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Woke, cancel culture and white privilege – the shifting terms of the UK's “culture war”

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**We are feeling more
divided by “culture wars”**

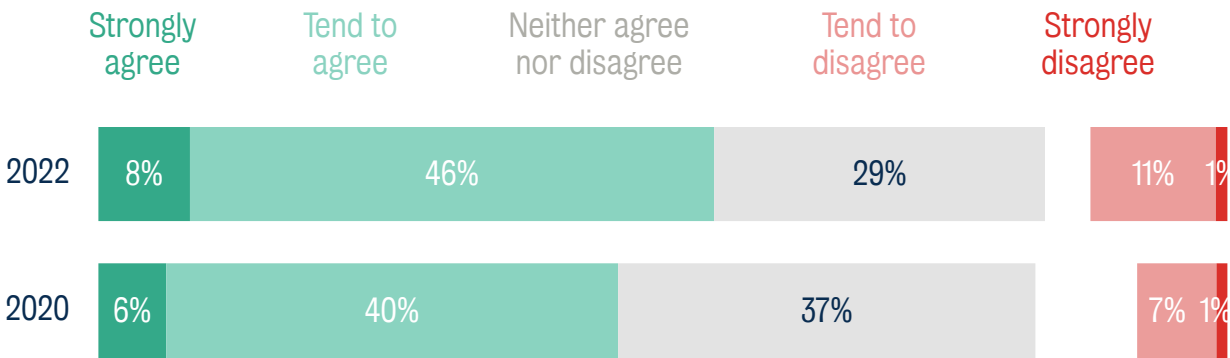
A majority now believe culture wars are dividing the UK

54% of the public now agree the UK is divided by “culture wars” – up from 46% at the end of 2020.

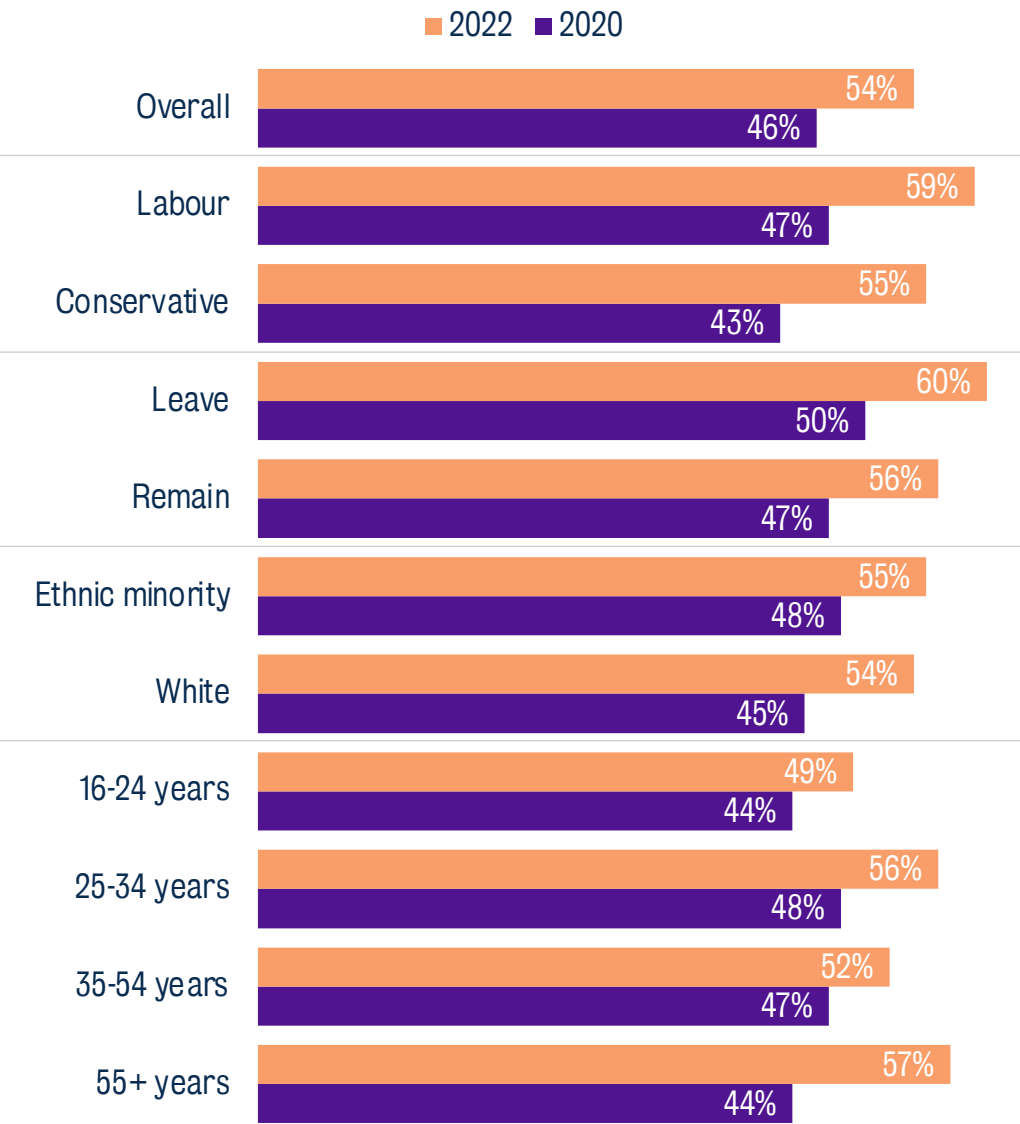
Some of the biggest increases in agreement can be seen among people who voted for one of the two main parties at the 2019 general election, as well as among those aged 55 and above, 57% of whom now feel culture wars are dividing the country, compared with 44% previously.

At the same time, three in 10 people still say they neither agree nor disagree that these divisions exist, and there has been a slight increase in the share of people who disagree, from 8% to 12%.

From what you see on TV, in the news media and online, and in your conversations with others, to what extent do you agree or disagree that the UK is divided by “culture wars”?



% who agree the UK is divided by “culture wars”



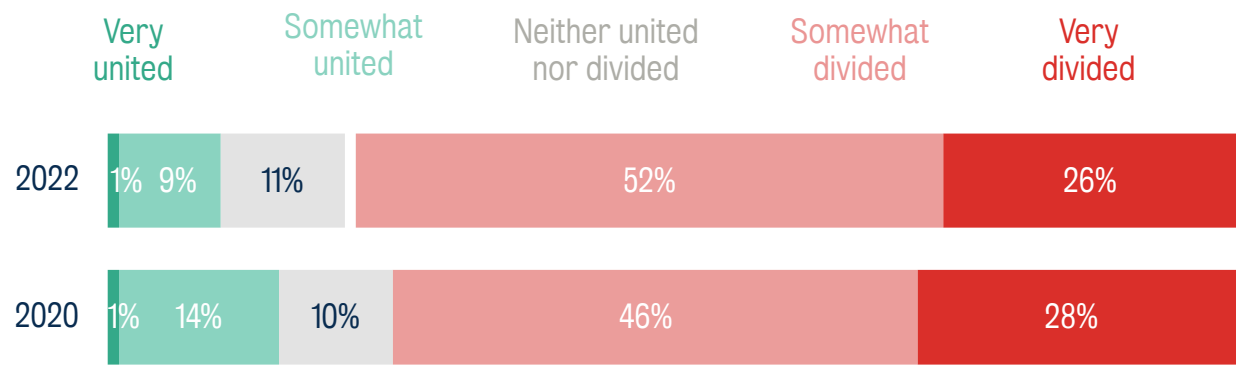
Three-quarters of the public think the UK is divided – but some groups are more likely to feel this way than others

78% of the UK public now believe the UK is somewhat or very divided, compared with 74% in 2020. Back then, only 15% thought the UK was united, but this has since fallen further, to 10%.

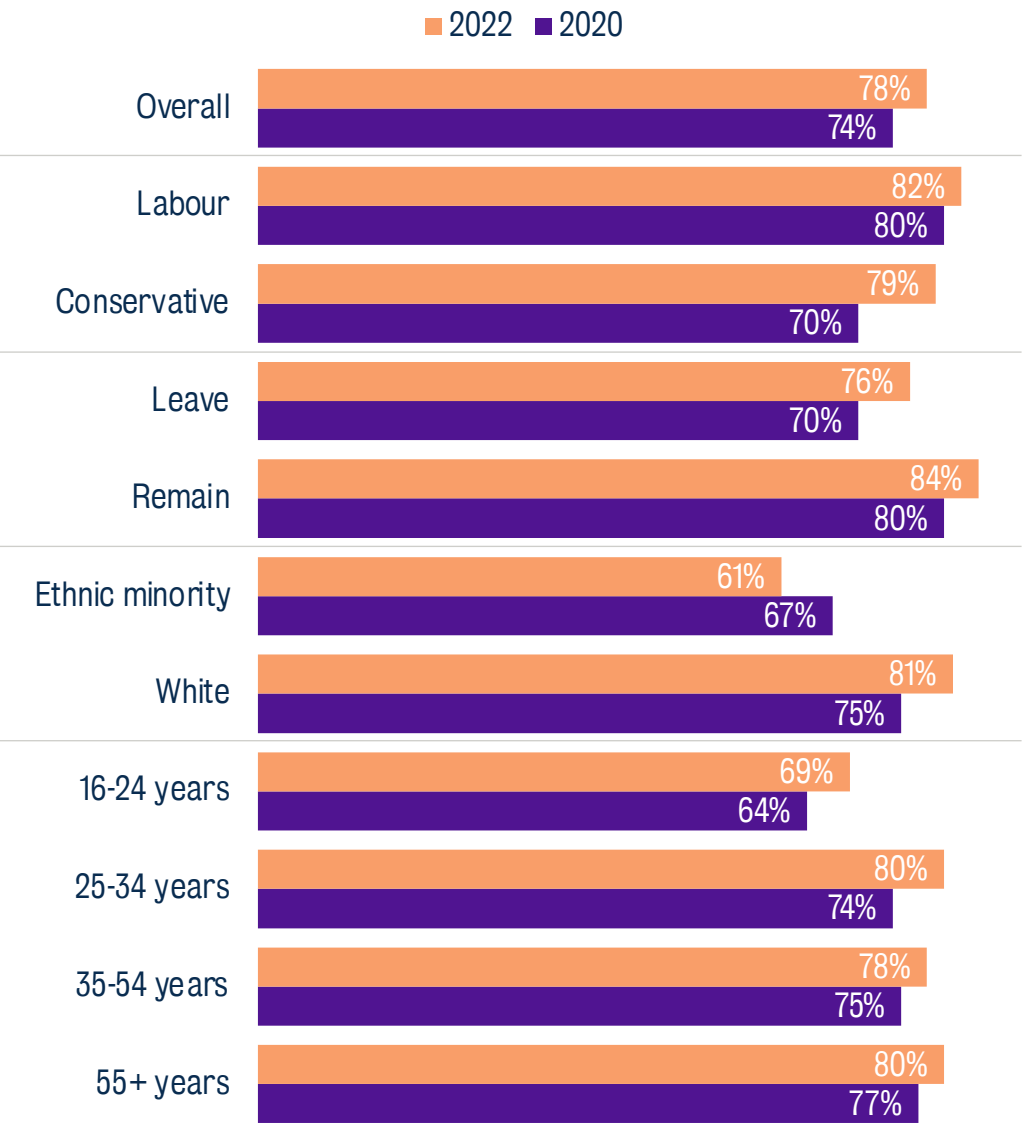
Those from a minority ethnic background (61%) are much less likely than white people (81%) to feel the UK is divided. And since 2020, the proportion who hold this view has grown slightly among white people, while declining slightly among people from ethnic minorities.

Around seven in 10 of the youngest group surveyed – those aged 16 to 24 – say they feel the UK is divided, compared with around eight in 10 who feel the same among the other age categories.

How united or divided does the UK feel to you these days?



% who feel the UK is “somewhat” or “very” divided



UK newspaper coverage of the term “culture wars” continued to grow exponentially in 2021

A detailed content analysis of 2021 UK newspaper articles indicates how media conversations relate to public opinion on culture war issues.

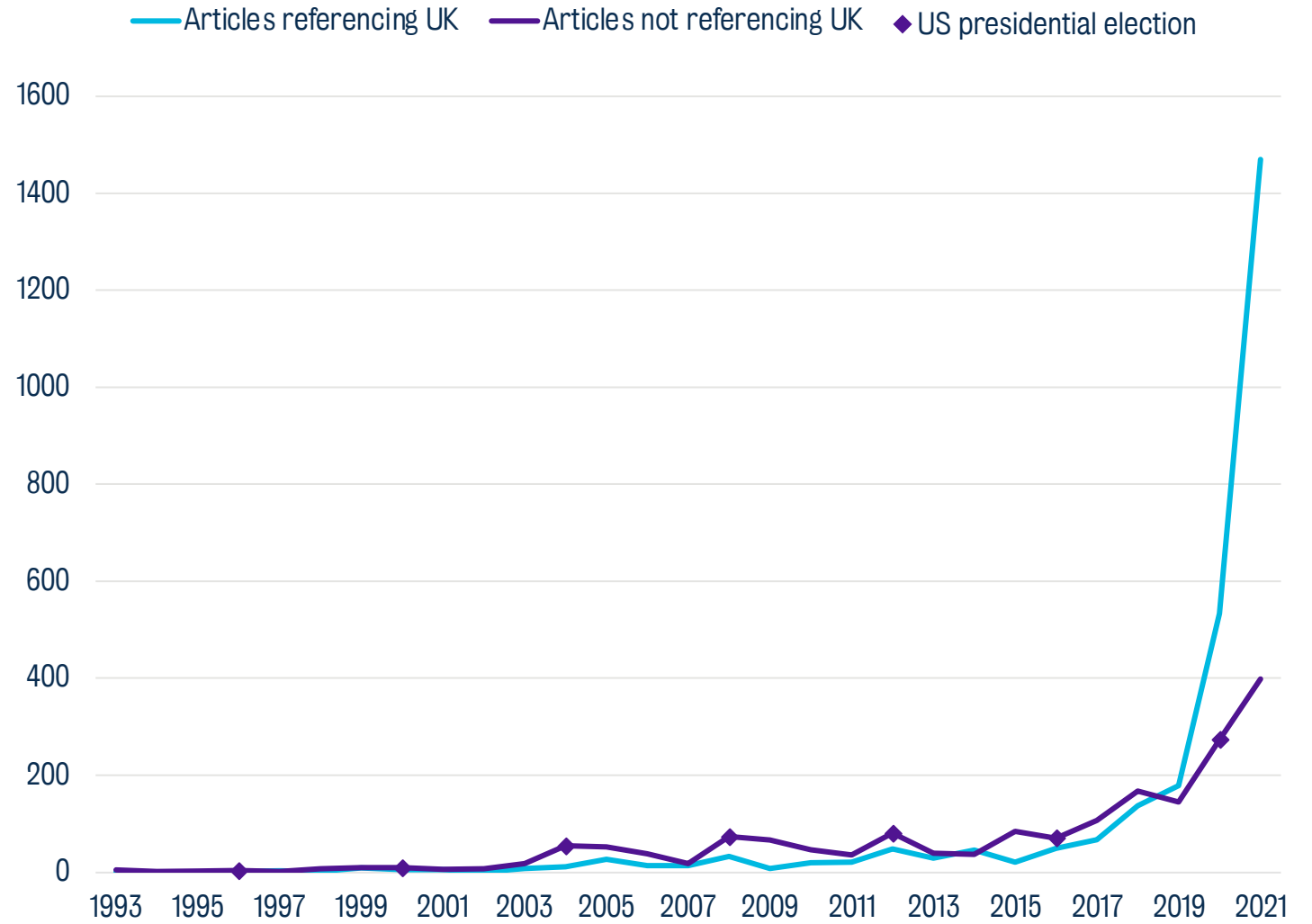
The clear trend that emerges from this is the continued exponential rise in the use of the term “culture wars” in reference to the UK.

There had already been a huge increase in such mentions in 2020, when there were 534 articles talking about UK culture wars – up from 178 in 2019 – but this has been dwarfed by the rise to 1,470 articles in 2021.

We have moved very quickly from UK media discussions of culture wars mainly relating to the situation in the US, to a very clear focus on UK-based cultural conflicts.

In that context, it is not surprising that we’ve seen a significant increase in public belief that the UK is divided by culture wars.

Number of articles mentioning “culture wars” in UK newspapers, by those referencing the UK or other countries



Source: Nexis (n=4,631). Country of focus primarily identified by headline; where it was not possible to determine geography from the headline, the full text was checked to determine location. The count for articles referencing the UK also includes some articles where other countries are discussed alongside the UK.

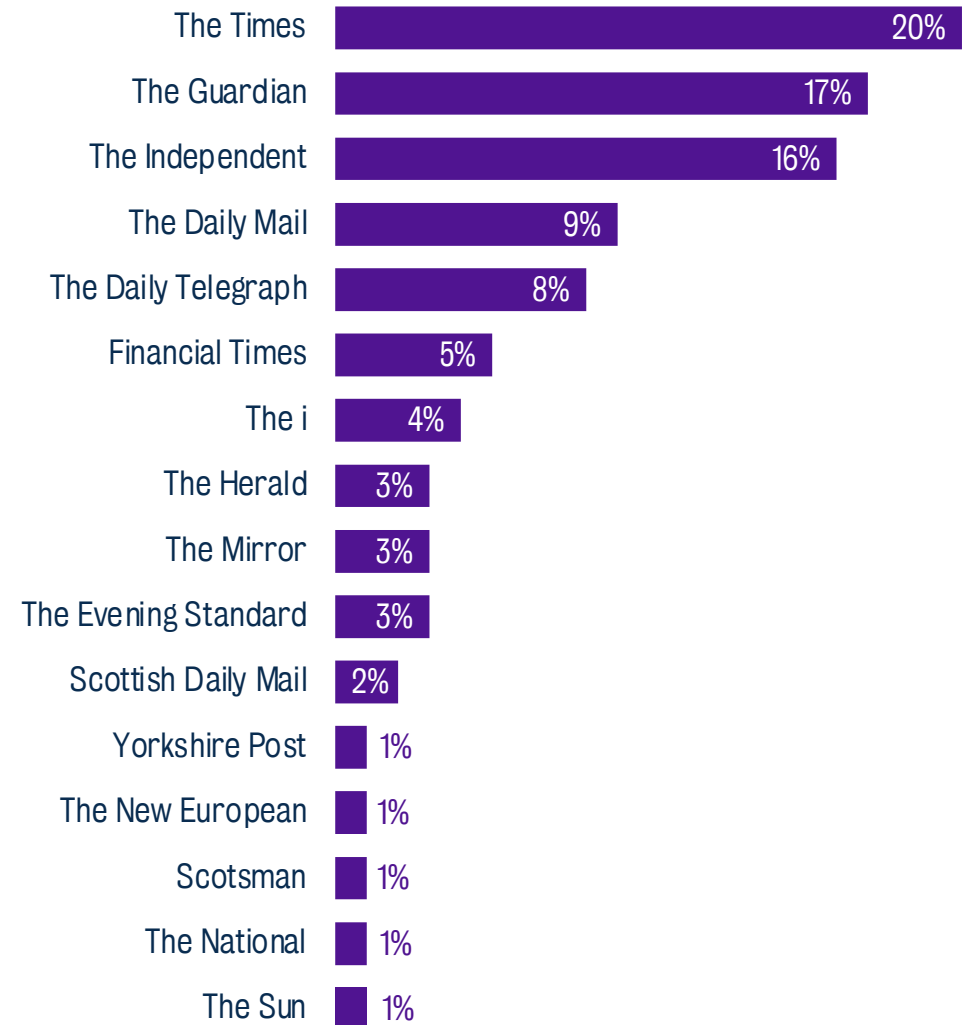
The term “culture wars” is mainly used in broadsheet newspapers

As we found in our last report, the term “culture wars” is most widely used in broadsheet newspapers such as the Times, Guardian and Independent.

There was, however, a shift in 2021, with the Times overtaking the Guardian as the outlet most likely to use the term. This reflects a trajectory seen in the previous study, where the Guardian had been using the term for longer while the Times was rapidly increasing its use.

“Culture wars” are very rarely mentioned in tabloids – for example, the Sun accounts for just 1% of the term’s total use across UK news outlets, reflecting a tabloid preference for other, related terms such as “cancel culture”.

% of 2021 UK newspaper articles mentioning “culture wars”, by title (top 16 shown)



Source: Nexis (n=2,135; 521 duplicates removed); titles grouped from Nexis metadata.
Titles include Sunday editions, supplements and online (eg Sunday Times and Mail Online).



“Woke” and “cancel culture”

are increasingly prominent terms

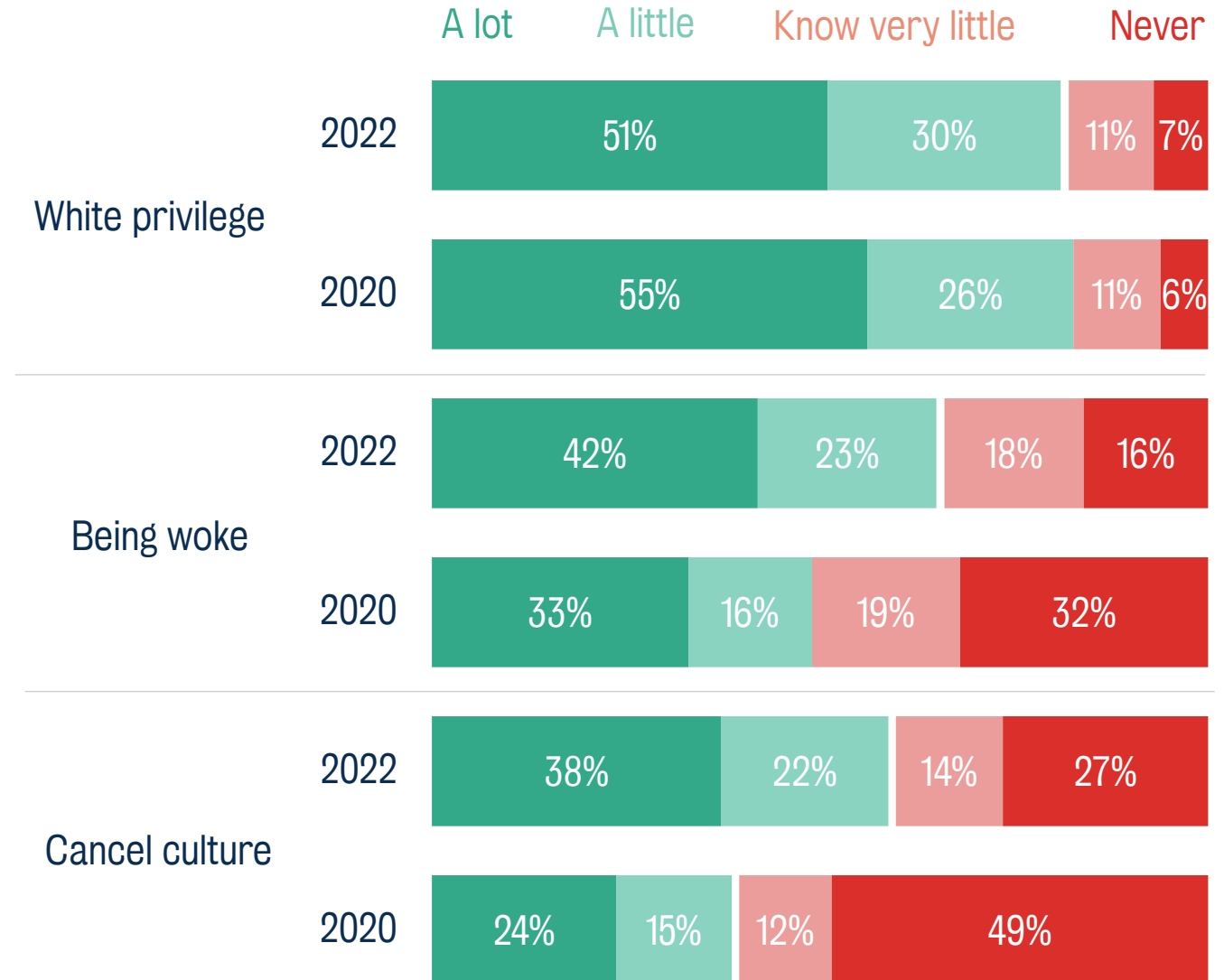
There has been a big growth in awareness of the terms “being woke” and “cancel culture”

65% of the public now say they’ve heard a lot or a little about the term **being woke** – up from 49% in 2020. Reflecting this growing awareness, the proportion who say they have never heard of the phrase has halved, falling from 32% to 16% in the past two years.

Similarly, in 2020, 39% said they had heard a lot or a little about **cancel culture**, but this has now risen to 60%. Around a quarter of people say they’ve never heard of the term, compared with around half two years ago.

By contrast, public awareness of the term **white privilege** has remained stable, with 81% saying they’ve heard at least a little about it – virtually unchanged from the 82% who said the same in 2020.

How much, if anything, have you heard or read about the following terms or phrases?



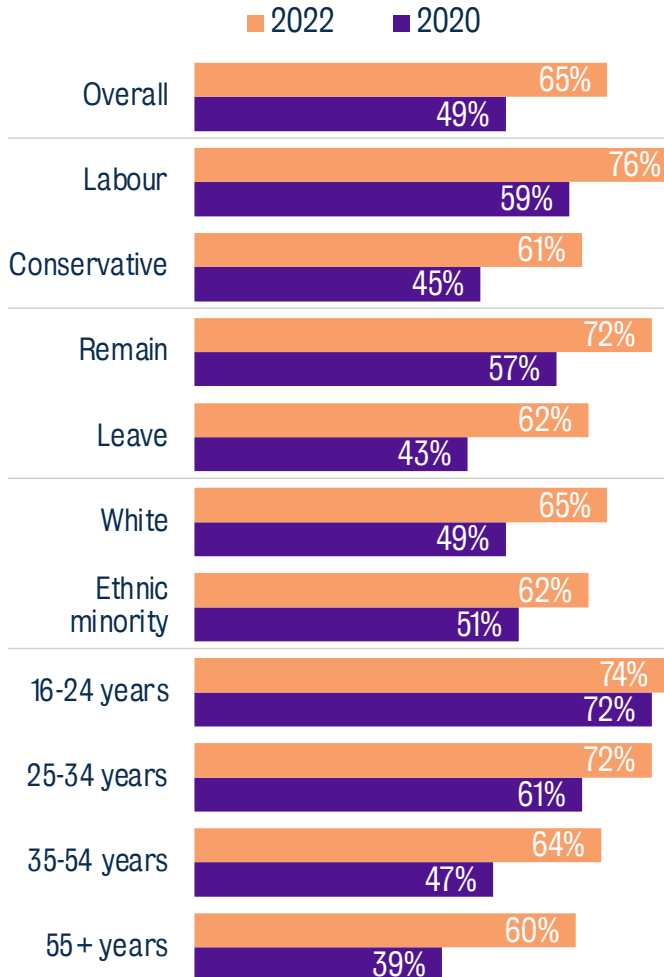
Older people have seen some of the biggest increases in awareness of the terms “being woke” and “cancel culture” since 2020

Awareness of the term “being woke” has grown across nearly all groups surveyed.

Among the different age categories polled, older people have seen the biggest change in recognition, with 60% of those aged 55 and over saying they’ve heard a lot or little about it, compared with 39% in 2020. However, younger age groups are still more likely to be aware of the phrase.

There have also been large increases in awareness across the political spectrum. For example, 76% of 2019 Labour voters have now heard at least a little about being woke – up from 59% – and awareness has risen by a similar level among Conservative voters, going from 45% to 61%.

% who have read or heard a lot or a little about being woke

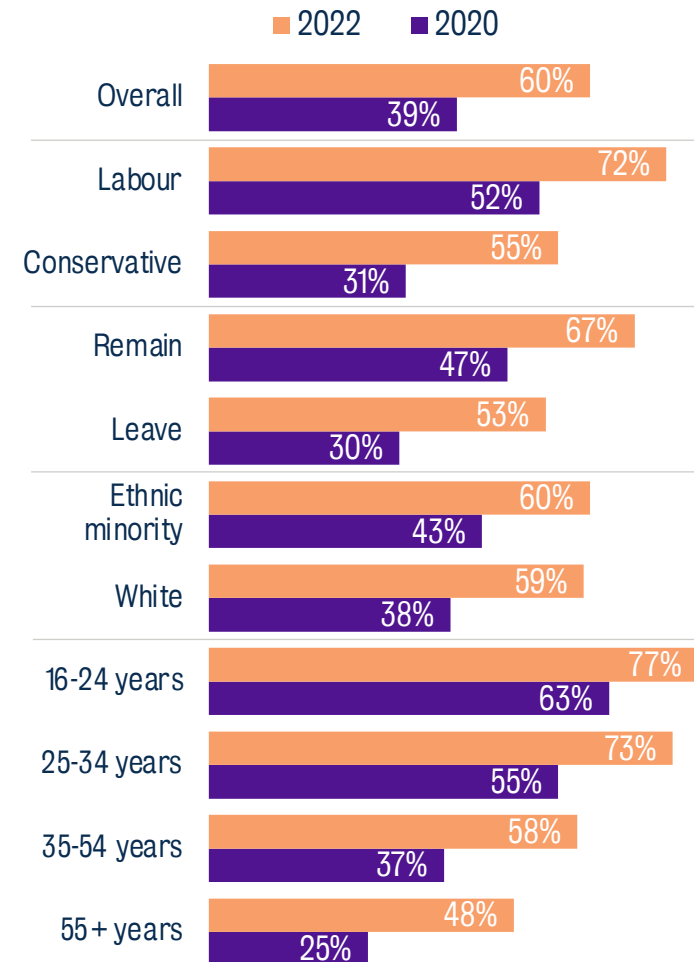


As with being woke, there have been large increases in recognition of the concept of cancel culture.

However, compared with that phrase, there is still a particularly steep age gradient in awareness, ranging from 77% among 16- to 24-year-olds to 48% among those aged 55 and above.

Looking across both issues, it is groups who had lower awareness of the terms in 2020 that have seen the biggest increases in awareness.

% who have read or heard a lot or a little about cancel culture

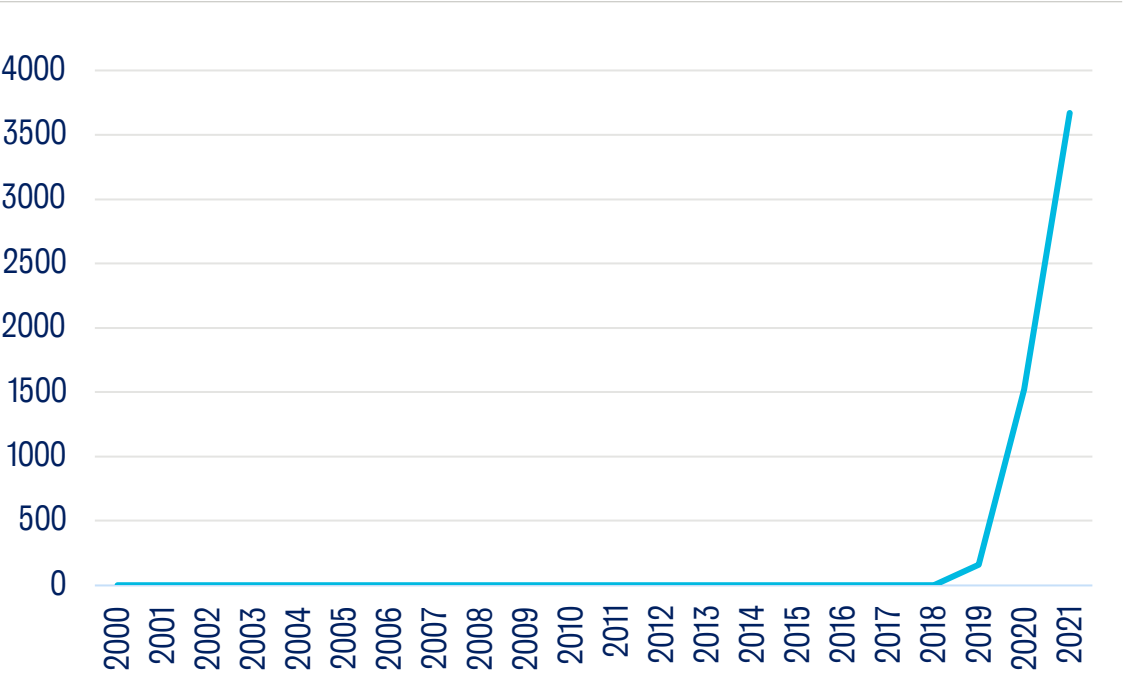


The growth in the use of “cancel culture” in UK newspapers dwarfs “culture wars”

The term “cancel culture” is a very recent addition to the language used in UK newspapers – in fact its first mention was only in 2018, when it was used just six times in the whole year.

Since then, there has been a staggering rise in coverage of cancel culture, to a high of 3,670 articles that included the term in 2021.

Number of articles mentioning “cancel culture” in UK newspapers, 2000–2021



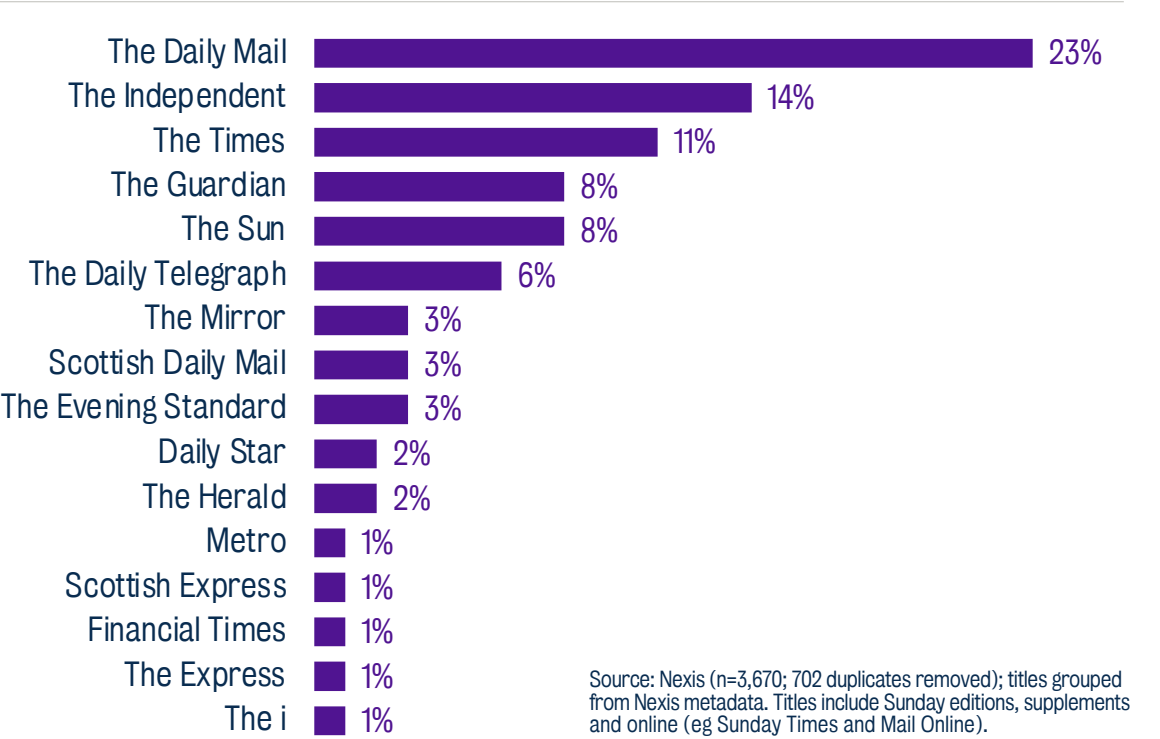
Source: ‘Cancel culture’ Nexis (n=5,349; 702 duplicates removed for 2021 count)

“Cancel culture” is more commonly used in tabloid newspapers than “culture wars”

The Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday was by far the top UK newspaper mentioning cancel culture in 2021, accounting for 23% of all uses of the term.

Broadsheets still frequently use the term – particularly the Independent (14%), the Times (11%) and the Guardian (8%) – but the Sun (8%) comes next, employing the term far more than it does “culture wars”.

% of 2021 UK newspaper articles mentioning “cancel culture”, by title (top 16 shown)



Source: Nexis (n=3,670; 702 duplicates removed); titles grouped from Nexis metadata. Titles include Sunday editions, supplements and online (eg Sunday Times and Mail Online).

“Woke” is increasingly seen as an insult

36% of people would consider it an insult if someone called them woke – up from 24% in 2020. Previously, the public were split on whether the term should be seen as a compliment or insult, but by 36% to 26% they are now more likely to view it as insulting.

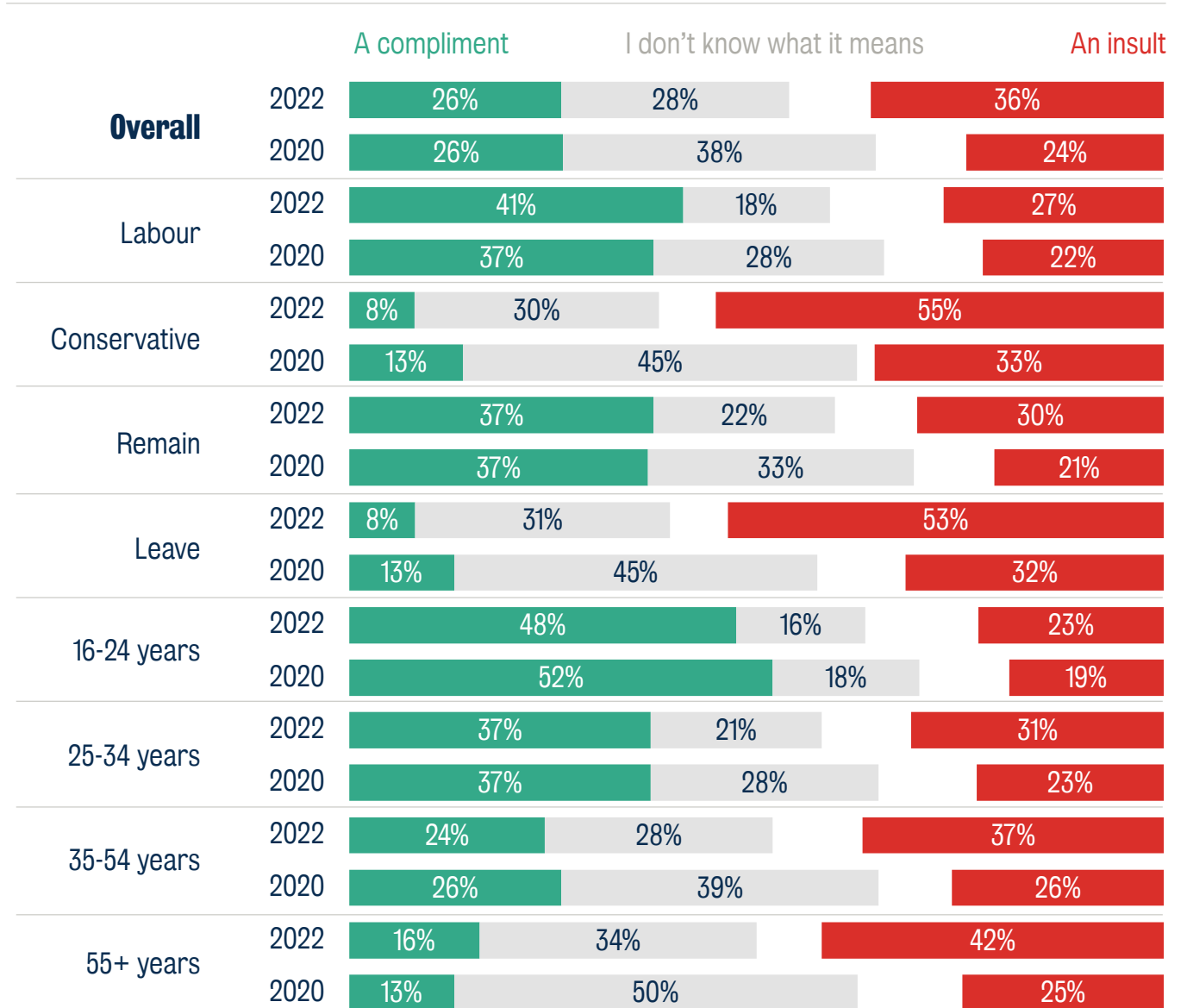
Changes among particular groups have driven this trend – for example, the share of 2019 Conservative voters who think “woke” is an insult has risen hugely, from 33% to 55%, with a similar shift seen among Leave supporters.

By contrast, 41% of 2019 Labour voters consider the term a compliment – a slight increase on 37% in 2020.

Perceptions of “woke” have become at least slightly more negative among all age groups surveyed, but especially the oldest: in 2020, 25% of people aged 55 and above considered the term an insult, but this now risen to 42%.

The proportion of people who consider being woke a compliment has remained at 26%, while the share of those who say they don’t know what it means has fallen from 38% to 28%.

If someone described you as “woke” would you consider it...



2020 Base: 2,834 UK adults aged 16+, interviewed 26 Nov-2 Dec 2020

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

Many people struggle to say what the term “woke” makes them think of

Among those who report having heard of the term “woke”, a quarter (26%) struggle to say what issues it actually brings to mind, not providing a response, saying that it doesn’t make them think of anything, or that they don’t know.

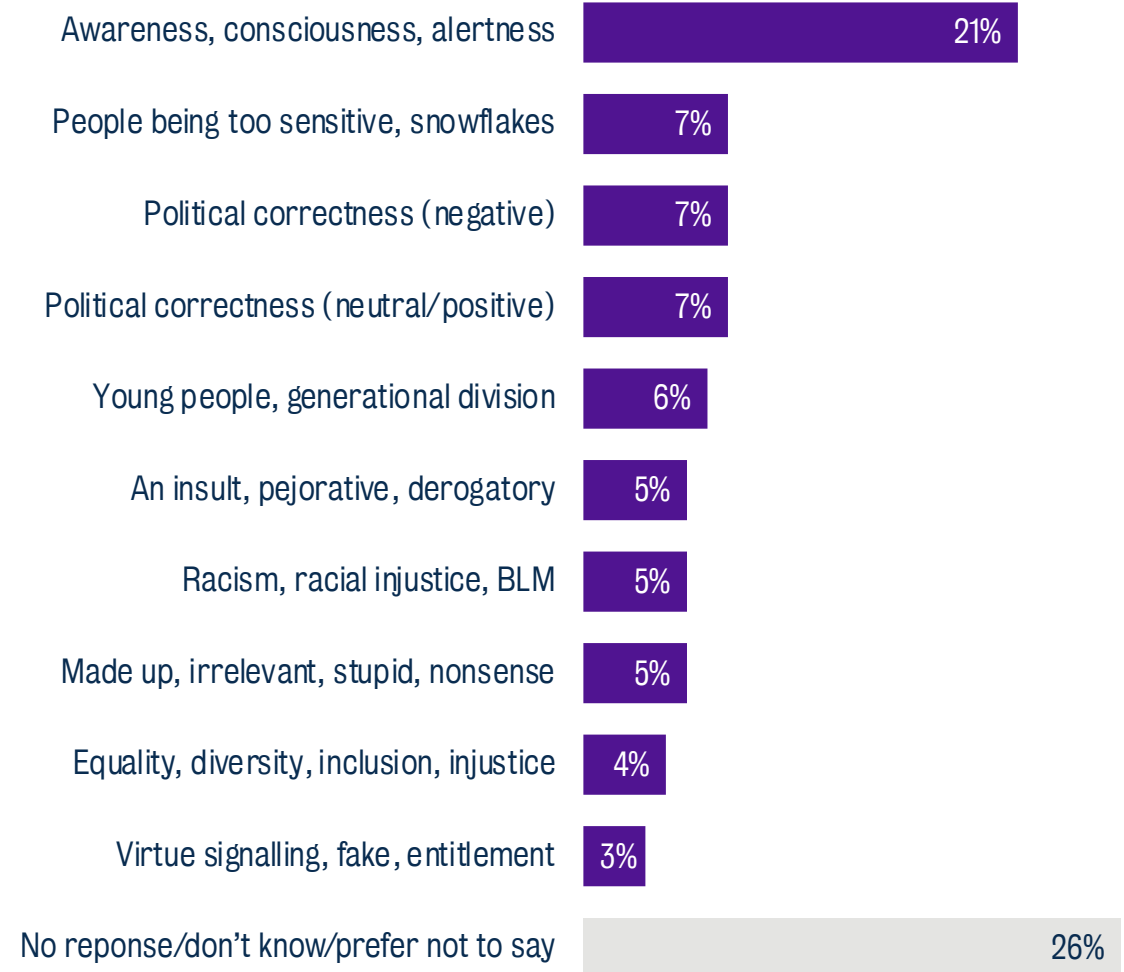
A fifth (21%) associate the term with “awareness”, “consciousness”, and/or “alertness”. These descriptions were often used alongside issues relating to injustice or inequality.

14% link the term to people being “too sensitive”, sometimes referring to others as “snowflakes” or to an inability to see humour.

7% mention “political correctness” in a negative way, in relation to it going into “overdrive” or people being too easily offended. A further 7% link it to political correctness in a neutral or positive way.

Some think of generational divisions, with 6% associating “woke” with being young, while a smaller set of responses cover specific issues that people are reminded of upon hearing the term – such as racism or equality – or more negative behaviours, including “virtue signalling” and/or being “fake”.

What sorts of issues do you think of when we say “woke”?*
(Responses coded according to topics mentioned; top 10 issues shown)



News articles using the term “woke” most often refer to politicians, the charity sector and the media

From our selected samples of 2021 newspaper articles that used the term “woke”, there were clear patterns in who was seen to be the main actors in, or subjects of, woke-related debates:

- **28% of “woke” articles reported on politicians**

The debate around woke was attributed frequently to the culture wars in the Labour and Conservative parties, as well as more widely across the House of Commons: *“Downing Street sought to redefine the word ‘woke’ yesterday against a backdrop of increasing confusion at the top of government over the wisdom of its culture wars strategy.”* – Maguire & Grylls, the Times, 22/01/21.

- **18% of “woke” articles reported on charities and the Charity Commission**

The Charity Commission and the National Trust were the focus of these articles, following the publication of the “Colonialism and historic slavery report” by the Trust in September 2020: *“The director of the National Trust has insisted that she is ‘not woke’ after commissioning a controversial report linking its properties to slavery and colonialism.”* – Lyons, the Daily Telegraph, 25/03/21.

- **13% of “woke” articles reported on the media**

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the increasing media focus on culture war-related terms, the media itself was often the subject of discussion in UK newspaper articles that used the term woke: *“You cannot move in the media for the word ‘woke’.”* – Hassan, the National, 06/07/21.

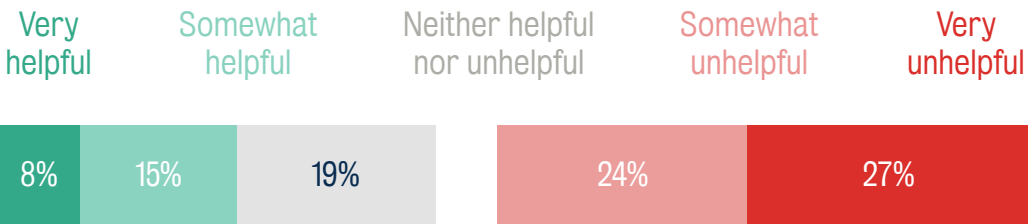
The public are most likely to think the term “white privilege” is unhelpful – but views vary by ethnicity, age and political support

51% of the UK public think “white privilege” is an unhelpful term when thinking about race relations in Britain today – more than double the 23% who do see it as helpful.

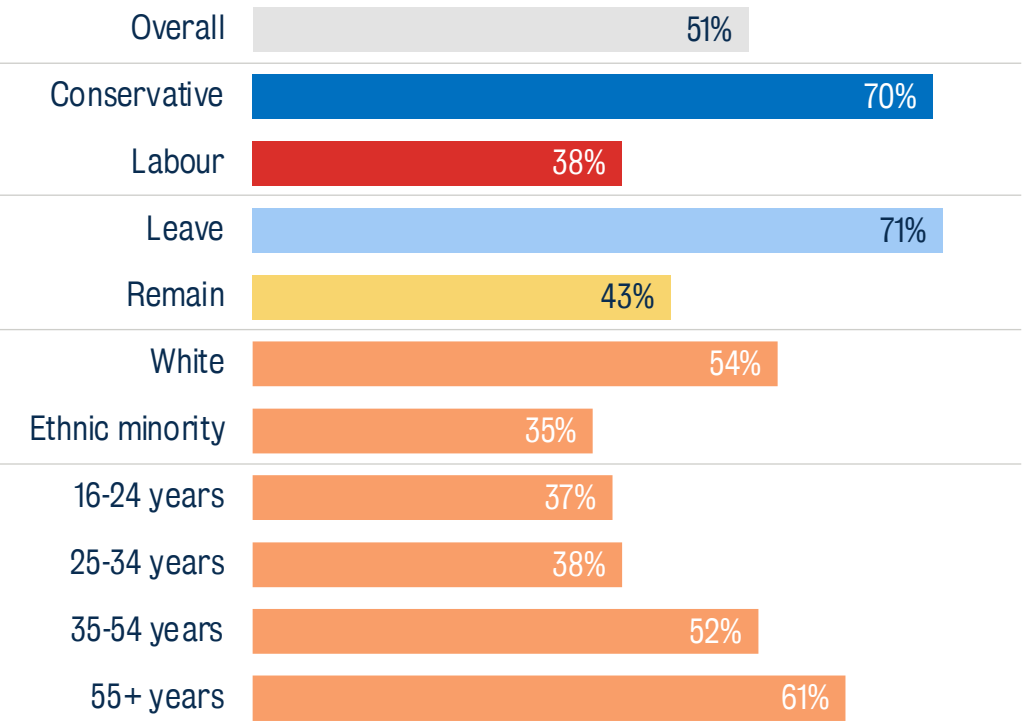
There are significant demographic and political differences in views. In particular, white people (54%) are much more likely than people from ethnic minorities (35%) to feel the term is unhelpful, while 70% of 2019 Conservative voters also feel this way, compared with 38% of Labour voters.

Views also differ by age – for example, 61% of those aged 55 and over believe “white privilege” to be unhelpful, far higher than the 38% of under-35s who feel the same.

To what extent, if at all, do you personally find the term “white privilege” helpful or unhelpful when thinking about race relations in Britain today?



% who say the term “white privilege” is unhelpful



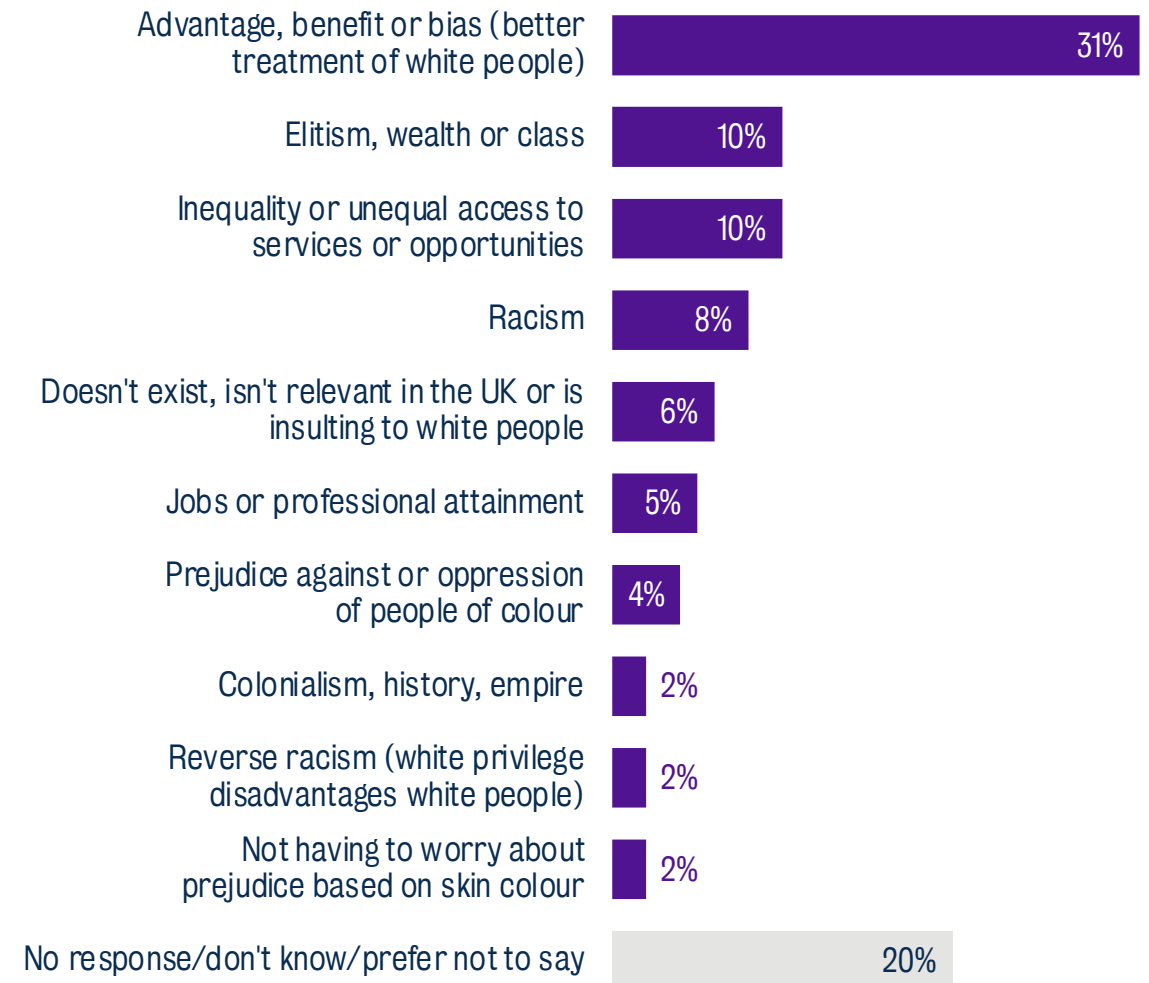
The term “white privilege” is slightly more likely to bring to mind specific issues than “woke”

Among those who say they have heard of the term, 31% associate “white privilege” with white people generally receiving better treatment in society, while the top issue associated with “woke” was named by 21%.

10% are more specific about the nature of this better treatment, linking white privilege to class issues, with reference to terms such as “elitism” and “wealth”, while another 10% identify inequality.

6% of responses outline a rejection of the term as not being relevant to the UK and/or an insult to white people, while smaller proportions think of jobs or professional attainment (5%) or prejudice or oppression of people of colour (4%).

What sorts of issues do you think of when we say “white privilege”?*
(Responses coded according to topics mentioned; top 10 issues shown)



Coverage of “white privilege” has also grown since 2019 – but dropped back from its peak in 2020

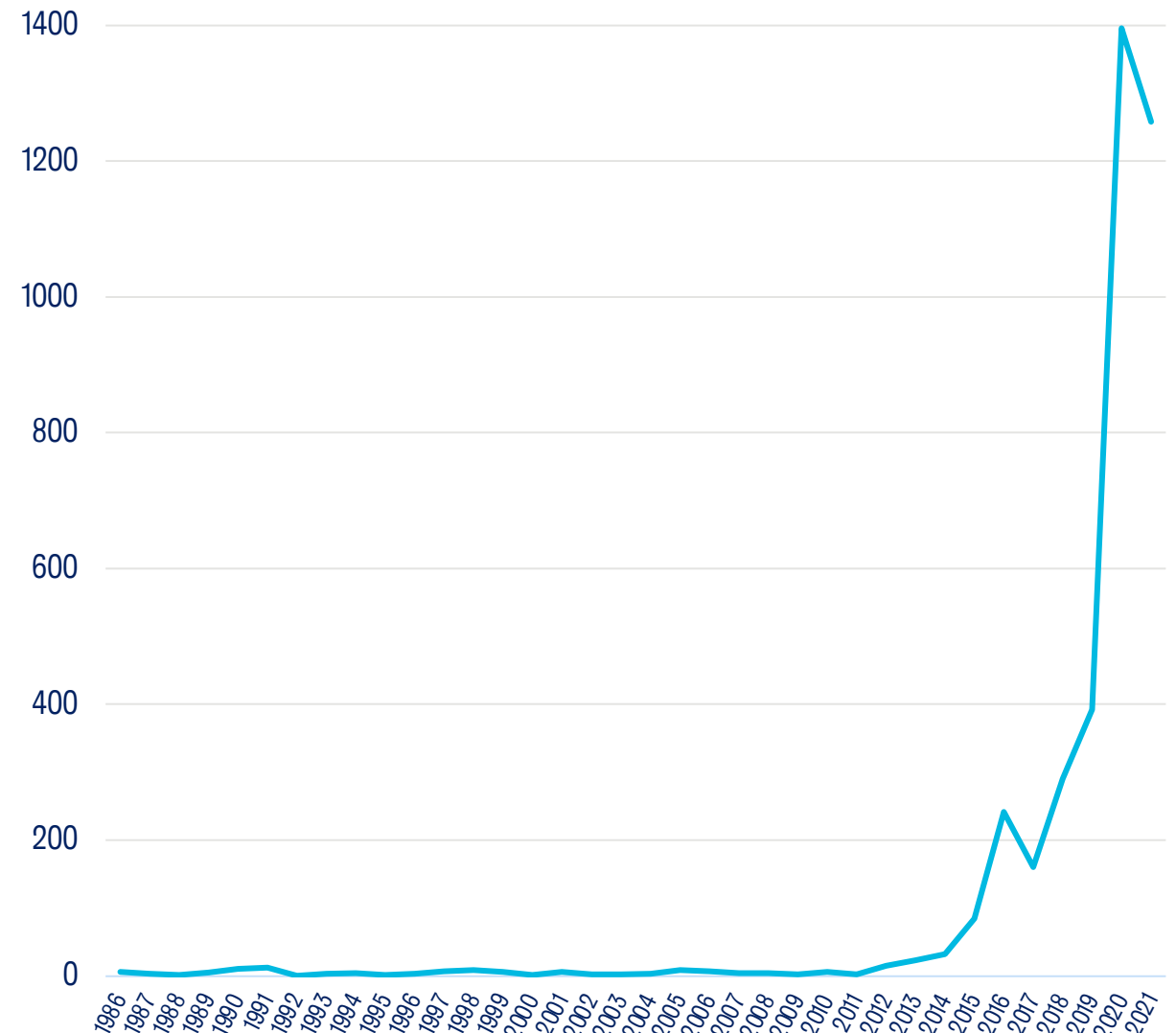
Following the trend seen with articles referencing cancel culture and culture wars, mentions of white privilege have also steeply increased in recent years. In 2019, there were 392 news articles that employed the term, before a three-fold increase in 2020, when the number reached a high of 1,396, followed by a slight fall to 1,258 in 2021.

The first peak in the term’s use, in 2016, can perhaps be attributed to a surge in global awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement. But this initial interest has been hugely surpassed, particularly in 2020, which again is likely related to the debates sparked by the protests in the US and globally, including in the UK, following the murder of George Floyd.

However, more detailed coding of a sample of articles from 2021 shows that the use of the term had moved on, focusing on its possible impact in education, often linked to a House of Commons Education Select Committee report which was reported as suggesting “terminology such as ‘white privilege’ may have contributed towards a ‘systemic neglect’ of white working-class pupils” (Fox, Evening Standard, 23/06/21).

Indeed, over half (55%) of all articles mentioning “white privilege” in 2021 were linked to educators, school children and school bodies.

Number of articles mentioning “white privilege” in UK newspapers (1986–2021)



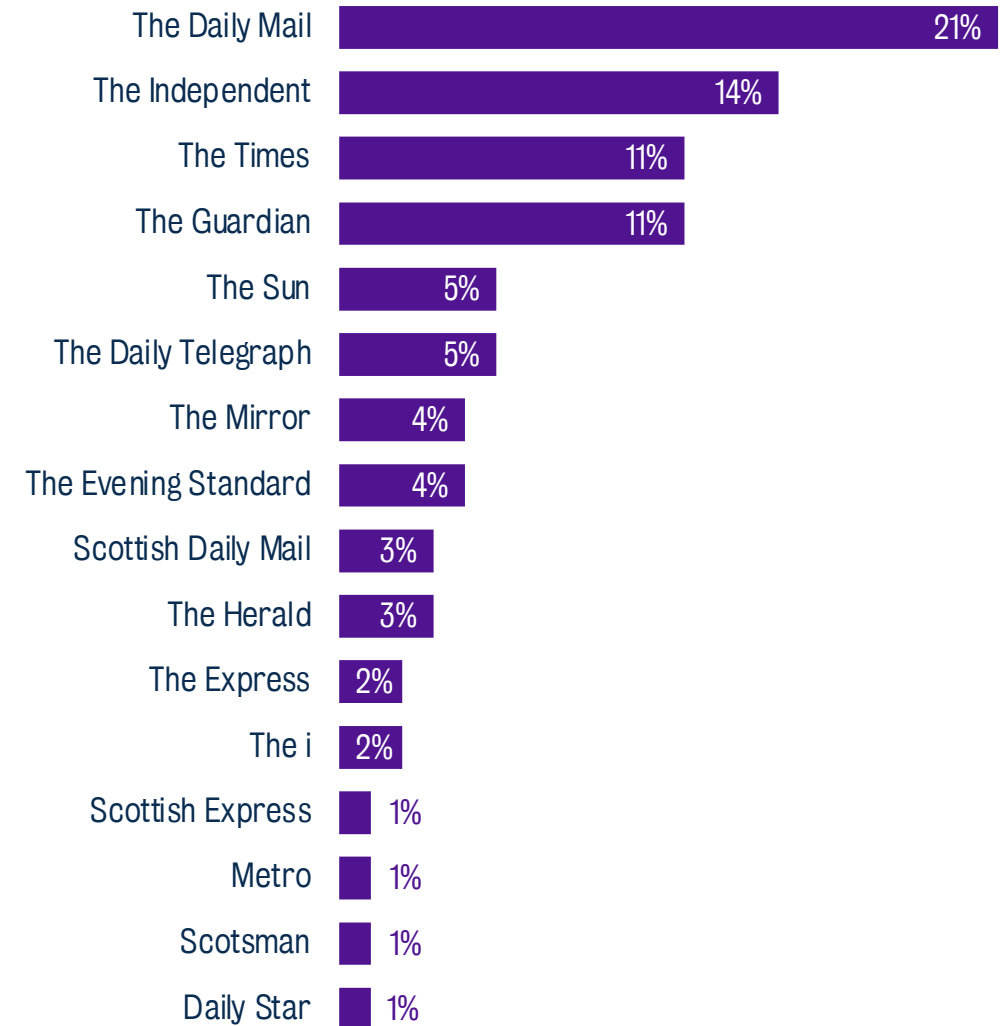
Source: Nexis (n=8,225, duplicates removed)

The term “white privilege” features more in tabloid newspapers than “culture wars”

The top five newspapers publishing articles on white privilege in 2021 are identical to the top five for cancel culture with similar percentages.

The term was mostly frequently mentioned in the Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday (21%), followed by the Independent (14%) and then the Times/Sunday Times and the Guardian, both 11%.

% of 2021 UK newspaper articles mentioning “white privilege”, by title (top 16 shown)



Source: Nexis (n=711; 381 duplicates removed); titles grouped from Nexis metadata.
Titles include Sunday editions, supplements and online (eg Sunday Times and Mail Online).

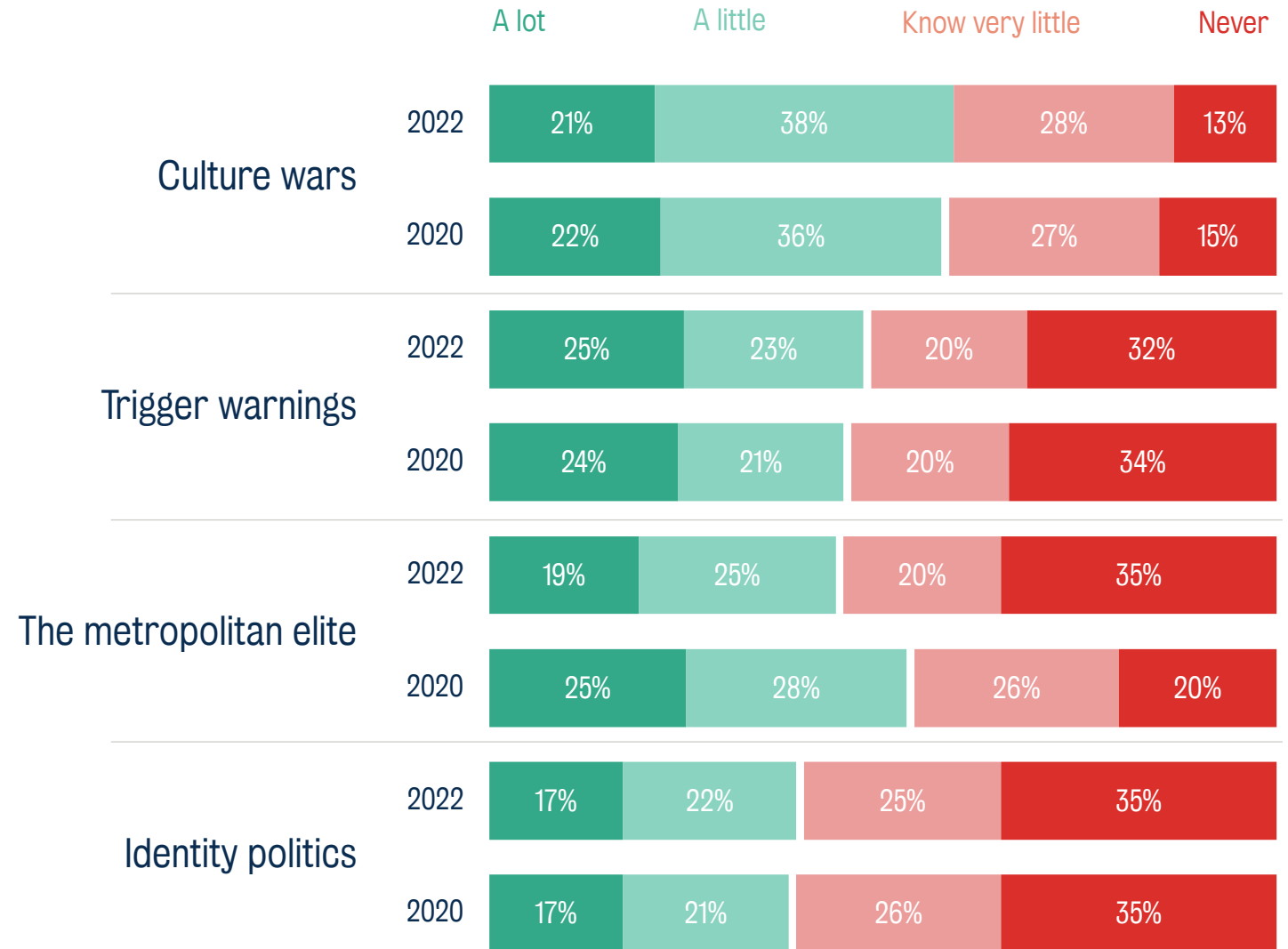
Since 2020, there has been little change in awareness of other terms used in the culture war debate

Awareness of other terms such as “trigger warnings”, “culture wars” and “identity politics” hasn’t changed much since 2020.

One exception is the term “metropolitan elite”, which is seemingly being used less in public discourse, with the proportion saying they have heard a lot or a little about it declining from 53% in 2020 to 44% in 2022.

“Culture wars” is the most widely known term, to 59%, but awareness has remained very stable over the last two years, despite its continued rise in media coverage. This may reflect a switch in focus to other terms, such as “cancel culture” and “woke”, particularly in tabloid discussions of cultural tensions.

How much, if anything, have you heard or read about the following terms or phrases?



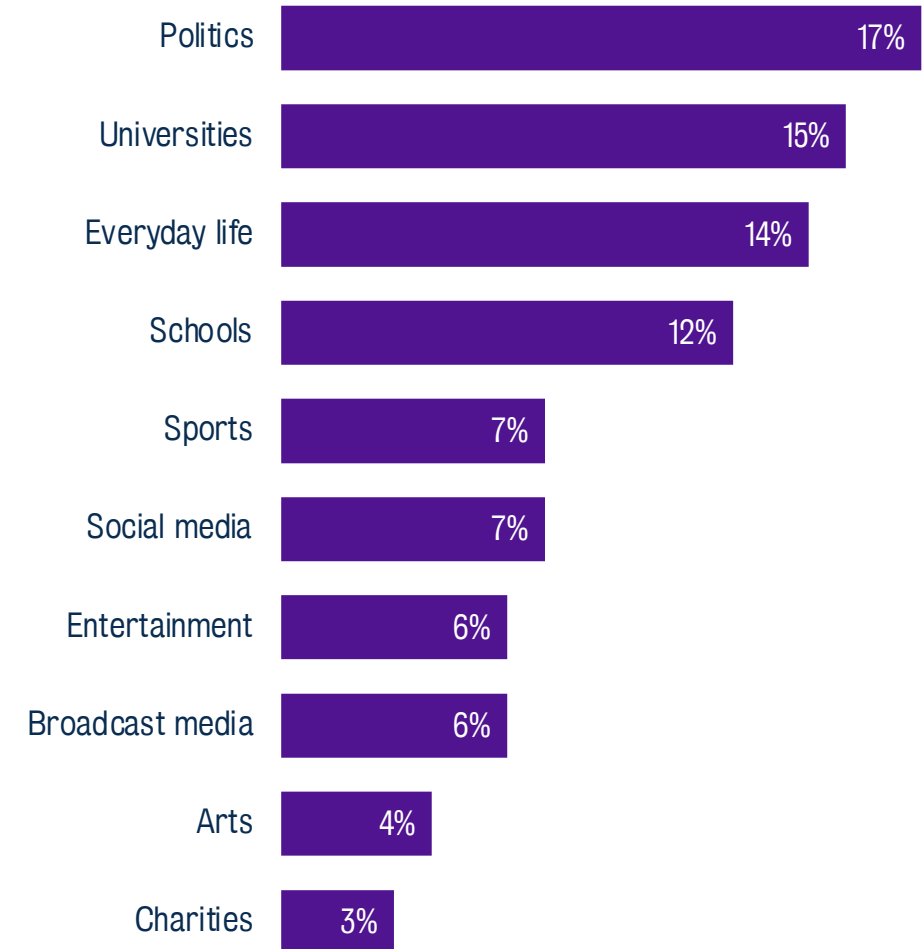
UK newspaper coverage suggests a perception that culture wars are touching many different institutions and aspects of life

UK newspaper coverage of issues such as free speech, white privilege and being woke connects these debates to a wide range of institutions and arenas, particularly politics, universities, everyday life and schools.

Each of the individual terms examined in this study has a key arena in which news stories about it tend to be situated:

- 38% of **free speech** articles discussed universities. Debates ranged from the no-platforming of speakers, to the harassment of academic staff for their personal views towards, for example, trans rights.
- 36% of **hate speech** articles centred around social media, as a key locus of hate speech due to increasing online abuse to members of the public, footballers and politicians.
- Politics was the most common arena found in articles about **being woke** (34%) and articles on **political correctness** (21%).
- The majority of **white privilege** articles were set in schools (55%), due to long-running debates around the teaching of white privilege that received renewed interest following the publication of the House of Commons Education Select Committee's last year,

Top 10 most commonly featured arenas featured in articles mentioning “free speech”, “political correctness”, “white privilege”, “woke” or “hate speech” (referenced in % of articles reviewed)



Source: sample of articles mentioning “free speech”, “political correctness”, “white privilege”, “woke” or “hate speech” in the UK (n=200)

Derogatory terms are most commonly used to describe groups linked to culture war issues in UK newspaper coverage

As the diagram shows, the most common descriptive language used by UK newspapers about groups in culture war-related debates is derogatory. This often involves connecting negative descriptors to the word woke – for example, “woke worthies”, “zealots of wokedom”, “puritan creed of woke” – but often also relates it to extremism and blinkered or narrow views of the world.

A large proportion of articles also focus on the political identities, which are often connected to pejorative terms, such as “right-wing”, which is used in conjunction with “increasingly weaponised [and] intolerant” and “enraged [and] incoherent”.

War metaphors are also often used to describe groups featured in these debates. Individuals are involved in an “absolute minefield”, while the “gender wars” is frequently used, and there are a number of “brigades”.

Three most common kinds of descriptive language used in reference to groups described in articles mentioning “free speech”, “political correctness”, “white privilege”, “woke” or “hate speech” *

Derogatory descriptors (46%)

Extreme or extremist; Pernicious; Racist; Pathetic; Blinkered by wokeness; Bullies; Demonised; Embittered; Hamstrung; Hateful; Intolerant; Lazy and not grounded in reality; Minority snowflake crowd; Moanalot; Puritan creed of woke; Snowflakes and woke-ists; Terrorist; Thuggish; Too loose; Woke clique; Woke worthies; Wokery classes; Zealots of wokedom; Bigoted; Absurd; Bargain bin version of the clan; Beleaguered; Bruising; Cynical; Defenders of woke-ism; Ludicrous; Politically biased; Ridiculously provocative; Significantly careless and naïve; Witchfinder Generals; Narrow; Nonsense; Incomprehensible; Comically woke; Performative; Super-rich; Virtue signalling; Vulnerable; Clinging to the lifebuoy of political correctness; Deadly doses of dodgy diversity and pernicious propaganda; Tribe; Off-putting; Divisive; Indoctrination; Damaging; Insidious, authoritarian and misogynistic trend; Insulting; Racist and homophobic; Doesn't exist; Unacceptable; Devastating; Condemned to failure.

Political ideology-related (16%)

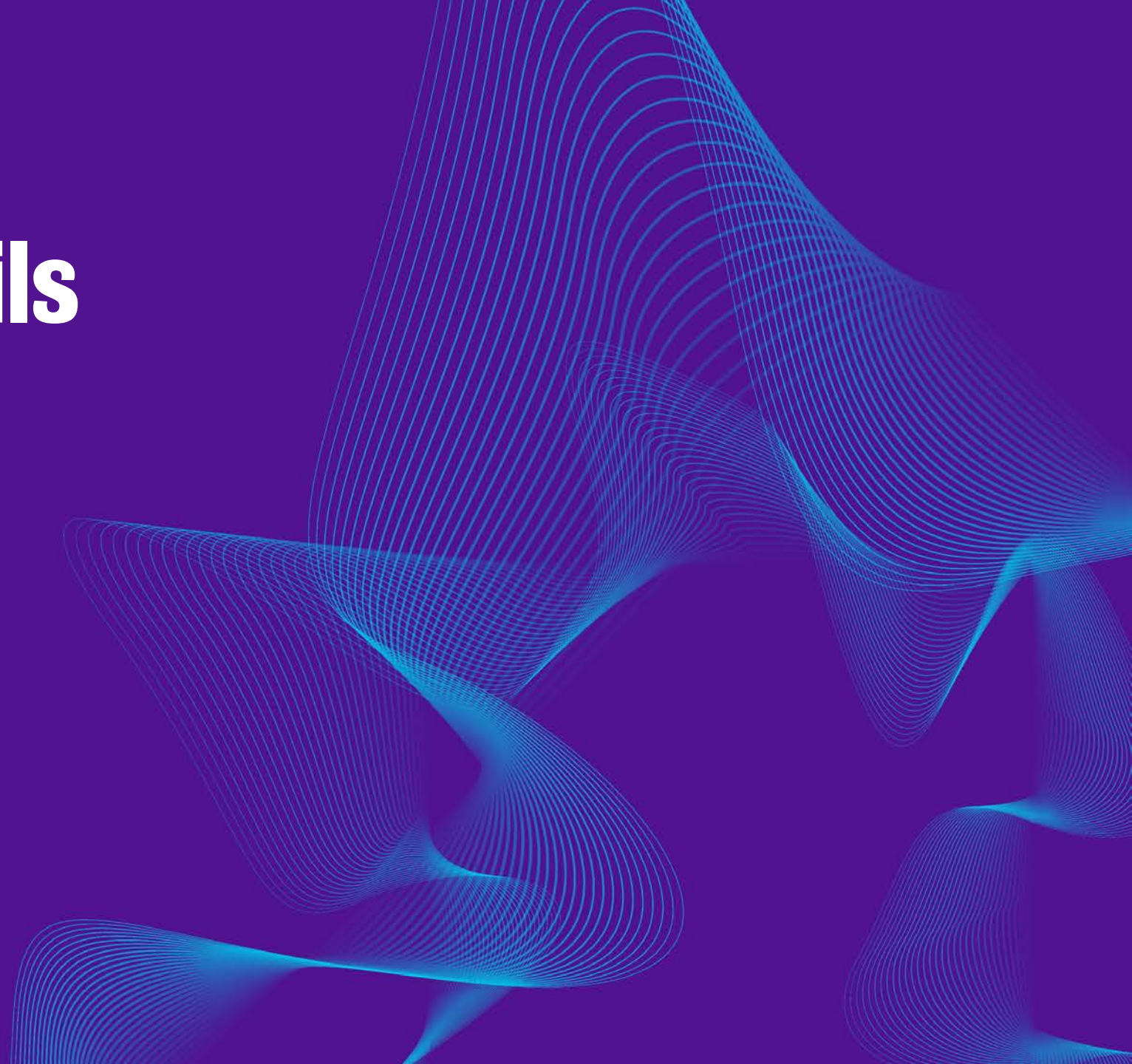
The woke Left; Left-leaning; Right-leaning; Enraged, incoherent, right-wing; Far-right sympathiser; Hostile Tory MPs; Increasingly weaponised, intolerant and right-wing; Pit of Leftiness; Pro-Brexit; Pseudo-liberal groupthink; Remoaner; Remain-leaning; Hotbed of socialist ideology.

War metaphors (9%)

Brigade; Woke warrior; Embattled; Hijacked; Absolute minefield; Casualty of culture wars; Gender wars; Long and continuous battle; Fodder for phoney culture wars; Tory culture warriors.

*“Not explicit” code removed and % adjusted accordingly. Source: sample of articles referencing culture wars in the UK (n=322). Chart maps frequency of descriptive language used in direct reference to the term “culture wars” (ie in the same sentence or paragraph as the word “culture wars”). Words are listed in order of frequency. Size of each box is proportionate to the number of references to that group.

Technical details



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 20,000+ 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](#).

This study was supported by Unbound Philanthropy

Technical note: media content analysis

The sample of articles was drawn from the Nexis database of UK national and regional newspapers, through a search for a range of specific terms, including culture wars, cancel culture and white privilege, with a cut-off date of 31 December 2021. The full sample of articles for each search term ranged between 1,208 and 6,272.

After cleaning (ie removing duplicates and false positives), this full sample was tagged manually for geography to determine whether the content referred to the UK or elsewhere.

Coding in NVivo

For the more detailed analysis of content of 2021 articles, a random sample of 200 articles were imported to NVivo. These articles were read in full and analysed in NVivo to identify more precisely the subject focus of the article, terms, key groups described and consequences, reported or perceived.

Coding was conducted by two researchers, with consistency of coding checked by one reviewer. The codeframe was developed iteratively through multiple rounds of review. The final code-frame captured:

- Framing (the author type, article type and main storyline).
- Content (groups reported on and descriptive framing of main narrative actors, the topic reported on, including the arena observed, issue type and descriptive terms used in association with the issues, and perceived or reported consequences).



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