

Public Opinion on Global Britain and the UK's Role in the World

The British Foreign Policy Group's 2020 Annual Survey

KEY FINDINGS

One of the most important factors shaping citizens' views on foreign affairs is their lived experience of mobility.

- Around 42% of Britons did not travel at all for leisure in 2019, and socio-economic and regional inequalities appear to play an important role in shaping citizens' access to travel opportunities.
- 71% of Conservative-Remain voters travelled abroad in 2019, compared to just 43% of Conservative-Leave voters. And 61% of Labour-Remain voters travelled abroad in 2019, compared to just 44% of Labour-Leave voters.
- Compared to those who did not travel in 2019, Britons who travelled frequently are 27 percentage points more likely to feel informed about foreign affairs (78% to 51%) and 23 percentage points more likely to advocate for increased expenditure on international engagement and programmes (39% to 16%).

International identities in Britain are becoming more concretely fused onto the broader trends towards social and political polarisation.

- The proportion of Britons who are unsure about their international identities has fallen in the past year, and the majority of those switching from uncertain to having a view are those *actively rejecting* identities. This reflects the increasing degree of tribalism around international identities.
- 40% of Britons describe themselves as 'global citizens', 54% describe themselves as 'patriots' and 47% describe themselves as 'European'.
- While Remain and Labour voters are more likely to describe themselves as global citizens and European, and Leave and Conservative voters are more likely to see themselves as patriots, many exceptions also prevail. 47% of Remain voters call themselves patriots, 21% of Remain voters actively reject a European identity for themselves, and a third of 2019 Conservative voters describe themselves as European.

Interest and self-reported knowledge in the UK's international activities has been growing steadily since 2017 as a result of Brexit.

- Nonetheless, a number of different demographics continue to hold disproportionately low levels of knowledge and interest, with women, Leave voters (especially Labour-Leave voters), residents in the North East, East of England, Wales and the East Midlands all vulnerable to disengagement.

Most Britons want the UK's international expenditure to stay at its current levels.

- The proportion of Britons favouring both increases and reductions in our foreign policy funding has fallen, with both sides more likely to favour a cautious approach of maintaining the status quo.

Most Britons want our foreign policy to balance strategic and humanitarian principles, but this is an area of increasing polarisation between the parties.

- Overall, 36% of Britons would prefer that Britain's international activities emphasise economic and strategic defence interests, 16% would like our foreign policy to emphasise democracy and human rights, and 32% favour a balance between the two.
- Labour voters tend to be focused on a values-based agenda, while Conservatives are more inclined to support a strategic and economically driven agenda.

Britons support aid and development spending on areas seen as basic human rights, but many also want a stronger emphasis on the UK's interests.

- When asked to consider how the UK should focus its aid and development spending, 31% of Britons choose combatting poverty as a priority, followed closely by 30% who choose providing infrastructure to provide essential public services, such as sewers and clean water, and 29% who choose basic health programmes, such as vaccinations.
- A quarter of Britons believe our aid should be directed to 'create new investment opportunities for the UK' and 16% want aid directed to programmes discouraging immigration from poorer countries to wealthier nations, such as Britain.

Support for retaining the UK's NATO membership remains strong.

- A majority of Britons (67%) support the UK maintaining its membership of NATO, with just 11% of the population actively against our membership.
- However, nearly a quarter of Britons (23%) are unsure, indicating a weak level of knowledge about NATO's purpose and relevance to Britain's security interests.

There is very little consensus about our strongest global allies.

- Britons are divided between favouring the United States (29%), the Commonwealth (25%), and other Anglosphere nations such as Australia as our 'best friend in the world', and these relationships are becoming increasingly politicised around party-political and Brexit divides.

The key message on immigration is that overall numbers must come down, yet many Britons also recognise the benefits that migrants have made to British economic and social life.

- While 62% of Britons agree the UK's population is too high, and 44% believe migrants are a burden on the UK's welfare system, so too do 44% believe immigration has had a positive impact on the UK's economy, and 47% believe immigrants strengthen Britain because of their hard work and talents.

There is not one country in the world from which a majority of Britons would support an increase in immigration.

- Around a third of Brits support increases in immigration from three Anglosphere nations: Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.
- The source countries from which an active reduction in immigration is sought are Muslim-majority nations such as Pakistan (47%), Saudi Arabia (47%), Turkey (46%), or nations perceived as hostile states, such as Russia (43%) and China (37%).
- Britons make clear distinctions between different groups of EU member states in their attitudes towards EU migration. 'Older' member states such as Germany, France and Spain are regarded much more favourably than newer states in Central and Eastern Europe.

Aside from the coronavirus pandemic, Britons regard international terrorism, cyber-attacks, political instability in the Middle East and North Korea's nuclear programme as critical threats to geopolitical security.

- Older Britons and those without a university education are much more likely to regard every geopolitical and security threat as 'critical' than younger and university-educated Britons.
- Climate change is the only issue outside of the defence spectrum which is regarded as a critical threat by the majority of Britons (53%).

Britons' understanding of the 'Global Britain' project is complex and often contradictory.

- Overall, the most popular understanding of 'Global Britain' is for the UK to become 'a champion of free trade and globalisation', followed by the notion of Britain as 'a diplomatic powerhouse, brokering negotiations in Britain's interests and helping to facilitate international cooperation on shared challenges'.
- However, a quarter of Britons (and 38% of 2019 Conservative voters) indicated that their understanding of Global Britain is 'A nation with strong and secure borders, focused on issues at home'.

2019 Conservative voters have bought into the Global Britain narratives much more strongly than other Britons – even if they traditionally would have instinctively been opposed to its messages.

- Broadly, Conservative voters are much more supportive of a free trade and 'active and engaged' UK agenda as part of the Global Britain project than Labour voters – many of whom would have traditionally supported internationalism, and an open and connected foreign policy.
- Labour Leave voters are more supportive of these narratives than Labour Remain voters, which indicates the power of the tribal Brexit narratives on both sides.
- Global Britain messages that promote strong defensive capabilities, or moral and values-based leadership, are much less popular.

Significantly, 28% of Britons are unsure about what Global Britain really means.

- Significant regional disparities are also evident, with 20% of Londoners unsure about its meaning, rising to half of all residents in the East Midlands.

Britons are open to military interventionism, although they are largely conditional in their support.

- 62% of Britons support conditional interventionism, with 18% hardened against military deployment under any circumstances.
- Leave voters (who are generally more sceptical of multilateralism) are more likely to support military interventionism than Remain voters – indicating that this kind of global engagement must be seen as a more patriotic, 'sovereign' kind of activity.
- The main scenarios for which Britons would support interventionism are when British interests and assets are directly threatened, and in scenarios where humanitarian crises have reached an untenable scale and pernicious nature. Scenarios pertaining to the Middle East, or conflicts concerning our allies, are less compelling.

There is no clear consensus around the single most troubling aspect of free trade negotiations, with Britons' concerns rather spread widely and thin across a vast array of issues.

- The most frequently cited concerns are around the NHS, workers' rights, food standards, environmental protections, animal welfare. Overall, Labour voters are more concerned about every aspect of trade negotiations than Conservative voters. Concerns about job security, loss of revenue for small firms, and wage competition, were relatively weak, only attracting the interest of around 10% of the population.

CONCLUSIONS

- Public opinion on foreign policy is becoming polarised, and dynamically responsive to political narratives. And as international identities harden, and perceptions of our global relationships become more contested, the task of bringing the country together around a vision for our role in the world becomes more challenging.
- Voter volatility has brought new challenges to the Conservative Party; however, it appears that the Labour Party's current voting coalition may prove more complicated to reconcile.
- Educational attainment and lived experiences with mobility remain significant predictive factors in public attitudes, raising significant questions around equality of access to international opportunities.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

At the end of April and the beginning of May, we re-ran a number of sections 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.

These results have been published separately, and are available online here:

<https://bfpg.co.uk/2020/05/public-opinion-foreign-policy-covid/>

NOTES AND BACKGROUND

The British Foreign Policy Group is an independent, non-partisan think tank dedicated to advancing the UK's global influence, at a crucial time in the nation's modern history. Our core objective is to bridge the link between the domestic and international spheres – recognising that Britain's foreign policy choices and challenges are shaped by our social landscape at home, and the political constraints of our allies and strategic rivals. In addition to exploring the UK's evolving geopolitical opportunities and challenges, we conduct in-depth qualitative and quantitative social research on a range of issues pertaining to foreign policy and international affairs.

Commenting on the survey, the Director of the British Foreign Policy Group, Sophia Gaston, said:

As Britain embarks upon its new life after the European Union, we are compelled to define our role and image in the world. It is a challenging time to do so: four years of polarising, fractious debate has left British society deeply divided, and the world order we are seeking to re-enter anew is itself undergoing dramatic structural shifts. The Global Britain project presents a defining opportunity for the nation to renew itself, consolidate its values, and take on a more prominent and meaningful leadership role in many of the world's most pressing challenges. To realise these ambitions, however, the Government must build consensus amongst the British people. Therefore, there has never been an important time to understand their priorities, values and ambitions for Britain and its international footprint.

This Survey

This report presents the findings of a nationally representative survey of British adults led by the British Foreign Policy Group (BFPG), with the fieldwork undertaken by Opinium Research. This survey builds on the previous surveys conducted by the BFPG in 2017 and 2019.

Fieldwork was conducted by Opinium Research over two sessions, incorporating the full questionnaire, to minimise the influence of topicality: 21-24 Jan and 7-11 Feb 2020. Sample size was 2,000 UK adults per session. Results were weighted to be nationally representative.