

Public increasingly see politicians as stoking culture wars, UK study finds

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The U.K. public increasingly think politicians are stoking culture wars, at the same time as the term "woke" has become more likely to be considered an insult and 1 in 7 people now identify as "anti-woke" (as

many as identify as "woke"), according to [a new study](#).

The findings, which are the latest from a long-running research program by the Policy Institute at King's College London and Ipsos UK, reveal 6 in 10 (62%) people now agree politicians invent or exaggerate culture wars as a political tactic—up from around 4 in 10 (44%) in 2020.

Yet the public do not see this as a purely manufactured issue: people are still far more likely to see culture wars as a real-life problem (49%) rather than one that only exists in the media and on [social media](#) (22%).

And for the first time, a majority (52%) now say culture wars are a serious problem for U.K. society and politics, an increase on the 43% who said the same three years ago.

The research—which is based on a series of representative surveys using the Ipsos UK online random probability KnowledgePanel—looks at the state of culture war debates, divisions and politics in the U.K., in many cases revealing just how much the situation has changed in a short period of time.

The term 'woke' is increasingly seen as an insult

Of the public surveyed, 42% say they would consider it an insult if someone described them as woke—up from 36% in 2022 and 24% in 2020.

Over the same period, the proportion who say they'd interpret woke as a compliment has remained stable, at 27% in the latest data, compared with 26% in 2022 and 2020.

Of those surveyed, 15% consider themselves to be anti-woke, and virtually the same proportion—16%—consider themselves to be woke,

but the most common response is that people don't know what these terms mean: 44% give this answer, while another 21% say they don't identify with either label.

Meanwhile, men (21%) are twice as likely as women (10%) to say they are anti-woke, and those aged 55 and above (24%) are four times as likely as 16- to 24-year-olds (6%) to say the same.

Looking across other groups within the population, those who voted both Conservative in 2019 and Leave in 2016 are most likely to see themselves as anti-woke, with 41% identifying in this way. This compares with just 3% of Labor-Remain voters.

Combining age and gender of respondents shows it is men aged 60 and above (31%) who are most likely to identify as anti-woke, while younger women aged 18 to 29 are least likely to (3%).

At the same time as considerable proportions of the population have begun to identify with culture war labels or form judgements about them, media attention on these issues has grown hugely:

- In 2019, there were just 10 U.K. newspaper articles that mentioned the term "anti-woke." By 2022, this had risen to 882.
- The number of articles mentioning "culture wars" continued to increase last year, rising from 1,869 in 2021 to 2,224 in 2022.
- And while the number of articles featuring the term "cancel culture" fell from a high point of 3,670 in 2021 to 2,800 in 2022, this still represents a huge increase on the 157 published as recently as 2019.

In the last three years the public have become less likely to say there is a great deal or fair amount of tension between various groups in the U.K. today.

The biggest change is in perceived divisions between Leavers and Remainers: in 2020, 78% thought there was at least a fair amount of tension between these two groups, but this has since declined to 58%.

Over the same period, the share of the public who see tension between those who support different political parties fell from 75% to 64%, while the proportion who said the same about immigrants and people born in the U.K. also declined, albeit to a lesser extent, from 80% to 74%.

One exception is the share of the public who say there is tension between men and women, which has remained relatively steady, at 32% in 2023, compared with 28% in 2020.

- The public are most likely to say politicians' focus on cultural divides has a negative impact on society—and that they do so for political benefits
- A majority of 56% say politicians who talk about divisions over cultural issues are just trying to distract people from other important topics, compared with 11% who say politicians who talk about these divisions genuinely believe it's an important topic.
- 51% say that when politicians focus on divisions over cultural issues it only divides society further—far greater than the 12% who say this focus helps highlight ways we can improve society.
- 48% say it's in politicians' interests to exaggerate divisions over cultural issues, compared with 28% who take the opposite view that there are no political benefits to exaggerating such divisions.

Will the next general election be determined by culture war debates?

Some culture war issues are low down the list of voters' priorities at the next election. Just 1% of the public say transgender rights will be one of the main issues determining their vote in the election, and less than 1% say the same about race relations or women's rights.

However, larger minorities say their vote will be mainly influenced by other issues that might be seen as part of culture war debates in the U.K., such as asylum seekers crossing the channel (13%), which comes third after the cost of living (43%) and the NHS (28%).

And while there is generally little variation in views between those who voted for one of the two main parties in 2019, this is a key point of difference: Conservative voters (27%) are around five times as likely as Labor voters (5%) to select asylum seekers crossing the channel as an issue that will decide their vote at the next general election.

Professor Bobby Duffy, director of the Policy Institute at King's College London, said, "The speed and scale of the U.K.'s adoption of 'culture war' issues and rhetoric in our media and politics has been one of the key trends of the last few years, and it has gone hand-in-hand with big shifts in public awareness and opinion. When we started the series in 2020, half the public hadn't even heard the term 'cancel culture'—now 4 in 10 say they've heard a lot about it.

"And opinions have changed quickly too, with a near doubling of people seeing 'woke' as an insult, and even 'anti-woke'—a term that didn't really exist before 2019—becoming something people identify with, including 3 in 10 older men, and 4 in 10 Conservative-Leave voters.

"But opinion is also swinging against the use of these identity divisions, with one of the biggest shifts being the increase in the public's perception that politicians are inventing or exaggerating culture wars as a political tactic. The evidence suggests it may not be a particularly

successful approach to an election, as tiny minorities pick out culture war-related issues as important to how they'll vote.

"But the key concern here is not election outcomes. The real worry is that true U.S.-style culture war divisions—where our views on a range of social issues become very tightly tied to our political identity—leave no room for compromise and are incredibly difficult to unpick once they become established. No one really wins a culture war, so it's best not to start."

Gideon Skinner, head of political research at Ipsos UK, said, "Over the last few years, this research program has tracked an intensifying story on culture wars across multiple strands: awareness and media coverage are rising, alongside a public that both continues to believe that the U.K. is divided and that culture wars are a real, serious problem, but also thinks that the media and politicians are exaggerating the problem. Meanwhile 'woke' and 'anti-woke' prompt very different reactions depending on someone's age, gender and political stance.

"But not everything is moving in the same direction, and it is important to keep it in perspective. Perceptions of tensions between several groups—between Remainers and Leavers, between supporters of different political parties, between different social classes, and between immigrants and people born in the U.K.—have fallen over the last three years. While negative associations of 'woke' are rising, most people do not consider themselves to be either 'woke' or 'anti-woke.'"

And most people believe that other issues such as the cost of living, the NHS and [asylum seekers](#) crossing the channel are likely to play a bigger role in the next election—even as they are not very optimistic that discussions over culture war divisions will slow down.

"Despite people's concerns over the divisions that [culture wars](#) create,

the issue shows little sign of going away, which means it's important to continue to look for ways to engage with the public and understand different perspectives so that they do not become entrenched."

Technical details

Ipsos UK interviewed online a representative sample of 3,716 adults aged 16+ across the United Kingdom between 17 and 23 August 2023, following previous surveys of 2,931 adults aged 16+ between 13 and 19 January 2022, and 2,834 between 25 November and 2 December 2020. This data has been collected by Ipsos's UK KnowledgePanel, an online random probability panel which provides gold standard insights into the U.K. population, by providing bigger sample sizes via the most rigorous research methods. Data are weighted by age, gender, region, Index of Multiple Deprivation quintile, education, ethnicity and number of adults in the household in order to reflect the profile of the U.K. population. All polls are subject to a wide range of potential sources of error.

Counts of media mentions of culture war terms were drawn from the Nexis database of U.K. national and regional newspapers, with duplicates removed from the sample.

More information: Woke vs anti-woke? Culture war divisions and politics. [www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute ... ons-and-politics.pdf](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute...ons-and-politics.pdf)

Provided by King's College London

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