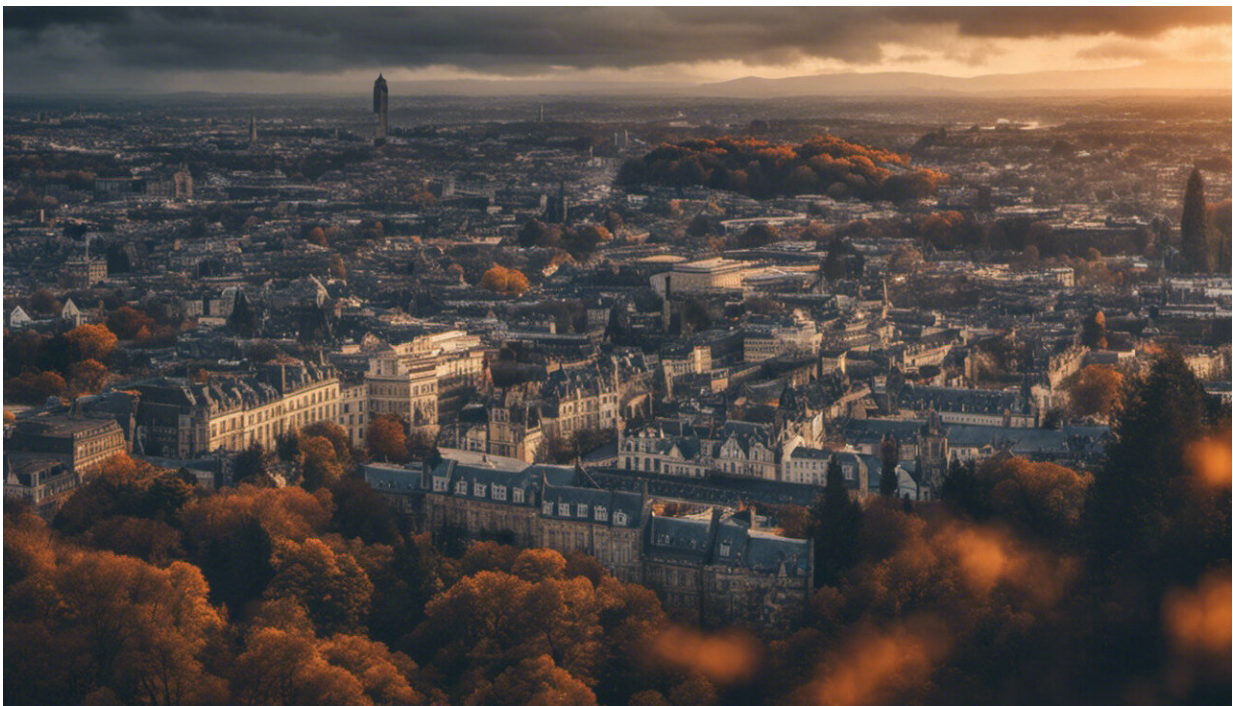


The UK now ranks as one of the most socially liberal countries in Europe, says new research

March 13 2023, by Bobby Duffy



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It's easy to lose sight of just how accepting the UK now is as a nation. What were once pressing moral concerns have become simple facts of life for much of the public. The UK, in fact, now ranks as one of the most accepting countries internationally, as shown by new data from the

[World Values Survey.](#)

This is one of the largest and most widely used social surveys in the world. It has run since 1981, capturing the views of almost 400,000 respondents in over 110 countries.

Major surveys on social trends help us to look back and remind us how far we've come in our attitudes across so many spheres of life—from homosexuality to casual sex and divorce.

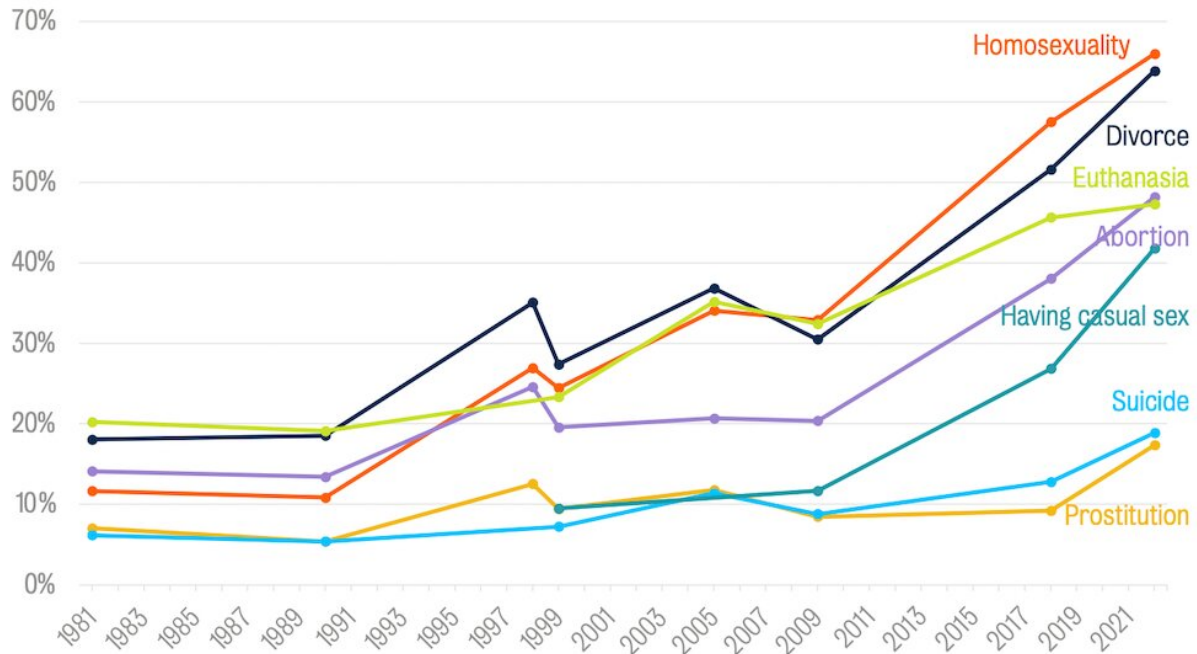
Attitudes towards sex

It's incredible to think that in 1981 just 12% of the British public thought that homosexuality was "justifiable". It is perhaps even more shocking that it had only risen to 33% in 2009. But by 2022 that level of acceptance had doubled again, to 66%.

Of around 20 nations included in [a report](#) by the Policy Institute at King's College London that analyzes the data, only three -- Sweden, Norway and Germany -- are more accepting of homosexuality than the UK.

In terms of sex more broadly, in 1999, just one in 10 Britons thought having casual sex was justifiable—but more than four times as many held this view in 2022, with a considerable rise from as recently as 2018. This shift means the UK is now the fourth most accepting of casual sex, ahead of countries including France and Norway, and not far off Australia, which is the most accepting.

Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between (% of British public who say justifiable)*



Base: minimum of 1,000 people aged 18+ surveyed in the UK per year. Credit: Policy Institute, King's College London, World Values Survey, [CC BY-SA](#)

And between 1981 and 2022, the proportion of Britons who said divorce is justifiable rose from just 18% to 64%. Only Sweden and Norway are more accepting of people dissolving their marriages, while the UK is far above some other Western nations such as the US (just 38%) and Italy (40%).

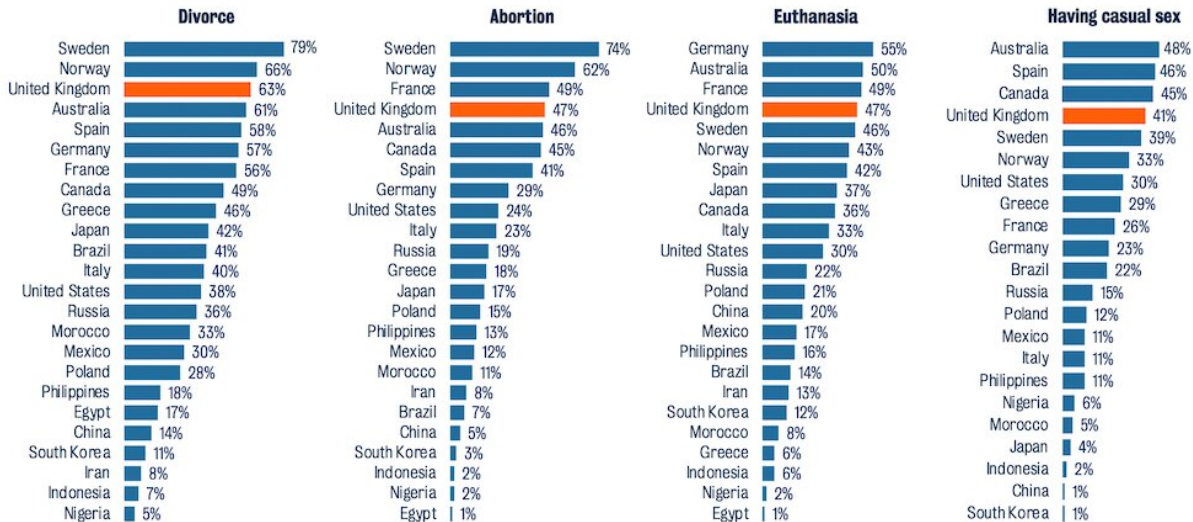
This social transformation isn't just a result of younger generations replacing older cohorts. All generations have changed their views significantly, although the oldest pre-1945 cohort now often stand out as quite different — and on some issues, like casual sex, there is a clearer generational hierarchy. Two-thirds of those born between the mid-1990s

and early 2010s think [casual sex](#) is acceptable, but only one third of baby boomers (born between the mid-1940s and mid-1960s) agree.

Attitudes towards death

The one key issue for which we rank as comparatively less liberal than other countries is the death penalty. One in five in the UK think capital punishment is justifiable and a further 35% think it is potentially justifiable. Taken together, this means a majority think it may be acceptable in certain circumstances, which is much higher than Italy, Germany, Sweden and Norway, for example, but lower than Australia, France and the US.

Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between (% who say justifiable)



UK base: 3,056 people in the UK aged 18+, surveyed 1 Mar–9 Sept 2022. Other countries all surveyed in wave 7 of WVS at various points between 2017 and 2022. Credit: Policy Institute, King's College London, World Values Survey, [CC BY](#)

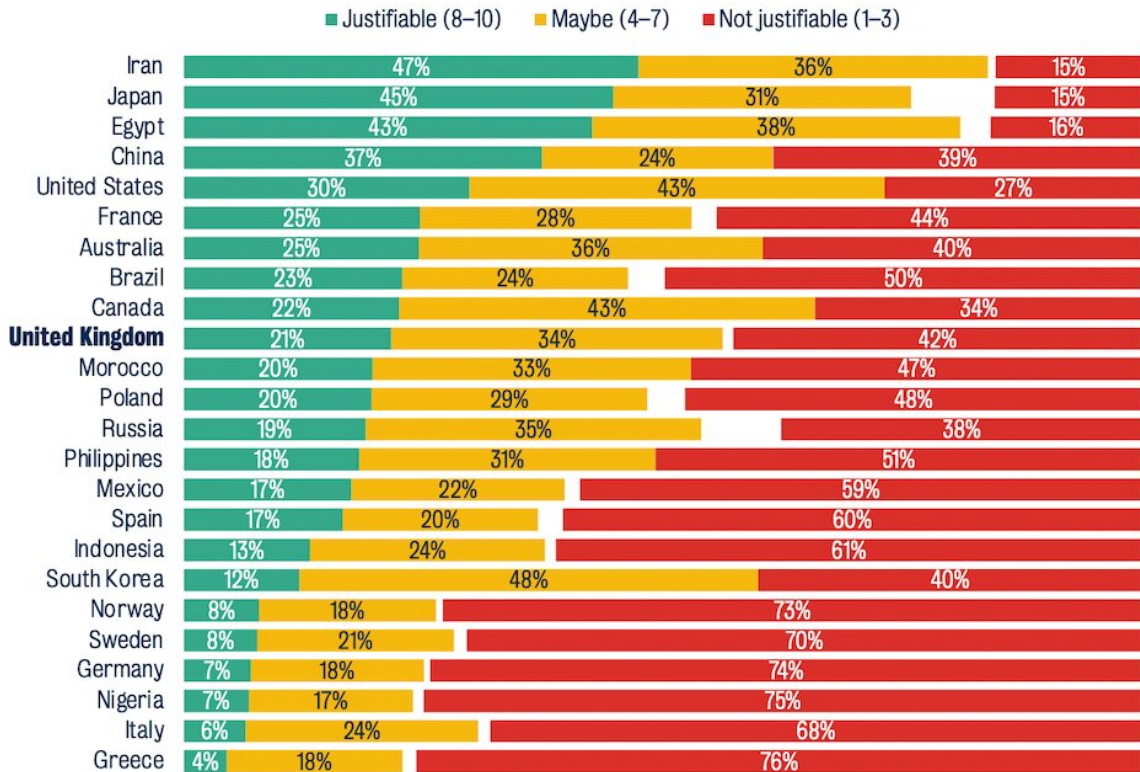
Support for the death penalty also relates much more to political identities than other issues, with Conservative voters much more likely to be in favor of [capital punishment](#) than Labour voters. This helps explain why it continues to be brought up in political discussions.

Other trends in attitudes also highlight likely future directions on some key topics that remain sensitive. For example, support for euthanasia has increased significantly, from 20% in 1981 to 47% now, no doubt partly due to greater awareness of the issue.

Assisted dying is, of course, still illegal in the UK. It is, however, now seen as much more acceptable by the UK public than other illegal behaviors asked about in the study, such as dodging taxes.

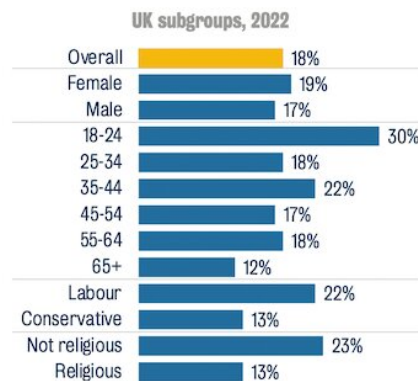
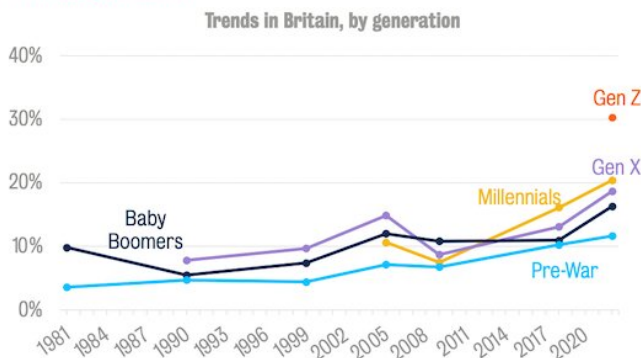
One other trend raises some thorny questions. Suicide is still seen as justifiable by a relatively small minority of the population. But that minority has grown substantially, from 6% to 19% between 1981 and 2022. The UK now ranks among the most likely to say [suicide](#) is justifiable, along with France, Germany and Spain.

Please indicate for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between (1=never justifiable; 10=always justifiable). **The death penalty**



UK base: 3,056 people in the UK aged 18+, surveyed 1 Mar–9 Sept 2022. Other countries all surveyed in wave 7 of WVS at various points between 2017 and 2022. Credit: Policy Institute, King's College London, World Values Survey, [CC BY](#)

Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between. **Suicide**
 (% who say justifiable)



Bases: minimum of 130 people surveyed per generation per year (left); 3,056 people in the UK aged 18+, surveyed 1 Mar–9 Sept 2022 (right). Credit: Policy Institute, King's College London, World Values Survey., [CC BY](#)

This increase is to a large degree driven by much higher proportions of gen Z saying suicide is justifiable, at 30%. The prevalence of suicide among young people can be overblown—for example, gen Z is often [wrongly characterized](#) as a "suicidal generation". Suicide is one of the top killers among the young, but this is mostly because young people don't die very often.

There has, however, been a slight increase in [suicide rates](#) among young people, particularly [young girls](#), in recent years, as well as increases in [suicide attempts](#) and self-harming behaviors. The greater acceptability of suicide among [young people](#) today could simply be a sign of a cohort of young that better understands and engages on mental health issues.

Thankfully, we're in a much better place in terms of people feeling more able to talk about suicidal thoughts. Any sense we may be "[normalizing](#)" suicide is clearly something to understand and consider carefully. But it's also important not to overplay this as yet and to remember that the

overall long-term trend is towards [significantly lower rates of suicide](#).

Surveys of this kind, on social attitudinal shifts, aren't just about reflecting on the past. They are vital in looking forward. For every [social issue](#) that is largely settled, there will always be new, emergent challenges, and these trends provide signals of what could come next.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: The UK now ranks as one of the most socially liberal countries in Europe, says new research (2023, March 13) retrieved 19 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-03-uk-socially-liberal-countries-europe.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.