



UK Nations Fracture as Government Trust Bubble Deflates

- *3 in 4 Brits say the nations that make up the UK are becoming more divided**
- *UK Government's management of pandemic fuels sentiment for the break-up of the union**
- *Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy 20-points higher amongst ethnic minority communities**

LONDON, 1st March 2021 - Trust in government 'to do the right thing' has collapsed 16 points from 60% at the height of the first lockdown last April to 44% at the height of the third lockdown this February.

The findings, from the UK supplement to the 21st annual Edelman Trust Barometer – the largest survey of institutional trust in the world – show that despite the success of the vaccine rollout, the trust bubble that characterised the government's initial handling of the pandemic has deflated.

The study suggests the integrity of the United Kingdom may now be under threat, with perceived mishandling of the pandemic and dissatisfaction around Brexit fuelling widespread concern about the future of the union between England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

Three in four people (75%) say that the nations that make up the UK are becoming more divided,* while 44% of Brits believe that the Brexit deal was a bad deal for the UK, compared to 31% of people who say it was a good deal and 25% who are undecided. Those who voted to leave the EU are more likely to be undecided.*

As Boris Johnson seeks to kick start a new chapter in the story of UK, the Barometer's findings suggest the UK Government faces three definitional tests. First, how it builds both trust and confidence as lockdown is lifted and how it works with the devolved administrations as restrictions ease. Second, how it delivers against its agenda to build back better and level up across the nations and regions. And third, whether it can persuade people of the benefits of remaining part of the union.

UK Government's Pandemic Performance Falls Short*

A majority (57%) of the British public say the UK Government has performed poorly in its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and the findings reveal the toll of the pandemic on people's lives.

Half (50%) of Brits say the Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing and nearly four in ten (38%) say it has had a negative impact on their physical health. Over a third say it has negatively impacted their future job prospects (34%), financial security (35%) and job security (36%).

The findings also expose how the UK Government's handling of the pandemic has damaged the perception of the UK amongst Britons. 44% of those in England, 60% of those in Scotland, 53% of those in Wales and 51% of those in Northern Ireland believe that the handling of the pandemic has had a negative impact on how they view the UK.

Far from bringing the United Kingdom together, the Covid-19 crisis has helped to expose divisions in the union. 65% of the British public say that the pandemic has made them realise how divided the countries that make up the UK are, 61% say there is a decreasing feeling of national unity and 59%



say it has made the breakup of the UK more likely – a number that jumps 11 percentage points to 70% amongst those living in Scotland.

Just 24% of Britons think that the UK Government has performed well in its response to the Covid-19 pandemic (25% of English people say so). The Scottish and Welsh Governments are seen as outperforming the UK Government by those living in these countries. 46% of people in Scotland say the Scottish Government has performed well in response to the pandemic, but just 15% of Scots say the UK Government has performed well. 35% of people in Wales say the Welsh Government has performed well, but only 21% say the same of the UK Government.

Similarly, trust in the Prime Minister sits at relatively low levels within the devolved nations - 32% in Wales, 34% in Scotland, and 32% in Northern Ireland. In England the figure is higher at 41%.

The leaders of the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales both enjoy considerably higher levels of trust among their populations than Boris Johnson. Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's First Minister, enjoys the trust of 62% of those in Scotland, and Mark Drakeford, the Welsh First Minister, enjoys the trust of 43% of people there. Only Arlene Foster, the leader of the power sharing executive in Northern Ireland, has lower trust levels (31%) than the Prime Minister among those in her own country.

The Fracturing and Division of the UK*

The UK Government's management of the pandemic appears to have fuelled sentiment for the break-up of the union in Scotland. 45% there say the way the UK Government has handled the pandemic has made them more favourable towards independence, compared to 29% who say it has made them more in favour of remaining in the UK, while 20% say it has not impacted their opinion either way and 6% say they don't know.

Opinions in Wales and Northern Ireland are more evenly divided, but significant proportions of the populations in both nations (30% in Wales and 33% in Northern Ireland) think the way the UK Government has handled the pandemic has made them more favourable towards independence.

There is a sense of grievance about the relationship between Westminster and the leaders in Holyrood, the Senedd and Stormont, with a majority of people in Scotland (70%), Wales (56%), and Northern Ireland (53%) believing that the UK Government does not work well with their national leaders.

At a time when the UK Government's stated ambition is to level up, there is a pervasive sense of unfairness among a majority of the populations of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. 65% of those in Scotland, 60% of those in Wales and 66% of those in Northern Ireland believe that far from treating each nation equally the UK Government prioritises the needs of some nations of the UK over others. In England that view is shared by 43% of people.

Moreover, the UK Government is seen as out of touch, with a majority of those in Scotland (66%), Wales (56%), and Northern Ireland (62%), believing that the UK Government does not have enough local knowledge to represent all the nations of the UK effectively. In England, the figure is much lower at 44%.

Our findings reveal people also feel dissatisfied with how they are represented in the UK media. In Scotland (66%), Wales (61%), and Northern Ireland (59%), a majority of the public believe that the UK wide media does a poor job of representing all the nations and regions. In England, it's 47%.



A majority of those outside England would also like to see more representation in the UK media of all the nations and regions that make up the UK. 59% of those in Scotland, and 52% of those in both Wales and Northern Ireland feel this way. The figure falls to 43% in England.

Despite all the fractures and grievances exposed in the study, when asked whether they would vote for their country to leave the union if there was a referendum today, people in Scotland are split, with 40% for and 41% against.

With elections to the Holyrood Parliament just months away and increasing talk about a new independence referendum, a significant proportion of the population remain undecided on the issue, with nearly 20% of those in Scotland unsure of how they might vote. That suggests hearts and minds are there to be won if there was an independence referendum.

In Wales and Northern Ireland, there may be growing discontent but the case for independence appears far weaker. In Wales, 25% said they would support independence if voting today, with 58% against, and 17% undecided. In Northern Ireland, 24% said they would want to leave if voting today, with 59% against and 17% undecided.

Ed Williams, President and CEO Edelman EMEA, said:

“The high Spring tide of trust in government in April last year has ebbed away and revealed cracks in the United Kingdom. Whether these divisions can be repaired or represent growing fault lines is now a fundamental question for the future of the union. For those looking to keep the UK together, building trust across all the nations and regions as the country emerges from the pandemic is an urgent and critical task, not just for government but for business and the media.”

Overcoming Covid-19 Vaccine Hesitancy Among Ethnic Minority Communities and Younger People*

If the Covid-19 vaccine was made available to them, 82% of the British public say they would have it. However, there is a worrying 20-point gap when considering ethnicity – 84% of people who identify as white say they would take the vaccine, compared to just 64% among ethnic minority communities.

There is a major need to tackle vaccine hesitancy, with those in ethnic minority communities twice as likely to say they would not have the vaccine (16%, compared to 8% of white people), and much more likely to be undecided on whether they would have it (21%, compared to 8% of white people).

There is also a stark difference between age groups – with younger people more reluctant to get the jab. Only 69% of Gen Z (aged 18-23), 73% of millennials (aged 24-39) and 82% of Gen X (aged 40-55) would have it, compared to 93% of baby boomers (aged 56-74) and 98% of those aged over 75.

When it comes to the voices the UK public trust to convince them that the Covid-19 vaccine is safe and effective, politicians are at the bottom of the pile – with their local MP at 40% and the Prime Minister at 45%. Medical experts are the most trusted – with your GP at 78%, medical academics at 76%, and public health officials at 71%.



Strikingly, there is significantly lower trust in medical experts around the vaccine among ethnic minority communities – with just 58% trusting public health officials (compared to 72% of white people), 66% trusting their local GP (compared to 79% of white people) and 67% trusting medical academics (compared to 77% of white people).

Overall, there is significant opportunity to empower and mobilise people's more immediate networks to provide reassurance - 74% of the UK public trust a member of their family and 71% their closest friend. Amongst people from ethnic minority communities 'a member of your family' and 'your closest friend' are the voices they trust most – considerably more than medical experts.

Ed Williams, President and CEO Edelman EMEA, said:

“These findings have clear implications for the message carriers the government should look to use, and how they target particular communities and groups when they promote and rollout the vaccine in the weeks and months ahead. A sophisticated approach to communications to overcome vaccine hesitancy will not only save lives; it is a societal and economic imperative.”

UK Public Has 'Do As I Say, Not As I Do' Mentality when it Comes to Climate Change**

In the year when the UK holds the presidency of the G7 and hosts COP26, our study reveals that there is a significant opportunity for Britain to show domestic and global leadership to address climate change.

Two thirds of people say that tackling climate change is more important than ever before (66%), but just one third believe climate change will improve in their lifetime (33%).

Whilst the world has spent a year tackling the global pandemic, two in five people say that Covid-19 has in fact made them more conscious of the impact of climate change (40%).

Brits think that both government and business are currently falling short on climate change. Only 30% think that government is doing enough to tackle it, and just 27% think business is doing enough. There are clear expectations on government and business to partner, with three quarters (78%) of people saying they should work together to tackle the issue.

The British public think it's not just for government and business to act to tackle climate change. They believe that they have personal responsibility, the ability to act and the licence to do so. Over six in ten agree with the statements 'it is my responsibility to take action to tackle climate change' (65%), 'I understand how I can personally contribute to tackling climate change (64%)' and 'I am personally taking steps to help tackle climate change' (63%).

However, there is a gap between the actions the public say that individuals could take to have an impact on climate change and the actions they themselves are prepared to take. There is a pervasive 'do as I say, not as I do' mentality.

64% of Brits say that using an electric car, rather than petrol car, would have an impact in addressing climate change, but only 34% of them would be prepared to or already use an electric car, rather than a petrol car - a 30-point gap.



Similarly, 61% of Brits say that going on fewer international holidays to reduce air travel would have an impact on addressing climate change, but only 34% say they would go on fewer international holidays to reduce their air travel – a 27-point gap.

Of the 14 individual actions we explored, only one saw a single figure gap between what people thought would make a difference and what they would actually be prepared to do, or already do. That action was around reducing plastic waste, with 78% saying reducing plastic waste would help address climate change and 70% saying they would be prepared to or are already reducing their plastic waste – an 8-point gap.

Ruth Warder, Edelman UK Chief Client Officer and EMEA Brand Chair, said:

“Our research suggests that people are more fearful about the long-term impact of climate change than Covid-19. The heightened awareness around plastic waste - the so called ‘Attenborough effect’ - shows considerable opportunity for public education and empowerment campaigns. Businesses and governments should partner to story tell in a way that is accessible and resonates - reducing the gap between the individual actions people think would positively impact climate change and the willingness of people to take action themselves.”

Trust in Media Collapses***

Trust in all information sources is at a record low in the UK. Not one of the sources of news in the study – traditional media, search engines, owned or social media – is trusted; and all have declined significantly in the last year. Strikingly, traditional media has had the steepest annual decline of any media source in almost a decade of tracking, down 13 points year on year.

A majority of people in the UK (54%) say that journalists are purposely trying to mislead by saying things that they know are false or grossly exaggerated. A similar proportion (56%) think that most news organisations are putting ideology or political position above informing the public about what is happening in the world.

The so-called echo chamber of media – the phenomenon of consumers seeking confirmation bias in their media choice – and the amplification of unverified information is a serious problem in the UK. Just one in five Brits (22%) have good information hygiene: regularly engaging with the news, avoiding echo chambers, vetting information and checking its veracity before spreading it.

Ed Williams, President and CEO Edelman EMEA, said:

“The way information is provided and consumed has radically changed. If we are to improve trust in our traditional media, then it is imperative that it reports with precision rather than clickbait. Journalism training needs to be funded to promote rigorous fact checking, impartiality and fairness, and public media literacy and information hygiene must be improved. And unless effort is made to determine the difference between free speech, fabrication and falsehoods, trust will continue to fall, and societal progress will be stymied.”

Business Seen as the Only Competent and Ethical Institution in the UK***

Business has overtaken government as the most trusted institution in the UK, seizing the high ground of trust by proactively developing vaccines in record time, and finding new ways to work



together. Importantly, business is now the only institution seen as both competent and ethical, moving up from last year, when it was viewed as competent but not ethical.

Trust continues to be higher with proximity, with 71% of the British public placing trust in 'my employer' and 61% placing trust in 'people in my local community'. The biggest opportunity to earn business trust surrounds guarding information quality. Communications from 'my employer' is the most believable source of information (63%), beating national government (61%), named source media reports (58%), and advertising (45%).

Given the new expectations of business, there are now new demands of CEOs: eight in ten want CEOs to speak out on important social issues, such as the pandemic's impact, job automation and societal problems. 59% expect CEOs to step in when the government does not fix societal problems and 60% expect CEOs to take the lead on change rather than waiting for government to impose change on them.

Hugh Taggart, Edelman UK General Manager Corporate Affairs & Global Head of Crisis, said:

"With business the most trusted institution in the UK, and the only one seen as both competent and ethical, CEOs have a big mandate to show leadership and step into the void left by government. There is also a weight of public expectation on their shoulders. Companies cannot afford to have a transactional relationship with society – they must demonstrate mutual benefit and make a greater contribution to society."

Notes to Editors

*To add further insight for the UK to the [2021 Edelman Trust Barometer](#), a supplementary survey was done by research firm Edelman Data & Intelligence (DxI) and consisted of 20-minute online interviews conducted between 3rd-12th February 2021. This UK Supplement online survey sampled over 3,000 respondents, consisting of 2,019 members of the general population and then boost samples of 441 in Scotland, 401 in Wales, and 179 in Northern Ireland to create total samples of 601, 502 and 232 respectively. The general population sample is nationally representative of the UK population with regard to gender, age and region. Boost samples were weighted to be representative of UK population with regard to gender and age.

**The survey on attitudes to climate change in the UK to supplement the [2021 Edelman Trust Barometer](#), was done by research firm Edelman Data & Intelligence (DxI) and consisted of 20-minute online interviews conducted between 7th – 14th January 2021. This UK Supplement online survey sampled more than 2,500 respondents, consisting of 2,014 general population respondents aged 18 and over. The general population sample is nationally representative of the UK population with regard to gender, age and region.

*** The [2021 Edelman Trust Barometer](#) is the firm's 21st annual trust and credibility survey. The survey was powered by research firm Edelman Data & Intelligence (DxI) and consisted of 30-minute online interviews conducted between October 19 and November 18, 2020. The 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer online survey sampled more than 33,000 respondents, which includes 1,150 general population respondents across 28 countries and 200 informed public respondents in each country, except China and the U.S., which have a sample of 500 informed public respondents each and Nigeria which has 100 informed public respondents. <https://www.edelman.com/trust/>

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**Further Information**

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