



Attitudes to Human Rights in Scotland

December 2023

About the Scottish Human Rights Commission

The Commission is Scotland's National Human Rights Institution established via the Scottish Commission for Human Rights Act 2006. This research fulfils our mandate under Section 2 and 3 of the 2006 Act, which requires the Commission to promote and protect human rights and to undertake research to inform and advise those with responsibilities to uphold them.

To investigate current attitudes to human rights in Scotland, we commissioned the public opinion specialists YouGov to carry out this research. The report updates insights from a [study carried out for the Commission in 2017](#) to help us understand public attitudes towards human rights and specific issues in Scotland. It sets out the findings and give a more detailed picture of how views on human rights in Scotland have progressed over time.

Beyond this report, the Commission has undertaken further work in 2023 to advance our priority of working with and for the people of Scotland to bring their rights to life. We are exploring the lived experience of groups of people campaigning for new public bodies to uphold their human rights and have published research identifying challenges with accountability and access to justice when things go wrong.

More information is available in the following reports on our website at www.scottishhumanrights.com:



[At A Crossroads: Which Way Now For The Human Rights System in Scotland?](#)



[Access To Justice For Everyone: How Might A New Human Rights Legal Framework Improve Access To Justice in Scotland Today?](#)

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Introduction

Scotland is at a milestone moment for human rights.

The Scottish Government has committed to bringing more human rights into Scots law, meaning that public bodies could have additional legal duties to uphold rights, from safe housing to good healthcare and nutritious food.

Now more than ever, ensuring that people in Scotland understand their human rights and feel empowered to claim them is vital to building a stronger human rights culture. However, the Commission hears all too often that warm words of rhetoric don't always match the cold reality of lived experience.

As Scotland's National Human Rights Institution, it is our duty to deliver greater accountability for people's rights; this research was commissioned to inform that process by deepening our knowledge about people's attitudes and beliefs and our understanding of what rights really mean in people's lives in Scotland.

The Commission believes that taking an evidence-based approach to talking about human rights is the most effective way to inform positive change. Our new findings, presented here, show a significant increase in support for human rights and concern about the prospect of people experiencing fewer human rights in Scotland.

Many respondents believe the Scottish Government should do more to protect and promote human rights. The survey also identifies that fewer Scots know who to contact about human rights issues than in 2017. Some people worry that their right to freedom of expression is under threat. Others believe that far stronger protections are needed for specific groups such as disabled people and minority ethnic communities.

The findings help us identify areas where more work is required to build understanding of human rights across Scotland. We are addressing this in the Commission's next Strategic Plan 2024-28, and with a series of new thematic projects spotlighting areas of concern in the lives of people and communities in Scotland.

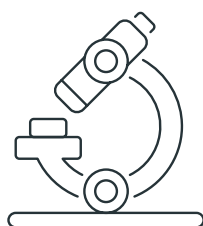
There has been significant progress in promoting positive awareness of human rights but there is still more work to be done to bring rights to life across the country. This report is a key element of our ongoing work to improve signposting, knowledge and awareness of the Commission and human rights in Scotland. Our findings will also be of interest to duty bearers, regulators and elected representatives who have responsibilities to uphold human rights.

Understanding public attitudes and awareness of human rights

We asked YouGov to conduct this research into attitudes towards human rights in Scotland on behalf of the Commission. The methodology included:



An online survey of 1401 adults aged 16+ in Scotland.

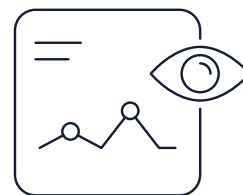


Four online focus groups to review how people responded to key messages on human rights.



Framing the responses around four key groupings based on understanding, awareness of and attitudes towards human rights: Supportive, Opposed, Conflicted, Disengaged.

There is more information about each of those groups on the following pages.



The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Scottish adults (aged 16+).

What do people in Scotland think about human rights?



KEY FINDINGS

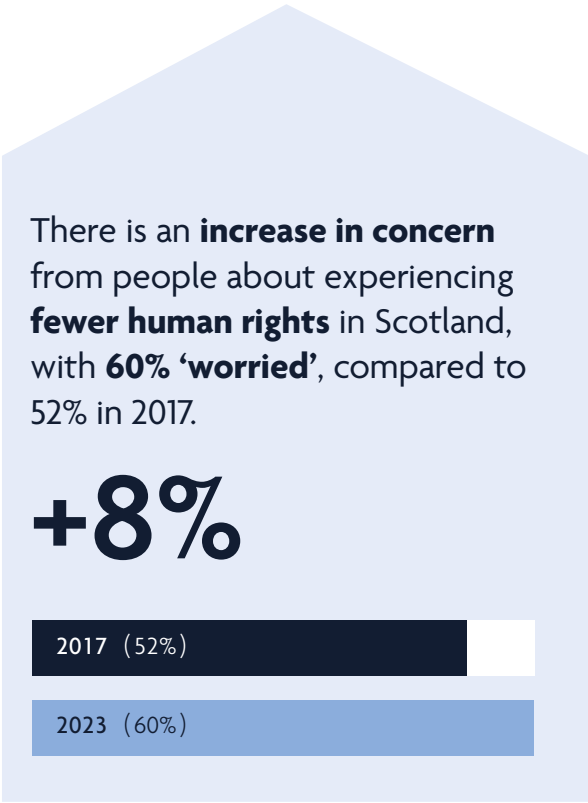
People in Scotland are more likely to support human rights than not.

48%

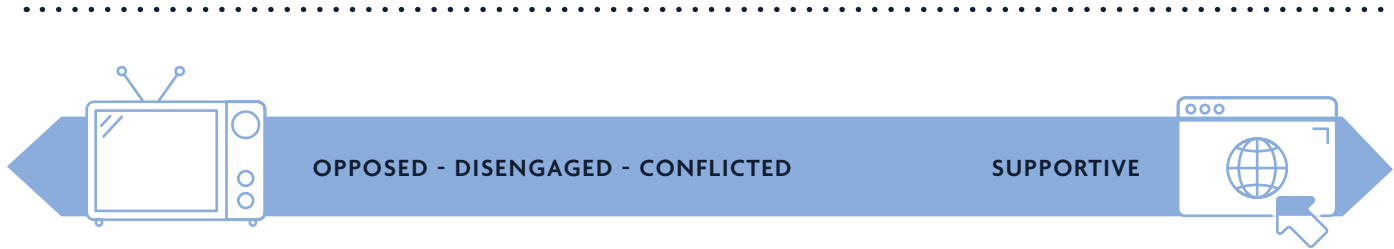
Our research shows support for human rights in Scotland has increased by 6% since 2017 to 48% and is the largest group in each Scottish region.

2017 (42%)

2023 (48%)



Age plays an important factor in opinion towards human rights with younger people more likely to be in the **Supportive** group and older people in the **Opposed** group. There is more information about each of those groups on the following pages.



TV news is the most popular source of information about human rights amongst **Opposed, Disengaged** and **Conflicted** groups while the **Supportive** group prefers **online news websites**

A third of people think the Scottish Government should do more

Many Scots either believe the Scottish Government should do more (33%), or is doing enough (32%) when it comes to their responsibility for human rights.

The Scottish Government is doing enough (32%)

The Scottish Government should do more (33%)

A majority of those in the Opposed group believe that the Scottish Government should give less consideration to human rights (61%), this has increased from 46% in 2017.

+15%

2017 (46%)

2023 (61%)

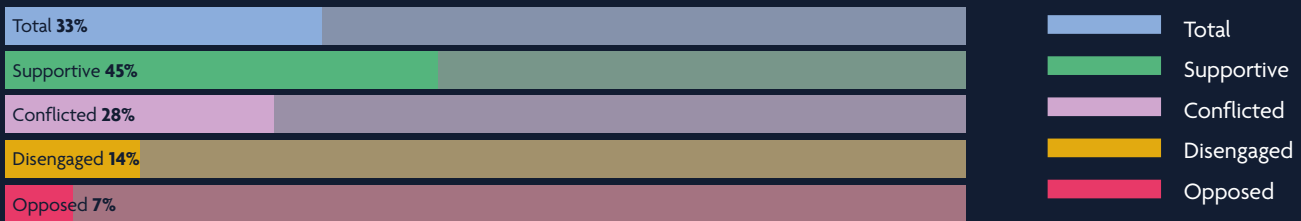
Those in the Supportive group are now more likely to believe that the Scottish Government should do more, than believe they are doing enough. The reverse was true in 2017.



2017

2023

The Scottish Government should do more to improve human rights



The Scottish Government is doing everything that can reasonably be expected to be done for human rights



The Scottish Government should give less consideration to human rights



Don't know

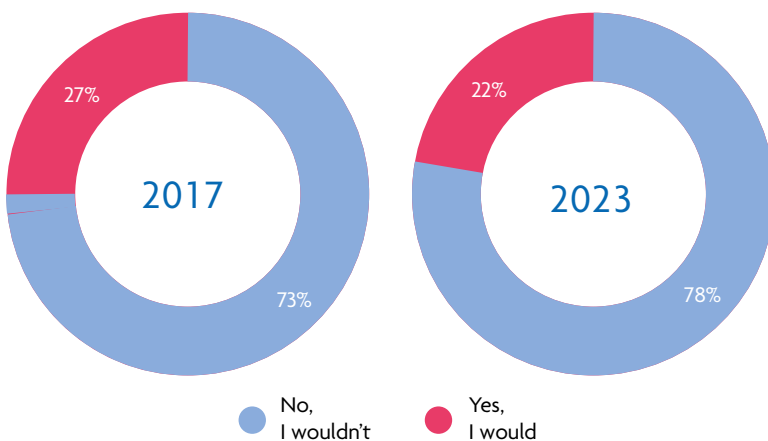


A photograph of a park in autumn. The trees have yellow and orange leaves. A paved path winds through the park, with several people walking. In the foreground, a dark wooden fence is visible. A large yellow graphic element, consisting of two overlapping curved lines, frames the text at the bottom of the image.

“There has been significant progress but there is still more work to be done to bring rights to life across Scotland.”

The majority of people don't know where to go if they have a query about human rights

Around three quarters (78%) would not know who to go to if they had a query about human rights.



To find out more about human rights people are most likely to rely on their own research online (50%), followed by an independent human rights organisation (36%).

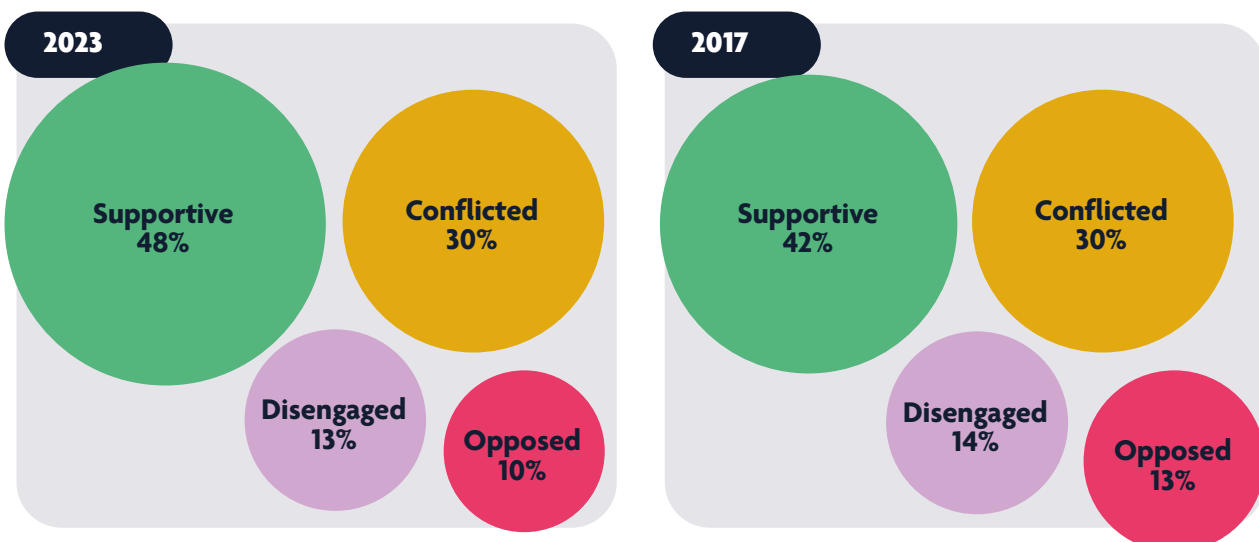


At least half of the Supportive (58%) and Conflicted (50%) segments and 41% of the Opposed segment would conduct their own research, but 42% of the Disengaged segment say they do not know.

SHRC

There is uncertainty about the role of the Scottish Human Rights Commission. People in the supportive group had a fair understanding and awareness of the SHRC but most in the Conflicted and Disengaged groups had not heard of it.

Identifying different demographics and what they think, feel and believe about human rights



This research tested and identified the impact of different types of messages on people's attitudes to human rights.

Through this work, and previous YouGov research in 2017, we found four groups of attitudes towards human rights in Scotland. There are clear difference in how people in each group think and feel about human rights.

Each group has a particular demographic profile and we have included more detail about each group and their attitudes towards human rights.

Supportive

48%

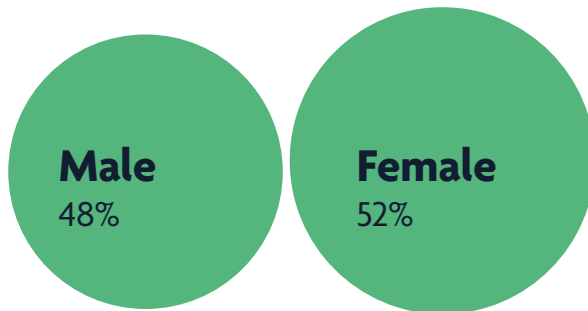
(6% increase since 2017)

Supporters are those who agree with positive messages about human rights and disagree with negative messages about human rights (48%). They are more likely to view human rights positively as something which should apply to everyone and believe human rights protect people in vulnerable situations.

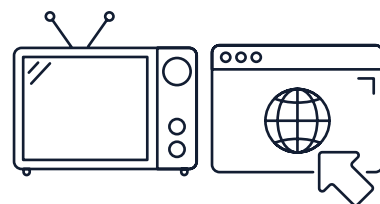
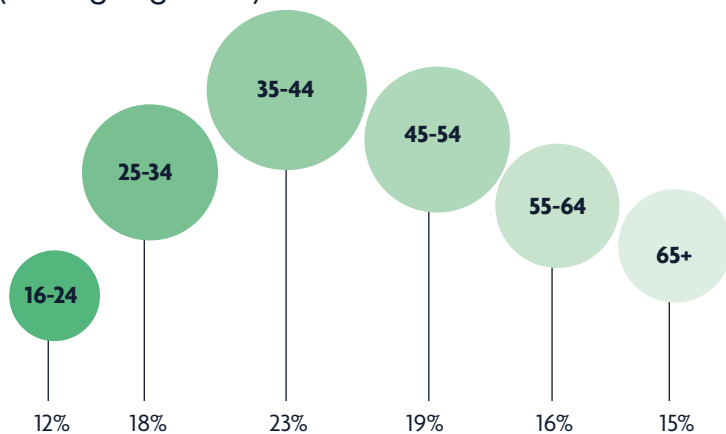
Majority voted SNP in 2019 general election.



Proportion of males and females in the supportive group



Youngest segment
(Average age = 45)

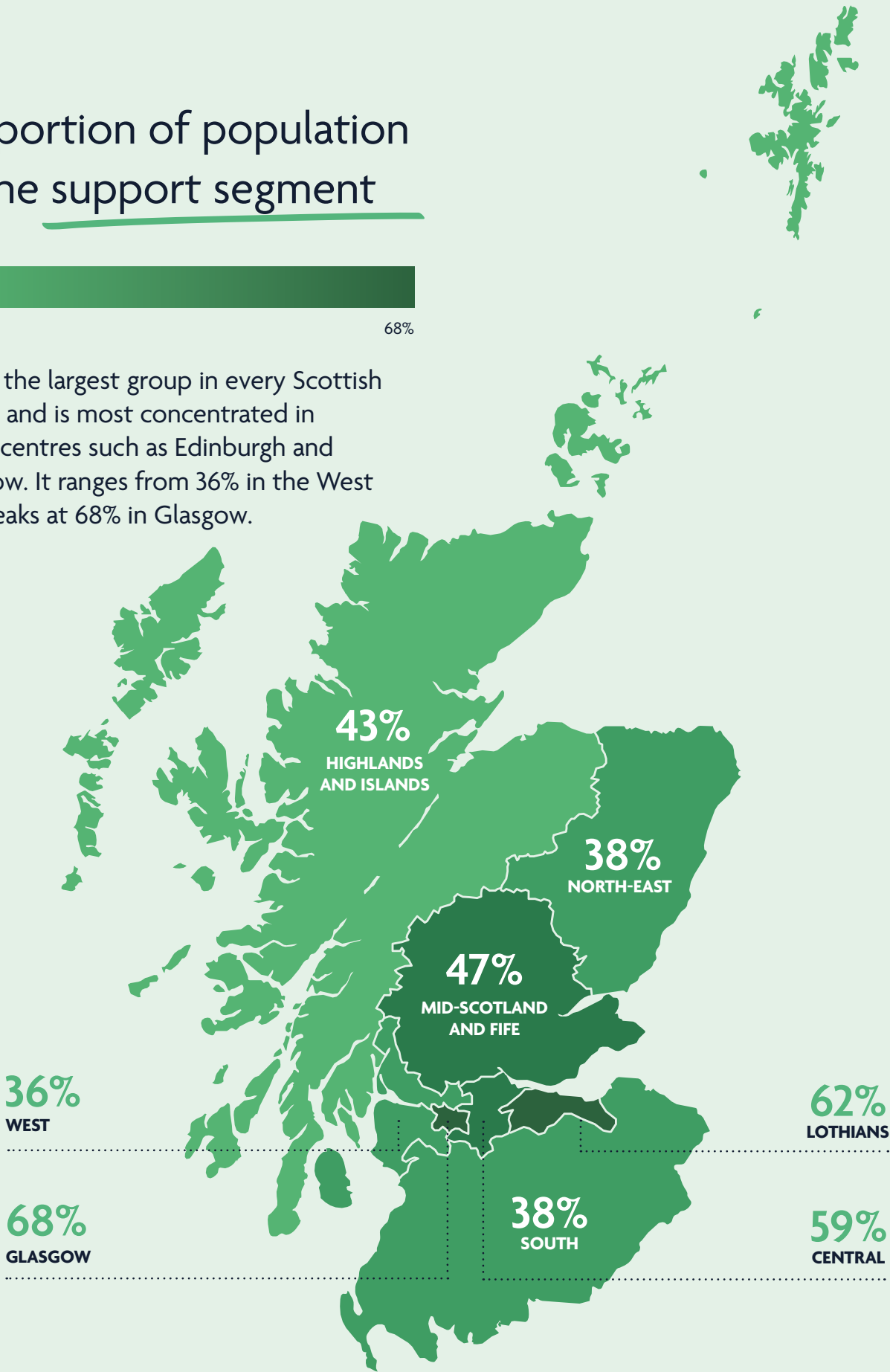


Get information about human rights from online news and television news.

Proportion of population in the support segment



This is the largest group in every Scottish region and is most concentrated in urban centres such as Edinburgh and Glasgow. It ranges from 36% in the West and peaks at 68% in Glasgow.



Conflicted

30%

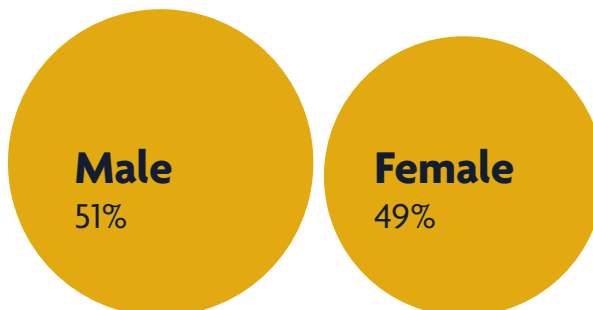
(unchanged since 2017)

This group agree with both positive and negative statements towards human rights. This group is most concentrated in North East, South, Mid and West Scotland.

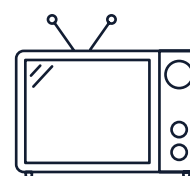
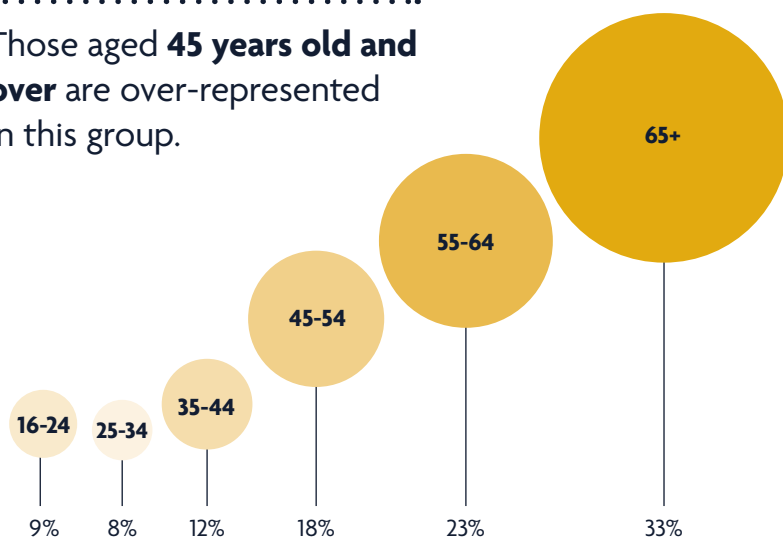
Predominately Conservative and SNP in 2019 general election.



Proportion of males and females in the conflicted group

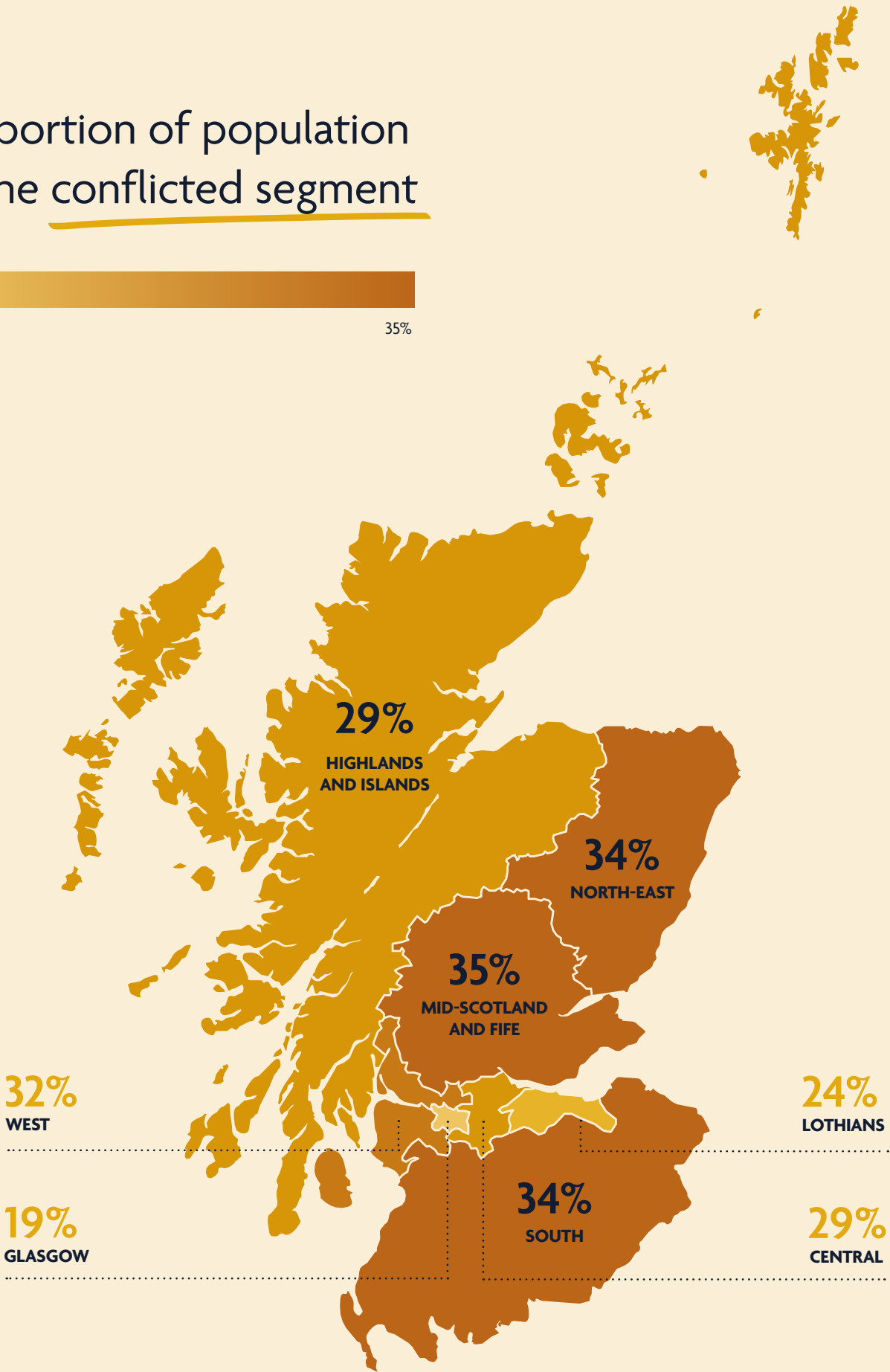


Those aged 45 years old and over are over-represented in this group.



Get information about human rights mainly from television news.

Proportion of population in the conflicted segment



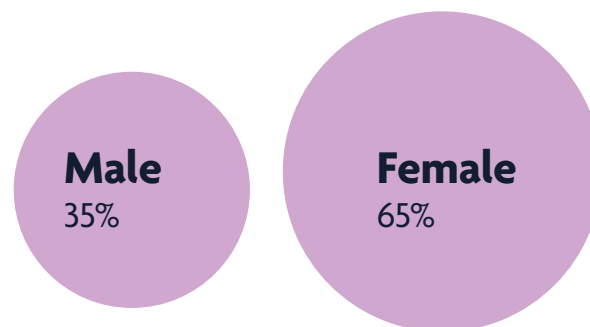
Disengaged

13% (-1% since 2017)

This group don't hold firm views on statements about human rights. 86% of the disengaged group were unsure about what words and emotions they would associate with human rights. This group is most concentrated in the Highlands, Islands and West.

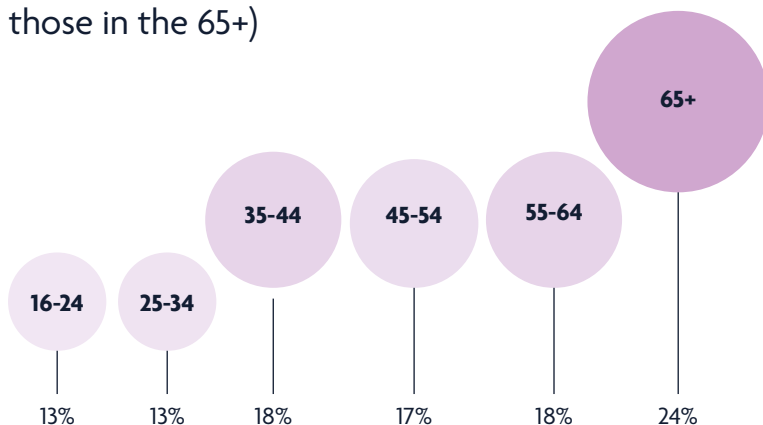
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Most likely to have voted SNP in 2019 general election



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Steadier distribution of ages (peaking amongst those in the 65+)



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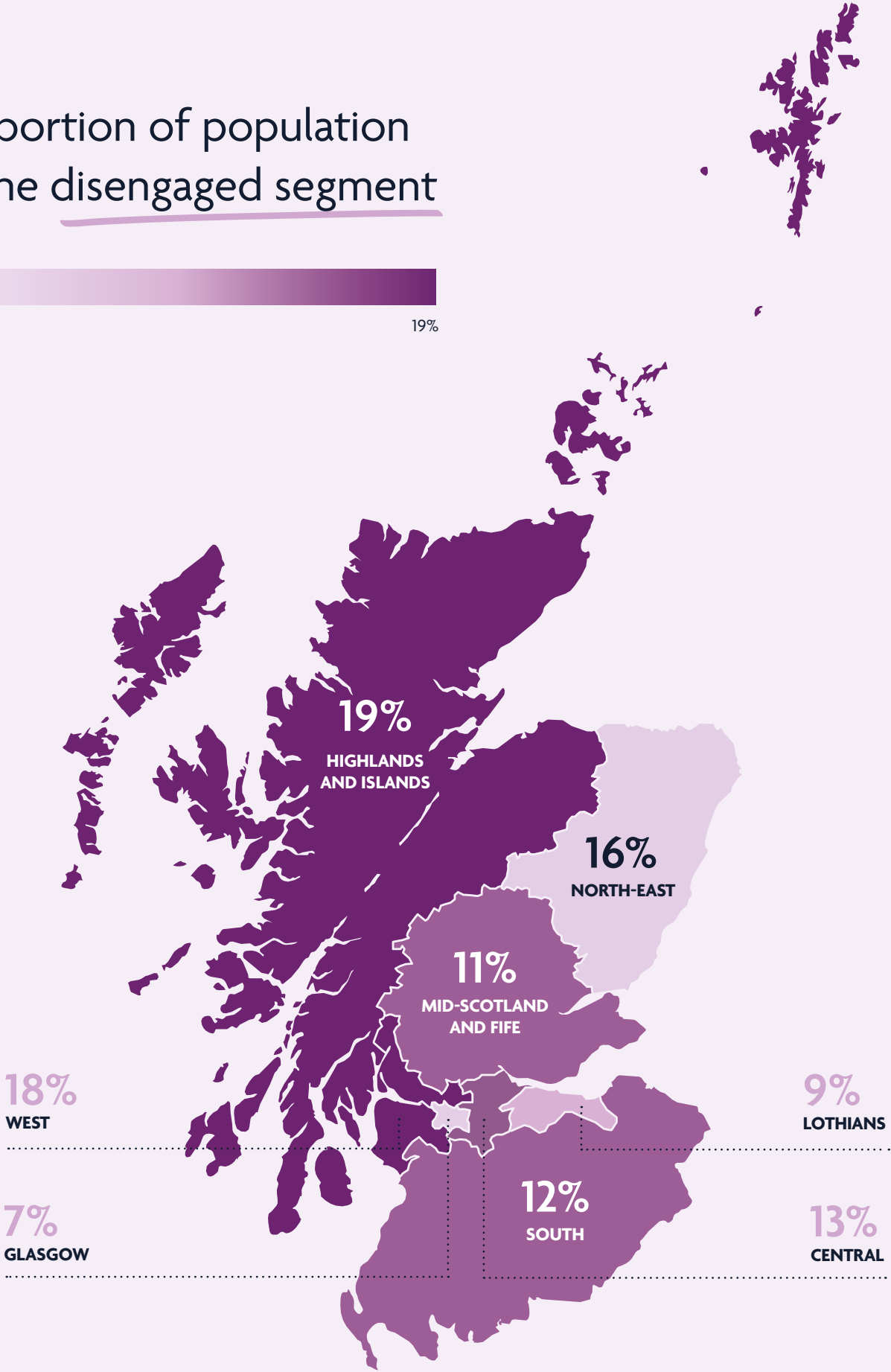
Some in the disengaged group implied that their rights to freedom of speech were under threat, because an excessive concern with human rights was creating a hostile environment for anyone 'to have an opinion'.

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Most likely to not know where they get information about human rights from.



Proportion of population in the disengaged segment



Opposed

10%

(-3% since 2017)

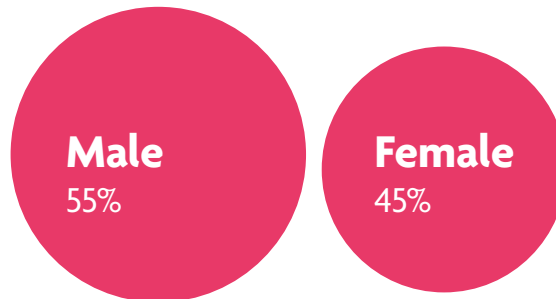
The Opposed group agree with negative statements and disagree with positive. This group is most concentrated in South and West Scotland and a quarter of the opposed group (26%) make reference to human rights being abused or taken too far.

Majority voted Conservative

in 2019 general election

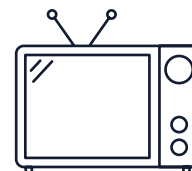


Proportion of males and females in the opposed group

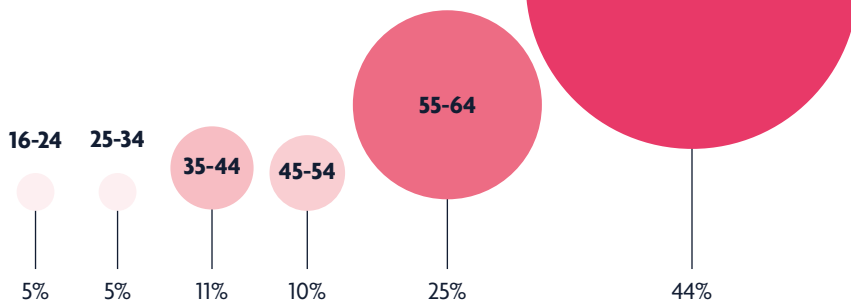


The oldest audience

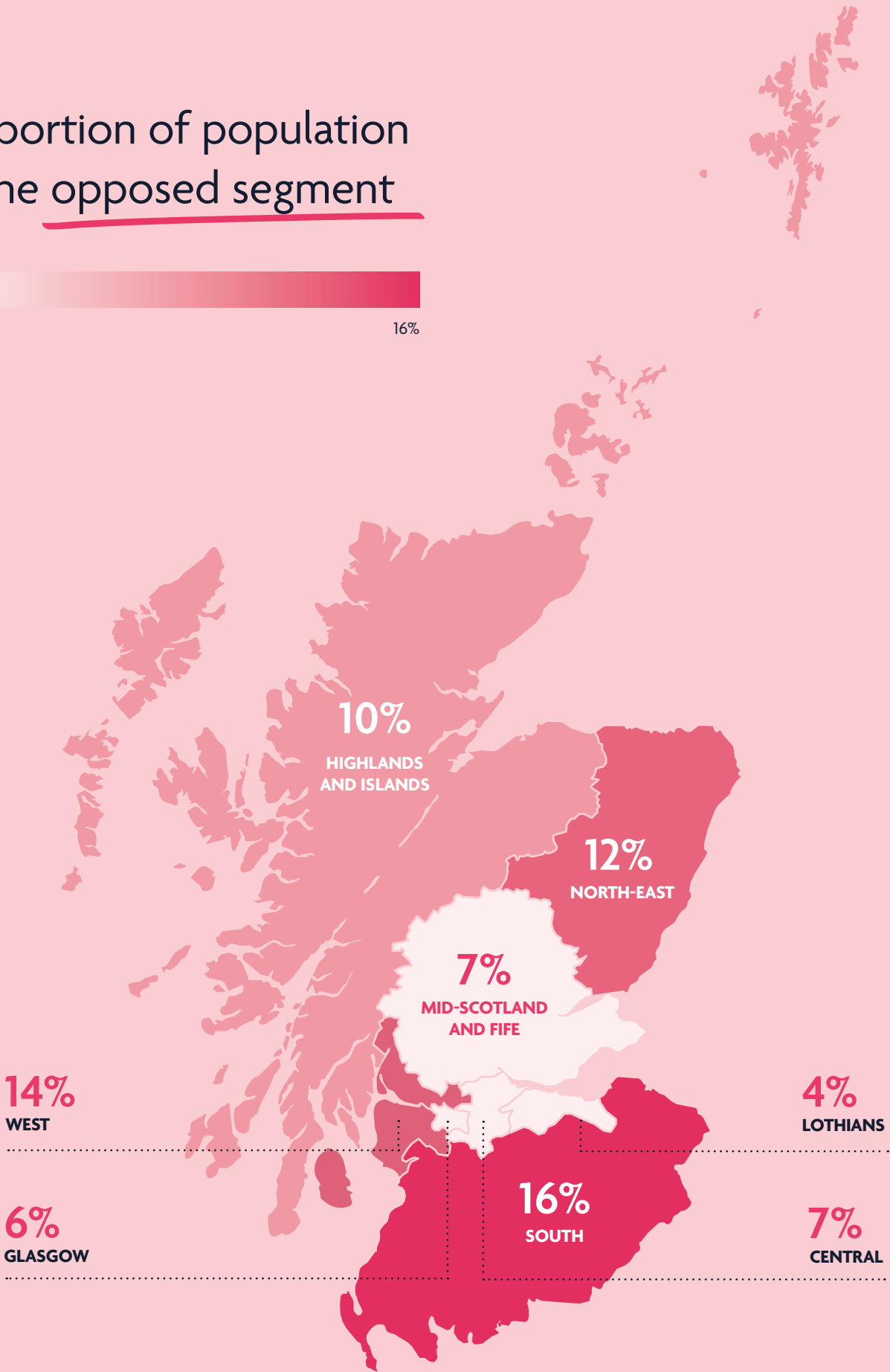
with an average age of 59 years



Get information about human rights mainly from television news. They are less likely to get information from an independent organisation related to human rights.



Proportion of population in the opposed segment





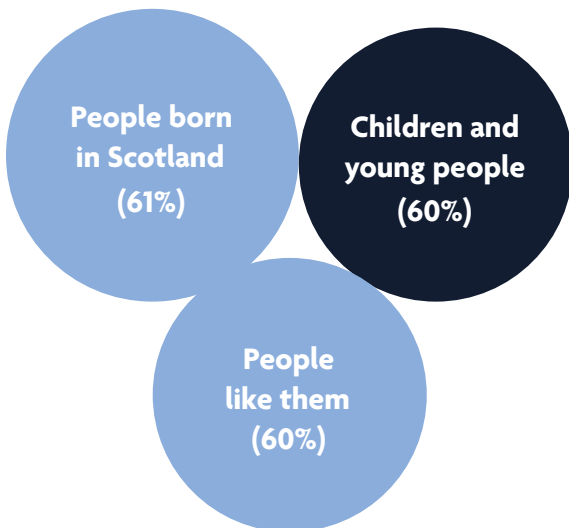
**“I believe human rights
are fundamental and
worth fighting for.”**

Supportive, 62

Human rights protections

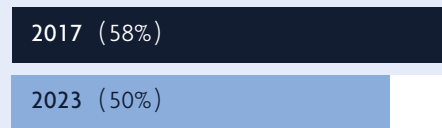
Many Scots expressed concerns about the human rights protections of people living in vulnerable situations and considered the rights of minority groups and people living in poverty to be under threat.

Scots are most likely to believe human rights **work well** for:

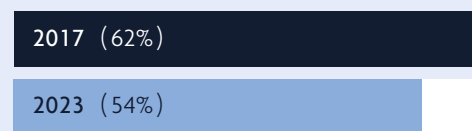


There has been a fall in the proportion who believe human rights **work well** for:

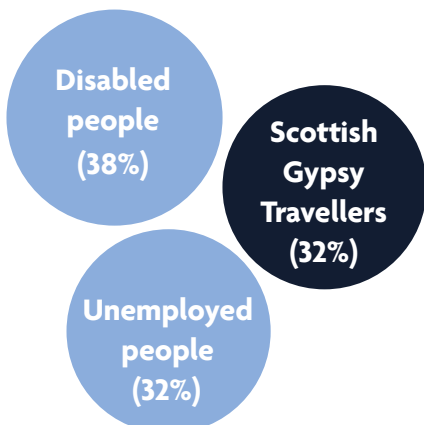
People of minority ethnic backgrounds



Prisoners



Scots are most likely to believe human rights **do not work well** for:



There has been a notable rise in the proportion who believe human rights **do not work well** for:

Minority ethnic groups, rising from 21% in 2017, to 28%.



What do we know about people opposed to human rights?

There are strong views amongst the Opposed group who think human rights work well for:

People who were born outside of and are now living in Scotland

(70%)

LGBT+ people

(71%)

Minority ethnic groups

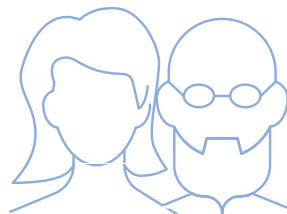
(74%)

Prisoners (68%)

(68%)

The **Opposed group** are also most likely to say that human rights **do not** work well for them and their families (46%).

Those who are in the **Disengaged group**:



- Are least likely to think human rights work well for them or their family (27%).
- Consistently have the largest majority who say they don't know how well human rights work for different groups (between 55% and 74%).

Those who are in the **Conflicted group**:



- Do not have extremely strong views of any group and the benefits from human rights, with the exception of 68% who say prisoners are served well by human rights.

“Poor housing denies many human rights but too often those in power treat the issue as one belonging to a lower grade of human.” Conflicted, 68



Putting the human into human rights

Often, people feel that human rights are abstract concepts. The research shows that if we can increase public understanding of what human rights are and the positive value they bring, then people will become powerful supporters of human rights.

The focus groups demonstrated that the greatest support is for those rights that are easiest to relate to through day-to-day examples:



Cost of living issues resonate with most people



The rights to housing and food are rights people relate to



Economic and social rights sparked interest from all groups including conflicted and opposed groups

Through correlation and regression analysis, which looked at how closely the issues we surveyed are linked, overall these messages performed the best:



Despite the cost of living crisis, Scotland can still be progressive and bold when it comes to protecting and realising human rights.”







We all have the right to an adequate standard of living – that means things like decent housing, healthy food and enough money to live on. It’s the Government’s responsibility to make sure these rights are realised for everyone.”



Key recommendations for communicating human rights

The research tells us a lot about the most effective ways to communicate about human rights.

The following are practical suggestions, based on our research, of how to build people's understanding of human rights and their importance.

-  Include real-life examples or case studies to illustrate how human rights are positively benefiting individuals or being used in everyday life
-  Avoid overuse of statistics and numbers
-  Talk about the right to an adequate standard of living
-  Explain where people can find help and advice on human rights

Points to note:

-  Scots are most likely to go online if they need to find out more about human rights (50% would rely on their own research online)
-  Scots are most likely to trust a human rights lawyer, an organisation involved in human rights, or a UN expert to tell the truth about human rights

Message reflections from focus groups

"The Right to Housing is a basic human right, but it's one of the hardest to implement with the systems we have in place."

Supportive, 23

"There's a minimum amount of nutrition humans need to survive and thrive across each aspect of health and wellbeing. I believe people have a right to that."

Supportive, 30

"A right to have a home whatever that may be, as long as it was safe, secure, dry, warm and affordable."

Disengaged, 34

"I like the fact that the videos about the right to housing and the right to food [played during the research] are showing real issues of people and not some hypothetical scenarios that the viewer might just forget."

Disengaged, 21

"Charities provide foodbanks, that hasn't resolved the problem. Education is also needed at Primary School level about budgeting and what constitutes a healthy meal."

Disengaged, 57

"I think it shows how human rights really impact everyone, not just the groups we automatically think of. That could be any of us".

Supportive, 24

"Either through work or welfare, there is no reason people should not have access to adequate food in 2023."

Supportive, 62

"Poor housing denies many human rights but too often those in power treat the issue as one belonging to a lower grade of human."

Conflicted, 68

Background

The Scottish Human Rights Commission is an independent public body with a duty to promote awareness, understanding and respect for all human rights – economic, social, cultural, civil and political – to everyone, everywhere in Scotland. Our full duties and powers are set out in the Scottish Commission for Human Rights Act 2006.

This research supports our role in the international human rights system as an National Human Rights Institution according to the UN Paris Principles including:

- A broad mandate to promote and protect human rights
- Representing all aspects of society
- Sharing with civil society
- Reporting independently of Government to the United Nations

Notes:

- All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc.
- Full data tables for the online survey are available online at: www.yougov.co.uk
- The total sample size for the online survey was 1401 adults (aged 16 years plus) across Scotland.
- The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Scottish adults.
- Fieldwork for the survey was undertaken between 17-26 January 2023.
- The focus groups were conducted online between 21-22 February 2023.
- [Previous YouGov Audience Insight research published by Commission in 2018.](#)
- For more information about the Commission visit our website: www.scottishhumanrights.com
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