

A growing liberalisation: how social attitudes have shifted in the UK and beyond

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THE BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS TEAM



SOCIAL CHANGE INITIATIVE



Introduction

The World Values Survey (WVS) is an international research programme devoted to the study of people’s social, political, economic, religious and cultural values around the world. Running since 1981, the WVS is the world’s largest and most widely used social survey, with over 800,000 data downloads per year. The WVS covers 120 countries represented across seven waves of data, with the most recent wave – 7 – the largest wave yet.

The questionnaire has extensive coverage of a huge range of attitudes, beliefs and values. The WVS also has a 50% overlap with the European Values Survey (EVS), opening up comparisons with another five waves of European data.

In the UK, fieldwork was completed Mar-Sept 2022 by Ipsos, among a random probability sample of **3,056 adults aged 18+**. This included respondents in England (1,645) and boost samples in Scotland (523), Wales (437) and Northern Ireland (446). This means not only can we compare the UK against other countries around the world, but also the four UK nations against each other. (See the technical details section at the end of this report for more information on the UK sample and international samples.)

How countries were selected for inclusion in this report

This is wave 7 of WVS, which included around 90 countries and ran from 2017 to 2022. This report focuses on comparison with a cross-section of 24 countries from WVS wave 7 and EVS wave 5 (see table for fieldwork years).

Countries were initially shortlisted based on the availability of reliable and accurately weighted data and then narrowed down, focusing on global coverage (based on the [UN's standardised country coding system](#)), regional coverage and population size. This selection gives coverage of 12 of the 17 UN M49 geographic regions across 24 countries, representing almost 50% of the world's population (source: [World Bank](#)).

Latest data for the UK was collected in 2022. However, for analysis of trends over time, data is for Great Britain due to a lack of available trend data from Northern Ireland.

Questions with 10-point scale response options

For questions about the justifiability of various actions, respondents were asked to give their answer on a numerical scale, where 1 = never justifiable and 10 = always justifiable, with no other labelling. For our analysis, following examination of the profile of responses and comparison with similar questions from other studies that use fully labelled semantic scales, we report these as 8–10 = “justifiable”, 1–3 = “not justifiable”, and 4–7 = “maybe justifiable”.

Countries included and latest years for which data is available

Australia (2018)	Japan (2019)
Brazil (2018)	Mexico (2018)
Canada (2020)	Morocco (2021)
China (2018)	Nigeria (2017/2018)
Egypt (2018)	Norway (2018)*
France (2018)*	Philippines (2019)
Germany (2017/2018)	Poland (2017/2018)
United Kingdom (2022)+	Russia (2017)
Greece (2017)	South Korea (2017/2018)
Indonesia (2018)	Spain (2017/2018)*
Iran (2020)	Sweden (2017/2018)*
Italy (2018)*	United States (2017)

* European Values Survey (EVS) country; 50% question coverage.

+ UK used comparing WVS7 data; Great Britain used for analysis over time due to data availability.

1. How social attitudes have shifted

Britain has seen big changes in many social attitudes over the last four decades, with the general trend towards increasingly liberal views



The British public have become much more socially liberal over the last 41 years

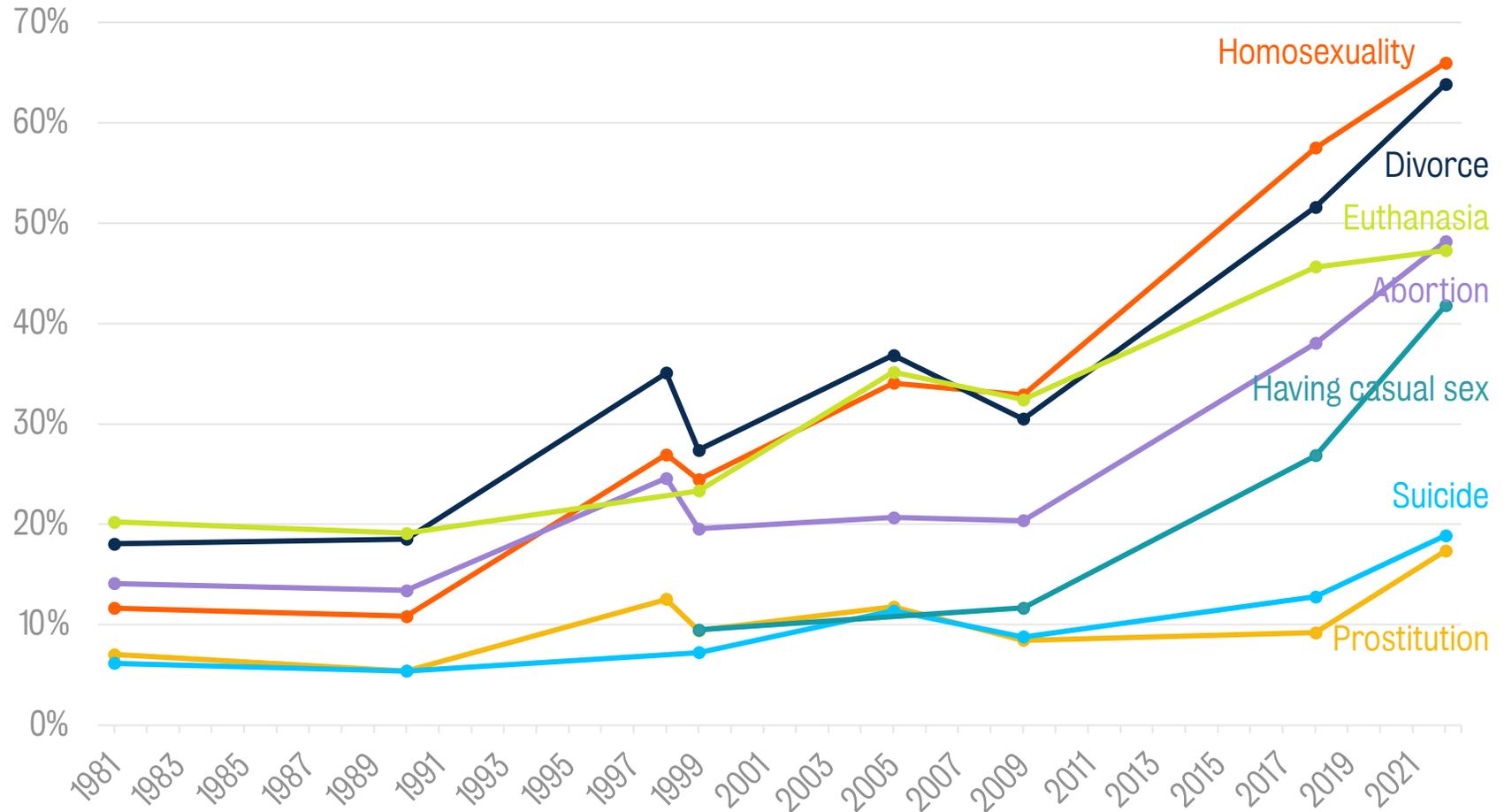
The last four decades have seen huge shifts in social attitudes in Britain. Below is the share of the public who thought each of the following was justifiable in 2022, and how it has increased since 1981:

- Homosexuality: 66%, up from 12%
- Divorce: 64%, up from 18%
- Abortion: 48%, up from 14%
- Euthanasia (terminating the life of the incurably sick): 47%, up from 20%
- Suicide: 19%, up from 6%
- Prostitution: 17%, up from 7%

And looking less far back, in 1999, 10% thought having casual sex was justifiable. Now more than four times as many (42%) held this view in 2022.

On several of these issues, the 2010s saw a clear acceleration in this shift. For example, in 2009, 33% thought homosexuality was justifiable – but this doubled in the space of just over 10 years.

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)*



Although attitudes towards some specific moral questions have changed little

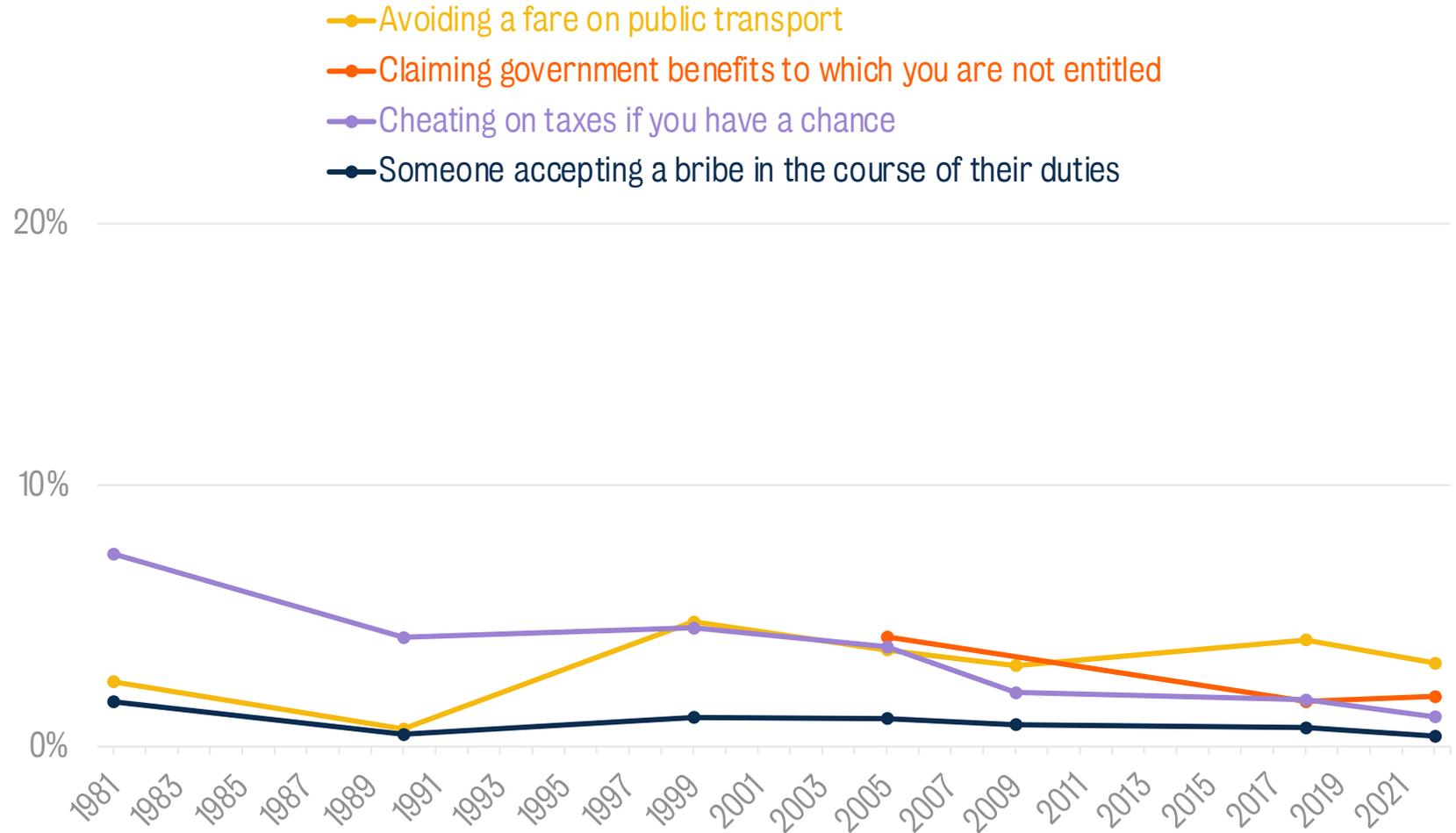
While there has been a sea change in social attitudes in Britain over the last 41 years, views on the rightness or wrongness of certain moral questions have varied far less.

2% of Britons said avoiding a fare on public transport was justifiable in 1981, and this had barely changed by 2022. Over the same period, the share of the public who think bribery is justifiable has also barely changed.

More recently, 4% thought claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled was justifiable in 2005 – around the same as the 2% who think this in 2022.

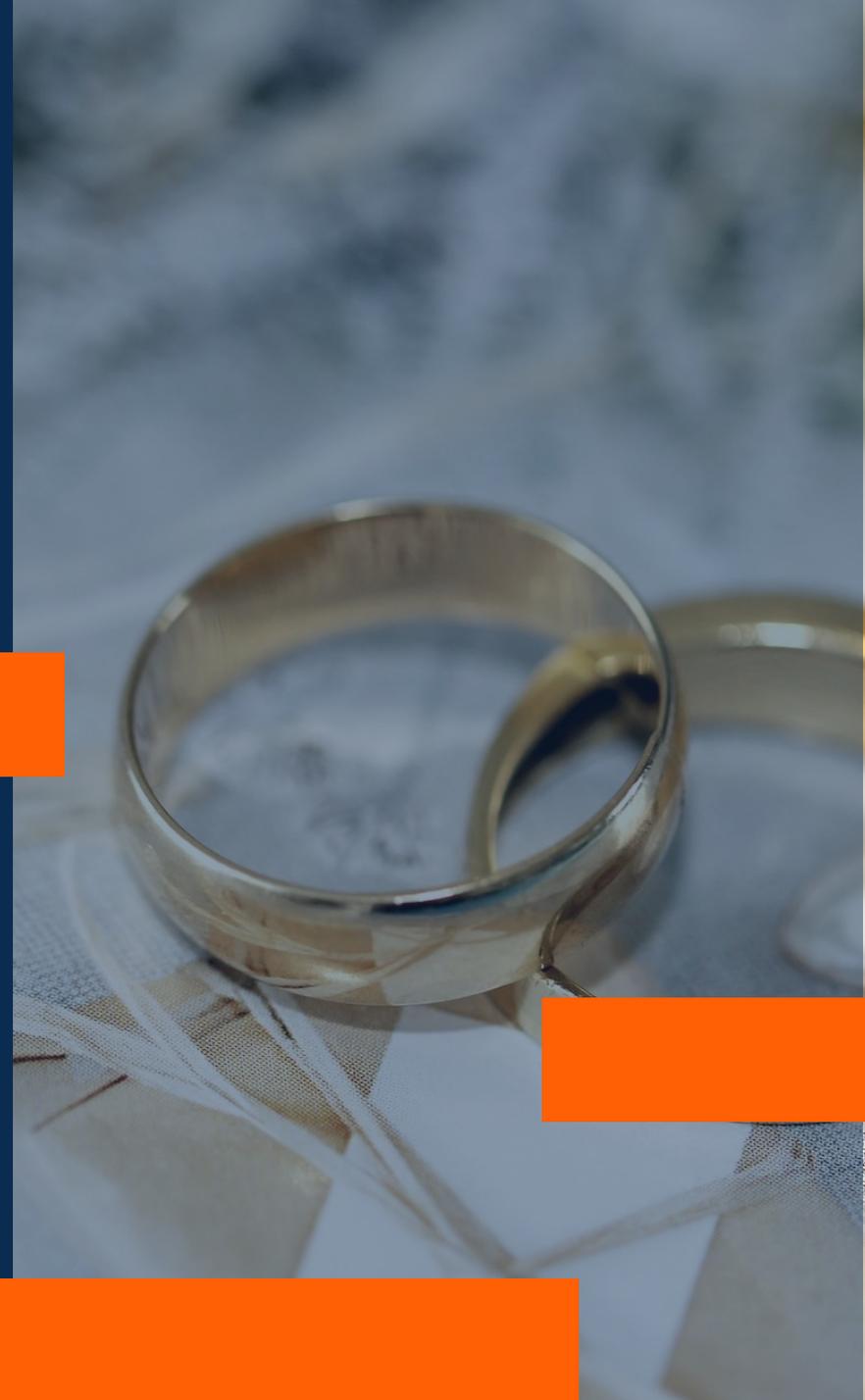
However, there has been a slightly greater change in attitudes towards cheating on your taxes, with 7% thinking this was fine in 1981, compared with just 1% in 2022.

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)



2. How the UK compares with other nations

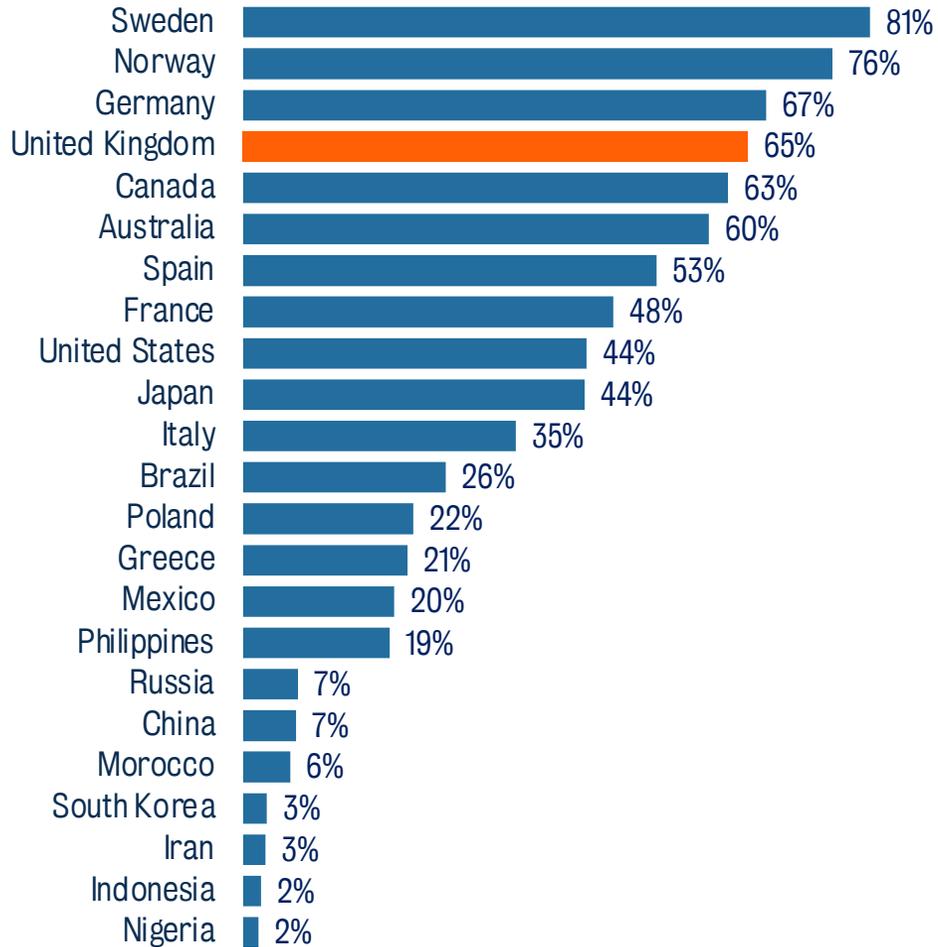
Across a range of countries, the UK now ranks among the most socially liberal on a number of measures



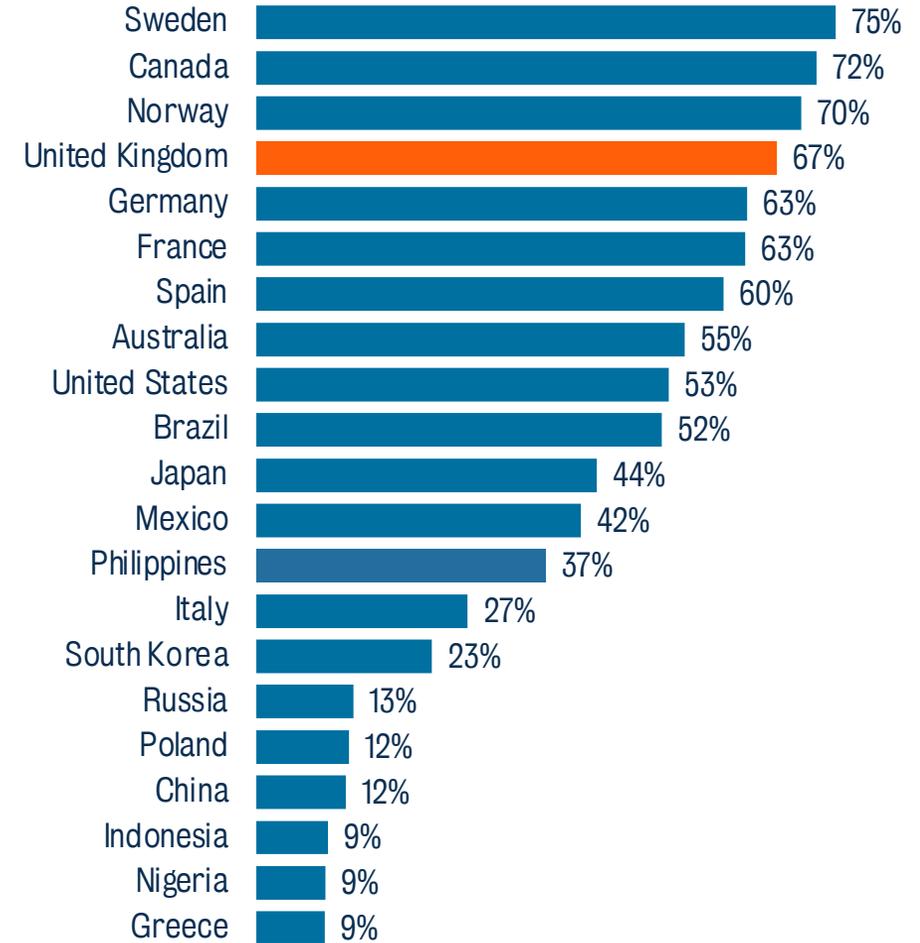
The UK is among the most accepting of homosexuality, including when it comes gay couples being parents

Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between.

Homosexuality (% who say justifiable)



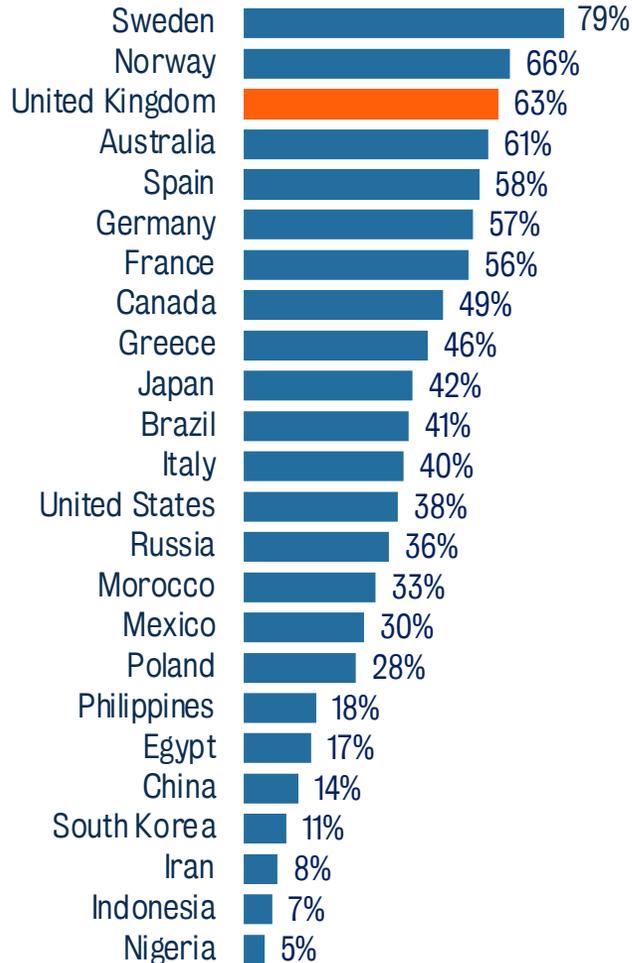
How would you feel about the following statements? Do you agree or disagree with them? **Homosexual couples are as good parents as other couples** (% who strongly agree/agree)



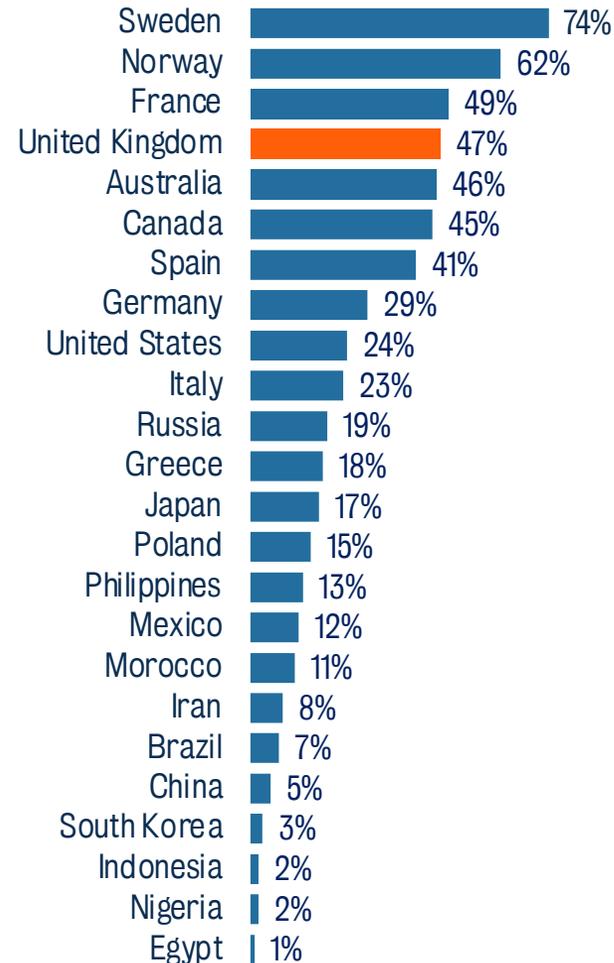
The UK is also among the most accepting of divorce, abortion, euthanasia and casual sex...

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)

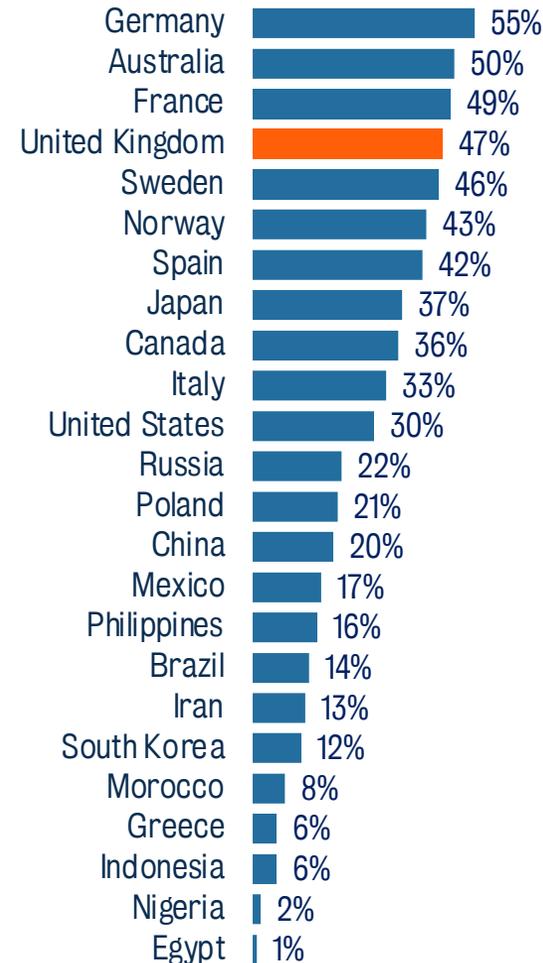
Divorce



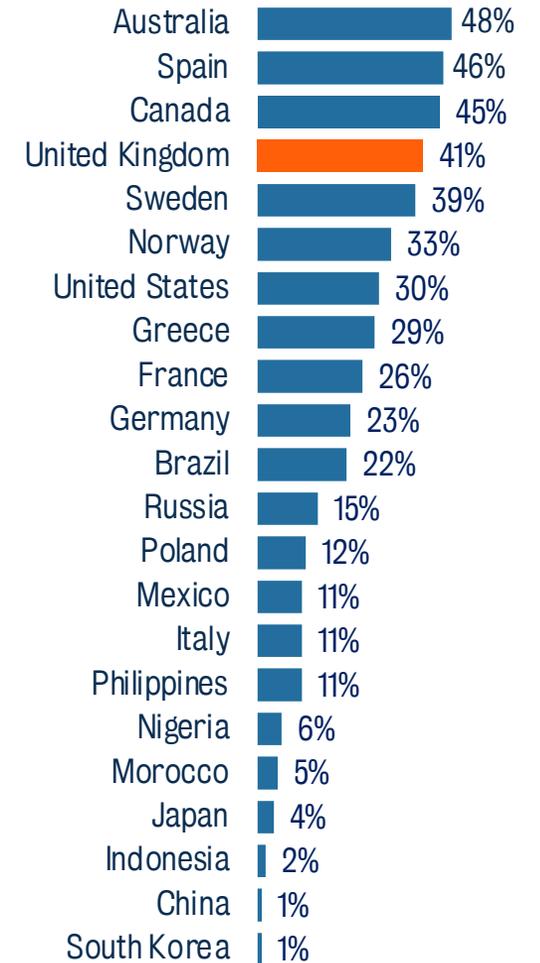
Abortion



Euthanasia*

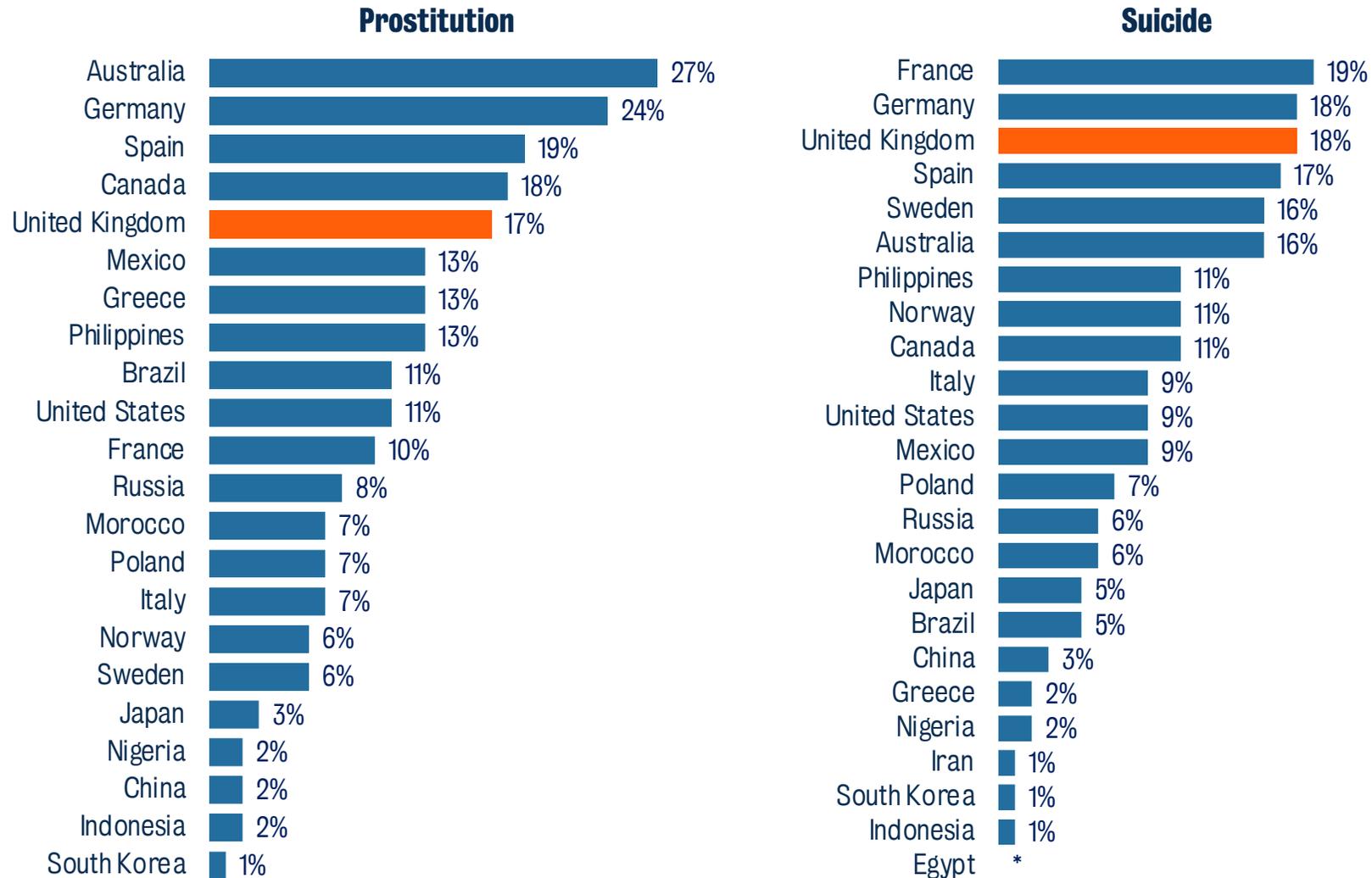


Having casual sex



...while prostitution and suicide are seen as justifiable by much lower proportions

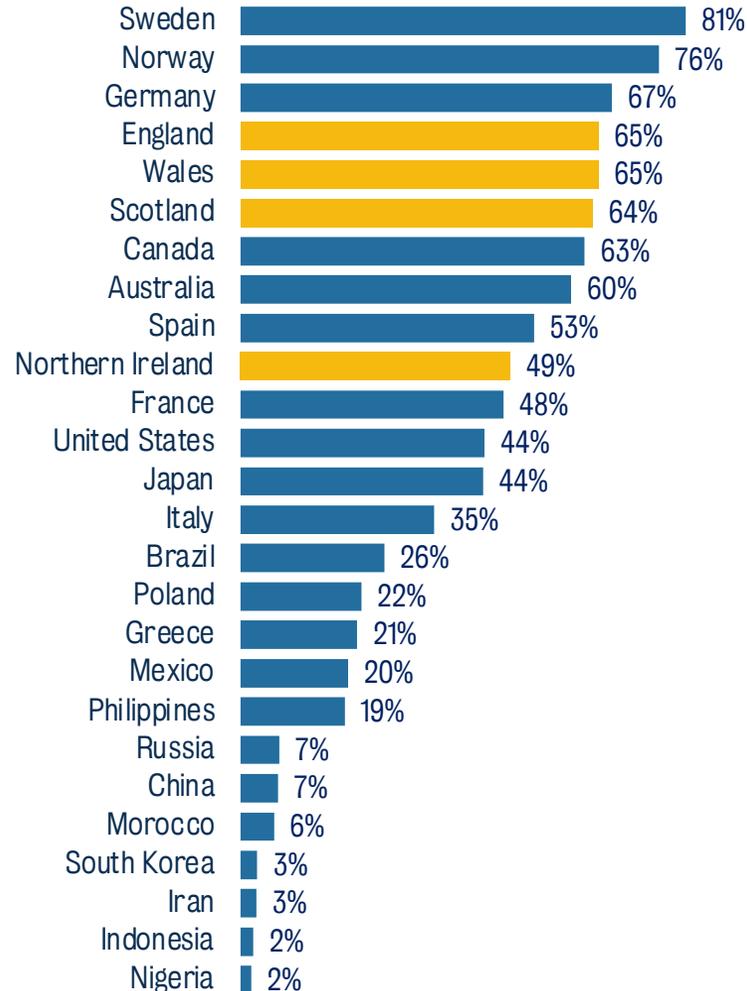
Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between (% who say justifiable)



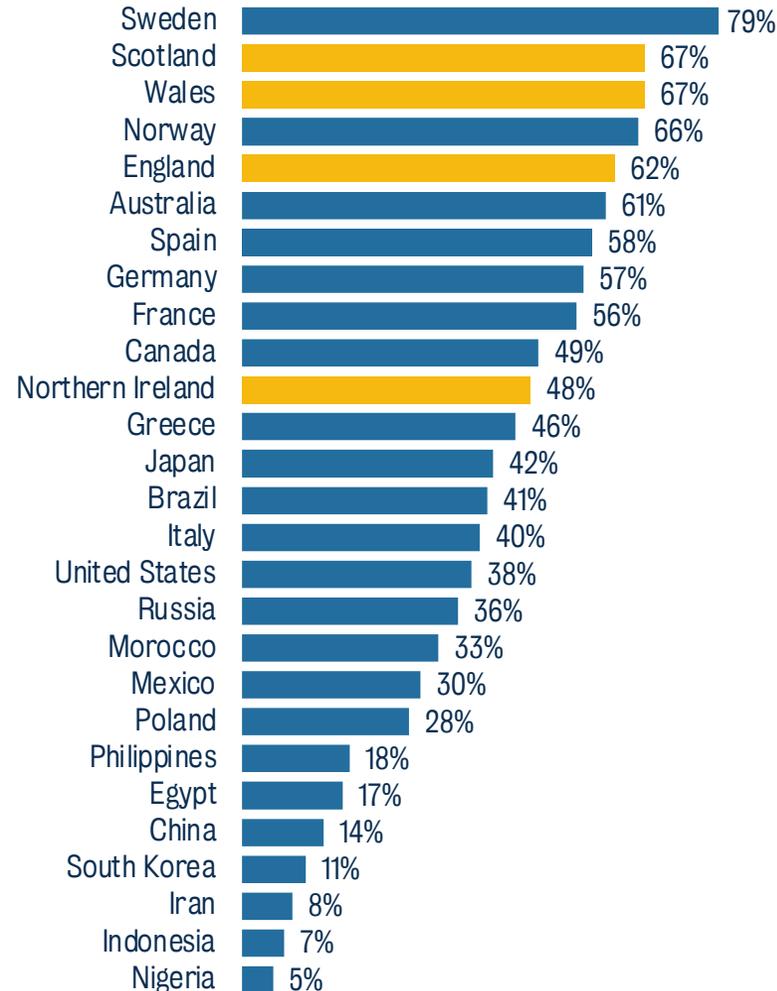
But the four UK nations don't all have the same views – Northern Ireland stands out as less accepting

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

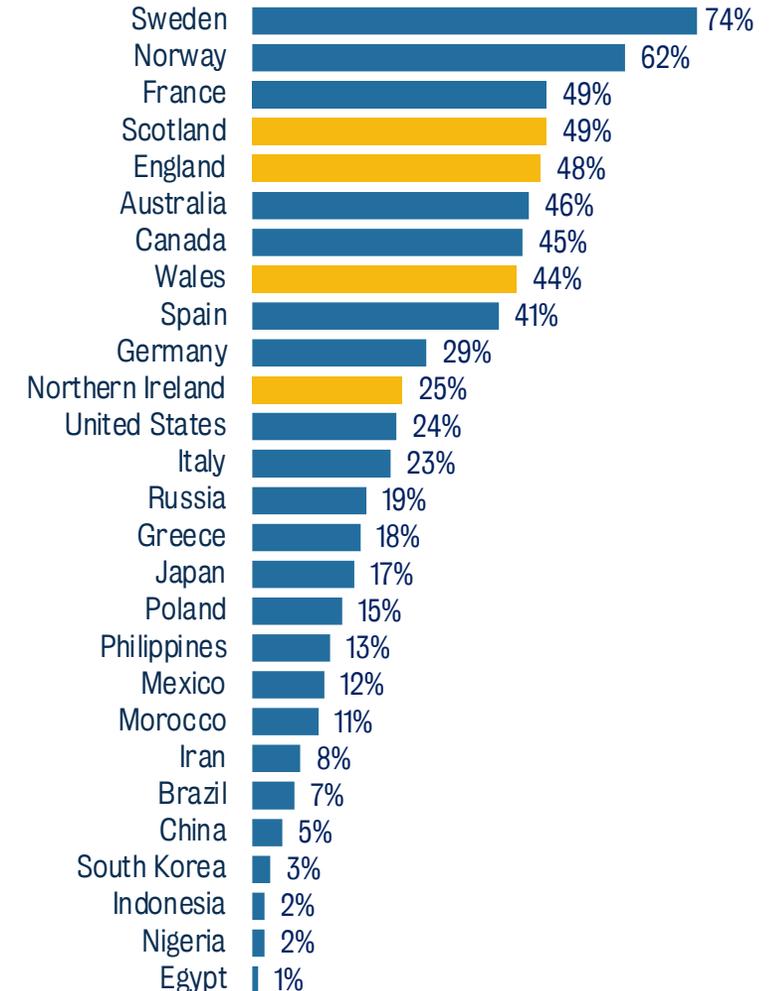
Homosexuality



Divorce



Abortion



3. Trends in social attitudes at home and abroad

The growing liberalisation of social attitudes in Britain reflects a direction of travel seen across several high-income nations

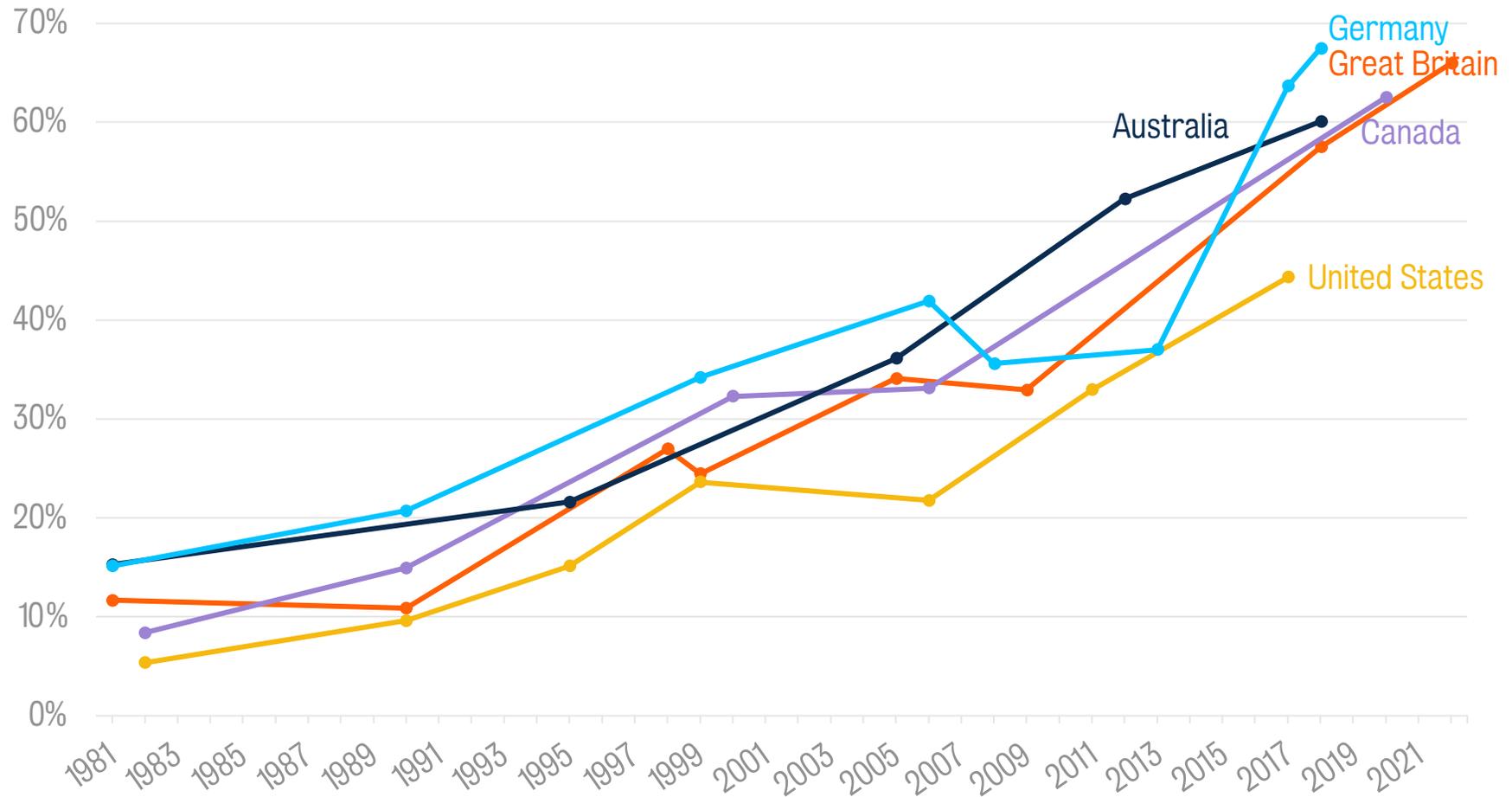


Acceptance of homosexuality has surged across many developed nations

Britain's growing acceptance of homosexuality mirrors that of other developed nations, such as Germany, Canada and Australia, where six in 10 or more people now think it is justifiable – up from around one or two in 10 in the early 1980s.

The US has followed a similar trajectory, albeit reaching a lower level of acceptance, with around four in 10 (44%) thinking homosexuality was justifiable in 2017, the latest year for which data is available – notably below other countries surveyed around the same time.

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



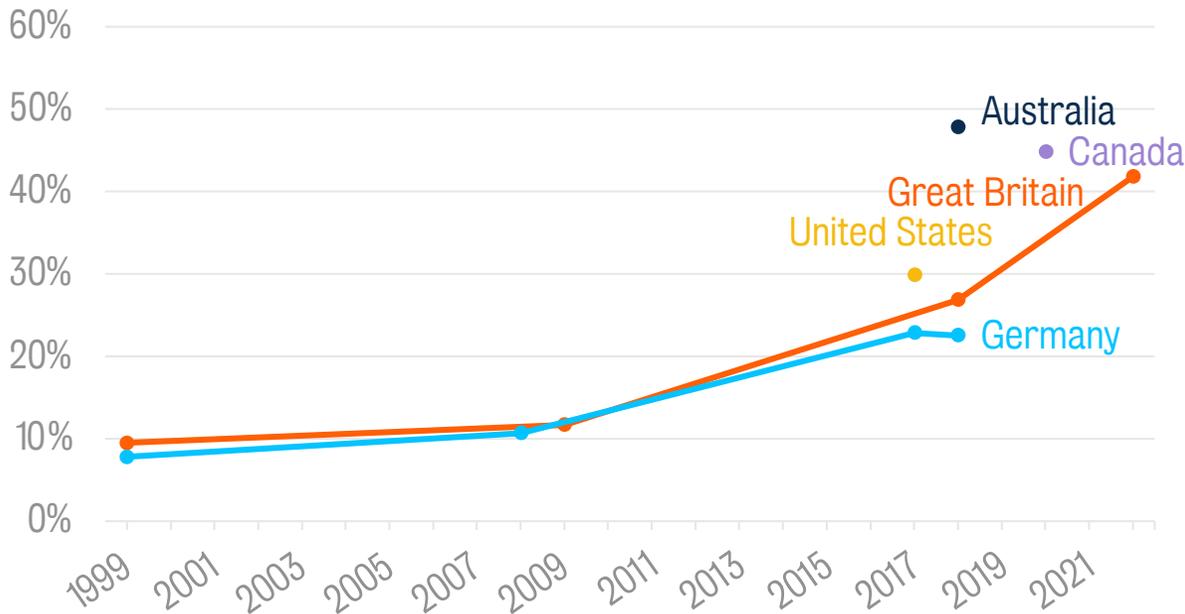
Views on casual sex have changed sharply in Britain since 2018, but on prostitution the shift has been smaller

While the proportion of the British public who think casual sex is justifiable had been increasing for decades, it jumped considerably between 2018 and 2022, rising from 27% to 42%. Views in Britain are now similar to those in both Australia and Canada – some of the most accepting countries on this measure. And until 2018, views in Britain closely tracked those in Germany – but new data is needed to reveal whether acceptance of casual sex among the German public has since risen as sharply.

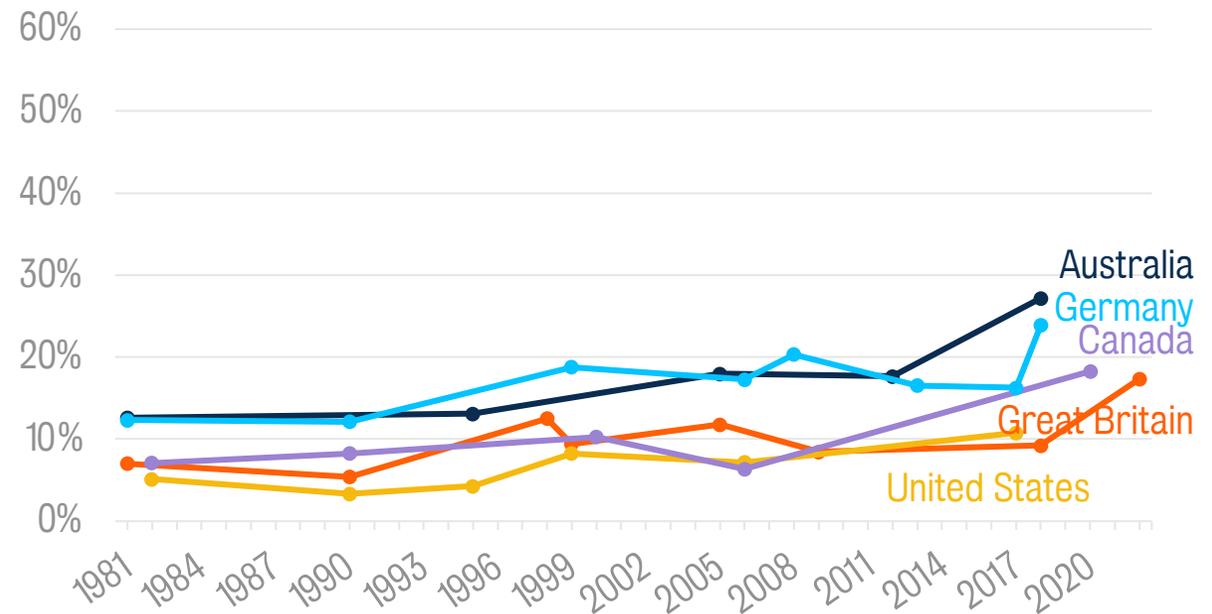
In 2018, Britain had the lowest level of acceptance of prostitution among these five nations – but in the space of four years, the proportion who think it is justifiable has increased from 9% to 17%, now on a par with Canada. Australia and Germany also saw increases in the perceived acceptability of prostitution, albeit earlier than Britain did, while attitudes have remained more stable in 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, using this card.

Having casual sex (% who say justifiable)



Prostitution (% who say justifiable)

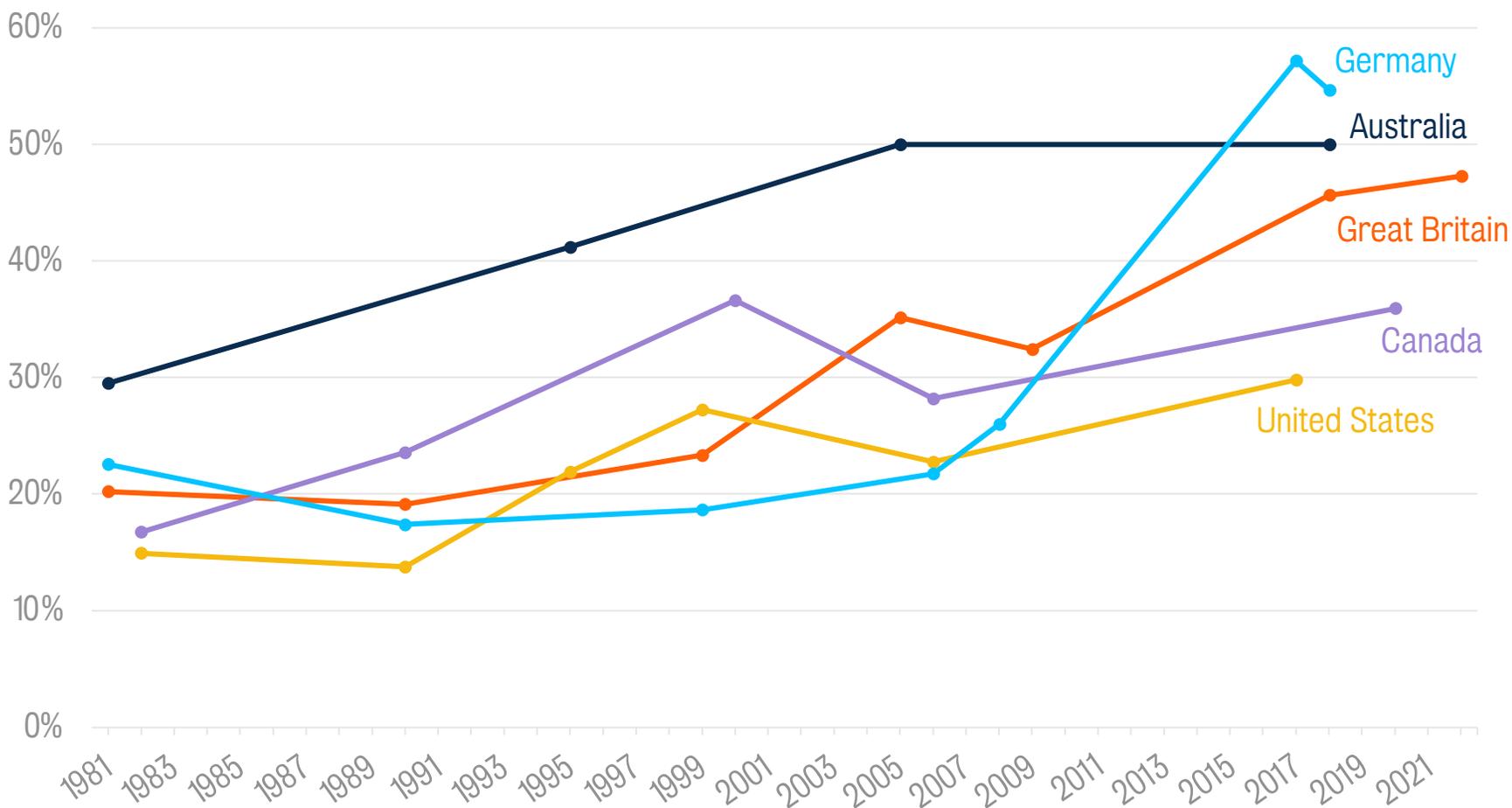


Attitudes to euthanasia have softened – but the change is more pronounced in some countries than others

Germany is particularly accepting of euthanasia, with attitudes shifting rapidly in the space of just nine years after decades of relative stability. There was little change in views even up to 2008, when 26% thought euthanasia was justifiable – but by 2017 this had risen to 57%.

Attitudes in Britain have changed more gradually, but still show a strong trend towards greater acceptance. Meanwhile, views in Canada and the US are roughly what they were at the turn of the millennium, and acceptance of euthanasia in Australia hasn't increased since 2005, despite rising for the preceding two decades.

Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between, using this card. **Euthanasia (terminating the life of the incurably sick)**
(% who say justifiable)

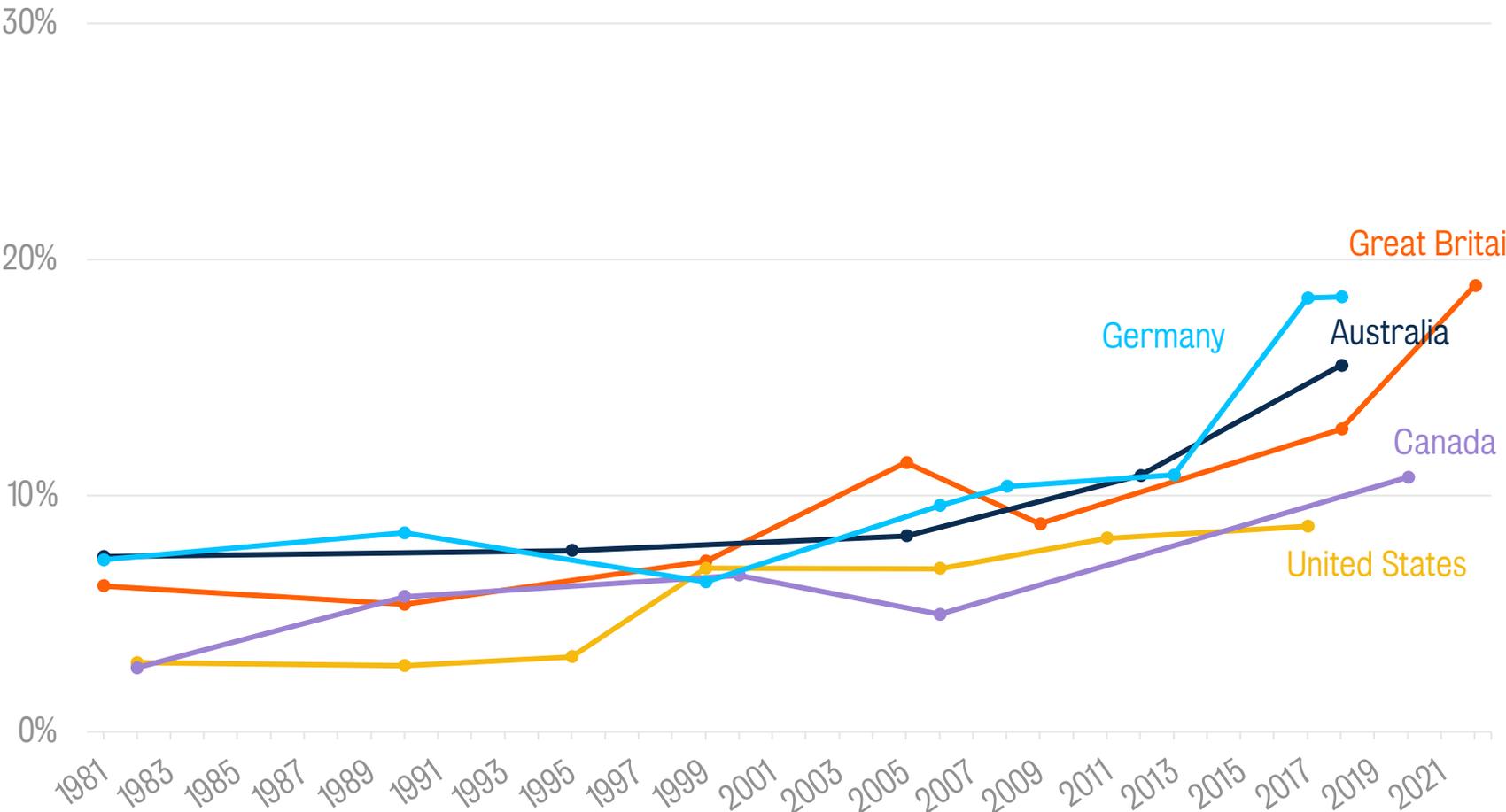


Far fewer people think suicide is justifiable, even if the trend across Britain and other countries has been of growing acceptance

In the 24 years between 1981 and 2005, the share of the British public believing that suicide is justifiable rose by only five percentage points – but this has more recently risen six points in just four years, with one in five people (19%) saying it is justifiable in 2022.

A similar shift in views of suicide occurred several years earlier in Germany, while trends in Australia, the US and Canada have also been towards greater justifiability, even if they have been more gradual.

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



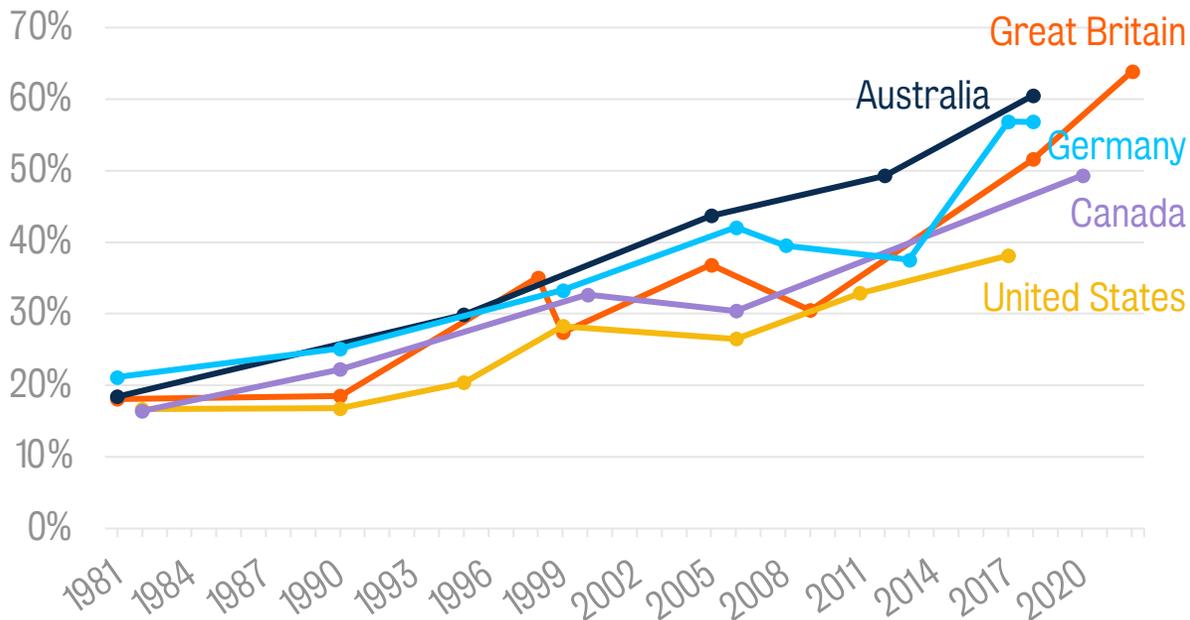
Divorce and abortion are seen as much more acceptable now – though views have changed least in the US

Following the same pattern as Britain, the proportion of people in Australia and Germany who believe that divorce is justifiable has roughly trebled over the last 41 years, while Canada and the US have also seen substantial increases. However, the US is notably less accepting of divorce, with the latest available figures showing 38% feel it is justifiable – below Canada, with the next-lowest level of acceptance, on 49%.

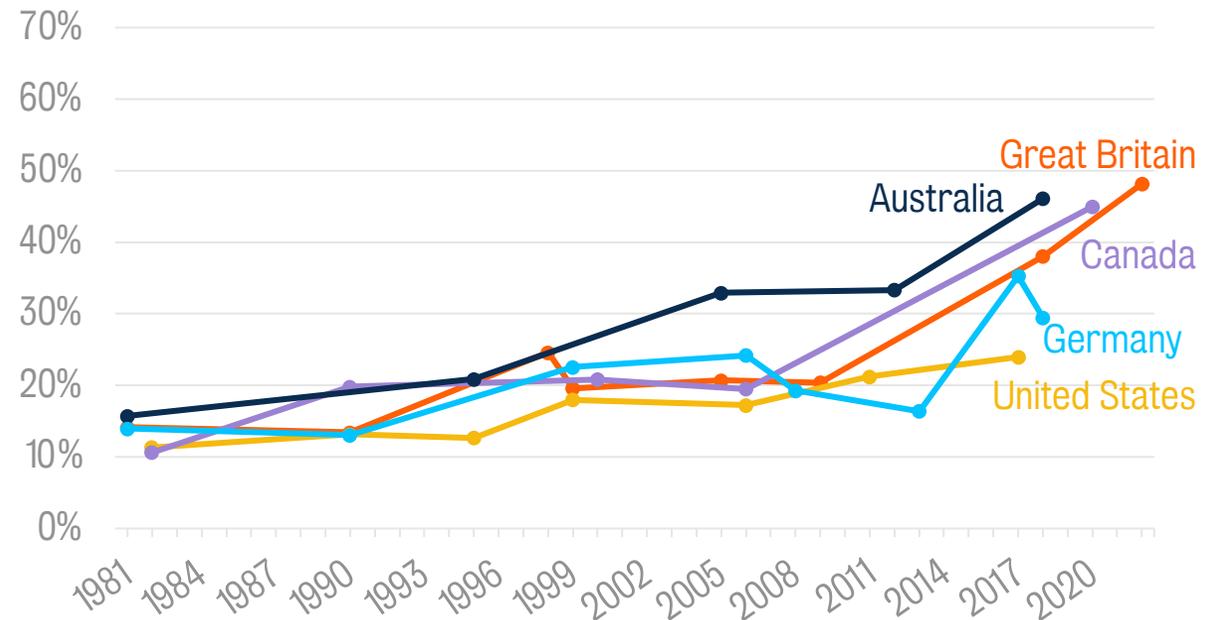
Meanwhile, Britain (49%), Australia (46%) and Canada (45%) are roughly equally likely to think abortion is justifiable, having all undergone a similarly large shift in attitudes since 1981. By contrast, Germany actually saw a decline in people saying abortion is justifiable between 2017 and 2018, while attitudes have changed least in the US – albeit still rising from 11% who said it was justifiable in 1982 to 24% in 2017.

Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between, using this card.

Divorce (% who say justifiable)



Abortion (% who say justifiable)



4. What's driving change in Britain?

Shifting attitudes in Britain are often related to generational change, but also to other differences between groups within the population



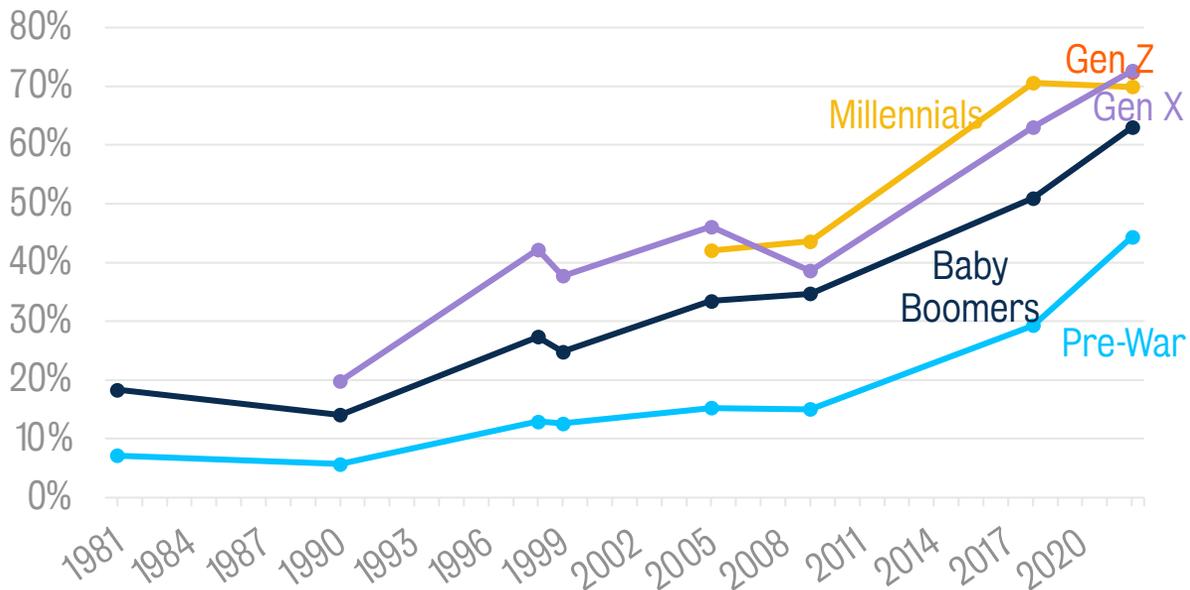
All generations in Britain have become much more accepting of homosexuality – but there is still a divide between the oldest cohort and the others

In 1981, just 7% of the Pre-War generation thought homosexuality was justifiable. This has now risen hugely, to 44% in 2022. Other generations have followed a similar trajectory, albeit with acceptance rising to even higher levels – 63% of Baby Boomers, for example, think homosexuality is justifiable today, more than triple what it was four decades ago, and not far off the levels of acceptance seen among even younger generations.

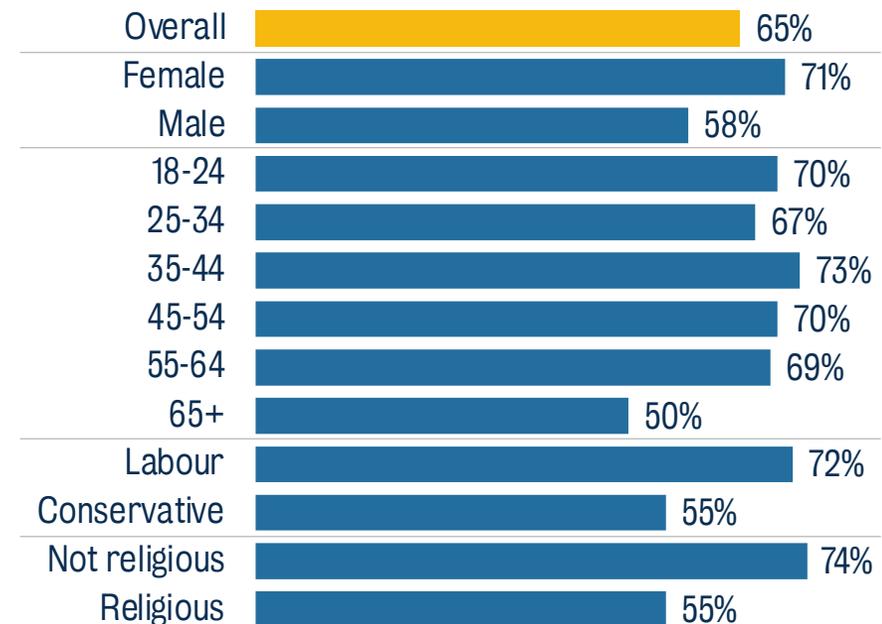
The breakdown of UK public opinion in 2022 underscores how age is a key dividing line on this question: those aged 65 and above are notably less likely than all other age groups to feel that homosexuality is justifiable. But religious belief, being male, and voting for the Conservative party in 2019 are also linked to lower levels of acceptance.

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

Trends in Britain, by generation



UK subgroups, 2022



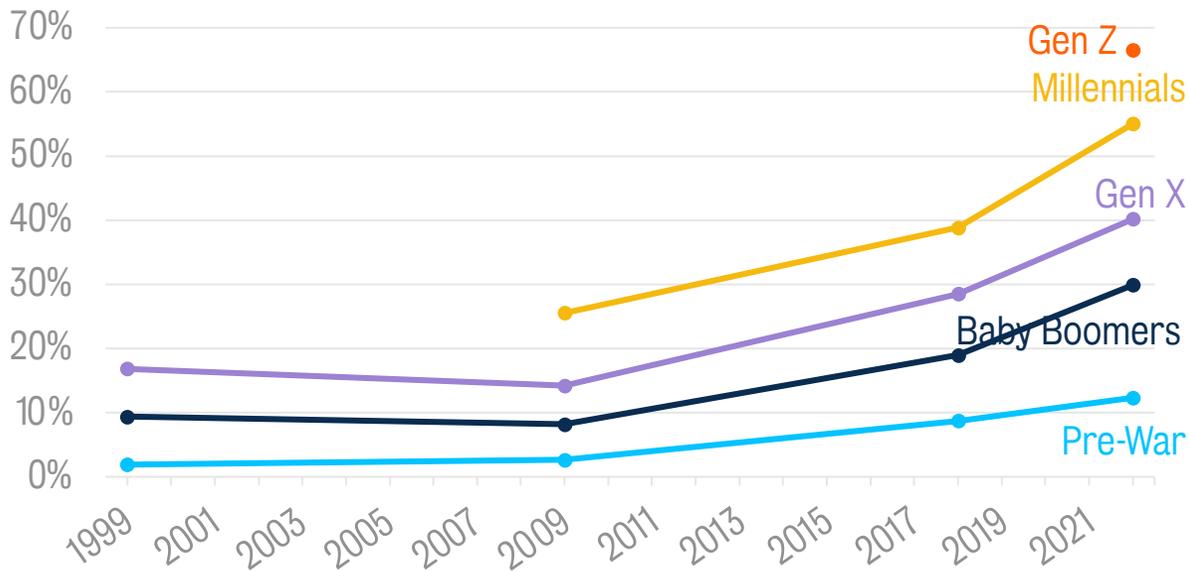
There is a clear generational divide in views on having casual sex, with Gen Z the most accepting

There is a much starker generational gradient to attitudes on casual sex – while all cohorts have become more accepting over time, very different proportions of each think having casual sex is justifiable, with younger generations far more likely to feel this way. In particular, Gen Z are the most accepting when it comes to this issue, with 67% saying it is justifiable – compared with 55% of Millennials, the next highest. At the other end of the spectrum, just 12% of the Pre-War generation feel this way.

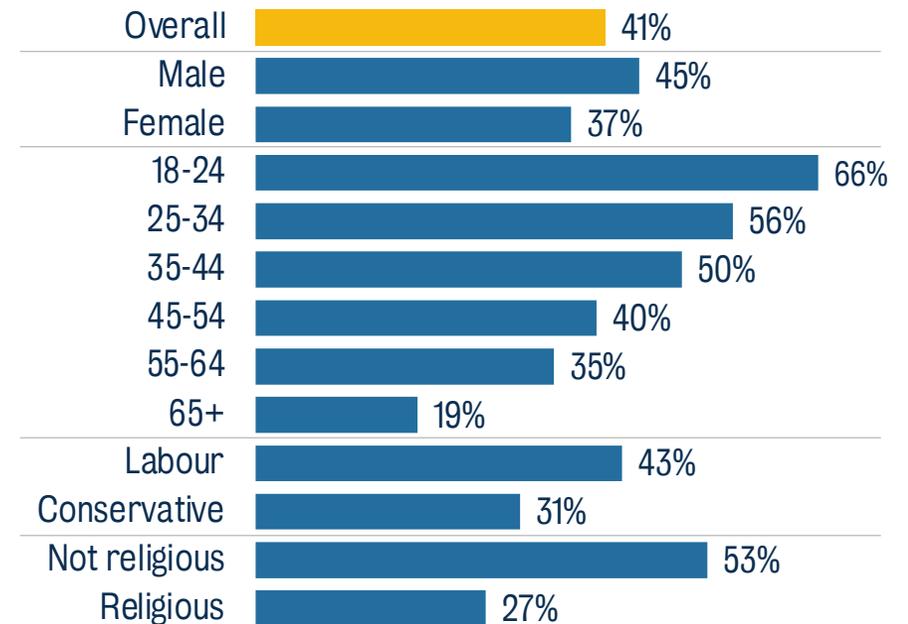
And attitudes vary between different sections of the UK population – not only among religious believers and non-believers, but also between likely Labour (43%) and likely Conservative (31%) voters, with the former more likely than the latter to say casual sex is justifiable. There is also a slight gender divide, with men (45%) more likely than women (37%) to hold this view.

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

Trends in Britain, by generation



UK subgroups, 2022



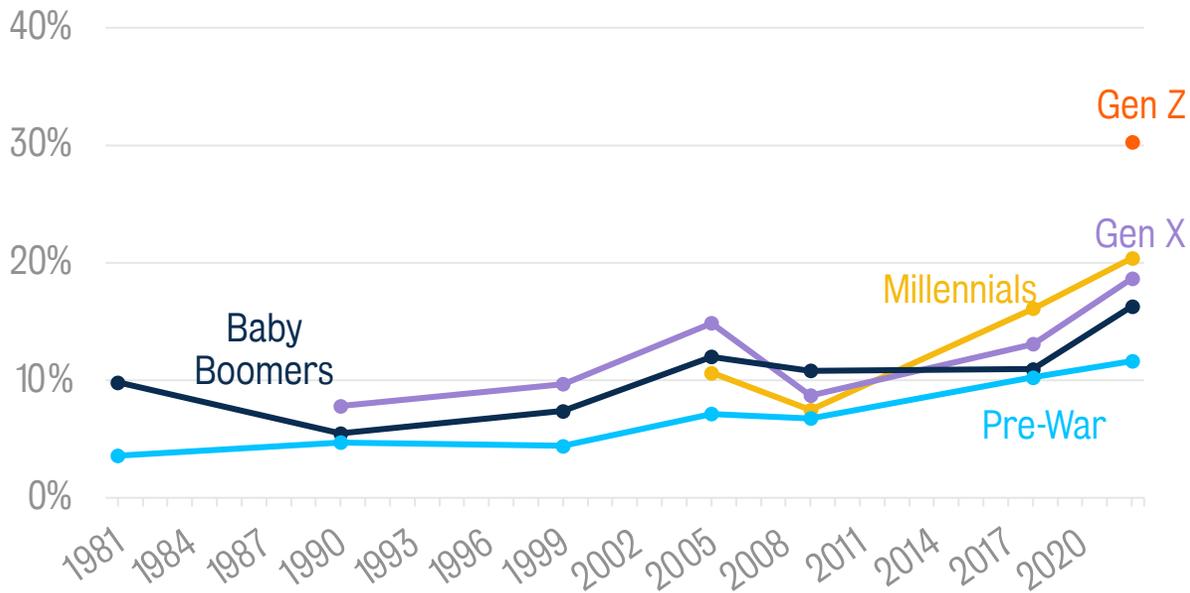
Gen Z also stand out as being particularly likely to think suicide is justifiable

30% of Gen Z in Britain today think that suicide is justifiable – notably higher than all other generations – although this is only one data point, so may not be indicative of a broader trend among this cohort. Millennials have also seen a shift in attitudes towards suicide, with one in five (20%) now saying it is justifiable, compared with around one in 10 (11%) in 2005.

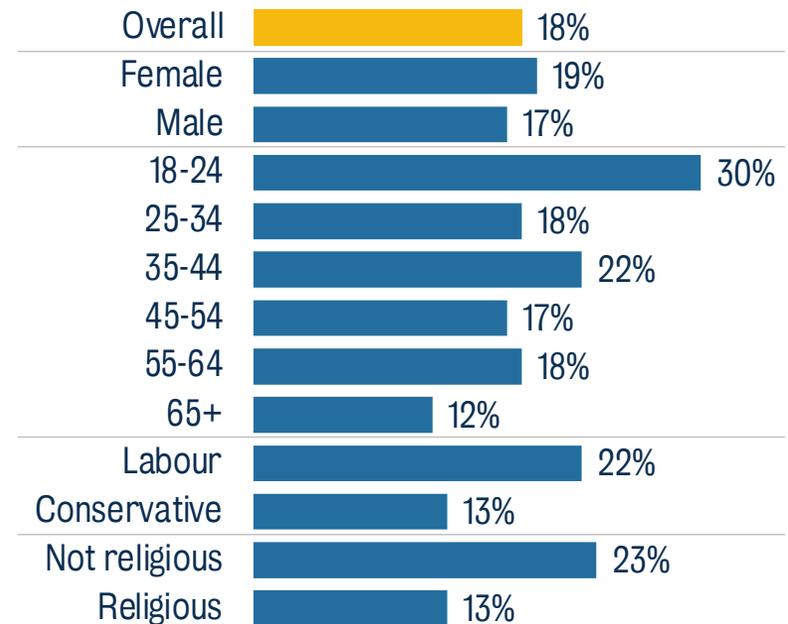
2022 UK data reinforces the extent to which the youngest age group differ from older groups on attitudes to suicide, while those who say they'll vote Labour at the next election (22%) are more likely to say suicide is justifiable than their Conservative counterparts (13%), as are non-religious people (23%) compared with those who have a religion (13%).

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)

Trends in Britain, by generation



UK subgroups, 2022



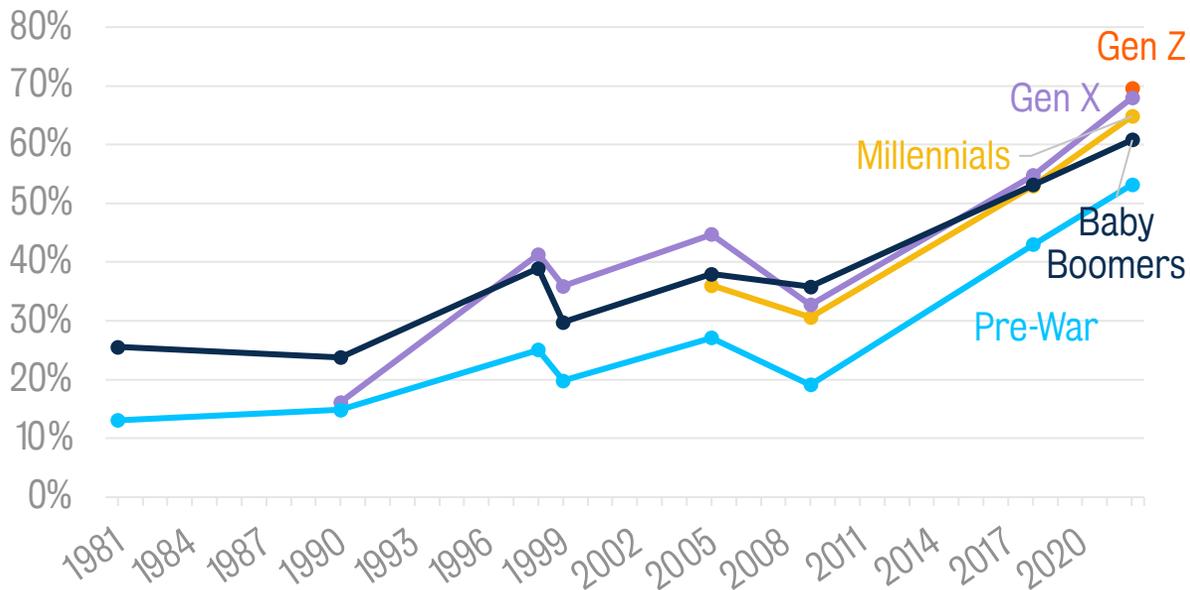
There is less of a divide in attitudes between the oldest and youngest generations when it comes to divorce, but religious belief is still a key factor

All generations have followed a similar trajectory in growing acceptance of divorce, with comparatively smaller differences in views today on whether it is justifiable. Baby Boomers (61%), Millennials (65%) and Gen X (68%) are all similarly likely to feel it can be justified, while the Pre-War generation (53%) are less likely to and Gen Z (70%) is most likely.

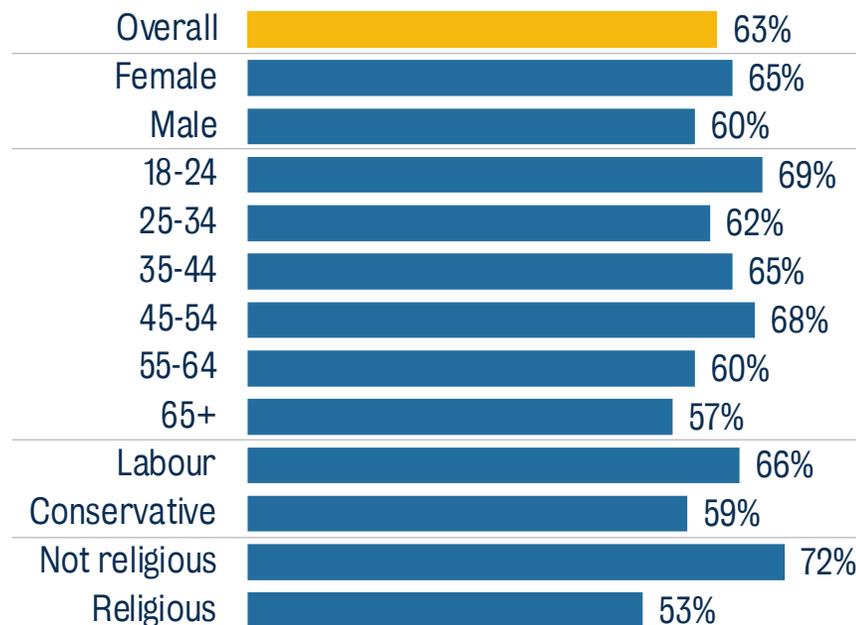
And as 2022 UK data confirms, the differences in views by age group are relatively less pronounced than on other social issues – for example, those aged 65+ (57%) are only slightly less likely than those aged 25 to 34 (62%) to believe that divorce is justifiable. Religion is, however, more of a dividing line, with believers (53%) much less likely than non-believers (72%) to be accepting of divorce.

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

Trends in Britain, by generation



UK subgroups, 2022



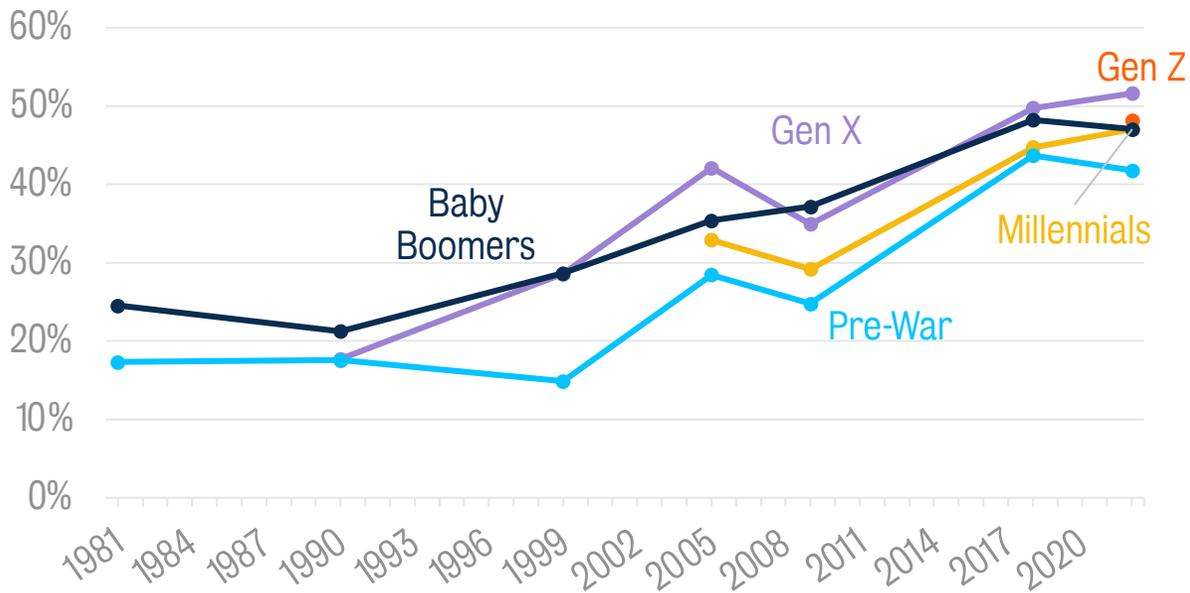
Being religious is also associated with being less accepting of euthanasia, while generational divides in attitudes are again relatively small

Again, all generations in Britain have followed a similar trend in becoming more accepting of euthanasia over time, and are now within a 10-percentage-point range when it comes to the share of each who feel that euthanasia is justifiable. This is reflected in 2022 UK data, where there is relatively small variation in views on this question between age groups.

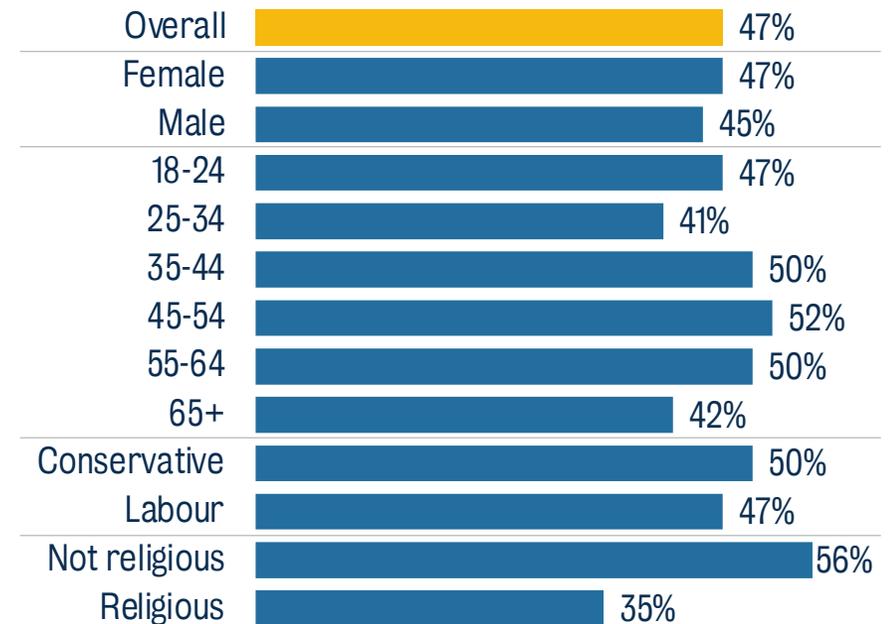
Unlike with other social issues included in this study, there is also little variation in views on euthanasia by political support, with around half of both Conservative and Labour voters believing it to be justifiable. But religion is still a key factor, with a clear split in views between those who are religious and those who are not.

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

Trends in Britain, by generation



UK subgroups, 2022



5. The death penalty: where the UK ranks as less liberal

One issue on which the UK ranks as *less* socially liberal relative to other peer nations is the death penalty – but attitudes have nonetheless softened in recent years

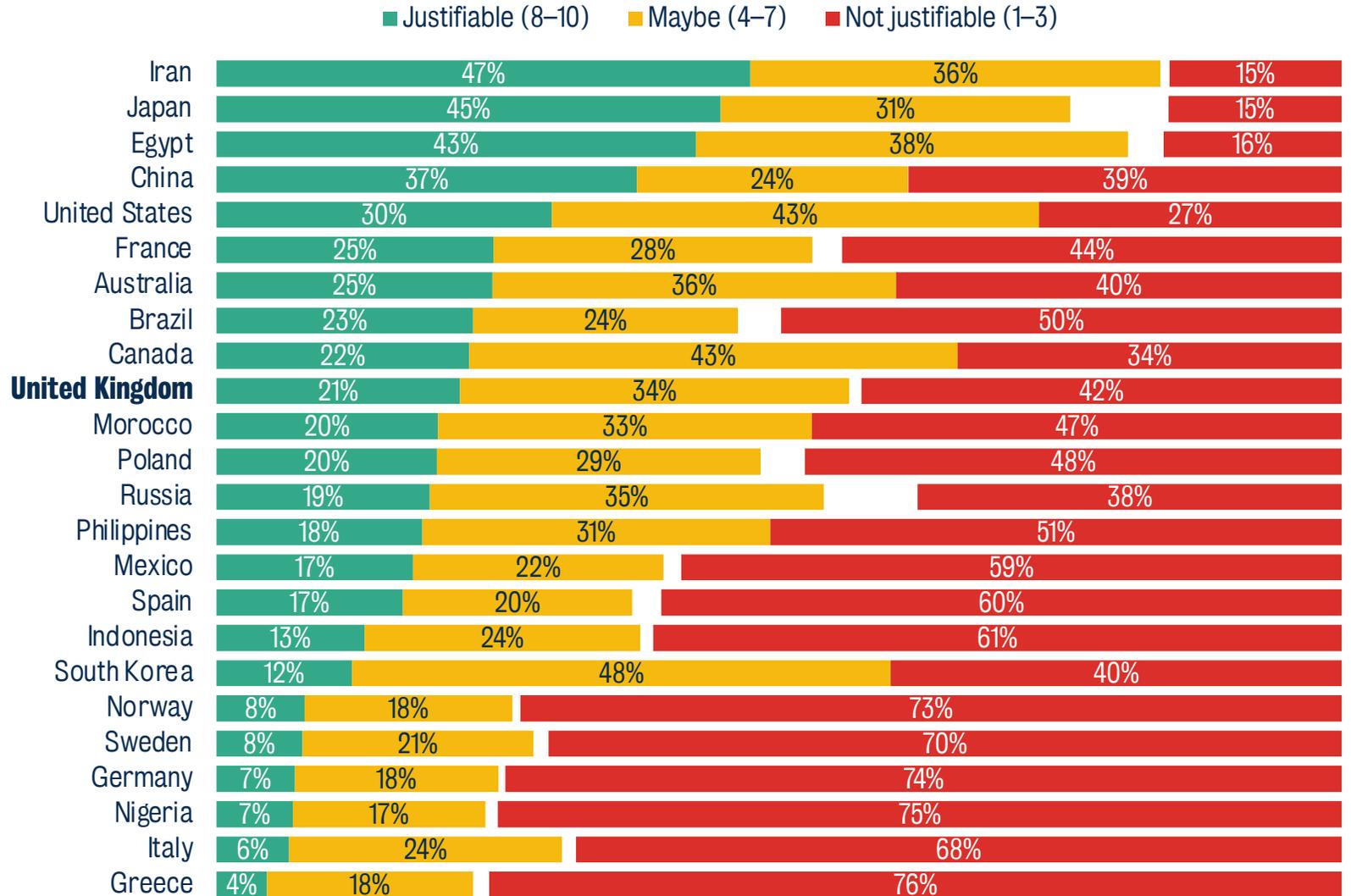


One in five people in the UK think the death penalty is justifiable – higher than in many peer nations

21% of the UK public say the death penalty is justifiable, with a further 35% indicating it is potentially justifiable, suggesting a substantial proportion believe it may be acceptable in certain circumstances. Taken together, this means a majority (55%) think it is at least maybe justifiable.

Various other western nations, such as Greece, Italy, Germany, Sweden and Norway, are much less likely to feel this way, with around seven in 10 or more people saying the death penalty is not justifiable.

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**

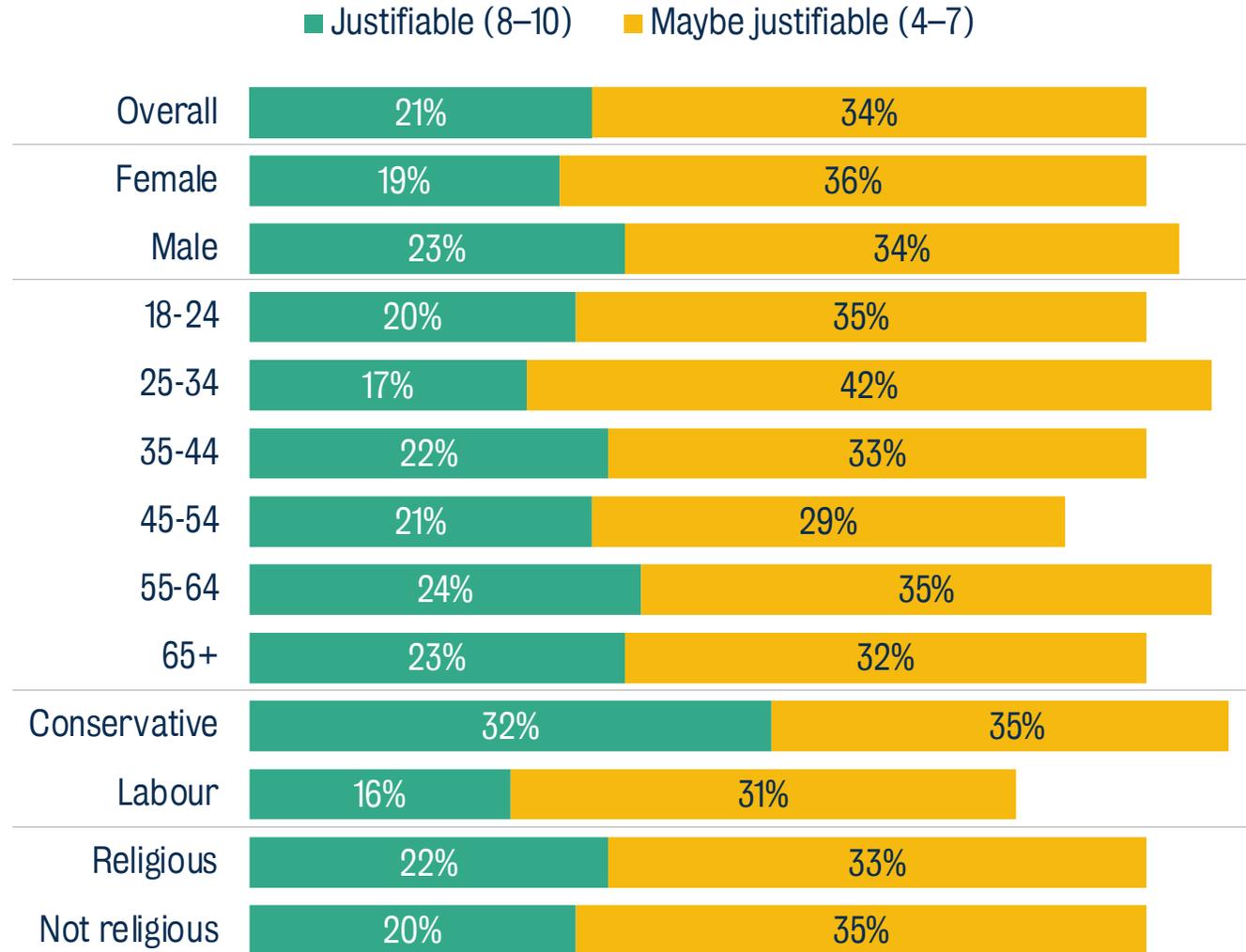


UK base: 3,056 people in the UK aged 18+, surveyed 1 Mar–9 Sept 2022. Other countries all surveyed in wave 7 of WVS at various points between 2017 and 2022. See [WVSA website](#) for sample information

Conservative voters are twice as likely as Labour voters to think the death penalty is justifiable

There is little difference in views by age, gender or religion on the question of whether the death penalty is justifiable – but there is a political divide. 32% of those who say they’d vote Conservative at the next general election believe it is justifiable, compared with 16% of likely Labour voters who feel the same. And two-thirds (67%) of Tory voters think the death penalty is at least potentially justifiable, versus just under half of Labour voters (47%).

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)**

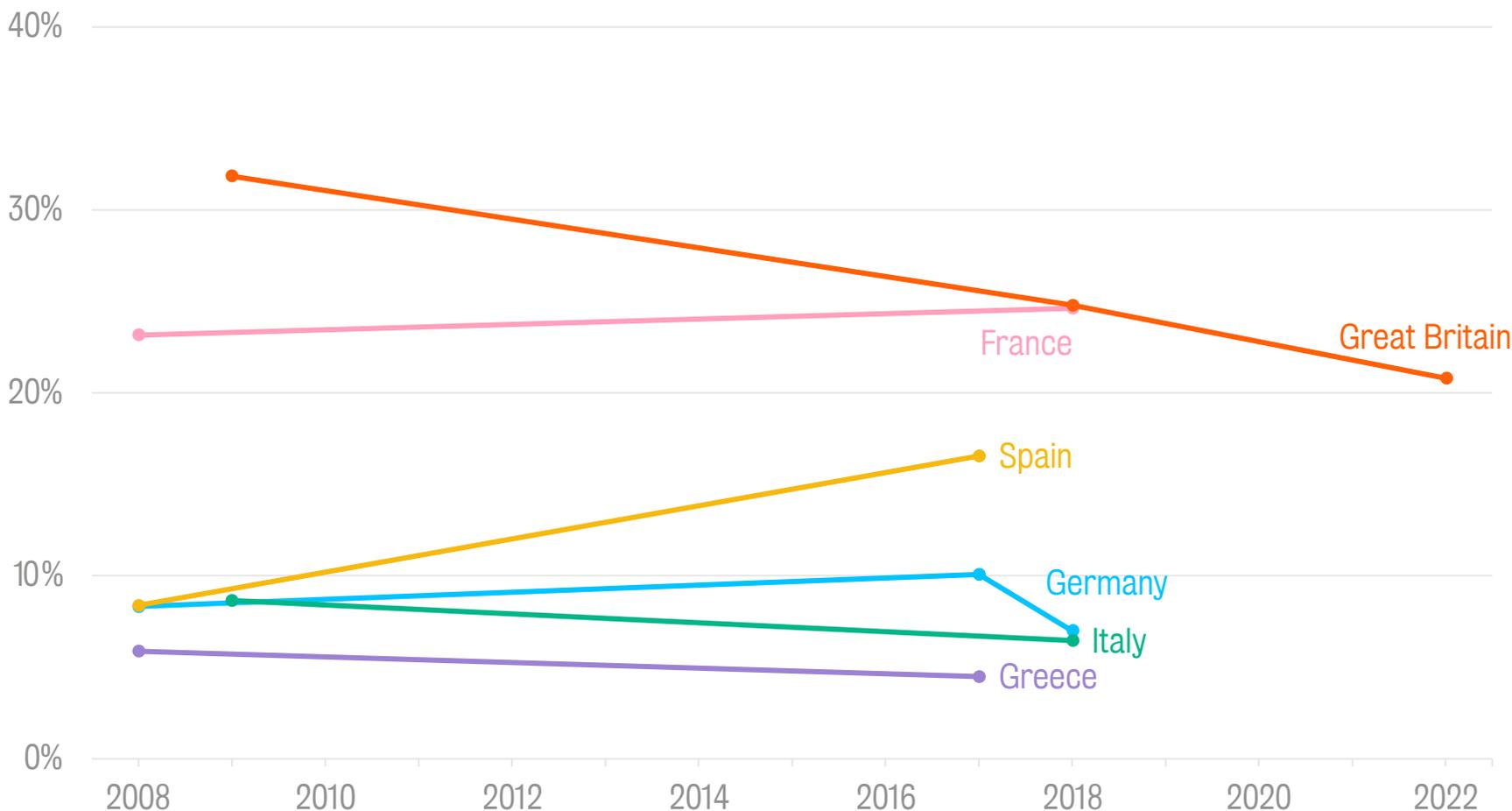


Yet British attitudes to the death penalty *have* become more liberal, even if not to the same extent as elsewhere

Trends in attitudes to the death penalty only cover a more recent timeframe, yet the share the British public who think it is justifiable has nonetheless fallen during this shorter period, declining from 32% in 2009 to 21% in 2022.

By contrast, attitudes have changed little in Germany, Italy and Greece – all countries that are much less accepting of the death penalty, according to the most recent available data. And in Spain, the trend has been towards *greater* support for the death penalty, with the proportion of the public saying it is justifiable rising from 8% to 17% between 2008 and 2017.

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



6. Where acceptance ends

Some behaviours, particularly those related to cheating, remain unjustifiable to a large majority – although there are small sections of the public for whom they are more permissible

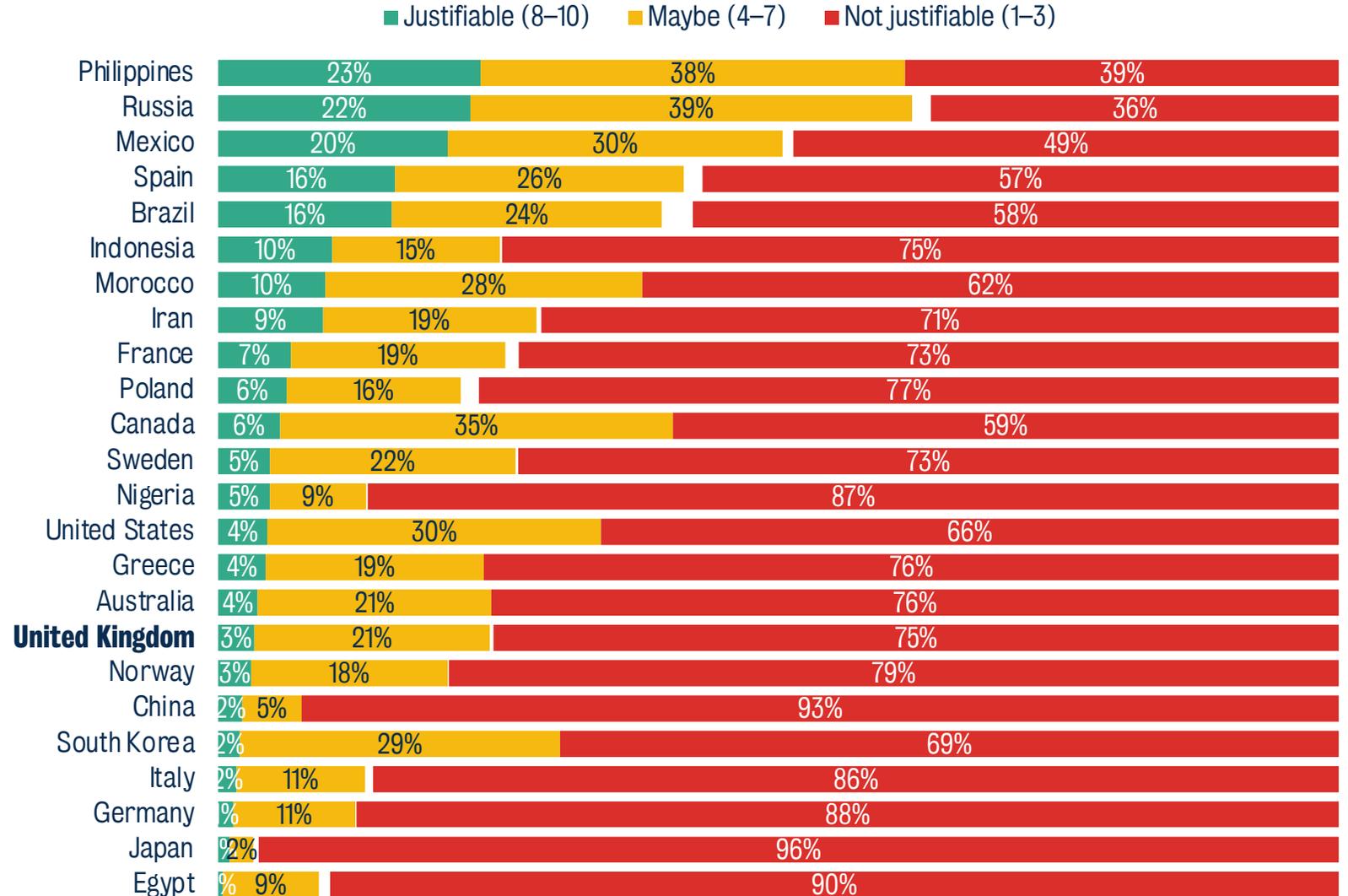


One in four people in the UK think it is at least potentially justifiable to avoid a fare on public transport

While three-quarters (75%) of the UK public think avoiding a fare on public transport is not justifiable, around a quarter (24%) think it is at least maybe justifiable.

But other nations are far more likely to think this behaviour is acceptable. In Spain, for example, 42% say avoiding a public transport fare is at least potentially justifiable.

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). **Avoiding a fare on public transport**



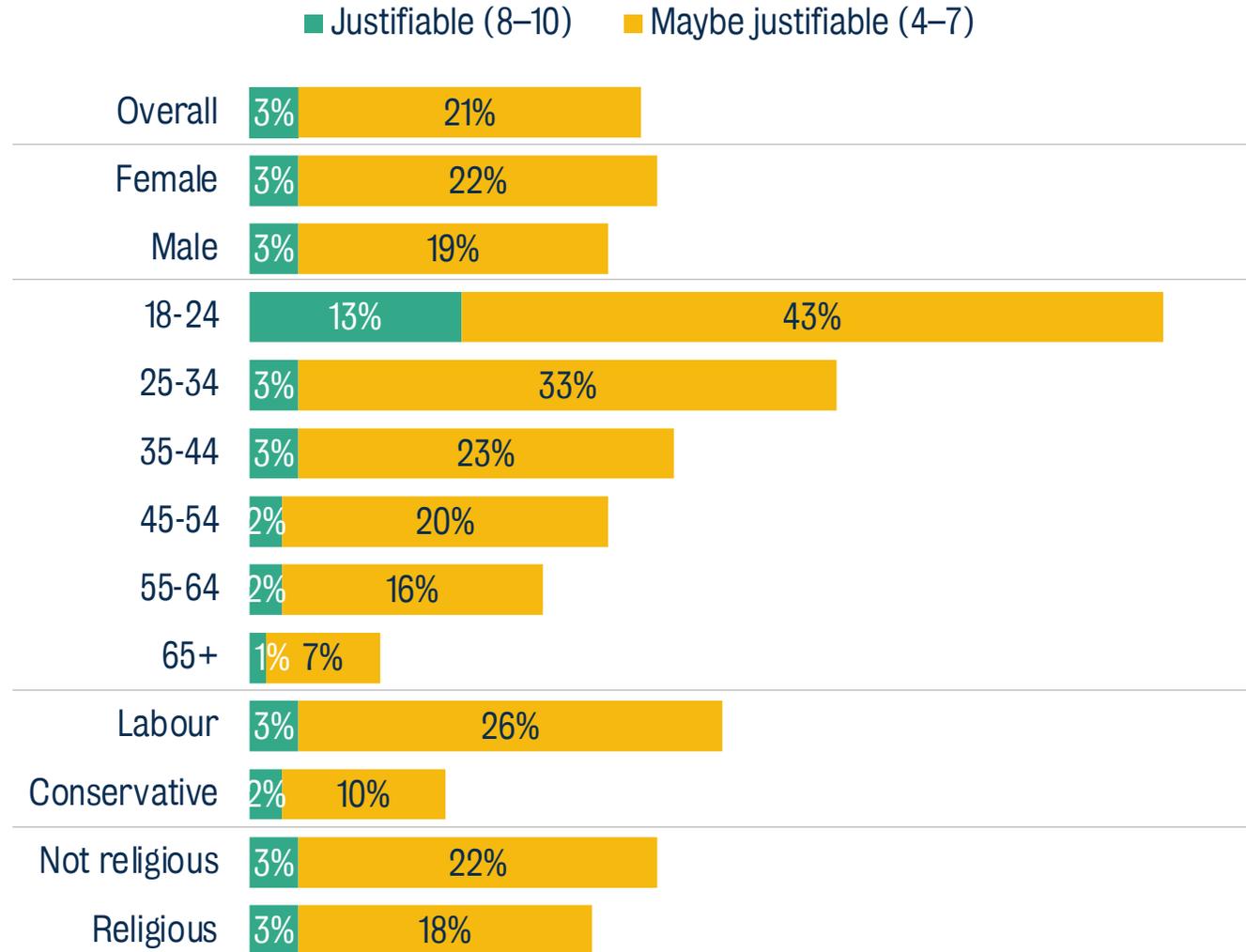
UK base: 3,056 people in the UK aged 18+, surveyed 1 Mar–9 Sept 2022. Other countries all surveyed in wave 7 of WVS at various points between 2017 and 2022. See [WVSA website](#) for sample information

There is a clear age gradient to views on whether fare-dodging is justifiable in the UK

A majority (56%) of those aged 18 to 24 in the UK say it's at least maybe justifiable to avoid a fare on public transport, including one in seven (13%) who are less equivocal, believing that it simply is justifiable – far higher than any other age group surveyed. At the other end of the range, just 8% of those aged 65 and above think fare-dodging is at least potentially justifiable.

And views on this question vary by political affiliation, with Labour voters (29%) more than twice as likely as Conservative voters (12%) to think dodging a fare on public transport is at least maybe justifiable.

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). **Avoiding a fare on public transport (UK)**

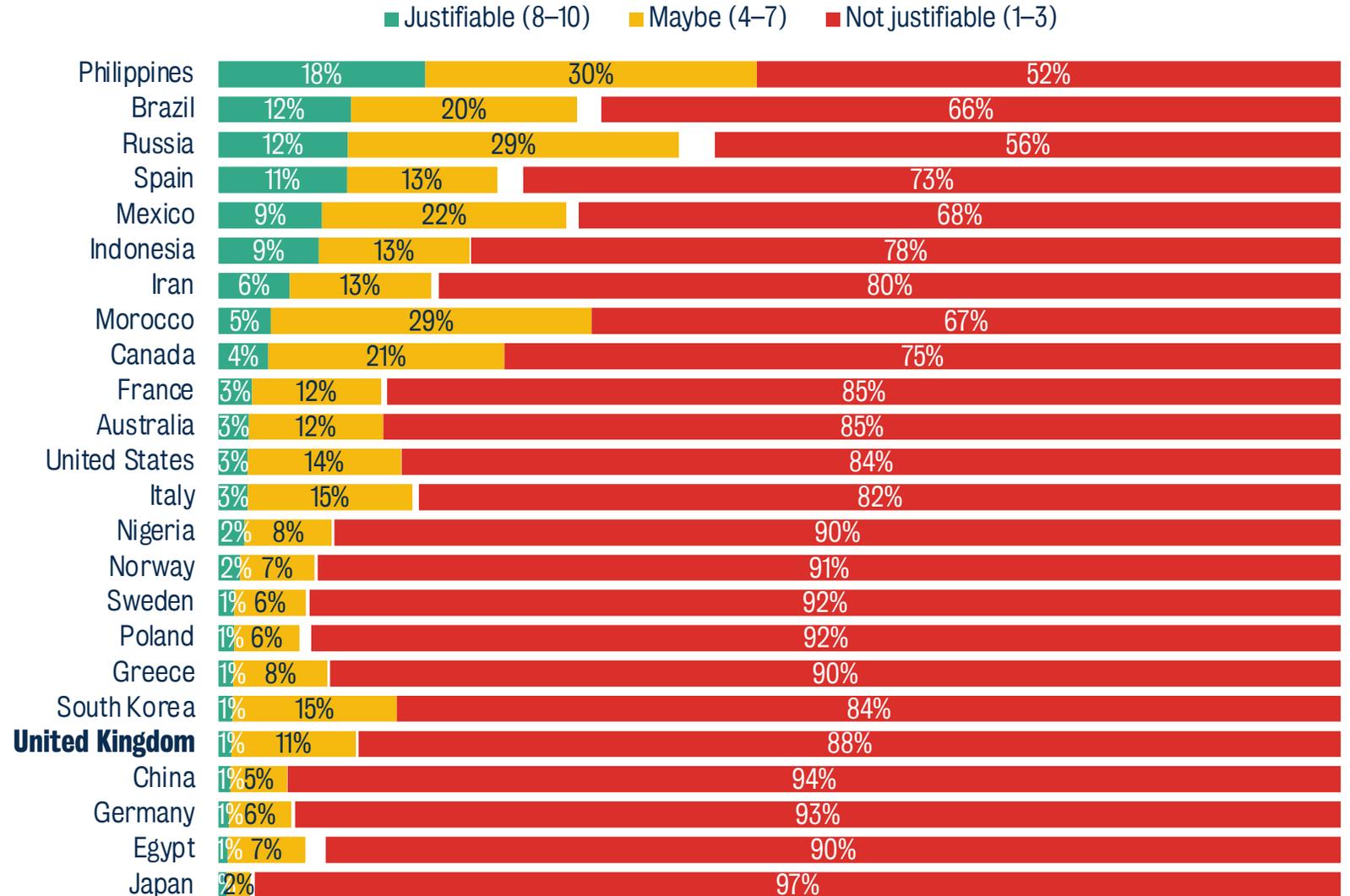


The vast majority in the UK say cheating on taxes is not justifiable – but one in eight think it at least might be

88% of the UK public think cheating on taxes if you have the chance cannot be justified, compared with 12% who say it is at least maybe justifiable.

People in Japan are least likely to think this is acceptable behaviour, with 97% saying it is not justifiable. By contrast, at the other end of the spectrum, a comparatively low share of 52% of people in the Philippines think the same.

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). **Cheating on taxes if you have a chance**

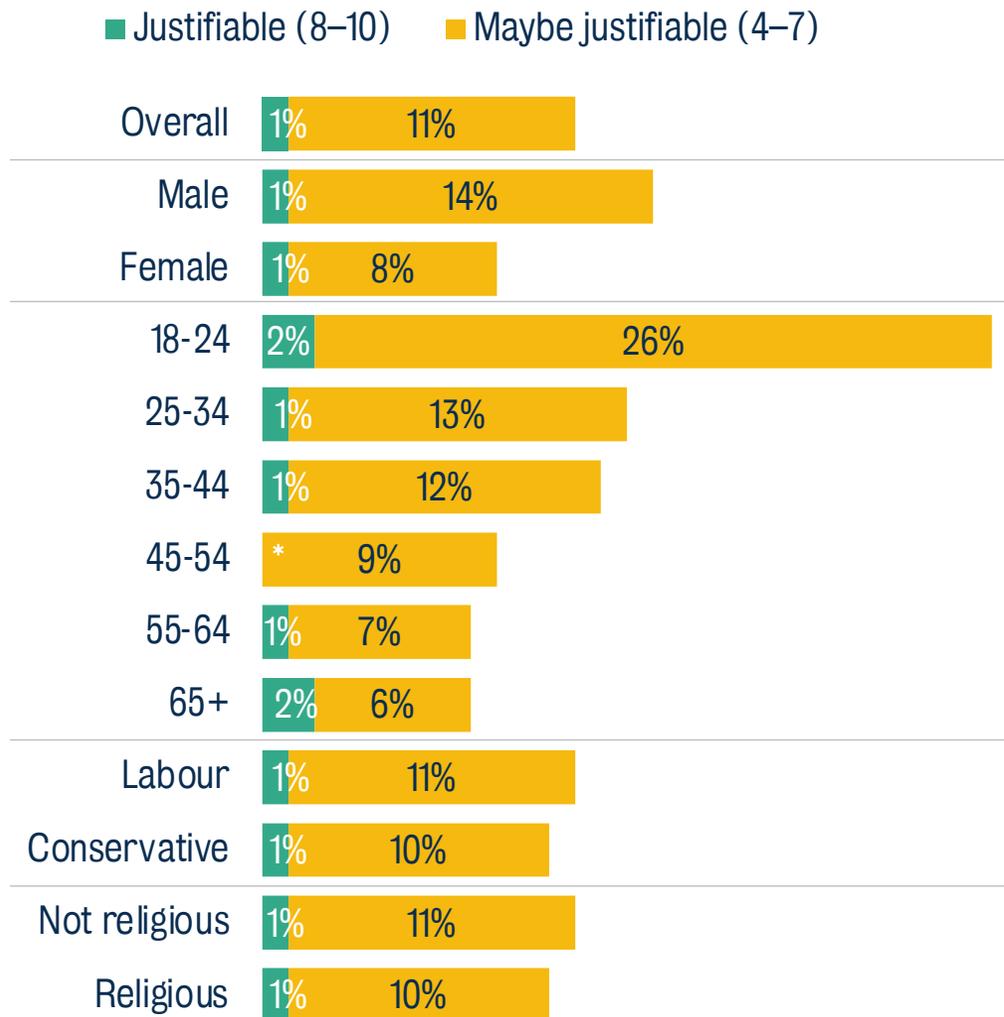


There is virtually no difference in views on cheating taxes by political affiliation – but there is by age

Labour (12%) and Conservative (11%) voters are effectively both equally likely to say it may be justifiable to cheat on taxes if you have the chance.

But there is much more of a difference in views on this question by age, with the youngest group – 18-24s – far more likely than all others surveyed to think cheating on taxes is potentially justifiable.

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). **Cheating on taxes if you have a chance (UK)**

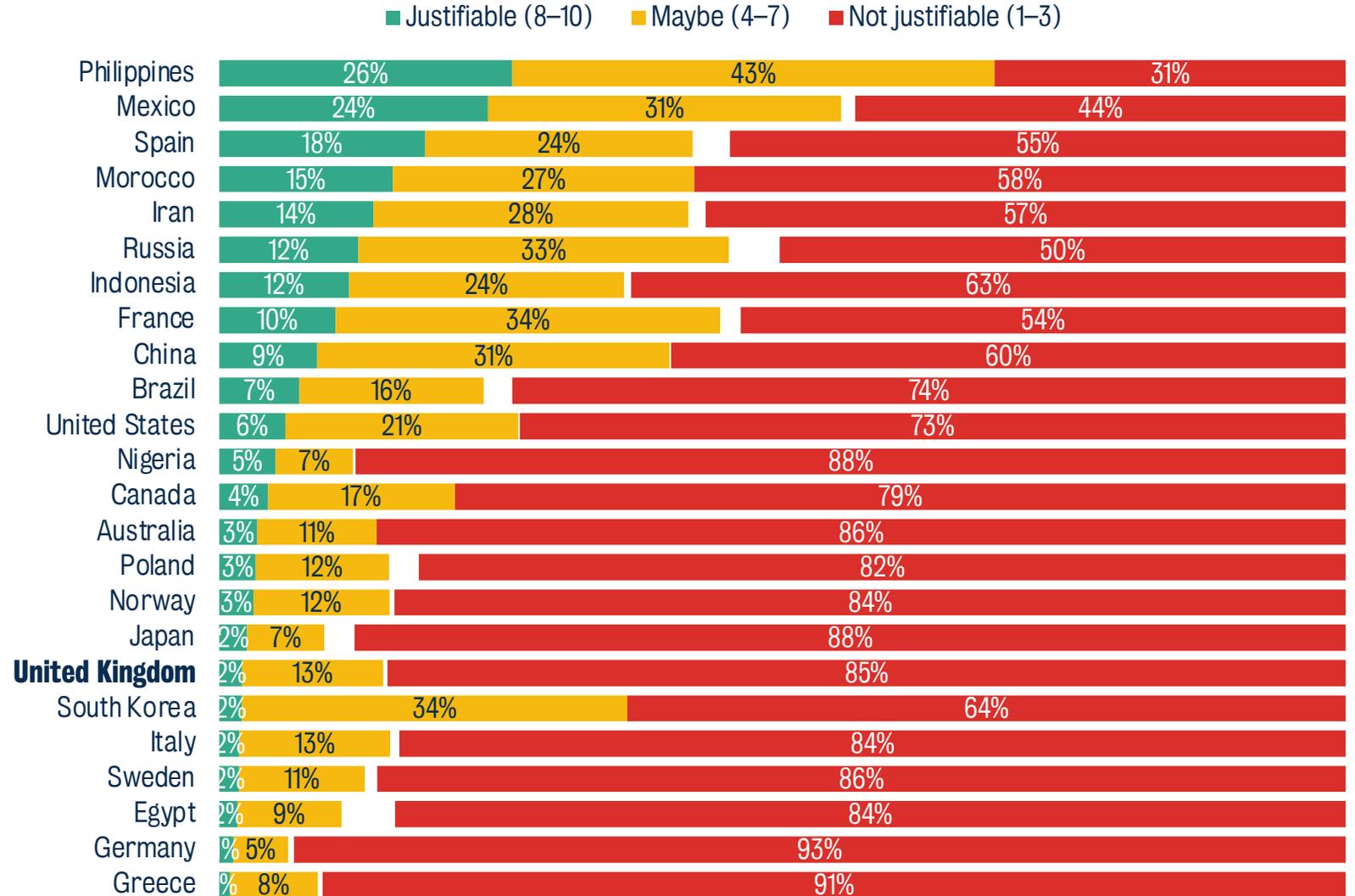


More than eight in 10 think claiming benefits that you're not entitled to cannot be justified

85% of people in the UK believe it is not justifiable to claim government benefits to which you are not entitled, while 15% think is at least potentially justifiable.

Again, those in the Philippines (69%) are by far the most likely to think that such behaviour is at least maybe justifiable, including a quarter (26%) who take a much more definite view that it can be permissible.

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). **Claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled**



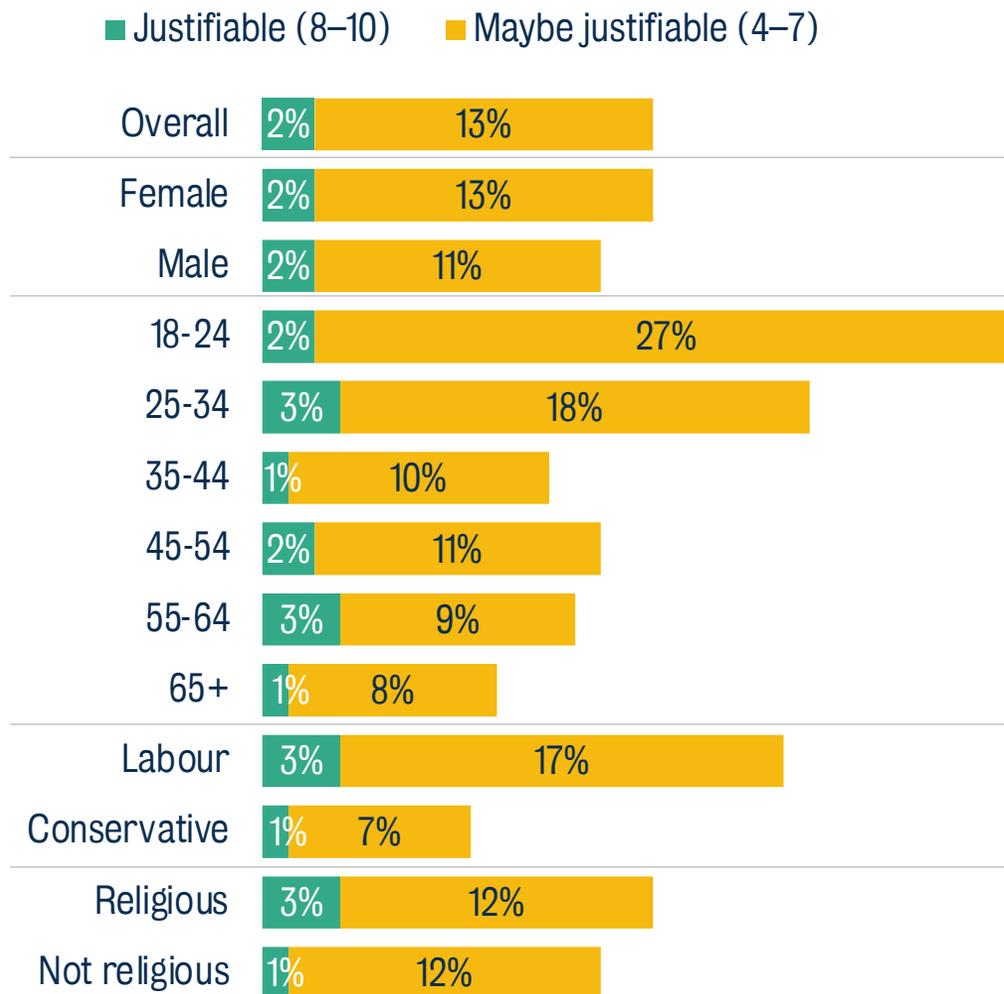
UK base: 3,056 people in the UK aged 18+, surveyed 1 Mar–9 Sept 2022. Other countries all surveyed in wave 7 of WVS at various points between 2017 and 2022. See [WVSA website](#) for sample information

Younger people and Labour voters are most sympathetic to people claiming benefits they're not entitled to

Labour voters (20%) are more than twice as likely as their Conservative counterparts (8%) to say that claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled is at least potentially justifiable.

And again, 18-24s (29%) stand out as by far the most likely to think such behaviour is at least possibly justifiable, while those aged 25 to 34 (21%) are also more likely than older groups to hold this view.

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). **Claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled (UK)**



7. Technical details



Technical details

Ipsos interviewed a random probability sample of 3,056 adults aged 18+ across the UK. This included respondents in England (1,645) and boost samples in Scotland (523), Wales (437) and Northern Ireland (446). Data has been weighted by region, education and age interlocked with gender to be nationally representative. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic respondents were able to complete the survey either through a face-to-face survey (1,509 completes), an interviewer-led video interview through MS Teams (86), or through either a self-completion paper survey (592) or an online push-to-web follow-up (869). Fieldwork ran from 1 March to 9 September 2022. Ipsos is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

Further information on the sampling methodology for other countries included in this report is available via the [World Values Survey Association website](#).

Unweighted sample sizes for UK nations	
England	1,645
Northern Ireland	446
Scotland	523
Wales	437
Region unknown	5
Total	3,056

Unweighted subgroup sample sizes	
Age	
18-24	199
25-34	438
35-44	467
45-54	452
55-64	494
65+	835
Gender	
Female	1,695
Male	1,328
Voting intention	
Conservative	564
Labour	711
Religious status	
Religious	1,412
Not religious	1,548

The **UK** *in the* **WORLD** **VALUES** **SURVEY**

For more information, contact:

Bobby Duffy

WVS Principal Investigator,
Professor of Public Policy and
Director of the Policy Institute,
King's College London

bobby.duffy@kcl.ac.uk

[@bobbyduffyking](https://twitter.com/bobbyduffyking)

[@policyatking](https://twitter.com/policyatking)

kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute

[@WVS_Survey](https://twitter.com/WVS_Survey)

worldvaluessurvey.org

WVS team at the Policy Institute,
King's College London:

Suzanne Hall

Director of Engagement

Kirstie Hewlett

Research Fellow

George May

Head of Communications

Zara Regan

Research Assistant

Becca Shepard

Digital Communications Officer

Paul Stoneman

Research Fellow

James Wright

Quantitative Research Assistant

Co-investigators:

David Halpern

Chief Executive of the Behavioural
Insights Team

Roger Mortimore

Professor of Public Opinion and
Political Analysis at King's College
London

Antonio Silva

Head of Social Cohesion at the
behavioural Insights Team

David Voas

Professor of Social Science at the
UCL Social Research Institute