National Centre for Social Research

BRITISH SOCIAL ATTITUDES

Age differences A new generational divide?

The age gap in British political attitudes

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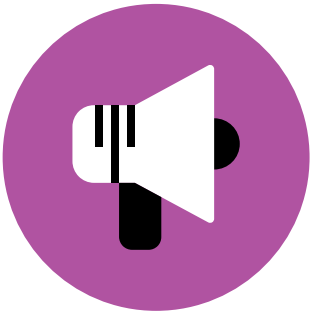
British Social Attitudes 40

September 2023

Age differences

A new generational divide? The age gap in British political attitudes

Age has become the biggest demographic divide in British politics, with younger people being more likely to vote Labour, while older people mostly support the Conservatives. But does this mean that a generational divide has opened up in people's values and policy preferences? This chapter traces the evolution of age differences in support for left-right and liberal-authoritarian values since the 1980s, together with attitudes towards taxation and spending.



Little difference in left/right values – until now

Until recently, there has been little difference between younger and older people in where they stand on the left/right spectrum. However, in recent years younger people have moved somewhat to the left.

- On a scale from 0 (left) to 100 (right), in 1986 those aged 18-34 and those aged 55 and over both had an average score of 37.
- In 2019, younger and older people still had the same score – 38.
- But now, with an average score of 28, younger people are somewhat to the left of older people whose average score is 36.

Younger people have always been less authoritarian

Though both groups have become more liberal over time, younger people have always been less authoritarian than older people.

- On a scale from 0 (liberal) to 100 (authoritarian), in 1986 those aged 18-34 had an average score of 62, while those aged 55 and over had a score of 77 – a gap of 15 points.
- By 2008 the gap had narrowed to four points, with younger people on 66 and older people on 70.
- Now, however, the difference is 10 points. Younger people have a score of 50, while older people have one of 60.

Younger people have become less keen on increased taxation and spending

In the 1980s and early 1990s, younger people were more likely than older people to say taxation and spending should be increased. But since the mid-1990s the opposite has been true.

- In 1984, 42% of those aged 18-34 supported increased taxation and public spending, compared with 33% of those aged 55 and over.
- Although by 1995, support among younger people for more taxation and spending had increased to 55%, among older people it had risen to 60%.
- Now just 43% of younger people favour higher taxation and spending, whereas as many as 67% of older people express that view.

Introduction

'Class is the basis of British politics; all else is embellishment and detail'. So wrote Peter Pulzer, the former Gladstone Professor of Politics at Oxford University in 1967 (Pulzer, 1967). In making this claim he was echoing one of the key themes of the first major survey-based study of voting behaviour that had been launched four years earlier (Butler and Stokes, 1969). Most people felt either middle class or working class. The Conservative party was widely regarded as a middle-class party, Labour (founded in 1900 with the express purpose of securing working-class representation) as a working class one. Consequently, middle class people tended to vote Conservative, while their working-class counterparts were more likely to back Labour. Of course, this was not true of everyone. Nevertheless, the relationship between how people voted and whether or not they had a white or blue-collar occupation was by far the most important demographic division in British voting behaviour.

However, the picture now looks very different. According to the British Election Study (the successor to Butler and Stokes' work), support for the Conservatives at the last general election in 2019 was just as high (42%) among those in routine and semi-routine (i.e. working-class) jobs as it was among those in professional and managerial occupations (42%). Equally, support for Labour among those in working class jobs (33%) was little different from that among those in the most middle-class professional and managerial occupations (31%). In short, someone's social class barely made any difference at all to how they voted. In contrast, there was a stark age divide. Labour were ahead of the Conservatives by 52% to 23% among those aged under 35, while the Conservatives were ahead by 55% to 22% among those aged 55 and over. Age has now displaced

class as the principal demographic dividing line in how people vote (see also Curtice, 2020).

In this chapter we assess whether this apparent age divide is also accompanied by a value divide between the generations. Typically, we would expect those on the 'left' to vote Labour and those on the 'right' to back the Conservatives (Heath, Jowell & Curtice, 1985). Consequently, we might anticipate that nowadays younger people, who are more likely to vote Labour, to be more 'left-wing' than older people, in contrast perhaps to the position in the 1980s when the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey started. And if that is the case, what are the implications for the future of British politics? In particular, do more left-wing younger generations herald a likely shift to the left in overall public attitudes as and when today's older generations gradually leave the electorate?

We begin by charting the relationship between age and party support since BSA began in 1983. Have younger people, to some extent at least, always been more likely than older people to prefer Labour to the Conservatives? Or is this a more recent phenomenon? We then examine whether younger people are indeed more left-wing than their older counterparts. If so, has this always been the case, and does this help explain why younger people are more likely to support Labour? Thereafter we undertake a similar analysis of the relationship between age and another value dimension, that is, between those who adhere to liberal values and those who have a more authoritarian or socially conservative outlook. We then look more briefly at the relationship between age and attitudes towards one of the key dividing lines between Conservative and Labour, the level of taxation and government spending. We conclude by assessing what we have learnt about the character of the age divide in Britain's electoral politics.

Age and party support

Every BSA survey conducted since 1983 has included a measure of party support. However, the survey does not simply ask people how they voted at the last election or how they say they would vote if an election were held now. Rather, it collects what is intended to be a longer-term measure of party support, that is, whether people affectively identify with a political party (Budge, Crewe & Farlie, 1976). As outlined further in the Technical Details of this report, respondents are asked whether they think of themselves as a supporter of one of the parties, and, if not, whether they feel closer to one of the parties or not. In short, people are not asked whether they vote Labour, Conservative, or for some other party but rather whether they think of themselves as, or identify as, Labour, Conservative or as a supporter of any of the other parties. Only if they respond negatively to both these initial questions does the survey invite people to say how they think they would vote if there were a general election tomorrow.

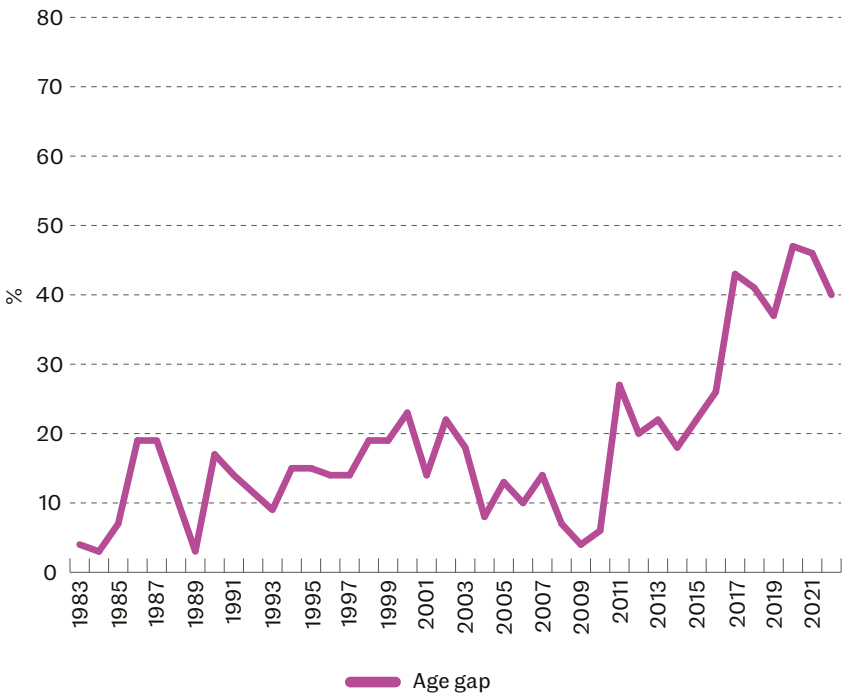
Not everyone emerges from this sequence of questioning as a supporter of a political party. Indeed, the proportion of people who do not support any party has grown. In 1983, for example, 8% said they did not support any of the parties, a figure that in our most recent survey stands at 15%. Furthermore, younger people are consistently less likely than older people to say they support a party. In our latest survey, as many as 22% of those aged under 35 say they do not support any one party, compared with just 8% of those aged 55 and over – it often takes a few years of adulthood before people develop a sense of loyalty or belonging to a political party (Dalton, 2021). We should also remember that many people identify with political parties other than Conservative and Labour – in our latest survey this is true of 21% of respondents. Our interest here, however, is in the difference in the relative strength of Britain's two largest parties among younger and older people, and therefore the measure of party support we use in our analysis reflects that focus.

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the difference in party support between age groups, which we refer to as the age gap, since the first BSA survey in 1983. To obtain the measure of the age gap we use in this figure, first of all, in each year, we calculate the difference between the proportion who support Labour and the proportion who identify as Conservative for both those aged under 35 and for those aged 55 and over. We then calculate, again for each year, the difference between the resulting figure for those aged under 35 and that for those 55 and over. The bigger this number, the greater the difference between the two age groups in their relative level of support for the two parties; a positively signed number indicates that Labour was relatively more popular among younger voters than their older counterparts, while a negative one indicates that the party was more popular among older voters.

An example might help: In 1983, the Conservatives and Labour enjoyed the same level of support among those aged under 35 (both parties were supported by 34%), while among those aged 55 and over support for Labour was four points lower (35%) than that for the Conservatives (39%). Thus, our measure of the age divide for that year is just four ((34-34)-(35-39)). In 1987, in contrast, Labour was slightly more popular than the Conservatives (by three points) among those under 35, while the Conservatives were 16 points ahead of Labour among those over 55. The resulting measure of the age divide in that year is therefore 19 (3-(-16))[1].

1 In nearly all years the difference between the level of Labour and Conservative support among those aged 35 to 54 has been in between the gap in the popularity of the two parties among the youngest and oldest cohorts of voters. Leaving them aside does not therefore distort the picture we are painting in Table 1. Meanwhile, as might be anticipated, calculating the odds ratios of Labour to Conservative support paints much the same picture as in Figure 1. For example, this statistic is 1.26 in 1983, 1.77 in 1987, 2.07 in 2015 and 4.92 in our most recent survey.

Figure 1 The age gap in party support, 1983-2022



The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in Table A.1 in the appendix to this chapter.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the age gap in party support has widened in recent years. In most years up to and including 2010 there was typically only a relatively small age difference in the pattern of party identification. As we have already seen, there was very little difference indeed in 1983, and the same was true in 1984. True, the gap did increase to 19 in 1986 and (as we have already noted) 1987, but then it fell back somewhat. There was a more sustained increase in the early years of the Labour government of 1997-2010, when Labour was very popular, reaching a peak of 23 in 2000, but then it fell back once again. Again, it stood at just four in 2009 and six in 2010, as Labour's time in office came to an end.

Ever since 2010, however, the age gap has consistently been higher. By the time of the 2015 election, it was above 20. Labour were nine points ahead among younger voters, but 13 points behind among their older counterparts. Then in 2017 it increased to over 40 – and it has remained at approximately that level ever since. In our most recent survey, the age gap is, indeed, exactly forty. Labour, on 43%, are as much as 32 points ahead of the Conservatives (on 11%) among those aged under 35. In contrast, it is the Conservatives, on 39%, who are ahead of Labour (31%) – by eight points – among those aged 55 and over. Ever since 2015 Labour have had a commanding lead among younger voters, while the party has trailed badly among older

people. Although there has always been something of an age divide in Britain's electoral politics, over the course of the last seven years, it has become a major demographic divide in Britain's electoral politics.

Left/right values and party support

Does this mean, then, that younger and older people are now further apart in terms of their values? Before we address that question directly, we should check that whether people are 'left-wing' or 'right-wing' is indeed still related to the pattern of party support. Table 1 illustrates how far this is the case by showing the pattern of party support, broken down by whether people are on the left or the right, for five years between 1986 and 2022. People's stance on this spectrum is based on their score on BSA's left-right scale. This is derived from people's responses to five questions on attitudes towards inequality in Britain and the role that government should play in reducing it (for further information see the Technical Details to this report). In each year we divide respondents into thirds, the one-third most left-wing on our scale, the one-third most right-wing, and the one-third in between.

Table 1 Conservative and Labour support by left-right scale score, 1986–2022

	Left	Centre	Right
1986	%	%	%
Conservative	14	29	61
Labour	59	36	12
Unweighted base	*420*	*471*	*417*
1996			
Conservative	11	25	50
Labour	61	42	22
Unweighted base	*1087*	*1022*	*96*
2006			
Conservative	14	24	40
Labour	43	31	24
Unweighted base	*1193*	*1248*	*1254*
2016			
Conservative	18	32	56
Labour	41	32	14
Unweighted base	*720*	*939*	*690*
2022			
Conservative	9	24	47
Labour	54	37	19
Unweighted base	*2095*	*2383*	*2169*

As seen in Table 1, there has been a relationship between where people stand on the left-right spectrum and party support ever since the left-right scale was first included on BSA in 1986. Indeed, although there has been some variation from year to year, often the level of support for Labour among those on the left has been closely matched by the level of identification with the Conservatives among those on the right. Given how the age difference in party support has grown, there would seem every reason to anticipate that different age cohorts are now further apart on the left/right spectrum than was the case forty years ago (see also Rawlings 2018; Young 2019).

An age divide in left/right position?

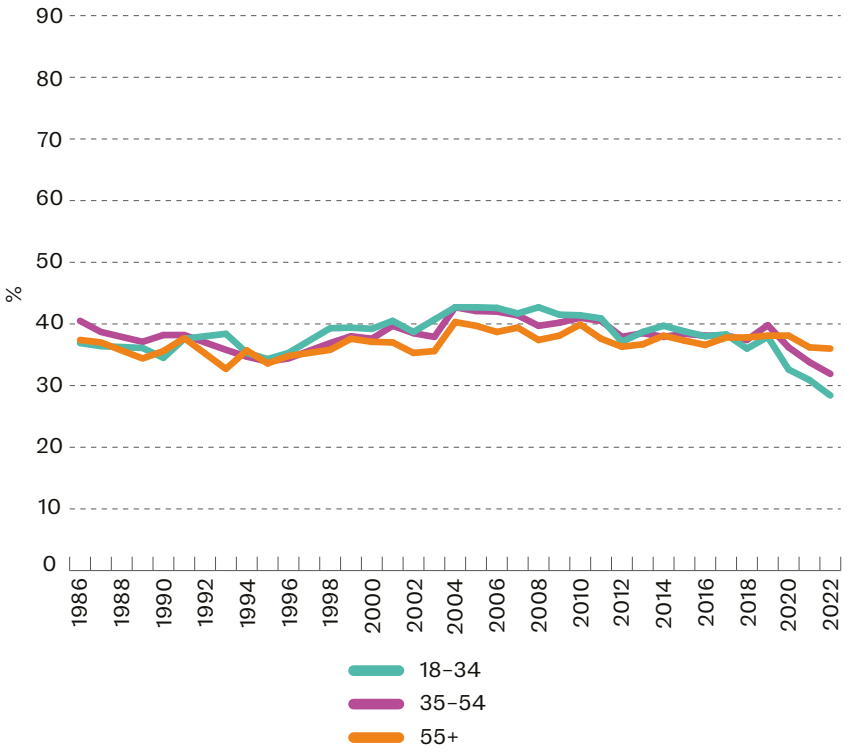
Figure 2 shows the mean score on the left-right scale for each age group in all the years that the relevant questions have been asked on BSA. To help make the scale easier to interpret, the original scale from 1 to 5 has been rebased to range from 0 to 100.[2] A scale score of under 50 means that a respondent leans to the left on the scale, while a score of above 50 implies that they lean to the right.

Contrary to what we anticipated, the figure reveals that, until the last few years at least, the average scale scores of our three age groups have been very similar to each other. Hitherto at least, there has been no sign of younger people being more left-wing than their older counterparts. For example, when the scale was first administered in 1986, the average score among those aged under 35 was, at 37, the same as the average score among those aged 55 and over. Younger people were inclined to the left but no more than any other age group (those aged between 35 and 54 had a mean score of 41 in 1986). Equally, thirty years later, in 2016, by which point a substantial age gap in party support had already emerged, the average score of younger voters (38) was little different from that for older voters (37). Meanwhile, throughout the period between 1995 and 2017[3], younger voters emerged, if anything, as slightly less left-wing than older voters. Most notably in 2008, at 43 the average score of those aged under 35 put them as much as six points to the right of those aged 55 and over.

2 This has been done by subtracting one away from the original scale score and multiplying the result by 25.

3 Data from BSA 1997 have been excluded from the time series as the questions asked to derive left/right position were somewhat different from those in other years.

Figure 2 Mean scores on the left-right scale by age group, 1986-2022



The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in Table A.2 in the appendix to this chapter.

Nonetheless, a glance at the far-right hand side of Figure 2 reveals that most recently the average scale score among younger people has diverged from that among older people. Younger people are now somewhat to the left of older people. There was a first inkling of this when, in 2018, the average scale score among those aged under 35 was, at 36, a couple of points below that among those aged 55 and over. But while in 2020 the average score among older voters was again 38, that among younger voters had slipped to 33. In subsequent years that latter figure has fallen yet further to 31 in 2021 and 28 in 2022, while the average score among those 55 and over has only slipped a couple of points (to 36) since 2020. Younger voters have now emerged as somewhat more left-wing than older voters for the first time in forty years.

This leaves us with a puzzle and a potential worry. Voters might be somewhat more left-wing now, but this has only become evident *after* the age gap in party support first reached its current high value in 2017. The shift to the left among younger people might possibly be a *consequence* of the increased support for the Labour party, but it seems it cannot have been a cause. Meanwhile, we should bear in mind that the emergence of an age divide on the left-right scale during the last three years coincides with a change in how the BSA survey has

been administered. Until 2020 the BSA survey was administered by interviewers face-to-face, but since then it has been conducted as a push-to-web survey (see Technical Details for further information). Could the apparent widening of the age divide simply be an artefact of the change in how the data have been collected?

We address the first of these issues in the next section. Here we consider the risk that our results might have been affected by the change of method.

On two occasions during the COVID-19 pandemic, once in July 2020 and again in June the following year, we administered many of the questions that have appeared regularly on BSA on a separate survey instrument (Curtice, Abrams & Jessop, 2022). This was the mixed-mode random probability panel run by the National Centre for Social Research (Jessop, 2018). The panel comprises a group of people who have previously taken part in BSA and who have agreed to complete occasional further interviews, usually over the web though in some instances over the phone. As a result, we can compare for the same individuals the responses they gave during the pandemic with those they offered previously in one of the years immediately prior to lockdown. If there really has been a divergence of attitudes on the left-right spectrum, we should find that younger people who participated in the panel surveys moved to the left in a way that was not apparent among older respondents.

Table 2 shows for the two rounds of panel surveys the average scale score of each age group when participants were first interviewed for their BSA survey and their mean score when subsequently interviewed during the coronavirus crisis. It reveals much the same pattern as in the main BSA surveys. In both cases the average scale score dropped among younger respondents by six or seven points between the respondents' initial BSA interviews and when they were interviewed again on the panel. In contrast, there was little or no change at all in the average scale score of older respondents. It seems that we can reasonably conclude that an age gap in position on the left/right spectrum has emerged for the first time in recent years, even if it has only become apparent after the age gap in party support.

Table 2 Mean left-right score by age group, July 2020 and June 2021

	July 2020 Panel			June 2021 Panel		
	BSA Score	**Panel Score**	*Unweighted base*	**BSA Score**	**Panel Score**	*Unweighted base*
18-24	36	29	*318*	35	29	*257*
35-54	38	36	*714*	39	37	*644*
55+	38	39	*1113*	38	38	*1082*
Age gap (55+, 18-34)	2	10		3	9	

Source: NatCen Opinion Panel

Why might younger people have swung distinctively to the left during the years of the pandemic? Although COVID-19 had a greater impact on older people in terms of morbidity and mortality, the disruption of the lockdown to younger people's social lives, their educational studies, and their ability to continue in employment was greater (Wilson and Papoutsaki, 2021). They were also less likely to live in spacious housing of the kind that meant adhering to lockdown was tolerable. Meanwhile, it has become more difficult in recent years for younger people to become owner occupiers (Barton, 2017). It is thus perhaps of some note that while there was some movement to the left among younger people by June 2021 irrespective of the tenure of the housing they occupied, at twelve points the swing to the left among those living in private rental accommodation was particularly marked. It may be that the reliance that a significant proportion of younger people are currently having to place on renting privately has stimulated them to be rather more concerned about the extent of inequality in Britain.

Age, left-right position and party support

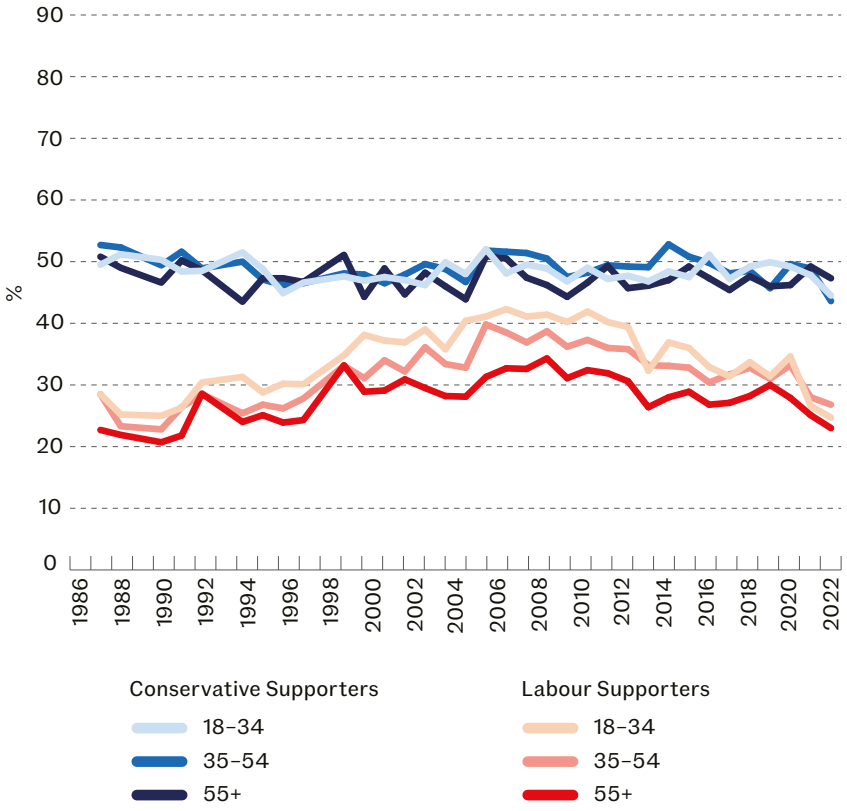
That still leaves us with the puzzle as to why, prior to 2020, younger voters were more likely than older people to vote Labour even though they were generally not more left-wing. Figure 3 gives us some initial insight into how this has come about. It shows separately for Conservative and Labour supporters the average left-right scale score in each age group in each year. The blue lines represent the scores of the three groups of Conservative supporters, while the red lines display the scores for the three groups of Labour identifiers.

Conservative and Labour supporters differ markedly on the left-right divide irrespective of age group. The former have higher scores,

putting them more on the right, while the latter have lower scores and thus are more to the left. At the same time, the closeness of the three blue lines indicates that age makes little difference to where Conservative supporters stand on the left-right spectrum. For example, in our most recent survey, the average scale score among those aged under 35 is, at 46, much the same as that among both those aged 55 and over (47) and those aged 35 to 54 (45).

In the case of Labour, however, the three red lines are somewhat apart from each other. This means that younger and older Labour supporters have tended to occupy somewhat different positions on the left-right divide. Until very recently at least, younger people who voted Labour have been consistently less left-wing than their older counterparts. Even as recently as 2019, at 35, the average scale score among Labour supporters aged under 35 was as much as seven points higher than that among those 55 and over (28). Meanwhile, at its height, in 2003, the difference in the scale score among the two groups was much as twelve points.

Figure 3 Mean left-right scale scores by age among Conservative and Labour party supporters, 1986-2022



The data on which Figure 3 is based can be found in Table A.3 in the appendix to this chapter.

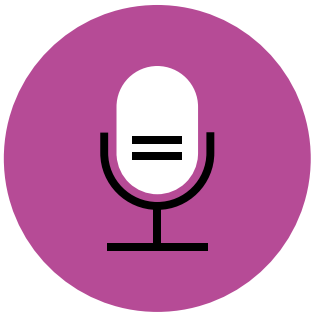
It seems that for much of the last forty years, and especially during the era of the New Labour government which attempted to position the party in the centre of the political spectrum, Labour have had more success among younger voters than older ones in securing the support of those who are not necessarily clearly located on the left of the political spectrum. The appeal of the party to some younger voters has apparently extended beyond issues of inequality and what government should do to reduce it. That said, now that younger voters themselves are to the left of older people this pattern has disappeared. Even then, however, younger people are still more likely than older people to support Labour rather than the Conservatives, irrespective of where they stand on the left-right spectrum. Most notably, as Table 3 shows, while in our latest survey as many 62% of those aged 55 and over who are on the right currently support the Conservatives, the equivalent figure among those aged 18-34 is just 25%.

Table 3 Conservative and Labour support by left-right scale score and age, 2022

	Left	**Middle**	**Right**
18-34	%	%	%
Conservative	3	13	25
Labour	55	42	24
Unweighted base	*611*	*509*	*362*
55+			
Conservative	15	35	62
Labour	53	32	12
Unweighted base	*762*	*1084*	*1148*

Perhaps, though, we have been looking at the wrong data to understand why the pattern of Conservative and Labour support is now so different among younger and older voters. Perhaps the reason why younger voters are more inclined to vote Labour lies not in their adherence or otherwise to left/right values, but rather in where they stand on another value divide, that is, between liberals and authoritarians.

The liberal–authoritarian spectrum



Liberals are those who value personal autonomy over social order, while authoritarians place a higher priority on the latter. Liberals are inclined to believe that people should be able to make their own moral choices, to decide for themselves what social mores they observe, what language they speak, and what national identity they acknowledge. Authoritarians say that society needs to enforce a collective moral code, that social cohesion requires observation of collective social mores, while a nation is strengthened by having a common language and a strong sense of identity. Where people stand on this value divide has been measured on BSA since 1986 by people's responses to a set of six questions, details of which are to be found in the Technical Details to this report.

As Table 4 shows, this value division is also reflected to some degree in how people vote. In a similar vein to Table 2 above, we have divided our sample in each year into the one-third most liberal on our scale, the one-third most authoritarian, and the one-third in the middle. The table reveals that authoritarians are somewhat more likely to vote Conservative, while liberals are more inclined to back Labour. However, this divide has typically not been as strongly related to whether people support Conservative or Labour as the left/right division has been. For example, whereas in 1997 those on the right were as much as 39 points more likely than those on the left to support the Conservatives, authoritarians were only 18 points more likely than liberals to back the party. The equivalent figures for Labour are 39 points and 15 points respectively. That said, the strength of the relationship between position on the liberal-authoritarian scale and party support has varied somewhat over time. It was particularly weak in 2006, when liberals were only three points more likely than authoritarians to support Labour, whereas now the gap is 25 points. Indeed, more broadly, having narrowed

somewhat during the years of New Labour government, the difference between liberals and authoritarians in their pattern of party support is now as wide as it has ever been (see also Curtice 2020). Perhaps this is a clue to the source of the widening of the age gap in party support?

Table 4 Conservative and Labour support by liberal-authoritarian score, 1986-2022

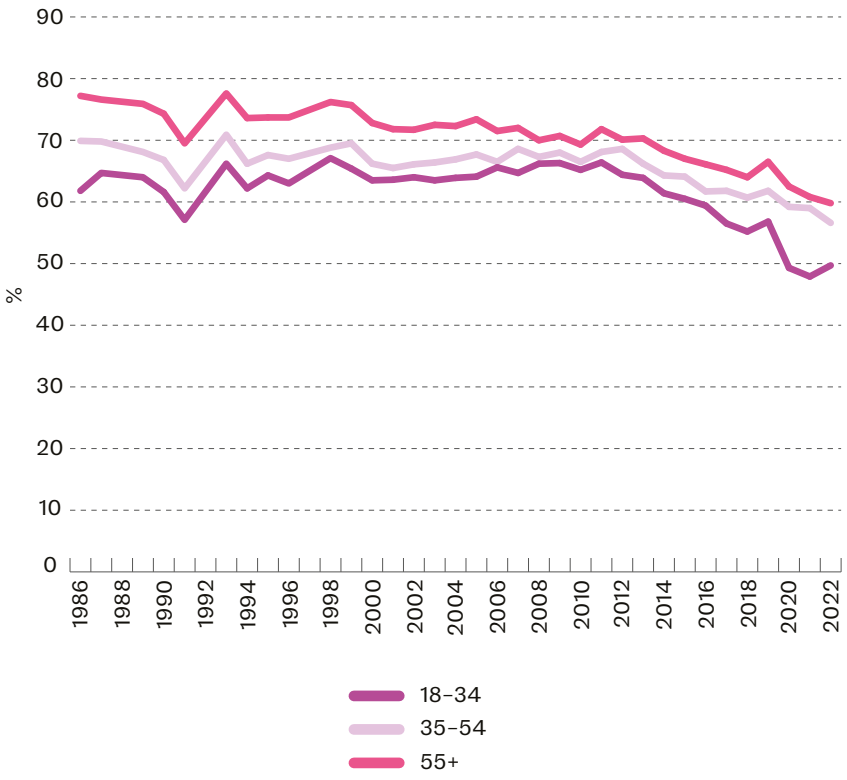
	Liberal	**Centre**	**Authoritarian**
1986	%	%	%
Conservative	23	38	43
Labour	46	28	32
Unweighted base	*438*	*436*	*437*
1996			
Conservative	17	31	35
Labour	51	39	38
Unweighted base	*889*	*1284*	*902*
2006			
Conservative	16	29	31
Labour	36	29	33
Unweighted base	*1003*	*1252*	*1451*
2016			
Conservative	26	38	41
Labour	39	24	25
Unweighted base	*727*	*895*	*733*
2022			
Conservative	10	27	39
Labour	52	32	27
Unweighted base	*2407*	*2025*	*2231*

Figure 4 shows the average score on the liberal-authoritarian scale for each age group since 1986. As in the case of the left-right scale,

we have rebased the scores so that they range from 0 to 100. A score of more than 50 means that someone is inclined to an authoritarian outlook, while a score of less than 50 indicates that they have a more liberal outlook.

Three patterns are immediately apparent. First, although it is still the case that most people have a score of over 50, a less authoritarian outlook has gradually become more common among all age groups, and especially over the last decade or so. On average respondents to BSA now have an average scale score of 55, compared with 69 in 1986. Second, those aged 18-34 have always been the most liberal age group, while those aged 55 and over have always been the most authoritarian. Third, the size of the gap between these groups has however varied over time. It became markedly narrower in the first decade of the twentieth century, only to become wider again more recently. In 1986 there was as much as a 15-point difference between the average scale score of those aged 55 and over (77) and those under 35 (62). In contrast, by 2008 the gap had diminished to just four points, with those 55 and over on a score of 70 and those under 35 on 66. Now, the gap stands at ten points – those 55 and over have an average score of 60 while those aged under 35 have one of 50.

Figure 4 Mean scores on the liberal-authoritarian scale by age group, 1986-2022



The data on which Figure 4 is based can be found in Table A.4 in the appendix to this chapter.

Given the relationship between age and where people stand on the liberal-authoritarian dimension, we might wonder whether the increase in support for a more liberal outlook over the last two decades is the result of generational turnover, that is, as a result of each successive generation of younger people being more liberal than their predecessors. That is certainly an important part of the story. The generation of people who were aged 18-34 in 2005 had a score of 64 on our scale, much higher than the equivalent score of 50 among those of the same age now. However, at the same time, in recent years older generations have become somewhat more liberal over time. For example, the cohort of 18-34 year olds in 1986 had a score of 62 on our scale at that point in time, while in 2003 (when those in this age group were now aged 35-51) they had an even slightly higher score of 66 – if anything, the group had become somewhat less liberal as they entered middle age. Now, however, aged 55-71, this cohort's score has fallen to 60, indicating that they are now more liberal than they were as young adults.

There has, then, always been an age divide between liberals and authoritarians, albeit one that has varied somewhat over time. It has certainly become bigger again more recently. Moreover, in this instance the widening of the gap was in evidence before the pandemic necessitated a change in the way that BSA was conducted. The age gap was already at its current level of ten points in the 2019 survey, before the change in methodology[4], so there is no particular reason to believe that the increase in the age gap is an artefact of the methodological change. But does it help us account for the age gap in party support?

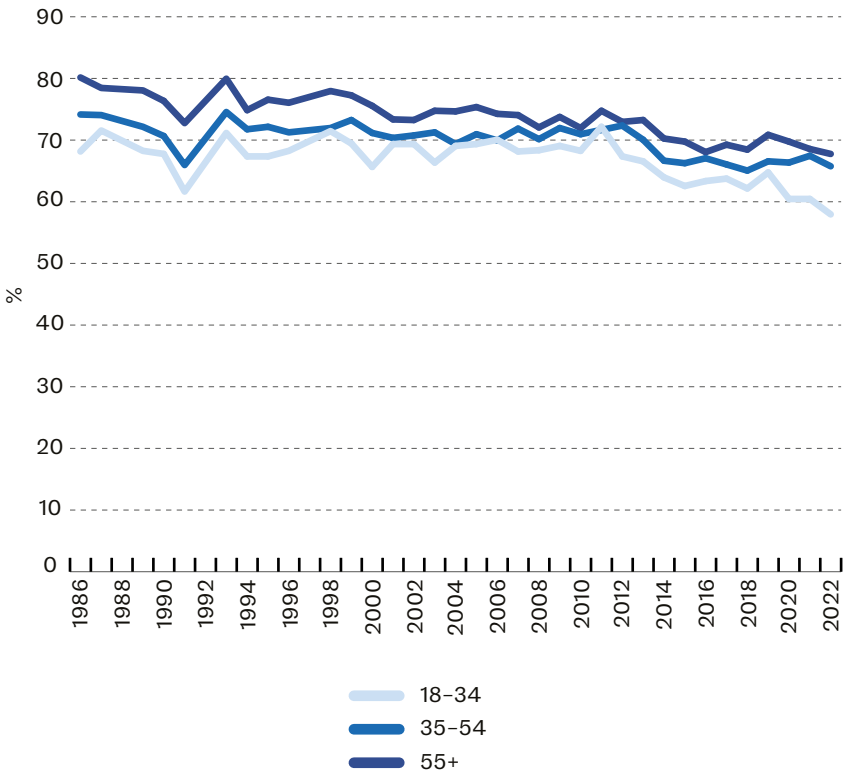
Age, liberal-authoritarian position and party support

Figures 5 and 6 cast doubt on that proposition. They show for the Conservatives and Labour separately the average scale score for their supporters within each age group. For both parties, their younger supporters have always been more liberal than their older counterparts. True, in both cases the age gap narrowed in the first decade of the twenty-first century, much as we have seen it did among the public in general. In 1986, younger Labour supporters were as much as 17 points more liberal than their older counterparts, while the equivalent gap among Conservatives was 12 points. By 2008, those figures have fallen to just two and four points respectively. But, equally, as has been the case among the wider public, the gap has now widened again somewhat. Indeed, at ten

4 Indeed, we should note that the data collected by the NatCen Opinion Panel during the pandemic suggests that while there were signs in all age groups of a shift in a more liberal direction, much as was registered by the BSA surveys, this shift was much the same in all age groups leaving the gap between them unchanged.

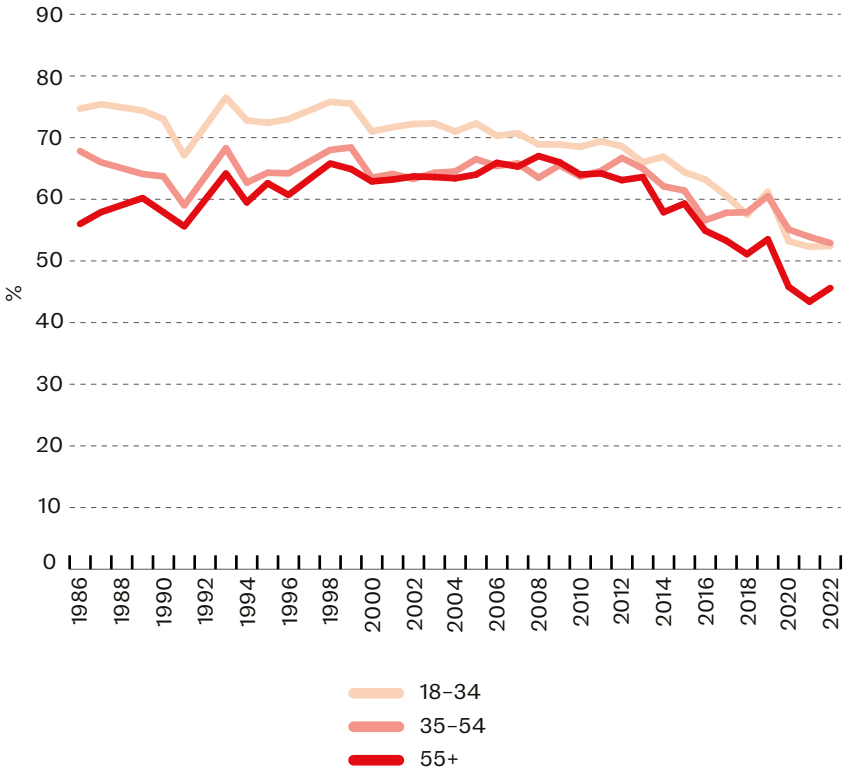
points, the difference between the mean score of younger and older Conservatives is the same as it is among the public in general, while, at seven points the equivalent difference among Labour supporters is only a little less. While, overall, Conservatives are somewhat more authoritarian than Labour supporters, nevertheless, younger and older supporters of both parties are just as divided among themselves, as is British society as a whole.

Figure 5 Mean liberal-authoritarian scale scores by age among Conservative supporters, 1986-2022



The data on which Figure 5 is based can be found in Table A.5 in the appendix to this chapter.

Figure 6 Mean liberal-authoritarian scale scores by age among Labour supporters, 1986-2022



The data on which Figure 6 is based can be found in Table A.5 in the appendix to this chapter.

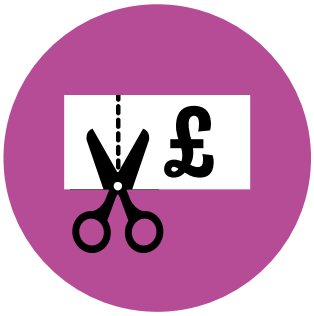
Unsurprisingly, therefore, taking into account where people stand on the liberal-authoritarian dimension does not adequately account for the age difference in party support either. As Table 5 shows, although in our latest survey there is relatively little difference between younger and older liberal voters in the balance of the support they give to the Conservatives and Labour, among those in the centre and those of an authoritarian outlook, support for the Conservatives is much higher among those aged 55 and over than it is among those aged less than 35. It seems that the age gap in voting behaviour is not simply a reflection of generational differences in values on either the left-right or the liberal-authoritarian divide.[5]

5 This remains the case if we look at where respondents stand on both the left-right and libertarian-scale together. For example, among those on the right who are also authoritarian, only 23% of 18-34 year olds support the Conservatives, whereas 74% of those aged 55 and over do so.

Table 5 Conservative and Labour support by liberal-authoritarian scale score and age, 2022

	Left	Middle	Right
18-34	%	%	%
Conservative	6	16	16
Labour	54	35	35
Unweighted base	*698*	*450*	*338*
55+			
Conservative	15	39	54
Labour	50	27	22
Unweighted base	*884*	*935*	*1178*

Taxation and spending



Another key dividing line that is often perceived to exist between the policy stances of the Conservative and Labour parties, is in their attitudes towards taxation and spending. As we might anticipate from a party that places a higher priority on using the power of the state to try and reduce inequality, Labour is thought to prefer a higher level of taxation and spending than the Conservative party. Certainly, those who support Labour are more likely than those who back the Conservatives to say that taxation and spending should be increased. This emerges in the responses that people give to the following question:

Suppose the government had to choose between the following three options. Which do you think it should choose?

Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits

Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now

Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits

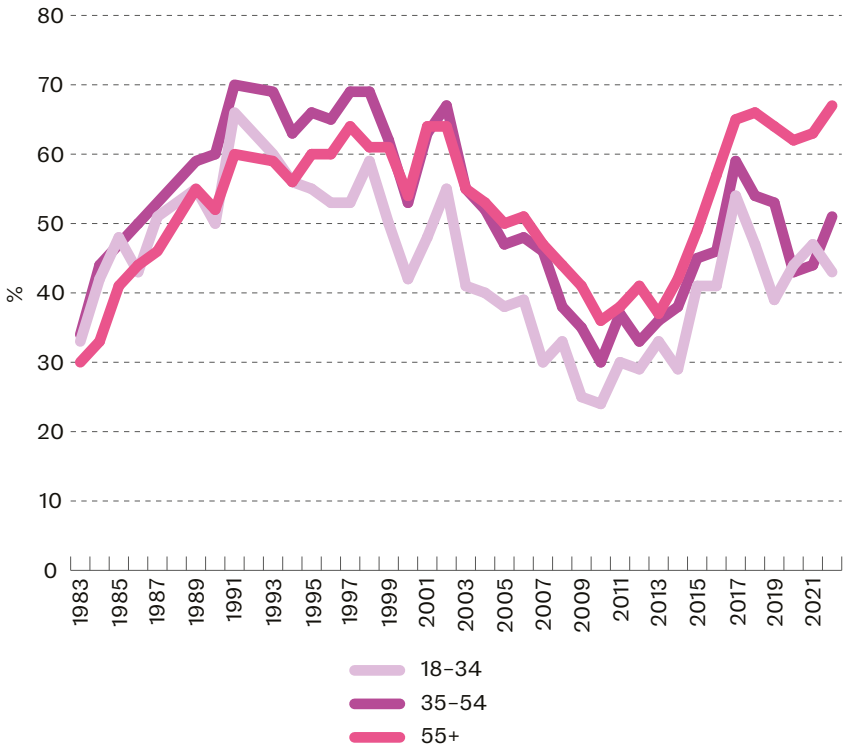
In our latest reading of this question (which was taken in January 2023 via the NatCen Opinion Panel), as many as 69% of Labour supporters say that taxes and spending should be increased, whereas only 44% of Conservative supporters express the same view.

Yet this does not mean that younger people are keener than older people on more taxation and spending. Rather, the opposite is the case. Figure 7 shows for all BSA surveys conducted since 1983 the

percentage of people in each of our age groups who have responded that taxation and spending should be increased. The volatility in the level of support for higher taxes and more spending that is discussed in the chapter by Curtice and Scholes is apparent within all age groups. However, what is of interest to us here are the differences between the age groups at any one point in time. On this the figure shows that while in the eighties and early nineties younger people were somewhat more likely than older people to say that taxation and spending should be increased (in 1984, for example, 42% of those aged under 35 said that taxes should be increased, compared with 33% among those 55 and over), since 1995 younger people have always been less likely than older people to say that taxation and spending should be increased. Our most recent reading, for example, reveals that while 67% of those aged 55 and over believe that taxation and spending should be increased, only 51% of those aged 35 to 54 and just 43% of those aged under 35 express that view.

The ageing of Britain's population has meant that an increasing proportion of public expenditure is being spent on health and social care, from which older people primarily benefit (Appleby and Gainsbury, 2022). Meanwhile the late nineties witnessed the introduction of university tuition fees that younger people in England and Wales have continued to pay ever since, while the old age pension has been uprated much more generously than benefits for those of working age (Gardiner, 2019). Perhaps between them these developments have led some younger people to the view that the state has relatively less to offer them. In any event, despite the attention that the issue often receives in political debate and commentary, it does not offer us a clue as to why there is now such a sharp age divide in party support. Rather, it simply makes the phenomenon even more surprising.

Figure 7 Support for increased taxation and spending by age group, 1983-2023



Source: 2023: NatCen Opinion Panel
The data on which Figure 7 is based can be found in Table A.6 in the appendix to this chapter.

Conclusion

We have emerged with a puzzle. Age has become a major demographic division in Britain's electoral politics. Yet it seems this is not underpinned by any clear ideological difference between younger and older voters on some of the key value and policy debates that are central to British politics. Liberals are more common among younger people. Yet while liberals are somewhat more likely than authoritarians to vote Labour, the age divide on this value dimension is just as apparent among Conservative and Labour supporters as it is among the public as a whole. Meanwhile, until very recently at least, younger people have not been any more left-wing than older people, yet they still supported Labour in much higher numbers. At the same time, younger people have become the least likely to back a policy of 'tax and spend' even though that point of view is associated with support for Labour.

Of course, there are other issues that we have not considered. One that has been central to British electoral politics since the EU referendum in 2016 – though much less so previously – is attitudes towards Brexit. That is certainly one issue on which younger people have different views from their older counterparts. In our 2021 survey, for example, over three-quarters (77%) of those aged 55 and over either said that Britain should be outside the EU, or only be a member of a less powerful EU than at present. In contrast, only 43% of those aged under 35 took that view. Given the prominence of this issue in how people voted at the 2019 election in particular, it may well have served to accentuate the age divide in recent years. However, the age divide had already become sharper well before Brexit became such a key issue, and, so far at least, appears to be surviving the decline in the partisan battle on Britain's relationship with the EU.

All in all, our findings might be thought to raise questions about the future of the age divide in British politics. It might be thought that today's age divide will become tomorrow's generational divide, presenting the Conservative party with a long-term challenge as today's older generations are replaced by younger ones more inclined to support Labour. But perhaps this is less likely to happen if today's age divide is not rooted in ideological differences. Today's younger voters may prove open to persuasion from the Conservative party as they get older. On the other hand, if today's younger voters have come to think of themselves as Labour supporters, maybe that sense of identity will remain irrespective of their views on specific issues.

In the meantime, our findings do have implications for the future of social attitudes in Britain. The country has become less authoritarian in its outlook, a change that in part has been fueled by the fact that successive younger generations have been more liberal than their previous counterparts. That suggests there is therefore every reason to anticipate that this trend will continue further. On the other hand, Britain does not look any more left-wing or right-wing today than it did forty years ago. Unless the recent swing to the left among the youngest group of voters presages a newly emerging generational divide on the left-right divide, the contours of public opinion on inequality and the role of government in tackling it may well look much the same in forty years' time as they do now.

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Appendix

Table A.1 Statistics and unweighted bases for Figure 1

	Age Gap	Unweighted Bases	
		18-34	55+
1983	4	525	607
1984	3	526	610
1985	7	624	551
1986	19	1003	973
1987	19	885	933
1989	3	933	988
1990	17	848	919
1991	14	871	1076
1993	9	855	1021
1994	15	1070	1242
1995	15	1080	1306
1996	14	1035	1309
1997	14	401	484
1998	19	886	1174

Table A.1 Statistics and unweighted bases for Figure 1 (continued)

	Age Gap	Unweighted Bases	
		18-34	55+
1999	19	828	1233
2000	23	891	1292
2001	14	793	1222
2002	22	900	1282
2003	18	1097	1696
2004	8	767	1232
2005	13	957	1726
2006	10	1026	1716
2007	14	929	1687
2008	7	974	1830
2009	4	748	1371
2010	6	676	1419
2011	27	752	1396
2012	20	635	1499
2013	22	694	1448
2014	18	543	1308
2015	22	925	1902
2016	26	594	1352
2017	43	814	1791
2018	41	730	1880
2019	37	631	1517
2020	47	860	1772
2021	46	1351	2885
2022	40	1496	3002

Table A.2 Statistics and unweighted bases for Figure 2

	Mean Left-Right Score			Unweighted Bases		
	18-34	**35-54**	**55+**	**18-34**	**35-54**	**55+**
1986	36.9	40.5	37.4	439	491	375
1987	36.4	38.7	37.0	777	911	768
1989	36.1	37.1	34.4	810	948	813
1990	34.5	38.2	35.6	737	892	769
1991	37.6	38.2	37.7	806	892	936
1993	38.4	35.8	32.7	398	477	414
1994	35.3	34.7	35.7	902	994	985
1995	34.3	33.9	33.6	925	1078	1063
1996	35.3	34.4	34.8	864	1099	1066
1998	39.3	36.9	35.8	701	887	881
1999	39.4	38.0	37.6	603	853	945
2000	39.2	37.6	37.1	759	1089	1095
2001	40.5	39.7	37.0	645	1091	1018
2002	38.7	38.5	35.3	729	1067	1026
2003	40.7	37.9	35.6	851	1301	1378
2004	42.7	42.7	40.3	590	960	999
2005	42.7	42.1	39.7	748	1314	1434
2006	42.6	42.0	38.7	877	1335	1479
2007	41.7	41.4	39.4	747	1294	1438
2008	42.7	39.7	37.4	823	1456	1608
2009	41.5	40.2	38.1	612	1111	1151
2010	41.4	41.0	39.9	563	995	1167
2011	40.9	40.5	37.6	625	996	1175
2012	37.1	37.9	36.3	523	963	1294

Table A.2 Statistics and unweighted bases for Figure 2 (continued)

	Mean Left-Right Score			Unweighted Bases		
	18-34	**35-54**	**55+**	**18-34**	**35-54**	**55+**
2013	38.7	38.5	36.7	580	950	1228
2014	39.7	37.9	38.1	407	839	1092
2015	38.8	38.4	37.3	740	1233	1621
2016	38.0	38.1	36.6	458	772	1116
2017	38.3	38.1	37.8	625	1100	1478
2018	36.0	37.4	37.8	546	960	1508
2019	37.9	39.8	38.1	494	840	1242
2020	32.6	36.2	38.1	865	1308	1776
2021	30.9	33.8	36.2	1345	1986	2877
2022	28.4	31.9	36.0	1483	2158	3000

Table A.3 Statistics and unweighted bases for Figure 3

	Mean Left-Right Score						Unweighted Bases					
	Conservative Supporters			Labour Supporters			Conservative Supporters			Labour Supporters		
	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+
1986	49.5	52.7	50.8	28.5	28.5	22.7	121	177	148	179	151	137
1987	51.2	52.3	49.0	25.2	23.3	21.9	250	382	337	268	235	191
1989	50.3	49.4	46.6	25.0	22.8	20.7	305	402	349	272	283	280
1990	48.4	51.6	50.2	26.3	26.4	21.8	212	325	318	316	321	279
1991	48.5	48.9	48.6	30.4	28.5	28.6	242	347	374	311	287	316
1993	51.5	50.0	43.5	31.3	25.4	24.0	114	160	144	153	179	155
1994	48.8	47.1	47.3	28.8	26.8	25.1	216	279	355	378	400	387
1995	44.9	46.2	47.3	30.2	26.2	23.9	157	314	352	436	472	426
1996	46.6	46.5	46.7	30.1	27.8	24.3	182	286	378	395	483	417
1998	47.6	48.1	51.1	34.8	33.1	33.2	126	224	295	313	417	362
1999	46.9	47.9	44.3	38.1	31.1	28.9	102	207	320	251	384	365
2000	47.5	46.5	48.9	37.2	34.0	29.1	144	276	413	330	465	410
2001	47.0	47.9	44.7	36.9	32.2	30.9	105	219	313	304	499	442
2002	46.2	49.6	48.2	39.0	36.1	29.5	113	264	335	310	435	412
2003	49.9	48.8	46.0	35.8	33.4	28.2	142	292	510	305	508	476
2004	48.0	46.7	43.9	40.4	32.8	28.1	114	233	329	155	337	320
2005	52.0	51.8	50.9	41.1	39.8	31.3	112	301	485	289	562	560
2006	48.1	51.6	50.5	42.3	38.5	32.7	148	306	526	254	467	477
2007	49.5	51.4	47.4	41.1	36.9	32.6	124	303	515	228	472	484
2008	48.9	50.5	46.2	41.4	38.7	34.3	216	448	640	194	418	466
2009	46.8	47.5	44.3	40.2	36.2	31.1	131	297	421	123	302	329
2010	49.0	48.2	46.6	41.9	37.3	32.4	121	279	419	145	310	384
2011	47.2	49.4	49.3	40.2	36.0	31.9	100	259	455	213	300	347

Table A.3 Statistics and unweighted bases for Figure 3 (continued)

	Mean Left-Right Score						Unweighted Bases					
	Conservative Supporters			Labour Supporters			Conservative Supporters			Labour Supporters		
	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+
2012	47.7	49.2	45.7	39.4	35.8	30.6	90	219	453	187	319	430
2013	46.8	49.1	46.1	32.3	33.2	26.4	85	201	432	187	340	374
2014	48.4	52.8	47.0	36.9	33.1	28.0	65	190	391	105	257	311
2015	47.5	50.8	49.2	36.0	32.8	28.9	156	378	697	230	362	435
2016	51.1	49.8	47.3	32.9	30.4	26.8	102	256	487	141	245	292
2017	47.2	48.1	45.4	31.4	31.7	27.1	110	302	660	294	416	436
2018	49.2	48.5	47.6	33.7	32.8	28.2	77	237	645	238	351	439
2019	49.9	45.7	46.0	31.4	31.0	30.0	63	212	513	154	219	259
2020	49.2	49.6	46.2	34.6	33.2	27.9	141	388	815	369	427	482
2021	47.8	48.9	49.2	26.6	28.0	25.1	177	549	1275	547	634	716
2022	44.5	43.6	47.3	24.7	26.8	23.0	184	476	1188	642	832	893

Table A.4 Statistics and unweighted bases for Figure 4

	Mean Liberal-Authoritarian Score			Unweighted Bases		
	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+
1986	61.8	69.9	77.2	439	490	379
1987	64.7	69.8	76.6	399	475	401
1989	64.0	68.1	75.9	812	951	820
1990	61.6	66.8	74.3	741	893	771
1991	57.1	62.2	69.5	368	424	449
1993	66.2	70.9	77.6	398	478	417
1994	62.2	66.2	73.6	903	998	986
1995	64.3	67.6	73.7	924	1082	1064
1996	63.0	67.0	73.7	864	1100	1070
1998	67.1	68.8	76.2	702	893	885
1999	65.4	69.5	75.7	606	855	953
2000	63.5	66.2	72.8	762	1087	1093
2001	63.6	65.5	71.8	645	1091	1023
2002	64.0	66.1	71.7	731	1069	1036
2003	63.5	66.4	72.5	855	1302	1406
2004	63.9	66.9	72.3	592	961	1005
2005	64.1	67.7	73.4	748	1318	1447
2006	65.6	66.5	71.5	877	1337	1487
2007	64.7	68.6	72.0	751	1304	1470
2008	66.2	67.3	70.0	828	1464	1629
2009	66.3	68.0	70.7	617	1114	1160
2010	65.2	66.5	69.3	563	995	1181
2011	66.4	68.1	71.8	628	1001	1181
2012	64.4	68.6	70.1	524	965	1296

Table A.4 Statistics and unweighted bases for Figure 4 (continued)

	Mean Liberal-Authoritarian Score			Unweighted Bases		
	18-34	**35-54**	**55+**	**18-34**	**35-54**	**55+**
2013	63.9	66.2	70.3	581	951	1238
2014	61.4	64.3	68.3	410	842	1097
2015	60.5	64.1	67.0	739	1235	1632
2016	59.4	61.7	66.1	460	772	1120
2017	56.5	61.8	65.2	626	1100	1484
2018	55.2	60.7	64.0	547	959	1512
2019	56.8	61.8	66.5	495	839	1250
2020	49.3	59.2	62.5	860	1306	1775
2021	47.9	59.0	60.8	1349	1991	2882
2022	49.7	56.6	59.8	1487	2168	3003

Table A.5 Statistics and unweighted bases for Figures 5 and 6

	Mean Liberal-Authoritarian Score						Unweighted Bases					
	Conservative Supporters			Labour Supporters			Conservative Supporters			Labour Supporters		
	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+
1986	68.1	74.1	80.1	56.0	67.8	74.7	121	177	150	179	151	137
1987	71.5	74.0	78.4	57.9	66.0	75.4	133	205	166	124	110	102
1989	68.2	72.1	78.0	60.2	64.1	74.4	306	403	352	272	284	283
1990	67.7	70.6	76.3	57.9	63.7	73.0	213	326	320	319	321	279
1991	61.6	65.9	72.7	55.6	59.0	67.1	106	162	199	143	132	146
1993	71.1	74.5	79.9	64.2	68.3	76.5	114	160	146	153	179	156
1994	67.3	71.7	74.8	59.5	62.7	72.8	216	280	355	379	400	387
1995	67.3	72.1	76.5	62.6	64.3	72.4	157	316	351	435	473	427
1996	68.2	71.2	76.0	60.7	64.2	73.0	182	286	379	395	483	418
1998	71.4	71.9	77.9	65.8	68.0	75.8	125	226	295	314	421	365
1999	69.4	73.2	77.2	64.9	68.4	75.5	102	206	321	252	384	370
2000	65.6	71.1	75.5	62.9	63.5	71.0	145	276	413	331	464	408
2001	69.3	70.3	73.3	63.2	64.1	71.7	106	220	313	305	497	444
2002	69.3	70.7	73.2	63.7	63.3	72.2	114	264	338	310	435	414
2003	66.3	71.2	74.7	63.6	64.3	72.3	142	291	522	307	508	485
2004	69.0	69.3	74.6	63.4	64.5	71.0	113	235	331	156	336	323
2005	69.3	70.9	75.3	64.0	66.5	72.3	112	302	487	289	565	568
2006	70.0	69.9	74.2	65.9	65.4	70.3	148	307	526	254	468	480
2007	68.1	71.8	74.0	65.3	65.8	70.7	124	306	521	230	473	501
2008	68.3	70.1	72.0	67.0	63.5	68.9	216	452	647	196	422	475
2009	69.0	71.9	73.7	66.0	65.5	68.9	131	297	423	123	305	331
2010	68.2	70.9	71.9	64.0	63.7	68.5	120	277	426	145	312	387
2011	72.1	71.6	74.7	64.2	64.6	69.4	100	260	456	213	301	349

Table A.5 Statistics and unweighted bases for Figures 5 and 6 (continued)

	Mean Liberal-Authoritarian Score						Unweighted Bases					
	Conservative Supporters			Labour Supporters			Conservative Supporters			Labour Supporters		
	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+
2012	67.3	72.3	72.9	63.1	66.7	68.6	90	220	453	188	320	432
2013	66.5	70.0	73.2	63.6	65.0	66.0	85	201	438	187	341	376
2014	63.9	66.6	70.2	57.9	62.1	66.9	65	190	391	106	258	312
2015	62.5	66.2	69.7	59.3	61.4	64.4	156	377	702	229	362	439
2016	63.3	67.0	68.0	54.9	56.6	63.2	102	256	488	142	245	294
2017	63.7	66.0	69.2	53.3	57.8	60.6	110	302	663	294	416	437
2018	62.1	65.0	68.4	51.1	57.9	57.5	77	238	646	238	351	440
2019	64.7	66.5	70.8	53.5	60.5	61.2	63	212	518	154	219	260
2020	60.4	66.3	69.7	45.8	55.1	53.2	141	389	816	369	427	483
2021	60.4	67.4	68.5	43.4	53.9	52.3	177	552	1276	547	634	714
2022	57.9	65.7	67.7	45.6	52.9	52.4	184	476	1192	642	834	892

Table A.6 Statistics and unweighted bases for Figure 7

	% support more taxation and spending			Unweighted Bases		
	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+
1983	33	34	30	525	623	607
1984	42	44	33	526	525	610
1985	48	47	41	624	624	551
1986	43	50	44	1003	1122	972
1987	51	53	46	885	1024	933
1989	55	59	55	933	1098	988
1990	50	60	52	848	1016	919
1991	66	70	60	871	958	1077
1993	60	69	59	862	1040	1029
1994	56	63	56	1070	1143	1242
1995	55	66	60	1080	1237	1306
1996	53	65	60	1035	1261	1309
1997	53	69	64	401	470	484
1998	59	69	61	886	1076	1174
1999	50	62	61	828	1080	1233
2000	42	53	54	604	828	855
2001	48	63	64	793	1267	1222
2002	55	67	64	900	1249	1282
2003	41	55	55	807	1213	1252
2004	40	52	53	507	807	828
2005	38	47	50	491	788	886
2006	39	48	51	785	1163	1287
2007	30	46	47	683	1128	1280
2008	33	38	44	488	801	931
2009	25	35	41	263	439	437

Table A.6 Statistics and unweighted bases for Figure 7 (continued)

	% support more taxation and spending			Unweighted Bases		
	18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+
2010	24	30	36	675	1194	1420
2011	30	37	38	749	1159	1397
2012	29	33	41	635	1108	1499
2013	33	36	37	693	1095	1450
2014	29	38	42	542	1020	1308
2015	41	45	49	707	1122	1433
2016	41	46	57	594	987	1353
2017	54	59	65	603	1026	1331
2018	47	54	66	529	949	1400
2019	39	53	64	631	1068	1519
2020	44	43	62	865	1308	1776
2021	47	44	63	476	666	930
2023	43	51	67	495	801	1113

Publication details
Frankenburg, S., Clery, E. and Curtice, J.(eds.) (2023),
British Social Attitudes: The 40th Report.
London: National Centre for Social Research

First published 2023

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