



INSIGHTS

INTO POLITICAL IDENTITY

ABOUT THE STUDY

Understanding Society is the largest longitudinal study of its kind and provides crucial evidence for researchers and policymakers about the causes and consequences of change in people's lives.

Our participants come from every area of the UK, and the Study covers issues that affect all of us, from relationships and employment to health, wealth and behaviour.



ALL AGES – the experiences of the whole population over time

WHOLE HOUSEHOLD – relations between generations, couples and siblings

CONTINUOUS DATA COLLECTION – interviews every year, capturing short- and long-term changes in people's lives

NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL DATA – from all four UK countries, allowing researchers to compare experiences in different places and policy contexts

ETHNIC MINORITY BOOST – to allow specific ethnic minority experiences to be investigated

MULTI-TOPIC – covering social, economic and behavioural factors, relevant to policy

LINKED DATA – to administrative records from other sources, with consent, for a richer picture


METHODOLOGICAL RESEARCH – world-leading survey design, supported by experimentation


BIOMARKERS AND GENETIC DATA – to explore the relationship between social and economic circumstances and health


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 Understanding Society: UKHLS

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UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY IS AN INVALUABLE TOOL FOR STUDYING POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR

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FOREWORD

With the next general election approaching, much of this year's Insights looks at voter behaviour and attitudes, based on research using Understanding Society. The large panel, which collects data from entire households, including children as young as 10, its booster samples of ethnic minority groups, and the sheer range of topics covered make Understanding Society an invaluable tool for studying political behaviour. As you can see from the studies described, the research has much to offer for our understanding of voters and the issues that will play a role in shaping the next election result.

Youth voter turnout, for example, could be decisive given the stark divides in party preference between young and old. Research into civic education and youth volunteering examine whether these measures get more young people to the ballot box and reduce the widening inequalities between the representation of younger and older voters.

'Levelling up' and the inequalities between more prosperous and 'left behind' communities will be a key feature of this election, and Understanding Society data has shown how those living in poorer communities in which local amenities (such as pubs) are disappearing are more likely to vote for populist parties. There's also an important link between the 'levelling up' agenda and youth voter turnout, with research showing that children raised in poorer and less educated households are far less likely to be interested in politics (and so to vote) on reaching adulthood.

We've already seen home ownership emerge as an issue for the next election, with both Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer committing to new house-building policies in their 2023 conference speeches. Research shows that becoming a homeowner helps encourage interest in politics and so makes people more likely to turn out to vote. It may even affect who they vote for, with new homeowners more likely to support parties on the left, such as Labour.

Another key issue will be climate change. Protestors have been trying to raise the salience of climate change as an issue for voters and government alike, and Understanding Society data have helped to assess the effectiveness of their efforts. It shows that protests don't necessarily alienate the public, but do raise the importance of government efforts to combat it. The consequences of climate related protest, therefore, have been to make parties' promises on climate change (and performance in office) a more important factor in voters' choices in the next election.

As you can see from Insights this year, Understanding Society has a great deal to tell us about the causal drivers behind political participation and how and why people will be voting when the election comes. Our thanks go to the scholars who conduct these studies, but greater thanks still to Understanding Society's participants, without whose patience, commitment and generosity none of this research would be possible.



the research has much to offer for our understanding of voters and issues that will play a role in shaping the next election result

INTRODUCTION

IT'S NOT JUST THE ECONOMY

Conventional wisdom tells us that electoral success is largely down to the economy – an idea made particularly memorable by Bill Clinton's 1992 strategist James Carville, who hung a sign in the campaign's HQ in Little Rock, Arkansas, which read:

1. Change vs. more of the same
2. The economy, stupid
3. Don't forget health care

Economic growth had slowed, and unemployment risen, under George Bush, and the sign was there to remind campaign workers of the talking points they should be using. Persuading voters to remove an incumbent president is easier when the economy isn't healthy. Clinton won a substantial victory.

The UK had an election the same year, though, and the incumbent – also representing a party that had been in power more than a decade, and also governing during a recession – won. A memorable headline the next day claimed that it was "The Sun Wot Won It". Even if that wasn't entirely true, it was one factor which prompted Labour's efforts to work for better press coverage in the run-up to 1997.

We need to focus on detail to understand why campaigns succeed or fail. Research can help us to pick apart what really matters, and add nuance – even if the legend has already been printed. In 1983, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's victory was ascribed to the 'Falklands Factor', although one study – famous, at least in political science terms – showed that "macroeconomic factors were at the root of ... Mrs Thatcher's political fortunes ... the Falklands crisis merely coincided with a jump in government popularity which would have occurred anyway in the wake of Geoffrey Howe's 1982 Budget"¹.

Any number of factors might correlate with an election victory, but establishing causes is a more complicated matter.

The 'pocketbook voting hypothesis' suggests that voters reward or punish incumbents for trends in their personal financial circumstances, but the 'Falklands Factor' paper speaks of "economic optimism" shaping support for the Conservatives. In other words, it's not the immediate sense of how well off we are now that's important, so much as our confidence that things are heading in the right direction. This is supported by US research which says that "economic voting is 'sociotropic', with voters responding to their beliefs about the state of the overall economy rather than to their personal pocketbooks"².

In our search for nuanced evidence – and in a year in which an election is looming – what can Understanding Society's data tell us? What economic and social factors are involved? What influences our views, our political engagement, and our voting patterns?



THIRTY YEARS OF DATA

One of the great advantages of longitudinal data is that they allow researchers to look at the same sample of people over the long term, seeing changes across time periods which are long enough to include different parliaments. Georgios Marios Chrysanthou and María Dolores Guilló³, for example, examined five electoral cycles between 1992 and 2014 using both Understanding Society and the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS).

Their findings show that our data are representative of the UK as a whole. In 1992, for example, the Conservatives returned to power with a reduced majority, and Georgios and María's results showed the Conservatives just ahead. By the following year, Labour opened up a small lead, which widened after Tony Blair became leader.

In each of Blair's terms in office, Labour's popularity lessened across the term before widening again in the year of the two subsequent elections he won. In 2008, the year of the financial crisis, by which time Gordon Brown was Prime Minister, the Conservatives had pulled ahead again.

Because Understanding Society covers such a wide variety of topics, Georgios and María were able to look at people's party preferences in relation to something quite specific: not macroeconomic conditions, but how people feel about their own financial situation. Overall, they concluded that the most important factor in support for the incumbent party is how partisan voters are. People's perceptions of their financial wellbeing are important, but only "during government terms adjacent to recessionary periods". They "are statistically insignificant in periods of relative economic stability and growth", such as Blair's terms in office.

Both BHPS and Understanding Society ask people:

- Generally speaking do you think of yourself as a supporter of any one political party?
- If they answer no, a follow-up question: Do you think of yourself as a little closer to one political party than to the others?
- If they answer no to the second question, there's another follow-up: If there were to be a general election tomorrow, which political party do you think you would be most likely to support?
- Finally, if the answer to either of the first two questions is 'yes', participants are asked: Which party do you regard yourself as being closer to than the others?

We also ask participants about their current financial situation, giving them the options of answering:

- very difficult
- quite difficult
- just getting by/don't know
- doing alright
- living comfortably

They then get three possible answers for what they expect their financial situation to be the following year:

- worse off than now
- about the same
- better off

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In all electoral cycles, the most important drivers of governing party support other than initial period support are previous period support and the strength of partisanship

¹ David Sanders, Hugh Ward, David Marsh and Tony Fletcher, Government Popularity and the Falklands War: A Reassessment, British Journal of Political Science, 1987: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/193822>

² Robert S. Erikson, Macro vs. Micro-Level Perspectives on Economic Voting: Is the Micro-Level Evidence Endogenously Induced?, 2004 Political Methodology Meetings, Stanford University, 2004: http://www.columbia.edu/~rse14/erikson_economic_voting.pdf

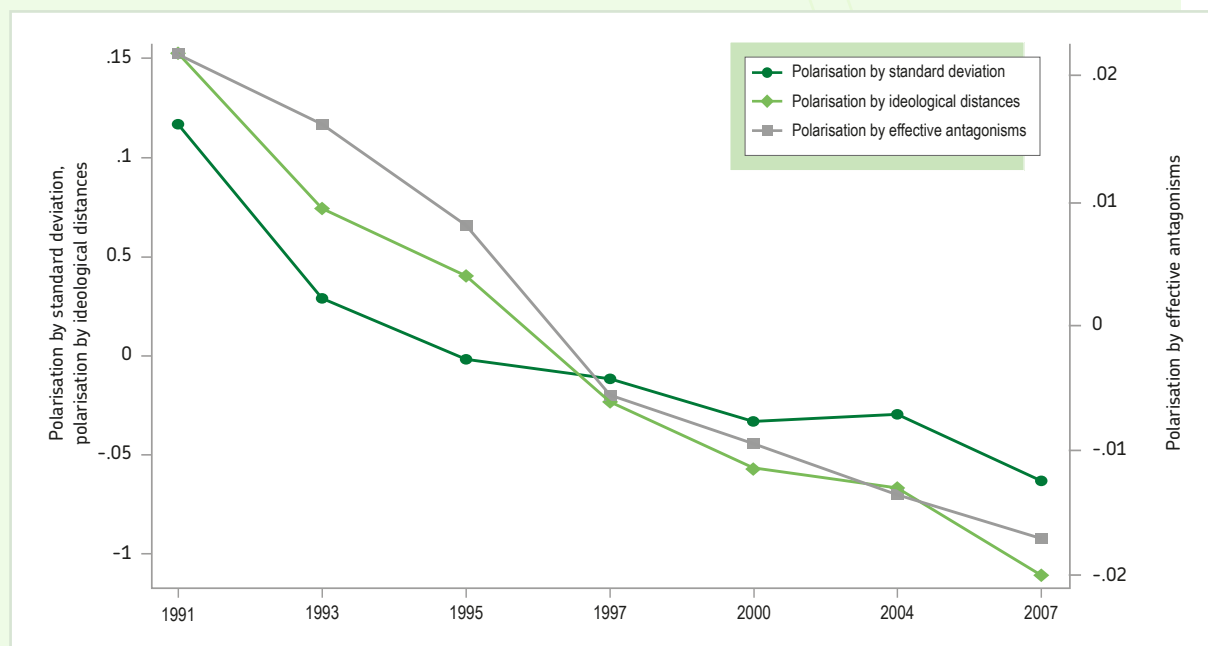
³ Georgios Marios Chrysanthou, María Dolores Guilló, Identifying the economic determinants of individual voting behaviour in UK general elections, Oxford Economic Papers, February 2023: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oep/gpad003>

INCREASINGLY POLARISED?

Something which many of us think is shaping politics at the moment is increased polarisation, and research bears this out to some extent. It's not a continuous increase, though – the level has changed over the lifetime of BHPS and Understanding Society.

Daryna Grechyna used BHPS and the European Social Survey, and found that polarisation fell between 1991 and 2007⁴.

Political polarisation 1991–2007



She measured polarisation by looking at the responses in BHPS to three statements about the role of the public sector in the economy:

- private enterprise is the best way to solve Britain's economic problems
- major public services and industries ought to be in state ownership
- it is the government's responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one

She was able to examine the extent to which people agreed and disagreed not simply nationwide, but at county level. She also measured polarisation in three ways:

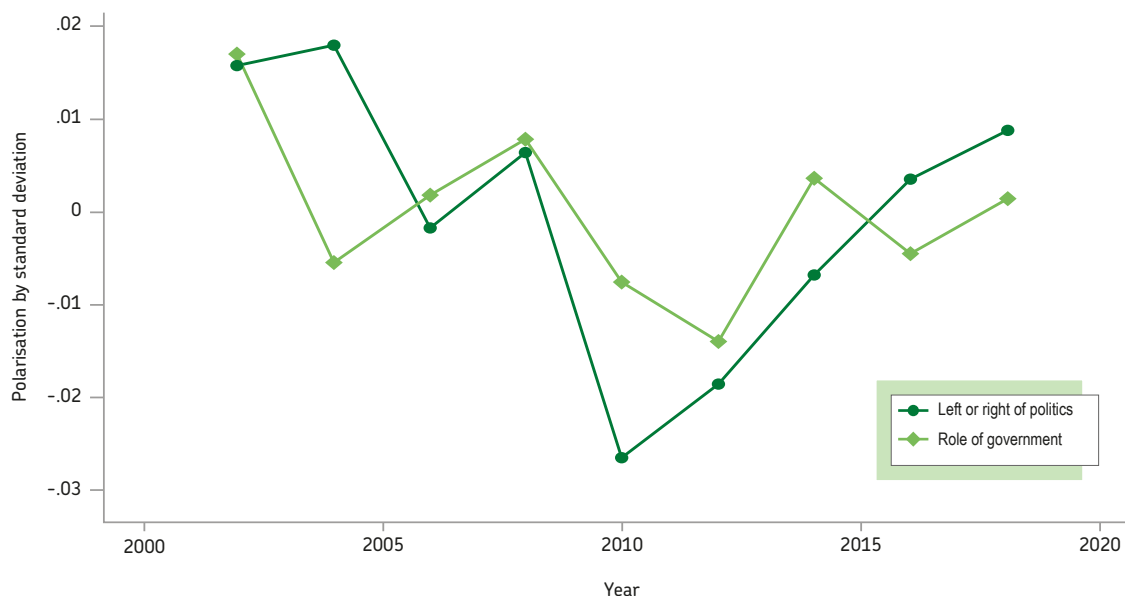
- standard deviation – the amount of variation from the mean value of polarisation
- ideological distances – the sum of ideological distances between all the individuals in a county in a given year
- effective antagonisms – the sum of all the effective antagonisms felt by different groups towards each other calculated by the distances in their scores on the policy statements



This showed that political polarisation in the UK is lower when the employment rate is higher, or when the number of UK-born residents in a county is higher. Polarisation is higher when there is greater variation in people's employment status – that is, there is a greater mix of people in the county who are, for example, employed, self-employed, unemployed, retired, or off sick.

In this part of the research, Daryna found polarisation falling between 1991 and 2007. Looking at UK data from the European Social Survey (ESS) from 2002-18, however, polarisation rose again significantly. In this case, the statement about the role of the public sector in the economy in the survey was "The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels" – and ESS also asked: "In politics people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?"

Political polarisation 2000-20



The fall in polarisation might be explained by 'New' Labour's move towards centrist social democracy in the 1990s, while the increase may be linked to the growth in immigration after 2004, the 2008 financial crisis and 'great recession', and the Brexit Referendum.

INCOMES AND VOTING

Factors other than the economy on its own play a part in voting patterns, then – but the crash of 2008, and the current ‘cost of living crisis’ are clearly significant. Understanding Society allows for a range of measures, including how well-off we are (or feel). Our incomes are obviously a significant factor in how we each see our economic circumstances, and we know that people on lower incomes, and with other socio-economic problems, show less political engagement than those who are better off. Sebastian Jungkunz and Paul Marx used Understanding Society to look at whether changes in income had any effect on this⁵. In other words, if someone is born poor, and therefore statistically less likely to vote in later life, but becomes better off, does that make them more likely to vote?

WHAT IS ‘POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT’?

Some research talks about engagement, and some about involvement, and we have taken both terms to mean having or showing an interest in politics. In our Youth Survey and Main Survey, we ask participants *“How interested are you in politics?”*

It’s likely that someone who is interested in politics will vote, and when the research looks specifically at whether someone votes, we will specifically say this, or refer to ‘political participation’.

We also ask about party preferences. The Youth Survey’s question is *“If you could vote for a political party which would you vote for?”* and the Main Survey asks *“If there were to be a general election tomorrow, which political party do you think you would be most likely to support?”*

By comparing our figures with other panel datasets, this research compared the UK with Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and the US. It was “the most comprehensive analysis to date of how income and political involvement are related in longitudinal data”, and concluded that “income changes do not influence political involvement”. This was true regardless of whether the respondents were young, on a low income, or had a low initial interest in politics.

Ultimately, the research suggested, the income gradient in political participation is likely to reflect stable differences between rich and poor voters which we see in early life. Even if we get richer, we don’t become more engaged with politics than we otherwise would have been. It seems that our position in society when we are born affects more than we may think.



the often-reported negative correlation between income and voting is likely to reflect stable differences between income groups

OTHER FACTORS

It appears, then, that perception – our idea of how we're doing, either individually, or as a household – is important, as well as the macroeconomic reality. But what else shapes whether and how we vote?

In the following chapters, we will look at:

The youth vote – following the supposed 'youthquake' in 2017, what do we know about this period in our lives, during which many views are shaped? What influences our political thinking, and what lasting effects does it have?

Changing lives, changing communities – in an apparent era of 'identity politics', what can research tell us about our sense of who we are, the communities we belong to, and life events, and how these influence our political involvement/voting patterns?

We finish with a look at **climate change** – a significant issue for governments and policy, and one which arguably dwarfs both. As a major issue for us all, it will, perhaps, do more to shape economic policy for the foreseeable future than any other consideration. How do we view it, how do we respond to policy designed to tackle it, and can protestors change our minds?



THE YOUTH VOTE

There was much debate after the 2017 election about the ‘Youthquake’ – the phenomenon of the largest increases in turnout happening in constituencies with larger numbers of young people. A paper using British Election Study data called the phenomenon a myth, and pointed to only “a modest increase in 18-24 turnout”¹.

The same month, in the same journal, however, another – using our data – said “turnout increased markedly” among under-30s in 2017². Stuart Fox has written that “there is no easy way of adjudicating between the two, and determining which is ‘right’ is impossible”³.

What can we say for certain, about young voters – and voters-to-be? Understanding Society asks 10-15-year-olds to fill in a separate Youth Survey, giving us insights into this crucial period in our lives, during which many of our views of the world are shaped. What influences our political thinking, and what lasting effect does it have?



THERE ARE SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

¹ Chris Prosser, Ed Fieldhouse, Jane Green, Jonathan Mellon, and Geoff Evans, Tremors But No Youthquake: Measuring Changes in the Age and Turnout Gradients at the 2015 and 2017 British General Elections, *Electoral Studies*, April 2020: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102129>

² Patrick Sturgis and Will Jennings, Was there a ‘Youthquake’ in the 2017 general election?, *Electoral Studies*, April 2020: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2019.102065>

³ Stuart Fox, The ‘Youthquake’ plot thickens..., Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data, December 2018: <https://wiserd.ac.uk/blog/the-youthquake-plot-thickens/>

UNEQUAL ENGAGEMENT

We know – as we saw in the introduction – that there are social inequalities in political engagement. Put simply: better-off people are more likely to vote. In the words of a report from the Nuffield Foundation, this is “problematic for democracy as it skews democratic decision-making in favour of the privileged and undermines the public legitimacy of democracy”⁴.

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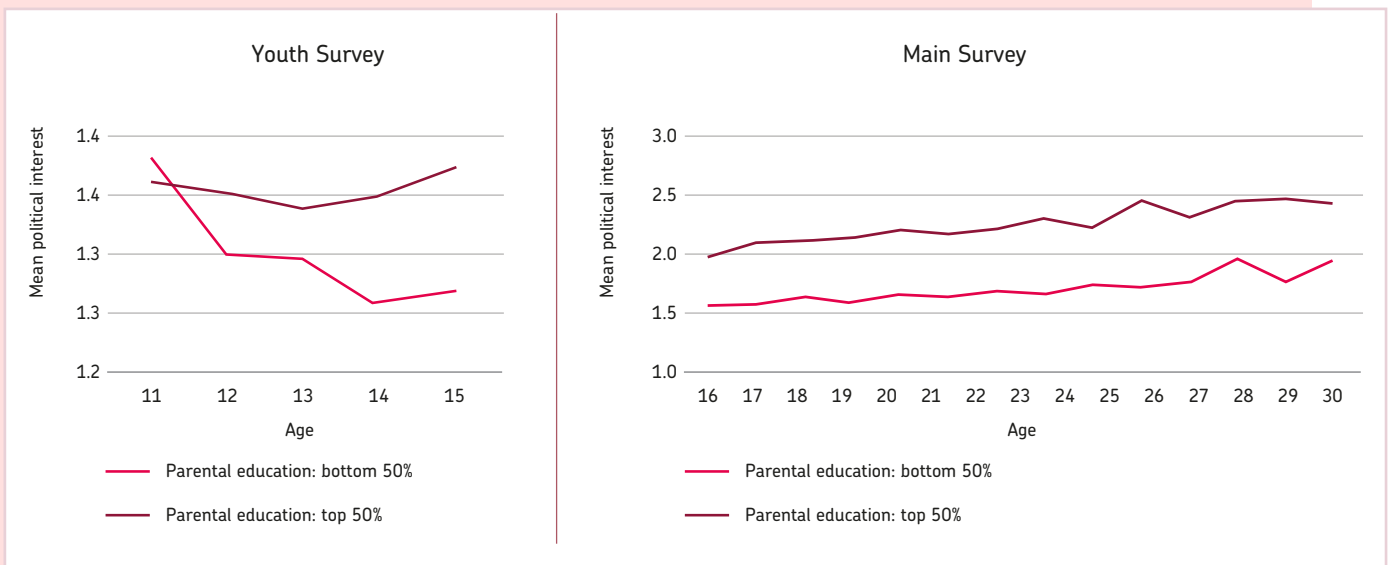
A large gap in political engagement between people with different social backgrounds is problematic for democracy as it skews democratic decision-making in favour of the privileged and undermines the public legitimacy of democracy

Research can shed light on this process, and what might be done about it. To begin with, Jan Germen Janmaat and Bryony Hoskins used BHPS and Understanding Society to look at people’s family background and their engagement with politics in adolescence and early adulthood⁵.

In our Youth Survey, 10–15-year-olds are asked how interested they are in politics, and offered three possible answers: not, fairly, or very interested. In this paper, the researchers used these answers from over 1,600 young people who were 11 between 1994 and 2003 – and looked at their parents’ education to gauge their social background.

They found that, between the ages of 11 and 15, young people with educated parents were becoming politically engaged more quickly than those with less educated parents, but from mid-adolescence to the age of 30, this aspect of their social background remained the same. In other words, at the beginning of adolescence, there are no social differences in political engagement, but these differences soon appear, and grow wider at ages 14 and 15. After 16, they stabilise, with young people from educated families showing consistently higher engagement levels than those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

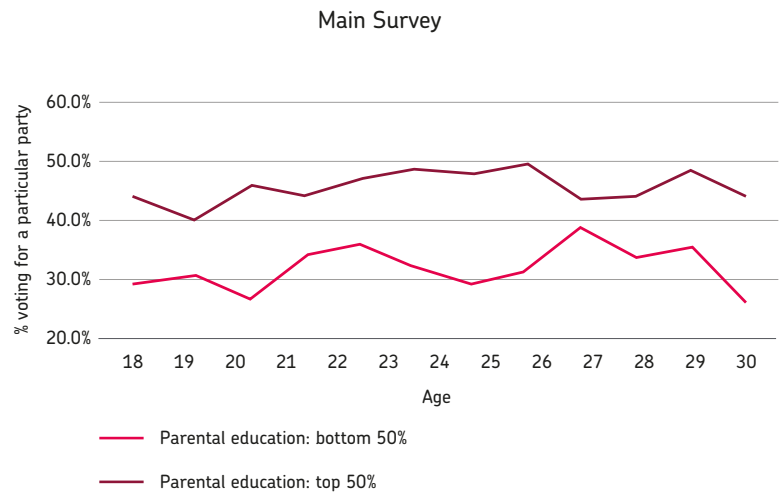
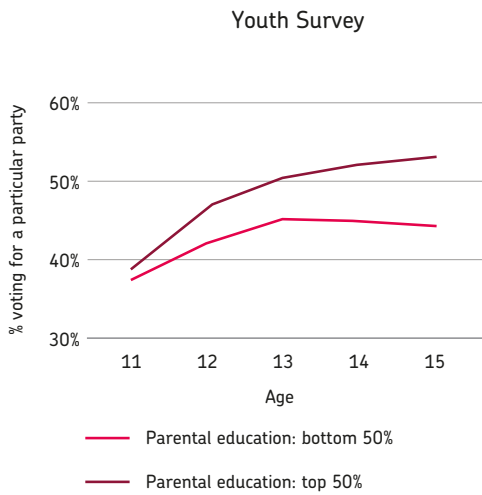
The development of political interest among young people in Great Britain by parental characteristics



⁴ Jan Germen Janmaat, Nicola Pensiero and Bryony Hoskins, The development of social and gender disparities in political engagement during adolescence and early adulthood: what role does education play?, Nuffield Foundation, December 2022: <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/post-16-educational-trajectories-and-social-inequalities-in-political-engagement>

⁵ Jan Germen Janmaat and Bryony Hoskins, The Changing Impact of Family Background on Political Engagement During Adolescence and Early Adulthood, *Social Forces*, September 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soab112>

The development of voting intentions among young people in Great Britain by parental characteristics



CHILDHOOD DEPRIVATION AND VOTING

Sebastian Jungkunz and Paul Marx agree that 11–15 is a crucial age, but also show that living in deprived conditions has an influence above and beyond parental education⁶. They used several waves of Understanding Society to examine whether experiencing deprivation in childhood is linked to being less likely to vote in early adulthood, even if people's socio-economic status has changed by then.

This is important because, since the 1970s, young people in Europe and America have become increasingly unlikely to vote when they become adults – and voting is a habit, so people who don't vote at their first election are likely to remain lifelong non-voters.

'Material deprivation' is measured by asking about six examples of things people may have in their life, but may not be able to afford:

- a holiday away from home for at least one week a year
- having household contents insurance
- having enough money to keep your house in a decent state of repair
- being able to save £10 or more a month
- being able to replace worn-out furniture
- being able to replace or repair electrical goods such as a fridge or washing machine

The researchers compared whether people voted in their first election after turning 18 to the level of deprivation their parents reported when the child first entered the study aged between 9 and 12. They were able to take into account factors such as the parents' education, the level of political interest the parents had when the children were aged 9–12, and the children's satisfaction with family life, and any mental health difficulties.

The research found a strong negative effect of deprivation on people's likelihood to vote in their first election. Although being in a bad financial situation as an adult is also linked to a lower propensity to vote, the effect of childhood deprivation is separate from this. Also, childhood deprivation doesn't explain away the effect of one's financial situation at election time. In other words, past and present problems both have separate – and negative – effects on voting behaviour, and the effect of childhood deprivation lasts into early adulthood.

"The likely reason", the researchers say, "is that material worries create unfavourable conditions for political learning, which in turn lead to a divergence in political involvement in teenage years."

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Material worries create unfavourable conditions for political learning, which in turn lead to a divergence in political involvement in teenage years



⁶ Sebastian Jungkunz and Paul Marx, Material deprivation in childhood and unequal political socialization: the relationship between children's economic hardship and future voting, *European Sociological Review*, April 2023: <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcad026>

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

A natural question which follows from this is: what can we do about it? Can measures be taken, or policies introduced, which encourage more people from poorer backgrounds to be interested in politics, and more likely to vote?

Jan Germen Janmaat and Bryony Hoskins, working with Nicola Pensiero, also used BHPS and Understanding Society – alongside the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS) – to look at how social and gender inequalities in political engagement develop during adolescence and early adulthood, and the role education plays.

This, too, used political interest, voting intentions and support for a political party as indicators of political engagement – and parents' education level to measure social background. They found that schools "exacerbate the social gap in political interest". About half of the increasing social gap in political engagement can be explained by:

- the social composition of schools – measured using the average score Youth Survey participants give for their parents' level of education
- taking part in school political activities – based on whether students had taken part in debates, student councils, school elections, or mock elections
- experiencing an open climate of classroom discussions – based on six questions about how free expression was in classroom discussions, and how much teachers encouraged this



Schools thus amplify social inequality in political engagement by not offering equal access to civic learning opportunities



Children whose parents have a higher level of educational achievement take part more in political activities at school, and in classroom discussions of political and social issues. These chances to learn about civics are linked to "a steeper rise in political interest than not taking part in these opportunities. Schools thus amplify social inequality in political engagement by not offering equal access to civic learning opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds."

The research also showed that people with A levels show a steeper growth in political engagement between the ages of 16 and 30 than those with post-16 vocational qualifications (such as a BTEC or NVQ). It found, too, that the gender gap in political interest which grows between 16 and 30 is partly explained by women with lower qualifications showing lower growth in their interest in politics.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The report notes that these "exclusionary processes" are unintentional, and suggests that strategies to counter them can be developed which encourage greater engagement with politics: "Constraining the voluntary nature of participation in such opportunities by, for example, giving turns to children from disadvantaged backgrounds to speak up in class, or asking such children to take on leadership roles and other responsibilities". They also call for more opportunities to learn about politics for people following a more vocational route in their education.

Finally, they point out that there is "social segregation in England's school system" represented by the divide between independent and grammar schools, and comprehensives, and between 'good' state schools, which are sought-after, and those performing less well. These divides, the researchers say, need to be reduced "in order to mitigate social disparities in political engagement".

Jungkunz and Marx say that "the quality and type of civics classes might differ by socio-economic composition of schools", but they point to research using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health which suggests that "civic education has little effect on political participation once the family background is accounted for"⁷.

Nonetheless, we need to know more about how much politicisation happens in children's peer groups and communities – and about schools' influences on children from more disadvantaged backgrounds – because school is where government policy which aims to involve them more in politics is going to reach them, and the work has to start while they are young.

COULD VOLUNTEERING REDRESS THE BALANCE?

Stuart Fox has been investigating another possible policy intervention: volunteering⁸. His work sets out the inequalities in voting turnout in some detail. In the 1970 general election (the first after the voting age was lowered to 18), 65% of 18-24-year olds voted, compared with an overall turnout of 72%. In 2017, however, only 52% did so, while the overall turnout was 68%. Turning to the educational divide, in 2017, 68% of graduates under 35 voted, compared with 42% of non-graduates.

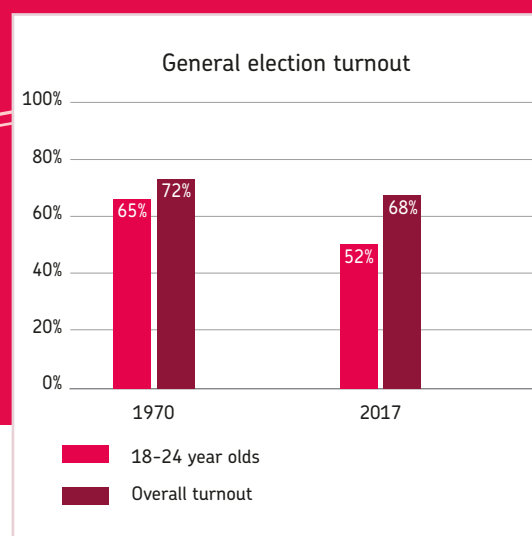
Previous research has suggested that youth volunteering increases political and civic engagement, because it helps young people to develop social networks and skills, and brings them into contact with social issues. However, the earlier work hadn't taken into account other factors in people's political socialisation, such as the influence of their parents. Our attitudes can change throughout life, but tend to be more malleable in childhood and early adulthood – developing as we encounter 'socialising agents': family, friends, the media, school, and the political atmosphere and area we grow up in.

Using Understanding Society allowed Stuart to take account of this, and he found that "there is a significant benefit to volunteering ... for young people raised by politically disengaged parents". It helped to compensate for the lack of encouragement to engage with politics during their childhood, "which makes them more likely to vote when they become eligible".

Children with politically engaged parents, though, "are already likely to have been socialised into being politically engaged during childhood". They are already far more likely to volunteer and vote, so "there is a 'ceiling effect' to the benefits of volunteering".

However, while the benefit of volunteering for one group of children was statistically significant, it was still relatively small. If there were a government campaign dedicated to encouraging volunteering as a way of increasing youth turnout, it would have far less impact than encouraging more young people from poorer backgrounds to go into higher education, for example – or than addressing the inequalities affecting their parents, which make them politically disengaged.

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⁸ Stuart Fox, Social action as a route to the ballot box: Can youth volunteering reduce inequalities in turnout?, *European Journal of Political Research*, March 2023: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12586>

OTHER INFLUENCES ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOTES

What else is going on in young people's lives which might affect whether and how they vote? Asking that question brings us to two subjects which may not sway results, but are contentious enough to have high electoral profiles: immigration, and the 'culture wars'.



VOTING IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

We've considered some of the factors affecting young people's political engagement – but are the experiences which shape that engagement different in immigrant families? Magda Borkowska and Renee Reichl Luthra wanted to investigate this question – not least because in 2019, when we last had a general election, more than one in four under-18s had at least one foreign-born parent.⁹



As of 2019, more than one in four children under the age of 18 years in the United Kingdom has at least one foreign-born parent

The process of learning about politics, either directly through political discussions at home, or indirectly through parents' socioeconomic status, is different for the 'second generation' – that is, the children of the 'first generation' immigrants who moved to the UK from overseas. The first generation parents will have grown up, and been socialised, in a different political system (that of the country they left) but their children will absorb information about the politics of the country they were born in.



Another factor here is that some of the research we've covered has used parents' level of education as a measure of their social status, but "international migration disrupts all of the channels by which socioeconomic status is expected to shape the political socialisation process". Immigrants' skills, political knowledge and educational qualifications don't directly translate to their new country, and many can only get work for which they are overqualified – so education is not the same indicator of social status for them as it is for people born in the UK.

The research found that the way interest in politics is transmitted from one generation to the next is different for immigrant families (or families with at least one immigrant parent).

The country the first generation immigrant has left is important: how stable a democracy it is, and whether it is a former British colony, both influence the political engagement of immigrants. This, in turn, influences their children's political engagement both directly and via the parents' voting behaviour.

Becoming a UK citizen is significant, because it brings with it the right to vote (although Commonwealth citizens have this right automatically). The children of immigrants who have at least one naturalised or UK-born parent are more likely to be politically interested, and, through seeing their parents voting, more likely to vote themselves.

Parents' own education is less of an influence on children's voting behaviour than it is with UK-born parents. However, migration does influence the second generation's social mobility – because many immigrants expect and encourage their children to do well and progress – and the integration this brings about boosts the children's political engagement.

Overall, the research says that the role of voting rights among immigrants from former colonies – and the higher turnout of the first and second generations that follows – has important policy implications. "It suggests that decreasing barriers to citizenship and promoting voter registration among immigrants can greatly enhance the political integration of immigrants and their descendants. The fact that children of immigrants with a naturalised parent tend to have higher political interest suggests that accessing citizenship might promote political engagement beyond voting. Accessing citizenship might be particularly important for the political integration of immigrants from less democratic countries, who, on average, report lower levels of political interest."

DOES UNIVERSITY MAKE YOU LIBERAL?

Finally in this section, what happens to young people after they leave home? Elizabeth Simon used Understanding Society to explore whether studying at university really makes us more liberal, as some commentators have claimed¹⁰.

Since the 1950s, research has shown that people with higher levels of education, especially graduates, have more liberal cultural views than those with less education. These findings have widely been taken to mean that higher education causes liberal views – and, in recent years, some commentators have attacked ‘woke’ universities for ‘indoctrinating’ students.

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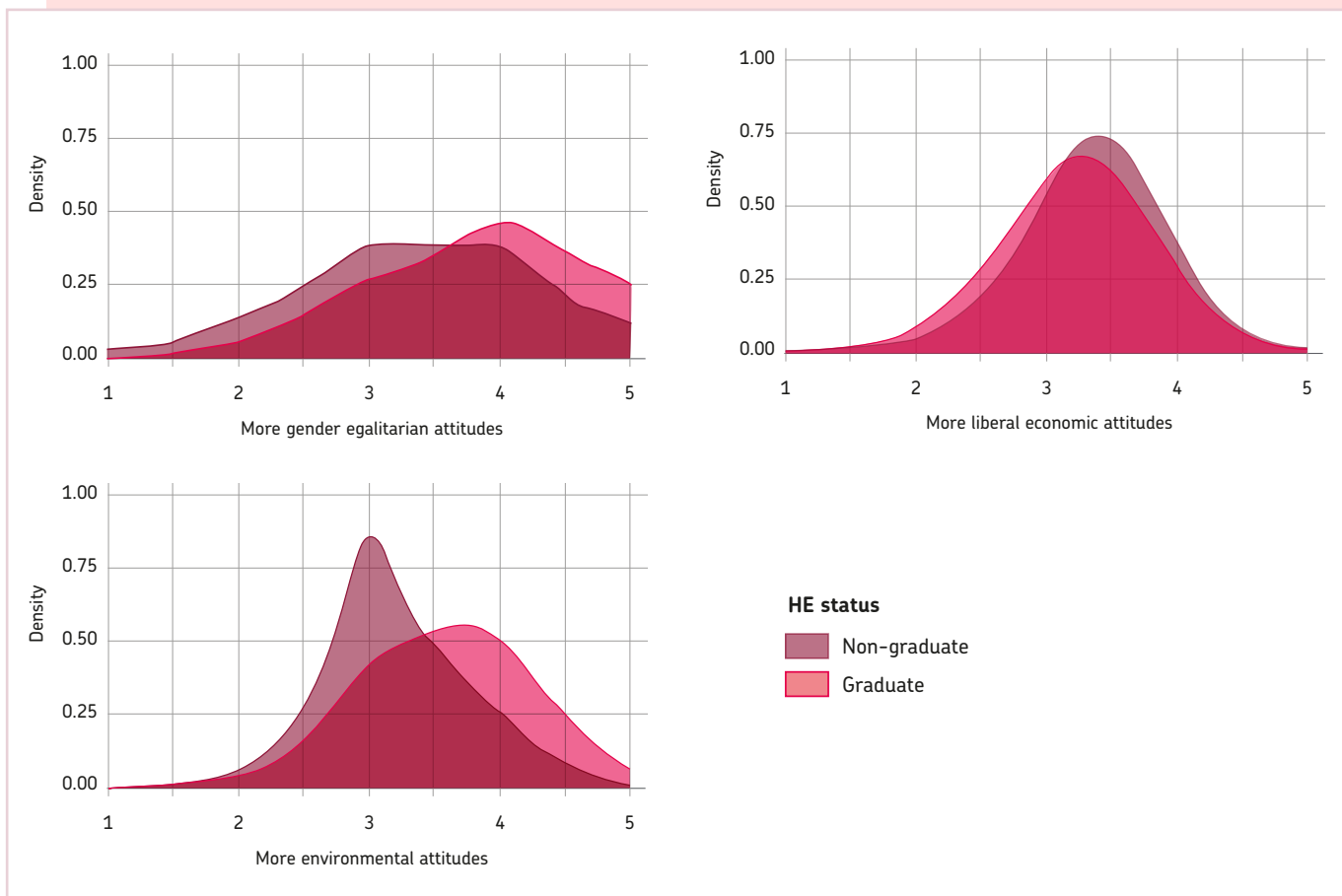
The link between university graduation and liberal values is well-established and often taken as evidence that higher education participation causes attitudinal change

However, people’s pre-existing attitudes, and other important determinants of attitude formation, haven’t always been measured well, or have been missing from the data – which has made it difficult to say if the relationship between education and liberalism is genuinely causal.

The link between higher education and attitudes may be due to self-selection. In other words, the things that shape our attitudes when we’re growing up – education, parental attitudes, and our family’s socio-economic status – also determine educational attainment. Alternatively, ‘sorting’ is a possibility: having got a degree, people tend to earn more, find more secure work, have higher social status and socialise among different social networks than their less educated counterparts – and these factors influence their attitudes.

In other words, while the experience of studying at university is likely to be part of our ‘political socialisation’, it seems equally plausible that these other factors contribute, too. Also, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, the crucial age for forming political attitudes seems to be between 11 and 15, before people go to university.

Adult attitudes by HE status



¹⁰ Elizabeth Simon, Demystifying the link between higher education and liberal values: A within-sibship analysis of British individuals’ attitudes from 1994–2020, *British Journal of Sociology*, August 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12972>



Understanding Society allowed Elizabeth to take factors such as gender, cognitive ability, parents' income and education, and students' later jobs into account. But the breadth of our family data also allowed her to compare siblings (whether natural, half-, step-, adopted or foster siblings) who lived in the same household during childhood. She could then see the effects of university study on people who would likely have experienced the same environment growing up. This allowed for better controls for self-selection – comparing only among siblings effectively controls for unobserved early socialisation experiences which don't vary within the family, and shape our attitudes (and our likelihood of studying at university).

She found that graduates' attitudes do, on average, change over the time they're at university – often more dramatically than those of non-graduates, and often in the opposite direction. Graduates are typically more environmentally friendly and gender egalitarian than non-graduates – but they are also less economically liberal. After taking individuals' pre- and post-university experiences, attitudes and characteristics – and their clustering into sibling units – into account, however, the effects of education shrank considerably.

Including these controls allowed this research to show not only that graduates are more economically conservative than non-graduates, but also that this is almost entirely down to self-selection and sorting. Differences in British graduates' and non-graduates' early life and adult experiences, rather than their differing educational experiences, are the cause of their divergent economic attitudes. And, looking at gender and environmental attitudes, each time another potentially influential factor was brought into the model, the magnitude of the effect of education also moved closer towards zero.

So, graduating from higher education does have a direct causal effect on our cultural attitudes, but this effect is very small, and not always in the direction we might expect.

The link between university study and cultural attitudes in Britain is mostly indirect. British graduates' attitudes come about largely because people whose upbringing predisposes them to have certain views are disproportionately likely to go to university.

It is also worth noting that the data do not tell us about people's social networks. The liberalising effect of education – which is, in any case, very small – could have more to do with people's peer groups on campus and their conversations and activities together than any 'indoctrination' from professors or the curriculum. In conclusion, the idea that universities are hotbeds of left-liberal bias has been rather exaggerated.



This study finds limited evidence that higher education causes graduates to develop distinctively liberal political values. Rather, it highlights that self-selection and stratification-based sorting are the key drivers

CHANGING LIVES, CHANGING COMMUNITIES

Politics has had a turbulent, polarised few years, so what can research tell us about our sense of who we are, the communities we belong to, and what happens in our lives – and how these factors influence our political involvement and voting patterns?



IMMIGRATION HAS HAD
A PARTICULARLY HIGH
PROFILE IN UK POLITICS
IN RECENT YEARS

IMMIGRATION AND WELLBEING

Immigration has had a particularly high profile in UK politics in recent years. One could argue that it has always been an issue, and that it flares up in response to specific events: the arrival of the 'Windrush generation' in the 1950s, for example, and in the 1990s, free movement in Europe, and the growth of the global economy.

Peter Howley and Muhammad Waqas used Understanding Society to ask why people are "so sharply divided on immigration issues. Why does immigration generate such strong political reactions?"¹

They did this by considering two different senses of national identity: ethnic and civic. People with an ethnic form of national identity tend to consider ancestry and descent as important criteria, while those with a civic form of identity are more concerned with respect for the country's laws and political institutions. National identity can bring people together and encourage trust and cooperation, but each group can also see others as an 'outgroup'. For those with an ethnic identity, this is likely to mean immigrants, and for those with a civic identity, it's less about where people are from, and more about how they behave.

This research used the first eight waves of Understanding Society, and looked specifically at people's subjective wellbeing – measured with a question about life satisfaction, and using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), which asks a series of questions about issues such as self-confidence, self-worth, feeling useful, and ability to enjoy day-to-day activities. By linking to the UK Annual Population Survey, the researchers could also consider how many immigrants live in the respondent's neighbourhood – and Department for Communities and Local Government data allowed them to take deprivation into account as well.

They also brought in the answer to our survey's question, "What do you consider your national identity to be?" Previous research has found that people who answer 'English' tend to have an ethnic sense of identity, while those who say 'British' are likely to have a civic identity. Combining all these elements allows the research to see how immigration has affected people's wellbeing, and how that varies according to how people see themselves.

Based on the average increase in numbers of immigrants across local authority areas from 2009-18 (about 15,000 in each area), the research found that this level was linked to a greater fall in wellbeing for people who identify as English than for those who see themselves as British. It was also possible to compare this loss of wellbeing to the drop which results from common life events. For those who said 'English', their fall in wellbeing was equivalent to 61% of the wellbeing loss from divorce, 19% of the loss from widowhood, and 7% of that from unemployment (based on figures for the population as a whole). For people who identify as 'British', the figures were much smaller, at 10%, 3%, and 1%, respectively.

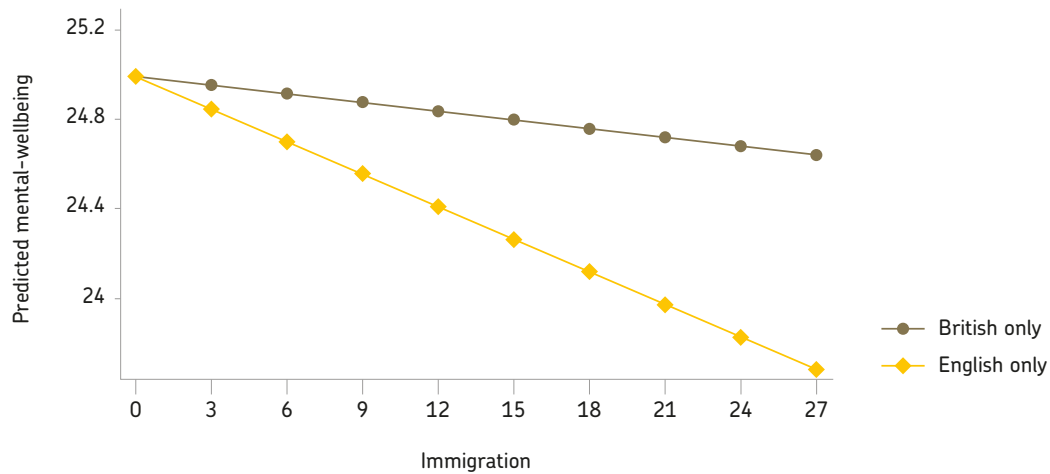
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The general public appears to be sharply polarized on the topic of immigration, much more so than on other issues associated with globalization such as free trade and financial integration



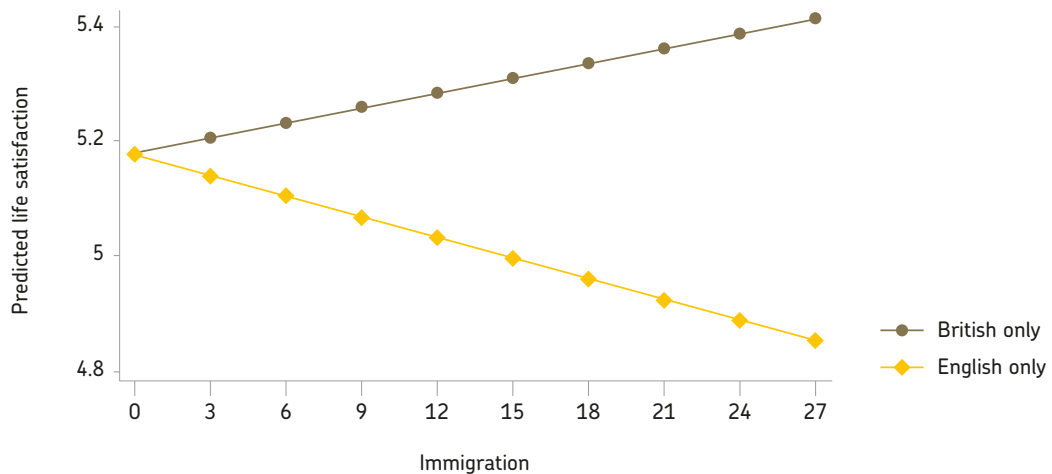
¹ Peter Howley and Muhammad Waqas, Identity, immigration, and subjective well-being: why are natives so sharply divided on immigration issues?, *Oxford Economic Papers*, November 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oepp/gpac045> (The authors noted that some people identify as Scottish, Welsh or Irish, but they excluded these because of the small numbers involved.)

Immigration and wellbeing



Relationship between immigration and mental well-being (GHQ) for natives who identify as English and British. Immigration is measured in tens of thousands by local authority area.

Immigration and life satisfaction



Relationship between immigration and life satisfaction for natives who identify as English and British. Immigration is measured in tens of thousands by local authority area.

Considering life satisfaction, the study found that when comparing those who identify as English as compared to British, the effects were diametrically opposed. Specifically, when faced with significant inflows of migrants into their local authority area, people who feel English appear to undergo a significant and substantive drop in their life satisfaction, but the opposite is true for those who identify as British.

DIFFICULTIES OF INTEGRATION

Immigration seems to polarise views much more than other aspects of globalisation, such as free trade and financial integration – but it does this more for some groups than others. Previous research has looked at socio-economic factors such as wages to explain this. However, the two main forms of national identity seem to predict both how people feel about immigration, but also – by comparing people's reported Brexit vote – how they acted in a referendum where immigration was a high-profile topic.

Identity is not the only factor, but patterns of attachment to national identity do seem to be important. For people with an ethnic form of national identity, any positive economic benefits associated with immigration may not be enough to outweigh a sense of loss of identity. For people with a civic form, seeing immigrants with different habits and customs may be less threatening to their sense of identity.

In the longer term, greater contact with migrants could weaken people's attachments to their ethnic identity, but equally it may strengthen as people define themselves in increasingly fragmented communities. Also, migrants belong to smaller groups, so may feel more need to define themselves, and to express their differences.

Ultimately, even when there are economic benefits, integration may be difficult, especially in areas where ethnic forms of national identity are dominant.





RELIGION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Despite being regularly overlooked in studies of voting behaviour, religion influences the voting patterns of the majority of adults in the UK, and in a way that is far more nuanced than a simple 'religious/non-religious' divide. A sense of English national identity, and being socially conservative, are both more prevalent among Anglicans, and were also associated with greater Euroscepticism and support for Brexit in the 2016 referendum.

Ekaterina Kolpinskaya and Stuart Fox found that "being a member of the Church of England helps foster an attachment to the English heritage and national identity", but that Catholics are less likely to share this – being, as they are, part of an institution which sits above nations and their leaders². This helps to explain why 55% of Anglicans voted Leave in 2016, while 61% of Catholics voted Remain.

In particular, people who identify with religion nominally and 'practically never' go to church were more likely to support Brexit than regular churchgoers, "reflecting the impact of regularly interacting with religious communities and leaders on our social networks (which tend to be more extensive for the religiously active) and our subsequent tolerance for 'outsiders'". People who identified themselves as Anglican, but never went to church, and "held few religious beliefs" were particularly Eurosceptic, with about two-thirds of them having voted Leave. By contrast, two-thirds of religiously active and devout Catholics voted Remain.

What's important now, several years after the EU referendum, is that – while secularisation is reducing religion's influence – its impact on national identity and political ideology is still shaping public opinion and attitudes. Feeling English, and being socially conservative affects how people feel about European integration and immigration, and these effects are moderated by religious identification and religious practice.



Being a member of the Church of England helps foster an attachment to the English heritage and national identity

² Stuart Fox and Ekaterina Kolpinskaya, *How religion contributed to Brexit, UK in a Changing Europe*, April 2021: <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/how-religion-contributed-to-brexit/> and *Religion and Euroscepticism in Brexit Britain*, Routledge, 2021

DEPRIVATION AND SOCIAL ACTION

How does where we live shape our political views? Franco Bonomi Bezzo and Anne-Marie Jeannet have shown that deprived neighbourhoods are places where membership of organisations such as parent associations, tenant groups, social clubs, and voluntary service groups is lower than in more advantaged areas³. The same is not true of political involvement, though.

Living in an area which lacks resources can compound the individual deprivation of the people who live there – and it can change the way people interact.

There are three main theories of why people might get involved in their local community:

- social cohesion – coming together to do something collectively
- obligation – getting involved in something local because one feels one ought to
- activated dissatisfaction – getting involved in order to change things

The research used Understanding Society data from 2010-19, combined with the Index of Multiple Deprivation. During the period studied, Understanding Society asked a series of questions about different kinds of voluntary association. The survey asked about:

- political membership – whether a person is an active member of a political party
- work membership – have they joined a union and/or a professional organisation
- civic membership – how many organisations a person is an active member of, including parent associations, tenant groups, scouts, community groups, and sports clubs

Understanding Society also asks people if they think it is their duty as a citizen to vote, how they feel about the social cohesion of their neighbourhood, and how satisfied they are with “the way democracy works in this country”. Using all this information, the research could consider changing levels of deprivation, people’s communities, and different types of civic involvement.



DEPRIVATION AND ISOLATION

The results show that “neighbourhood deprivation is associated with lower norms of civic obligation”, and that this makes people less likely to engage with their community. People with lower income and education levels are less likely to get involved with local associations in the first place, and neighbourhood deprivation lowers this still further.

Social isolation is common in deprived neighbourhoods, and plays a significant part in reducing civic involvement. Social coherence is good for civic and political membership, suggesting that the more people feel attached to their community, the more likely they are to join both local associations and national organisations such as political parties and trade unions. Getting involved is an investment of time and energy, and if people feel less closely attached to their neighbourhood and to each other, this may alter how they see the benefits of taking part.

However, membership of political organisations is an exception to this general pattern: it is more likely in deprived neighbourhoods. This suggests that in deprived areas, people spend more energy on community work which aims to bring about social change, and less on hobbies, leisure, or socialising.

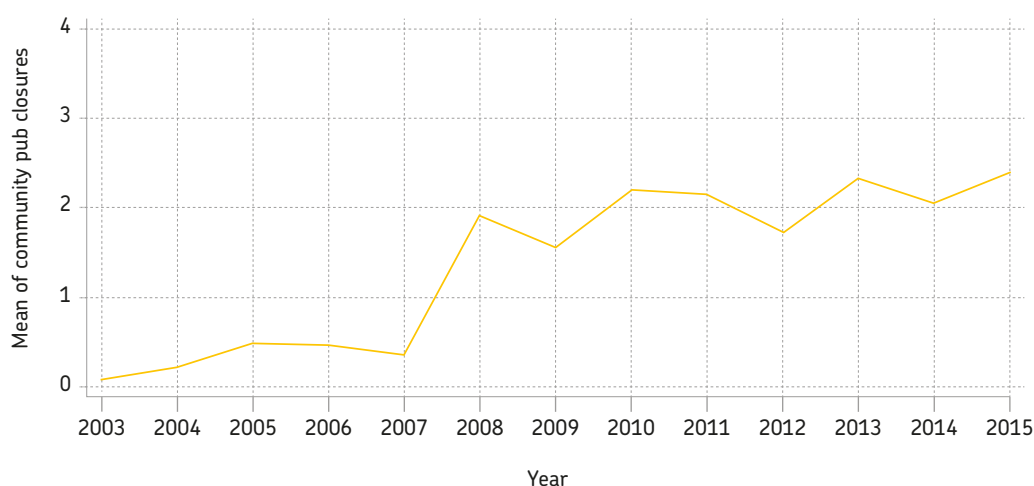


The social isolation that commonly occurs in deprived neighbourhoods is a strong mechanism for reducing participation

PUB CLOSURES AND RIGHT-WING POLITICS

Another factor affecting neighbourhoods, contributing to a feeling of being 'left behind', is the decline of the local pub. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that more than 25% of pubs have closed since 2001, and for a combination of reasons: taxes on alcohol, the 2007 national smoking ban, house price inflation (which reduces disposable income), and the number of people who drink four or more times a week halving between 2006 and 2016. The rise of cheaper beer in supermarkets is also likely to be a factor.

Mean of community pub closures per year in Britain





Could this have an effect on how people vote? Diane Bolet used Understanding Society data from Waves 5–7 to ask whether closures of a specific type of pub could boost support not for a mainstream party, but for the radical right in the form of UKIP⁴.

She linked:

- Understanding Society participants' answers from between 2013 and 2016 to the question about who they would vote for tomorrow
- Census data from 2001 and 2011 on migration growth in their area
- information from the Local Data Company on openings and closures of retail outlets

The research specifically looked at pubs outside high streets, which are owned either by the local community or by J D Wetherspoon, in order to target a particular segment of the population: White, male, and with a lower education level and lower disposable income. In other words, it didn't look at gastro pubs (used by middle-class communities in gentrified areas) or pub chains and city centre pubs (frequented by tourists and large groups).

The results showed that one additional community pub closure relative to the number of pubs in the district increases an individual's likelihood to support UKIP by around 4.3 percentage points, and the effect is larger if the area is deprived. What this tells us is that, while support for non-mainstream political parties has been linked to deindustrialisation and globalisation, social and cultural factors play a part, too.

One additional community pub closure relative to the number of pubs in the district increases an individual's likelihood to support UKIP by around 4.3 percentage points

These pubs are 'socio-cultural hubs' – places where people engage with their local community, and whose existence can affect how many friends they have. They "serve as one of the last bastions of British culture for the white working-class identity". Closures can signify a loss of community, which can affect how satisfied people feel in life, but also a loss of cultural identity.

Interestingly, there is no effect on Conservative or Labour votes, only on votes for UKIP – and it doesn't affect people who never vote, so these cultural changes are not changing the views of people who have always felt detached from the political system. Also, the effect is not significant if we look at the longer time from period 2001–16, but is significant if we just consider the years 2008–16, after the rapid decline in pubs that started with the 2007 smoking ban.

POLICY FOR 'LEFT BEHIND' AREAS

Deindustrialisation, the growth of urban areas, and ageing populations in peripheral places have affected local community structures. "Many rural areas and industrial clusters", Diane Bolet writes, "have moved from being communities with local employment to dormitory areas or second home locations where commuters no longer stop at the bars or pubs on their way home." Economic downturns also affect these cultural hubs – as does our increasing habit of staying at home and watching streaming services.

"The transformation of the economy", she adds, "has contributed to the gradual disappearance of low-skilled, decent, and secure jobs in manufacturing sectors and the rising demand for highly skilled employees with higher education. It has relegated low-skilled white workers to the fringes of the social order." Radical right parties respond to this by appealing to a nostalgic idea of coherent (and culturally homogenous) communities.

Overall, Diane says, policymakers should be looking at initiatives to maintain vibrant local communities to improve social cohesiveness in economically deprived areas, because it is a good thing in itself – but also if they want to prevent a 'left behind' narrative taking hold.



THE DISABILITY VOTING GAP

What about other kinds of disadvantage? Disabled people have consistently been found to have lower levels of political participation – a 'disability voting gap', estimated to be between 4 and 17 percentage points in the United States and 5 percentage points in Europe.

In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 gives disabled people an equal right to vote, including via the provision of reasonable adjustments. Research has used our data to examine the four most recent general elections and see what that meant for disabled people and voting in 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019⁵.

The findings suggest that, across the 2010s, there is a 6.2 percentage point voting gap for people whose disability limits their daily life. This is after taking into account factors such as gender, age, the region where they live, ethnicity, and UK citizenship.

Previous research suggests the mechanisms which might affect disabled people's participation are:

- resources – such as time, capacity, skills and financial assets
- recruitment – that is, less contact with political campaigning due to factors such as social isolation
- psychology – in the form of political interest and political efficacy (the belief that one can understand and participate in politics, and that this has an impact on the political process)

This research found that resources accounted for 60 per cent of the gap – but, even after accounting for demographic characteristics, and resources and recruitment, there was still a disability voting gap of 2.3 percentage points. This suggests that disabled people continue to face extra barriers to voting such as lack of access to campaign information or polling stations. This is greater for more severe disability, disability related to mental impairments, and chronic disabilities.

Wider disability-related economic and social inequalities are important, but don't explain the gap on their own. Nonetheless, policies which aim to reducing economic inequality for disabled people are likely to narrow political inequality.

Despite the 2010 Equality Act, then, disability still affects political participation over and above its impact on social and economic outcomes. The evidence suggests the need for more work specifically to increase political participation among disabled people, and for consideration of disability-related barriers when making any changes to the voting system in this country.

⁵ Samuel Brown and Melanie Jones, Understanding the disability voting gap in the UK, *Electoral Studies*, 2023: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102674>

‘SOMEWHERE’S’ AND ‘ANYWHERE’S’

Another suggested explanation for our polarised politics is that the country is divided into “people who see the world from Anywhere and the people who see it from Somewhere”. David Goodhart’s 2017 book *The Road to Somewhere: The new tribes shaping British politics* suggested that how people see themselves and their community was crucial to understanding the UK today, and particularly the result of 2016’s EU referendum. ‘Anywheres’, he said, tend to be mobile, university-educated professionals who don’t live where they were brought up, while ‘somewheres’ are more likely to be social conservatives who “left school before doing A-levels... to be older and come from the more rooted middle and lower sections of society, from small towns and suburbia”.

The idea is that ‘anywheres’ tended to be Remain voters, while ‘somewheres’, with their attachment to their local community, were Leave voters, but is this true? Tak Wing Chan and Jutta Kawalerowicz used Understanding Society Waves 1, 3 and 6 to examine this⁶. In those waves, we asked questions about neighbourhood cohesion such as

- how much people feel they belong to their neighbourhood
- how close they feel to their neighbours
- how much they communicate with them.

In Waves 3 and 6, we also asked about local groups people belong to, including neighbourhood associations, scouts, parents’ associations, churches, and social clubs. In Wave 1, we asked how trusting people feel they are.

The research found that there was “some truth” to the idea that the Brexit divide was down to education and mobility – but that the explanation wasn’t purely causal. Selection and self-selection played a part, too.

Perhaps most importantly, they found that “the dichotomy between cosmopolitan Anywheres and communitarian Somewheres is a misleading one. Cosmopolitan Anywheres are just as communitarian as Somewheres, if not more so.” We can see this from the fact that “Remainers are just as attached to their neighbourhood as Leavers. Indeed, so far as trust and membership of (or active involvement in) civic organisations are concerned, Remain supporters are more socially engaged than Leave supporters. ... Somewheres are better described as nationalists than as communitarians.”



The difference between Leave-supporting Somewheres and Remain-supporting Anywheres lies not in how they relate to the actual communities they live in, but rather in that English nationalism holds much greater appeal to the Somewheres



DIGITALISATION – WINNERS AND LOSERS

Moving on to the question of our working lives, technology – specifically the ‘third industrial revolution’ or ‘digital revolution’ has transformed workplaces in recent decades. Much has been written about the contrast between successful tech entrepreneurs and ‘left-behind’ voters, but Aina Gallego, Thomas Kurer and Nikolas Schöll point out that “while pessimistic voices emphasise the potential of new technologies to replace human labour and cause political upheaval, technology optimists point to a long history of misguided fears of technological unemployment”⁷.

They used Understanding Society and the European Union Capital, Labor, Energy, Materials, and Service (EU KLEMS) dataset to examine whether digitalisation has actually changed workers’ political preferences. EU KLEMS data shows levels of ICT equipment in 40 industries in a range of countries, including the UK, from 1997-2015. Understanding Society provides data on employment status, salary, voter turnout, party support, education, and life satisfaction.

Thinking in this area has tended to focus on people ‘left behind’ by this process, and whether they tend to support populist right-wing parties as a result. This research, though, shows that digitalisation “increases wages for a majority of workers, a process that does not come at the cost of substantially higher unemployment”.

There is clear evidence that people with higher education levels (especially degrees) earn more when there is increased digitalisation in their industry. For every £1,000 of ICT equipment per worker in their industry, they see an average annual wage increase of over £700 a year. But even workers with no qualifications see their wages increase over £300 on average. There is some evidence that people with less education are more likely to be unemployed, but the effect is small.

More significant, though, is the effect on political participation. Highly educated workers in rapidly digitalising industries become more likely to vote, while less educated workers show no change or a decreased likelihood of voting. Although the effect is not great, it does increase inequalities in voter turnout, which already favour the highly educated.

In terms of party support, a combination of greater education and greater digitalisation increases support for the Conservatives – but they lose support among those with lower levels of education. The ‘winners’ of digitalisation are also more likely to vote for the incumbent party than the ‘losers’ are. It may be that benefitting from digitalisation changes one’s views about the redistribution of wealth.

There is also evidence of those with no qualifications, when faced with this kind of workplace change, becoming more likely to support parties which position themselves as ‘anti-establishment’, such as UKIP. This could be because these parties distinguish between those they see as ‘deserving’ (‘ordinary’ people and pensioners, for example) and others (such as recipients of other non-pension welfare benefits). The less educated workers may see themselves as deserving, and the ‘winners’ of digitalisation as undeserving recipients of the state’s money.

Overall, though, there is “little indication of political unrest among regular workers”. The largest group of voters benefits from digitalisation and becomes more likely to vote, and more likely to vote for a conservative and/or incumbent party. There is a divergence in political behaviour, though, between the winners and losers of this process, which could cause increasing political polarisation.

It’s important to note, though, that these findings apply to the ‘third industrial revolution’ or ‘digital revolution’. The last year has seen an explosion in speculation that the ‘fourth industrial revolution’, characterised by the rise of artificial intelligence, will see swaths of educated professionals’ jobs replaced. It is too soon to know whether this will happen, and what effect it might have, but the researchers point out that the political effects of technological change depend on whether workers benefit economically. This may change according to both the context and the technology.

33 The beneficiaries of digitalisation become more likely to support the Conservative Party, in particular when they are the incumbent party ... with respect to turnout, the highly educated turn out more to vote if their sector digitalises, whereas we do not find such mobilising effects among the less educated

⁷ Aina Gallego, Thomas Kurer and Nikolas Schöll, Neither Left Behind nor Superstar: Ordinary Winners of Digitalization at the Ballot Box, *The Journal of Politics*, January 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1086/714920>

CHANGES CLOSER TO HOME

Turning to the domestic sphere, what happens to our vote when our lives change? Habit is one of the most important factors in voting, but Lauri Rapeli, Achillefs Papageorgiou, and Mikko Mattila used 27 waves of data from Understanding Society to show that when people move in together, divorce, lose their job, and/or retire, the life disruption often alters their habits⁸.

They split the sample into three groups:

1. **habitual voters** – survey participants who voted in both previous elections, which was 68% of the sample of over 43,000 people
2. **occasional voters** – those who voted in only one of the previous two elections (18%)
3. **habitual non-voters** – people who voted in neither of the previous two elections (14 %).

About 10% of the sample changed groups between elections, and 90% remained in the same group.

Life events in our survey are defined as:

- started cohabitation
- started living alone
- became disabled
- divorced
- became unemployed
- retired
- became widow(er)
- moved to new address

The research showed that changes in partnership status have the biggest impact on habitual voting, especially on occasional voters. Moving in with a partner makes people more likely to vote, for example. People who started living with someone before the most recent election, after having lived alone during the one before, are 8.5 percentage points more likely to vote than those who lived alone during both elections. However, divorce and widowhood make voting less likely. Divorce has the largest effect for habitual non-voters (-11.1 percentage points), occasional (-26.5) and habitual voters (-16.4).

Retirement increases turnout for habitual voters, but does not affect voting either way for occasional and habitual non-voters – a good example of the same life event having different effects on groups with different voting habits. The likely explanation is that habitual and occasional voters find that retirement means more leisure time and mental capacity to engage in politics, and habitual non-voters withdraw more from social connections that might otherwise encourage them to vote.

Overall, the research shows that life events affect people differently, depending on the strength of their voting habit. The more personal the event, the larger the impact. These events often have the least effect on habitual non-voters, but habitual voters are also heavily affected by relocating, retiring and especially by changes in partnership status. In other words: even strong habits can be affected by life events.



Even strong habits can be affected by life events. Patterns of political behaviour could be more sensitive to changes in life circumstances, and political behaviour more malleable than we thought

WHAT ABOUT OWNING A HOME?

Another important life change, often seen as something which may change who we vote for, is homeownership. Sinisa Hadziabdic and Sebastian Kohl found that – although people who own property are more likely to vote for parties on the right – the picture may be more complicated than previously thought⁹.

It's long been assumed that homeownership makes people more politically active, and more likely to vote for conservative (and for incumbent) parties. Giving council house tenants the right to buy their property, for example, transferred a massive amount of housing from public to private hands – and research has shown that those who bought in this way were more likely to be conservative than non-buyers. People who can't buy a house, by contrast, are apparently likely to turn to populist protest parties.

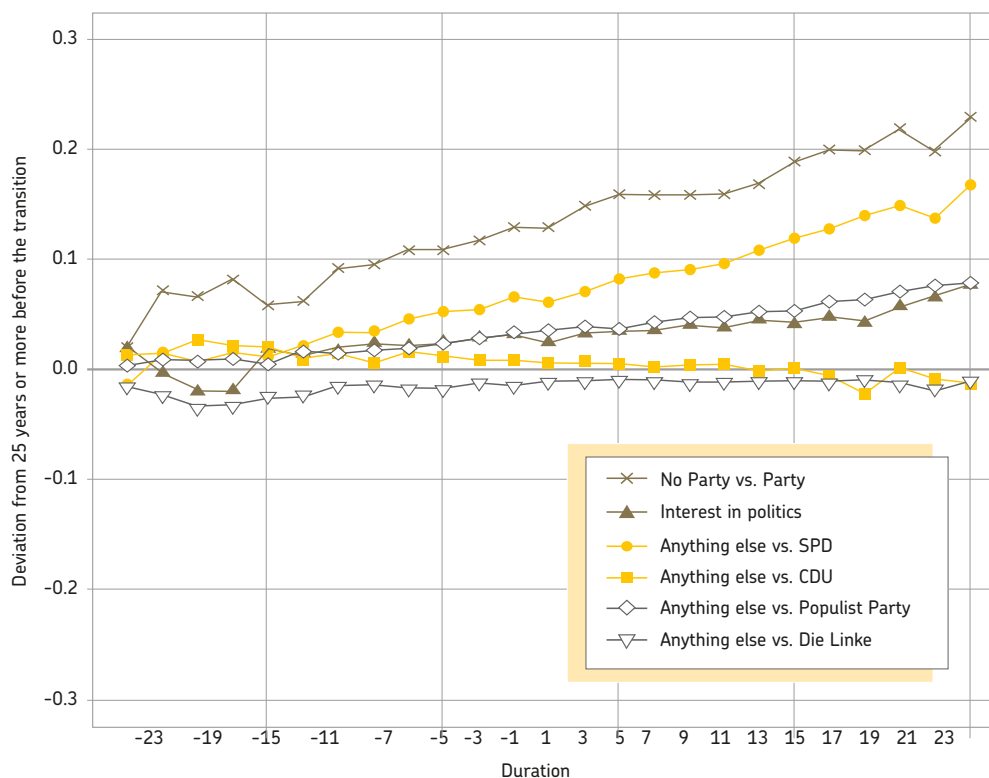
These findings, though, tend to be based on cross-sectional studies. This research used data from Understanding Society, the German Socio-Economic Panel and the Swiss Household Panel, to compare three European countries. Using longitudinal data allowed the researchers to track changing political attitudes throughout the homeownership trajectory, looking at how political convictions change in the years before and after buying a home. The German data covered 1984 to 2018, the Swiss from 1999 to 2018, and Understanding Society data 1991–2017.

In each dataset, the question of whether someone owns their home is asked in every wave, and the researchers also considered:

- level of interest in politics
- whether a respondent feels an attachment for any party (Germany and the UK) or the extent to which they participate in federal polls (Switzerland)
- whether a respondent feels an attachment to the main left-wing or conservative parties in the three countries
- whether they lean towards to the main right-wing populist parties in Germany and the UK (in Switzerland, the main conservative party is also the main populist party) and the main left-wing populist party (only Die Linke in Germany)

In Germany, there is a continuous increase in the likelihood of both being interested in politics, and having a partisan preference, starting before and continuing after having become a homeowner. The propensity to favour the centre-left Social Democratic Party also increases continuously, while the preference for the centre-right Christian Democratic Union stays the same. The vote for right-wing populist parties shows a consistent increasing trend, while no impact is visible when it comes to the support for the left-wing populist party Die Linke.

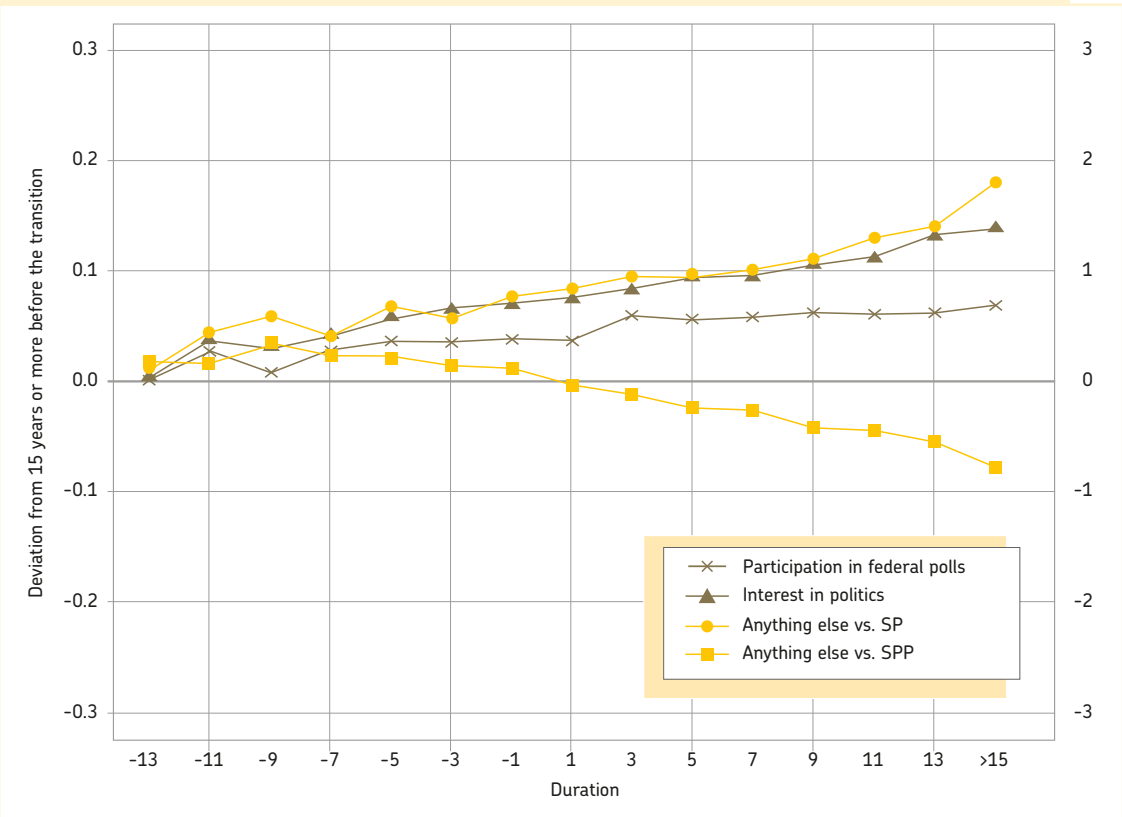
Effects of home ownership on political preferences in Germany



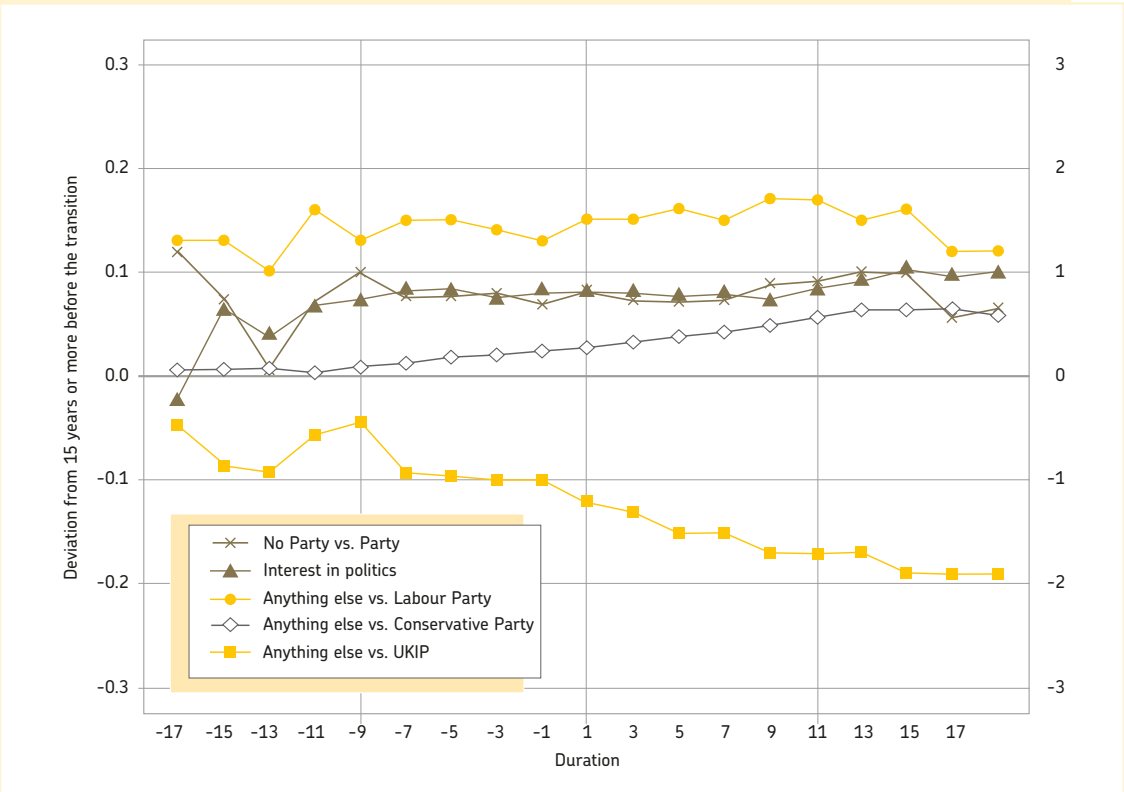
⁹ Sinisa Hadziabdic and Sebastian Kohl, Is the left right? The creeping embourgeoisement of social democracy through homeownership, European Journal of Political Research, September 2021: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12479>

In Switzerland, there is an increasing interest in politics, and an increase in the propensity to vote, which peaks some years after having become a homeowner. The likelihood of voting for the SP (the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland) also increases continuously, while support for SVP (the conservative Swiss People's Party) declines.

Effects of homeownership on political preferences in Switzerland



Effects of homeownership on political preferences in the UK



In the UK, interest in politics increases in the period leading up to homeownership, and there is a general trend towards supporting Labour, particularly around the time of buying a house – and a continuous disaffection with the Conservative Party.

in house price, people become slightly more likely to support Labour and much less likely to feel close to the Conservative Party. With the highest level of house price growth, there is a fall in support for the Conservatives, and a boost for UKIP.

People are more likely to be interested in politics and to have a partisan preference if they own property, but homeownership doesn't make people more conservative. Overall, it brings them closer to 'New' Labour. Also, the change isn't sudden – homeownership is part of a long-term shift in people's political views.

However, while homeownership does not increase support for mainstream right-of-centre parties, it does slightly boost the more populist parties on the right. The researchers suggest that some homeowners see their property as something which separates and protects them from social forces such as economic globalisation or migration.

As in Germany, the right-wing populist party (in this research, UKIP) gains a continuous (but smaller) share of voters among homeowners. Those who see the lowest increase in the value of their property don't change their level of interest in politics, but become less likely to support Labour and the Conservatives, and more likely to support UKIP. With a medium level of growth

Homeownership moves individuals in their lifecourse away from the major conservative parties and brings them closer to (New) Labour

LESSONS FOR HOUSEBUILDING POLICY?

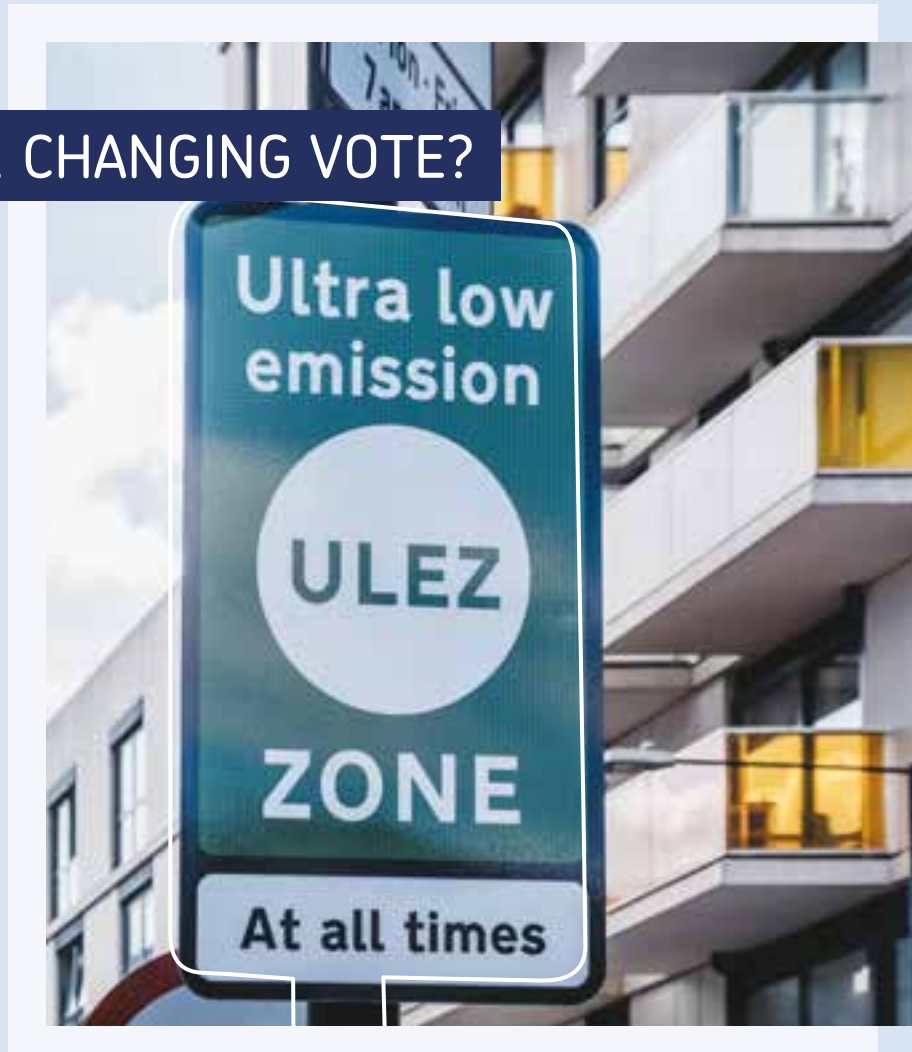
Overall, this looks to be a symptom of the way support for left of centre parties has persistently changed from low-income, low-education working class to high-income and high-education groups. It could be seen as a way for homeowners – who are wealthier than the average citizen – to solve the contradictions arising from their 'left-wing' ideals and the fact that the more liberal economic policies of new-Labour-style parties are in their economic interests.

Ultimately, homeownership consolidates long-held views, but it can't be disentangled from other trends in life, such as building a family and career. Perhaps the message for policymakers is that housebuilding is a public good, but can't be guaranteed to be in their partisan interests.



CHANGING CLIMATE, CHANGING VOTE?

One issue which we expect to be increasingly influential in elections is climate change. Some analysis of 2023's Uxbridge by-election, for example, said London's ultra-low emission zone was a factor. Understanding Society may not be able to answer that specific point, but it can tell us how we view climate change, how we respond to policies which are designed to tackle the problem, and whether protestors change our minds.



WISELY DESIGNED POLITICAL
INSTRUMENTS ARE NEEDED
TO STEER INDIVIDUAL
BEHAVIOUR INTO A MORE
SUSTAINABLE DIRECTION

IS THE CLIMATE PROBLEM SERIOUS?

For increasing numbers of us, the answer to this question is yes. Ting Liu, Nick Shryane and Mark Elliot used Waves 4 and 10 of Understanding Society to examine people's attitudes across the 2010s¹.

In 2011, research had shown that 28% of people were uncertain about the existence of climate change, although a paper from 2018 suggests that only 6% of survey respondents could be classed as deniers – and many of them are not overly confident in their beliefs. So, it may seem that views are moving away from scepticism and towards acceptance – but this earlier work has tended to use cross-sectional data, which can't show us change over time.

The Understanding Society data used in this research was gathered from 2012–14 and 2018–20 to look at two points in time, six years apart. In both waves, people were asked how much, on a scale of 1–5, they agreed with these statements:

- Climate change is beyond control, it's too late to do anything about it.
- The effects of climate change are too far in the future to really worry me.
- People in the UK will be affected by climate change in the next 30 years.
- If things continue on their current course, we will soon experience a major environmental disaster.
- The so-called 'environmental crisis' facing humanity has been greatly exaggerated.

In both waves, it was possible to group respondents into three clusters: sceptical, concerned, and paradoxical. People in the sceptical cluster are the least likely to worry about the effect of climate change in the future, and the most likely to think it is exaggerated and far away. In the 'concerned' cluster, people agree that problems are coming, and that the crisis has not been exaggerated, and isn't too far away to worry about.

The paradoxical cluster is more complicated. This group thinks the effects of climate change are too far in the future to worry about, but also believe that they will arrive within 30 years. This group is likely to feel that the risk has been exaggerated, but also that people will be affected in the near future – and that climate change is out of control, and it's too late to tackle it.



The perception that climate change is low risk has been identified as a barrier to participation in climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts

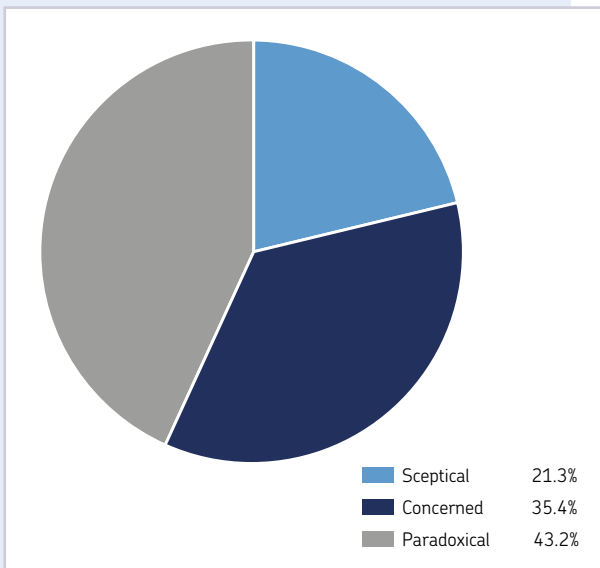
The paradoxical cluster is the largest at the beginning of the 2010s, but becomes the least stable by the end of the decade. People in the paradoxical and sceptical clusters tended to move towards the concerned cluster between the two waves of data, but the paradoxical cluster is still 40% of the population.

¹ Ting Liu, Nick Shryane and Mark Elliot, Attitudes to climate change risk: classification of and transitions in the UK population between 2012 and 2020, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, August 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01287-1>

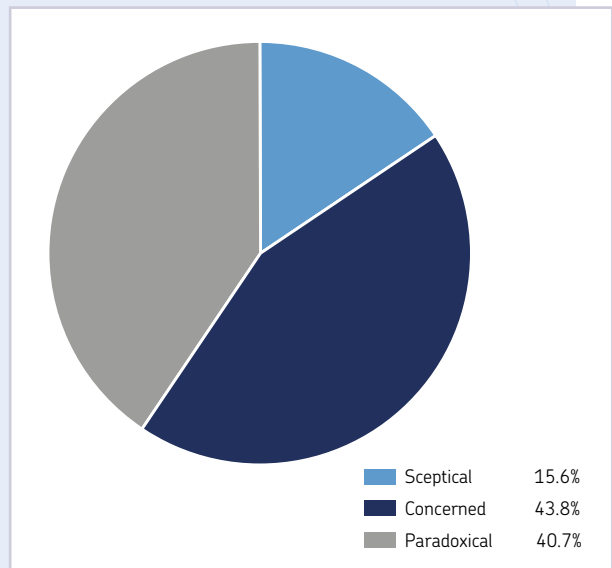


The strongest predictors of which cluster people belong to were their education and political affiliation. The higher their qualifications, the more likely participants were to be 'concerned', and less likely to be in the other two clusters, in both waves. Those aligned with left-wing parties were at least 36.7% more likely in Wave 4 (and 58.7% in Wave 10) than right-wingers to be 'concerned'.

Clusters from Wave 4



Clusters from Wave 10



REACHING SCEPTICS WITH POLICY

In terms of policy, the researchers say it makes sense to target the paradoxical group – the largest at Wave 4 – with environmental messages and policy. This group tends to be worried about climate change, but feel powerless to cope with it, and motivational messages targeted at them could shift their views.

The researchers think pessimistic messages might work better than optimistic ones with this group, but that the sceptical group may need to see risks quantified and visualised. Messages need to be carefully pitched, too. People need to hear that the threat is serious, but too much emphasis on worst-case scenarios could reduce people's intention to act.

They add that “the worst-case scenario of death and destruction” will bore people if it is too prevalent, and that “messages with strong emotional content may erode intention to act among those who were not already highly concerned about climate change”. Also, different groups choose different media, so, ultimately, governments need to

- present messages in a way which will influence behaviour
- tailor messages to specific segments of society
- target the news and other media that those groups use



Absolute denial about the existence of climate change is relatively rare in the UK ... some degree of ambivalence, mixed feelings, or non-straightforward sceptical thinking appear to be widespread

WEATHER OR CLIMATE?

What else might affect our opinion of climate change? What effect does weather have on people's views about climate change itself, and on policies designed to mitigate it? David Johnston, Rachel Knott and Silvia Mendolia have examined this by linking Understanding Society data and temperature data from Met Office weather stations across the UK².

Again, they compared Wave 4 and Wave 10, in which we asked our participants the same set of questions about the climate. Our data also allowed them to compare the attitudes of people who lived in the same area, and who had answered the survey in the same month, but who experienced a different number of abnormally hot days in the week before their interview.

They also monitored whether there was more news coverage of climate change around the time of a heatwave, which would have given the issue a higher profile.

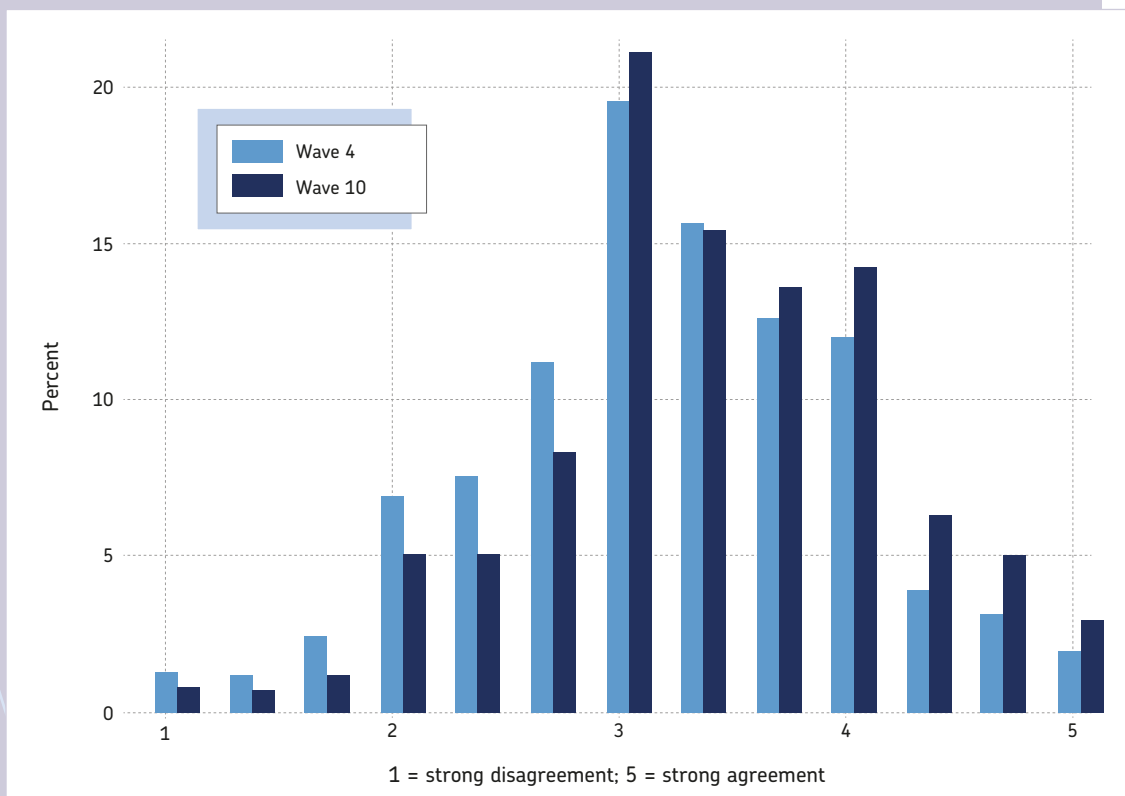
They found that support for public and private action to combat climate change actually fell after abnormally hot weather. However, this was only true at a time of high unemployment (2012-13), not when unemployment was low (2018-19). Also, the support for policy to tackle climate change was lowest among people who were more financially insecure and who worked in carbon-intensive industries. This suggests that – although economically vulnerable groups can respond negatively to climate change mitigation policies – their response can change.



Unusually hot weather caused significant reductions in support for policies to reduce emissions in 2012-2013, a high-unemployment period, but not in 2018-2019, a low-unemployment period

² David Johnston, Rachel Knott and Silvia Mendolia, Climate Change Salience, Economic Insecurity, and Support for Mitigation Policies, Institute of Labor Economics (IZA) Discussion Paper, September 2022: <https://ideas.repec.org/p/iza/izadps/dp15562.html>

Being pro-climate change action by wave



EXTREME WEATHER AND CHANGING MINDS

Another researcher, Tobias Rüttenauer, used Understanding Society to look at the issue of extreme weather, and investigated if individual exposure changes people's minds and behaviour³.

The thinking behind this investigation was that people are unlikely to change their minds when presented with scientific evidence, but may do so when extreme weather affects them directly. The research also used Met Office temperature data and Environment Agency figures on flooding to look at how far away people lived from where extreme weather happened, and how long ago the event was.

It found that people were 3% to 4.5% more likely to believe in climate change if there was a flood within 1 or 2 km of their home than they were before the flooding. However, the effect dropped with distance – by 5km away, there was no change in attitude. Also, only 3.6% of the sample experienced a flood within 2km of their home, so – even if the number of floods doubled in the next decade – this would only increase the overall share of people believing in climate change by 0.26%.

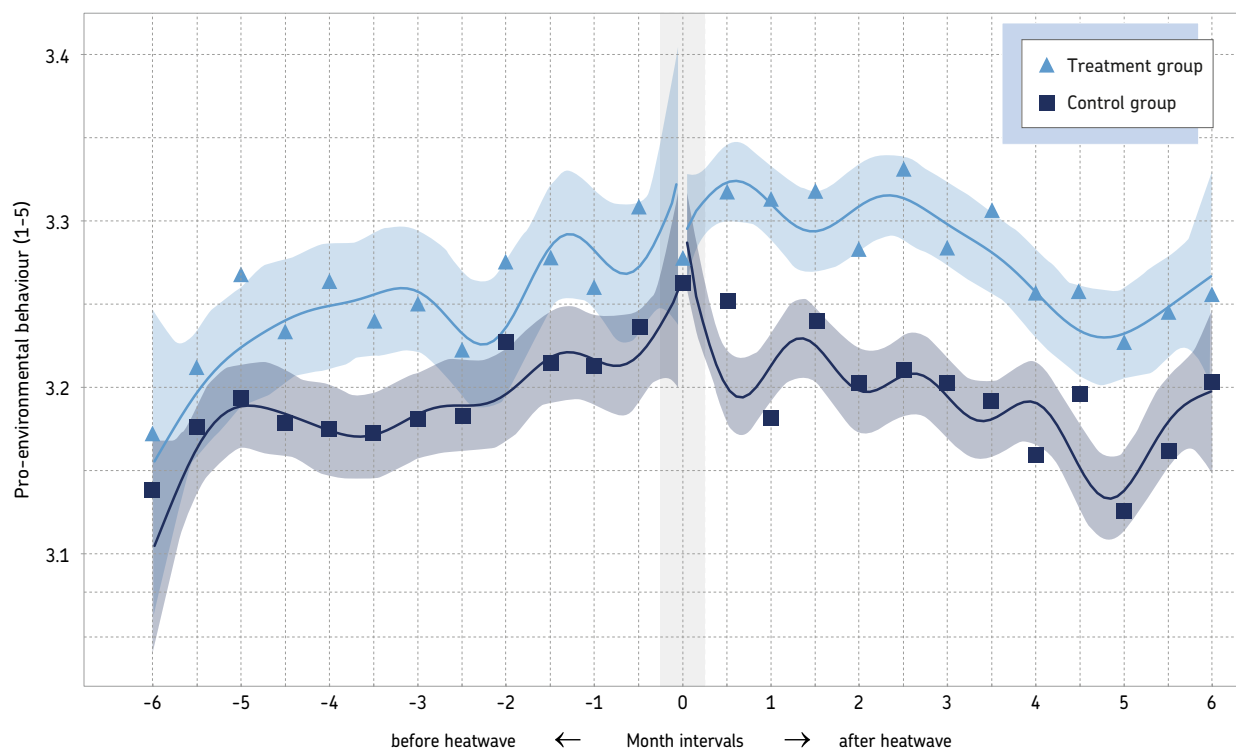
In addition, even if there was a flood nearby, and people changed their minds about climate change, it didn't make them more likely to change their behaviour. In fact, the trend even showed a slight decrease in pro-environmental behaviour.

Looking at heatwaves, the pattern was similar: in the first month after a heatwave, people were more likely to believe in climate change. In this case, the effect decreased with distance of time – by four months later, there was no effect – and again, there was no effect on behaviour: people showed roughly the same level of pro-environmental behaviour before and after experiencing a heatwave.

Interestingly, the changes in views varied according to people's political beliefs. We know that people on the left are more likely to believe that climate change is real, but this research showed that people on the right, and those who had previously been sceptical, were significantly more responsive to extreme weather. It may be that those more likely to believe in climate change are less likely to respond to weather, because they expect such events, and are already concerned.

Why, though, don't people change their behaviour? It may be that they feel incapable of preventing climate change, or that they are aware that any individual's actions can only have a very small effect on their own. Future research could help to identify ways to link beliefs and behaviour, the paper suggests – but concludes that "wisely designed political instruments are needed to steer individual behaviour into a more sustainable direction".

Pro-environmental behaviour before and after a heatwave



³ Tobias Rüttenauer, More talk, no action? The link between exposure to extreme weather events, climate change belief and pro-environmental behaviour, European Societies, November 2023: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2277281>

DO PROTESTS WORK?

One way of bringing the climate to wider attention is to take direct action, and recent years have seen demonstrations and calls to action by Extinction Rebellion, Insulate Britain, and Just Stop Oil – some of which have divided opinion. It's too soon to know what the effects of – for example – throwing soup over a Van Gogh painting have achieved, but Yiannis Kountouris and Eleri Williams used our data to look specifically at Extinction Rebellion's 2019 occupation of sites in central London⁴.

Researchers can see when people answer our survey, so this research was able to compare answers given before and after the 11-day protest (15–25 April 2019). They also used Google Trends data to see whether people's awareness of the issues was raised, in the form of increased searches for the terms 'extinction rebellion' and 'climate change'.

The researchers found no evidence that the protest alienated the public from sustainable lifestyles. Indeed, there was some evidence that XR's actions "influenced the public's attitudes towards sustainable behaviour and their willingness to approve of climate change mitigation policy". However, they also found that responding to the survey after the protest was related to lower likelihood of being willing to pay a premium for environmentally friendly products.

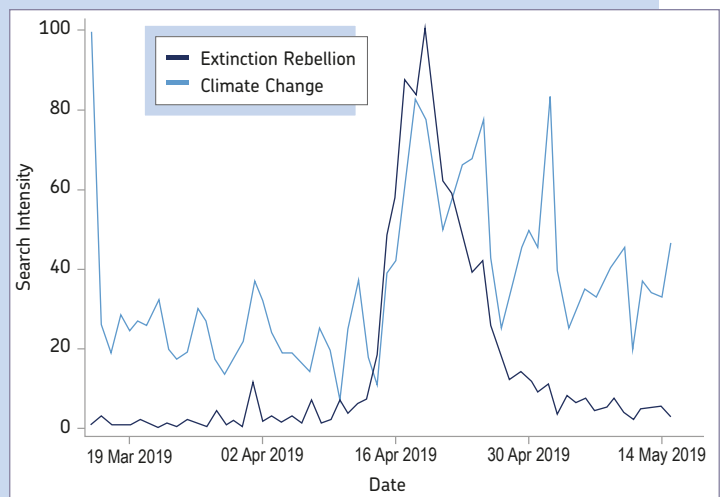
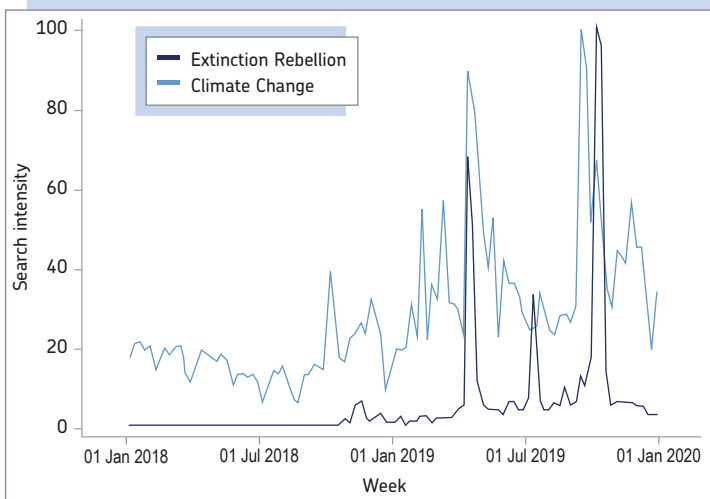
This might seem inconsistent, but it may be that the public were listening to XR's "focus on the responsibility of national governments for environmental conservation and climate change mitigation", and taking from it the message that government and business should bear the burden instead of, rather than alongside, individual actions.

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We do not find evidence that the protest alienated the public from sustainable lifestyles, influenced perceptions of personal environmental impact, or views about the imminence and severity of environmental crises

In other words, just as legislation can have unintended consequences, so can protest. Different people will take different messages from protests, not least because people have different awareness levels to begin with, and some groups in society face greater costs from pro-environmental behaviours and policies.

Google Trends data showing weekly search intensity for terms 'Extinction Rebellion' and 'Climate Change' before, during and after the protest



EVALUATING POLICY

Researchers can also use Understanding Society to evaluate specific policies.

POLICY FAIRNESS

Air travel is a major source of carbon emissions, so it makes sense to direct policies at this sector. But does that mean that migrants – who may need to fly back to their country of origin to visit family and friends – are disproportionately affected? Or would air taxes disproportionately affect those on low and middle incomes, who may only be taking one foreign holiday a year, and not affect those who can afford to take multiple flights?

In fact, research using data from Understanding Society and the Living Costs and Food Survey⁵ shows that “the most progressive option is a ‘frequent air miles tax’ based on both the number of flights and emissions”. A policy is seen to have ‘progressive’ distributional effects if it burdens richer households more than poorer relative to their income. Recent migrants are more likely to be frequent flyers, but overall, taxing air travel is “far less regressive than taxing home energy or motor fuels”.



⁵ Milena Büchs and Giulio Mattioli, How socially just are taxes on air travel and ‘frequent flyer levies’?, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, September 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2022.2115050>

WORK WITH US

INFORMING POLICY, ENABLING RESEARCH

Every year, we ask each member of thousands of the same households across the UK about different aspects of their lives.

The data we build up allow researchers in academia, government departments, the third sector and other organisations to understand how people's lives are changing. Importantly, they can help us determine the causes and consequences of change over time – even over generations.

Our study covers:

- biomarkers, genetics and epigenetics
- COVID-19
- education
- employment
- ethnicity and immigration
- family and households, including pregnancy and early childhood
- health and wellbeing
- money and finances
- politics and social attitudes
- transport and the environment

...and we have a youth questionnaire documenting the experiences of 10-15-year-olds.

That makes Understanding Society a rich resource for shaping policy and practice. There is growing concern that many of the deepest problems faced by the UK need long-term thinking and planning rather than short-term fixes. We can help your organisation or industry use longitudinal data and the evidence from research, and connect you with academic experts.

Charities and third sector organisations can use our data to identify areas where action and policy change is needed. Our data have helped:

- The Centre for Social Justice to report on digital exclusion in the UK
- Marie Curie to show that people of working age who die are more likely to be in poverty than those who died at pension age
- Race on the Agenda to report that Black people in England are over three times more likely than white British people to experience homelessness.

EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF POLICIES

More than that, though, our data make it possible for researchers to evaluate the impact of policies – to assess whether they are working, and for whom, and to highlight unintended consequences, both good and bad.

Policy evaluations and impact assessments are a vital tool for improving services and outcomes – and in the durability and legitimacy of policies. However, the constant drive for new ideas, and the challenges of accurately estimating impact, mean that policy evaluations are under-used.

Designing good evaluations can be challenging, but our data have helped to assess:

- how Covid lockdowns changed people's activity levels
- how raising the legal age of buying tobacco reduced the numbers of teenagers taking up smoking – and reduced inequality
- the impact of same-sex marriage legislation on sexual minorities' mental health.

The longitudinal nature of the data allows researchers to compare the before and after. The under-occupancy penalty – the reduction in housing benefit for some recipients, which became known as the 'bedroom tax' – was assessed with data from at least three years either side of the policy being introduced.

Understanding Society can also be used to compare different nations of the UK, to see how different policies are working. The charge for single-use plastic bags in shops was introduced in Wales before anywhere else in the UK, for example, allowing researchers to test its effects there against behaviour in England and Scotland, which hadn't yet brought in the charge.

RESEARCH SPRINGBOARDS

Complex social problems need careful consideration. Our research springboards tap into the 'collective mind' by bringing together experts and actors from different disciplines and sectors to examine knotty problems using our data. They provide opportunities for diversity of thought, and the combined knowledge of people with 'skin in the game'.

To discuss either of these areas of our work, or ideas for collaboration please get in touch.

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A RICH RESOURCE
FOR SHAPING
POLICY AND
PRACTICE

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