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What the world thinks about work



THE BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS TEAM



SOCIAL CHANGE INITIATIVE



September 2023

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Introduction

The World Values Survey (WVS) is an international research programme devoted to the study of people's social, political, economic, religious and cultural values around the world. Running since 1981, the WVS is the world's largest and most widely used social survey, with over 800,000 data downloads per year. The WVS covers 120 countries represented across seven waves of data, with the most recent wave – 7 – the largest wave yet.

The questionnaire has extensive coverage of a huge range of attitudes, beliefs and values. The WVS also has a 50% overlap with the European Values Survey (EVS), opening up comparisons with another five waves of European data.

In the UK, fieldwork was completed Mar-Sept 2022 by Ipsos, among a random probability sample of **3,056 adults aged 18+**. This included respondents in England (1,645) and boost samples in Scotland (523), Wales (437) and Northern Ireland (446). This means not only can we compare the UK against other countries around the world, but also the four UK nations against each other. (See the technical details section at the end of this report for more information on the UK sample and international samples.)

How countries were selected for inclusion in this report

This is wave 7 of WVS, which included around 90 countries and ran from 2017 to 2022. This report focuses on comparison with a cross-section of 24 countries from WVS wave 7 and EVS wave 5 (see table for fieldwork years).

Countries were initially shortlisted based on the availability of reliable and accurately weighted data and then narrowed down, focusing on global coverage (based on the [UN's standardised country coding system](#)), regional coverage and population size. This selection gives coverage of 12 of the 17 UN M49 geographic regions across 24 countries, representing almost 50% of the world's population (source: [World Bank](#)).

Latest data for the UK was collected in 2022. However, for analysis of trends over time, data is for Great Britain due to a lack of available trend data from Northern Ireland.

Questions with 10-point scale response options

For one question in this report, respondents were asked to give their answer on a numerical scale between 1 and 10, with only these two points on the scale labelled. For our analysis, following examination of the profile of responses and comparison with similar questions from other studies that use fully labelled semantic scales, we group the top three and bottom three response items together, with items 4–7 considered a middle group.

Countries included and latest years for which data is available

Australia (2018)	Japan (2019)
Brazil (2018)	Mexico (2018)
Canada (2020)	Morocco (2021)
China (2018)	Nigeria (2017/2018)
Egypt (2018)	Norway (2018)*
France (2018)*	Philippines (2019)
Germany (2017/2018)	Poland (2017/2018)
United Kingdom (2022)+	Russia (2017)
Greece (2017)	South Korea (2017/2018)
Indonesia (2018)	Spain (2017/2018)*
Iran (2020)	Sweden (2017/2018)*
Italy (2018)*	United States (2017)

* European Values Survey (EVS) country; 50% question coverage.

+ UK used comparing WVS7 data; Great Britain used for analysis over time due to data availability.

1. How important is work and should it always come first?

Of 24 countries, the UK public are least likely to say work is important in their life and among the least likely to say work should always come first, even if it means less leisure time

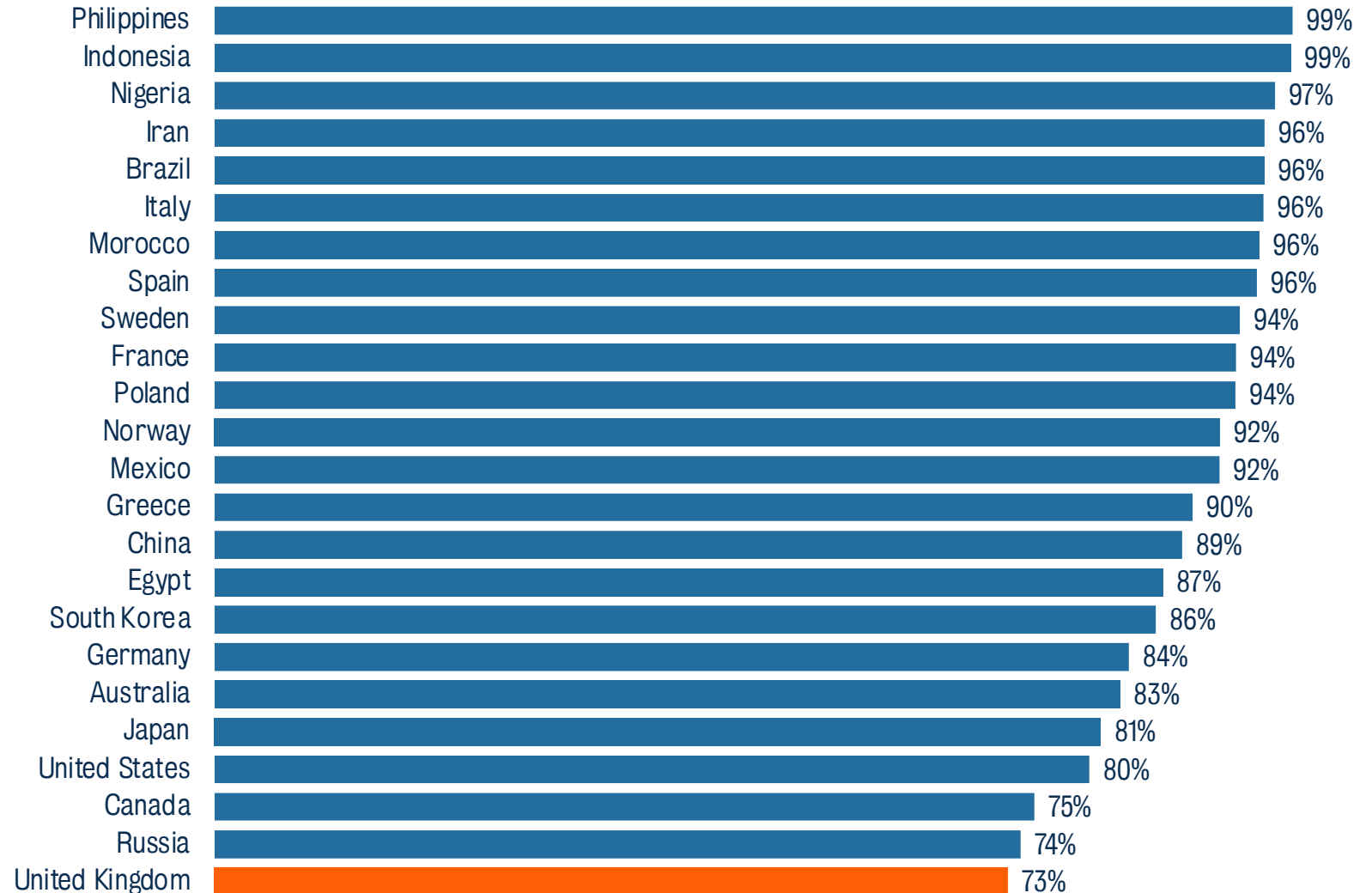


People in the UK are least likely to say work is important in their life

73% of the UK public say work is very or rather important in their life – the lowest of 24 countries, though on a par with Russia (74%) and Canada (75%).

Other western nations such as Italy, Spain, Sweden, France and Norway all rank much higher than the UK on this measure, with more than nine in 10 saying work is important in their life.

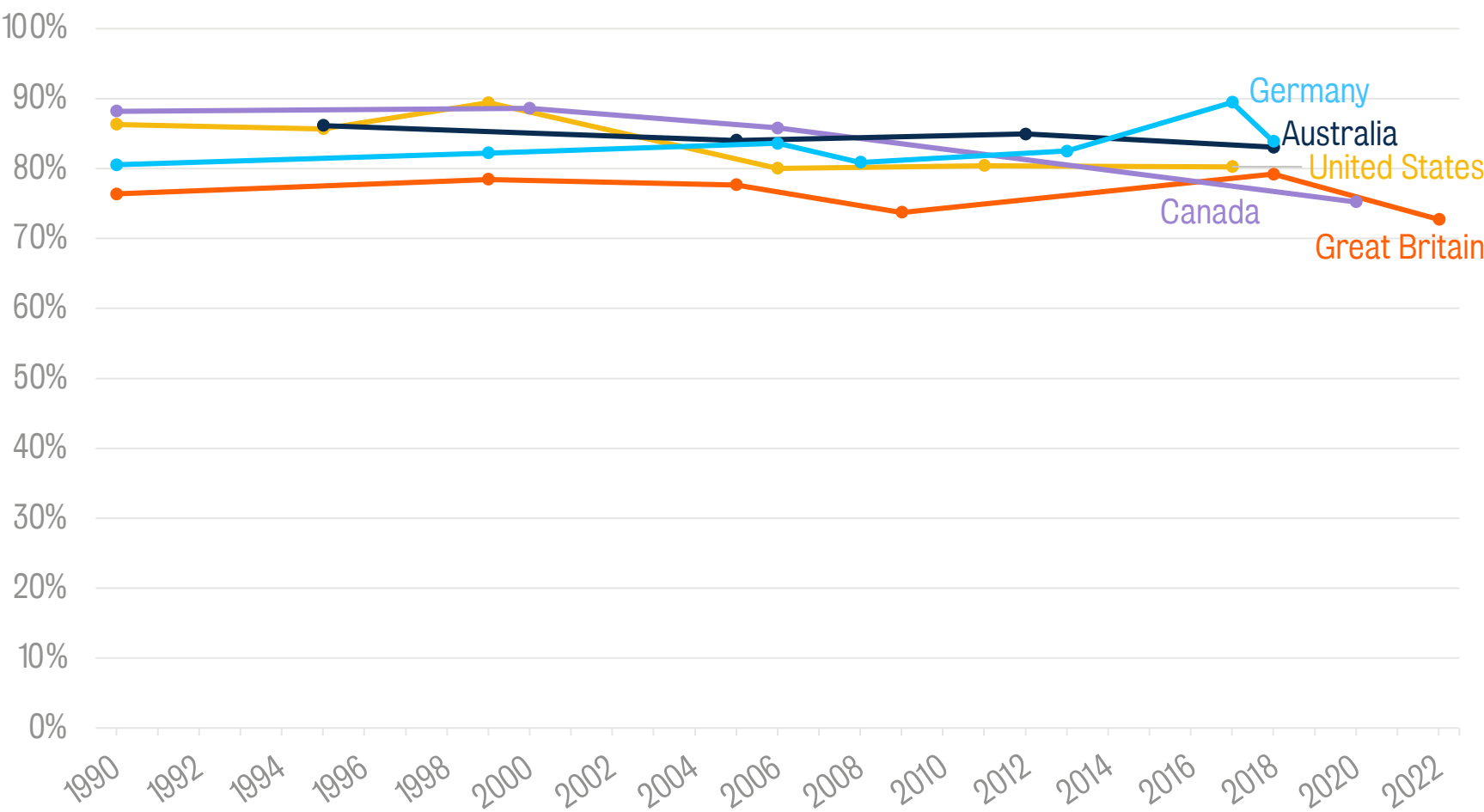
For each of the statements below, please indicate how important it is in your life: **Work**
(% who say very/rather important)



But this is not a new development: the share of the British public who say work is important in their life has hardly changed in three decades

As in several other high-income western nations, the proportion of Britons who say work is very or rather important in their life has changed little since 1990. Back then, 76% felt this way, compared with 73% in 2022.

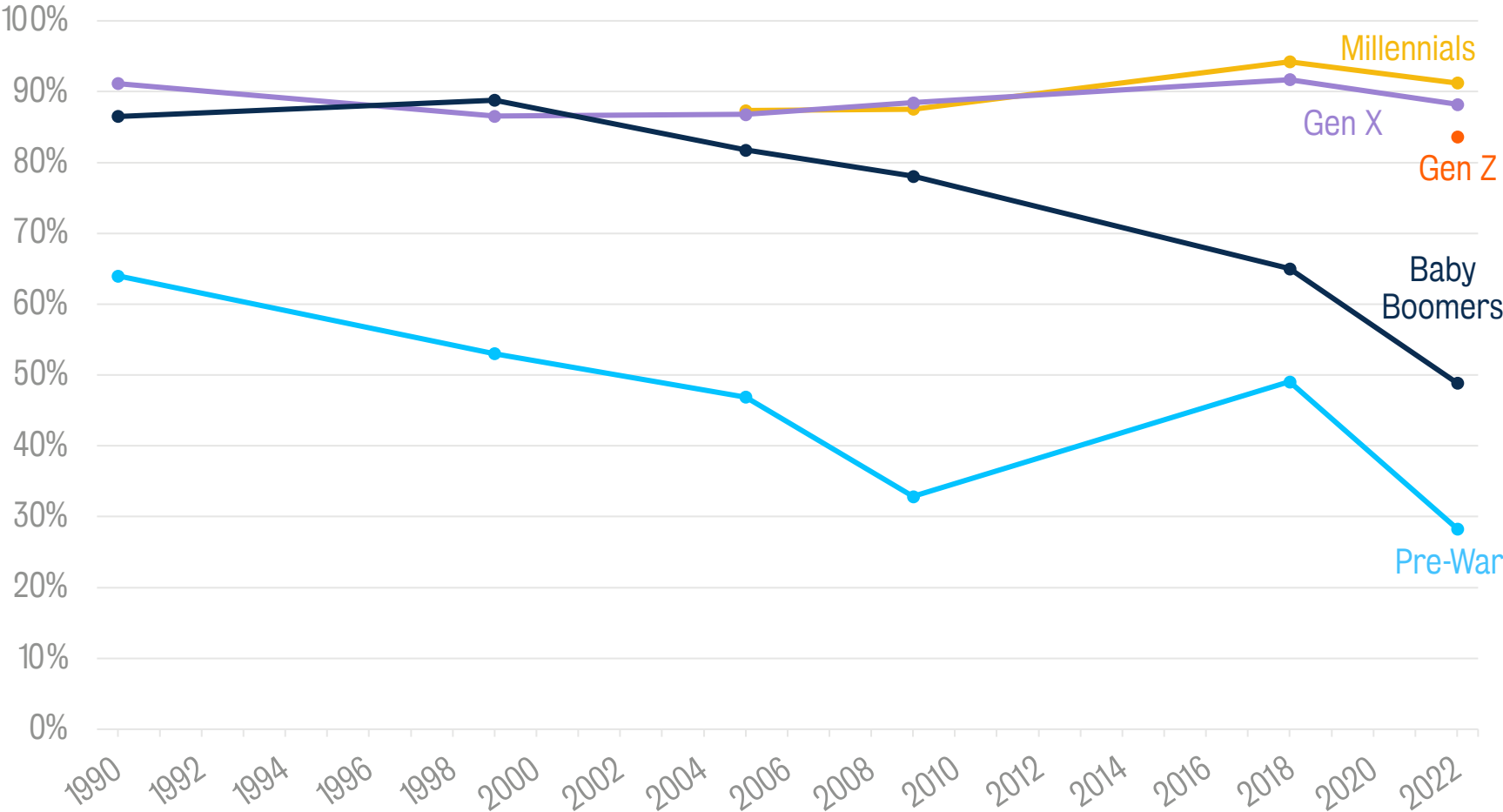
For each of the statements below, please indicate how important it is in your life: **Work**
(% who say very/rather important)



Work inevitably becomes less important to people as they age and leave the workforce

The importance of work has declined significantly among Baby Boomers and those born pre-1945 as they age and leave the labour market, while younger generations that still make up the workforce are much more likely to view work as a key part of their life.

For each of the statements below, please indicate how important it is in your life: **Work**
(% who say very/rather important by generation in Britain)



Only three nations are less likely than the UK to say work should always come first

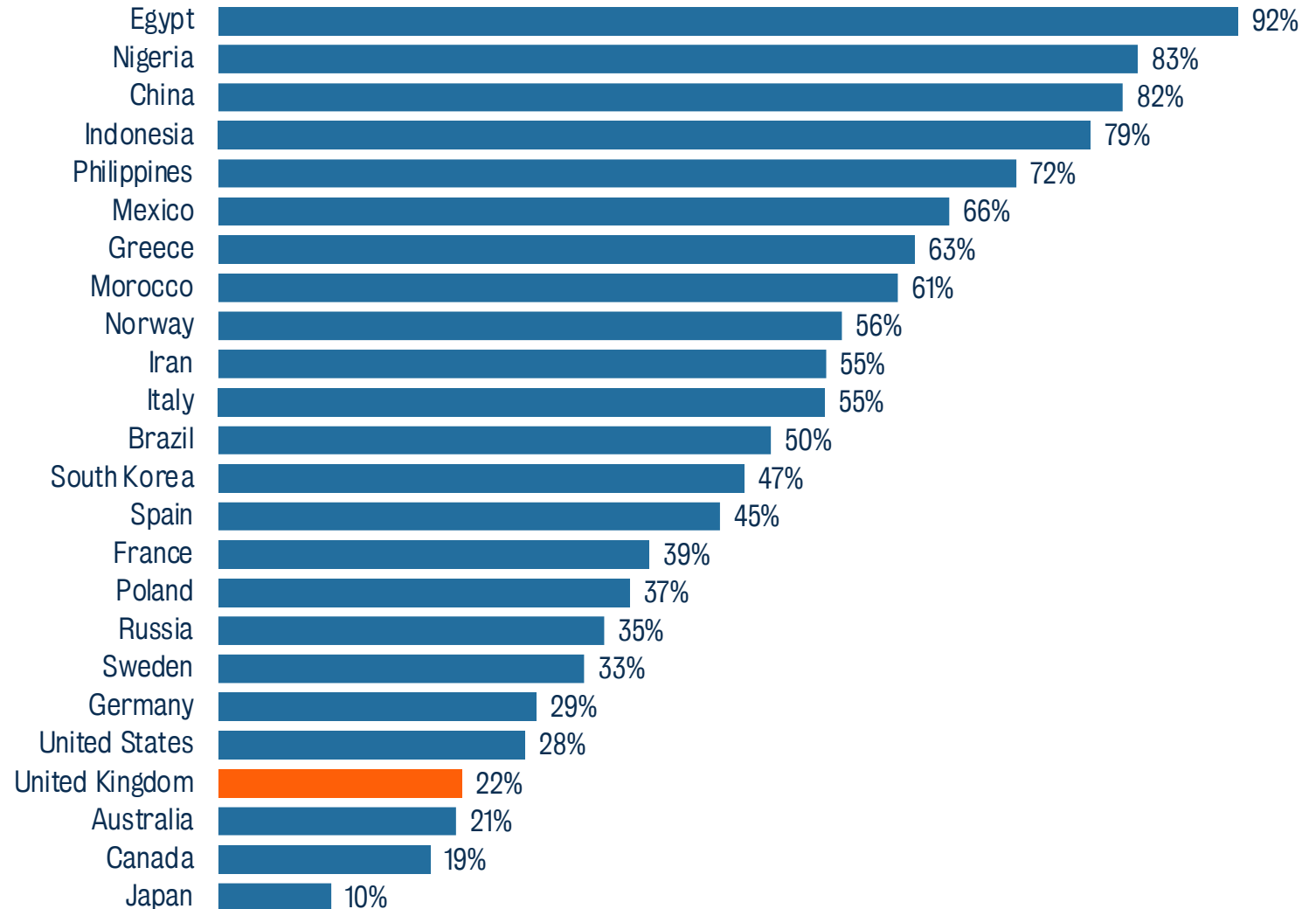
22% of the UK public agree work should always come first, even if it means less spare time, with only Australia (21%), Canada (19%) and Japan (10%) less likely to hold this view.

And within the UK, there is a notable gender difference in responses, with men (28%) more likely than women (16%) to say work should always take priority.

In some comparable countries, such as Spain (45%) and France (39%), the public are around twice as likely as those in the UK to say work should come first, while Italy (55%) and Norway (56%) are even more likely to.

But Egypt (92%), Nigeria (83%) and China (82%) come top for this view, in line with other findings on the perceived importance of work in those countries.

How would you feel about the following statements? Do you agree or disagree with them?
Work should always come first, even if it means less spare time (% who strongly agree/agree)

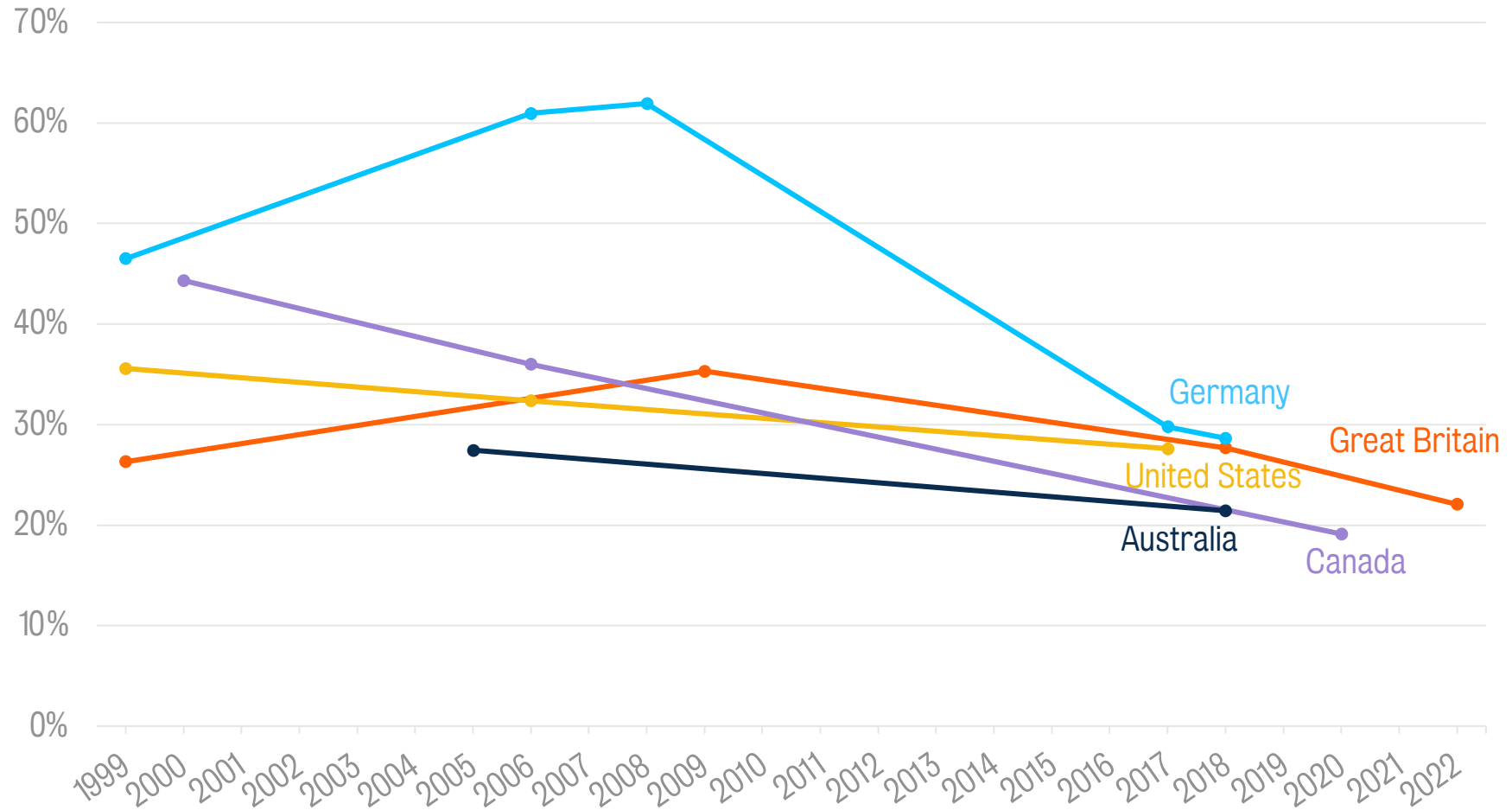


Britons' views on whether work should always come first are largely unchanged since 1999

Between 1999 and 2022, the proportion of the British public who agreed work should always come first, even if it means less spare time, declined only slightly, from 26% to 22% – although agreement rose as high as 35% in 2009.

Canada has seen a starker decline, with the share of the public saying work should always come first more than halving, from 44% to 19%, between 2000 and 2020. Meanwhile, the US and Australia have experienced much smaller declines.

How would you feel about the following statements? Do you agree or disagree with them?
Work should always come first, even if it means less spare time (% who strongly agree/agree)

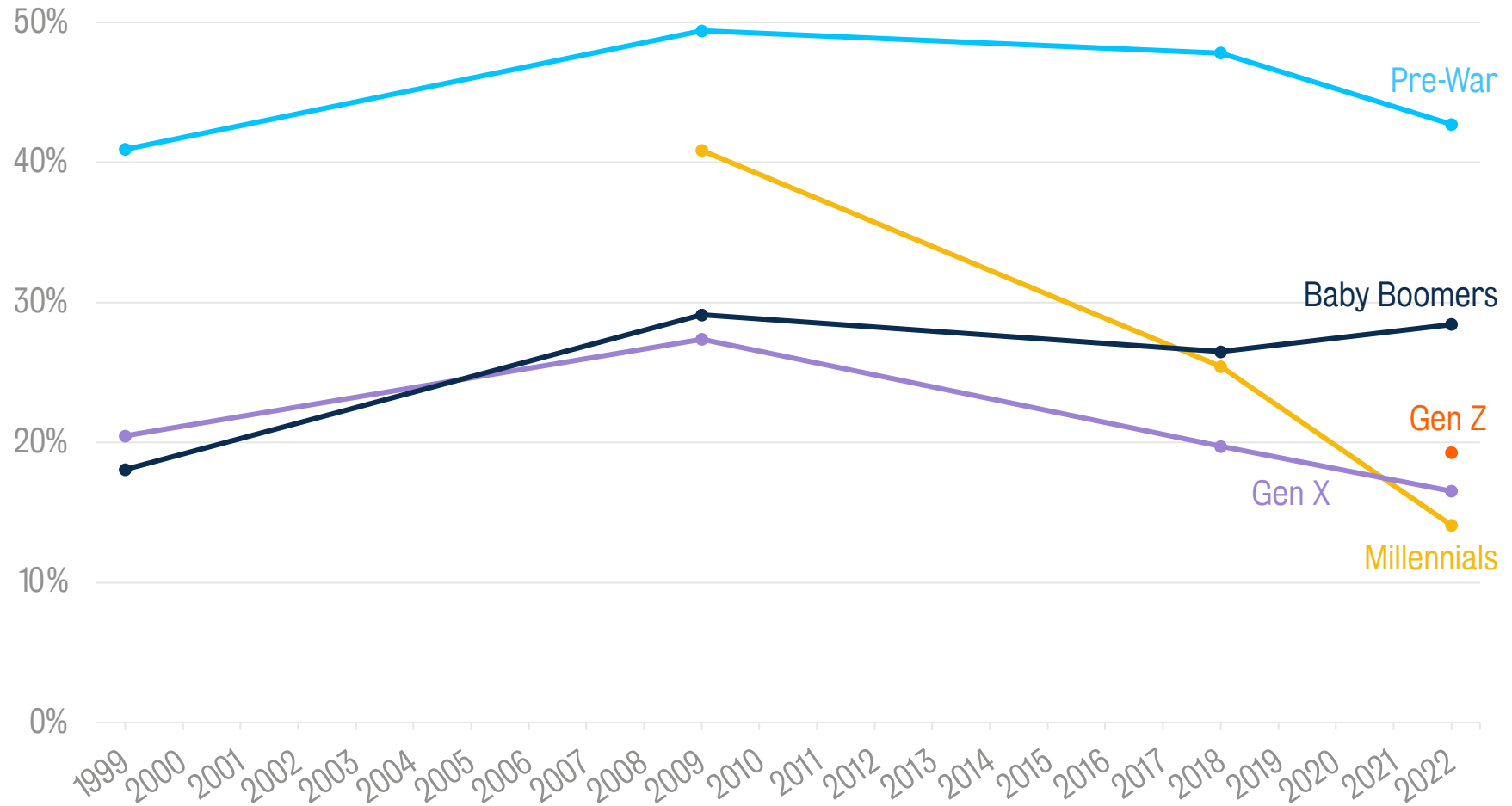


There are big generational differences in views on whether work should always come first

Most generations' opinions on whether work should always come first have remained relatively stable, but Millennials have become much less likely to agree with this view over time: in 2009, 41% felt this way; by 2022, this had fallen to 14%.

Both Gen X (17%) and Gen Z (19%) are similarly unlikely to think work should be prioritised above all else, while the Pre-War generation (43%) stand out as by far the most supportive of the view that work should always take precedence.

How would you feel about the following statements? Do you agree or disagree with them? **Work should always come first, even if it means less spare time** (% who strongly agree/agree by generation in Britain)

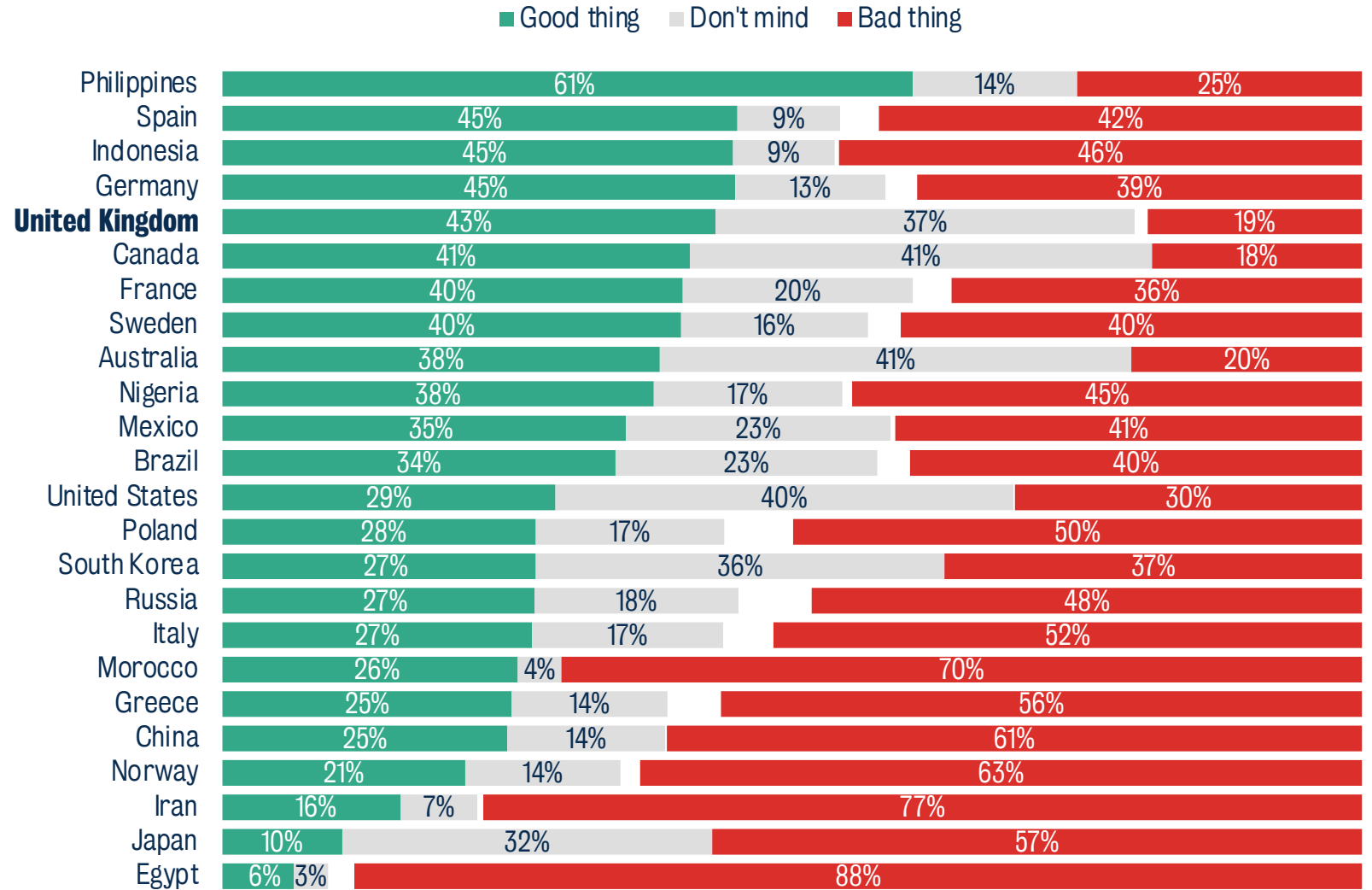


The UK is among the most likely to say it would be a good thing if less importance were placed on work

43% of people in the UK say it would be a good thing if less importance were placed on work – virtually the same as Spain (45%), Germany (45%) and Indonesia (45%), where slightly greater proportions agree with this view, but far behind the Philippines (61%), which comes top on this measure.

At the other end of the table, just 6% of people in Egypt think it would be a positive development if work was seen as less important, while Norway (21%) ranks bottom among western nations for this view.

Below is a list of various changes in our way of life that might take place in the near future. For each one, if it were to happen, please indicate whether you think it would be a good thing, a bad thing, or you don't mind?
Less importance placed on work



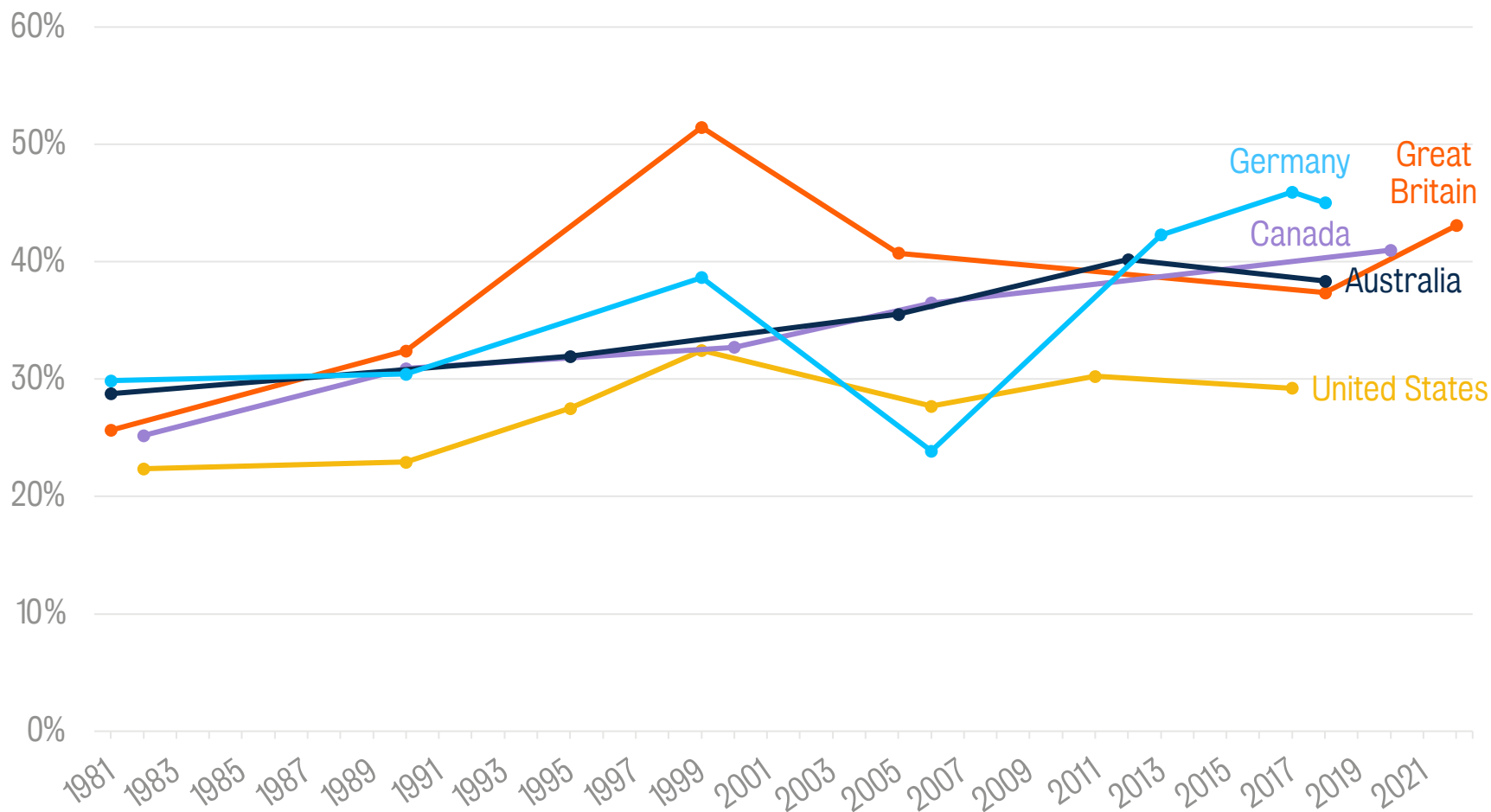
UK base: 3,056 people in the UK aged 18+, surveyed 1 Mar–9 Sept 2022. Other countries all surveyed in wave 7 of WVS at various points between 2017 and 2022. See [WVSA website](#) for sample information

Compared with 40 years ago, people in Britain are now more likely to say it would be a good thing if less importance were placed on work – a trend that can also be seen across other western nations

Between 1981 and 2022, the share of the British public who said it would be a good thing if less importance were placed on work rose from 26% to 43% (although this view peaked in popularity in 1999).

This opinion has gradually become more widespread in several other western nations too. For example, over a similar period, the proportion holding this view rose from 25% to 41% in Canada and from 30% to 45% in Germany.

Below is a list of various changes in our way of life that might take place in the near future. For each one, if it were to happen, please indicate whether you think it would be a good thing, a bad thing, or you don't mind?
Less importance placed on work (% who say good thing)



1999 question wording asked if it would be a good or bad thing to "make work less central in our lives".
 Base: minimum of 1,000 people aged 18+ surveyed per country per year. See [WVSA website](#) for sample information

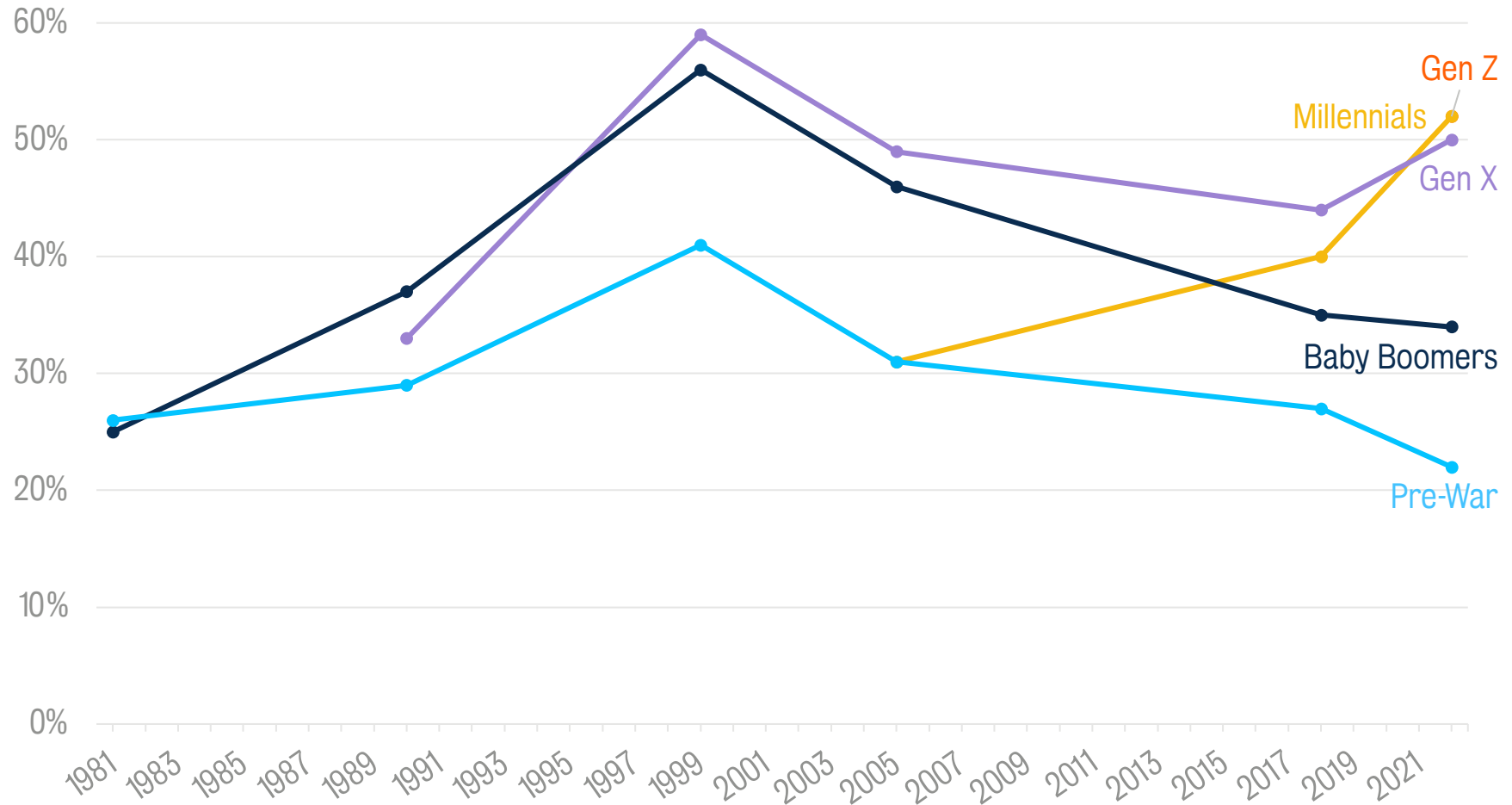
In Britain, Millennials have become much more likely to say it would be good if less importance were placed on work – but older generations previously underwent a similar shift in views

In 2022, 52% of Millennials said it would be a good thing if less importance were placed on work – up from 31% in 2005.

But they are not alone in becoming much more likely to feel this way. At different stages, older generations experienced a similar shift, before then reverting back. For example, between 1981 and 1999 the proportion of Baby Boomers who thought work should be treated as less important more than doubled from 25% to 56%, only to then fall back to 34% by 2022.

And while other generations took many years to become increasingly convinced that we should focus less on work, Gen Z – the youngest cohort – have *entered* the data with a majority (52%) feeling this way.

Below is a list of various changes in our way of life that might take place in the near future. For each one, if it were to happen, please indicate whether you think it would be a good thing, a bad thing, or you don't mind?
Less importance placed on work (% who say good thing by generation in Britain)

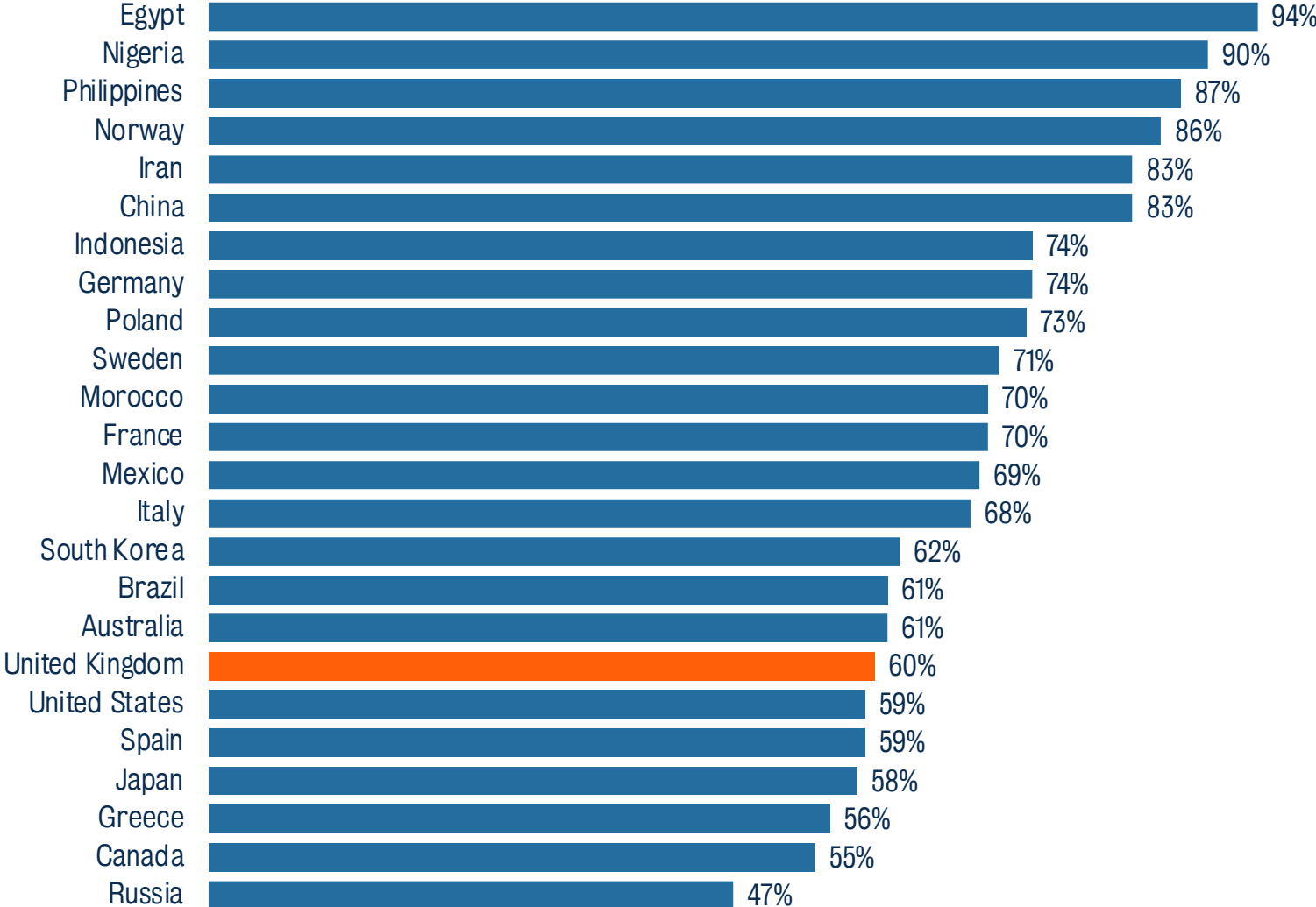


By international standards, the UK is relatively less likely to agree that work is a duty towards society

60% of people in the UK say work is a duty towards society, placing the country on a par with several other western nations – such as Australia (61%), Spain (59%) and the US (59%) – for agreement with this view.

However, other peer countries, including Norway (86%), Germany (74%) and Sweden (71%), are all more likely to consider work a duty.

How would you feel about the following statements? Do you agree or disagree with them?
Work is a duty towards society (% who strongly agree/agree)



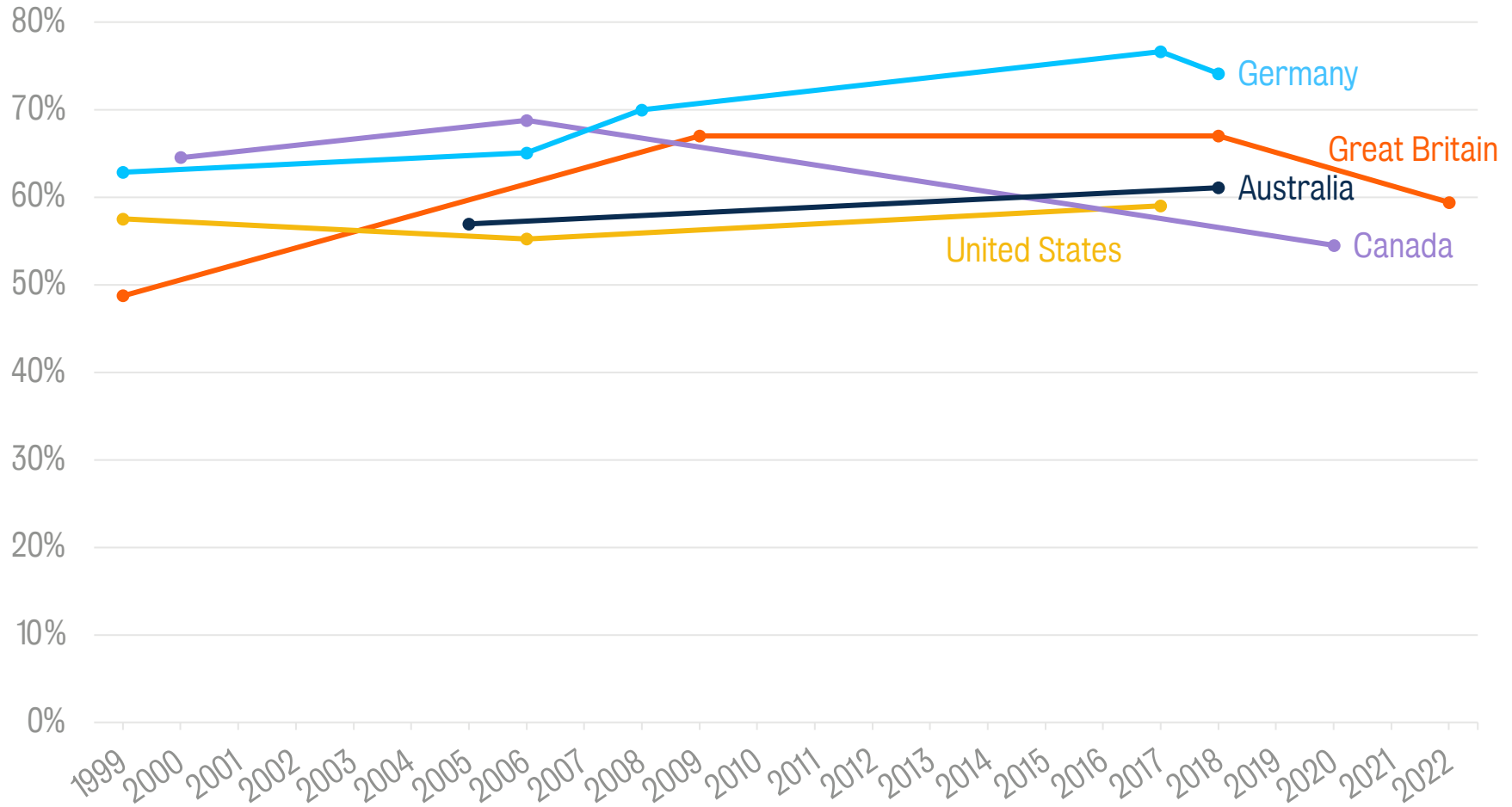
Britons are more likely to see work as a duty towards society than they were around two decades ago

When trends began in 1999, 49% of Britons agreed work is a duty towards society. By 2022, this had risen to 59% – although this is down on the 67% who felt this way as recently as 2018.

Trends in other countries have varied. In the US, views on this question have remained largely stable, while in Canada, people have become less likely to see work as a duty towards society: 55% held this view in 2020, compared with 69% in 2006.

How would you feel about the following statements? Do you agree or disagree with them?

Work is a duty towards society (% who strongly agree/agree)



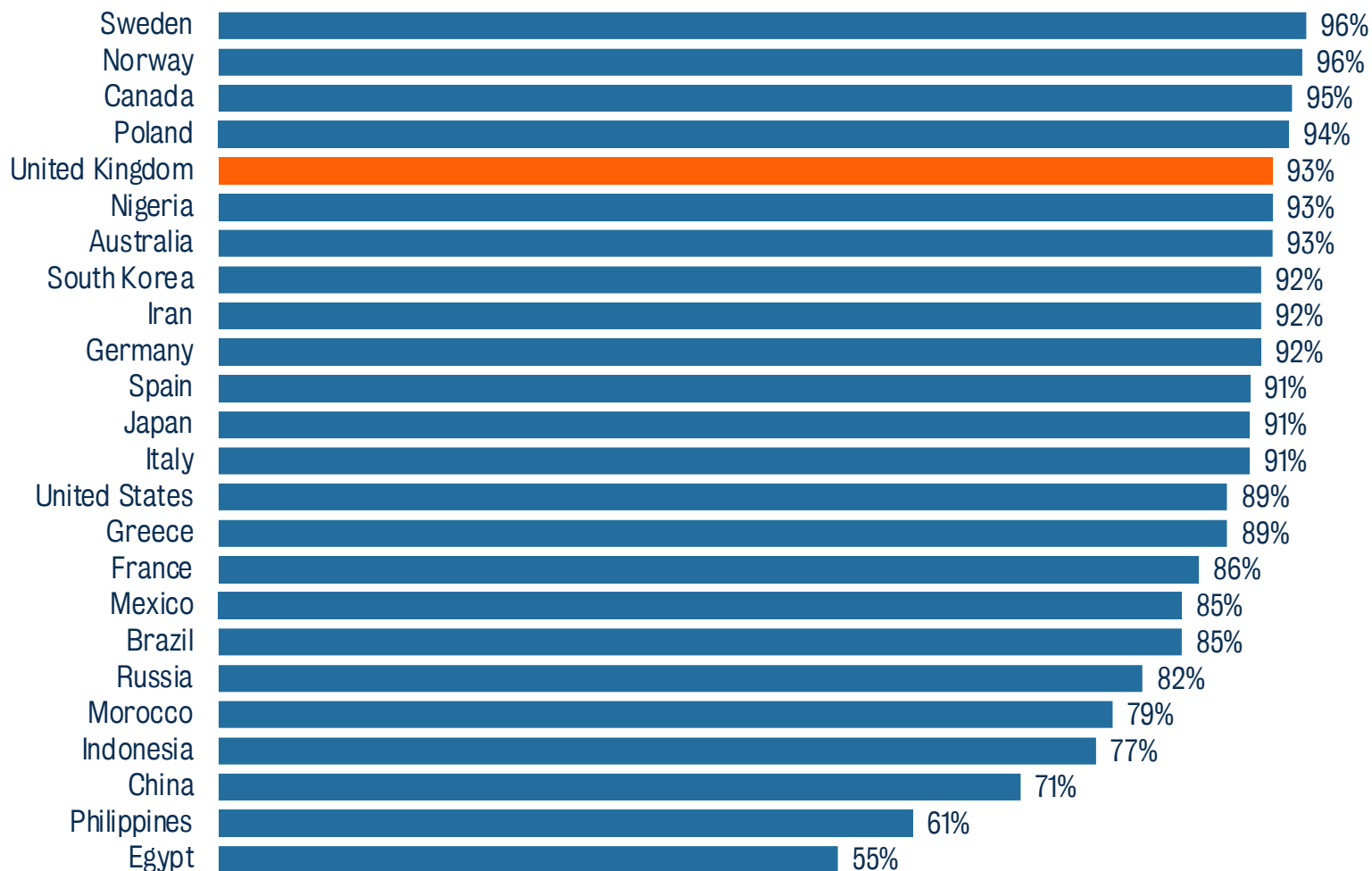
The UK public are among the most likely to say leisure time is important in their life – though the majority of countries place a similarly high value on this

93% of the UK public say leisure time is very or rather important in their life – only slightly lower than Sweden and Norway, which come top on this measure, with 96% feeling this way.

The UK is not alone in valuing leisure time a great deal: in the majority of countries, around nine in 10 people say it is important for them, and there is little difference in views.

Egypt (55%), the Philippines (61%) and China (71%) are the biggest outliers, with far smaller shares of the population reporting that leisure time is important in their life.

For each of the statements below, please indicate how important it is in your life: **Leisure time**
(% who say very/rather important)

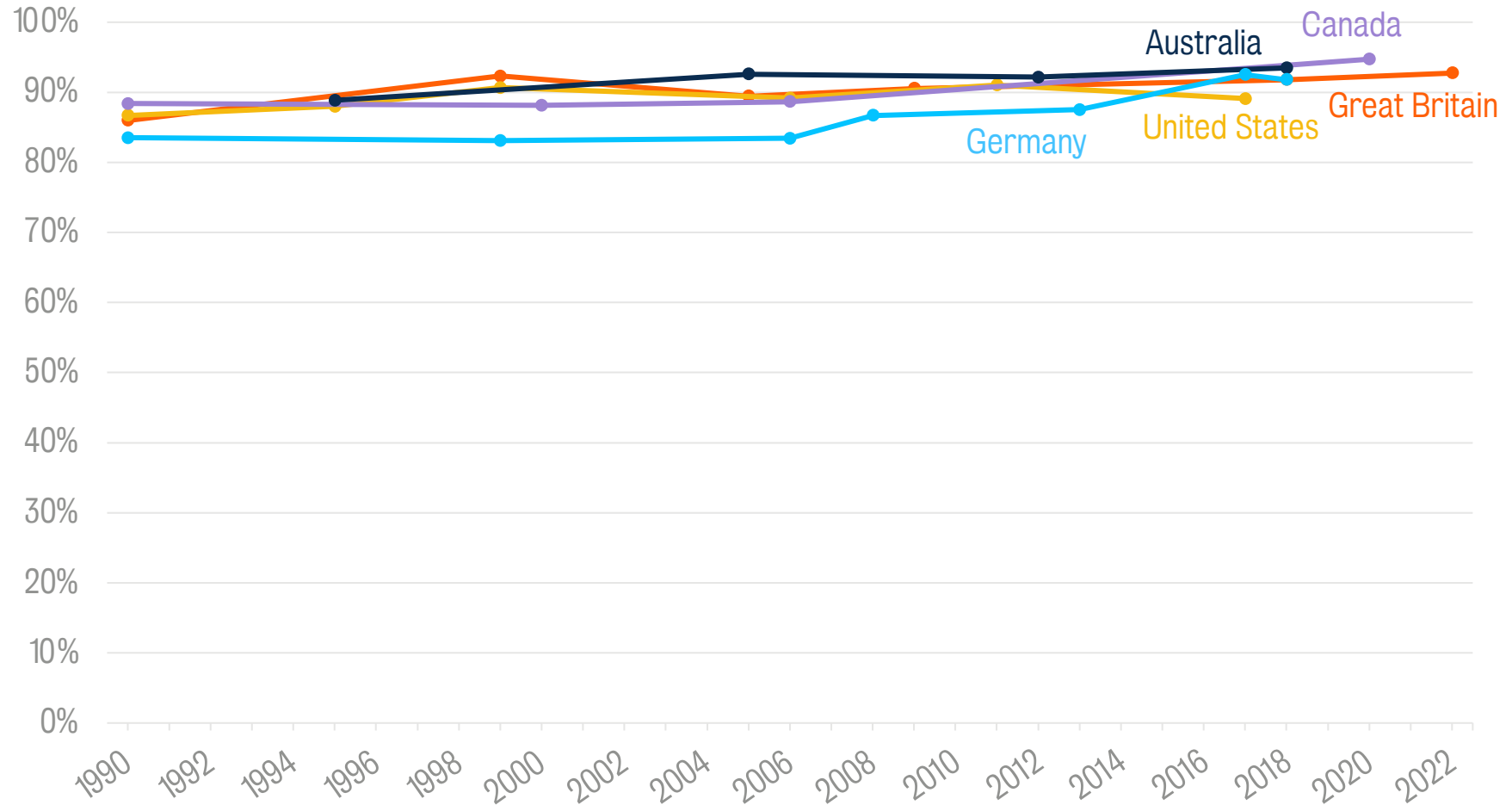


Across Britain and other nations, there has been little change in the perceived importance of leisure time

The share of the British public who say leisure time is important in their life has risen only slightly in recent decades, from 86% in 1990 to 93% in 2022.

Similar shifts can be seen in Canada and Germany, while attitudes in the US and Australia have remained even more stable.

For each of the statements below, please indicate how important it is in your life: **Leisure time**
(% who say very/rather important)



2. What the world thinks of those who don't work

The UK has one of the most favourable views of people who don't work: only Sweden is less likely to say such individuals turn lazy



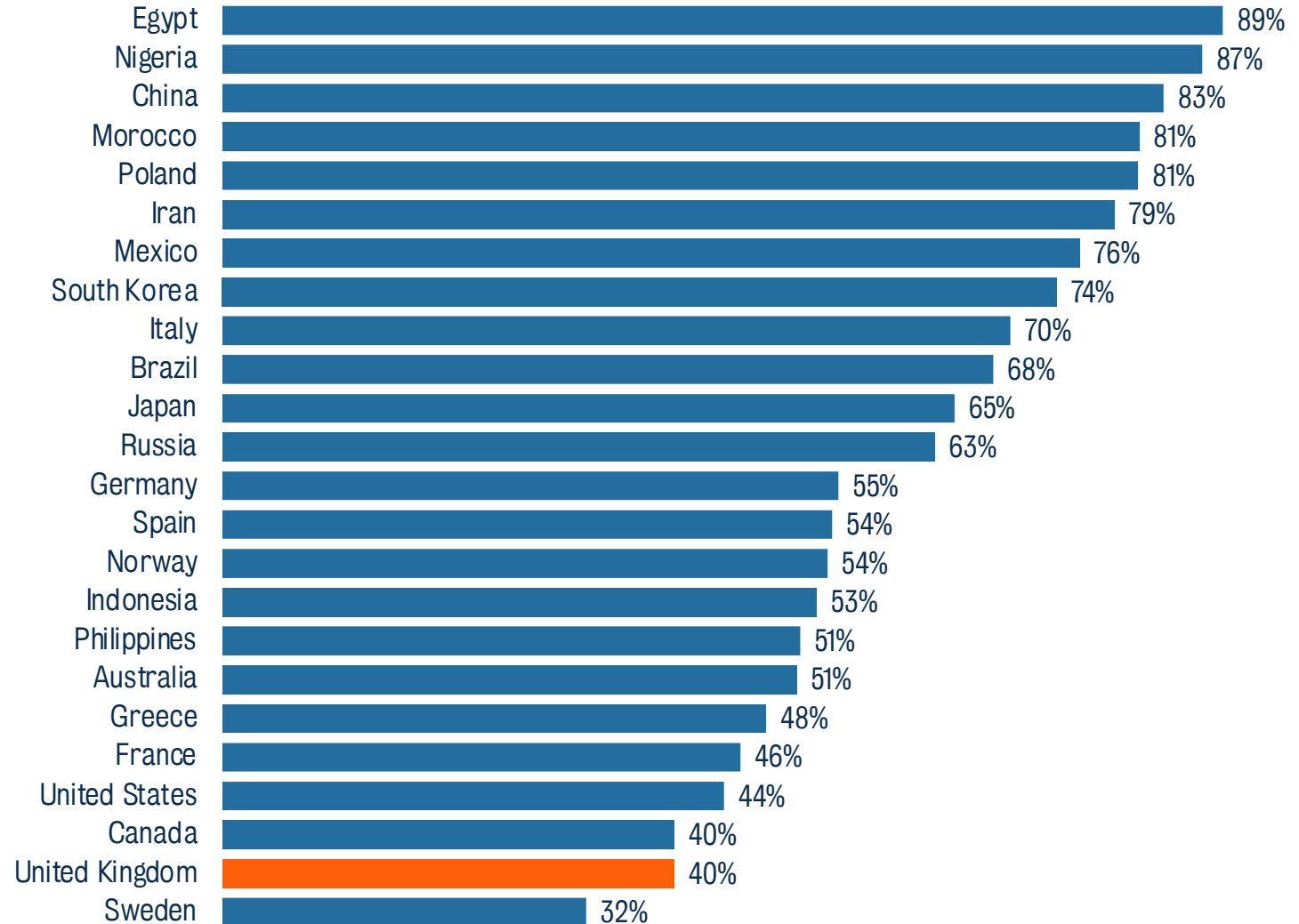
Only Sweden is less likely than the UK to say people who don't work turn lazy

40% of the UK public agree those who don't work turn lazy, with Sweden (32%) the only nation where people are less likely to agree.

Yet there is a gender divide in the UK, as men (48%) are considerably more likely than women (32%) to hold this opinion. Overall, however, the UK has a more favourable view of people who don't work than those in many peer countries, such as Italy (70%) and Germany (55%), where greater proportions think such individuals turn lazy.

And there is a broad range of opinion on this issue: at the top of the table, nearly nine in 10 people in Egypt (89%) and Nigeria (87%) have this negative perception of those not in work.

How would you feel about the following statements? Do you agree or disagree with them?
People who don't work turn lazy (% who strongly agree/agree)

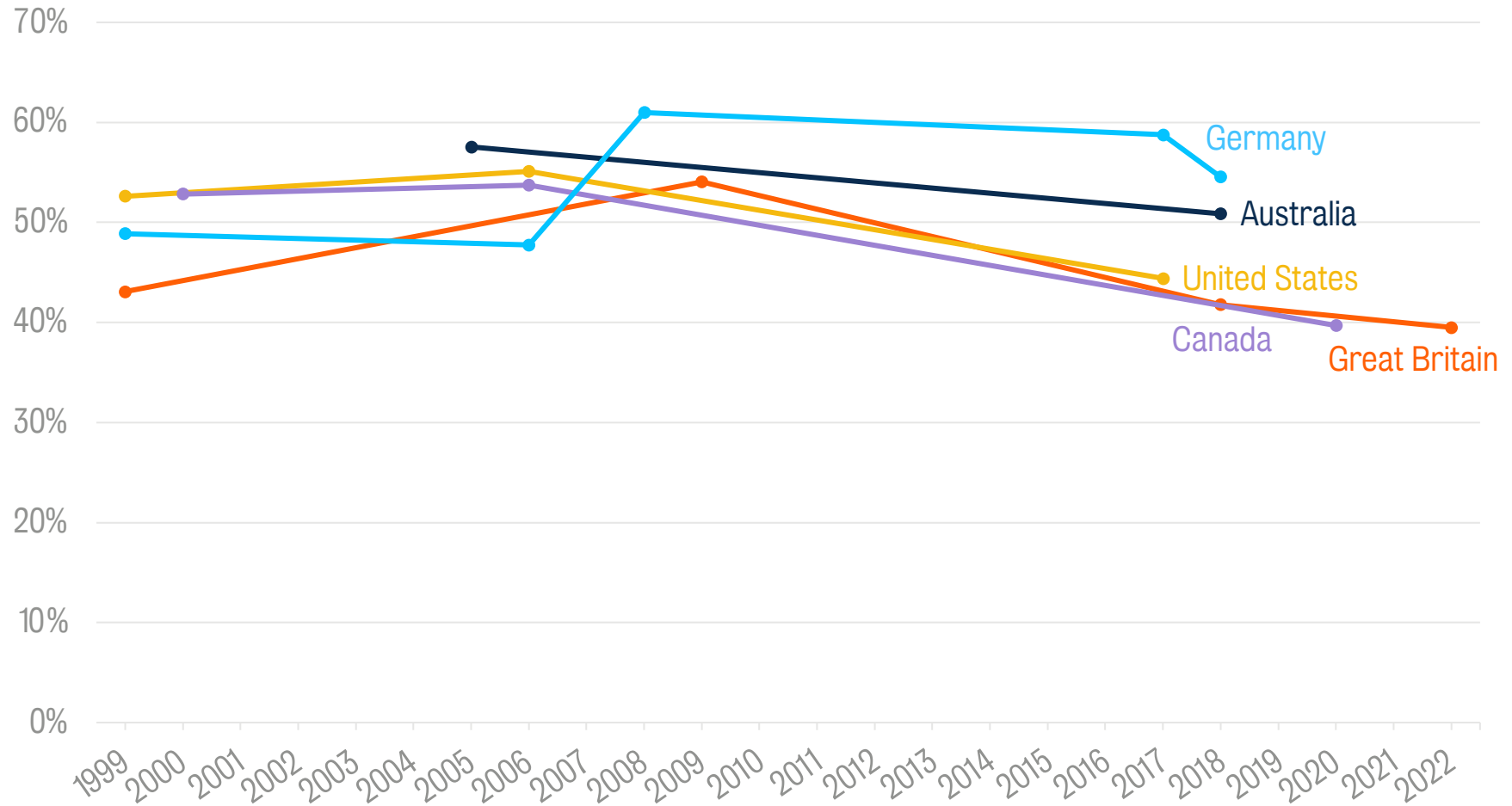


Britons' perceptions of those who don't work are roughly as negative as they were back in 1999

In 1999, 43% of Britons said those who don't work turn lazy – a figure that was virtually the same in 2022, at 40%. However, this is down on 2009, when agreement with this view peaked at 54%.

In several other western nations, people are less likely to hold this opinion than they were in previous decades. For example, in Canada, the share of the public who agree that those who don't work turn lazy fell from 53% to 40% between 2000 and 2020.

How would you feel about the following statements? Do you agree or disagree with them?
People who don't work turn lazy (% who strongly agree/agree)



3. Does hard work bring a better life?

Other countries, such as the US, are notably more likely than the UK to think hard work leads to a better life, with the UK public more inclined to think luck and connections are equally important

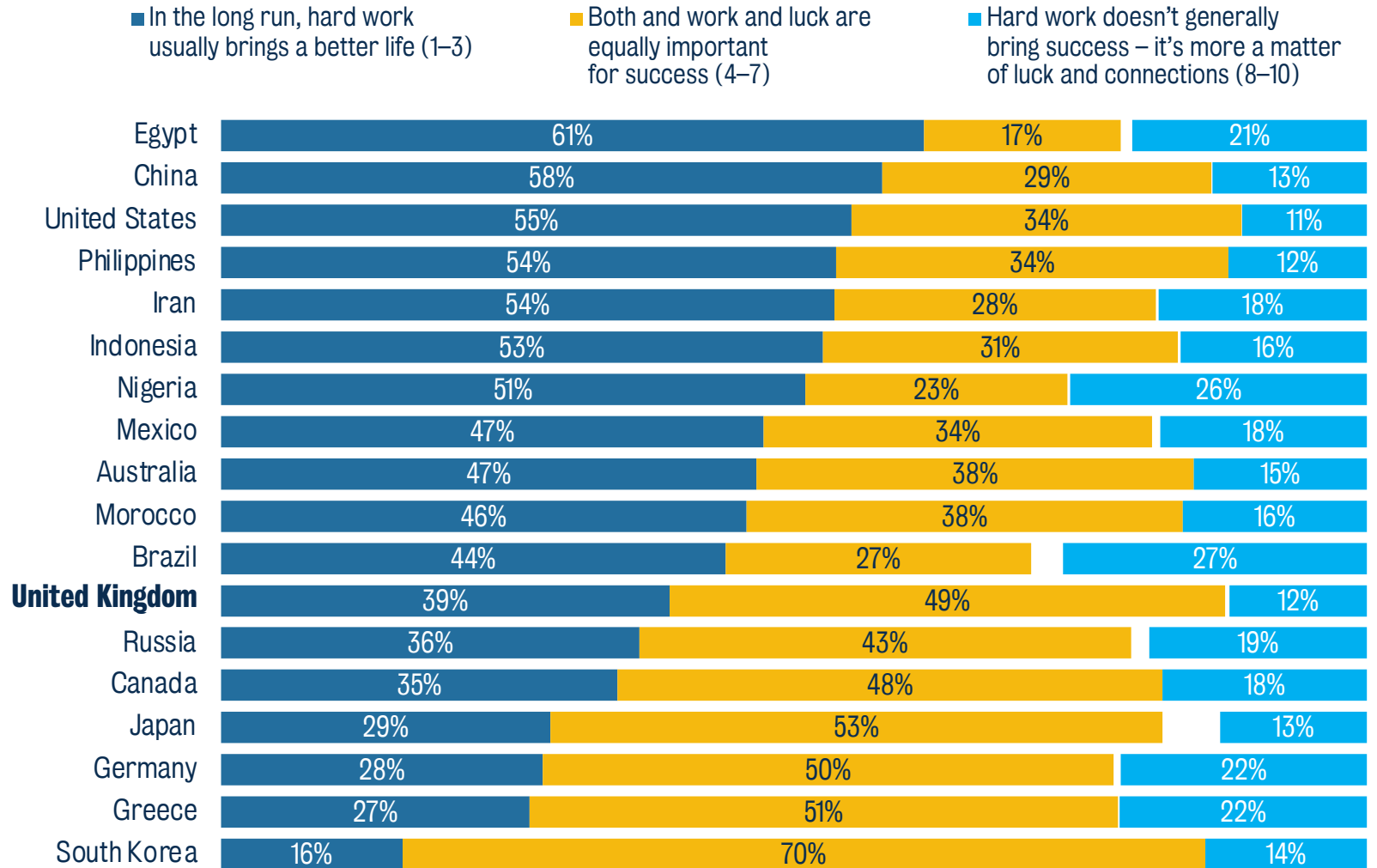


The UK ranks relatively low for the belief that hard work usually brings a better life

39% of people in the UK lean towards the view that, in the long run, hard work usually brings a better life – notably below the US, where a majority of 55% hold this opinion, but above Germany, where 28% feel this way.

Once again, Egypt (61%) and China (58%) put a great deal of stock in the importance of work, coming top for this belief.

How would you place your views on each of these scales? 1 means you agree completely with the statement on the left; 10 means you agree completely with the statement on the right; and if your views fall somewhere in between, you can choose any number in between.

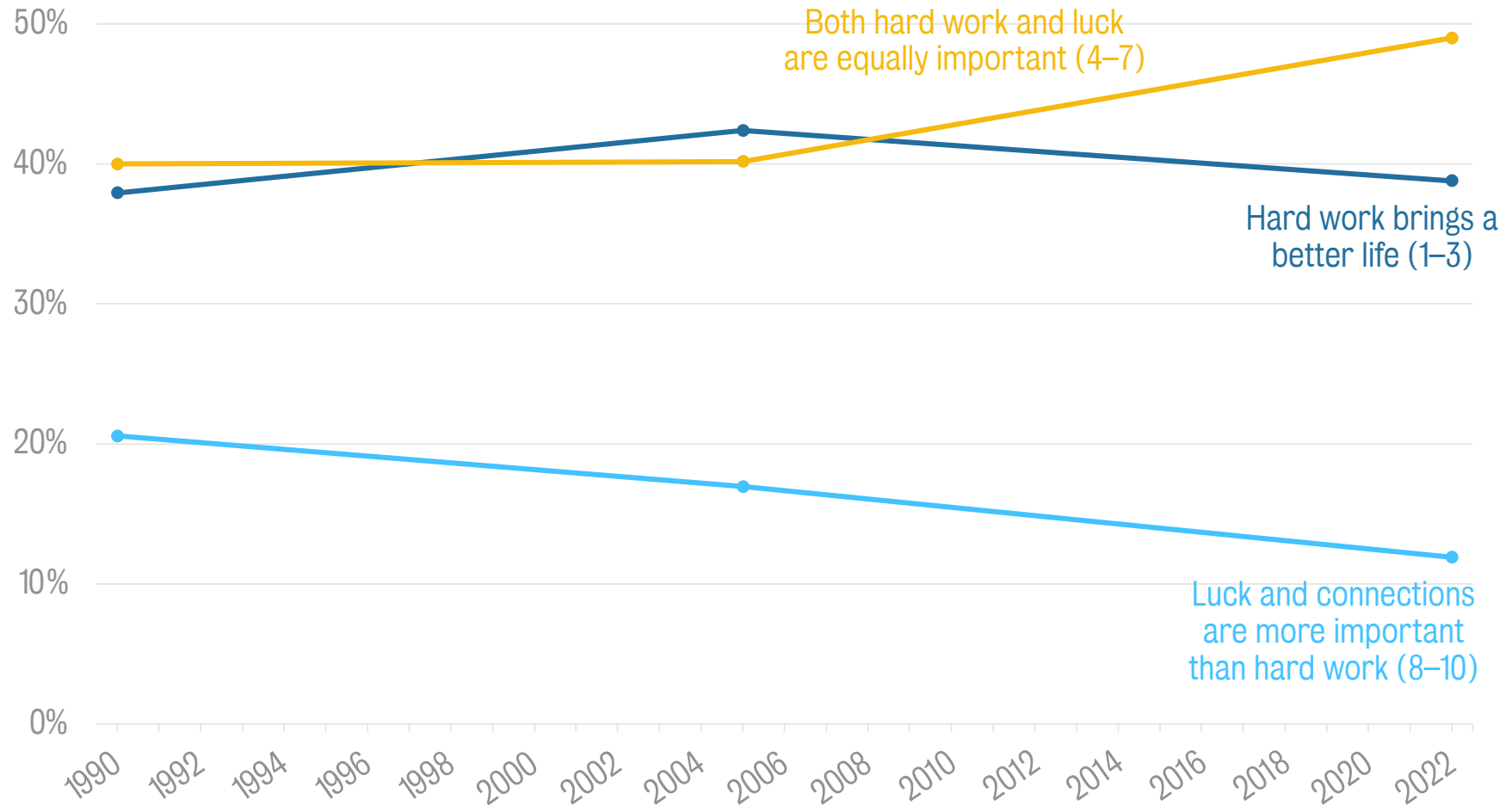


Britons increasingly see both hard work and luck as equally important for success

In 1990, 40% of Britons thought both hard work and luck are equally important for success – a figure that had risen to 49% by 2022.

Over the same period, the share of the public who felt luck and connections are more important than hard work has fallen from 21% to 12%, while the proportion believing that hard work brings a better life has remained largely unchanged.

How would you place your views on each of these scales? 1 means you agree completely with the statement on the left; 10 means you agree completely with the statement on the right; and if your views fall somewhere in between, you can choose any number in between. (Views in Britain)



7. Technical details



Technical details

Ipsos interviewed a random probability sample of 3,056 adults aged 18+ across the UK. This included respondents in England (1,645) and boost samples in Scotland (523), Wales (437) and Northern Ireland (446). Data has been weighted by region, education and age interlocked with gender to be nationally representative. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic respondents were able to complete the survey either through a face-to-face survey (1,509 completes), an interviewer-led video interview through MS Teams (86), or through either a self-completion paper survey (592) or an online push-to-web follow-up (869). Fieldwork ran from 1 March to 9 September 2022. Ipsos is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

Further information on the sampling methodology for other countries included in this report is available via the [World Values Survey Association website](#).

Figures in this report may vary from those in the official WVS dataset because of the exclusion/inclusion of non-responses, use of different weighting, or different rounding procedures used by statistical software. Data points for non-WVS years are taken from the European Values Survey, with weights to compare samples provided by the World Values Survey Association.

Unweighted sample sizes for UK nations

England	1,645
Northern Ireland	446
Scotland	523
Wales	437
Region unknown	5
Total	3,056

Years of birth for generations used in report

Gen Z	1996 onwards
Millennials	1980-1995)
Gen X	1966-1979)
Baby Boomers	1945-1965
Pre-War	1944 or earlier

The **UK** *in the* **WORLD** **VALUES** **SURVEY**

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