

The British Foreign Policy Group

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Public Opinion on Global Britain

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Introduction

The original fieldwork for the annual British Foreign Policy Group Survey of Public Opinion on the UK's Role in the World was completed in January and February 2020 – in the early spectre of the Coronavirus crisis, but before it had been declared a pandemic and any restrictions on daily life had come into force. There was no sense at this time that the disease would escalate as rapidly and dramatically as came to pass, and it therefore did not enter into our survey as an explicit nor implicit force. Some three months on, the national and global landscape has been utterly transformed.

One of the most challenging aspects of researching the social and political consequences of the crisis has been the volatile and nebulous nature of public opinion. The pandemic could provide the grist to the mill to accelerate existing trends; equally, it could diffuse the salience of certain issues. There is also every chance that much of the movement we see in public opinion during this time will re-stabilise in the aftermath of the pandemic and the age of our 'new normal'.

At the end of April, we re-ran a portion of the survey selected to identify areas of fluctuation in public opinion. These questions are on the 'frontline' of issues brought to focus in the pandemic, and address how the COVID-19 crisis is being assessed against other issues, citizens' instinctive preferences for the UK's role in the world, their trust in the government, and our relationships with other nations.

Key Findings: The Pandemic's Influence on UK Public Opinion

The results from our survey make clear that certain shifts are indeed under way in public opinion. In short, these can be summarised in five key observations, as follows:

- The pandemic is now by far the single greatest global issue of interest to Britons (71%), but other issues – namely Brexit, climate change, and immigration – also continue to be important and have not shifted in their relative rankings of significance. International terrorism, however, has fallen from 4th place to become the 8th most important issue, with the pandemic assuming the role of the primary existential threat to the nation.
- Britons' enhanced trust in the UK Government during the pandemic is carried through to an increased level of trust in the Government to act in the nation's interests in foreign policy and world affairs, up 7 percentage points since January to 51%, with a majority of Britons

now trusting of the Government on the world stage. The ‘rallying around the flag’ effect is strongest amongst 2019 GE Conservative voters living in the ‘Red Wall’ areas.

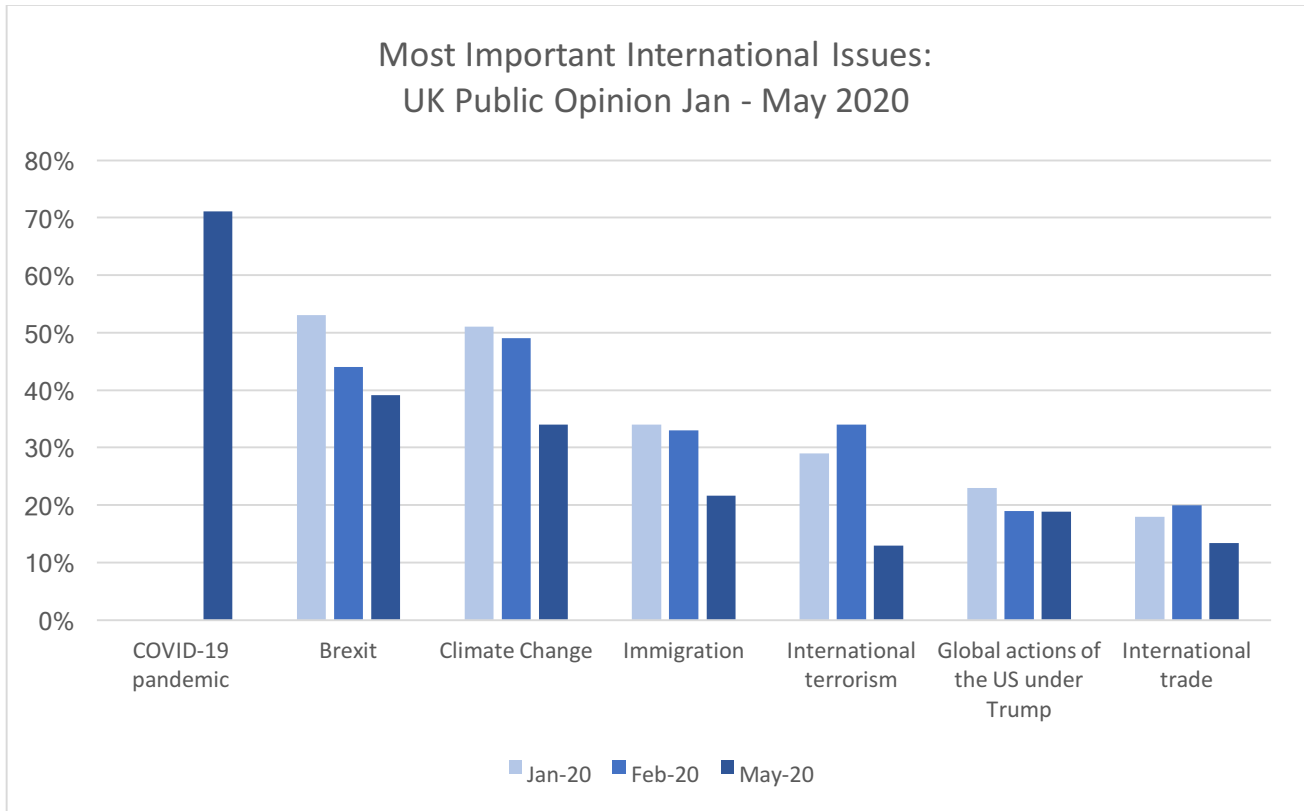
- The United States’ reputation has suffered further in the pandemic. Just 28% of Britons now say they trust our strongest historical ally to act responsibly in the world, a fall of 13 percentage points since January. Conservative voters, who previously expressed outsized levels of trust in the United States, are responsible for the largest loss of confidence.
- The pandemic has strengthened the idea of a ‘truly Global Britain’. Britons are now more inclined to want the UK to always take part in world affairs (up 8 percentage points since Jan to 34%), although the proportion wanting the UK to never get involved globally has also increased (up 4 percentage points to 12%).
- The divisions between Leave and Remain coalitions within the two major parties appears to be increasing during the course of the pandemic – namely, because Conservative-Remain voters are becoming dramatically more interventionist, and Labour-Leave voters are becoming dramatically more isolationist.

The Evolution of Public Opinion is Uneven Across Demographics

Turning to the demographic nuances underpinning these shifts, we can see that in some areas, the pandemic is strengthening the trends towards political polarisation – especially those germinating between the genders, and between generations.

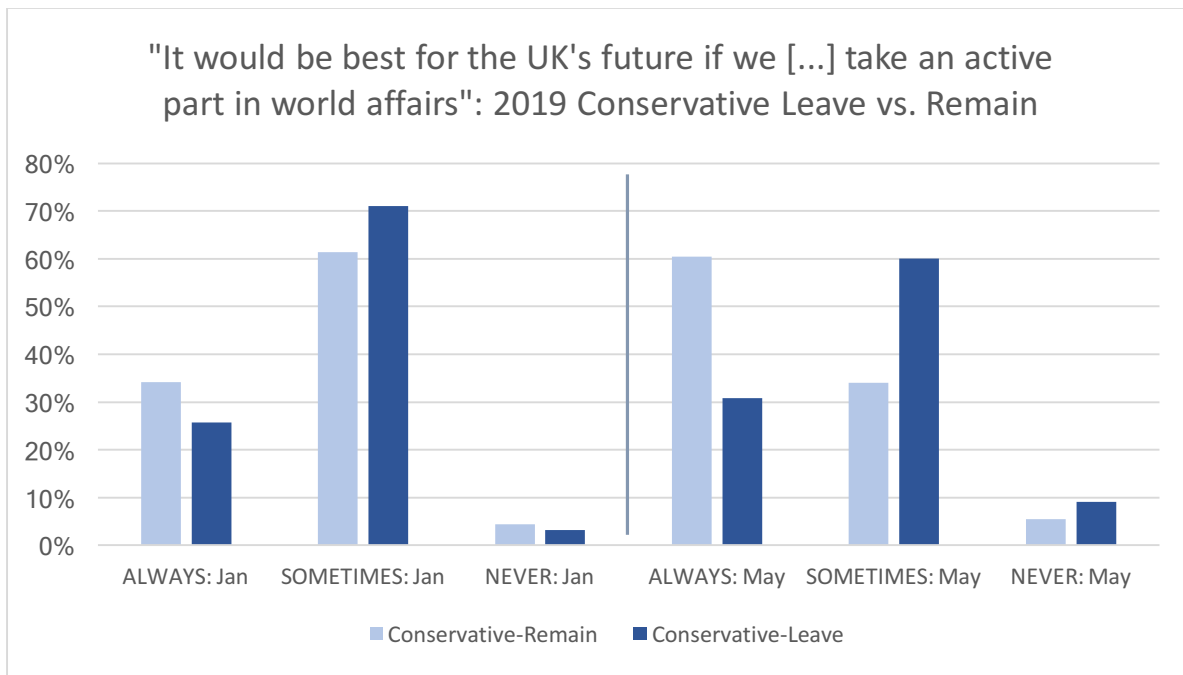
Most Important Issues on the World Stage

- The gulf between perceptions of issues of importance between men and women is becoming more pronounced. Women are more likely to see the pandemic as an important global issue (75% to 67% of men), and the gap between male and female interest in Brexit has widened considerably – from 55% of men and 51% of women in January, to 46% of men and just 33% of women three months later.
- The gulf in gendered concern about climate change remains large (around 10 percentage points), but has fallen in synchronicity since January; while women have become somewhat even less concerned about immigration relative to men.
- Similarly, the chasm of shared interests between the younger and older generations has widened further. Older people are considerably more likely to regard the pandemic as an important issue (81% to 57% of under-35s), and have therefore depleted their interest in issues such as climate change. Younger people, however, have lost interest in Brexit and immigration. The generational gap between under-35s and over-55s, has widened since January by five points on Brexit, nine points on climate change and four points on immigration.

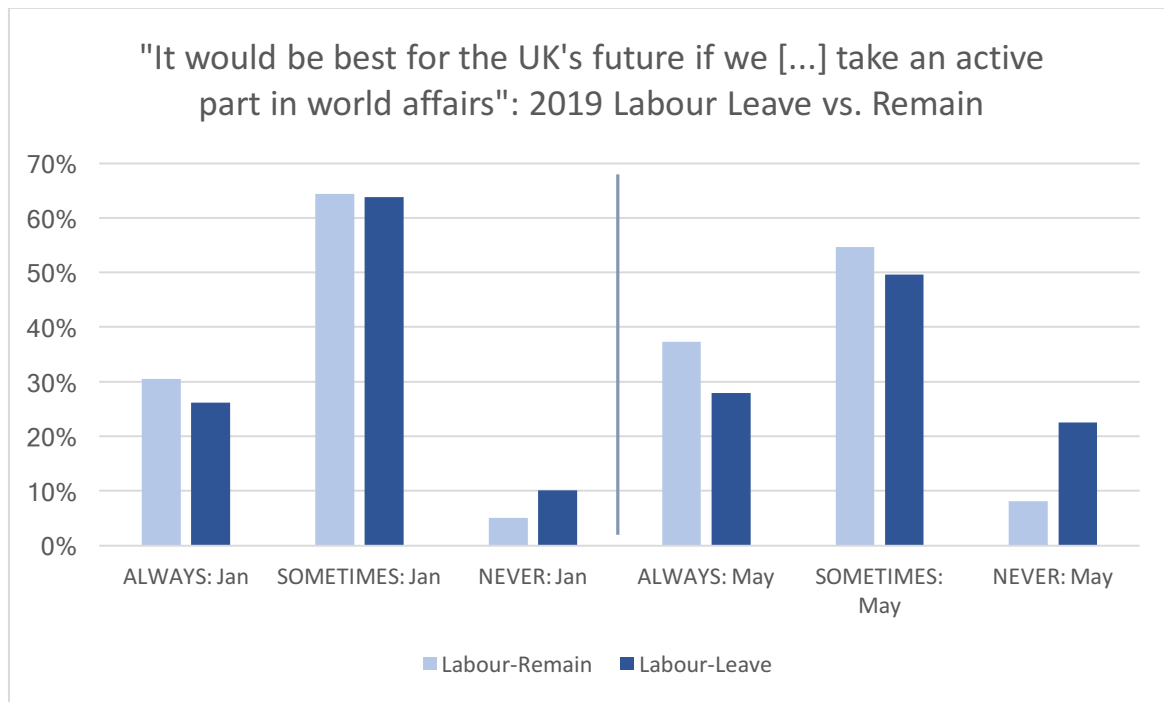


Britain as an Interventionist Power

- The increased desire for Britain to always take an active role in world affairs is primarily driven by older citizens (up 12 percentage points since January, compared to a two-percentage point increase amongst under-35s). Younger Britons are also more likely to have moved towards an anti-interventionist position.
- The largest regional increases in support for international engagement are to be found in the North West, the East Midlands and the South East – all areas of new Conservative gains or established Conservative Party heartlands.
- Overall, Labour voters increased their support for the UK always being involved in world affairs by five percentage points, while both Liberal Democrat and Conservative voters from 2019 became nine percentage points more supportive of an interventionist UK.
- Examining these trends by 2016 Referendum and 2019 General Election behaviour, it is clear that the boost in support for the UK being active in the world is driven by Conservative-Remain voters, jumping from 34% in favour in January to 60% in favour in May. Gains amongst Conservative-Leave voters, and both Labour-Leave and Labour-Remain voters, were relatively marginal. This shift is driving an increasing asymmetry of opinion on interventionism between Conservative-Leave and -Remain voters.

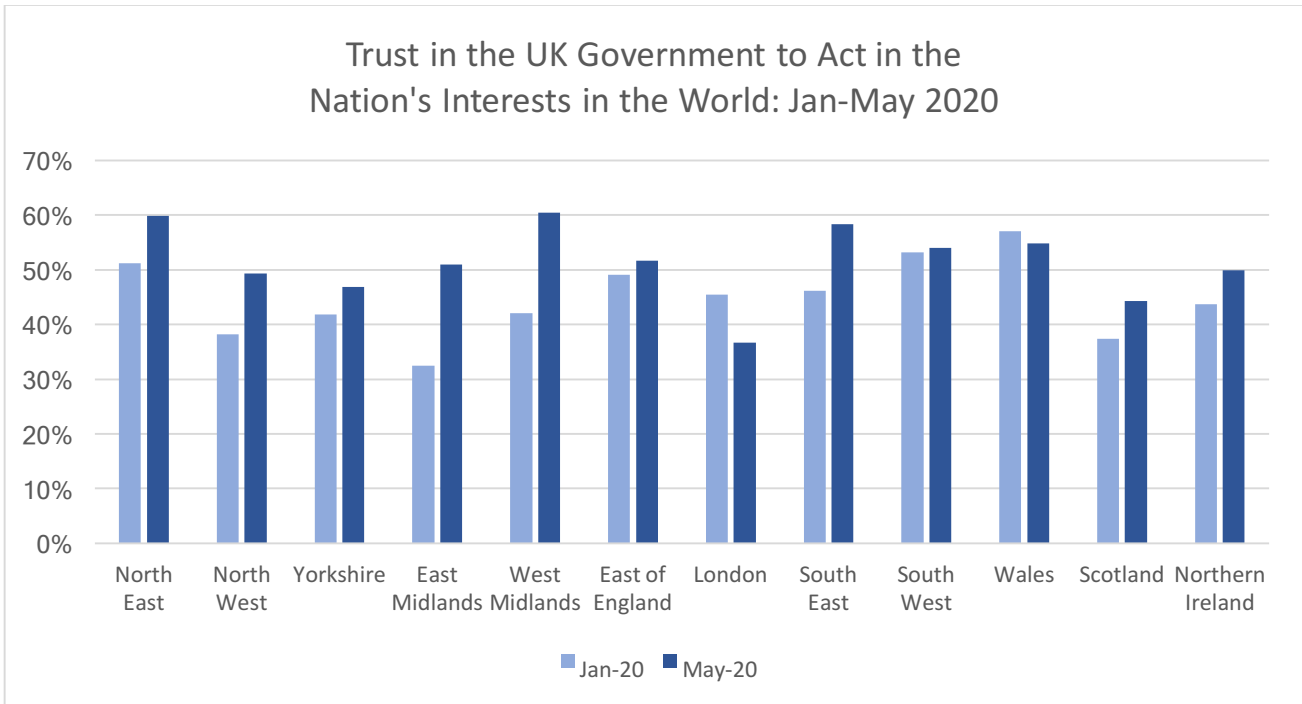


- The other dramatic finding is the leap in support for an anti-interventionist position amongst Labour-Leave voters – from 10% in January to 22% now wanting the UK to *never* take an active part in global affairs. Conservative-Leave voters, by contrast, became six percentage points more likely to want the UK to never intervene in world affairs.
- Interrogating the positions of those who do not want the UK to always be engaged in world affairs, the growing reticence appears to be driven by older men concerned that ‘spending money abroad uses money that should be spent at home’ and older women concerned that ‘being active on the world stage distracts from domestic politics’. Leave voters continue to be disproportionately concerned about international spending, and Labour-Remain voters continue to be distinct in their concern about the UK’s international record.



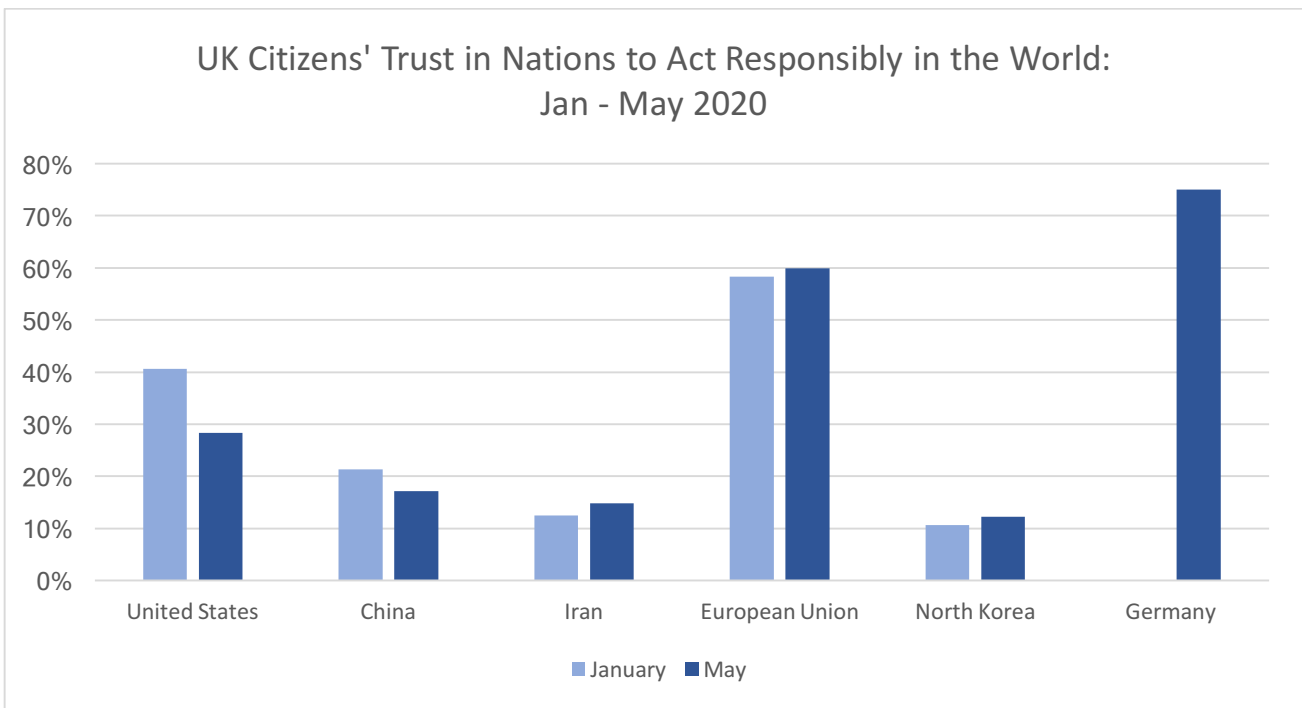
Trust in the UK Government's Capacity to Act in the Nation's Interests

- Women and younger Britons remain considerably more sceptical of the UK Government's capacity to act in the nation's interests on the world stage, with the gap between under-35s and over-55s nearly doubling from 12 to 23 percentage points since January.
- The increase in trust in the UK Government's capacity to act in the nation's interests on the world stage is largely driven by older and male voters. In particular, citizens who live in the North East and West, the Midlands, and the South East, and who voted for the Conservatives in the 2019 General Election. This indicates that both established and 'new' Conservative voters are the primary drivers of the 'rallying behind the flag' effect.
- Aside from their recent expression of support for the Government in December's election, it may be the case that these voters are more sensitive to security – both personal and the more abstract, national state of security – and therefore their stake in the Government's handling of the crisis was always likely to be more intensely experienced.
- By contrast, trust in the Government's foreign policy decisions has in fact declined in both Wales and London – falling almost 10 percentage points in London since January.



New Areas of Emerging Consensus

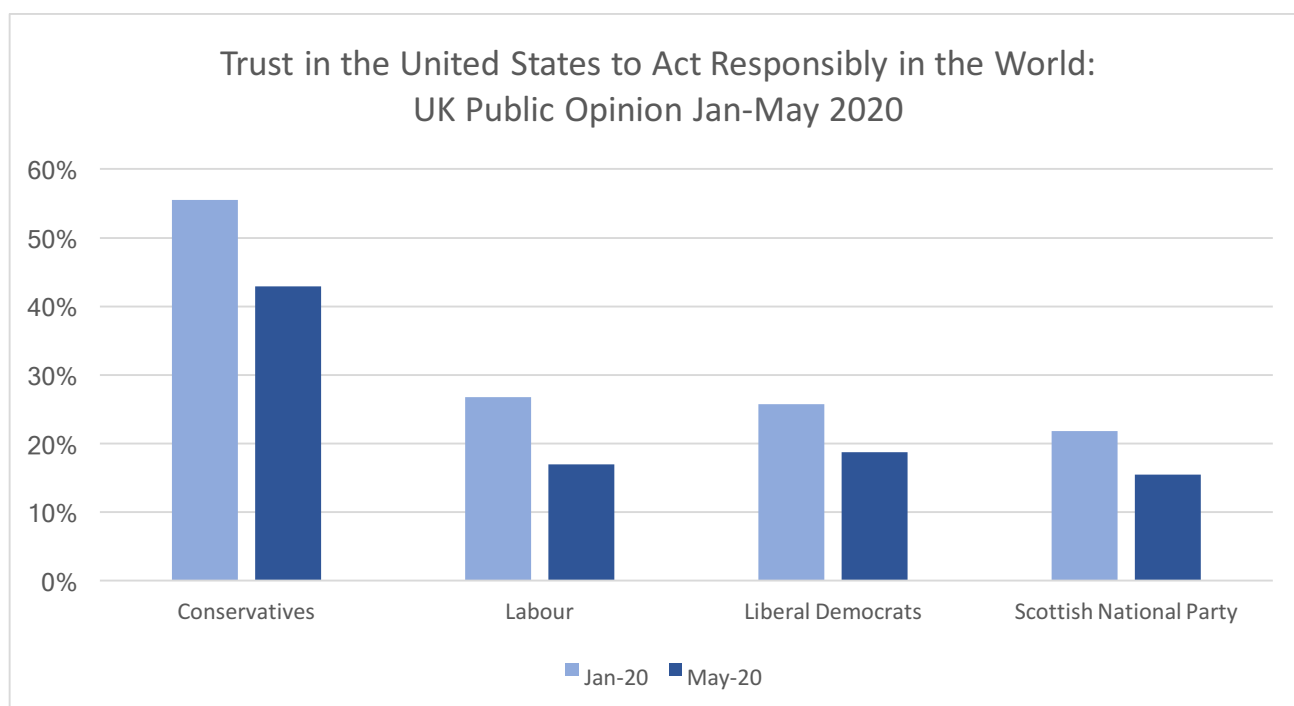
In other areas of the survey, we can observe that the contemporary situation with the pandemic is having more widespread impacts across the population as a collective whole. This is especially true of the public perceptions regarding trust in other nations to act responsibly in the world – identified in our previous research as an area of polarisation, and now demonstrating some degree of emerging consensus due to the disproportionate falls amongst certain voter groups.



Note: Germany was not included as a standalone response in the January 2020 survey

Trust in Other Nations to Act Responsibly in the World

- China’s actions on the world stage were already treated with suspicion by Britons, and therefore the erosion in its global image has been relatively small – falling by only four percentage points since January. Nonetheless, with 83% of Britons distrusting of its intentions, it is closing the gap on distrust towards Iran (85%) and North Korea (88%).
- The decline in trust in China has been relatively universal across demographics, with the exception of London residents, already dramatic regional outliers, who have become somewhat *more* likely to regard China in a positive light during the pandemic (up three percentage points to 31% since January).
- The considerable fall in public perceptions of the United States as a ‘responsible’ global actor is most pronounced in both Brexit heartlands and ‘Red Wall’ areas (ie. North East, East Midlands), as well as in cosmopolitan London. While Labour voters are now 10 percentage points less likely to regard our historical ally as a responsible actor, Conservative voters are in fact 12 percentage points less likely to do so compared to January.
- These findings make clear that the United States’ image has been tarnished amongst groups of citizens that only months ago carried distinct political identities around Brexit, and which had become increasingly polarised from one another. The United States had become symbolically important for both sides on the Brexit divide – as an emblem of strength and fear. We can either interpret this development as a reflection of the degree to which the message salience of a ‘botched American response’ has penetrated, or, perhaps jointly, as capturing the somewhat diluted salience of Brexit identities during the pandemic.



- It is worth emphasising that one group of nations that has received (an albeit small) boost in its positive global image amongst Britons is the European Union, up two percentage points since January, to 60% of Britons trusting the EU to act responsibly in the world.
- The BFPG also chose for this latest survey to include Germany as a standalone nation in the question about citizens' trust in other nations, in addition to 'The European Union', finding that Britons are 15 percentage points more likely to trust Germany to act responsibly in the world than the EU as a whole. These findings correspond with other recent Opinion surveys, which indicate that Germany is the only nation for which a majority of Britons agree that its Government has handled the COVID-19 pandemic more favourably than the UK Government. As such, we can assess that Germany has certainly been able to capitalise on the 'soft power' opportunities of the coronavirus pandemic.

Conclusions and Next Steps

From this data, we can conclude that public opinion on international affairs is indeed experiencing volatility during the pandemic. Yet, the manifestation of these shifts is uneven. In some areas, they appear to entrench demographic polarisation – particularly along generational, gender and regional lines. In other areas, such as the politicisation of our international relationships that took place during the height of the Brexit negotiations, we can see that the pandemic has somewhat diluted the power of these divisions. Finally, while we can also see that the political realignment that took place during the 2016 EU Referendum, solidified in the 2019 General Election, has further embedded itself during the Coronavirus crisis – with new and older Conservative voters aligning together in support behind the Government, we can also observe that the divisions between Leave and Remain voters *within* the two major parties remain important in the construction of instinctive world views.

Having completed this analysis, we can assert that the findings of the larger British Foreign Policy Group studies conducted in January and February remain relevant, because they capture trends that continue to be broadly resilient during the pandemic. In some instances, these trends have accelerated. In others, they have slowed or diffused somewhat. Overall, however, the volatility is experienced within the anticipated parameters of the existing trends. For example, while the salience of Brexit, climate change and immigration have been diminished due to the myopic focus on the pandemic, the consistency in their relative positions suggests that they will continue to play important roles in the national discourse and psyche for some time to come.

Nonetheless, we cannot be certain of the trajectory of public opinion over the coming months, as the UK moves into our 'new normal', the full economic and social cost of the pandemic is revealed, and the global reckoning around the spread and containment of the pandemic becomes ever more prominent in the news media. It will therefore be necessary to treat this data-set as a kind of time-series analysis, with future data points in the Summer and the Autumn of 2020, and beyond. Understanding the evolution of public opinion on these issues will continue to be critically important to formulating the strategies by which to engage the British population and build public consent around the Integrated Review and the Government's vision for 'a truly Global Britain'.