

**THE  
POLICY  
INSTITUTE**

**KING'S**  
*College*  
**LONDON**

# **How British moral attitudes have changed in the last 30 years**

This analysis by the **Policy Institute at King's College London**, based on polling by **Ipsos MORI**, reveals how the British public's views on moral issues have become increasingly liberal over the last 30 years, with society today far more tolerant of illegal drug use, homosexuality, abortion, depictions of violence and many aspects of sex in popular culture, and many other issues and activities.

However, views on some behaviours haven't changed or have even hardened, including on extra-marital affairs and rejection of capital punishment.

The 1989 survey was published in the book *We British*, by Eric Jacobs and Sir Robert Worcester. The wordings of the statements have been kept consistent to ensure comparable trends, even where concepts and language have moved on.

Most of the 2019 survey results here have been conducted using the same design as the original study: face-to-face interviews in respondents' own homes, to be representative of the whole population aged 15 and above. Two of the 2019 questions were asked on an online study, of a representative sample of the population aged 16-75: these comparisons should therefore be seen as indicative but still useful, given the very large changes in attitudes seen.

# Generational differences

Given the very long time frame for the study, it's worth bearing in mind that, for example, those aged 55+ in the 1989 survey grew up in a very different time to the 55+ sample in the 2019 survey: one was born in 1934 or before, the other in 1964 or before, as shown in the table below.

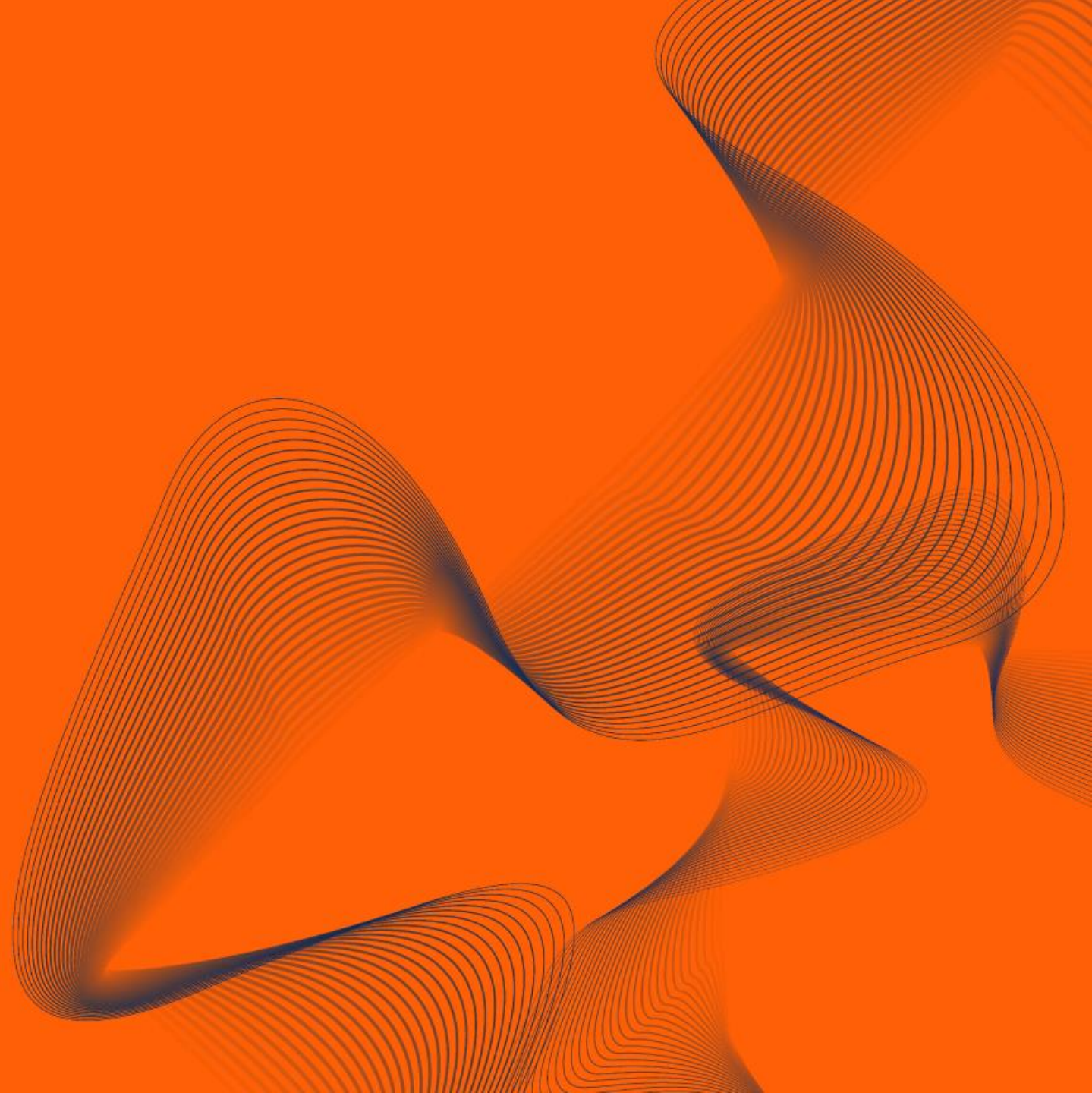
Some of the big changes we see are therefore due to a different sort of older group replacing previous old (a generational replacement effect), as well as general shifts in attitudes among the population as a whole (a period effect).

As we'll see, one of the big causes of change in moral attitudes overall in Britain has been the “**Baby Boomer**” generation moving into older age

**When the different age groups in this survey were born**

	<b>15-34</b>	<b>35-54</b>	<b>55+</b>
<b>1989 survey: year of birth</b>	1955-1974	1935-1954	1934 & earlier
<b>2019 survey: year of birth</b>	1985-2004	1965-1984	1964 & earlier

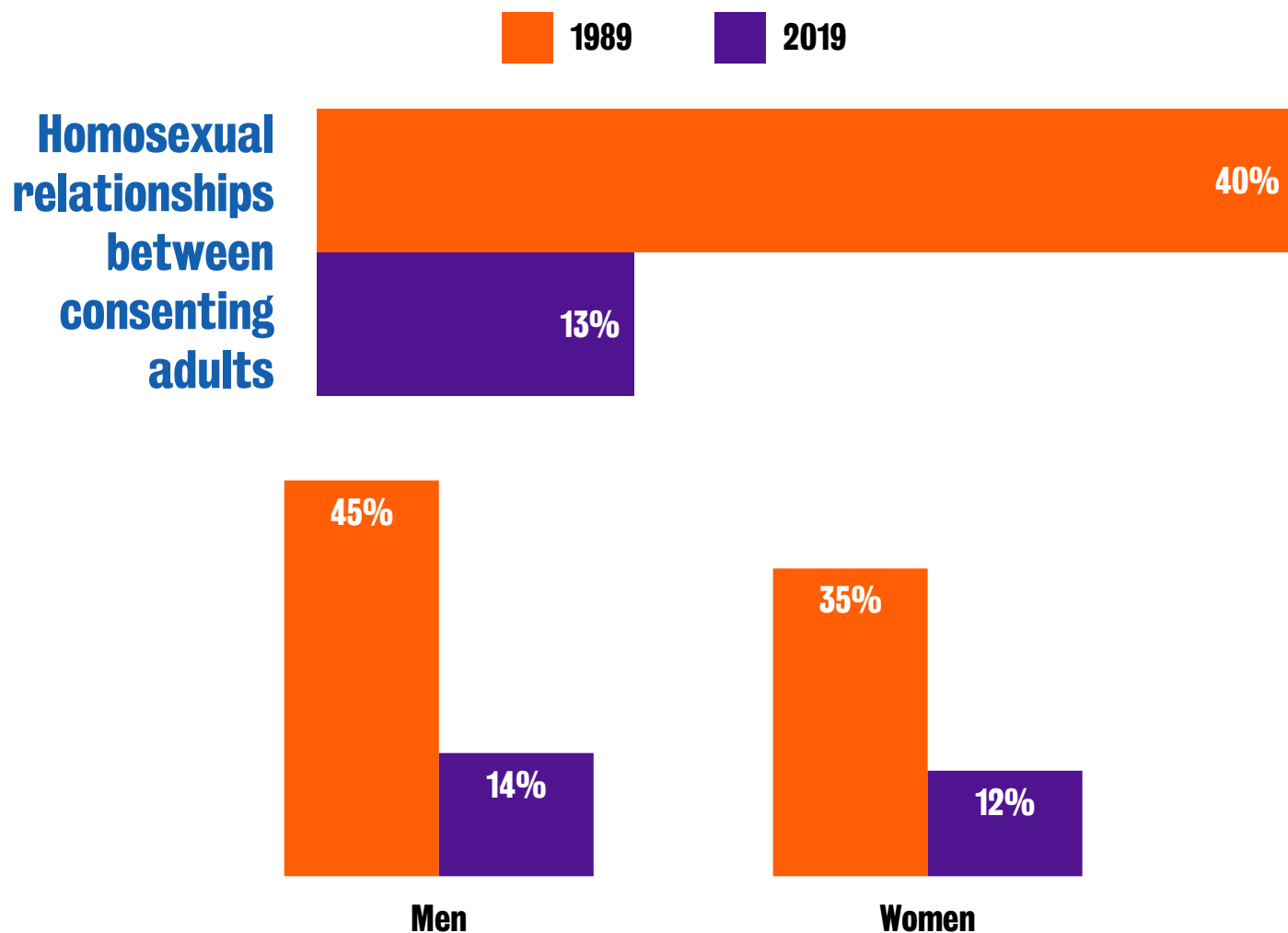
# **Relationships and family**



The public are now hugely more tolerant of **homosexuality** compared with 30 years ago, when **4 in 10** people thought it was immoral.

Back then, **men** were significantly **more likely** than women to think being gay was morally wrong, but this **gender gap in opinion** has now been **virtually eliminated**.

Here is a list of issues some people might think are immoral or morally wrong. Which of them, if any, do you personally think are **morally wrong**?

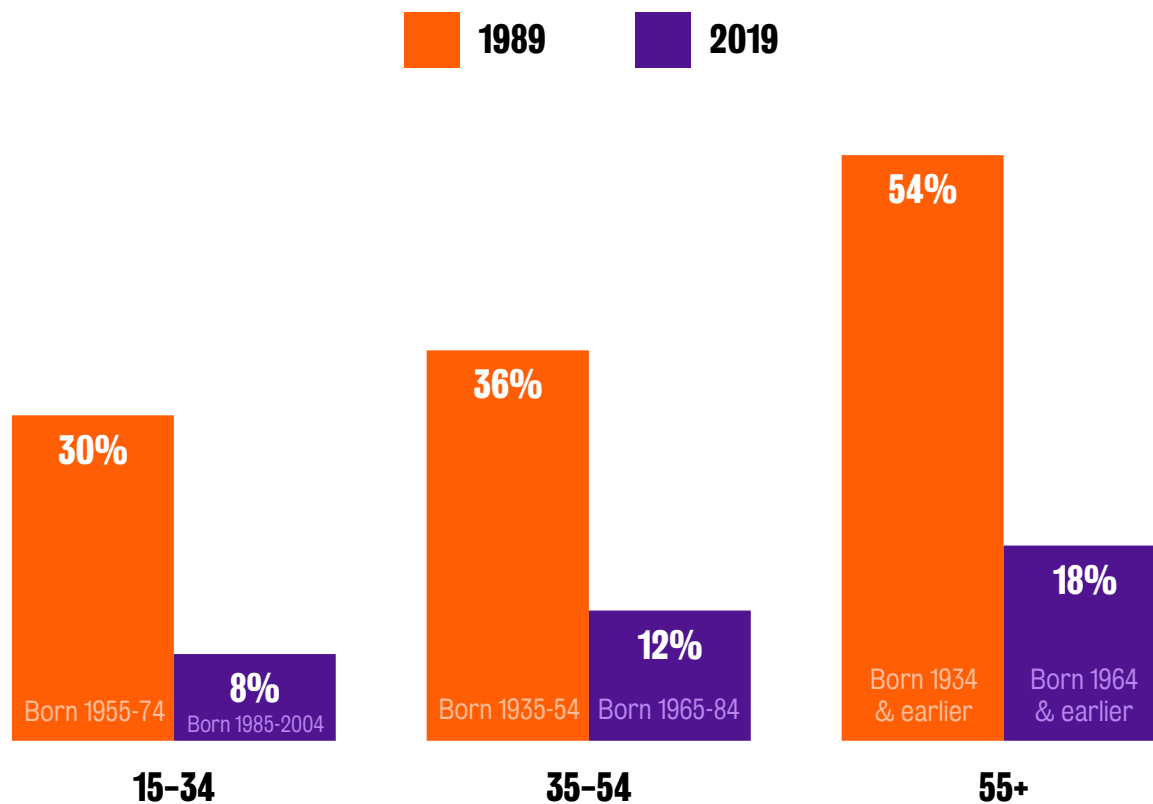


Bases: 1989 – 1,458 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (March 1989); 2019 – 1,021 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (July 2019)

As in 1989, those aged **55 and above** are today still **most likely to oppose homosexual relationships**, although tolerance within this age group has massively increased, and the gap in opinion between this group and other age categories is **dramatically reduced**.

Here is a list of issues some people might think are immoral or morally wrong. Which of them, if any, do you personally think are **morally wrong**?

### Homosexual relationships between consenting adults



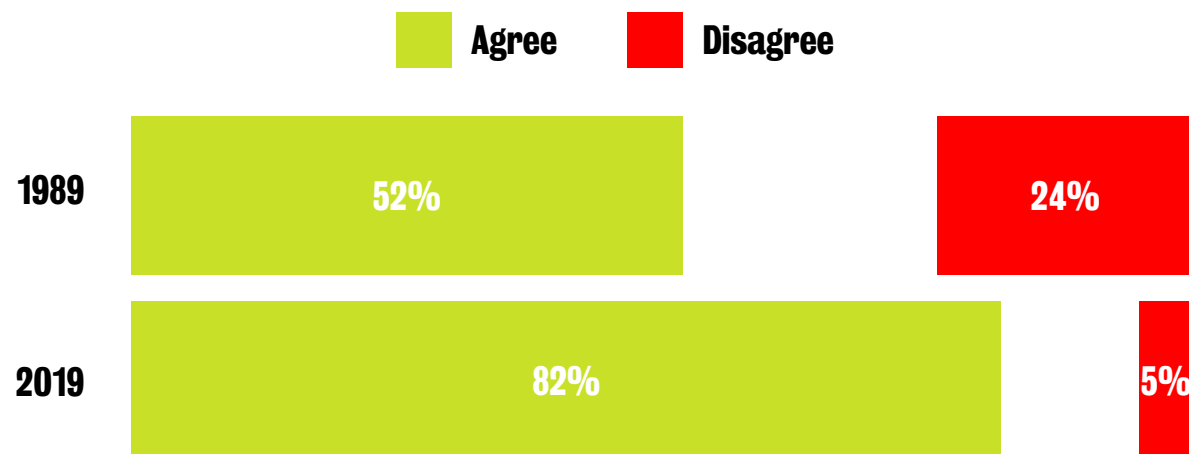
Bases: 1989 – 1,458 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (March 1989); 2019 – 1,021 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (July 2019)

Today, **8 in 10** say homosexuals should be treated just like everyone else, up from **half** in 1989.

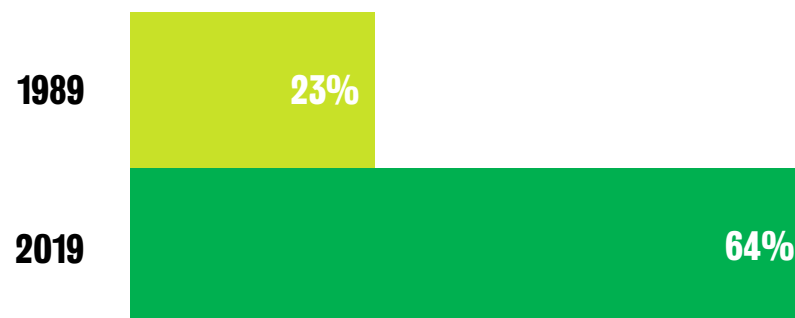
The proportion who **strongly agree** with this statement has risen dramatically, from **23%** to **64%**.

Note: the 2019 question was asked online of 16-75-year-olds, and so comparisons should be seen as indicative, but this scale of change is very unlikely to be fully explained by sample or mode differences.

## Homosexuals should be treated just like other people



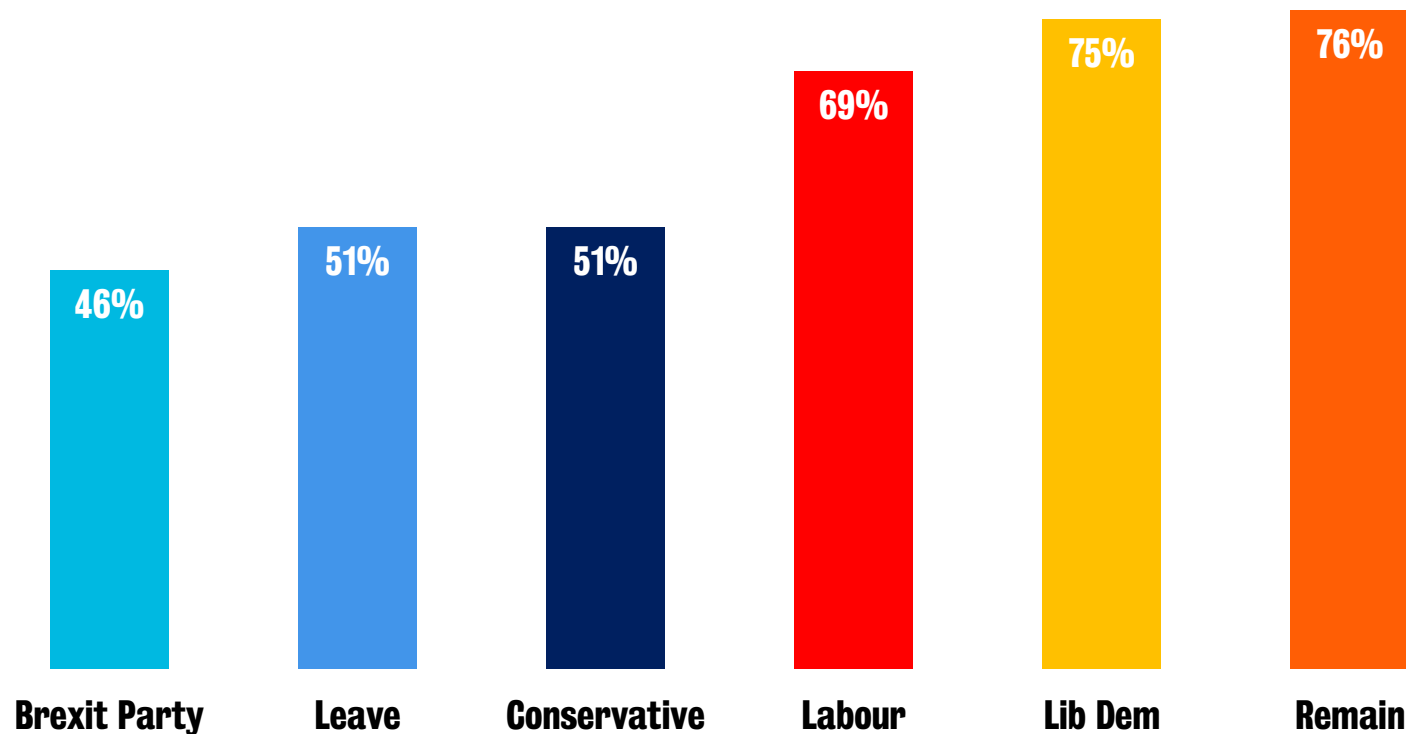
## % who **strongly agree** that homosexuals should be treated just like other people



Bases: 1989 – 1,458 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (March 1989); 2019 – 1,021 interviews conducted online among 16 to 75-year-olds (May 2019)

There are **significant differences in opinion** among voters of the main **political parties** in 2019, and when looked at by **EU referendum vote**: in particular, Brexit Party and Conservative Party supporters and Leave voters are significantly less likely to strongly agree that homosexuals should be treated just like other people than Labour, Lib Dem or Remain supporters

**% who strongly agree that homosexuals should be treated just like other people, by voting intention (2019)**

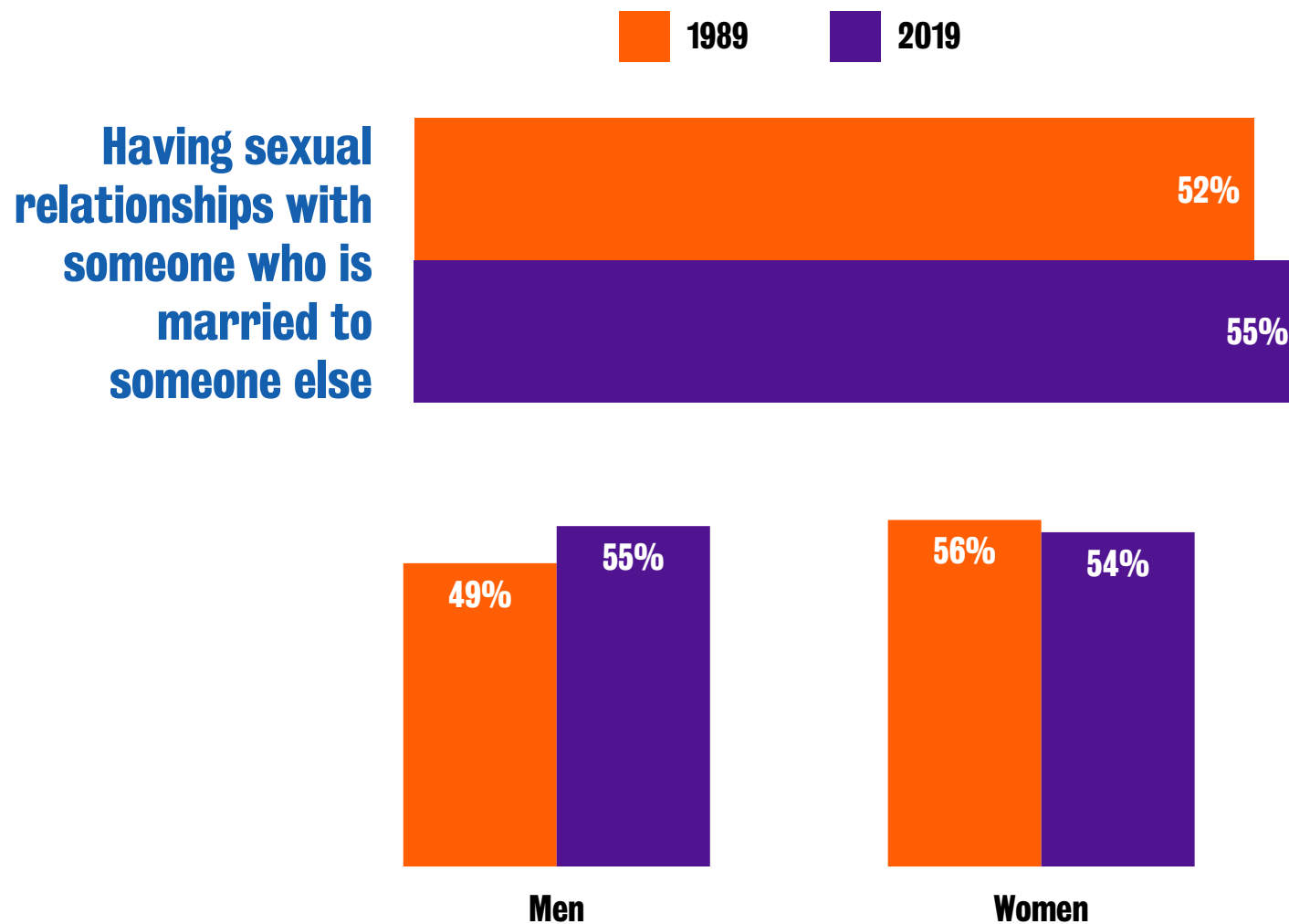




Attitudes towards infidelity remain virtually unchanged from 30 years ago, with 55% now saying it is immoral, compared with 52% in 1989.

Men have become slightly less accepting of unfaithfulness, now in line with women's views.

Here is a list of issues some people might think are immoral or morally wrong. Which of them, if any, do you personally think are **morally wrong**?

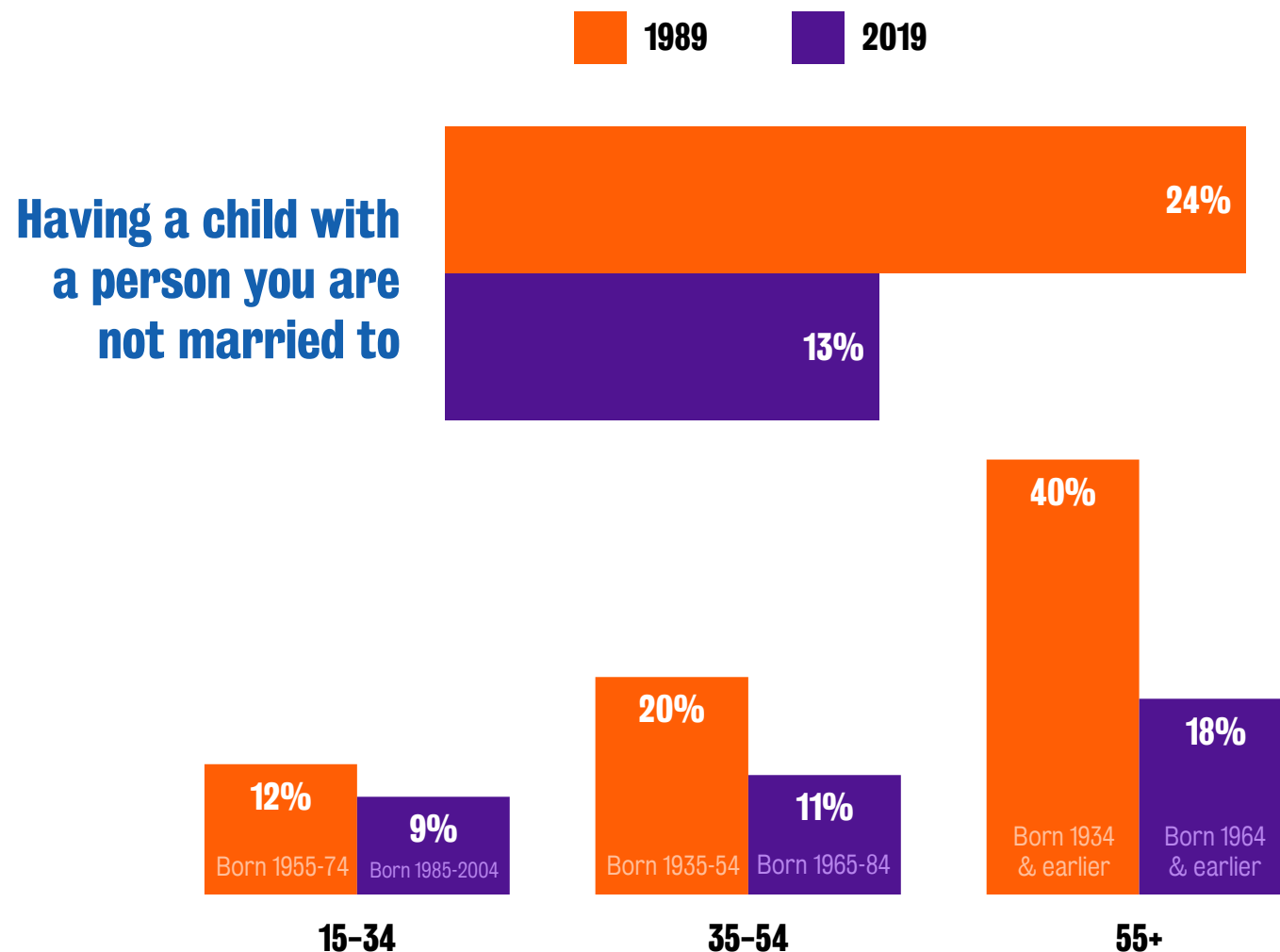


Bases: 1989 – 1,458 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (March 1989); 2019 – 1,021 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (July 2019)

13% today think it is morally wrong to have a child with someone you're not married to, down from 24% in 1989.

The biggest decline is among people aged 55 and above. Levels of moral disapproval among this group have more than halved.

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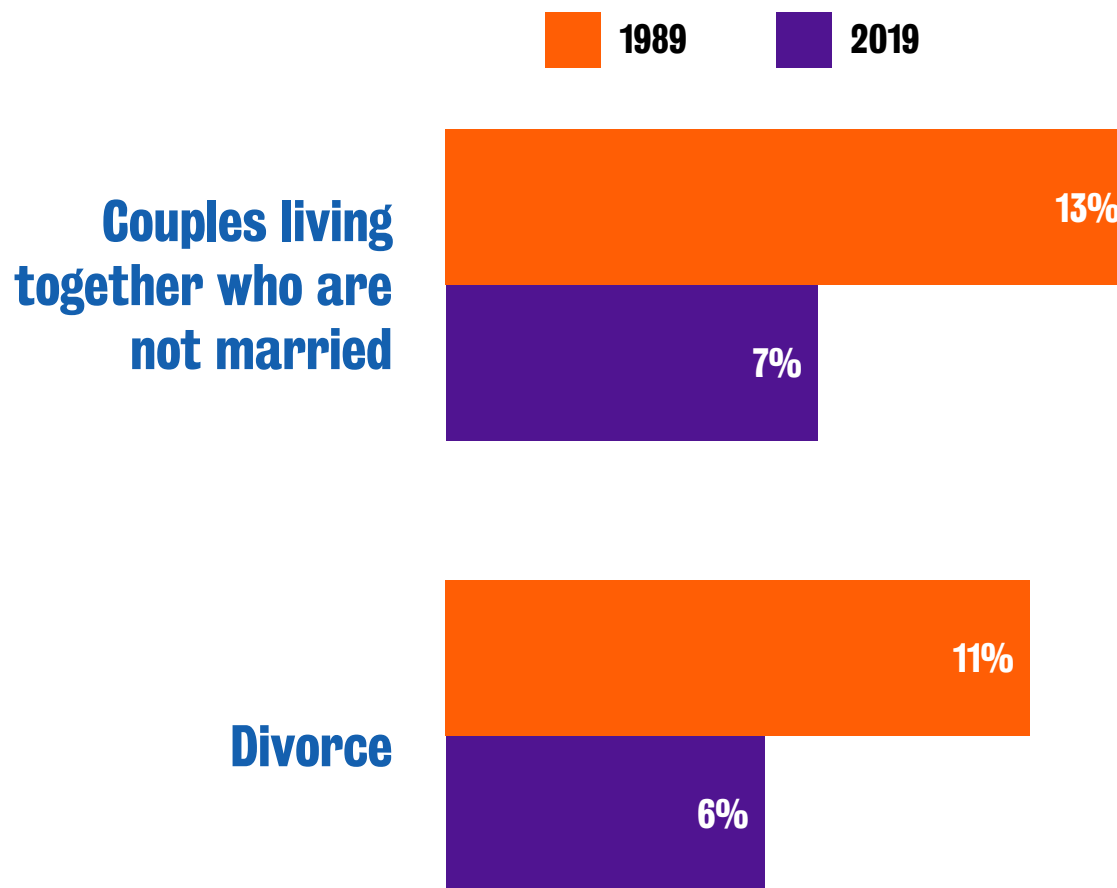
Bases: 1989 – 1,458 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (March 1989); 2019 – 1,021 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (July 2019)

Just 7% think it is immoral for **couples who are not married to live together**, down from 13% in 1989.

Moral disapproval of **divorce** has declined along similar lines.

As with 30 years ago, there is today virtually no gender gap in opinion on both issues, with levels of disapproval among men and women almost identical.

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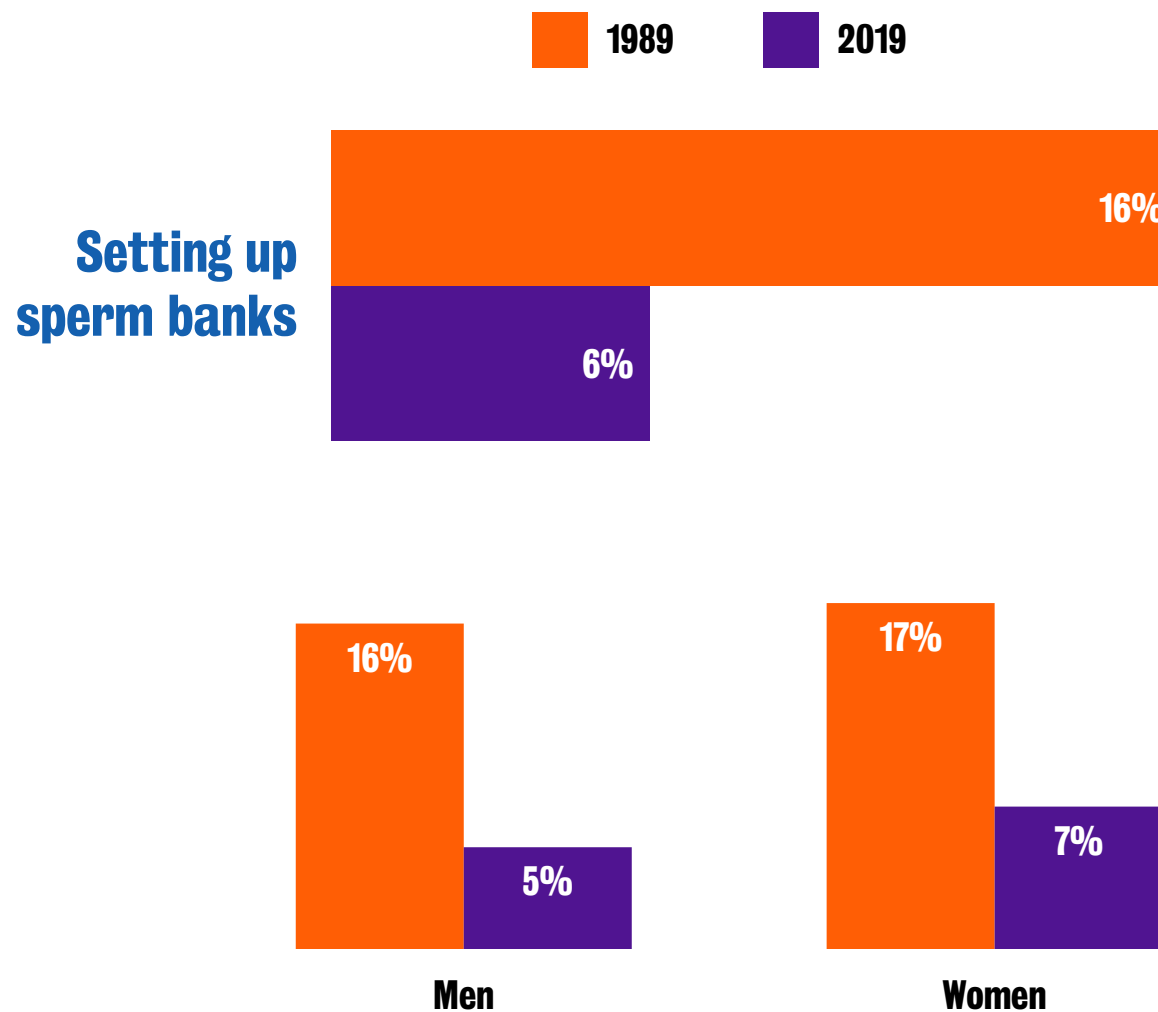


Bases: 1989 – 1,458 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (March 1989); 2019 – 1,021 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (July 2019)

Once seen as a moral concern for **16%** of the population, **sperm banks** are now viewed as immoral by just **6%**.

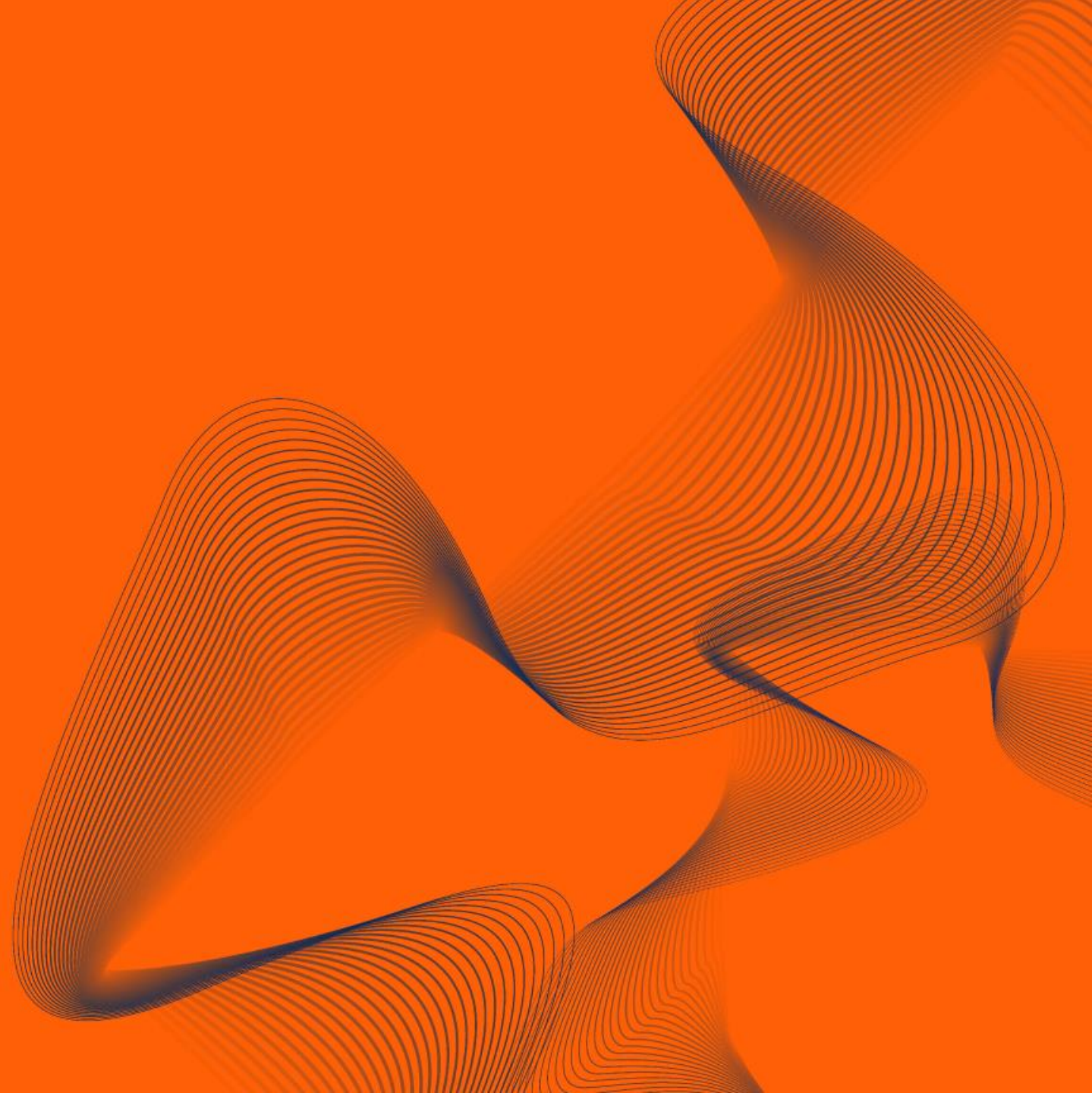
In 2019, men and women have virtually identical views on setting up sperm banks, as was the case in 1989.

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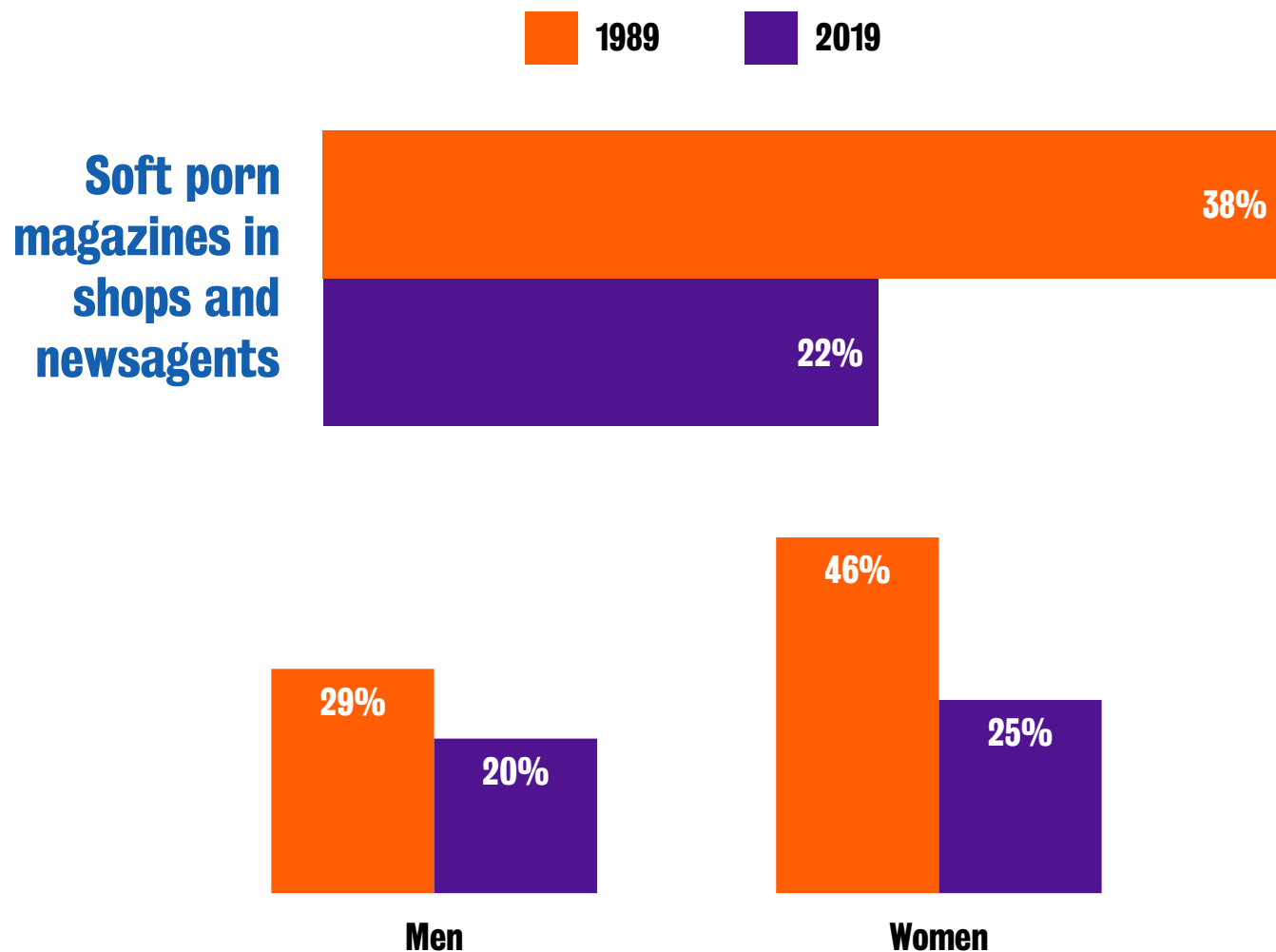
# **Sex in popular culture**



**Women** in particular have become far less likely to disapprove of **soft porn magazines in shops**, with the proportion who see them as morally wrong almost **halving**, from 46% to 25%.

This may be because such pornography in magazines (as opposed to on the internet) is less of a salient issue today.

Here is a list of issues some people might think are immoral or morally wrong. Which of them, if any, do you personally think are **morally wrong**?

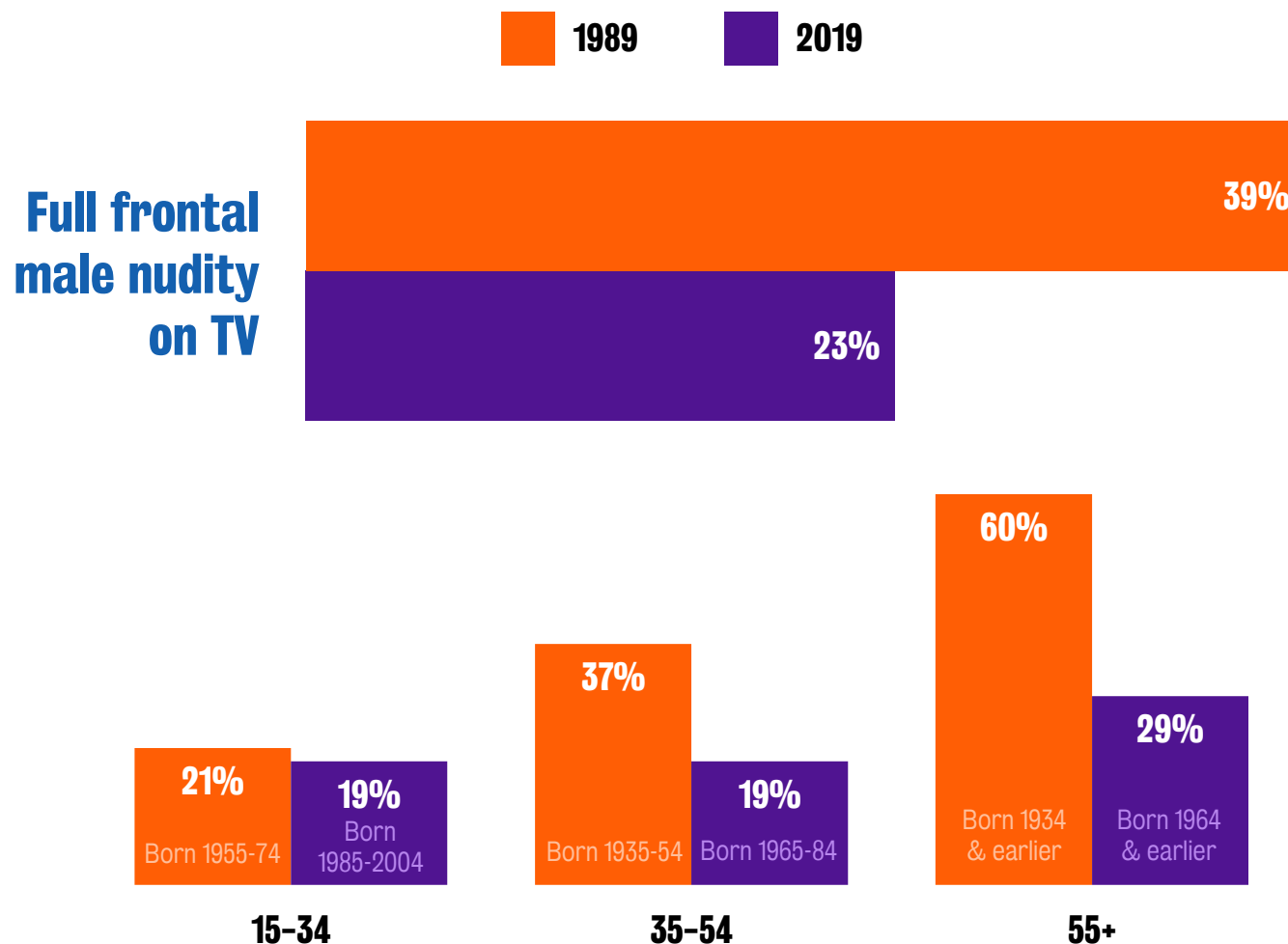


Bases: 1989 – 1,458 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (March 1989); 2019 – 1,021 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (July 2019)

A similar downward trend can be seen in moral disapproval of **full frontal male nudity on TV**, with the biggest declines among older age groups, falling from **60%** in 1989 to **29%** today.

**25%** of women now think it is immoral, compared with **20%** of men – a **smaller gender gap** than in 1989, when the proportions were **43%** and **34%** respectively.

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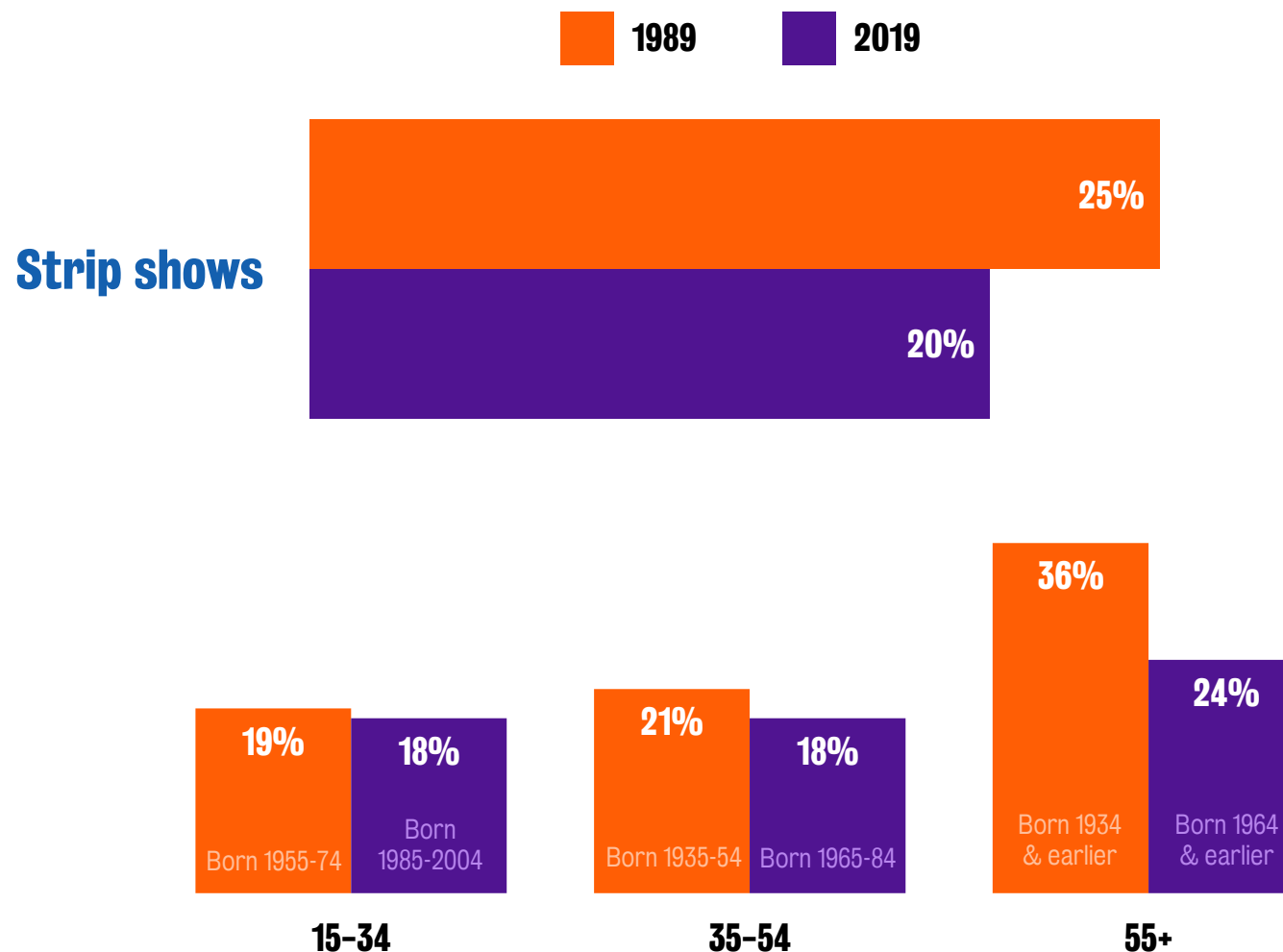


Bases: 1989 – 1,458 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (March 1989); 2019 – 1,021 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (July 2019)

Moral disapproval of **strip shows** is down slightly overall, with the biggest decline among those aged 55 and over.

When looked at by gender, the most significant decline in disapproval is among men, down from **21%** in 1989 to **14%** today. By contrast, among women the same figure has declined from **29%** to **26%**.

Here is a list of issues some people might think are immoral or morally wrong. Which of them, if any, do you personally think are **morally wrong**?



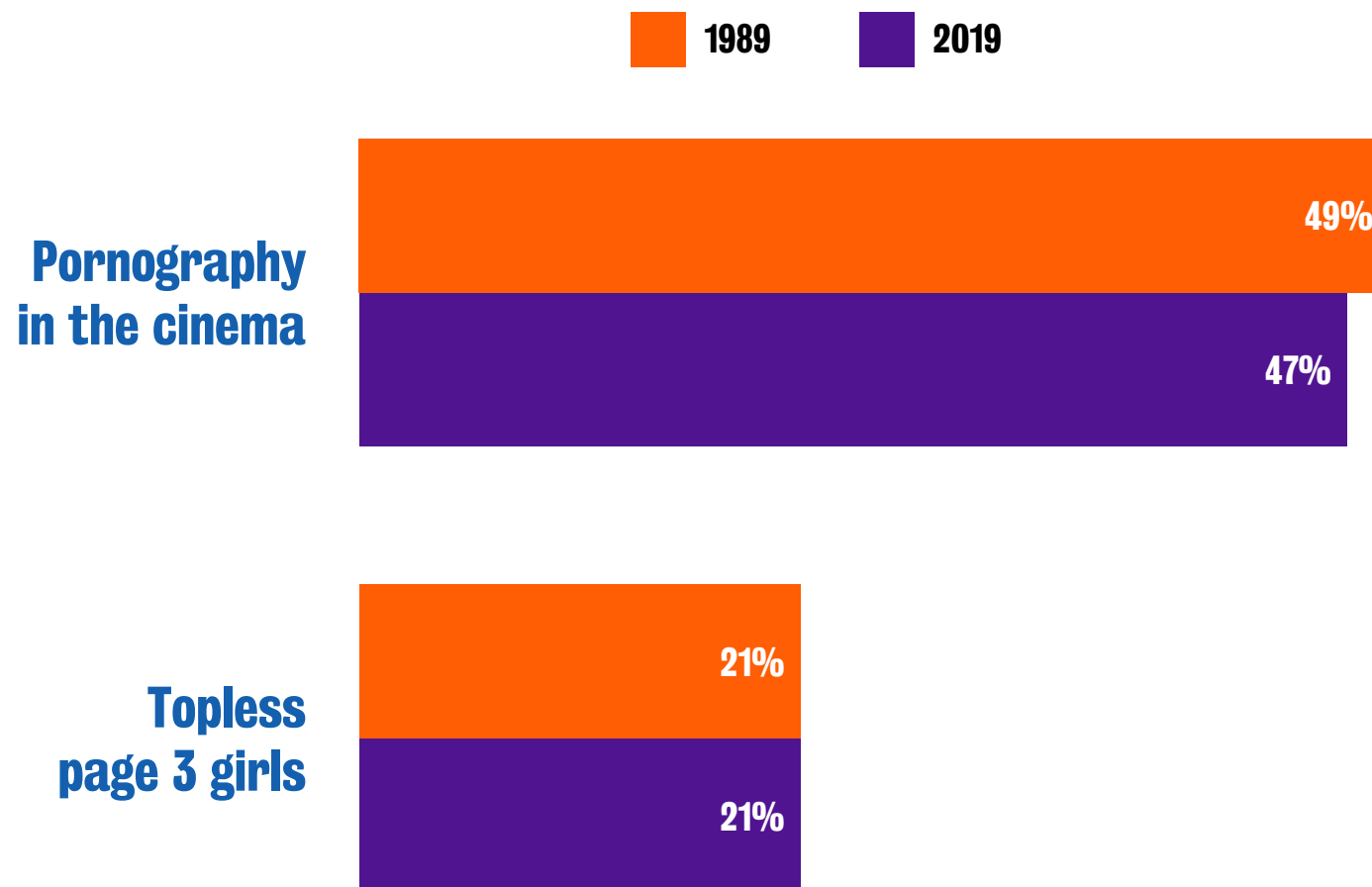
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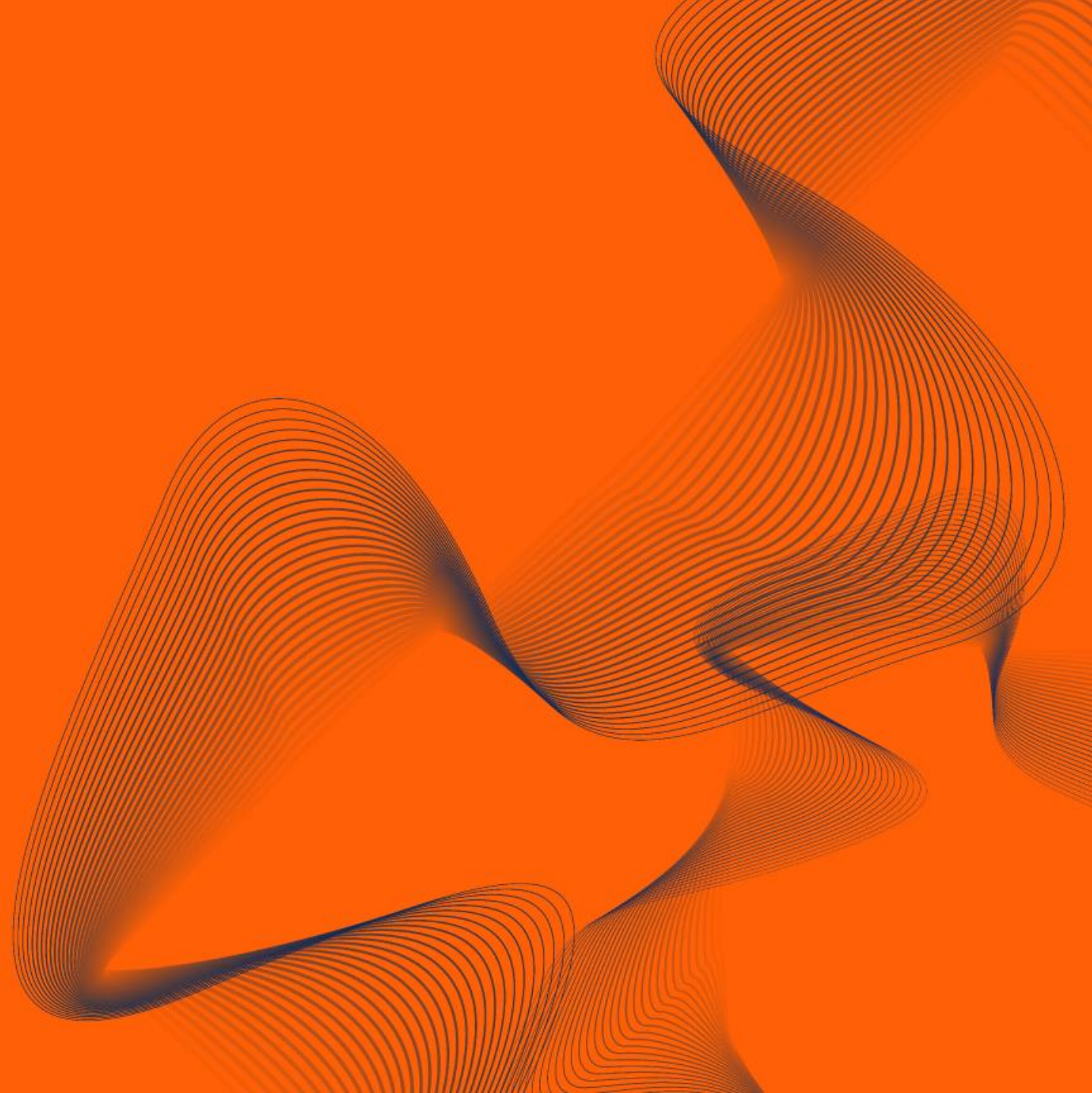
There has been **virtually no change** in views on **pornography in the cinema**. **53%** of women and **39%** of men today think it is immoral, compared with **54%** and **43%** respectively in 1989.

Views on **topless page 3 girls** are also **stable**. **26%** of women and **15%** of men today think it is immoral, vs **24%** and **17%** respectively 30 years ago.

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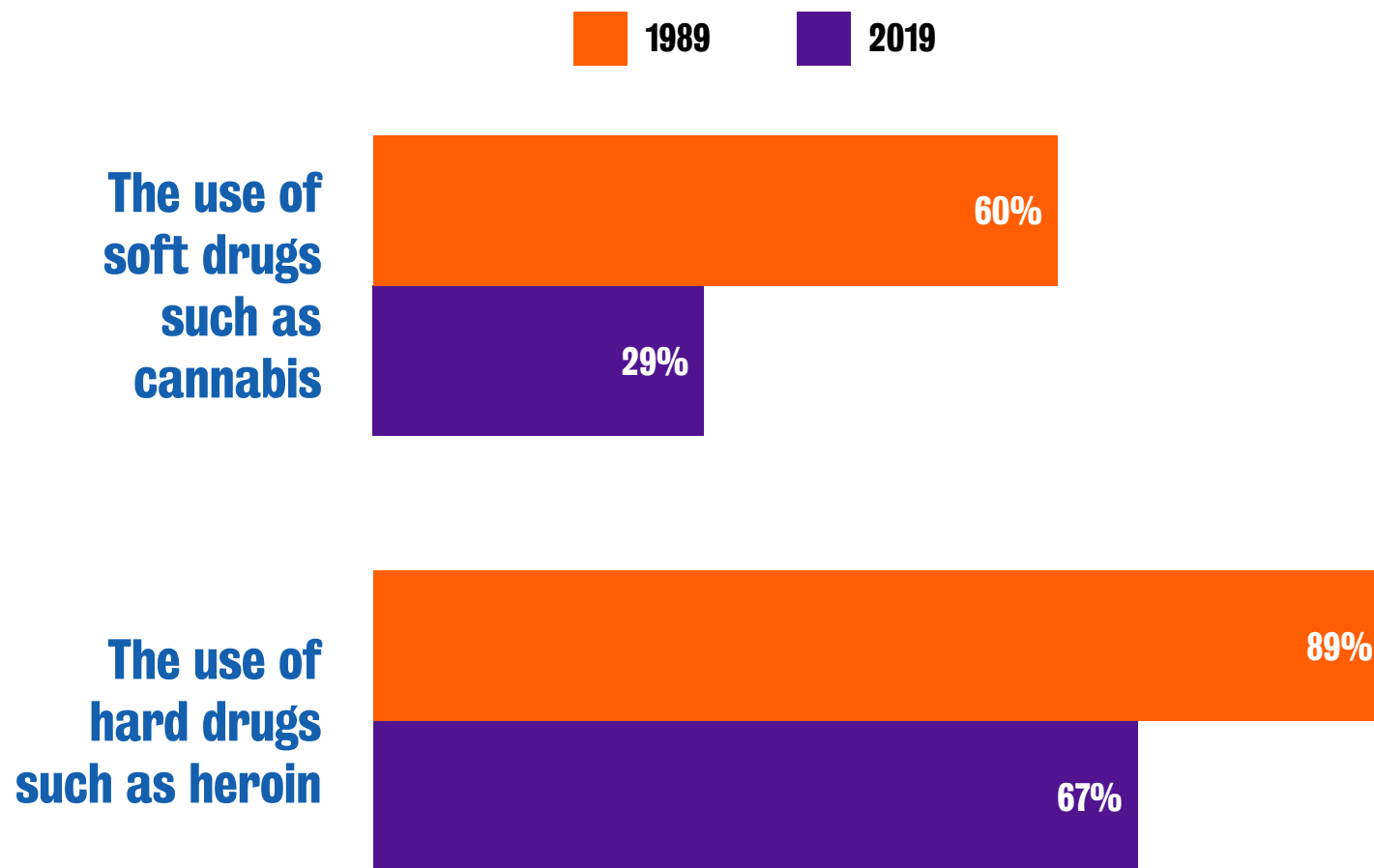


# Drug use



The public today are much more accepting of **illegal drug use** than they were in 1989. The proportion who think **soft drug use** is morally wrong has **halved**, while moral disapproval of **hard drug use** has also declined significantly – although two-thirds still think this is immoral.

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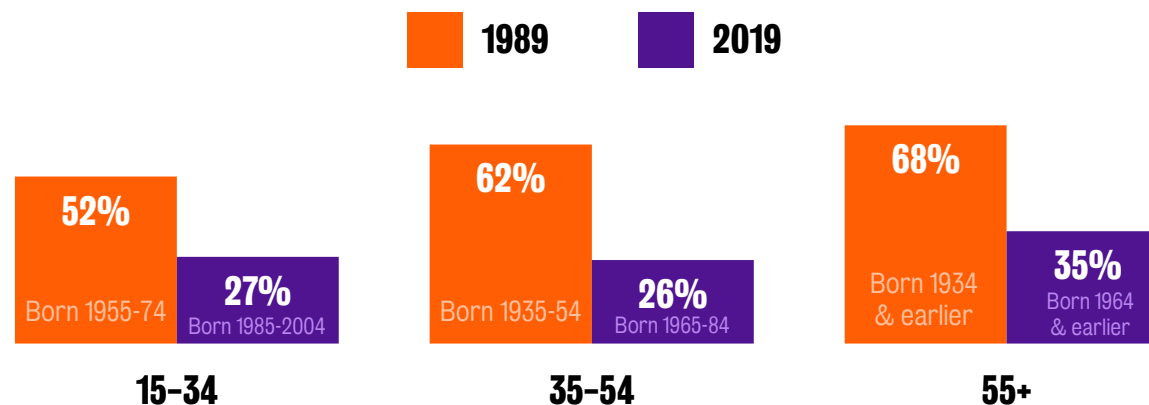


Across **all age groups** surveyed, tolerance of **soft drug use** has increased significantly as **far fewer now think it is morally wrong**. Those aged 55+ are still most likely to think it's immoral (35%).

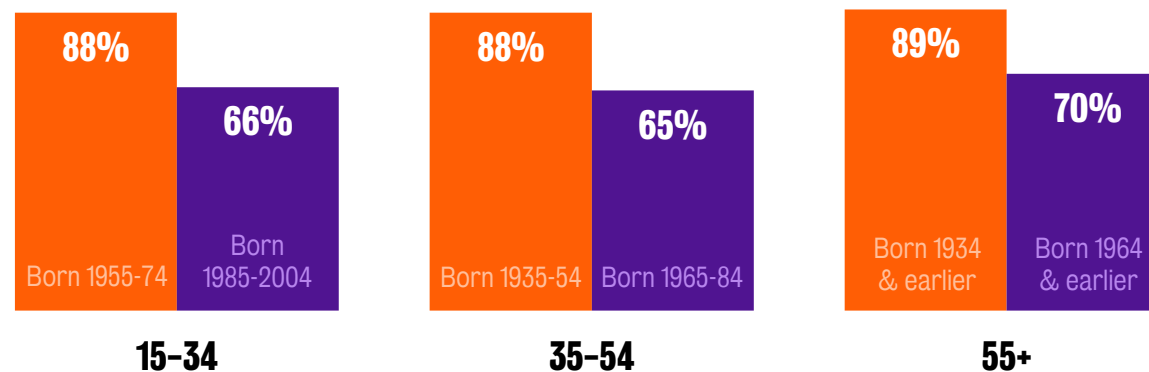
Moral disapproval of **hard drug use** is also **down significantly** across **all age groups**, albeit not to the same extent: two-thirds or more of each age group still say it is immoral

Here is a list of issues some people might think are immoral or morally wrong. Which of them, if any, do you personally think are **morally wrong**?

### The use of soft drugs such as cannabis

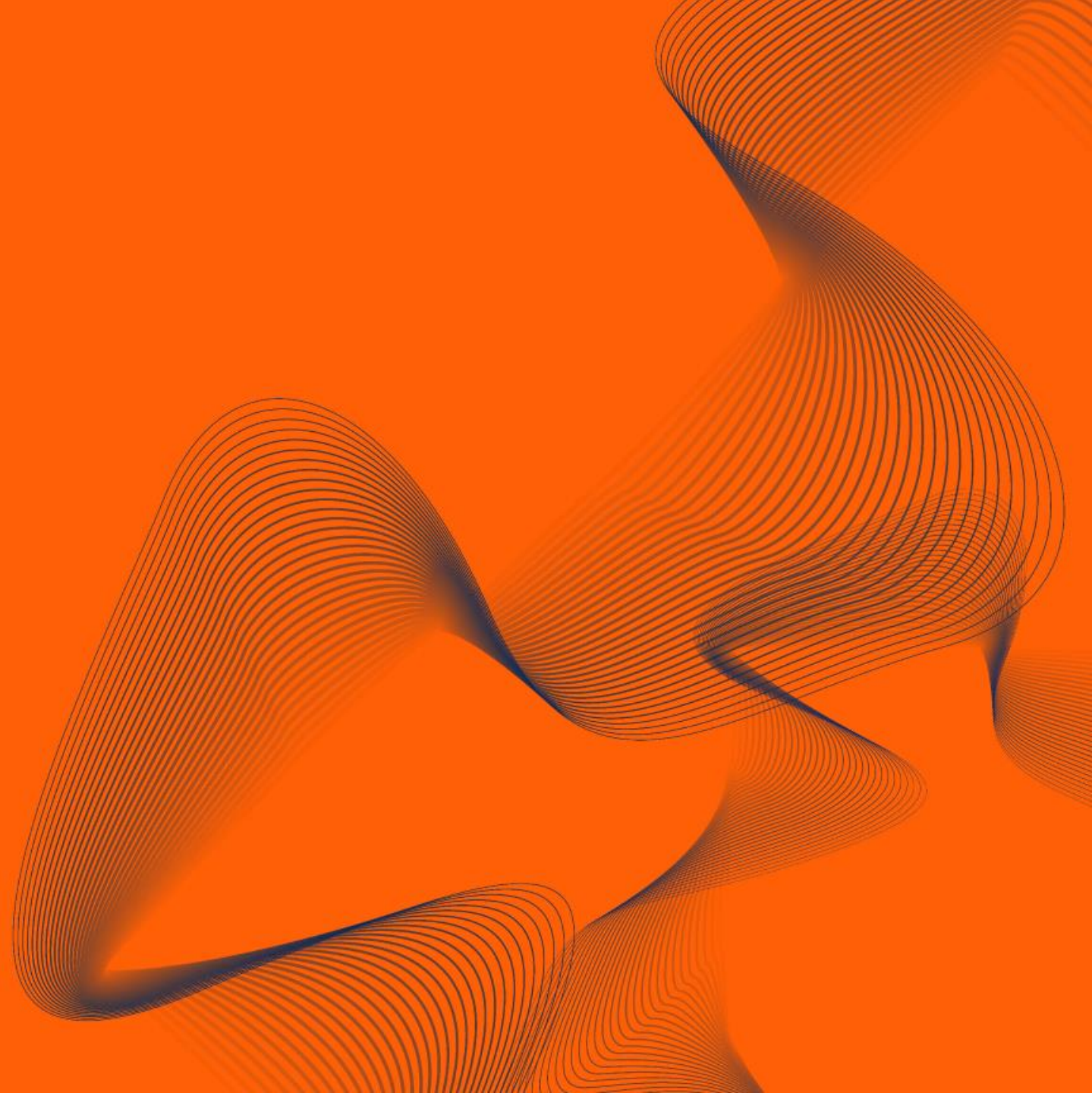


### The use of hard drugs such as heroin



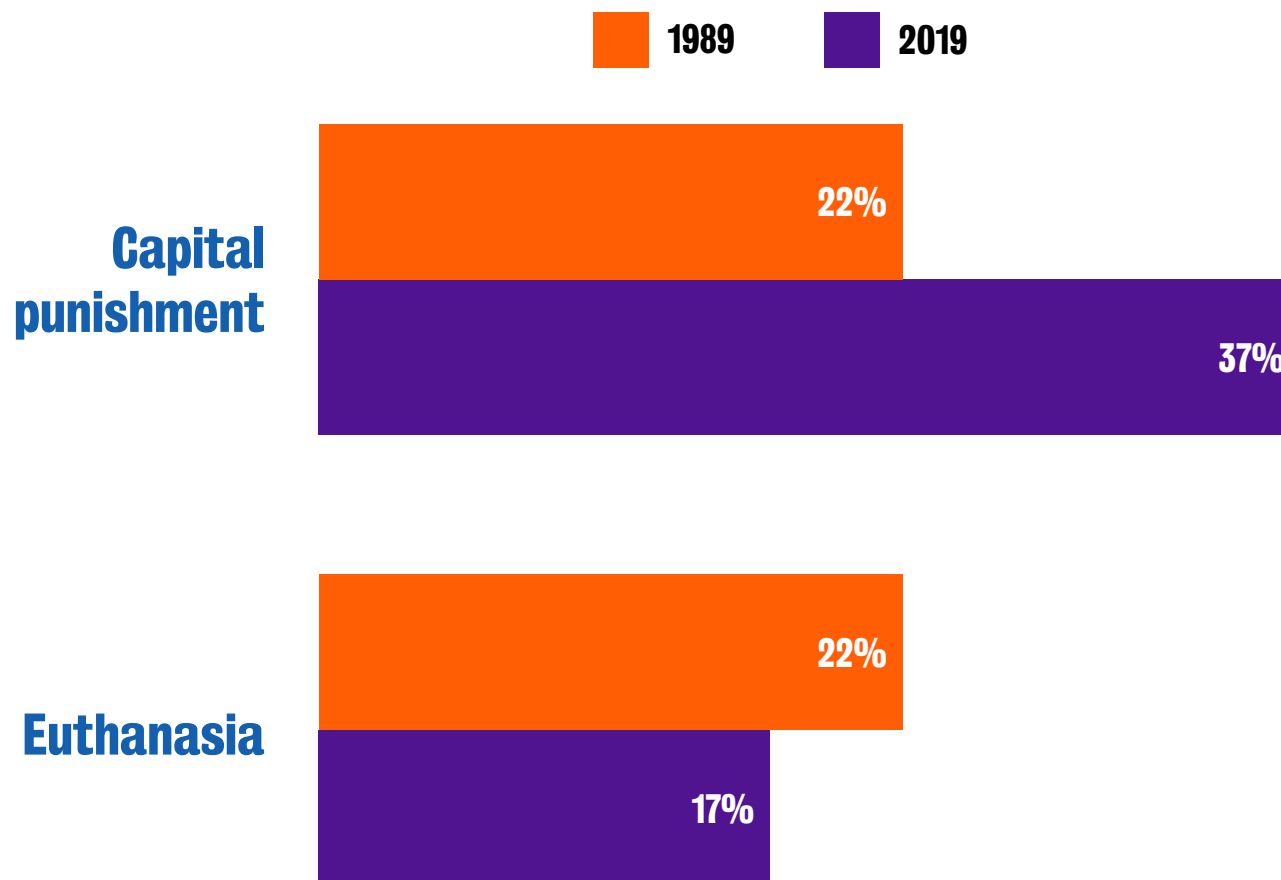
Bases: 1989 – 1,458 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (March 1989); 2019 – 1,021 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (July 2019)

# Life and death



Capital punishment is the only issue in the survey that saw a significant increase in moral disapproval, while there has been a slight decline in the proportion who see euthanasia as immoral.

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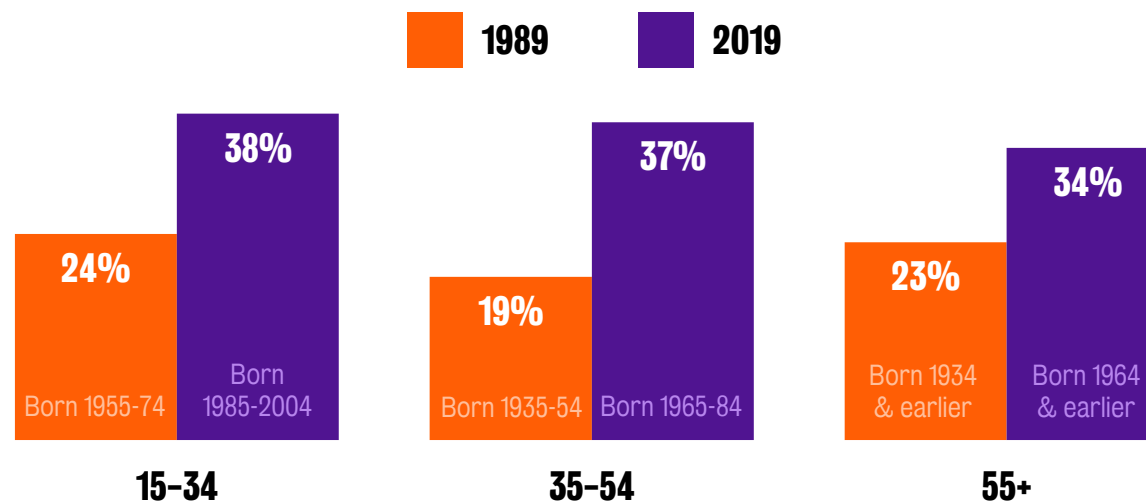
Bases: 1989 – 1,458 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (March 1989); 2019 – 1,021 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (July 2019)

Moral disapproval of **capital punishment** has increased by similar amounts across **all age groups** surveyed, with a **third or more** in each age range now saying it is immoral.

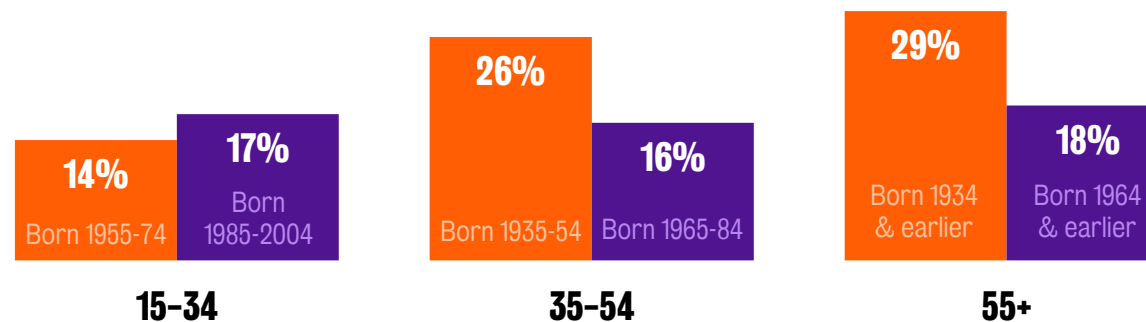
Those aged 35+ have seen a significant **decline in thinking euthanasia is morally unacceptable**, while it has remained more consistent among younger age groups

Here is a list of issues some people might think are immoral or morally wrong. Which of them, if any, do you personally think are **morally wrong**?

### Capital punishment



### Euthanasia

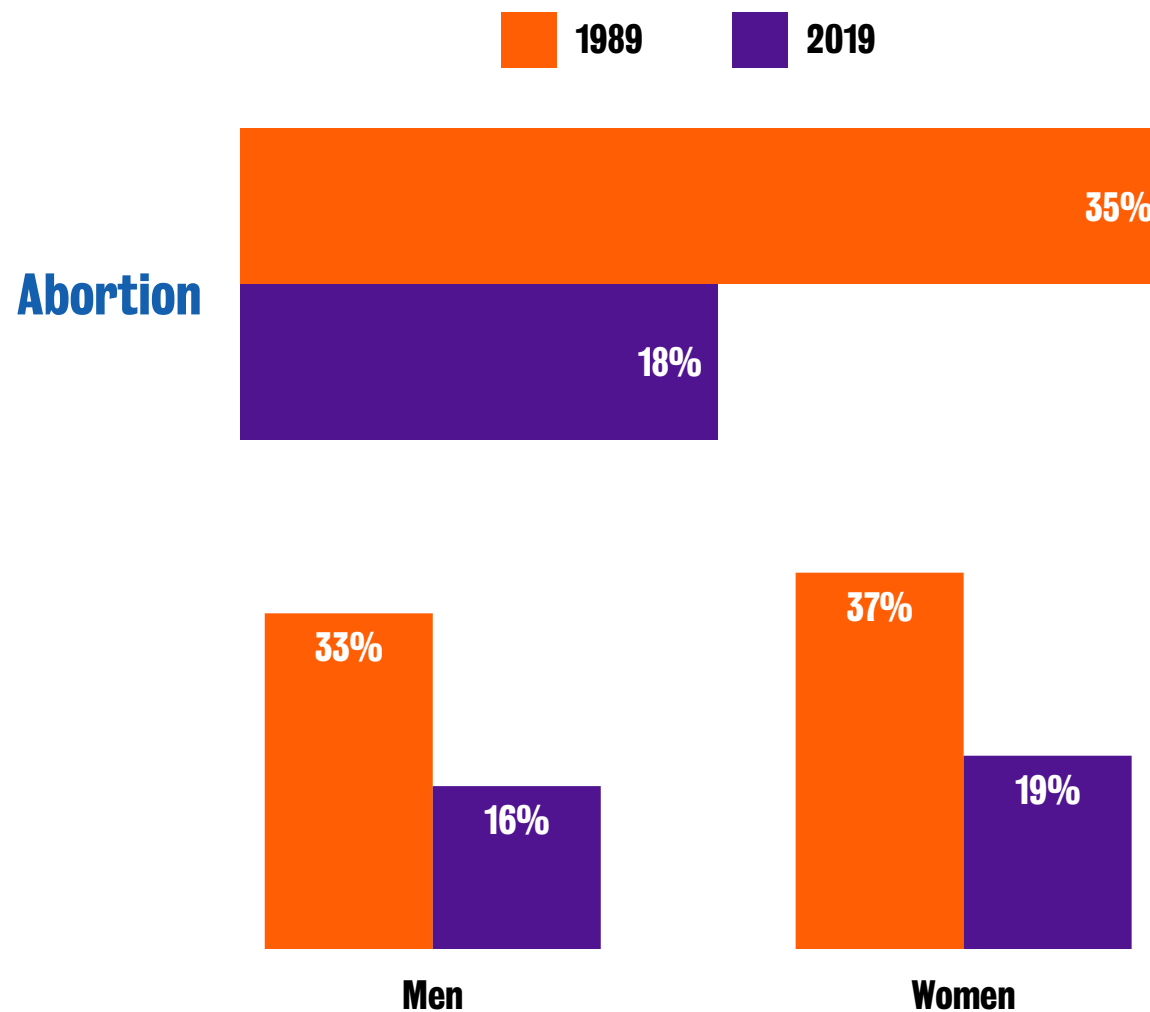


Bases: 1989 – 1,458 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (March 1989); 2019 – 1,021 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (July 2019)

The proportion of the public who think **abortion** is immoral has **halved** in the last 30 years, from 35% to 18%

And as in 1989, today there is little difference in opinion between men and women.

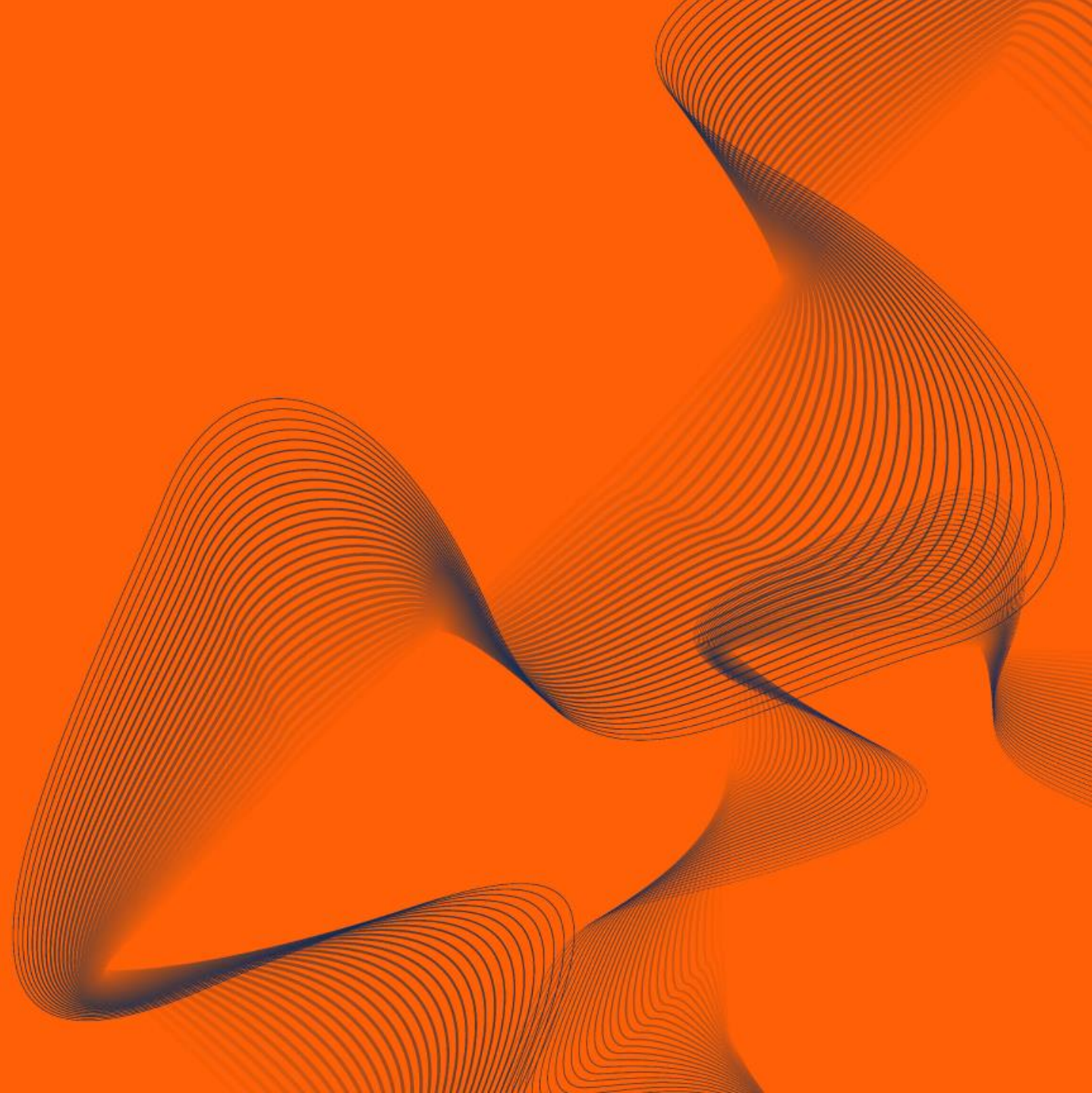
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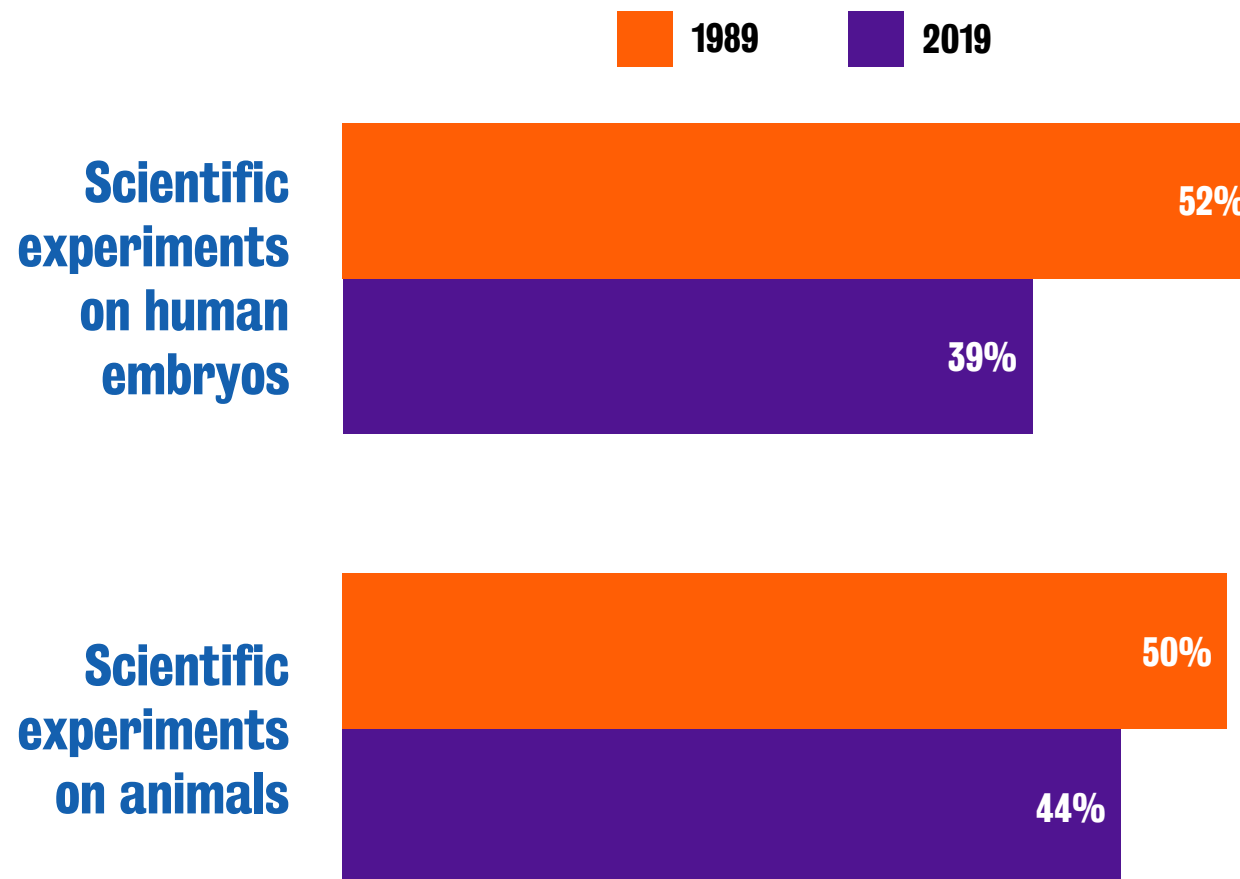
# Scientific experiments



The public are more tolerant of **scientific experiments on human embryos** than they were 30 years ago, and slightly more tolerant of **experiments on animals** – although around **four in ten** think both remain morally wrong.

Women continue to be more disapproving than men on these issues by **6 to 7 percentage points**.

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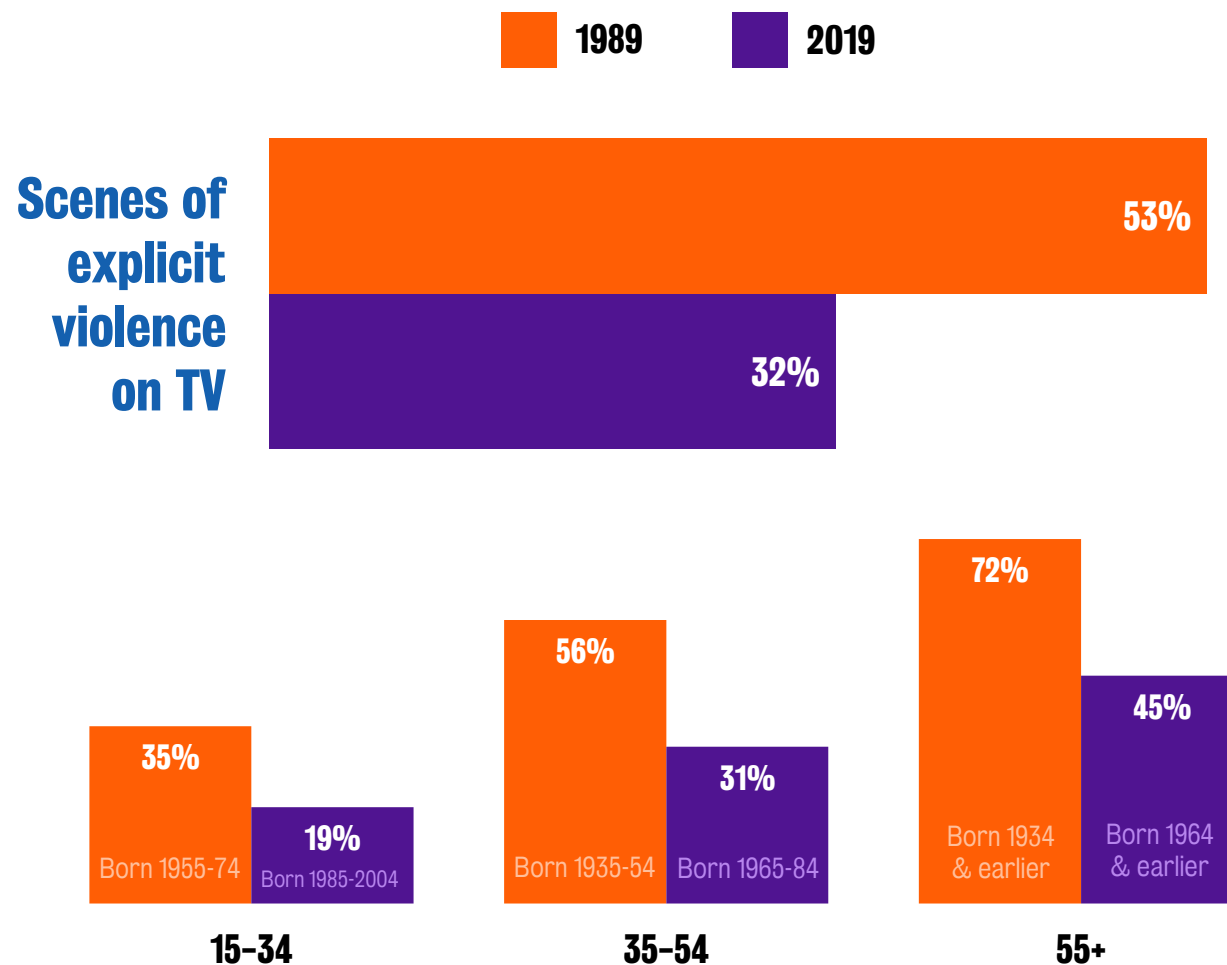
Bases: 1989 – 1,458 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (March 1989); 2019 – 1,021 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (July 2019)

# **Violence on TV and at football**



Moral disapproval of **TV violence** is down significantly, with **declines across all age groups**, but older groups still more concerned than younger people

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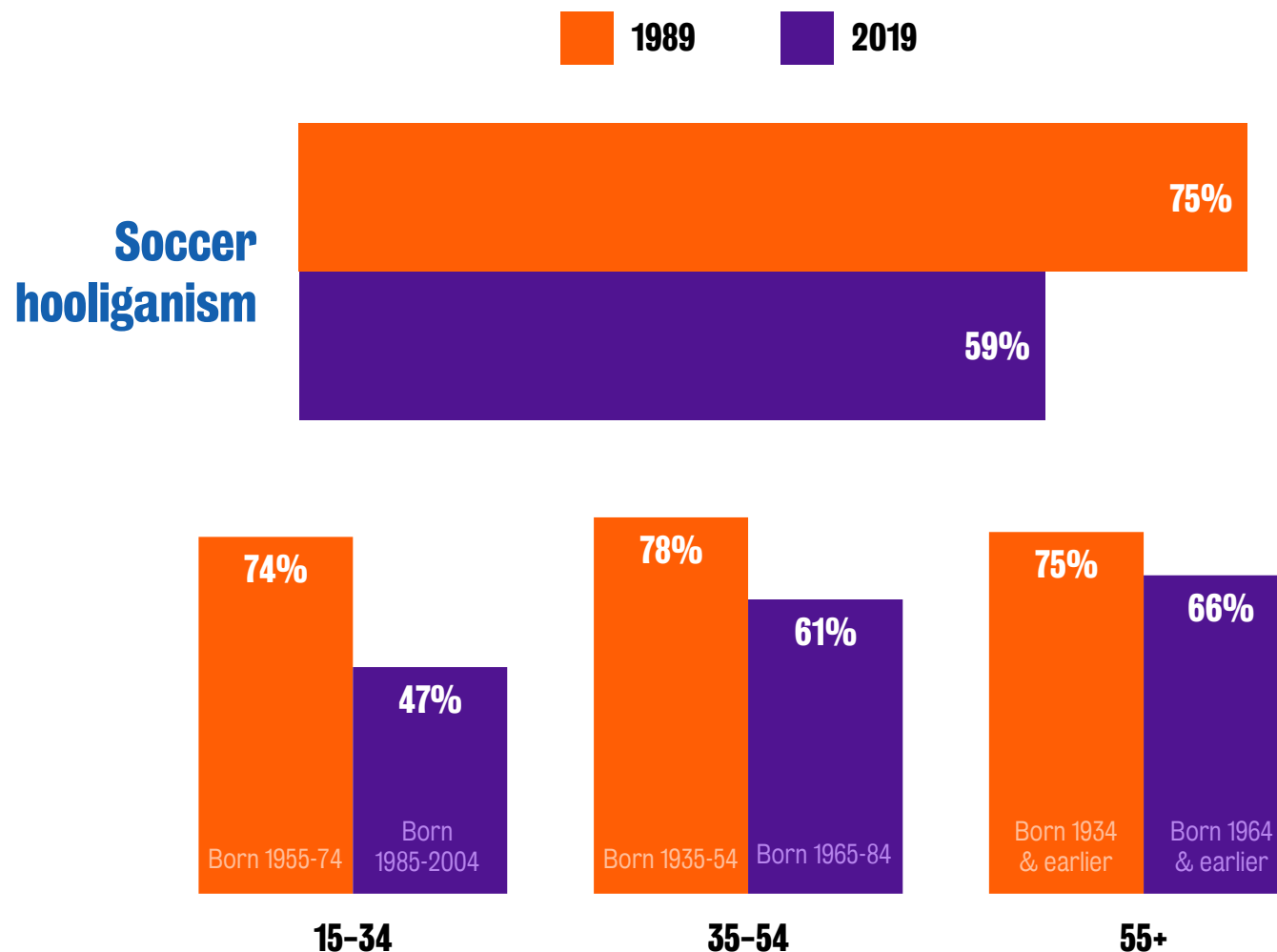


Bases: 1989 – 1,458 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (March 1989); 2019 – 1,021 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (July 2019)

Moral disapproval of **football hooliganism** has declined – although this is likely because it is not in the news as much, rather than it being seen as more acceptable.

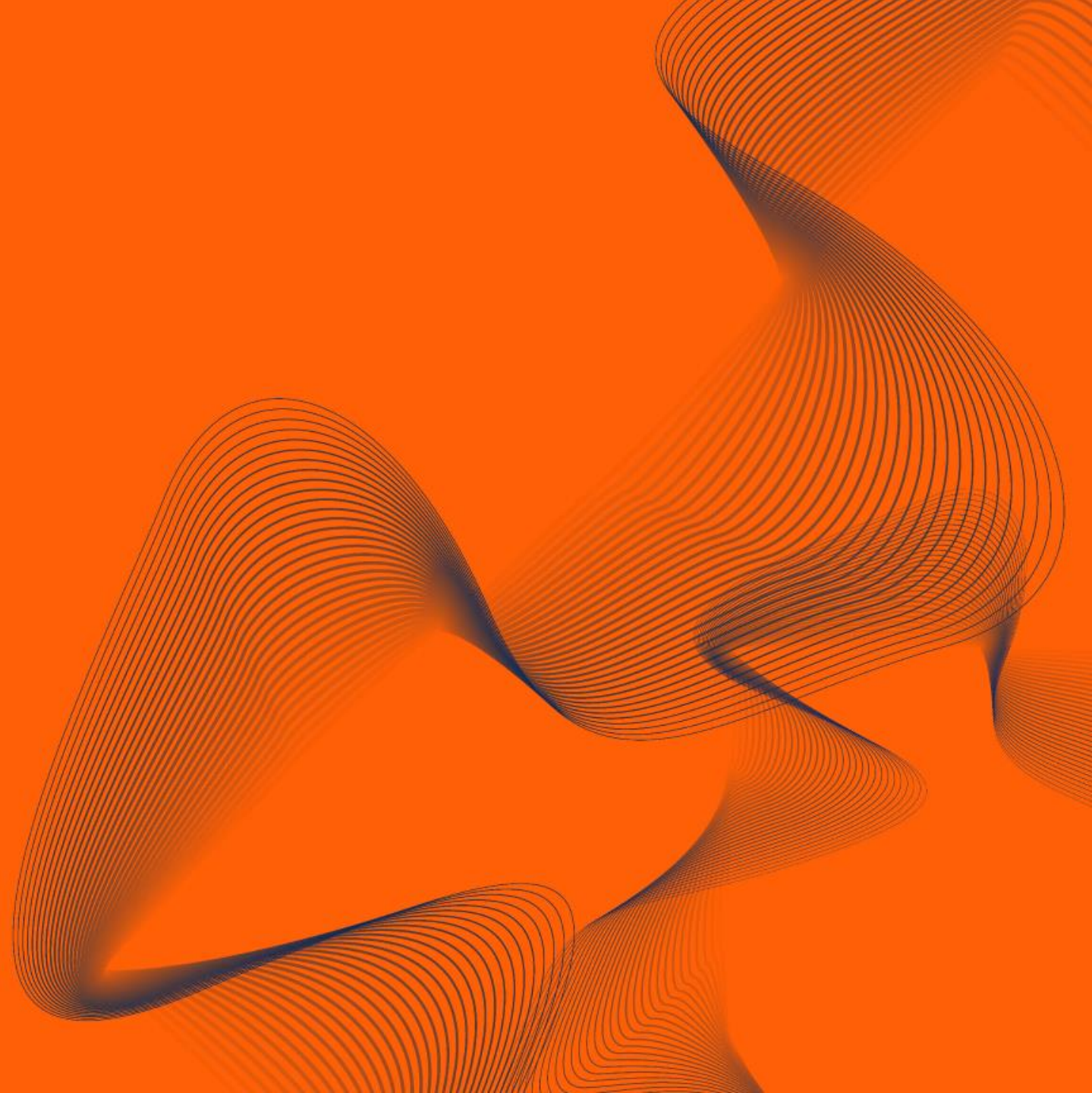
With younger people today having grown up without hooliganism being such a salient concern, the **biggest decline** in moral disapproval is among **15 to 34-year-olds**.

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**Are politicians  
good people?**

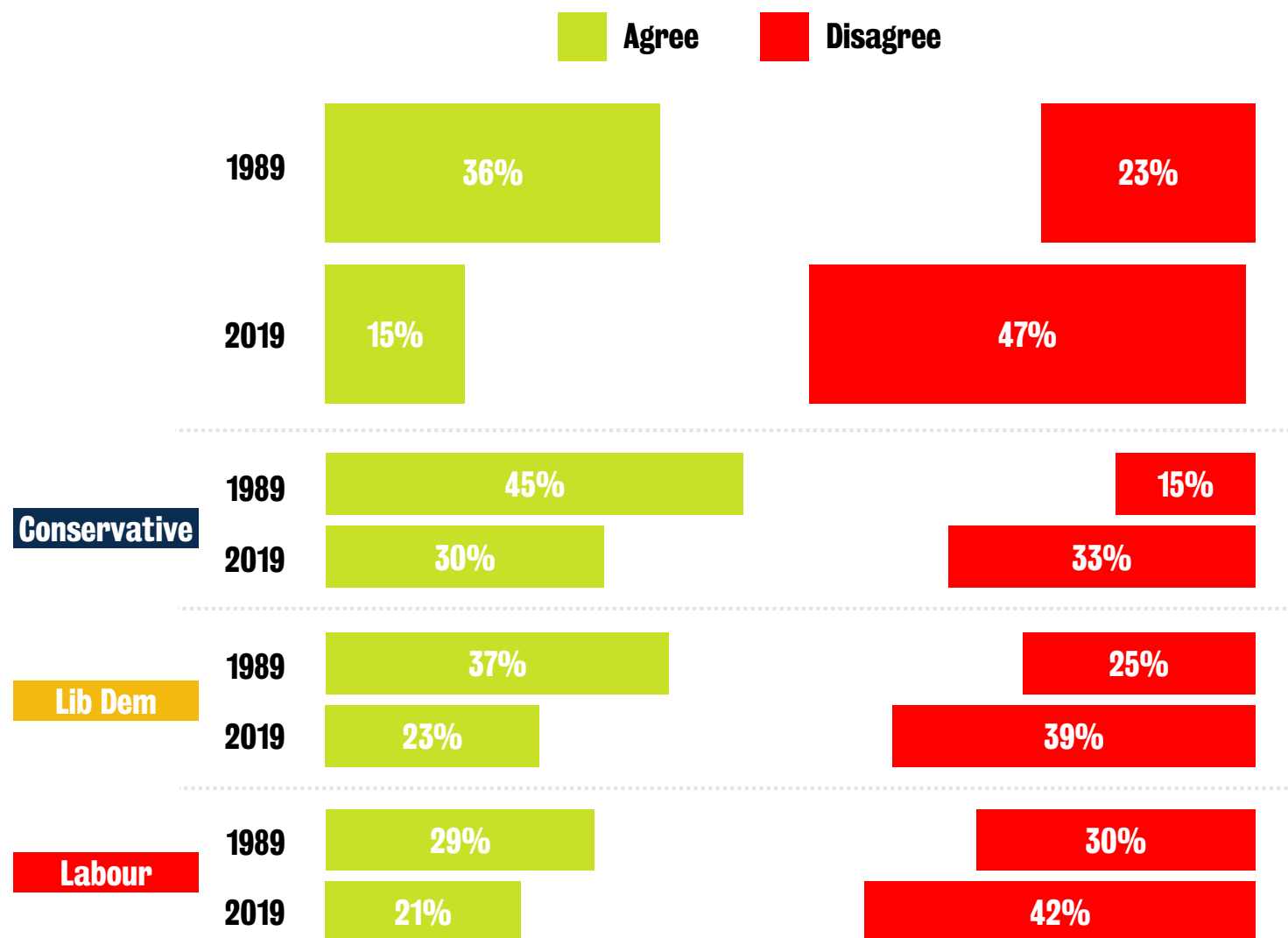


The proportion of the public who **believe that politicians are good people** has **more than halved** in the last 30 years. Half the population now disagree that they are good people.

Conservatives have seen the biggest changes in opinion.

Note: the 2019 question was asked online of 16-75-year-olds, and so comparisons should be seen as indicative, but this scale of change is very unlikely to be fully explained by sample or mode differences.

## In general, politicians are good people

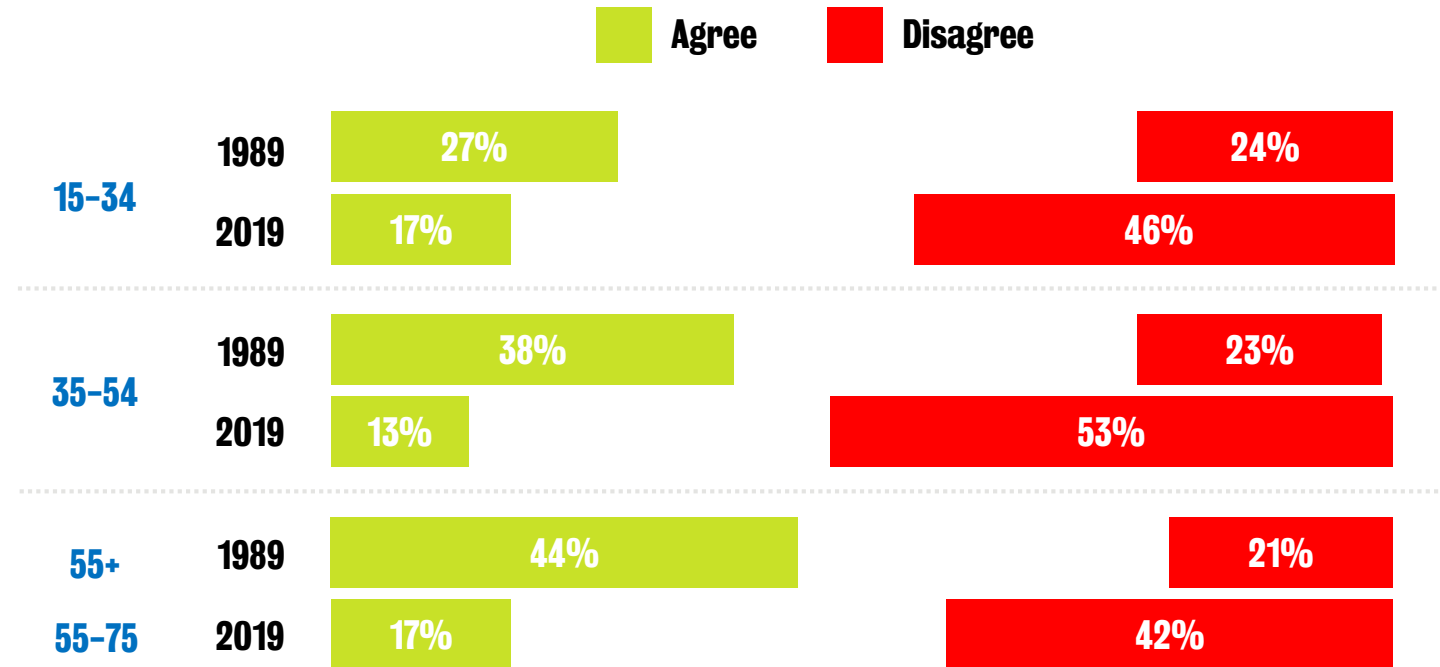


Bases: 1989 – 1,458 interviews with respondents aged 15+ conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes (March 1989); 2019 – 1,021 interviews conducted online among 16 to 75-year-olds (May 2019)

All age groups are now significantly more likely to disagree that politicians are good people, with those aged 35-54 now most negative.

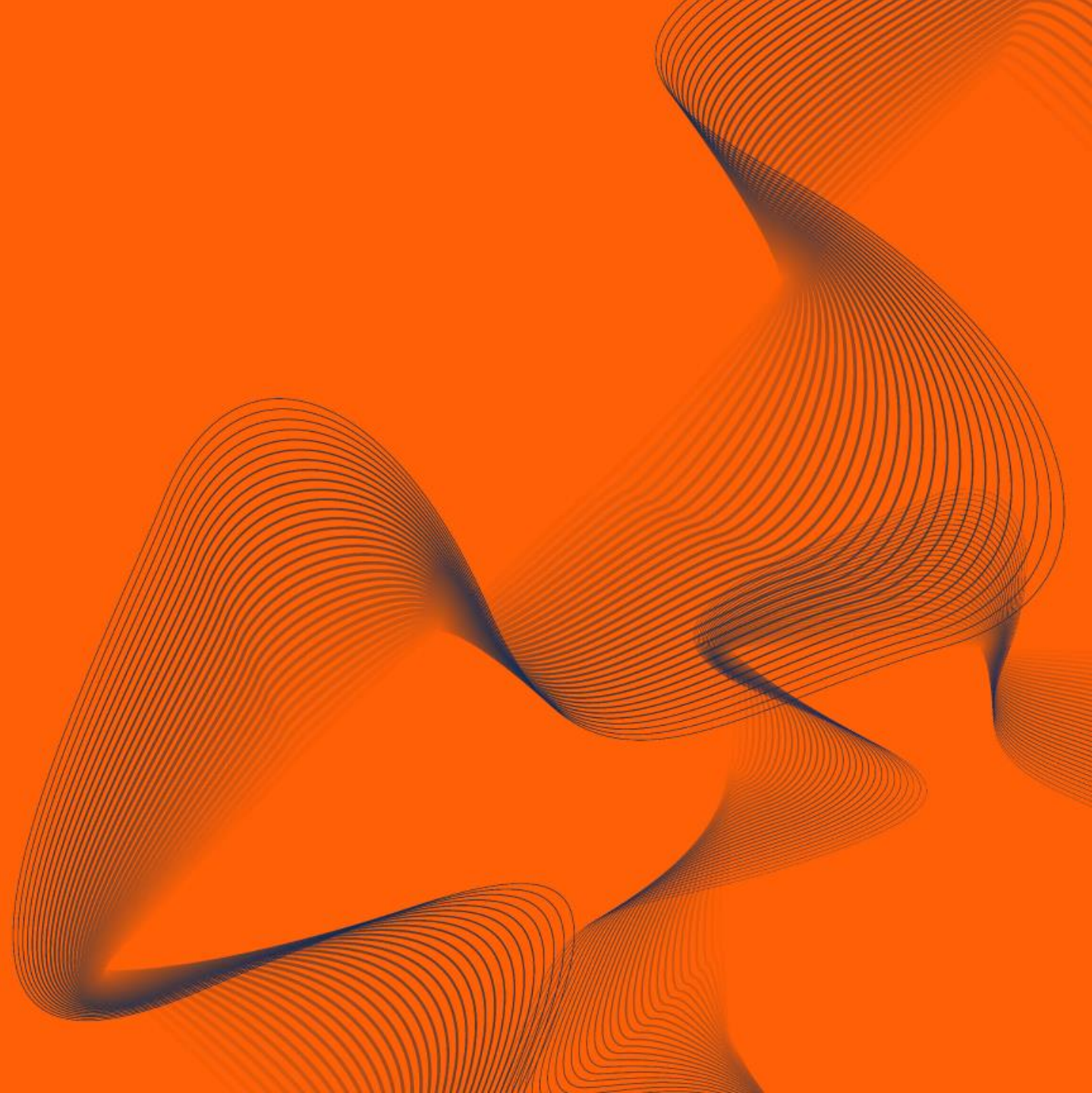
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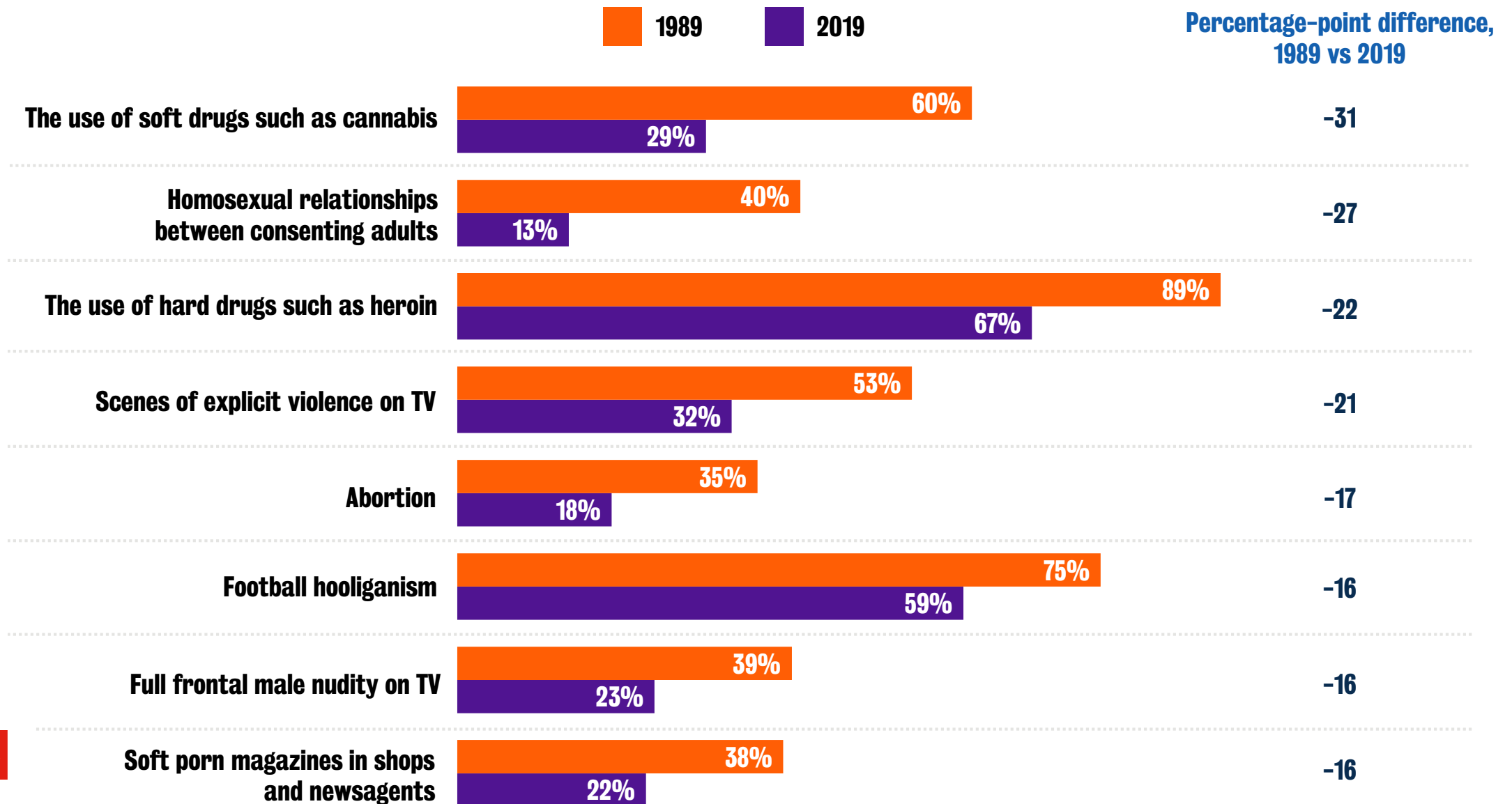


# Summary



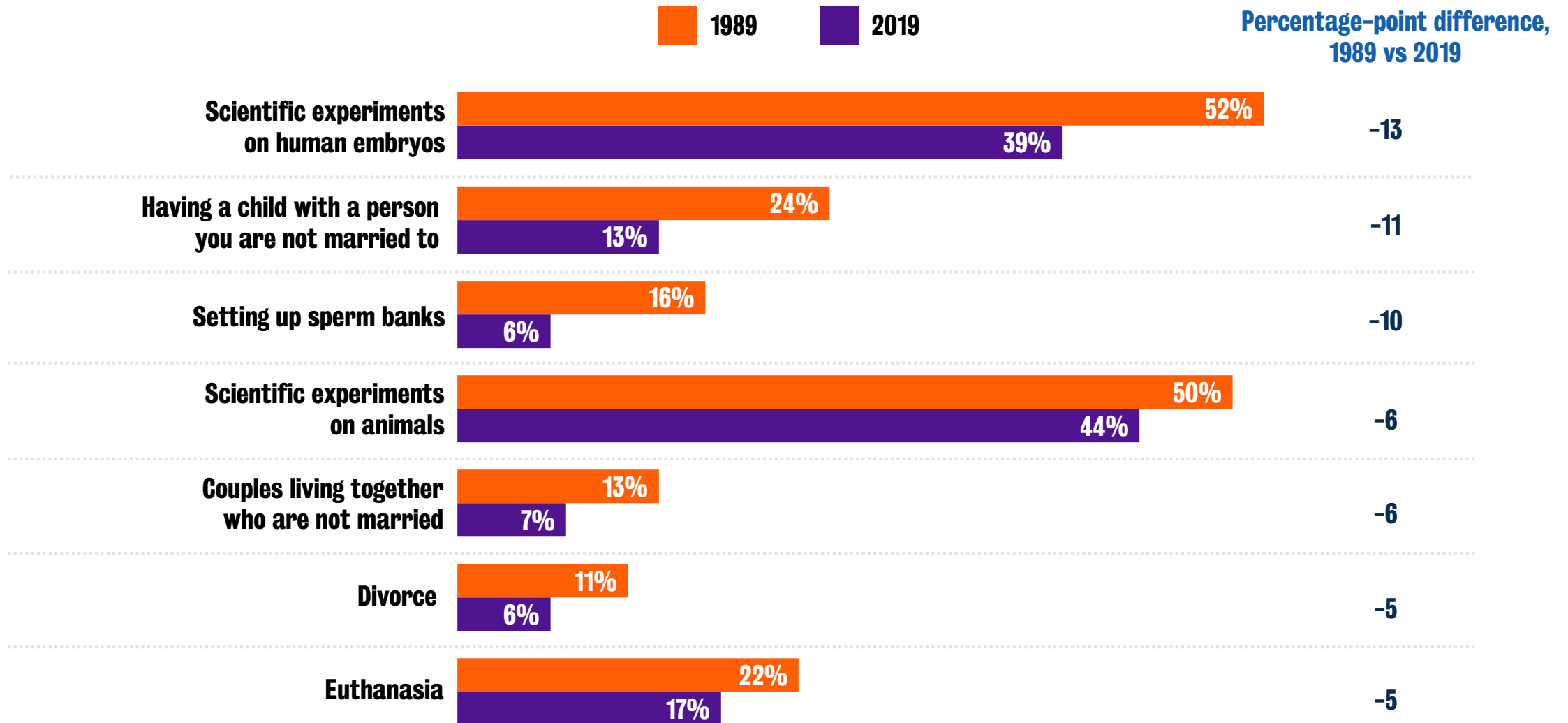
# SUMMARY OF CHANGES IN WHAT BRITAIN SEES AS IMMORAL (1 OF 3)

Here is a list of issues some people might think are immoral or morally wrong. Which of them, if any, do you personally think are morally wrong?



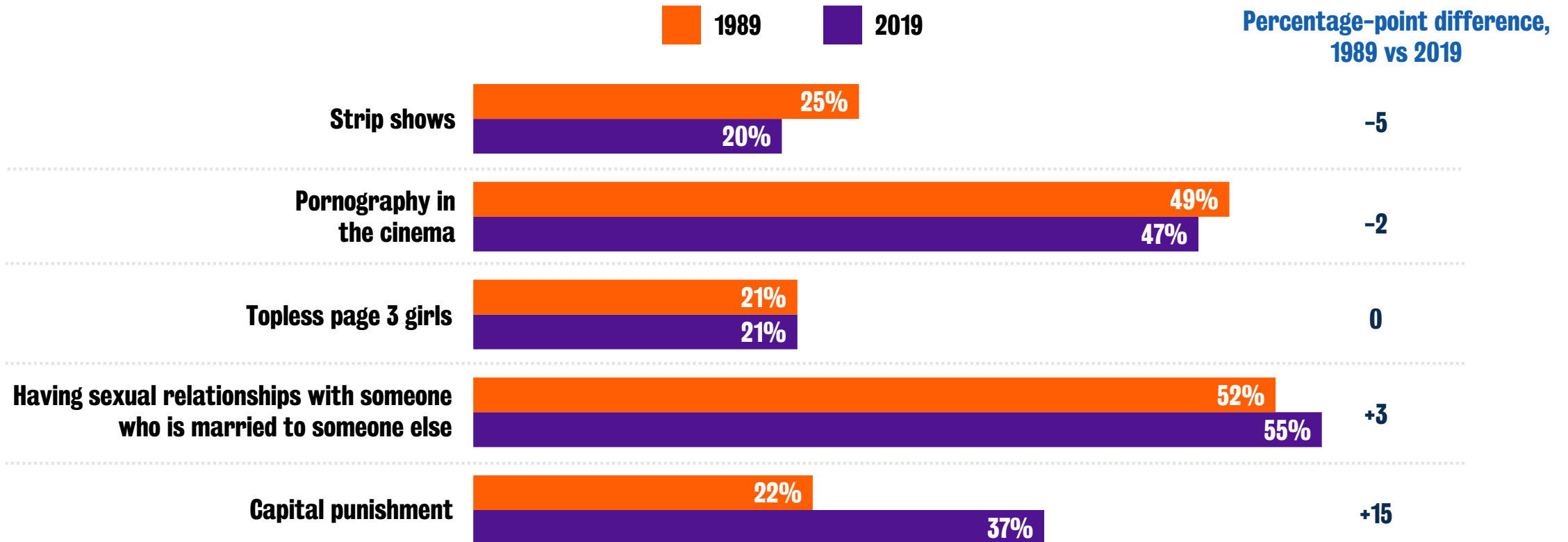
# SUMMARY OF CHANGES IN WHAT BRITAIN SEES AS IMMORAL (2 OF 3)

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# SUMMARY OF CHANGES IN WHAT BRITAIN SEES AS IMMORAL (3 OF 3)

Here is a list of issues some people might think are immoral or morally wrong. Which of them, if any, do you personally think are morally wrong?



## Technical notes

**1989 study:** 1,458 interviews conducted face-to-face in respondents' own homes across 251 sample points between 2 and 13 March 1989. Data are weighted to reflect the GB population profile.

**2019 study on immoral behaviours:** 1,021 interviews conducted face-to-face in respondents' own homes between 27 June and 9 July 2019. Data are weighted to reflect the GB population profile.

**2019 additional questions on homosexuality and “politicians are good people”:** 1,124 interviews conducted online among respondents aged 16-75 between 31 May and 3 June 2019. Data are weighted to reflect the GB 16-75 population profile. Direct comparisons with the 1989 survey should therefore be treated with some caution, given the change in sample structure and mode of interview. However, the original 1989 survey was conducted using a self-completion form, so any differences due to mode of interview due to interviewer effects will be reduced. Further, those aged 76 or over make up around 9% of the 16+ population in GB, and therefore not being included in the sample will have a minimal effect on the overall results. Given the scale of differences seen on these questions, they are very unlikely to be explained by sample or mode effects alone, and rather will reflect real changes in opinion between the studies.

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