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Disagreeing Well

Public opinion on how Britain disagrees



More in
Common



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Foreword

How we manage and live with disagreement is more important in an era of online communication and political polarisation. It is fundamental to the nature of society, cohesive communities and to the functioning of democracies.

The findings of this report crystallise how the public see the challenge of disagreeing in this moment. They set out in clear terms how disagreement has become harder in recent years and the importance of public space for constructive disagreement. While many people across Britain continue to value open debate, they increasingly worry about the personal consequences of speaking honestly about difficult issues. When people feel unable to contribute, there is a risk that misunderstanding grows and common ground becomes harder to find.

Disagreement is not something to be feared or avoided. Done well, it can strengthen relationships, improve decision-making and help us better understand one another. The challenge is not whether we disagree, but how we disagree.

Universities exist to create, challenge and share knowledge through open discussion and debate. At their best, they bring together people with different perspectives and experiences to explore ideas, test assumptions and learn from one another. In a period of growing social and political division, this role has never been more important.

That is why we started the Disagreeing Well programme at UCL. Through it, we are exploring how individuals and institutions can build the skills, confidence and spaces needed for constructive disagreement.

At a time when public debate can often feel polarised and hostile, creating opportunities for disagreeing well has never been more important.

Dr Michael Spence
President and Provost, UCL

About More in Common

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

About UCL

UCL is a global top 10 university, set up in London 200 years ago to offer education for all. Today, we gather 60,000 staff and students, from over 150 countries, to create a unique city within a city – a research and innovation powerhouse that leads the world in subjects spanning the arts, sciences, technology and the humanities. We've nurtured 33 Nobel Prize winners, because here, brave ideas have the scale and the support they need to succeed.

About Disagreeing Well

UCL has developed the Disagreeing Well programme led by Professor Dame Hazel Genn. Through it, UCL is exploring how individuals and institutions can build the skills, confidence and spaces needed for constructive disagreement. It aims to address UCL's continued role as a forum for open discourse in an increasingly polarised world. This will help students and wider society to become rounded global citizens well-versed in values of 'freedom of expression', and to respect divergent views and perspectives.

Further information

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Executive summary

1 - How Britons think about disagreement

The public believe that disagreement is normal and necessary, but Britain bottles it up.

Nearly two in three Britons (63 per cent) lean toward the view that it is important to discuss every topic, no matter how strongly we disagree. Yet most avoid tricky or controversial topics. In focus groups, Britons describe a tension between disagreeing well and often, which they see as healthy, and the polite British tendency to avoid conflict.

Britons see disagreement as a life skill that is developed through practice and experience.

In focus groups, people describe how they have got better at disagreeing throughout their lives, through arguing with family and learning to listen to others. Asked what skills are most important for productive disagreement, listening comes first, selected by nearly half (46 per cent) of Britons.

The goal for Britons isn't always to win the argument, but to be understood. Only 4 per cent of Britons say the most important thing in a political argument is to change the other person's mind. Eight times as many (32 per cent) say it is to understand the other person's point of view.

Not everyone feels comfortable disagreeing. Graduates, men and Progressive Activists are far more likely to enjoy debating tricky or controversial topics, while most Britons prefer to avoid these issues.

2 - Barriers to disagreement

Three in five (58 per cent) say it's getting harder to disagree in Britain. While Reform UK voters are most likely to say this, it is not simply a left-right split; most voters across politics agree that disagreement is becoming harder.

Most Britons are biting their tongues; fears of being labelled or misunderstood are stifling debate. Seven in ten Britons (69 per cent) say they are at least sometimes reluctant to say how they feel. This is often fuelled by a fear of being misunderstood or labelled as prejudiced. More than two in five (44 per cent) at least sometimes worry about being seen as 'racist', 'right-wing' or 'woke' if they say what they really feel.

Discussion of topics like migration, conflict in the Middle East and the trans debate feel stifled. On each of these issues, Britons describe fears that their valid views, questions or concerns will be misunderstood, or labelled as prejudiced. Many say they feel afraid to ask questions on these topics, out of fear that they will be misread.

3 - The spaces where we disagree

Britons feel that the forums that are supposed to enable or model good disagreement are not working. Few feel happy with the spaces that are intended to facilitate public

disagreement and debate: Britons describe social media as toxic, see Parliament as a place where unhealthy debate is showcased, and while they see a role for universities and other civic institutions in facilitating debate, some see these spaces as elitist or exclusive, and few access them for this purpose.

People who disagree online are demographically and politically unusual. Only 22 per cent of Britons say they at least sometimes debate politics online, and they do not look like the rest of the country: three in five vote for left-leaning parties; nearly half (47 per cent) went to university, compared to less than a third of the general public; three in five (62 per cent) are men.

Outside of the home and the workplace, the pub is Britain's favourite place to disagree. 23 per cent of Britons say they at least sometimes disagree about politics in the pub – more than at a university campus, a community group or in public with strangers, and just ahead of those they don't know on social media. In focus groups, people describe pubs as a place where people can have "heated" debates with people with different worldviews. The pub is also the only space tested where those who disagree there are evenly split between left and right-wing voters.

On disagreement, the public's preference is in person, or not at all. Asked how they would resolve a disagreement with a colleague, 47 per cent say face to face, and the second most popular answer, chosen by 22 per cent, is to avoid discussing it altogether. Just 1 per cent would choose a video call.

4 - What Britons want in order to disagree well

The public want Britain to get better at disagreement, and highlight a range of skills, spaces and standards in order to disagree well.

Skills: The top skill people believe we need to disagree well is listening, and many feel we are losing it. While Britons tend to feel that this is a skill that built up through years of arguments in the home and debates in the workplace, there is also an appetite for these skills to be considered more in formal education – either as part of the national curriculum, as a programme at universities, or in programmes available to the wider public.

Spaces: Few believe that the current places where disagreement is supposed to happen are working. The one example that works is the pub. The three criteria people say the things places to disagree need are to be accessible, not self-selecting, and in-person.

Standards: People think that politicians must play a role in modelling healthy disagreement, yet few think that this is being done. Only 43 per cent say that politicians remain respectful when they debate each other, while 83 per cent say they should. People value robust debate in politics, yet there is also a widespread sense that politicians too often cross the line. Many want to lower the temperature on our politics.

The Seven Segments

This research uses the Seven Segments of the British public. Based on More in Common's extended research into Britons' core beliefs, their values and behaviours, this segmentation allows us to look upstream not just at what different groups think, but why they think it. Going beyond a simple left-right spectrum, it reflects deeper differences in how people relate to authority, change, community and the future, which help explain why traditional party loyalties have weakened and political volatility has increased. Segmentation is a particularly powerful way of detecting and understanding differences and commonality in people's values and in their broader orientation towards society and the big issues facing the country.

The analysis produces seven segments within the British population:

Progressive Activists – 12 per cent of the population

A highly engaged and globally-minded group driven by concerns about social justice. Politically active but feeling increasingly alienated from mainstream party politics, they prioritise issues such as climate change and international affairs. Occasionally outliers on social issues, they maintain a strongly held and sometimes uncompromising approach to their beliefs.

Incrementalist Left – 21 per cent of the population

A civic-minded, community-oriented group holding views which are generally left-of-centre but with an aversion to the extreme; they prefer gradual reform over revolutionary change. They trust experts and institutions yet are largely tuned out of day-to-day politics and can be conflict-averse, stepping away from issues they see as particularly fraught or complex.

Established Liberals – 9 per cent of the population

A prosperous, confident segment who believe the system broadly works as it is and who trust experts to deliver continued progress. They have a strong belief in individual agency which can make them less empathetic to those who are struggling. Institutionally trusting, they maintain faith in democratic processes and have a strong information-centric way of engaging with issues.

Sceptical Scrollers – 10 per cent of the population

A digitally-native group whose unhappiness with the social contract means they have lost faith in traditional institutions and seek alternative sources of truth online. Often shaped by their experience of the Covid pandemic, they prefer individual influencers over mainstream media and are increasingly drawn to conspiratorial thinking.

Rooted Patriots – 20 per cent of the population

A patriotic but politically untethered group which feels abandoned and overlooked by political elites and yearns for leaders with common sense, but does not want to overthrow the system as a whole. They are particularly concerned about community decline and the

pressures of migration. Interventionist on economics but conservative on social issues, they have shaped much of Britain's politics over the past decade.

Traditional Conservatives – 8 per cent of the population

Respectful of authority and tradition, Traditional Conservatives believe in individual responsibility and established norms that have served them well. Nostalgic for the past but optimistic about the future, they are deeply sceptical of many forces of change such as immigration or the path to net-zero.

Dissenting Disruptors – 20 per cent of the population

Frustrated with their circumstances and with an appetite for radical solutions, Dissenting Disruptors crave dramatic change and strong leadership. Highly distrustful of institutions, opposed to multiculturalism and feeling disconnected from society, they are drawn to political movements that promise to overhaul the status quo and put people like them first.

Chapter 1 | How Britons think about disagreement

The public thinks disagreement is important, but that Britain bottles it up

Most Britons see disagreement as normal and necessary. Nearly two in three (63 per cent) lean toward the view that we should debate every topic, no matter how strongly we disagree, compared to 37 per cent who say some topics are too divisive to be discussed and are best left alone. On both a personal level and in public life, people in focus groups say that uncomfortable or difficult topics should be debated freely.

Nothing's off the table for me. If it's something that's needing discussed, then it should be discussed. I think the worst thing you can do, particularly in a relationship, is not have that discussion.

Darrell, Glasgow

It's important... to respect and have that mutual understanding and allow everyone to have that freedom of speech and have their say and their opinions.

Daniyah, Manchester

Yet while Britons might welcome difficult debates in principle, most avoid it in practice. 54 per cent say they prefer to avoid discussing controversial or tricky topics, while 46 per cent say they enjoy it. And enjoyment varies significantly across different groups: men, young people and those who attended university are significantly more likely to enjoy disagreement than older Britons, women and non-graduates.

In focus groups, many make a distinction between friendly 'debates' or 'disagreements', and serious 'arguments'. Often, avoiding difficult topics is not a political choice, but simply a desire to avoid ruining a good conversation.

I like a passionate conversation... it can get passionate and a little heated, but I don't enjoy an argument. Definitely not.

Katherine, Sheffield

I don't enjoy arguing. I think it takes up too much time and effort. But if I do think I'm right, then I will try and argue my point.

Archie, Mid-Wales

How Britons think about disagreement in their own lives is significant because it shapes how they view public debate.

There is a political dimension here, but it is not a left-right split. Of the Seven Segments, the only two where a majority enjoy discussing controversial topics are Progressive Activists and Dissenting Disruptors. While these two segments are on opposing ends of the spectrum in many of their political attitudes, they share a belief that the status quo is broken, crave radical systemic change, and are willing to tolerate risk and upheaval to deliver it. Both are more likely to back populist parties outside of the traditional mainstream.

I think it can be fun to have a debate because it gives you an insight to how someone else thinks... There's loads of films that I like and other people hate. Why do they love them? Why do I hate them? I find that interesting. It's fun. (...) I live in Islington. Most of my friends overwhelmingly love Jeremy Corbyn, and I just happen to believe he wasn't the Messiah. And I would argue that, because it's like, well, hang on a minute — you're not speaking for me. It's almost like, we all love him, don't we? Well, no, I don't.

Steve, Islington, Dissenting Disruptor

It's easier said than done for me, because I feel like I probably do argue to the end of the earth on topics that I'm passionate about.

Chelsea, Birmingham, Progressive Activist

On the opposite end of the spectrum are Rooted Patriots. While they share many socially conservative values with Dissenting Disruptors, they are far more risk-averse, with higher threat perception and diverge in their views about free speech. Most Rooted Patriots believe that people have the right to be protected from harmful or offensive views, and many feel that avoiding heated debates is both polite and sensible.

Likewise, while Incrementalist Left Britons share many of Progressive Activists' left-leaning and liberal values, they are 19 percentage points less likely to enjoy discussing controversial topics. They tend to be less engaged in politics, and more likely to value compromise over 'sticking to your guns' than Progressive Activists.

I think debates and arguments should follow the same rules as gambling. Some of the gambling companies say that once it stops being fun and it becomes an addiction — I think an argument or a debate should be that as well. Once it stops being fun or really good banter back and forth, as soon as it starts becoming serious, you need to stop.

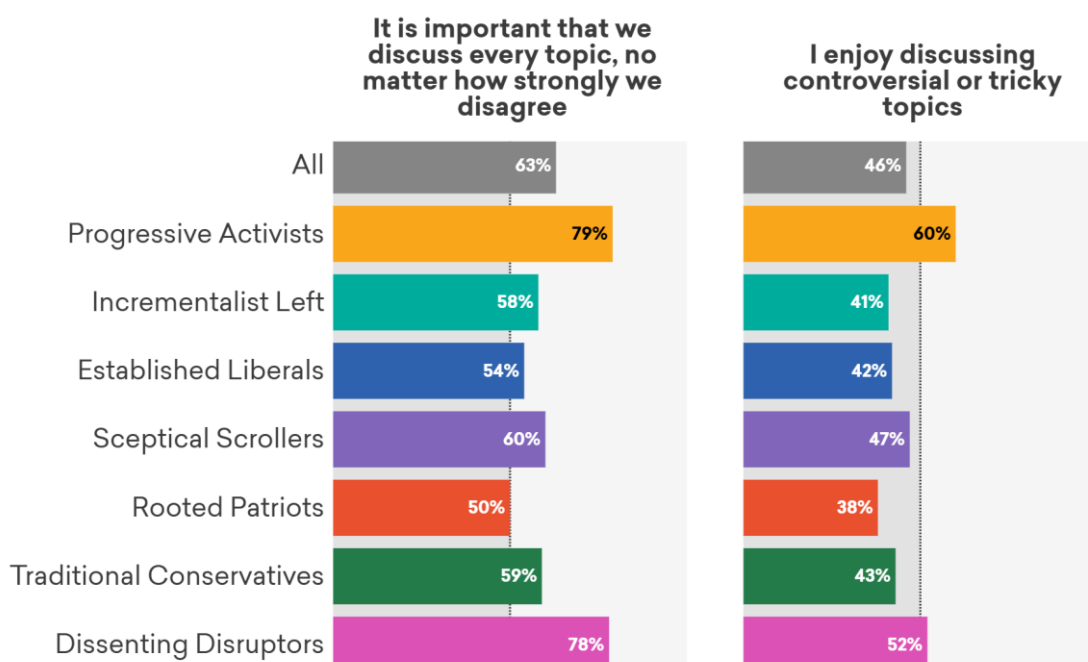
Amarjit, London, Incrementalist Left

I'd like to get my points across, but I sometimes think, oh, it's not worth it, because I just don't want the agro. I really don't want the agro. Healthy debate, they call it, don't they? But that can turn nasty.

Janet, Wakefield, Rooted Patriot

Most Britons believe it is important to debate difficult topics, but only **Progressive Activists** and **Dissenting Disruptors** enjoy doing so

Proportion who agree with each statement



This is reflected in the voting behaviour of those who like to discuss tricky topics: 58 per cent of current Green voters and 52 per cent of current Reform voters like to discuss controversial topics – higher than any other voter group.

Overall, those who feel comfortable with debating tricky or sensitive topics – across the left and the right of politics – tend to be more politically engaged, have a greater appetite for risk, and are more likely to crave radical change than the average Briton. As explored in more detail in chapter 3, this shapes the composition of many of the spaces where disagreement happens.

For many Britons, there is a tension between believing in disagreement and living in a country that is naturally conflict averse. And not everyone believes that we need to debate more fiercely: 58 per cent say that Britain's polite and respectful style of debate is a good

thing, compared to 42 per cent who would rather that we debated more robustly. And to 'agree to disagree' is near-universally seen as a virtue, with 91 per cent saying that it is good to 'agree to disagree' if it ends the argument.

Yet alongside this polite British tendency to soften debates, or 'agree to disagree' to keep the peace, some Britons believe there is a risk we avoid disagreements to our own detriment. 57 per cent say that people in the UK generally avoid discussing things they disagree about, rather than being comfortable discussing their disagreements openly.

In focus groups, some Britons say that rather than airing disagreements openly, Britain has a culture of letting them simmer under the surface until they burst out in unhealthy and destructive ways.

I think we tend to let it bubble more rather than explode... ours tends to simmer and there's a level of discomfort, and then suddenly something will happen and then there is huge protests, there are the riots, there are the looting. But it stems from months or years of small things happening and people feeling not listened to.

Willow, Southampton

I just think we're terrible at complaining. It's that whole British thing, isn't it? Never complain and never explain. You just go along not agreeing, and then there's mass explosion. On the world stage I think we're known for it, aren't we? Just not complaining, trying to resolve everything over a cup of tea.

Daisy, Nottinghamshire

I think we disagree badly and we give over a lot and agree to disagree as such. Even if we're correct, we give up.

Neil, Essex

In this context, many want Britain to be better at disagreeing.

Disagreement as a life skill

In focus groups, Britons describe disagreeing well as a life skill, something they had picked up through years of experience of household arguments and workplace debates. Several describe getting better at it as they got older, or after having children. And for many, this 'getting better' meant being less interested in winning, and more able to hear the other side.

It's a life skill. (...) thinking back to the person I was when I was 20 versus the person that I am now that I'm 41. When I was 21, I was 'this is right, I know what I'm doing.' Now it's like, okay, I need to listen to this person's point of view. I need to have a balanced argument.

Willow, Southampton

Too many people... they're actually just waiting for the person to stop talking so that they can get theirs across.

Darrell, Glasgow

I think it's active listening rather than you're nodding. You can tell the person, they're not talking, but they're not listening either. It's actually about seeing that they're absorbing what you're saying.

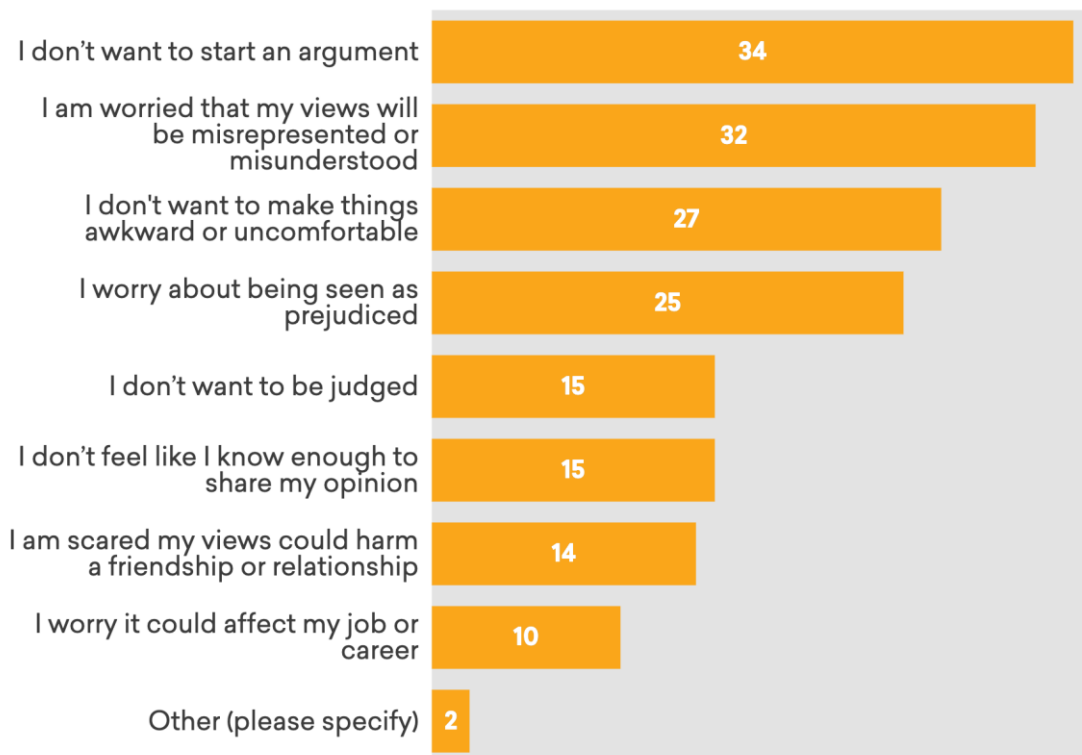
Daisy, Nottinghamshire

Asked which skills matter most for productive disagreement, listening tops the list for Britons, selected by 46 per cent, ahead of staying calm (39 per cent), using facts (35 per cent) and remaining polite (26 per cent).

This speaks to what Britons consider to be the point of arguments or debating disagreements; rather than winning the debate, the public tend to see the goal of conversational disagreement is not to win or change the other person's mind; it is to get their point across and feel understood.

Britons see listening as the most important skill for disagreeing well

Which skills are the most important for productive disagreement? Choose up to two.



Only four per cent say the most important thing when arguing about politics is to change the other person's mind. Eight times as many (32 per cent) say it is to understand the other person's point of view, and a quarter (25 per cent) say it is to get their own point across clearly. Nine in ten (91 per cent) say it is often good to "agree to disagree" if it ends the argument.

As I've got older, I've cared less about winning... I've always been fairly good at accepting other people's point of view, but I don't feel like I have to win. I don't always have to be right.

Daisy, Nottinghamshire

They wouldn't have to agree with me, but to have some acknowledgement that they understand my point of view. I needed to have got it across clear enough for them to think, okay, I understand that... I just wanted to make sure that I would get the point across correctly and in a clear, friendly way.

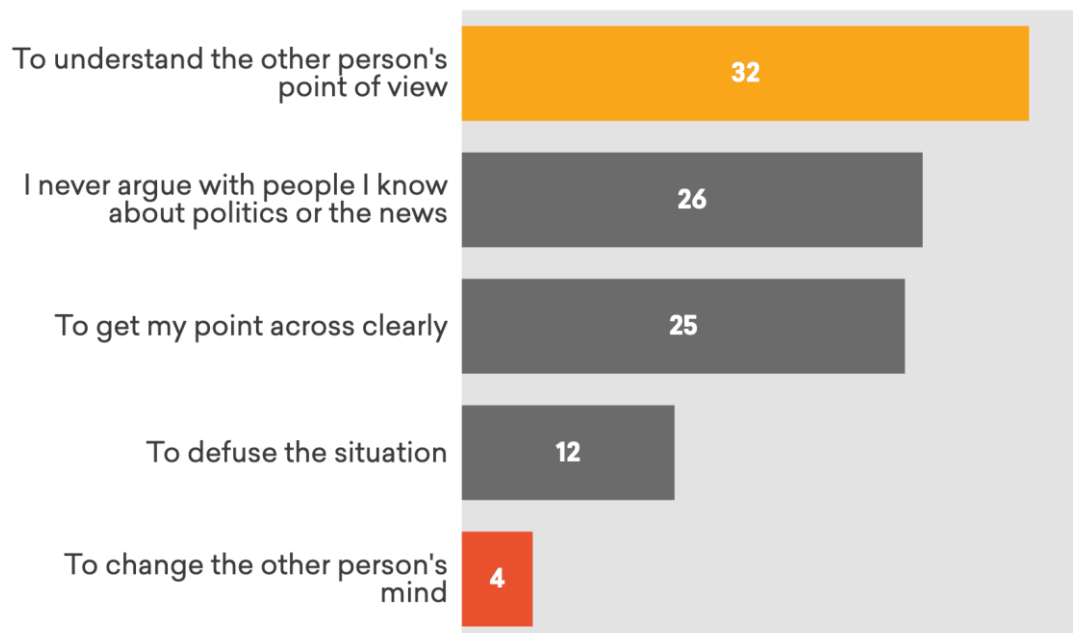
Katherine, Sheffield

As I've got older, it doesn't bother me about being right anymore. It's about getting to the right goal, whether it's my goal, whether it's their goal. It's making sure everyone understands where we're at.

Neil, Essex

Only 4 per cent of Britons believe the point of a political debate is **to change the other person's mind**

When arguing with someone about politics or the news, which of the following is most important to you?



The flip side is that if the point of disagreeing in conversations is to be understood, being misread – or mislabelled – is deeply frustrating. Asked to describe an argument that had gone badly or been left unresolved, participants often cite a time the other person had come away with the wrong impression of their view, or had assumed bad intentions.

As the next chapter explores, this fear of being misunderstood is a significant driver of Britons' reluctance to say what they think on controversial topics.

It's that lack of understanding - you don't know all the emails I'm sending, all the reports I'm writing... it's that misunderstanding, and him not seeing it from my perspective, what's behind the scenes.

Willow, Southampton

I said, 'Oh, I would probably be more classed as right-wing.' And the first thing he said, he went, 'Not racist?' And I thought, well, you didn't think I was racist five seconds ago before I told you that I was probably more right-wing, and you've known me for six years.

Archie, Mid-Wales

Chapter 2 | Barriers to disagreement

Biting their tongues

Nearly three in five Britons (58 per cent) say it is becoming harder to disagree about difficult topics in the UK than it was a few years ago. This is not a simple left-right split. The view is most widely held by Reform UK voters (69 per cent) and Conservative voters (67 per cent), but majorities of Labour (56 per cent), Liberal Democrat (55 per cent) and Green Party (52 per cent) voters say the same.

In fact, the generational divide is wider than the political one: 74 per cent of 65–74 year olds say it is becoming harder to disagree, versus 45 per cent of 25–34 year olds.

In focus groups, people point to a range of factors that have made disagreement more toxic in Britain: social media often arises, alongside the decline of physical spaces where debate can take place.

Definitely become more divisive. I mean, we live in the information age now. It's never been so easy to get an opinion across and hide behind a keyboard.

Ben, West Yorkshire

If you go back, I don't know, 30 years ago, even if people had different opinions of who they supported, there wasn't this big divide.

Neil, North West London

I think people are far less tolerant, far more ignorant of everything. I think we've lost that way of just being respectful of people's opinions almost... I remember when I was growing up, you'd sit in the pub and there could be people sitting there having a debate about something and almost agreeing to disagree... And it just doesn't seem like that kind of thing happens anymore.

Sean, Slough

It's clear that many Britons are holding their tongues. Seven in ten (69 per cent) say they are at least sometimes reluctant to say what they really think – 21 per cent feel that way often.

Among those who do hold back, many cite British politeness: the top reason for not wanting to express themselves is hoping to avoid an argument.

But alongside this, for many Britons there is a deep worry that their views will be misrepresented or misunderstood (32 per cent). A quarter (25 per cent) worry about being seen as prejudiced – and for Reform UK voters, that fear is the single biggest reason to stay quiet, given by 36 per cent.

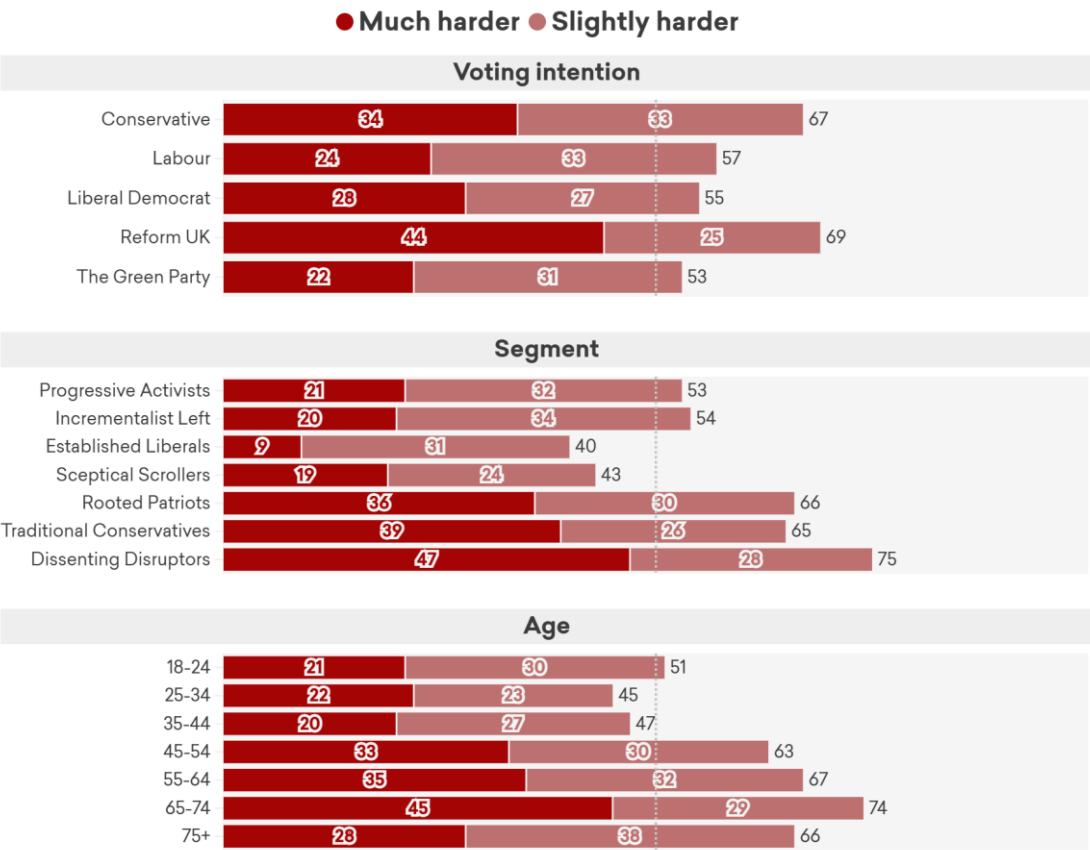
More than two in five Britons (44 per cent) at least sometimes worry about being labelled negatively when they express an opinion, including 14 per cent who worry often. In focus groups, several describe worries that voicing an opinion now gets you branded racist or far right.

Everyone is afraid of being called far right or racist... so I think everyone tiptoes around.

Archie, Mid-Wales

3 in 5 say it's becoming harder to disagree in Britain

Compared to a few years ago, do you think it is becoming easier or harder to disagree about difficult topics in the UK?



You don't want to be accused of anything just because of your opinion, but also how can it be used as a slur as to which way you vote? This is why we vote, because it gives us our opinion, and you don't want to be slandered for having an opinion - and that's basically what's happening now.

Katherine, Sheffield

I look at the comments and I just think, I would not dare say that, whether I agree with it or not.

Janet, Wakefield

For many, this fear of being mislabelled has a chilling effect on discussions of important topics. Many describe not wanting to ask innocent questions, or being unable to discuss an issue they care about.

People are so fearful of being labelled something that maybe they don't ask, so maybe they don't understand... They're afraid to question it for the fear of being called something or being labelled something that they're not.

Archie, Mid-Wales

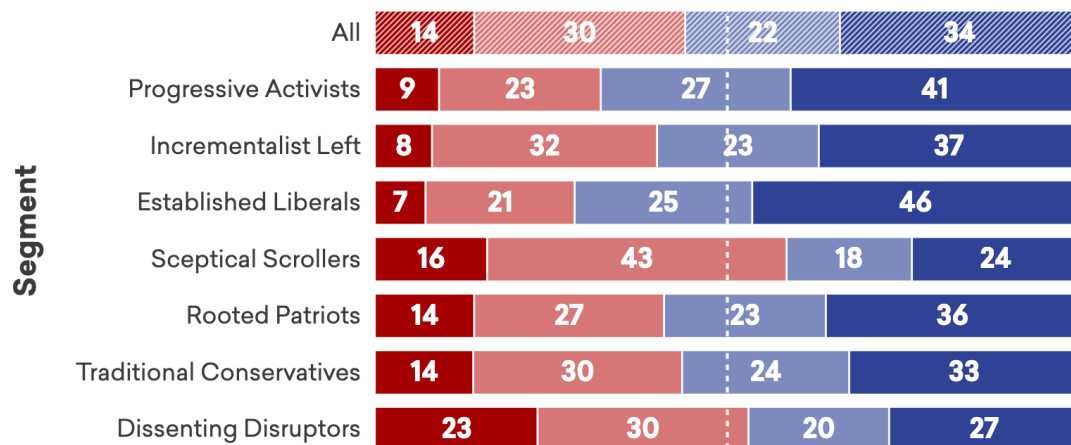
If you talk about immigration and if you say something like we need maybe more controlled immigration, then suddenly someone slaps the word or label Nazi... once they've labelled you, pretty much your credibility is just diminished just from them saying that.

Baba, London

Over 4 in 10 Britons worry they'll be negatively labelled when sharing their opinion

How often, if at all, do you worry about being labelled negatively (for example, as 'racist', 'right-wing' or 'woke') when you express an opinion?

● Often ● Sometimes ● Not very often ● Never



The topics where we can, and cannot, disagree

Most Britons do not believe any topics are off-limits. On all fourteen topics tested, more people say they find disagreement easy than difficult, and on most of many topics majorities find them easy: 52 per cent find the economy easy to disagree about compared to 12 per cent who find it hard, and 55 per cent say the same of Covid, compared to 14 per cent who say difficult.

The issues that Britons struggle most with are the Israel-Palestine debate, assisted dying, immigration and the debate around transgender people.

I think immigration is a real big one. It's an emotional level, isn't it? For people to have such strong points sometimes about it, it's hard to hear, but you don't want to be a walkover either. So it's such a tricky thing to talk about.

Sadie, Hertfordshire

Immigration is a topic that is very sensitive and it's quite controversial for quite a number of reasons. People don't want to be accused of racism on the one hand, but on the other hand, countries have to protect their borders.

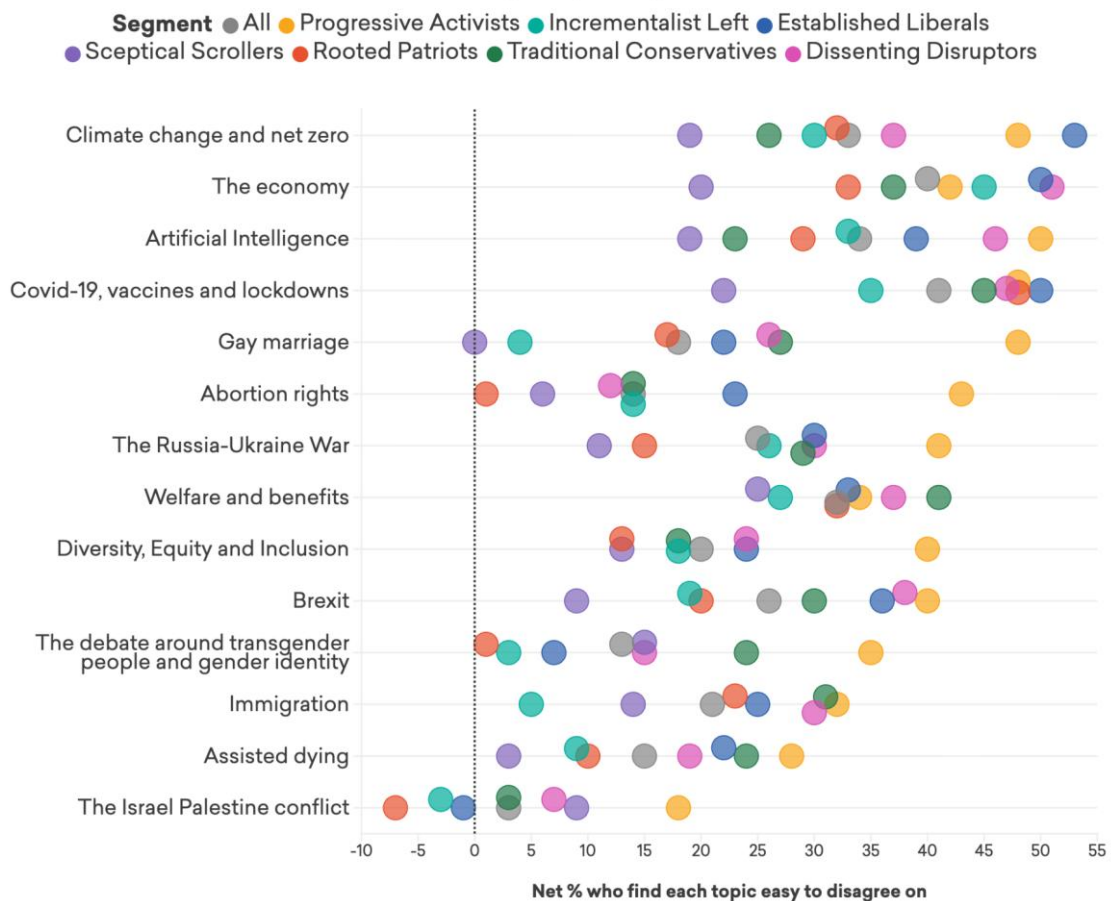
Baba, London

Yet there is significant variation: Progressive Activists are the most comfortable segment on more subjects than any other group, coming top on eight of the fourteen. On the trans debate, half of them (50 per cent) find disagreement easy and 14 per cent find it hard; among Incrementalist Left Britons the split is 33 to 31, and among Rooted Patriots 29 to 28.

Britons find it easy to disagree about the economy, and difficult to argue about the Israel-Palestine conflict, gender identity and immigration

To what extent do you find it easy or difficult to disagree with people on the following topics?

Net values shown: those who find each topic easy to disagree minus those who find it difficult



Israel-Palestine is the hardest topic tested, with 31 per cent of Britons finding it easy to disagree about and 28 per cent finding it hard.

Progressive Activists are exceptionally comfortable with it, with 44 per cent saying it is easy and only 26 per cent hard, while three segments are more likely to find it hard than easy: Rooted Patriots (24 to 31), Incrementalist Left Britons (30 to 32) and Established Liberals (24 to 25). The people most engaged with the conflict are the most confident arguing about it, while everyone else prefers to avoid taking a side in, often on the grounds that they do not know enough to take part. That echoes previous More in Common research on the Israel-Gaza conflict: in *More than Choosing Sides*, research found that while only a small number of Britons exclusively sympathised with Palestine or Israel more - with most saying neither, both sides or that they didn't know. In debates on the Middle East the loudest voices in the conflict drown out the larger number of Britons who do not want to pick a side.

I try and avoid it. I'm not an expert enough in that. I just think it's a shame that it's happening, but I wouldn't be one side or the other, because it's something that's got so much history to it. I don't think I'm educated enough to have a full-on debate with anyone regarding it.

Steve, Islington

Asked what it is that makes a debate difficult, often it is how personal it feels; nowhere is this more true than in the debate around transgender people, where a political discussion invariably encroaches on some of the most deeply personal issues of daily life. For other debates, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, it is a sense that the topic is too vast and that people lack knowledge and confidence to engage with it. On immigration, it is often a fear that valid concerns will be mislabelled as racist. And across each of these issues, there is a sense that arguing is futile because the viewpoints are too deeply entrenched, and so hostility is inevitable.

It becomes more contentious the more personal it becomes... Disagreeing with somebody's opinion about politics, that is less personal - that's about what they think rather than who and what they are. The gender issues, that is personal. They take it personally, and that's why I think tensions rise so quickly.

Daisy, Nottinghamshire

The hardest one to talk about is always immigration. That always seems to get people quite angry.

Amina, Sheffield

If you made up your mind 10 years ago and you probably still have the same opinion now, I don't think what I say to you in the next five minutes is going to change that opinion that you've held for the last decade.

Sam, Mid-Wales

Chapter 3 | The spaces where we disagree

Britain's disagreements happen overwhelmingly in private. Asked where they debate about politics or the news, the top options are with family (49 per cent), with friends in person (49 per cent), at home (45 per cent) and with a partner (41 per cent). In focus groups about disagreement, these private debates are raised long before any public ones: for many, it is in the home, with loved ones, that we learn to disagree well.

I disagree with my 16-year-old regularly. She knows everything. It's fine.

Neil, Essex

Even so, Britons believe public disagreement matters – and that the country needs spaces to enable it.

Social media, parliament and universities

In focus group conversations, it's clear that Britons think many of the places and institutions that are supposed to facilitate or model good public disagreement – social media, Parliament, universities – are doing it badly.

In the absence of physical spaces where people can disagree face-to-face, social media has become one of the most prominent places for exchanging views. Yet the majority of Britons avoid it: 63 per cent say they never debate about politics online. In focus groups, people describe how anonymity, rage-baiting and pile-ons make social media the place where they read but never post themselves.

Social media is the most unhealthy... the arguments are really terrible on social media, especially Facebook.

Rohan, Rotherham

I think communicating with strangers online, it's the biggest waste of time that there is... A lot of subject matter online is just put there to stir up some kind of controversy between so many people.

Ben, West Yorkshire

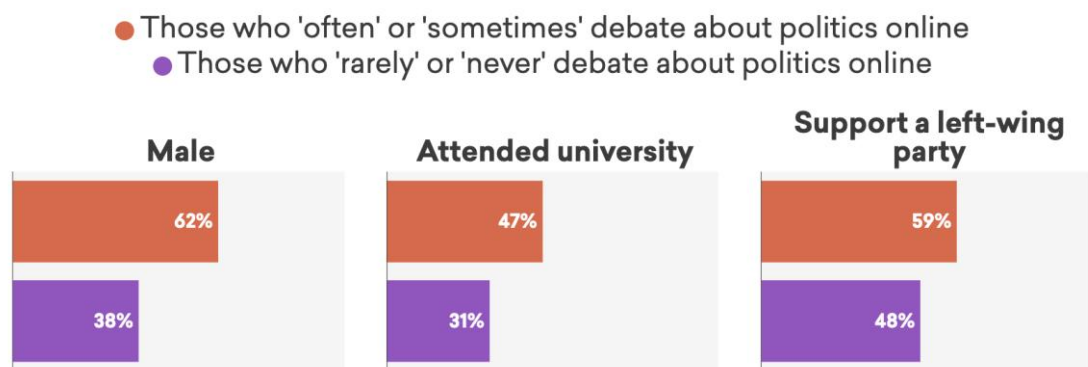
I think social media could have the power to enable healthy debates, but I think until anonymous posting is eradicated from those spaces, you won't have that, because you are always going to get people click baiting, rage baiting.

Niran, Kenilworth

Only 22 per cent of the British public say they 'sometimes' or 'often' debate politics online. And this 22 per cent are not representative of the British public as a whole. They are far

more left-wing: 59 per cent support a party on the left of British politics, compared to 48 per cent of those who stay out of online debates; nearly half (47 per cent) attended university, compared to only 31 per cent of those who do not debate online. And they are disproportionately male: 62 per cent of online debaters are men.

Those who **debate about politics online** are far more left-wing, male and university-educated than **those who do not**



Nor do Britons feel that healthy debate is being modelled well in Parliament. 57 per cent say politicians tend to be rude and disrespectful when they debate each other, such as at Prime Minister's Questions or on Question Time, while 83 per cent say politicians should always be respectful when disagreeing.

In focus groups, Britons often compare the House of Commons to a classroom. They describe the jeering, the sarcasm and the constant one-upmanship, and the sense that questions are asked to score a point rather than to get an answer. Several said they would find Prime Minister's Questions more useful if it ran slower and longer, with enough time for a proper answer.

You only have to watch the House of Commons... it's always a one-upmanship where they're trying to get one over on the other person... cheering in the background like they're in primary school.

Archie, Mid-Wales

They're diabolical. When you watch them in parliament, it's awful. They're rude to each other. They're sarcastic. They act like a bunch of children. And I think if any young people were watching that and wanting to be inspired to go into politics... it's appalling.

Lindsay, Worcestershire

No one addresses any point that anyone else has made. Someone will make a point and they won't come back and say, 'This is what you've said.' Or maybe even, 'What you've said is right, however I would change this about it.' There's no cooperation or anything.

Sam, Mid-Wales

Britons feel that universities have a role to play in facilitating debates, and most believe they should be zones where free speech is celebrated: by a margin of 79 per cent to 21 per cent, Britons lean toward the view that universities should be a place where all views can be expressed, rather than places that protect students from views that offend or upset them. Many feel that this is not being lived up to: some raise examples of no-platforming as evidence that disagreement on campus isn't happening as freely as it once did.

Notably, graduates themselves tend to be far more positive: asked about their own experiences of university, 65 per cent say that they mostly or always felt comfortable expressing their opinions. Yet this drops to 57 per cent among Gen Z graduates and students.

But regardless of whether universities are having free debates, most Britons do not feel included in them. Where participants did think of universities as a place for debate, they often assumed it was not a place for them – that campuses are closed spaces for students, or that public debates were aimed toward graduates.

It used to be the case that universities was a really good space where people could have debates... But sadly within universities, there's this kind of safe space kind of culture or mentality that seems to have become much more dominant. So any kind of sense of controversy or disagreement, universities seem to shy away from it.

Baba, London

Not everyone has access to university... it doesn't mean that the views of my aunts, my uncles, my parents don't deserve to be heard because they don't have that level of education. I think there needs to be some sort of forum where every voice can be put forward.

Willow, Southampton

The workplace

The workplace is one of the few remaining places where Britons regularly encounter people who they didn't choose to spend time with and who didn't choose to spend time with them.. But only a quarter of Britons (27 per cent) say they at least sometimes argue

about politics or the news with colleagues. Most avoid it, describing a desire to 'keep the peace' and retain professionalism.

It's really hard to have any sort of political conversation in the workplace and I completely avoid them for that reason.

Rohan, Rotherham

I think in the workplace you have to be very, very careful... So I would probably just walk away from a potential disagreement just to try and keep the peace and keep my job.

Amarjit, London

I think as long as it stays professional, then there can be a difference of opinion... Sometimes different viewpoints really help lead something into a better direction.

Niran, Kenilworth

And Britons generally don't want a more permissive culture when it comes to disagreement in the workplace. Only 30 per cent think being able to disagree more comfortably would make their workplace more productive, while 47 per cent say it would make no difference.

That reflects a distinction the public draws between the workplace and the rest of life. More in Common's [earlier work with the UCL Policy Lab and the University of Oxford on equality, diversity and inclusion](#) found that while Britons want workplaces to be places where everyone is treated with dignity and respect, they do not see work as the right environment for litigating contentious issues unrelated to the job. A quarter of Britons say they would feel uncomfortable expressing political views at work at all.

The same distinction shows up in where people think conduct should carry consequences: nearly two thirds think it is acceptable for someone to lose their job for expressing grossly offensive views in the workplace, but fewer than a third think the same if those views are expressed outside of it. Britons expect the rules of conduct at work to be different to those outside it.

Asked how they like to resolve non-work-related disagreements with colleagues, the public's preference is clearly "in person, or not at all". 47 per cent say they prefer to resolve the issue face-to-face, and the second most popular option, selected by more than one in five (22 per cent) is to simply avoid discussing it. Contrary to the rising culture of remote working, almost no Britons (1 per cent) say their first choice would be to resolve the disagreement on a video call. The public believes that the spaces we need to resolve conflict are, first and foremost, in person.

As working from home becomes increasingly widespread, a key challenge for employers is to enable constructive disagreement between colleagues, given there is such a strong aversion to doing so in any format except face-to-face.

Britons would rather resolve disagreements with colleagues face-to-face, or not at all

What is your preferred way to resolve a non-work-related disagreement (e.g. about news or politics) with a colleague?



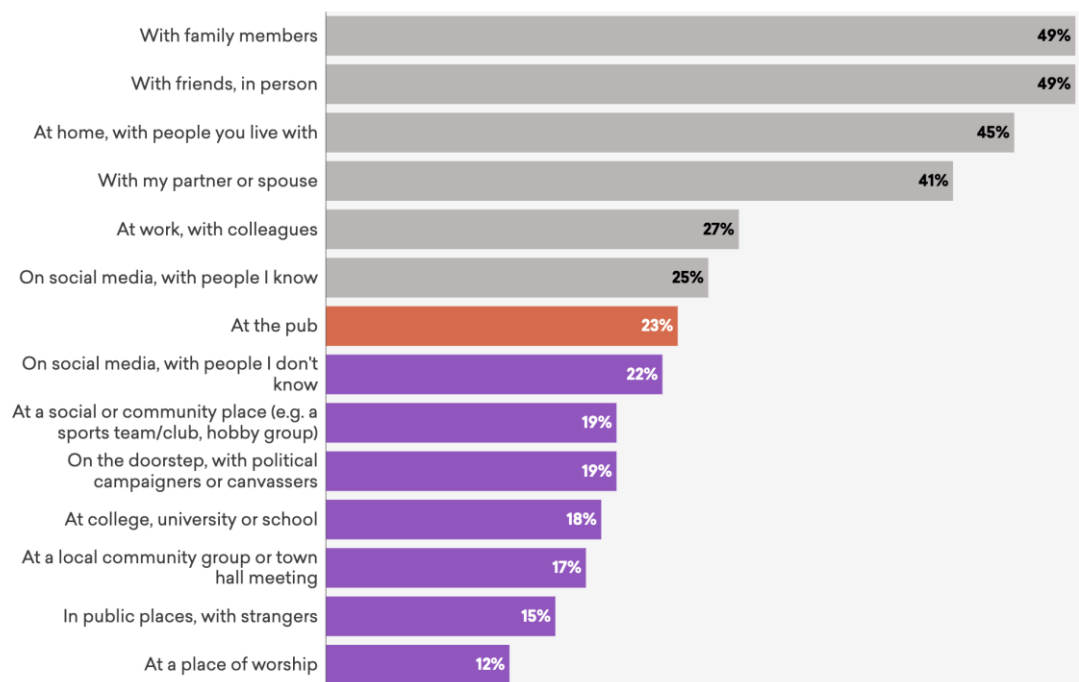
The pub

Beyond the home and the workplace, the main setting where Britons are likely to disagree about politics is the pub. 23 per cent at least sometimes argue about politics there: more than at a community group or town hall meeting (17 per cent), on a university or college campus (18 per cent) or in public with strangers (15 per cent), and just ahead of arguing with strangers on social media (22 per cent).

Beyond private conversations, the pub is where Britons are most likely to disagree

How often do you debate or argue with people about politics or the news in the following settings?

(Those who selected often or sometimes for each setting)



The pub is also one of the few spaces tested that remain politically balanced in terms of who is willing and feels able to disagree there. Those who disagree in the pub are equally likely to vote for parties on the left as on the right. From social media to community clubs, left-wing voters are far more likely to say they disagree about politics in public spaces. The pub is the exception.

In focus groups, the pub was the example participants returned to when describing a space where people can still disagree well, one of the few informal, face-to-face places that is - crucially - open to people you did not choose.

I enjoy a deep conversation where there's a bit of passion and difference of opinions... you might have strangers at your table that overhear a conversation and it turns into this mix of opinions.

Katherine, Sheffield

People and particularly ones that had a drink, people become very political, don't they? And very vocal. So I mean that has always gone on in a pub.

Janet, Wakefield

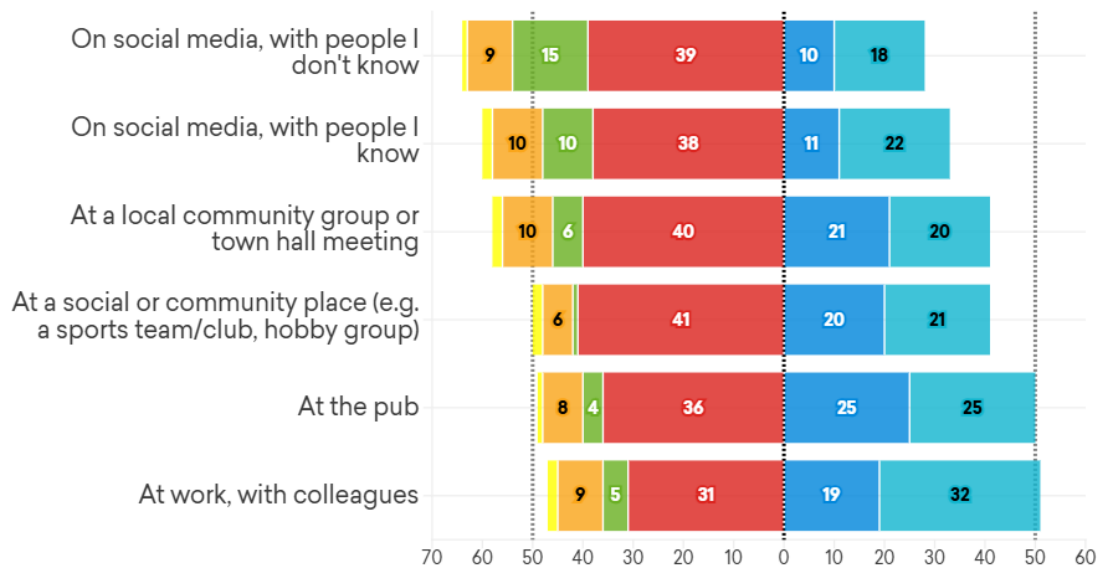
The local pub, if you get into a conversation with people who are more open-minded, it can work out quite well. Quite interesting.

Andy, focus group participant

Those who often disagree in public tend to vote heavily for left-wing parties - the exceptions being the pub and the workplace

Voting intention of those who disagree often in the following spaces

● Labour ● The Green Party ● Liberal Democrat ● Scottish National Party (SNP) ● Conservative ● Reform UK



Chapter 4 | What Britons want in order to disagree well

Many Britons want Britain to get better at disagreement, and highlight a range of **skills**, **spaces** and **standards** that are needed in order to disagree well.

Skills

The top skill people believe we need to disagree well is listening. Many say that we're losing our ability to listen, understand other viewpoints and remain open-minded.

Britons tend to feel that this is a skill that is built up through years of debates in the workplace and arguments at home. But there is also an appetite for these skills to be considered more in formal education – either as part of the national curriculum, as part of apprenticeship courses, as a course at universities, or in programmes available to the wider public. Where participants had seen it done well, it was usually in a school.

I've got four children, three of them are teenagers... one of my sons, he does debate class at his secondary school, and it's quite interesting to then hear what they have been debating about... We've got a lot to learn and I wish we'd listened to teenagers more.

Sadie, Hertfordshire

We have to do a programme of essential life skills as part of their apprenticeship course - racism, sexism, gender stereotypes. They're really tough conversations to have. You either get a group of students not wanting to say anything because they're too scared to express their opinion, or you get very opinionated students. Often they don't know how to ask the questions without being very challenging. So this might give them the ability to feel confident enough to express themselves in a respectful manner.

Lindsay, Worcestershire

In part, this is a matter of practice: many people feel that we no longer have opportunities to disagree with people beyond our own circle, and so have stopped honing the skills we need to do so. There is a real appetite to have opportunities to practice and learn debate, but people tend to feel that these opportunities are only available to students.

Sometimes it's quite difficult to handle disagreements. And if someone could teach you how to look at things a little bit differently, then that'd be a really good, helpful life skill to have.

Sarah, Fareham

It's not just like only university, which is only one bubble. I think whole country need to have their say.

Musarat, Manchester

Spaces

Few believe that the current places where disagreement is supposed to happen are working. The one example that is often described positively is the pub.

Of course, the pub alone is not a sufficient place for all of our disagreements to take place: given that not everyone uses them. But what people like about the pub tells us what they want from a disagreement space. Britons want spaces that are accessible, that are not self-selecting, and that are, crucially, in-person.

The first criteria is accessibility: the fact that many of the key settings for debate are seen as closed spaces means that they lose some of their social benefit. Many want to see places for debate where education and money are not barriers to entry.

I think saying it can only be in universities and government can be quite classist (...) you have this level of education, you have this amount of money, so your voice is more important than somebody else's.

Willow, Southampton

The second is that these spaces should not be self-selecting. Most disagreement happens with friends and family, while the spaces that expose people to people they have not chosen are thinning out. Social media skews heavily towards left-wing voices, as do community clubs and civic forums. The pub stands out as the exception, and as somewhere a conversation can begin with the strangers at the next table.

Me and my friends and family have similar political views. So we're not going to have big arguments about immigration or whatever it is, because we probably share similar views.

Sam, Mid-Wales

My friends and family are generally of the same mindset. If we're disagreeing with things, it's going to be tiny technicalities. We all kind of exist in the same mentality... That's possibly more about the people I'm surrounded with rather than the actual topic.

Daisy, Nottinghamshire

The third is that these spaces need to be in person. Asked how they would rather resolve a disagreement with a colleague, 47 per cent of Britons say face to face – and more would avoid the conversation altogether (22 per cent) than would use a message, an email, a

phone call or a video call combined (13 per cent). With the decline of associational spaces and the rise of working from home in recent years, it's clear that few Britons believe the digital world offers an alternative.

Standards

People believe that politicians must play a role in modelling healthy disagreement, yet few think that it is being done. Only 43 per cent say politicians remain respectful when they debate each other, while 83 per cent say they always should.

Andy Burnham's more conversational style draws public praise. In focus groups, participants repeatedly point to his laid-back, approachable demeanour as a strength of the Prime Minister. These are qualities Britons want to see in political leaders, a likely contributing factor to Burnham holding the highest approval rating of any political leader.

He's more charismatic. I think he's also probably got... between the two of them the most experience. I think he's more down to earth...

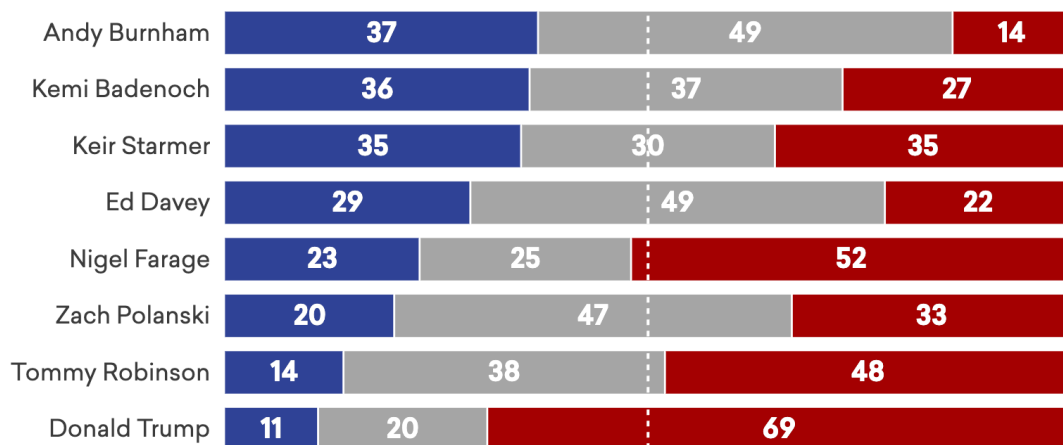
Lauren

Yet, the public believe there is a place for robust debate in our politics. In focus groups, Kemi Badenoch's direct, humorous style of argument at Prime Minister's Questions is often praised; many believe it is the sign of a healthy democracy that politicians are holding one another to account.

Britons see Andy Burnham and Kemi Badenoch as disagreeing well when debating politics

For each of the following individuals, do you think that they tend to disagree well or badly when debating about politics?

● Disagree well ● Don't know ● Disagree badly



She's now coming out and whether you agree or disagree with what she's saying, and I think sometimes she can be borderline being slightly rude, but she is absolutely coming out fighting now and holding her own with him. And I'm actually enjoying seeing her and she's winning me over, I have to say. I think she's doing a great job of holding him to account

Nicola, Black Notley

But there is a line: Britons believe that politicians cross into unacceptable behaviour when robust debates stray into personal attacks. Andy Burnham's rhetoric about moving away from 'point-scoring' is one that resonates with the public - as does his style of not taking himself too seriously and remaining light-hearted and conversational in tone.

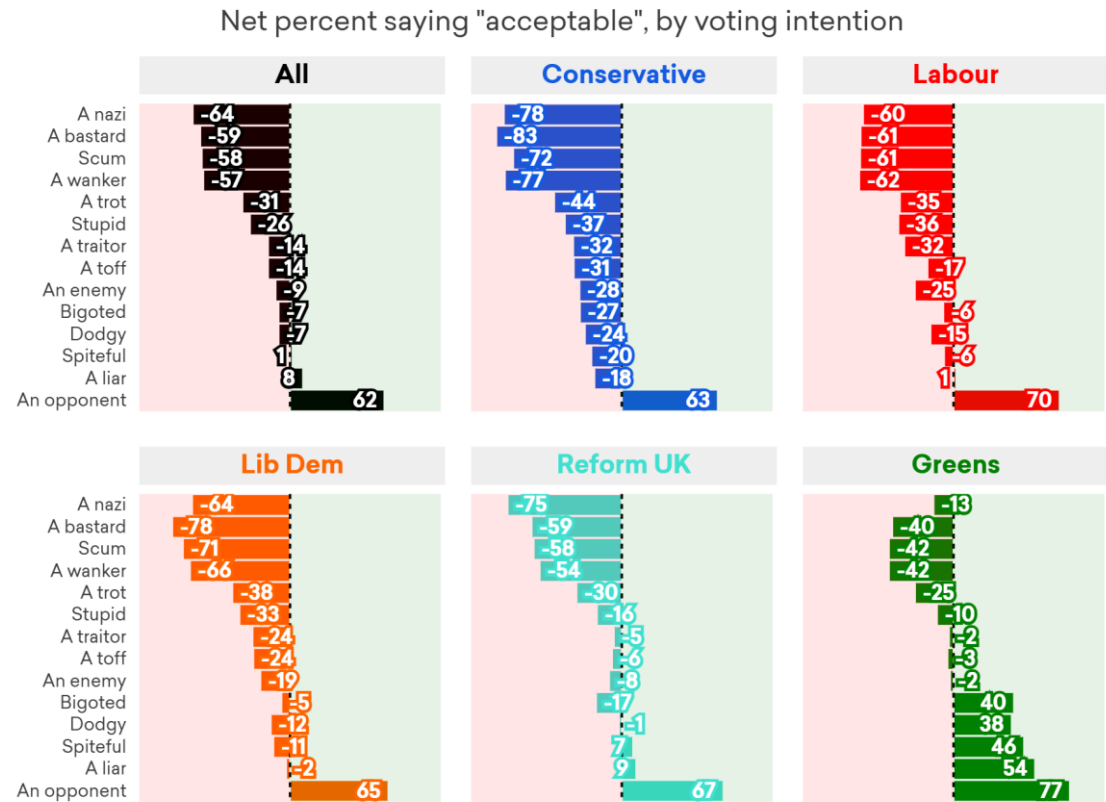
That's more of what I want to hear... the tone in which (Burnham's) doing it - he's asserting himself without having to shout at people or point fingers. That's much more reasonable. He's coming in with evidence, facts, a quote - making it a bit more human.

Holly, Surrey

Central to this is the language that politicians use, and the public's expectations that they do not inflame debates when they should be helping to navigate them. In recent years, incidents of violence against politicians have heightened Britons' concerns about the language that is used.

Voters across politics tend to say that it is unacceptable for politicians to use insults

Do you think it would be acceptable or unacceptable for a politician to describe someone from another party as...

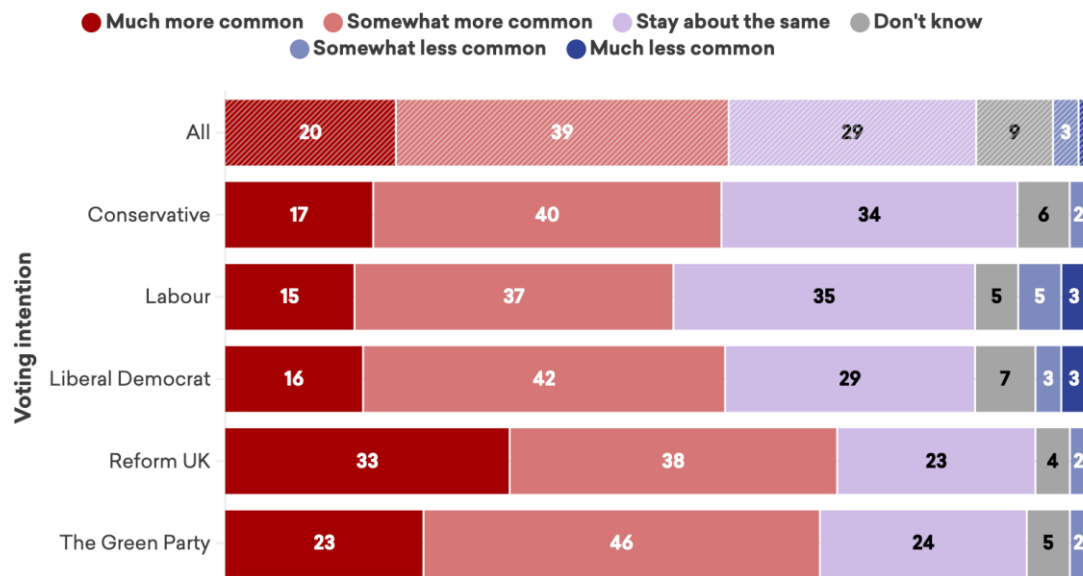


A third of Britons say that politicians often use language that could increase the risk of political violence. And Britons across politics say that personal insults - ranging from 'traitor' to 'bigoted', 'stupid' or 'spiteful' - are unacceptable in politics.

The importance of language used in debate is heightened given that political violence is not an issue Britons think is going away any time soon, the majority (59 per cent) think political violence will become more common in upcoming years, just 4 per cent believe it will become less common.

The majority of Britons think political violence will become more common in coming years

Do you think political violence in the UK will become more common, less common, or stay about the same over the next five years?



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Beyond language, one way to model healthier disagreement would be to demonstrate more cross-party cooperation. Where participants had seen politicians work across party lines, or say that they wanted to, it was noticed and welcomed.

Looking at the social care reforms, for instance, he wants that cross-party collaboration. And I think that's a positive.

Sean, Slough

Conclusion

The ability to disagree well touches on many important British values: mutual respect, tolerance, and fundamentally democracy itself. The public prize being able and free to disagree about everything, and few think that we should shy away from tricky topics. But this exists alongside the classic British politeness, which at its best facilitates comfortable and friendly discussion, and at its worst strays into conflict aversion and causes debates to become stifled.

However, there's no doubt that for the public, many parts of Britain feel like they are not safe places to disagree. On a softer level, people are worried about the awkwardness and frustration of valid concerns being labelled 'right-wing', 'racist' or 'woke'. On the harder edge, political violence, and the inflammatory and sometimes bullying or threatening nature of social media risks having a chilling effect.

Recent years have also seen the hollowing of physical spaces that may have allowed people to exchange views as associational life has declined and more people are working, shopping and learning from home. The shift has resulted in reduced opportunities for the kind of incidental social interaction between Britons who hold differing world views or perspectives. These interactions that would typically take place daily between colleagues in the workplace are becoming less and less frequent, and with it the exposure Britons have to alternative views.

To compound this change, in the absence of a 'town hall', social media has filled the vacuum and is now arguably the most prominent place where collective conversations are had. Yet the vast majority of Britons do not feel comfortable disagreeing online, and those who do are disproportionately male, university-educated and left-wing.

Instead of encouraging healthy disagreements, social interaction online encourages the contrary. Social media platforms facilitate interactions via common interest and views, rather than chance or shared place and rarely require people to practice the skill of listening. Unlike a face-to-face conversation, where disagreement has to be sat through, engaged with, or at least witnessed, online platforms allow users to scroll past, mute, or unfollow anything that challenges their views with a flick of the thumb. This makes it easier for people to fall into "echo chambers" or "rabbit holes" - spaces absent of contrasting views.

The other spaces that are supposed to enable or model healthy debate are also seen to be failing: universities and other universities are sometimes perceived as elite and inaccessible, and Parliamentary debate as unhealthy and hostile.

The pub remains one of the few spaces people can point to where views are exchanged in a passionate, but civil way. It is not enough on its own, of course, but it offers a sense of what Britons are craving: real places, where strangers meet by chance and can exchange views, and debates can be held in a friendly way. This points to the need to create more spaces that carry the same sentiment found in pubs across the country. Settings that

encourage people to disagree well, where Britons listen to those around them, people placed in the same room by chance and community, not by algorithm.

There is also a role for leaders in modelling this disagreement. People want robustness in politics, but for many, politics too often crosses the line into point-scoring and personal attacks. At a minimum, Britons feel this is unproductive; at its worst, they worry it makes violence and fear more likely. It is not that Britons want debates to be muted in politics: the public still believe in the need for disagreement, challenge and scrutiny from opposition parties. But most want the tone of these disagreements to be improved. People lament the toxicity of Westminster culture; more visible efforts from politicians could to show that they are disagreeing in a friendly yet robust way could also help to restore trust in politicians.

