

Ten things we learned about public attitudes in 2021

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1. The pandemic paradox: while we're stuck with Covid, it may be the thing we agree on.

If 2020 was the most extraordinary year of our recent lives, the frustrating theme of the second year of the Covid pandemic often seemed to be déjà vu all over again. So it has been a year of wanting to leave Covid behind – but being unable to do so. Covid remained the top public issue for the first 10 months of the year, according to the Ipsos-MORI issues index, but a less dominant one than in 2020. The pre-Christmas Covid narrative relies more heavily on repeated storylines from last year than any television channel could get away with.



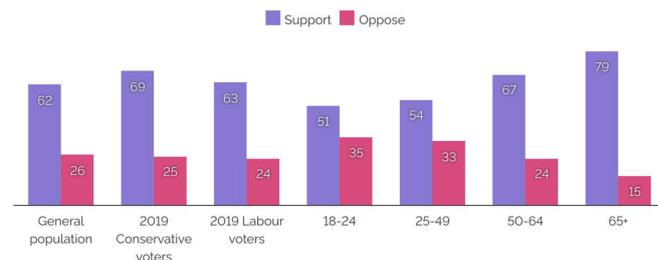
Clapping on our doorsteps had resonated for millions for 3 months in the Spring and Summer of 2021, but the suggestion of reviving in January 2021 fizzled out for lack of appetite, symbolising how early narratives of the pandemic now deliver diminishing returns. The sense of stronger national unity in the first months had stalled or reversed by this year, according to Pew’s comparative research in July 2021, confirmed by the Belong Network’s *Them and Us* study. Perceptions of national disunity are combined with more resilience in local connection – and evidence of impressive returns when there is an investment in policy and practice.

The pandemic paradox is that there may still be a broader public consensus, while the focus remains on Covid, than afterwards. There is still a broad public consensus on Covid policy: of the reluctant restrictionists (more now for softer measures – mandatory masks in shops, rather than lockdowns).

A significant determinant of Covid attitudes in the UK has been age.

Britons would support a ban on unvaccinated people attending events and non-essential shops

Would you support or oppose banning people who have not been vaccinated against coronavirus being banned from visiting public places such as non-essential shops and events? (%)



This persistent caution of older voters has therefore been an important check on US-style polarisation – where the wearing of masks is politically polarising. But the age dynamic among the public is also a source of the growing gulf between elite narratives and public perceptions, particularly on the political right – because Conservative voters do not share the itchiness of many politicians and media outlets on the right for more rapid relaxations. That contrast has been there for 18 months – but has become a major focus with the scale of the December 2021 backbench rebellion, where the party’s MPs and voters are pulling the Prime Minister in opposing directions.

A big political question for 2022 is whether this split between centre-right elites and Conservative voters is primarily about a public health emergency – or will there be a similar clash of intuitions and policy choices across a broader range of issues involving the role of the state, the economy, and personal freedom? 2022 will also be a year of identity in the UK – with the Jubilee and many other national events, a decade on from 2012 Olympics. Will the shared experience of Covid now remain a reference point for future national narratives – or will Covid join Brexit as something that a great many people would much rather hear as little about as possible in the future?

(2) A broader pro-vaccine norm showed how positive social norms can spread

Vaccines were the main source of hope for much of 2021. The good news on vaccines is that take-up rose significantly during the year. A detailed ONS study of what happened to vaccine hesitancy estimates that 96% of adults had at least one jab. Almost half of those who were unsure or opposed did have the vaccine.

Figure 1: Vaccine hesitancy has declined since the beginning of the vaccine roll-out

England, 13 January to 8 August 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Opinions and Lifestyle Survey

Figure 2: Adults who previously declined a vaccine were less likely to have it than those who were unsure

England, 7 to 16 September 2021



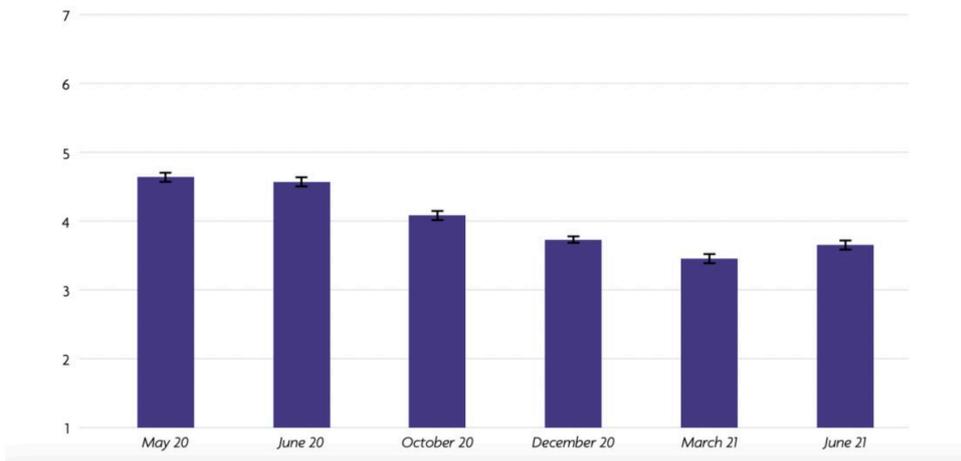
The conversion rate of the hesitant was lowest among people with disabilities (with questions about pre-existing conditions) and among those in the least affluent and most deprived neighbourhoods. The ethnic minority conversion rate of the hesitant was above average – though this partly reflects that a larger hesitant group may have included more soft and more persuadable sceptics.

There is now a similar hesitancy challenge with booster jabs. ONS reported, before the new variant, that 9 out of 10 people who had been vaccinated would welcome the booster – but that around 5-6% of people who had been double-vaccinated did not think they would get the booster. The main reason was not believing extra protection was needed after two jabs. Some media reporting is now over-estimating the unvaccinated population. The Times report this week, that one-third of Londoners are unvaccinated, is based on a data-set (NIMS) that significantly over-estimates the base population, for example often double-counting people who change doctors, and there is no accurate data on pandemic emigration. There will be a London vaccination gap – but not on this scale.

Covid conspiracies retreated – rather than advanced – yet may have intensified too.

The spreading of the vaccine norm also casts new light on conspiracy theories – and the complex interaction of professed attitudes and behaviour. With people more often indoors and online during lockdown, there were fears about the new opportunity for conspiracy theories. Overall, the evidence suggests a retreat in conspiracy theories rather than advance, reported by Belong across 2020-21.

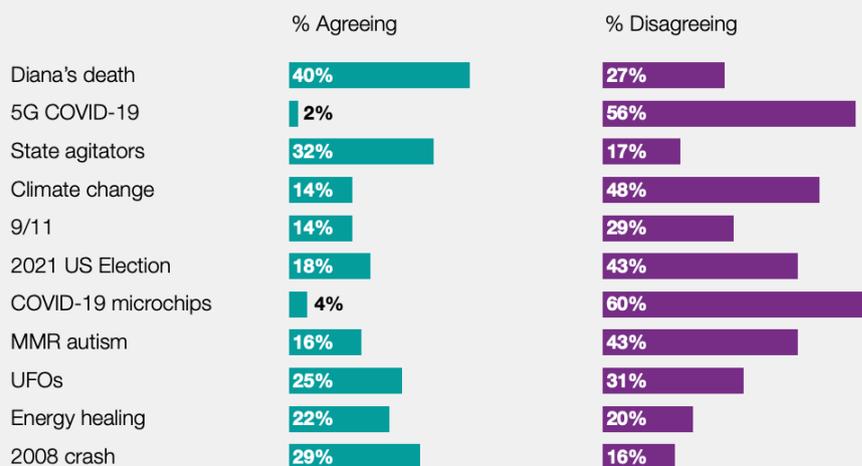
Figure 3. Average endorsement of COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs in May, June, October, and December 2020, and March and June 2021.



I found it illuminating that this May 2021 Ipsos-Mori survey recorded much lower numbers (2-4%) who find Covid conspiracies plausible – a live issue which had now become linked to personal choices about behaviours – while a much broader segment were willing to somewhat entertain conspiracies about the death of Princess Diana, 9/11 or the 2020 US election.

Figure 4: Percentage considering the Conspiracy Theory ‘plausible’

Do you agree or disagree with the following points about the information concerning [CONSPIRACY THEORY]? It seems plausible.



Source
Ipsos MORI KnowledgePanel

Base
All asked about this statement – rebased to reflect overall population (see Figure 1) of 4,192 UK adults aged 16+, online, 13-19 May 2021

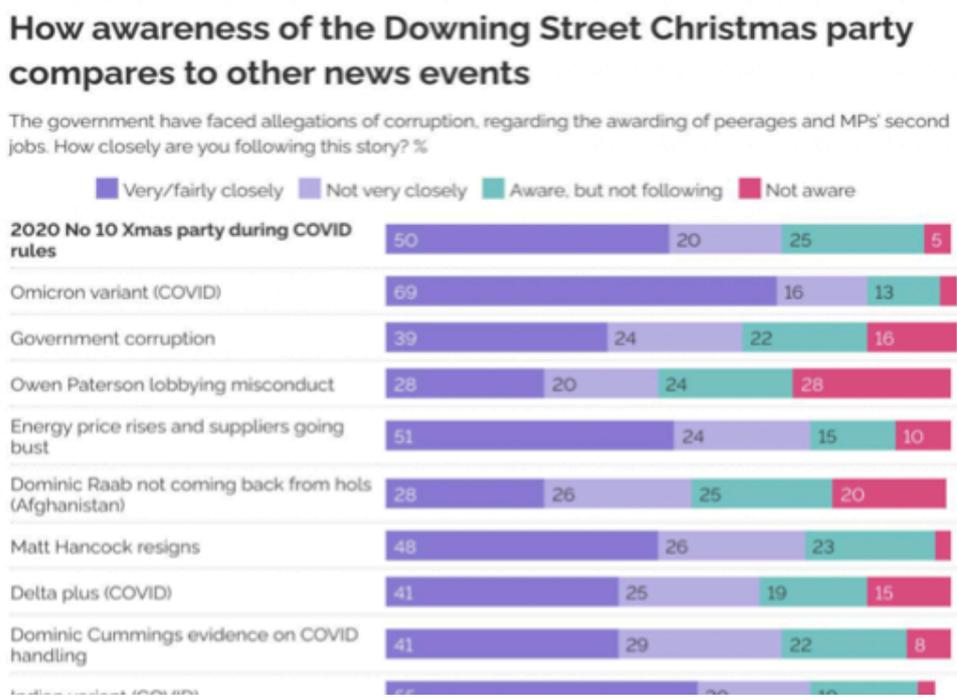
Yet this narrowing reach of conspiracies could co-exist with or indeed reinforce a dangerous and radicalising intensification among the 1-3% most actively committed to them, where online milieus can reinforce the misperception that fringe views are held by the broad majority.

Questions for 2022:

Vaccine rates rose as people were invited to take up an appointment. This was particularly striking in vaccine willingness among young people. Simple interventions – such as doctors phoning those who had not taken up a vaccine offer – reportedly had significant success where implemented. Is this impact from “the power of being invited” specific to public health issues – or does this have wider relevance as an insight into what can trigger pro-social behaviour?

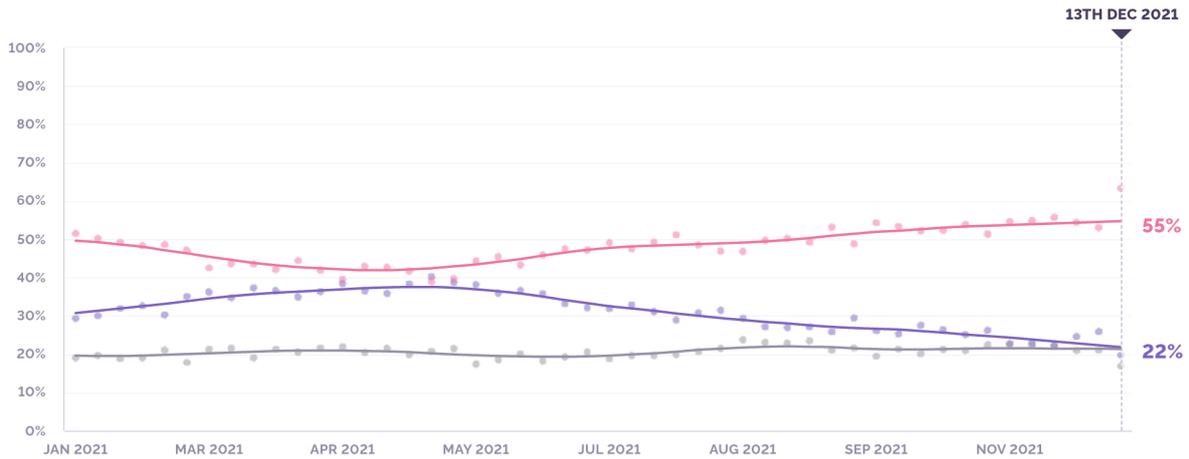
(3) We did finally find out what ‘cuts through’?

It often seems that political Twitter primarily involves the excited, if selective, sharing of opinion polls – followed by reminders that most people aren’t sharing opinion polls on Twitter. I don’t know of any fully systemised theory of the “cut through” question – but Downing Street’s Christmas parties during lockdown combined the relevance of everybody recalling having to decide how to change their own Christmas plans, the strong public belief in rule-following, reciprocity and equality of sacrifice in a crisis.



(4) Political gravity has returned

The vaccine bounce of the Spring and Summer gave way to an Autumn and Winter of rising discontent, as YouGov’s government approval/disapproval tracker shows.

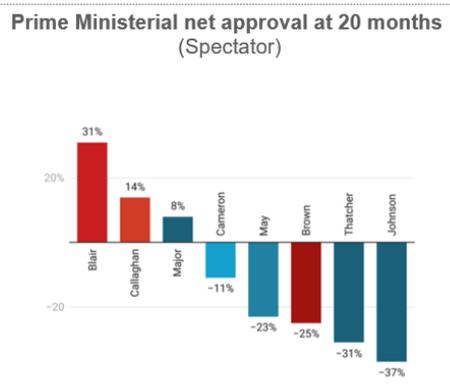
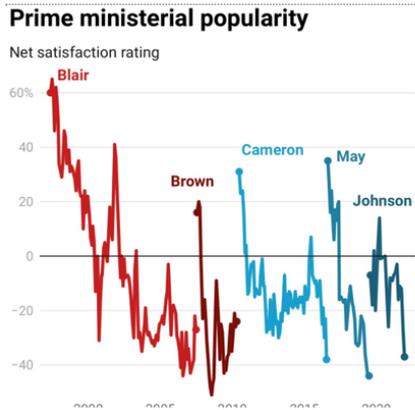


But the government’s disapproval rating could also be seen as the reversion to a mid-term “norm” with its pre-Christmas crisis rating quite similar to that during its winning election campaign of 2019.



But was Boris Johnson ever quite as popular as he seemed?

It certainly helped that there was a major question to which Boris Johnson was an answer in December 2019. The authoritative academic study of that election points out that he was never quite as popular as he seemed – having the lowest peak rating of any recent Prime Minister (because the polarising effects of the 2016 EU referendum had shifted his previous London Mayoral persona).

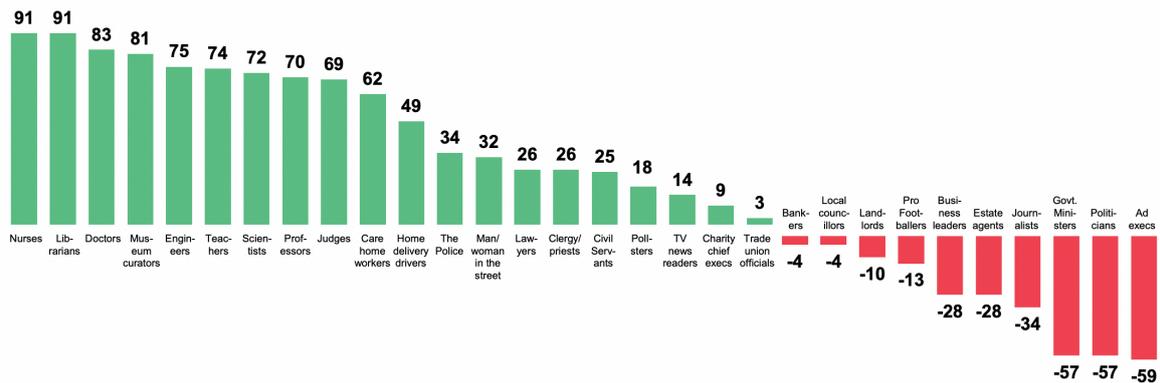


This month, there was majority disapproval of the Johnson government among 2016 Leave voters for the first time since the last General Election in December 2021 (hat-tip: Anand Menon). It will be worth watching out for an increasing divergence of current Conservative voters, Conservative 2019 voters, and Leave 2016 votes.

(5) Trust is low – in politicians and the media – but not generally

Net trust in professions 2021

Net trust = % trust to tell the truth - % do not trust to tell the truth

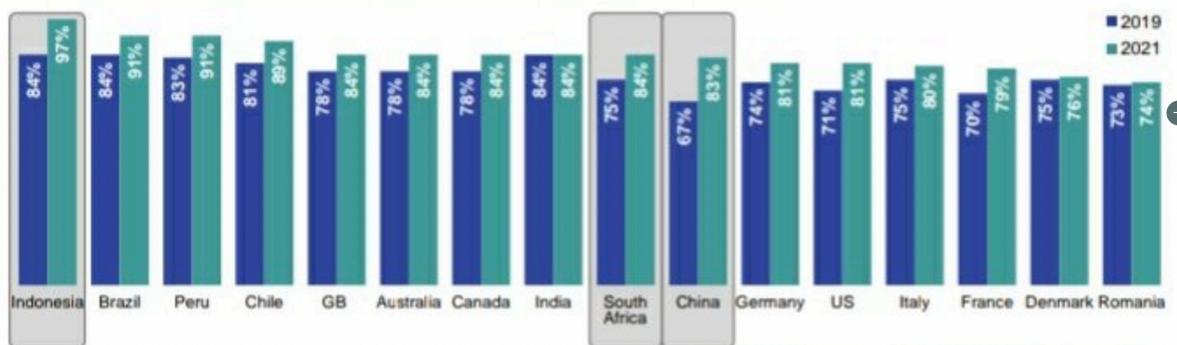


Base: 1,007 and 1,009 British adults aged 18+, interviewed by telephone 29 Oct – 4 Nov and 5 – 10 November 2021
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Ipsos MORI Ipsos

Some 84% of people in the UK think social media firms have too much power – and this is part of a growing international consensus of opinion, creating significant legitimacy challenges for the major platforms.

Social media firms have too much power - % agree 2019 and 2021



Ipsos Global Trends Series: 500-1,000 adults aged 18-79 (18-79 in US and CA) per market per year

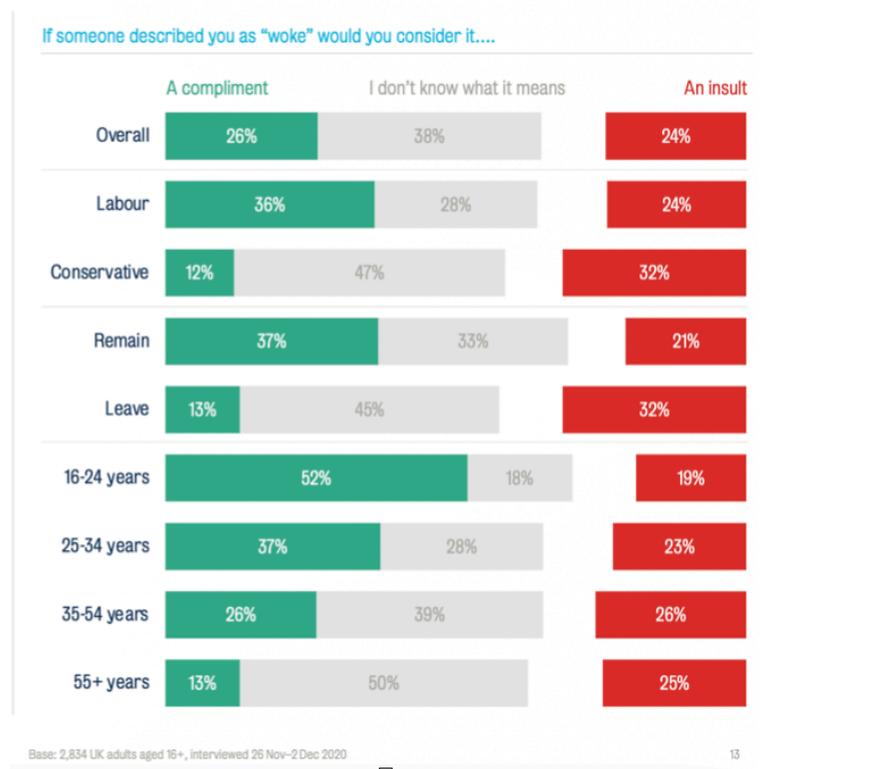
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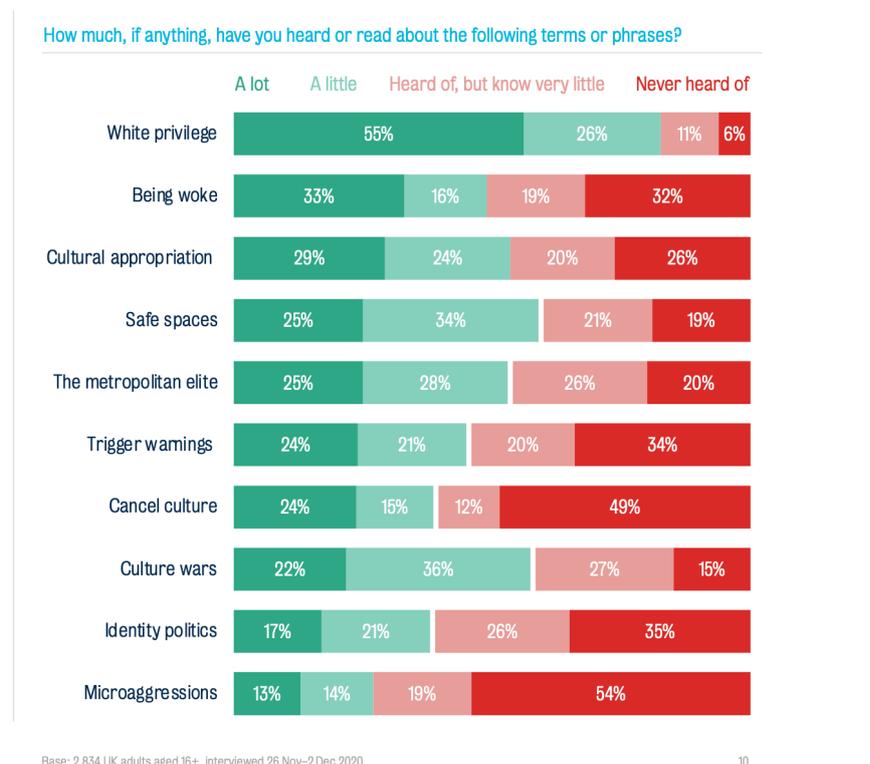
(6) The “Culture Wars” are still a Minority Sport

We know much more about how the public think about “culture war” issues, especially thanks to the in-depth research of Kings College. The headline finding is that the “culture wars” are largely a

polarisation among two quarters of society – with “woke” considered a compliment or an insult by a quarter each, but a broad swathe of the public having no idea what this is about at all.



The term “white privilege” is an exception – it has broken out to awareness among 8/10 people, in contrast to the other ‘culture war’ terms. (British Future’s research on race attitudes shows why this is a challenge – as making these points without the term ‘privilege’ has significantly broader appeal).



Comparatively, Britain is a middling country on identity and cultural conflict, with America and France among those where identity and political conflicts are more intense.

Britain has stronger and broader liberal foundations on contested issues of identity than most major democracies. The socially liberal shift across society has happened at a differential pace by generation, by geography and by politics – so there is broad scepticism regarding the boundaries about language and the claims made by the most progressive sections of politics and civic society.

Listening to fringe debates on this topic, it struck me that British “culture war” politics may be played by different rules to that in America or in France. As the Labour Party debated how to call off the “culture war” politics being cooked up in Downing Street, while Conservatives talked about how to respond to the woke left’s challenge to identity and institutions, there was incredulity and offence at the idea that those on the left pursuing social justice, or those on the right defending traditional values, were somehow the “culture warriors” of the political argument. The British “culture war” may prove rather less a boxing match to slog out the issues of identity, culture and race – but rather a somewhat subtler sport of “Culture War Jujitsu” in which the winning move is to pin the “culture war” on the other side.

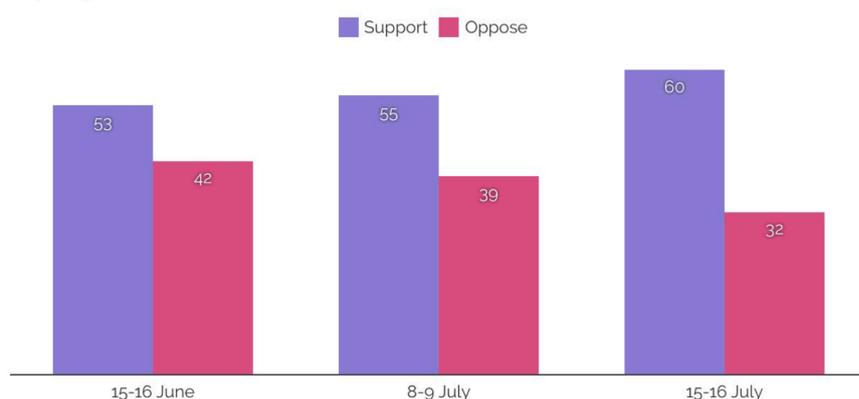
(7) ‘Taking a knee’ redraw the boundaries on the pitch

The focal point of public debate about race and racism in 2021 was not ultimately the highly polarised debate about the Sewell Report this Spring – but rather the debate about the England players taking the knee ahead of and during the Euro 2020 football tournament.

Football fans had begun on the fence about this gesture last year. The first poll (October 2020) found 37% in favour and 37% against, with many indifferent or uncertain about the particular gesture, though attitudes had shifted in favour (+8) by December 2020. The debate intensified when the players were booed in a pre-tournament friendly game. After this, attitudes shifted from +11% in favour to +17%, as England progressed towards the final, and then rose again to +28% after England lost the final to Italy on penalties.

Six in ten English football fans now back players taking the knee before games

In some countries, professional football players and staff have chosen to kneel at the beginning of each game to show their support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Would you support or oppose professional players and staff in your country kneeling before each game in this fashion? (% of 553 English adults very/fairly interested in football)



YouGov

Latest update: 15-16 July 2021

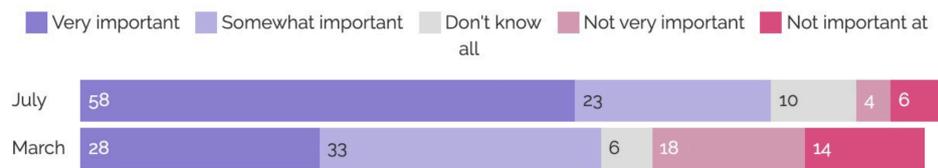
The shift in the middle ground probably reflected a combination of:

- hearing the manager and players talk about the motives for the gesture.
- a desire to disassociate from those booing the gesture, which repelled those unsure about taking a knee.
- coverage and responses to racism received by the players after the defeat, which showed that, despite the progress that has been made, the young players receive more than their share of the racism that remains.

While ethnic minority football supporters had always been more supportive than others of the gesture itself, there were significant shifts in whether this symbolic gesture was seen as meaningful. The contested public argument, and criticism of the gesture, sparked a significant spike in ethnic minority football fans seeing the taking the knee gesture as “very important” in tackling racism, up 30 points to 58%, with 81% (+20) seeing it as important or very important.

Over half of ethnic minority football fans now see taking the knee as very important in tackling racism in football

How important, if at all, do you think professional football players and staff kneeling before matches can be in tackling racism? (% of 204 ethnic minority GB adults very or fairly interested in football)



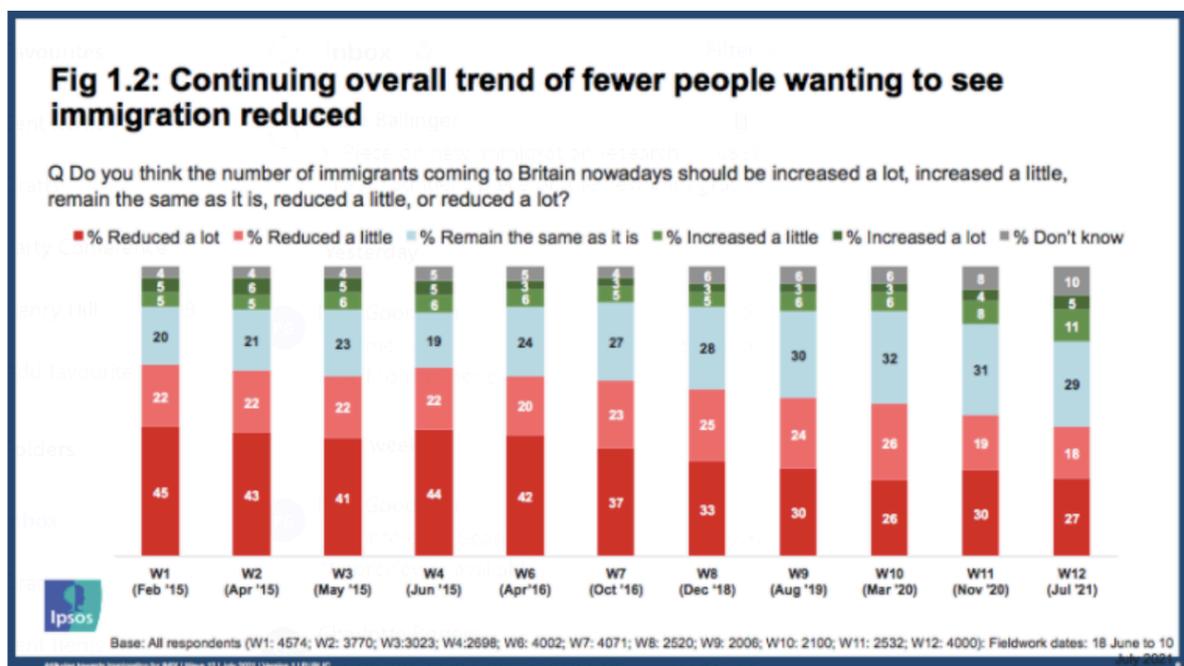
YouGov

Latest update: 21 - 27 July 2021

It may not be entirely coincidental that when another major sport, cricket, became a focal point for debate about racism in sport and society, Conservative MPs were as or more vocal as Labour MPs, including in describing Yorkshire County Cricket Club as “institutionally racist”.

(8) “Immigration” is not one issue – but many issues

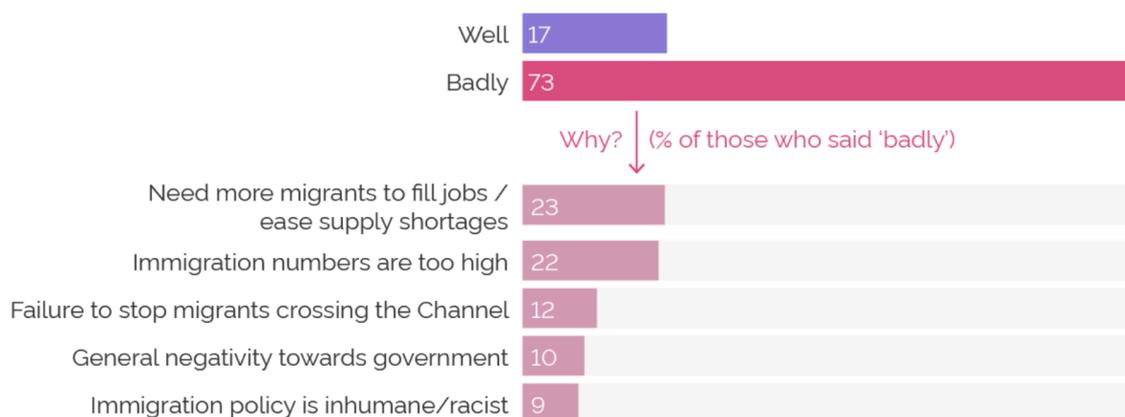
Attitudes to immigration have continued to soften overall – with increasing differentiation between and within different aspects of immigration – including for study, work and for protection



This November 2020 YouGov finding, on why the public are dissatisfied with immigration policy, demonstrates the increasing complexity arising from the long-term softening of immigration attitudes, combined with polarised views within more vocal and mobilised groups on both flanks of opinion.

Why do people think the government is handling immigration badly?

How well or badly do you think the government is handling [immigration]? %



The median voter would want a points-based immigration system, which was more flexible for care workers and lorry drivers, while favouring more domestic training too; they would be in favour of allowing Hong Kongers to come to the UK, including among many voters who favour reductions in migration; they would want to see a more controlled asylum system for Channel Crossings, and an Afghan resettlement programme; and they would see the value of asylum seekers being able to work while their claims are assessed.

After the 70th anniversary of the refugee convention, ICM ran a poll experiment for British Future to assess the impact of hearing the stories of refugees from across the last seven decades.



In a split-sample test, these were the impacts on public attitudes of watching 60 seconds of [this video](#) - tested by ICM asking whether respondents agreed or disagreed with these statements about asylum seekers and refugees.

Britain should protect refugees fleeing war and persecution

Saw video: 67% agree to 9% disagree (+58)

Didn't see video: 57% to 16% (+41)

Net impact of film: **+17%** gain in net support

Refugee protection saves lives. We must stand up to government attempts to tear up these important rights.

Saw video: 60% to 14% (+46)

Didn't see video: 47% to 21% (+26)

Net impact of film: **+20%** gain in support

Most asylum seekers don't really have a valid need for protection here in the UK

Saw video: 38%-32% (6%)

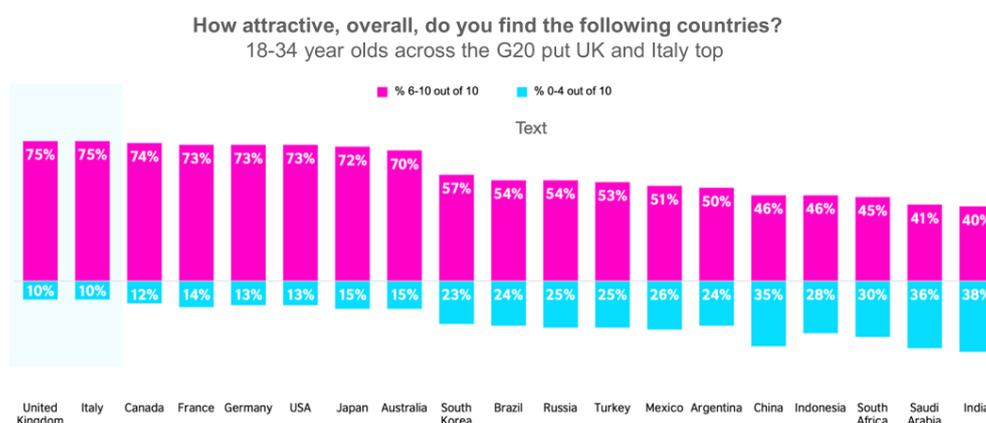
Didn't see video: 41%-26% (15%)

Net impact of film: **- 9%** loss of support for a negatively framed statement

(9) Britain's reputation is not dominated by Brexit

The British Council's survey of young adults (aged 18-34) across the G20, asking which countries they find most attractive, finds the UK sharing top spot with Italy – slightly above Canada, France, Germany and the USA.

9. Britain may be more popular than you think!



IpsosMori for British Council global perceptions survey, December 2021

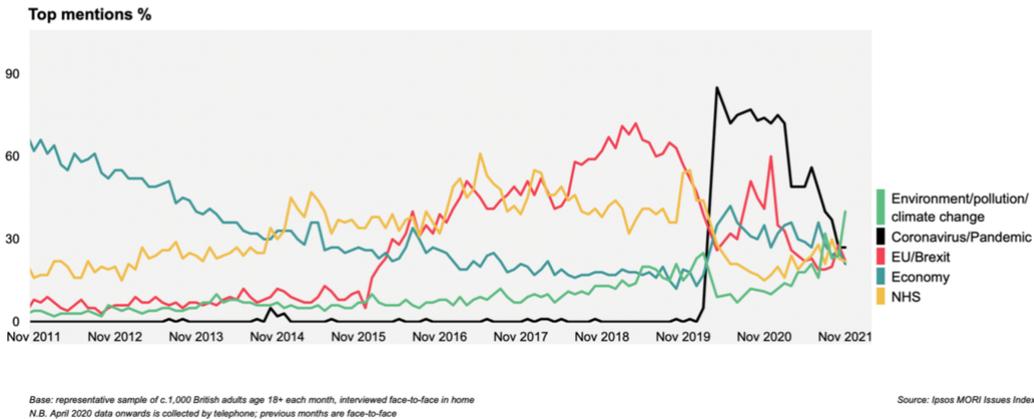
(10) The issue agenda has rarely been so open

For the last five years, there has been an overwhelmingly dominant public issue in British politics. It appears less likely that there will be such a dominant issue across 2022.

10. The issue agenda is much more fluid now

After 5 years of 'single issue' dominance (Brexit, then Covid), new battles for salience in 2022?

What do you see as the most/other important issues facing Britain today?



This Autumn, there was a near five-way tie for issue salience in the Ipsos-MORI issues index – between Covid, climate, the NHS, the economy and Brexit. This was the first time since 1990, when defence and the Poll Tax were tied for most important issue, that the leading issue has been nominated by under 30% of respondents.

During the pandemic, there has been a gradual loss of salience of Brexit, and a continued decline of immigration. Meanwhile, climate change, poverty/inequality and housing are becoming more salient, as Professor Rob Ford notes, with differing levels of engagement across groups. A key 2022 question is how far will the government, opposition, media outlets or other public voices succeed in establishing a core theme – or whether there will be a sustained period in which several different issues are top of mind for different parts of the population.

Sources

(1) Covid attitudes

Covid policy attitudes (December 2021)

[UK: Voting intention – 10th December 2021 - Opinium](#)

Pew: Comparative pandemic attitudes

[People in Advanced Economies Say Their Society Is More Divided Than Before Pandemic | Pew Research Center](#)

[Diversity and Division in Advanced Economies | Pew Research Center](#)

Talk Together report (February 2021)

[Talk - Together](#)

Belong: Them and Us study (November 2021)

[Beyond Us and Them: Societal Cohesion in Britain Through Eighteen Months of COVID-19 - Belong- The Cohesion and Integration Network \(belongnetwork.co.uk\)](#)

(2) Vaccination norms and conspiracies

ONS: what happened to vaccine hesitancy (November 2021)

[Coronavirus and changing attitudes towards vaccination, England - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

Ipsos-MORI: understanding conspiracies (November 2021)

[Tackling conspiracy theories | Ipsos MORI](#)

(3) and (4) Political approval and leadership

YouGov approval tracker

[Government approval \(yougov.co.uk\)](#)

(5) Trust

Ipsos-MORI veracity index (November 2021)

https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2021-12/trust-in-professions-veracity-index-2021-ipsos-mori_0.pdf

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<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/ipsos-global-trends-2021-release-aftershocks-and-continuity>

(6) The Culture Wars

Kings College (May 2021)

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(7) Taking the knee

Wideneing the pitch on anti-racism (August 2021)

<https://www.britishfuture.org/football-and-anti-racism-widening-the-pitch/>

How to find common ground on race (British Future, March 2021)

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(8) Shifting immigration attitudes

YouGov on immigration concerns (November 2021)

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British Future: Immigration: a shifting debate (Sept 2021)

<https://www.britishfuture.org/publication/immigration-a-changing-debate/>

(9) International perceptions in the G20

British Council/Ipsos-MORI (December 2021)

<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/view-other-side-perceptions-uk-abroad-2021>

(10) Issue salience

Ipsos-MORI issues index tracker (November 2021)

[Ipsos MORI Issues Index: November 2021 | Ipsos MORI](#)