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British Public Opinion on Taiwan, the US Presidential Elections, and AUKUS

Sophia Gaston and Opinium



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Polling conducted: 10 to 12 January 2024

Audience: Nationally representative sample of 2,050 UK adults

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Participants were provided with objective, neutral information regarding the subjects being surveyed before each question was presented.

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About the Author



Sophia Gaston

Sophia Gaston is a London-based foreign policy expert, who has collaborated with Opinium since 2018. Her research focuses on strengthening the resilience and competitiveness of advanced liberal democracies in a turbulent geopolitical era.

Sophia is the Head of Foreign Policy and UK Resilience at a leading Westminster think tank. She is also an Expert Associate at the National Security College at the Australian National University in Canberra, and an Academic Fellow at the European Policy Centre in Brussels.

She is the author of several pioneering studies of British public opinion on foreign policy, as well as influential studies about UK-China relations, the integration of domestic and international policy-making, and the UK's evolving security and strategic interests in Europe.

Sophia is the Founder and Lead of the AUKUS Industry Forum, a dialogue and education hub which brings together British defence, security and technology firms with a stake in the trilateral project, along with senior Government officials, Parliamentarians and academia.

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Research Findings

1. Taiwan: Acceptability of Responses to an Invasion Scenario

This question sought to identify the British public's assessment of the acceptability of a range of possible UK Government responses to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

Overall Findings

- Overall, the most popular response amongst the British people for the UK Government to take following a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan is to reduce the UK's trade in goods and services with China, with 57% supporting this action in the event of such an incursion.
- This is a striking finding, because the cost-of-living crisis had weakened the willingness of the British people to pursue proactive economic decoupling for China to address growing security concerns about the authoritarian power.
- This result suggests that either the most acute pressures of the cost-of-living crisis are beginning to subside, or that a specific scenario of invasion is considered a more acceptable motivation through which to pursue decoupling from China.
- The second most popular scenario, supported by 55% of Britons, is to impose diplomatic and economic sanctions on China.
- Britons have seen the implementation of sanctions towards Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine, and that these have been coordinated with our closest allies – a fact that tends to strengthen British support for a variety of different actions.
- Significant pluralities of Britons also support the UK accepting Taiwanese refugees to the UK (42%) and providing British arms and munitions to the Taiwan government (42%), similar to the approach currently being taken in the defence of Ukraine.
- The least popular responses were to send British naval and air support to directly participate in the defence of Taiwan (38%), preventing Chinese students from studying in the UK (37%), and sending British troops to fight on the ground to defend Taiwan (32%).
- Around a quarter of Britons consistently express that they do not know how to respond to these questions, underscoring the relatively poor levels of public education regarding these issues.

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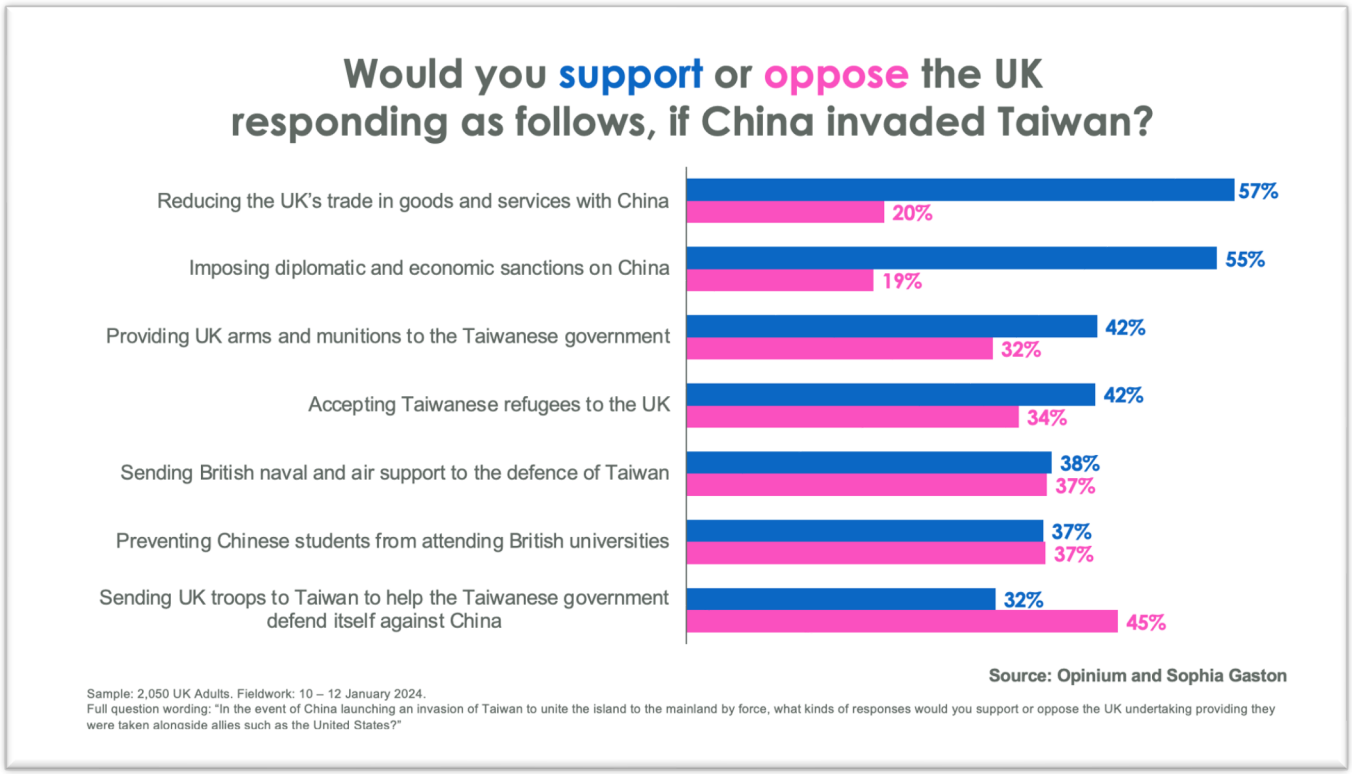

Key Demographic Observations

Political Differences

- Conservative and Lib Dem voters are consistently more supportive of all forms of action than Labour voters, with the single exception of accepting Taiwanese refugees into the UK, which is supported by 50% of Labour voters to 42% of Conservatives.
- Both Conservative and Labour voters share similarly weak support for sending British troops into a potential conflict over Taiwan, with just 35% of both voting groups finding this scenario acceptable.
- Britons who signal their intention to vote Conservative in the forthcoming election are somewhat more inclined to support all forms of action, compared to those who voted Conservative in the 2019 election.
- And Britons who signal their intention to vote Labour in the forthcoming election are somewhat less inclined to support the absorption of refugees and the disruption of economic trade, likely reflecting the movement of some previously Conservative voters into the party's orbit.
- There are few differences between the preferences of Leave and Remain voters, as is increasingly the case in many foreign policy areas – reflecting a significant shift from the 2016-2019 years. The one exception, however, is the question of accepting

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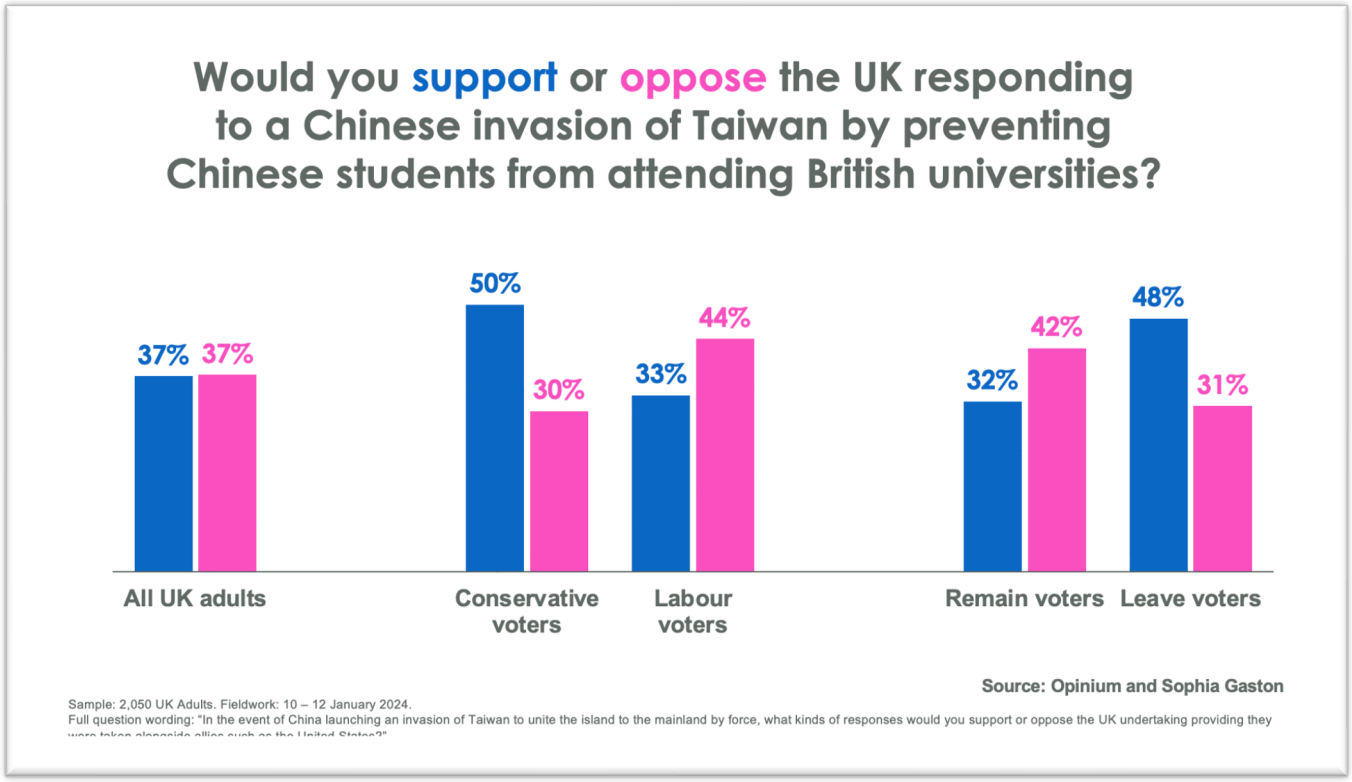
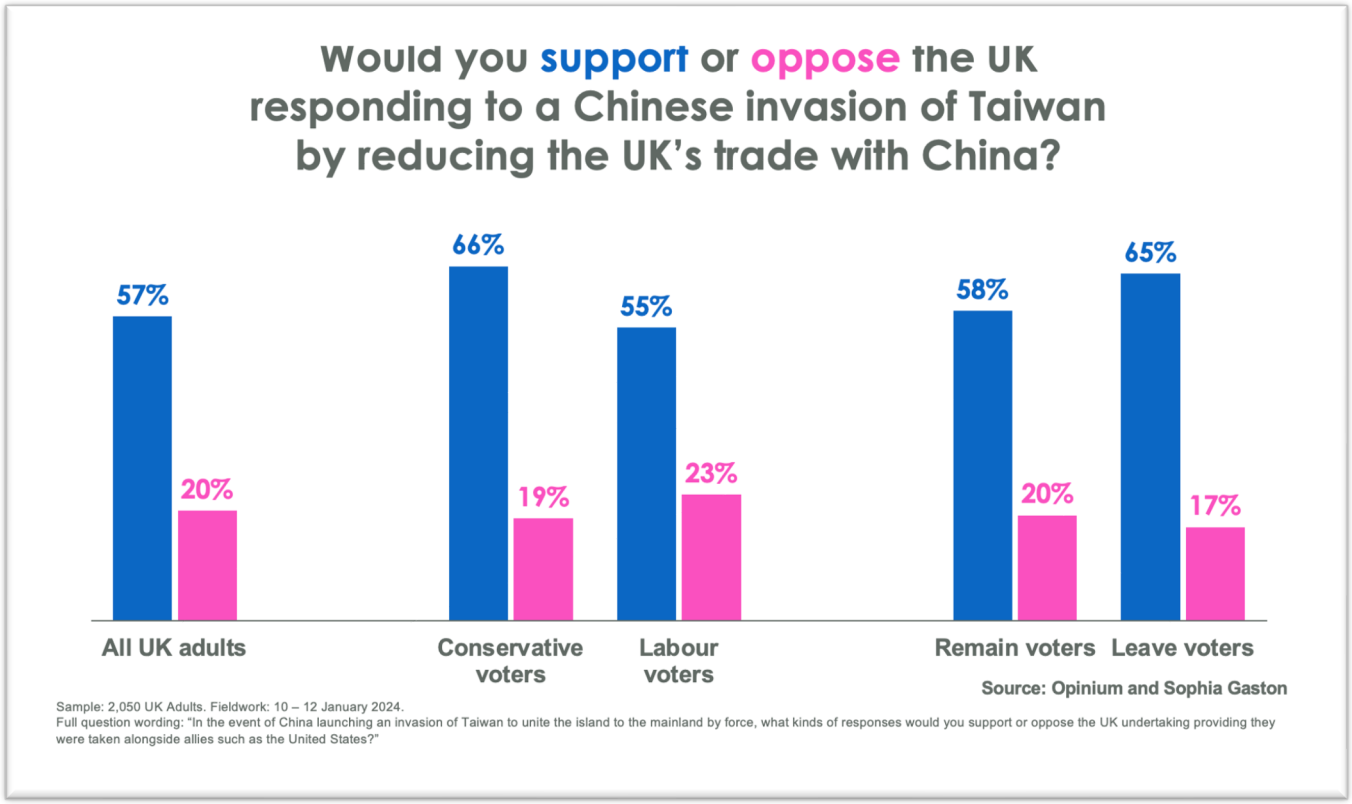
Taiwanese refugees into the UK, which is supported by 51% of Remain voters and just 34% of Leave voters.





Generational Differences

- There are some striking findings relating to age. Young Britons are much less inclined to support the application of economic and diplomatic sanctions on China than all other demographic groups (ie. 45% under-35s support vs. 61% of 65+), to support the reduction of trade with China (ie. 50% under-35s support vs. 63% of 65+), or to support preventing Chinese students from studying in the UK (30% under-35s support vs. 46% of 65+).
- But under-35s are more likely to support hard power responses than other age groups, including sending naval and air support, and – very strikingly – sending UK troops on the ground (43% under-35s support vs. 24% of 65+). They are also much more favourable to accepting Taiwanese refugees than older Britons (54% under-35s support vs. 35% of 65+).
- This likely reflects the relatively pronounced perceptions of economic fragility amongst young Britons, their comparatively muted concerns about immigration, and their relative scepticism about the legitimacy of the UK's role in upholding the international order.

Uncertainty and Lack of Knowledge

- As ever in foreign policy social research, women are dramatically more likely to express their uncertainty about each of the possible scenario responses.
- Labour voters also consistently express higher levels of uncertainty about their responses compared to Conservative and Liberal Democrat voters, possibly reflecting the relative lack of visible public leadership on issues related to China and the Indo-Pacific from Labour, and the demographic makeup of their voting base.

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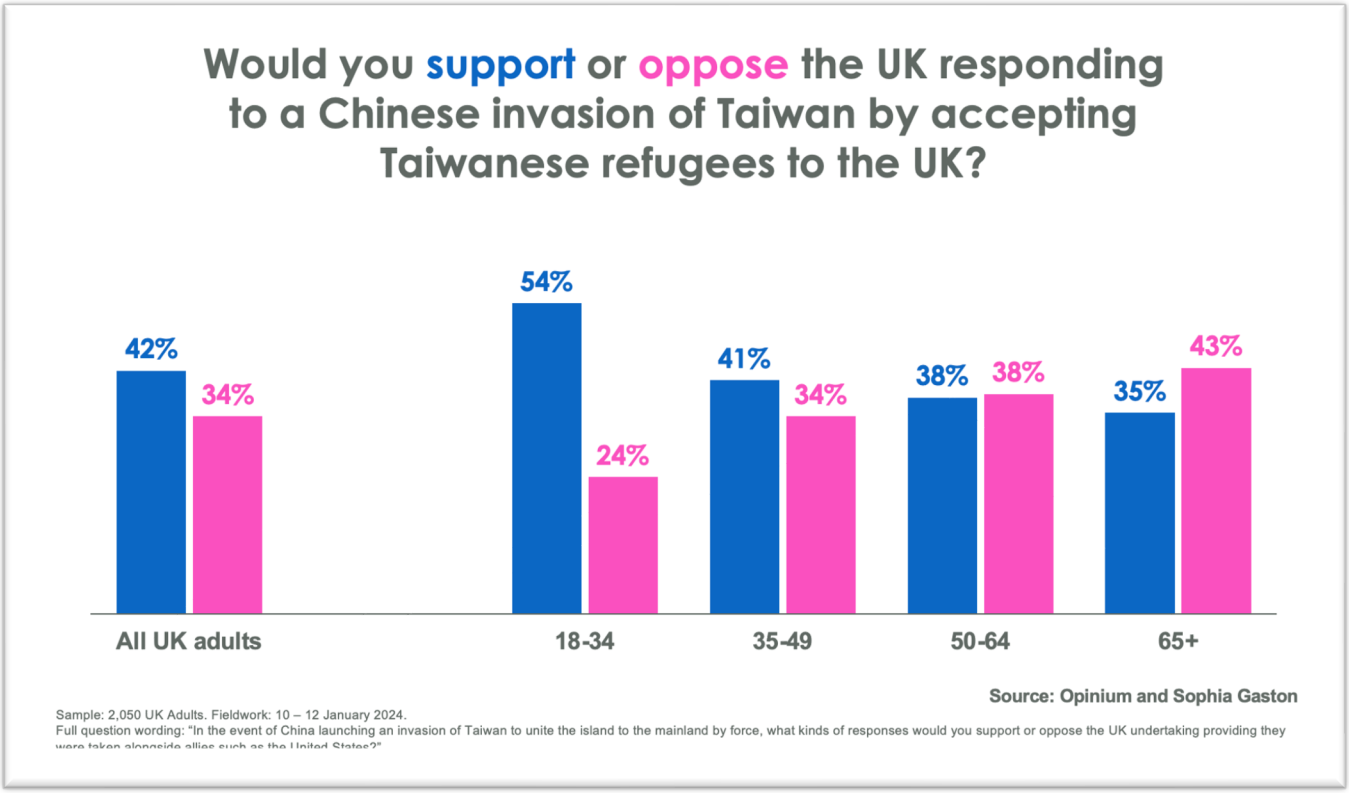

2. Implications of the US Elections on the UK-US Relations and the Special Relationship

This question captured Britons' assessment of the likely impacts of Donald Trump winning the 2024 US Presidential Elections on the UK-US 'Special Relationship'.

Key Findings

- Britons are clear that the re-election of Donald Trump would have a negative impact on the UK's relationship with our closest and most vital security partner, with 57% believing it would have a negative impact, and only 20% believing it would have a positive impact.
- The strength of feeling on this issue is quite pronounced, with only 7% of Britons believing that Donald Trump's election would have no impact on the UK-US relationship.
- Britons intending to vote for the Conservative Party are twice as likely to believe that Trump's re-election could reap positive dividends for the UK, at 34%, but still a larger plurality (44%) would anticipate negative outcomes.

- Labour voters and Lib Dem voters are considerably more emphatic in their negative perceptions of Donald Trump, with 66% and 70% respectively believing his re-election would damage UK-US relations.
- Reflecting the redistribution of voters taking place ahead of the 2024 General Election, we can observe that the Britons currently intending to vote Conservative are more positive towards Donald Trump than the voters that supported the party in the 2019 General Election (34% vs. 28%).
- Interestingly, the splits between Leave and Remain voters do not reflect the divisions between the main parties. While Leave voters are markedly less fearful and more optimistic than Remain voters about a second Trump Presidency, Leave voters are more likely to have negative perceptions about the impact of his re-election (52%) than Britons intending to vote Conservative (44%).
- Women are more likely to express concern (61% negative) about the impact of a Trump Presidency on UK-US relations than men (53% negative).
- Older Britons are also much more fearful than younger Britons. 65% of over-50s perceive a negative impact from Trump's re-election, compared to 57% of 35-49-year-olds and just 45% of under-35s.
- These relatively heightened concerns held amongst women and older Britons reflect their generally more acute levels of threat perception on a range of different international issues.
- Britons living in London (49%) and the Midlands (51%) have the lowest levels of anxieties about a second Trump Presidency, although they are still considerably more (twice as likely) likely to be concerned than not. Concern is highest in Scotland (68%).

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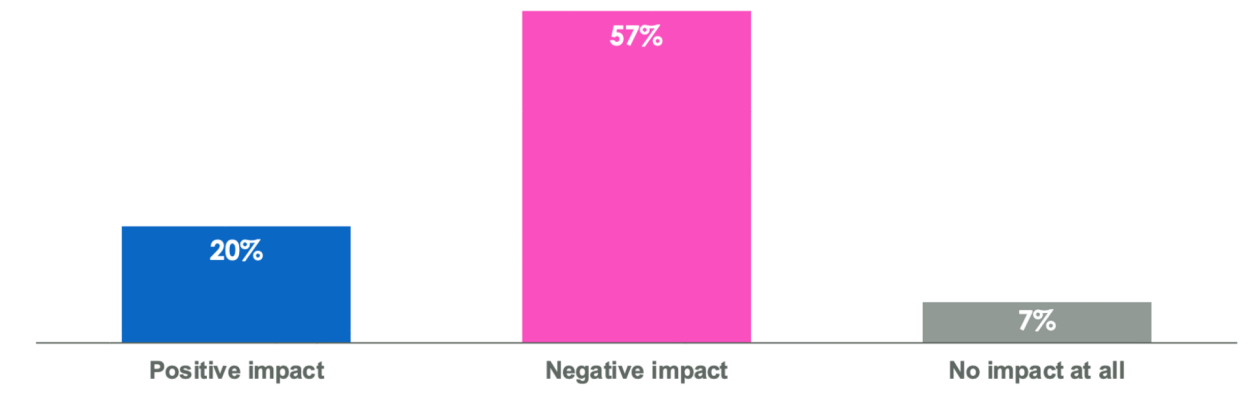
Would the re-election of Donald Trump as President of the United States have a positive or negative impact on UK-US relations?



Source: Opinium and Sophia Gastor

Sample: 2,050 UK Adults. Fieldwork: 10 – 12 January 2024.
Full question wording: "In the event of China launching an invasion of Taiwan to unite the island to the mainland by force, what kinds of responses would you support or oppose the UK undertaking providing they

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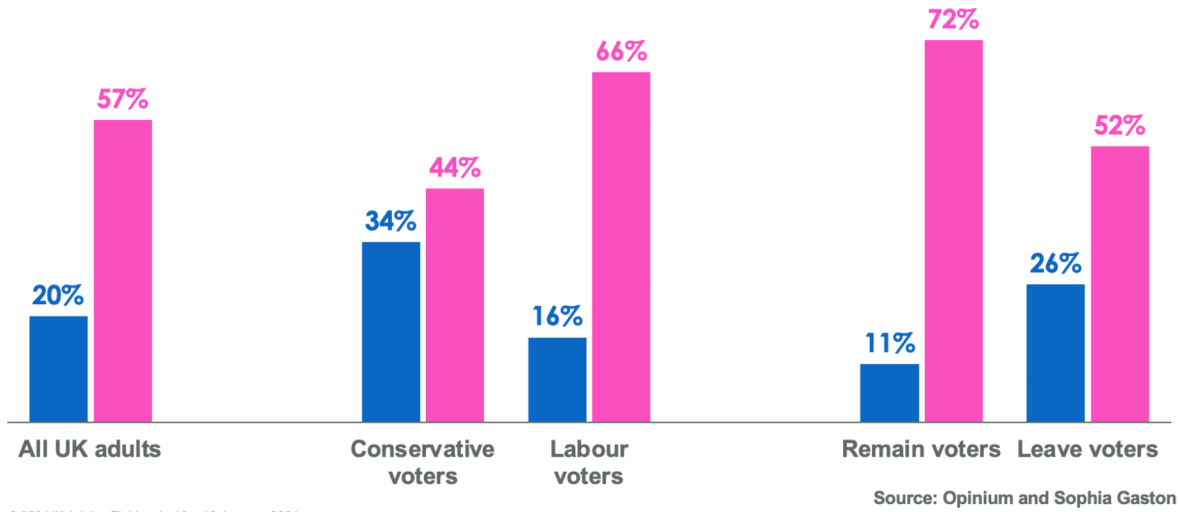

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Sample: 2,050 UK Adults. Fieldwork: 10 – 12 January 2024.
Full question wording: "In the event of China launching an invasion of Taiwan to unite the island to the mainland by force, what kinds of responses would you support or oppose the UK undertaking providing they were taken alongside allies such as the United States?"

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3. Evolving Significance of the AUKUS Security Pact

This question explored whether Britons believe the AUKUS security pact has become more or less significant to the UK's national interest in the 2.5 years since its announcement in September 2021.

Key Findings

- Britons are divided in their assessment about whether the AUKUS pact has become more or less significant to the UK's interests since it was announced.
- Twice as many Britons believe AUKUS has become more important (27%) than the proportion who believe it has become less important (13%) in the 2.5 years since its announcement.
- However, the largest single group of Britons is unsure (36%). A further quarter of Britons (24%) believe that AUKUS has become neither more nor less important.
- The lack of clarity on this question likely in part reflects the relative lack of public engagement and communications about the project and its progress, as we know that Britons have, in general, become more likely to believe that the current international security environment is in a state of deterioration and that alliances will be important to address this.
- The failure to connect AUKUS to these trends or to view the pact as an effective vehicle through which to respond to them is particularly problematic given that we know from the surveys undertaken in early 2023 that the narratives associated with AUKUS are extremely popular amongst the British people.
- This suggests that the narratives (which are supported) are not associated with the AUKUS project, and therefore AUKUS is not considered by the public to be relevant to the salient issues shaping British public opinion at this time.

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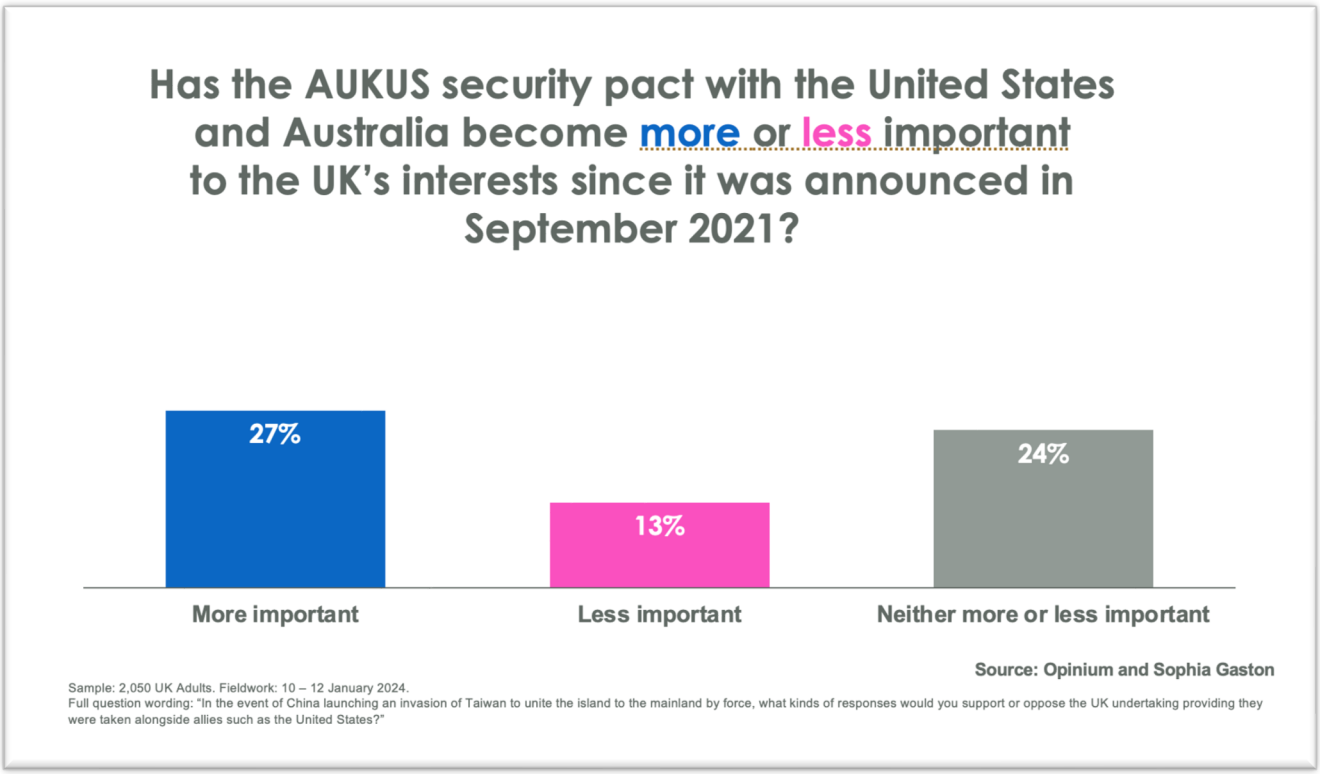
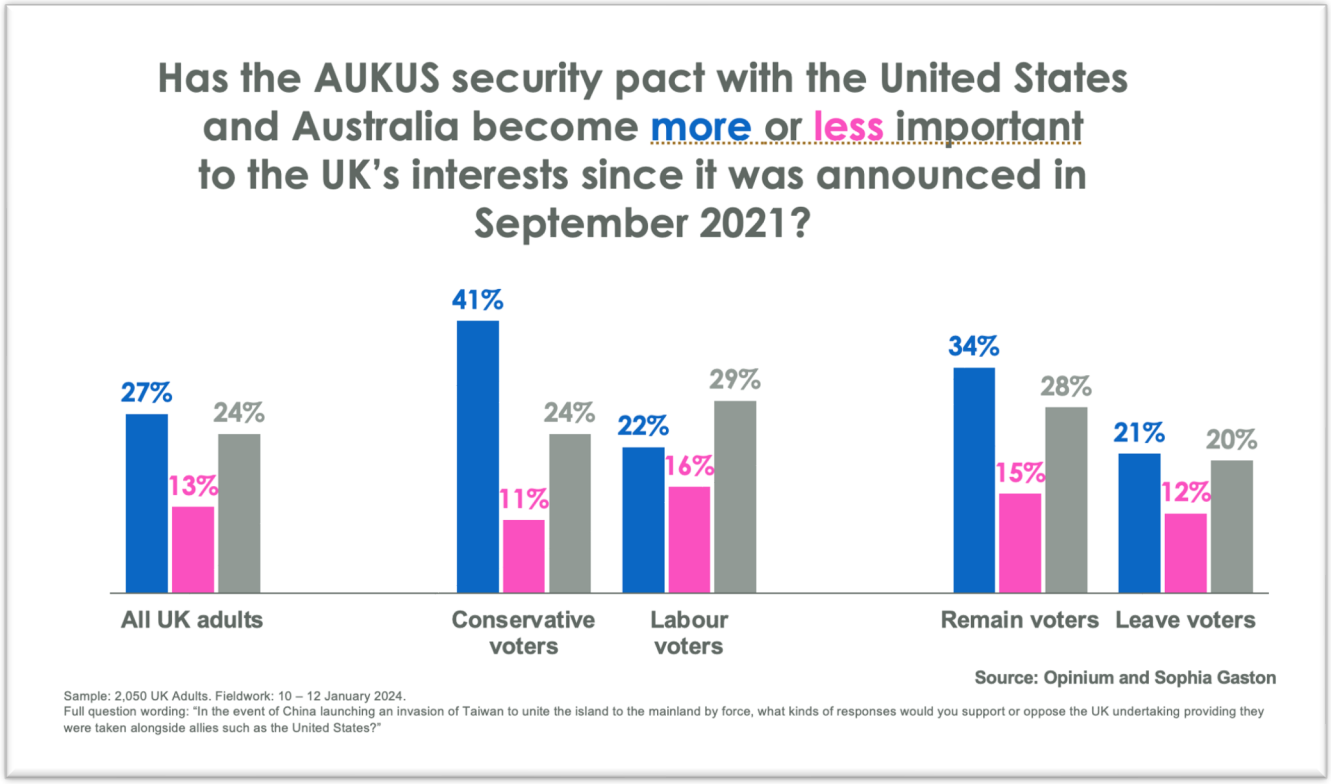
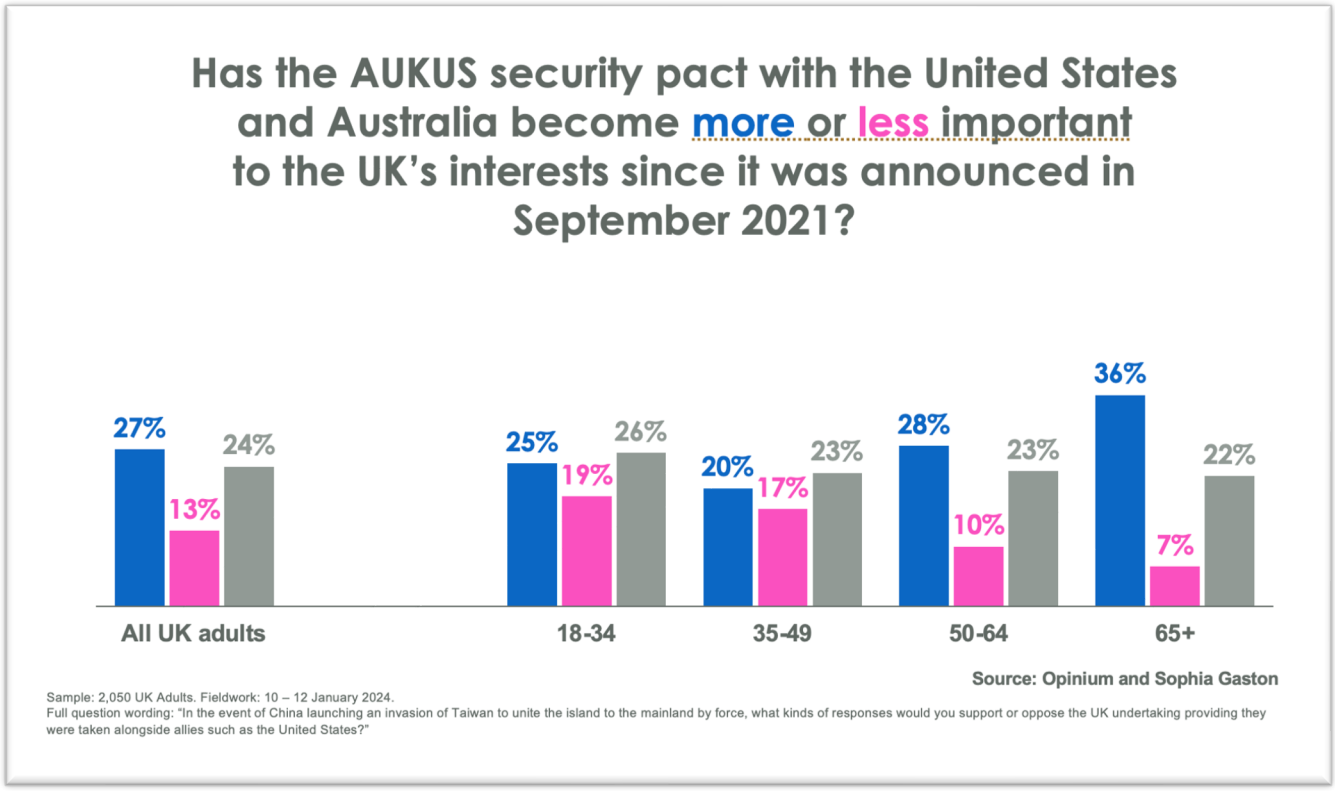


Key Demographic Observations

- The Conservative Party's voters continue to be the most fundamentally invested in the AUKUS pact, with twice as many (41%) inclined to believe that AUKUS has become more important than Labour voters (22%).
- The gap between the parties is partly explained by the fact that Labour voters are more likely to be unsure of their assessment, but they are also more likely to actively believe it has become less important.
- Leave voters are 10 percentage points more likely (35%) to believe that AUKUS has become more important to the UK's national interest than Remain voters (25%).
- Britons under the age of 50 are distinctly less likely to believe that AUKUS has become more important than older Britons, and Britons under 35 years are more than twice as likely to believe it has become less important than older Britons.
- Strikingly, it is Britons who live in the North of England, the region in which the Pillar I AUKUS submarines will be constructed, who are the least likely to believe that the project has become more important. Just 21% of Northerners believe that AUKUS has increased in significance, compared to 28% of Londoners and 32% of Britons living in the South of England.
- This disconnect between direct localised gain and citizens' investment in the project highlights the failure to effectively convey the regionally distributed benefits of AUKUS to local communities, and also suggests that the "retail politics" arguments

around the pact, for example, focusing on job creation, are not necessarily the most persuasive in terms of cultivating support.





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