

How UK campaigners are responding to tougher protest restrictions

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Findings from a survey of campaigners and activists

Social Change Lab •

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Key Findings

Protest rights are almost universally seen as under threat by this sample of UK campaigners.

97%

of respondents believe the right to protest has been significantly restricted, and believe so intensely - 85% strongly agree.

93%

worry that peaceful campaigning could be labelled extremism or terrorism. While this deters some activists, others are galvanised.

In fact, more respondents have increased their protesting over five years (48%) than decreased it (34%), and 64% say tougher laws make them more determined.

This growth in participation has been driven by Gaza, anti-far-right mobilisation and anger at the repression itself. But many have shifted towards lower-risk activities because of legal concerns, and respondents describe avoiding direct action, arrestable tactics and open support for Palestine Action. The legislation is changing how people protest more than whether they do.

Main barriers to participation

The more barriers someone faces, the less they protest.

Risk tolerance is highest in the oldest campaigners; over-65s are the engine of participation growth, having most increased their participation in recent years (+20 points). The 35-44 year old group, more likely to have employment and childcare pressures, are the only age group in overall decline.

Lapsed protesters illustrate the chilling effect - people who have recently stopped protesting keep their sympathy with the cause but their defiance is reduced: 64% say they support the right to protest but do not feel able or motivated to act. The clearest measurable chilling effect is that

protest is being shifted to softer tactics, with many moving towards petitions, boycotts, donations and lobbying because of concerns about protest.

Overall, the evidence suggests that recent protest legislation has produced a selective chilling effect. It has not stopped protest altogether, but it has narrowed the tactics people are willing to use, increased caution around particular causes, and deterred some groups more than others.

At the same time, repression has mobilised many campaigners, leaving overall participation resilient even as higher-risk activism has become more constrained.

87%

Fear of legal consequences

81%

Personal safety

77%

Surveillance

71%

Uncertainty about legalities

Main messages for organisers, campaigners and funders



Treat legal uncertainty as an organising issue

Even very experienced activists are unsure of their legal rights - uncertainty about the legality of protests deters 71% of potential activists. Groups such as Green and Black Cross, CASP (Climate Action Support Pathway), Liberty and Netpol already provide Know Your Rights training. Movement organisations and funders could do more to support and expand this work, alongside pre-action legal Q&As and providing visible legal observers at protests, especially for younger protesters who lack confidence in their rights.



Build roles across the risk spectrum

Legislation has deterred some from joining protests, but people who have been 'chilled' do not disappear altogether - they turn to other tools such as signing petitions, taking part in boycotts and contacting MPs. Groups that consciously offer meaningful lower-risk roles (court support, logistics, outreach, digital, fundraising) and treat those doing them as valued participants, are more likely to retain people who are less likely to seek arrestable frontline roles.



Don't build strategies assuming young people will carry the risk

We found that risk tolerance is concentrated among retirees, while under-45s are most fearful of legal consequences, surveillance and violence at protest. Conversations around who will take up that baton is important, as is safeguarding younger members' careers and immigration status, and considering who can afford which risks are increasingly important.



Support the risk-bearers

People told us about the practical and emotional costs of repeated court attendance, restrictive bail, licence conditions, lost jobs, and family impacts lasting years. Court solidarity, hardship funds, mental health support and practical help for dependents of anyone arrested are crucial.



Plan for accessibility & threats from third parties

76% of disabled respondents say accessibility affects their willingness to attend. Stewarding, accessible roles, toilets and rest points, and clear end times all help. Several respondents fear far-right “auditors” and doxxing more than police; post-protest digital safety guidance can help address this.



Fight feelings of futility as much as fear

Belief that protest works was the weakest motivation we measured (59%) - and we also found that feelings of fear and futility compound each other. Communicating concrete protest wins and a credible theory of change can be useful counters to the chilling effect.

59%

of respondents believe that protest works

76%

of disabled respondents said accessibility was an issue

Introduction

“Without protest there is no democracy, the more the UK clamps down on peaceful protest the more determined people become to protest.”

“Any effective protest has been stopped. If we organise openly we can be imprisoned for conspiracy. If we organise in secret we can be imprisoned for terrorism.”

Two very different views expressed by survey respondents

This report presents findings from a survey of UK campaigners, activists and movement supporters conducted by Social Change Lab and Fossil Free London. The research was undertaken against a backdrop of significant changes to the legal environment for protest, including the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, the Public Order Act 2023, the National Security Act 2023 and subsequent legislation that has expanded police powers and increased criminal sanctions for some forms of protest. We should note that some aspects of this legislation relate to England and Wales only, not Scotland or the North of Ireland. This allows us to look for clues in the data as to whether Scottish and Northern Irish activists have a different experience from their English and Welsh counterparts.

The Joint Committee on Human Rights states that “The right to peaceful protest is a cornerstone of democracy, which should be championed and protected rather than stifled.” Yet when scrutinising the Public Order Bill, the Committee raised concern that the recent toughening of protest laws risks doing precisely the opposite, warning that the new legislation could have a “chilling effect on the right to protest” (a view echoed by the UN). The worry is that repressive laws deter people from exercising their fundamental rights (Berglund et al., 2024; Gall, 2026). It is not clear that deterrence is always the effect; other research (e.g., Curtice & Behlendorf, 2021; Demirel-Pegg & Rasler, 2020; Hess & Martin, 2006) suggests the opposite: that increased government restrictions can bring sustained or even increased protest activity, as campaigners and the wider public react against the perceived injustice (Gulliver et al., 2023). We have seen this both at home - in how the Palestine Action proscription inspired thousands of new people to protest;

and we have seen it abroad, such as earlier in 2026 in the Indian cockroach movement, where a brutal police response to protesters served only to swell their numbers and help bring about the dramatic concession to their demands. This sort of response - where repression leads to increased mobilisation by galvanising activists - is often referred to as a ‘backfire effect’ (Adam-Troian et al., 2020; Dono et al., 2025) or the ‘repression paradox’ (Kurtz & Smithey, 2018) and is a phenomenon particularly seen in highly committed activists (Davies-Rommetveit et al., 2026; Rumbelow, 2023).

The central question for this survey is what effect, if any, recent legislative changes in England and Wales are having on protest in practice. Tighter restrictions might deter people from taking part, but they could equally galvanise them, or they could make little difference. We also look at whether particular people respond differently, and at the type of protests people are willing to take part in. We explore these questions through the experiences of people actively engaged in campaigning and protest.

The findings presented here complement parallel work we are conducting examining attitudes towards protest and testing which framing strategies increase support for protest rights amongst the general public. Together, these studies aim to build a fuller picture of how recent legislative changes are affecting both public support for protest rights and participation in protest itself - and to help campaigners best navigate a challenging environment.

Who did we survey?

This was, by design, a self-selecting sample of activists - that is, a population of engaged campaigners, not UK activists in general and not the public. We recruited participants via an anonymous link distributed through Social Change Lab and Fossil Free London's newsletters and partner networks, including several other UK civil society organisations. 415 people answered the survey. A brief description of respondents is shown below.¹

Overall, the sample is older, more female, more disabled at younger ages, and more likely to hold caring responsibilities than the general population.

¹ Full information is given in 'Methods and sample' at the end of this report.

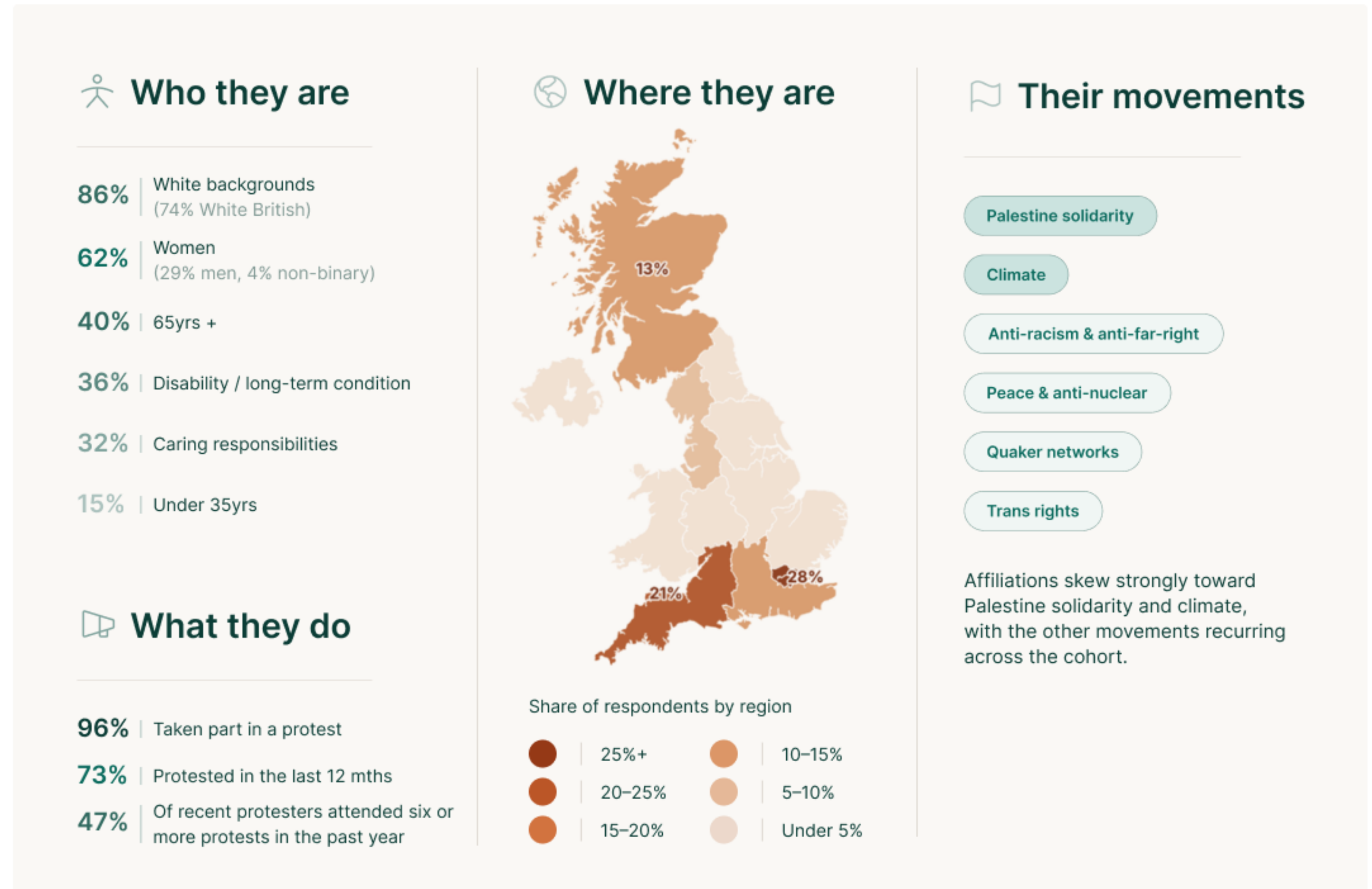


Fig 1. Overview of the demographic make up of survey respondents

Source: Social Change Lab — Survey of UK campaigners, 2026

How has participation changed?

Respondents were asked how their protest frequency compares with five years ago – a period which includes most but not all of the new protest legislation². The responses were split decisively in favour of more, not less protesting: 48% report an increase (34% a significant increase) against 34% reporting a decrease (22% a significant decrease). This headline finding cuts against a straightforward ‘chilling’ narrative.

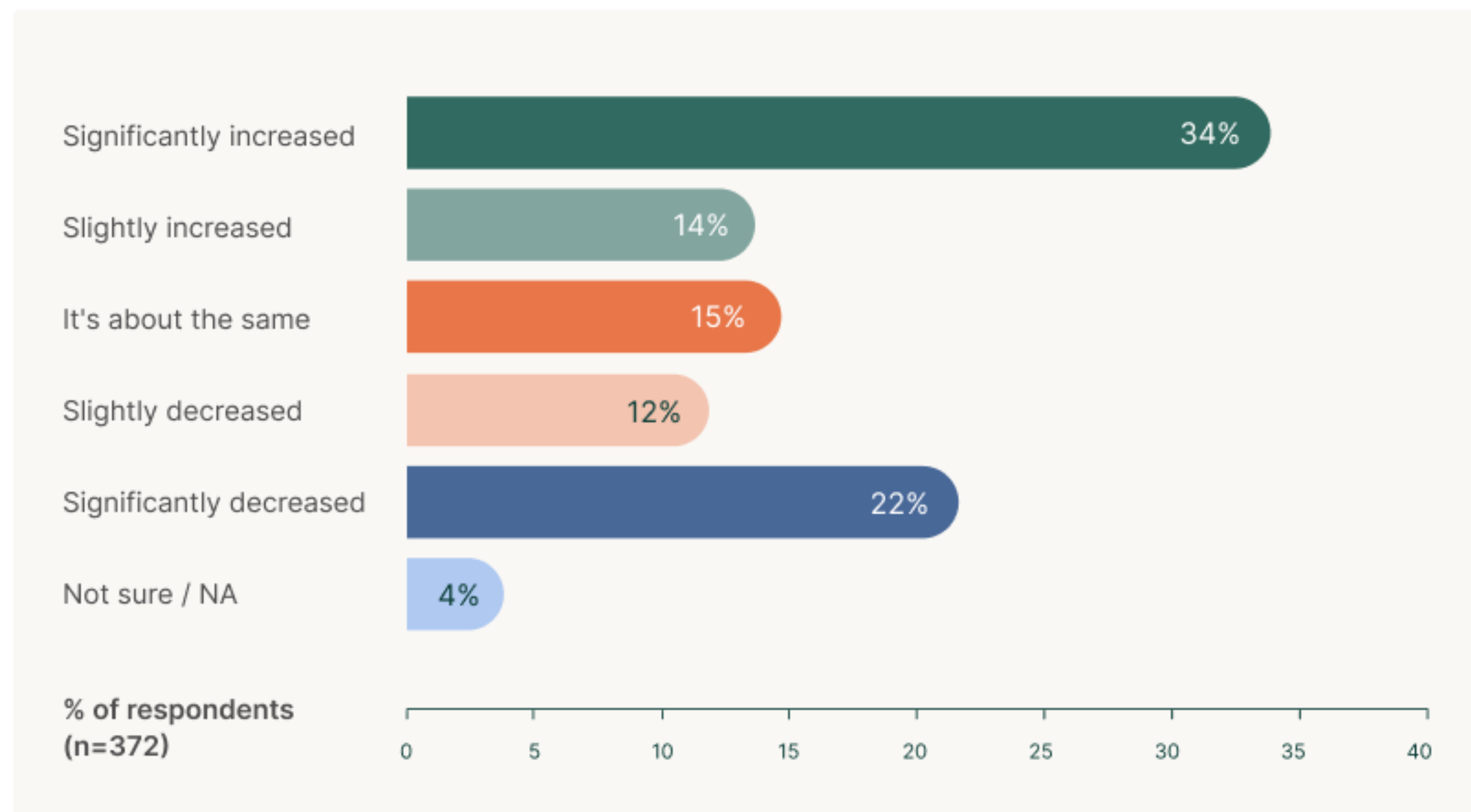


Fig 2. Change in protest participation compared with five years ago

² The Terrorism Act, which was used as the basis for the proscription of Palestine Action in 2025, for example, was introduced in 2000.

Why participation rose

Support for Palestine is the single largest explanation. 49% of the 173 open-text explanations mention Gaza, Palestine or genocide, with people mostly referring to the wave of solidarity marches since October 2023. Counter-mobilisation against the far right, climate urgency, and the fact that retirement has freed up more time appear as secondary contributing factors to the increase. A small minority say that repression itself is a reason to protest more: 15 of these 173 responses (9%) name anti-protest legislation, the proscription of Palestine Action, policing or government authoritarianism. This, though a small effect, suggests a backfire effect. Some examples of what people said are:

“Because I wanted to protest the proscription of Palestine Action.”

“The government is taking more extreme authoritarian measures.”

“The terrifying escalation of anti-protest laws, and creeping reduction in our democratic rights. The government’s complicity with the genocide in Gaza. The lack of government response to ... the climate emergencies.”

Separately, there were a handful of respondents whose participation hadn't changed but who described holding steady as an act of defiance.

"I try to attend at least a few large protests every year to let the Establishment know that they can't scare me off."

Why participation fell

Among the 124 people who reported reducing their participation and told us why, 48% mention repression, legal risk or policing. Health, age and disability appear in 31%, and time, work and caring in 34%, frequently in combination with each other and with legal risk.

These numbers are more meaningful when we consider them in comparison with those whose participation did not fall. Among that group, just 8% mention repression - a sixth of the rate of those whose participation fell. In other words, those who were deterred were those who talked about repression - the chilling effect in action. Some respondents wrote about their specific fears and experiences of repression:

"I was given a custodial sentence for protest at the start of December 2025, and was released on licence in April 2026, with conditions preventing me from participating in ... any demonstration ... without permission from my probation officer, which she hasn't given."

"I'm autistic and wouldn't survive a night in custody. So I am terrified of doing anything that might lead to arrest. Because of my caring responsibilities I could also not risk anything that might lead to detention or prison."

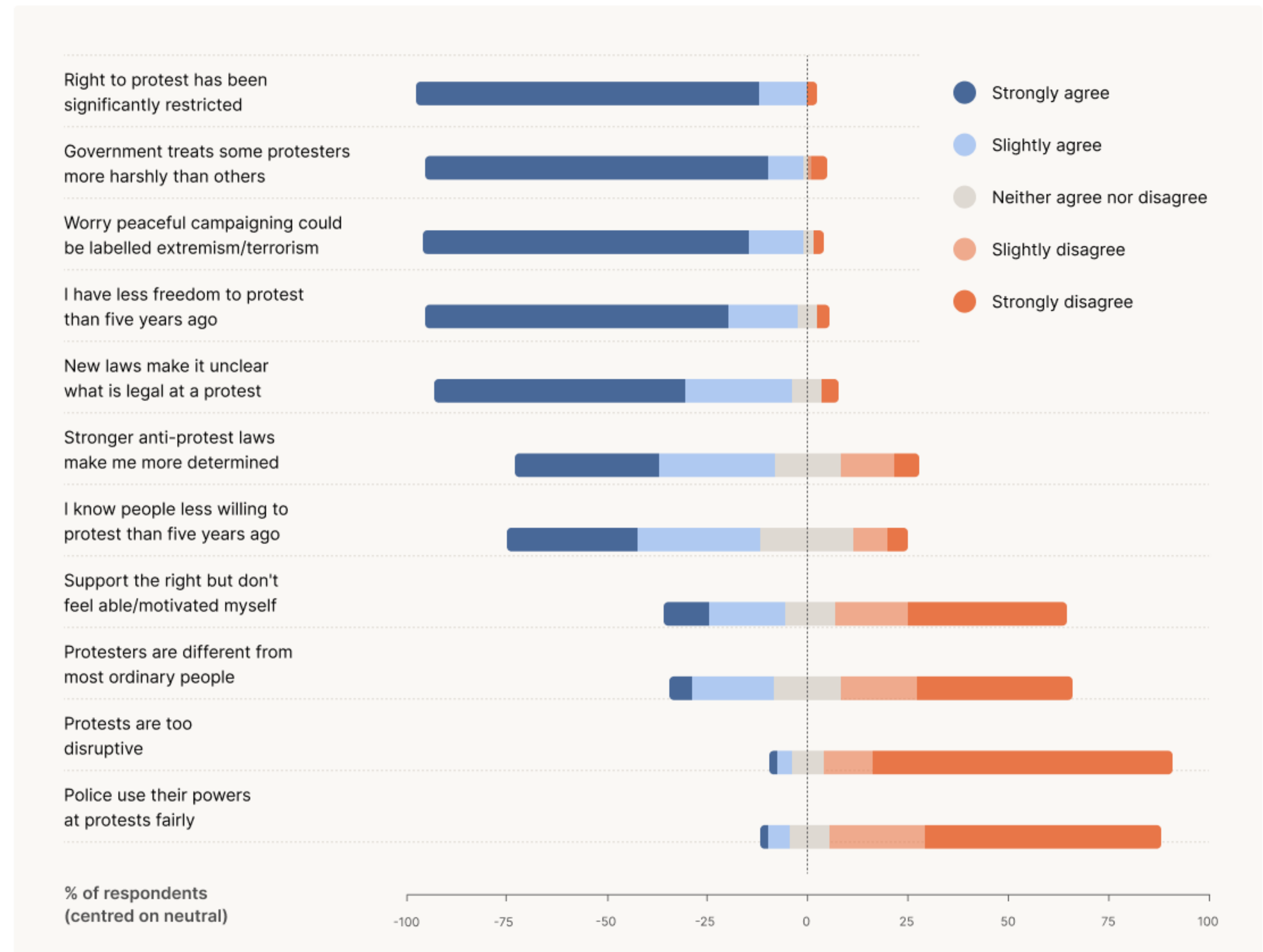
"Fear of losing my income is literally stopping me from taking action, which is exactly what they want and I don't want to play into that."

respondent who went through a fitness-to-practise process after a 2020 protest conviction

How do people view the protest environment?

Nearly all respondents agree that protest rights are being restricted and they hold these views intensely; on most items a large majority choose “strongly agree”, rather than “slightly agree”. 97% agree the right to protest has been significantly restricted; 94% that the government treats some protesters more harshly than others; 93% worry that peaceful campaigning could be labelled extremism or terrorism; 92% feel they have less freedom to protest than five years ago; 89% that new laws have made legality unclear. 82% disagree that police use their powers fairly and proportionately. A pretty dismal view of the environment for protest, at least for this group of campaigners.

Fig 3. Agreement with statements about protest and protest rights



Two items speak directly to the question of whether restrictive laws lead to chilling of protest or whether repression backfires on the state; 64% of respondents agree that stronger anti-protest laws make them more determined to protest - this is the repression paradox in a nutshell (Kurtz & Smithey, 2018). On the other hand, 63% say they know people who feel less willing to protest than five years ago - the chilling effect. Both can be true: determination from committed campaigners, deterrence for those who are wavering - and wavering for any number of possible reasons. 30% agree they “support the right to protest but don’t feel able or motivated to take action” themselves.

How is repression affecting different groups?

The effect of legal restrictions is not evenly distributed. Whether people are protesting more or less varies a great deal by group.

- **Over-65s are the engine of growth.** People aged 65+ are the ones whose protest participation has gone up the most: +20 points (52% increased against 31% decreased), the highest of any age group. The open-text explanations point mainly to retirement freeing up time rather than to anything about the legal environment. Participation also rose among 25-34s (+18 points).
- **The ‘squeezed middle’ is the only group in overall decline.** Among 35-44s participation fell by 8 points (38% increased against 46% decreased). Respondents caring for children were similarly reducing their protest attendance, albeit only slightly (12 of 35 increased against 14 who decreased). Carers as a whole are not in decline - people caring for adult dependents are strongly net positive (+21 points), so the pressure is specific to childcare.³

- **Participation among disabled respondents is flat.** Overall, disabled respondents showed +3 points change in participation (46% against 43%), much lower than the +19 points among those without a disability. Disabled respondents are also more likely to have shifted towards lower-risk forms of action because of concerns about protest involvement (46% against 33%). They are no more likely than others to cite legal consequences as a barrier (87% against 88%). Rather, the constraints are access and safety, and the response is to adjust tactics rather than to stop.
- **No gender gap.** Women and men report identical net change (+13 points each).
- **A possible Scotland effect.** Scotland-based respondents are more positive (+20 points against +13 in England) and report fewer decreases in participation. This is consistent with the much larger Scotland-England gap in reported policing (see later section) and with the fact that the recent legislation extends only to England and Wales.

³ Note that sub groups are small in some cases so percentages are indicative only

What are the specific barriers?

We examined barriers based on fear, as well as those which were more about practical and social concerns.

Fear of legal consequences dominates every measure: 87% say it affects their willingness to attend at least somewhat (36% strongly), followed by concerns about safety (81%) and surveillance (77%). **Uncertainty about what is legal affects 71%** of respondents, consistent with only half feeling confident about their legal rights at a protest. By comparison, social disapproval is much less mentioned as a barrier (19%), likely because many respondents are embedded in communities that support protest. **Financial barriers also have a clear geographic split:** they affect 61% of respondents outside London, compared with 38% of Londoners, consistent with open-text accounts of the cost of travelling to major protests (many large protests take place in the capital).

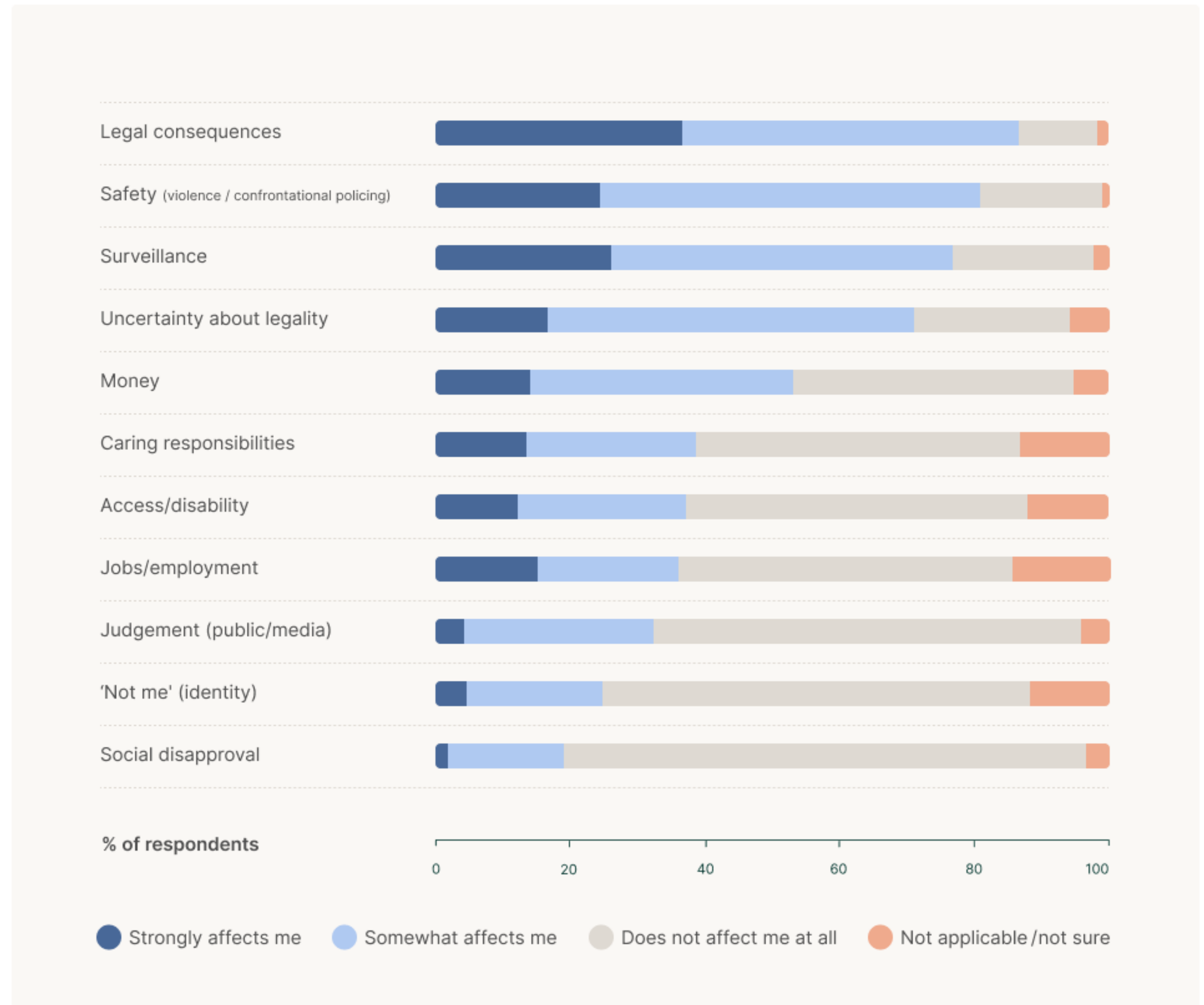


Fig 4. How each factor affects willingness to attend a protest

Asked which barriers had the biggest impact (respondents could choose up to three), 65% selected legal consequences, followed by safety (43%) and surveillance (42%) - the same fear-based set of three, and in the same order. These same three also top the question asking which barriers have become more of a concern in recent years.

135 respondents described other barriers not listed.

Several themes recur:

- **Consequences beyond conviction** (mentioned by 22): bail conditions, injunctions and SLAPP suits; repeated court attendance (“the sheer number of times you have to attend court”); insurance, mortgage and travel implications; effects on family members.
- **Third-party violence** (mentioned by 9): far-right counter-protesters and self-styled “auditors” filming and doxxing protesters - several respondents fear them more than police, and several more fear being identified online and sacked.
- **Efficacy doubt and burnout** (mentioned by 21): a persistent minority say the binding constraint is not fear but the sense that sanctioned A-to-B marches achieve nothing - “essentially going on a police-escorted walk” - while the disruptive alternatives now carry “too much legal jeopardy”. This interaction (repression limits the tactics people believed worked, leaving only tactics they are more skeptical about) may be an important mechanism for chilling effects.

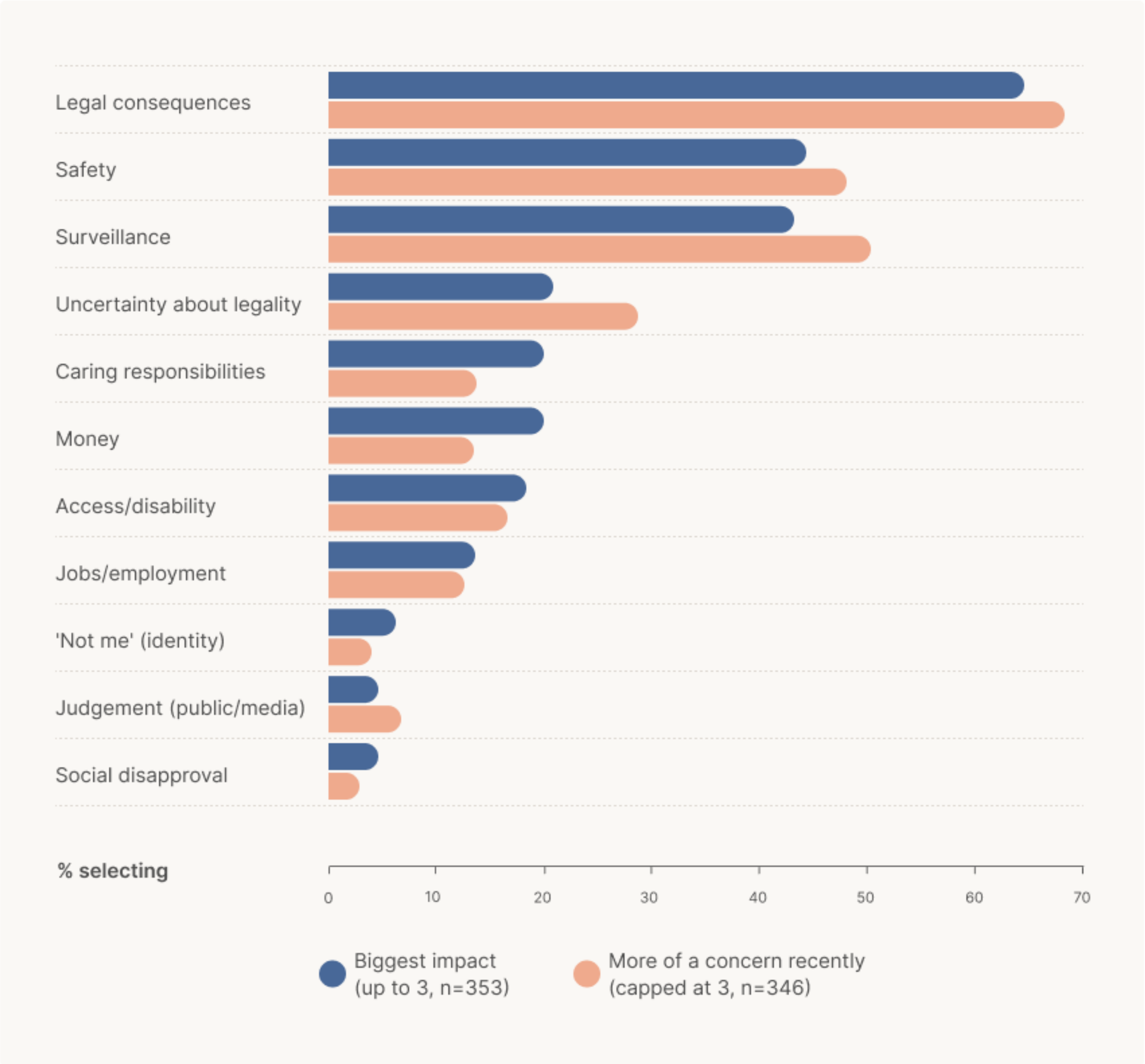


Fig 5. Barriers with the biggest impact, and barriers that have grown as concerns

“I have been to 35 large ... demos as well as several small local demos over the last two years. Millions are still attending, but when it seems to have almost no noticeable effect on government policy it gets harder to stay motivated.”

- **Health, age, disability and physical access** (mentioned by 23) - lots of standing, medication in custody, mobility, lack of toilets on long marches, mental health are all contributing factors.

Barriers by group: fear changes with age

The fear-based barriers show a steep age effect. Legal consequences strongly affect 56% of under-45s, 38% of 45-64s and 23% of over-65s. The same pattern holds for surveillance (35% / 29% / 17%) and safety (38% / 22% / 18%). Under-45s are also the least confident of their legal rights (60% not confident against 45% of over-65s) and the least likely to agree that stronger anti-protest laws make them more determined (59% against 70%). Employment risk is a working-age barrier: it affects 67% of under-45s and 50% of 45-64s, against 13% of the over-65s - a group likely to include many retirees.

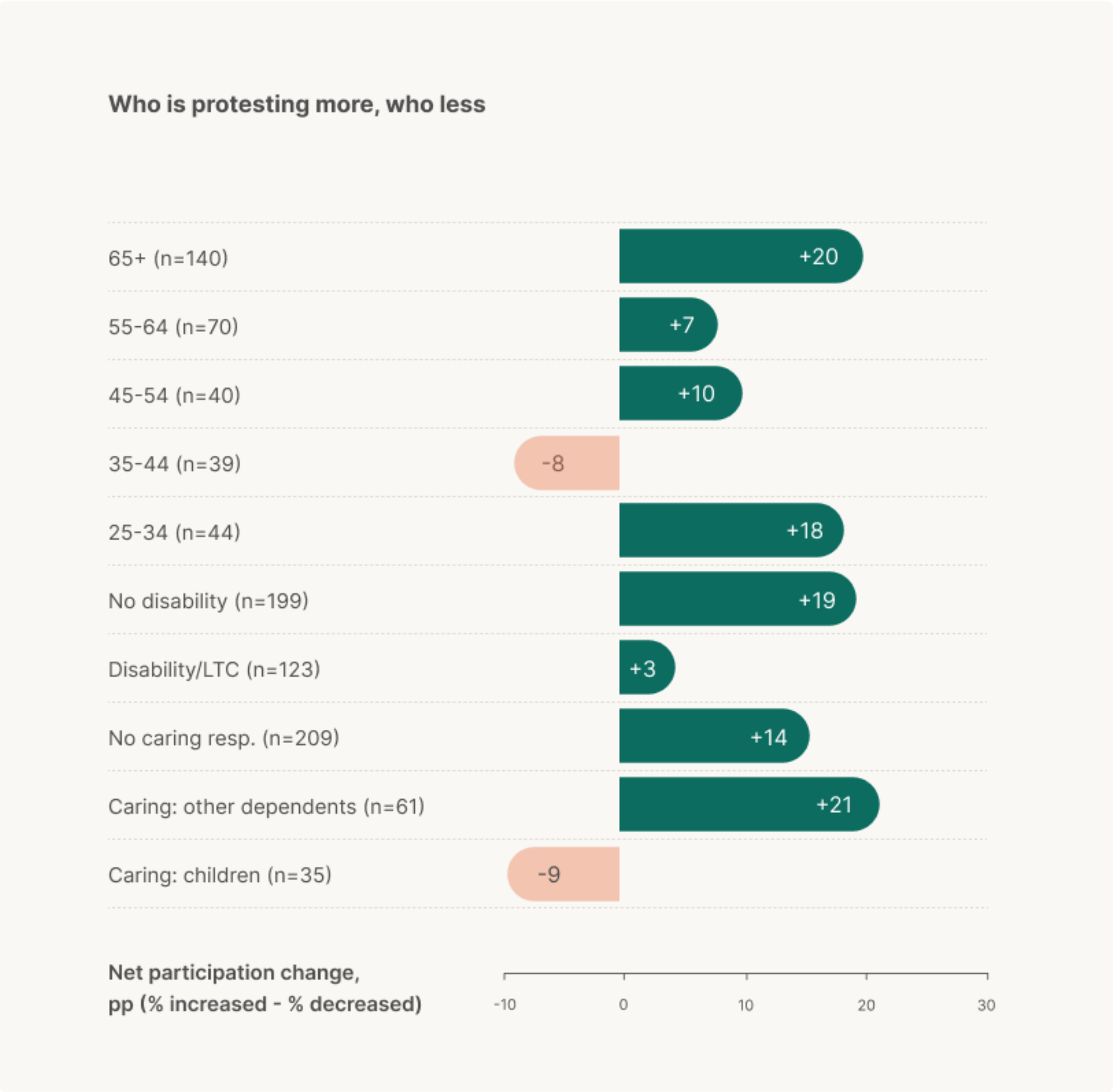


Fig 6.1 - Net participation change by subgroup

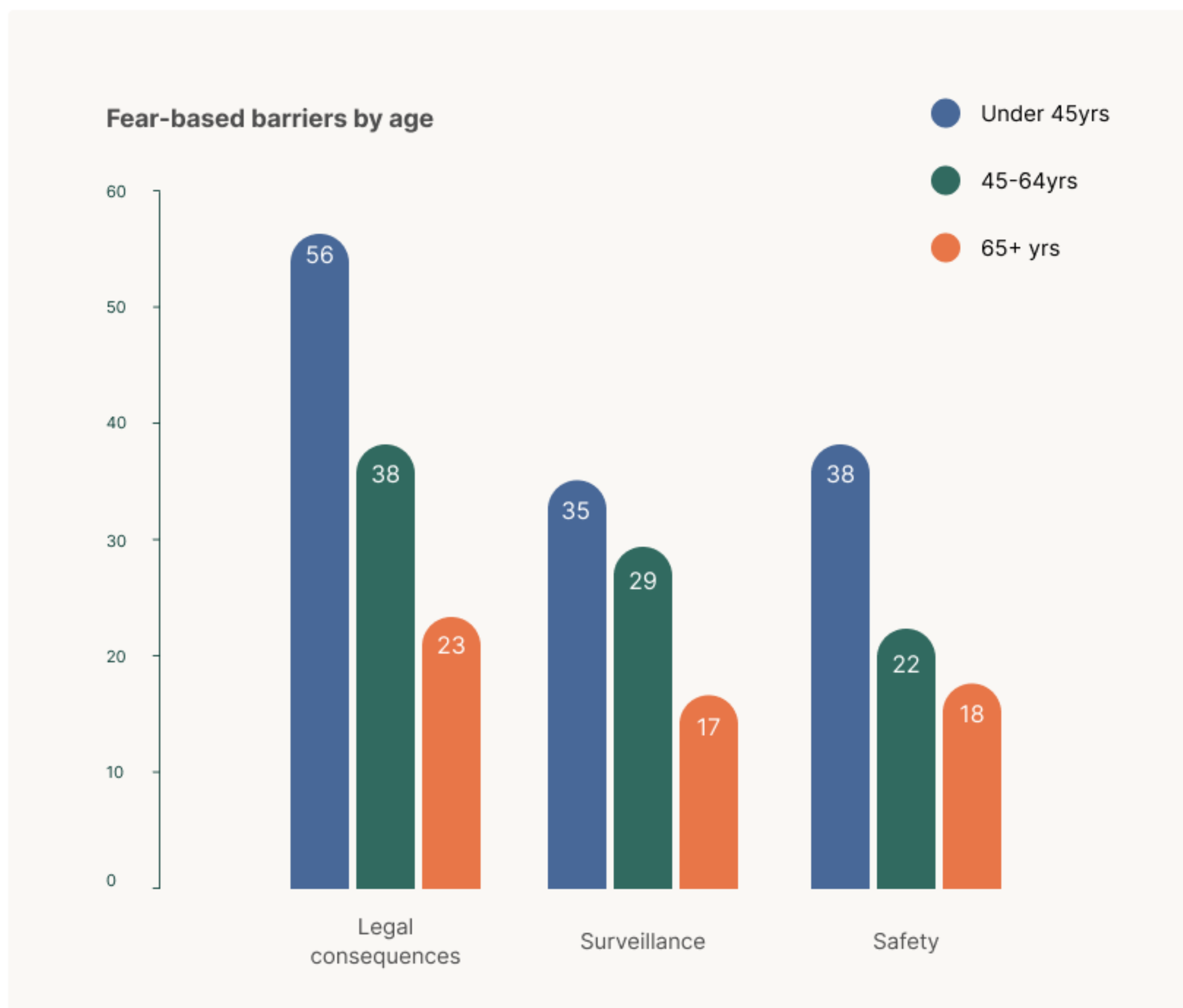


Fig 6.2 - % strongly affected by fear-based barriers, by age

Read together, the people most able to absorb legal consequences are those past working age, with no employment or career at risk. Younger activists - already underrepresented in this sample - carry the most acute fear of arrest, surveillance and violence, and report the least confidence about what the law permits. The 35-44 band, where employment and childcare pressures coincide, is the only age group in net decline. Several respondents saw this themselves: "I feel very protective of young people and children I see - whereas I used to feel joy to see new generations protest, now I have fear for them." For disabled respondents the pattern is somewhat different. Safety strongly affects 32% (against 20% of non-disabled respondents), and access affects 76% (against 19%). But legal consequences (36% against 37%) and surveillance (25% against 25%) affect them no more than anyone else. What constrains disabled activists is attending a protest safely, rather than the legal risk of being at one.

More fear does not straightforwardly mean less protest

How much legal fear someone feels does not map neatly onto how much they protest. Comparing three groups, those with moderate legal concern are the most mobilised group in the survey - more likely to have increased their protesting than either the unafraid or the very afraid. Some awareness of legal risk seems to be compatible with protesting more, not less.

The picture is different at the top of the scale. Respondents strongly affected by legal consequences are the only group who have decreased participation overall. While many (41%) have still increased their protesting, more have decreased (50%, compared to 31% and 27% in the other groups). Acute legal fear appears to push people towards either escalation or withdrawal, with few carrying on as before.

Legal consequences as a barrier	Base (n)	Increased (%)	About the same (%)	Decreased (%)
Does not affect me at all	39	44	26	31
Somewhat affects me	172	55	18	27
Strongly affects me	122	41	9	50

Table 1. Fear does not straightforwardly curtail protest

Access is a huge barrier for people with disabilities

76% of disabled respondents say accessibility somewhat or strongly affects their willingness to attend, against 19% of non-disabled respondents. While

this is somewhat unsurprising - disability and accessibility being highly related - the fact that three-quarters of disabled respondents are put off is a serious failure for movements seeking to be inclusive.

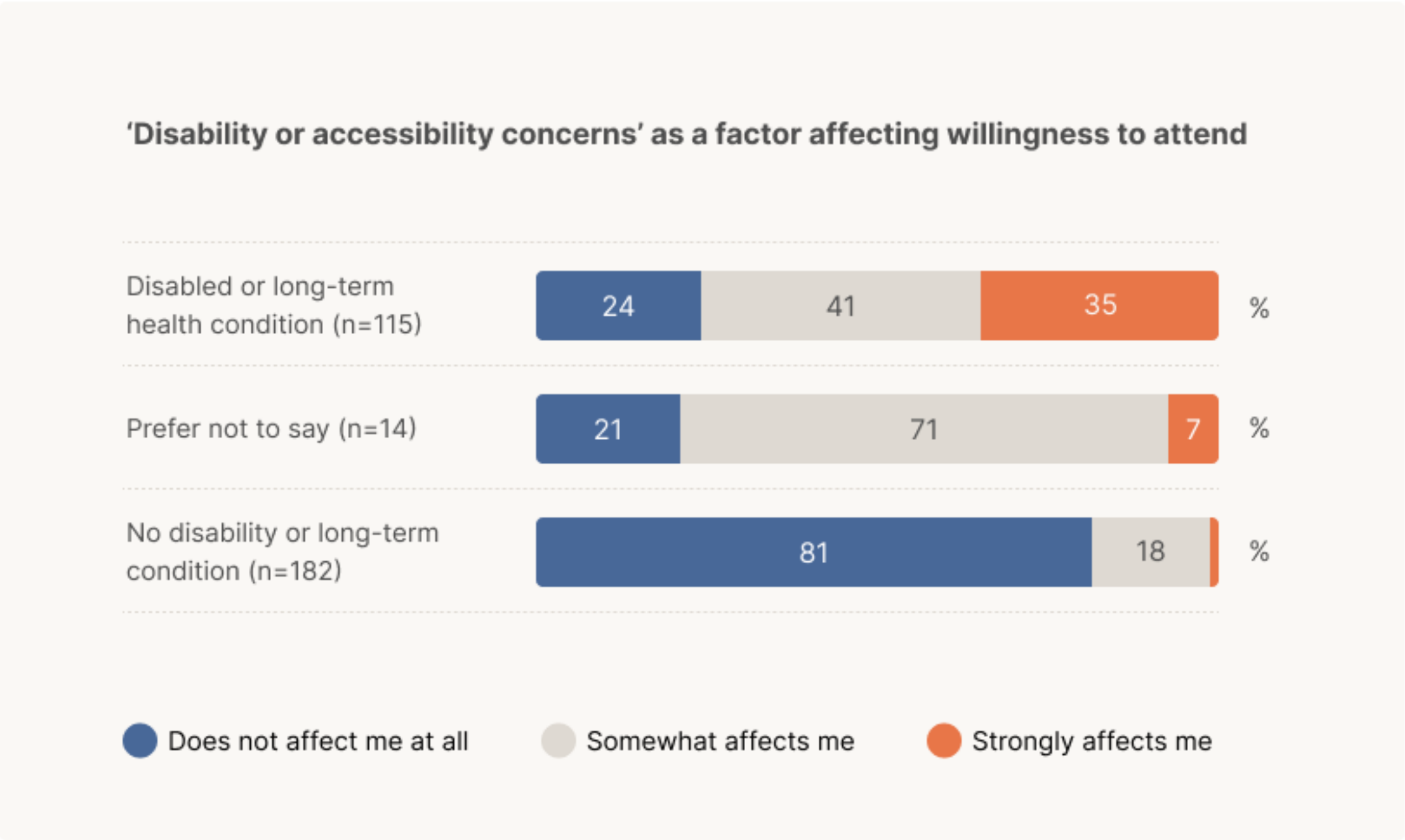


Fig 7. Access as a barrier to attending a protest, by disability status

Lapsed protesters show how strong chilling effects can be

Fully deterred people are largely invisible to this survey, since those who have fully disengaged would not have received the request to fill it out. The closest observable group is the set of 95 respondents who have protested but not in the last 12 months. Roughly two-thirds of these last protested within five years, and over a third within the last two. The table shows some of the differences in the profile of this group compared to current protesters.

Causality may run both ways - people drifting out of protest for any reason will feel less determined and less legally confident - and lapsing has many causes besides repression. But the pattern fits a 'chilled' population - people who still sympathise with protest but who see the risks and have stopped showing up.

	Current protesters (n=297)	Lapsed protesters (n=95)
"Support the right but don't feel able/motivated"	16%	64%
Stronger laws make me more determined	74%	38%
Shifted to other actions due to protest concerns	28%	60%
Not confident of legal rights at a protest	42%	69%
Legal consequences strongly affect willingness	35%	40%

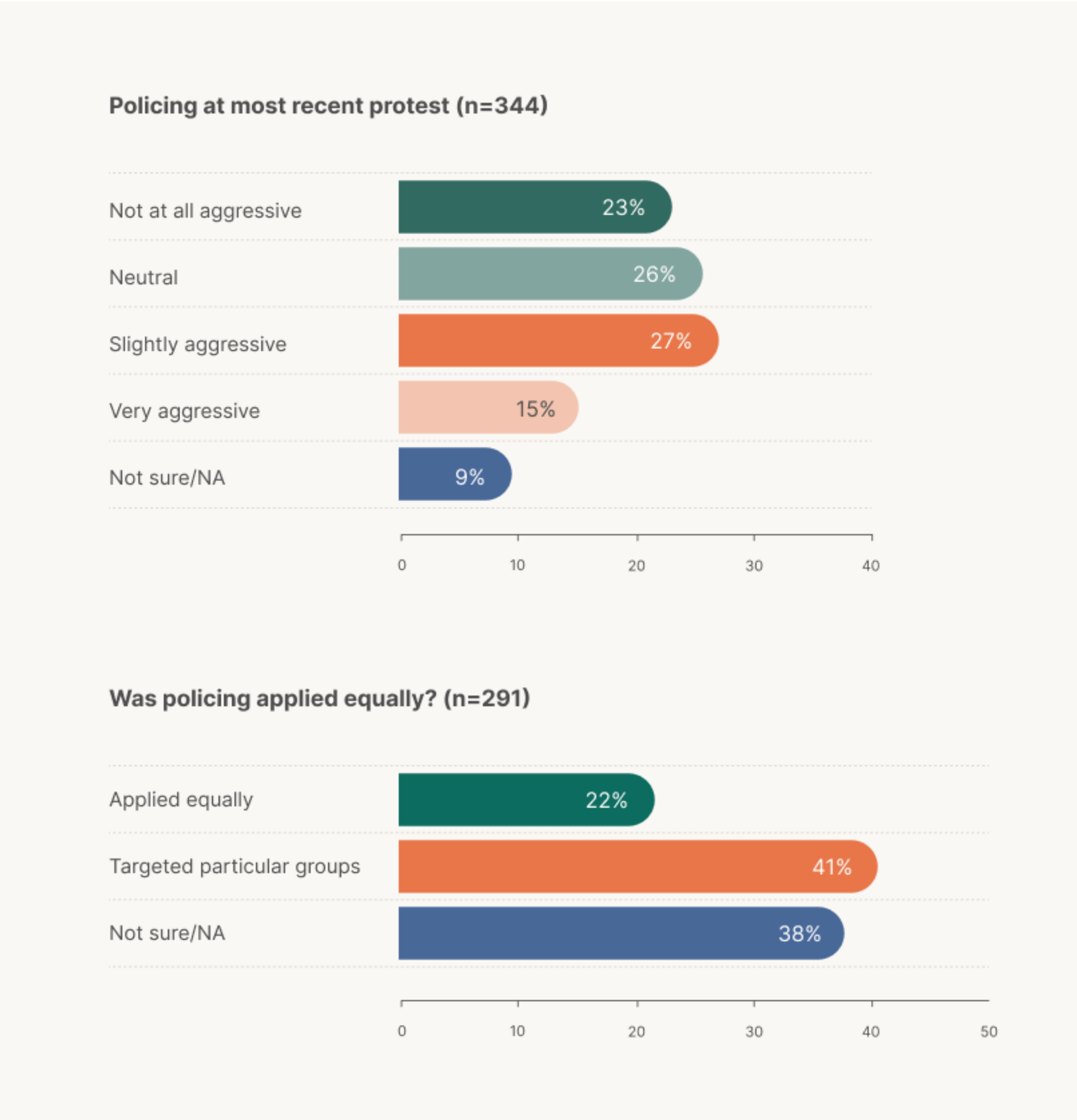
Table 2. Differences between lapsed and current protesters

What are people’s experiences of policing at protests?

42% describe policing at their most recent protest as aggressive or confrontational (15% very), and the share rises steeply with exposure - from 25% of those attending one or two protests in the past year to 56% of those attending six or more (which may reflect greater opportunity to witness aggressive policing, participation in more heavily policed protest types, or both). Among those able to compare with previous years, 29% found policing more confrontational than in previous years, 13% less, 40% about the same and 18% were unsure. 41% said policing at their most recent protest disproportionately targeted particular groups; only 22% said it was applied equally, with 38% unsure. Of those who reported targeting, 61% said it was worse than a few years ago.

Asked which groups were targeted, respondents most often selected people of colour (62%), Muslim people (46%), migrants (34%), trans and non-binary people (30%), women (29%), younger people (29%), working-class people (19%), people with disabilities (16%). The 37 “other” descriptions are dominated by two themes: differential treatment by cause (pro-Palestine and anti-fascist protesters policed harshly while far-right demonstrations were facilitated) and targeting of “known faces”, organisers, legal observers and journalists.

Fig 8. Policing at most recent protest attended >



“Antifascists were treated violently whilst fascists were treated like old mates.”

“The police often picked out people who they knew were popular in the movement, or the ones who were loudest or had done more actions.”

Scotland vs rest of UK

Respondents in Scotland report markedly less aggressive policing. 18% describe policing at their most recent protest as slightly or very aggressive/confrontational, compared with 50% elsewhere in the UK, excluding those answering "not sure". In terms of whether policing has become more confrontational than in previous years, 17% of respondents in Scotland thought it had, compared with 38% in other regions. Equal shares in both groups reported it was less confrontational, so the gap comes from respondents in Scotland reporting no change in policing - 66% against 45%. However, it is worth noting that residence is an imperfect proxy for where people protest, with a quarter of respondents in Scotland having also protested in England.

As mentioned earlier, there is a possible legislative explanation. Policing is devolved, and the protest provisions of the PCSC Act 2022 and Public Order Act 2023 apply in England and Wales only. However the contrast is not simple since proscription under the Terrorism Act 2000 is reserved and has been enforced heavily in Scotland, where Palestine Action cases made up more than half of the 193 charges for showing support for a proscribed organisation lodged since 2000 (Butterly et al., 2026).

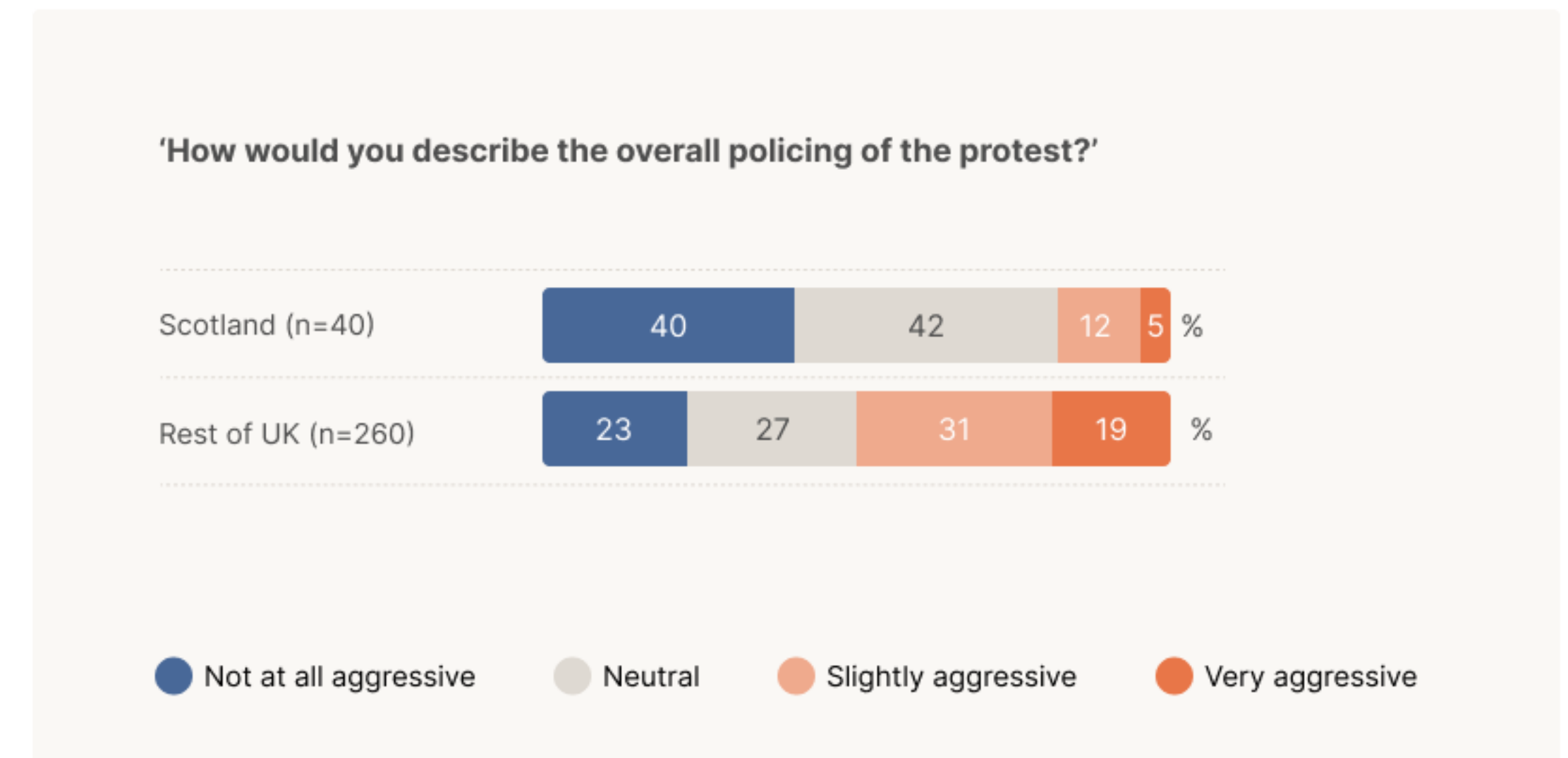


Fig 9. Policing in Scotland vs the rest of the UK

Are people switching to alternative actions?

Nearly everyone in this sample also campaigns through channels other than protest. Of the 359 respondents who answered, nearly all (98%) had signed a petition in the last two years, joined a boycott (90%), made a donation (89%), and contacted an MP or councillor (87%).

The relevant question for our purposes is whether people have moved towards these other channels because of concerns about attending protests. Overall, 37% say they have: 25% 'a bit' and a further 11% 'definitely'. The extent to which people have changed these behaviours relates to their protest participation. Those who have cut back on protesting are by far the most likely to have switched to other channels, and those whose protest participation is unchanged are the least likely. The association is strong and statistically significant.⁴

The two ends of the scale suggest different things. For those protesting less, the pattern looks like substitution - people switching from protests to petitions, donations and lobbying. For those protesting more, it is more a case of addition - people both protesting more (despite their concerns) and engaging in alternative actions.

This is the clearest quantitative sign of a chilling effect in the data. People are not being silenced so much as redirected to less dramatic ways to express their concerns.

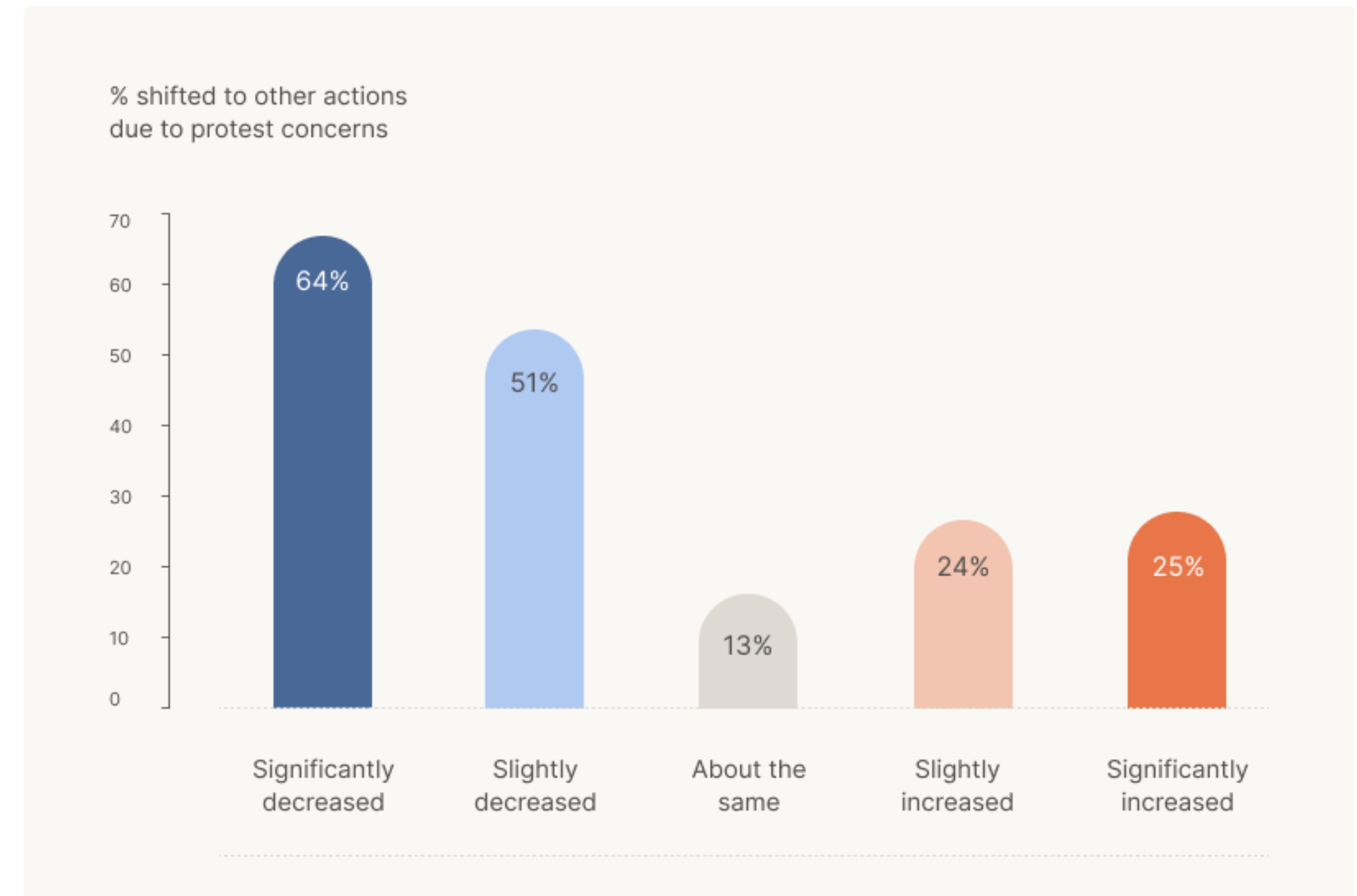


Fig 10. Shift towards other forms of action because of concerns about protest (y-axis), as a function of how much respondents indicated decreasing or increasing their participation (x-axis).

⁴ Association between change in protest participation over five years (Q2.6) and reported shift towards other forms of action (Q6.2), excluding respondents answering "not sure / not applicable" to Q2.6: $\chi^2(4) = 51.65$, $p < 0.001$; Spearman's $\rho = -0.30$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 333$.

Do campaigners know their rights?

Half the sample (50%) are not confident they know their legal rights at a protest - remarkable for a population this experienced, and likely connected to the 89% who agree recent laws have made legality unclear. This kind of uncertainty is itself a chilling mechanism: several open-text statements describe people deciding not to take part in specific actions, not because they were illegal but because people could no longer tell whether they were.

Among those still protesting, people’s main motivations are moral and emotional rather than instrumental: strength of feeling about the cause (93%), a sense of duty (89%), and - third of all motivations - not wanting to let repression succeed in silencing dissent (86%). Solidarity with others was next (76%). Belief that protest is effective at creating change came last with not much over half (59%) finding this a motivating force. On this evidence, persistence with a movement is more about people’s conviction and a sense of defiance than on confidence that protest actually works.

Confidence in legal rights, by protest experience

Confidence in legal rights closely tracks protest participation. Among those who have protested in the past 12 months, 58% say they feel fairly or very confident about their legal rights, compared with 29% of lapsed protesters and just 21% of those who have never protested.

Taken alongside the findings on cumulative barriers, this suggests that legal uncertainty is not simply a general-population issue. Instead, it appears to disproportionately affect people already disengaging from protest, who are less likely to have gained practical legal knowledge through experienced organisers, legal observer briefings, or repeated participation.

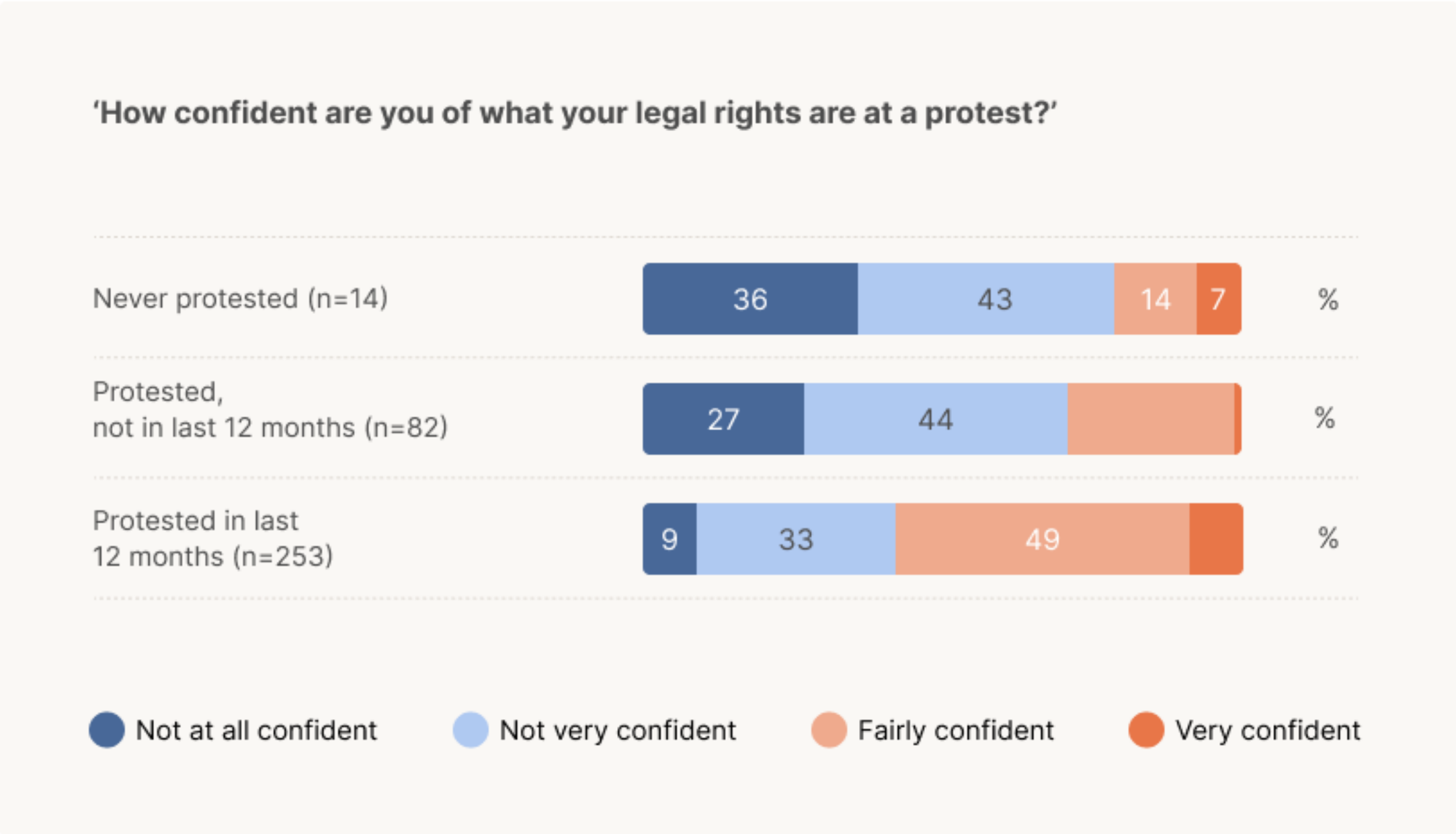


Fig 11. Confidence in legal rights at a protest, by protest experience

In their own words

172 respondents answered the final open question, producing some highly affecting comments (examples follow). Although people spontaneously mention arrest (14%), terrorism (11%) and the Palestine Action proscription (8%) almost nobody names a specific piece of legislation (1%). This suggests that a chilling effect operates more through a general sense of increased unease or through enforcement events people have witnessed or suffered, rather than through specific knowledge of restrictive laws. We draw out four themes from the qualitative responses:

The terrorism threshold

A recurrent theme is the use of terrorism powers against peaceful protest - the Palestine Action proscription above all. Multiple respondents report having been arrested or charged under the Terrorism Act simply for holding signs.

“I have protested for 60 years but have never been arrested. Last year I was arrested and charged with terrorism for holding a placard. I still can’t believe my country has lost its moral compass but this has made me more committed despite my disability.”

“Any effective protest has been stopped. If we organise openly we can be imprisoned for conspiracy. If we organise in secret we can be imprisoned for terrorism.”

“It is scary now, and the fear is working sadly ... prison and terrorism charges are not something I am willing to risk so it’s all been taken away, the one thing where I felt utterly aligned with my values and living my values is gone and I am devastated.”

Escalation of enforcement

Respondents describe mass arrests followed by no further action, restrictive bail conditions, strip searches, raids on homes and trainings, and jury-related restrictions in court.

“I was wrongfully arrested in a mass arrest at a Palestine protest, held for 23.5 hours, on bail for one month before no further action ... I am now in the process of being diagnosed with PTSD and pursuing legal action.”

“Police no longer feel that they are obliged to facilitate peaceful protest.”

Defiance and community

Against this, an equally clear strand insists that repression proves protest matters and that solidarity sustains participation - including among those facing charges.

“If they didn’t achieve anything, they wouldn’t be making them illegal.”

“What is dominant is the sense of purpose, solidarity and joy.”

“Without protest there is no democracy, the more the UK clamps down on peaceful protest the more determined people become to protest.”

And some doubts about protest

Some were concerned that protests have become more symbolic than effective:

“I'm worried protests can feel more about performing an identity than working together tactically, using the power we have, to make change. I wonder if protest used to be less like this.”

“In an abstract sense I feel that protesting now is an expectation of those against whom protests are aimed. As a result, I now feel that live protests have a consolidating effect that only serves to entrench the status quo further. Online petitions etc with singular, specific aims feel more effective than broad protests which draw a mixture of often non-related factions.”

While others expressed concern about the nature of some protests:

“What I can find disconcerting are loud chants where I may not always agree with the words.”

So overall, is there a chilling effect?

Yes, but it is not straightforward. There are four key findings.

01

Participation overall has not collapsed – it has grown. Net participation in this sample is up, mobilisation around Gaza and against the far right has increased, and 64% say repression makes them more determined. This is the repression paradox in action. In this selective population repression has had a galvanising effect.

02

The composition of action is changing. People describe giving up direct action and arrestable tactics and avoiding open support for Palestine Action. 37% have shifted to lower-risk tactics because of protest concerns. People are still turning out. What has changed is which tactics they will use, which causes they will attach themselves to, and how visible they are willing to be.

03

The strongest chilling effect is on those most exposed to specific consequences. In qualitative responses, people who feel exposed in terms of their legal or immigration status, their professional or caring duties were most likely to report full withdrawal. Quantitatively, the same logic shows in the age gradient: fear of legal consequences, surveillance and violence is concentrated among under-45s, and the 35-44 band is the only age group in net decline. Risk tolerance is highest among those past working age.

04

The tactics seen as most effective are those that come with the highest legal risk. Belief that protest works ranked lowest among stated motivations (59%, against 93% for 'strength of feeling' and 89% for 'moral obligation'), though it remains a majority view that protest works. Some respondents describe how tactics seen as effective are the ones exposed to the greatest legal risk, leaving people caught between forms of protest they see as safe but ineffective, and forms they see as effective but risky.

Repression is reshaping rather than completely suppressing protest. Among committed activists, repression is leading them to double down. But for those who feel exposed - through immigration status, professional registration or caring responsibilities - the costs are too high. And this survey almost certainly did not reach those who are most thoroughly deterred.

Limitations and next steps

This was a self-selected sample recruited through activist channels, so it describes engaged campaigners and those sympathetic to the right to protest rather than the UK public generally. A parallel study focused on the general UK population is underway. The design also cannot observe the fully deterred: anyone chilled out of activist networks altogether would not have seen the survey, which biases the findings against detecting people who have stopped protesting entirely.

Some features of the sample and survey instrument affect how participation figures should be read. The five-year retrospective spans the COVID-19 pandemic, which inflates both directions of change - a post-lockdown rebound for those reporting increases, which several respondents state explicitly, and lasting health effects for those reporting decreases. The age structure compounds this, with 61% of respondents over 55, so declines might reflect ageing as well as legislative changes; for this reason, figures showing decreased participation are reported alongside respondents' own stated reasons. Movement affiliation was collected as free text and is used indicatively only.

Method and sample

The survey ran in Qualtrics via an anonymous link distributed through Social Change Lab and Fossil Free London’s newsletter and partner networks. It was fielded between 9th June and 10th July 2026. It screened for adults living in the UK. Respondents who had never protested were routed past protest-specific sections; those active in the last 12 months and those active longer ago received tailored participation questions. Baseline numbers therefore vary throughout.

415 people started the survey and 352 finished it (85%). Median completion time was 11.4 minutes. Response arrived in two clear waves (16-20 June and 29-30 June), consistent with distribution pushes."

Who responded

This survey describes a population of engaged campaigners, not UK activists in general and not the public. Percentages below are of those answering each item.

The age profile matters for interpretation: a sample this old will show participation declines for reasons (health, mobility, energy) that have nothing to do with legislation, and the open-text data confirm this. It also means younger activists - arguably those with most to lose from a criminal record - are underweighted here.

96%

have taken part in a protest

- 73% in the last 12 months. Repeat participation is heavy: 47% of recent protesters attended six or more protests in the past year.

40%

are aged 65+

- a further 21% are 55-64; only 15% are under 35. 62% are women, 29% men, 4% non-binary.

86%

are from white backgrounds
(74% White British)

- 36% report a disability or long-term condition. 32% have caring responsibilities.

London (28%)
South West (21%)

are heavily over-represented

- Scotland contributes 13%. Almost all protest experience is in England (90% of those saying where they had protested), with Scotland at 15%.

Open-text movement affiliations (indicative only, per the agreed treatment of this question) skew strongly towards Palestine solidarity and climate, with peace/anti-nuclear, anti-racist/anti-far-right, Quaker networks and trans rights also recurring.

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