

Towards a more liberal Britain. Generational change or different times?

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Generational change or different times?

Britain is becoming more socially liberal. Data from the British Social Attitudes (BSA) study show that the opinions of British people on a range of issues, including family formation, sexual relationships, or abortion, shifted to more liberal positions compared to what they were in the late 80s (Clery, 2023). At the same time, Britain is becoming less concerned with traditional core values of security, order, and conformity – in other terms: less authoritarian. An authoritarian person is more likely to think that people should follow a particular moral code and specific social norms, while libertarian people are more likely to believe that people should be left to decide for themselves how to live their lives (Curtice, 2023).

This transformation is part of an attitudinal shift observed in Western countries since the 60s that has been described by Inglehart (1977) as the “Silent Revolution”. Inglehart found that people are becoming increasingly less attached to material values and physical security concerns, and more focused on post-material values and on quality of life. Generational differences have also been found, across a number of attitudinal areas – including attitudes to policies – in the recent report of the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) in the Society Watch series (Lucas et al., 2024).

What is the driver behind this shift towards more socially liberal attitudes? Evidence points towards a generational divide, with previous generations being authoritarian and recent generations being more libertarian. The clash between these two groups, known as the Cultural Backlash (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Inglehart and Norris, 2016) is presented as one of the explanations for the spread of populist attitudes, anti-immigrant sentiments, and euroscepticism, leading to a new political divide along cultural-identity lines (Kriesi et al., 2013). According to Norris and Inglehart (2019), in the last decades the cultural conflict between generations – libertarian versus authoritarian – has reached a tipping point: the older generations are a significant minority, but still represent a majority of the electorate – even because they are more likely to vote – and they are playing the political cards at their disposal to promote a more conservative society. In the UK, the Cultural Backlash could explain some of the grievances leading to the Brexit vote (Curtice, 2016; 2017), with leavers more likely to belong to earlier – and more authoritarian – generations.

However, other authors also suggest that contemporary events, ranging from economic crises to security emergencies, also play a significant role in making society more liberal, or more authoritarian. The Chinese trade shock – intended as the detrimental impact of large volumes of imports from China on the labour markets in traditional manufacturing areas (Autor et al. 2013) – has been found to be an area-level predictor for Brexit in the UK (Colantone and Stanig, 2018) and for the election of Donald Trump in the US (Autor et al., 2020). Ballard-Rosa et al. (2022; 2023) has linked this effect to an increase of authoritarianism in those areas, within the frustration-aggression mechanism (Berkowitz, 1989): an individual would become more authoritarian in response to a security or economic threat. Similar patterns have been observed focusing on the financial crisis of 2008 (Margalit, 2019), on the NAFTA trade shock (Kuziemko et al., 2021), or on the War on Terror (Hetherington and Suhay, 2011).

What about age? Since the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950), there is a broad consensus (e.g., Norris and Inglehart, 2019, Ballard-Rosa et al., 2022) that age does not influence how authoritarian or libertarian a person is. These attitudes are formed when people learn about social norms – their position in society, the position of others, and rules that determine social interactions between people. This means that people do not become more authoritarian or libertarian because they have a specific age: what matters is the experiences they make in their formative years, or, in other terms, the years they were born.

In this working paper, we are trying to understand if what we know about authoritarian and libertarian tendencies, and how they are influenced by cohort, period, and age, can be confirmed in data from the UK. To do so, we use cross-sectional data from the British Social Attitudes (BSA), collected between 1986 and 2023. BSA is a study carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), which has been tracking public attitudes for over 40 years. It uses a random probability sampling design to reduce the risk of bias and produce robust estimates of the views of British adults.

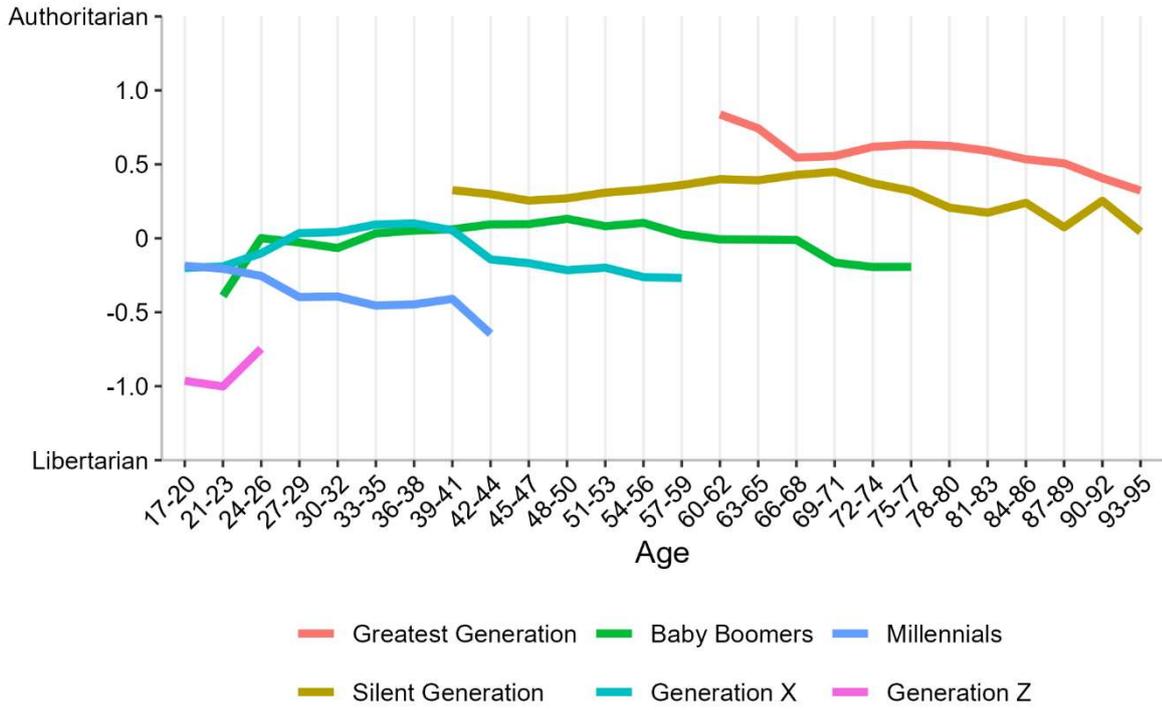
Our variable of interest is the Libertarian-Authoritarian scale, where higher values indicate stronger authoritarian tendencies, while lower values indicate stronger libertarian tendencies. This variable has been part of the core set of questions of BSA since the early years of the study (see for example: Jowell et al. 1988; 1990; 1991; Evans et al., 1996). The variable has been standardised (z-score) for interpretability (a change of one point indicates a departure from the mean equal to a standard deviation).

Age, period, and birth cohort

An overview of the data seems to provide some indications of the effects of age and generation on levels of authoritarianism or libertarian attitudes among the adult population of Britain. Starting with age, when comparing the answers given by people in different generations at the same age (Figure 1), it is possible to see that recent generations – on average – seem to have expressed increasingly liberal attitudes, with the Greatest Generation (born between 1901 and 1924) being the most authoritarian and Generation Z (born after 1997) being the most liberal. The variation seems to be greater between different generations than within the same generation at different time points, with the lines being relatively steady and horizontal across all the different time points of the data.

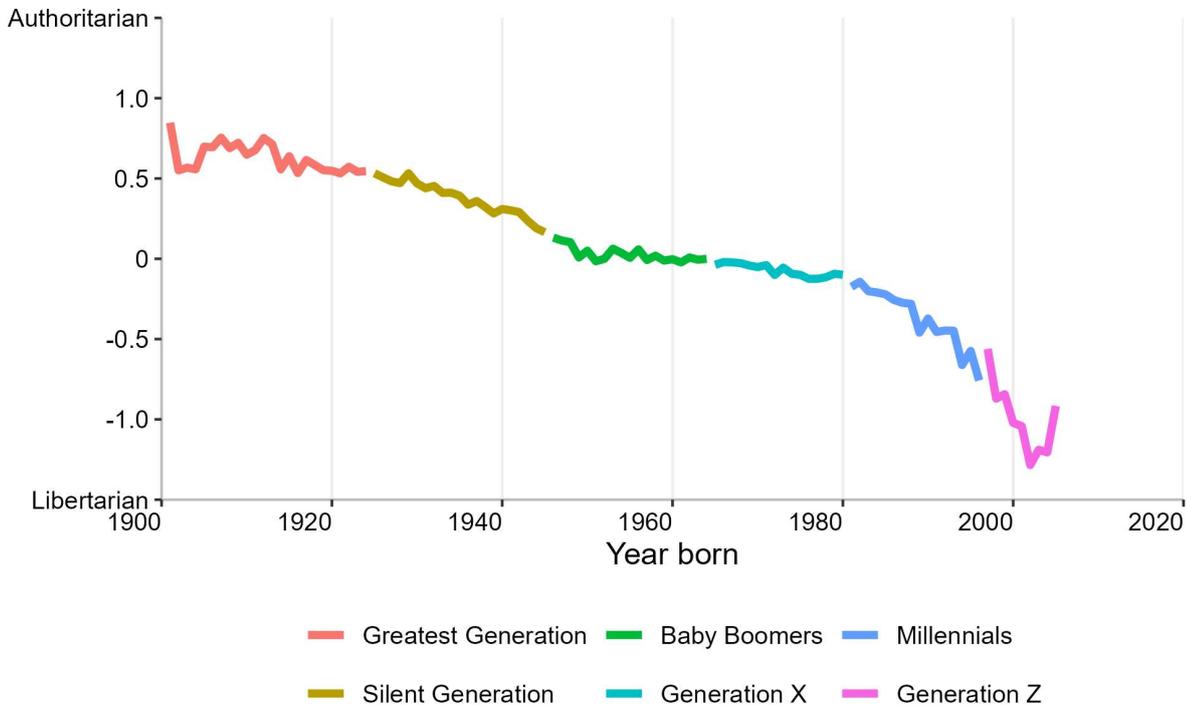
A clear generation effect is clear in Figure 2. On average, people born in any year seem to have reported more liberal attitudes compared to those born in the previous year, with steeper shifts towards liberal attitudes being seen in people born after the Second World War – coming to age in the late 60s and early 70s – and in those born in the 80s and 90s.

Figure 1. Authoritarian/Libertarian z-scores by age, grouped by generation



British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey 1986 – 2023, N=101735.

Figure 2. Authoritarian/Libertarian z-scores by year of birth, grouped by generation



British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey 1986 – 2023, N=101735.

While this initial analysis appears to offer an indication of age and birth cohort – or generation – effects, it is difficult to understand whether period effects – intended as what was happening in society when data was collected – played a role on strengthening libertarian or authoritarian tendencies. If the year of birth can explain differences between generations, can the fluctuations we see within generations at different points in time (Figure 1) be linked to events people experienced? To answer this question, we employed statistical modelling.

Between birth cohort and period effects

Hierarchical Age-Cohort-Period modelling was first proposed by Yang and Land (2006; 2013) as a way of separating age, cohort, and period effects, and estimate the effect of these three dimensions that are perfectly correlated. This is known as the identification problem: $\text{Age} = \text{Period} - \text{Cohort}$. In plain words, the age of the individual is equal to the year when the data was collected (period) minus the year when the person was born (cohort). This means that these three variables (age, cohort, period) are conceptually different, but – in practice – they are three versions of the same variable. We employ this model with the corrections proposed by Bell and Jones (Bell, 2020; Bell and Jones, 2021), who suggested to assume either age, cohort, or period to have an effect equal to zero, in order to allow for a more accurate estimation of the other two dimensions.

Our model is based on the explicit assumption that the age effect on authoritarian or libertarian attitudes is null. This is in line with previous findings (Adorno et al., 1950; Norris and Inglehart, 2019), and with the descriptive analysis offered in the previous section. Additionally, models testing the alternative assumption of period effects being equal to zero (see Model 3 and Model 4 in the appendix), provided some evidence to support our assumption that an age effect isn't present. Age did not have a significant linear effect on authoritarian or liberal attitudes; authoritarian attitudes were slightly higher for some age groups but the effect size, albeit significant, was nearly zero.

Our initial model explores how much of the variation in libertarian or authoritarian attitudes expressed by British people could be explained by period or cohort, under the assumption that these views will not vary with age. Evidence suggested that 17% of the variance is explained by generation, 2% by period, and the remaining 81% by other elements, such as demographic and socio-economic characteristics (see Model 1 in the appendix).

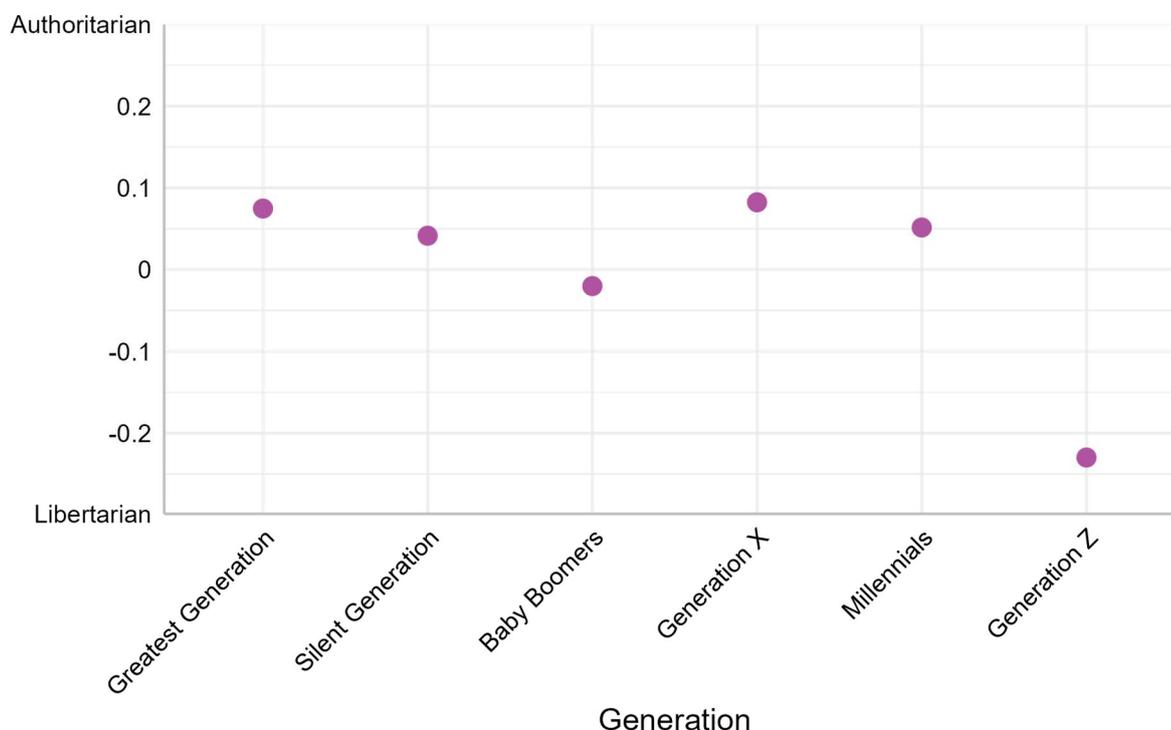
The model was expanded to explore whether there is a trend towards a gradually more liberal society over time. To do so, we introduce birth cohort and period specific linear effects (Model 2 in the appendix). We found that birth cohort had a statistically significant effect on determining libertarian

attitudes: 0.01 increase of libertarian attitude for each additional birth year, on a standardised z-score¹ scale. Although this may seem to be a small number, it is important to remember that attitudinal shifts take place over large time spans: between the first person to be born in the Greatest Generation (1901) and the first person to be born in the Generation Z (1997) there is a standard deviation of difference on the libertarian-authoritarian scale.

The linear effect of period was very small, 0.004 for each additional year, and not statistically significant. This would suggest that there is no evidence of a *spirit of the age* promoting a generalised shift towards libertarian positions. The year when someone took part in the study was not associated with a linear shift towards liberal or authoritarian positions.

The situation, however, was diametrically reversed if we study the model residuals – or the divergence from the linear trends identified in the model. Here, we did not find that generations explain a significant portion of variation after we account for the linear effect of year of birth. The one exception is Generation Z, which was significantly more liberal than the linear trend would suggest. In practical terms, if the effect of year of birth was 0.01 for each additional year, Generation Z was on average liberal for an additional 0.2 points, above and beyond the effect of year of birth. To offer an example, a Millennial would be 0.1 more liberal than a member of Generation X born 10 years before (0.01 year of birth effect, multiplied 10). A Generation Z would be 0.3 more liberal than a Millennial born 10 years before (0.01 year of birth effect, multiplied 10, plus 0.2 for being a Generation Z).

Figure 3. Authoritarian/Libertarian z-score residuals by generation

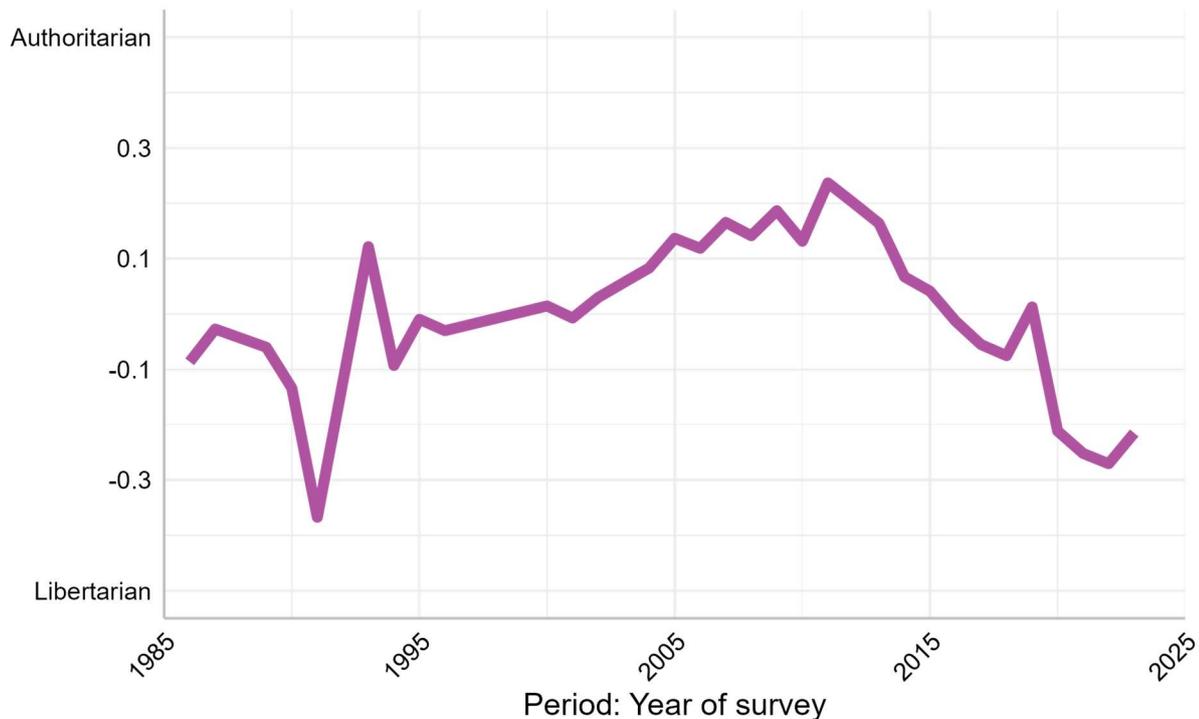


British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey 1986 – 2023, N=101735.

¹ The z-score is a standardised transformation of a variable. The transformation makes the variable assume a mean of zero and a standard deviation of 1. This transformation helps with the interpretation of abstract concepts: an increase of 0.5 would indicate an increase equal to half standard deviation from the mean.

If the residuals for generations could explain little above the linear trend of year of birth, the situation is different for period effects. Here, in the absence of a linear period trend, we have strong evidence of the effect of specific events, with peaks and drops in levels of authoritarianism or libertarian attitudes, which can be associated with specific national and global events.

Figure 4. Authoritarian/Libertarian z-score residuals by period



British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey 1986 – 2023, N=101735.

The distribution of the residuals indicates a substantial growth in authoritarianism in Britain starting in the early 2000s and lasting for almost 15 years. This could potentially be linked with the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York, and with the War on Terror that had both global and national consequences for Britain, such as the military participation in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and the London bombing of 2005. Later in that decade, the UK experienced another global event, the financial crisis of 2007-08. Both these events may also have contributed to an increase in authoritarianism, with the peak in the time series – over 0.2 points of authoritarianism – being touched in the early 2010s, a period heavily affected by the wave of austerity following the financial crisis.

Since reaching the peak, the period effects seem to have shifted rapidly towards a more liberal society, although it is possible to see that the years surrounding the Brexit referendum seem to have been characterised by a conservative turn. The liberal effect seen since the mid-2010s – from a period perspective – may be a reaction to the previous 15 years of security concerns and economic uncertainty.

It is a bit more difficult to understand the rapid shifts seen in the data for the early 1990s. While there was another financial crisis and recession taking place in those years, these rapid fluctuations, lasting only for one year each, may be caused by forms of survey measurement errors.

Conclusions

Our analysis has shed some light on what is driving the libertarian turn on social attitudes observed in Britain over the last few decades. Britain is becoming more socially liberal, and this appears to be broadly associated with a birth cohort effect – people born in recent years are less conservative than people born in earlier years. However, this is not explained by the conventional division of people in generations: differences in libertarian and authoritarian tendencies between Millennials and the Greatest Generation, or between Generation X and the Silent Generation, can be simply explained by looking at the year where people were born and not by some underlying characteristics that make people in a specific generation particularly attitudinally different from another generation, or particularly similar to each other.

People from Generation Z are the exception. They diverge from this trend observed across the other generations, as they express tendencies that are significantly more socially liberal than it would be expected by considering their year of birth only. This finding should, however, be treated with caution and validation should be sought in evidence generated from a different data source. In the years when Generation Z became 18 and started to take part in the British Social Attitudes study, fieldwork methodology changed, shifting from in-person interviewing to online and phone interviewing. This change in survey design may have led to a slightly different sample being recruited to the study, namely people who perceived the study to be more salient, and – therefore – more likely to have more radical social attitudes.

We also found that the times we live in are not contributing to making people more socially liberal or conservative, but specific events matter. Increase of authoritarian attitudes was observed following security concerns – War on Terror, Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and the London bombing – and economic crises – 2007-08 recession and the austerity in the following years. The national context, such as the Brexit referendum, also seem to have played a role in the increase of authoritarian attitudes. A few years after the global financial crisis of 2007-08 we have also noticed a strong period effect towards libertarian attitudes, representing a potential reaction for the difficult 15 years experienced by people in Britain.

We want to conclude this paper with one key consideration and one recommendation. The key consideration is that the liberal turn in social attitudes in Britain can be explained with the formative experience that one person has growing up, and not by their age. This does not mean that attitudes do

not change: we found evidence that people reported more socially conservative positions in difficult times, such as when there were security risks or during an economic crisis.

Turning to our recommendation, we invite you to reflect on the meaning of generation when referring to, or interpreting, the term in the context of social attitudes. Talking of generations may be useful as a form of grouping together people born in a range of years in broader categories, but conventional generations – per se – do not seem to have an inherent contribution to understanding socially liberal or conservative attitudes. Is Generation Z the exception? Time will tell.

Appendix

Table 1. Model 1 Results

FIXED EFFECTS	COEFFICIENT	SE	P VALUE
INTERCEPT	-0.007	0.178	0.971

RANDOM EFFECTS	VARIANCE	SE
YEAR OF SURVEY	0.03	0.158
GENERATION	0.186	0.431
RESIDUAL	0.881	0.938

British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey 1986 – 2023, N=101735.

Table 2. Model 2 Results

FIXED EFFECTS	COEFFICIENT	SE	P VALUE
INTERCEPT	30.948	4.982	0.000
YEAR BORN	-0.012	0.001	0.000
YEAR OF SURVEY	-0.004	0.002	0.097

RANDOM EFFECTS	VARIANCE	SE
YEAR OF SURVEY	0.023	0.151
GENERATION	0.014	0.120
RESIDUAL	0.877	0.937

British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey 1986 – 2023, N=101735.

Table 3. Model 3 Results

FIXED EFFECTS	COEFFICIENT	SE	P VALUE
INTERCEPT	30.740	4.864	0.000
YEAR BORN	-0.016	0.002	0.000
AGE (CENTERED)	-0.004	0.002	0.097

RANDOM EFFECTS	VARIANCE	SE
AGE (CENTERED)	0.023	0.151
GENERATION	0.014	0.120
RESIDUAL	0.877	0.937

British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey 1986 – 2023, N=101735.

Table 4. Model 4 Results

FIXED EFFECTS	COEFFICIENT	SE	P VALUE
INTERCEPT	31.260	4.935	0.000
YEAR BORN	-0.016	0.003	0.000
AGE (CENTERED)	-0.005	0.003	0.062
AGE (26-35)	0.086	0.015	0.000
AGE (36-45)	0.114	0.023	0.000
AGE (46 – 55)	0.108	0.032	0.001
AGE (56 – 65)	0.126	0.041	0.002
AGE (66 – 75)	0.122	0.051	0.017
AGE (76 +)	0.041	0.062	0.513

RANDOM EFFECTS	VARIANCE	SE
AGE (CENTERED)	0.024	0.154
GENERATION	0.010	0.098
RESIDUAL	0.876	0.936

British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey 1986 – 2023, N=101735.

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