

Is the “culture war” a generational conflict?

Professor Bobby Duffy

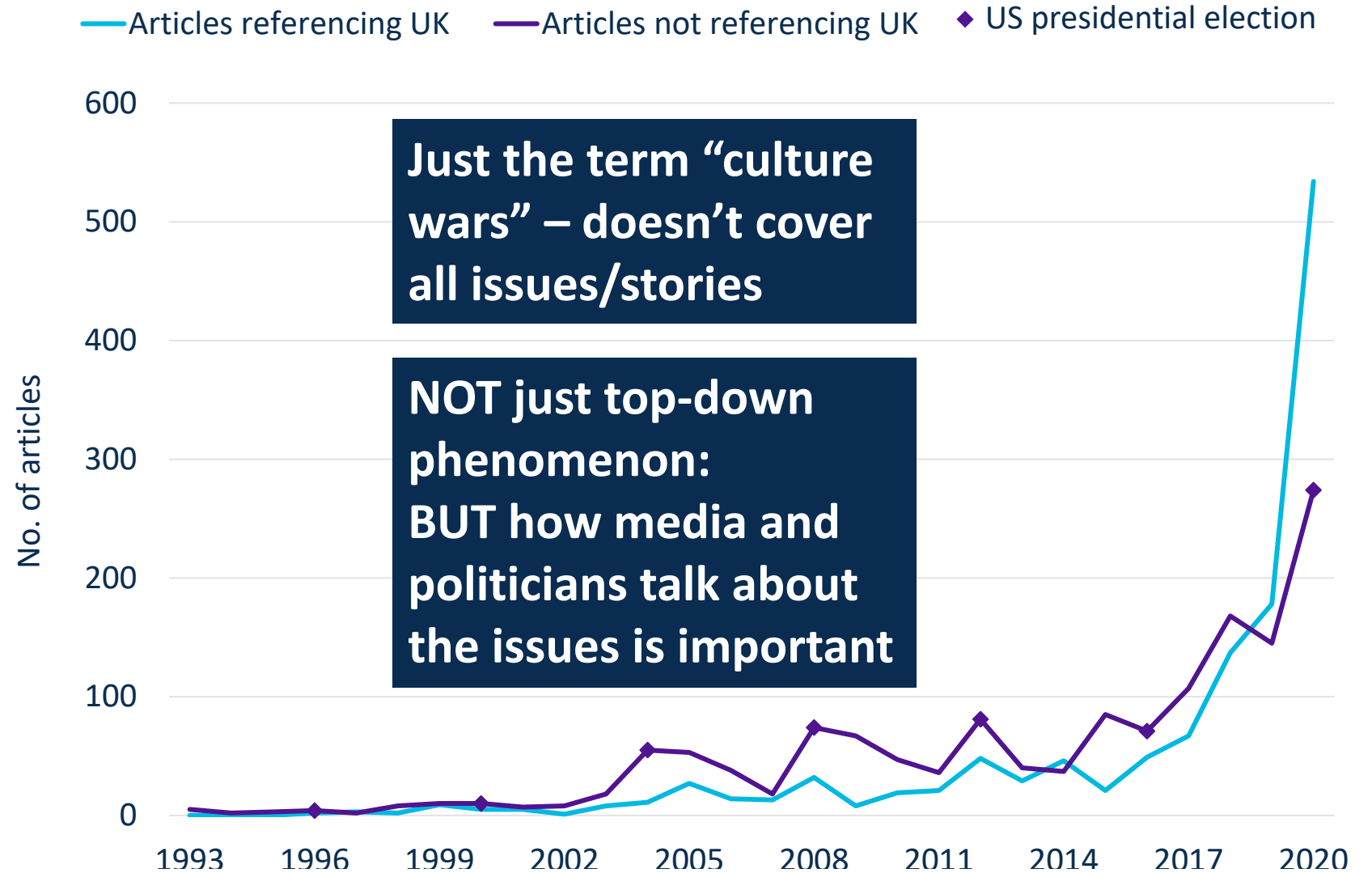
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1. There has been an explosion in UK media coverage of “culture wars” in recent years

Number of articles mentioning “culture wars” in UK newspapers, by those referencing the UK or other countries



2. A “culture war” signals much more than disagreement

“A sense of conflict between two irreconcilable views of what is **fundamentally right and wrong about the world we live in**”.

– James Davison Hunter

“...once these **‘mega-identities’** get formed, we start to think of **out-group partisans as quite different from us** ... which makes it easier to **dehumanize them, to think about them with less generosity.**”

– Lilliana Mason

“When you activate one [identity] **you often activate all**, and **each time they’re activated, they strengthen**”.

– Ezra Klein

UK public think focus is exaggerated – but not entirely invented...

77%

Agree “the media often makes our country feel more divided than it really is”

44%

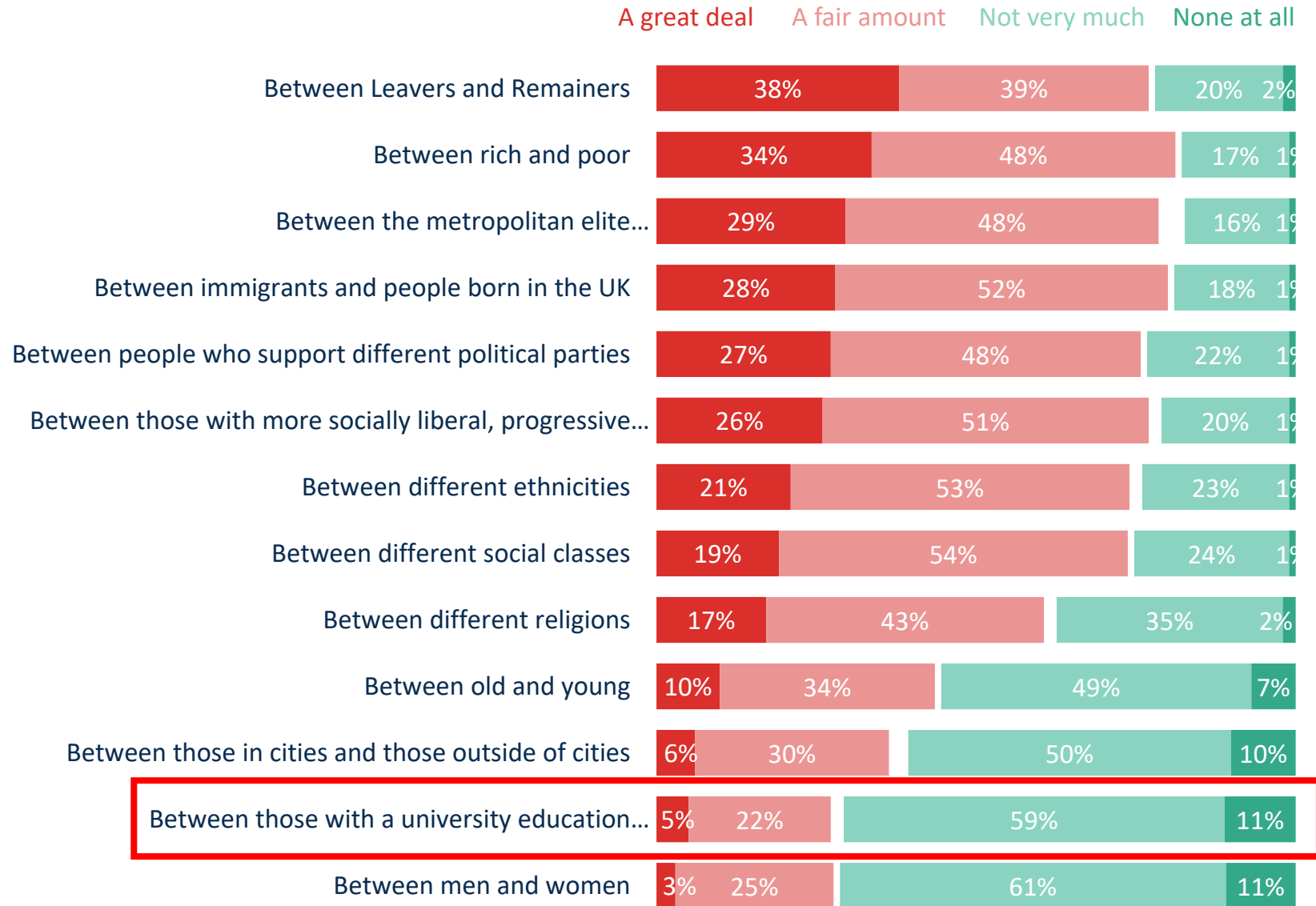
Agree “politicians invent/exaggerate culture wars as a political tactic”

12%

Agree “culture wars only exist in the media and on social media, not in real life”

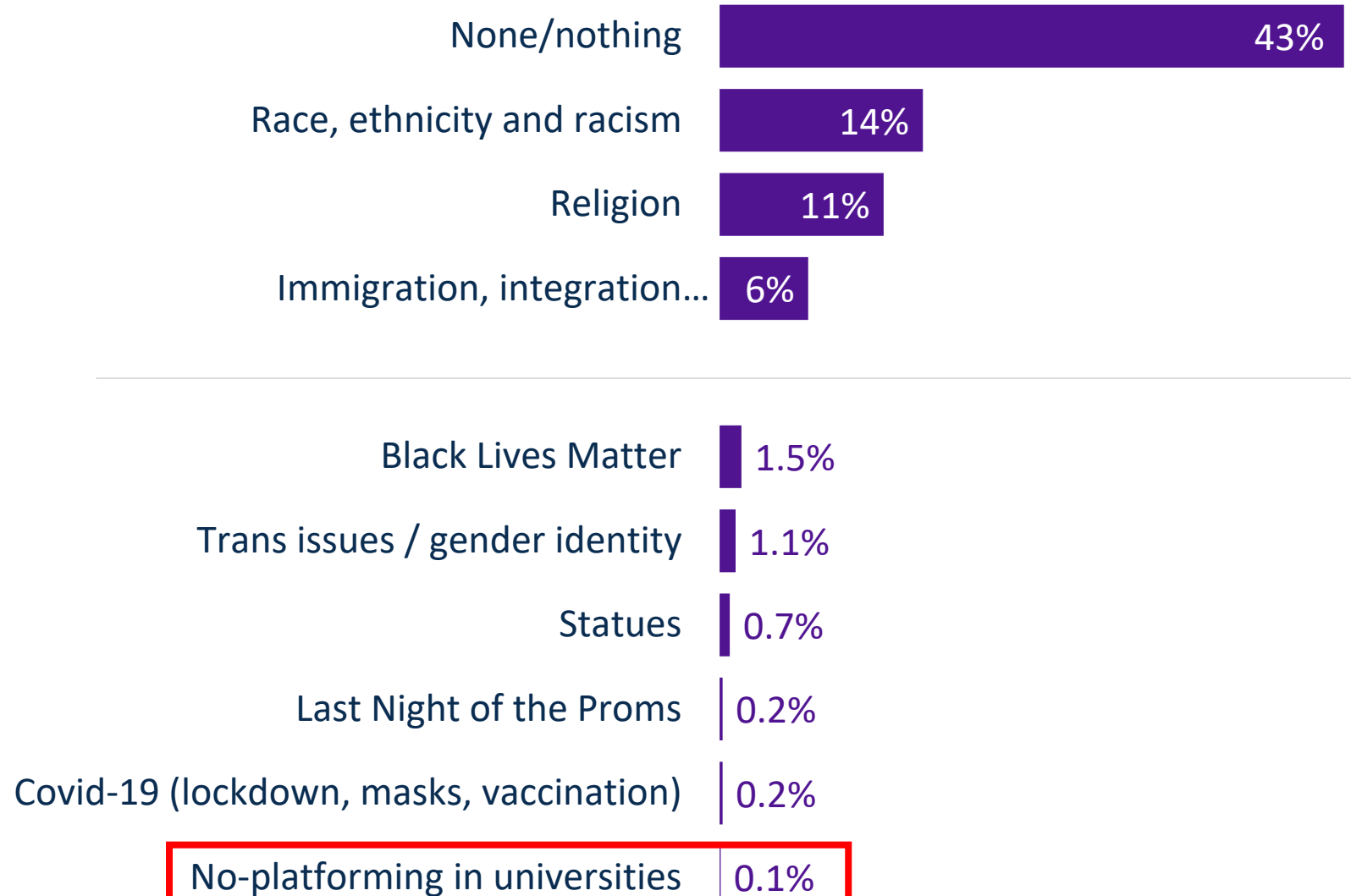
How the public see the key faultlines...

How much tension, if any, would you say there is between the following groups in the UK today?



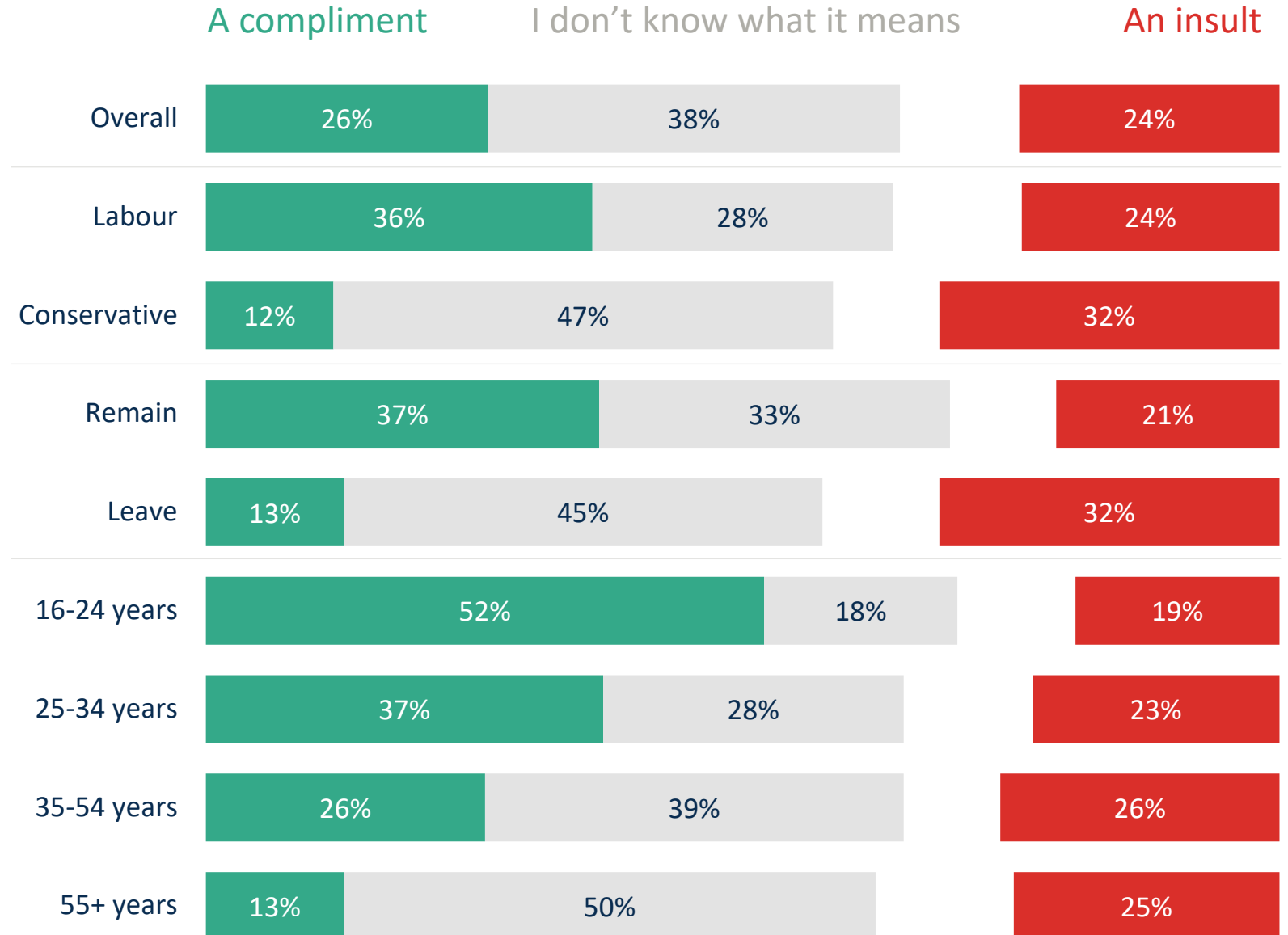
3. What do people think of as key issues in “culture wars”?

What sorts of issues do you think of when we say “culture wars”?



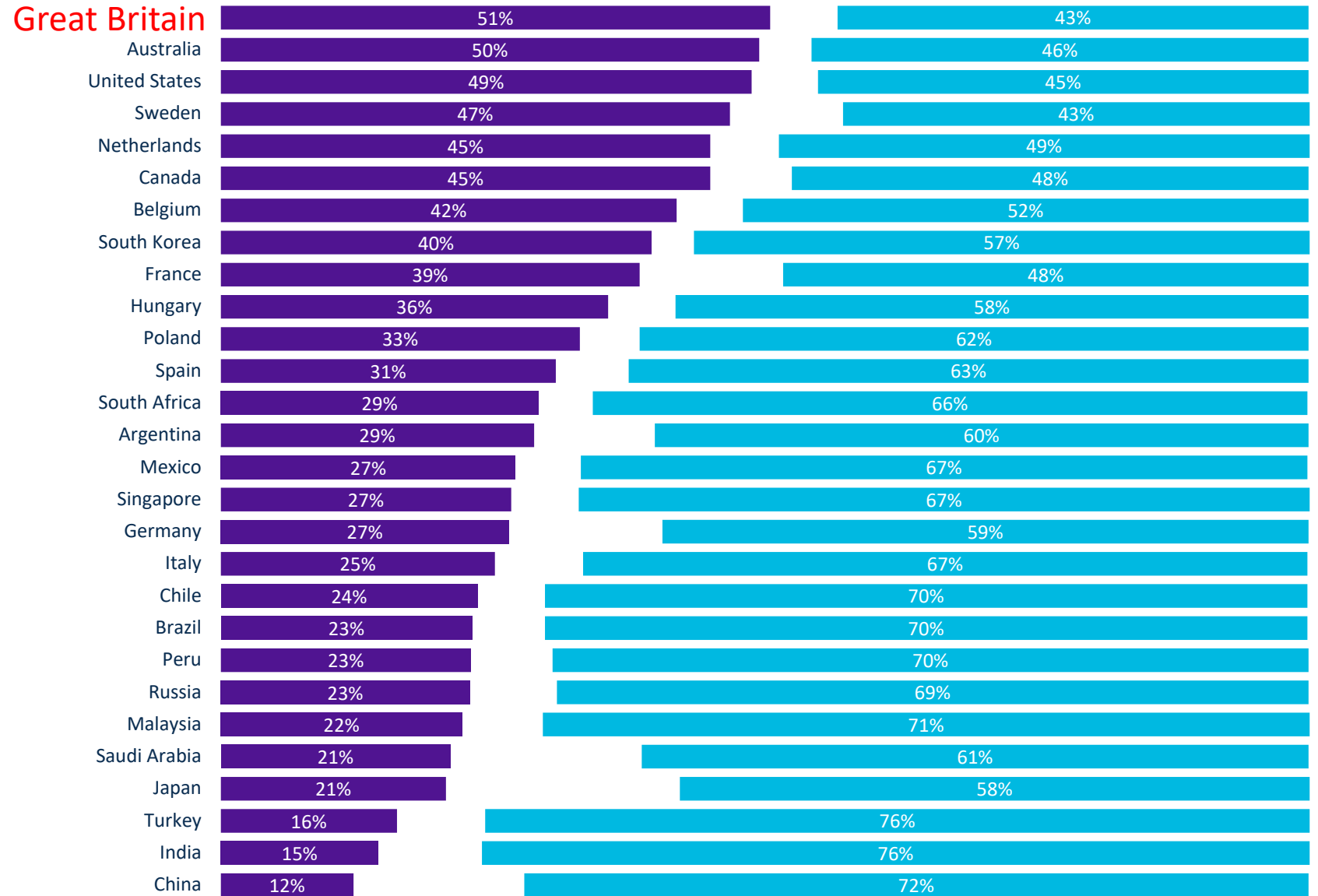
And “woke” means different things to different people...

If someone described you as “woke” would you consider it...



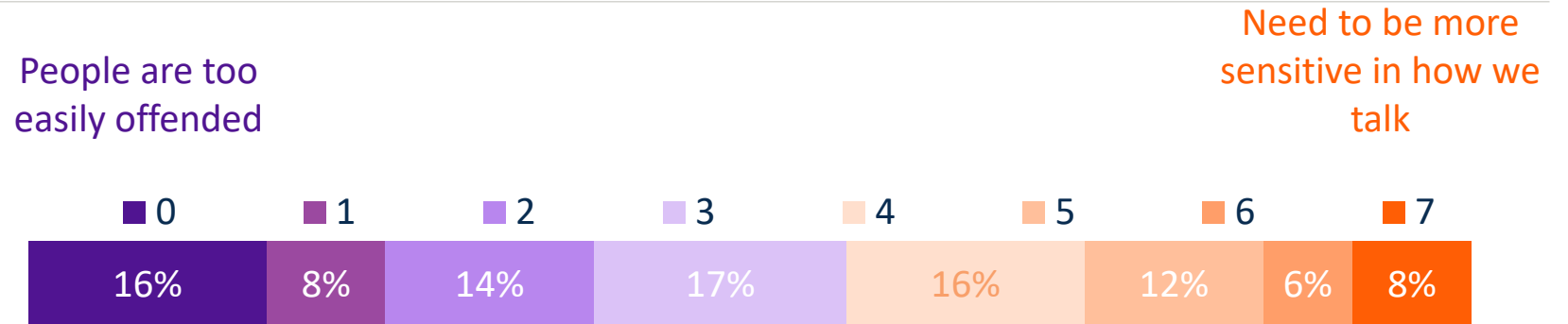
4. Britain MOST likely to think people are too easily offended by speech...

Some people think that the way people talk needs to be more sensitive to people from different backgrounds. Others think that many people are just too easily offended. Where would you place yourself on this scale?
 0 – people are too easily offended, 7 – need to be more sensitive in way talk

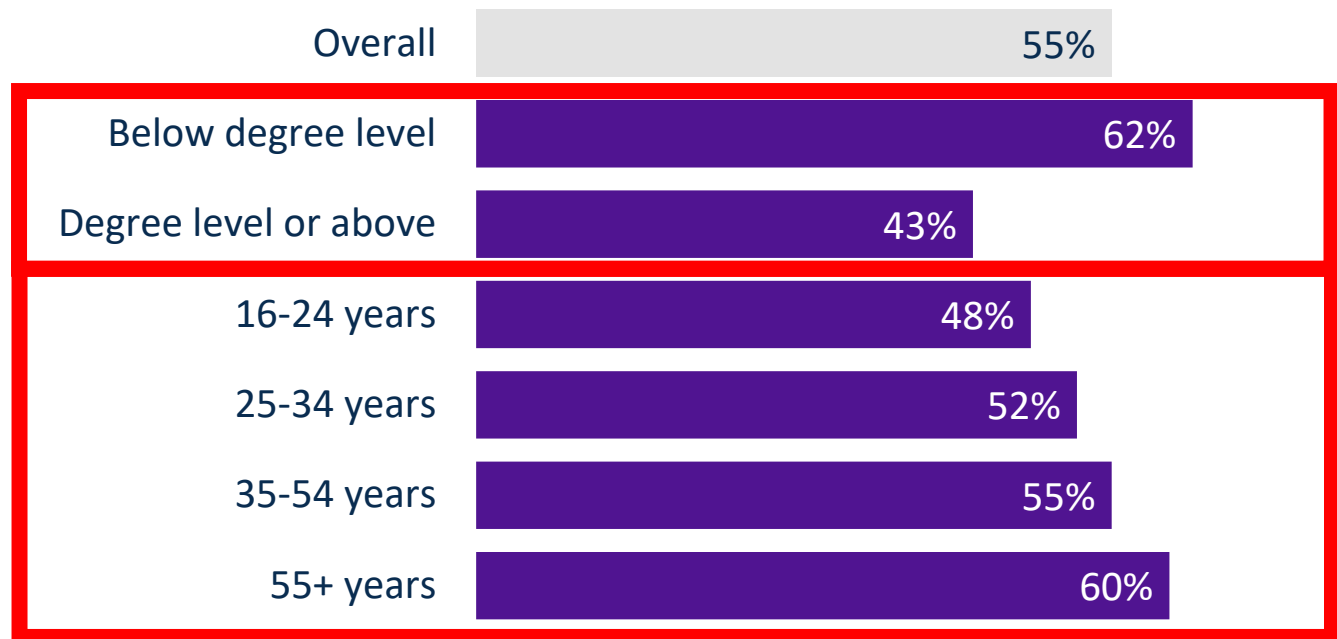


... policing our speech is a key faultline that fragments us, but NOT by age...

Some people think that the way people talk needs to be more sensitive to people from different backgrounds. Others think that many people are just too easily offended. Where would you place yourself on this scale?



% who place themselves at 0–3 on scale



5. Phoney generational stereotypes are fuelling the “culture war” ...



Generations

Does When You're Born Shape Who You Are?



Karl Mannheim



Auguste Comte

“We should not hide the fact that our social progress rests essentially upon death... the successive steps of humanity necessarily require a continuous renovation ... from one generation to the next”

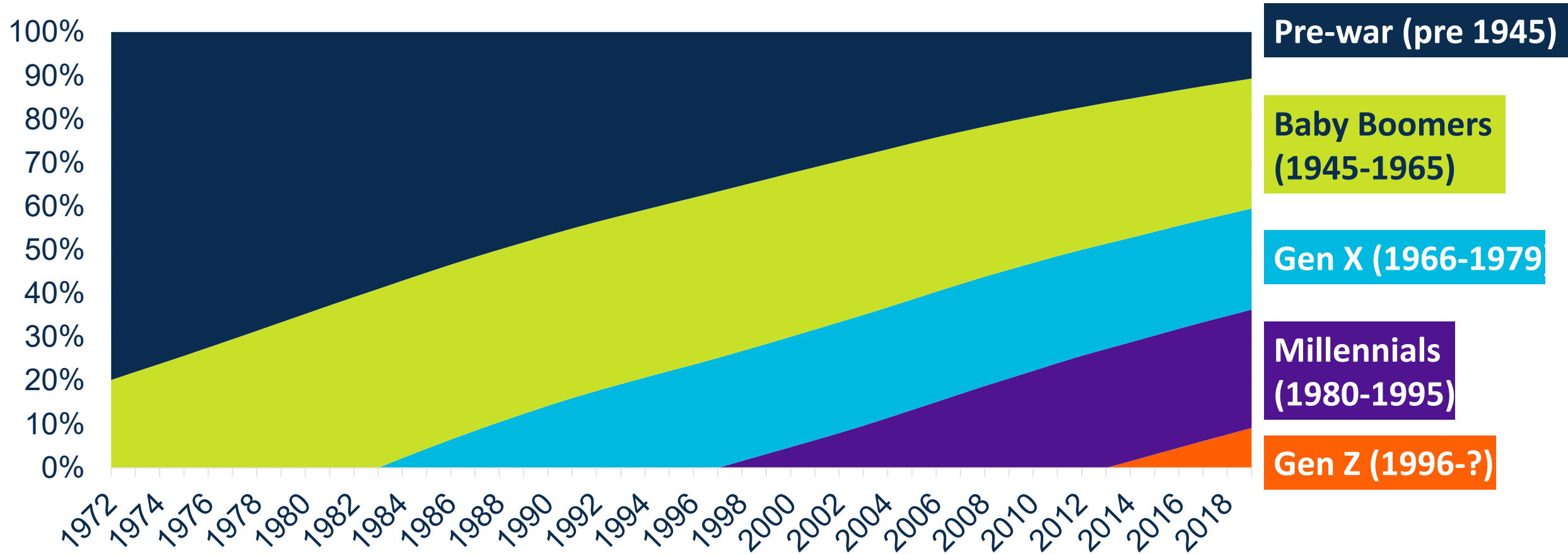
Today we get...

Millennials are killing the napkin industry

How baby boomers ruined parenting forever

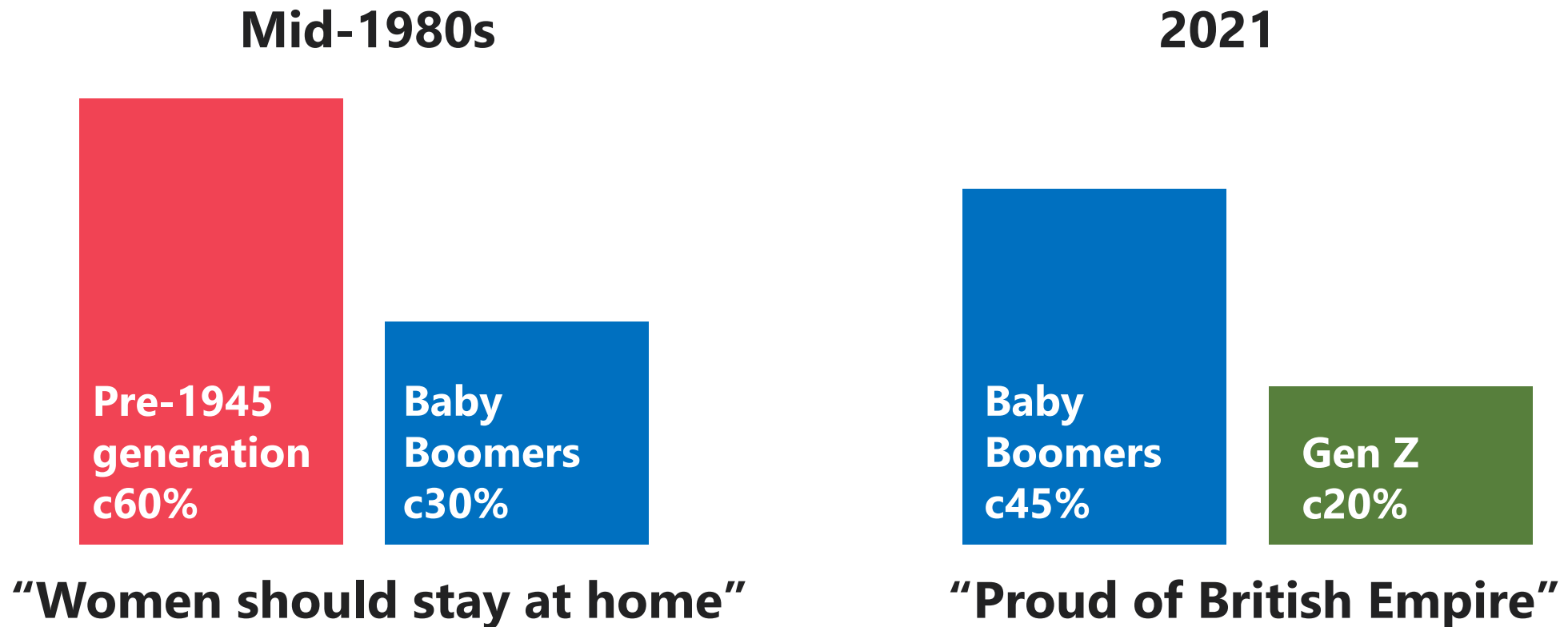
Can only understand future if understand generations...

% of UK adults in each generation



“Culture wars” NOT down to new generation of “snowflakes” or “social justice warriors”

- Evidence shows clear gaps between young and old on attitudes to race, immigration, gender equality and identity, sexuality etc – but **NOT** unusual gaps...
- ...constant ratio – youngest generation 2x as likely to be comfortable with changing norms than oldest...



Two reasons we feel particularly divided by age now...

- Thinking today's young are *uniquely* wrong or weird is a constant of history...

400 BC

“The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, they show disrespect for elders...”

– Socrates

1771

“A race of effeminate, self-admiring, emaciated fribbles”

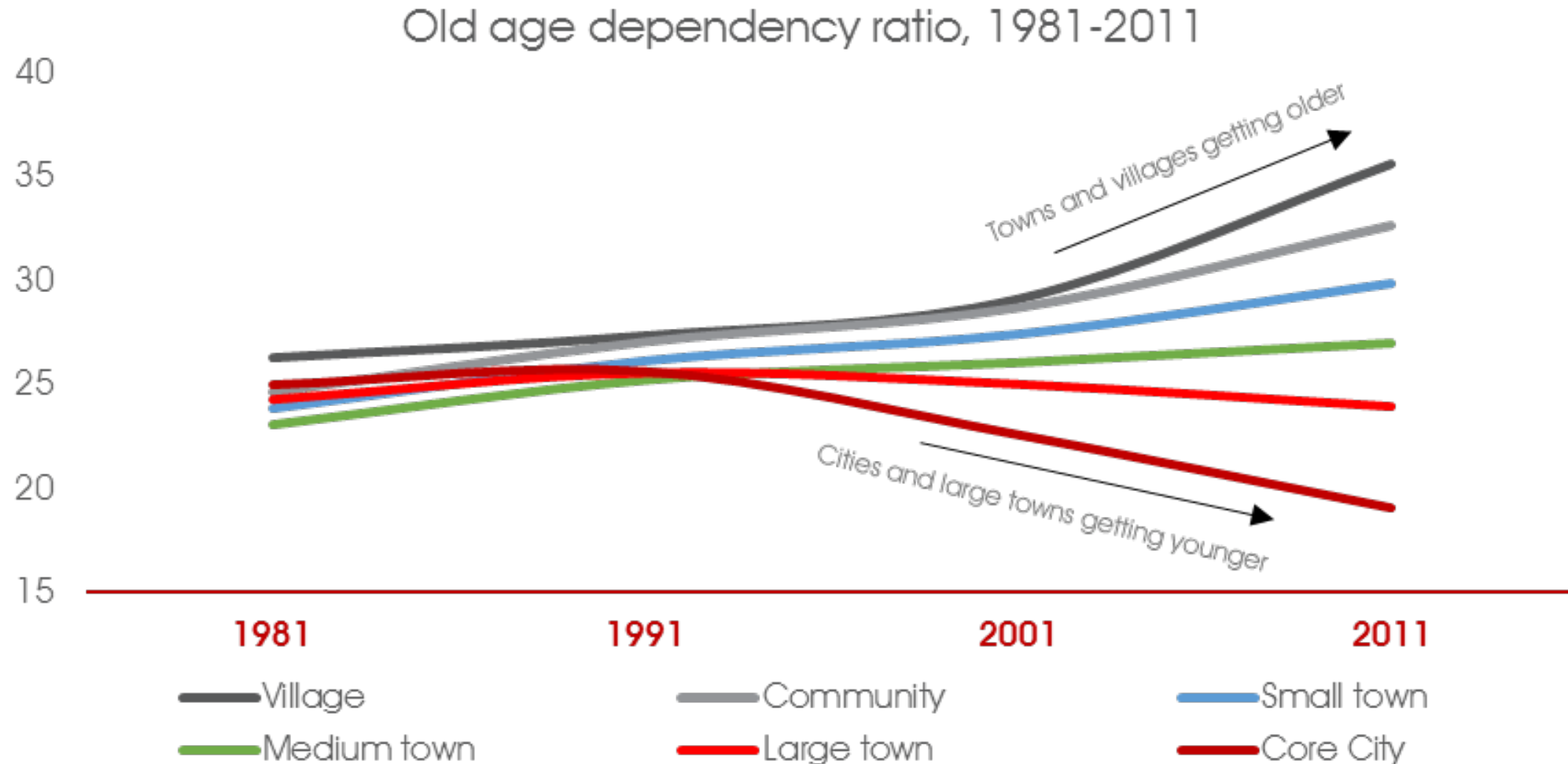
– Letter in Town and Country magazine

- BUT *feels* worse now – because mixed with a “period effect” of fractious politics, media and social media...
- ...hear much more from the noisy extremes, rather than much more nuanced and balanced majority



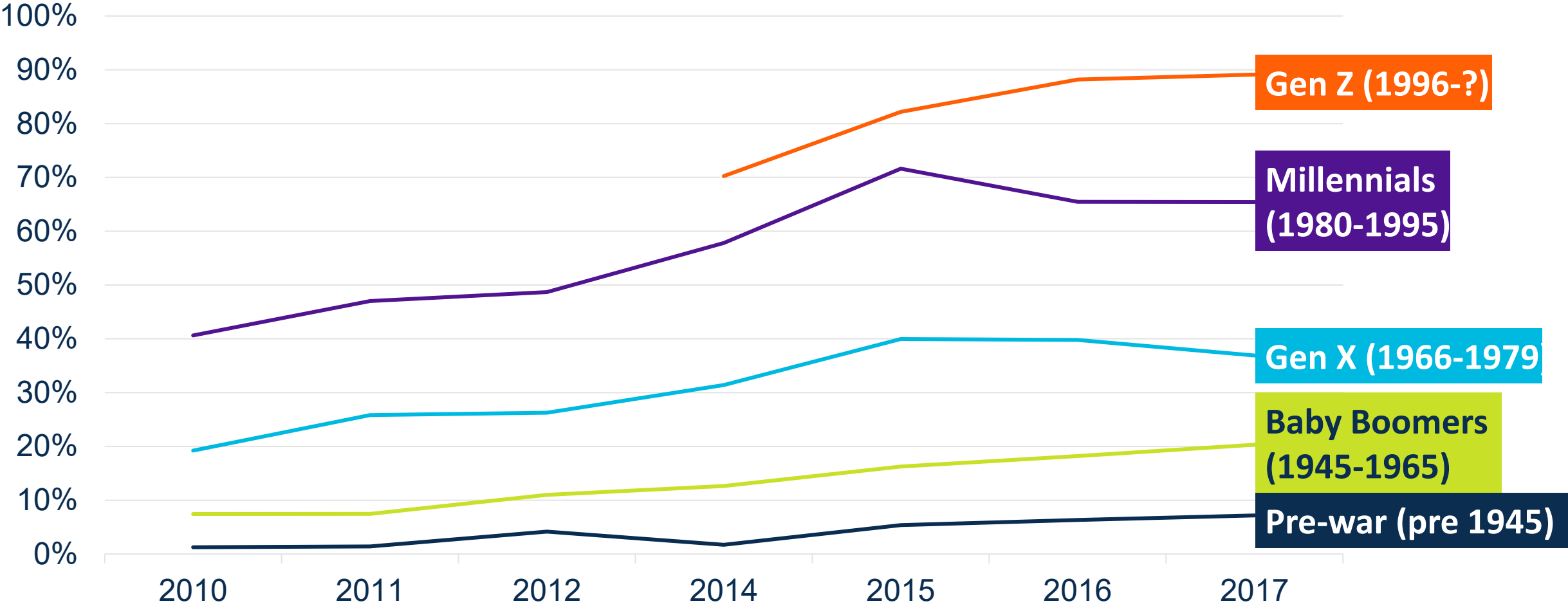
6. Tension is NOT the new generational issue – it's separation...

A “dangerous experiment” in age segregation...



...and living very separate digital lives...

Proportion of French adults using online social networks everyday





Separation leads to stereotyping...

facebook A group where we all pretend to be boomers



Final reflections

- Incredibly difficult to engage well on culture wars – BUT impossible to ignore: will keep coming back, and too important an issue for nation and universities
- Tension between generations not just natural, it's *essential and beneficial* – a type of “demographic metabolism” that prevents us becoming a “stagnant pond”
- Outright “culture wars” are different, in cause and effect: don't misdiagnose between period, lifecycle and cohort effects
- Stay optimistic: not unusually far apart, not paying as much attention to cultural division as may think...
- ...but need more focus on bringing us together, rather than exaggerating division

Thank you

bit.ly/culturewarreport

<https://generations-book.org/>

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