

DEMOS

**THE  
POLITICAL  
DIVISION  
INDEX:**

PATHFINDING FOR  
BRITISH DEMOCRACY

TESSA VAN RENS  
ALEX KRASODOMSKI-JONES

NOVEMBER 2019

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Errors and omissions remain, as always, our own.

Tessa van Rens  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The idea that the Brexit referendum has split Britain into two opposing camps, leading to an ever more divisive politics, is one frequently repeated. This report - the first in a series - looks to test this idea of a divided nation in order to find a path to a better public debate after Brexit. We define division as a problem not with disagreement as such, but with the quality of the public debate.

This report maps the quality of the political debate as perceived by British voters on 10 current political issues. By analysing where the debate is divisive and toxic, and where it is healthy, this report identifies means to achieving and sustaining a healthier public debate.

We find that:

- Beyond Brexit, British citizens have more in common than we might suspect. Compromise, conversation and empathy - each critical requirements of democracy - are still found among the public. Divisive voices are overrepresented and amplified in the public debate, so the image of a deeply divided Britain represents a particular segment of society, rather than the whole population.
- Immigration and Brexit are very divisive topics and the conversations surrounding them are perceived by the public as toxic. But the polarisation on Brexit has not necessarily lead to as much hostility between Leavers and Remainers as of 10 suggested, nor has it created similarly deep divisions on all other topics.
- Most other topics form the basis of a healthy national public debate, with a surprising amount of consensus. The NHS in particular is a source of consensus, perceived as the most important topic, and leading to a healthy debate, with Climate Change proving similarly consensual.

- The continued focus of Westminster and media on topics such as immigration is likely to deepen divisions and is not in line with the public's perception of what is important. Instead, a focus on topics like the NHS and climate change have the potential to have high quality debate and lead to compromise - something we should pursue not just for the sake of overcoming divisions, but in order to deliver on priorities shared by the whole country.

These results should primarily serve as a call to action, and give us a reason to hope for progress: we should promote the elements of a healthy debate such as empathy and a push for compromise. Converging opinions and increased empathy among those who disagree requires conversations among citizens which cover the full spectre of motivations and values towards a particular issue. Demos intends to take this work forward by using innovative online deliberation tools, as well as many more conversations, to test these means and create a blueprint for a better public debate. We identify the clear need for more research in this field. We further call upon those who have the power to shape the public debate, not to deepen our divisions, but instead show us what compromise and good quality debate looks like.

# INTRODUCTION

In recent times politics seem more divisive than ever. Fights over whether and how to leave the European Union have escalated inside Westminster while, across the country, two opposing groups of citizens are becoming increasingly angry. The idea that the Brexit referendum has created a country split in half has become commonplace.

The division that worries the nation is more than mere disagreement over the Brexit question. Many media outlets assert that the question of membership of the European Union has triggered, or is a symptom of, a tribal, permanent division between Leavers and Remainers. Some report not just on the creation of these polarised tribes, but on the effect this is having on public debate: "Listening has been swept away by shouting, persuasion has been replaced by protest and co-operation, compromise and consensus have given way to conflict."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, both groups are said to exist inside 'echo chambers'<sup>2</sup> which exacerbate the toxicity of our debates: whichever side we are on, we rarely engage with 'the other side' and risk becoming incapable of talking to them at all.

The public agrees: a 2018 Sky Data poll showed that three quarters of Britons believe the UK is divided, with an even higher percentage among young people. In line with what we see in the media, 42% blame Brexit, while 23% blame politicians and 14% immigration.<sup>3</sup> But has Brexit - or these other factors - really torn this country in half? After all, The 2018 British Attitudes Survey found that our trust in others is as high as ever, and the 2018 BBC Global

Survey finds that more than two thirds of Brits think that people across the world have more things in common than things that make them different<sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup>- demonstrating widespread agreement, in the words of Jo Cox, that we 'have far more in common than that which divides us'.<sup>6</sup>

This report - the first in a series - looks to test this idea of a divided nation in order to find a path to a healthier public debate after Brexit. We define division as a problem not with disagreement as such, but with the quality of the public debate. This report maps the quality of the political debate as perceived by British voters on 10 current political issues. By analysing where the debate is divisive and toxic, and where it is healthy, the report can identify the means to achieving and sustaining a healthy public debate.

This report starts with a short evidence review on the concept of 'division' and other terms such as 'polarisation', 'echo chambers' and 'tribalism', which helped shape the definition of division. It also explores what a healthy debate looks like in a democracy and how we might achieve it.

The insights from the existing literature have informed our definition of good quality debate and divisive debate. Chapter 2 of the report presents the different dimensions of a good quality debate and the variables used to measure these dimensions.

Rather than asking the UK public about division in general, this report analyses how they perceive the quality of the debate on 10 particular issues. The

1 Kinnock, S. (2019, 16 July). Stephen Kinnock: 'We're now a tribal society after Brexit hardened divides'. Mirror find at <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/stephen-kinnock-were-now-tribal-18325658>

2 Delaney, B. (2017, 29 December). Our social lives have become echo chambers. Time to get uncomfortable. The Guardian find at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/29/our-social-lives-have-become-echo-chambers-time-to-get-uncomfortable>

3 Garcia, C.A. (2019 14 January), Mercer, D. State of the Nation. Sky News find at <https://news.sky.com/state-of-the-nation>

4 Harding, R. (2018). British Social Attitudes Survey 35. Key findings. How will Britain navigate the global, social, economic and Brexit challenges of the near future? London: The National Centre for Social Research p9 find at [http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39285/bsa35\\_key-findings.pdf](http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39285/bsa35_key-findings.pdf)

5 Ipsos Mori (April 2018), BBC Global Survey: A world divided? Ipsos Mori Global Research Institute Find at <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/bbc-global-survey-world-divided>

6 See <https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/>

third chapter compares the scores of these topics on the various measures which feed into political division and provides an analysis of the meaning of these scores.

Providing a more in-depth look at the different measures of a good quality debate, the fourth chapter explains how each measure was calculated. It then compares the scores of the 10 issues on each of these measures, and finally, presents and interprets the complete index of division. The fifth chapter concludes the report by using the insights from the political division index to ask how we might create a healthier public debate, overcome existing divisions and find a common way forward for all citizens.

*Underlying the findings in this research are the results of an Opinium survey of 2,000 British citizens, commissioned by Demos to understand how they viewed the state of politics and their political opponents.*

# CHAPTER 1

## EVIDENCE REVIEW:

### THE HEALTH OF PUBLIC DEBATE

#### THE IDEALS OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Democracy relies on a society which allows and encourages members to disagree on important issues but to accept that compromises in decision-making are necessary and valid. Challenges to democracy arise when it is unable to broker agreement among its participants: when healthy diversity of opinion give way to immovable polarisation and irresolvable conflict.

This balancing act begins with the recognition that, though groups may disagree with one another, they still recognise their opponents as legitimate: empathy for one's opponents. Mouffe argues that democracy is sustained through the construction of the "we/they" dichotomy, arguing that "it is an illusion to believe in the advent of a society from which antagonism would have been eradicated", and that this antagonism is necessary to create the space for and incentivises a creative dialogue that allows a society to progress.<sup>7</sup> Yet when the commonality of democratic participants is removed entirely and opposing groups are unable to recognise the "legitimacy of their opponents", democratic debate and compromise is unsustainable.<sup>8</sup>

Along with failure to recognise the opponents legitimacy, irresolvable conflict also undermines democracy. Gutmann and Thompson further underline the importance of a public political discourse which resolves conflicts and produces compromise: arguing in favour of a deliberative approach to democracy, they show that "when citizens or their representatives disagree morally... they should continue to reason together to reach mutually acceptable decisions."<sup>9</sup> Barber argues that one of the key reasons democracies are in peril is lack of opportunity for people to talk to each other in a meaningful way, as central to good conversations is the ability to empathise with the 'other' despite potentially holding vastly contrasting views.<sup>10</sup> Philosopher Martha Nussbaum makes the case for "public emotions", whereby individuals extend their compassion further than their immediate social groups or collective identity, liberal or conservative.<sup>11</sup>

In practice, experiments in democracy have frequently turned on improving participants' willingness and ability to recognise the legitimacy of opposing views: through a process coined "deliberation", the Healthy Communities approach aimed to provide new avenues for productive debate amongst citizens.<sup>12</sup>

7 Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the Political*. London: Routledge, p16

8 *Ibid*, p20

9 Gutmann, A. and Thompson, D.F. (1998). *Democracy and Disagreement*. Cambridge: Belknap Press

10 Barber, B. (2006). *How Democratic Are the New Telecommunication Technologies?*, IDP:

Revista de los Estudios de Derecho y Ciencia Política de la UOC V. 3. Find at <http://www.uoc.edu/idp/3/dt/esp/barber.html>

11 Nussbaum, M. (2013). *Political Emotions*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

12 O'Connor, D., Gates, C.T. (2000). *Toward a Healthy Democracy*. Public Health Reports, volume 1, 15, find at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1308705/pdf/pubhealthrep00022-0055.pdf>

A number of studies examine the ways in which empathy and a willingness to compromise among participants in democracy fails. Chua notes that tribalism among democratic participation, in which group identity defines a citizen's experience of democracy, hampers the democratic process. Tribal division creates a discourse problem by making people revert to quick judgments of the other and immediate defense of their tribe. This means listening to those they are in conversation with, she writes in *Political Tribes*.<sup>13</sup> Similarly to other studies, she notes the negative impact of an absolutist, exclusionary, 'us vs them' mentality on democratic discourse.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the concept of an "echo chamber" has entered the political lexicon in recent years. The rise of social media has been credited for the belief held by some that people are either unknowingly or purposefully cultivating the pages and people they follow online, which results in them being exposed to political views which match their own, resulting in a narrower view of what legitimate opposition might look like.<sup>15</sup>

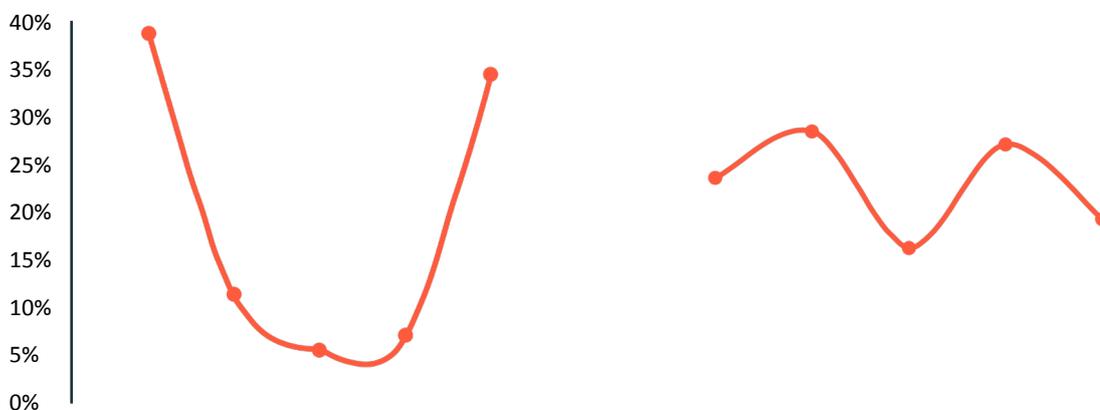
Identifying the tipping point - where tribalism and an unwillingness to compromise become so entrenched as to threaten democracy - is a challenge. In the US, researchers concluded that the majority of Americans (77%) believe that among opposing groups "differences are not so great we cannot come together."<sup>16</sup> The research identified seven different 'tribes' amongst the general population who "are distinguished by differences in their

underlying beliefs and attitudes." 67% of those surveyed displayed greater openness and were less ideologically rigid than those on the fringes of tribal politics: the most polarised groups - progressive activists and devoted conservatives - represent just 14% of the electorate, suggesting those unwilling to participate in democratic compromise on account of a perceived illegitimacy of opposition are a minority. The opinions, hostile attitude and violent conflicts of this minority are often taken to be representative of the discourse between the average Republican and Democrat, while in fact, the remaining 67% are characterised as the 'exhausted majority', recognising the legitimacy of the opposition and being open to compromise.

In addition to the perceived legitimacy of political opposition, the literature revealed the significance of the scale of disagreement among democratic participants. The wider the gap, the more difficult a compromise is to achieve. This division is frequently referred to as polarisation: a situation in which collective opinions move further and further to opposing extremes. The issue of polarisation has taken centre stage since the results of the EU referendum with opinions on Brexit shifting from 'we should vote to leave the EU with a deal' or 'we shouldn't vote to leave the EU' to 'we should leave without a deal as fast as we can' or 'we should revoke Article 50 and remain without even a second referendum'.

**FIGURE 1.**  
MORE POLARISED DISAGREEMENT

What does the population think about issue 1?



Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*

**FIGURE 2.**  
LESS POLARISED DISAGREEMENT

What does the population think about issue 2?



13 Chua, A. (2018). *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing  
 14 Ibid  
 15 Rajan, A. (2019). Do digital echo chambers exist? <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-47447633>  
 16 Hawkins, S., Yudkin, D., Juan-Torres, M., Dixon, T. (2019). *Hidden Tribes; A Study of America's Polarized Landscape*. New York: More in Common find at [https://hiddentribes.us/pdf/hidden\\_tribes\\_report.pdf](https://hiddentribes.us/pdf/hidden_tribes_report.pdf)

Identifying 'division' on an issue, as opposed to simply a difference of opinion, demands measurement of the extent to which groups disagree with one another. This is what Hewlett, Hall & McCrae (2019) call 'variance' between those opinions: the gap between the furthestmost extremes of opinion – the wider the gap between larger groups of citizens, the more likely an issue is to be polarised.<sup>17</sup> See Figures 1 and 2 for an example of polarised and less polarised disagreement.

However, research on the political discourse in the US finds that polarisation is frequently overstated because of who gets a voice in the public debate. The voices of the politically engaged elites, who are usually more polarised, get amplified while the majority of people are tired of divisive politics and open to compromise.<sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> Moreover, politicians who discuss divisive topics or use divisive rhetoric often garner more attention than those looking for compromise.

Finally, researchers have identified the importance of the qualities and features of conversations between democratic participants. Political theorists put forward evidence that improving the quality of conversations between citizens is likely to impact their ability to take part in, and improve the outcomes of, democratic exercises. Conversely, evidence shows that poor quality conversations, conflict and violence impair the effectiveness of the democratic process.

Deliberation has been put forward as a method for structuring democratic conversations effectively. The original conception of deliberation originates from philosophers Rawls, Habermas and Cohen. They take "public reason" as the central legitimizing concept of deliberative democracy, meaning it should be free, reasoned, equal and aiming towards a rational consensus.<sup>20</sup> Missing from this framing is the inclusion of emotion, as they argue that the conversation must be rational, and thus 'cannot include affective concerns.'<sup>21</sup> Other theorists have argued that ignoring the emotionality of a conversation is wrong: a way for people to have conversations in a way which includes an understanding of emotion is "analogic perspective taking." This works by overcoming division through empathic imagination, whereby individuals identify common feelings.

The frequency and severity of conflict or violence is an indication of the entrenchment of the different opinions and the likelihood of a common resolution, modus vivendi or convergence, which most political theorists consider the purpose of public discourse. As such, in this report we have looked to identify how often the average person engages in conflict over political topics, and how often conflict involves verbal violence or an unwillingness to participate in conversation.

17 Hewlett, K., Hall, J. & McCrae, J. (2019). To heal a 'divided Britain', we first need to know what's broken Policy Review 2019, King's Policy Institute, p52 found at <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/policyreview2019.pdf>. Since the time of writing The Policy Institute at King's College London also published Duffy B., Hewlett, K., McCrae, J., Hall, J. (2019). Divided Britain? Polarisation and Fragmentation trends in the UK. The Policy Institute at King's College London, September 2019, found at <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/divided-britain.pdf>

18 Hetherington, M.J. (2009). Review Article: Putting Polarization in Perspective, Cambridge University Press, find at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/review-article-putting-polarization-in-perspective/63399498FAD2D3BDF8BDDF3340A9A41B>

19 Hawkins, S., Yudkin, D., Juan-Torres, M., Dixon, T. (2019). Hidden Tribes; A Study of America's Polarized Landscape. New York: More in Common find at [https://hiddentribes.us/pdf/hidden\\_tribes\\_report.pdf](https://hiddentribes.us/pdf/hidden_tribes_report.pdf)

20 Cohen, J. (1989). Deliberation and democratic legitimacy. In: Hamlin, A. and Pettit, P. (eds) The Good Polity, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell; Rawls, J. (1993). Political Liberalism. 1st ed. New York: Columbia University Press

21 Calhoun, C. (2013). Reliable democratic habits and emotions. *Nomos*, 53, p212–225. p213

# CHAPTER 2

## MEASURING THE HEALTH OF A PUBLIC DEBATE

We began by mapping the nature of consensus and division among British citizens: not only measuring agreement or disagreement, but the extent to which they felt the political conversations they were having were productive and healthy. Survey respondents were asked a series of questions on 10 prominent political themes, chosen from those issues most frequently discussed in the media over the past two years. Those topics were:

- **Brexit** - Should we leave without a deal or revoke article 50?
- **Immigration** - Do we need more or fewer immigrants?
- **Benefits** - Are the right people receiving benefits?
- **Taxation** - Should the top earners pay more tax?
- **Minorities** - Are we doing enough to protect minorities?
- **Climate change** - Should we do whatever we can to combat climate change?
- **Free speech and social media** - Should we allow hate speech and incitement to violence on social media?
- **Politicians** - Do politicians really represent the people's interests?

- **Abortion** - Should abortion be illegal?

For each topic, researchers surveyed respondents across four overall measures, shown in Figure 3.

Based on the Evidence Review of the previous chapter, we chose the following dimensions to measure the quality of a public debate.

### AGREEMENT

#### How different are the opinions people hold on this subject?

For each topic, the respondents were asked to position their opinion along a 5-point scale - for instance, with 'Abortion should be legal in all circumstances' at one end, and 'Abortion should be illegal in all circumstances' at the other. This produces a measure of "variance": the gap between the furthest extremes of opinion – the wider these gaps, the bigger the disagreement.<sup>22</sup>

While disagreement is a necessary element of a diverse democracy where citizens can speak their mind, it's specifically the increasing polarisation of those diverse opinions that worries many.

### EMPATHY

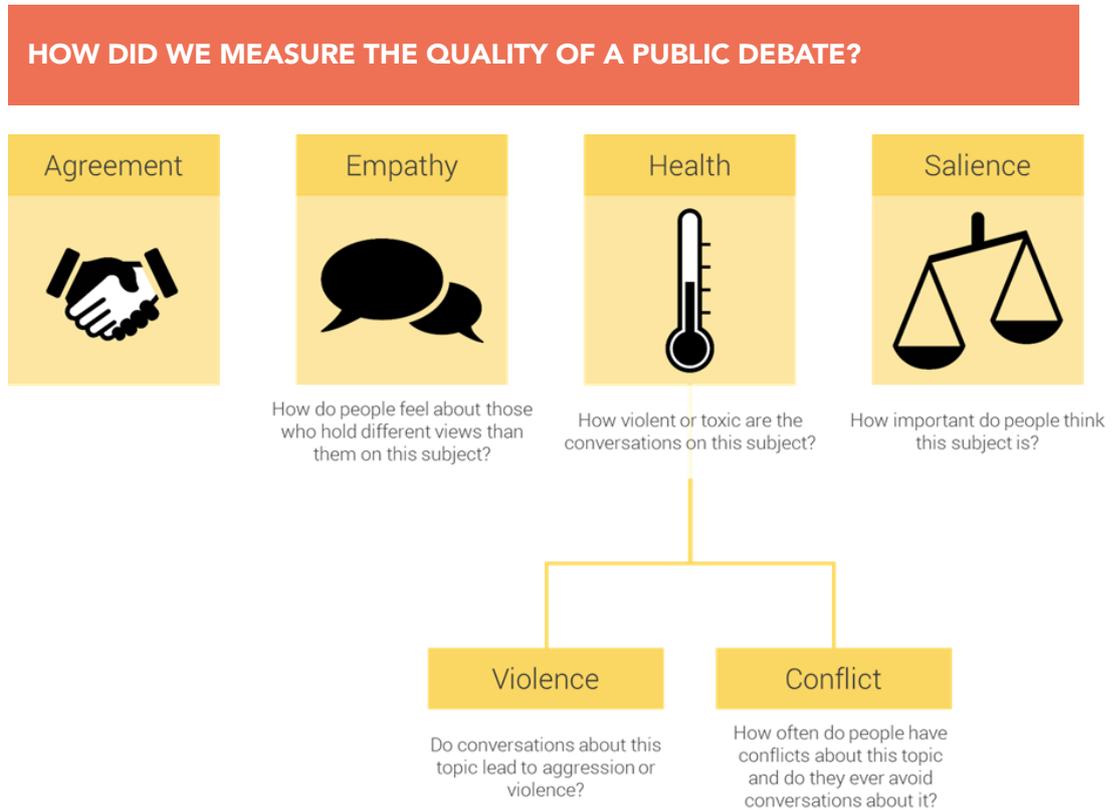
#### How do people feel about those who hold different views than them on this subject?

For each topic, researchers asked respondents to choose which statements they thought applied to

<sup>22</sup> Hewlett, K., Hall, J. & McCrae, J. (2019). To heal a 'divided Britain', we first need to know what's broken Policy Review 2019, King's Policy Institute, p52 found at <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/policyreview2019.pdf> Since the time of writing The Policy Institute at King's College London also published Duffy B., Hewlett, K., McCrae, J., Hall, J. (2019). Divided Britain? Polarisation and Fragmentation trends in the UK. The Policy Institute at King's College London, September 2019, found at <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/divided-britain.pdf>

**FIGURE 3.**

**MEASURES OF THE QUALITY OF A PUBLIC DEBATE USED**



those who disagreed with them on a particular issue. These statements ranged from a positive view ('They have a right to their opinion, it doesn't change my view of them at all') to a negative view ('They're the cause of a lot of the problems in this country'). A full list of positions is contained in Annex I.

The ability to empathise with one another is a core driver of democratic compromise. Or, at the very least we should be able to recognise the legitimacy of our opponents in the debate.<sup>23</sup>

Consolidation into distinct identities, frequently referred to as 'tribalism' or 'identity politics' generates divisive politics.<sup>24</sup> But tribalism and identity also play key roles in determining a person's willingness to participate in the democratic process.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Therefore, the politics of 'us' and 'them' are corrosive to the public debate primarily when our view of 'them' becomes a negative one - when we fail to empathise or recognise the legitimacy of those who belong to a different tribe.

**HEALTH**

**How violent or toxic are the conversations about this subject?**

For each topic, survey respondents were asked

four questions. First, respondents estimated how frequently they had conflicts about each topic, and how frequently they avoided conversations about that topic out of a fear it might lead to conflict. Then, respondents estimated how frequently they were subjected to or expressed violent language in relation to those they were in conflict with.

Where violence, abuse or conflict are the dominant styles of political discourse, the power of democratic discourse to achieve consensus or compromise is hampered.

**SALIENCE**

**How important do people think this subject is?**

Survey respondents were asked to rank topics by how politically urgent they thought they were, and which they would want to contribute to solving within their lifetime. In measuring the scale of division in the country, the focus was on those issues the largest number of people felt were important. Failure to achieve consensus or compromise is only cause for concern if it relates to issues which we consider important as they have a real impact on the future of the country and its citizens. The results of the survey responses are shown below.

23 Mouffe, C. (2000). *The Democratic Paradox*. Verso Books

24 See, for example Hewlett, K., Hall, J. & McCrae, J. (2019). To heal a 'divided Britain', we first need to know what's broken Policy Review 2019, King's Policy Institute, p52 found at <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/policyreview2019.pdf>

25 Gutmann, A. and Thompson, D.F. (1998). *Democracy and Disagreement*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

26 Nussbaum, M. (2013). *Political Emotions*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

# CHAPTER 3

## POLITICAL ISSUES

### BREXIT

**Britain should leave the European Union without a deal or Britain should revoke Article 50 and remain a member of the European Union**

Brexit was the political issue with the lowest consensus among those surveyed. 31% felt strongly that the UK should leave without a deal whereas 34% felt strongly that the UK should revoke Article 50. 29% chose 'neither agree nor disagree' or 'no opinion'. Brexit was highly salient, with the public ranking it as the second most important issue facing the UK, just behind the NHS.

The health of the conversation around Brexit was, however, much more mixed. Brexit is the cause of a lot of conflicts: 54% of respondents reported avoiding conversations on the subject, and 36% reported receiving violent reactions to their views.

On measures of empathy, 26% of respondents had some negative views about those who disagree with them on Brexit. 39% expressed that they were open to compromise. Leavers were 11% more likely to say

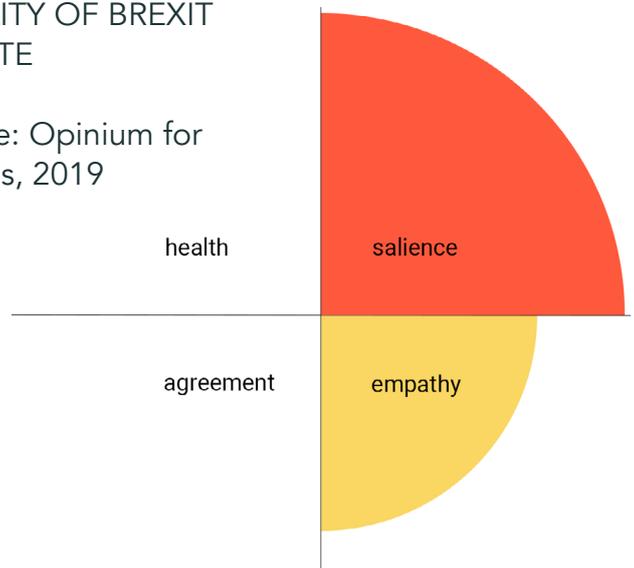
so than Remainers, an outcome in line with YouGov's finding that Leavers are more tolerant of Remainers than vice versa.<sup>27</sup>

These results imply that while disagreement is larger than ever and the debate is unhealthy, the now commonplace idea of an irreparable split between Leavers and Remainers is perhaps exaggerated.

**FIGURE 5.**

### QUALITY OF BREXIT DEBATE

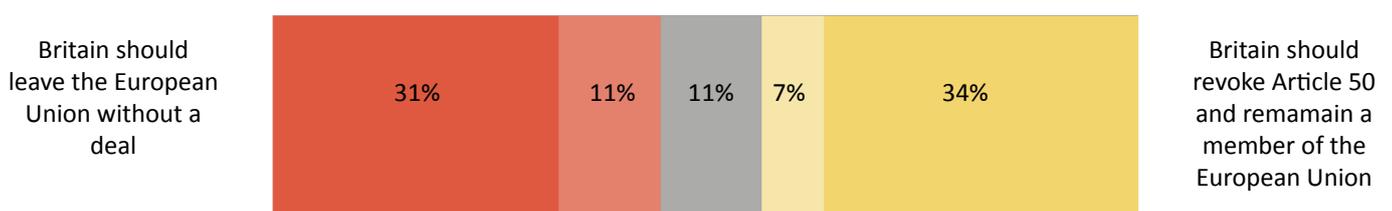
Source: Opinium for Demos, 2019



**FIGURE 4.**

### OPINIONS ON BREXIT

Source: Opinium for Demos, 2019



27 Chorley, M. (2019, 21 January) Could you love a Leaver? The Times Red Box find at <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/could-you-love-a-leaver-bbv5vhbw#>

## IMMIGRATION

### Too many immigrants are coming to live in the UK or Not enough immigrants are coming to live in the UK.

There was very low consensus on immigration. 35% felt strongly that too many immigrants were coming into the UK, whereas only 4% felt strongly that not enough immigrants were coming to live in the UK. 32% of respondents chose the middle position - indicating that a significant proportion of people hold more nuanced views on immigration.

Immigration was the fifth most salient issue: while many put immigration in their top 5, only 8% put immigration first as the issue they would like to contribute to addressing in their lifetime. Survey work by Ipsos Mori finds the importance of immigration as a political discussion topic is generally in decline.<sup>28</sup>

The health of the conversation around immigration was low, and on measures of empathy immigration scored lower than any other issue. 22% of respondents found that those who disagreed with them on immigration were 'the cause of a lot of the problems in this country' and 11% called them dangerous.

While there is nuance in citizens' opinions on immigration, the debate is comparatively toxic. Nevertheless, citizens do not consider immigration as important an issue as we might expect based on the attention it receives.

FIGURE 6.

### OPINIONS ON IMMIGRATION

Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*

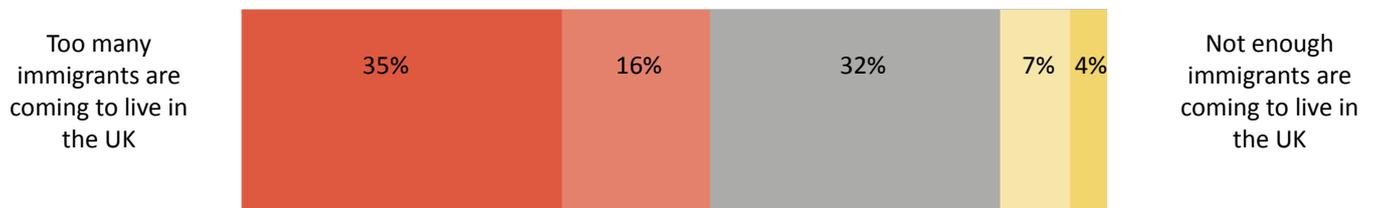
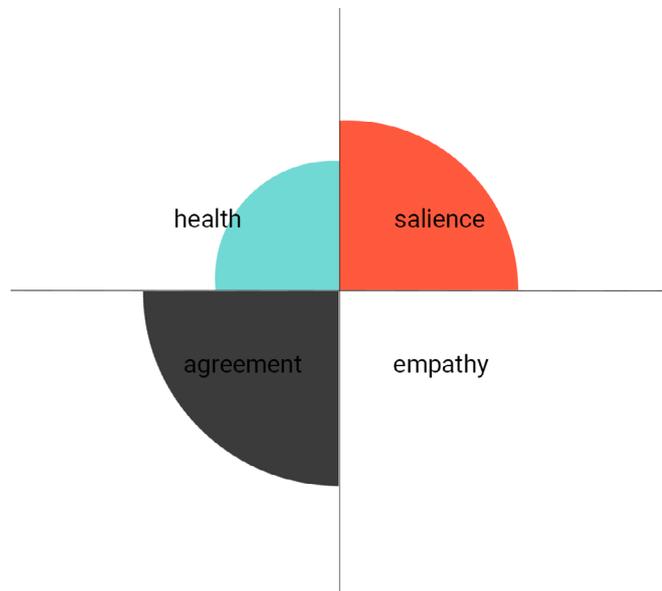


FIGURE 7.

### QUALITY OF IMMIGRATION DEBATE

Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*



28 BritainThinks (2019). Challenges Facing Britain: Research into the public's priorities and attitudes on key issues. Find at [britainthinks.com/pdfs/Engage-Britain-summary-report.pdf](https://britainthinks.com/pdfs/Engage-Britain-summary-report.pdf)

## BENEFITS

**It is far too easy to claim welfare benefits and lots of people who receive them don't really need them or It is too difficult to claim welfare benefits and lots of people who need them are unable to receive them.**

There was disagreement on benefits, but the topic was not very polarised - the most represented position (25% of respondents) were split. 6% had no opinion at all.

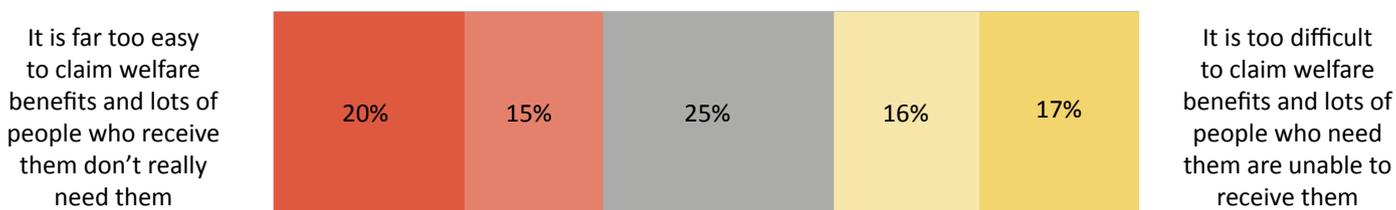
On measures of empathy towards the opposing side on this issue, 14% of respondents reported an unwillingness to get along with those who disagreed with them. However, the health of the debate was perceived to be quite high, with 73% of respondents never expressing and 71% reporting never receiving any verbal violence on the topic. 18-24 year-olds have almost 20% fewer debates on this topic than those between 65 and 74 years old.

Benefits are an issue consistently at the forefront of public discourse. The recent debates around the roll-out and failures of Universal Credit signal a widespread concern with who gets benefits and when. While there is disagreement, both the spread of opinions and the health of the debates shows that there is space for compromise.

## FIGURE 8.

### OPINIONS ON BENEFITS

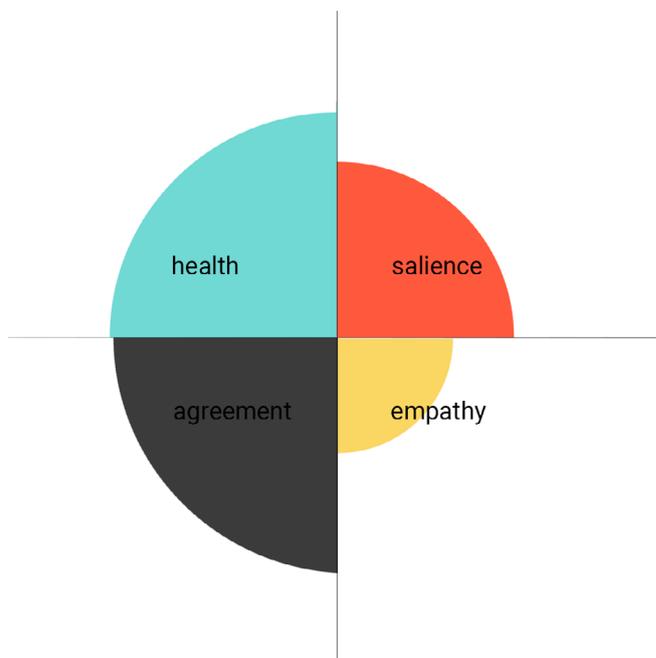
Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*



## FIGURE 9.

### QUALITY OF BENEFITS DEBATE

Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*



## MINORITIES

**Society should do more to help historically marginalised groups such as women, ethnic minorities, LGBTQI+ or Efforts to help historically marginalised groups have gone too far and it's now safe to discriminate against white people, straight people, and men.**

This is not the most polarised issue, but there isn't consensus either. The largest group (27%) didn't agree with either of the statements, and a significant proportion of people think that we're either not doing enough or too much to support marginalised groups (18% each).

This issue isn't seen as very important: only 23% of respondents ranked the topic in their top five priorities, rising to 39% among non-white respondents.

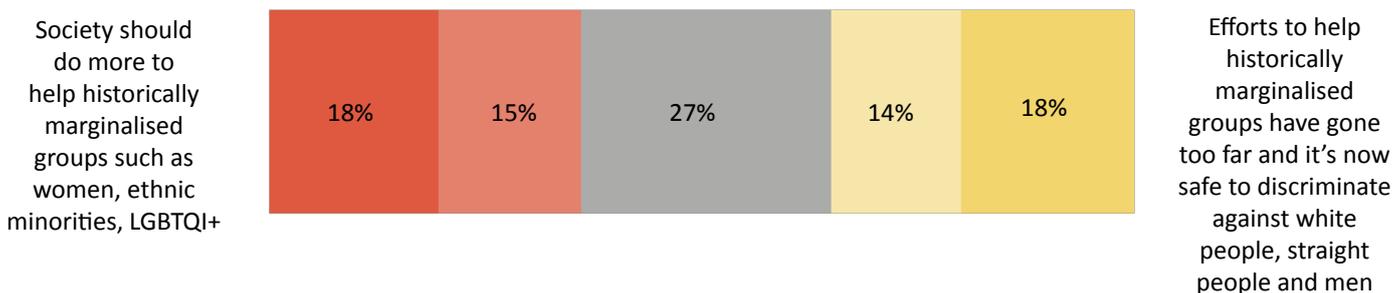
There was a certain lack of empathy towards the other side on this issue. 9% considered the other side dangerous, which rose to 10% among women and 12% among non-white respondents. Nevertheless, 28% said that they would be open to compromise with those who disagree with them on this issue.

Misogyny, Islamophobia, homophobia and anti-Semitism frequently enter the public consciousness after a scandal or other incident. The debate that follows often feels polarised, toxic and lacking empathy. But the issue of minority rights is not considered very salient by most - that is, by those who don't belong to a minority themselves. There might be room for better conversations and compromise if there is room for the vastly different interests and experiences of different groups in relation to this issue.

## FIGURE 10.

### OPINIONS ON MINORITIES

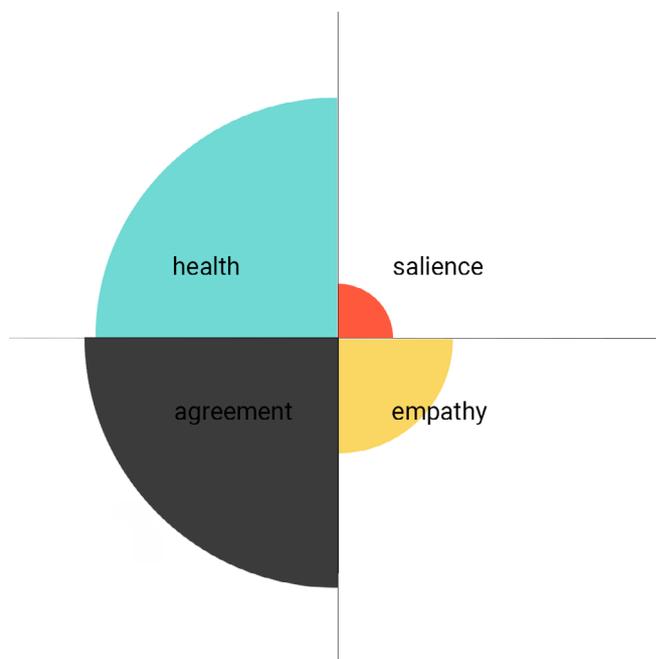
Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*



## FIGURE 11.

### QUALITY OF MINORITIES DEBATE

Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*



## FREE SPEECH AND SOCIAL MEDIA

**People should be allowed to post whatever they want on social media even if it is hateful, offensive or incites violence or People shouldn't be allowed to post things on social media that are hateful, offensive or incite violence.**

There was strong consensus on this issue: 72% agreed that people shouldn't be allowed to post hateful, offensive or inciting language on social media, and only 10% disagreed. However, respondents did not consider it to be a very salient issue: only 18% placed it in their top 5.

Possibly due to the low level of salience respondents assigned to this issue, it scored quite high on empathy and on the health of the debate. 40% had never had a debate on this issue, and 14% said they didn't have any opinions relating to those who disagreed with them on this issue.

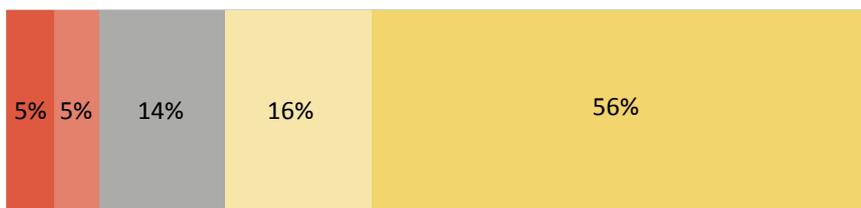
In the ongoing debate about the future of the web, the general population is firmly on the side of further regulation.

### FIGURE 12.

#### OPINIONS ON FREE SPEECH AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*

People should be allowed to post whatever they want on social media even if it is hateful, offensive or incites violence

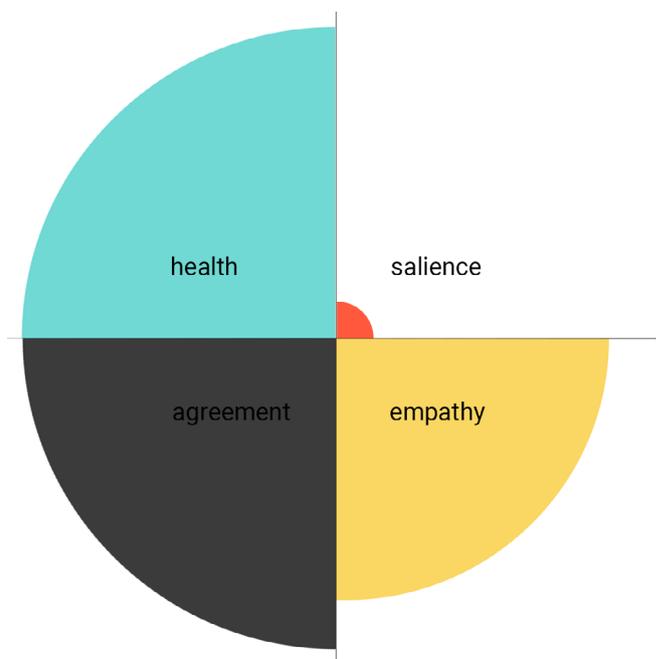


People shouldn't be allowed to post things on social media that are hateful, offensive or incite violence

### FIGURE 13.

#### QUALITY OF FREE SPEECH AND SOCIAL MEDIA DEBATE

Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*



## ABORTION

**It should be legal to have an abortion in any circumstances or It should be illegal to have an abortion in any circumstances.**

While there was less consensus on abortion than on some other issues, 64% of respondents reported the opinion that abortion should be legal in any circumstances. Only 9% believed that it should be illegal.

It was considered the least important topic across the 10 surveyed. Only 9% mentioned abortion as an issue they would tell the Prime Minister to focus on.

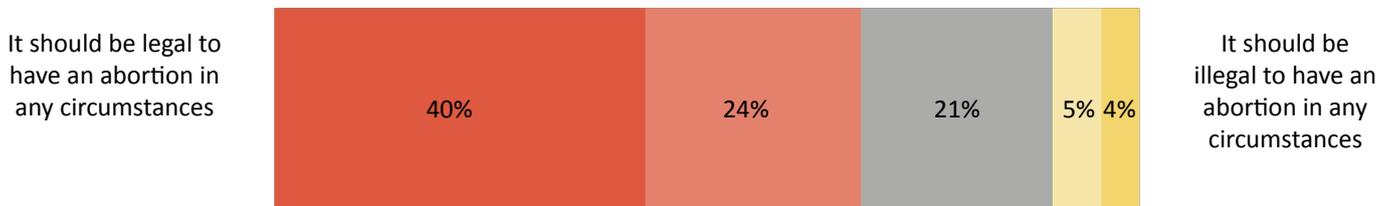
Likely due to its position as least salient, the debate on abortion is perceived as very healthy. This means that people had the least conflicts and the least violence in those conflicts about the topic of abortion. 50% of respondents had never had a conflict about abortion, but this was only 32% among those who lived in Northern Ireland.

With the referendum in Northern Ireland, and recent statements on stricter abortion laws by politicians such as Dominic Raab, Jeremy Hunt and Jacob Rees Mogg, abortion has been a topic in the media for quite a while. This attention by the media and politicians is incongruent with the population's attitude towards it - that is, outside of Northern Ireland.

## FIGURE 14.

### OPINIONS ON ABORTION

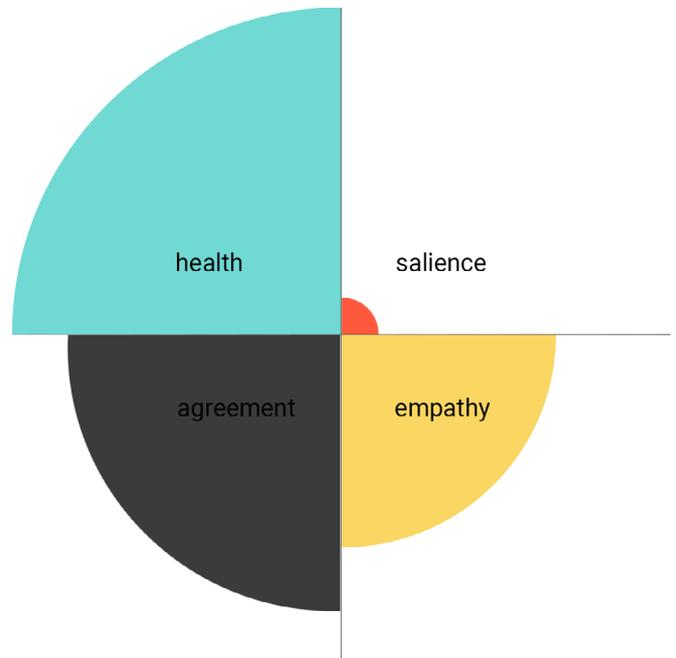
Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*



## FIGURE 15.

### QUALITY OF ABORTION DEBATE

Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*



**CLIMATE CHANGE**

**We need to combat climate change by any means necessary or We don't need to do anything about climate change.**

There was broad consensus on climate change: 79% agreed that we need to combat climate change by any means necessary. It was viewed as a very important issue, 22% chose climate change as the most important issue in the long term, and 58% placed it in their top 5, rising to 67% among 18- to 24-year-olds.

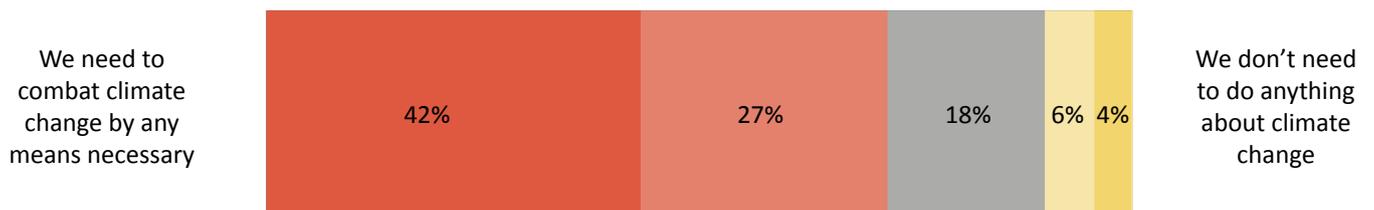
The debate on climate change was perceived as quite healthy, but there was some lack of empathy. 13% of respondents considered those who disagreed with them to be dangerous, rising to 22% among 18- to 24-year-olds.

The increasing prominence of the issue of climate change in the media seems to correspond to its salience and consensus among the population. Outside of some minority voices, the topic has not yet been translated into a central political talking point.

**FIGURE 16.**

**OPINIONS ON CLIMATE CHANGE**

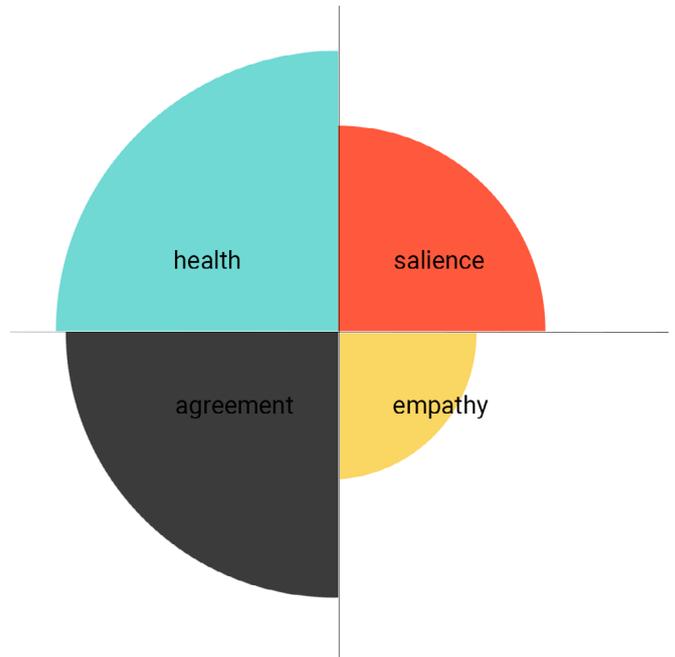
*Source: Opinium for Demos, 2019*



**FIGURE 17.**

**QUALITY OF CLIMATE CHANGE DEBATE**

*Source: Opinium for Demos, 2019*



## TAXATION

**Taxes on the rich should be higher to stop society becoming more unequal or Taxes on the rich need to be lower to encourage businesses to invest and create wealth.**

There was a lot of disagreement on taxation, with only Brexit being more contended. However, the population did lean towards taxing the rich more: only 15% thought we should tax the rich less. Respondents didn't consider this issue very important in the long term. But, 41% still said that the Prime Minister should make this issue a priority right now.

The issue of taxation had one of the lowest empathy scores out of the 10, with 15% of respondents saying that those who disagreed with them are the cause of a lot of the problems in this country, rising to 17% for those earning an annual salary between £40k and £60k.

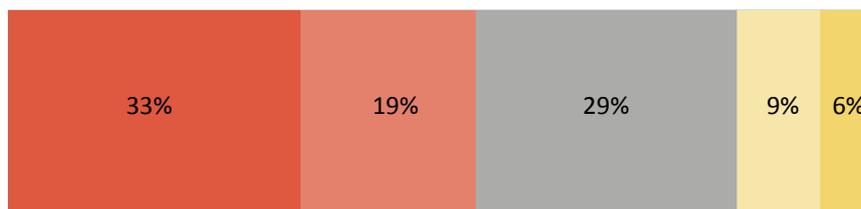
Recent government plans to cut taxes for the rich enjoy only 15% support from the population. Implementing policy on such a contended issue with hostility on both sides, might fuel divisions rather than heal the country.

## FIGURE 18.

### OPINIONS ON TAXATION

Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*

Taxes on the rich should be higher to stop society becoming more unequal

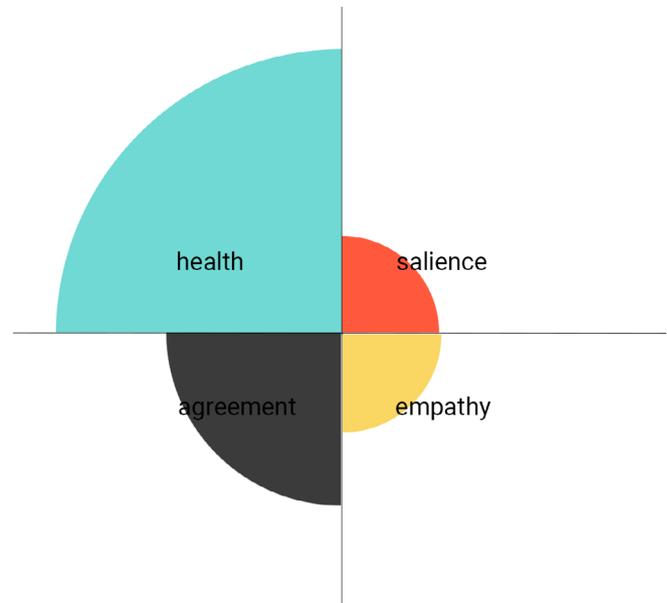


Taxes on the rich need to be lower to encourage businesses to invest and create wealth

## FIGURE 19.

### QUALITY OF TAXATION DEBATE

Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*



## NHS

**The NHS should be free for everybody and given whatever public funding it needs to do its job or Healthcare shouldn't be the responsibility of government and people should have the choice to use that money for other options instead.**

The NHS was the most consensual and the most important issue. 76% thought that it should be free for everybody and given whatever public funding it needs to do its job and only 7% believed that the government shouldn't be responsible for healthcare. 78% of respondents put NHS in their top 5 of long term priorities, 15% more than on Brexit.

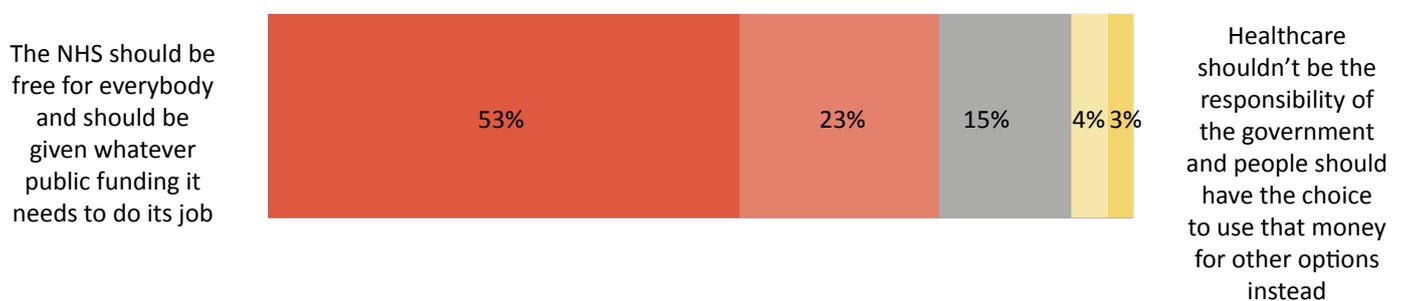
Possibly because they considered it so important, people still had quite a lot of conflicts on the NHS, but are very empathetic towards the other side. 36% had only positive things to say about those who disagreed with them.

The majority of the British population wants to give the NHS more funding, and finds this to be a more important issue than Brexit. It is hard to deny that time spent both by the media and parliament talking about the NHS, compared to the time spent discussing Brexit does not reflect this fact.

## FIGURE 20.

### OPINIONS ON NHS

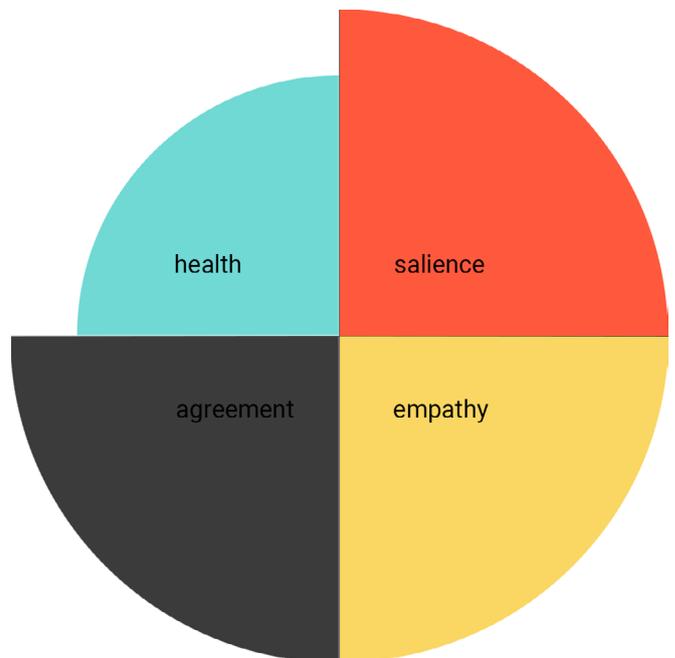
Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*



## FIGURE 21.

### QUALITY OF NHS DEBATE

Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*



## POLITICIANS

**Most politicians really care about what the public think and try to act in accordance with their wishes and interests or Most politicians are in it for themselves and don't really care about what the public think.**

There was a general consensus on the issue of politicians: 70% agreed that most politicians are in it for themselves and don't really care about what the public think, and only 9% disagreed. Respondents found it to be somewhat important: 39% placed it among their top 5 issues they would want to contribute to in their lifetime.

Empathy was quite low on this issue, as was the health of the debate. 16% had avoided talking about this topic in order to avoid a conflict and 29% of those who had conflicts on this topic had expressed violence or anger towards those they argued with.

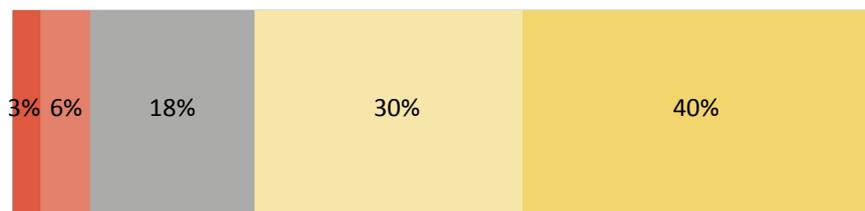
While consensus among the population on a political topic gives us hope for the future, the fact that the majority agree that politicians don't care about what the public think is a sad indictment of the state of our politics.

## FIGURE 22.

### OPINIONS ON POLITICIANS

Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*

Most politicians really care about what the public think and try to act in accordance with their wishes and interests

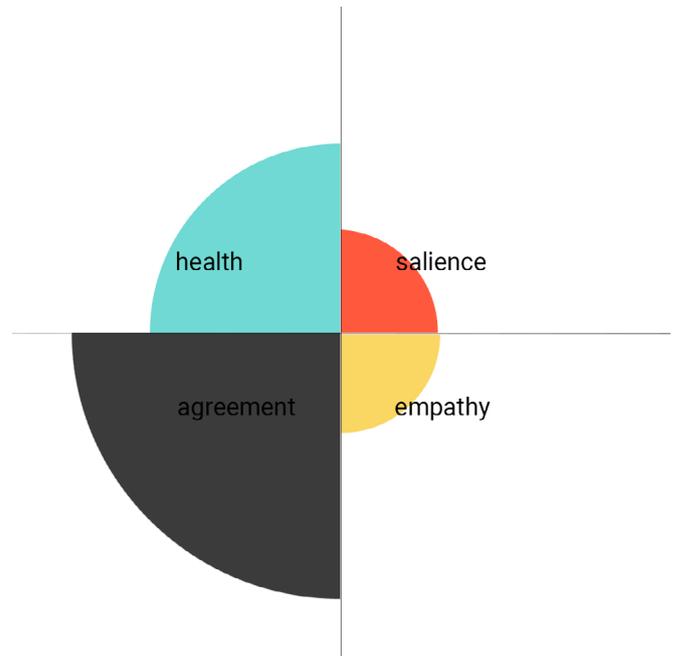


Most politicians are in it for themselves and don't really care about what the public think

## FIGURE 23.

### QUALITY OF POLITICIANS DEBATE

Source: *Opinium for Demos, 2019*



# CHAPTER 4

## TOPIC COMPARISONS

Each topic was perceived by survey respondents to differ widely across the three measures. Political issues of great importance could still be the subject of a healthy debate - as in the case of the future of the NHS - or a more unhealthy one, as in the case of immigration. The British public is widely divided on Brexit but there is significant consensus on issues like the NHS.

The following sections explore each measure by how different topics score on them.

### AGREEMENT

Among the topics explored, the NHS found the greatest consensus among respondents. Brexit by contrast was the most contested issue. More so than any of the other issues, the Brexit referendum, and the subsequent debate has divided people into two camps.

**TABLE 1.**  
AGREEMENT SCORES BY TOPIC,  
RANKED FROM HIGHEST TO  
LOWEST SCORE

TOPIC	RANK	AGREEMENT
NHS	1	24
Free Speech	2	19
Climate Change	3	4
Politicians	4	4
Abortion	5	3
Minorities	6	-2
Welfare	7	-6
Immigration	8	-20
Taxation	9	-27
Brexit	10	-85

<sup>29</sup> To ensure agreement had the same direction and the same order of magnitude as the other measures, we subtracted 100 from these scores, and multiplied them by -1.

The agreement score in Table 1 represents how great the consensus was among our survey respondents on each issue.

It was calculated by multiplying the percentage of respondents that held one of the five positions with the distance of that position from the most popular position. For all 4 positions that were not the most popular one, these were added up to form the total score. The distance was measured in absolute terms, as it is the difference, not the direction of this distance, that matters for calculating agreement.<sup>29</sup>

Any score above 0 indicates a consensual issue, while a score below 0 indicates a contended issue, with the magnitude of the score indicating the level of agreement or disagreement.

### SALIENCE

Brexit, the NHS and Climate Change were the top 3 salient issues for both questions. Especially for the second question, relating to the long term, there was a large distance between these 3 issues and all the other ones.

The attention these three issues get in the media and in government is incongruent with this outcome: Brexit dominates the public discourse which leaves little space for discussing current issues with the NHS. Other issues, like immigration and abortion, seem to be presented as more important by media and government than the public perceives them to be.

In order to learn what the population considered important in the long and in the short term, researchers asked respondents to pick and rank five issues in response to two questions:

1) *If the new prime minister was asking you for advice and wanted to know which issues to focus on, which would you choose?*

2) *If you could, in your lifetime, make a significant contribution to any of these issues, which ones would you choose?*

The salience score was calculated by assigning the inverted amount of points for the position each respondent had placed an issue on, for both those questions.

For example, if a respondent identified 'Minorities' as the most important topic, the topic received five points. The total score of the issue for each question was divided by the total possible score an issue could get: the score if all respondents had put that issue on number 1. This process was done for both salience questions and the average of those two was taken.

**TABLE 2.**  
SALIENCE SCORES BY TOPIC, RANKED FROM HIGHEST TO LOWEST SCORE

TOPIC	RANK	SALIENCE
NHS	1	54
Brexit	2	53
Climate Change	3	34
Welfare	4	29
Immigration	5	28
Politicians	6	17
Taxation	7	16
Minorities	8	9
Free Speech	9	9
Abortion	10	6

### EMPATHY

The level of empathy which British citizens feel towards those who disagree with them varies widely depending on the topic. On Brexit, in contrast to the story of mutual hatred we often hear, Leavers and Remainers have relatively positive views about the other side. But on immigration we view the other side very negatively, which might explain the toxic immigration debate which many opinion makers have warned of.<sup>30</sup>

On the NHS and free speech, the attitudes towards opponents are the most empathetic, contributing to conversations where people listen to one another

and are open to finding compromises. There is also a large consensus on these issues, meaning there would be scope for productive conversations about new policies with wide support from the population.

Researchers asked respondents to choose which statements they thought applied to those who disagreed with them on a particular issue. These statements ranged from positive 'They have a right to their opinion, it doesn't change my view of them at all' to very negative 'They're the cause of a lot of the problems in this country' – for a full list see Annex I.

Two of the total statements were positive, 5 were negative. The total empathy score was calculated by finding out what proportion of respondents ticked 1 or 2 positive and 1 or 2 negative statements. We then introduced factors to these percentages, as a person believing two negative things about the opposite side would likely have a worse adverse effect on the quality of debate than a person believing one negative thing.

Empathy score = weighted positive responses - weighted negative responses

= (4 x P2) + (2 x P1) - (2x N1) - (4 x N2) where P2 is the percentage of respondents who ticked two positive statements, N1 the percentage of respondents who ticked one negative statement, and so on.

**TABLE 3.**  
EMPATHY SCORES BY TOPIC, RANKED FROM HIGHEST TO LOWEST SCORE

TOPIC	RANK	EMPATHY
NHS	1	22
Free Speech	2	14
Brexit	3	10
Abortion	4	8
Climate Change	5	0
Benefits	6	-4
Minorities	7	-4
Politicians	8	-6
Taxation	9	-6
Immigration	10	-18

30 See for example, Mehta, S. (2019) Immigration panic: how the west fell for manufactured rage. The Guardian, find at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/aug/27/immigration-panic-how-the-west-fell-for-manufactured-rage>

Scores above 0 indicate an empathetic attitude to those who disagree with you on this issue, whereas scores below 0 indicate a hostile attitude.

### HEALTH OF DEBATE

All health scores except immigration and Brexit are above 0, meaning that the conversations around the other topics are mostly peaceful and productive. The number and intensity of conflicts on the other eight issues was varied. As we saw in the Evidence Review, due to the different political identities and interests of citizens in an open democracy, conflict is inevitable.<sup>31</sup> Conflicts ignite the passions of the population and engage many citizens in politics, which can be conducive to a healthier conversation. This is corroborated by the fact that abortion, with the lowest salience, has the highest health score: the population doesn't care about this issue and thus doesn't have many conflicts about it.

However, when the population avoids these conflicts, or they frequently become violent, then these conversations aren't healthy. This is the case with the debate on Brexit: both conflicts and violence in those conflicts are frequent and toxify the debate.

**TABLE 4.**  
HEALTH SCORES BY TOPIC, RANKED  
FROM HIGHEST TO LOWEST SCORE

TOPIC	RANK	HEALTH
Abortion	1	32
Free Speech	2	29
Taxation	3	24
Climate Change	4	23
NHS	5	19
Minorities	6	15
Benefits	7	12
Politicians	8	5
Immigration	9	-9
Brexit	10	-32

The total health score was calculated by adding together conflict and violence. Violence was given a higher weight in the score as violent conflict creates a much more toxic discourse than simply frequent non-violent conflicting interactions.

Health = -1\* (Conflict + Violence -100)  
*conflict = average of C1 and C2*

For C1 we multiplied the frequency (rarely=1, occasionally=2, frequently=3) by the respective percentage of respondents who reported having conflicts with that frequency on a particular topic. For C2 we took the percentage of people who said that they'd ever avoided talking about this topic to avoid conflict.

*Violence = average of V1 and V2.*

For V1 we multiplied the frequency of respondents expressing violence towards those they are debating with (once or twice=1, occasionally=2, frequently=3) by the respective percentages who said they expressed violence with that frequency and for V2 we did the same with the frequency of respondents being subject to violence. The violence percentages, and thus the violence scores are significantly higher than the conflict scores, as only those who had conflicts about a particular issue were asked about violent language on that issue.

Scores above 0 indicate an issue where the debate is healthy, while those under 0 indicate an issue where the debate is toxic.

31 See for example, Mouffe, C. (2000). The Democratic Paradox. Verso Books

For example - What is the health score of immigration?

How often, if at all, have you had debates or conflicts over immigration?

**Conflict** Sum of C1 and C2  
C1 - frequency of conflict =

FREQUENCY	PROPORTION	FACTOR
Never	24%	0
Online-frequently	5%	3
Online-occasionally	8%	2
Online-rarely	8%	21
In person-frequently	17%	3
In person-occasionally	30%	2
In person-rarely	22%	1
<b>Total C1 score</b> (sum of all proportions * factors)	<b>29%</b>	

**Conflict** Sum of C1 and C2  
C1 - frequency of conflict =

C2 - which subjects, if any, have you avoided discussing it to avoid getting into an argument?

Immigration - 25%

**Violence** –average of V1 and V2

V1 - Have you ever expressed anger (online or offline) towards a person you were arguing with on immigration? Eg swearing, shouting, name-calling, threats?

FREQUENCY	PROPORTION	FACTOR
Yes-frequently	6%	3
Yes-occasionally	11%	2
Yes-once or twice	13%	1
No-never	70%	0
<b>Total V1 score</b>	<b>58%</b>	

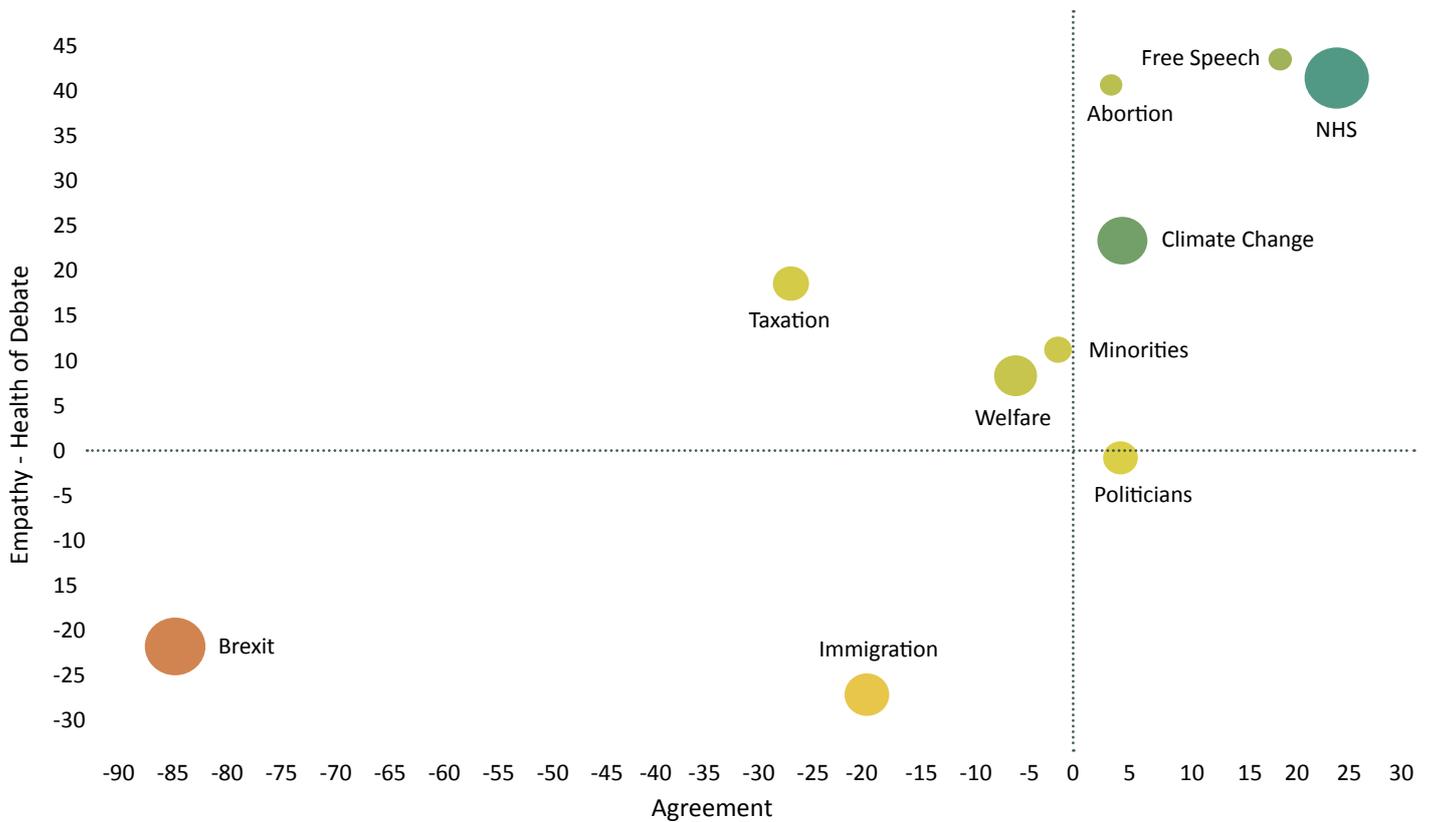
V2 - And have you ever been on the receiving end of anger (expressed online or offline) from a person you were arguing with on immigration? Eg swearing, shouting, name-calling, threats?

FREQUENCY	PROPORTION	FACTOR
Yes-frequently	6%	3
Yes-occasionally	11%	2
Yes-once or twice	16%	1
No-never	66%	0
<b>Total V1 score</b>	<b>54%</b>	

**TOTAL TOXICITY SCORE = (29 + 25 average of (58, 54) = 109**

**HEALTH SCORE = -1\* (109-100) = -9**

**FIGURE 24.**  
INDEX OF POLITICAL DIVISION



**POLITICAL DIVISION INDEX**

Each topic has been scored across four broad measures: how far the public agree or disagree on it, how important a topic is to citizens, what attitude the public has towards those who disagree with them, and how healthy conversations on the topic are perceived to be.

The Figure 24 above compares each measure. Topics are positioned according to how far the public agrees on them (X-axis), and by how healthy and empathetic the conversations on these topics are (Y-axis). Marks are sized by their salience: the larger the mark, the more important the topic in the eyes of British citizens. The colour of the marks are an indication of the overall divisiveness of that topic.

The overall picture is mixed. Taking our measures together, immigration and Brexit emerge as the primary divisive issues, driven by disagreement among the public and an overall perception of a poor-quality of conversation around the topics. The two topics are inevitably linked: many claimed the largest motivation for those who voted to leave the EU was curtailing immigration. Interestingly, there

was more empathy towards the other side on the topic of Brexit than on immigration, which implies that people may be in a position to lead productive conversations on Brexit outside of conversations around immigration. It also shows that while disagreement is high and the debate toxic, there isn't as much animosity between Leavers and Remainers as some have suggested.

The remaining topics appear more likely to form the basis of a healthy national political conversation. The NHS in particular emerges as both of significant political importance and a topic where the foundations of an empathetic and healthy debate can be found. Respondents report having good quality debates about this topic and are open to compromising with those who hold different ideas on the NHS. The perceived importance and conversational health of the debate on climate change is similar.

The results should encourage new efforts for a politics beyond Brexit. While the primary focus of parliament must remain on negotiating a future relationship with the EU, and the media in covering that negotiation, we expect the health of the

national democratic conversation to remain poor.

We present here evidence to suggest that a focus on topics such as immigration policy are both unconstructive and out of line with the public's perception of what is important. In comparison, the amount of attention for an issue like the NHS, which the public considers more salient than Brexit, and on which it agrees what the course of action should be, is disproportionately small. We fear that the increasingly prominent political method that deliberately pursues division over consensus, and a media environment geared to the outrageous and sensational, risks widening rifts in British society and

reducing the effectiveness of democratic debate.

Nevertheless, there is room for optimism. There is more nuance to the image of a nation torn in half: all other topics are far less divisive than Brexit. It is possible that like in the US, British media and government amplify primarily those voices that are divisive while in fact many citizens are open to compromise. The image of a deeply divided Britain likely represents a particular segment of society, rather than the whole population. The attitudes of the population tell us that in the future of the NHS and climate change policy, there exists a base from which a new, forward-looking public debate can be created that is less divisive, less unhealthy and more likely to result in compromise and consensus. We hope that the evidence presented here offers an impetus to pursue this politics.

**TABLE 5.**  
SCORES ON 4 MEASURES OF  
DIVISION, AND OVERALL DIVISION,  
FOR ALL 10 TOPICS

TOPIC	SALIENCE	HEALTH	EMPATHY	AGREEMENT	DIVISION
Brexit	53	-32	10	-85	-68
Immigration	28	-9	-18	-20	-21
Benefits	29	12	-4	-6	3
Minorities	9	15	-4	-2	2
Free Speech	9	29	14	19	9
Abortion	6	32	8	3	5
Climate Change	34	23	0	4	17
Taxation	16	24	-6	-27	1
NHS	54	19	22	24	57
Politicians	17	5	-6	4	0

## HOW WAS THE DIVISION CALCULATED?

Healthy and empathetic debate is a better indicator of quality than agreement alone: in a diverse democracy we should value having healthy empathetic discourse about a polarised set of opinions over toxic, hateful discourse concerning opinions which barely diverge. Therefore, we multiply both health and empathy by a factor of 2 before adding it to agreement.

The whole formula is then multiplied by salience, because if an issue is very salient this should certainly make its score bigger: either more divisive or more consensual depending on its original direction. The fact that the NHS is considered the most important issue makes the wide consensus that exists on it all the more positive for the overall quality of debate.

$$\text{POLITICAL DIVISION} = (\text{DISAGREEMENT} + 2 \times \text{TOXICITY}) \times \text{SALIENCE}$$

# CHAPTER 5

## A BLUEPRINT FOR A BETTER DEBATE

The previous chapters have established the need for high quality debate, defined its parameters and explored how the British public perceives the debate on 10 different topics. We can take a few lessons from this: a divisive debate is one where empathy between opposing sides is lost, where violent conflict is frequent, opinions become increasingly polarised and the outcome of this debate is relevant to most citizens. The number of topics on which the debate is divisive are perhaps lower than expected and the general attitude among the population is a cause for hope.

However, the impact of both media and Westminster on the quality of debate is significant. What's more, the current political climate revolves around a very important issue which also happens to be the most divisive. This hope should therefore primarily be a call to action: the country should find a common way forward by having a debate that is better, more empathetic, and more consensual than the one we currently have.

But how? This final chapter will provide the first steps in answering this question and provide a strong impetus for action, identify the need for further research and express the ambition to create a blueprint for better debate.

Let's start with the first dimension of divisive debates: polarised disagreement. Why is there such disagreement on issues like Brexit, immigration and taxation, but not on climate change, the NHS or free speech?

One difference between these issues lies in the

empirical basis we use to form our opinion on them. We asked our sample to rate fact statements, relating to each of the 10 political issues, from 'definitely true' to 'definitely false'. Only on the topics Minorities, Climate Change, Free speech and social media and the NHS were there any common facts - defined as when two thirds or more believed a statement to be true (for a full list of these common facts, see Annex II). On Brexit and immigration, none of the facts tested - which were in fact all true - came even close to two thirds. This means that in debates on these topics, different sides aren't operating from the same view of the political reality. Evidence also suggests that we are unlikely to accept new facts if they contradict with our existing beliefs.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore unlikely that new facts will change our views on divisive issues - confirming the critique many opinion makers have lodged against the facts-driven campaign of the Remain side in the run up to the referendum.

Calm discussion or even just meeting those we disagree has the largest potential to change our minds. But the meeting should involve not the recounting of facts the other believes in but rather what underpins those beliefs.<sup>33</sup> Learning how the other side feels, what they value, and what experiences have led them to a particular opinion does something even more important: it allows us to empathise with the other. Irrespective of whether such interactions have the power to change our minds, they will allow us to recognise the other as human, creating a higher quality debate. It is in these human factors that we are most likely to find what share as human beings across all groups.

32 Cook, G. (2017). Understanding the Influential Mind: In a "fake news" world, the neuroscientist Tali Sharot explains what convinces people—and what does not. Scientific American find at <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/understanding-the-influential-mind/>

33 Walker, P. (2018, 23 October) Helping people to find common ground on Brexit. OpenDemocracy.org find at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/helping-people-to-find-common-ground-on-brexit/>

A study by David Broockman and Joshua Kalla at UC Berkeley found that a short conversation with a canvasser, where they recounted an experience of a transgender person being treated unfairly, permanently erased the prejudice against transgender people of about 1 in 10 people.<sup>34</sup>

So we've established what looks to be an important means to a higher quality debate: allowing participants in the debate to really learn what motivates the other side.

At Demos, our ambition is to continue in shaping a common path forward. A recent study by LSE showed that in the Brexit debate Remainers are particularly bad at understanding the motivations of Leave voters - emphasising the need for a Brexit debate which allows us to develop an understanding of the motivations of the other side.<sup>35</sup> Awareness of the full picture of the other will form a fruitful basis for empathy with even those whose opinion is furthest removed from our own.

There is an overwhelming need for further research on this question of how we can have better debates and on what truly motivates those we disagree with. A large variety of research designs, of perspectives, of citizens queried and engaged with, and more cooperation between those passionate about answering this question, will only increase the likelihood that we find a path forward in these challenging times.

As such, our next phase of work will be using Pol.is, an innovative online deliberation software, to get a complete image of the attitudes people hold in relation to a particular divisive and a particular consensual issue. This tool asks a representative sample of people to express all their thoughts, feelings, experiences, values, frustrations and motivations in relation to one salient political issue.

Other participants can agree or disagree with any of these statements and respond to them. This process will ideally generate some values or emotions which even those with the most diverging opinions on an issue have in common. If not, as might be the case for certain divisive issues, it will give insight into the full spectrum of attitudes a citizen with a particular opinion has in relation to this issue. We then aim to use this information to help anyone in a debate on that issue empathise and thus change the quality of the conversation. We hope to test this approach with as many people and as many different settings as possible, to learn, adapt and create a true, tangible blueprint of how to have better quality debate.

Debates and conversations with people we disagree with are ubiquitous. A better quality debate and a common path forward that works for all UK citizens needs a change in attitude from all citizens. In particular those who have the power to shape the public debate, the media and Westminster, have a responsibility not to deepen our divisions but instead show us what compromise looks like. Talking is important, but listening more so - truly listening to the other, to their hopes and fears, not spreading tired tropes, stirring violent conflict, or pedaling hatred for the sake of votes, likes or hits. Moreover, those at the forefront of the public discourse ought to consider what topics they talk about and how they discuss them. While some divisive topics are very important and in need of impassioned contributions, some divisive topics, like immigration, get a disproportionate amount of our attention, and this attention rarely leads to compromise or better outcomes. Topics like the NHS and climate change have the potential to have high quality debate and lead to compromise - something we should pursue not just for the sake of overcoming divisions, but in order to deliver on priorities shared by the whole country.

34 Bohannan, J. (2016, 6 April). For real this time: Talking to people about gay and transgender issues can change their prejudices Science Magazine find at <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2016/04/real-time-talking-people-about-gay-and-transgender-issues-can-change-their-prejudices>

35 Carl, N. (2018, 4 May). Leavers have a better understanding of Remainers' motivations than vice versa. LSE blogs find at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/05/04/leavers-have-a-better-understanding-of-remainers-motivations-than-vice-versa/>

# APPENDIX

## ANNEX I

### Polling questions used to calculate empathy

Q11. Please think about people who have the opposite opinion to you on each of the issues below. For each issue, please tell us which phrases describe what you'd think of someone with the opposite view to you.

- 1 They have a right to their opinion, it doesn't change my view of them at all
- 2 They are probably somebody I wouldn't get along with if I met them
- 3 They're delusional and don't know what's good for them
- 4 They are probably somebody I wouldn't get along with if I met them
- 5 We'd have absolutely nothing in common
- 6 They are the cause of a lot of the problems in this country
- 7 I wouldn't want my child to marry someone like that
- 8 I'd think they have no morals
- 9 They are dangerous

*Statement 1 and 2 were classed as positive statements, and statements 3 to 9 were classed as negative statements.*

## ANNEX II

List of common facts relating to the 10 chosen political issues (more than two thirds agreement among the respondents)

- Racism exists in British society (81%)
- Sexism exists in British society (68%)
- The climate is changing because of human factors (76%)
- Cyber violence and hate speech cause real harm to those on the receiving end of them (78%)
- The NHS is underfunded which stifles its ability to provide good care

# DEMOS

Demos is a champion of people, ideas, and democracy. We bring people together. We bridge divides. We listen and we understand. We are practical about the problems we face, but endlessly optimistic and ambitious about our capacity, together, to overcome them.

At a crossroads in Britain's history, we need ideas for renewal, reconnection and the restoration of hope. Challenges from populism to climate change remain unsolved, and a technological revolution dawns, but the centre of politics has been intellectually paralysed. Demos will change that. We can counter the impossible promises of the political extremes, and challenge despair – by bringing to life an aspirational narrative about the future of Britain that is rooted in the hopes and ambitions of people from across our country.

Demos is an independent, educational charity, registered in England and Wales (Charity Registration no. 1042046).

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