



*Networked Age*



*Polarisation Tracker*

# Political identity, hardship, suspicion and pessimism

*Wave five – February 2023*

Produced in partnership with

Cambridge University Political Psychology Lab





# Introduction

*Divided by* political identity, *united by* hardship, suspicion and pessimism

In [Wave 4](#) of the MHP Polarisation Tracker, we found a strong correlation between a belief that the economy is performing poorly and hostility towards elites.

If your fortunes are worsening, you are more likely to believe that the ‘people in charge’ are aloof, conspiratorial and actively hostile to your interests.

Since the last tracker, conducted in summer 2022, the economy has worsened and people we surveyed are more pessimistic about their own, future generations and our collective prospects. So how does the British public now feel about elites?

**Public suspicion is endemic: Three quarters of voters believe ‘people in power often work together to frustrate the will of the people,’ while two thirds believe ‘mainstream media aren’t really independent, they work together to push the elite’s political agenda.’**

This populist critique straddles the political divide and presents major challenges to businesses, media brands and other institutions. It also creates a vacuum unscrupulous political actors could step into.

Elsewhere, the data uncovers a deep sense of misgiving and pessimism about the road ahead. Divisions persist between groups, but there are points of unity, and in general the public is united in despair.

People agree that future generations will have it harder than ones before and that Britain is headed in the wrong direction as a country. The cost of living crisis resonates through our entire findings - 85% of respondents told us they were experiencing financial difficulties. A rise from our previous tracker.

So this time, we conducted questions to test how people would feel if tensions continued to escalate.

Would people have sympathy for striking workers, for those who refused to pay bills they could not afford, if people took part in unlawful protest? Whilst theory suggests economic hardship will divide we uncovered a more generous picture – at least for now.

We found a high degree of sympathy for those who were struggling and refused to pay their bills or taxes. The momentum behind the ‘do not pay’ movement may continue to gather pace, and support. The Government may find it increasingly difficult to deliver on its agenda. Unprepared businesses could find themselves caught in the crossfire.

In previous waves, voters have told us they are broadly unimpressed by businesses speaking out about political issues, and the hostility towards brand activism (especially related to identity politics) has grown since [Wave 4](#).

**With recession looming, however, there is one field where brand activism is much more welcome: Economic policy.**

We tested the response to outspoken criticism senior executives from the British Chamber of Commerce and Land Securities on the economic instability during Liz Truss’ tenure as Prime Minister. We found widespread support.

**There was support too, for brands that satirised Truss’ performance and 42-day long Prime Ministership.**

As in the previous waves of this research we have worked with Lee de Wit and David Young at Cambridge University’s Political Psychology Lab. Their insight and analysis has strengthened both this research and the clarity of its implications.

**Underneath these findings remains a cause for real concern. Animosity between different groups in the UK remains high and increased. While our polling offers glimmers of hope that sympathy can cross divides, the environment we are operating remains one where tensions are likely to increase further.**

All is far from lost but the signs are ominous, and their implications for leaders complex, challenging and unignorable.

**Nick Barron**  
Deputy CEO,  
MHP Group



**Ali Goldsworthy**  
President,  
Accord



Finding one  
The public believes Britain  
is in a bad way and that *things  
are going to get worse*





Finding one

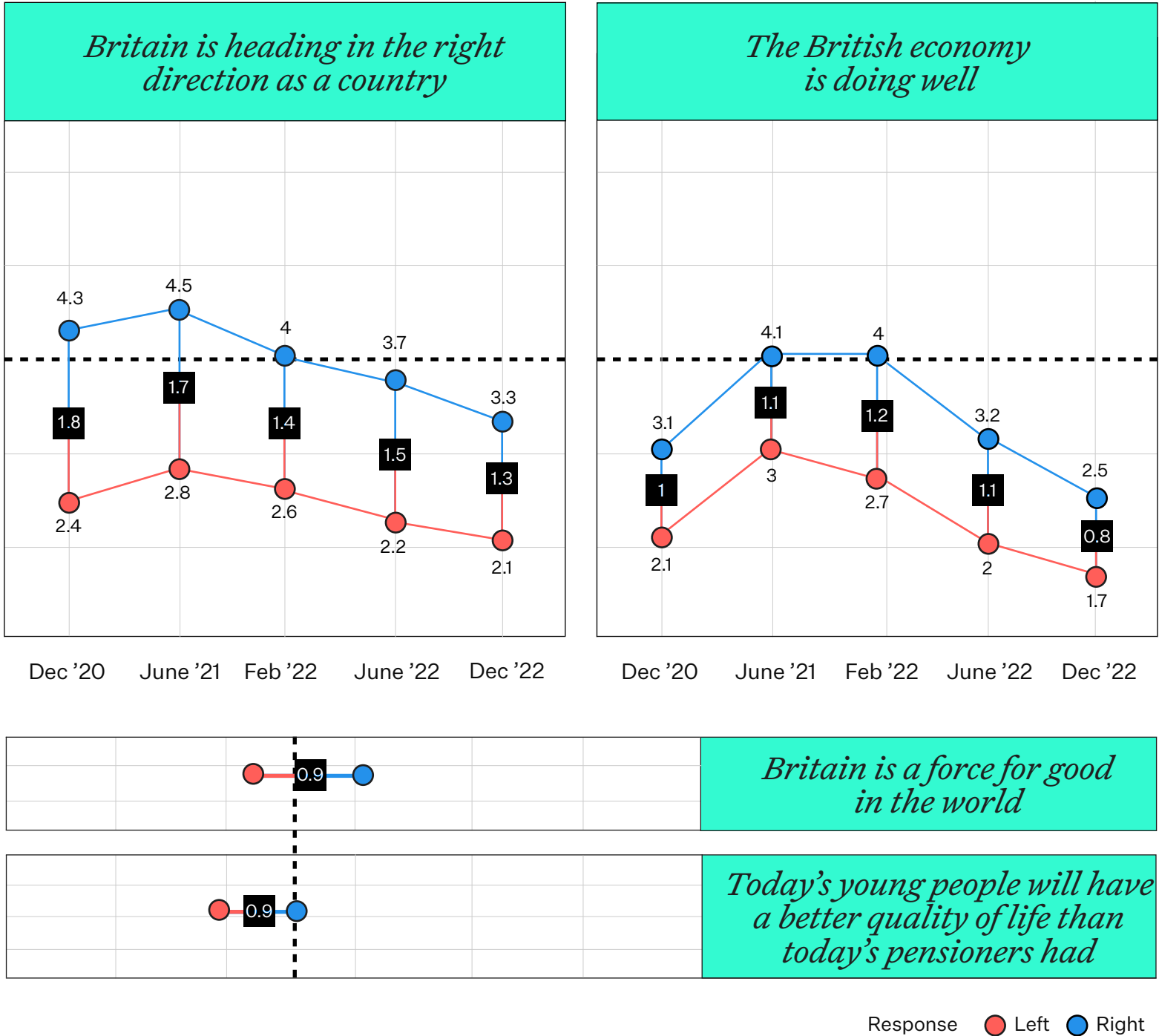
*The public believes Britain is in a bad way and that things are going to get worse*

Nearly three quarters of people we spoke to (74.3%) think that Britain is headed in the wrong direction as a country with less than one in three thinking that young people will have a better quality of life than today’s pensioners had.

A majority of people are pessimistic about the future in every group we analysed, irrespective of political identity, geography, affluence, gender and race.

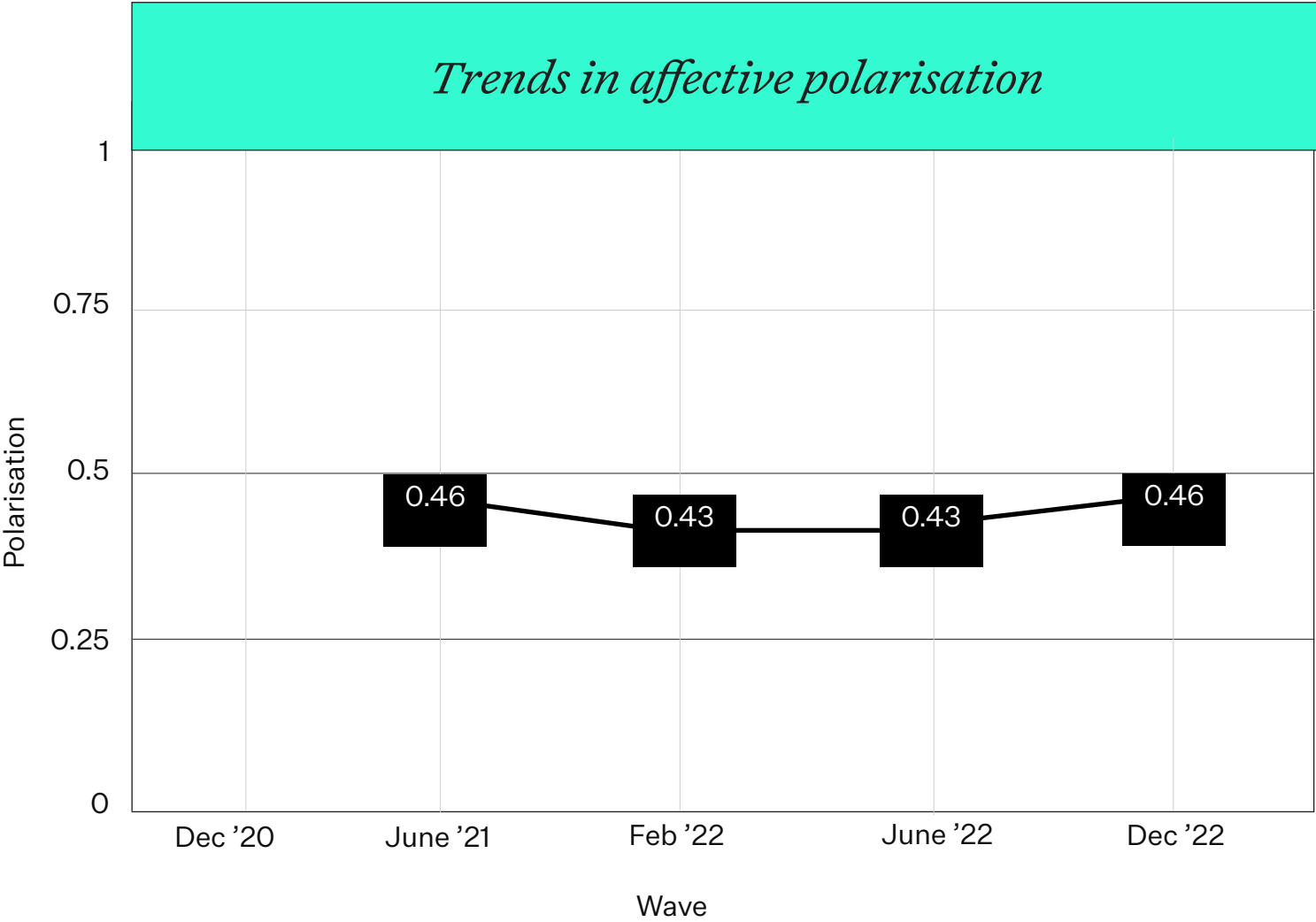
Tightening economic conditions often fuel polarisation. If there is less to go round, people can collaborate but hostility levels rise. That is especially the case if they think the system is loaded against them.

Both left and right wing voters have a worsening view of the state of the nation, with differences of opinion narrowing



*In these circumstances, we should not be surprised to find that polarisation between different political groups has grown, driven particularly by an increasing dislike for Conservatives by Labour supporters.*

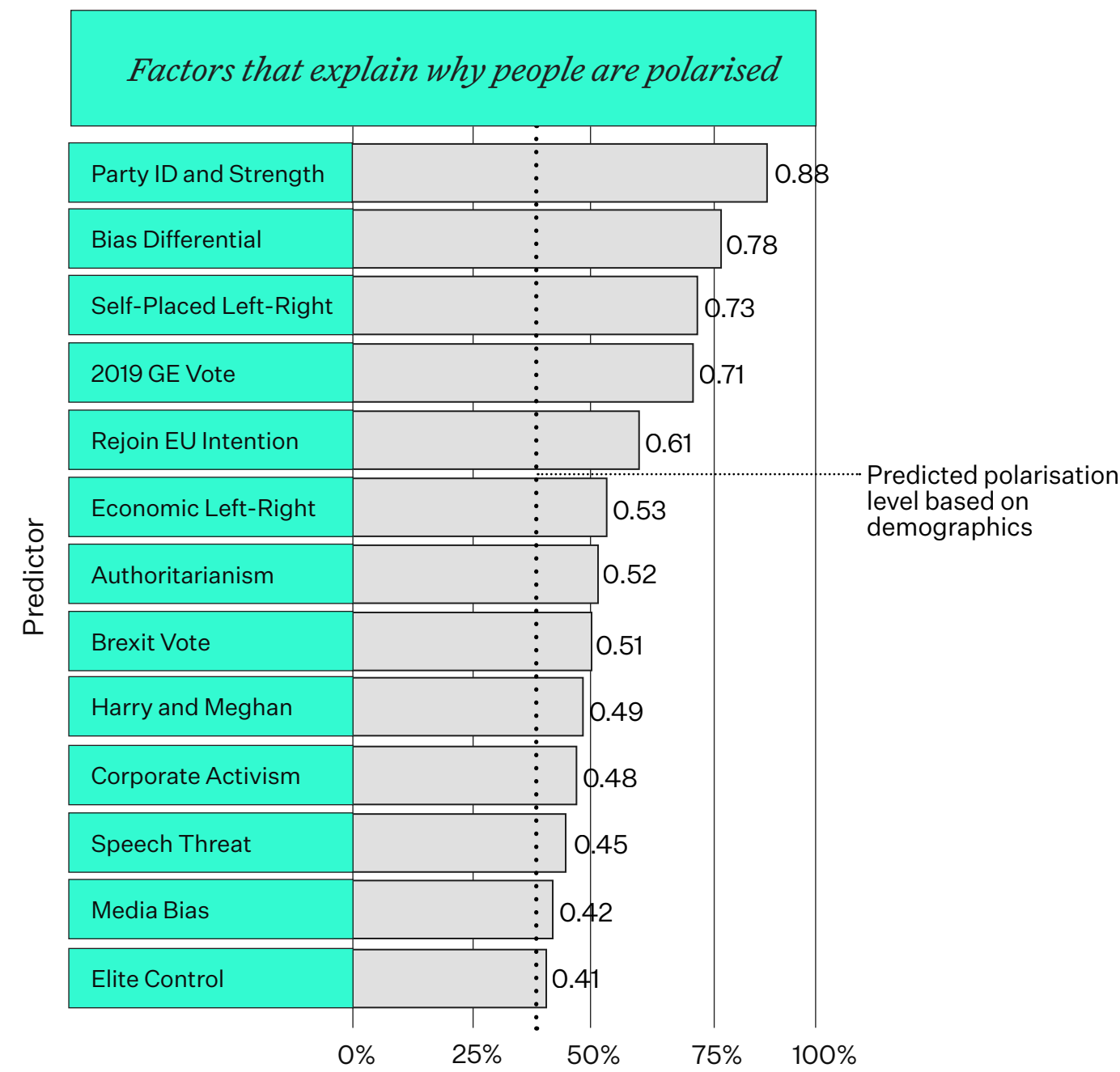
Affective polarisation the divide between groups has worsened, returning to levels not seen since the pandemic.



The State of Polarisation – February 2023

We dug deeper into this polarisation, using a multivariable regression analysis to see which of our questions went beyond demographics to best explain why people may be the most polarised. This is important for people trying to understand how to communicate with different groups of people.

The top five factors to suggest people were polarised, were strength of identity with a political party, how biased they were likely to think “others” were, where they self-placed on the left-right scale, how they voted in the 2019 General Election and an intention to rejoin the EU.





## **Finding two**

The majority believe that elites in business, the media and government work together *against the public interest*



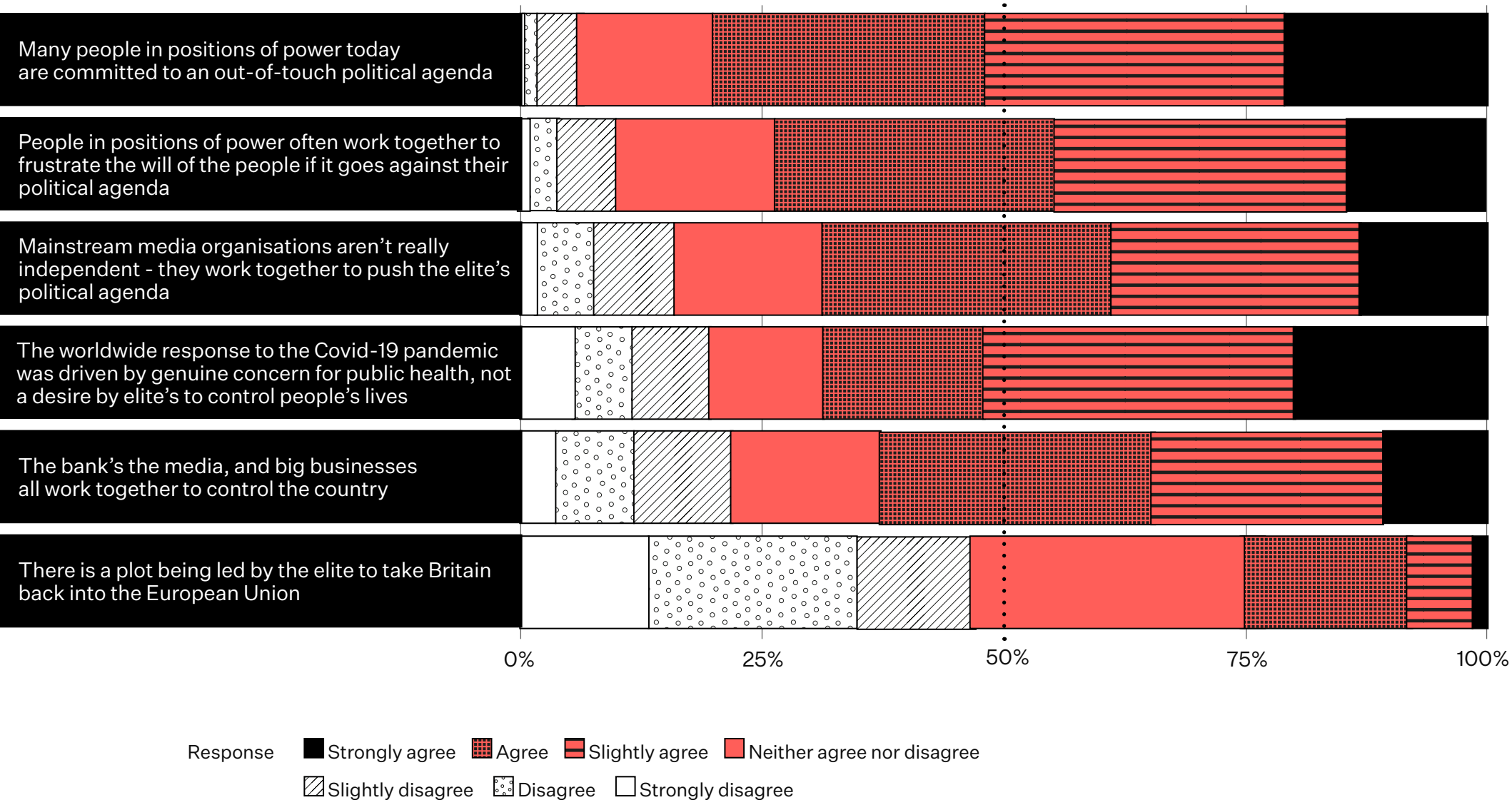
Finding two

*The majority believe that elites in business, the media and government work together against the public interest*

There is strong public support for the idea that ‘people in power’ are out-of-touch and conspire against the public interest.

Support for these beliefs has risen since Wave 4 of the Tracker, which found a strong correlation between economic distress and anti-elite sentiment. The escalating cost-of-living crisis will likely have contributed to rising resentment.

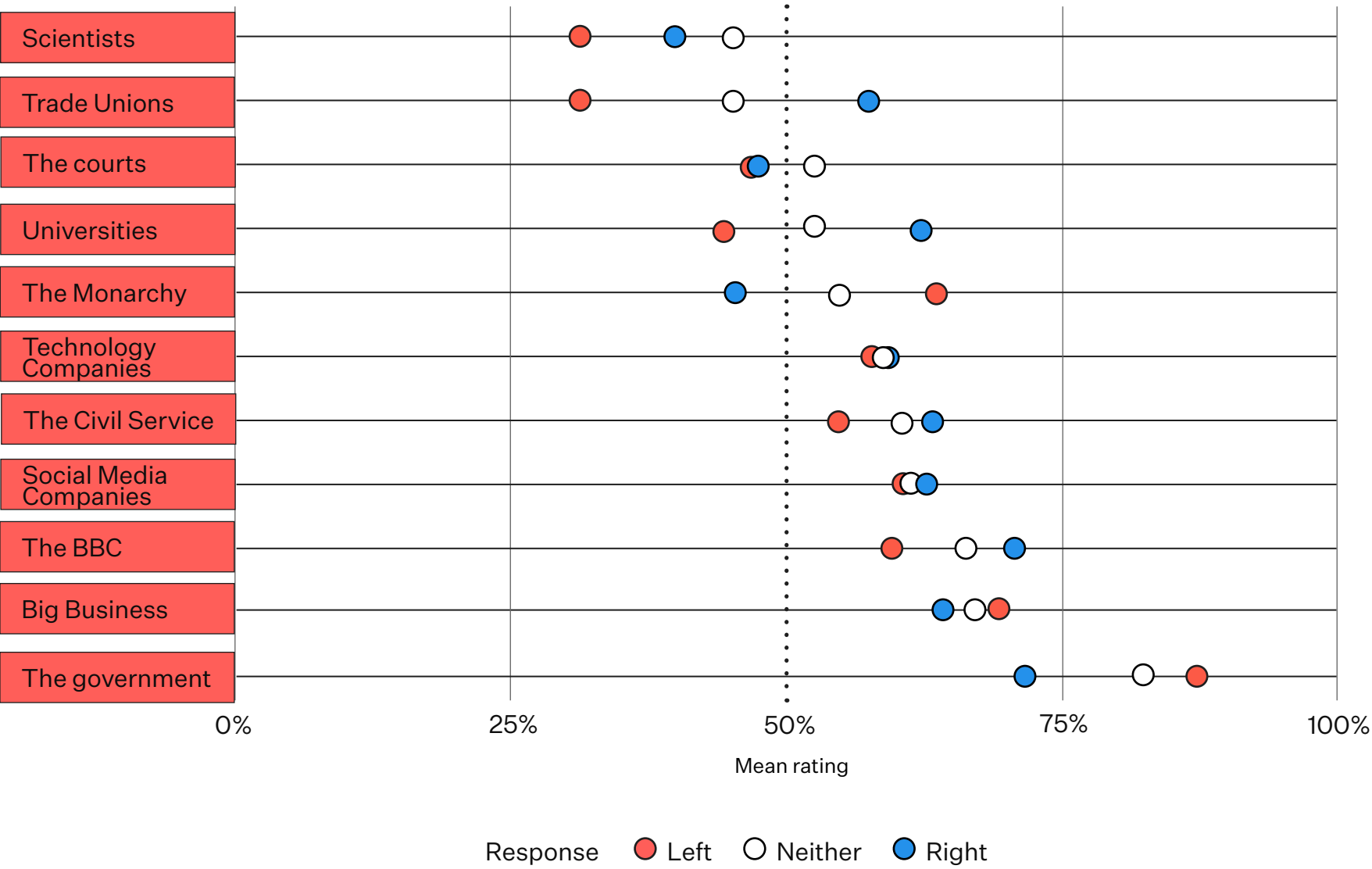
Perceptions of Elite Control





When we drill down into the question of which institutions are seen as the most likely to serve elite interests, we find government and big business continue to lead the pack. By contrast scientists and trade unions are the least likely to be seen as elitist.

To what extent do you think the following description applies to these institutions?  
“They are more interested in pushing a political agenda than doing what they think is right by the people.”





## **Finding three**

Brand activism in general remains unpopular, but as confidence in the governments handling of the economy plummetse *leadership from business is welcome*





Finding three

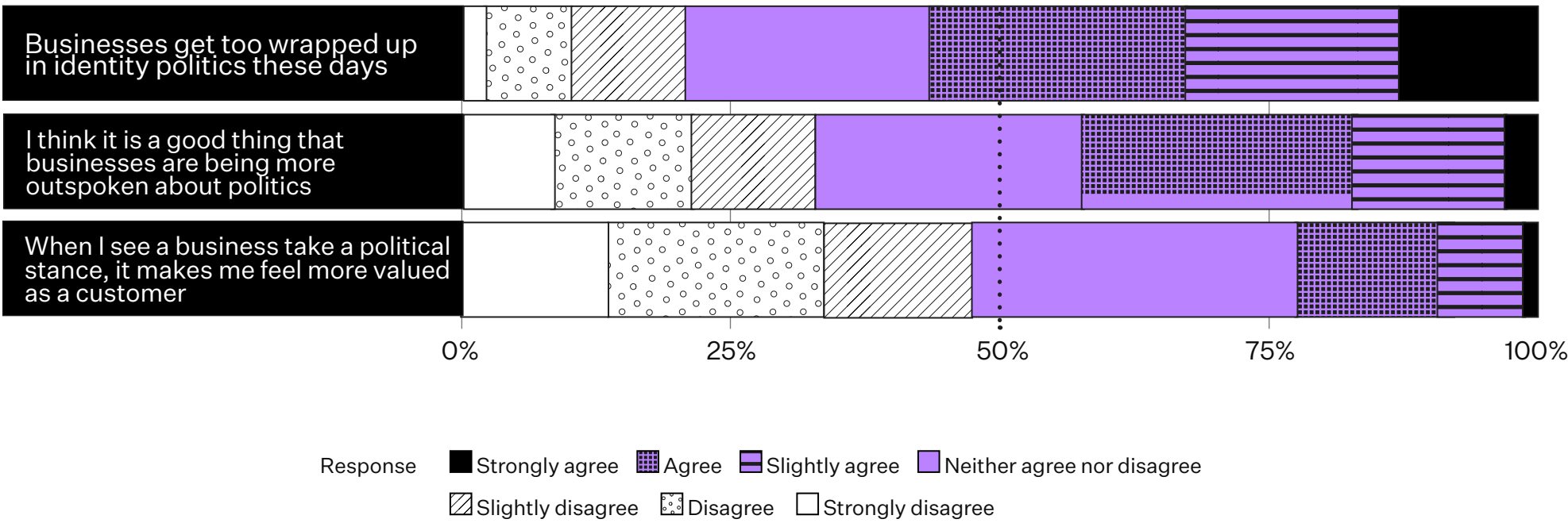
*Brand activism in general remains unpopular, but economic leadership from business is welcome*

**Whilst the Government saw an uptick in confidence in Wave 2 (Summer 2021), it has plummeted since, and especially in relation to healthcare.**

In these circumstances, people look to alternatives.

It is into this space that business leaders can step, with our data showing that the public is receptive.

Perceptions of Corporate activism



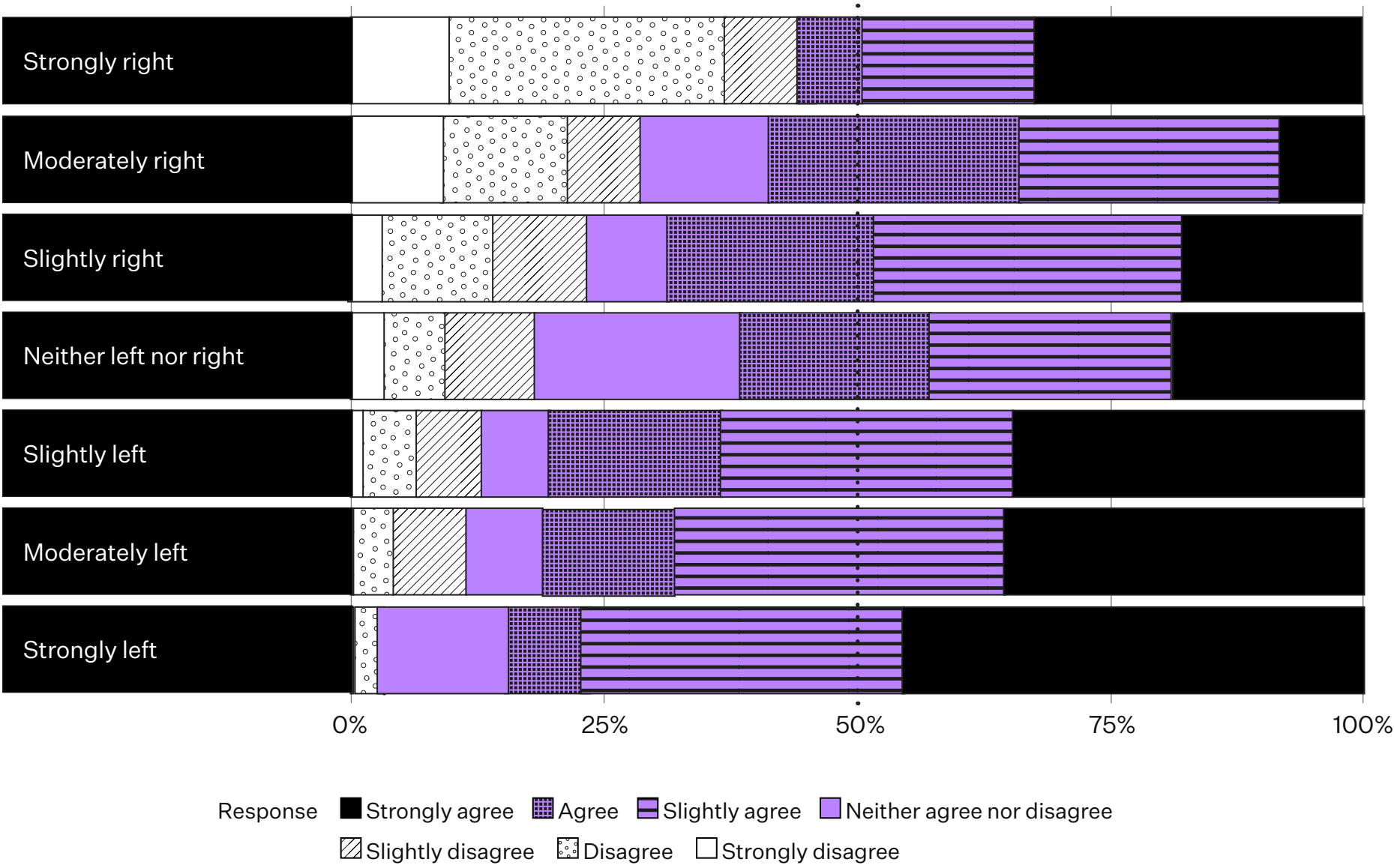
As we found in Wave 4, the majority of the British public disapproves of brand activism in general, particularly activism related to identity politics. Disapproval has grown since the last wave

People from all backgrounds strongly agreed business groups were right to heavily criticise Liz Truss.

We showed them statements from Shevaun Haviland from the British Chambers of Commerce saying there had been “weeks of chaos and uncertainty” and Alison Carnwath from Land Securities and Evercore making more personal remarks about Liz Truss; saying she “lacks style, charisma and authority”.

One of the manifestations of polarisation is people finding it harder to accept criticism of their own side, but in this case, even a majority of those who identify as strongly right wing welcomed this intervention by business.

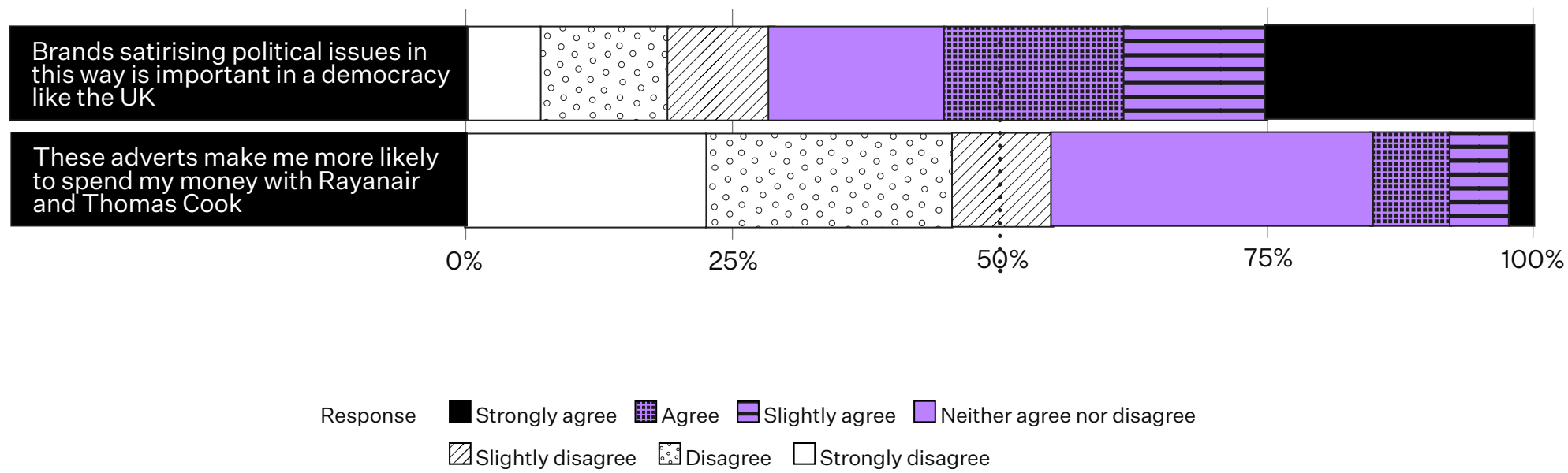
Business groups were right to talk about the Prime Minister in this way





We dug further into this phenomena, explicitly looking at brands who had poked fun at Liz Truss’ short tenure on social media, asking respondents if they thought this satire was important in a democracy.

Perceptions of satirical adverts about Liz Truss



*These posts from Thomas Cook and Ryanair were both generally welcomed - good news for social media managers trying to craft creative copy.*

*However, a word of caution: Few respondents said it was likely to make them spend more money with Thomas Cook or Ryanair.*



## **Finding four** The public *backs protestors*





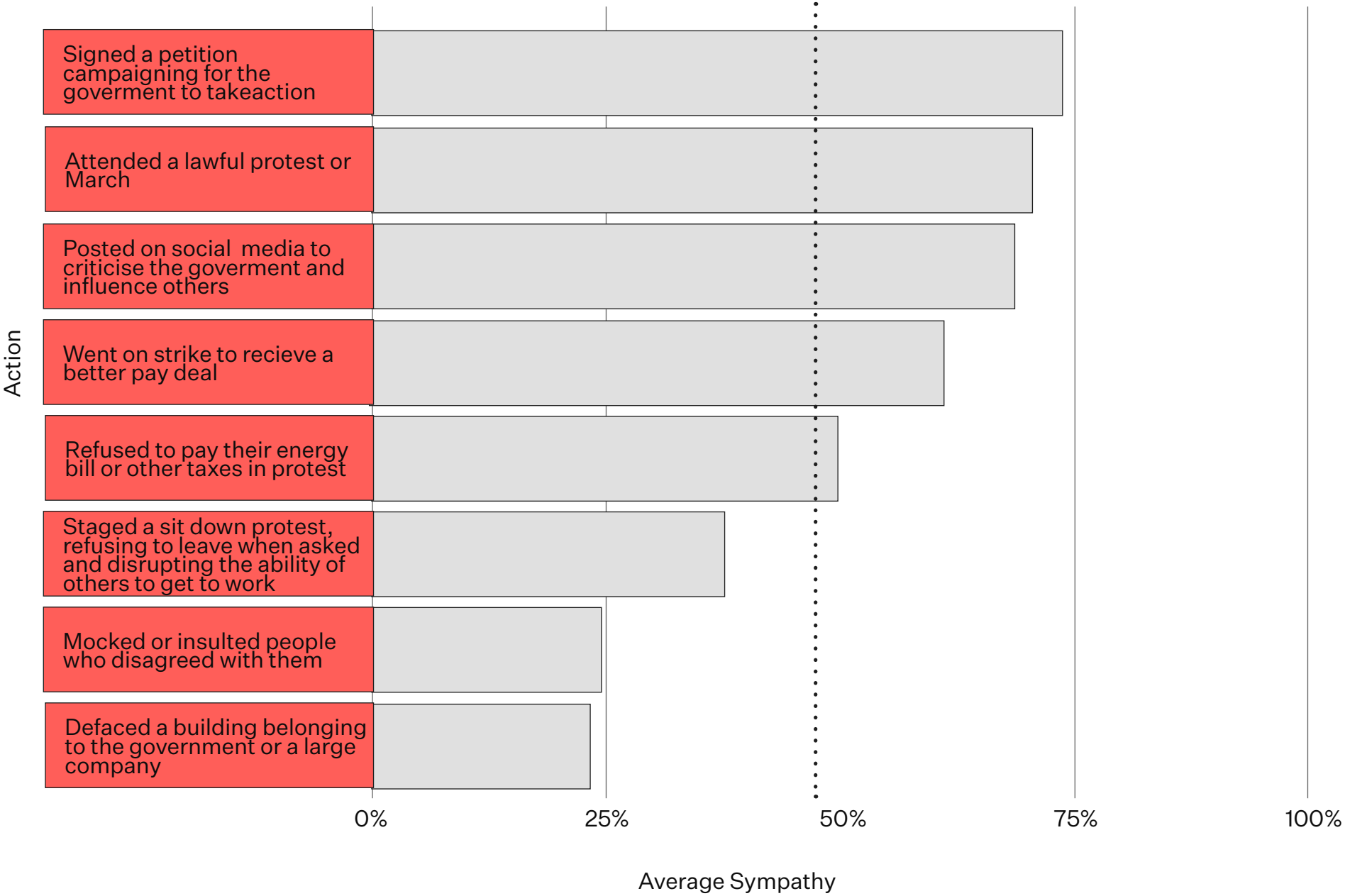
Finding four  
*The public backs protestors*

A winter of strikes and climate activism did not dent public sympathy for disruptive action.

When we showed the public a vignette drawn from a real-life case study, there was considerable sympathy for lawful protest, with and for those who would cease to pay their taxes or bills.

This shows the risk that a spark could ignite polarising tension creating an exceptionally difficult environment for government and businesses to operate in.

There is net public support for direct action including strikes and withholding payment.



# What is polarisation

*There are two types of polarisation:*

*Issue polarisation* Where people consistently support policies associated with one side of the political spectrum, from Brexit to immigration. Typically, when people think about polarisation they consider it in terms of issues, but there is another form of polarisation which is harder to detect but often gives a far more complete understanding.

*Affective polarisation* Looks at the difference between how you feel about your own and other groups. Decades of social psychology research shows these powerful, often subconscious, dynamics cause people to favour and see nuance in

their own group, whilst discriminating against others. who start to think they are all the same. As a result this often leads to people increasingly perceiving, interpreting and describing the world around them in terms of ‘us and them’, as they hold onto their views more firmly.

If you want a short hand to think about the difference between issues and identity, consider if people say they believe in leave or remain or ‘I am a Leaver or Remainer’. If it is the latter then an issues is likely to have expanded to become a matter of identity too. In this report, unless we say otherwise, we have focussed on affective polarisation.





## *About the MHP Polarisation Tracker*

This is the fifth wave of MHP Group's polarisation tracker. It was undertaken and analysed with the support of the Political Psychology Lab at Cambridge University under the leadership of Lee de Wit.

Using Prolific, 1004 people responded to our survey, which was in the field between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> December 2022.

Visit [mhpgroup.com/approach/library](https://mhpgroup.com/approach/library) for more details.

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