



# Protect or deregulate?

A review of public attitudes to regulation

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September 2022



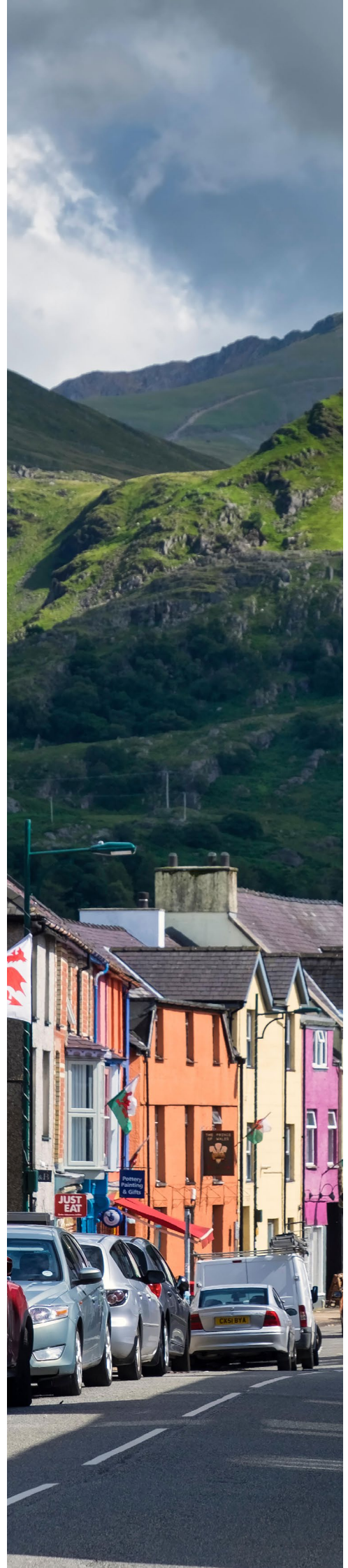
# Key Insights

What do British people really think about regulation? Do they believe that the country is burdened by too many rules? Are they concerned about the impact which 'red tape' is putting on UK businesses? Do they feel personally restricted by regulations?

Over the years, multiple studies have sought answers to these questions. In this note we set out some of the key insights from this body of research. We review work by a wide range of organisations, including polling companies, academics, government and think tanks. We also include research carried out by organisations which both lean towards more libertarian and more interventionist views.

We draw **three broad conclusions** from this review:

- ✓ Multiple studies confirm that a **significant majority of the UK public favours strong protections and robust enforcement**. People understand that rules keep them safe, are essential in the pursuit of environmental goals, and are unpersuaded that deregulation is the right way to secure wider economic goals. There is no evidence of this support weakening in light of growing concerns about the cost-of-living crisis. In short, we find little evidence of public support for deregulation.
- ✓ **Support for regulations cuts across the political spectrum**. Although support tends to be strongest among Labour voters, only a minority of Conservative voters favour deregulation. Indeed, the evidence suggests that Labour-Conservative 'swing voters' in Red Wall seats could be amongst the staunchest supporters of strong protections. Other demographic factors (such as age, gender, socio-economic status, and geography) do not play a significant role in determining levels of support for strong protections.
- ✓ We find some variation in terms of levels of support for different types of regulations. Salience tends to play a key role. This suggests that **campaigns and communications are central to mobilising public support for protections**.



# 1. The British public is strongly on the side of protections, not deregulation

Most of the research we reviewed suggests that a significant majority of the British public understand the importance of strong and well-enforced regulations. Indeed, we were not able to identify any evidence which contradicted this. This pro-protection inclination was evident at the height of the Covid lockdowns when multiple studies confirmed an overwhelming level of public support for the rules put in place to contain the virus.<sup>1 2 3</sup>

Importantly, this insight holds true across research carried out both by organisations that lean to the right economically (such as the Institute for Economic Affairs) and those that lean to the left (such as the Institute for Public Policy Research). Indeed, a study by Matthew Elliot and James Kanagasooriam for the Legatum Institute, a pro-market think tank, concluded that the **British public “oppose the notion that only lightly regulated markets produce a healthy economy.”**<sup>4</sup>

This is consistent with multiple studies that suggest that the UK public tends to tilt to the left on economic policy and favours active government intervention.<sup>5 6 7</sup> However, the evidence suggests that backing for robust regulations could be stronger and more deep-rooted than, for example, support for taxing wealth or for increasing public spending (see figure 1). People firmly believe that government should play a role in regulating business (see figure 2).

Older studies suggest that public support for strong regulations is long-standing.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, we have found **little evidence that there has been a weakening in public support because of the mounting cost-of-living crisis.** For example, recent polling carried out by YouGov for the campaigning group Pregnant then Screwed found that 85% of parents did not want childcare ratios relaxed, even if this meant lower costs.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, support for farming standards and environmental protections has remained strong despite increasing food prices and claims that a watering down of rules could benefit consumers.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, research during the Partygate revelations suggested a redoubling of support for the application of rules across all groups in society, including the government, even in times of crisis.<sup>11</sup>

In particular, we find that **enforcement of existing rules is seen as essential** by all sections of the British public. Whether it’s labour market rules or environmental protections, voters want to ensure that regulators take robust measures against those who violate the rules and strongly oppose the defunding of key agencies.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, a large body of evidence suggests that the **UK public strongly opposes moves to lower standards and water down protections in the pursuit of other economic goals.** Research by Which? showed that the public expects trade policy to maintain health and safety rules, environmental standards, data protection and consumer rights.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, a survey shortly after the Brexit referendum found that there is strong support for maintaining EU-derived regulations, including on more controversial legislation such as the Working Time Directive and the cap on bankers’ bonuses.<sup>14 15</sup>

**“The UK public’s libertarian instinct is not strong.”**

*Luke Tryl, UK Director of More in Common  
(speaking at Unchecked UK Supporter event, March 2022)*

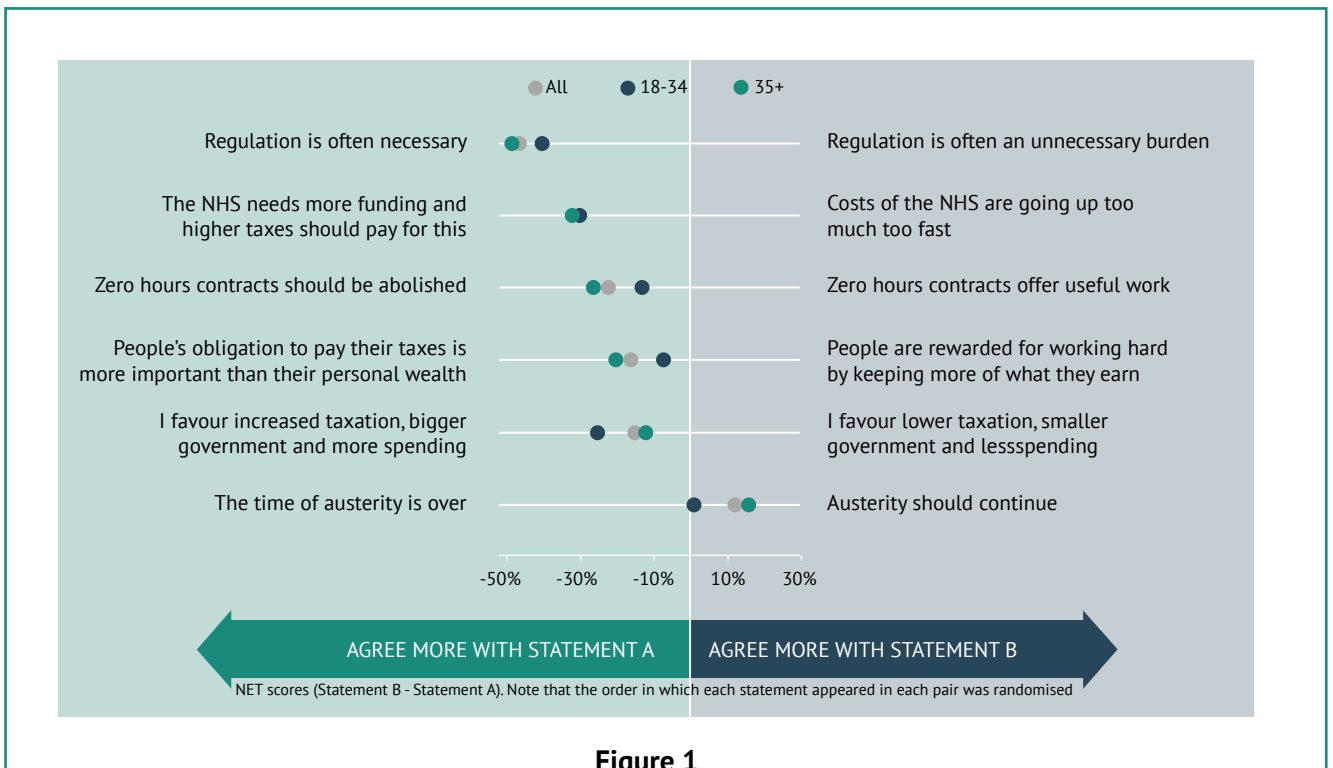


Figure 1

SOURCE: Legatum Institute, Public Opinion in the Post Brexit Era (2017)

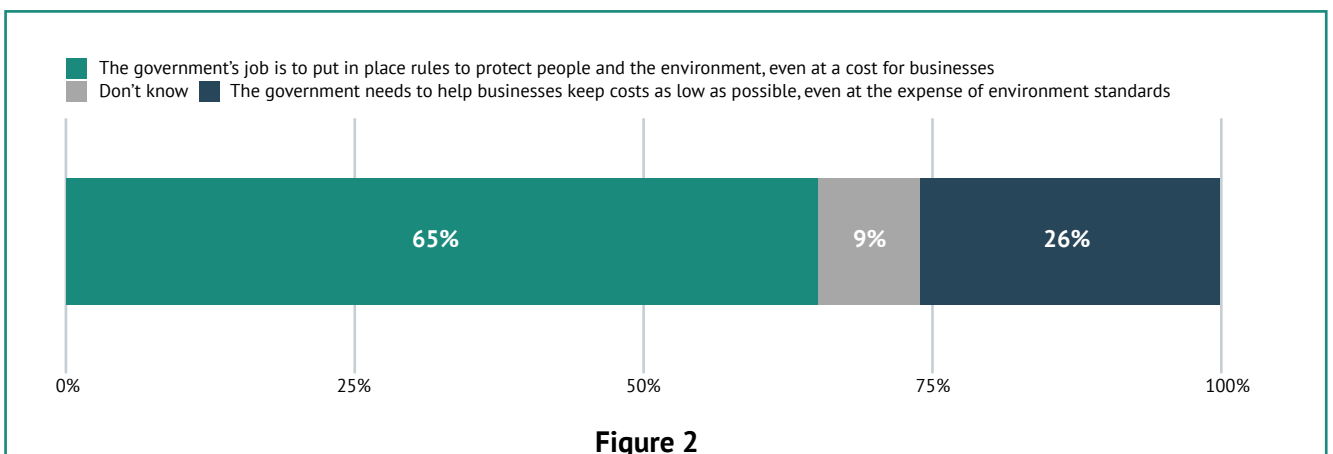


Figure 2

SOURCE: Unchecked UK, A View from the Blue Wall (2022)

## 2. Support for protections holds true across most sections of the public

The evidence suggests that political persuasion is not a significant factor in determining levels of support for protections. Surveys by Unchecked UK and others show that, **whilst Labour voters tend to be most supportive of strong regulations, a majority of Conservative voters also believe that they are important.**<sup>16</sup> This is backed up by a recent study by The UK in a Changing Europe that shows that Conservative MPs tend to sit far to the right of Conservative voters on the economy, including on issues relating to regulation.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, studies suggest that voters **who switched from Labour to the Conservatives in the 2019 election could be among the staunchest supporters of strong regulations.** Unchecked UK’s extensive qualitative research with this group of voters in the Red Wall has revealed that they are deeply sceptical, even hostile, towards the deregulation agenda. They tend to see **regulation as something Britain needs to take pride in**, and as a means of creating a fairer society and supporting those who are struggling.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, **concern about the burden of regulations seems not to have been a factor in determining whether people opted for leave or remain in the EU referendum.** Quite the reverse – the evidence suggests that leave supporters were motivated by a desire for stronger

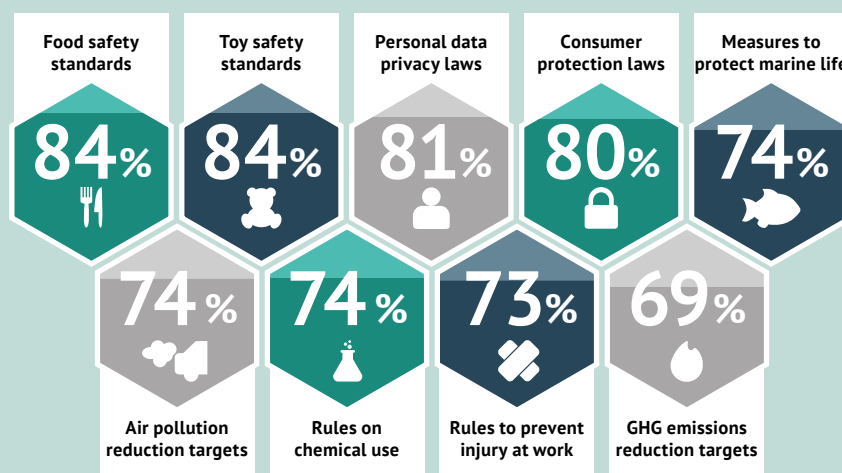
regulations made closer to home.<sup>19 20</sup> We have found no evidence that those who supported leave saw deregulation as a so-called ‘Brexit opportunity’ (see figure 3).

Our review suggests that support for protections cuts across gender, socio-economic status and geography. Our research in Wales, for example, found that support is as strong there as it is in England.<sup>21</sup> Although some studies find generational variations, conclusions from these studies are inconsistent (with some studies suggesting that older voters favour more regulations, and others the opposite).<sup>22 23</sup> Our conclusion is therefore that **support for strong regulations broadly holds true across all key demographics** (although there are likely to be differences between generations in terms of how regulations are applied to specific issues, such as online or environmental protections).

**“The proposition that Brexit should entail a bonfire of red tape holds no popular appeal.”**

*Professor John Curtice, University of Strathclyde  
(speaking at Unchecked UK Supporter event, March 2022)*

**% of Conservative Leave voters who want to increase or keep EU standards and rules**



**Figure 3**

SOURCE: **Unchecked UK Attitudes of Younger Leave Voters to Regulation and Deregulation - Unchecked UK (2020)**

### 3. Public support for protections can vary across different issues and types of regulation

Although there are few comparative studies available, we find some evidence to suggest variation in attitudes to regulations as they apply to specific issues.

The evidence shows that public support for certain protections is almost incontrovertible. This applies to, for example, food standards and animal welfare.<sup>25</sup> For large sectors of the public these standards are almost signifiers of what it means to be British.<sup>26</sup>

The evidence also suggests that levels of **support tend to be stronger when regulations relate to tangible problems** (such as the quality of rivers or the safety of food) than when presented with generic standards (such as consumer protections or financial services). Deliberative research by NatCen has also found that voters' inclination to back specific protections became more pronounced once they had considered issues in greater depth.<sup>27</sup> Unchecked UK's qualitative research has also found very strong aversion to the loss of regulations which are already in place.

The public also tends to back strong regulation of new sectors and technologies which have seen rapid development.<sup>28 29</sup> Regulations can provide a source of comfort and security.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, government studies have shown that **people are more likely to accept new innovations when they are confident that the right rules are in place** (and enforced).<sup>31 32</sup>

It is important to note that this salience can also help erode support for protections. Most notably, we have found some evidence to suggest that support for health and safety regulations has suffered because of ongoing media stories about the allegedly excessive interventions of regulators.<sup>33</sup> This is even though

Unchecked UK's consultations suggest that the public is strongly in favour of the principle of safety at work. Support for strong regulations is perhaps strongest where trust in the private sector to deliver in the public interest has suffered. This has clearly been the case in relation to the recent public outcry over the water industry's failure to tackle sewage pollution.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, we find that British public increasingly sees business as something that needs to be controlled for the benefit of society and the environment.<sup>35</sup> For a majority, regulation is the best way of retaining the benefits of the free market, whilst still managing corporate excess.

Unsurprisingly, **salience is a key predictor of levels of support for specific regulations**. People express very strong support for rules that tackle issues that they experience directly and where the evidence of abuse is visible, such as the case of fly tipping and littering which consistently feature as the public's top local concerns. Parents, likewise, are among the strongest supporters for tougher regulations online.<sup>36</sup> Support also grows in tandem with media prominence as has been the case with growing support for the regulation of water companies or chlorination processes used to treat chicken. This underlines the **critical role which campaigning and communication plays in increasing support for protections**.

***“If you want to secure public support for regulation you need to provide the living examples not the legislative case.”***

***Baroness Nicky Morgan***  
*(speaking at Unchecked UK Supporter event, March 2022)*

# Conclusion

Much has been written about the growing divisions which characterise UK society today. This review suggests that the pursuit of strong and enforced protections is something that unites us regardless of how we vote or where we live.

However, there is no room for complacency. Unchecked UK's ongoing conversations with members of the public suggest that, despite the mounting evidence of the crisis of enforcement of key protections<sup>37</sup> and over a decade's worth of deregulation policy, the public is often unaware of what is at stake. Campaigns and communications play a key role in driving up salience and therefore consolidating public support.

Our mission at Unchecked UK is to work with our partners and supporters to build on this foundation of public support in the pursuit of a safer, cleaner, and fairer UK.

**Phoebe Clay** is co-Director of **Unchecked UK**

## About Unchecked UK

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

We are a growing and diverse network of leading 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, our landscape and wildlife are protected, our homes and workplaces are safe.

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 opinion research, we shape new positive narratives about our shared protections and the enforcement agencies who work hard to keep us safe.

Ultimately, Unchecked UK aims to shift the political discussion around regulation, and to build momentum for proper investment in 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](http://www.unchecked.uk)



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