

# Strong Protections

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Do regulations hold the key to winning the next general election and fixing Broken Britain?

Phoebe Clay, co-director, **Unchecked UK**

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# Introduction

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Unchecked UK has carried out extensive research into the ways in which the British public conceives of regulation.<sup>1</sup> Our polling and focus groups find strong support for the idea that regulations keep us safe. British people – regardless of their age, politics or location – believe that regulation helps protect the environment and see strong protections for workers and consumers as instrumental in ensuring that the economy delivers fairer outcomes. We have also found that UK businesses also see robust, well-enforced regulations as essential to creating the conditions necessary to boost growth and drive investment.<sup>2</sup>

This new research with More in Common seeks to test whether strong support for social and environmental protections could indeed influence the way in which key parts of the electorate cast their votes at the next general election. We explored the following questions:

- **Do key voters respond favourably to deregulation as a political proposition?**
- **Or do voters prefer strong regulations?**
- **If the latter, could this support be a factor in determining how they vote at the next general election?**

## What we did

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This research was led by More in Common. It focuses on three of the seven ‘segments’ of the British public identified through More in Common’s values-based segmentation.<sup>3</sup> This approach goes beyond traditional demographic approaches. Instead, it segments voters based on insights from social psychology, including threat perception, moral foundation, group identity and belief in meritocracy.

Our definition of key voters focuses on the three segments some of the key swing constituencies which will determine the outcome of the next general election:

**Established Liberals (Hitchin & Harpenden, and Hastings)** – these are among the most economically secure voters who supported ‘remain’ and have the greatest levels of trust in government. Although historically these voters have voted Conservative, levels of support have waned in the aftermath of the EU referendum and the rise of more populist politics in the Conservative party. They are now wavering between Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative party.

**Loyal National (Blyth and Redcar)** – often referred to as Red Wall voters, these are the key group who abandoned historic support for the Labour Party and supported the Conservatives in the 2019 election. Strongly in favour of Brexit at the referendum, their high threat-perception coupled with a more authoritarian outlook gives them a high concern for law and order but also an instinctive distrust of government.

**Disengaged Battlers (Long Eaton, Swindon, and Stevenage)** – identified as an increasingly pivotal group of voters,<sup>4</sup> Disengaged Battlers tend to be amongst the most financially insecure voters. They are also the most pessimistic about the future and the most disengaged from politics.



*“I think regulations are important and not just for the protection of people, but the **protection of our country, our food, our water and they shouldn’t all be thrown away just so that a lot of people can make a lot of money.**”*

*Richard, Established Liberal, Hastings*

*“I just think **new standards would make the UK better as a whole because it’s a little bit of a mess.**”*

*Zaynah, Disengaged Battler, Stevenage*

*“I think it is important **the rules are there to stop bad things happening.** If you didn’t have rules, the country would just be in chaos.”*

*Gaz, Loyal National, Blyth*

*“When it comes to the election, **I will be asking some of the people on the doorstep some of these questions about regulation.**”*

*Linda, Established Liberal, Hastings*

*“If this government was to bring in anything like lockdown again, would I be listening? Absolutely not. So, just like the rest of them said, [the government] may be good at putting these regulations in place, but following them, not so much. **So I feel like going forward as a country on a whole, anything major happens, again, I don’t think a lot of people would listen.**”*

*Elisa, Loyal National, Redcar*

*“[The government] don’t seem to know what they want or what they’re doing. He’s [Rishi Sunak] rich, he seemed to go, yeah, this is what people want, so let’s burn these rules, let’s make some new ones. This will get me in. And then actually, if he sat down and thought about it, **you can’t ever burn or get rid of 2,400 rules and there’d be no impact on the country.**”*

*Chris, Established Liberal, Hitchin & Harpenden*



# What we found

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## 1. Deregulation enjoys little support among key voters

Despite the high prevalence of deregulatory narratives in political debate and the media, key voters across all the segments are unpersuaded. **Key voters do not support arguments about regulations being a burden on our economy.** Those who voted 'leave' do not see deregulation as a so-called 'Brexit dividend' (indeed, previous Unchecked UK research suggests that leave supporters are amongst the strongest advocates for the introduction of stronger rules overall<sup>5</sup>). Those who voted 'remain' are concerned that efforts to diverge from the EU are driven by political rather than economic reasons.

*“[Deregulation] often leads to a lot of people who basically will not work by any rules or standards. And often in my mind, the way I look at it, it often leads to a lot of abuse.”*

*Kevin, Disengaged Battler, Long Eaton*

In these voters' minds, **deregulation is more readily associated with the pursuit of narrow elite interests**, most often at the expense of protecting working people (particularly those who face the greatest vulnerability because of the cost-of-living crisis) and the environment. Voters see deregulation as being strongly at odds with concepts such as fairness and good governance; they think it will undermine the protections and standards that are deeply valued, such as animal welfare and food standards. Many voters also link deregulation with a gradual loss of standards in public and political life, alongside growing incidents of corruption and corporate abuse.

*“It's more regulated here than in any other country. **Hence the standards are better quality...** I am proud to be living in this country for so many reasons - like animal welfare when it comes to slaughtering animals.”*

*Veronika, Disengaged Battler, Stevenage*

*“Deregulation means that **something shady is going on.**”*

*Zaynah, Disengaged Battler, Stevenage*

## Priorities for the government

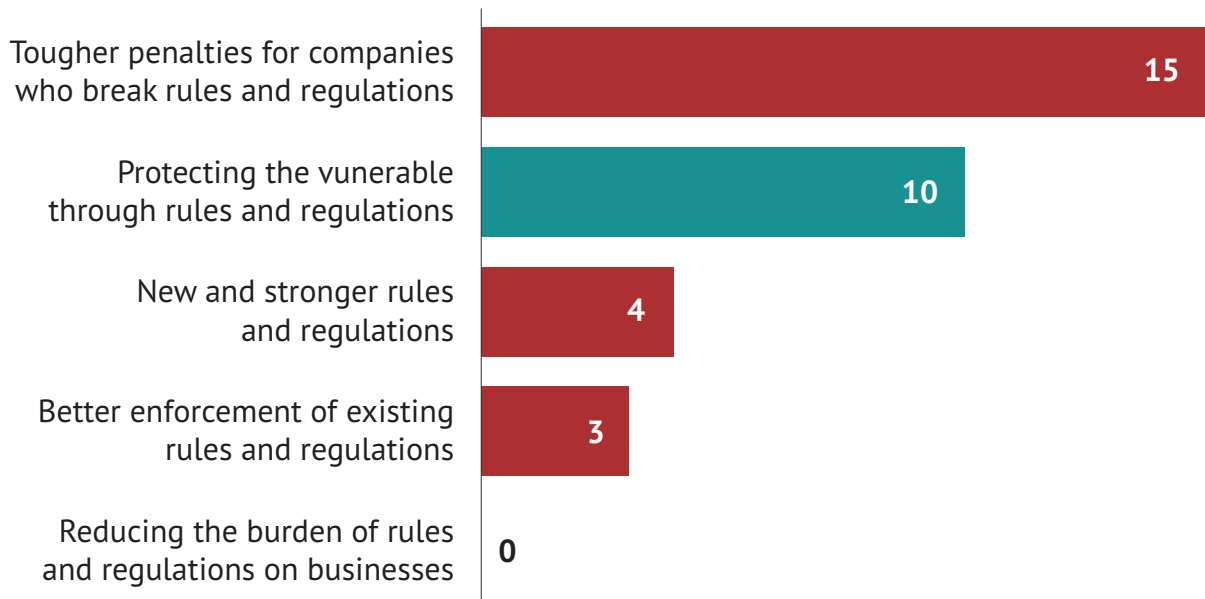


Figure 1: Participants' choices when asked to identify strategies they would prioritise from a list of options

## 2. Key voters strongly support the robust enforcement of regulation

Across the three segments, voters agree that government's role is to not just to make rules, but to ensure that rules are followed, and that rule-breakers are punished appropriately. These voters see this role as not just key to ensuring safety and security, but as an important underpinning of fairness and trust in our economy and politics.

Indeed, our research suggests that the cost-of-living crisis may have intensified this expectation. Although price has become a central concern, on balance, key voters see regulations as becoming a more central consideration than before. **We found little evidence to suggest that voters believe there is a trade-off between prices and standards.** Voters want government to use regulation proactively, leverage rules to clamp down on profiteering and ensure that the most vulnerable are protected (for example, from exploitative employers).

*"I don't think that food standards should be sacrificed for cheaper food. Obviously everyone wants to pay for cheap food but having recently just had food poisoning I would not wish that on anyone."*

*Amelia, Loyal National, Blyth*

Although many of these voters still see the UK as a world leader when it comes to regulation and standards, levels of confidence in government's ability to play this function effectively have waned. Whilst previous Unchecked UK focus groups suggested relatively high levels of trust in the government's commitment to strong regulations, this research suggests that levels of trust have been severely dented, particularly among Loyal Nationals and Disengaged Battlers. The ongoing revelations of abuses by trusted businesses, particularly the failures of privatised water companies as well as trusted brands in relation to the Living Wage underpayment, have reverberated strongly across all these segments. Distrust has been exacerbated by the ongoing revelations of abuses by the political class, particularly the "party gate" scandal which remains highly salient.

This is proving to be a toxic combination, one that reinforces a widely documented and growing sense of Broken Britain.<sup>6</sup> **Trust in the fact that there are systems in place to keep checks on abuse and to enforce the rules fairly has been eroded.** Key voters widely see the system as rigged in favour of the most powerful. Suspicion that rules are being willingly overlooked for the benefit of those who have the most to gain is also widely shared. Continued weakening of protections and further evidence that these are linked with environmental damage and human suffering is therefore likely to exacerbate this growing crisis of distrust and disengagement.

*“From my point of view, I think [politicians] definitely don’t care. And going back to the Covid situation, they’re having that party gate and we’re told that we can’t leave the house, we can’t visit family or go outside of where we live. They just simply don’t care. They care about power, **they care about control and money and that’s just it. I don’t think they care about the people.**”*

*Michelle, Established Liberal, Hitchin & Harpenden*

*“[The government should be] ensuring that **everybody abides by the same rules.** I think particularly with what’s going on with the government at the moment, all of these videos and everything that happened during Covid, **it seems to me there’s a set of rules for some people and a set of rules for other people.**”*

*Kevin, Disengaged Battler, Long Eaton*

Despite this, we found that, outside high-profile cases such as sewage pollution, levels of awareness about the systemic weaknesses of the UK’s enforcement regime (as documented by Unchecked UK’s Enforcement Gap research<sup>7</sup>) remain relatively low. When presented with evidence that the system is struggling on many fronts, these voters tend to express shock and surprise. Most voters continue to assume that protections are in place. This suggests that there is more to do in terms of raising public awareness about the growing failings of the UK’s regulatory regime.<sup>8</sup>

*“What are the consequences? They seem very minimal. **The repercussions of people who’ve not followed regulations, bop on the wrist.** So people who are following regulations tend to think, well what’s the point.”*

*Stephen, Loyal National, Redcar*

*“I would also go with the tougher penalties with business and individuals who break the rules. At the end of the day, we have standards that are already established. It’s just unfortunately people are ignoring them. **Just give them harsher penalties and they won’t do it.**”*

*Emily, Disengaged Battler, Stevenage*

### 3. Voters want regulations that fix real, everyday problems

Key voters are understandably most animated when regulations are linked to specific problems in their everyday lives. Issues which have had most media focus tend to trigger the highest level of support. Amongst the most salient were sewage pollution (particularly in coastal constituencies) and vaping.

*“I suppose [with taxes] we’re paying for a service from the government, so we should have the same expectations as when you’re buying a product from a shop. You expect it to work for it’s supposed to do. Same thing as the government. **They say that they’re going to [enforce these rules] for us, we pay our taxes and it should be done.**”*

*Matt, Established Liberal, Hitchin & Harpenden*

Levels of support for labour market regulations (both in terms of wages and conditions, and wellbeing) were strong among all these segments, and particularly among Disengaged Battlers and Loyal Nationals. There was no acceptance that high standards for workers could lead to fewer jobs being created. Indeed, we found that voters’ expectations on standards tended to outstrip the level of protection currently on offer to average UK workers (for example, responses to the Labour Party’s proposal for a ‘right to disconnect’ for British workers were consistently positive<sup>9</sup>).

*“I think another really common one at the moment is the minimum wage laws. I think that’s quite important that all organisations kind of stick to that...I think certain companies try to get away with not offering the minimum wage, **a lot of companies are trying to kind of bypass that at the moment and I don’t think it’s right.** So that’s one that’s quite firm to me actually at the moment. Just with all the cost of living and everything.”*

*Michelle, Established Liberal, Hitchin & Harpenden*

*“I personally think this [the ‘right to disconnect’] is a really, really good idea and I think that’s why as well with more and more people working from home as well, **I think you need that to be able to distinguish and differentiate between this is my workplace and my work time.** This is my chill place and my chill time. **If those lines become blurred, then for me that’s a massive, massive stressor, which is not a good thing.**”*

*Francis, Loyal National, Blyth*

We also found **little appetite for the weakening of environmental regulations**. Voters were supportive of measures which helped protect local beauty spots and green spaces which are widely known and enjoyed. They were also supportive of the idea that the UK should lead the way in terms of setting environmental standards internationally, and broadly understood the role that robust regulations needs to play in achieving net zero.

Key voters strongly support the principle of ensuring that those who pollute take responsibility. **The principle of 'polluter pays' enjoyed very high levels of support across all the segments**, with voters favouring robust regimes which prevent companies from pricing in the costs of pollution and ensure that the level of punishment creates an effective deterrent (particularly in the case of water pollution and fly tipping).

*“And businesses just put anything into rivers and the seas...wasn't there a news story there about water companies putting a lot of sewage into the sea and you just think, how is that possible?... I like the idea of making people pay to put things if they've [broken rules], so if their business has polluted a river, they have to pay for it to be cleaned up. I like that idea.”*

*Rachel, Disengaged Battler, Long Eaton*

*“I go on holiday to other countries and I go in the sea and it's crystal clear. To see the state of the water on the local news after we have heavy rain is quite **frightening in this day and age.**”*

*Linda, Established Liberal, Hastings*

Overall, voters in the Disengaged Battler segment were amongst the most concerned about regulations which could affect personal choice and behaviour, such as restrictions on driving. They were also marginally more worried that measures to promote healthier shopping habits could impact on food costs. However, all groups were generally supportive of outright bans on products that affect the most vulnerable, particularly children, and for high animal welfare and food standards.

*“I think it's exceptionally important [as an electoral issue] considering that rules and regulations affect every aspect of our life...and realistically they should be in our best interests. It's quite clear that the current government have made these regulations that are not in our best interests.”*

*Christian, Loyal National, Redcar*





# Conclusion

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## Stronger protections: a proposition that works for key voters

Our research suggests that politicians who shun deregulatory ideas and embrace common-sense rules which protect people and the environment stand to gain. Given the option, none of these key voters opted for propositions which focused on the need to lessen the so-called 'burden' of regulation. On the contrary, participants across all segments were strongly in favour of more robust enforcement of key protections. Strong, well-enforced protections are seen as evidence that whoever is in power is committed to fair play, to the effective functioning of society and to addressing the everyday problems they want resolved.

We found that support grew considerably as participants engaged with the issues and made links with the things they care about – the safety of their children, the quality of their local environment and the fairness of their workplace. Whilst regulatory failure as an overarching challenge may not rank highly as a key concern at present, key voters can readily understand the links with the problems and fears they face in their everyday lives. Making these links and increasing the salience of regulatory weaknesses is therefore a key priority for those who want to activate support for key protections.

Importantly, we found that support for strong protections cuts across economic and environmental issues. These voters feel as strongly about the importance of rules that clamp down on fly tippers and ban the sale of vapes to young people, as they do about labour market regulations which protect workers from bullying and ensure that employers safeguard their mental health. Whilst backing for action to address issues that have enjoyed high levels of salience, such as sewage pollution, was understandably more immediate, voters also recognise the need for regulations that can help us tackle complex challenges, such as climate change, obesity and mental ill health.

This research shows that, as the election draws near, the UK electorate would favour political parties who are clear in their commitment to protect people and the environment. But the insights suggest that the implications run deeper. A strong regulatory framework that is underpinned by well-funded and robust institutions is not just the best choice electorally, it will be central to addressing the deepening sense of distrust, powerlessness and malaise which affects growing numbers of UK voters today.



# Acknowledgements

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# References

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- 1 [Public Attitudes](#) - *Unchecked UK*
- 2 [Regulation: what does UK business think?](#) - *Unchecked UK*
- 3 [britainschoice.uk](#)
- 4 [Red Shift | Labour Together](#) It is worth noting that although not the same as the ‘Stevenage Woman’ identified in this report, Disengaged Battlers share many of the same economic characteristics and are similarly disengaged from politics and lean towards social conservatism.
- 5 [Attitudes of Younger Leave Voters to Regulation and Deregulation](#) - *Unchecked UK*
- 6 See for example, [Broken Britain: Poll Shows Majority Of Brits Think UK Is In Decline](#) | *HuffPost UK Politics* ([huffingtonpost.co.uk](#)) and [Broken Britain](#) | *New Britain Project*
- 7 [The UK’s Enforcement Gap 2020](#) - *Unchecked UK*
- 8 Unchecked UK and its supporters have published extensive investigations into the failings of the UK regulatory system. See for example, [Enforcement Gap - Unchecked UK](#), [Spotlight\\_closing\\_the\\_UK\\_economic\\_crime\\_enforcement\\_gap.pdf](#) ([spotlightcorruption.org](#)), [Report\\_The-Enforcement-Problem-in-the-UK.pdf](#) ([animalequality.org.uk](#))
- 9 [Give people the right to switch off after work - Labour](#) - *BBC News*