

Truth under attack? Belief in terrorism conspiracy theories among the UK public

*Report prepared for BBC Panorama
and BBC Radio 4 podcasts*

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The vast majority of the public accept the reality of terrorist attacks in the UK – but notable minorities say they struggle to know what to believe or think we don't have the full picture

An abstract graphic on the right side of the slide, consisting of numerous thin, dark orange lines that form a series of overlapping, wavy, and undulating shapes. These lines create a sense of movement and depth, resembling a stylized, multi-layered wave or a complex, organic form. The background is a solid, vibrant orange color.

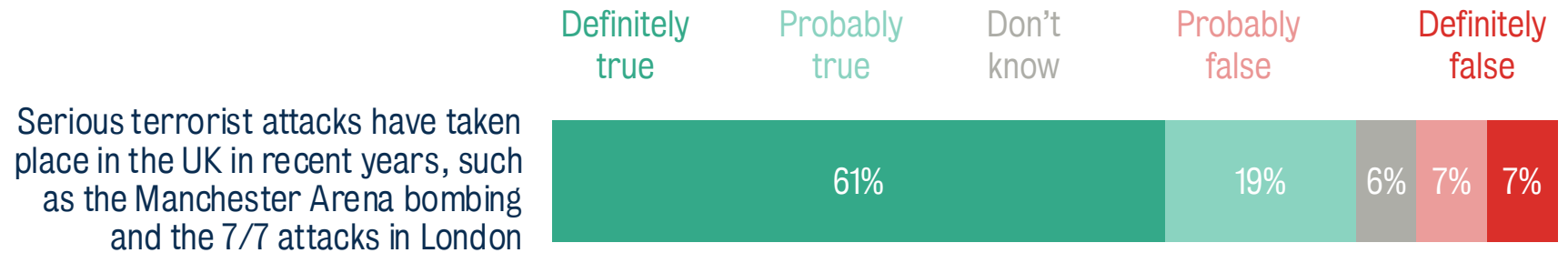
Four in five people recognise that serious terrorist attacks have occurred in the UK in recent years

80% of the UK public accept that serious terrorist attacks, such as the Manchester Arena bombing and the 7/7 attacks, have taken place in the UK in recent years – but this includes 61% who say it’s *definitely* true that this is the case and another 19% who are somewhat less certain, saying it’s *probably* true.

One in seven (14%) people think it’s probably or definitely false that such attacks have occurred, while 6% say they don’t know.

But overall, large majorities of various groups within the population recognise the reality of serious terrorist attacks in the UK, although age is a key dividing line, with younger people less likely to think they have taken place.

In your opinion, are the following statements true or false?



Base: 4,549 UK adults aged 18+, interviewed online 1 to 9 October 2022

% who say this is **definitely or probably true** among the following groups...



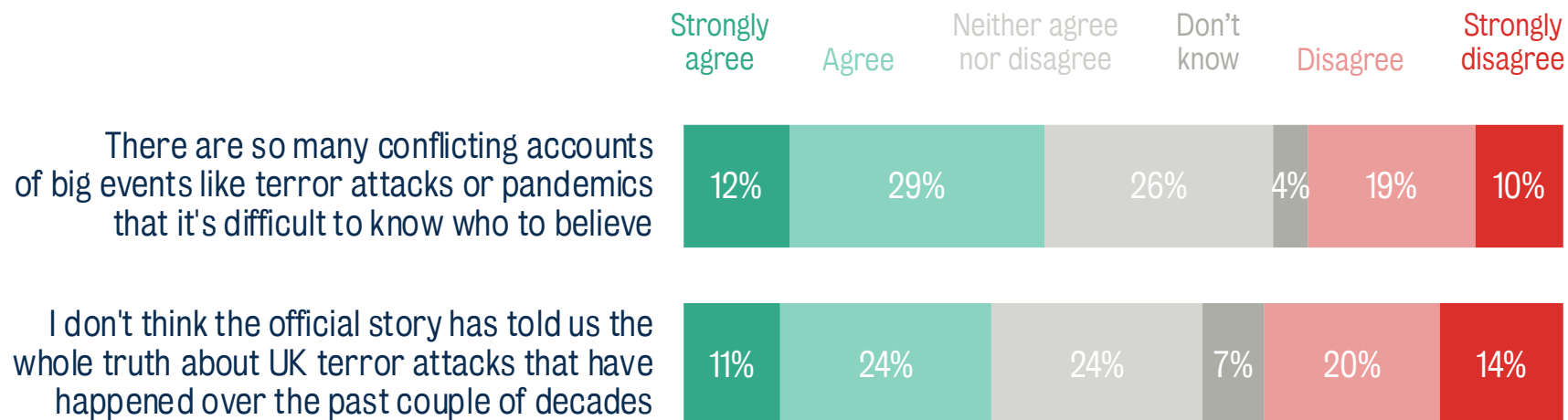
Base: 4,549 UK adults aged 18+, surveyed online by Savanta ComRes, 1 to 9 October 2022

Yet a considerable minority have doubts about the truth of terror attacks

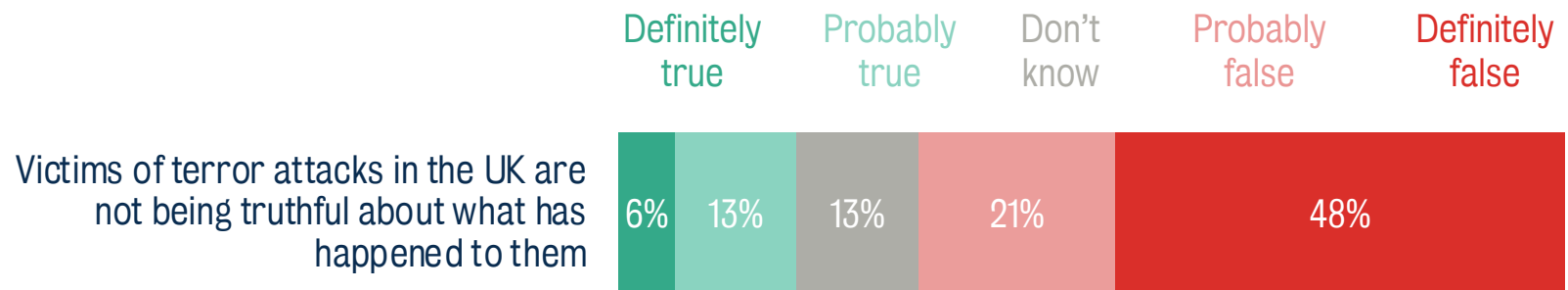
Two in five (41%) say there are so many conflicting accounts of big events like terror attacks or pandemics that it's difficult to know who to believe, while a third (35%) say they don't think the official story has told us the whole truth about UK terror attacks that have happened over the past couple of decades.

A smaller but still notable minority – one in five (19%) – goes as far as saying they think the victims of terror attacks in the UK are not being truthful about what happened to them.

To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



In your opinion, are the following statements true or false?



These doubts extend to beliefs about specific events – the Manchester Arena bombing and the 7/7 attacks in London – elements of which are questioned by a minority of the public

An abstract graphic on the right side of the slide, consisting of numerous thin, dark orange lines that form a series of overlapping, wavy, and somewhat chaotic shapes. The lines are dense and create a sense of movement and depth against the solid orange background.

One in four think the truth about the Manchester Arena bombing is being withheld, and one in seven believe “crisis actors” pretended to be injured or killed in the attack

A quarter (28%) of the public say they think the real truth about the Manchester Arena bombing is being kept from the public, and a similar proportion – 26% – feel the mainstream media and government are involved in a cover-up relating to the attack.

One in seven (14%) think people weren't really killed or hurt in the attack, and that actors instead pretended to be, while one in eight (12%) say they believe it was probably a hoax.

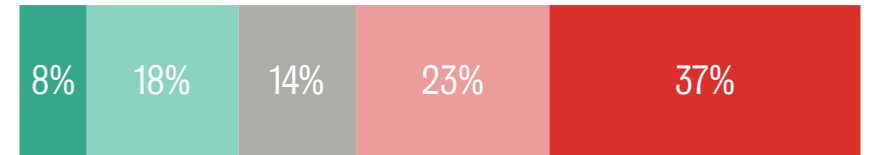
In your opinion, are the following statements true or false?

Definitely true Probably true Don't know Probably false Definitely false

The real truth about the attack at Manchester Arena is being kept from the public



The mainstream media and government officials are involved in a conspiracy to cover up important information about the attack at Manchester Arena



The Manchester Arena attack involved "crisis actors" who pretended to be injured or killed - people weren't really killed or injured



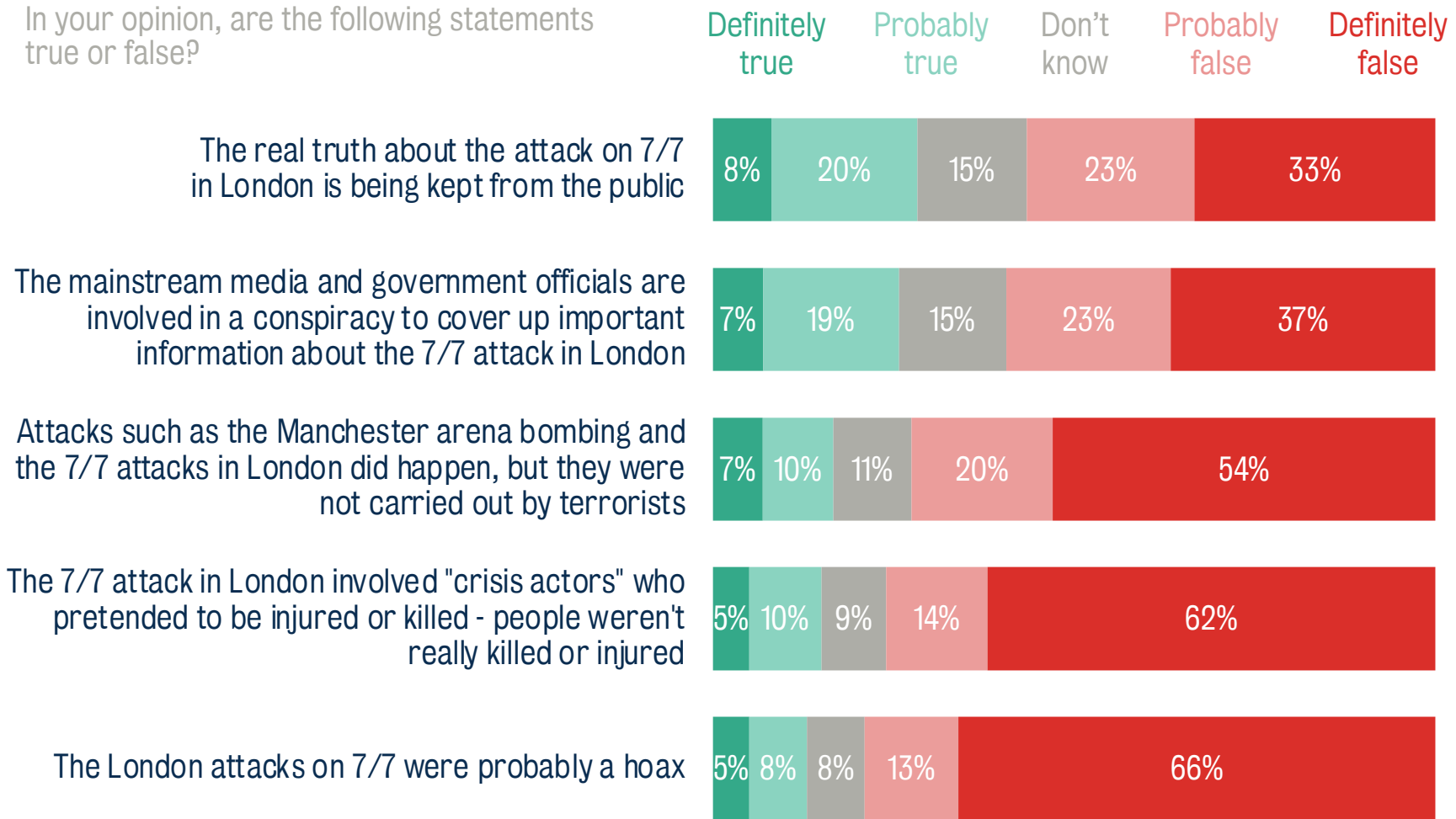
The Manchester Arena attack was probably a hoax



One in eight believe the 7/7 attacks were probably a hoax, while one in six think attacks like 7/7 and Manchester did happen but were not carried out by terrorists

One in eight (13%) people say it's definitely or probably true that the 7/7 attacks were a hoax, while an even greater proportion (17%) say the same about the idea that 7/7 and Manchester did happen but were perpetrated by someone else, not terrorists.

In your opinion, are the following statements true or false?



Disengagement from the political process is associated with a greater likelihood of holding conspiracy beliefs about such attacks

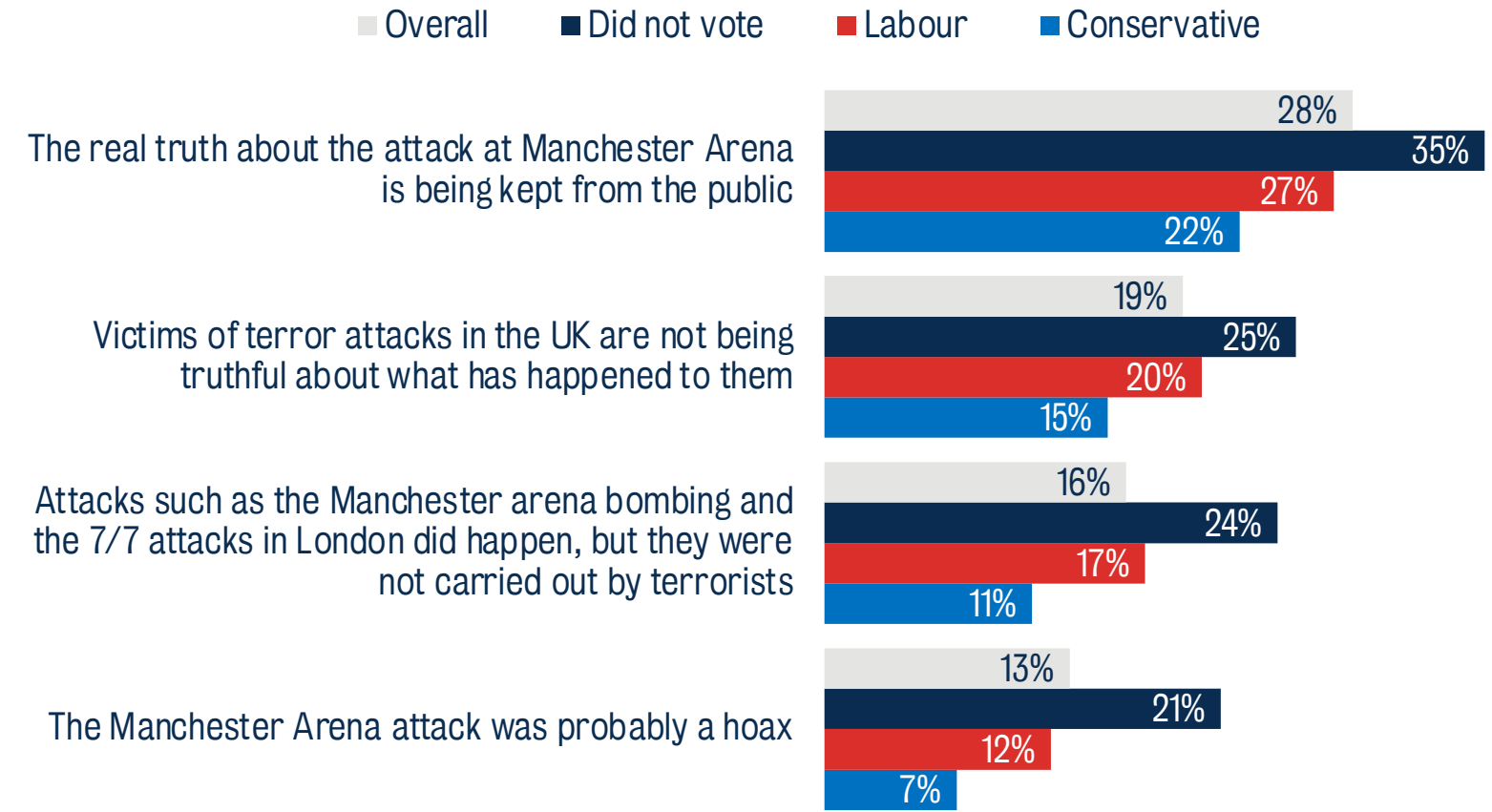
An abstract graphic on the right side of the slide, consisting of numerous thin, dark orange lines that form a series of overlapping, wavy, and somewhat chaotic shapes. The lines are more densely packed in some areas, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is a complex, organic pattern that contrasts with the solid orange background.

A third of people who didn't vote in the 2019 general election think the truth about the Manchester Arena attack is being kept from the public, and one in five think it was a hoax

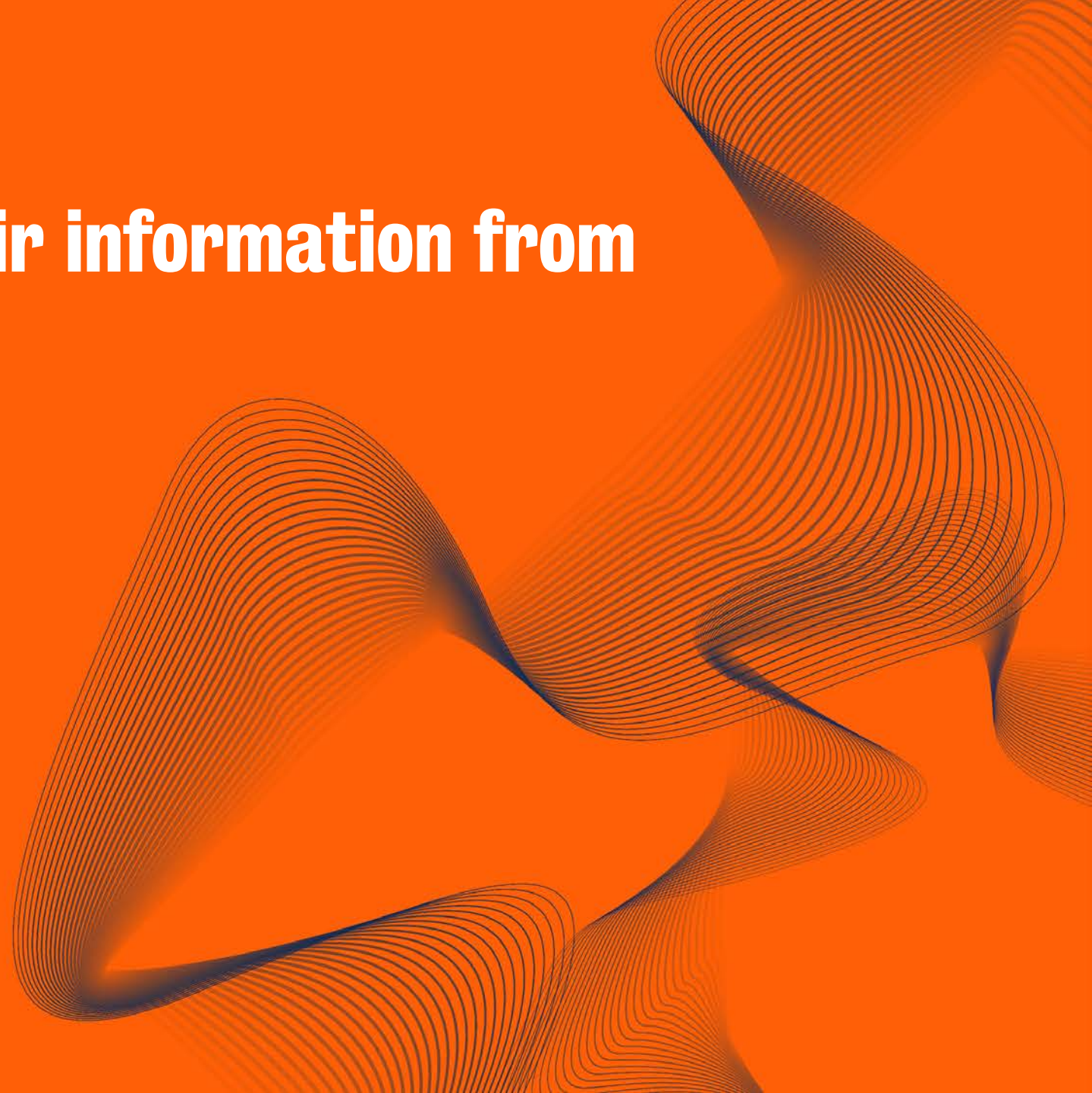
35% of those who say they didn't cast a vote in the 2019 general election think it's definitely or probably true that the real truth about the attack in Manchester is being concealed from the public, compared with 27% of those who voted Labour and 22% who voted Conservative who think the same.

And 21% who didn't vote say they think it's true that the attack was probably a hoax – three times the proportion of Conservative voters (7%) who hold this view.

% who say statements are **definitely/probably true**, by 2019 general election vote



**Where people get their information from
is also key...**



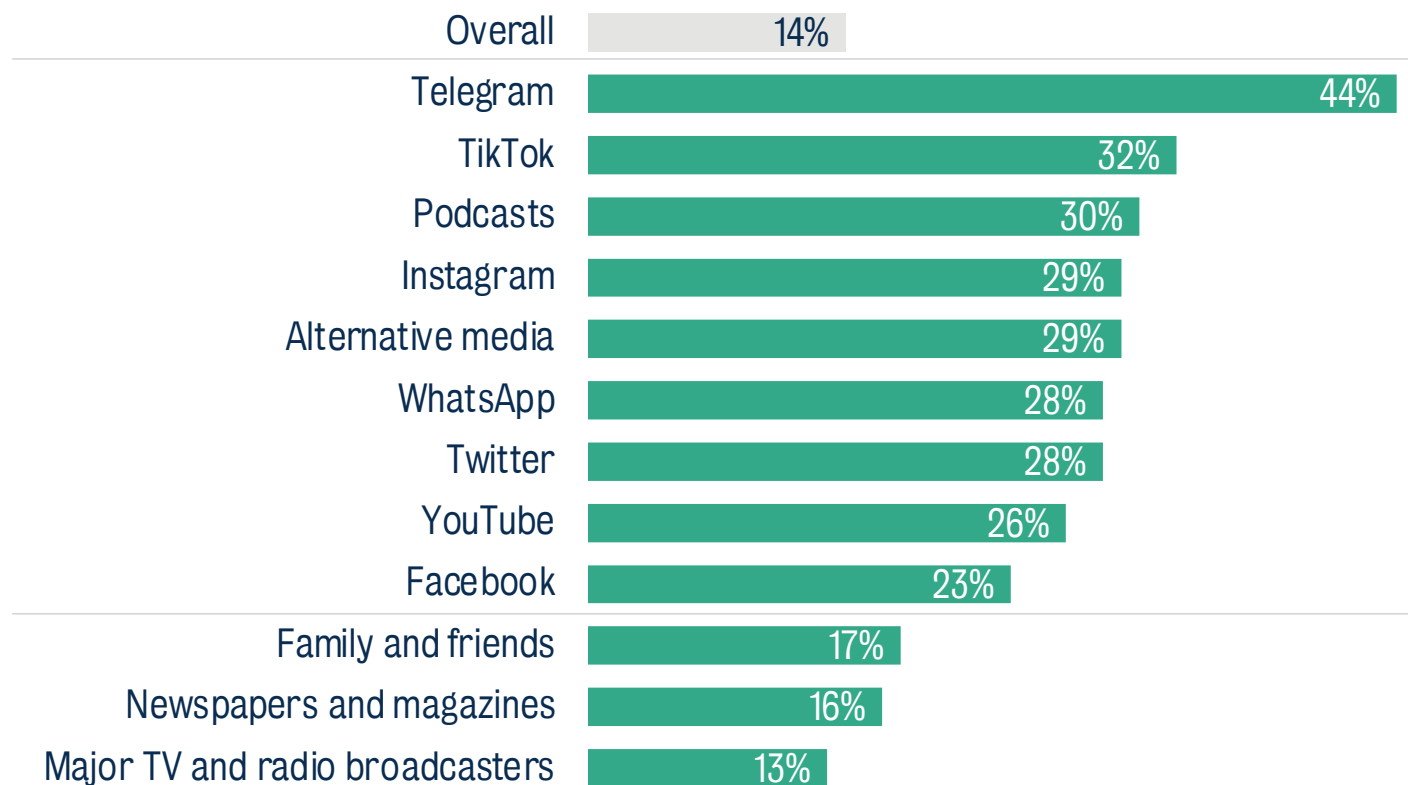
Those who get much of their news from social media are more likely to believe that people weren't really killed or injured in the Manchester Arena attack

14% of the population overall say it's definitely or probably true that the Manchester attack involved "crisis actors" – but this rises to 44% among those who say they know a great deal or fair amount about news and events from the messaging app Telegram.

Those who get much of their information from other social networks, such as TikTok (32%), Instagram (29%), Twitter (28%) and WhatsApp (28%), are all more likely than the public as a whole to say they believe this conspiracy theory – in contrast to those who rely more on traditional news sources.

The Manchester Arena attack involved "crisis actors" who pretended to be injured or killed – people weren't really killed or injured

% who say this is definitely or probably true among those who know a great deal/fair amount about news and events from...



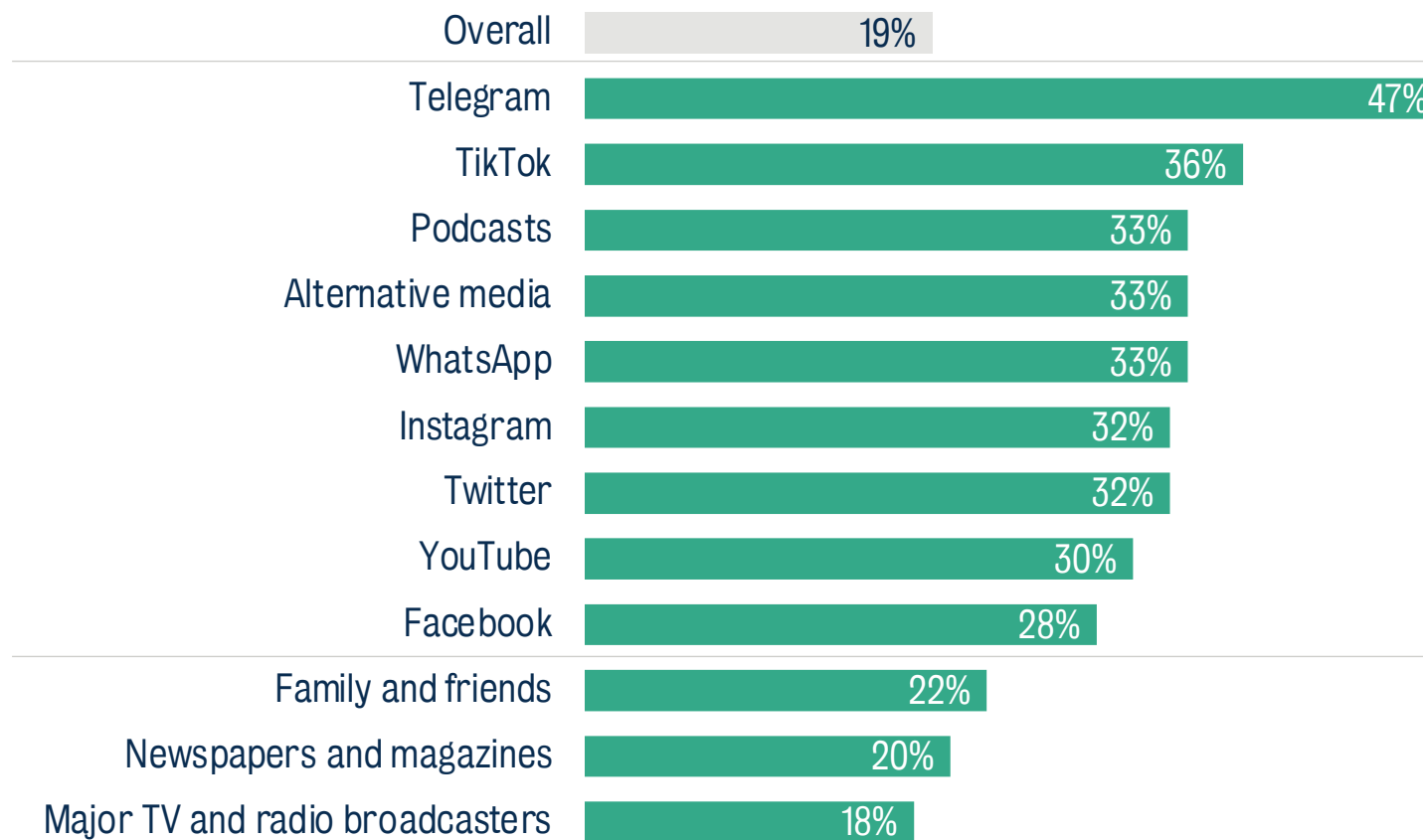
More generally, people who get much of their news from social media – and podcasts, too – are also more likely to think UK terror attack victims are concealing the truth about their experience

Again, those who say they know a great deal or fair amount about news and events from Telegram are particularly likely to say it's true that the victims of terror attacks in the UK are not being truthful about what has happened to them, with nearly half (47%) holding this view.

Those who use other social networks to the same extent are also more likely than the public overall to think this is true, but so too are people who get at least a fair amount of their news from podcasts: a third (33%) of this group feel terror attack victims are not being truthful.

Victims of terror attacks in the UK are not being truthful about what has happened to them

% who say this is **definitely or probably true** among those who know a great deal/fair amount about news and events from...



...as is age, with these beliefs tending to be more common among younger people...



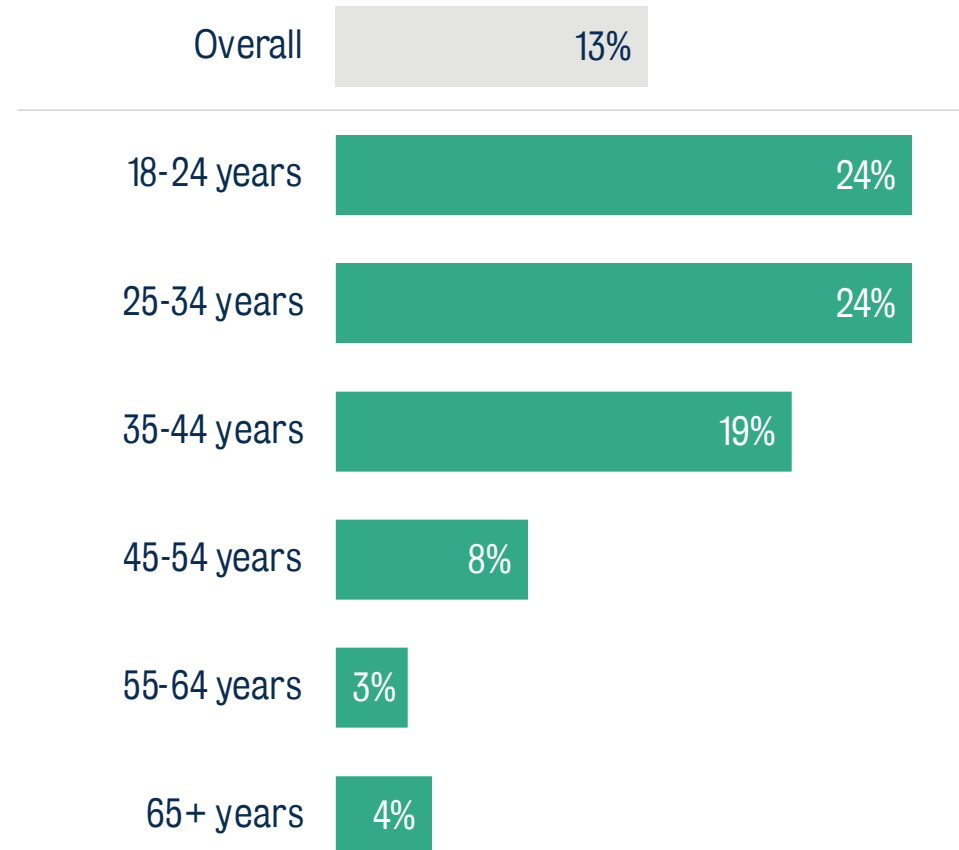
One in four people aged 18 to 34 say they think the 7/7 attacks were probably a hoax

Those aged 18 to 34 (24%) are almost twice as likely as the population overall (13%) to think that the 7/7 attacks were probably a hoax.

Belief in this conspiracy theory declines with age, with 8% of 45- to 54-year-olds thinking it's true, and just 4% of the oldest surveyed – those aged 65 and above – thinking the same.

The London attacks on 7/7 were probably a hoax

% who say this is **definitely or probably true**, by age

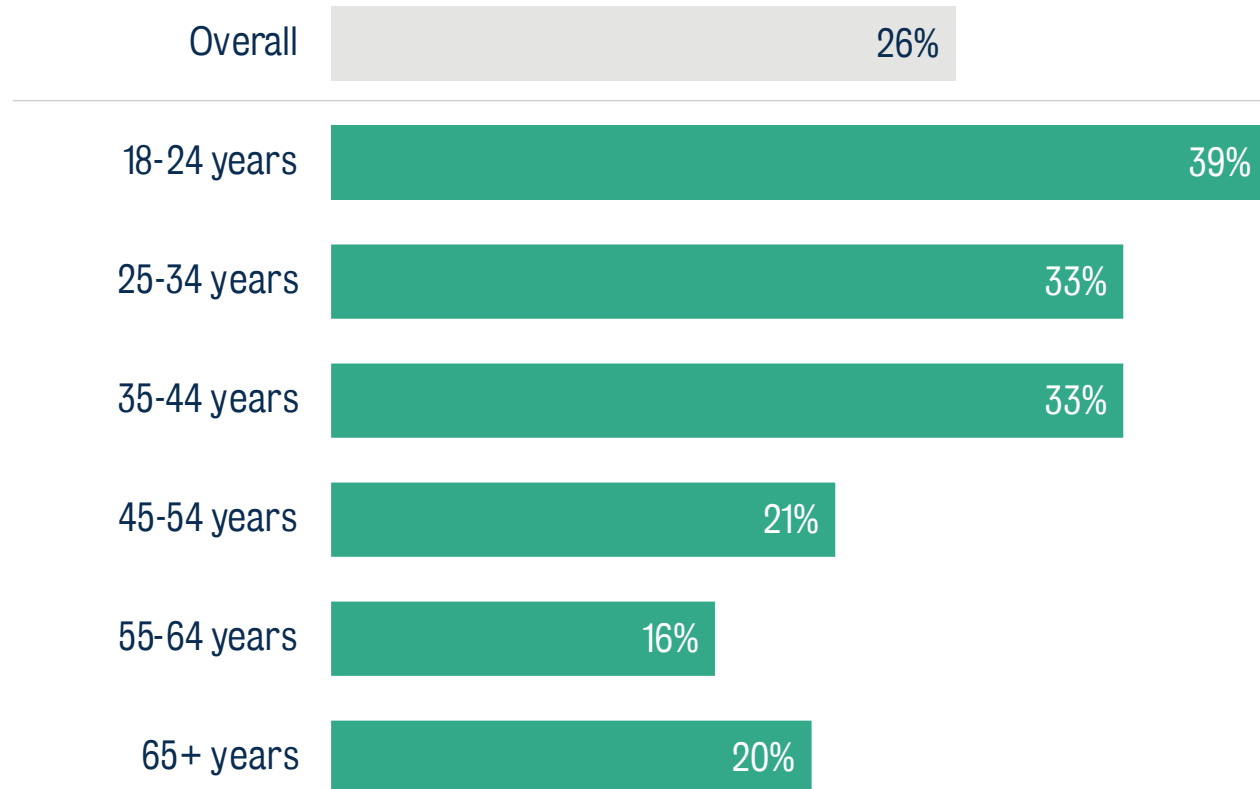


The youngest age group surveyed is twice as likely as the oldest to think the mainstream media and government are involved in a cover-up linked to the Manchester Arena bombing

Two in five (39%) of those aged 18 to 24 say it's definitely or probably true that the mainstream media and government officials are involved in a conspiracy to cover up important information about the Manchester attack – compared with one in five (20%) of those aged 65+ who say the same.

The mainstream media and government officials are involved in a conspiracy to cover up important information about the attack at Manchester Arena

% who say this is definitely or probably true, by age



**...as well as among men more
than women**

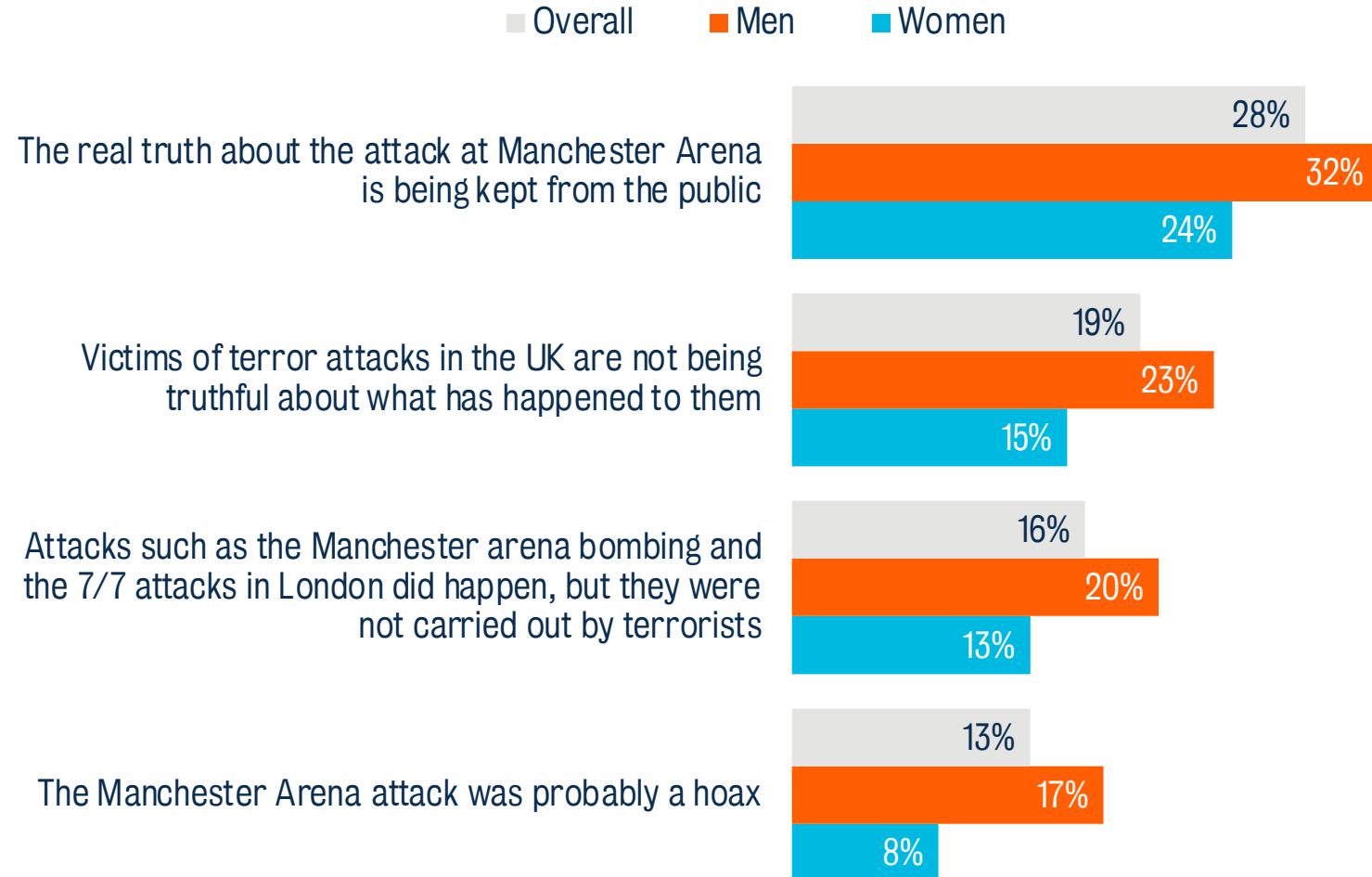


Men are twice as likely as women to say the Manchester Arena attack was probably a hoax

17% of men believe the Manchester Arena attack was probably a hoax – roughly double the 8% of women who think the same.

And across a range of terror-related conspiracy theories, men show a greater inclination to believe them. For example, 23% of men think victims of such attacks in the UK are not being truthful about what has happened to them, compared with 15% of women.

% who say statements are **definitely/probably true**, by gender



**This pattern extends to beliefs about
conspiracy theories in the United States**



Certain sections of the UK are far more likely to think some US school shootings are probable hoaxes

One in six (16%) people in the UK say they believe at least some of the school shootings in the US have probably been hoaxes.

But belief in this conspiracy theory is far higher among certain sections of the population, such as people from ethnic minority backgrounds (34%), those aged 18 to 34 (30%), and those who get their information from alternative / non-mainstream media sources (32%).

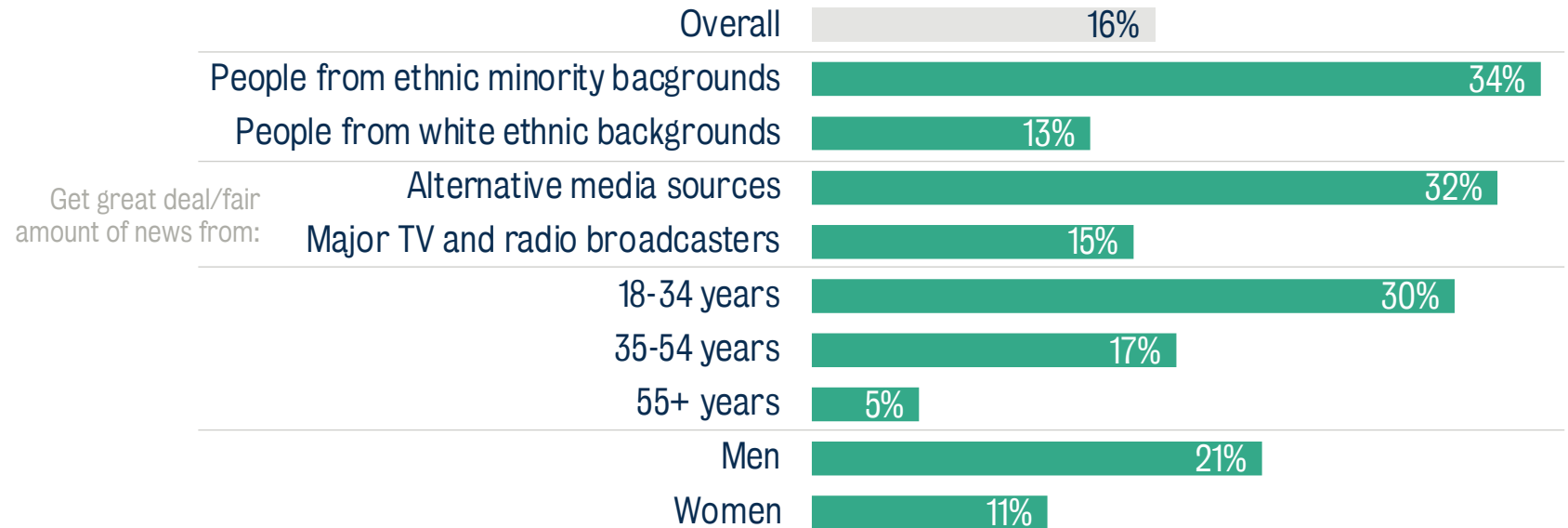
Men (21%) are also around twice as likely as women (11%) to believe this conspiracy.

In your opinion, are the following statements true or false?



Base: 4,549 UK adults aged 18+, interviewed online 1 to 9 October 2022

% who say this is **definitely or probably true** among the following groups...



Base: 726 UK adults aged 18+ who think statement is definitely or probably true, surveyed online by Savanta ComRes, 1 to 9 October 2022

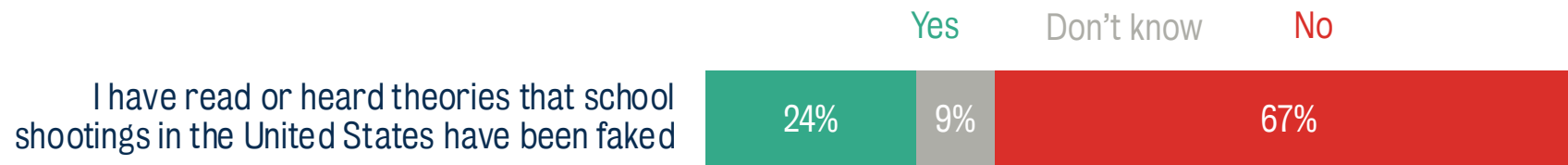
Those who get much of their news from non-mainstream sources are more likely to have heard theories about US school shootings being faked

One in four (24%) members of the UK public say they've heard or read theories that school shootings have been faked in the US – but where people get their information from is key.

Among those who say they know a great deal or fair amount about news and events through alternative media sources that are not considered “mainstream”, two in five (39%) report having heard such theories.

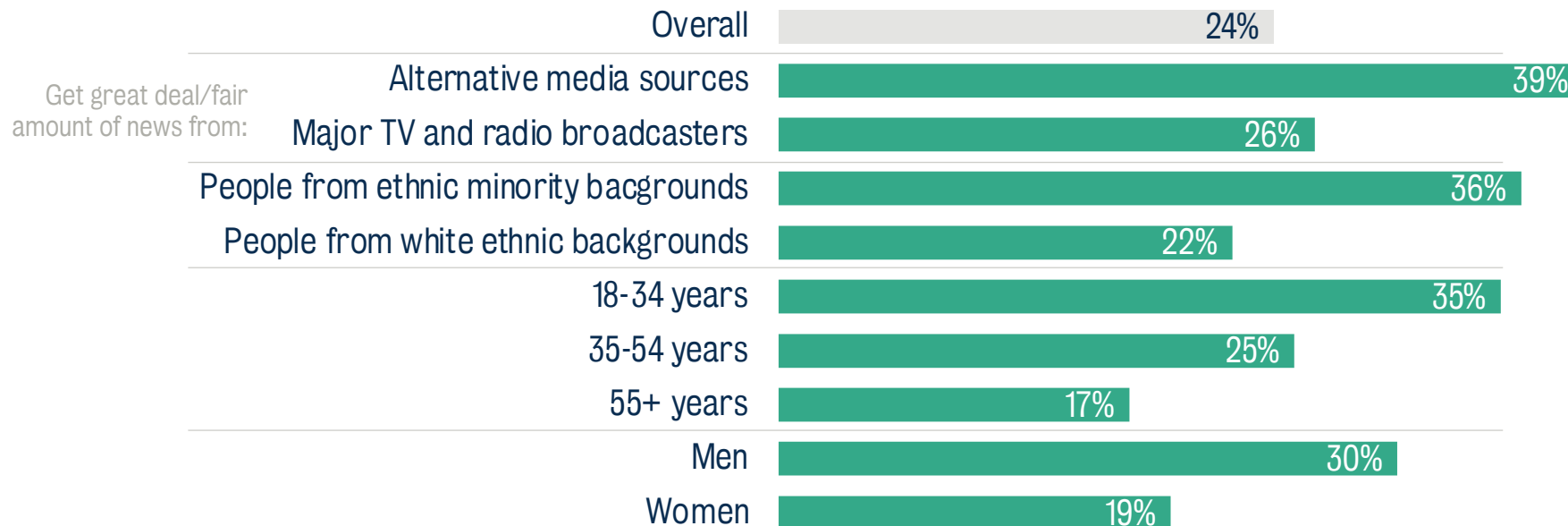
There are also notable variations by age, gender and ethnicity.

Does the following apply to you personally?



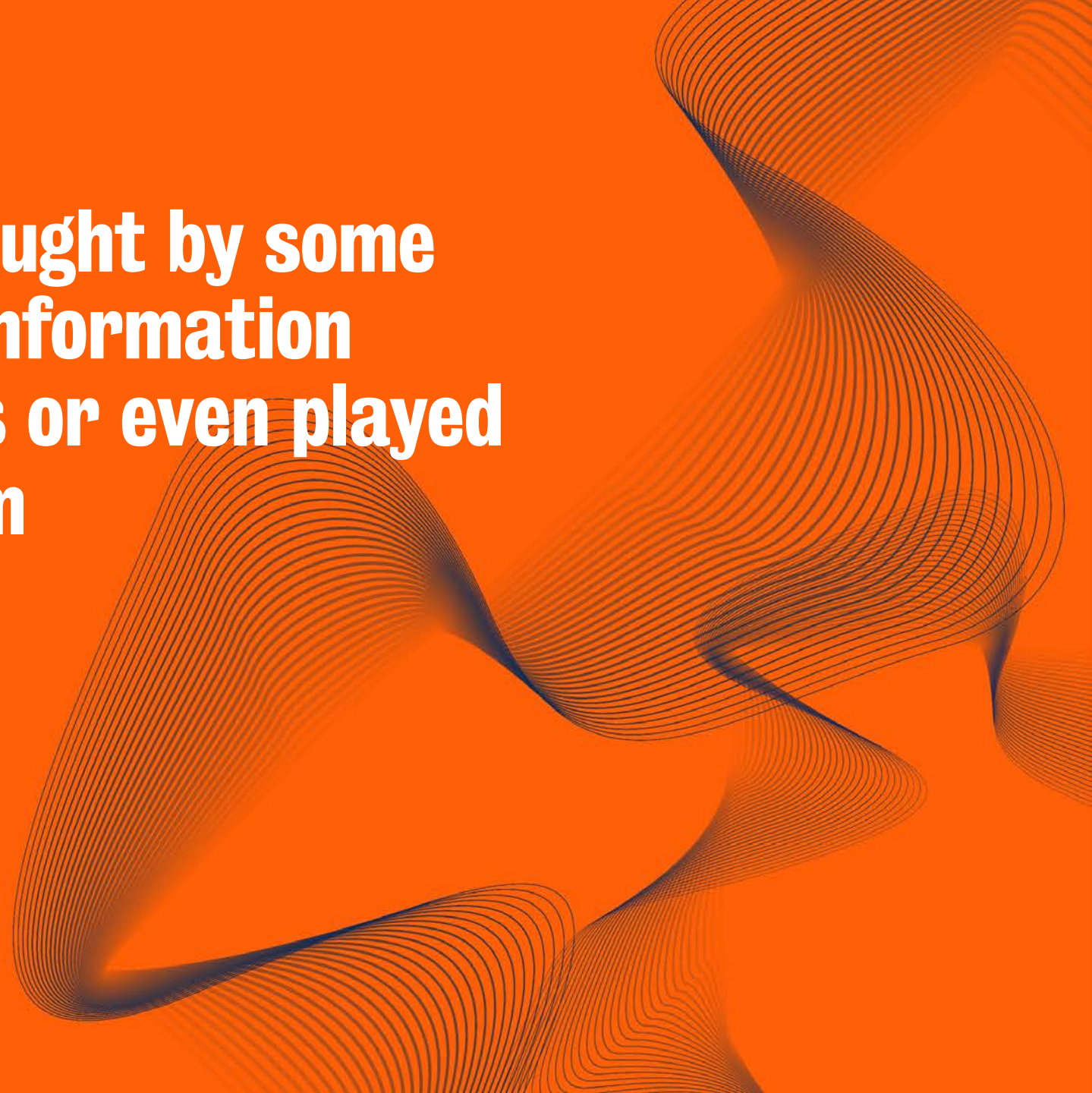
Base: 4,549 UK adults aged 18+, interviewed online 1 to 9 October 2022

% who say they have read or heard such theories among the following groups...



Base: 1,114 UK adults aged 18+ who think statement is definitely or probably true, surveyed online by Savanta ComRes, 1 to 9 October 2022

**Governments are thought by some
to have suppressed information
about terror attacks or even played
an active role in them**

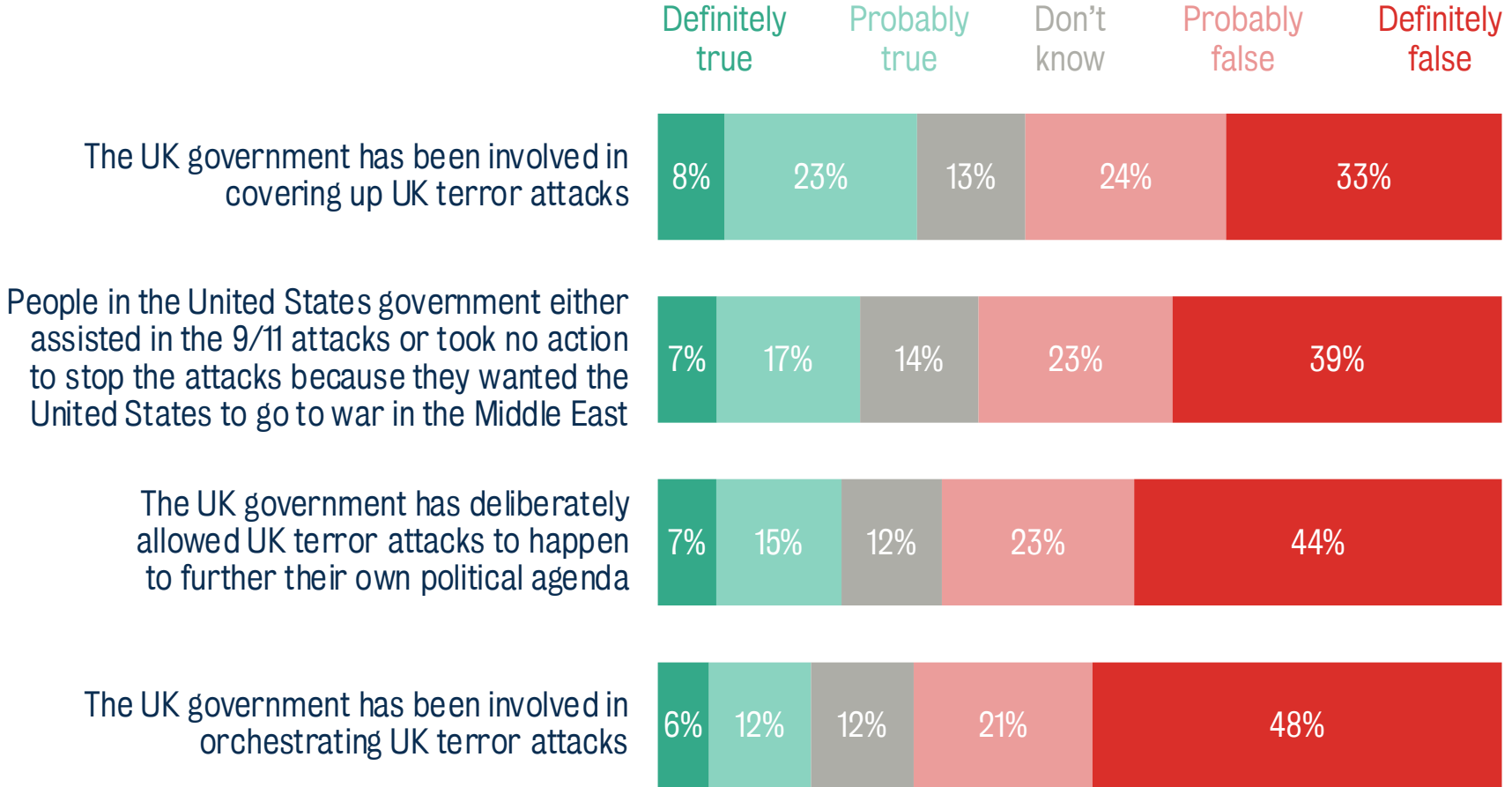


Nearly a third of the public think the UK government has covered up terror attacks, while a quarter believe the US government either assisted in 9/11 or took no action to stop it

Around a third (31%) of people believe the UK government has been involved in covering up terror attacks in the country, and roughly one in five (22%) think it has deliberately allowed such attacks to happen or even been involved in orchestrating them (18%).

A quarter (24%) of the UK public also believe the US government either played an active role in carrying out the 9/11 attacks, or took no action to stop them because they wanted to go to war in the Middle East.

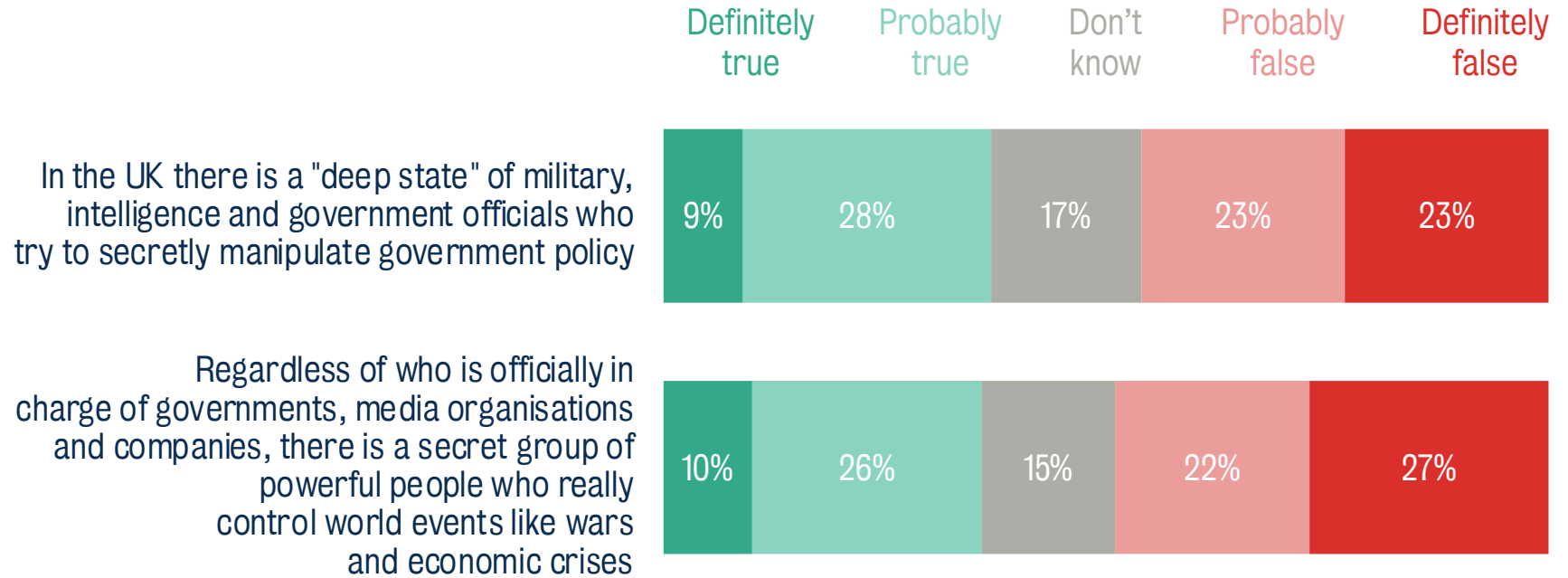
In your opinion, are the following statements true or false?



Over a third also think there is a “deep state” or other secret groups that really control society

37% of the public say it’s true that there exists a “deep state” who try to secretly manipulate government policy, and virtually the same proportion – 36% – think that regardless of who is officially in charge, there is a secret group of people who really control world events like wars and economic crises.

In your opinion, are the following statements true or false?



This distrust may have worsened due to the experience of the Covid pandemic, which some say has made them much more suspicious of official explanations of events such as terror attacks

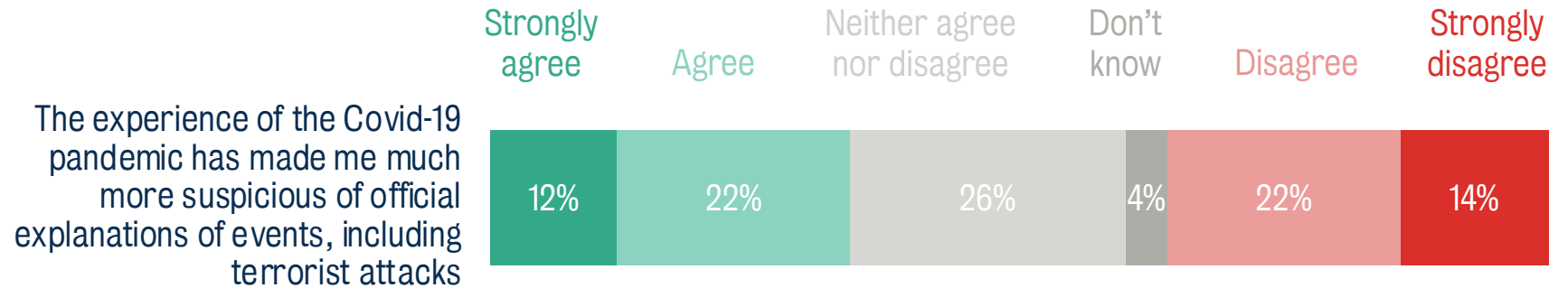
The background features a solid orange color with a complex, abstract pattern of thin, overlapping lines in a darker shade of orange and blue. These lines form a series of interconnected, wavy shapes that resemble a stylized, flowing ribbon or a series of concentric, distorted circles, creating a sense of movement and depth.

A third say the pandemic has made them more suspicious of official explanations of terror attacks

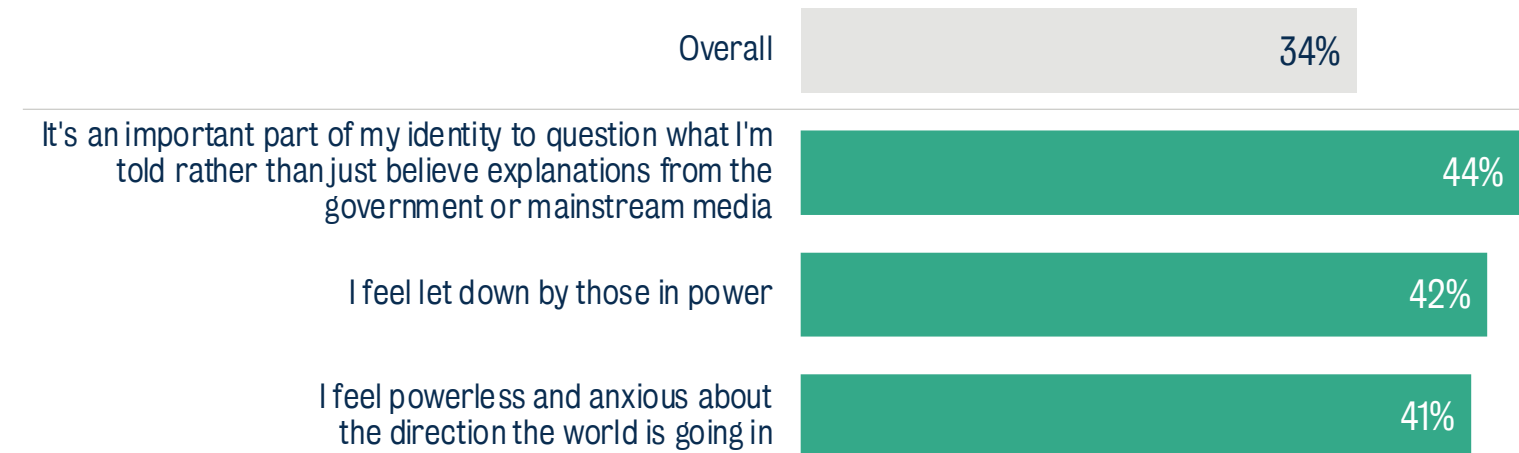
34% of the public agree that the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has made them much more suspicious of official explanations of events, including terrorist attacks.

And people are more likely to feel this way if they already see it as an important part of their identity to question what they're told rather than just believe explanations from the government or mainstream media (44%), if they feel let down by those in power (42%), or if they feel powerless and anxious about the direction the world is going in (41%).

In your opinion, are the following statements true or false?



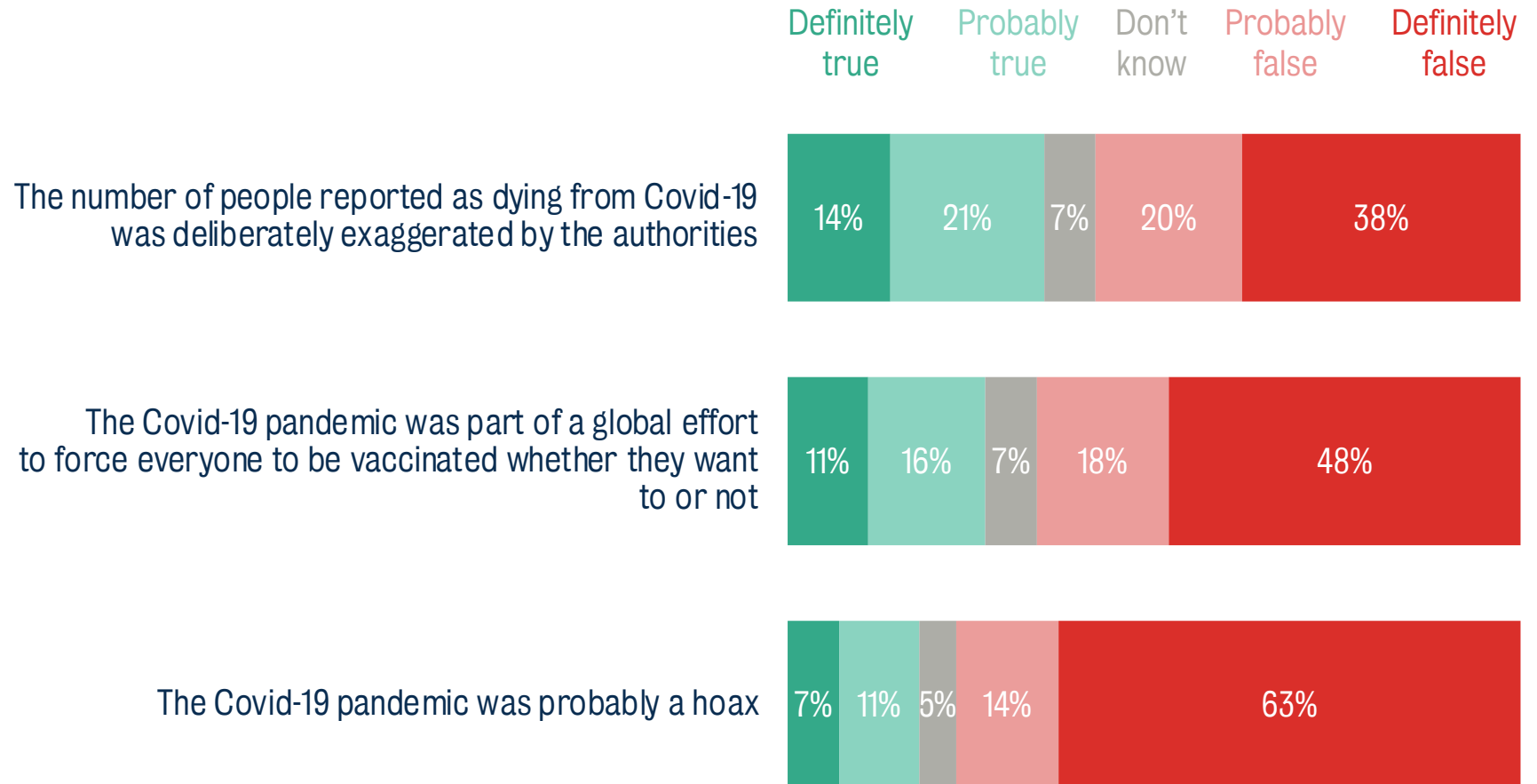
% who **strongly agree or agree** that the pandemic has made them much more suspicious of official explanations of events, including terrorist attacks, among those who agree with the following statements...



And more broadly, conspiracies about Covid itself are believed by a notable minority

A third (35%) think the death toll from Covid has been deliberately exaggerated by the authorities, while a quarter (27%) think the pandemic was part of a global forced vaccination effort, and one in five (18%) believe the Covid crisis was likely a hoax.

In your opinion, are the following statements true or false?



Overall, when it comes to belief in a range of different types of conspiracy theories relating to terror attacks in the UK, there is a hardcore minority who are particularly strong believers

The background is a solid orange color. On the right side, there are several overlapping, wavy, white lines that create a sense of depth and movement, resembling a stylized, abstract representation of a person's profile or a series of ripples.

Analysing responses to three types of conspiracy theories sheds more light on who the strongest believers are

To get a broader picture of the different groups of people within the population who have a tendency to believe terror-related conspiracy theories, we analysed responses to 11 statements about terrorist attacks in the UK.

The statements fall within three categories: cover-up, hoax and government involvement. From the extent to which people say they believe these statements, it's possible to identify five distinct groups among the public...

Cover-up

The real truth about the attack at Manchester Arena is being kept from the public.

The mainstream media and government officials are involved in a conspiracy to cover up important information about the attack at Manchester Arena.

The real truth about the attack on 7/7 in London is being kept from the public.

The mainstream media and government officials are involved in a conspiracy to cover up important information about the 7/7 attack in London.

Government involvement

The UK government has been involved in covering up UK terror attacks.

The UK government has been involved in orchestrating UK terror attacks.

The UK government has deliberately allowed UK terror attacks to happen to further their own political agenda.

Hoax

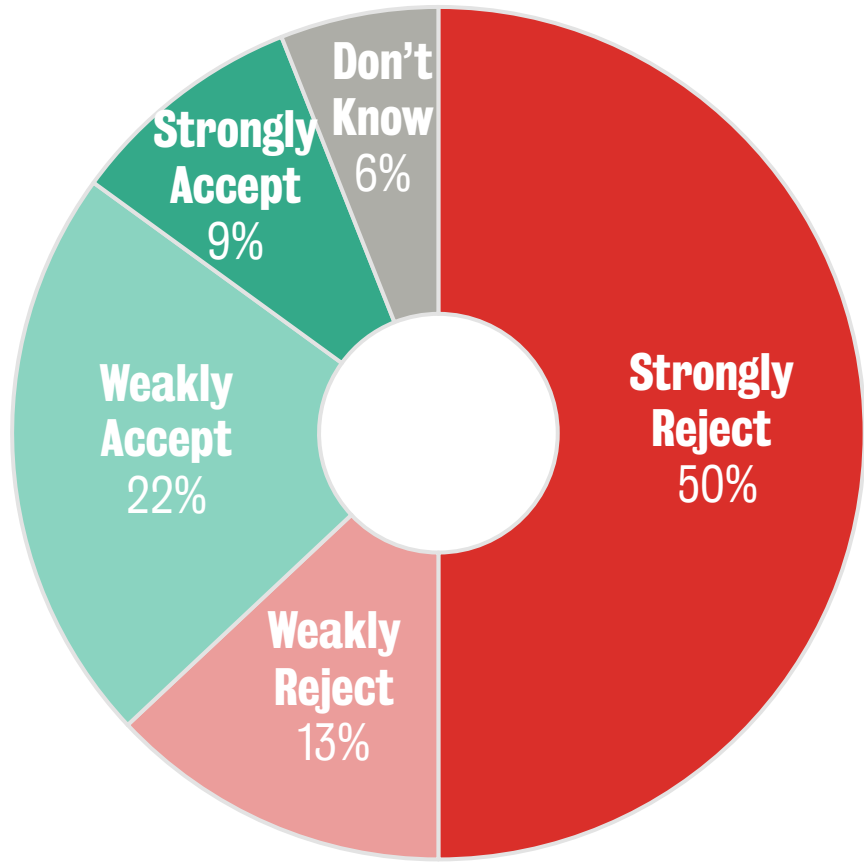
The Manchester Arena attack involved "crisis actors" who pretended to be injured or killed – people weren't really killed or injured.

The Manchester Arena attack was probably a hoax.

The 7/7 attack in London involved "crisis actors" who pretended to be injured or killed – people weren't really killed or injured.

The London attacks on 7/7 were probably a hoax.

A hardcore minority of around one in 11 people can be classed as strongly accepting most or all 11 conspiracy statements – while a further one in five weakly accept at least some of them, and 6% say they're not sure what to think about these theories



Strongly Reject (50%)

Think most/all conspiracy statements are “probably” or “definitely” false.

Weakly Reject (13%)

Think most hoax items are “probably” or “definitely” false, but are less sure about cover-ups and government intervention (more don't knows).

Weakly Accept (22%)

Think some conspiracy statements across all three sets are “probably” or “definitely” true.

Strongly Accept (9%)

Think most/all conspiracy statements are “probably” or “definitely true”.

Don't Know (6%)

Are not sure what to think in relation to most/all conspiracy statements.

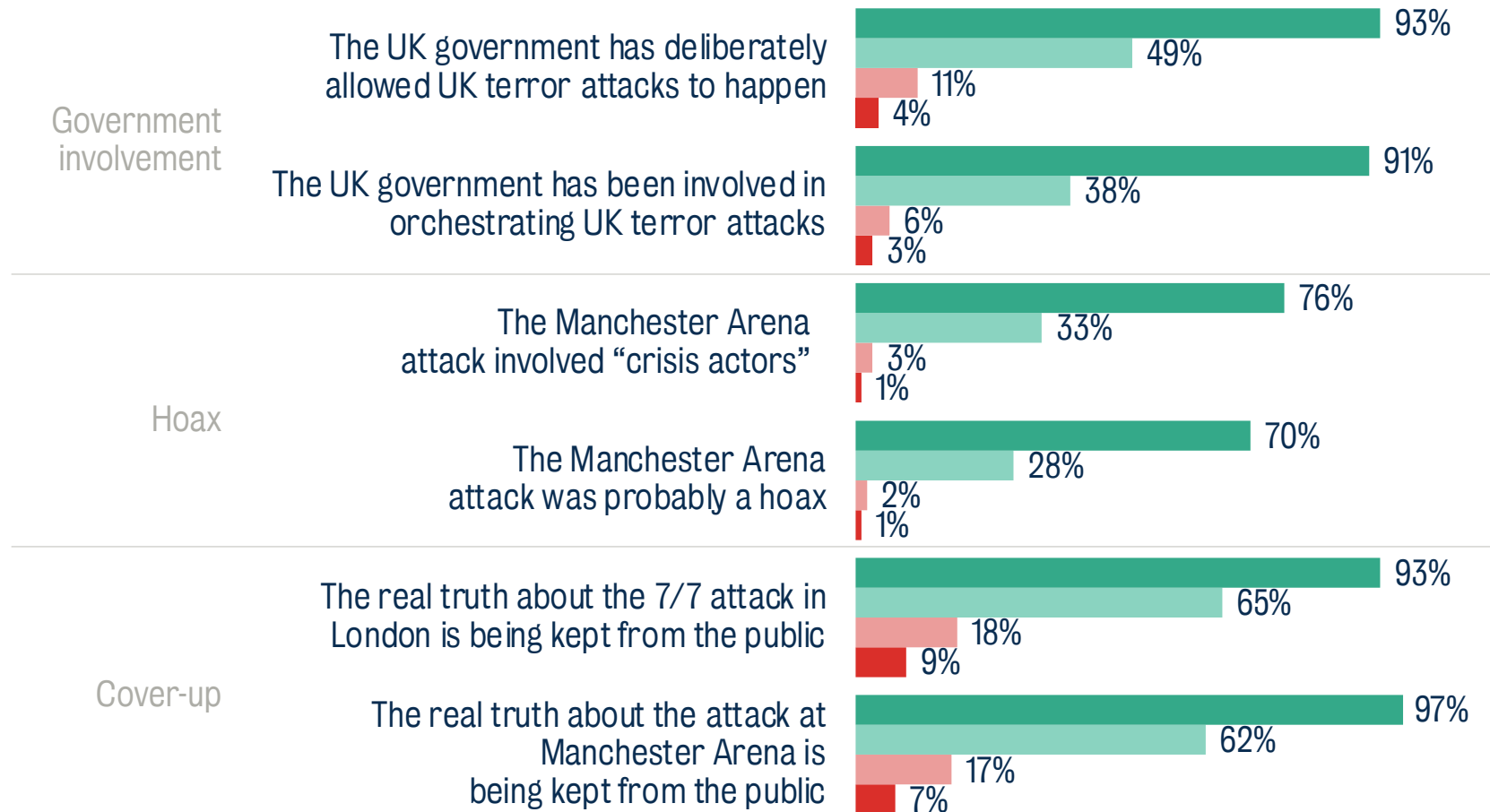
The “Strongly Accept” group stand out as the biggest believers of specific conspiracies

The 9% of the public who can be classed as belonging to the “Strongly Accept” group are by far the most likely to say various conspiracy theories about terror attacks in the UK are true.

For example, 93% of this group think the UK government has deliberately allowed UK terror attacks to happen, compared with 49% in the “Weakly Accept” group, and just 11% and 4% in the “Weakly Reject” and “Strongly Reject” groups respectively.

% who say statement is definitely or probably true, by group

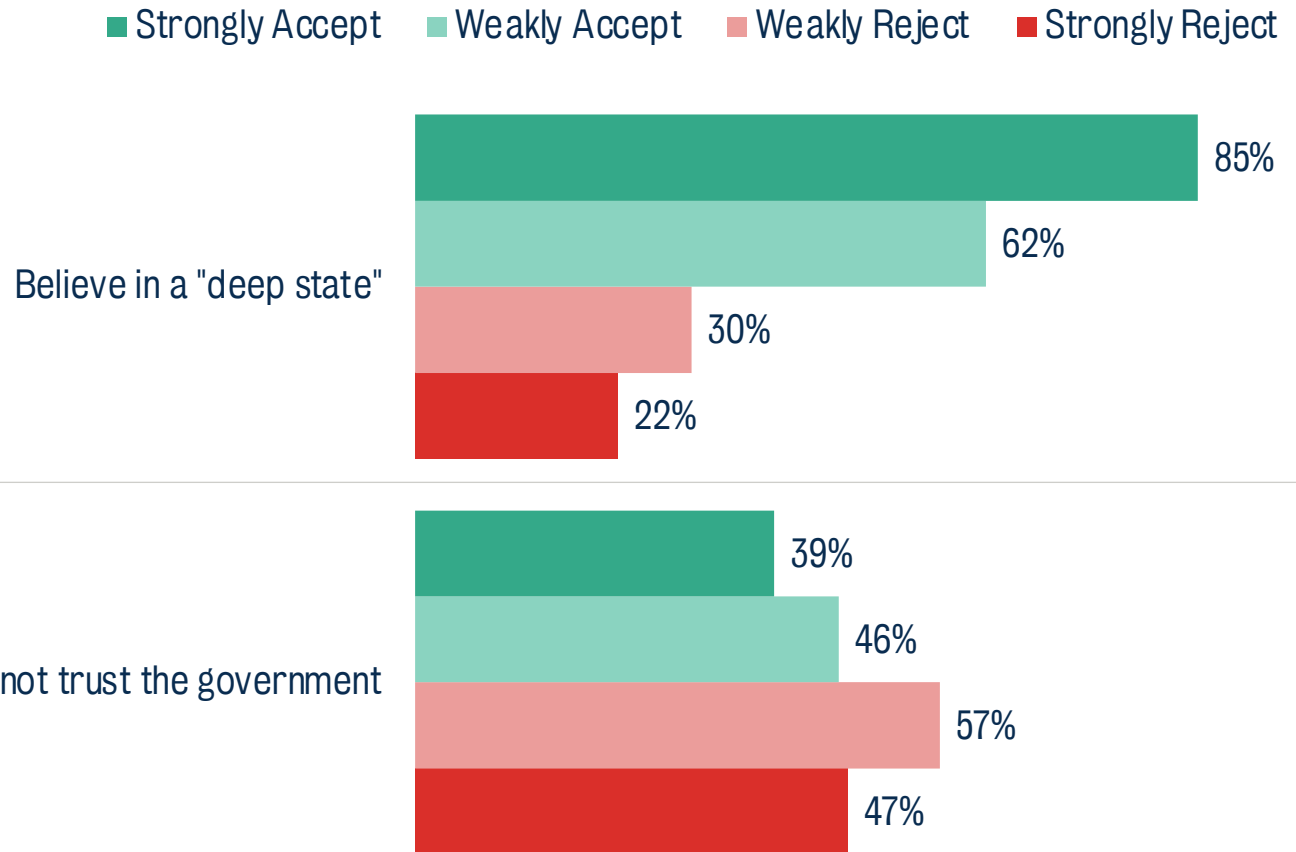
■ Strongly Accept ■ Weakly Accept ■ Weakly Reject ■ Strongly Reject



While the hardcore “Strongly Accept” group do not seem to have a greater lack of trust in government, they do have a much higher likelihood of believing in the existence of a “deep state”

85% of the “Strongly Accept” group say they believe in a deep state of military, intelligence and government officials who try to secretly manipulate government policy – much higher than the other groups identified among the UK population.

% of each group with the following characteristics



Demographic differences between the groups

* “Don’t know” group not shown

	Strongly Reject	Weakly Reject	Weakly Accept	Strongly Accept
Age				
16-34	25%	32%	51%	53%
35-54	33%	32%	28%	37%
55+	42%	37%	22%	10%
Gender				
Men	50%	34%	59%	62%
Women	50%	65%	41%	37%
Education				
College or less	52%	61%	45%	41%
University degree	32%	25%	30%	30%
Postgraduate degree	14%	11%	21%	25%
Ethnic background				
White	91%	83%	71%	70%
Asian	4%	9%	16%	18%
Black	2%	3%	6%	6%
Mixed	2%	2%	5%	4%

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Survey details

This report presents findings of a survey conducted online by Savanta ComRes of 4,459 UK adults aged 18+, from 1 to 9 October 2022. Data was weighted to be representative of the UK population by age, gender, region and social grade.

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