

Protecting what matters: attitudes of Welsh voters to regulation and deregulation

A survey carried out by YouGov for Unchecked UK

March 2021



Contents

About Unchecked UK	p. 4
Introduction	p. 5
Executive summary	p. 6
The research	p. 8
Summary of findings	p. 10
Conclusion	p. 26

About Unchecked UK

Unchecked UK makes the case for common-sense protections which help keep people safe and allow businesses to thrive.

We are a rapidly growing network of leading and diverse [civil society organisations](#) who see sensible, properly enforced protections as the framework for a decent society - where the food we eat and the things we buy can be trusted, the natural environment is protected, our homes and workplaces are safe, and our rights are safeguarded.

We carry out research and investigations to highlight the loss of protection for the UK public that results from the erosion of important regulations and of the public bodies which enforce them. Through public insights research, we shape new positive narratives about our shared protections and the enforcement teams who work hard to keep us safe. We run campaigns to show how important strong rules are to everyday life, and work with our civil society partners to develop policy alternatives to the deregulation approach.

Ultimately, Unchecked UK aims to shift the political dynamic around regulation, and to build momentum for proper investment in strong rules and the public bodies which defend them. We are a non-partisan organisation, incubated as a project of The Ecology Trust.

Find out more about our work: www.unchecked.uk

Introduction

Differing approaches to regulation have been an important element of the political debate over the UK's departure from the European Union, with proponents of deregulation arguing that regulation stifles economic growth and overly restricts individual liberty. Other commentators have pointed to the role of EU-derived laws in protecting the public, creating competitive markets and providing long-term investment certainty.

This survey was undertaken to explore the extent to which Welsh voters would support the strengthening or weakening of regulations and protections across public life¹. It follows on from our previous qualitative and quantitative research on these issues, including a [2020 poll conducted by Ipsos MORI](#) with younger Leave voters, and a recent [qualitative research project](#) involving 52 first-time Conservative voters in five so-called 'Red Wall' constituencies, including Wrexham.

Recent years have seen significant changes to the political landscape in both Westminster and Wales. The collapse of the North Wales 'Red Wall' in 2019 (the Conservatives gained five seats), the gains made by UKIP in the 2016 National Assembly for Wales election, Vote Leave's EU referendum success, and wins from the Brexit Party in the 2019 European elections all point to political realignment in Wales, and the emergence of new, and fragile, coalitions of voters.

This has contributed to the perception that politicians in Wales – and across the UK – are 'caught between two stools', trying to please both 'identity liberals' and 'identity conservatives', to use the terms coined by two leading academics². When it comes to attitudes to regulation and standards, Unchecked UK believes that this is a false dichotomy – a belief which is repeatedly and robustly backed up by our research.

This survey compounds the strong sense that, across Wales, there is significant agreement on the importance of regulation in today's society. This holds true among voters of all political persuasions, and across Leave and Remain voters alike. Likewise, we find little enthusiasm for a weakening of regulatory standards post-Brexit.

The Welsh Government has repeatedly provided assurances of its intention to keep domestic standards high, regardless of the terms of the UK's exit. In areas of reserved policy, the Welsh Government has consistently stated that the UK should not diverge from EU regulatory standards, advocating a dynamic alignment approach with Europe.

However, deregulatory concerns in Wales remain. As the UK embarks on trade negotiations with countries around the world, there is a risk of a race to the bottom on standards in non-devolved policy areas. Additionally, as we find in our recent report: "[Safeguarding standards: why Wales should lead the way](#)", more could be done by the Welsh Government to drive high standards across a number of areas of public life.

Our polling clearly shows that addressing these deregulatory concerns is not just the right thing to do – but is also a potential vote-winner for all political parties.

Below, we outline some of our findings.

¹ This online survey went to respondents in Wales aged 16+; they are referenced as 'voters' in this report, given the eligibility of 16/17 year olds to vote in the 2021 Senedd election for the first time.

² Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford, *Brexitland*, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Executive summary

This public opinion research was carried out to test attitudes to environmental protections, food standards, employment regulations, and enforcement of tax laws among Welsh citizens.

The survey finds a high level of support for regulations among Welsh voters of all political persuasions, with the majority of respondents expressing a preference for maintaining or increasing regulations across each of the areas above.

We find that:

- The majority (70%) of respondents want more regulation of large businesses, or to see current levels maintained, with just 4% expressing a desire that large businesses be regulated less.
- Welsh voters generally support keeping or strengthening EU-derived rules, such as protections for habitats and wildlife, food safety and cleanliness standards, workplace health and safety protections, and regulations on the production and use of chemicals. Support for regulations is high among Leave voters, as well as Remain voters. 78% of Leave voters, for example, think that the UK government should strengthen or keep health and safety regulations, and 86% think that protections for wildlife and habitats should be strengthened or maintained. Across all areas of policy, no more than 9% think EU-derived protections should be weakened or removed.
- Anti-regulation rhetoric fails to resonate with Welsh voters as strongly as pro-regulation rhetoric. When asked to consider a range of pro- and anti-regulation statements, respondents from across the voter base, in all age groups, and from all regions, identified most strongly with statements which portray regulations in a positive light. The statement which resonated most strongly with respondents likened regulations to “society’s ‘immune system’”, followed by a statement which underscores the role of regulation in “the march of British progress.”
- In contrast, suggestions that “regulations curtail our freedom”, “strangle the economy and cost jobs” and are “turning people into a generation of nervous nellys” receive less support from respondents – including those intending to vote for the Conservatives in the forthcoming Senedd elections³, and those who voted to leave the EU in 2016.
- Welsh voters are proud of and protective over Welsh food, and resistant to any potential weakening of food quality or sustainability standards. Most respondents think that food should only be able to be sold in Wales if it meets Welsh food standards, although there are significant differences in opinion between respondents who intend to vote Conservative in the forthcoming Senedd elections, compared with prospective Labour and Plaid Cymru voters.

- Support for environmental protections is strong across the voter base, with environmental concerns trumping the perceived need for the UK government to secure trade deals with other countries. The view that the UK government should keep or increase environmental protections, even if this makes it harder to secure trade deals with other countries, is shared by 60% of respondents who plan to vote Conservative at the forthcoming Senedd elections, 77% of those who intend to vote Labour and 74% of those planning to vote for Plaid Cymru. Just a tenth of Welsh voters think that the focus of the UK government should be on securing trade deals if this means relaxing or weakening environmental standards.
- Most respondents would like to see the Welsh Government go further on environmental protection, with over two-thirds supporting the setting of legally-binding targets for wildlife restoration.
- When it comes to workplace protections, the views of deregulatory proponents are again out of step with the views of Welsh voters. Most respondents, regardless of political persuasion, think that employment regulations are necessary to “ensure Welsh businesses operate fairly”, “to protect people”, and to “ensure a level playing field for Welsh businesses.” Clear majorities in support of these views exist among Leave voters as well as Remain voters; for example, 60% of the former group believe that these rules are necessary to ensure a level playing field for Welsh businesses, while 18% disagree.
- When considering workplace health and safety regulations in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic, three-quarters of Welsh voters would like to see these maintained or strengthened. These protections are supported by both Remain and Leave voters, with 75% of the latter group stating that they should be maintained or strengthened, and 87% of the former group expressing this view.
- Fair work practices gain even more support, with all respondents selecting this as an important consideration for the Welsh Government when deciding which organisations should be awarded Senedd business support or procurement contracts.
- Finally, when asked about enforcement of tax laws, there is overwhelming consensus among Welsh voters that stronger enforcement is needed – with 76% of respondents sharing this view.

This survey finds that most Welsh voters are supportive of regulations across public life, and value them for the role they play in keeping society running smoothly, in providing a level playing field for businesses, and in protecting Welsh families.

³ When we refer to respondents who intend to vote for a certain party in the forthcoming Senedd elections, we are referring to the Constituency vote, rather than the List vote, unless otherwise specified.

The research

Unchecked UK commissioned YouGov to conduct interviews drawn from a representative sample of 1090 people aged 16+ in Wales.

Interviews were conducted online using panels owned by YouGov between 2nd-9th February 2021. Quotas were set by age, gender, social grade and region, 2019 General Election vote and EU Referendum vote for the full sample and the results were weighted by these variables.

In total, participants were surveyed on 17 questions relating to environmental protections, food standards, employment regulations, and enforcement of tax law.

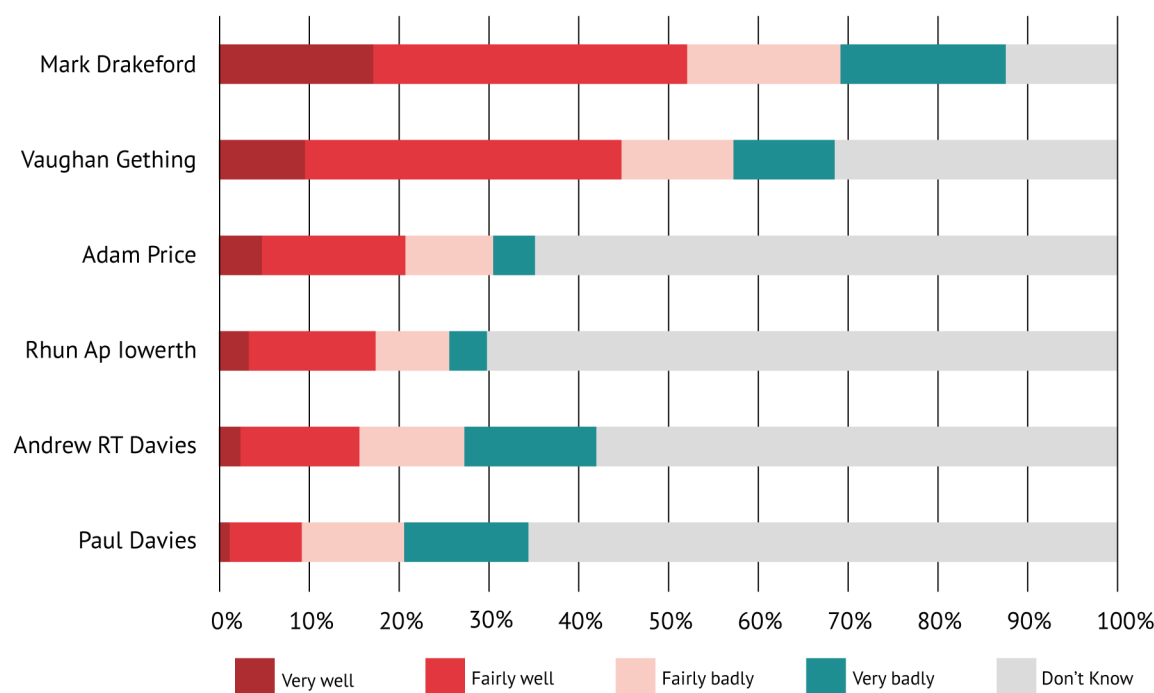


Summary of findings

This section details some of the most notable findings from the survey. Please refer to the [full data tables](#) to view all questions and responses, as well as differences in responses across factors such as age, gender, region, social grade, Welsh election voting intention, EU referendum vote and 2019 General Election vote.

Setting the context

Q) During the Coronavirus pandemic, do you think the following politicians have performed well or badly?



Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

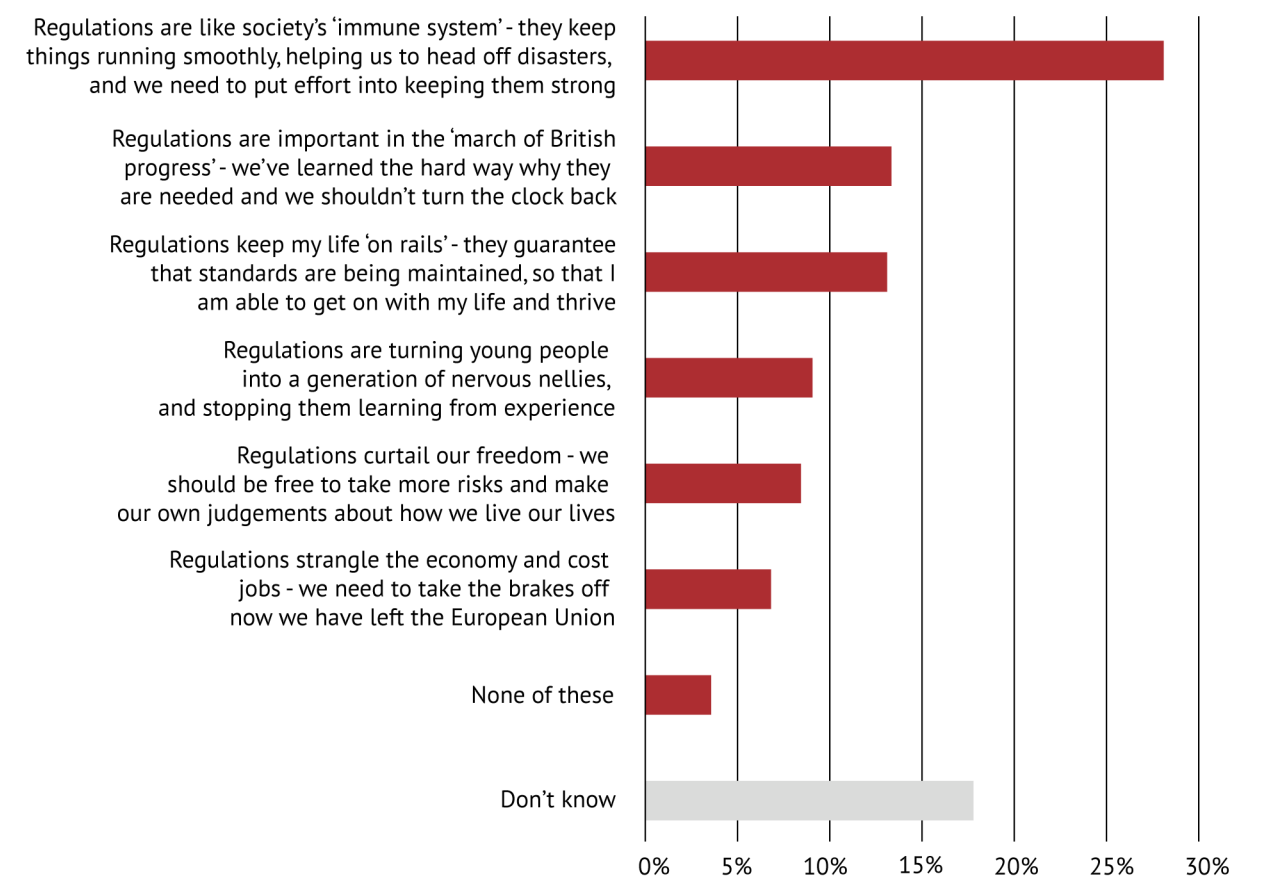
Overall, First Minister Mark Drakeford ranks most highly among Welsh voters with regards to political performance during the Covid-19 pandemic.

73% of respondents who intend to vote Labour in the forthcoming Senedd elections, and 73% of those who intend to vote Plaid Cymru think Mark Drakeford has performed very well or fairly well.

For those intending to vote Conservative, Andrew RT Davies is ranked as the highest-performing politician during this period, with 45% of these voters stating that Davies had performed very or fairly well.

1) Welsh citizens generally see effective regulations as vital to a strong society, and do not support the views often expressed by deregulatory proponents

Q) When thinking about rules, regulations and protections which of the following comes closest to your view?



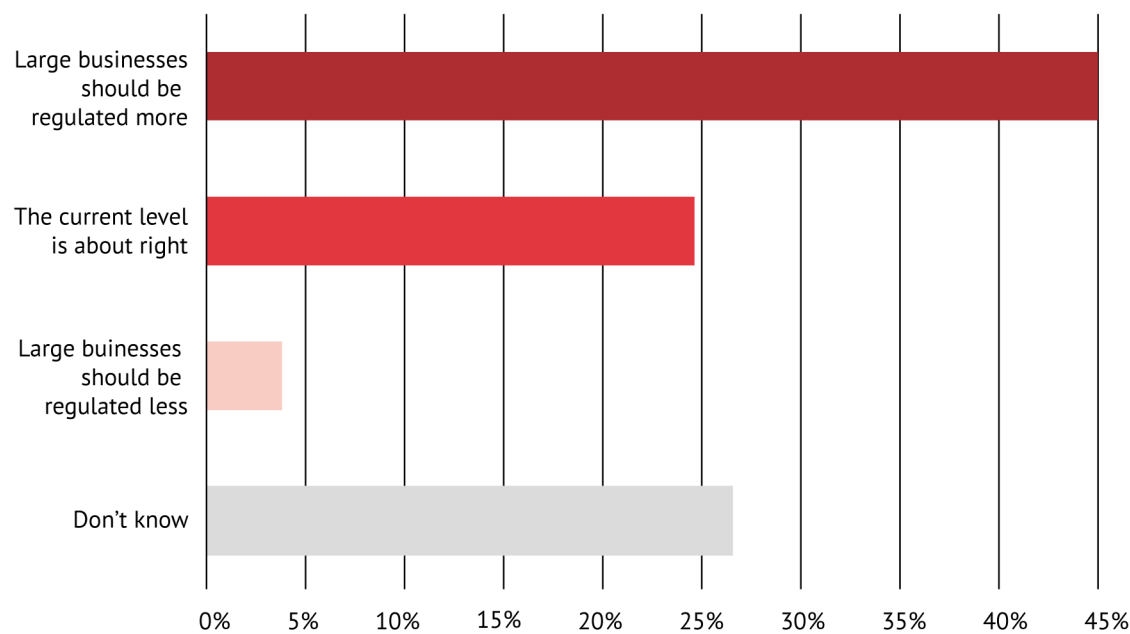
Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

The majority of Welsh voters identify most closely with statements which portray regulations in a positive light, rather than those which convey the views often expressed by pro-deregulation advocates.

The statement that likens regulations to "society's immune system" is supported by the largest number of respondents, with 28% selecting this option. This statement is also the most popular among respondents who voted for the Conservatives in the 2019 General Election, among those who intend to vote for the Conservatives in the forthcoming Senedd elections, and among those who voted to leave the EU in 2016.

Just 10% of Leave voters agree that: "regulations strangle the economy and cost jobs – we need to take the brakes off now we have left the European Union." Only 3% of Remain voters hold this view.

Q) Do you think that government should regulate 'large businesses' more, less, or is the current level of regulation about right?



Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

Welsh citizens across the political spectrum strongly support increasing or maintaining regulation of large businesses.

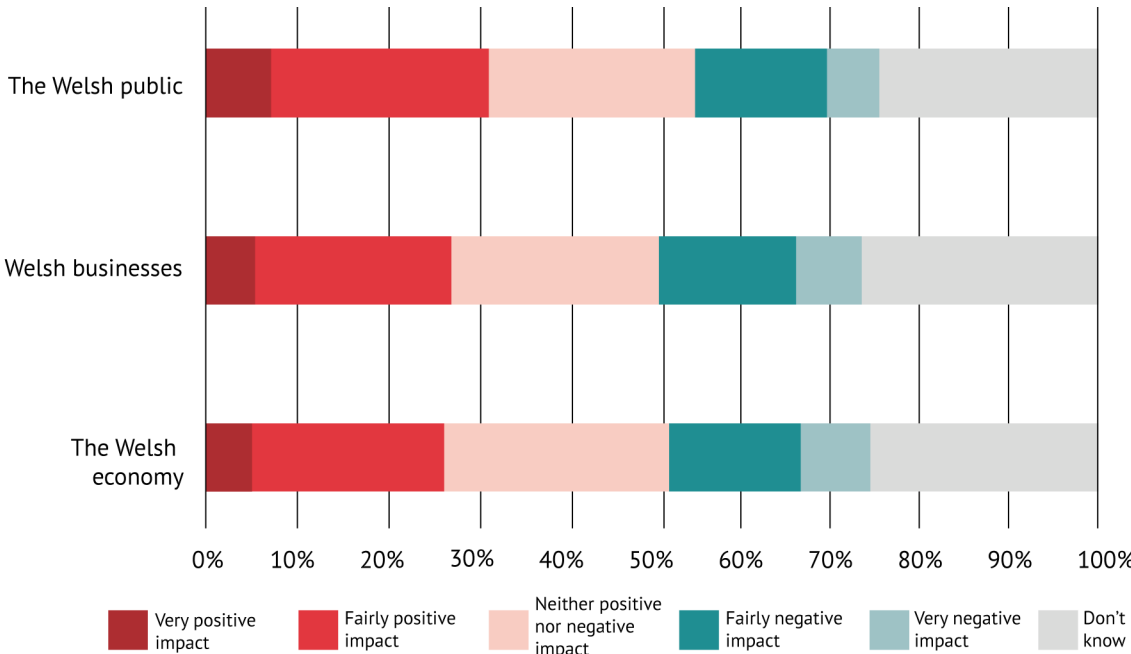
70% of Welsh citizens think that large businesses should be regulated more, or that the current level is about right. Just 4% think that large businesses should be regulated less.

77% of respondents who intend to vote for the Conservatives in the May Senedd elections share this view, compared with 76% of those who intend to vote Labour, and 83% of those who intend to vote for Plaid Cymru.

Both Leave voters and Remain voters believe that regulation of businesses should be strengthened or maintained (71% and 75% respectively). Just 5% of Leave voters and 2% of Remain voters think that large businesses should be regulated less.

The view that businesses should be regulated more, or current levels maintained, was strongest among respondents from Cardiff (74%) and the South East of Wales (72%).

Q) Generally speaking, do you think regulations have a positive or negative impact on each of the following?



Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

Overall, Welsh voters feel that regulations have a positive, rather than negative, impact on the Welsh public, businesses and economy, although significant differences exist across voter groups.

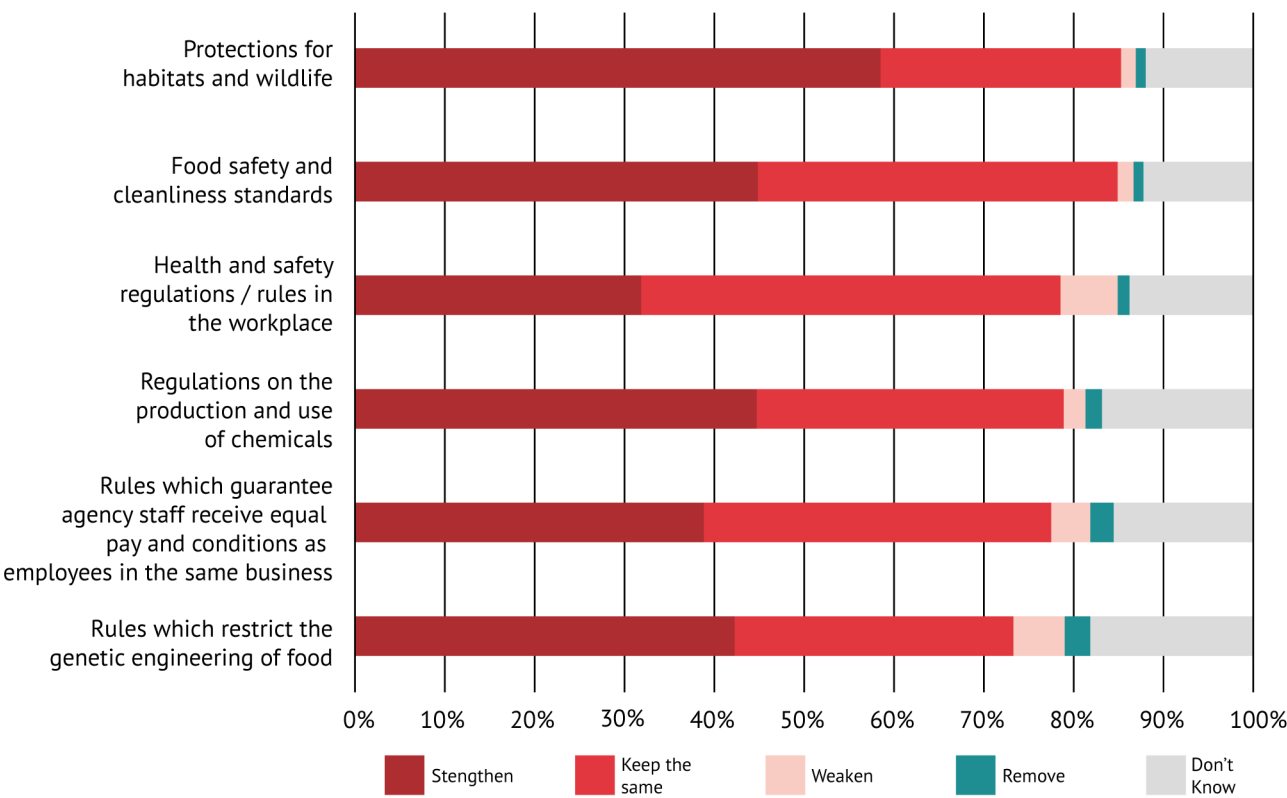
The strongest support was in relation to the role of regulations in protecting the Welsh public, with 51% of voters who intend to vote Labour in the forthcoming Senedd elections, and 40% of those intending to vote Plaid Cymru sharing this view.

Differences in opinion exist between voters who intend to vote Conservative in the Senedd elections, when compared with those who intend to vote Labour or Plaid Cymru. 31% of prospective Conservative voters think that regulations have a negative impact on Welsh businesses, compared with 15% of prospective Labour voters, for example.

As we see from the graph on the page overleaf, respondents show much greater support for regulations when they are presented with 'real-world' examples, rather than when regulation is portrayed as an abstract concept.

2) Welsh citizens see the UK's departure from the EU as an opportunity to strengthen regulations across public life

Q) Now that the UK has left the European Union, some organisations are calling on the UK government to remove or alter laws that were originally required by the EU. In your opinion, what should happen to each of the following types of regulation?



Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

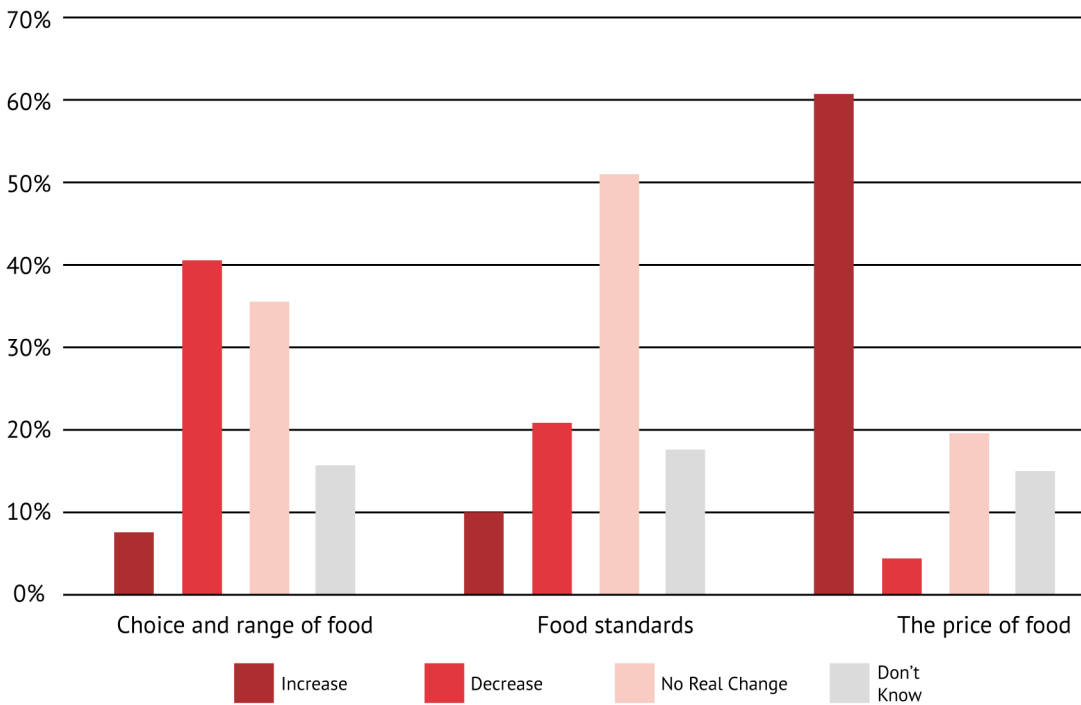
Welsh citizens think the UK government should strengthen or keep EU-derived regulations and standards – with more than 73% supporting this across all categories.

85% of respondents support increasing or keeping food safety and cleanliness standards, with 85% also supporting strengthening or keeping protections for habitats and wildlife. Health and safety regulations, which are often painted as burdensome 'red tape', are in fact strongly supported by Welsh citizens, with 79% opting to maintain or strengthen these protections.

Across all categories, no more than 3% support the removal of regulations, and no more than 6% think regulations should be weakened in any way.

3) Welsh citizens want to protect Welsh food standards

Q) Please say whether you think each of the following will increase or decrease in Wales, now that the UK has left the European Union, or will there be no real change?



Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

Overall, Welsh voters are more pessimistic than optimistic about the future of food post-Brexit.

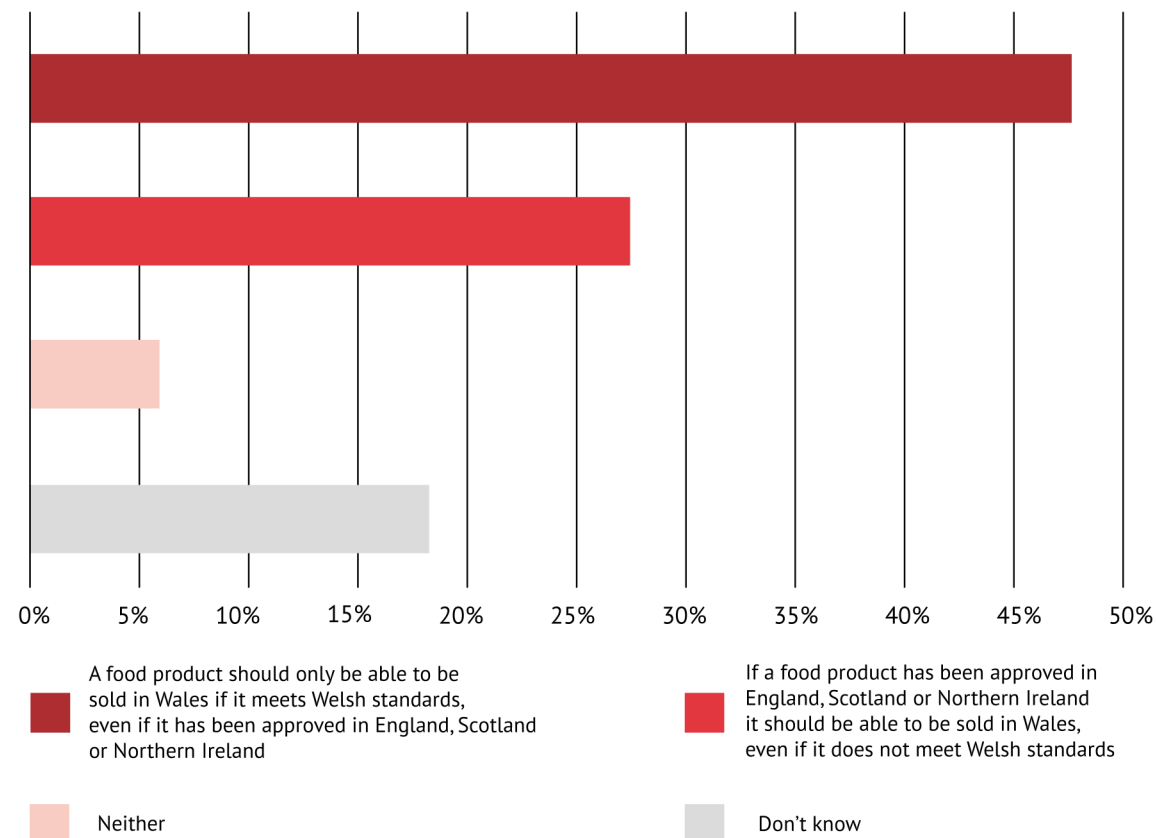
While the majority of respondents (51%) think that food standards will stay the same, there are more than twice the number (21%) who think that standards will decrease now that the UK has left the EU, compared with those who think standards will increase (10%).

Nearly two-thirds of Welsh voters (61%) think that food prices will increase, and 41% think that the choice and range of food will decrease.

Across all three areas, there is significant variation across respondents according to voting intention, with Conservative-leaning voters generally more optimistic about the future of food than their Labour- or Plaid Cymru-leaning counterparts.

For example, just 4% of those who intend to vote Conservative in the Senedd elections think that food standards will fall, compared to 30% of those intending to vote Labour, and 33% of those intending to vote Plaid Cymru. 52% of prospective Labour voters and 60% of prospective Plaid Cymru voters think the choice and range of food will decrease, compared to 21% of prospective Conservative voters.

Q) Thinking about food standards (for quality and environmental impact) which are a devolved matter, where each UK country set its own standards, which of the following best reflects your view?



Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

Overall, Welsh citizens think that food should only be able to be sold in Wales if it meets Welsh food standards.

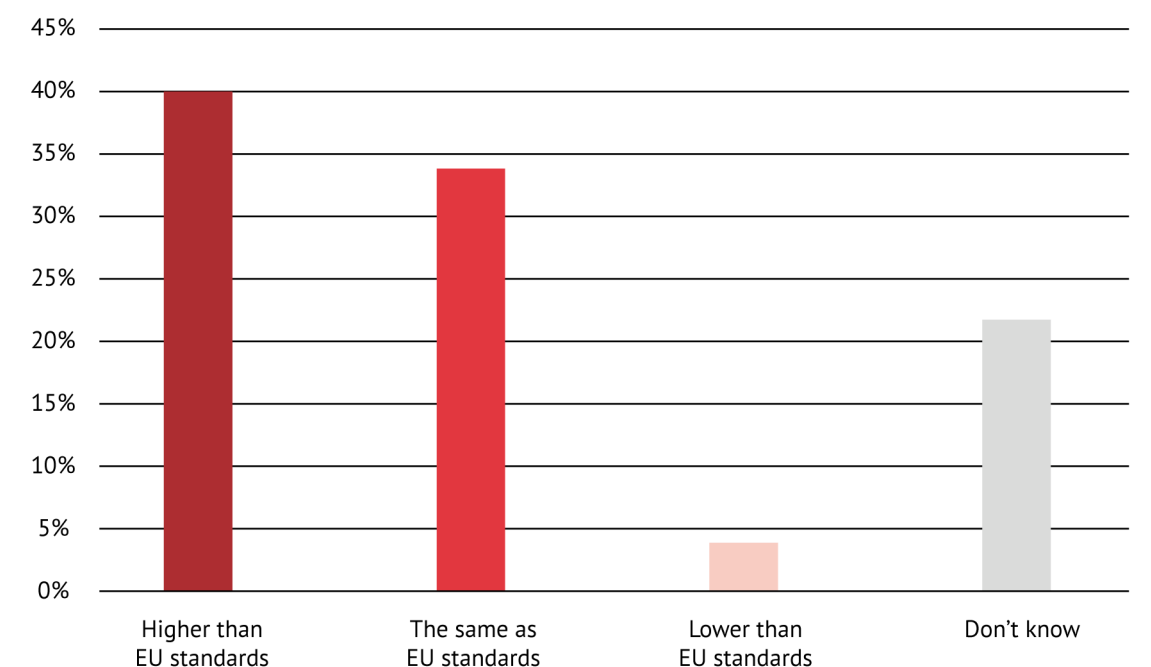
However, positions differ significantly across voters of different political persuasions. 51% of respondents who plan to vote Conservative in the forthcoming Senedd elections think that food products which have been approved in England, Scotland or Northern Ireland should be permitted for sale in Wales, even if they do not meet Welsh standards. This view is shared by 25% and 14% of prospective Labour and Plaid Cymru voters, respectively.

Leave voters appear split on this view, with no clear majority either way. A majority of remain voters (56%) feel that food should meet Welsh standards before being sold in Wales.

Across age groups, the youngest cohort (16-24) most strongly oppose the sale of food which does not meet Welsh standards (61%).

4) Welsh voters want to see stronger or equivalent environmental protections, and would oppose trade deals which result in a weakening of these laws

Q) Many of the environmental protections that apply in the UK (and Wales) derive from European Union laws. Now that the UK has left the EU, do you think it should pass environmental laws which are:



Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

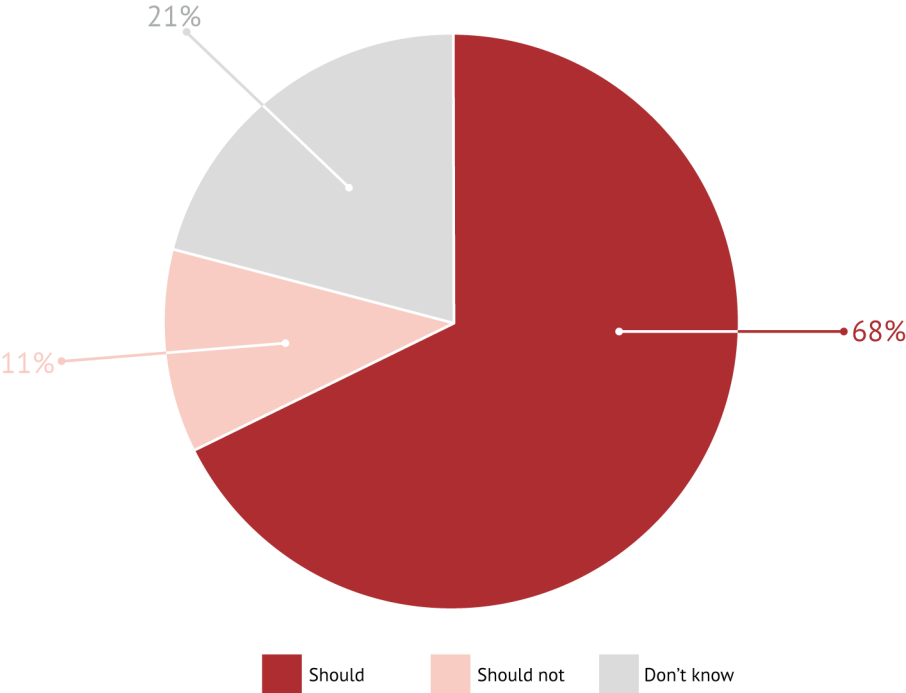
Three-quarters of Welsh voters think that environmental protections should be maintained or strengthened, now that the UK has left the EU.

At least 8 in 10 of those intending to vote for one of the main three parties in the upcoming Senedd elections support this view. There is extremely little support for lowering environmental regulations across any of the groups in this study.

Leave voters overwhelmingly believe that environmental laws should be maintained or strengthened (73%), with just 5% stating that these protections should be lowered.

Contrary to the view that environmental concerns are primarily a concern of younger people, support for maintaining or increasing environmental regulations is highest among respondents aged 65+ (81%), followed by those aged 50-64 (79%).

Q) Do you think the Senedd/ Welsh government should or should not set legally binding targets for the restoration and protection of wildlife in Wales?



Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

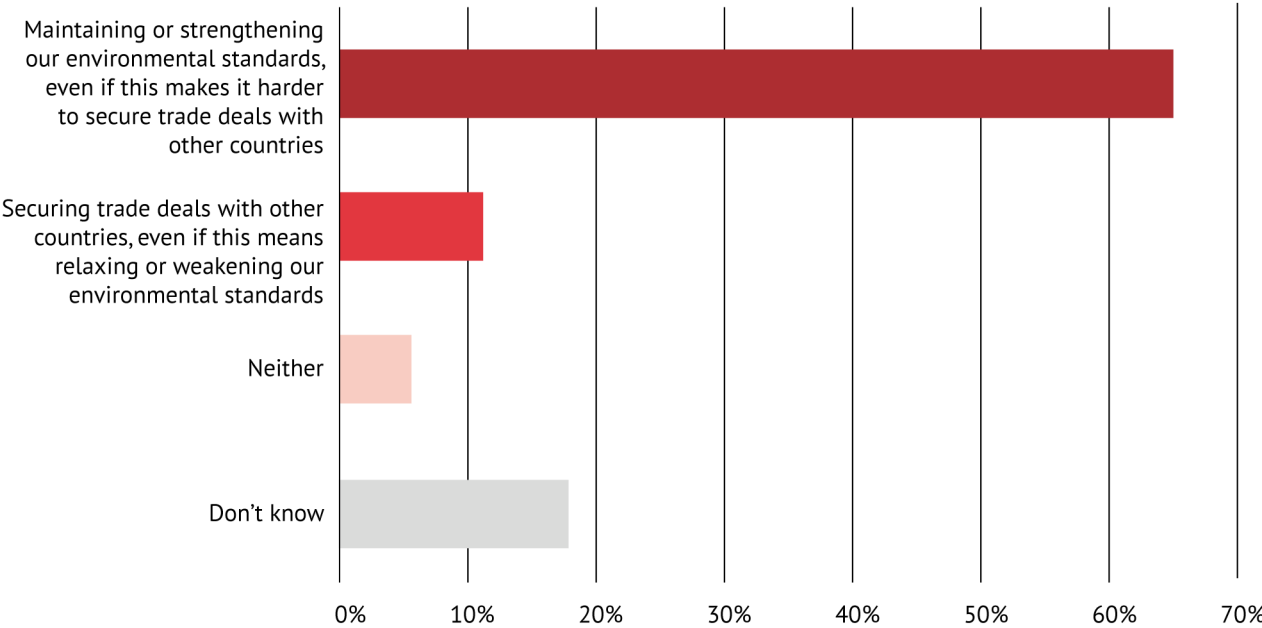
68% of Welsh citizens support the setting of legally-binding targets for wildlife restoration.

The setting of legally-binding targets for wildlife restoration and protection is supported by a majority of groups in the study, including both Leave voters (62%) and Remain voters (79%).

Respondents from Cardiff, and Mid and West Wales are strongest in their support for legal targets (70% across both groups). Support is lower among respondents within the C2DE social grade (63%) than those in the ABC1 social grade (73%), but this is likely due to the high number of 'don't know' responses among the former group.

Support for these measures is high across age groups – with no lower than 66% of support for legally-binding targets across respondents of all ages.

Q) Now that the UK has left the European Union, the UK government is looking to secure trade deals with other countries, some of which have different standards to the UK. Do you think the UK government should prioritise:



Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

Welsh voters prioritise environmental standards over securing trade deals with other countries.

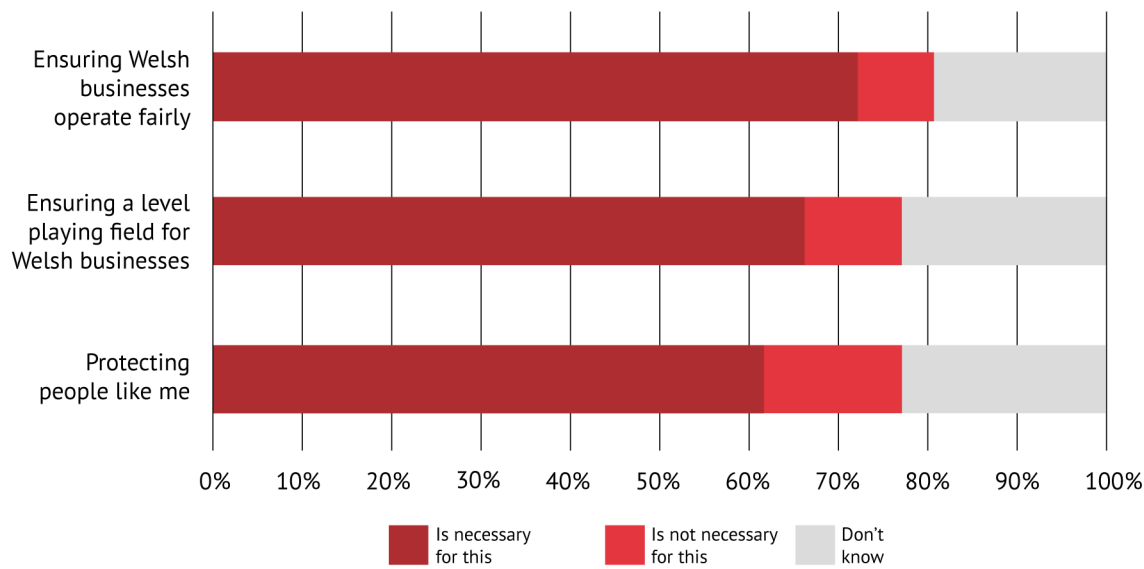
60% of respondents who plan to vote Conservative at the forthcoming Senedd elections think that the UK government should keep or increase environmental protections, even if this makes it harder to secure trade deals with other countries. This holds true for 77% of those planning to vote Labour and 74% of prospective Plaid Cymru voters.

Across the board, just a tenth of Welsh voters think that the focus of the UK government should be on securing trade deals if this means relaxing or weakening environmental standards.

While Remain voters are more likely than Leave voters to support maintaining or increasing environmental standards over securing trade deals (77%), the majority of Leave voters also hold this view (60%).

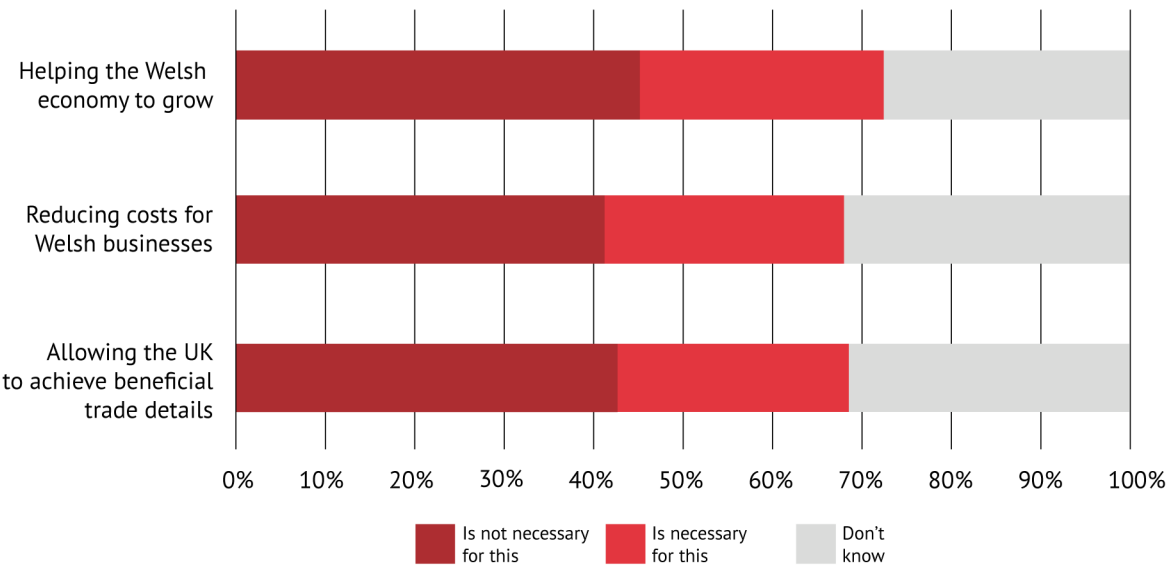
5) When it comes to workplace protections, the views of deregulatory proponents are out-of-step with the views of Welsh voters

Q, part A) Please say whether you think maintaining or strengthening employment regulations and protections is or is not necessary for each of the following:



Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

Q, part B) Please say whether you think weakening employment regulations and protections is or is not necessary for each of the following:



Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

Welsh voters endorse pro-regulation statements on workplace protections, while anti-regulation statements win far less support.

These two questions were designed to test attitudes to both pro- and anti-regulation statements on workplace protections. The anti-regulation statements were drawn from some of the dominant narratives often deployed in support of arguments to deregulate employment laws.

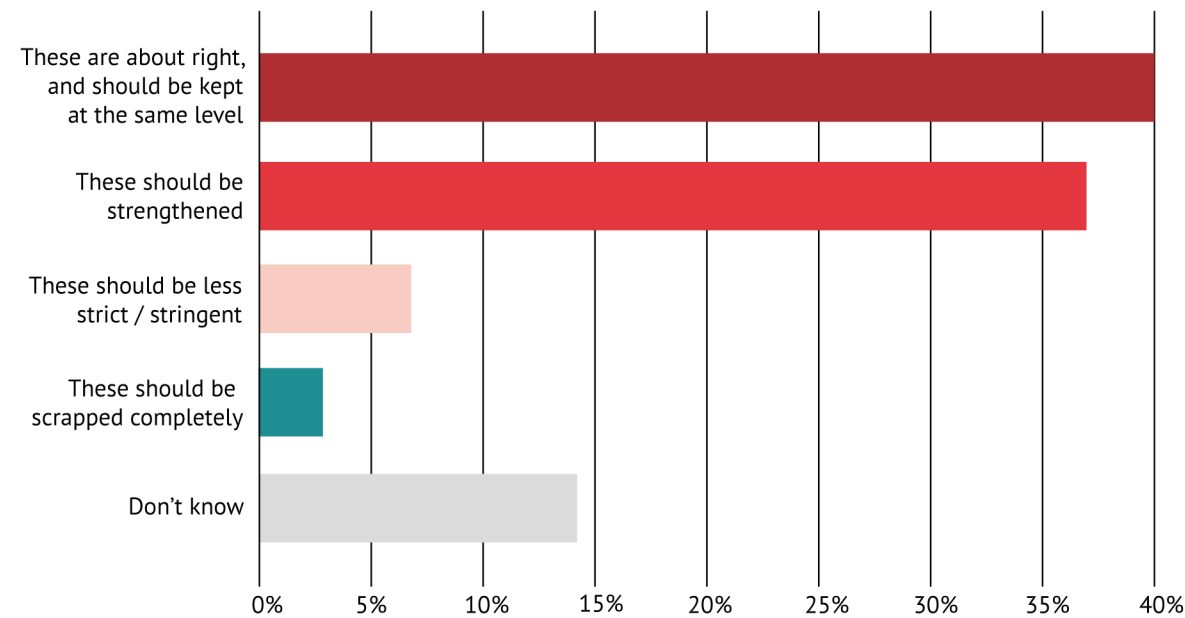
A majority of respondents think that employment regulations are necessary to ensure Welsh businesses operate fairly, to protect people, and to ensure a level playing field for Welsh businesses.

These views win support among respondents who intend to vote Conservative in the Senedd elections. For example, 64% of these prospective Conservative voters believe that employment regulations are necessary to ensure Welsh businesses operate fairly, as opposed to 22% who disagree. Clear majorities also exist among Leave voters, with 60% believing that these regulations are necessary to ensure a level playing field for Welsh businesses, as opposed to 18% who disagree.

In contrast, anti-regulation statements win far less support. The view that weakening employment regulations is necessary to help the Welsh economy to grow is opposed by 48% of respondents who plan to vote Conservative in May, and opposed by 55% and 51% of prospective Labour and Plaid Cymru voters respectively.

While differences exist between Remain and Leave voters, both groups support pro-regulation statements more than they oppose them.

Q) Thinking about health and safety regulations in the workplace in Wales, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which of the following best reflects your view?



Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

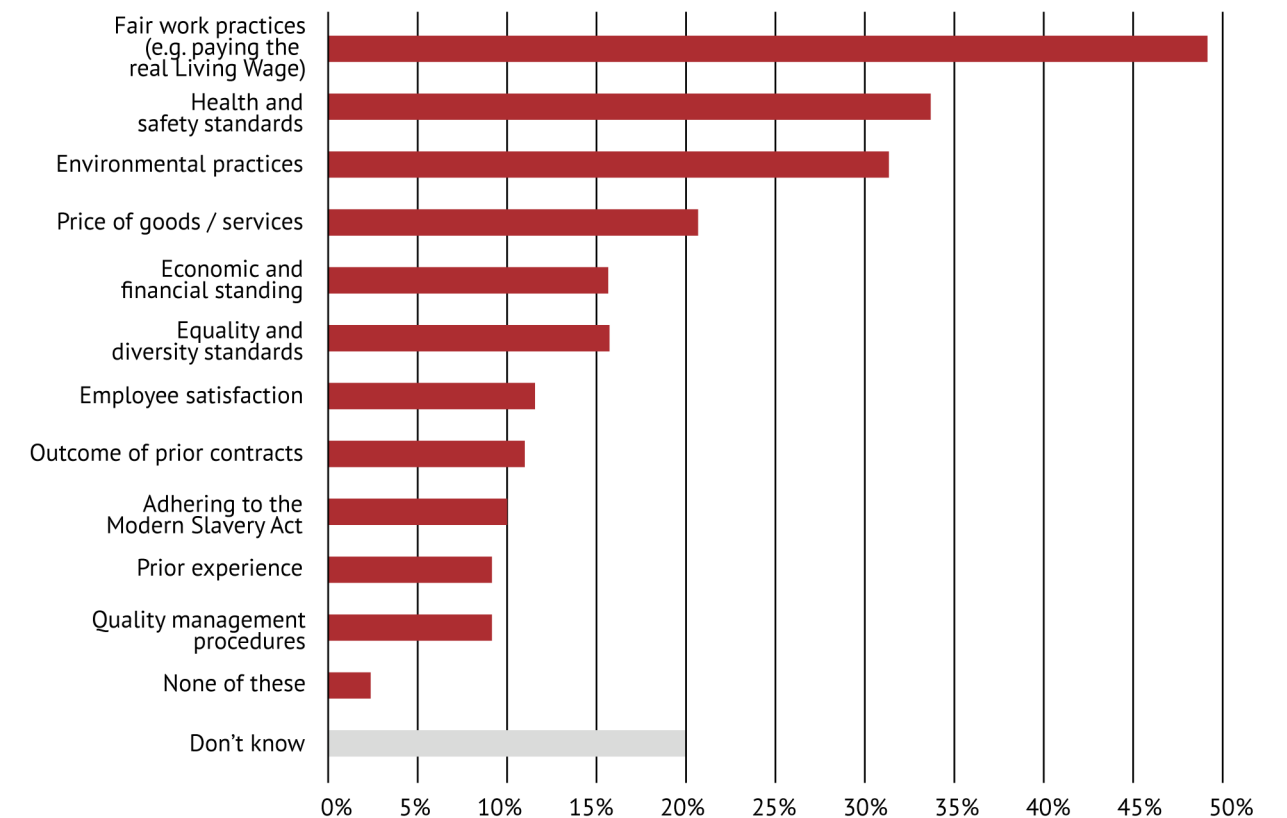
Over three-quarters of Welsh voters want to see workplace health and safety regulations maintained or strengthened.

Workplace health and safety regulations are supported by voters across the political spectrum. 77% of respondents who plan to vote Conservative in the Senedd elections want to see these rules maintained or strengthened, with just 15% stating that these rules should be relaxed, and 4% stating that they should be scrapped. 85% of prospective Labour voters, and 84% of prospective Plaid Cymru voters would like to see workplace health and safety rules maintained or strengthened.

Workplace health and safety rules are strongly supported by both Remain voters and Leave voters, with 87% of the former group and 75% of the latter group stating that they should be maintained or strengthened.

Support for these rules is particularly strong among older voters, with 85% of respondents aged 65+ stating that they should be maintained or strengthened, compared with 61% of those aged 16-24.

Q) Which two or three, if any, of the following do you think are the most important when deciding which organisations should be awarded Senedd/ Welsh government business support or procurement contracts?



Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

Fair work practices top the list of criteria to be met by organisations awarded Senedd business support or procurement contracts.

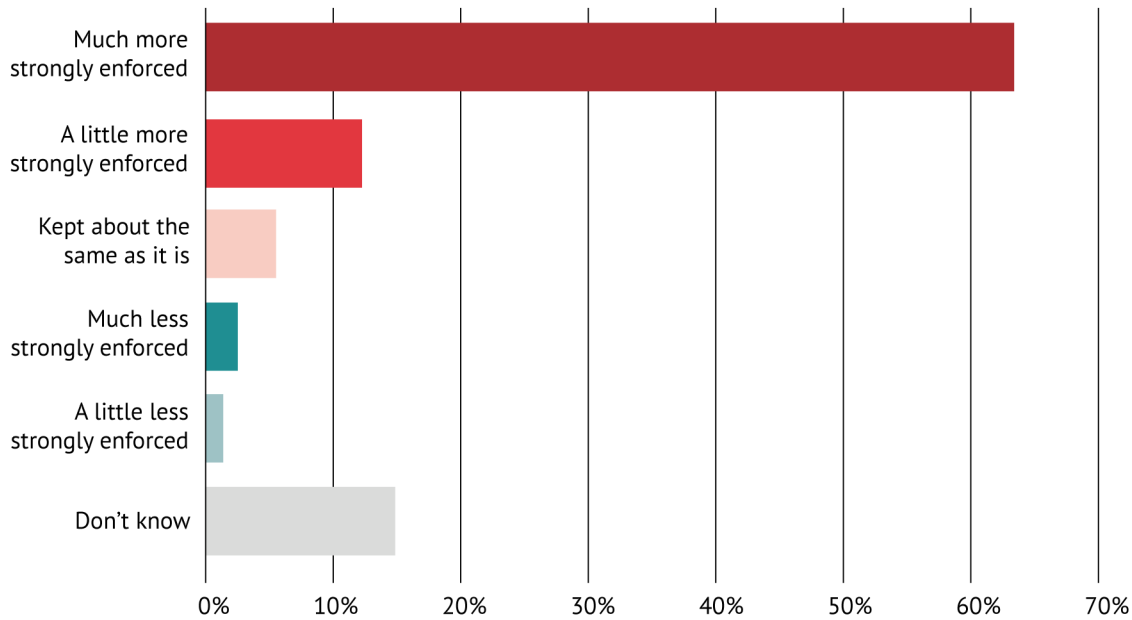
When asked what is important when awarding organisational contracts, 49% said fair work practices. This is followed by health and safety standards (34%) and environmental practices (31%).

Among respondents intending to vote Conservative in the Senedd elections, 46% think fair work practices are an important consideration, while 42% think that health and safety standards are important. Among intentional Labour voters, 61% think fair work practices are an important consideration, followed by environmental practices (38%). Those who intend to vote Plaid Cymru see fair work practices and environmental standards as important (58% and 43% respectively).

Fair work practices and health and safety standards are most strongly backed by C2DE voters, with 52% prioritising fair work practices and 35% prioritising health and safety. ABC1 voters also support fair work practices (47%), but prioritise environmental practices (37%) above health and safety standards (33%).

6) Welsh voters overwhelmingly support stronger enforcement of tax laws

Q) Do you think that regulations which prevent people and companies from avoiding tax across the UK should be...?



Source: Unchecked UK/ YouGov survey, February 2021

Over three-quarters of Welsh voters want to see stronger enforcement of tax rules.

Support for stronger enforcement of tax rules is extremely high among respondents who intend to vote Conservative in the Senedd elections (81%), as well as among prospective Labour voters (81%), and prospective Plaid Cymru voters (83%). Across all of these groups support for less enforcement of tax rules never exceeds 5%.

Across respondents from all regions, 74% or more support stronger enforcement of tax rules. Older respondents are particularly supportive of measures to cut down on tax dodgers, with 86% of those aged 65+ and 83% of those aged 50-64 expressing this view.



Conclusion

This survey finds that, overall, Welsh voters support strong regulations and high standards; whether environmental protections, food safety standards, employment laws or the enforcement of tax rules. This support tends to be strongest when regulations are conveyed in terms of real-world protections, rather than presented as an abstract concept.

Welsh voters across the political spectrum generally want to see EU-derived public protections maintained or strengthened. This contradicts claims that the Welsh vote for Brexit was driven by a desire for deregulation.

When presented with pro- and anti-regulation statements, Welsh voters tend to cohere around pro-regulation statements, with particular alignment around the need for regulation to ensure fair play by Welsh businesses. These voters are most likely to see regulations as ‘society’s immune system’; a system of protections which keeps society running smoothly, but which require effort and investment to remain strong.

It is clear from these findings that any political moves to weaken or remove regulations in the areas covered by this survey would not be supported by Welsh voters, while efforts by the Welsh Government to shore up and strengthen public protections are likely to win widespread popular support.

About the authors

Emma Rose is director of Unchecked UK.

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Accessing the data

The full tables are available online [here](#).