

A view from the 'Red Wall'

Swing voters' attitudes to
regulation and food standards

Jon Cracknell
Emma Rose

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LET'S PROTECT WHAT MATTERS MOST



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“I do believe you need rules and regulations for most things in life, just to keep an order ... I'd like to think that we're more capable of keeping to (existing) rules and expecting other people to keep to the rules, so that we are part of this Great Britain, and so that we're proud of being British.”

Maureen, 54, Heywood & Middleton

“I voted Leave and I wanted a better Britain... I don't think we should be looking at trade deals with America to compromise what we have now. We should be building on that really”

Alice, 59, Burnley

“If you live in a civilised society, and that civilised society, no matter where it may be, has rules and regulations, and they're policed properly, and everyone, kind-of, adheres to those rules, we'll all get on. If you go out of them rules, if you break them rules, then you should suffer the consequences.”

Tom, 51, Heywood & Middleton

“Yeah. We were called Great Britain at one point, and I do definitely kind of feel we've lost that ... Why because we've left something [the EU] should our expectations be lower? They shouldn't.”

Karen, 23, West Bromwich East

“Whether you were a Brexiter or not, it was very much about Great Britain being great again. We have chlorinated chicken coming, and that's shocking – it's not supporting Britain's industry.”

Vicki, 35, Heywood & Middleton

“My big thing really is getting back to some kind of British pride and standard in our food where we produce it from, you know from rearing it to eating it, from farmyard to table, and support the local farmers.”

Tony, 56, Burnley



IF YOU DO NOT SEE
WHAT YOU REQUIRE
PLEASE ASK

QUALITY
STANDARD
LAMB

MEP-30 WEIGHT kg UNIT PRICE £ TOTAL £
0.00 0.00 0.00

3 Loin Steaks
1.85p

4 Loin Steaks
2.19p

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

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Executive Summary

This report draws on qualitative research involving 52 voters who swung from Labour to the Conservatives in 2019, in five so-called 'Red Wall' constituencies: Burnley, Heywood & Middleton, North West Durham, West Bromwich East, and Wrexham. These constituencies look set to be part of a key electoral battleground in years to come. We found that:

- These swing voters lean to the left on economic issues, but are conservative on cultural and social issues. **This blend of economic and cultural values manifests itself in strong support for effective rules and public protections.** We found these voters to be supportive of state intervention, albeit cynical and distrusting of both politicians and large corporations.
- **These voters are patriotic and pragmatic, focused on getting by day-to-day.** They are focused on their local area, and very keen to see the towns where they live prosper in the future, after what many feel has been a period of decline.
- When we asked them about the issues which concerned them they often talked about the death of the High Street, about crime and anti-social behaviour, increasing homelessness, and a lack of opportunities for young people.
- **Few regretted their decision to vote Conservative in December 2019,** albeit for many this was a vote against Jeremy Corbyn and to get Brexit 'done', rather than an enthusiastic endorsement of the Conservative Party.
- **On Covid-19 we found that most of our Labour to Conservative swing voters gave the government the benefit of the doubt,** partly because this was an unprecedented situation, and partly because they had no confidence that a Labour government under Jeremy Corbyn would have handled the situation better.
- Our swing voters are **strongly in favour of well-enforced rules and regulations, seeing them as essential to the kind of country they aspire to live in, and necessary in order to ensure respect for law and order, to keep standards high, and to create a fair society.** If anything they would like to see tougher punishments for those who break the rules.
- **They feel Britain has always had innately high standards, higher than those of many other countries.**
- As with our quantitative polling last year (see P15), **we detected very little enthusiasm for lower standards in the wake of Brexit.** Indeed the reverse was true. **One of the reasons why most of our participants voted to leave the European Union was so that the UK could take back control of making its own laws and rules, with the expectation and hope that these will be better.** The last thing the voters in our research wanted is for standards to be undermined. For those who voted Leave this would be seen as a betrayal of their vote for Brexit, and they expressed strong opposition to any politicians pursuing such an agenda.
- **We heard repeated references to the need to put the 'great' back into Great Britain,** and a demand that other countries should match British standards if they want to trade with us.
- **These voters are sceptical about trade deals with countries like the United States. Many voted for Brexit because they thought it would benefit British producers,** in this case British farmers and food producers. Our swing voters try to buy British when shopping, and assume others will do the same. Supporting UK farmers feels like an important political stance to many of them. They are therefore sceptical about opening up the British market to foreign agribusiness companies.
- We concluded the research by asking about the cheaper food or increased choice of products that might result from trade deals. We also asked about labelling and whether consumers could rely on it to avoid products that might be lower quality. **We found no enthusiasm for lower standards as a way to reduce the cost of food.**
- **Indeed our swing voters felt that with families struggling to put food on the table due to Covid-19 it was all the more important to have a strong regulatory floor in place to make sure that cheaper food is still safe and of good quality.** Our participants hope not to have to buy that food themselves, they aspire to give their families the best, but they recognised that others might not be in as fortunate a position, and felt those individuals needed to be protected.
- **We found no support for the idea that consumers could rely on labelling when shopping,** with scepticism about the time that would be required to read every label, the complexity of the information, and whether producers would be open about worrying ingredients.

SECTION 1

RESEARCH PROCESS & RATIONALE

Research process

This report is based on an in-depth audience insights project in former 'Red Wall' constituencies which changed hands from the Labour Party to the Conservative Party in December 2019. The project included ten teleforums, as well as a number of participant video-selfie 'pre-tests'.¹ All of the participants in the teleforums had voted Conservative for the first time in December 2019, usually having voted for the Labour Party in the past. Most, but not all, had voted to Leave the European Union in 2016. A total of 52 swing voters recorded video-selfies for the project, and 40 of these voters then took part in 75 minute long teleforums.

The first wave of research in the constituencies of Heywood & Middleton and West Bromwich East took place in June 2020. These conversations covered a range of topics related to regulation and deregulation. In September 2020 we carried out further teleforums with voters in Burnley, North West Durham, and Wrexham, with a tighter focus on food and farming, and on climate change mitigation. In this report we draw on the broader discussions from June, and the food and farming teleforums from September.

The project was delivered for Unchecked UK by KSBR Brand Futures.

Introduction

In December 2019 the Conservative Party secured a parliamentary majority of 80 MPs, following a successful election campaign which focused on the need to "get Brexit done." The Conservatives won 54 parliamentary seats from the Labour Party, many of which were in the so-called 'Red Wall' of constituencies stretching from North Wales to North East England.

Immediately after the election the Prime Minister acknowledged the importance of these new

constituencies, thanking the voters who had 'lent' their votes to the Conservative Party, and recognising that they have different priorities from more long-standing Conservative voters. Research by think-tanks and academics backs this up,^{2,3} and has shown that many Labour to Conservative swing voters are 'cross-pressured'. These voters lean to the left on economic issues, but are more conservative on cultural issues than the average Conservative MP or Conservative Party member.⁴ As we will see below, this blend of economic and cultural values manifests itself in strong support for effective rules and regulations. We found these voters to be supportive of state intervention, and also keen on discipline, coupled with law and order. Their values are different from those held by the more libertarian supporters of the Conservative Party.

Unchecked UK's quantitative polling of younger Leave voters last year, carried out with Ipsos MORI, also showed strong support for a wide range of regulations.⁵ For example, 84% of respondents supported increasing or maintaining food safety regulations, and 81% supported increasing or maintaining environmental regulations. No fewer than 84% of younger Leave voters who had voted Conservative in December 2019 supported increasing or keeping the food safety and cleanliness standards that applied while the UK was a member of the European Union. In this report we include some previously unpublished findings from the polling.

These findings chime with those of other researchers carried out by other organisations, including the British Social Attitudes research team⁶ and the consumer organisation Which?⁷

In short, our research compounds the strong sense that, at the national level, there seems to be little public enthusiasm for a weakening of regulatory standards post-Brexit among either Leave or Remain voters.

Why the Red Wall?

We felt it was important to build on our and others' quantitative research, and test whether similar support for strong rules and protections also holds among Labour to Conservative 'swing' voters, in the constituencies that look set to be a key electoral battleground in years to come.

We set out to discover how these swing voters feel about regulation and deregulation, and about British standards post-Brexit. As the research progressed we began to focus more closely on food and farming issues. These have featured prominently in public debate in the UK, including the child food poverty campaign started by footballer Marcus Rashford, and ongoing discussion of whether post-Brexit trade deals might have an impact on food standards and safety. There have been parliamentary rebellions, petitions with more than a million signatures,⁸ and no shortage of media stories. Well-known chefs have been speaking out, alongside farmers from across the UK.

This isn't surprising, given the importance of food in people's day-to-day lives, and the role it plays in nurturing those we love. If anything, Covid-19 seems to have made people more aware of their diets. As one of our teleforum participants noted:

Alice, 59, Burnley: *"Food seems like our main pleasure at the minute, doesn't it? Especially through lockdown and Covid and everything, people are really enjoying good food."*

We hope that our findings will contribute to the wider public debate about food standards and food safety.

Our Red Wall swing voters

The swing voters in our teleforums were patriotic and pragmatic, focused on getting by day-to-day. They are focused on their local area, and very keen to see the towns where they live prosper in the future, after what many feel has been a period of decline. When it comes to leaders they admire strength and decisiveness. We found these voters to be pro-government, and keen to see cuts to public services reversed, but also very cynical and distrusting of politicians. There was strong scepticism about the motives of large corporations, with more enthusiasm for local small and medium-sized companies.

A strong majority of our teleforum participants had voted to leave the European Union in 2016. When we asked them about the issues which concerned them in their local area they often talked about the death of the high street, about crime and anti-social behaviour, increasing homelessness, and a lack of opportunities for young people. Few regretted their decision to vote Conservative in December 2019, albeit for many this was a vote against Jeremy Corbyn and to "get Brexit done", rather than an enthusiastic endorsement of the Conservative Party.

In order to protect the identity of our teleforum participants we have changed their names throughout the report. In the following pages we largely let our participants speak for themselves, using a few verbatim quotes to illustrate each point, with further quotes provided in the Annex at the end of the report.



SECTION 2

WHAT OUR SWING VOTERS TOLD US

1) Covid-19

Running teleforums relating to rules, regulations and standards during the coronavirus crisis means that the discussions inevitably touched on the government's handling of the pandemic. In line with other polling and research,⁹ we found that most of our Labour to Conservative swing voters gave the government the benefit of the doubt, partly because this was an unprecedented situation that no government had ever had to deal with before, and partly because they had no confidence that a Labour government under Jeremy Corbyn would have handled the situation better.

Judy, 31, North West Durham: *"I do watch a lot of Good Morning Britain and they completely, they bash Boris Johnson all the time, and they're very much one sided, I think, and they're doing all this boycott with the government, sort of thing..."*

Carol, 73, Burnley: *"They've had a very difficult job, I wouldn't have liked to have made the decisions they've had to make, I mean they're groping in the dark because they've never had to deal with this before so yeah, I think they've done a pretty good job. They've made a few gaffes but I don't think, I honestly don't think Labour or Liberal would have done any better."*

Emma, 48, Wrexham: *"I think it's a very hard situation for anybody, any government, for anybody to be in, because we've never had a pandemic before, it's all advised, the country's never been through anything like this, so everything that they're doing is new, it's new for them."*

Naomi, 51, Burnley: *"I don't think they've done a bad job. I don't think they knew what to do. Like you said, all the information is a bit conflicting. I agree with Jim about the masks, we should have all been wearing them a lot sooner."*

The main criticism that we heard related to confusion due to mixed messages.

Jim, 35, Burnley: *"Boris obviously was trying his best to keep people safe, but I think it was all very unclear as to what we should be doing. There was one point where you can go out but you can't go out, but you can do this but you can't do this, and it was like where are we, what's going on?"*

Danny, 42, Wrexham: *"I think actually since the Covid crisis with all the flip flopping that he's been doing and the lack of decisive leadership, it's made me feel like I didn't make the best decision, although you never know what would have happened if you had voted for Jeremy Corbyn, you don't know how he would have coped under these circumstances."*

The controversy in May 2020 over Dominic Cummings' trip to Durham during lockdown had also cut through, reinforcing the feeling that there was one rule for elites, and another for the public as a whole.

Tom, 51, Heywood & Middleton: *"I think you're going down the lines of Mr Cummings and Mr Johnson there, it's alright for them to tell you what to do, 'you must stay in, you must do this, you must do that, but when it comes to me and my mate, we're off.'"*

Darren, 51, West Bromwich East: *"This whole situation as well with, what's that guy's name they're going on about, who drove up to Durham, and Boris Johnson hasn't done anything about that, when we all adhered to living by the rules. To me, I'm dismayed at the whole situation."*

2) Why is it important to have effective regulations and rules?

In our June teleforums in Heywood & Middleton and West Bromwich East we talked in some detail to participants about regulation and deregulation. Our swing voters were strongly in favour of well-enforced rules and regulations, seeing them as essential to the kind of country they aspire to live in, and allied to a respect for law and order. If anything they would like to see tougher punishments for those who break the rules.

We identified five reasons why our swing voters place an importance on effective rules and regulation: a) to protect people (including their loved ones); b) to uphold high British standards; c) to level the playing field (so that everyone has a fair chance); d) to enforce respect and decency; and e) to educate 'others' to live better.



To protect people

Andy, 37, Heywood & Middleton: *"I've always gone along with the fact that the rules are there for a reason. They're there to protect people, they're there to help people ... I don't see the point in having rules and laws if they're not being enforced. And if you have to spend more fine, because again, it's for the greater good."*

Julie, 29, West Bromwich East: *"Having rules gives you a level, makes it a safe place. It protects our future and our children's future. I think that's why they're really important."*

Adam, 38, West Bromwich East: *"I think we need to have rules there, to protect our families, and individuals, so we look after each other. We shouldn't obviously break any rules or regulations. That's what the law is there for, to look after us."*



To uphold high British standards

Karen, 23, Heywood & Middleton: *"I think we do sometimes take for granted living in this country... We're very very lucky to kind of live and be born in this country – it kind of gives us so many opportunities in our lives, just to be from Britain. But I do think that because of that, it allows the government to kind of lack on rules and regulations, just because other countries may not be as far as we are."*

Maureen, 54, Heywood & Middleton: *"I do believe you need rules and regulations for most things in life, just to keep an order ... I'd like to think that we're more capable of keeping to (existing) rules and expecting other people to keep to the rules, so that we are part of this great Britain, and so that we're proud of being British."*

Andy, 37, Heywood & Middleton: *"It's all about keeping the majority of the population safe, keeping the country moving in a positive direction, sort of get them back on track and moving in the right direction, rather than moving backwards. I think without them...[rules], a growing minority of people would allow it to slip back into something less desirable."*

Sandra, 38, West Bromwich East: *"People take advantage anyway, and there is rules in place and still people are taking advantage. If there was no rules and protections I just think that it would be absolute carnage and it would be an absolutely terrible world to live in."*



To level the playing field

Andy, 37, Heywood & Middleton: *"I'm thinking of a more equal society, a more fair society, where, you know, people who play by the rules get what they deserve."*

Joe, 50, West Bromwich East: *"I think that too much deregulation basically only serves to make rich people richer, shareholders richer, and obviously takes away from society. And I think that if you, you know, spread the wealth and you actually create a fairer society and opportunity through rules and regulations then you'll actually have a more coherent society."*

Mary, 57, Heywood & Middleton: *"Otherwise we'd be a lawless society wouldn't we ... If you play the game and you haven't got rules, there isn't an end result is there, and it doesn't become fair. So as long as there's rules to understand and be boundaries then hopefully we all stay within those boundaries and play the game accordingly."*



To enforce respect and decency

Darren, 51, West Bromwich East: *"We need law and order. Otherwise there'd be complete anarchy ... There needs to be guidelines, there needs to be a perimeter fence doesn't there. Because if you cross that perimeter fence there needs to be, from my point of view, there needs to be some sort of discipline ... I do believe, in some ways, that we haven't got enough of that, and we're too soft."*

Tom, 51, Heywood & Middleton: *"If you live in a civilised society, and that civilised society, no matter where it may be, has rules and regulations, and they're policed properly, and everyone, kind-of, adheres to those rules, we'll all get on. If you go out of them rules, if you break them rules, then you should suffer the consequences."*



To educate 'others' to live better

Having well-enforced rules was seen as particularly important for groups who are perceived as being potentially unfamiliar with the way we do things in Britain. Participants talked about a desire to defend British standards, a theme that reappears in relation to food quality below.

Mary, 57, Heywood & Middleton: *"People don't understand what they should and shouldn't be doing. They don't understand our way of doing things, lots of these people have come from another country. They just keep on doing it – so we need to ask these people why they do it."*

Maureen, 54, Heywood & Middleton: *"The people who fly tip haven't been told the rules of the country, so if you're going to allow people to come in, we should explain how we live and they have to live by those rules."*

Who is responsible for regulation?

We asked our swing voters who they felt was responsible for keeping effective rules and regulations in place. They see this as a job for the government, paid for by our taxes. This is especially the case in relation to food safety.

Tony, 56, Burnley: *"...Having strong regulations is a bit like having a strong immune system, it's absolutely crucial to the nation's health and wellbeing that need maintaining and I think we need to like put our stamp on things again and start grabbing, taking back control."*

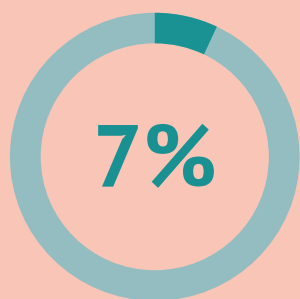
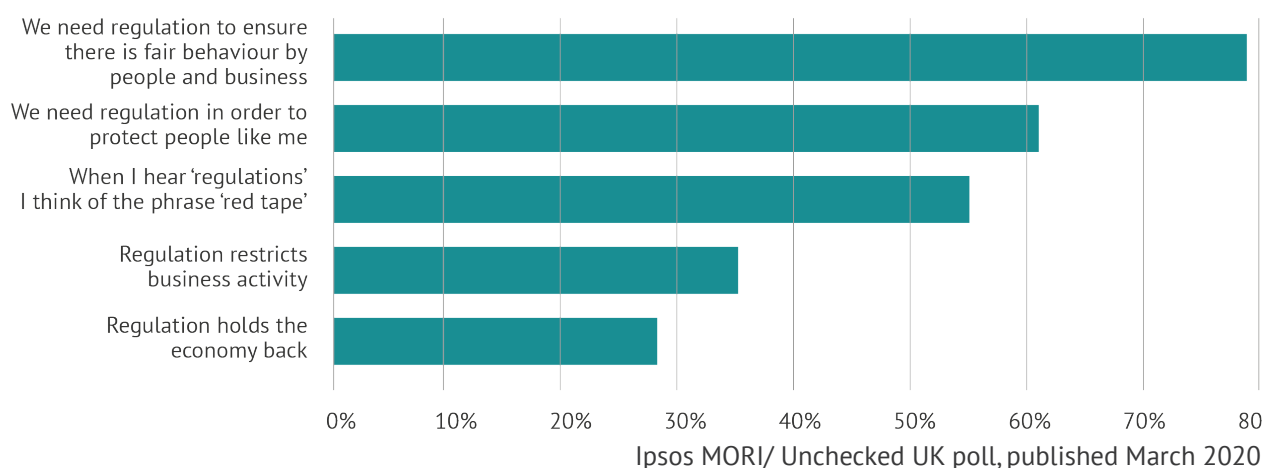
Vicki, 35, Heywood & Middleton: *"You know we do pay taxes. And you know, sometimes I forget that, we do pay people to have these jobs, to protect us and to create Great Britain. I like that idea that it's to achieve our goals, it's a partnership, we are paying for these services, we pay to live in the country."*

Jane, 49, North West Durham: *"I don't want to have to worry about what I'm eating all the time. We pay our taxes so that the government can take care of things, the food quality, and we can just get on with our lives."*

Findings from polling of younger Leave voters by Ipsos MORI

This public opinion research was carried out to test attitudes to regulation, deregulation and enforcement of regulations among young adults (aged 22 to 48 years) in Great Britain who voted to leave the European Union in the 2016 referendum.

79% of respondents who voted Conservative in the 2019 election and 80% of Labour-voting respondents agree that 'we need regulation to ensure there is fair behaviour by people and business'.



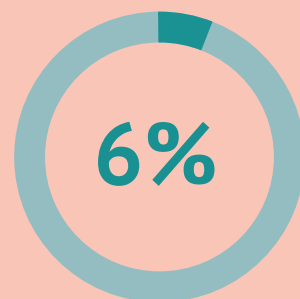
Just 7% of younger Leave voters want less regulation of large businesses.

(Ipsos MORI/ Unchecked UK poll, published March 2020)



85% of younger Conservative Leave voters think the UK should keep or increase current levels of food safety regulation.

(Ipsos MORI/ Unchecked UK poll, previously unpublished)



Just 6% of younger Conservative Leave voters want to see a reduction in food safety and cleanliness regulations as a result of leaving the EU.

(Ipsos MORI/ Unchecked UK poll, previously unpublished)

3) British standards and Brexit

As we mention earlier, these voters are patriotic. They feel Britain has always had innately high standards, higher than the United States (particularly where food is concerned), and at least as high as those in (Northern) Europe. They see Britain as a green and pleasant land of farmers and fishermen, where it's obvious that both the land and those who steward it should be protected.

As with our quantitative polling last year, we detected very little enthusiasm for lower standards in the wake of Brexit. Indeed the reverse was true, one of the reasons why most of our teleforum participants voted to leave the European Union was so that the UK could take back control of making its own laws and rules, with the expectation and hope that these will be better. The last thing the voters in our research wanted is for standards to be undermined. For those who voted Leave this would be seen as a betrayal of their vote for Brexit, and they expressed strong opposition to any politicians pursuing such an agenda.

Mary, 57, Heywood & Middleton: *"England can make our own rules because of Brexit, surely that's why we're leaving, so that we can make our own rules ... whatever's going to benefit us."*

Alice, 59, Burnley: *"I voted Leave and I wanted a better Britain ... I don't think we should be looking at trade deals with America to compromise what we have now. We should be building on that really."*

Terry, 62, Heywood & Middleton: *"Still the best cars in the world are the Rolls Royce and the Bentley, our cotton industry used to be one of the best in the world. We need it back like that, we need them standards and to keep them standards, and to up them standards, so that we are the best in the world."*

They are proud of British high standards and see them as a selling point, something that will enable UK exports to 'sell themselves' abroad, and will help us to put the 'great' back in Great Britain.

Wendy, 42, North West Durham: *"We should be able to go in and make a good [trade] deal and set out own standards and not drop from them standards. You know, we've had standards for years and I think just because they're wanting to try and make deals, we shouldn't lower our standards just to get a good deal. We should hit them hard and say 'this is where we're at and we're not going to falter from that.'"*

Vicki, 35, Heywood & Middleton: *"Whether you were a Brexiter or not, it was very much about Great Britain being great again. We have chlorinated chicken coming, and that's shocking – it's not supporting Britain's industry."*

Tony, 56, Burnley: *"... Well, we used to have trade deals with everybody in the world and everybody would go by British standards and it was guaranteed that you were going to get something good. A British standard meant a great product. The 'great' has been taken out of Great Britain a bit, I think it should be put back."*


Our swing voters want the country to be aiming high when it comes to standards, and were unhappy with the idea of lower quality food coming on to the UK market as a result of trade deals:

Carol, 73, Burnley: *"Yeah, we need trade deals with leaving the EU but we should maintain our standards, we shouldn't adopt the standards of anywhere else because it's not acceptable; let's make Britain great again by keeping our standards up. Let's be leaders of the world in food quality."*

Betty, 55, Wrexham: *"They need to deliver what they promised, we don't need to go backwards, because our food safety and our hygiene standards and everything like that, it's good and it works, why would we want to go backwards?"*

Andy, 37, Heywood & Middleton: *"Brexit was sold by key members of this government as taking back control, and it seems we're not taking back control, we're just passing it to other more worrying countries – American and Chinese multinationals that are going to be lowering standards, and undermining British industry."*

Karen, 23, West Bromwich East: *"Yeah. We were called Great Britain at one point, and I do definitely kind of feel we've lost that ... Why because we've left something [the EU] should our expectations be lower? They shouldn't."*



BUTCHER'S SELECTION

BRITISH BEEF MINCE

Typically less
than 20% fat

Beef mince

Origin: UK

Slaughtered in: UK

59

4) Scepticism about politicians and also large companies

The participants in our teleforums were very sceptical about the motives of politicians, and of large companies. They were far from certain that standards would be protected going forwards.

Andy, 37, Heywood & Middleton: *"[I have] no faith that the current government will protect British standards. The majority of key members of the government is looking out for themselves – the last few weeks [May-June 2020] has shown that they're incompetent in looking out for the British people. Current reopening shows that it's the economy first and people next."*

Emma, 48, Wrexham: *"If they are going to be swayed by other countries and be bullied into things then obviously they're not the right people for the job, because the whole idea was to move forward with doing what the country needs to do."*

Alice, 59, Burnley: *"So, the food producers cutting corners wherever they can which is what happened with the horse meat thing. You know they're putting horse meat in with the beef, cutting corners so that they could make more profit and it stems from there."*

This tied into concern about who will benefit from trade deals.

Tony, 56, Burnley: *"It's just a shame it's gone down political paths and trade paths, well bigger trade paths to make more money. The coin seems to be the winner at the moment, doesn't it."*

Samantha, 29, North West Durham: *"Big food chains, they're not going to be bothered about what they put in our food as long as they're making money."*

5) A U.S. trade deal is of particular concern to swing voters

Our teleforum participants felt effective rules were important to keep British standards high, and free from foreign influence. Participants felt very strongly that other countries should have to meet British standards in order to be able to trade with us, rather than the other way round. They felt that letting one substandard product in might be the thin end of the wedge, which will lower our standards and devalue the British 'brand'. This is particularly true when they think about industrialised food from countries like the United States.

Tara, 43, West Bromwich East: *"I know that generally in America, the majority of their food, I've been to America several times now, is overly processed. You have to literally go out of your way to find normal bread, and by that I mean bread that doesn't contain any sugars. Cereals, everything is just so much sweeter and saltier than it is here. And I just worry that if we do end up having to rely on America for a lot of our trade deals we are going to have to comply with having a lot of their exports and it will become mainstream here ... And I just think that at the moment, the EU has fairly high standards on everything really, certainly higher than what there is in America."*

Sue, 67, Burnley: *"I just think that we should be, if they want to trade with us, their standards should be coming to ours, it should be acceptable to us."*

Carol, 73, Burnley: *"I've read things in the paper about America, how they you know they use chlorinated things and bleach to wash chickens and things and it just sounds horrendous! I know it won't be really strong probably but I don't like the idea that food has been mucked about with."*

Emma, 48, Wrexham: *"If we do see a trade deal with America going through I will be very cautious with what we eat."*

6) Supporting British farmers and food producers

Another reason why our teleforum participants are sceptical about trade deals with countries like the United States is that those who voted for Brexit did so because they thought it would benefit British producers, in this case British farmers and food producers. Our swing voters try to buy British when shopping, and assume others will do the same. Supporting UK farmers feels like an important political stance to many of them. They are therefore sceptical about opening up the British market to foreign agribusiness companies.

Jane, 49, North West Durham: *"Should their priority not be this country and helping like the farmers in this country so we can get healthy meat from our country? I don't see why we need to go out of our country when we've got loads of farmers in this country who could get help off the government to make them better."*

Tony, 56, Burnley: *"My big thing really is getting back to some kind of British pride and standard in our food where we produce it from, you know from rearing it to eating it, from farmyard to table, and support the local farmers."*

Vicki, 35, Heywood & Middleton: *"You know we're an island, we should be able to be self-sufficient and we're not. Some changes do need to be made, and to be making sure that we are supporting British businesses as much as we can, encouraging people to buy local."*

7) Choice, price, and labelling

In order to explore the extent to which participants in the teleforums held strong views about this subject we presented them with a series of counter-arguments which are commonly heard, including the idea that trade deals might provide more choice for consumers, cheaper food, and new opportunities for British producers. We also explored the idea that as long as products were clearly labelled consumers should take responsibility for avoiding products that might be lower quality.

We thought that given the economic challenges posed by Covid-19, which our teleforum participants were personally experiencing, there might be a strong demand for cheaper food. It was striking that this wasn't the case, a finding that corresponds with unpublished polling carried out by Which?. Indeed our swing voters felt that with families struggling to put food on the table due to Covid-19 it was all the more important that

a strong regulatory floor is in place to make sure that cheaper food is still safe and of good quality.

The participants in our teleforums hope not to have to buy cheaper food themselves, they aspire to give their families the best, but they recognised that others might not be in as fortunate a position, and felt those individuals needed to be protected.

Betty, 55, Wrexham: *"There's a lot of people out there worse off than what I was for money during the lockdown, and we can't all afford to go to farmers' markets or local shops that's local cattle, local sheep, or whatever, so it's the vulnerable that are going to suffer."*

Nicola, 39, Wrexham: *"...if people are suffering money wise as well, you don't always have the choice to be able to make, like they said, go to farmers' markets and things like that, but you have got the confidence that our food is looked after and how it should be, it's regulated."*

When it came to labelling there was widespread scepticism about whether this would help.

Betty, 55, Wrexham: *"If you've got children or you work full-time and you're just flying into the shop to get something to take home you don't want to have to read all the labels."*

Sue, 67, Burnley: *"For everything to be so detailed, you'd be shopping for a day, wouldn't you? ... I feel we should be protected from the harms, they should be looking after us, that's what they're in their job for is the government and the rules should be put there and if people are breaking them, close them down, they should be checked on more, the rules should be stricter, definitely."*

Steve, 50, North West Durham: *"I would expect food standards to be of a high level ... I don't agree that just putting labels on solves the problem. The fix would be to maintain the higher level."*



Conclusion

We hope this report provides useful insights into the way in which Labour to Conservative swing voters in Red Wall constituencies view the need for well-enforced regulations, and in particular high standards in relation to food safety and quality.

In our research we found nothing to suggest that Red Wall swing voters want to see lower standards post Brexit. Indeed, the reverse is true, these voters opted to take back control because they believe that the freedom to make our own laws will enable us to put the 'great' back in Great Britain. Brexit, for this cohort, can be read as a vote for optimising and strengthening the standards which underpin what these voters love about Britain.

In contrast to the direction of travel advocated by some, our Red Wall swing voters would see an erosion of what they perceive to be innately high British standards as a betrayal of their vote for Brexit.

In short, there is no appetite for deregulation of food standards from this key voter group.

We encourage politicians of all stripes to bear this in mind in the months and years to come.

Annex

Additional verbatim quotes from swing voters

More on British standards and Brexit

Alice, 59, Burnley: *"You just think if it said "British Standard" on the front, you look at it, produced in Britain, that should be reassurance that you know you're getting a good quality product."*

Wendy, 42, North West Durham: *"I voted to leave Brexit because I thought it would put us in a really strong position. I thought we'd be able to hit the ground running and set our own standards and be able to make all these really good deals, and it just doesn't seem as though it's coming out like that. It's made me rethink my decision about leaving Brexit, definitely."*

Billy, 28, West Bromwich East: *"I don't think because of Brexit we should go all easy and forgiving on the rules. I think they've been set in place for a reason. I don't think we should deteriorate from them at all, really."*

Rob, 51, North West Durham: *"I think that it was on the list of things that they were going to do for our benefit [a good trade deal], and nothing seems to have been done. If I could believe that we would take control of our food quality along with other things then yeah, that would be an opportunity that we need to grab, yeah, for sure, but it doesn't seem that much is going in our favour in that respect."*

Steve, 50, North West Durham: *"I would expect with leaving the EU that we would maintain our standards, or possibly even increase standards to suit the UK rather than the EU or even the world market."*

Tara, 43, West Bromwich East: *"I just feel that there are going to be situations that may come up and the government may feel that to get a deal that is perhaps more financially viable they'll have to reduce some of our standards and I'm really really opposed to that, especially to do with food standards and employment law and things like that."*

Steve, 50, North West Durham: *"I expect things to be in place to protect the consumer. If we're looking to develop trade agreements with different countries then we can't lower our standards to try and gain trade agreements. It has to be the other way, where if they can maintain the standards we're looking for, we would trade with them."*

More on scepticism about politicians and also large companies

Megan, 48, Wrexham: *"A lot of restaurants and cafes, they do cut corners, I've worked in places before and been shocked about what I've seen, they just want the money, they just want the produce out, sometimes it's not good quality."*

Mary, 57, Heywood & Middleton: *"You need regulations so that these big companies don't just take over the world and go murdering everybody."*

Tony, 56, Burnley: *"The agribusiness companies who hire lobbyists to get weaker rules, I mean these are the agricultural companies that want to drive prices down ... they hire the government ministers on paying them a huge amount of money to sit for probably one day a month on a panel and fall asleep after he's had his cup of tea and biscuits and then get him to lobby whatever, hand him a piece of paper saying, "That's what we want doing at the end", I mean it does happen, and this is where the companies get in to parliament and this is where the laws get affected."*

More on a U.S. trade deal

Steve, 50, North West Durham: *"I'm open to the government, Boris and whoever, organising trade deals with these countries as long as we maintain our regulations, because at the end of the day we shouldn't be bending regulations or discarding regulations and changing rules to suit a trade deal because of another country's food standards. If they want to do trade with us they should up their level as an individual company or even as a country to import their goods into our system. We shouldn't be lowering our standards to allow them to trade with us."*

Betty, 55, Wrexham: *"We're one very tiny, little country, and we're talking about countries like America and China, they're big countries, they think they've got a lot to offer us so they're going to push all sorts."*

Tony, 56, Burnley: *"We let too much stuff in a lot of the time and we don't look after ours and our people, the public."*

References

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