



THE  
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LONDON

# Freedom of speech in the UK's "culture war"

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# **Offence, abuse, threats and free speech**

# The public increasingly feel people need to be more sensitive in how they talk, and are now split on the question of whether people are too easily offended

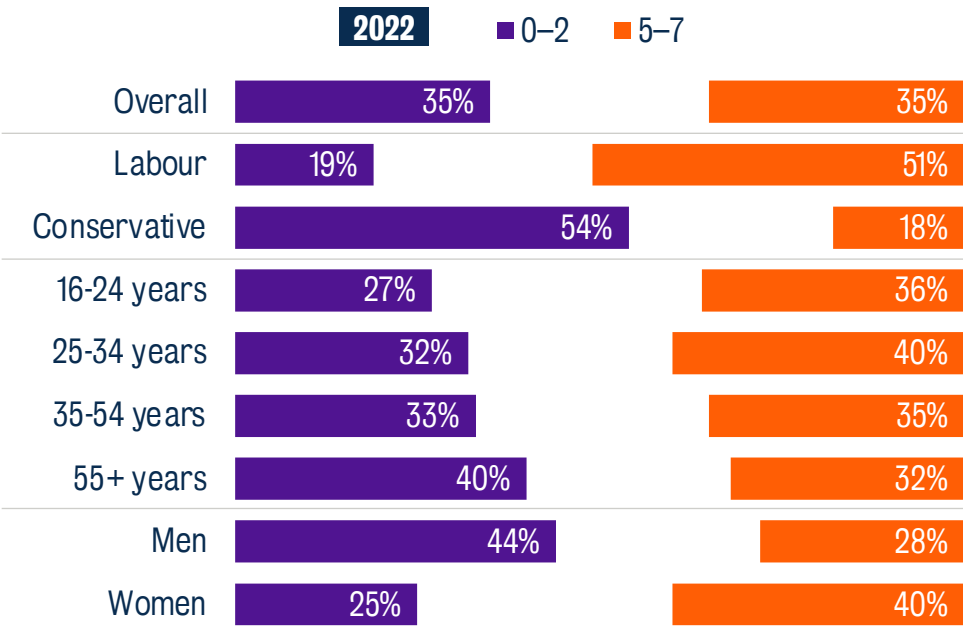
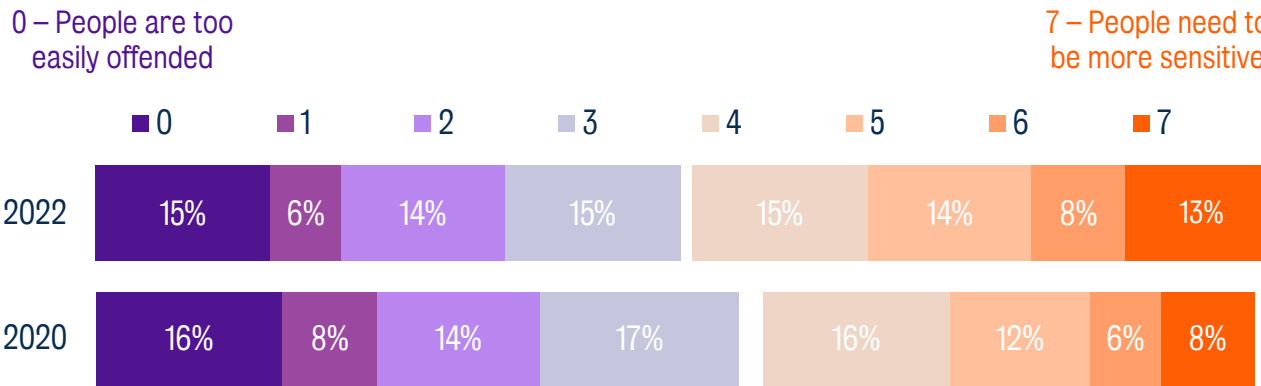
A third (35%) of the public tend towards feeling that people need to be more sensitive in how they talk to people from different backgrounds – up from a quarter (26%) at the end of 2020.

The shift in views means the country is now evenly split on whether people are too easily offended (35%) or whether they should be more sensitive (35%). 30% are somewhere in the middle of these two opposing positions.

This balance reflects very different views between groups within the population. For example, 54% of 2019 Conservative voters believe people are too easily offended, compared with 19% of Labour voters. Men (44%) are also much more likely than women (25%) to feel this way.

There are also important differences by age, with 27% of 16- to 24-year-olds thinking people are too easily offended, rising to 40% among those aged 55 and over.

Some people think that the way people talk needs to be more sensitive to people from different backgrounds. Others think that many people are just too easily offended. Where would you place yourself on this scale?



## Being a man, being white, and being a Conservative or Leave voter are characteristics that make someone more likely to feel people take offence too easily

Using statistical methods,\* it is possible to estimate how much more likely one section of the population is than another to believe that people are too easily offended, while controlling for other characteristics. This gives a clearer picture of how being a member of a particular group increases the likelihood of a certain outcome.

Analysis shows that men are 3.3 times more likely than women to believe people are too easily offended, while white people are 3.8 times more likely than those from a minority ethnic background to feel this way.

Leave voters and 2019 Conservative voters are also more likely than their Remain or Labour counterparts to think people take offence too readily.

\*More information on this analysis is provided in technical appendix.

How much more likely one group is than another to think people are too easily offended (adjusted odds ratios)

Leave voters are **4.5 times** more likely than Remain voters

White people are **3.8 times** more likely than people from ethnic minorities

Men are **3.3 times** more likely than women

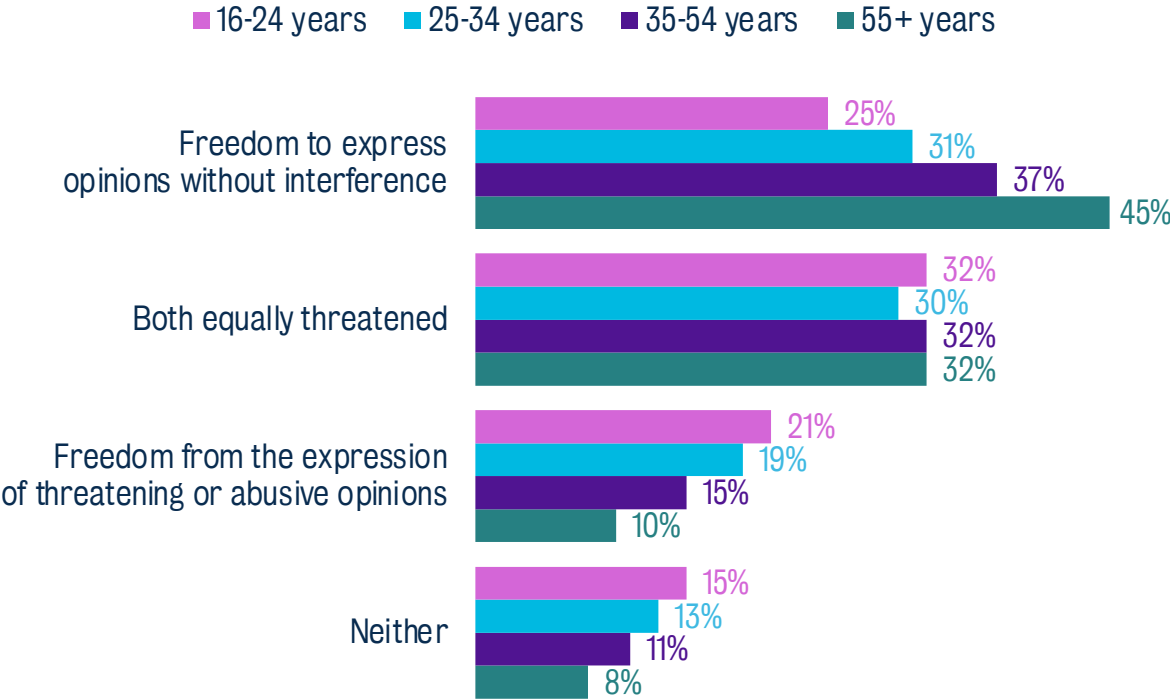
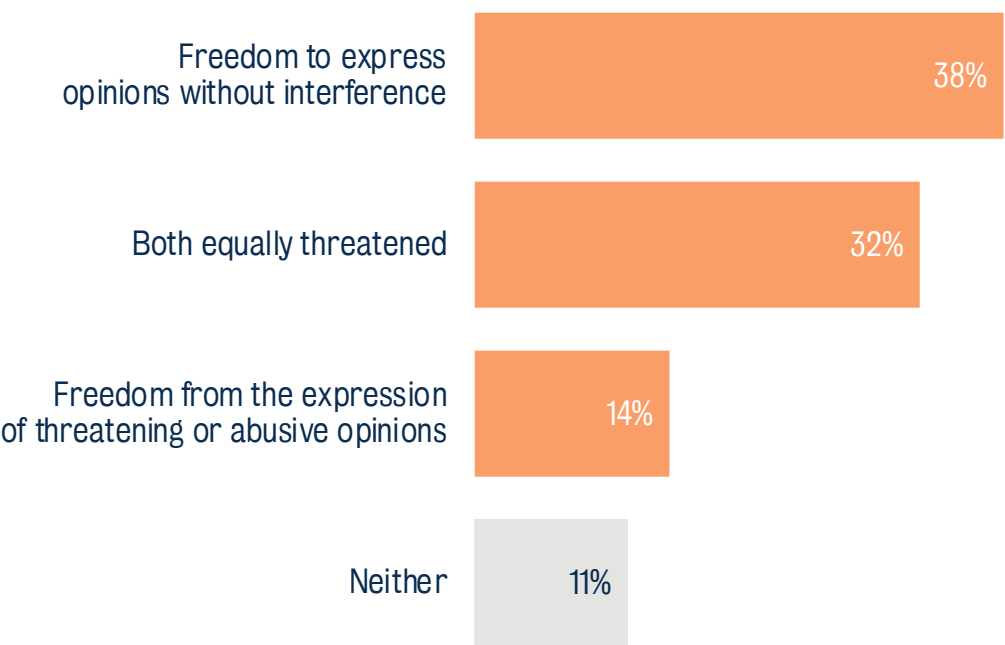
Con voters are **2.2 times** more likely than Lab voters

# The freedom to express opinions without interference is seen as more at risk than freedom from threats and abuse

When asked to choose which, if either, of two freedoms is most threatened in the UK today, 14% say freedom from the expression of threatening or abusive opinions, compared with 38% who say freedom to express opinions without interference – however, a similar proportion, 32%, feel that both freedoms are currently equally threatened.

Older age groups are more likely to be concerned about freedom of expression, while younger age groups are more likely than older people to be concerned about freedom from threatening or abusive opinions. Nearly a third within each age group believe that both freedoms are under threat.

This question asks about the expression of peoples opinions, for example through speech, online, in the media and on social media. Generally speaking, which of these two freedoms, if either, do you think is the most threatened in the UK today?



## Conservative voters and Leave supporters are by far the most likely to feel freedom of expression is under threat

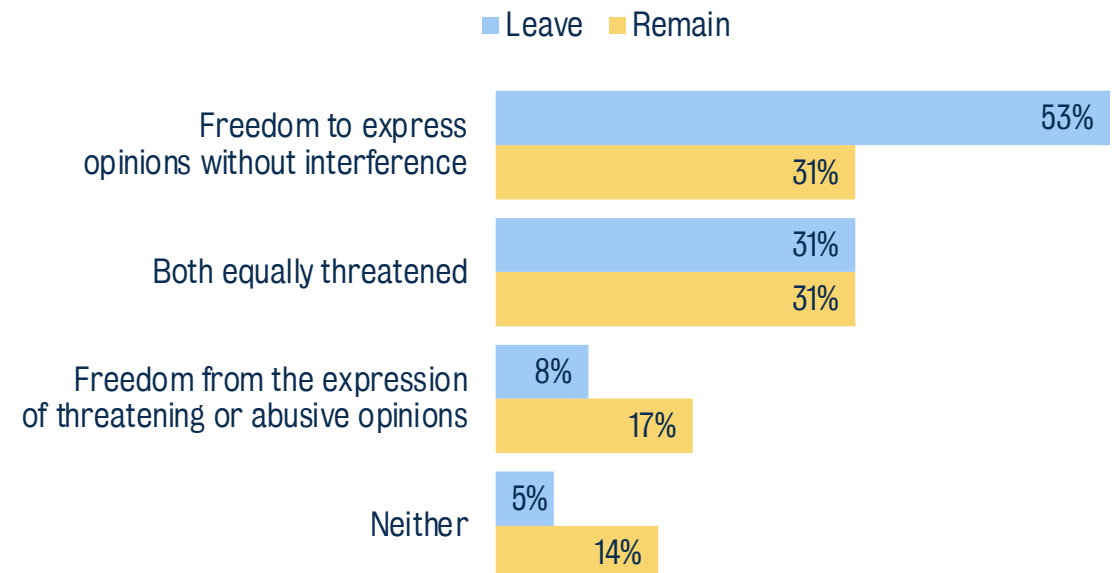
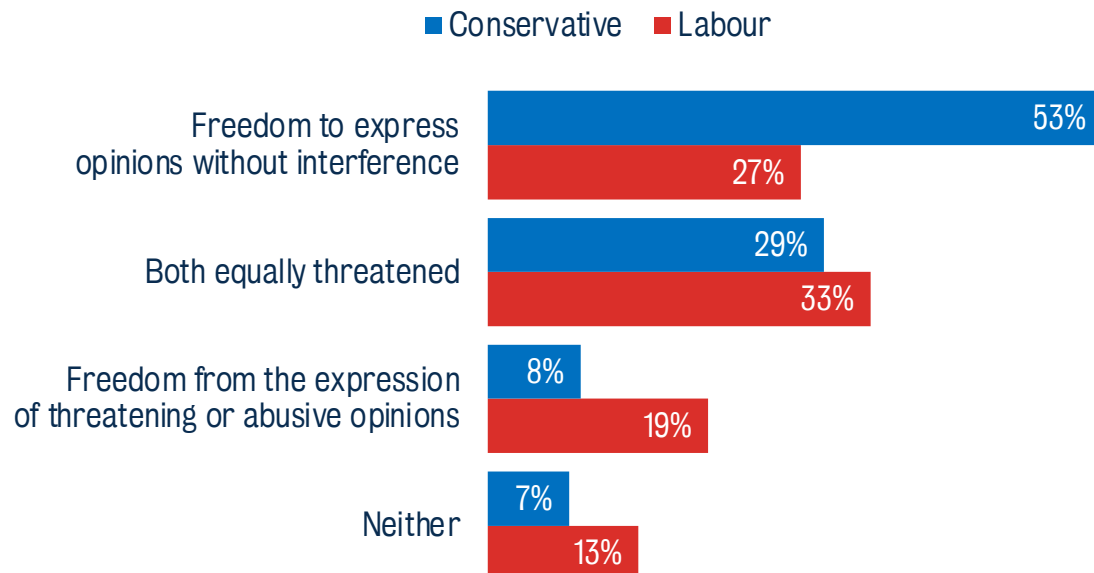
Conservative voters (53%) are twice as likely as Labour voters (27%) to say the freedom to express opinions without interference is most threatened in the UK today.

Conversely, Labour voters are more than twice as likely (19% vs 8%) to feel that freedom from threats or abuse is most at risk – although a greater proportion (33%) say both freedoms are equally under threat.

It's a very similar picture when comparing Leavers and Remainers, with freedom of expression a much greater concern for Leavers (53%) than Remainers (31%).

As with Conservative and Labour voters, around three in 10 (31%) of those on either side of the Brexit debate feel both freedoms are threatened to the same degree in the UK today.

This question asks about the expression of peoples opinions, for example through speech, online, in the media and on social media.  
Generally speaking, which of these two freedoms, if either, do you think is the most threatened in the UK today?





# Race, sexuality, trans issues and gender identity are the issues people feel need to be discussed most sensitively to avoid threatening or abusive views

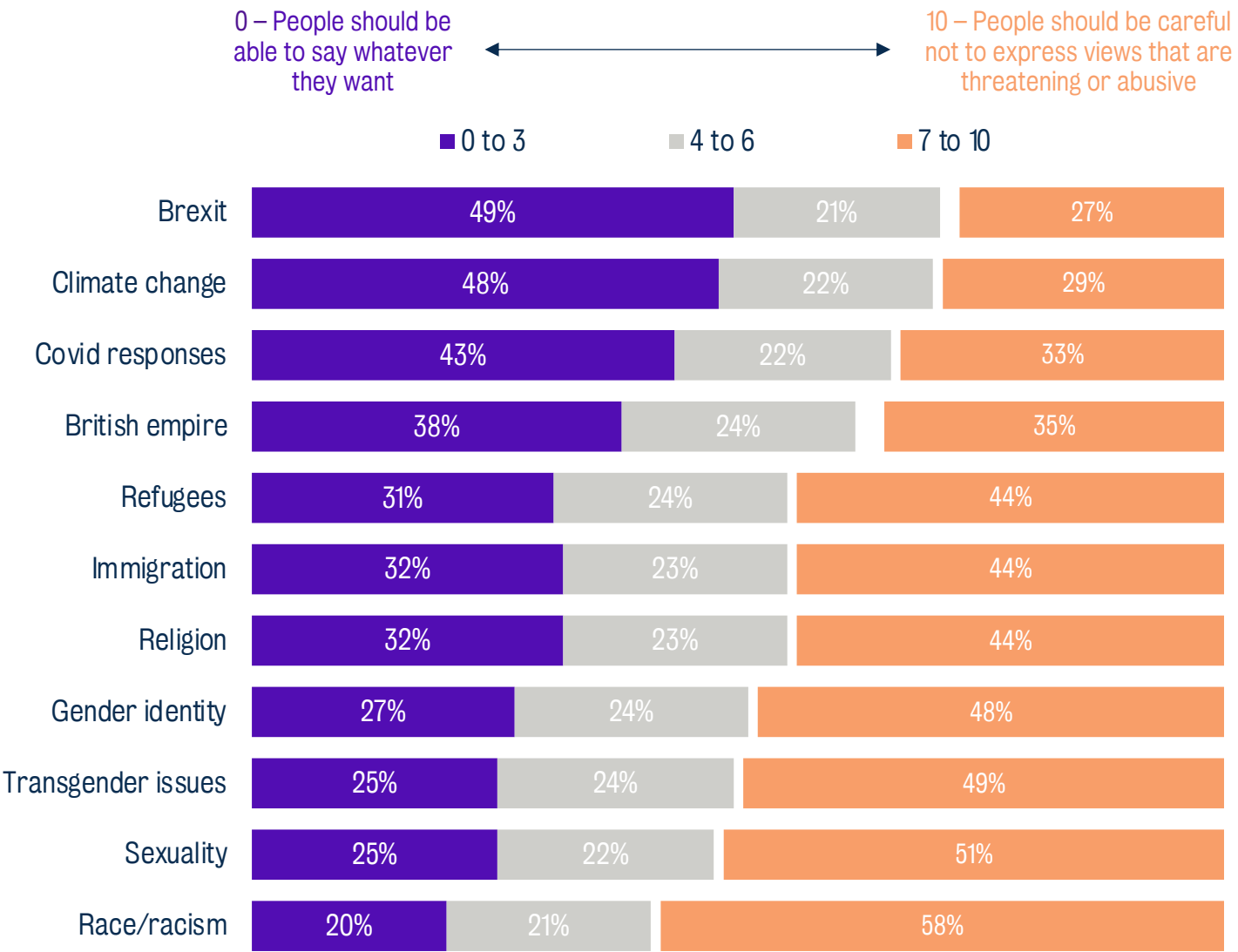
A clear majority of the public – 58% – believe people should be careful not to express threatening or abusive opinions on issues related to race or racism, compared with 20% who feel people should be able to say whatever they want on such topics.

Sexuality, transgender issues and gender identity are other topics where the public are particularly likely to say care needs to be taken to avoid abusive views, with around half feeling this way.

At the other end of the spectrum, on the issues of Brexit, climate change and responses to Covid-19, the public are much less concerned about the need to refrain from expressing threatening opinions.

The public are evenly balanced between the two options when talking about the British empire (38% vs 35%), while erring on the side of being careful for the other topics asked about.

When thinking about each of the following issues, do you think people in general should feel free to say what they want about them or that people should be careful not to express views that are threatening or abusive?



Base: 2,931 UK adults aged 16+, interviewed 13 Jan-19 Jan 2022.  
 Note: not all figures add to 100% due to missing values/don't knows/refusals

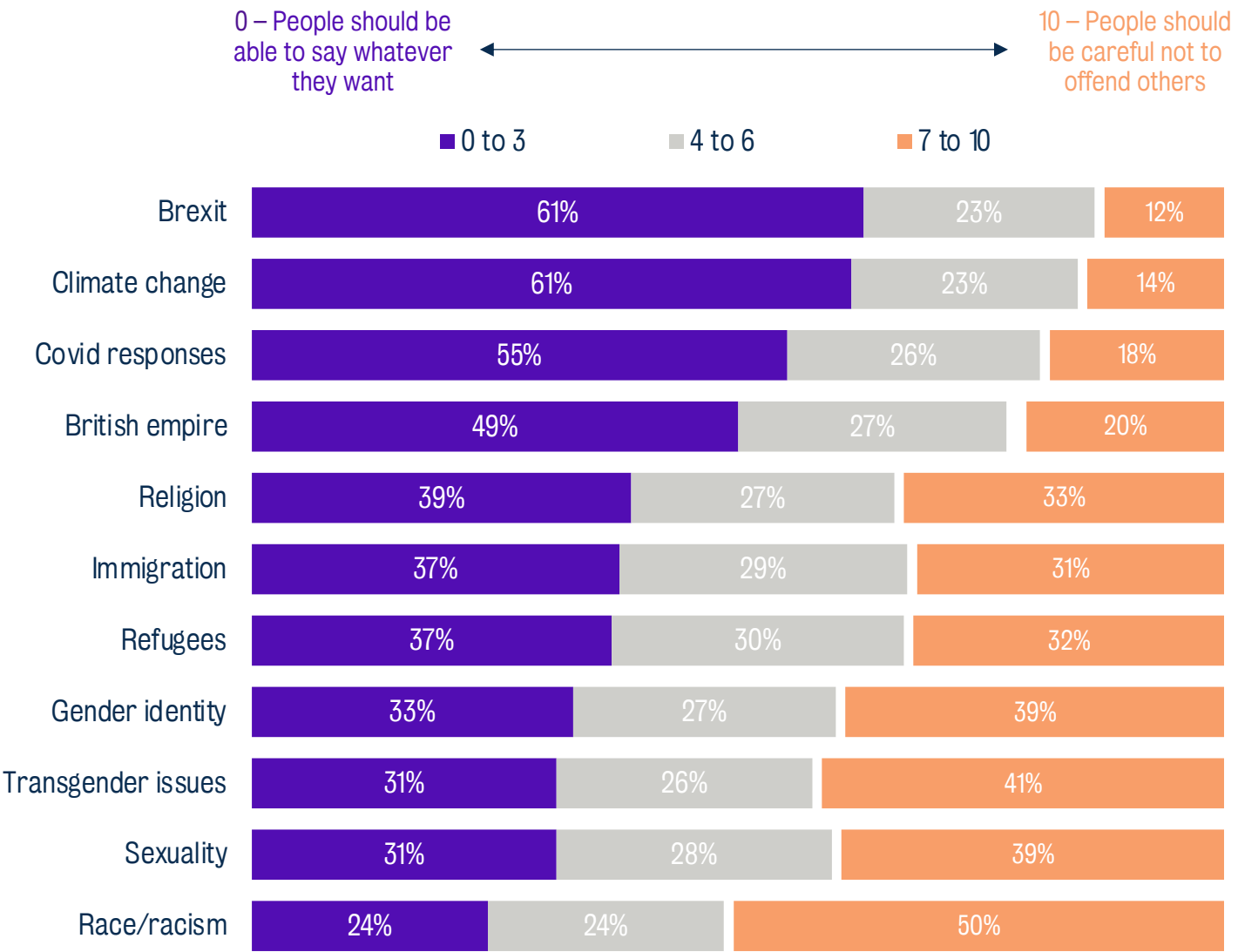
# The same issues are seen as requiring most sensitivity when the risk is of offending people rather than of expressing threatening views – but a greater proportion think people should be able to say whatever they want

The public are more relaxed about speech that may be offensive rather than threatening or abusive, although on many issues there is still concern about the impact on other people.

For example, 39% think people should be careful not to offend others when talking about sexuality, compared with 51% who say they should avoid expressing threatening or abusive views on such issues.

The same pattern is seen across the other issues asked about, such as the British empire, where 20% think people should refrain from offending others – lower than the 35% who think people should be careful not to offer threatening opinions on this topic.

When thinking about each of the following issues, do you think people in general should feel free to say what they want about them or that people should be careful not to offend others when talking about these issues?



Base: 2,931 UK adults aged 16+, interviewed 13 Jan-19 Jan 2022.  
 Note: not all figures add to 100% due to missing values/don't knows/refusals



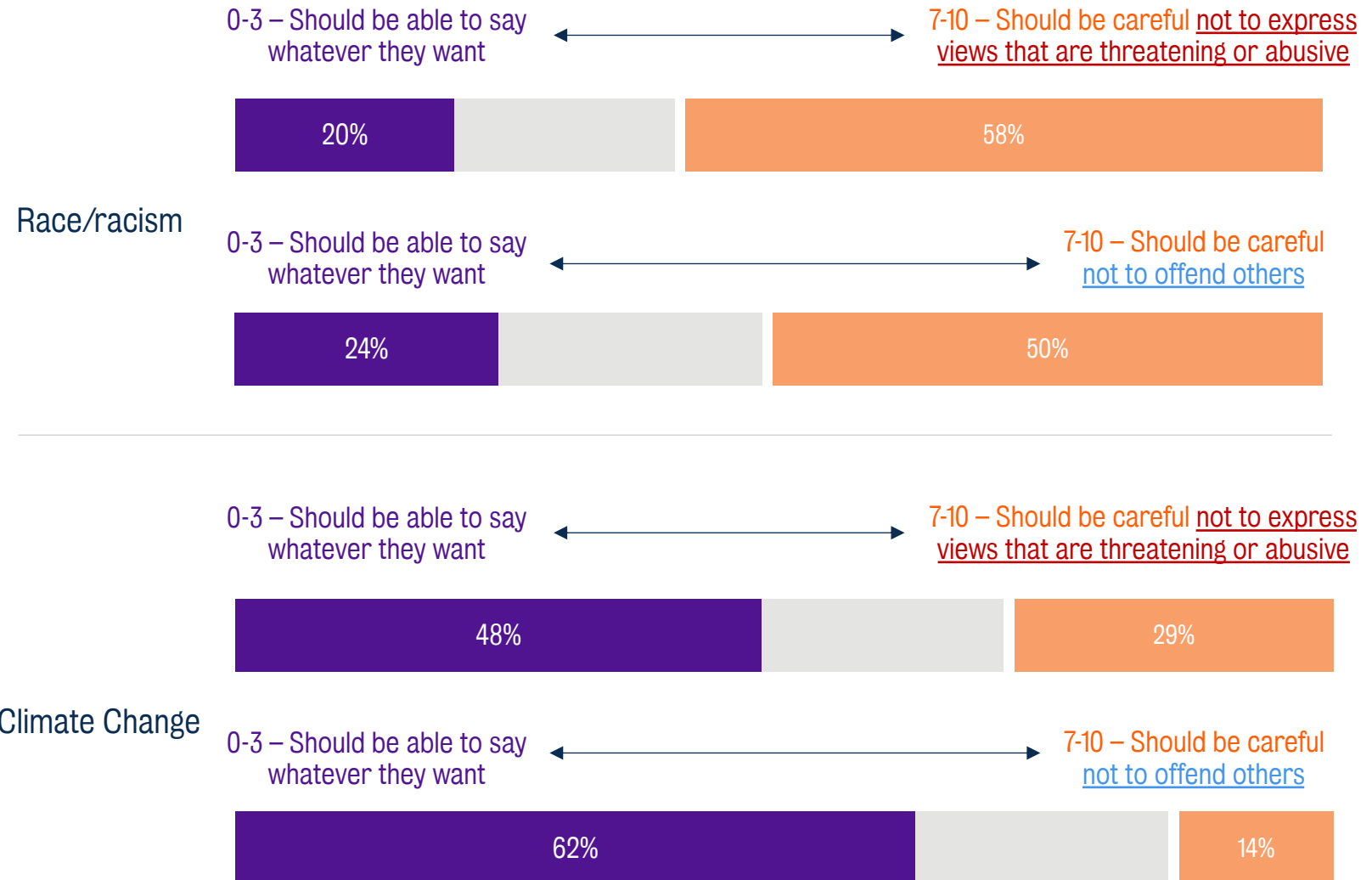
## There is a greater change in views on climate change than on race when the debate is about threatening rather than offensive opinions

Looking more closely at how the public respond to two similar questions – one focused on causing offence, and one on abusive or threatening speech – reveals how attitudes to freedom of expression change depending on the circumstances specified.

On race or racism, 50% believe we should be careful not to offend others, only slightly less than the 59% who feel we should be careful not to express threatening or abusive views on this issue.

There is a bigger gap when people are asked about climate change, with 14% believing we should be careful not to offend others – half the proportion (29%) who believe we should avoid expressing threatening or abusive opinions on it.

When thinking about each of the following issues, do you think people in general should feel free to say what they want about them or that people should be careful not to express views that are threatening or abusive / not to offend others when talking about these issues?

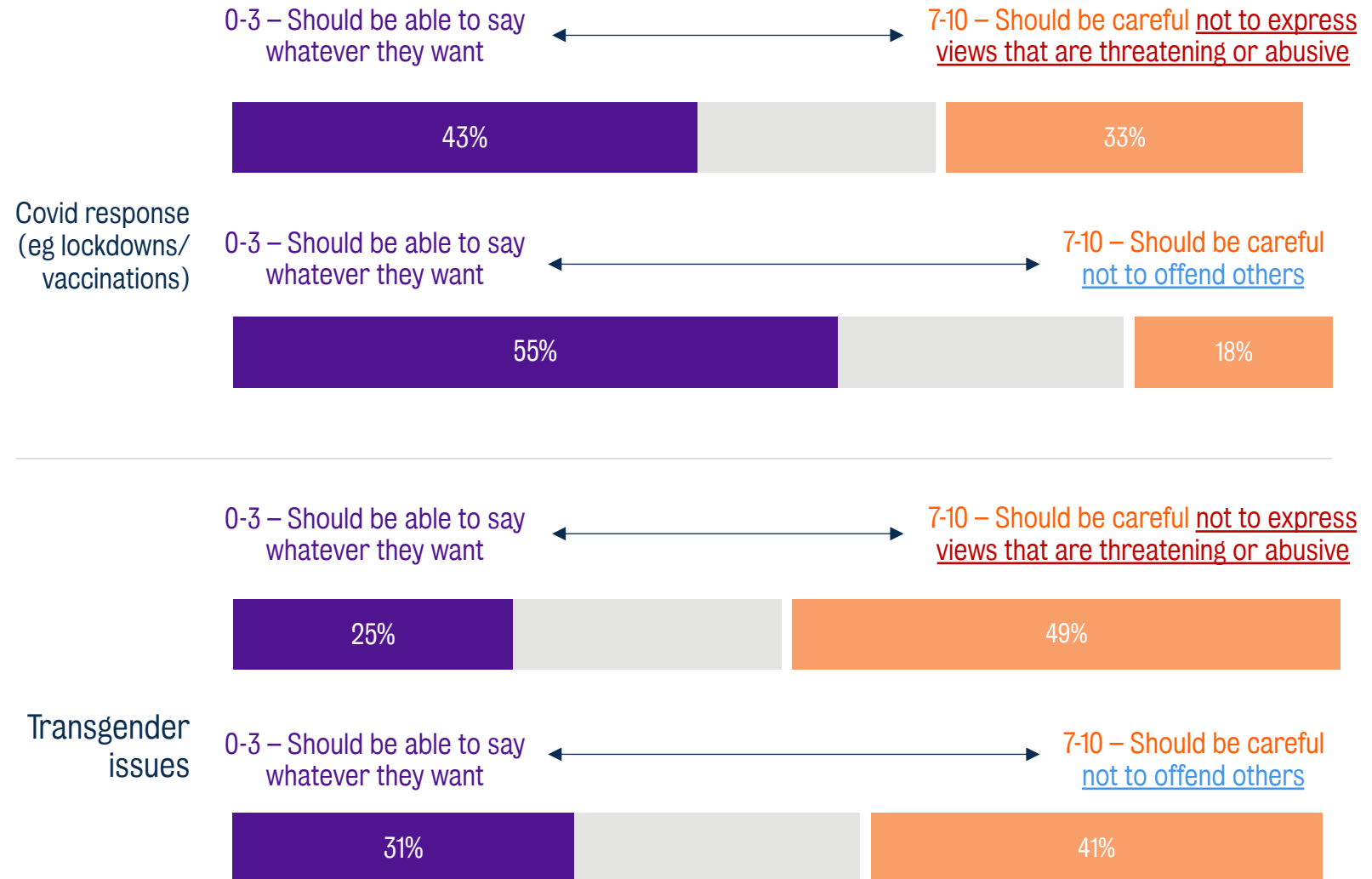


## Similarly, free speech trade-offs make more of a difference to views on how people should talk about Covid responses than about trans issues

33% of the public believe we should be careful not to express views that are threatening or abusive on Covid-19 responses – almost double the 18% who say we should be careful when using speech that could be offensive to others.

But again, this change in framing makes less of a difference to views on whether more care needs to be taken when talking about transgender issues, which are clearly seen as a more sensitive subject in general.

When thinking about each of the following issues, do you think people in general should feel free to say what they want about them or that people should be careful not to express views that are threatening or abusive / not to offend others when talking about these issues?







**Support for actions that  
impinge on free speech**



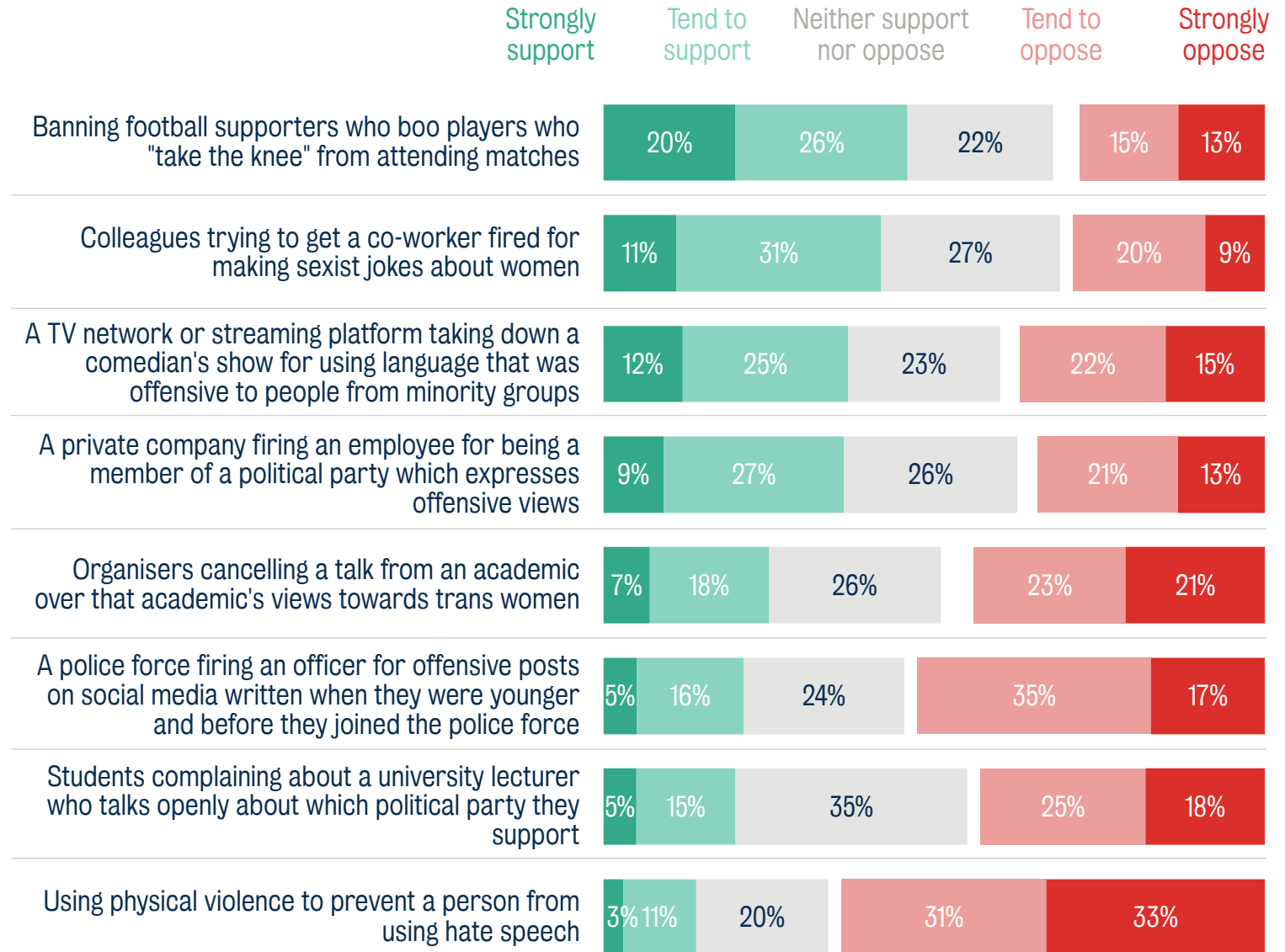
## Support for action that impacts free speech depends on the specific issues at stake

In many contexts, the public are split on how to respond to potentially controversial speech acts – for example, 37% say they support a comedian's show being cancelled for using language offensive to people from minority groups, while another 37% oppose such a move. Similarly, 36% support an employee being fired for being a member of a political party which expresses offensive views, with virtually the same proportion (34%) against.

But other scenarios elicit clearer support for action, such as banning football supporters who boo players "taking the knee" from attending matches – a response favoured by 46% of the public and opposed by 28%.

There are two scenarios that produce majority opposition to censure: using physical violence to prevent hate speech, which nearly two-thirds (64%) are against, and a police force firing an officer for offensive social media posts written before they joined the force, which 52% oppose.

When thinking about the following situations, to what extent do you support or oppose the actions described?



Base: 2,931 UK adults aged 16+, interviewed 13 Jan-19 Jan 2022



## Just one in five people support a majority of the actions impinging on free speech that were asked about

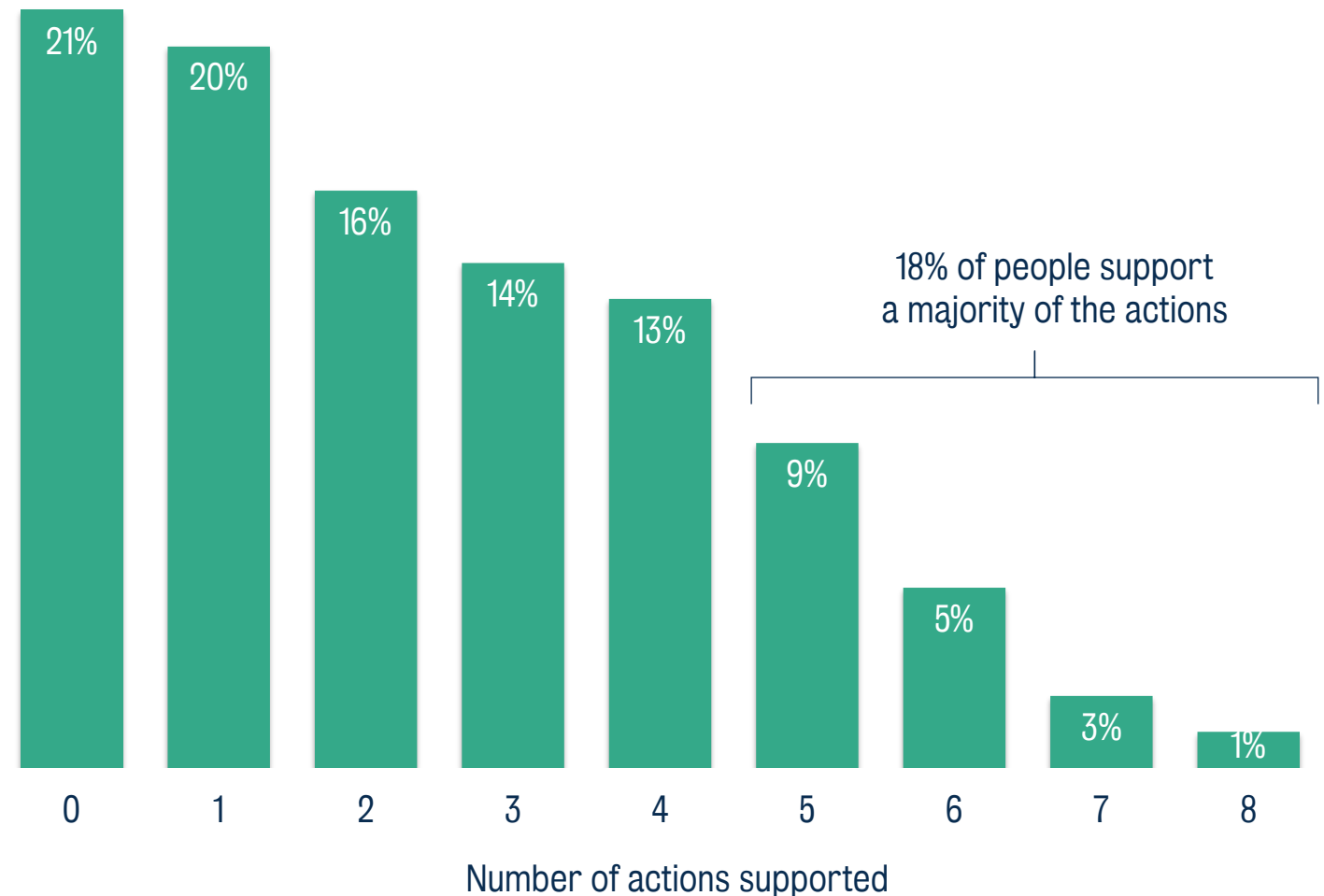
Summing the number of actions supported by each person surveyed provides an indicator of how strongly people like to see direct interventions that have an impact on free speech.

Those polled support a different number of actions, ranging from zero to all eight.

A fifth (21%) do not support any of the actions outlined, with another fifth (20%) supporting just one of the actions.

A further one in five (18%) support a majority of the actions that impinge on free speech – that is, five or more of the actions asked about – but very few support all or nearly all the actions.

Proportion of the public who support each number of actions that impinge on free speech

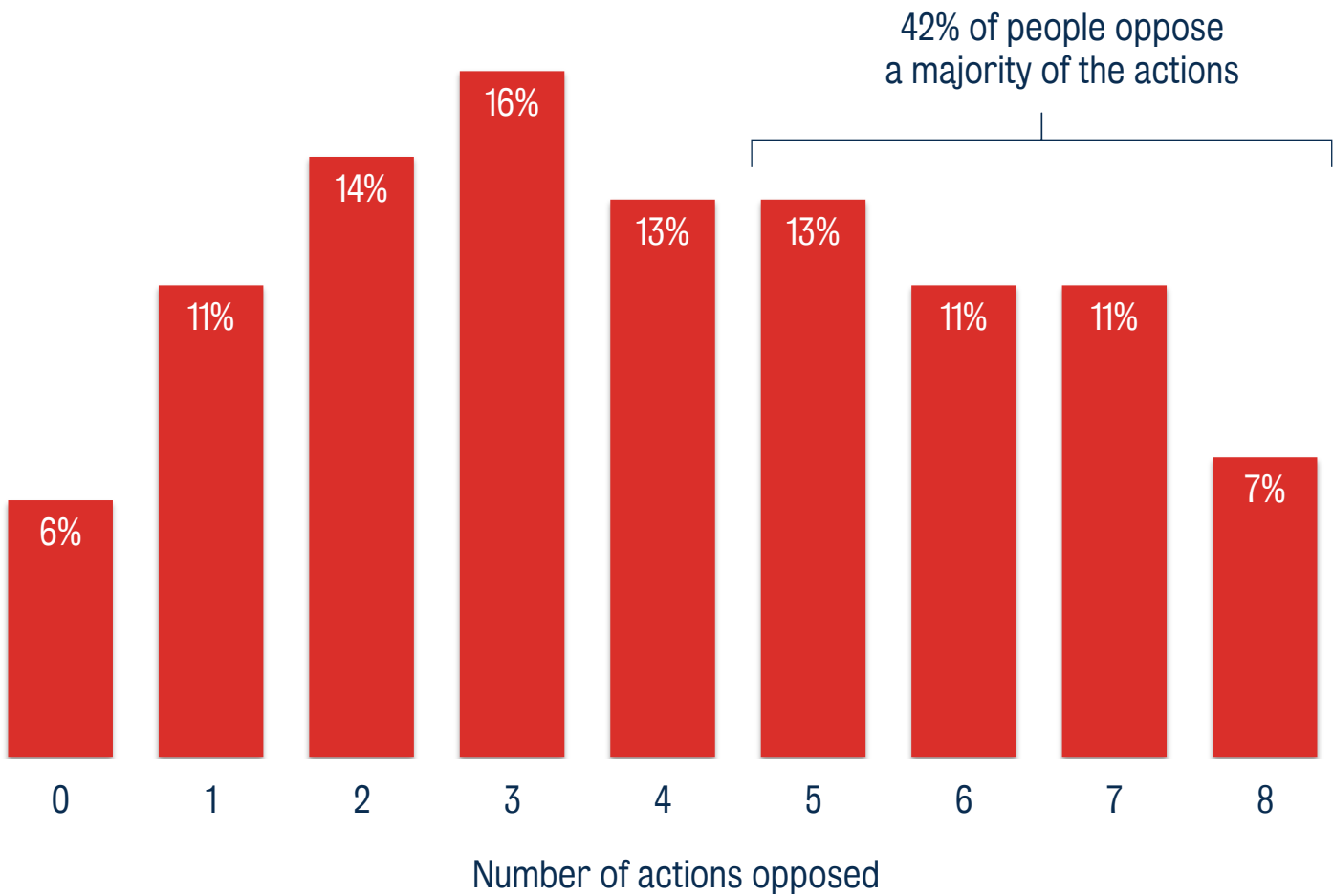


**Two in five people oppose most of the actions outlined that would impact free speech**

42% of the public oppose a majority of the actions affecting free speech that were asked about (five or more). In contrast with support for these actions, notable minorities oppose all or nearly all of them, with one in five (18%) being against at least seven of the eight.

This suggests, on these specific issues at least, there is a larger proportion of the UK public who are actively against regular use of these types of interventions than actively in favour of them.

Proportion of the public who oppose each number of actions that impinge on free speech



# Banning football fans who boo taking the knee is most popular among Remainers and Labour voters, while support for action on sexist jokes is highest among young people

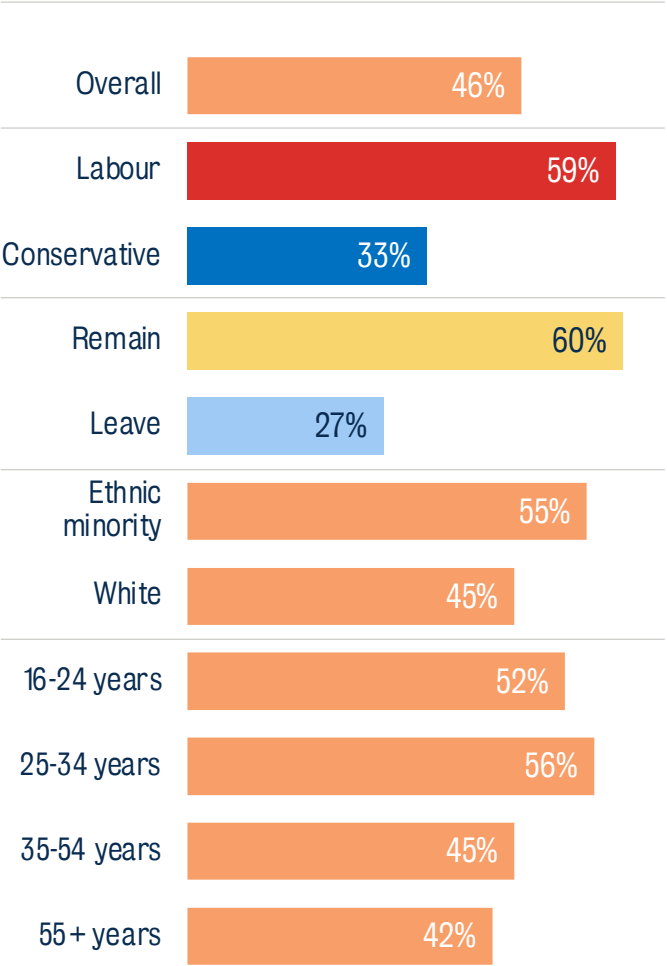
Nearly half of the public (46%) support banning football supporters who boo players taking the knee from attending matches, compared with 28% who oppose.

Support for this is higher among ethnic minority groups (55%) than white people (45%).

Younger age groups are also slightly more supportive, with around half of those aged 16 to 34 approving of such bans.

The large differences are political: 59% of Labour voter approving compared to only a third of Conservative voters. An even bigger gap exists between Remainers (60%) and Leavers (27%).

% who support banning football supporters who boo players who take the knee from attending matches



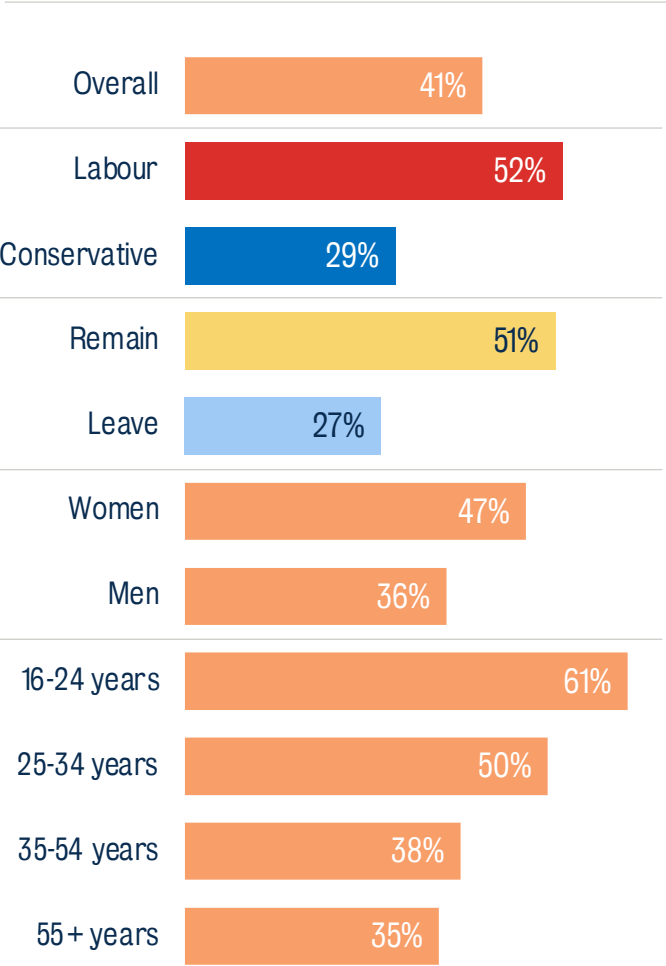
41% of the public support trying to get a co-worker fired for telling sexist jokes. 29% oppose such action.

There are again large differences in support for this across sections of the population, especially when looked at by age: 61% of 16- to 24-year-olds are in favour – far higher than the 37% support among those aged 35 and over.

While there is a gender gap in support for firing a co-worker in such circumstances (47% women vs 36% men), it is political loyalties that are a bigger dividing line.

52% of 2019 Labour voters support getting the co-worker fired, compared with 29% of Conservative voters. An almost identical difference is seen between Remainers (51%) and Leavers (27%).

% who support colleagues trying to get a co-worker fired for making sexist jokes about women



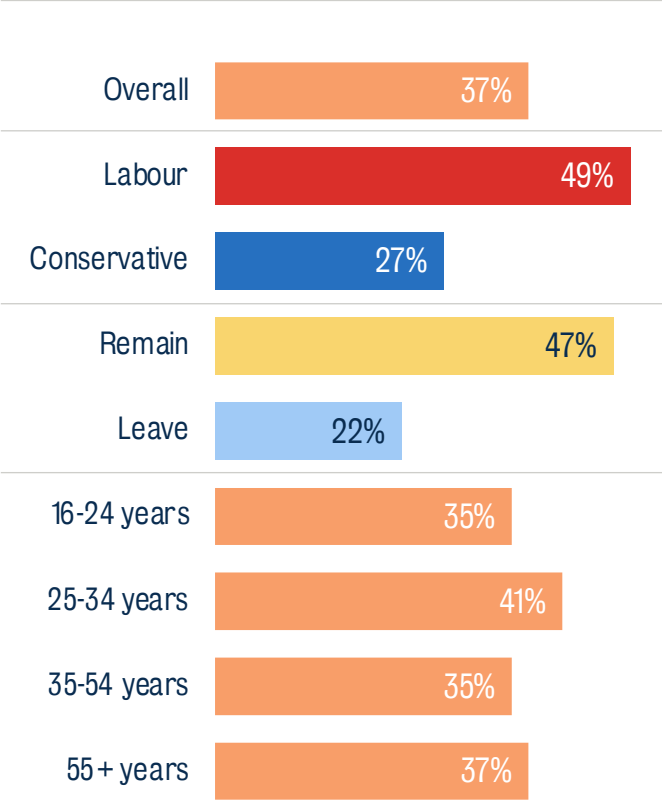
# Political support, more than age, predict support for a comedian’s offensive show being cancelled, as well as for firing an employee for their membership of a controversial political party

37% support cancelling a comedian’s TV show that contains offensive language to minority groups, while another 37% are against this.

Support for such action is higher among Remain supporters (49%) and 2019 Labour voters (47%) than Conservative voters (27%) and Leavers (22%)

There are no significant differences in support across age groups.

% who support a TV network or streaming platform taking down a comedian's show for using language that was offensive to people from minority groups

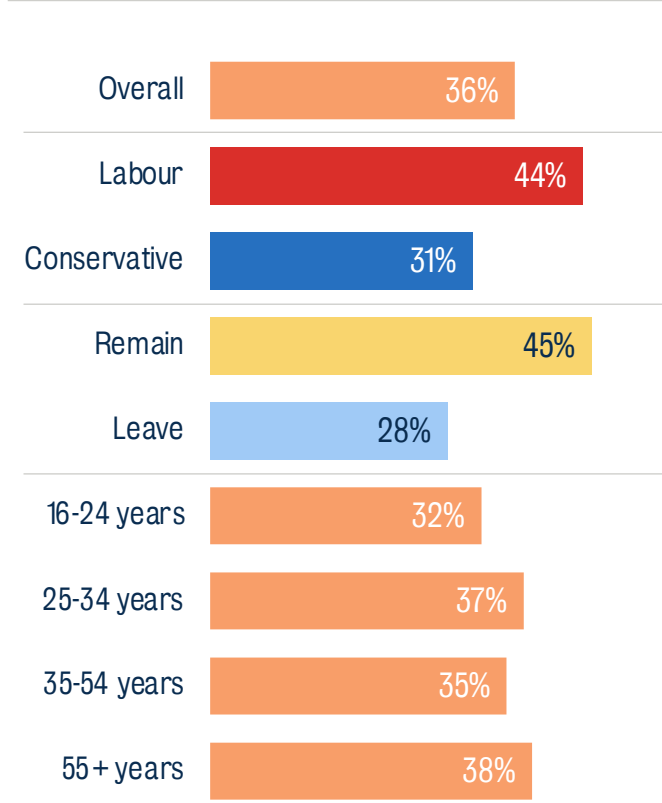


36% support a private company firing an employee for being a member of a political party which expresses offensive views, with virtually the same proportion (34%) opposed.

2019 Labour voters and Remain supporters are more likely than their Conservative and Leave counterparts to be in favour of such a move.

Again, there is little difference in support by age.

% who support a private company firing an employee for being a member of a political party which expresses offensive views



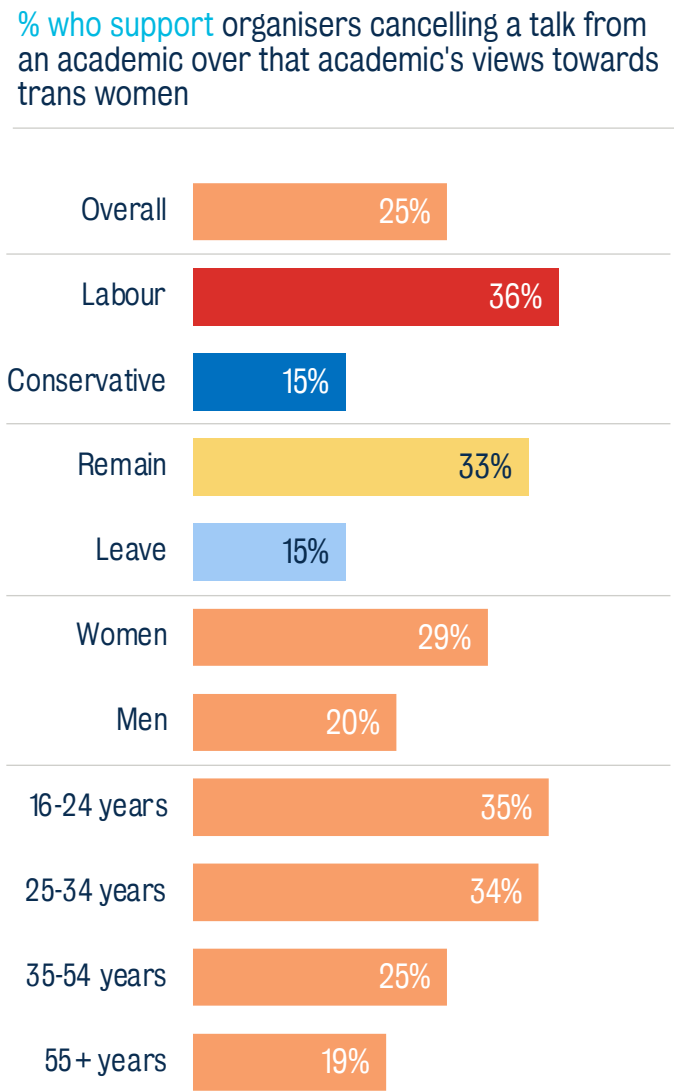


# Older people are least likely to support cancelling an academic’s talk on trans issues, while joint-most likely to support firing a police officer for past offensive social media posts

A quarter of the public support an academic having their talk cancelled because of their views towards trans women, compared to 44% who oppose this action.

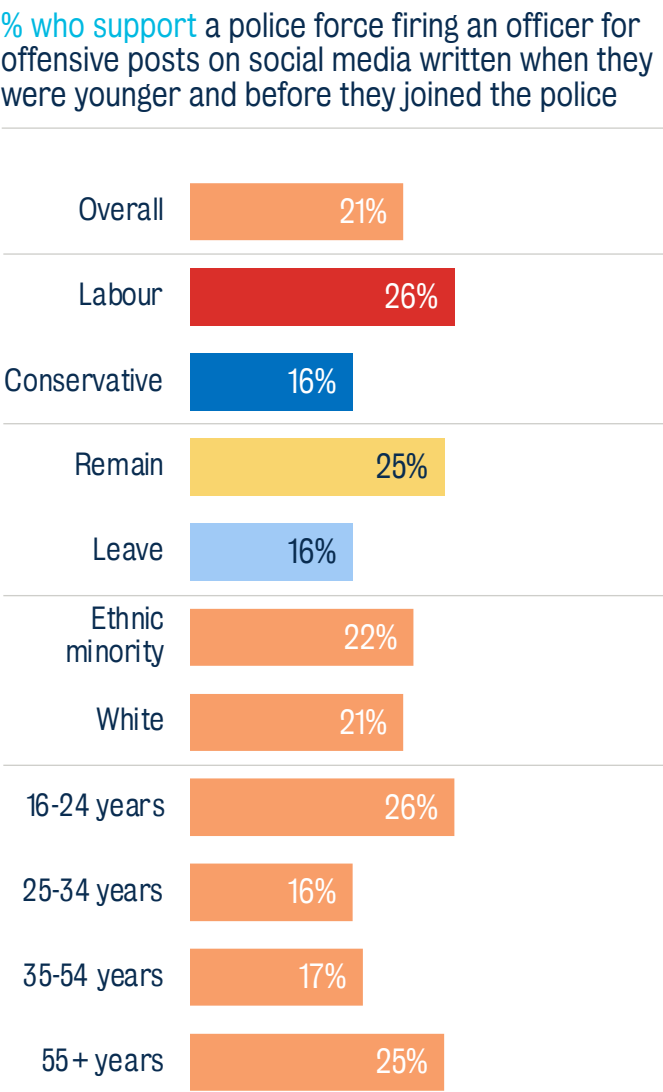
Labour voters (36%) and Remainers (33%) are over twice as likely to support the cancelling of the talk than Conservative voters and Leavers.

16-24 year olds and 25 to 34 year olds (35% and 34%) are also more likely to support the action in addition to women compared to men (29% versus 20%).



A fifth (21%) of the public support firing a police officer for offensive social media posts written before they joined the force, but a majority of 52% would be against doing so.

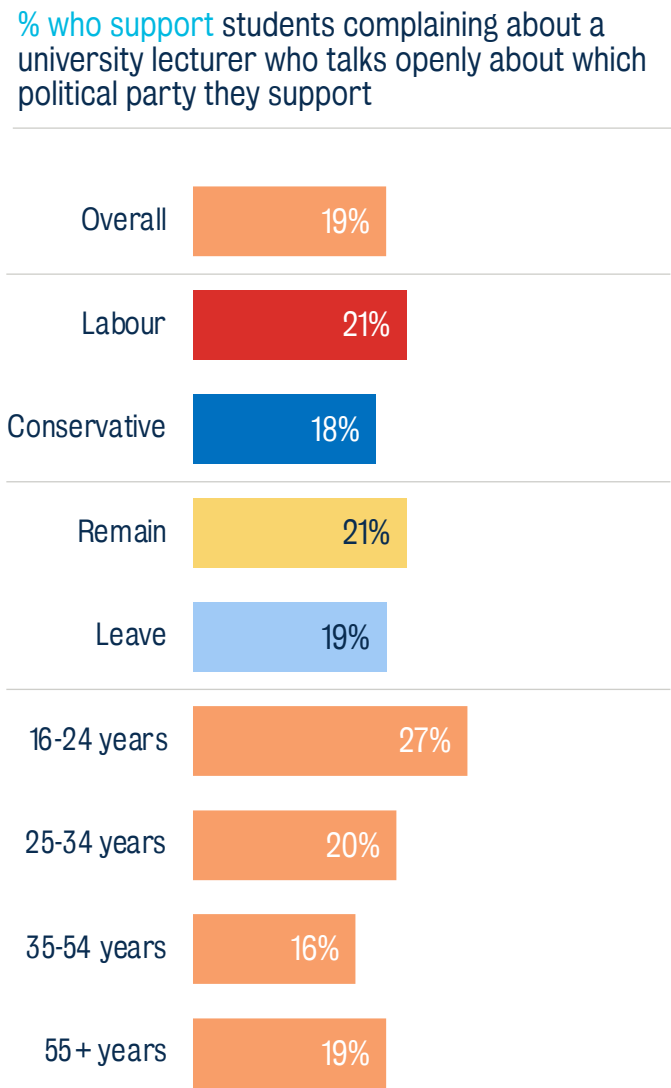
Across social groups, there is little deviation from the overall population average, but support peaks at both ends of the age range, with around a quarter of both the youngest and oldest surveyed supportive of firing a police officer for such conduct, compared with around one in six 25- to 54-year-olds.



# Young people are slightly more likely to support complaints about a lecturer discussing their personal politics, but no more likely than older people to be in favour of using violence to prevent hate speech

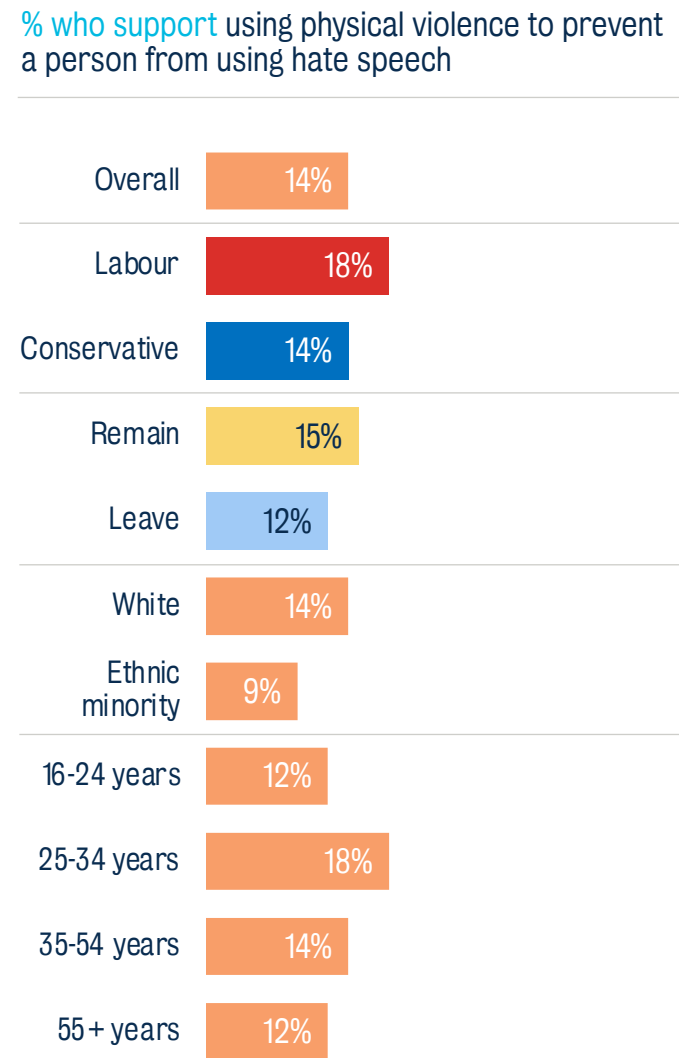
By 43% to 19%, the public oppose rather than support students complaining about a lecturer discussing their political affiliations.

Around a quarter of the youngest age group surveyed – 16- to 24-year-olds – are in favour of such complaints taking place, compared with a fifth or fewer who are supportive among older age groups.



There is even less support among the public overall for the use of physical violence to prevent an incident of hate speech, with 14% in favour, versus 64% against.

And there are few variations in views across different groups, with, for example, the oldest surveyed just as likely as the youngest to support such violence.



## In the public's eyes, comedians have most licence to offend, while school teachers and the prime minister have among the least

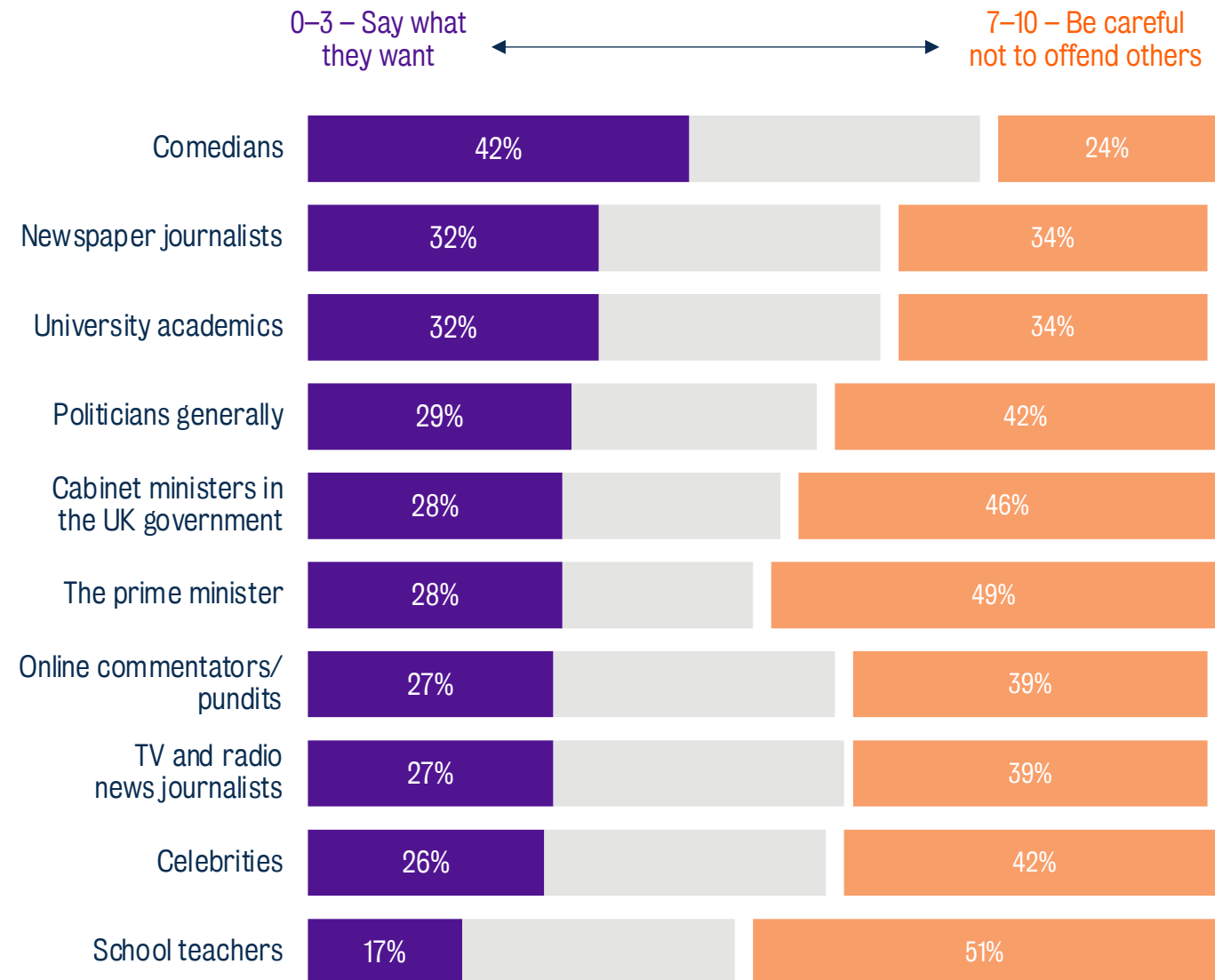
The public does discriminate to some extent between what is acceptable for certain groups to say but not for others.

Of all the professions asked about, comedians are given most licence to offend, with 42% of people believing this group should be able to say what they want, regardless of whether it causes offence. However, around a quarter – 24% – do still think comedians should be careful not to offend others.

School teachers (51%) and the prime minister (49%) are seen as needing to avoid offending people the most, with around half of the public feeling it's important that they watch what they say.

And while higher education has been a focal point for many discussions about freedom of expression, the public are split on whether university academics should be able to say what they want (32%) or instead be careful not to cause offence (34%).

Thinking about the following people or groups of people, to what degree do you think they should feel free to say what they want in public, or they should be careful not to offend others?

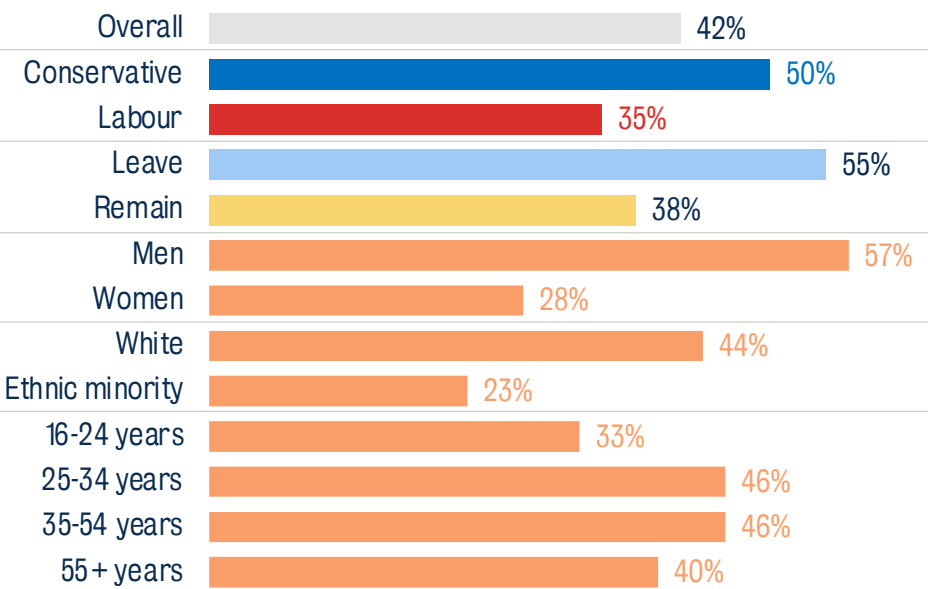


# Views on whether comedians or the prime minister should be able to say what they want vary hugely by political support and gender

Men (57%) are around twice as likely as women (28%) to feel that comedians should have free rein to say what they want in public, and there is a similarly large split in opinion between white people (44%) and those belonging to an ethnic minority group (23%).

Across the different age categories, young people are least likely (33%) to think comedians should have this freedom, while 2019 Labour voters and Remain supporters are less supportive than those with opposing political views.

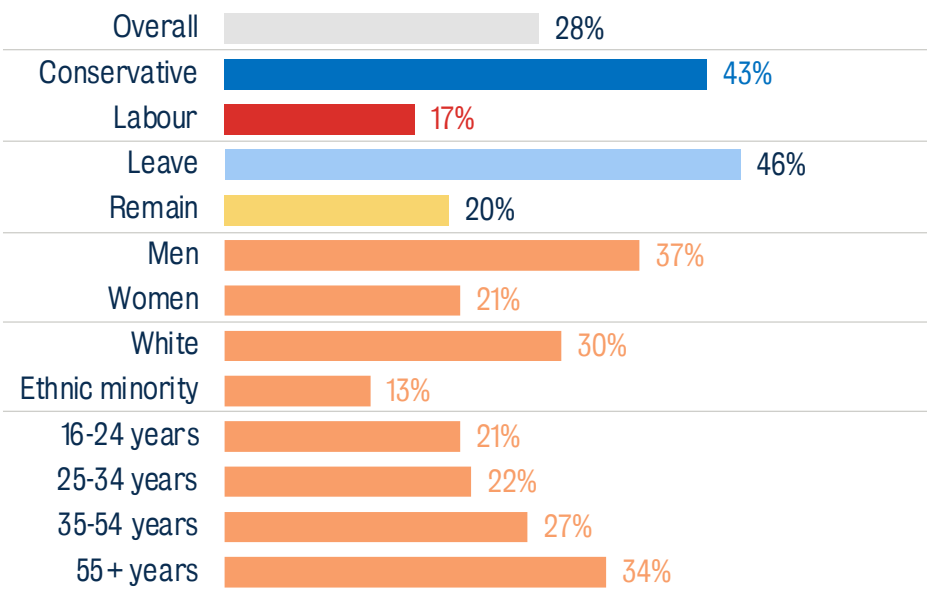
% who say comedians should be able to say what they want in public



There is also a gender divide in views on this issue when it is the prime minister under consideration, with men (37%) much more likely than women (21%) to feel that the PM should be able to say what they want.

There is also a clearer age gradient in views, as well as a more pronounced divide according to party political support, with 2019 Conservative voters and Leavers more than twice as likely as their Labour and Remain counterparts to support the prime minister having such freedom of expression.

% who say the prime minister should be able to say what they want in public







# **The five groups of people with distinct views on free speech**

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## Segmenting the public by their views on freedom of speech

Using a statistical technique called latent class analysis,\* it is possible to combine information on people's views on free speech and their level of support for actions that impinge on it to identify different groups within the population, each with distinct attitudes towards freedom of expression.

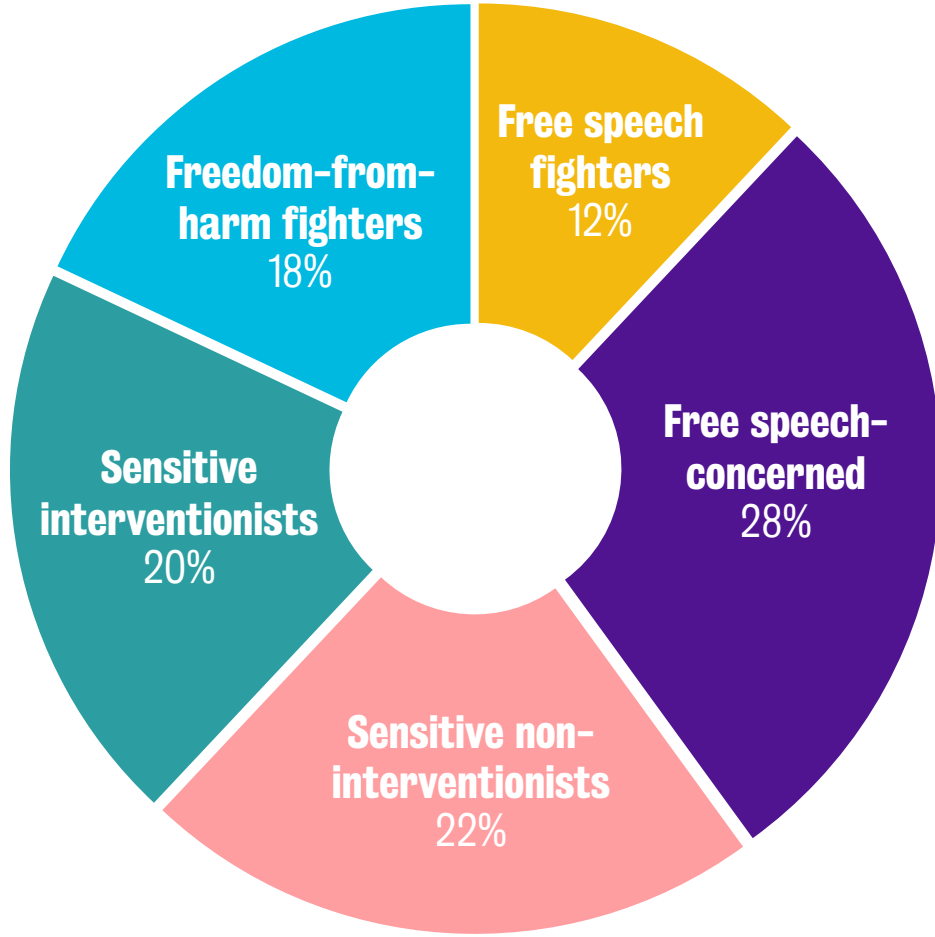
The questions that fed into this analysis were:

- Whether people need to be more sensitive in what they say to others or whether people are too easily offended
- Whether freedom to express opinions without interference or freedom from abuse is most under threat
- Whether people should be allowed to say what they want on different issues or not
- Whether various public figures should be allowed to say what they want on different issues or not
- The number of actions supported to intervene in a particular social problem

The analysis identified five distinct groups...

\*More information on this analysis is provided in technical appendix.

## Within the UK population, there are five groups of people with distinct views on freedom of expression



### “Free speech fighters” (12%)

The most concerned about freedom of expression, with a very strong belief that people are too easily offended and that both private individuals and public figures should overwhelmingly be allowed to say what they want. They express very little support for actions that impinge on free speech. Eight in 10 are men – the highest of the groups.

### “Free speech-concerned” (28%)

Mostly concerned about freedom of expression over freedom from harm, with *some* worry about people being too easily offended. They feel that, by and large, individuals and public figures should be able to say what they want, and they do not have much support for interventionist actions.

### “Sensitive non-interventionists” (22%)

Concerned about *both* freedom of expression and freedom from harm, with a strong belief that people should be more sensitive in the way they talk and that private individuals and public figures need to be careful to use language that isn’t threatening, abusive nor offensive. However, they express little support for actions that would impact free speech. Two-thirds are women – the joint-highest proportion among the different groups.

### “Sensitive interventionists” (20%)

Share the concerns and beliefs of sensitive non-interventionists but diverge in also supporting a number of actions that impinge on free speech.

### “Freedom-from-harm fighters” (18%)

Most concerned about freedom from harm and least concerned about freedom of expression, with a *very* strong belief that people should be more sensitive in the way they talk and that private individuals and public figures should be careful not to use threatening, abusive or offensive language. They support many actions impacting speech, and two-thirds are women.

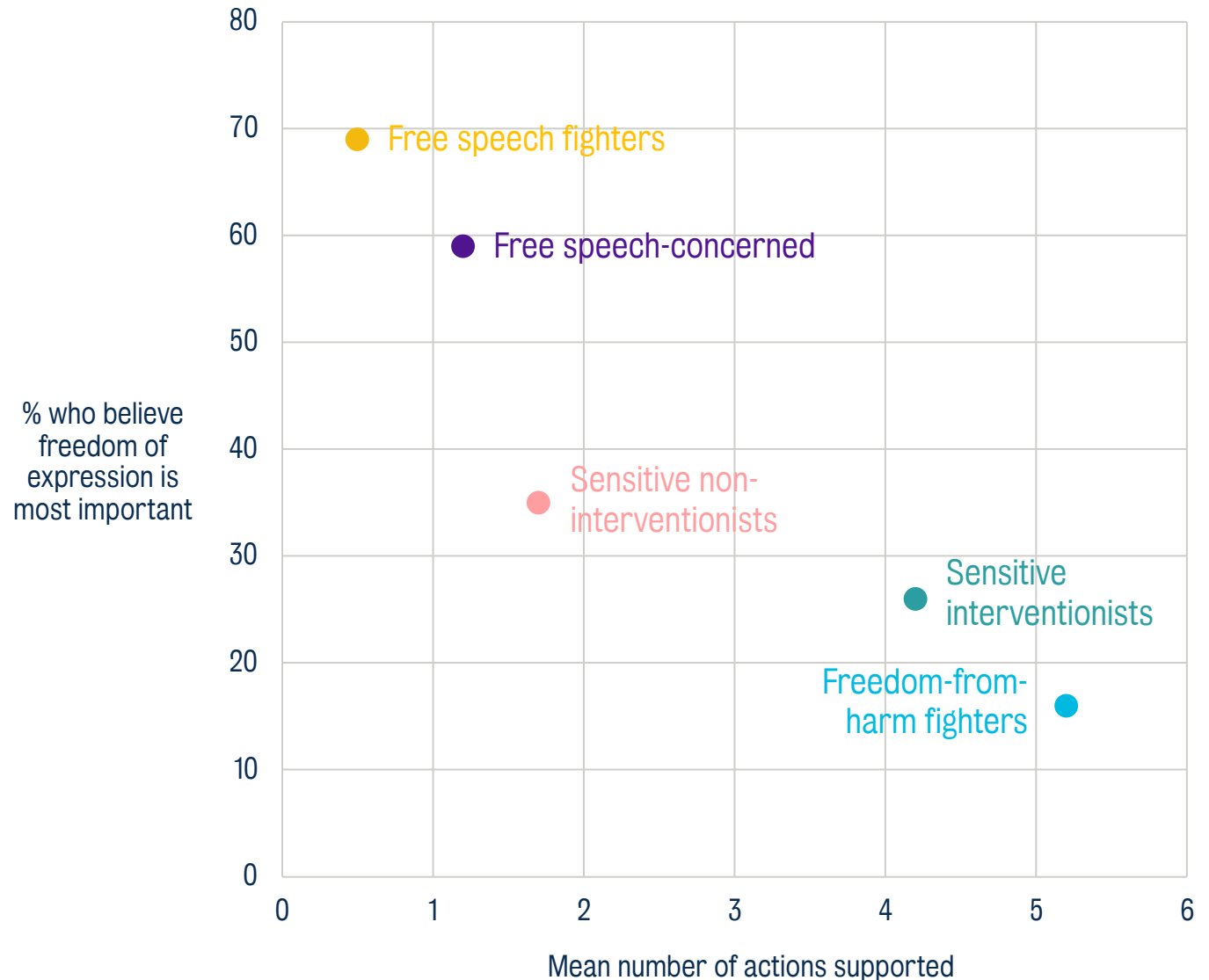
## There are clear differences in how the groups see issues of freedom of expression and efforts to restrict it

Belief in the importance of free expression and the number of actions impinging on it that people support, are two key measures that reveal the groups' different positions on these issues.

Nearly 70% of **free speech fighters** think people's freedom to express themselves is under threat, while also rarely supporting any free speech-limiting actions. On average, people in this group support less than one such action of the eight asked about.

They can be compared with the **freedom-from-harm fighters**, only 19% of whom believe freedom of expression to be most under threat in the UK today, while at the same time supporting a majority of actions affecting free speech (on average, at least five).

The chart also reveals how **sensitive non-interventionists** differ from **sensitive interventionists**. Both groups have around 30% who report being most concerned about freedom of speech, but non-interventionists support fewer than two actions, while interventionists support at least four on average.





## Free speech fighters overwhelmingly feel that people take offence too easily and see little problem with public figures saying whatever they like

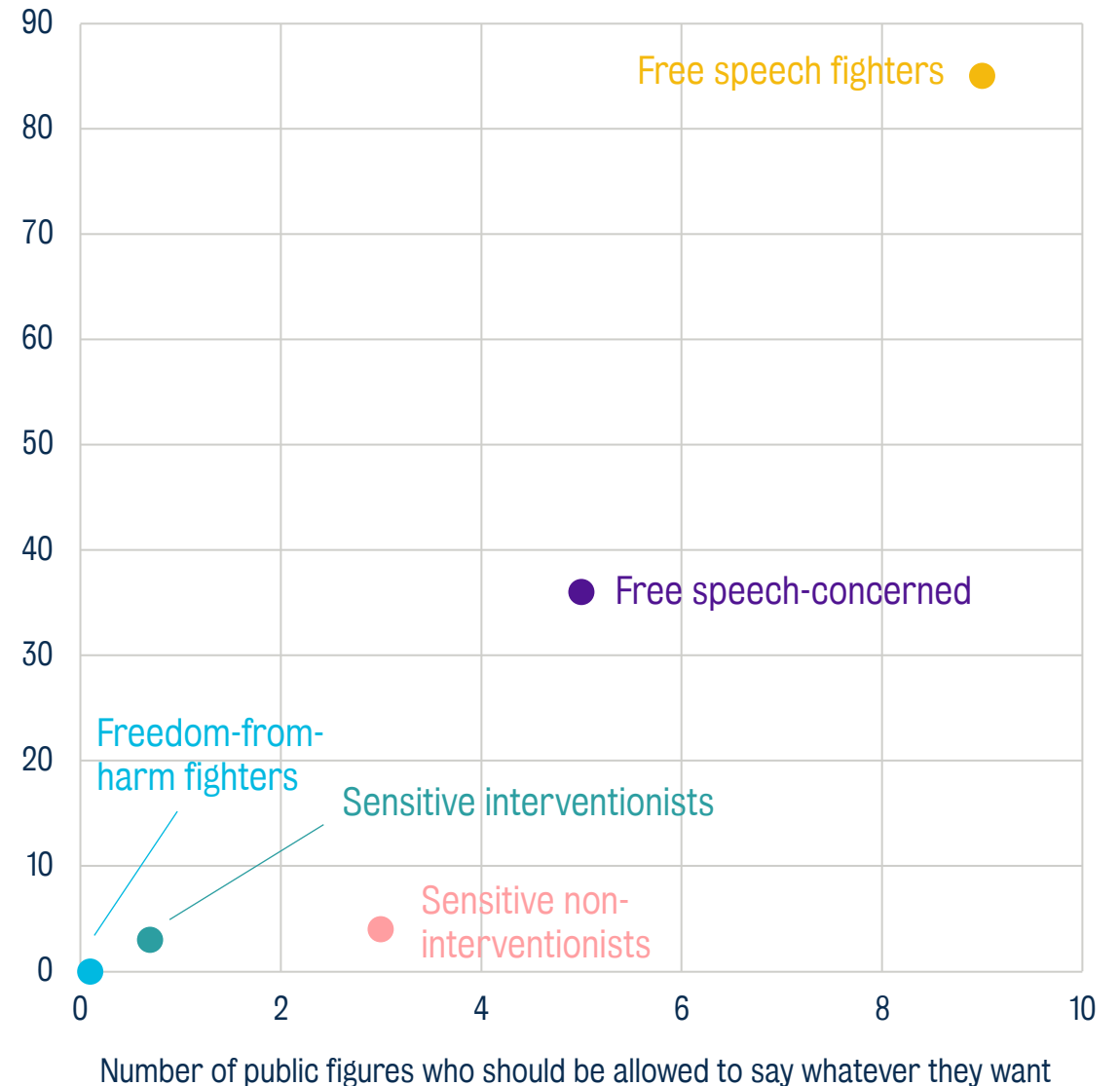
Further insights into the groups' attitudes are revealed by the extent to which they believe public figures – such as school teachers, the prime minister, etc – should be allowed to say whatever they want in public and how much they feel others are too easily offended.

On average, **free speech fighters** believe that nine out of the 10 public figures asked about should be allowed to say whatever they like. Around 85% also believe that people are too easily offended.

**Freedom-from-harm fighters**, on the other hand, think that on average none of the public figures listed should be allowed to say what they want publicly, and no one in this group believes that people are too easily offended.

Very few people in either of the two “sensitive” groups believe that people are too easily offended. However, the **non-interventionists** are more likely than the **interventionists** to believe some people figures should have licence to say whatever they want (three public figures vs fewer than one).

% who believe people are too easily offended



## Eight in 10 free speech fighters are male, while women make up two thirds of sensitive non-interventionists and freedom-from-harm fighters

There are some small differences across the segments in terms of age. 76% of free speech fighters are aged 35 or over, compared with 61% of freedom-from-harm fighters

The biggest difference is in terms of gender: nearly 80% of free speech fighters are men, compared with only 35% of freedom from harm fighters.

	Free speech fighters	Free speech-concerned	Sensitive non-interventionists	Sensitive interventionists	Freedom-from-harm fighters
Age 16-24	8%	10%	12%	15%	18%
Age 25-34	15%	12%	14%	21%	21%
Age 35-54	32%	29%	41%	30%	32%
Age 55+	44%	49%	33%	34%	29%
Men	78%	61%	36%	46%	35%
Women	22%	39%	64%	54%	65%

## There are clear distinctions between the different groups based on political views and ethnicity

There are some differences across the groups in terms of race/ethnicity. Only 1% of **free speech fighters** are from a minority-ethnic background, compared with 11% of **freedom-from-harm fighters**. **Sensitive non-interventionists** contain the largest proportion, with 16% from a minority-ethnic background.

The biggest difference is in terms of political identity. **Free speech fighters** are more likely to be Conservative than Labour voters (66% vs 10%) and Leave supporters rather than Remainers (67% vs 24%)

Those in the **freedom-from-harm fighters** group are overwhelmingly Remainers rather than Leavers (85% vs 11%), and more likely to be Labour than Conservative voters (51% vs 16%)

	Free speech fighters	Free speech-concerned	Sensitive non-interventionists	Sensitive interventionists	Freedom-from-harm fighters
White	99%	93%	84%	90%	89%
Ethnic minority	1%	7%	16%	10%	11%
Conservative	66%	45%	30%	19%	16%
Labour	10%	21%	40%	35%	51%
Leaver	67%	43%	22%	14%	11%
Remainer	24%	49%	69%	79%	85%

# Technical details



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## Technical note: survey

Ipsos UK interviewed online a representative sample of 2,834 adults aged 16+ across the United Kingdom between 26 November and 2 December 2020 and 2,931 between 13 and 16 January 2022. This data has been collected by Ipsos's UK KnowledgePanel, an online random probability panel which provides gold standard insights into the UK 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 UK population. All polls are subject to a wide range of potential sources of error.

The Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel is the UK's largest online random probability panel, providing total understanding of the UK public for businesses and organisations looking for cutting edge insight at the gold standard of online research methods. It is important because it includes both online and offline participants selected at random from every address in the UK, the first of its kind, with a single interface to eliminate modal effects and produce accurate data rapidly.

UK KnowledgePanel utilises a panel of 15,000+ participants to provide a new innovative tool for all those organisations who wish to garner greater insights into the behaviours, beliefs and attitudes of not just the UK population as a whole, but also into the specific communities which make up the UK's diverse population.

Studies completed on UK KnowledgePanel will be fully representative of the UK population including the 4% of households who are considered 'offline'. This is made possible by recruiting offline and supplying participants with a tablet, internet access and the tech support needed to get online. As a result of this approach the panel utilises a single online data collection method, with no differential mode effects – a pioneering advancement which enhances the ability to understand our society.

The UK KnowledgePanel builds on work done by Ipsos in the US on their own, which has been operating since 1999, utilising that experience and blending it with Ipsos's own research and methodological expertise to produce a tool which delivers robust nationally representative data at speed. [Find out more](#).

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## Technical appendix

**Slide 4:** An odds ratio (OR) in our analyses is a measure of association between one characteristic of a person and another. It tells us the extent to which an outcome is likely to occur given a particular characteristic of a person. So, for example, what characteristics of people makes it more likely that they believe others are too easily offended? Our analyses suggest that being a man makes this response more likely, and that on average men are 3.3 times more likely to believe this than women. *Adjusted* odds ratios, which we present in our analyses, presents this type of statistic but does so taking into account other characteristics. Adjusted odds ratios therefore highlight the association between a characteristic and a response net the effect of other characteristics.

**Side 22:** Latent Class Analysis (LCA) is a statistical technique that uses different response patterns in data to classify people into relatively different groups. Each person is assigned to a class with an attached probability of being a member of that class. The outcome is the identification of subgroups of individuals who are similar to each other and distinct from those in other classes.



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