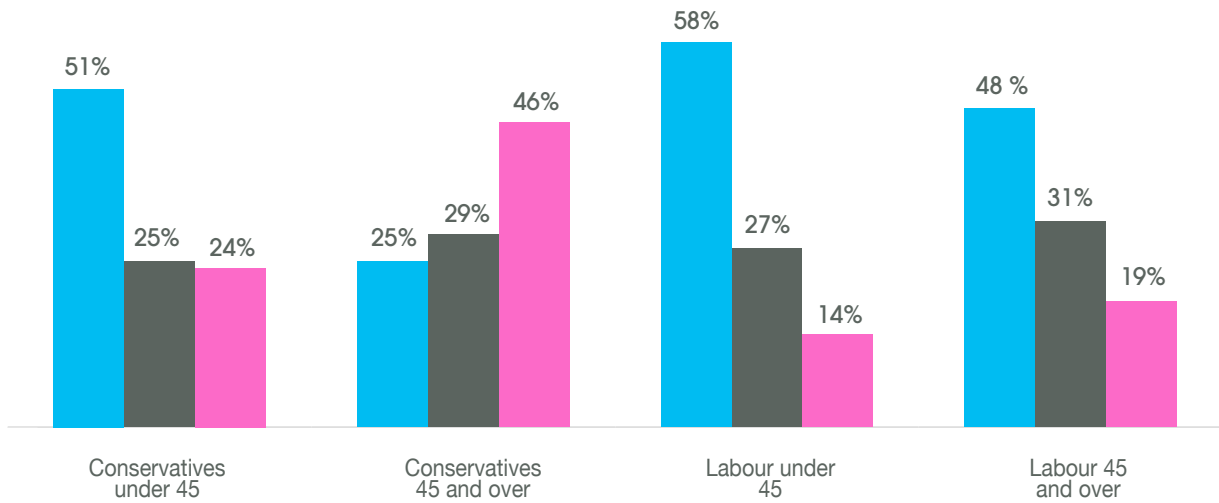r cent of under-35s from lower social grades agree that 'Political correctness sometimes goes too far and exceeds common sense', compared to 69 per cent of under-35s from higher social grades.

We can therefore conclude that, amongst the young, the debates around political correctness – on both sides – are a matter of substantially greater concern for those in higher socio-economic groups.

Voting Intention and Age

Analysing the findings through these two specific dimensions provided some of the most fascinating results of the study. In particular, identifying the tremendous disparities of opinion on the issue of political correctness between the younger and older generations of Conservative voters. While distinctions could also be observed between Labour voters, they were significantly less dramatic and demonstrated a consistency of socially liberal attitudes coalescing around a shared ideology. For the Conservative Party, however, it is clear that there is a struggle ahead to bridge the entrenched hostility towards these issues amongst its older generation of voters, with the convincing level of liberalism permeating amongst its younger – and future – generations of voters.

"Political correctness helps to create a fairer society by enabling more citizens to feel comfortable and participate to their fullest extent"

Conservatives under 45: Agree 51%, Neither agree/disagree 25%, Disagree 24%

Conservatives 45 and over: Agree 25%, Neither agree/disagree 29%, Disagree 46%

Labour under 45: Agree 58%, Neither agree/disagree 27%, Disagree 14%

Labour 45 and over: Agree 48%, Neither agree/disagree 31%, Disagree 19%
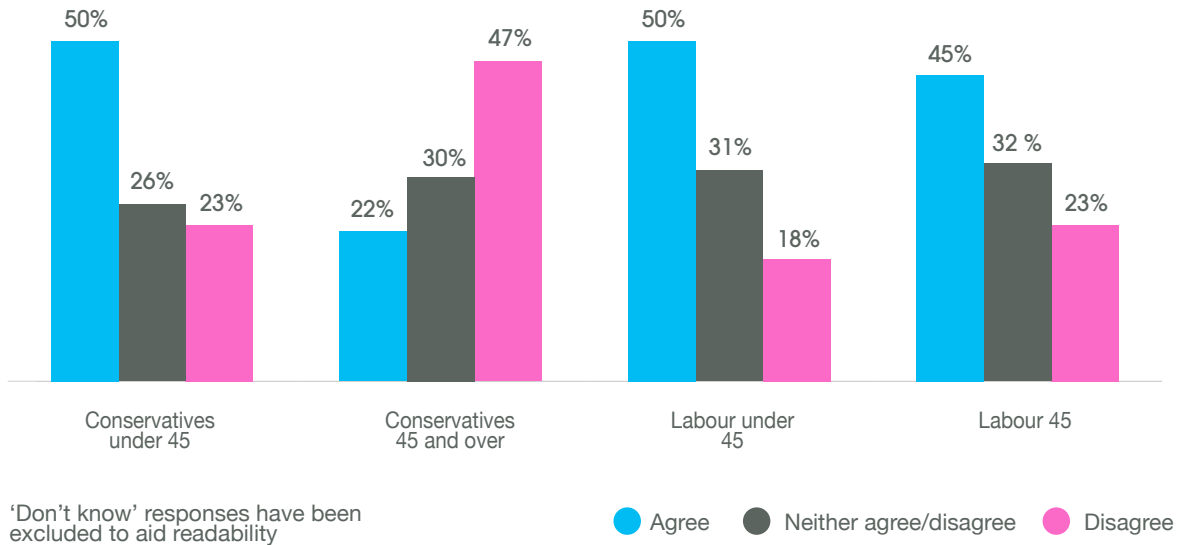
'Don't know' responses have been excluded to aid readability

● Agree   ● Neither agree/disagree   ● Disagree

An especially staggering gulf can be observed in the responses to the statement, 'Political correctness helps to create a fairer society by enabling more citizens to feel comfortable and participate to their fullest extent', with a majority of under-45s (51 per cent) agreeing with this, compared to just a quarter (25 per cent) of older Conservative voters. This chasm increases further in response to the statement, 'Political correctness is a small price to pay for a more equal society', with half (50 per cent) of under-45 Conservative voters agreeing with this, compared to only 22 per cent of over-45 Conservative voters. By contrast, the opinion gap between younger and older Labour voters is only five percentage points – at 50 per cent to 45 per cent respectively.
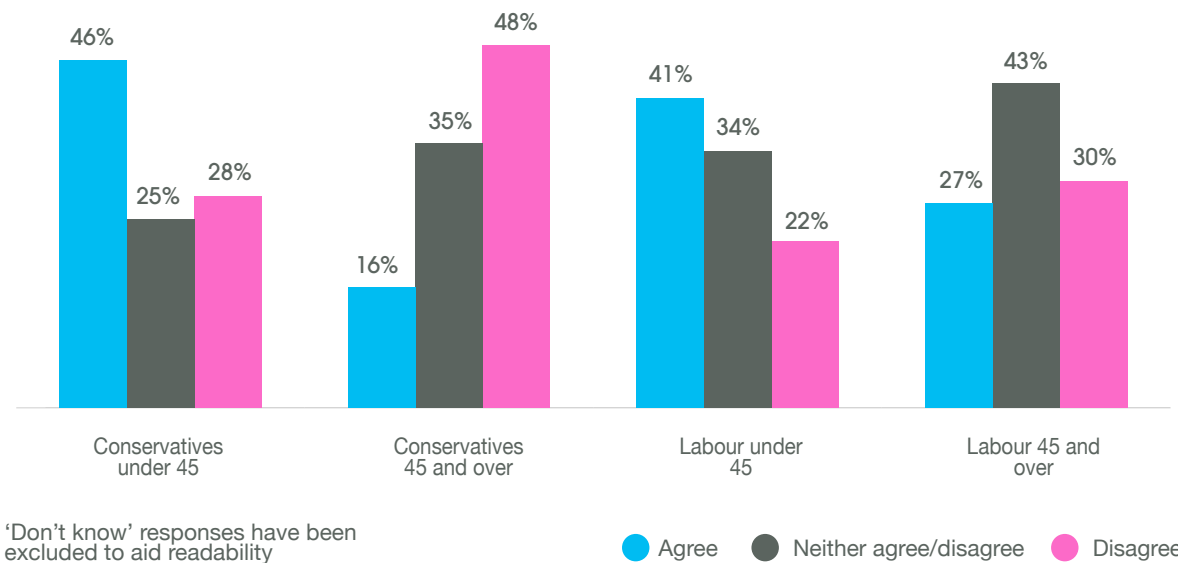
"Political correctness is a small price to pay for a more equal society"

Conservatives under 45
- Agree: 50%
- Neither agree/disagree: 26%
- Disagree: 23%

Conservatives 45 and over
- Agree: 22%
- Neither agree/disagree: 30%
- Disagree: 47%

Labour under 45
- Agree: 50%
- Neither agree/disagree: 31%
- Disagree: 18%

Labour 45
- Agree: 45%
- Neither agree/disagree: 32 %
- Disagree: 23%

'Don't know' responses have been excluded to aid readability

● Agree ● Neither agree/disagree ● Disagree

On the question of who should arbitrate language and behaviour, younger Conservatives were much less likely to choose 'ordinary people/society as a whole' than their older counterparts – at 46 per cent to 62 per cent. On this issue we also see a relatively similar split between the younger and older generations of Labour voters, with younger Labour voters (at 41 per cent) much more closely aligned to their Conservative age group than their Labour elders (at 58 per cent).

"Political correctness protects people like me"

Conservatives under 45
- Agree: 46%
- Neither agree/disagree: 25%
- Disagree: 28%

Conservatives 45 and over
- Agree: 16%
- Neither agree/disagree: 35%
- Disagree: 48%

Labour under 45
- Agree: 41%
- Neither agree/disagree: 34%
- Disagree: 22%

Labour 45 and over
- Agree: 27%
- Neither agree/disagree: 43%
- Disagree: 30%

'Don't know' responses have been excluded to aid readability

● Agree ● Neither agree/disagree ● Disagree

Nonetheless, the distance between the views of the young and old in the Conservative Party reach their zenith in response to the statement, 'Political correctness protects people like me'. A considerable 46 per cent of under-45-year-old Conservative voters recognise that they benefit from political correctness and the protections it offers, compared to just 16 per cent of over-45-year-old Conservative voters – a gap of 30 percentage points.

One issue, however, revealed that the liberalism of the younger generation of Conservatives may indeed also comprise a strong libertarian streak. When asked to choose between two statements – 'It's more important to protect all citizens from harm, even if it sometimes means limiting freedom of speech' OR 'It's more important to protect free speech, even if it sometimes means exposing some citizens to harm' – 54 per cent of Tories under 45 years chose to favour free speech and 29 per cent chose to protect society from harm, while Tories over 45 years in age were evenly split at 37 per cent between the two choices.

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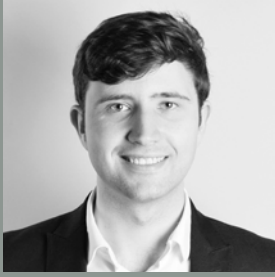
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