

Making or taking?



Public attitudes to wealth creation and extraction

Will Snell | 17 February 2026



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The online version of this report is at <https://fairnessfoundation.com/making-or-taking>. This includes interactive versions of all charts, with detailed political and demographic breakdowns.

About this report

What does the public think about the distinction between wealth creation and wealth extraction? Do they view certain business models as inherently ‘creative’ or ‘extractive’? We carried out nationally representative polling with Opinium in January 2026 to find out. The results show that, while there are a mixture of predictable and more surprising variations in attitudes along political and demographic lines, overall there is a clear sense that the British public are strongly opposed to business models that are seen as extractive. Particular anger is reserved for business models that are understood to exploit consumers, workers or society more broadly, including those that avoid tax or rip off consumers. There are more mixed views about businesses that cut costs by squeezing staff or suppliers. However, there is strong support for businesses that do well by creating wealth through innovation and investment in R&D.

About the author

Will Snell is Chief Executive of the Fairness Foundation. He set up the organisation in 2021, after several years working on tax justice campaigns in the UK and overseas with the Tax Justice Network and as the founding Director and then Chair of Tax Justice UK, and following a period as interim Chief Operating Officer at Global Witness, a human rights and climate nonprofit. Earlier in his career, Will worked in government as a Fast Stream civil servant, first at the Department for Health and then the Department for International Development, as well as working on the cross-government resilience programme led by the Cabinet Office. He left government in the late 2000s to set up a social enterprise in Kenya before joining a global health NGO, Development Media International, as Director of Strategy and Development. Will has served on nonprofit boards for over 20 years and is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences.

About the Fairness Foundation

The Fairness Foundation works to change the debate around fairness in order to build a fairer Britain. We are a registered charity (1044174). Our vision is a Britain where everyone has the ‘fair necessities’ (fair essentials, fair opportunities, fair rewards, fair exchange and fair treatment). We believe that inequality is not only unfair and unpopular but is also damaging our society, economy and democracy. We work to persuade UK policymakers of the moral, the political and the policy arguments for tackling inequality.

Cover: *The Glorification of Art and Diligence and the Punishment of Gluttony and Earthly Pleasures*, by Jeremias van Winghe (c. 1580–1600)

Background: Differentiating between wealth creation and extraction

Politicians often talk about finding ways to boost ‘wealth creation’ in the pursuit of economic growth. But what do they, and we, mean by that term?

‘Wealth creation’ is often used to describe any process by which wealth is gained by certain groups, regardless of whether society as a whole benefits. We have lost a fundamental, once-acknowledged distinction between economic activity that generates genuine value for society (wealth creation) and activity that merely extracts value from existing systems, assets, or populations (wealth extraction).

At their best, well-run capitalist economies are engines of extraordinary value generation. Through innovation, risk-taking, enterprise, and investment, they produce goods and services that improve people’s lives, while creating jobs, supporting economic development and contributing to tax revenues. But in recent decades, economic activity in the UK has increasingly gravitated toward wealth extraction - the appropriation of existing value without corresponding productive contribution.

Wealth can be extracted in various ways, including monopoly power (which allows dominant firms to charge excessive prices, stifle competition, and extract economic rent from consumers and suppliers), financialisation (where companies prioritise shareholder dividends and financial engineering over investment in innovation, wages, or productive capacity), and rentierism (where wealth is accumulated by controlling scarce assets, like land, housing, or infrastructure, and extracting income without enhancing productivity).

Wealth extraction not only erodes the principle of fairness, especially the relationship between contribution and reward, but it also constrains genuine economic dynamism, widens inequality, and undermines state capacity and public faith in democratic institutions.

To address this problem, we need to recover a fundamental, once-acknowledged distinction between economic activity that generates

genuine value for society (wealth creation) and activity that merely extracts value from existing systems, assets, or populations (wealth extraction). Armed with this distinction, we can better consider which types of economic activity we should incentivise and celebrate, and which we should reform or discourage.

As a first step in exploring this issue at the Fairness Foundation, we want to better understand how the public thinks about wealth creation and wealth extraction, and where the line between the two sits. To begin answering this question, we commissioned Opinium to carry out nationally representative polling in January 2026.

To ensure that the polling questions were accessible and interpretable, we opted to use simplified examples of ‘creative’ and ‘extractive’ business models and practices, and we recognise that real life is more nuanced and complicated than those examples might suggest. This piece of attitudinal research is an exercise in exploring where the instincts of the public lie; more detailed policy work is needed to enable the development of a clear conceptual distinction between wealth creation and wealth extraction. However, we believe that these findings provide policymakers with a clear mandate to take action to support genuine wealth creation at the same time as cracking down on examples of wealth extraction and exploitative business models. Further research is needed to gauge levels of support for specific policy options. We will be doing much more work on wealth creation and extraction over the coming months, looking in detail at particular aspects of the issue and at a range of potential policy responses.

Polling questions

We asked respondents to comment on the acceptability (or otherwise) of the business models of eight fictional businesses, each of which doubled their profits recently, but in very different ways:



Tocrad has developed a new type of hairdryer that is quieter, cheaper and more efficient than its rivals and has gone on to sell millions of them



Hydrome has the regional monopoly to provide water to people living in the East of England, and has used its position to increase customer bills and borrow large amounts of money



Corazam has become the biggest online retailer for electronic goods and is able to use its dominant position in the market to drive down the prices it pays to its suppliers



Artizem has spent millions developing a new drug to treat Alzheimer's and has negotiated a contract to sell it to the NHS



Cronosphere has bought up 50 struggling accountancy businesses and has reduced their costs through a major round of redundancies



Tixboss has developed an AI tool that allows it to buy up concert tickets in bulk as soon as they are released and sell them onto fans at a big markup



Credum has identified a loophole that allows football clubs to reduce their tax bills by claiming for tax credits intended for research, and is selling advice on how to exploit it to those clubs



Finawhizz has reduced its costs by restructuring its operations so that some of its employees are reclassified as self-employed workers and are not liable for employers' national insurance

We then asked respondents why they thought that some of these businesses had unacceptable business models, asking them to choose up to two suggested reasons from the following options:

1

They are extracting wealth from society, instead of creating wealth for society

5

The system is rewarding the takers, not the makers

2

They are exploiting consumers, workers, or society more broadly

6

The system is rewarding speculators rather than productive businesses

3

They are becoming excessively wealthy without earning that wealth

7

They show that the system is rigged against ordinary people

4

Poor or harmful business practices are being rewarded over better ones

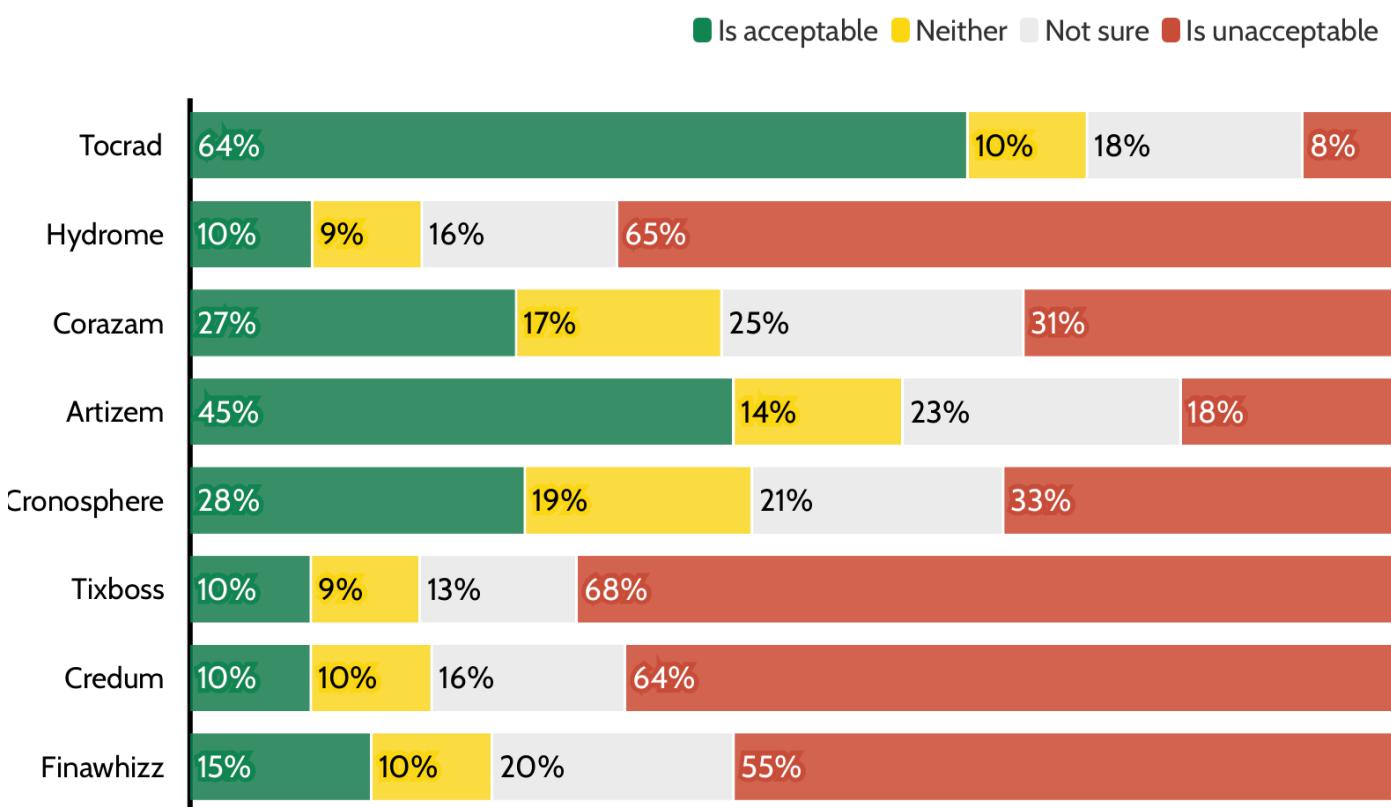
Headline findings

We see high levels of approval for profits that are considered to be 'earned' - especially those that arise from product innovation (Tocrad), and to a lesser extent from pharmaceutical R&D (Artizem, although support for this business might be tempered by the fact that it is selling into the NHS).

There are mixed views about profits that come about from reducing staffing costs (Cronosphere), and from establishing a dominant market position and using this to drive down supplier prices (Corazam).

Respondents have much more negative views about companies that make profits from carrying out (Finawhizz) or marketing (Credum) tax avoidance schemes. They are especially disapproving of companies whose business models are based on taking advantage of consumers who are forced to pay higher prices through either natural monopolies (Hydrome) or manufactured scarcity (Tixboss).

*Thinking about these examples, which of the following best reflects your view?
Increasing profits in this way...*



We asked five questions about each business: whether it is acceptable or unacceptable, whether it is mainly achieved by creating wealth (adding value to the economy overall) or by extracting wealth (taking value from others in the economy), whether it is mainly achieved by working within the system fairly or by taking advantage of the system, whether it has a positive or negative impact on society overall, and whether this kind of business activity should be encouraged or discouraged. As the table below shows, the answers across all five areas were fairly consistent.

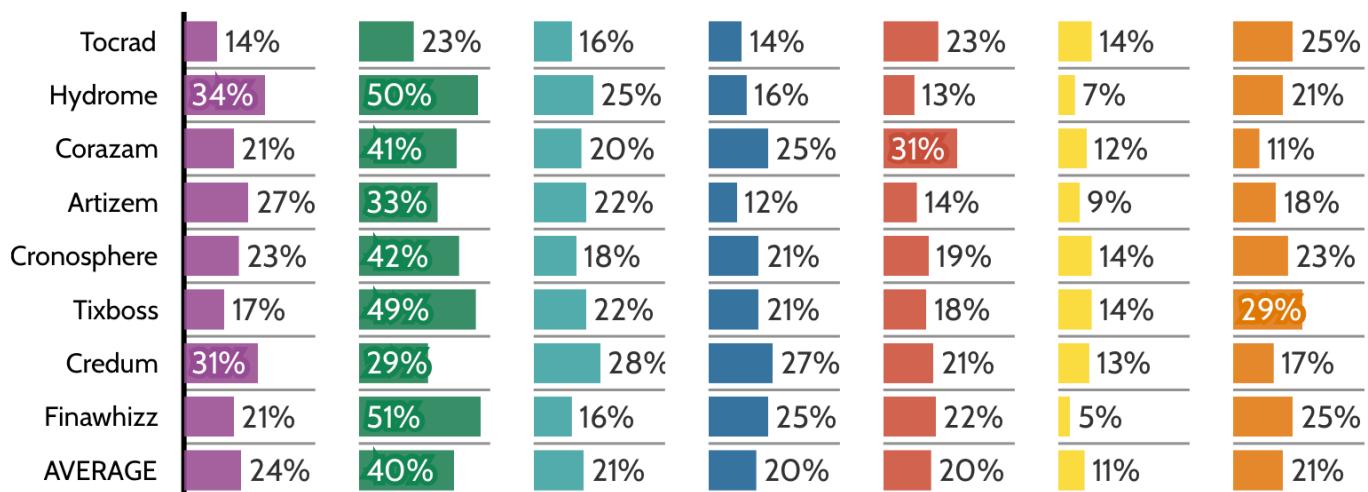
Each column shows the 'net approval rating' (the percentage of respondents who selected the first answer, minus those who selected the second) for each of the five questions, for each of the eight businesses.

Business name	Is acceptable	Creates wealth	Works within system	Positive impact	To be encouraged	Overall net approval rating (average of all five ratings, each of which is % agree minus % disagree)
Tocrad	57%	41%	46%	50%	57%	50%
Hydrome	-54%	-53%	-54%	-51%	-57%	-54%
Corazam	-4%	-22%	-17%	-11%	-13%	-1%
Artizem	27%	14%	16%	29%	22%	21%
Cronosphere	-5%	-16%	-12%	-20%	-15%	-5%
Tixboss	-57%	-52%	-59%	-57%	-58%	-57%
Credum	-54%	-49%	-54%	-49%	-55%	-52%
Finawhizz	-40%	-36%	-46%	-43%	-43%	-42%

When respondents were asked why they had come to form negative views about some of the fictional businesses, a range of reasons were given, but by far the most popular reason overall was that they are exploiting consumers, workers, or society more broadly.

Earlier, you said that the way some of the fictional businesses increased their profits was unacceptable. For each, please select up to two arguments you find most persuasive in explaining why it is unacceptable.

- They are extracting wealth from society, instead of creating wealth for society
- They are exploiting consumers, workers, or society more broadly
- They are becoming excessively wealthy without earning that wealth
- Poor or harmful business practices are being rewarded over better ones
- The system is rewarding the takers, not the makers
- The system is rewarding speculators rather than productive businesses
- They show that the system is rigged against ordinary people



Political and demographic differences

There are not significant differences in the levels of approval of different voter groups for the eight business models. However, a few interesting patterns emerge (to explore these in detail, browse the [interactive charts online](#)):

Labour voters are more slightly more likely than average respondents to say that all eight of the business models are acceptable, although in most cases they are also more likely to say that they are unacceptable (and less likely to sit on the fence).

Conservative voters are similarly more supportive of each business model than average, except Tixboss; they are very opposed to natural monopolies (Hydrome), but slightly more relaxed about businesses that restructure to reduce their national insurance obligations (Finawhizz).

Lib Dem voters are, like Labour voters, less likely to be undecided than the median respondent, but they are more against business models based on establishing and exploiting market dominance (Corazam).

Reform voters are broadly in line with the median respondent on almost all of the eight business models, but are more supportive than most of business models based on establishing and exploiting market dominance (Corazam).

Green voters are the most negative of all groups when it comes to most of the business models, although there is still net support for two of them, product innovation (Tocrad) and R&D (Artizem).

Attitudes also vary by demographics, including age, gender, household income, region and ethnicity. Some key findings are as follows (to explore these in detail, browse the [interactive charts online](#)):

Age: Younger adults are much more relaxed about many of the business models than older adults (e.g. net disapproval of Hydrome among 18-34-year-olds is 24%, compared to 66% for those aged 65+), and also slightly less supportive of business models based on genuine innovation.

Gender: Women are generally more concerned than men about some of the more extractive business models (e.g. net disapproval of Tixboss among women is 63%, compared to 51% among men). However, there are no examples where a majority of women disagree with a majority of men.

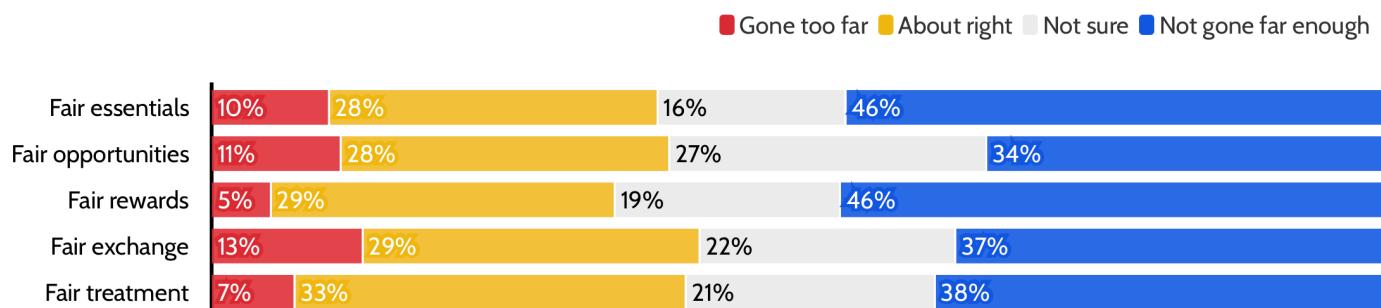
Household income: Higher-income respondents are more favourably disposed to most of the business models than lower-income respondents, with those on lower incomes less likely to approve even of innovation-based profits but also more hostile to exploitative business models than those with higher incomes.

Region: Respondents in Scotland, the East Midlands, the East of England and the South East are particularly negative about the water monopoly (Hydrome), perhaps linked to negative perceptions of real-life companies in those regions. Welsh respondents show lower levels of support than average for several of the business models.

Ethnicity: Respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds are less supportive than white respondents of innovation-based profits, but are more supportive than white respondents of many of the more extractive business models, even if more ethnic minority respondents oppose those business models than support them.

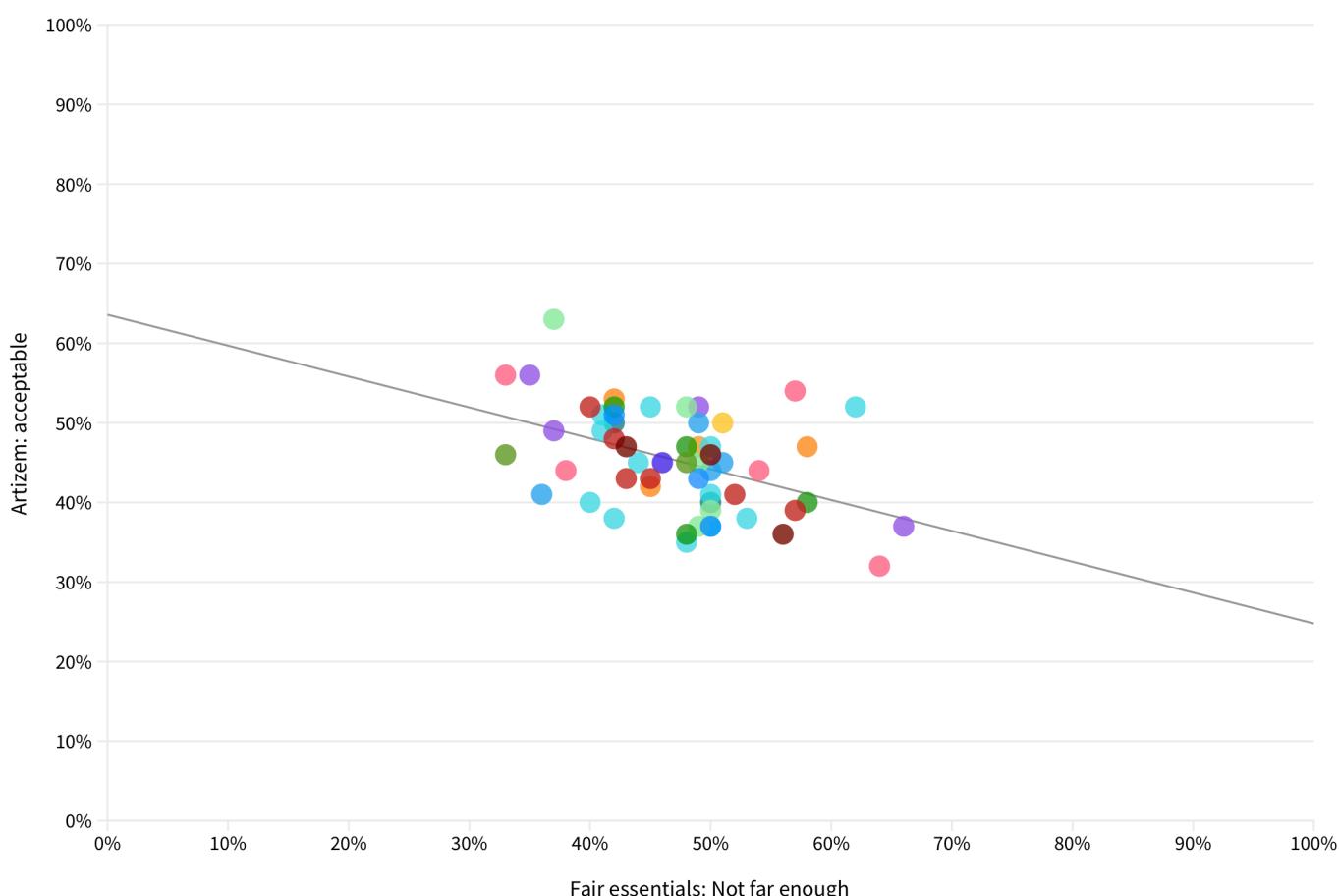
How fairness views link to attitudes to wealth creation and extraction

How might respondents' views about fairness affect their attitudes to which of these business models are acceptable or not? To help answer this question, we included a question about whether people think we have made sufficient progress in the UK (or gone to far) on each of our five fair necessities:



When we look at the relationship between views on these different components of fairness and attitudes to the various business models (analysed by each of the political and demographic breakdowns in the polling sample), we find some interesting correlations. For example, people who are more concerned about 'fair essentials' (people meeting their basic needs) seem less likely to say that Artizem's business model is acceptable - perhaps because they are worried about the impacts of large pharmaceutical profits on the NHS budget and therefore on people's ability to access healthcare.

FILTER BY GROUP ■ Total ■ Voting intention ■ 2024 vote ■ 2019 vote ■ EU referendum vote ■ Gender ■ Age ■ Region
■ Annual household income ■ Housing status ■ Social grade ■ Employment status ■ Level of education ■ Ethnicity



Conclusion

While there are a mixture of predictable and more surprising variations in attitudes along political and demographic lines, overall there is a clear sense that the British public are strongly opposed to business models that are seen as extractive. Particular anger is reserved for business models that are understood to exploit consumers, workers or society more broadly, including those that avoid tax or rip off consumers. There are more mixed views about businesses that cut costs by squeezing staff or suppliers. However, there is strong support for businesses that do well by creating wealth through innovation and investment in R&D. These findings provide policymakers with a clear mandate to take action to support genuine wealth creation at the same time as cracking down on examples of wealth extraction and exploitative business models. Further research is needed to gauge levels of support for specific policy options.

We will be publishing a launch report in March on why the distinction between wealth creation and wealth extraction matters, and what we can do about it. This will be followed by a set of reports on this issue, looking at specific impacts and policy responses in more detail, over the rest of 2026 and beyond.

Fieldwork was carried out by Opinium between 21 and 23 January 2026 with a nationally representative sample of 2,050 adults across the UK, weighted to nationally representative criteria and various political criteria. The order of options presented in each question was randomised. The data tables can be downloaded [here](#). All visualisations were made using Flourish. Any minor discrepancies between Flourish charts and the data tables (<1pp) are due to the way in which Flourish rounds numbers up or down.



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