

# A GROWTH MINDSET?

Public understanding of British economic performance  
and attitudes to pro-growth policies

**Matthew Lesh and Michael Turner**  
**April 2026**

## Acknowledgment

The publication was made possible with support from the John Templeton Foundation.

## About the IEA

Founded in 1955, the Institute of Economic Affairs is Britain's oldest free market think tank. Its mission is to improve understanding of the fundamental institutions of a free society by analysing and expounding the role of markets in solving economic and social problems.

The IEA is a registered educational charity. It is entirely independent of any political party or group and is wholly funded by voluntary donations from individuals, foundations, trusts and companies who support its mission.

It does no contract work and accepts no money from any government or government agency. The IEA retains full editorial control over all of its output.

The IEA holds no corporate position. The views in this publication are those of the authors alone, not those of the Institute, its managing trustees, Academic Advisory Council members or senior staff.

## About the authors

**Matthew Lesh** is the Country Manager for Freshwater Strategy and Public Policy Fellow at the Institute of Economic Affairs. He is a public policy expert and commentator specialising in British and Australian politics, with a focus on economic reform and regulation. He is a regular media contributor across television, radio, and print, and a columnist for *City AM*, with writing featured in publications including *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Spectator*. Matthew has authored research on a range of policy issues, particularly in digital regulation and economic policy. Previously, he served as Director of Public Policy and Communications at the Institute of Economic Affairs, Head of Research at the Adam Smith Institute, and a Research Fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs in Australia. He holds a First Class Honours degree from the University of Melbourne and a Master's in Public Policy from the London School of Economics.

**Dr Michael Turner** is a Director at Freshwater Strategy. He is an experienced pollster and strategist with a reputation for delivering best-in-class insights and advice, specialising in complex regulatory, public policy, and communications challenges. He has served as a senior advisor on several pivotal election campaigns in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, and brings deep expertise in public opinion research and political strategy. Michael holds a Master's in Social Research and a PhD focused on English local elections from the University of Plymouth, where he studied under leading psephologists. He is a Fellow of the Royal Statistical Society and the Adam Smith Institute, and a Certified Member of the Market Research Society.

## Methodological note

The survey was conducted online, and interviews lasted around 12 minutes.

The sample size was 3,001 completed interviews with voters in the United Kingdom.

Fieldwork was undertaken from 13-18 January 2026.

Data are weighted to be representative of UK voters.

The margin of error is approximately +/- 1.8% for top-line results, and is significantly larger for subsamples.

For some questions results are 'squeezed', meaning respondents who initially select 'unsure' are asked if they lean one way or the other, while retaining the option to remain unsure.

This report also presents findings from focus groups conducted with young voters (aged 18–34) and Reform UK voters (aged 18–69) to understand how these audiences perceive the UK economy, what they believe drives economic growth, what they think is holding the country back, and their attitudes to key barriers and reforms.

Prospective participants across all groups were selected if: (1) they held a negative view of the direction of the economy, and (2) they believed that the economy was performing poorly. The younger voters (Groups 1 and 2) were selected to assess the attitudes of individuals with a limited understanding of the

market drivers of economic growth.<sup>1</sup> Reform UK voters (Groups 3 and 4) were selected to assess the attitudes of people who feel drawn to a new political formation. Their inclusion does not reflect any statement, positive or negative, about Reform UK.

Four online focus groups were conducted between 25–26 February 2026.

There were a total of 27 participants recruited from across England and Wales.

Participants were segmented into the following audiences:

	<b>Electorates</b>	<b>Age and demographic</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
Group 1	All locations	Young women (18–34)	6
Group 2	All locations	Young men (18–34)	7
Group 3	Wales and East England	Younger Reform voters (18–44)	7
Group 4	Midlands and North	Older Reform voters (45–69)	7

Each focus group session lasted approximately 90 minutes. Participants were reimbursed for their participation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Specifically, participants for Groups 1 and 2 were selected if they felt that higher taxes, greater government spending, and increased regulation were the best ways to grow the national economy, with the goal of better understanding the views of individuals who do not have pro-market views.

# Contents

Summary	7
Foreword	9
Introduction	14
The growth gap: strong support, weak understanding, and limited trust	18
Concern to shock: the power of correcting economic misperceptions	29
The ‘kitchen sink’: contradictory beliefs on growth and the state	39
Business, entrepreneurs and wanting to get ahead	50
The growth tribes of Britain	56
Making the case for growth	65
Conclusion: from diagnosis to mandate	71

## Summary

- Britain is experiencing a prolonged period of economic stagnation, if not decline. Most people believe living standards have declined and that the country is heading in the wrong direction.
- Support for economic growth is broad and deep, spanning all age groups, regions and political affiliations, with most Britons believing the UK should place greater priority on growth. There is no public appetite for ‘degrowth’ narratives.
- However, many voters do not clearly grasp what economic growth means, what drives it, or why it matters. Younger voters in particular often struggle to connect growth with the benefits of productivity, business investment, and rising living standards.
- The public also remains sceptical about who benefits. While most people believe growth matters in principle, many worry that much of the gain will go to someone else – namely, government, big business and higher earners – rather than to themselves, their families and their communities.
- Although voters recognise that the economy is weak, they underestimate the scale of Britain’s relative decline compared to peer economies and the United States. When confronted with the true picture, they react with shock and embarrassment, creating an emotional jolt that increases openness to change.
- Public opinion on the causes of stagnation is often confused and contradictory. Voters support market-orientated explanations for low growth, such as too-high taxes, too-

high energy costs, and excessive red tape, but they also endorse more interventionist strategies for achieving high levels of growth.

- This reflects a broader ‘kitchen sink’ mindset: wanting to throw everything at the problem. People distrust politicians and government, often blaming them for economic decline, yet still instinctively look to the state to fix the problem. This leads to frustration without a coherent diagnosis.
- Even so, there is real openness to pro-growth reform. A majority of Brits support measures such as reducing energy costs, cutting taxes, and easing regulation, especially when framed as resulting in lower bills, higher wages, more homes, and better public services.
- The biggest political obstacles to support for pro-growth measures are perceptions around *fairness*. Anti-growth arguments gain traction when people believe growth will deliver greater benefits to others, especially the wealthy, while imposing potential costs or greater risks on ordinary workers and families.
- Voters distrust big business and significantly overestimate profits, holding the belief that economic growth benefits corporations at the expense of consumers. Bridging this gap by emphasising the role of businesses in creating jobs, delivering prosperity, and boosting innovation, is key to building a credible case for economic growth.
- The central strategic lesson is that the case for growth must be practical rather than abstract, grounded in tangible benefits. To build a durable mandate for reform, growth must be linked directly to personal and local benefits, while it is made clear that Britain’s stagnation is the result of barriers that can be removed, failures that can be reversed and political choices that can be changed.

# Foreword

Imagine someone had emigrated from Britain in 1988, and returned 19 years later in 2007.

That person would have had a real sense of returning to a country that was substantially richer than the one they had left behind. It would have been quite obvious to them that a lot of economic progress had been made in the meantime.

And they would have been right. We can see this in macroeconomic figures: average disposable incomes in 2007 were almost 60% higher in real terms than they had been in 1988. We can also see it in consumer expenditure surveys: more dining out, more foreign holidays, more leisure services, more household electronics. Necessities (with the crucial exception of housing) accounted for a smaller share of people's household budgets, while nice-to-have optional items accounted for a larger one.

Now imagine a similar scenario, in which someone who had left Britain in 2007 returned today – also 19 years later. That person would notice plenty of social changes, but they would not have a similar sense of returning to a richer country. Because they would not have. Average disposable incomes for the current year are forecast to be less than 10% above their 2007 level (and at this stage, it would take a miracle for the actual figures to deviate substantially from that forecast).

It is the latter of these two 19-year periods which is the unusual one, not the former. It has been the 'normal' British experience

since at least the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (or earlier; estimates differ) that most people's living standards rise over time. We can pick almost any peacetime 19-year period at random, and we will find that Britain was richer at the end of the period than at the start. This is what market economies do: they grow. People become more prosperous over time. A 19-year period with as little improvement in living standards as the most recent one is an anomaly which needs explaining.

It has certainly preoccupied us at the Institute of Economic Affairs for quite some time, as anyone familiar with our *Substack Insider* or our YouTube channel will have noticed. Indeed, we are talking about it so often that we sometimes worry whether we sound like a broken record. But is this something which preoccupies the wider public to the same extent?

Casual observers of British political debates could easily gain the impression that Britain is a country which is not that bothered about economic growth. Over the course of this low-growth period, we have been fighting a series of 'culture wars' over issues which, while they may well be important in other ways, are not going to make us any more prosperous. Even our arguments about Brexit, an issue which has important economic implications, looked a lot more like a culture war episode than an economic policy debate. Some of the most impactful social movements of the period, especially the 'climate protest' around Greta Thunberg, Extinction Rebellion, and Just Stop Oil, have been actively hostile to economic growth.

The most influential book of the early 2010s was *The Spirit Level*, which argued that we 'have now come to the end of what economic growth can do for developed countries', and that from now on, we should focus on other things, such as equality and ecological sustainability. It was followed by a series of other

popular books which made a similar case, or a more radical version of it: *Prosperity without Growth*; *Post Growth: Life after Capitalism*; *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*; *Slow Down: How Degrowth Communism Can Save the Earth*; and *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*. The only real counterexample that comes to mind is *Abundance* by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson.

Has Britain become a ‘post-material’ society, in which most people are simply not interested in economic growth any more?

Matthew Lesh, Dr Michael Turner and their colleagues at Freshwater Strategy have conducted the most comprehensive and in-depth study of public attitudes to economic growth and prosperity yet, combining both quantitative and qualitative evidence. They set out to answer a series of questions that have thus far not been thoroughly researched in this way, such as: do people in Britain realise that they have been living through a period of unusually slow economic growth, and of relative economic decline? Or do they see it as a period like any other? If the former: do they see that as a problem? Or do they take the view that Britain is prosperous enough as it is, and that we should prioritise other things? Alternatively, could it be that they simply do not see a connection between their own personal economic situation and the performance of the economy as a whole? Do they think ‘economic growth’ is something which happens to other people, and which has nothing to do with them? (This was the sentiment expressed by a heckler during an episode of Question Time, which subsequently went viral: ‘That’s *your* bloody GDP – not *ours!*’)

Without wishing to pre-empt the results here, it is not much of a spoiler to say that the answer to the above question (of whether Britain is a post-materialist society which no longer cares

about prosperity) is an emphatic ‘No!’. While we could imagine a society in which most people are broadly content with what they have, and do not aspire to much more than that, Britain is not that society.

What the Freshwater team has found is evidence of a deep sense of pessimism and dissatisfaction with Britain’s economic situation, an outlook shared by people of different demographic backgrounds and of otherwise very different political persuasions. There are, unsurprisingly, huge differences in attitudes, but the vast majority of people are clearly not relaxed about the prospect of an economically stagnant Britain, which falls further and further behind its peers. And while there is a lot of scepticism about whether a rising tide really would lift all boats, this has not led many people to conclude that rising tides are unimportant or undesirable. Degrowth books may sell well within their genre, but Britain is not a degrowth nation.

For those of us of a free-market persuasion, large parts of this report make for uncomfortable reading. There are, again, huge differences in attitudes, but it is fair to say that Britain is not a nation of natural free-marketeters, and the pro-market case is not a popular one to make in the current climate. Dissatisfaction with politics and politicians does not stop people from looking to the state for answers first. But the situation is also far from hopeless. Yes, significant sections of the population are instinctively interventionist or even socialist – but these convictions are often only skin-deep, and to varying degrees amenable to persuasion.

Ultimately, Britain is not a deeply ideological nation. What happens is simply that most people are, perfectly understandably, dissatisfied with their current living standards, because they

have perfectly reasonable expectations of rising prosperity which are not being met.

There was never anything inevitable about this low-growth path, and there is nothing inevitable about it now. Britain's relative decline is the result of poor policy choices, and poor policy choices can be undone. The above example of the 'hypothetical' emigrant is not entirely hypothetical: record numbers of British people really are currently emigrating, or seriously thinking about doing so. We hope that changing to a different policy trajectory will give them a reason to come back, and to come back to a much more prosperous country which offers them the opportunities they currently feel compelled to seek elsewhere.

KRISTIAN NIEMIETZ

Editorial Director, Institute of Economic Affairs

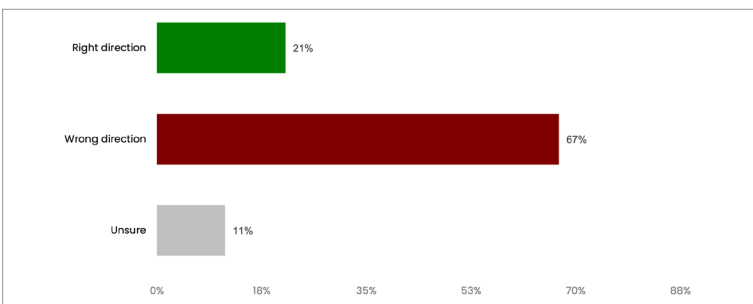
London, March 2026

# Introduction

Life in Britain has lost its charm. The United Kingdom once stood at the centre of an economic powerhouse on which the sun never set, propelled by a liberal environment for ideas that precipitated the industrial revolution and much of our modern global prosperity. Today, while the UK is still immensely wealthy in international and historical terms, there is an undeniable sense of stagnation, if not decline; a feeling that the political system is broken, that leaders are letting the nation down, that life is getting harder, not easier, and that the economic system is failing to deliver for ordinary people.

There's a striking pessimism: not only have things not improved in recent history, but there are limited prospects for improvement in the future. Two-thirds of Brits (67%) say the country is going in the wrong direction, while just 21% say the country is heading in the right direction (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Britain heading in the wrong direction**



*Q: Generally speaking, do you think that the UK is currently heading in the right direction, or the wrong direction?*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

This feeling was reflected not only in our national polling, but also across all four focus groups. The participants expressed a belief that the country is in severe decline economically, socially, and institutionally. This sentiment is grounded in personal experience of rising supermarket prices, unaffordable rents, longer NHS waiting lists, visible homelessness, and stagnant wages.

**‘The country is going downhill so fast.’** – Younger Reform voter

**‘Why is everything getting more expensive when my pay isn’t going up?’** – Younger (female) voter

Younger voters in particular feel they are doing everything right by working hard and budgeting carefully, yet they are getting no closer to stability. Rising prices and stagnant wages have left them with a shared sense that hard work no longer pays off.

Economic growth – or lack thereof – sits at the heart of Britain’s sense of malaise.

Between 1993 and 2007, on the eve of the financial crisis, the UK economy grew by an average of 3% per year. Since 2008, it has averaged just 1.5%. Growth in productivity averaged just 0.5% per year from 2009 to 2023, one-third of its pre-crisis level. ‘Productivity isn’t everything, but, in the long run, it is almost everything,’ centre-left economist Paul Krugman said. ‘A country’s ability to improve its standard of living over time depends almost entirely on its ability to raise its output per worker.’

While few can precisely articulate the statistics, the national mood reflects what happens when growth slows. It creates severe tensions, as difficult zero-sum decisions must be made about

who gets what, rather than everyone getting more over time. This necessitates difficult decisions about the national finances. Tax people more to pay for pensions? Cut from schools to enable more disability spending? Spend more on defence, but cut foreign aid in a time of global uncertainty?

The effects are also personal. Real average earnings have risen just 1.6% since 2007-08. Per capita GDP is nearly £11,000 lower than it would have been had pre-crisis trends continued – a gap measured in foregone pay rises, smaller pension pots, and diminished security.

In a growing economy, households can absorb higher taxes or prices because incomes are rising too. In a stagnant one, every additional cost feels like a cut. Council tax rises mean trimming leisure spending. Higher childcare costs mean one parent cutting back hours. What was once manageable becomes a permanent constraint.

Post-Covid inflation has compounded this challenge. Prices remain permanently higher, but wages have not kept pace. Many expect recovery to mean falling prices, not simply slower increases. When that expectation is unmet, the economy still feels like it is failing, even after the crisis has passed in macroeconomic terms.

Economic growth is not a technocratic obsession. It is the difference between a society where families can plan and aspire, and one where they simply cope.

This study of public opinion has found – perhaps to the surprise of the so-called ‘degrowth’ movement, which claims that high-income nations should abandon GDP growth in pursuit of alternative environmental and social outcomes – that few Brits

disagree with the goal of a growing economy. In fact, the vast majority of people prioritise economic growth highly, especially when linked to personal outcomes (such as higher wages and better public services). They will back a wide array of policies in the name of growth, including pro-market ones.

But the picture is not without hiccups. For many, economic growth is poorly understood, seen as benefiting others such as big business or the government, rather than themselves. While most people acknowledge that Britain's economy is stagnant, few understand how Britain is falling behind internationally. People also back interventionist explanations for why growth has slowed, and state-led solutions, as much as (if not more than) market-based ones.

This highlights the IEA's educational role in the public debate: to distil the extent to which Britain is now falling behind, to explain why the economy has struggled, and to articulate a plan. The British public is desperate for answers; now is the time to make the case.

# The growth gap: strong support, weak understanding, and limited trust

**Economic growth commands broad and high levels of public support across Britain. Brits believe it should be a national priority – but this support is tempered by a weak understanding of what growth means, and concern about who benefits.**

Key insights:

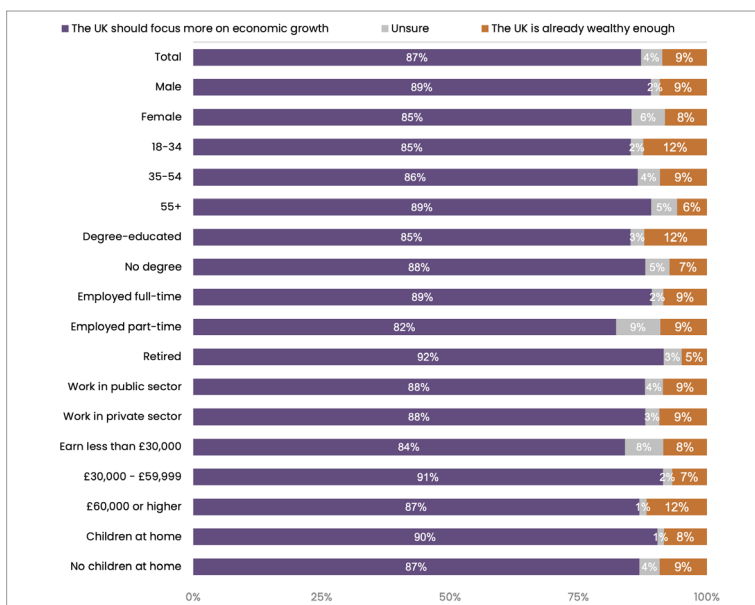
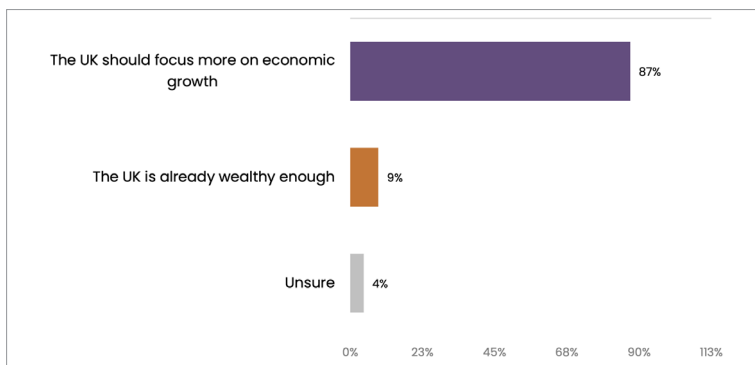
- Most voters believe the UK should focus more on growth (87%), rather than that the country is already wealthy enough (9%).
- Growth is seen as a top-tier priority; however, ‘here-and-now’ concerns such as the cost of living, immigration, and the NHS still dominate the immediate agenda.
- There is a stronger belief that ‘the government’ (81%) and ‘large corporations’ (81%) benefit more from growth than ‘my family’ (55%) or ‘me, personally’ (52%).

## **Brits want economic growth**

Most Brits believe the UK should focus more on economic growth (87%), rather than that the UK is already wealthy enough (9%).

This pro-growth consensus spans age groups, income groups, regions of the UK, and the political spectrum.

Figure 2: Brits prioritise economic growth



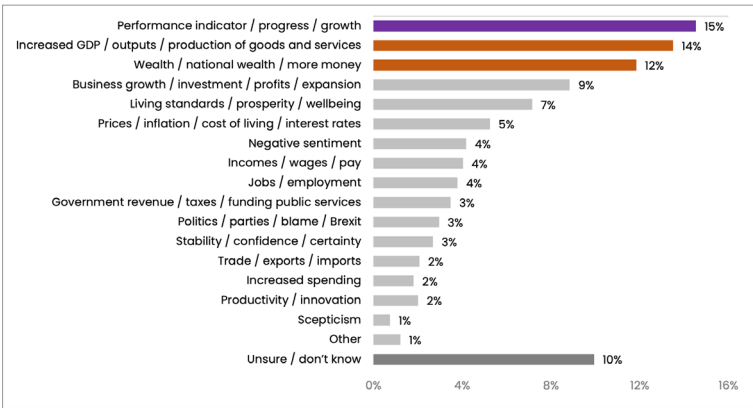
Q: Which of the following is closest to your view? (squeezed)

Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy

## A weak understanding of economic growth

When asked for their view unprompted, Brits tend to associate economic growth positively with performance and progress, followed by greater production. Relatively few responded negatively or were unsure (10%).

**Figure 3: Growth is foremost associated with performance, production and national wealth**

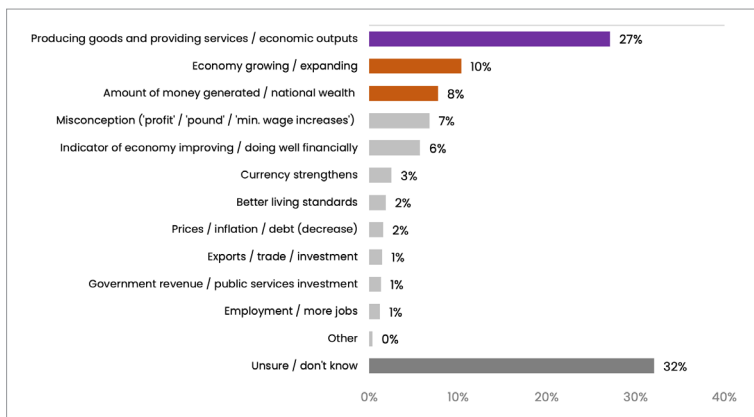


*Q: What comes to mind when you hear the term 'economic growth'? Please be as specific as possible.*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

While there was no significant anti-growth sentiment, many lacked understanding. When asked about the meaning of 'GDP', the most common answers related to producing more (27%), the economy growing (10%) and national wealth (8%). However, many qualified their response by saying they were uncertain or didn't know (32%).

**Figure 4: The meaning of ‘GDP’**



*Q: The term ‘GDP’ is often used in discussions about the economy. What do you think it means if GDP grows? Please be as specific as possible.*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

Our focus groups revealed a poor understanding of basic economics. When asked what politicians mean when they refer to ‘growing the economy’ (typically understood by economists to mean producing more goods and services), participants offered responses like ‘more taxes’, ‘more inflation’, ‘more money flowing’, and ‘more government spending’. Younger voters in particular struggled to connect growth to productivity, business investment, competition, or private sector investment.

**‘I think maybe part of the problem is that younger people don’t really know what economic growth means. It’s thrown around as a kind of a phrase, but then what? Quantify it for people, simplify it, let them know what it actually means.’**  
– Younger (male) voter

**‘What do they [politicians] literally mean when they say they want to grow the economy?’** – Younger Reform voter

Young women tended to have a particularly poor understanding of what happens when an economy grows, what drives growth, and how conditions for growth come about. Participants often focused on the tangential outcomes like ‘living conditions and necessities are met’, ‘recycling organisation from government’, ‘free healthcare’, ‘good education’, ‘international trade’, and ‘bills not rising’. One participant suggested that higher taxes would increase growth because more revenue would come into the state (generally, the opposite is the case; higher taxes typically lead to lower growth).

Young men were only marginally more business-aware. Some mentioned manufacturing, business incentives, and trade, though they tended to understand growth through a demand-side, state-centric lens: government spending creates jobs, which means people spend more.

**‘More money flowing through businesses and spending.’** –  
Younger (male) voter

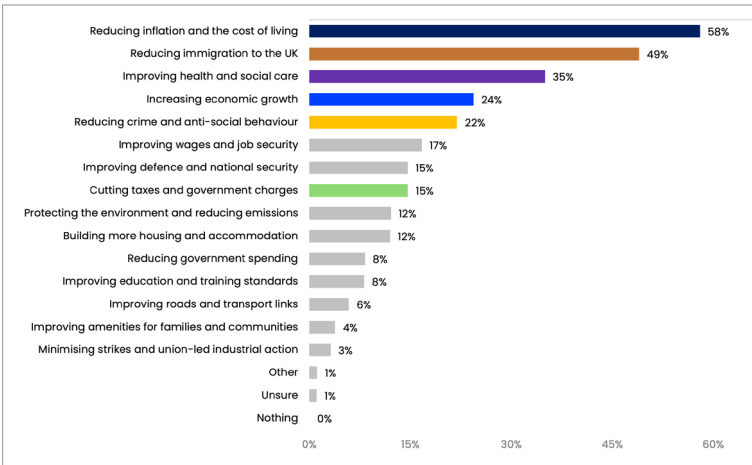
Among Reform voters, younger participants had a greater understanding, tending to mention ‘growing businesses’, ‘lower taxes and get people spending more’, ‘general expansion of various sectors’. Older Reform voter participants had a weaker understanding of what growth meant than younger Reform voters, with several stating that they had never really thought about the term ‘economic growth’ before. Taken together, the focus groups revealed a lack of understanding about growth.

### **A high priority, but not the only one**

Increasing economic growth is among Brits’ top priorities (24%) when asked to pick three from a number of general policy

priorities. But it is still below the ‘here-and-now’ concerns that have dominated politics in recent years: the cost of living (58%), reducing migration (49%), and improving health and social care (35%).

**Figure 5: What are the top priorities?**

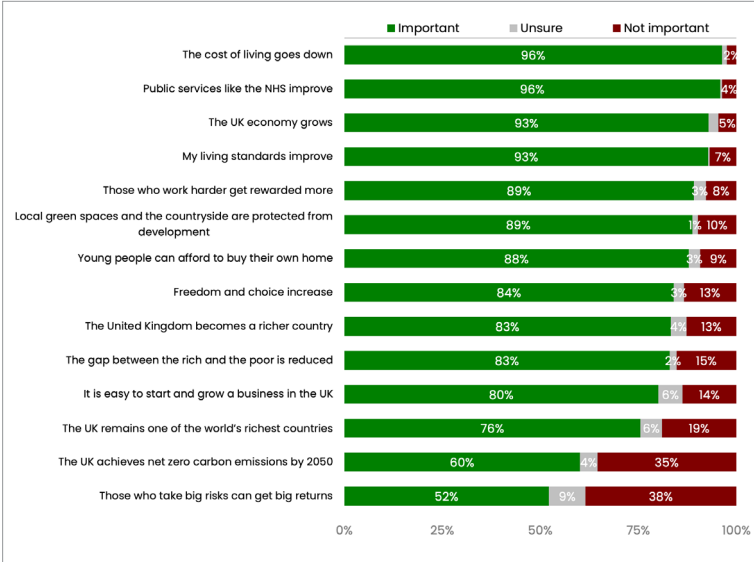


*Q: In your view, which of the following issues are the most important for the UK government to prioritise at this time? Pick up to three.*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

When asked about its importance without choice limits, an overwhelming majority picked UK economic growth (93%), only marginally below decreasing the cost of living and improving public services like the NHS (96%). That said, most of the potential priorities score highly, from improving living standards (93%) to allowing young people to buy homes (88%) and increasing freedom and choice (84%).

**Figure 6: What are important goals?**

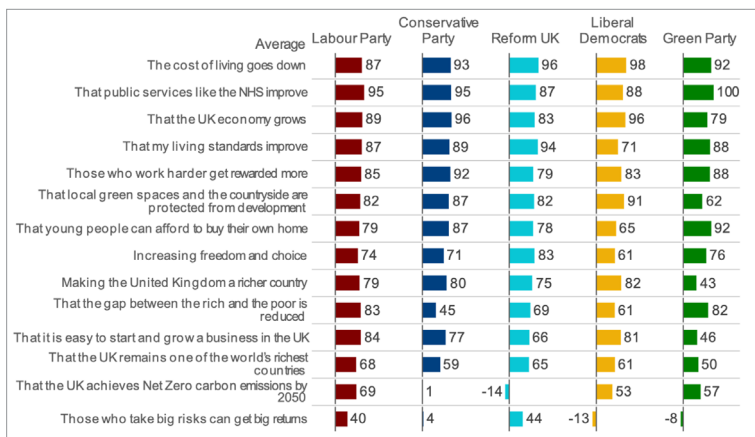


*Q: How important is it to you, if at all, that the following happens...?*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

While key economic priorities – such as the cost of living, public services, and UK economic growth – are held across the political spectrum, several others, particularly those related to distribution, wealth, and the environment, invite divergence across political lines.

**Figure 7: Important goals by vote**



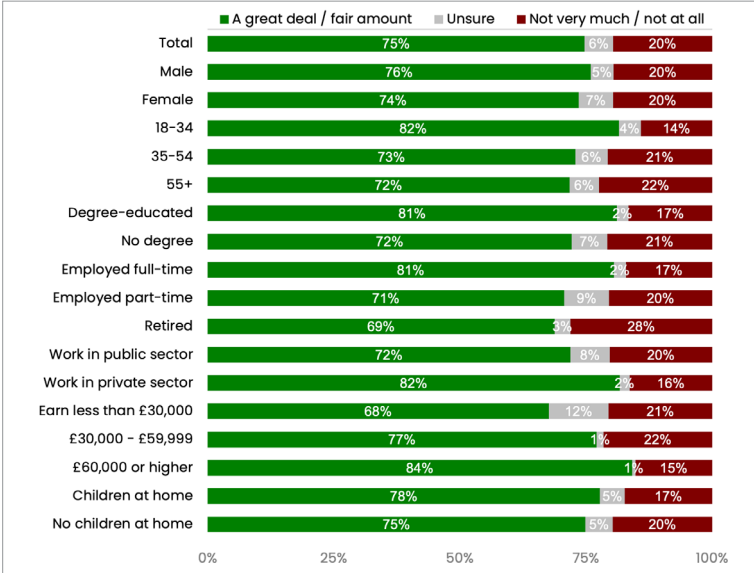
*Q: How important is it to you, if at all, that the following happens...?*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

## Who benefits?

Most Brits believe that economic growth will have a great deal or a fair amount of impact on them personally (75%), with particularly strong agreement among younger, higher-income and degree-educated cohorts.

**Figure 8: Brits believe economic growth impacts them**

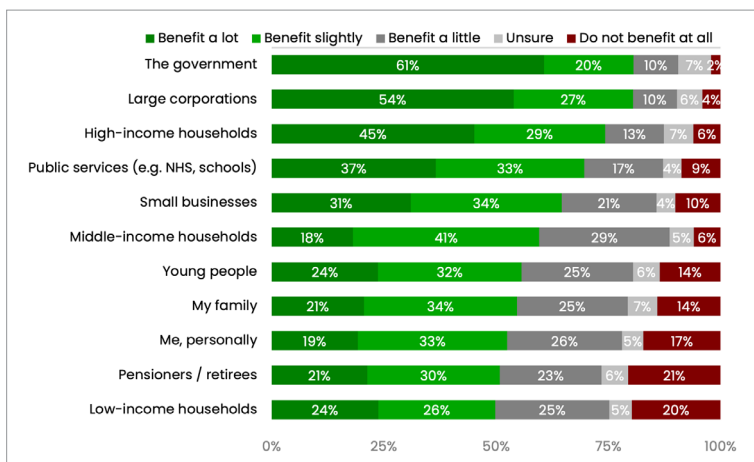


*Q: To what extent, if at all, do you feel that UK economic growth affects you personally?*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

Yet despite the strong headline, many doubt that economic growth will benefit ‘people like them’ in reality. Large majorities believe the government (81%), large corporations (81%), and high-income earners (74%) gain most from growth, while only around half say that they (52%) or their family (55%) would benefit to a significant degree.

**Figure 9: Government and large corporations benefit more than people**



*Q: To what extent do you think each of the following groups benefit, if at all, from economic growth in the UK?*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

## An era without growth

Focus group participants consistently supported economic growth in principle, but were sceptical that it would benefit them. Younger participants reported never having experienced growth. The UK has been stagnant for most of their adult lives, making it hard to imagine what growth even looks like.

**‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen real economic growth to know what it actually feels like or looks like’ – Younger (male) voter**

Even when participants could associate growth with positive outcomes, they doubted those outcomes would reach them. Growth, they believed, enriches corporations, the wealthy, and politicians — not ordinary working people.

**‘People like us are caught in the middle and are forgotten.’**

– Younger (male) voter

**‘I don’t think anyone sees the costs of anything going down.**

**No one gets richer, everyone just affords to scrape along.’**

– Younger (male) voter

Across all groups, participants judged economic policy in zero-sum terms: will this help people like me, or someone else at my expense? Reform voters framed this differently: the system rewards the wrong people. But the underlying sentiment was the same: growth, as currently structured, does not reach them.

This is the central tension. People want growth, but they need reassurance that it will be shared fairly and benefit them personally. Arguing for growth in abstract terms falls on deaf ears. The case must be grounded in material improvements to people’s lives, and after many years of false promises, it must actually be felt in practice.

# Concern to shock: the power of correcting economic misperceptions

**Although most Brits recognise that the economy is underperforming, they significantly underestimate the scale of the UK's relative decline. Correcting these misperceptions triggers strong emotional reactions and can be a powerful lever to build support for pro-growth reform.**

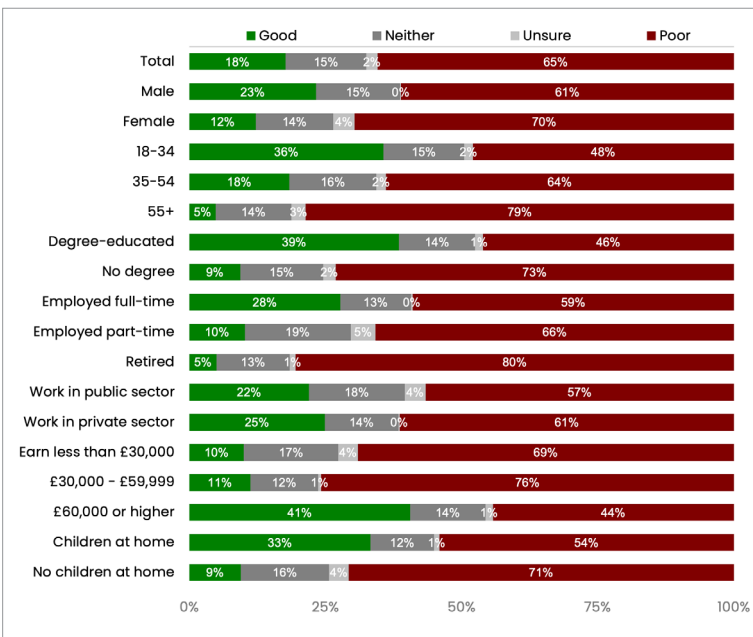
- 65% rate the UK economy as poor; 46% believe it is contracting.
- Two in five Brits believe the UK has 'no major economic strengths' today.
- However, Brits greatly overestimate the UK's GDP relative to its peers and many US states, on average ranking the UK 5th globally and 7th among major US states.
- Learning the UK's true ranking generates strong emotional responses, especially shock and embarrassment, creating a window for persuasion.

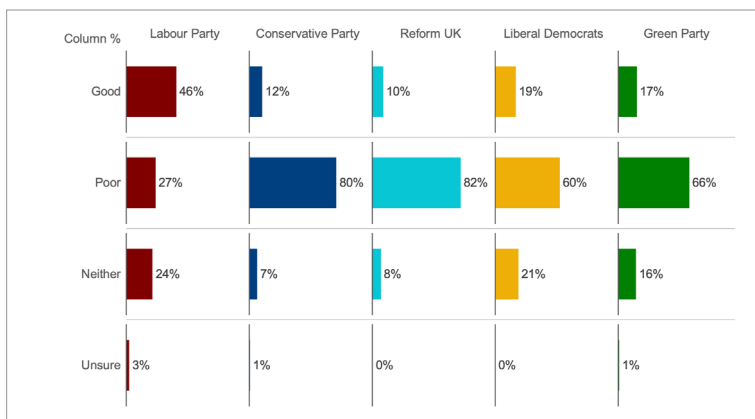
## **Brits believe the economy is poor and lacks strengths**

Brits believe the economy is contracting rather than growing, and almost half say living standards have worsened over the

last year. Almost two-thirds (65%) say the economy is in a poor state – though there are some notable divergences across demographics, with younger, degree-educated and higher-paid individuals more likely to have a positive view of the economy. Labour supporters also have a more positive perspective.

Figure 10: Brits rate the British economy as poor



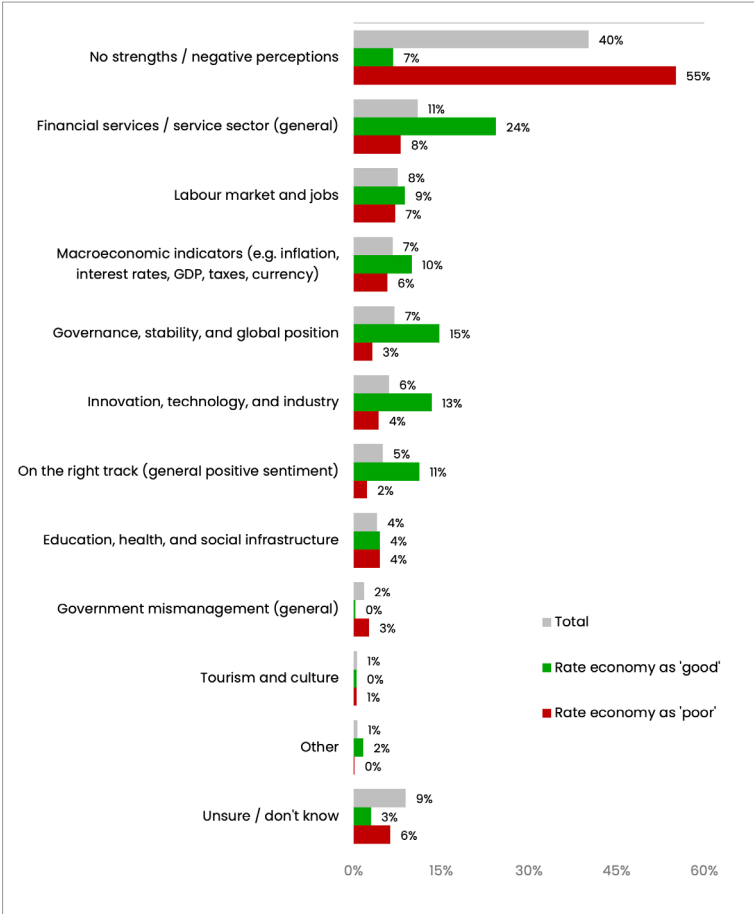


*Q: How would you rate the UK economy right now?*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

When asked unprompted, two in five (40%) Brits believe the UK economy has no major strengths. This sentiment is particularly strong among those who say the economy is performing poorly (55%). Financial services (11%) and the labour market (8%) are seen as strengths among a small minority.

**Figure 11: Brits largely believe the UK economy has no major strengths**



*Q: What would you say are the main strengths of the UK economy right now? Please be as brief as possible.*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

## **Underestimating the UK's relative decline**

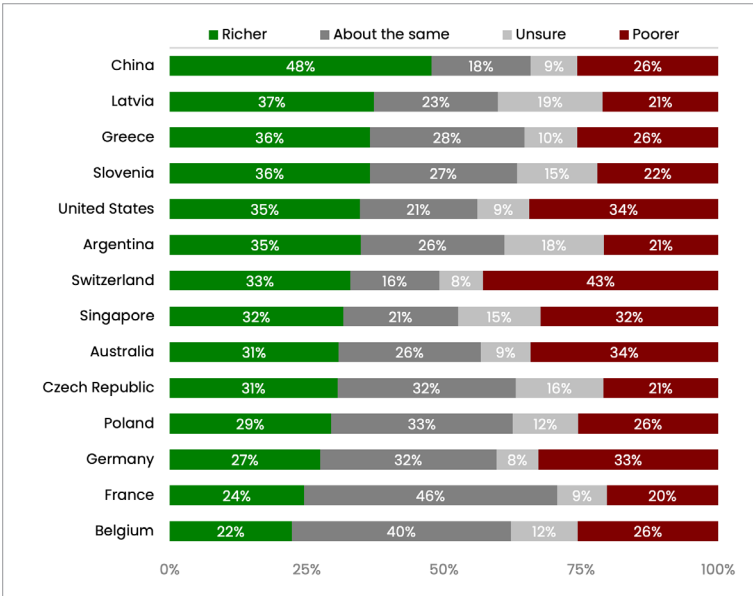
Despite the economic pessimism, many still believe that the UK is significantly wealthier than it actually is, especially when compared with other countries. A majority of Brits wrongly believe that the average person in the UK is as rich, or richer, than those in Switzerland, the United States, Singapore, Germany, Australia, and much of Western Europe.

In reality, the average Briton is significantly poorer than the average person in all of these countries. According to IMF projections, the UK's GDP per capita of around \$57,000 places it well behind Switzerland (\$118,000), Singapore (\$99,000), the United States (\$93,000), Australia (\$69,000), and Germany (\$64,000).<sup>2</sup> The UK ranks 21st globally, behind not just these major economies, but also the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Austria, and Belgium.

---

<sup>2</sup> International Monetary Fund (2026) GDP per capita, current prices. Accessed: 30 March 2026 (<https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPDPC@WEO/GBR/DEU/GRC>)

**Figure 12: Most Brits do not realise that they are poorer than the Americans, Swiss, Australians, or Singaporeans**

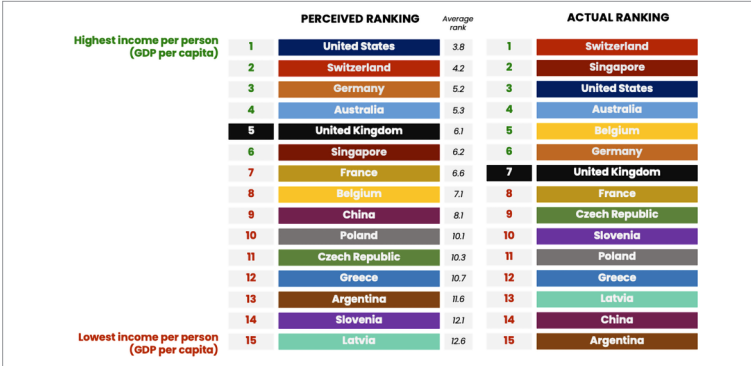


*Q: Thinking about the average person in the UK, do you think they are richer or poorer than the average person in each of the following countries?*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

When asked to rank it, Brits significantly overestimate the UK's relative position.

Figure 13: Brits overestimate the UK's economic position relative to other countries

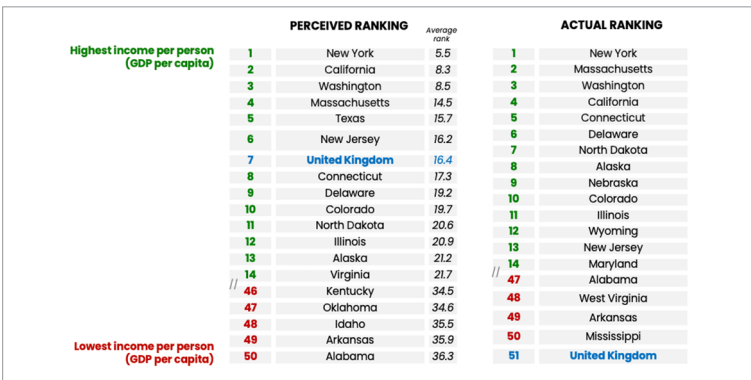


Q: When compared to other countries, where do you think the UK ranks in average income per person (GDP per capita)?

Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy

There is an even more extreme disconnect when participants are asked to rank the UK relative to the 50 states that make up the United States. Brits tend to identify the United Kingdom as richer than 43 states, or in 7<sup>th</sup> place on average, when in reality the UK ranks last, behind every single US state.

Figure 14: Brits significantly overestimate the UK's economic position relative to US states



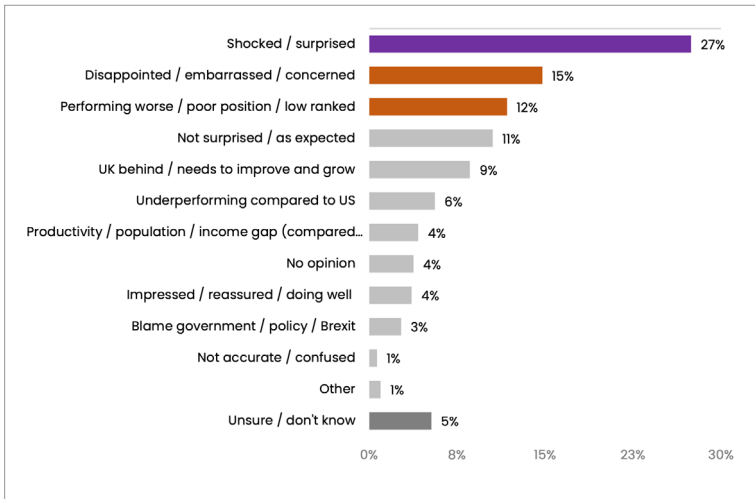
Q: Compared to the following US states, where do you think the UK ranks in average income per person (GDP per capita)? District of Columbia not included.

Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy

## A powerful platform for change

The reaction to how the UK compares with other countries, and particularly US states, is one of genuine surprise. Over a quarter (27%) say they feel shocked when they hear the truth, with a further 15% describing feelings of disappointment or even embarrassment. As one respondent put it, ‘I’m completely shocked because I was under the opinion that the UK ranked higher than most states in the USA’. Another noted, ‘I am surprised that the UK is so low compared to US states’, while others described the findings more bluntly as ‘concerning and disappointing’.

**Figure 15: Brits are shocked and surprised, then disappointed and embarrassed, by the UK’s international position**



*Q: Knowing this, what is your reaction to how the UK compares to other countries and the states of the US?*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

There was a similar reaction to Britain's relative decline across focus groups. When participants were told that the UK would rank below states like Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas in GDP per capita, their reactions were shock, embarrassment, anger, and a visceral sense that something had gone fundamentally wrong and that something needed to be done.

**'It's kind of shocking to think actually we're quite [a lot] lower down than expected.'** – Younger (female) voter

**'We have been falling off the global stage for years now.'** – Younger Reform voter

**'It's shocking to find out we are at the bottom. I wouldn't have said we were anywhere near the bottom at all.'** – Older Reform voter

Participants believe that the US succeeds because of higher wages, more opportunities, a stronger work ethic, a culture of entrepreneurship, and better leadership and ambition.

Younger voters, in particular, described the US as a place where people 'get ahead' and where ambition is rewarded. A few participants across the focus groups mentioned seriously considering emigrating to the US or Australia.

**'It's because they're quite cut-throat. I feel like the ethos in America has kind of always been like money, money, money. Like everyone starts their own business, everyone wants to prosper.'** – Younger (female) voter

When the UK was compared with Poland (which may overtake the UK in GDP per capita by 2030 if growth rates remain the same), it was also an effective trigger for participants, as for many

it evoked associations with Poland as an ‘emerging’ European economy, not a fully developed economy like the UK.

**‘It’s a real eye-opener. Other countries have learnt from financial mistakes and disasters, built on them and progressed. The UK just keeps going further downward.’**

– Younger Reform voter

This gap between perception and reality creates a ‘burning platform’ for reform. When focus group participants learned about the UK’s relative decline, they became noticeably more open to fundamental economic change.

**‘It suggests that there needs to be change in the UK because we can’t be fifty-first, there’s no way.’** – Younger Reform voter

## The 'kitchen sink': contradictory beliefs on growth and the state

The public identifies many barriers to growth, distrusts the state and politicians, and backs many free-market solutions. Yet simultaneously it supports statist narratives such as redistribution and industrial policy, and looks to the state for fixes. This 'kitchen sink' attitude reflects confusion, highlighting the need for market advocates to demonstrate concrete ways that state failure has held back growth.

### **Key insights:**

- A clear majority (85%) of Brits agree that the UK should prioritise economic growth. Almost three-quarters (72%) of Brits support the UK government cutting taxes to allow the economy to grow, and a majority (61%) of Brits support the UK government reducing regulation to allow the economy to grow.
- In general, support for market pro-growth measures is broad: 75% support cutting taxes to grow the economy; 61% support reducing regulation.
- There is strong support for many market-led explanations of Britain's lack of growth, including high energy costs (85%), high taxes (75%), trade barriers (74%), and too much red tape (74%) – along with lesser majority support for the view that

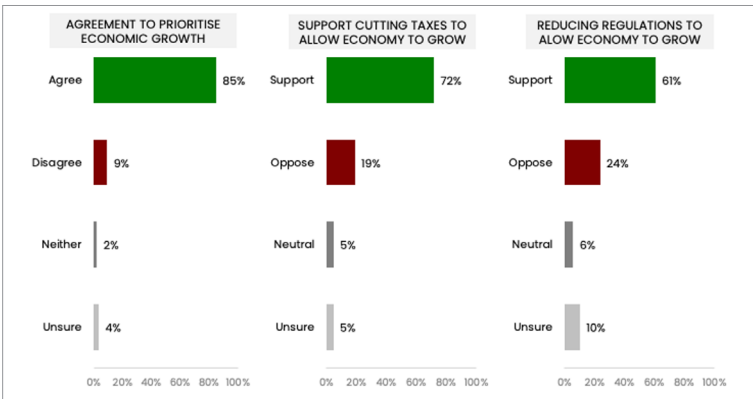
welfare (65%), employment laws (64%), and strict planning laws (55%) also undermine growth.

- But there is also agreement among voters for alternative explanations, such as wages being too low (78%), lack of investment in public services (77%), companies prioritising profit (73%) and the political system being rigged in favour of the wealthy (72%).

## Economic growth is a priority

There is overwhelming support for prioritising economic growth, with 85% of Brits in agreement. A clear majority also broadly supports key pro-growth policies, including cutting taxes (72%) and reducing regulatory barriers (61%).

Figure 16: Brits back growth



Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the UK should prioritise economic growth?

Q: To what extent do you support or oppose the UK government cutting taxes to allow the economy to grow?

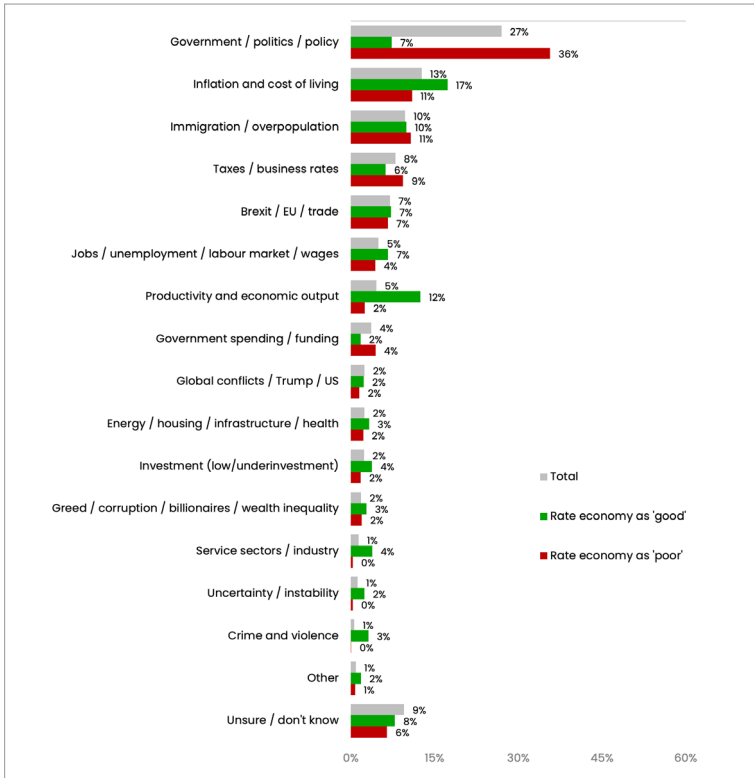
Q: To what extent do you support or oppose the UK government reducing regulations to allow the economy to grow?

Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy

## Politics blamed, but also viewed as the solution

Brits responded that government and poor policy were the main barriers to growth, particularly among those who rated the economy as performing poorly. This reflects a broad sense of hopelessness and distrust in the political class.

Figure 17: Government, politics and policy are the most-cited factors for Britain's economic woes



Q: What do you think is the main barrier to economic growth in the UK right now? Please be as brief as possible.

Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy

*Examples include:*

- *‘Current government policies are a significant factor’*
- *‘The government’s inability and unwillingness to see, hear and do anything’*
- *‘Labour’s economic policies punishing businesses’*
- *‘The main barrier to economic growth in the UK is high inflation and interest rates’*

All four focus groups displayed a striking contradiction. Participants deeply distrust politicians and the government’s ability to effect change. They view politicians as incompetent, wasteful, corrupt, and self-serving. Young women felt that the government makes ‘false promises’ and that things keep getting worse regardless of who is in power. Young men said politicians are ‘all looking after themselves; all the kickbacks; second houses’. Reform voters were especially scathing, blaming the government for wasting money, pursuing irrelevant priorities, and failing to deliver basic services.

**‘I blame unnecessary government spending, and misspending on the wrong things is getting in the way of us having a better economy.’** – Younger (male) voter

**‘I think the government have had one job and they’ve repeatedly failed.’** – Younger Reform voter

**‘I think the government spend it so badly. I don’t think I want to give them any more money to try and fix it. I can’t trust that money in their hands any more.’** – Younger Reform voter

However, despite this deep distrust, participants' default model for fixing the economy is state-led. When asked what would most likely improve things, participants instinctively turn to government for action: government spending, government investing in skills, government building houses, and government creating jobs.

Even the young men, who were highly sceptical of government authority and showed some pro-market instincts, tended to lean towards state intervention when asked directly – though this appeared to be driven by a desire for someone with the means and authority to fix things, rather than by a genuine ideological commitment to state control as the best means of achieving prosperity. It was a feeling that 'somebody' must do 'something' about Britain's woes, and that the state is the only entity capable of tackling the problem right now.

**'More government spending because it like directly supports economic activity, because you're injecting demand into the economy.'** – Younger (female) voter

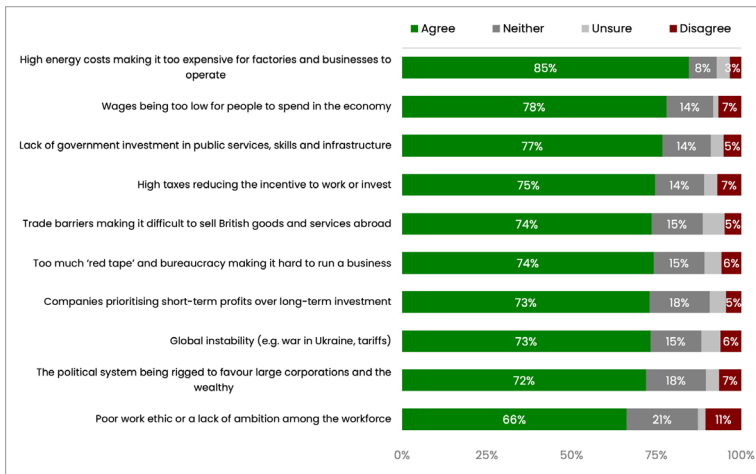
**'State intervention would probably be necessary.'** – Younger (male) voter

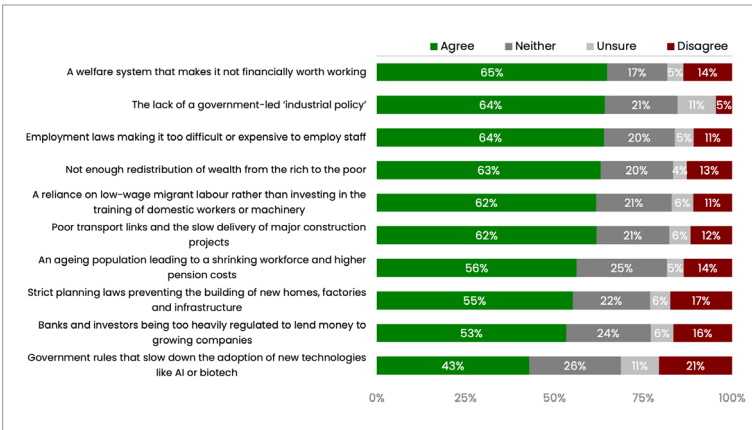
Notably, many of the same participants who said they wanted the government to fix the economy also expressed other pro-market sentiments (their pro-market instincts are discussed further below). Government wasn't necessarily their first choice for fixing the economy, but perhaps their only perceived route to effect change. This may also not be entirely a contradiction, as it likely tends to reflect more of a desire for leadership rather than a commitment to a state-led economy. Even from a pro-market perspective, there is a clearly significant amount of state action that must now be taken to remove barriers to growth.

## Throwing the kitchen sink at it

Brits attribute slow economic growth to a mix of often contradictory factors, rather than a single clear cause. There is especially strong agreement around cost-based and supply-side constraints, such as high energy costs (85%), high taxes (75%), trade barriers (74%), and red tape (74%), suggesting broad intuitive support for market-orientated explanations of stagnation. At the same time, there is high agreement with demand-side and interventionist explanations, including low wages (78%), lack of public investment (77%), and corporate behaviour (73%). Lower levels of agreement on factors such as ageing (56%), planning restrictions (55%), and especially technology adoption (43%), suggest that more structural or long-term drivers of growth are less well-understood.

Figure 18: Brits agree with a wide array of explanations for why growth has slowed





*Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree that each of the following is preventing the UK economy from growing?*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

Labour and Green voters lean more strongly towards viewing redistribution and the public sector as drivers of economic growth, while Reform and Conservative voters are more likely to blame high taxes, red tape, immigration, and political failure for slower growth.

Across all four focus groups, there was consensus on two things: the government has the power to shape economic outcomes, and it has repeatedly failed to use that power effectively, regardless of which party is in charge.

But a clear divide emerged on the nature of that failure. Younger voters believe the government is failing to prioritise the fundamentals, such as NHS capacity, housing, education, and the cost of living. Reform voters were more likely to believe government intervention itself is the problem, with excessive spending, waste, and bureaucracy holding back growth.

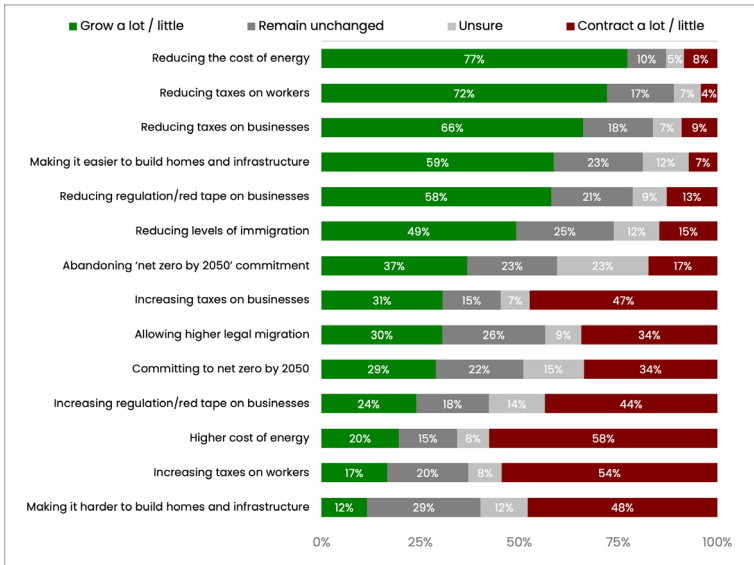
This reinforces the ‘kitchen sink’ pattern: public opinion is not ideologically consistent, but a tangle of competing narratives. The strategic implication is clear. Since both pro-growth and anti-growth policies are popular, the priority is not simply making the case for growth. It is demonstrating why bad policy has failed. That means attributing stagnation to government mismanagement and showing why overregulation and overtaxation backfire, in order to consolidate the pro-growth sentiment that already exists. This is pushing an open door, since many already attribute the nation’s poor state of affairs to state failure.

### **What drives growth**

Brits show a relatively clear preference for cost-reducing and supply-side policies as drivers of economic growth. Large majorities support reducing energy costs (77%) and cutting taxes on workers (72%) and businesses (66%), indicating a strong link between perceived cost pressures and growth outcomes. There is also moderate support for structural reforms such as easing planning restrictions (59%) and reducing regulation (58%).

In contrast, policies that increase costs or constraints such as higher taxes, tighter regulation, or higher energy prices, are widely seen as harmful to growth.

**Figure 19: Brits most strongly believe that reducing the cost of energy and lowering taxes would lead to economic growth**

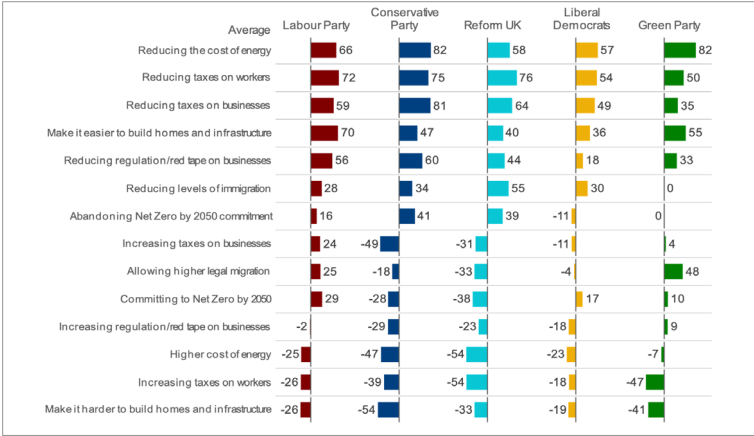


*Q: For each of the following actions, please indicate whether you think it would lead to growth, contraction or make no impact on the UK economy?*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

Divisions emerge on more politically sensitive issues, especially migration and 'net zero'. Conservative and Reform voters are more supportive of reducing immigration and weakening net zero commitments, while Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Green voters are more opposed or divided on these issues.

**Figure 20: All voter groups believe that higher energy costs, increased taxes on workers, and barriers to building cause the UK economy to contract**



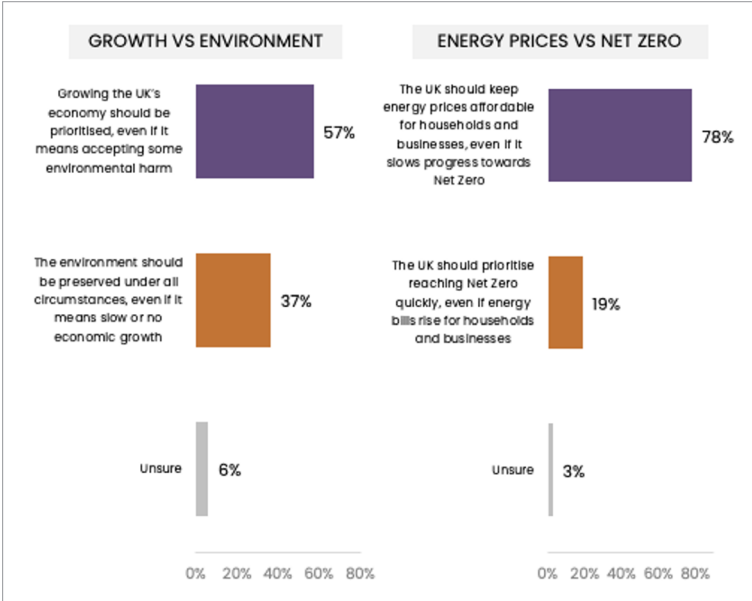
*Q: For each of the following actions, please indicate whether you think it would lead to growth, contraction, or make no impact on the UK economy?*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

## Growth and the environment

When faced with a choice, Brits generally prioritise economic growth and affordability over environmental goals. A clear majority (57%) believe growth should take precedence even if it causes environmental damage, compared to 37% who prioritise environmental protection. This preference is even stronger in energy policy. An overwhelming 78% support keeping energy prices affordable, even if it slows progress towards net zero. This indicates how cost of living concerns have come to outweigh environmental considerations.

**Figure 21: Brits place a higher priority on lowering energy prices than on environmental goals**



Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy

# Business, entrepreneurs and wanting to get ahead

Brits are strongly supportive of small businesses and entrepreneurs, and acknowledge that the private sector is more effective than government. Yet they often see large corporations negatively and as profiting excessively, reinforcing the belief that growth does not benefit people like them. Bridging this gap by emphasising the role of businesses in creating jobs, delivering prosperity, and boosting innovation is key to building a credible case for pro-growth reform.

## **Key insights:**

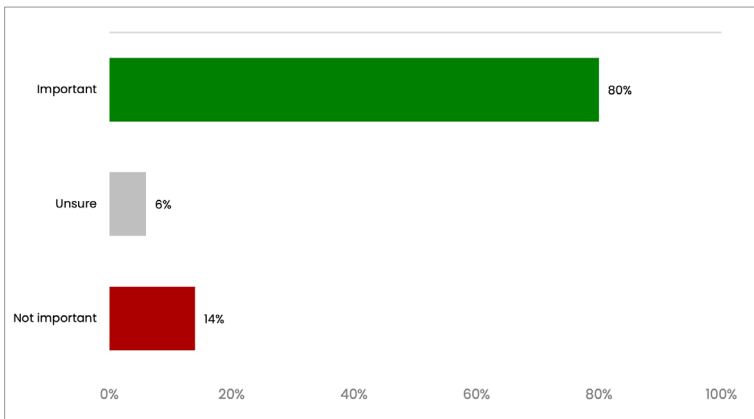
- Brits (80%) consider it important to make it easier to start and grow a business in the UK.
- Yet most substantially overestimate business profitability, feeding into the view that corporations are extractive. By contrast, entrepreneurs and small businesses are generally viewed favourably.
- While many expressed superficial sympathy towards socialism, their desire to get ahead and face a lower taxation burden revealed underlying pro-market sympathies.

## The importance of business

Public attitudes towards business represent one of the most important and misunderstood barriers and opportunities for pro-growth policies.

In many respects, Brits are pro-business. They strongly back the importance of being able to start and grow a business in the UK (80%), with relatively few (14%) saying it is unimportant.

Figure 22: Brits believe in reducing barriers to entrepreneurship



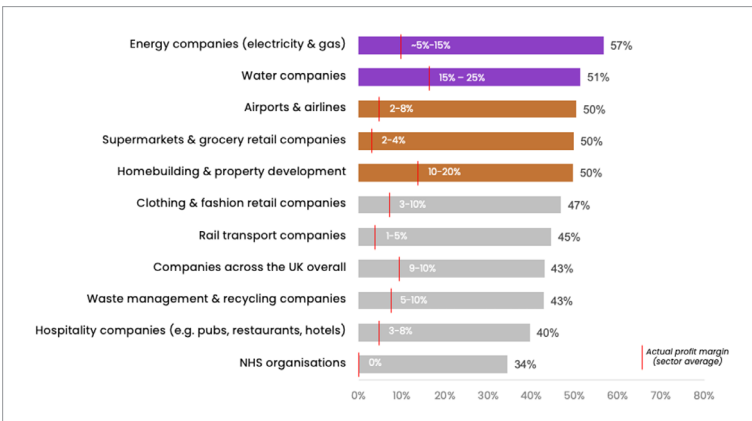
Q: How important is it to you, if at all, that it is easier to start and grow a business in the UK?

Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy

As discussed above, there is also strong support for the view that businesses are being held back by excessive taxation and red tape, and most backed removing these impediments. Yet when asked about who benefits from growth, there was concern that much of the upside went to bigger businesses rather than smaller ones.

This is compounded by a broad misunderstanding of business profitability. Many voters assume that companies, particularly in sectors like energy, grocery retail and utilities, are generating very high profit margins. In reality, these margins are far lower than people believe.

**Figure 23: Brits significantly overestimate profit margins across the economy, and in particular utilities**



*Q: Thinking about the United Kingdom, what do you think is the average profit margin of organisations in each of the following sectors? By profit margin, we mean the percentage of revenue left as profit after all costs are paid.*

*Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy*

This gap between reality and understanding reinforces a broader narrative that large businesses are extracting excessive value from the economy, rather than operating within tight constraints. If voters believe businesses are already highly profitable, then the case for government creating the conditions for them to grow further becomes much harder to make.

## **The small business–big business divide**

Across focus groups, participants (particularly younger voters) did not spontaneously mention business as central to driving economic growth.

When businesses were discussed, there was a clear split: small businesses were viewed sympathetically (pubs closing, high streets declining, local shops struggling), while large corporations were viewed negatively (exploitative, not paying enough tax, extracting wealth). Entrepreneurs are seen as hard-working, relatable, and operating under pressure. Many participants either identify with these groups directly or see them as ‘people like me’ trying to get ahead.

Young men were somewhat more business-aware and positive, with several mentioning job creation, business investment, and manufacturing. Some, without prompting, identified high taxes and regulations as making it harder to run a business.

**‘Employment regulations get in the way of businesses employing more people.’** – Younger (male) voter

Reform voters were notably more pro-business than others. Younger Reform voters talked about businesses needing to ‘thrive’ and government ‘not giving businesses what they need’. Older Reform voters mentioned entrepreneurship and self-employment as being important, though they also had strong sympathies for protectionist ideas, highlighting the need to ‘keep money in-house’ through domestic production.

**‘The government are detached from reality. I think it would be better if the government just stepped aside and let a business run the country.’** – Younger Reform voter

Only when explicitly prompted did some participants make the connection: businesses invest → productivity rises → wages go up → living standards improve. That causal chain is absent from most people's default model of the economy.

Accordingly, it is essential to address misunderstandings about profit and to explain that businesses actually operate on thin margins. This can most effectively be achieved by emphasising that small businesses and entrepreneurs are held back by the excessive hand of the state, and highlighting the role of enterprise in creating opportunity through jobs and improving living standards by producing goods and services that we all need.

### **Socialist instincts, free market behaviours**

Across both younger groups, participants said they leaned toward 'socialism', but when pressed they had a very limited understanding of what socialism actually means. When further prompted about what they value, their preferences aligned far more closely with free market principles; they want lower taxes on themselves, more freedom to spend their own money, the ability to start businesses and get on the housing ladder, and less government waste.

**'To give us more freedom for people to do with the money what they want.'** – Younger (male) voter

**'To me capitalism is pro-corporation and socialism is pro-worker.'** – Younger (female) voter

Young voters associate capitalism with corporations exploiting workers and socialism with the government looking after people.

But they also recognise that government is poor at looking after people, which creates an opening.

**‘Just the pure mistrust in government, let businesses run. I’d rather be privately richer and spend my money wherever I want than have the government take it straight away and tell me what it’s being spent on, or misspend it.’** – Younger (male) voter

Among Reform voters, the lean towards capitalism was more explicit. They were more comfortable saying they wanted lower taxes, less regulation, and more personal freedom. But the word ‘capitalism’ carries baggage: it is associated with inequality, corporate greed, and ordinary people being left behind.

The downsides of socialism identified by participants included: loss of freedom, greater government control over personal finances, reduced incentive to work harder, and the risk of corruption when too much power is concentrated in government hands. The downsides of capitalism they identified included: exploitation of workers, environmental damage, and inequality.

**‘On paper socialism is great, and then you put it into practice and you end up with a communist country where everyone’s voices are shut down.’** – Younger (female) voter

**‘Without the prospect of personal success and personal profit, individuals might lack the incentive to work harder and keep society moving forward.’** – Younger (female) voter

Beneath the pessimism, a consistent desire ran through all four groups: freedom, opportunity, agency, and a fair chance to build a better life. Participants wanted to choose how to spend their money, to start businesses, and to advance through their own effort. The frustration came from the belief that the system no longer provides these conditions.

## The growth tribes of Britain

The British public does not think about economic growth in a uniform way. Our analysis has identified six distinct tribes shaped by experience, financial position, and underlying beliefs about fairness and opportunity. Across all tribes, support for growth is high – but conditional, fragile, and filtered through the tribe's social position.

Tribe	Size	Core profile	Vote	Economic outlook	Growth stance	Who benefits from growth (perception)	Most important outcomes
<b>Affluent Progressives</b>	32%	Degree-educated, higher-income, London-based, homeowners	Labour / mixed	Relatively positive	Strongly pro-growth	Themselves, businesses, wider economy	Higher living standards, business growth, family prosperity
<b>Squeezed Sceptics</b>	22%	Working-age, Midlands/Wales, mid-income, mortgages/renters	Mixed	Highly negative	Pro-growth but sceptical	The rich, corporations, government (more than 'people like me')	Cost of living falling, wages rising, economic growth
<b>Uncertain Renters</b>	17%	18-34, non-degree, renters, lower income	Labour	Mixed / uncertain	Conditional support	Unclear / split – unsure who gains	Housing affordability, education, infrastructure, cost of living
<b>Comfortable Retirees</b>	16%	55+, homeowners, Conservative	Conservative	Negative but stable	Moderately pro-growth	Government, large institutions	Strong public services (NHS), stability, rewarding hard work
<b>Aggrieved Left Behind</b>	7%	35+, non-degree, Reform-leaning	Reform UK	Extremely negative	Strongly pro-growth (anti-state)	Elites, corporations, 'the system'	Lower cost of living, higher wages, fairness for workers
<b>Precarious Populists</b>	6%	Lower income, insecure work, Midlands/Wales/Scotland	Reform UK / Green	Deeply negative	Most sceptical	Corporations, wealthy, not ordinary people	Cost of living falling, NHS improvement, basic security

### **Affluent Progressives (32%)**

Affluent Progressives are high-income, university-educated workers, predominantly men aged 18-54, concentrated in London and major cities. They work in managerial and professional roles, typically earning £60,000 or more, and most own their homes. Politically, they lean towards Labour and consume a broad, international media diet. Their priorities reflect security and upward mobility – improving education, enhancing local amenities, and protecting the environment – and they are the most economically comfortable and future-orientated group.

They are the affluent, the winners of Britain's current settlement. Accordingly, they are the only tribe with a consistently positive outlook. Most believe the country is heading in the right direction, rate the economy as strong, and report improving living standards. They are optimistic that future generations will benefit as well.

They strongly support economic growth and have a more developed sense of what drives it. Their instinct is to enable pro-growth conditions, to build more homes and infrastructure, and to reduce taxes on workers and businesses. The outcomes they prioritise are broad and ambitious: a dynamic economy where it is easy to start a business, in which living standards rise, public services improve, and long-term goals like net zero are achieved.

They respond to messages that connect growth to both personal opportunity and wider societal progress: higher wages, greater freedom, and better-funded public services without higher taxes. At the same time, they are open to critiques of the current economic system, with many believing it is not working as it should, even while remaining supportive of growth itself.

This is the group most willing to accept trade-offs. They are relatively comfortable with planning reform, skilled migration, and a greater role for the private sector in public services. For them, growth is both credible and desirable. It aligns with their experience and their expectations for the future.

### **Squeezed Sceptics (22%)**

Squeezed Sceptics are a large, economically active group aged 18-54, concentrated in the Midlands and Wales, and feeling under financial pressure. They are typically non-degree-educated, working in technical or associate professional roles, earning £30,000 or more, and either paying a mortgage or renting privately. Politically mixed, they sit at the centre of the electorate.

They are deeply pessimistic about the country's direction and the state of the economy. Large majorities believe the economy is performing poorly and contracting, and many feel their living standards have worsened. There is also a feeling of generational decline, with many believing they are worse off than their parents and that their children will be worse off still.

They strongly support economic growth, but are sceptical that the benefits will flow to them personally. Growth is only meaningful if it translates into higher wages, better living standards, and stronger local economies. Messages about opportunities for towns and communities resonate, reflecting a place-based sense of economic identity. They are also responsive to arguments that growth can fund public services like the NHS without increasing taxes, and that politicians have failed to prioritise living standards.

At the same time, they are sceptical about who benefits from growth. Many believe it primarily helps the wealthy, and there are concerns that deregulation could come at the expense of safety and fairness. This reflects a broader unease that the system is not delivering for ordinary workers.

They identify low wages, lack of government investment, and short-term corporate behaviour as the main barriers to growth. Overall, this is a large and politically important group: pro-growth in principle, but demanding clear evidence that growth will deliver for them, not just businesses and the already wealthy.

### **Uncertain Renters (17%)**

Uncertain Renters are lower-income voters, typically aged 18–34, non-degree-educated, and working in part-time or irregular roles, often in sales or customer service. Most earn under £30,000 and rent privately or live in council housing. They lean towards Labour and place a strong emphasis on issues like net zero. They are defined by economic uncertainty: worried about the country's direction, the state of the economy, and whether they themselves will get ahead.

Their outlook is genuinely divided. Unlike other tribes, they are neither uniformly pessimistic nor confident. Many feel stuck rather than falling behind, and while some believe they could still do better than previous generations, this optimism is fragile.

They support economic growth, but only tentatively. The key question for them is whether growth will actually reach people like them. Messages that link growth to a more stable future, better opportunities, and, most importantly, more housing and cheaper energy resonate strongly. Housing in particular

is central, shaping both their economic outlook and what they expect growth to deliver.

At the same time, they are wary of trade-offs. They reject arguments that weaken environmental protections and are particularly resistant to sacrificing employment rights for higher pay. Growth framed without fairness, or at the expense of security, quickly loses appeal.

They see low wages, high energy costs, and a system tilted towards large corporations as the main barriers. Overall, this is the most uncertain tribe: open to growth, but not yet convinced it will work for them.

### **Comfortable Retirees (16%)**

Comfortable Retirees are older and predominantly female, concentrated in the south of England. They are financially secure, and overwhelmingly homeowners, giving them the most stable economic position of any group. They lean towards the Conservative Party and rely on traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers. Their priorities reflect their own interests and desire for stability: protecting the NHS and social care, maintaining national security, and ensuring responsible government spending.

Despite their personal security, they are pessimistic about the country as a whole. Most believe the UK is heading in the wrong direction and express concern about a broader decline in institutions and social cohesion.

They support economic growth, but see it primarily as a means of maintaining their quality of life rather than as a mode of

change. Growth is valued because it sustains public services and underpins national stability, with improving the NHS standing out as the most important outcome. They see high energy costs and government inefficiency as key barriers to growth.

They respond most strongly to messages that emphasise protection and safeguarding of the NHS, maintaining national security, and ensuring a stable future for younger generations. At the same time, they are cautious about change, particularly where it may threaten that stability, and have concerns about immigration levels.

Overall, this is a risk-averse group. They support growth insofar as it preserves what they value, but are wary of reforms that could introduce uncertainty.

### **Aggrieved Left Behind (7%)**

Aggrieved Left Behind are predominantly aged over 35, non-degree-educated, and working in middle-income administrative, technical or associate professional roles, often in private rental housing. They lean heavily towards Reform and back reducing immigration and cutting crime, which they see as central to economic and social decline.

They are the most uniformly negative group. All believe the country is heading in the wrong direction, and large majorities say their living standards have worsened. Many feel worse-off than their parents and expect future generations to be worse-off still. Decline is viewed as long-term and structural.

They support economic growth, but interpret it through the lens of fairness, reward, and national strength. Growth is associated

with cutting taxes, lowering energy costs, and reducing immigration, while policies like net zero are seen as holding the country back. What matters most are lower costs of living, rising personal living standards, and a system that rewards hard work. Welfare and migration are often viewed as undermining that sense of fairness.

They respond to messages that validate their frustrations and emphasise consequences: national decline, lost opportunity, and a system that no longer works. Arguments that link growth to personal financial freedom, a stronger future for younger generations, and political neglect resonate strongly. By contrast, they reject redistribution and environmental framing, which they see as out of touch with everyday concerns.

They are relatively open to trade-offs, particularly where these align with their worldview. Measures such as reducing government spending, cutting welfare, or abandoning net zero attract some support. For this group, growth is not an abstract goal but a means of restoring control in an economy they feel has stopped working for people like them.

### **Precarious Populists (6%)**

The Precarious Populists are the most economically insecure and politically disillusioned group. Predominantly women in the Midlands, Wales and Scotland, they are typically low-income, non-degree-educated, in part-time or irregular work, often living in council housing. Almost all believe the country is heading in the wrong direction and that their living standards are getting worse. Politically populist, they split between Reform and the Greens, united by a shared sense that mainstream politics have

failed them. Their priorities centre on the cost of living, alongside crime and immigration.

They experience the economy day-to-day: rising prices, low wages, and a sense of limited prospects for getting ahead. While they support economic growth in principle, it is often seen as benefiting corporations and the wealthy rather than ‘people like me’, reinforcing a sense that the system is unfair.

Their understanding of growth is practical and immediate: lowering energy costs, reducing taxes on workers, and easing financial pressure. What matters most are lower costs of living and better public services, particularly the NHS. The main barriers they see are low wages and a system that feels rigged against ordinary people.

They respond to messages that validate their frustration and promise tangible improvements, better wages, lower bills, and a more secure future. But they are highly resistant to trade-offs, with little support for reforms such as planning changes or business tax cuts. Support for growth exists, but is conditional on it clearly improving their lives, without asking them to bear additional costs.

# Making the case for growth

Support for pro-growth reform strengthens when growth is clearly linked to personal benefits – such as greater financial freedom, and a stable future for young people and future generations – and local benefits, such as higher living standards and affordable housing. Concerns about fairness and a sense that the system is broken drive anti-growth sentiment, so effective messaging must show that growth can meaningfully improve people's lives.

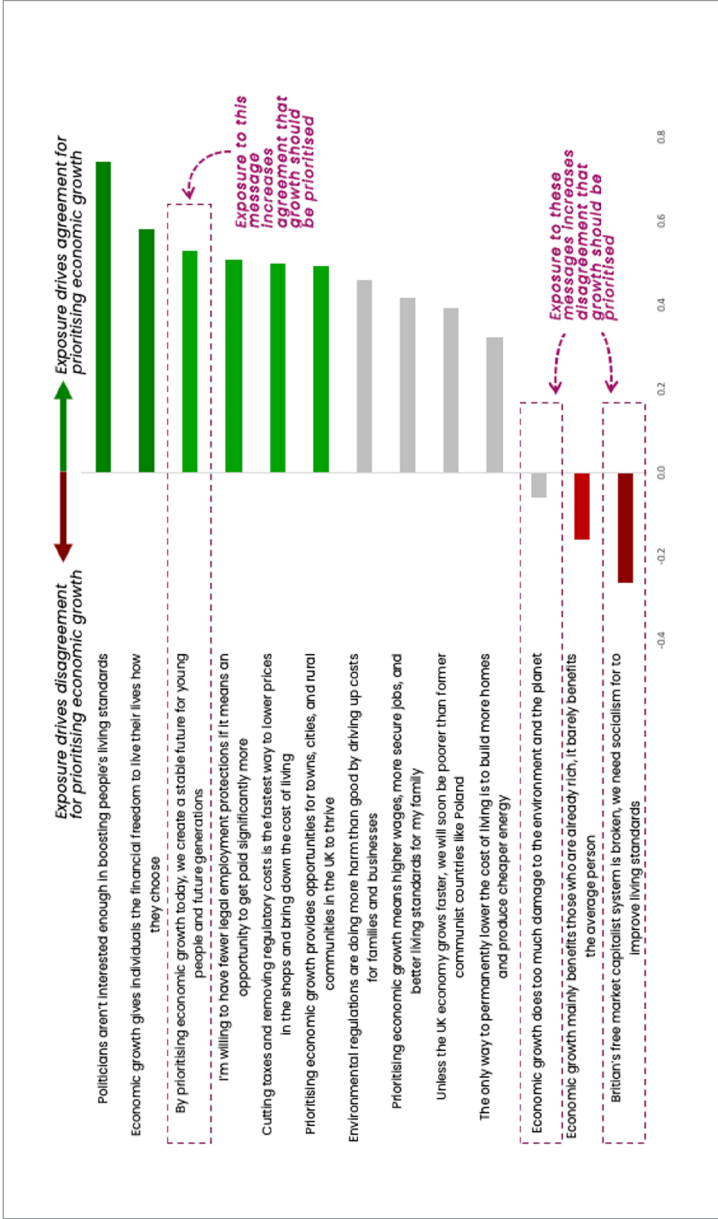
## **Key insights:**

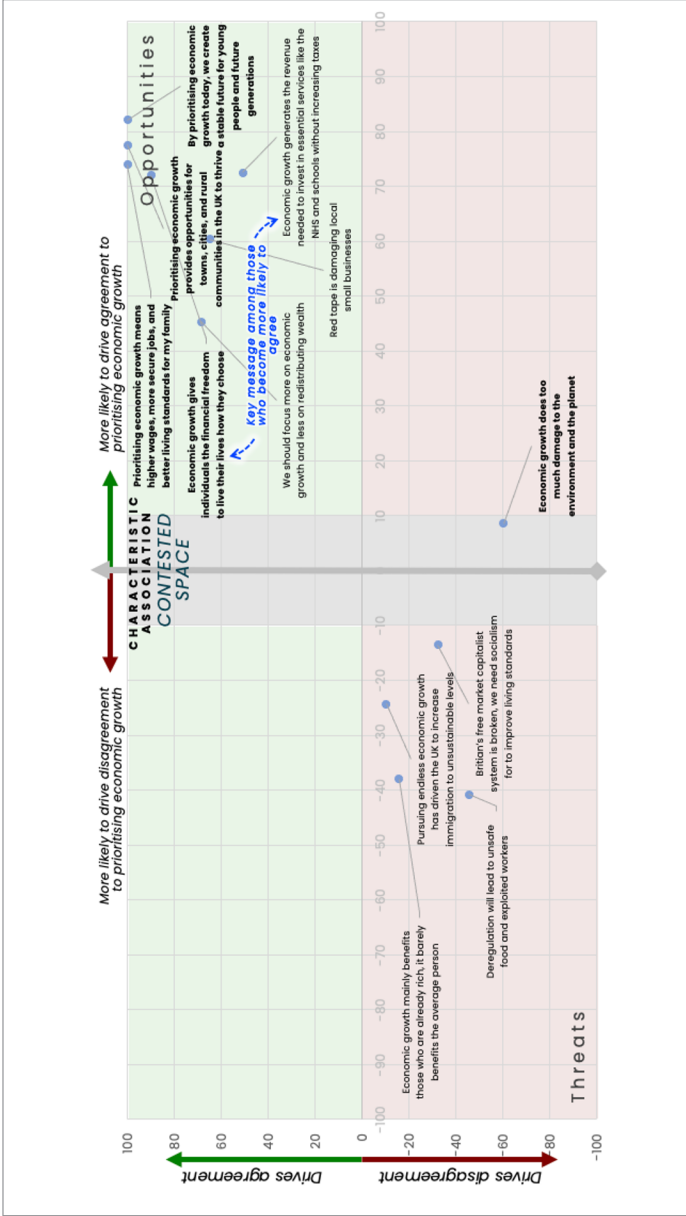
- Strongest pro-growth statements: 'stable future for young people', 'opportunities for communities', 'higher wages and secure jobs', and 'growth funds public services'.
- Messages connecting growth to cost-of-living relief also perform well, particularly among younger voters and swing groups.
- Anti-growth concerns centre on fairness, scepticism that growth benefits ordinary people, and fears about exploitation if regulation is reduced.
- After message exposure, support for prioritising growth remains extremely high (81%), showing the debate is winnable with the right framing.

## **Linking growth to personal benefits**

Message testing shows that the most effective pro-growth frames link growth to personal outcomes, including higher living standards, secure jobs, thriving communities, and well-funded public services without higher taxes. Anti-growth messages gain traction when they tap into fairness concerns, particularly the claim that growth benefits the wealthy while deregulation harms workers. Environmental objections are weaker than often assumed.

Figure 24: Economic growth message testing – regression modelling





Source: IEA / Freshwater Strategy

Focus groups revealed important differences in willingness to accept trade-offs for growth:

- Young women were largely unwilling to accept the trade-offs necessary for growth over concerns about negative personal impact. No participant was open to reducing environmental regulations, and they were also deeply reluctant to cut business taxes (over concern that the cost would fall on them personally) or workplace protections.

**‘Why would we get rid of protections that help people like us?’** – Younger (female) voter

**‘The ones that I’m holding on to the most are environmental rules, workplace protections and consumer regulations, but predominantly because I think it impacts like the regular day-to-day person.’** – Younger (female) voter

- Young men were significantly more willing to accept pro-growth trade-offs, particularly regarding reducing environmental regulations and lowering taxes on the wealthy. They understood the logic that overtaxing businesses could drive them away. But they were more defensive of workplace protections; several thought reducing them would mean fewer jobs, not more (as employers would use them to sack workers, rather than giving employers the confidence to hire more).

**‘If you tax businesses, they might move.’** – Younger (male) voter

- Younger Reform voters were the most open to pro-growth measures. They supported cutting business taxes (especially for hospitality), reducing workplace regulation, and cutting public spending – including the welfare system, which they viewed as wasteful.

**‘Many workplaces have to keep staff who are unproductive, late every day, and ruining the culture — because of the laws. Something needs to change.’** – Younger Reform voter

- Older Reform voters were similar to younger Reform voters, but placed greater emphasis on immigration control and domestic production. They were more sceptical of net zero spending and wanted the government to prioritise citizens over immigrants.

# Conclusion: from diagnosis to mandate

There is a significant opportunity to unlock pro-growth sentiment and turn it into support for pro-market reforms. Support for economic growth is broad and deep, as is an understanding that the current system is faltering, even if there is a lack of awareness about how far Britain has fallen behind internationally.

The challenge is that this support is not yet anchored in a shared understanding of what went wrong or what must change to fix it. There is significant confusion and cynicism: voters are almost as open to command-and-control interventions as to pro-market measures.

## **1. Brits want growth, but don't know how best to achieve it**

Voters recognise that weak economic growth is a serious problem, but they don't have a clear understanding of the drivers of growth or the best way to boost it.

This reflects a concern that current conversations around growth are not personally relevant. What is needed is messaging that clearly shows how growth fixes problems in a way people can easily understand and value.

## **2. Brits are sceptical that the benefits will flow to them**

Compounding this is a scepticism about who benefits: while most people believe that economic growth affects them personally (75%), they are also far more likely to believe that government and large corporations benefit most (both 81%) than that they (52%) or their family do (55%). But there is strong support for the core components of a growth agenda once it is linked to personal outcomes: 77% believe reducing energy costs would drive growth, and 72% support cutting taxes on workers. Crucially, these measures align with voters' stated priorities: lower bills, higher wages, and better public services – rather than abstract theory.

Therefore, discussions about growth should be grounded in simple, personally relevant, and tangible examples that are relevant to ordinary Brits. How does growth benefit a teacher, a plumber, a homeowner, a young person? How do anti-growth measures hold them all back? Ensure that the personal consequences of achieving or not achieving growth are at the centre of all public messaging.

## **3. Demonstrate how state intervention has suppressed growth and eroded living standards**

While voters correctly identify the current poor economic circumstances, they often misdiagnose the cause. The public overwhelmingly agrees that the UK economy is struggling: 65% rate it as poor, 46% believe it is contracting, and 44% say living standards have worsened in the past year. Yet, responsibility is diffused across a 'kitchen sink' of explanations.

Voters simultaneously blame high energy costs (85%), high taxes (75%), and red tape (74%), while also expressing support for more state-led solutions such as industrial policy (64%) and redistribution (63%). This contradiction does not reflect an ideological hostility to markets or business, but rather low confidence that the system is well-run and that the benefits flow to them personally.

Where markets appear unfair or unstable, voters default to state intervention, even though they have a deep scepticism of the ability of government to deliver. What's more, government, politics, and policy are frequently identified as the main barriers to growth (27% unprompted).

The challenge, therefore, is not to show that market ideas can work – most already sympathise with lower taxes and cutting red tape – but rather to demonstrate that state failure has suppressed growth and eroded living standards. It is, in other words, to demonstrate clearly the barriers to growth.

The Institute of Economic Affairs  
2 Lord North Street  
London SW1P 3LB  
Tel 020 7799 8900  
email [iea@iea.org.uk](mailto:iea@iea.org.uk)



**iea**  
Institute of  
Economic Affairs