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# Racial prejudice in Britain today

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# Introduction

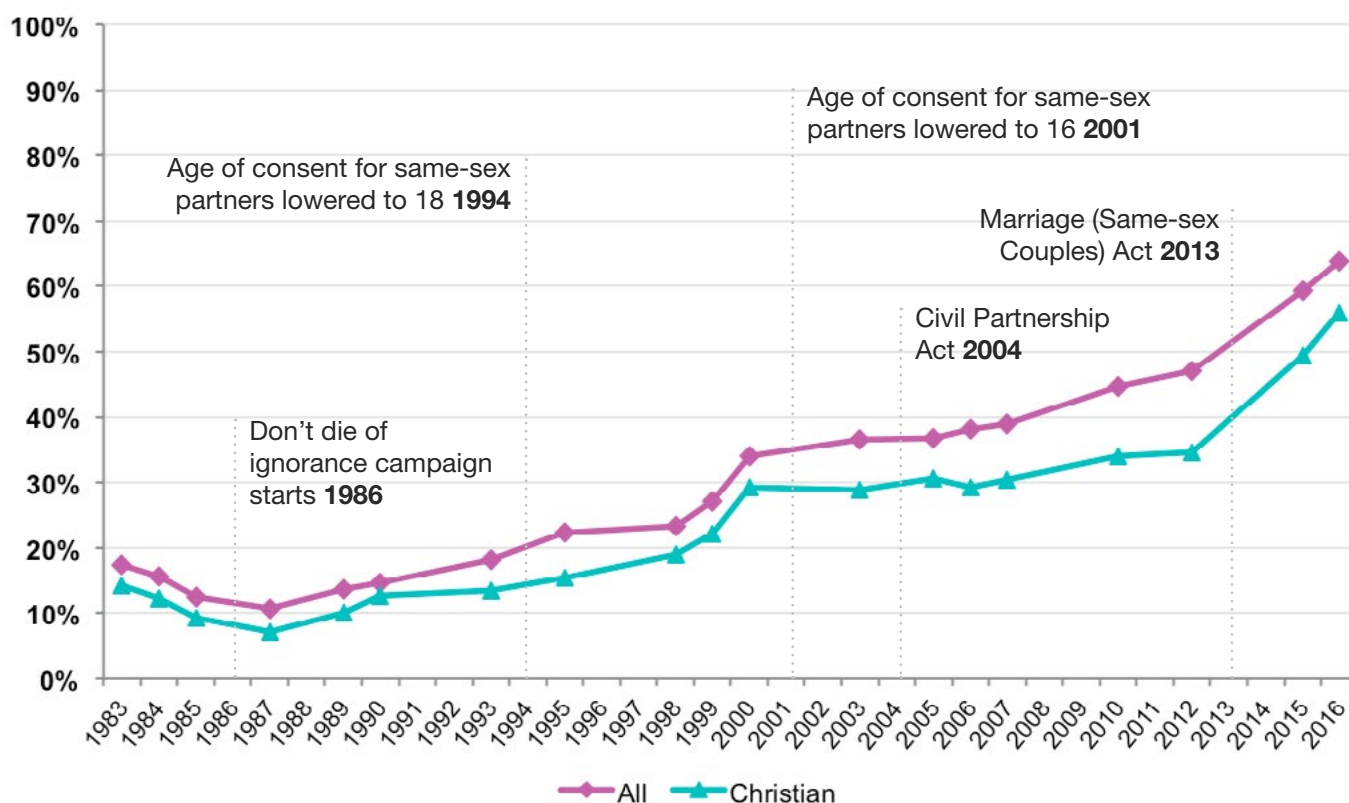
Over the decades since it was established in 1983, NatCen's British Social Attitudes Survey has tracked a long term trend of social liberalisation in which attitudes to same sex couples, sex outside of marriage, and abortion have all steadily softened.

More recently, public debate has explored the idea that political, economic and social liberalism are all in decline, with events such as the election of President Trump in the USA and the UK referendum result interpreted by some commentators as a backlash – signs of the 'death of liberalism'<sup>1</sup>.

But data from this year's British Social Attitudes Survey shows the trend in social liberalism continues to accelerate, even among traditionally conservative groups such as older people and the religious<sup>2</sup>.

The most striking example of this trend is attitudes to same sex relationships, where the percentage of people who say they feel same sex relationships are 'not wrong at all' continues to rise sharply<sup>3</sup>.

## Acceptance of same-sex relationships has increased quickly in the last four years, especially among Christians



However, this trend of increasing social liberalism is not universal.

1 See for instance <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/14/opinion/the-death-of-liberalism.html>, <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2016/11/donald-trumps-victory-marks-death-liberalism/>

2 NatCen's British Social Attitudes Survey, 2017,

3 There is nonetheless a significant minority of BSA respondents who remain opposed to same sex relationships – in BSA 2017 19% of respondents stated they felt same sex relationships were 'always' or 'mostly' wrong.

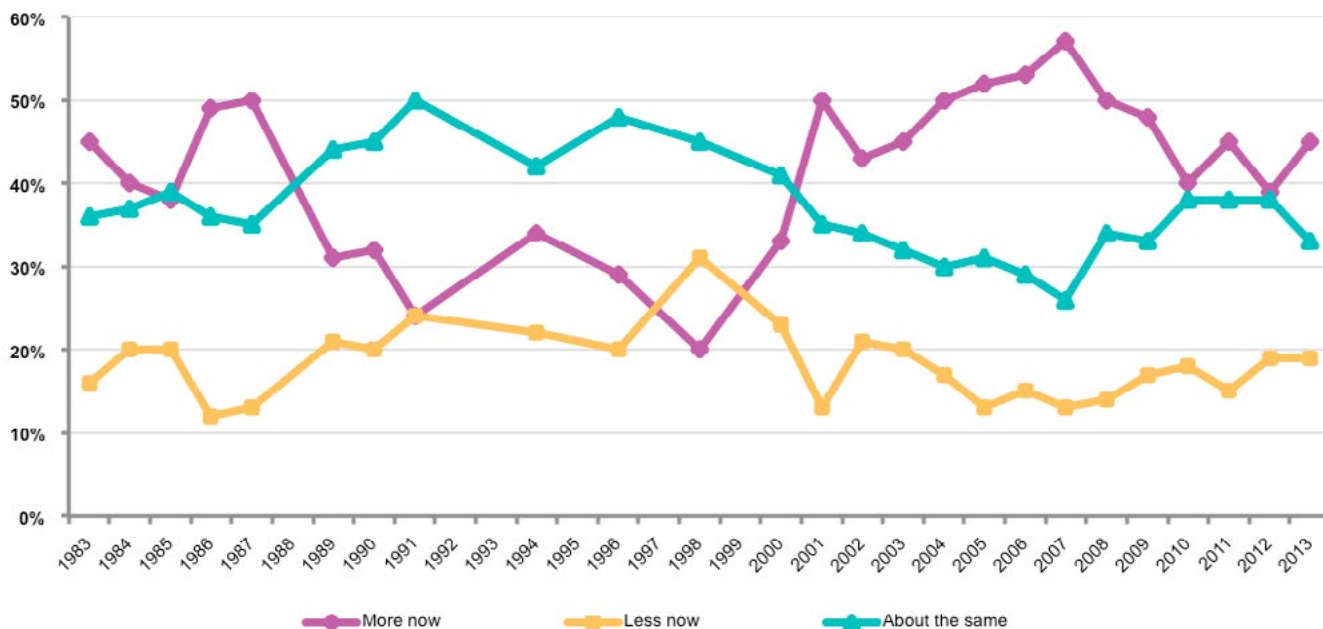




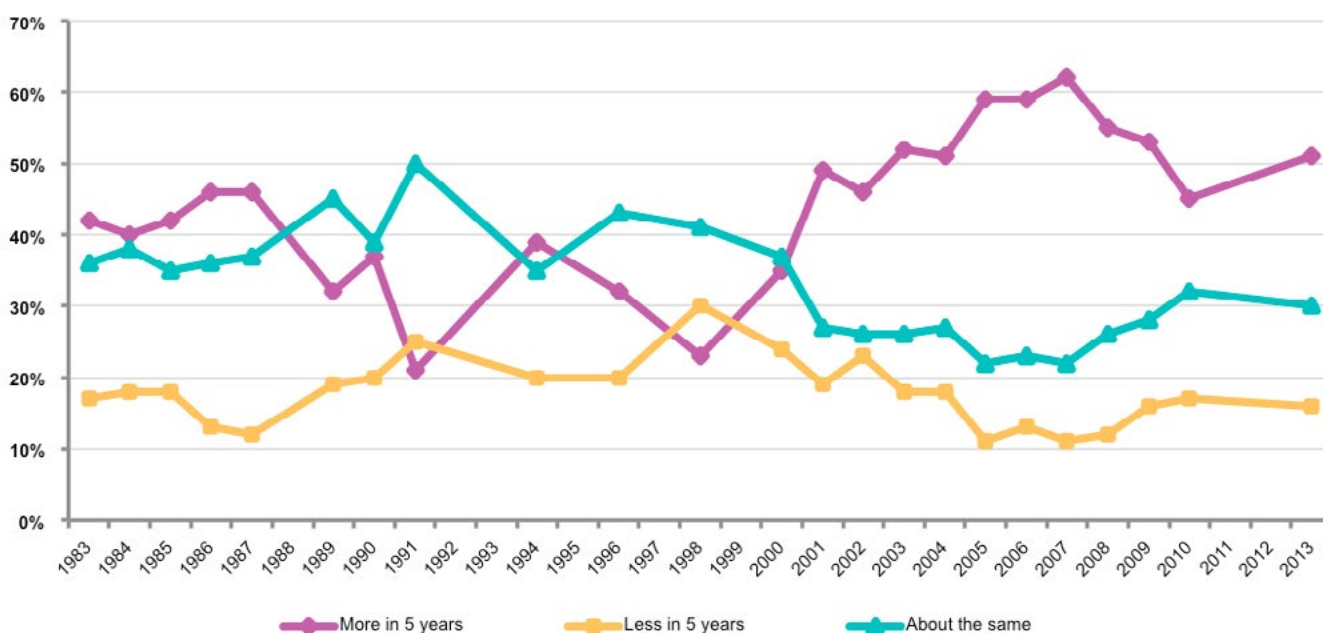
# Racial prejudice – the long term trend

Between 1983 and 2013, NatCen asked a series of questions about racial prejudice as part of the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA).

**Do you think there is generally more racial prejudice in Britain now than there was 5 years ago, less, or about the same amount?**



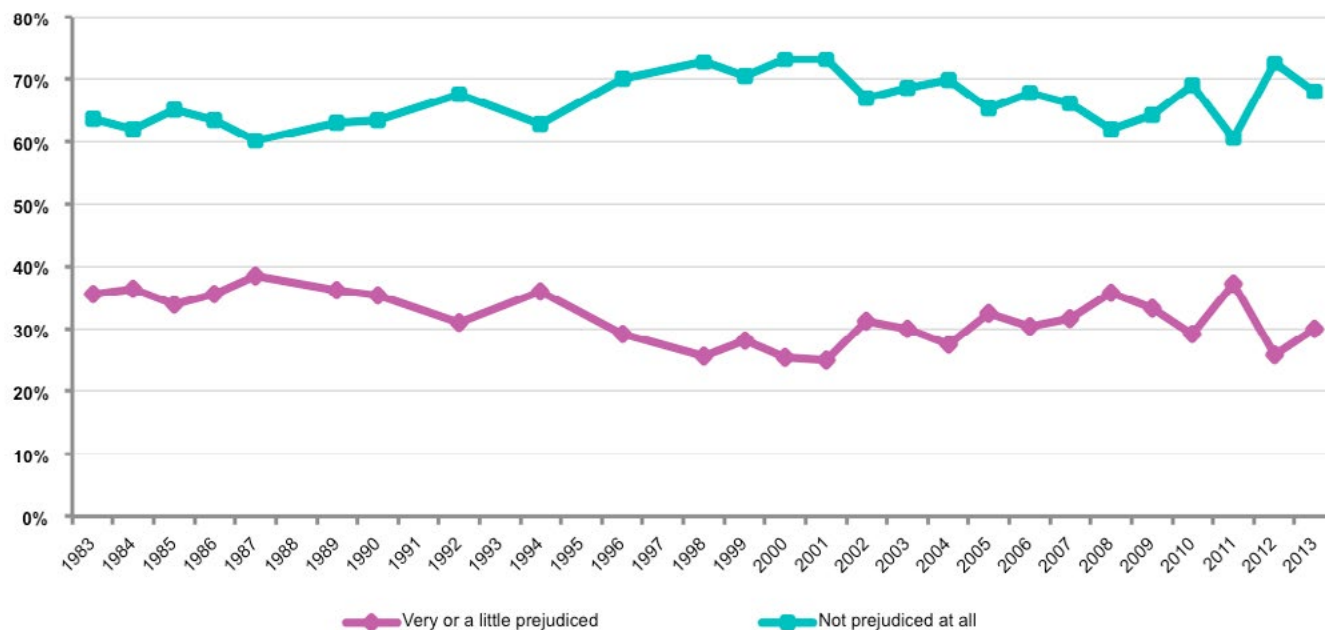
**Do you think there will be more, less, or about the same amount of racial prejudice in Britain in 5 years' time compared with now?**



It is striking to note that across more than three decades, we have consistently felt that racial prejudice has been on the increase or unchanged, and (with the exception of 1991), have predicted a continuation of that trend when asked to look to the future. What might explain this? It seems likely that this picture is a result of both increasing awareness and decreasing social tolerance of racial prejudice.

In addition to asking the public about their perception of racial prejudice in wider society, we also asked respondents to tell us whether they themselves were prejudiced. Specifically, we asked whether they considered themselves very prejudiced against people of other races, a little prejudiced, not prejudiced at all or 'other'.

### How would you describe yourself ... prejudiced OR not prejudiced against people of other races?



In the 30 years between 1983 when BSA was founded and 2013 when we last asked this question on BSA, the proportion of the public who described themselves as either 'very' or 'a little' racially prejudiced varied between a quarter and over a third of the population. It has never fallen below 25%.

Given that racial prejudice is not generally perceived as a positive characteristic, there is good reason to assume that the actual proportion of the British public who are racially prejudiced may be higher.

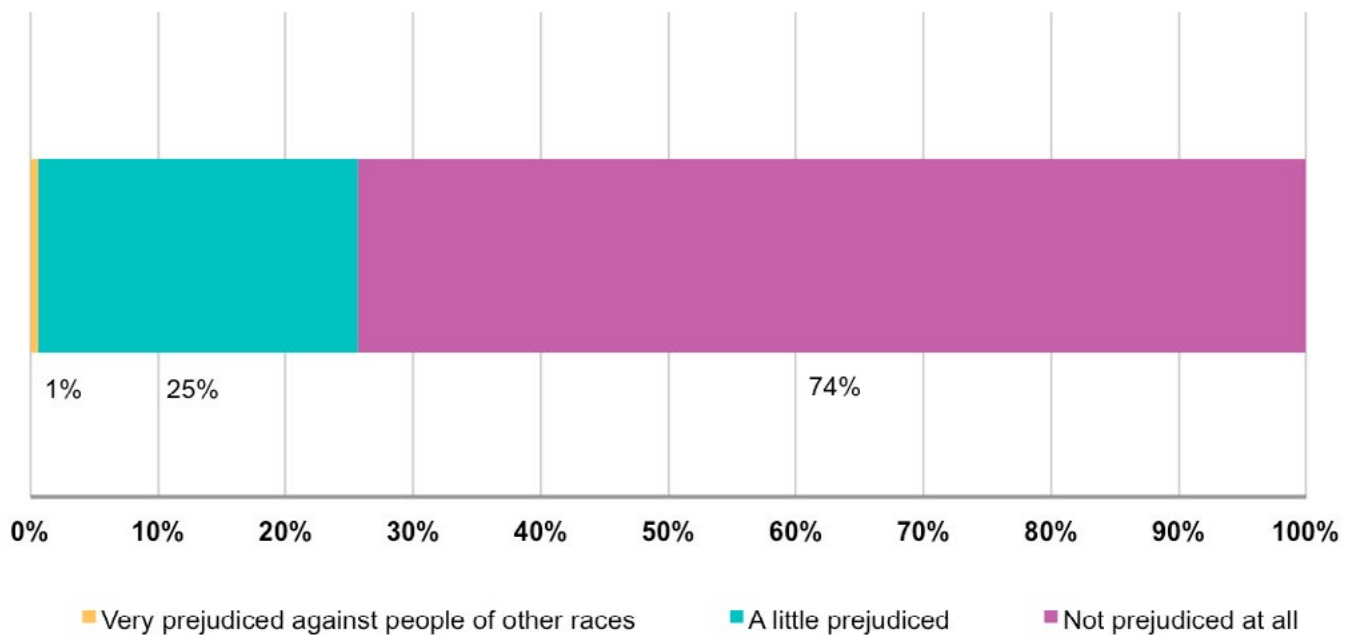
Most significantly, when it comes to racial prejudice, we are not seeing the clear trend towards social 'liberalisation' that is so marked in other areas, particularly attitudes to same sex relationships.

# Racial prejudice now

Has anything changed in the last four years? In March 2017, we asked this same question on the NatCen Panel.

The NatCen Panel has a random probability sample drawn from the British Social Attitudes Survey. By using both web and telephone, the panel is able to include people who are less likely to respond online. Taken together, this means that we can be confident that the Panel reflects the attitudes of the British public with a high degree of accuracy<sup>4</sup>.

**How would you describe yourself ... prejudiced OR not prejudiced against people of other races?**



This year, 26% of respondents described themselves as 'very' or 'a little' racially prejudiced.

So for nearly 35 years, while the percentage of the population describing themselves as racially prejudiced has varied, it remains the case that it has never fallen below 25%, and we are still not seeing a clear liberalising trend.

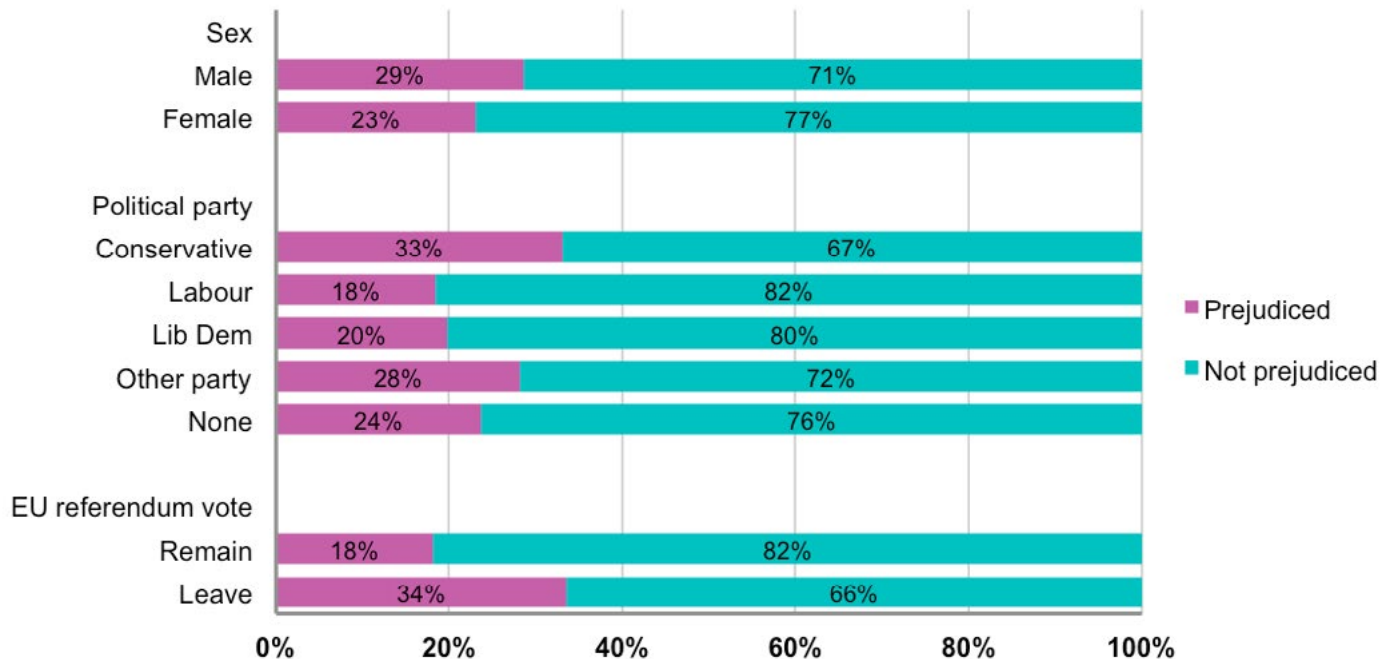
## Who is describing themselves as racially prejudiced?

We used regression analysis on the panel data to identify relationships between racial prejudice and key demographic and social variables:

We found statistically significant relationships in three areas: sex, party political identification, and declared vote in the EU referendum. Being male, a Conservative party supporter and a Leave voter are all associated with a higher likelihood of an individual describing themselves as racially prejudiced.

<sup>4</sup> It is, however, important to note that data collected using different modes is not directly comparable. Evidence on the impact of shifting sensitive questions from face-to-face surveys (such as BSA) to surveys conducted by web/telephone (such as the NatCen Panel) suggests that people may be more likely to report views that they think are less socially acceptable.

### Racial prejudice by sex, self-reported referendum vote, and grouped party identification



Perhaps more striking are the areas where we did not find a statistically significant relationship: level of education, social class, income, age and region. This is particularly interesting given the strong association we see between these variables and attitudes to immigration in this year's BSA.

## Is this all just liberal handwringing?

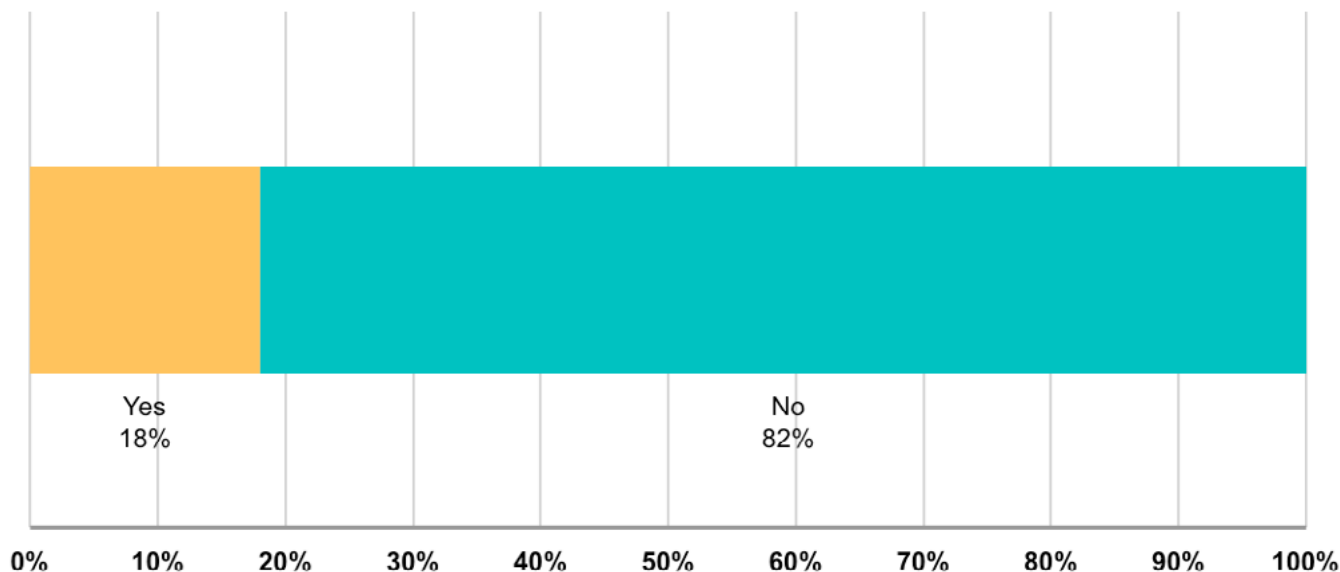
As we noted above, it is likely that a decrease in the social acceptability of racial prejudice has been accompanied by an increase in sensitivity to prejudice – including in ourselves. Put simply, it is possible that we have become far more likely to categorise our own and others' views as prejudiced.

But it does not therefore follow that the quarter of the population who describe themselves as racially prejudiced are doing so incorrectly, or on the basis of very subtle or subconscious factors.

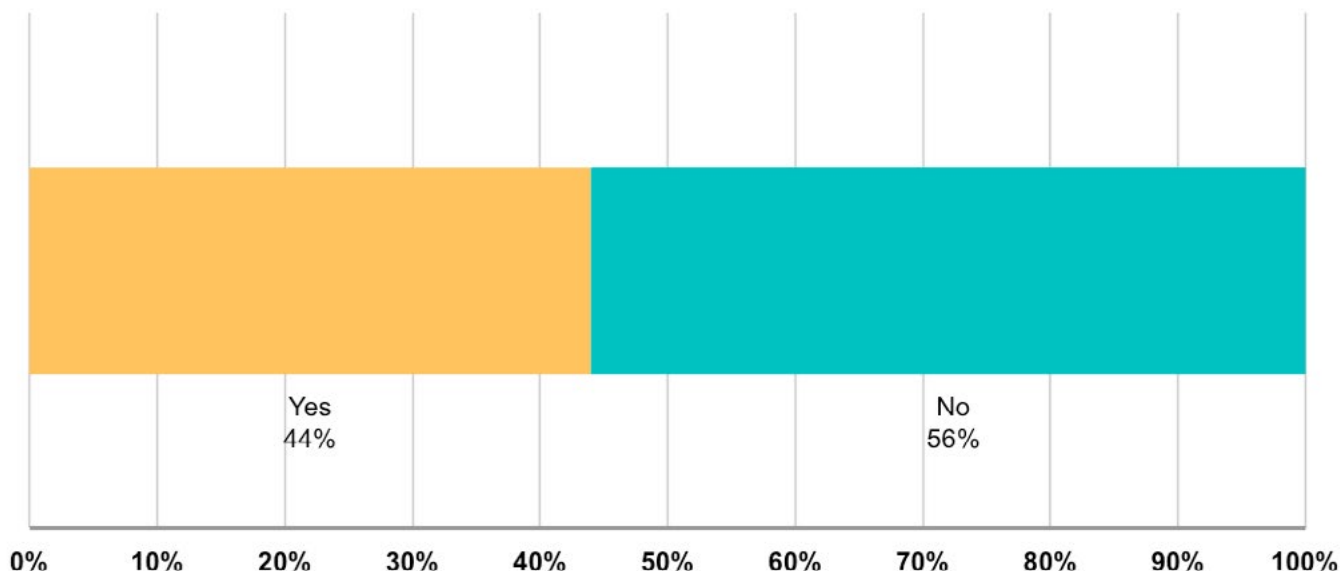
The 2014 European Social Survey asked some questions about race that shed some light in this area.

When asked whether “some races or ethnic groups are born less intelligent”, 18% of UK respondents said yes. While a clear majority rejected this idea, this finding nonetheless shows that a substantial proportion of the public hold a view that indicates significant racial prejudice.



**Are some races or ethnic groups born less intelligent?**

When asked whether “some races or ethnic groups are born harder working”, 44% of respondents said yes. As with innate intelligence, this shows a very substantial proportion of the population support an idea that demonstrates significant racial prejudice.

**Are some races or ethnic groups born harder working?**

In the ESS data, age and educational attainment have a statistically significant relationship with believing that some races or ethnic groups are born less intelligent or more hardworking. Older people, and people with lower levels of educational attainment were more likely to answer ‘yes’ to both questions.

Interestingly, gender and income have a statistically significant relationship with believing that some races and ethnic groups are born less intelligent, but have no effect on the belief that some races and ethnic groups are born more hardworking. Men, and people on lower incomes were more likely to answer 'yes' when asked whether some races and ethnic groups are born less intelligent.

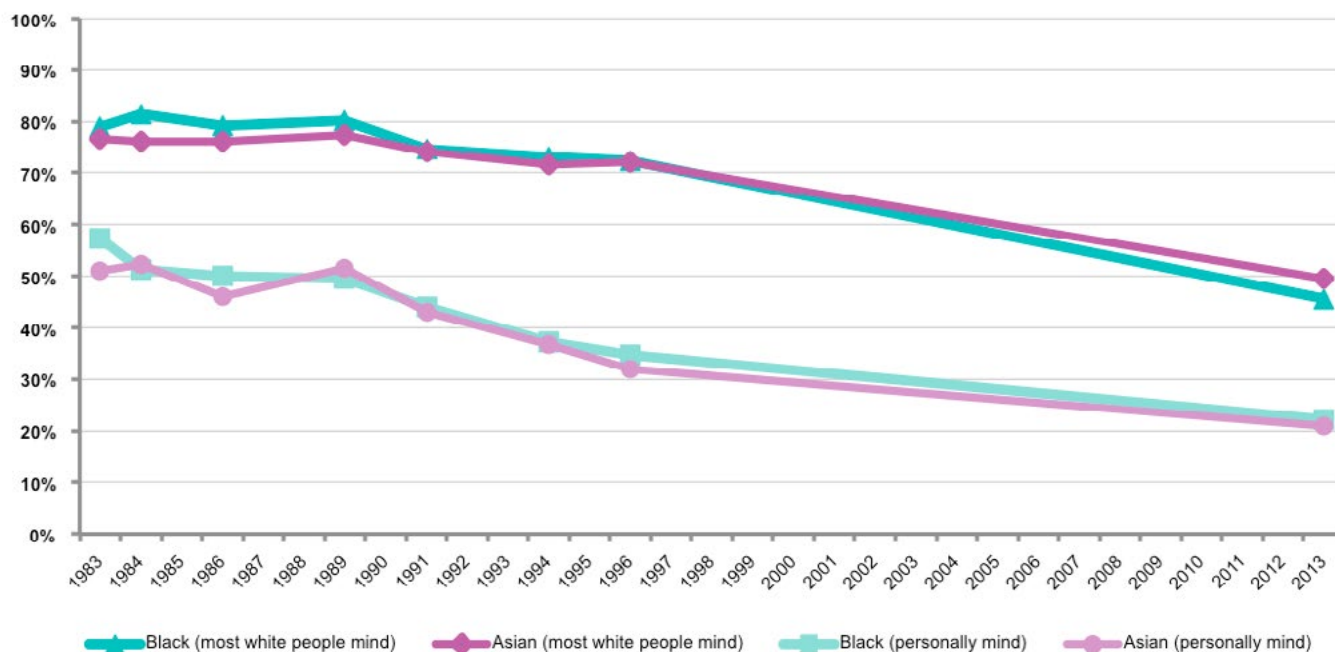
## Does this mean nothing has changed?

While the proportion of the population describing themselves as somewhat racially prejudiced is not following the consistent downward trend we see in other social attitudes, data from BSA suggests that the **focus** of that prejudice may be shifting.

Between 1983 and 2013 we asked respondents questions about how 'most White people in Britain' would feel about a close relative marrying someone who was Black or Asian, and how they themselves would feel if a close relative married someone who was Black or Asian.

As with the general question about racial prejudice, respondents were much more likely to perceive prejudice in others than in themselves. But unlike the general question about racial prejudice, we do see a significant and steady decline in the percentage of respondents who say that both 'most White people in Britain' and they themselves would 'mind a lot' or 'mind a little' if a close relative married someone who was Black or Asian.

### Do you think most white people in Britain would mind/would you mind if a close relative were to marry a person of black or West Indian/Asian origin?



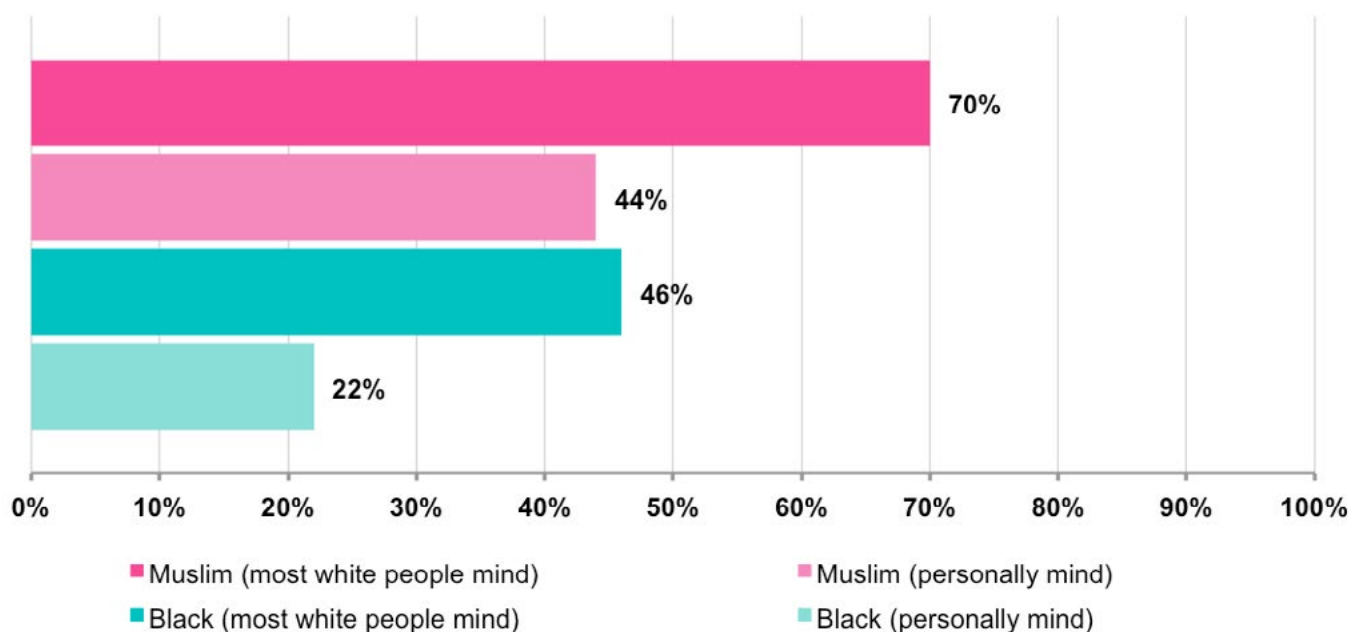
It is important to note that this decline starts from a relatively high base. Despite the downward trend, when we last asked this question in 2013, 21% of respondents still said they would mind if a close family member married an Asian person, and 22% said they would mind if a close family member married a Black person.

Interestingly, at several points in the time series more people said they would mind 'a lot' or 'a little' if a close relative married someone who was Black or Asian than described themselves as racially prejudiced.



Finally, in 2013, as part of a module on attitudes to immigration, we also asked about attitudes to marriage in relation to Muslims. 70% of respondents said that 'most White British people' would mind if a close relative married a Muslim and 44% of respondents said they would mind themselves.

**Do you think most white people in Britain would mind/would you mind if a close relative were to marry a person who is Muslim/of black or West Indian origin?**



So while prejudice against some groups may be declining, it seems that other forms of prejudice may be rising in their place, accounting for the mixed trend data on racial prejudice as a whole.

## How this contributes to racial inequality

A significant body of evidence suggests that even subtle racial prejudices contribute directly to racial inequalities. One example of this is in employment, where racial bias has been shown to affect recruitment practices<sup>5</sup>, promotion, and access to training and mentoring<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, in education there is evidence that teachers' perception of Black pupils can have a negative impact on both educational attainment<sup>7</sup> and discipline<sup>8</sup>. Institutionalised racial prejudice within the criminal justice system, where BAME people are consistently overrepresented, has been highlighted as a key concern in decades of research and public enquiries from the Scarman report onwards.

5 Wood, M, (2010) A Test for Racial Discrimination in Recruitment Practices in British Cities, DWP Research Report 607

6 Hudson, M and Radu, D (2011) Poverty and Ethnicity: the role of employer attitudes and behaviour, JRF

7 Strand, S (2007) Minority Ethnic Pupils in the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, DCSF

8 Gillborn, D et al (2016) Race, Racism and Education: inequality, resilience and reform in policy and practice, Society for Educational Studies

# Conclusion

Compared to other social attitudes, where the last three decades have seen significant liberalisation, our attitudes to race appear more stable.

While it is true that a majority of the public do not consider themselves racially prejudiced, a considerable minority describe themselves as prejudiced, and there are sound reasons to believe both that the actual prevalence of racial prejudice is likely to be higher, and that some of this prejudice is of a very significant nature, such as believing that some races are born less intelligent.

Inequalities associated with race are endemic in UK society, across income, education, work, health, and criminal justice<sup>9</sup>. Public debate often focuses on extreme or overt forms of racism expressed by individuals, such as hate crimes, or the more distant, impersonal concept of institutional racism. In this context, it is perhaps important also to consider that the cultures and practices of our public and private institutions are made by individual people, and that even subtle prejudices can lead to significant inequalities.

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<sup>9</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission (2016) Healing a Divided Britain: the need for a comprehensive race equality strategy





