



Inequality

The IFS Deaton Review

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An IFS initiative funded by the Nuffield Foundation

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Fiscal Studies

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ESRC
CENTRE FOR THE
MICROECONOMIC
ANALYSIS OF
PUBLIC POLICY

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Executive summary

- **The rise of economic inequality in the UK over the past four decades raises serious questions about the state of political equality in Britain.**
- **Voter participation in the electoral process has become substantially more unequal since the 1960s.** Income, education and homeownership have become stronger predictors of propensity to turn out to vote.
- **Traditional voting coalitions built around income, education and homeownership have changed profoundly in recent years.** Whereas higher-income, more educated, and homeowners voters trended Conservative in the 1960s through 1980s, that pattern has weakened in recent elections, especially 2019. Demographics have increasingly diverged, with education and income pointing in different directions. Highly educated voters in particular, have shifted sharply away from voting Conservative.
- **Traditional geographic patterns of voting, where wealthier constituencies typically voted Conservative, have almost entirely vanished.** The Brexit referendum in particular cut across parliamentary voting patterns, with wealthier constituencies generally voting to Remain in the EU and poorer ones voting Leave.
- **Britain's electoral politics now reflect both 'first-dimension' politics of class and 'second-dimension' politics of identity.** This shift in mobilisation may have reduced the connection between economic inequality and political polarisation by breaking down class voting.
- **Parliament has become more reflective in demographic and socio-economic terms of the population.** However, this shift has occurred through two mechanisms. In some cases, particularly gender and ethnicity, Members of Parliament have shifted to look more like the population than in 1979. In other cases, particularly education and occupational background, the country has shifted to look more like Parliament over the same period. Parliament remains dominated by high-skill, white-collar professionals.
- **Policymaking in Britain has been more responsive to some economic inequalities than others.** During the 2000s, benefits for both children and older households expanded, but the former have proven more politically vulnerable than the latter. Access to higher levels of education has expanded, but the translation of education into better labour market opportunities remains unequal across groups and geographies in many areas. Policies on wealth inequalities have been weaker, allowing persistent geographic inequalities.
- **British citizens nonetheless feel less represented by politicians and policymaking than they did several decades ago** and large gaps remain across educational and income groups in terms of perceived legitimacy of government.

¹ Ben Ansell acknowledges support from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, grant agreement no. 724949. The ERC project code for this project is WEALTHPOL.

Jane Gingrich acknowledges support from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, grant agreement no. 759188. The ERC project code for this project is SCHOOLPOL.

- **Many of the changes in voting and turnout mirror those in other advanced democracies,** but Britain's (Westminster) electoral institutions and structure of government distinctively shape the way these dynamics play out politically.

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, economic inequality has returned to contemporary political debate with a vengeance. From the chants of 'We are the 99%' of the Occupy Movement to the Labour Party 2019 General Election slogan of 'People before Privilege', inequalities in Britain and beyond have become explicitly politicised. What might in the past have seemed like arcane tomes of inequality statistics, such as Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, have become bestsellers. However, popular attention to income inequality across wealthy democracies has met with very different political responses. In the UK, the axes of Britain's traditional class politics appear to have flipped, as Boris Johnson's government stressed the mantra of 'levelling up' poorer parts of the country and moving away from the politics of a privileged London-based 'elite'.

Has economic inequality created new forms of political inequality in Britain? Has political inequality risen in line with economic inequality? Is the political process able to respond to economic inequality? By political inequality we mean systematic differences in citizens' ability to influence the political process, whether that means through choosing to vote at all, how they vote, whether politicians reflect the population they serve, and whether the policies that they produce favour one group over another.

In this chapter, we explore the relationship between political and economic inequality in the UK. We begin in the next section by setting out what scholars mean by 'political inequality' and the channels that connect potential voters to the policies that governments ultimately produce. We separate out this chain into several components. Economic inequalities can influence political inequality at any point along this chain – who votes, who they vote for, who politicians are and what policies are produced. We discuss what existing work in political science tells us about the connection between economic and political inequality, and then argue that rather than a singular trend towards more or less political inequality in response to economic inequality, the intersection of economic changes in the UK with British political institutions has produced particular patterns of inequality – and responsiveness – which do not simply mirror economic trends. In so doing, we make three arguments.

First, we argue that growing economic inequality likely has contributed to some new forms of participatory inequalities: whether citizens vote or participate in non-electoral channels through which they can influence the political process equally. To analyse participation and representation, we look at the voting behaviour of the British electorate and, in turn, examine how three key forms of economic inequality – income, education and housing wealth – shape these electoral outcomes. We do so by analysing multiple waves of the British Election Study from 1964 to 2019, focusing on how various socio-economic characteristics of potential voters alter their choice to vote and for whom. We see growing gaps across income, education and homeownership groups in the propensity to turn out to vote over the period – indicating a growing political inequality in terms of political participation in modern Britain.

Second, on questions of *representation* – how the demographic and socio-economic differences among voters filter into (a) which parties they vote for and (b) the backgrounds of politicians who represent them – both the relationship to economic inequality and the over-time trends are less straightforward. As in other countries, we see shifts in the way in which demographic groups behave politically. Whereas voters with higher incomes and homeowners have largely continued to vote for the Conservative Party, in the last several elections this pattern has faded considerably. Even more strikingly, there has been a systematic reversal of voting patterns among highly educated voters who have shifted from the Conservative Party to Labour over the past few decades.

We also examine the role of local housing wealth in shaping General Election voting back to 1997, finding that the pattern of constituencies with expensive housing voting Conservative has

evaporated in recent elections, with the turning point appearing to be the Brexit referendum of 2016, which has shaken up traditional class patterns of voting. This suggests that 'first-dimension' politics of class are partly countered by a 'second dimension' of cultural or group-identity attitudes, although cultural mobilisation may still be more muted in the UK than in other advanced democracies.

When it comes to 'descriptive' representation – the degree to which the demographic and socio-economic make-up of politicians resembles that of the population from which they are drawn – the picture is also mixed. Examining data on MP background and comparing it with changes since 1979 in the population, we find general evidence of convergence between the two. However, the mechanisms of convergence vary substantially. In some cases, such as gender and ethnic representation, Parliament has moved towards the people. In others, such as university education, the people now look more like Parliament.

In other words, demographic characteristics such as income, education and wealth have increasingly pushed in different directions in terms of structuring voting, meaning that we cannot draw a simple line between socio-economic status and voting behaviour in the UK any more. This trend exists elsewhere (e.g. Piketty, 2020), but in the UK it intersects with established British political parties to create a (ongoing) process of realignment within existing political parties, which creates distinct representational dynamics. An ongoing question is whether this realignment in voting has moderated some of the translation of economic inequality into political representation.

Third, we argue that the political process shows more responsiveness to some forms of inequality than others. Far from uniformly 'correcting' economic inequality or universally intensifying it, we see that policies over the last 30 years have been highly responsive to the needs of pensioners and older voters, but more variably responsive to the insecurities faced by working-age adults, renters, younger people and those in particularly deprived geographic areas.

We argue that the combination of the participatory inequalities outlined above, with class and geographic partisan realignment, creates particular patterns of downstream responsiveness in the UK electoral system. While parties across the political spectrum have paid increasing attention to insecurity amongst the elderly, there has been less stable policy attention to insecurity amongst younger citizens or to geographic and wealth inequalities. This asymmetry arises in part due to the changing incentives for political parties to tackle inequalities, given the combination of their changing bases and the first-past-the-post electoral system.

We conclude by examining the perceived legitimacy of the British government among the general public, finding that the public has become somewhat less likely to feel listened to and that very large gaps remain across educational, income and wealth groups in these perceptions.

Our focus is general – thus we only briefly look at differences across the countries of the UK, despite important differences across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We also focus largely on inequalities in education, wealth and income, while recognising that other inequalities, such as gender or racial inequalities, and the intersection of these inequalities, also matter. We nonetheless show changes in the nature of participation, representation, responsiveness and legitimacy that are deeply consequential for understanding contemporary British democracy. In line with Beramendi, Besley and Levi (2022), we see these as distinct forms of inequality, whose dynamics need to be studied in tandem with economic inequality.

2. What is political inequality?

What is the relationship between political and economic inequality?

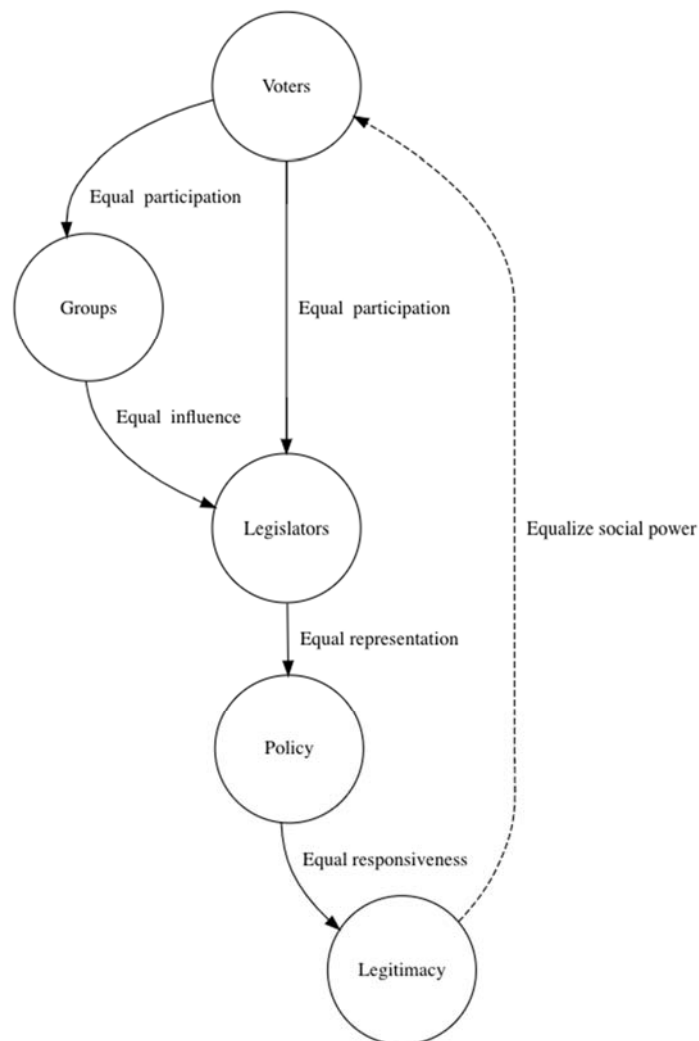
Answering this question requires first defining political inequality. There is no singular agreed-upon definition, but in basic terms political inequality refers to a process of collective decision-making whereby the voices, preferences or interests of some member of a community are not considered equally to others (Dahl, 2008). Beramendi, Besley and Levi (2022) define it in relational

terms, arguing that 'members of a political community are deemed politically equal if the rules, norms and procedures that govern the community afford equal consideration to all members'.

Non-democratic systems are self-evidently unequal: the process of collective decision-making excludes the voices of some. Democratic systems, in theory, operate on the principle of equality among enfranchised adults. 'Naïve democratic' models define a process whereby voters have equal scope to select political elites, which in turn creates incentives for elite responsiveness to mass preferences. Democracies weigh all votes equally, and prohibit the buying and selling of votes; all voters, irrespective of their economic circumstances, have equal opportunities to *participate* in selecting their legislators. In turn, legislators have incentives to *represent* the interests, preferences or voices of citizens equally. Equality in representation produces policies that are *responsive* to the preferences of a majority of voters (Downs, 1957). These policies, and the legitimacy that accompanies them, provide a counterweight to the inequalities in *power* produced in the marketplace, household and broader social sphere. Figure 1 schematises this basic logic.

Thicker understandings of the democratic process extend an equal role to citizens in political action that extends beyond selecting elites. In pluralist models of democratic decision-making, interest groups play an important role in linking citizens to the democratic process. Here too, classical theory stresses that citizens have equal options to join groups, with competition among groups preventing a consolidation of power (Dahl, 2008).

Figure 1. Naïve democratic model of political equality



Political equality in the naïve democratic model is both a defining normative principle – a desideratum in its own right – and a central mechanism for producing decisions that reflect collective preferences. Because voters often demand equality-producing institutions, most canonical theories of redistribution suggest that political equality is likely to act as a check on economic inequality (Meltzer and Richard, 1981). In Arthur Okun's (1975) memorable language, the 'domain of rights' is a distinct sphere to the 'domain of the dollar', and acts as a *corrective* to it.

Clearly, however, inequalities *do* exist at every step of the democratic process schematised in Figure 1: in citizen participation in politics; in voting behaviour and subsequent representation of economic or social interests; in the responsiveness of politicians to citizen demands; and in perceptions of systemic legitimacy and social power (see Choi (2021) for a schematic). In light of rising economic inequality, a number of scholars have argued that economic inequality may *undercut* political equality, limiting the democratic process as a correcting mechanism. In this view, rising economic inequality limits the capacities of low-income citizens to participate in the democratic process (Solt, 2008) while increasing the capacities of the wealthy to sidestep it through lobbying or other forms of direct political influence (Hacker and Pierson, 2008). The result is that economic inequality creates political inequality, which in turn feeds back into policies that allow for greater economic inequality. Far from being a universal corrective, inequalities in the economy can undermine equalities in the democratic process, and vice versa.

The relationship between economic inequality and political equality, then, is contested. We argue below that the evidence neither suggests a straightforward 'correcting' role of political equality in the face of economic inequality, nor a pure 'undercutting' effect of economic inequality on political equality. Instead, the relationship between the two may vary across types of institutions and inequalities.

In order to analyse the British case, we examine the relationship between political and economic inequality at each node on Figure 1.

Participatory inequalities

Inequalities exist among people in their ability and propensity to participate in both the electoral process and politics more generally. At a basic level, not all adults, even in a democracy, are enfranchised. In some countries, there are sizeable numbers of immigrants or other non-enfranchised groups (e.g. prisoners in the United States) that do not have access to the vote, and thus are excluded from the electoral process. As recent debates about voting rights in the US demonstrate, the boundaries of inclusion in advanced democracies remain contested.

Even where there is more universal enfranchisement of the adult population, as in some – but not all – wealthy democracies, lower-income, lower-education, younger and marginalised groups vote at lower rates than other social groups. While early scholarship on socio-economic gaps in participation pointed to large gaps in the US as compared with European countries (Topf, 1995), more recent work shows such gaps are not unique to the US context, but vary substantially in magnitude (Gallego, 2015).

Similar or greater gaps between the highly educated and other groups exist for other forms of political participation – both in representative government (e.g. contacting politicians) and non-electoral politics (e.g. participating in protests) (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Schlozman et al., 2012). Russ Dalton's (2017) cross-national analysis of participation across a wide variety of political activities, from donating to parties to engaging in protest activities, finds social-status gaps on multiple dimensions as citizens become politically active in groups. As one of the dons of American political science, E. E. Schattschneider, famously wrote: 'The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent'.

Thus, inequalities exist both in the process of selecting representatives, the most basic and 'thin' component of the democratic process, and in engaging in political life in a more regular and continuous way – both through contact and interactions with elected representatives and through social movements and activism. How do these inequalities relate to economic inequality?

There is some evidence from across the US states and Europe that economic inequality is associated with a decline in participation, but scholars debate both the relationship to participatory inequality and the direction of causality (Solt, 2008; Avery, 2015; Gallego, 2015; Jensen and Jespersen, 2017). Schäfer and Schwander (2019), in a recent comprehensive study, find a robust relationship between inequality and overall turnout in the post-2000 period across 21 advanced democracies, an effect that is in part driven by lower participation among the poorest quintile. Rather than mobilising the poor, they argue that rising inequality often supports a logic of 'rational abstention', whereby those that perceive little responsiveness to their needs (lower-income voters) abstain, as do those that perceive alternative mechanisms for responsiveness (higher-income voters) (Goodin and Dryzek, 1980).

These arguments leave questions unanswered, however. Why would it be rational to abstain? Anderson and Beramendi (2012) look in part to theorise this rationality by examining the incentives for parties themselves. They argue that the left generally mobilises lower-income voters; however, under conditions of rising inequality, doing so is more costly. Where left parties face few left-competitors, they have greater incentives to turn their mobilising efforts at middle-income voters. Economic inequality, then, may drive political inequality in turnout (and the reverse), but this effect is conditional on voter or parties' expectations about downstream political responsiveness or state capacity (Kasara and Suryanarayan, 2015).

When it comes to group participation, unequal participation is also intertwined with rising economic inequality. Unions (and to some extent churches) were historically the key groups that mobilised lower-income voters. Here economic demands for wage equality were deeply linked to questions of labour's political power (Korpi, 1983). Wage bargaining amongst unions and employers is historically associated with lower levels of inequality (Pontusson, 2005), although in recent years this relationship has been changing (Thelen, 2014). The decline of unions in the post-1980 period, then, has implications for both rising economic inequality and participatory inequalities (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 1999).

In the UK, as we show below, major participatory inequalities exist, and these inequalities have worsened over time.

Representational inequalities

Political philosophers have long debated the meaning of the concept of *representation*, and what equal representation implies (Pitkin, 1967; Urbinati and Warren, 2008). Scholars of representation often distinguish between substantive and descriptive representation. Substantive representation refers to legislators acting on behalf of – or in a principal-agent framework, as the agents of – the represented. Inequalities emerge when the agenda, issues and positions that elites adopt collectively represent the concerns of some groups more than others. Descriptive representation refers to the aggregate representation in a legislature of particular types of groups relative to their representation in society.

Unlike turnout, where one can conceptualise political equality (everyone votes), the nature of substantive representation necessarily involves some inequalities – there are always fewer representatives than voters, legislatures are unlikely to reflect all ideas or groups at all moments. The question, then, is whether there are systematic biases in which groups are represented.

Parties are crucial transmission belts between social interests and the organisation of modern government. Legislatures in representative democracies are largely organised around the principle of territorial representation or party representation (or both), meaning that both institutions (through the electoral system) and parties are organised to represent particular interests to the exclusion of others. Individual legislators, in first-past-the-post models, have a formal relationship of representation to a particular geographic area, while also representing the groups that make up their party's electorate. In proportional representation systems, the territorial dimension of representation is attenuated, with legislators acting first as partisan representatives. Understanding which groups the electoral process represents, then, requires understanding how economic divisions translate into party choices.

In the post-war era, political competition in many advanced democracies produced, to varying extents, some substantive representation of the interests of both lower- and higher-income groups (Alford, 1962; Hibbs, 1977; Korpi, 1983). Because class groups in many countries voted as a block, most legislatures contained political elites who substantively (if not descriptively) reflected these divisions. This model of competition meant that some economic inequalities were ignored; women, for instance, have never mobilised successfully through a mass political party despite widespread gender wage gaps. However, it also produced legislative actors with different stances on economic redistribution, taxation and welfare that represented (again to varying extents) the interests of different economic groups.

In the contemporary moment, the nature of partisan competition in many countries has changed. Scholars debate the extent of party realignment, but there is compelling evidence across multiple contexts that the relationship between social class and voting has shifted (Gingrich and Häusermann, 2015). Many voters now select political parties in part based on their values or so-called 'second-dimension' preferences, rather than primarily economic considerations. The result is that collectively, parties on the centre-left have a more middle-class and educated base, while workers, in some countries, are more likely to vote for populist right parties.

This shift in voting behaviour can create new forms of representative equality – for instance, it may encourage more representation of non-elite attitudes towards trade or immigration (Marx and Nguyen, 2016). However, one of the open questions in political contemporary research is what cultural realignment implies for the substantive representation of economic interests. Piketty (2020) argues that the shift in the class and cultural composition of the contemporary centre-left parties reduces the substantive representation of the interests of the working class in politics, whereas critics of his approach suggest that most culturally-left voters also demand substantial economic redistribution (Abou-Chadi and Hix, 2021).

Whether economic inequality leads to a shift in substantive representation is an open question. Traber et al. (2022) do find, across 10 European countries in the 2000s, that elite agendas did tend to reflect the political priorities of higher-status voter groups. In the UK, both Evans and Tilley (2017) and O'Grady (2022) look at the language and priorities of the Labour Party over time, finding that by some metrics, the party has become less representative of the demands of parts of the working class (but perhaps by others, more representative of new forms of precarity and inequalities of race and gender).

As inequality increases, and the economic interests of the population become more heterogeneous, parties may have an incentive to create broader nationalistic appeals through group identities (Shayo, 2009; Huber, 2017). Hacker and Pierson (2020) develop a model of 'plutocratic populism' to explain the electoral strategy of the US Republican Party in response to rising inequality. They argue that its aim of representing the interests of narrow groups of wealthy individuals while seeking a broad base of voters leads it to promote populist and culturally nationalist appeals alongside economically conservative stances towards taxation and welfare.

These arguments remain controversial, and the broader cross-national evidence here is mixed. Distributive politics remains alive and well in some high-inequality contexts (e.g. Spain), and parties making cultural appeals have succeeded in some low-inequality contexts (e.g. Denmark). The relationship between economic inequality and particular modes of political conflict, and ensuing substantive representation, then is not straightforward. Nonetheless, as we show below, the nature of substantive representation in the UK *has* changed – the Conservative and Labour parties increasingly represent cross-class coalitions of voters who share more geographically or culturally than they do economically, and nationalist mobilisation in Scotland and Wales has led to new cross-country splits in voting.

If we turn to a different conception of representation – descriptive representation – we see that all legislatures were historically highly unequal. In most countries, legislative and government elites come from a narrower range of social and economic backgrounds than the population as a whole (Cotta and Best, 2007; Carnes, 2013; Dal Bó et al., 2017). Legislators tend to be more educated, male, older, from majority ethnic groups and from professional backgrounds than the population at large. The relationship between descriptive and substantive representation is a

long-standing area of research, with mixed findings. However, there is some evidence that working-class legislators (Carnes, 2013), women (Wängnerud, 2009) and minorities (Broockman, 2013) do address different issues or devote more legislative energy and resources to issues related to their descriptive group.

In recent years, changes in the social structure and the rise of gender quotas have produced greater gender parity in legislatures. While most legislatures continue to have few low-income or low-education representatives, their lack of 'representativeness' on these dimensions is falling as population education rises. Thus, while political equality in descriptive representation may be increasing, the gap between lower-income voters, and elites, in absolute terms may also be rising.

Unequal responsiveness

Third, inequalities exist in the outputs of the democratic process. Policymakers may be more *responsive* to higher income or status groups than lower income or status groups, meaning that policies follow from their demands and interests more extensively. Research in recent years has looked at either the congruence between policy and the preferences of different groups of voters (or interest groups), meaning the correlation between the two, or the responsiveness of policy changes to shifts in preferences among groups of voters (or interest groups).

Much of this work comes from the US (Flavin, 2012; Gilens, 2012; Rigby and Wright, 2013; Gilens and Page, 2014; Bartels, 2016), but more recent work uncovers similar patterns in Europe (Giger, Rosset and Bernauer, 2012; Elsässer, Hense and Schäfer, 2018; Rosset and Stecker, 2019) and globally (Lupu and Warner, 2022). Gilens (2012) finds that when affluent citizens (defined as the top income decile) demand a policy at odds with the preferences of other groups, it passes about half of the time, whereas when poor and middle-income groups demand a policy at odds with the preferences of the affluent, it does not have a major effect on the likelihood of the legislature adopting the policy. Gilens concludes politics are more responsive to the interests of the affluent, whether through an electoral or an interest group channel. More recent studies investigate questions of unequal responsiveness in new ways – for instance, finding that US legislators' perceptions of citizens' demands are skewed towards more educated and conservative voters (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildemberger and Stokes, 2019), with recent work finding that this pattern travels beyond the US (Sevenans, Soontjens and Walgrave, 2022).

The empirical question of unequal responsiveness is deeply linked with questions of both unequal participation and representation.

One line of argument suggests a causal chain running from unequal participation to responsiveness via an electoral selection mechanism. This work argues that as the average voter is wealthier, older and more likely from a majority ethnic group than the average adult, it creates incentives for politicians to respond to these voters' interests (Anderson and Beramendi, 2008; Pontusson and Rueda, 2010; Avery, 2015; Schäfer and Schwander, 2019). These differences may continue in the post-electoral period, with male, more educated and conservative voters in the US more likely to contact politicians (e.g. Broockman and Skovron, 2018). For Anderson and Beramendi (2008), economic inequality creates a self-reinforcing process, depressing turnout among the poor, which in turn both allows the selection of less redistributive politicians and the production of less redistributive policy, which in turn allows for more economic inequality.

For others, unequal responsiveness is not primarily a product of upstream political inequalities in voting, but rather follows from a political process in which democratic mechanisms themselves are weak. In this literature, the power of non-electoral actors, namely monied interest groups (Bartels, 2016; Gilens and Page, 2014) or other racial or socially dominant groups (Strolovitch, 2008), to exert influence over politics means legislatures are simply less responsive to voters overall. Monied interest groups exercise influence in part by selecting candidates favourable to their demands via campaign contributions and mobilisation (Rhodes and Schaffner, 2017), and partly through post-electoral lobbying and information provision (Becher and Stegmueller, 2021). Indeed, interest groups often structure which issues even make it onto the political agenda in the first place, so looking at votes alone may be misleading (Drutman, 2015). Voters, even when they participate, are largely unable to effectively evaluate candidates and sanction politicians for unresponsive legislation, often following partisan cues rather than critically evaluating policies

(Achen and Bartels, 2017). When weak voter sanctioning meets strongly organised interest groups, the result, in Hacker and Pierson's (2008) evocative language, is politics that is fundamentally 'off center'.

Much of the above literature comes from the US context, which displays the extremes of lax campaign financing and highly organised lobby groups; however, Cagé (2020) finds a growth of monied interest groups in political campaigns more broadly. Culpepper (2010) further finds that in many areas of business regulation, such as corporate governance and financial reform, organised business interests dominate. While organised interests do not exclusively represent the wealthy, the decline of trade unions (particularly those representing lower-income and lower-education voters) has, in many cases, left fewer organised interest groups representing lower-income voters (Visser, 2019). The result is potential structural inequalities in responsiveness. Again, this literature suggests a vicious circle is possible. Rising income inequality may allow the wealthy to purchase more extra-democratic forms of political power, further limiting policy that would remediate inequality.

While it is relatively uncontroversial that some gaps in participation and descriptive representation exist, the academic literature debates the extent of unequal responsiveness. While the above-mentioned work finds evidence of unequal responsiveness to the preferences of the wealthy or unequal congruence between policy and group preferences, methodological and theoretical questions remain as to how to conceptualise unequal responsiveness and its normative implications.

Since the preferences of voters do not always diverge across income groups, most policy, most of the time, remains in line with the majority of voters (Wlezien, 1995; Enns, 2015). Findings of unequal congruence (Lupu and Warner, 2022) or responsiveness (Gilens, 2012) often rely on a small subset of policies in which preferences are strongly divided across groups. More generally, Elkjaer and Iversen (2020) argue that policy structures – for example, the welfare state – reflect the interests of a broader group of voters. Focusing on political inequality at the margin misses how structures of responsiveness remain in place overall. Policymakers opt not to cut popular redistributive policies precisely because these policies are popular, meaning that focusing on changes in economic policies ignores the high levels of representative support for redistributive institutions. In other words, the structural power of voters, in equilibrium, may not manifest as observable policy changes, leading us to overestimate unequal responsiveness. Finally, given that higher-education voters often take cues from elites themselves, the direction of causality in observed congruence is not always clear – do the wealthy lead policy, or learn about it from technocratic elites (which in turn suggests a more equal overall lack of responsiveness)?

Even if the degree of unequal responsiveness is uncertain, the body of evidence above suggests that it likely exists in some contexts, and that attention to both who votes and what incentive voting creates (*vis-à-vis* interest groups) remains crucial to understanding political inequality. Whether political systems correct rising inequality, then, depends on both whether voters react to it in ways that demand policy responses and whether politicians have incentives to listen to these voters. We show in the British case that shifts in policies may be more congruent with the preferences of some groups than others – however, these are not always the richest or most educated groups. Understanding these dynamics requires thinking about how the splitting of various social groups substantively (due to realignment), combined with the dynamics of the electoral system, can create varying incentives for responsiveness to the different groups of voters, rather than a generic 'median voter'.

Unequal legitimacy

Finally, political inequalities may emerge not just in policy but in broader system legitimacy. Across many democracies, lower-income citizens express lower levels of satisfaction with democracy (Mayne and Hakhverdian, 2017). They perceive democratic processes as less representative, and often express lower feelings of political efficacy – the perception that their interests and voices are taken account of by elites (Marx and Nguyen 2016).

There is some evidence that gaps in efficacy and participation between low- and high-income voters grow with economic inequality. Some argue these steps are interdependent, creating a self-reinforcing process: political inequalities in participation create inequalities in

representation, which in turn reduce responsiveness, allowing for greater economic inequality, which in turn depresses the resources and efficacy of lower-income voters participating in politics (Solt, 2008; Houle, 2018). Even if the connection between political inequalities in participation and policy is less certain, political inequalities may have important social implications. The result is that political inequality may reinforce inequalities in economic and social power, with unequal policies systematically reproducing inequality in other spheres – the market, the household, or broader social order.

How politically unequal is the UK? How has political inequality changed over time? What is the relationship between upstream inequalities in participation and representation and downstream inequalities in responsiveness and legitimacy? While this chapter can only scratch the surface of the questions, we use the framework above to examine political inequalities, and their connection to economic inequalities, in the UK.

3. Political inequality in participation and representation

We now turn to an empirical analysis of political inequality in the United Kingdom. We start in this section by looking at political inequality in terms of participation and representation. For participation, we examine self-reported turnout in General Elections from 1964 to 2019. For representation, we look at the determinants of vote choice in those same General Elections. In both cases, we draw from the British Election Study, which has fielded consistent questions at elections for several decades. We structure this section around three distinct forms of economic inequality – income, education and wealth – and explore each in turn. We examine the relationship between these core types of economic inequality and our two political inequality outcomes. Our interest is in the degree to which inequality in resources shapes both participation in the political process itself and the voting coalitions that ultimately manifest themselves in different governments of the era.

Income inequality

We begin with the most common measure of economic inequality used by scholars: income inequality.

Income inequality in the UK rose rapidly in the 1980s, with a more variable pattern in the post-1990s period. According to the Office for National Statistics, the pre-tax-and-transfer Gini coefficient rose from 36.8 in 1977 to 49.5 by 1993, with a continuing increase in the 2000s and a slight fall in the 2010s. The post-tax-and-transfer Gini coefficient remains lower, but also rose from 25.5 in 1977 to 33.7 in 1993, with again a flatter trend in the 2000s and 2010s.²

As other chapters in this review highlight, there are multiple causes for the changes in both pre- and post-tax-and-transfer inequality, including structural changes in the labour market (in pay, self-employment and working time), changes in family structures and changes in the structure of social benefits. The result has been both a rise in those with low pay and more insecure incomes, and a rise in relative earnings at the top of the distribution.

Given the close connection between social/occupational class and earned incomes, this focus on labour market inequality has been the standard lens through which scholars have viewed the structure of British electoral politics since 1945. Through the 1950s to the 1980s, there was a relatively sharp class gradient on voting in the UK (Evans, 1999) which also manifested in a relatively steep income gradient on voting: lower-income people tended to vote for Labour and higher-income people for the Conservative Party. Because the distribution of income across place is not flat – either within or across regions – these patterns also meant, in Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system, substantial geographic variation in Labour and Conservative support.

The rise of income inequality rests in part on a shift in the class structure in the UK. In Britain, as elsewhere, class has become a more heterogeneous concept, with the rise of new working-class

² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/householdincomeinequalityfinancial/financialyearending2021>.

professions in services and the care sector (often with a heavily female labour force) and new middle-class professions in the public sector (Oesch, 2013). At the same time, rates of unionisation have fallen dramatically, with 13.2 million trade union members in 1979, falling to 6.67 million by 2019–20.³ Thus the experiences of British workers have become more heterogeneous, as has their political and economic mobilisation.

The consensus in the literature is that the class bases of British political voting have shifted considerably. In particular, this can be seen in a convergence in voting patterns between working-class and middle-class groups (the latter often split into 'old' (managers) and 'new' (professional) groups) in both political parties. That is to say, working-class voters, traditionally Labour, have shifted rightwards and middle-class voters, traditionally Conservative, have shifted leftwards. This convergence was particularly pronounced in the 1990s. This pattern of a reshaping of social class gradients reflects a wider trend in vote choice across European political parties, particularly social democratic parties (Gingrich and Häusermann, 2015). What there is less consensus on is whether class as a meaningful political concept has narrowed. Evans and Tilley (2017) argue that class groups maintain distinct preferences on a range of issues, including economic redistribution.

We should be careful, however, about assuming that social class feeds directly into income gaps. Educational gaps may be just as profoundly connected to class. Indeed, as Piketty (2020) argues, one of the striking features of contemporary politics is the increasing difference between education and income effects on voting. In the following subsection, we will indeed see that the relationship of education to vote choice has narrowed and in fact flipped over the past few decades, in ways that differ substantially from income. Thus, to understand class representation and its shifts, we need to look at both.

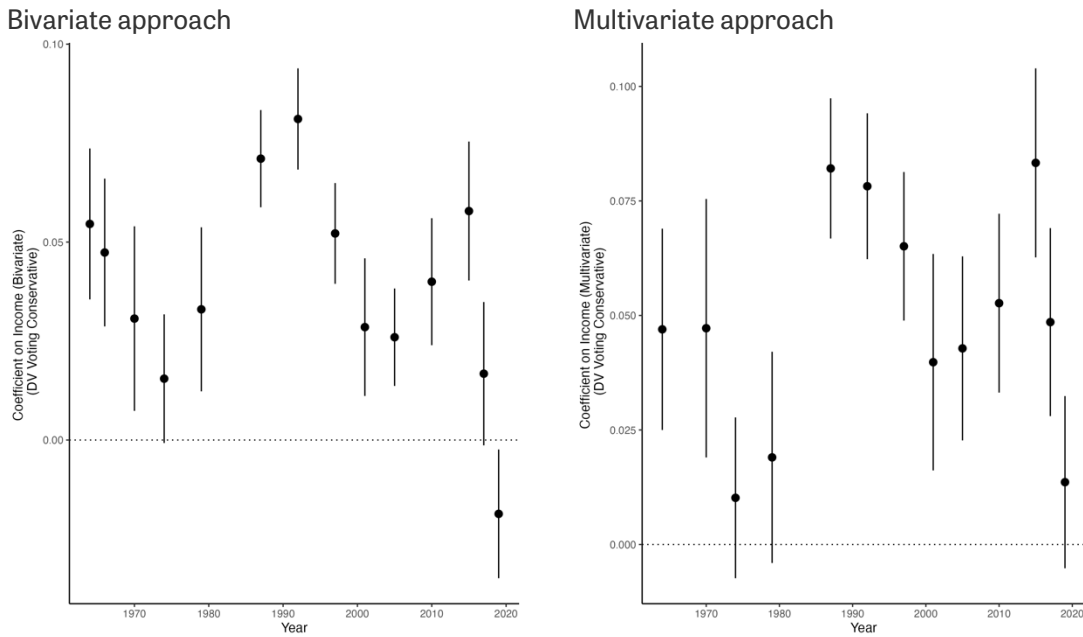
We begin with income. We use the British Election Study question on household income, which typically has 12–14 categories, take the midpoints of these income categories, and calculate estimates of the 20th, 40th, 60th and 80th percentiles of the income distribution of the sample. We then place respondents into the five resulting income quintiles, which gives us a comparable household income measure across surveys. We then run a series of linear probability models estimating (a) whether the respondent voted Conservative and (b) whether they voted at all. We look at both simple bivariate models with only income as a predictor and multivariate models including controls for age, gender, education and homeownership (we omit attitudinal controls since it is not clear these are causally prior to partisanship and our interest is in simple demographic models with consistent controls across elections).

Figures 2 and 3 look at the relationship between household income and (a) voting Conservative and (b) turning out to vote, respectively, using British Election Study data for General Elections from 1964 to 2019 (excluding 1983, which lacks income data). The left panel of each figure shows estimates of the bivariate coefficients for income, whereas the right panel shows estimates of the coefficient for income from a multivariate regression including measures of age, gender, education and homeownership, both with 95% confidence intervals.

The temporal patterns are consistent across the bivariate and multivariate approaches. We begin by examining the relationship between household income and voting for the Conservative Party in Figure 2. We can see that across almost every election – save one striking exception in 2019 – higher-income people have voted Conservative. This pattern was relatively weaker in the 1970s and early 2000s and strongest in the 1987 and 1992 elections, but it remained sizeable up through at least the 2015 General Election. Since then, there has been a sharp drop-off in the income / Conservative vote relationship such that, in the bivariate case at least, the relationship is now negative!

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/trade-union-statistics-2021>.

Figure 2. Income and voting Conservative, 1964–2019



As we shall see when we turn to education and housing, this pattern appears related to a realignment of British politics around a group-based or cultural dimension, of which vote choice in the EU membership referendum appears to be the defining factor. Still, even controlling for age, education and homeownership, the previously positive relationship between income and voting Conservative has vanished. If we take the average Conservative vote and average income by respondents in each region and correlate these for each election, we find that whereas up until 2010 there was a strong positive relationship between regional wealth and Conservative vote share (in sample means), in 2019 there was a weak negative relationship. Across people and across regions, traditional class-voting patterns appear to have broken down.

Figure 3. Income and turnout, 1964–2019

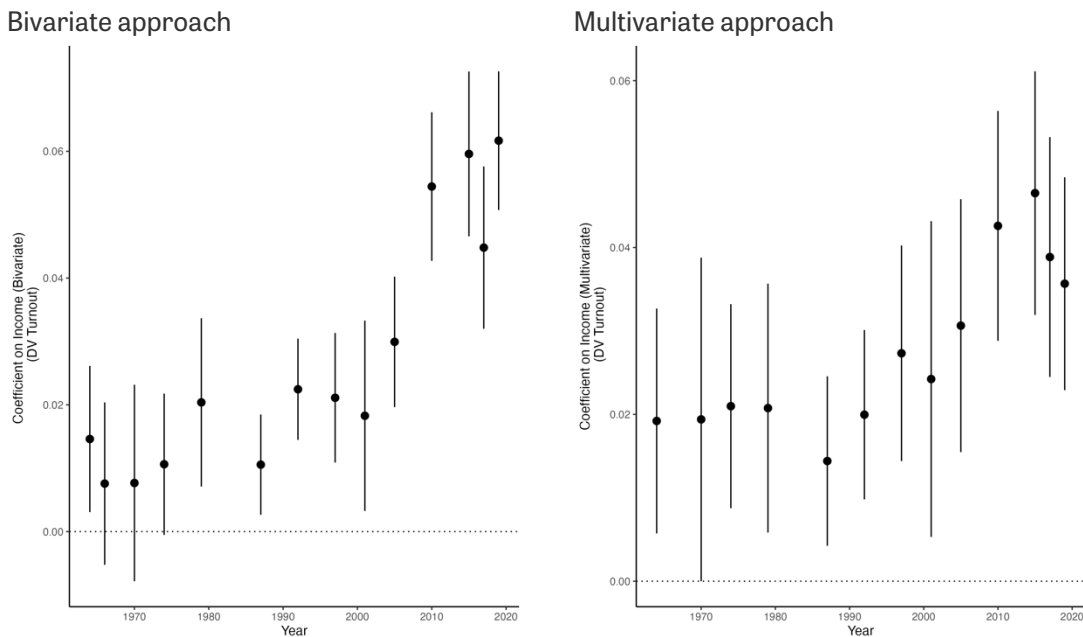


Figure 3 examines the relationship between income and turning out to vote over the same General Elections. Here we see an almost monotonic increase over time in the 'turnout advantage' of higher income groups – even if we control for other determinants of turnout such as age. Notably, this does not appear to have been affected by the political realignment since the Brexit referendum. Richer people are now substantially more likely to turn out than poorer people. Moving from the poorest to the richest group (up four quintiles) is associated with a 20 percentage point higher probability of turning out in elections since 2010, as compared with a level of under 10% until 2000.

The greater propensity of richer individuals to turn out is not specific to the UK. Work by political scientists suggests that this is systematic across OECD countries and is higher in countries with relatively high income inequality (Anderson and Beramendi, 2012).

Unlike the case of vote choice, the pattern relating income to turnout *is* consistent with the relationship between occupational class and turnout identified by Evans and Tilley (2017), which shows a widening of the turnout gap between working-class and middle-class (however defined) citizens.

How should we think about these patterns between household income and vote behaviour in the light of rising income inequality from the 1970s until the early 2000s? Our five-point household income scale can only capture a limited degree of this rise in inequality since much has been driven by inequality growth within the top quintile. With regard to vote choice, rising income inequality in the 1980s did coincide with a growing income gradient in voting Conservative. Stable income inequality since the 2000s has coincided with a decline in the income gradient. But it is not obvious that there are causal relationships at play here. The overall rise in turnout inequality too has been ongoing since the 1980s but reached its peak once inequality stabilised and even declined somewhat.

Education inequality

The second form of economic inequality we examine is closely related, but distinct from, the first: educational inequality.

The educational composition of Britain's population has changed dramatically over the past few decades. As recently as 1998, almost 40% of working-age adults (25- to 64-year-olds) had failed to complete an upper-secondary education. Only around 24% had completed a university degree. Today, just over 50% of working-age adults have completed a university degree. By contrast, the percentage of this group who have not completed upper-secondary education has declined to just over 18%.⁴

The 1944 Education Act increased the school-leaving age, ensuring that all children had some exposure to secondary education in England and Wales, with similar shifts in the Scottish education system. However, the structure of provision and qualifications remained variable. Only a small minority of pupils in the early 1950s and 1960s completed a secondary qualification, with many leaving school at the compulsory age without a formal qualification. Reforms in 1965 introduced the 'Certificate of Secondary Education' to complement the existing 'Ordinary-level' lower-secondary qualification, and later reforms further increased the leaving age. Nonetheless, by the 1980s, large numbers of pupils in England and Wales continued to leave school without a lower-secondary (let alone upper-secondary) qualification.

The creation of the GCSE qualification in 1988 created a more common structure in England and Wales (with reforms in Scotland also harmonising aspects of the qualification structure). Through the 1990s, the number of pupils completing school with five GCSEs dramatically expanded, with a knock-on effect on the completion of upper-secondary qualifications, including both the primarily academic A levels / Scottish Highers and vocational qualifications. In England and Wales, reforms in 2014 increased the education-leaving age to 17 and in 2015 to 18.

⁴ Data available at <https://data.oecd.org/eduatt/adult-education-level.htm>.

At the same time, reforms to the structure of higher education, including the conversion of former polytechnics into degree-granting universities, dramatically expanded access to higher education. The government combined these shifts, since 1997, with an expansion of tuition fees. Tertiary enrolment dramatically increased, with large shares of pupils now attending higher education.

These shifts have dramatically changed educational inequality. Defining educational inequality is not simple. If we measure it as a distribution inversely related to the proportion of people with a university degree, or as positively related to the proportion of people without qualifications, it has clearly declined. For Goldin and Katz (2010), the supply of education is negatively related to wider inequality measures and so, by this logic, educational inequality in the UK has declined substantially.

If we measure it as a relationship between social background and attainment (a relative rather than absolute measure), the relationship is more complex, in terms of both secondary attainment and tertiary enrolment (Blanden and Macmillan, 2016). There remains a family background gradient in educational performance in terms of test scores, but the mass expansion of secondary qualifications has meant that most children (of all backgrounds) now complete secondary education with at least some type of qualification. At the tertiary level, there remains a background gradient in the likelihood of attendance, but access to tertiary education has expanded well beyond the small elite of the past.

A third way to think about educational inequality is the translation of educational qualifications into labour market experiences. The mass expansion of higher education might have been expected to produce a fall in the 'skill premium', but it still exists, suggesting, as Goldin and Katz (2010) do, that the demand for skills continues to outpace supply. Blundell, Green and Jin (2022) show that the premium associated with higher education has been 'extraordinarily flat' since 1993. However, the mass expansion of skills (combined with the above-mentioned changes in the labour market) does mean that those without higher-level skills face an increased likelihood of low-paid and more precarious work. Goos and Manning (2007) describe this as a polarisation of the labour market between 'lovely' and 'lousy' jobs. Work demanding lower levels of formal qualification is often low-paid and more precarious in terms of contract structure (access to benefits, security) and hours of employment. Moreover, the structure of formal skills, and work that employs them, is not geographically flat. While cities have both a high share of 'lovely' and 'lousy' jobs, the former are under-represented in many rural areas and smaller towns.

At the same time, amongst the more educated, the rise of 'new middle-class' voters, who include socio-cultural professionals in comparative work by Oesch (2013) and Gingrich and Häusermann (2015), suggests that there is an emergent class group defined by university education and increasingly employed in the professions and in 'non-routine cognitive' work in the knowledge economy across Europe (Iversen and Soskice, 2019). As educational inequality has declined because of growing university enrolment, this group has become an ever larger share of the electorate and scholars have argued that their political preferences are quite distinct from those of more traditional middle classes, being substantially more socially liberal and generally more supportive of left-wing economic policies.

Educational elitism may have declined as first mass upper-secondary and then mass higher education became the norm. But, as we shall see, what has not declined is polarisation in political behaviour by education – which in turn may explain commentary that views education in the UK as especially unequal. Here we look at different attainment rates in the UK, with a particular focus on three categories of education – completion of a university degree, completion of a full course of upper-secondary education (equivalent to A levels or Scottish Highers), and leaving education without either of these qualifications (a large group including those without any qualifications and those whose highest attainment was either their CSEs / O levels or GCSEs).

We now turn to examine the relationship between educational achievement and vote choice and turnout in General Elections from 1964 to 2019. Here we use a harmonised three-level education variable: less than full secondary education (up to CSEs / O levels / GCSEs), upper-secondary or equivalent (A levels), and degree-holder.

Figure 4. Education and voting Conservative, 1964–2019

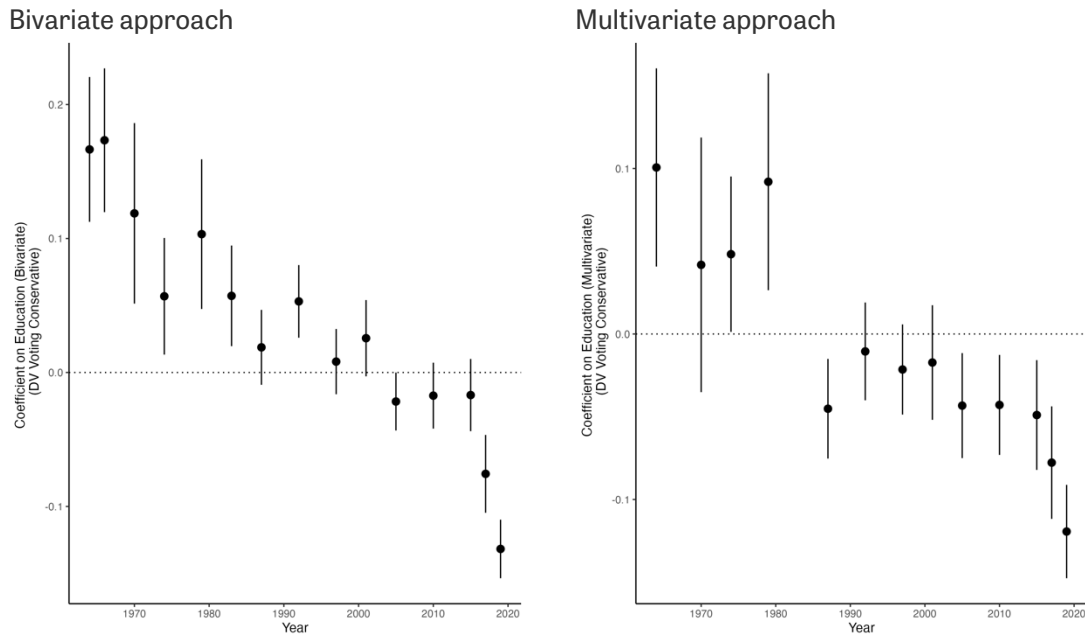
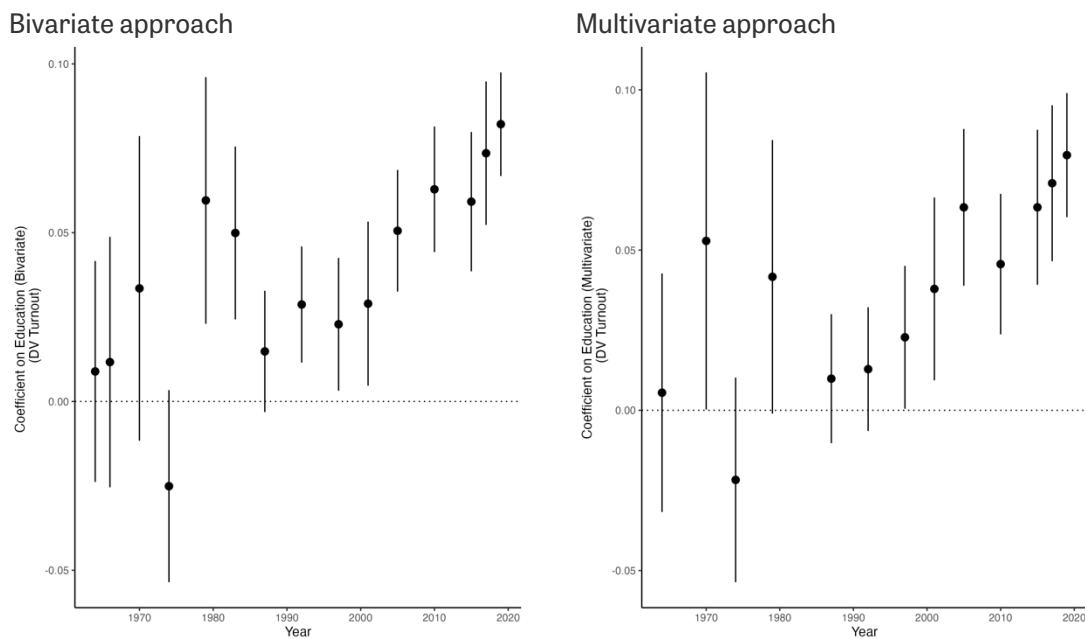


Figure 5. Education and turnout, 1964–2019



We begin with Figure 4, which shows the coefficients from a regression of voting Conservative on the education variable. The left panel is a simple bivariate regression, whereas the right panel is the coefficient from a multivariate regression including age, gender, income and homeownership.

In both cases, we see a very clear pattern: whereas education was associated with voting Conservative in the 1970s – with a point shift along the scale associated with between a 5 and 15 percentage point higher probability of voting Conservative, that relationship flat-lined and became borderline negative in the 1990s. In the last two General Elections (2017 and 2019) the relationship between education and voting Conservative has become sharply negative – a point shift in the education variable is associated with an approximately 10 percentage point lower probability of voting Conservative.

If we break our education variable into measures for having a degree or having upper-secondary education – with lower-secondary the omitted category – we find degree-holders were almost 25 percentage points less likely to vote Conservative in 2019 than people who did not complete upper-secondary education. Completing upper-secondary education was associated with being 5 percentage points less likely to vote Conservative compared with not completing it. Hence holding a university degree appears to be the key factor driving voting behaviour.

Looking at turnout, in Figure 5, we see that higher education has been associated with a much higher propensity to turn out at least since the 1970s. By 2019, this had grown to its highest level: a 1 point increase in education is associated with around an 8 percentage point higher likelihood of voting.

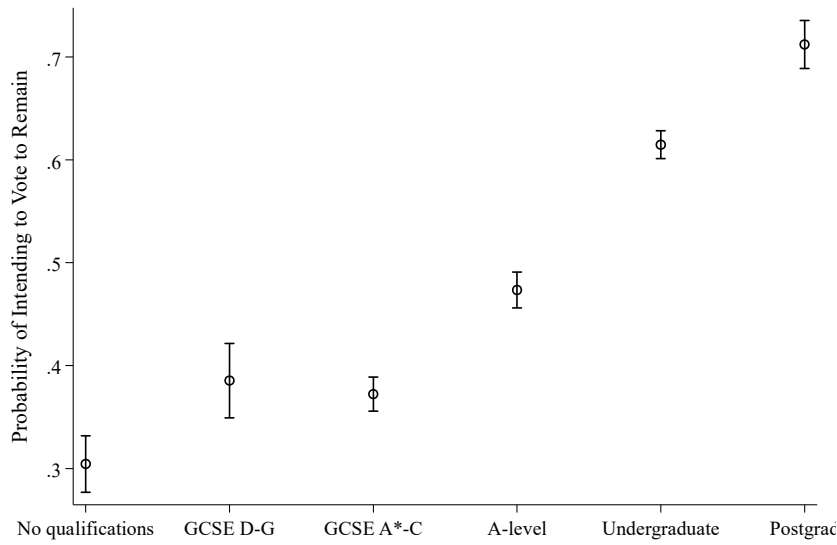
How can we reconcile these two findings? As discussed above, it is not clear that educational inequality has increased in the UK, unlike the case for income and wealth inequalities. Instead, the UK has substantially increased educational achievement at both the upper-secondary and degree levels over the past four decades. What has changed is that polarisation over education has entirely flipped since the 1960s. Arguably, the 1980s through the early 2000s were the period of least educational political polarisation. The mass expansion of higher education has created a reversal of preferences – a once elite group of university graduates, whose income and wealth would also push them to vote Conservative, have been replaced by a mass cohort, whose university education is less scarce, less elite, and more likely to result in moderate pay in socio-cultural professions. The recent success of the Conservative Party in electoral terms might seem at odds with graduates being more likely to turn out and to vote Labour in recent years. However, this marginal difference in turnout is countered by the sheer numbers of people who did not complete university, or indeed upper-secondary education.

What explains why the Conservative Party has become more attractive to voters with lower education over the past decades? This appears to be the result of a partial realignment of British politics along a cultural dimension – something we also see when we look at income and wealth inequality and voting. This is a pattern that is also occurring across Europe. Gingrich and Häusermann (2015) show that left parties have largely shifted to a support base of middle-income, urban voters in socio-cultural professions and have lost much of their previous low-education working-class support from small towns and rural areas. That support has drifted in different directions across Europe. Clearly populist right parties have been some of the chief beneficiaries in countries from France to Denmark to Sweden.

Cultural polarisation in Britain has been less extreme than elsewhere, and like many centre-right parties in Europe, the Conservative Party has been more supportive of same-sex marriage, decarbonisation and racial equality than centre-right parties in some other contexts. However, as the UK's majoritarian electoral system has proved challenging for third parties, even UKIP, who were at their peak able to command 13% of the General Election vote (and around a quarter in European elections), the Conservative Party has picked up a number of culturally conservative voters from different social backgrounds. Ultimately, it was the Brexit referendum and its aftermath that shifted low-education voters towards the Conservative Party, as can be seen clearly in Figure 4.

Figure 6 shows predicted probabilities of intending to vote Remain from the British Election Survey pre-referendum survey in 2016. There is a very clear educational gradient, even when we break it down into more educational categories. People with less than an upper-secondary education had a probability of intending to vote Remain of less than 40%. Graduates and postgraduates by contrast had a probability of over 60%, with people with upper-secondary qualifications split almost evenly. Ultimately the greater weight of numbers in the lower education groups – despite their typically lower propensity to vote – told for the final result of the referendum.

Figure 6. Education and Brexit vote intention, 2016



By the 2019 General Election, British party politics had largely realigned along these cultural divides that had clearly been brewing before the referendum but had not been fully activated. Since 2016, education has been a negative predictor of support for the Conservatives in General Elections. There has been a temptation among commentators to attribute this pattern to the distribution of education across age groups in Britain. It is certainly true that university education was much less common among people who are today aged over 50 than among younger generations. Is it education, then, or age that is driving voting behaviour?

However, if, as in Figure 7, we look at voting by age, especially once we control for education, income and other demographics, it is not obvious that age per se has become more important. In fact, older people have consistently been more likely to vote for the Conservative Party since the 1960s, with a decade of age associated with around a 5 percentage point increased probability of voting Conservative, all else equal.

Figure 7. Age and voting Conservative, 1964–2019

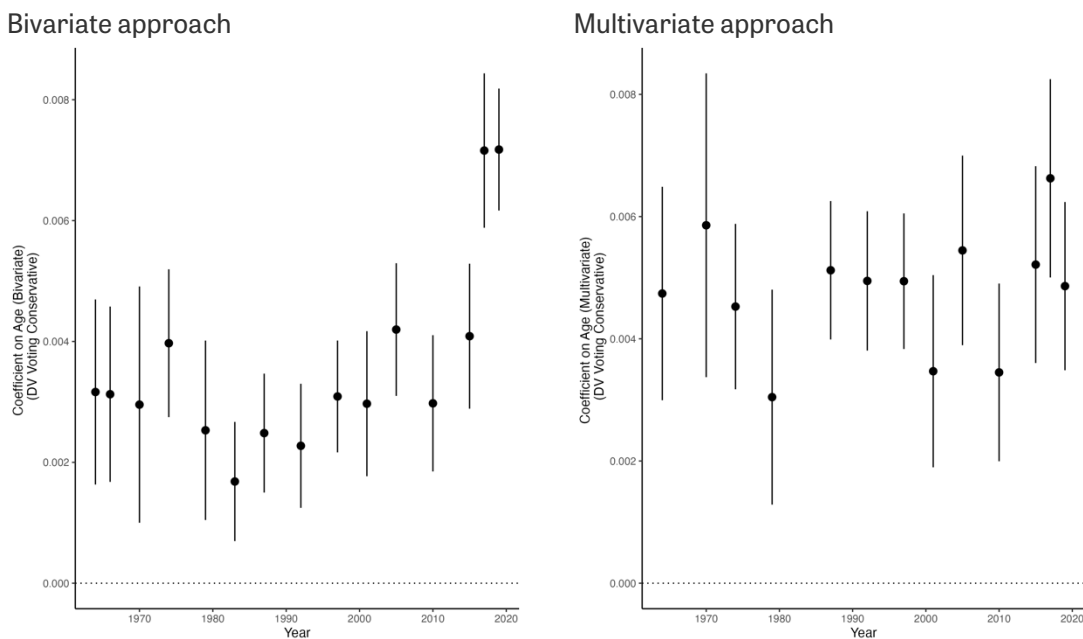


Figure 8. Education and voting Conservative in 2019 by age group

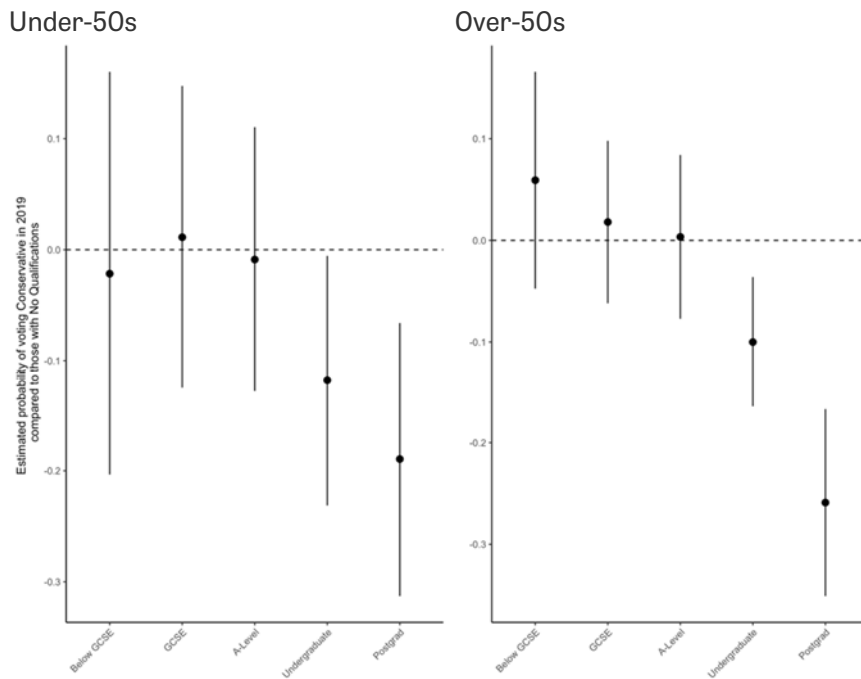
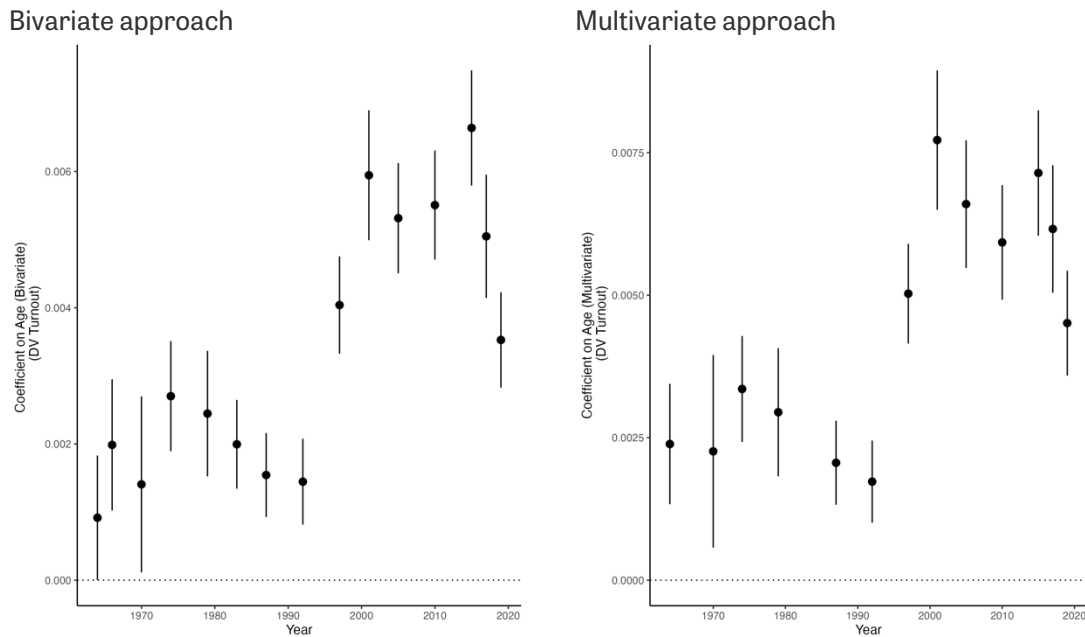


Figure 9. Age and turnout, 1964–2019



Moreover, Figure 8 shows that if we take voting behaviour in the 2019 General Election and look in the British Election Survey at how vote choice depends on education, the pattern is very similar across people aged both over and under 50. Bluntly, having a degree drives both younger and older voters away from the Conservative Party. Since degree-holders are a minority of the electorate, this polarisation on education – regardless of age group – has proven beneficial for the Conservative Party in recent elections.

Where we do see changes over time is in the relative participation in voting of younger and older citizens (see Figure 9). From 1997 onwards, there has been a sharp shift in generational patterns, with older people substantially more likely to vote. The age gap in voting has increased from

about 2.5% per decade to around 6% per decade. To the degree that policy responsiveness in the UK appears more targeted to older citizens – as we discuss in Section 5 – this differential degree of political participation appears the cause.

Wealth inequality: homeownership

The UK is a highly densely populated country with a core global city and generations of landholding wealth. On the face of it, it is not surprising that wealth inequality, particularly as embodied in residential property, is politically salient. But for most of Britain's recent political history, the politics of wealth looked fairly similar to the politics of income, in that those people who owned expensive property tended to have higher household incomes.

Moreover, Britain's well-developed mortgage market played an important role in connecting incomes to assets, as people from low-wealth backgrounds but with high relative incomes could borrow their way into the property market. This is a sharp contrast to the type of housing market that prevails, for example, in southern Europe where homeownership rates are high but property largely changes hands through inheritance. The UK's experience also contrasts with that of many continental European countries, particularly the German-speaking ones, where homeownership rates remain low today, often under 50%.

The UK in the 1980s, then, had fairly high homeownership rates by international standards and a liquid mortgage market that facilitated transactions. People with high incomes tended to purchase expensive houses. People around the middle of the income distribution were also generally homeowners, and lower-income people were confined to the social housing market and the then small private rental market. Homeowners, especially those in more expensive properties, tended to vote Conservative. Social renters voted Labour. The politics of wealth looked very much like the politics of income.

Over the past three decades, these two types of politics have become decoupled. Areas with expensive housing are no longer reliable Conservative constituencies. Many areas with cheap housing and social housing have split with Labour. And age has become as important as income in defining who owns expensive property. Or who owns property at all. How did this happen and what does it mean for the relationship between wealth inequality and politics in the contemporary UK?

The contemporary politics of British housing have their origins in a series of structural changes to the housing market in the 1980s. In 1980, large proportions of the population still lived in social housing, which from its origins in the interwar years had expanded dramatically during post-war reconstruction. Social housing had become increasingly politically contentious – both main political parties had advocated publicly built and provided housing in the 1950s but for different reasons. For the Conservatives of the era, it was aimed at the poor – cleared from urban slums – who could not otherwise get shelter. For Labour politicians, council housing was viewed in the same tones as the NHS or comprehensive education – an integral part of the welfare state that would extend right into the middle classes (Boughton, 2018).

In 1980, the Thatcher government massively increased the ability of council tenants to purchase their social housing through Right to Buy. Local authorities were compelled to sell public housing at a large discount to tenants, with the maximum discount rising from 50% to 70% over the 1980s. Within seven years, over a million houses had changed hands. By 1990, council house purchases amounted to around 6% of all properties (Boughton, 2018).

At the same time, the lowering of interest rates and taming of inflation in the mid 1980s encouraged a growth in mortgage-purchased private housing and the first of the UK's modern wave of housing booms. Between 1985 and 1988, house prices rose by over 10% per annum. This was followed by a crash beginning in 1989 and deepening through the early 1990s recession. But thereafter began the long slow climb to 2008 in British house prices, which reached unprecedentedly high multiples of income.

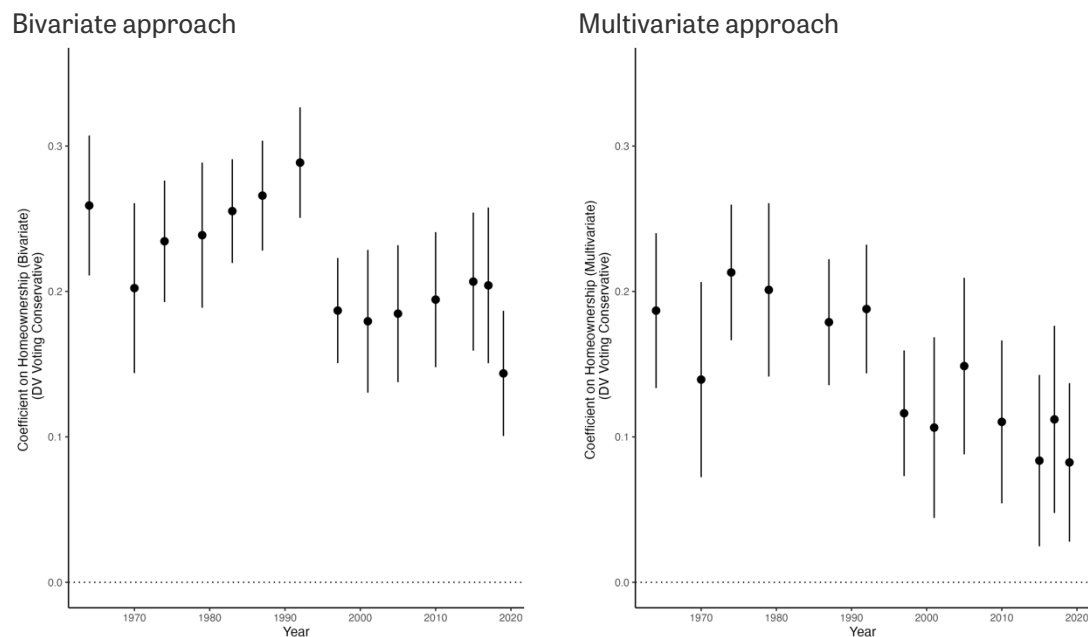
Right to Buy and the private housing boom marked the final upward leap in British homeownership rates. Over the 1980s, the homeownership rate increased by 12 percentage

points to a level roughly equivalent to today's. The political consequences of this surge in homeownership were roughly what Margaret Thatcher would have hoped for. Studlar, McAllister and Ascui (1990) showed that not only were homeowners a core base of the Conservatives' General Election victory of 1987 but that previous council house tenants were crucial switchers.

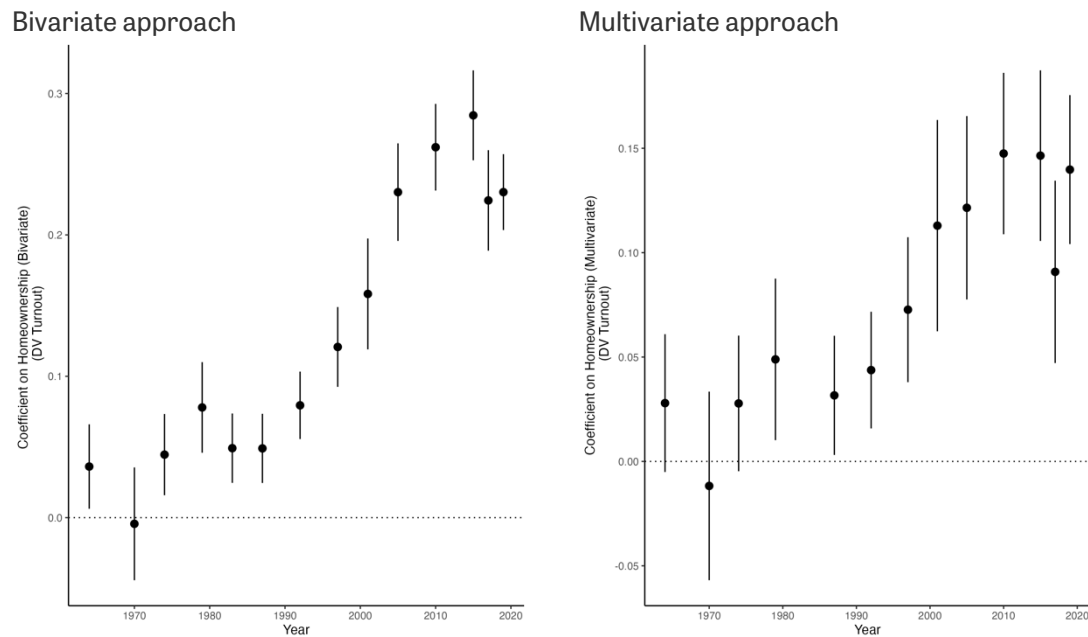
Using multiple waves of the British Election Study dating back to the General Election of 1964 and up to that of 2019, we can look at the relationship between homeownership and (a) voting for the Conservative Party and (b) turnout. As with our earlier analyses of income and education in the British Election Study panel, we look at the coefficients from (a) a bivariate regression of voting behaviour on homeownership and (b) a multivariate analysis including age, gender, income and education.

Figure 10 begins with the relationship between homeownership and voting Conservative over the past six decades. The left panel shows the bivariate regression coefficients (with 95% confidence intervals). Across the whole period, it has been the case that homeowners are more likely to vote Conservative. From 1970 to 1992, that relationship appeared to be strengthening, buttressing the Thatcher era strategy of Right to Buy. Homeowners had a probability of voting Conservative 25–30 percentage points higher than non-owners. However, there was a sharp fall in the relationship – to around 20 percentage points – following the 1997 General Election as New Labour captured homeowners (as well as marking Labour's best electoral performance in general across the period). That relationship appears fairly constant thereafter, though perhaps with a drop-off in 2019. The right panel shows the multivariate coefficients – hence controlling for age, income, gender and education. Here we see a generally reduced magnitude, though with a similar disjuncture in 1997. Overall, we can conclude that there remains a Conservative advantage among homeowners but it has been more modest in recent years.

Figure 10. Homeownership and voting Conservative, 1964–2019



We now turn to look at the propensity to vote at all in Figure 11. Here we see a more dramatic change in both the bivariate and multivariate analyses. In the 1960s and 1970s, homeowners were only marginally more likely (perhaps around 5 percentage points) to vote than non-homeowners. By the mid 2000s, this had increased dramatically to around 25 percentage points in the bivariate analysis (15 percentage points in the multivariate analysis). So, to the degree that homeowners in Britain find it politically easy to protect their assets' prices and restrict development, much is likely to depend on their much higher propensity to vote at all. While we cannot draw any causal conclusions about British housing policy since the 1960s, the fact that renters have become ever less likely to vote relative to homeowners is likely to have reduced their effective political ability to lobby against policies that favour existing owners.

Figure 11. Homeownership and turnout, 1964–2019

Wealth inequality: regional

It is not only homeownership per se that connects British housing markets to politics. The long housing boom from the early 1990s to the late 2000s also magnified differences in house prices across – and indeed within – regions.

The value of housing in the UK, as well as the structure of housing tenure, has political implications, not least because local house prices are one of the most effective ways of distinguishing cross-regional economic differences. Unlike the case of income, house prices are tied to specific localities. Furthermore, they also reflect the stock of economic value in a location rather than its current flow. Finally, median house prices tend to vary more than median incomes across the UK. Hence examining house prices helps us to understand the political consequences of growing regional inequalities in Britain.

Britain's electoral system amplifies the importance of growing wealth inequality across regions. First past the post is a geographically concentrated system, which means that it is difficult for parties to assemble coalitions of voters who are thinly spread geographically. Instead, parties will focus on winning pluralities within constituencies and concentrate their resources on 'swing districts', potentially ignoring homogeneous, 'captured' areas and support bases.

Finally, rising and unequal house prices might have direct political implications for homeowners. A recent wave of scholarly work in political science has shown that owners of more expensive housing appear to have quite distinct preferences from those owning cheaper housing on both first-dimension (economic) and second-dimension (cultural) politics.

Preferences on first-dimension politics refer to preferences over the economic dimension of politics, anchored between support for higher taxes and redistribution and support for lower taxes and redistribution. Since most taxation falls on flows of income (either directly as income taxation or indirectly as consumption taxation), the political science literature has long found a strong correlation between higher income and greater support for lower taxes and spending, though this has weakened in recent years.

It is not entirely obvious whether individuals should react in a similar fashion when the value of assets they own increases. On the one hand, there is a superficial similarity in that greater wealth means greater lifetime resources, which presumably correlates with less support for taxation of

those resources. On the other hand, wealth itself is taxed irregularly, particularly in the UK, which lacks an annual wealth tax (unlike, for example, local property taxation in the US or bona fide wealth taxes in Switzerland and France). It is not obvious that an increase in property prices ought to make homeowners in the UK more tax-averse if any knock-on increase in taxes only comes on death (inheritance) or house purchase (stamp duty).

Analysis of the British Household Panel Survey in Ansell (2014) shows a strong indication that, even net of transitory and average income over the panel, rising house prices are associated with less support for a suite of redistributive policies, including for full employment, and less agreement with 'left-wing' social attitudes such as 'there is one rule for the rich and one for the poor' and 'ordinary people don't share in the country's wealth'. This finding holds using both individual-level estimates of their own housing value and local median house prices. Intriguingly, when house prices decline individuals appear to respond by expressing more economically left-wing values.

In a similar analysis of the American National Election Survey, Ansell (2014) finds that homeowners in metropolitan statistical areas with greater house price increases are less supportive of the Social Security old-age pensions programme, and indeed within the panel set-up of the data are more likely to become less supportive over the panel. And in the same paper, a cross-sectional analysis of 19 countries in the International Social Survey Program shows that individuals with greater estimated equity value in their house are less likely to support government responsibility for narrowing the gap between rich and poor. Moreover, this apparent effect on preferences carries over into vote choice. Work in Sweden by Persson and Martinsson (2018) using fine-grained data from the Swedish Tax Registry finds that rising asset prices are strongly associated with voting for centre-right parties.

Scholars have also found 'first-dimension' effects of housing prices in terms of economic voting – that is, the willingness to reward politicians for rising house prices, regardless of their partisan hue. Larsen et al. (2019) show that in Denmark, voters appear to support the incumbent more where local house price rises were larger. Han and Shin (2021) extend this to aggregate analysis of elections across 16 countries and microdata in the British Household Panel Survey, also finding that house price increases – in the aggregate and in the particular – appear associated with increased incumbent support, *especially* when the incumbent is a centre-right party.

This raises an interesting question in the British context, which is what the effects of rising house prices were on the New Labour government in power during 1997 to 2010, coterminous with the bulk of Britain's historic housing boom (and in the last two years, its crash during the Great Recession). We saw in Figure 10 that 1997 marked a shift in the relationship between homeownership and vote choice, with homeowners moving somewhat away from the Conservatives from that election onwards. Nonetheless, homeowners have continued to favour the Conservatives by around 20 percentage points since that date.

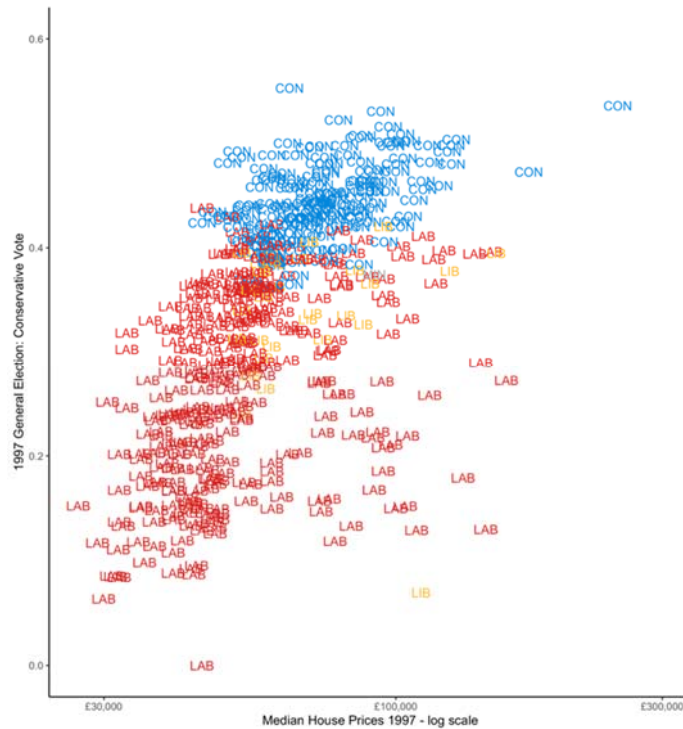
When we look at constituency house prices and voting behaviour, we also see that those areas with higher house prices tended to favour the Conservatives in 1997. The 108 constituencies in England with the lowest house prices all voted Labour in 1997, and 43 out of 50 of the constituencies with the highest house prices voted Conservative. Figure 12 shows the overall pattern for 1997. What is notable is that despite the overall positive correlation between house prices and vote choice, Labour was making inroads with a number of wealthier constituencies, largely in London, as can be seen in the south-east of the graph.

The fact that New Labour performed relatively well with homeowners in general and was winning a growing number of affluent, high-price constituencies may help to explain the general pro-homeowner veneer of New Labour's housing policy. An important recent article by Chou and Dancygier (2021) argues that New Labour deliberately moved away from its voter base in social housing (and to some degree private rental accommodation) to focus on attracting homeowners, particularly in well-to-do urban areas. It finds that Labour's coalition of support in London shifted strongly towards professionals and intermediate non-manual professions (over 50% of support, up from a third in the 1980s) and away from manual workers (from 40% to around 30% of support). Chou and Dancygier find that Labour wards with higher incomes in London saw much larger reductions in council housing as the party shifted towards support for gentrification. And

they quote a Labour Lambeth councillor on the behaviour of the new middle-class base: 'Yes, they'd be Conservative anywhere else, but Labour in London. They read *Guardian*, *Independent*, vote Labour, many work in the public sector, doctors, teachers, civil servants'.

Labour's success in attracting middle-class, high-education voters, often homeowners in expensive areas, began to dissolve traditional patterns of voting on income, education and wealth lines. Rising inequality in income and wealth was thus able to coincide with Labour's dominance at the polls. However, the greatest shift in this pattern of realignment, as we saw earlier in our analysis of education, came as the centre-right began to attract Labour's traditional base of poorer, less-educated workers from less-expensive areas.

Figure 12. House prices and voting in the 1997 General Election

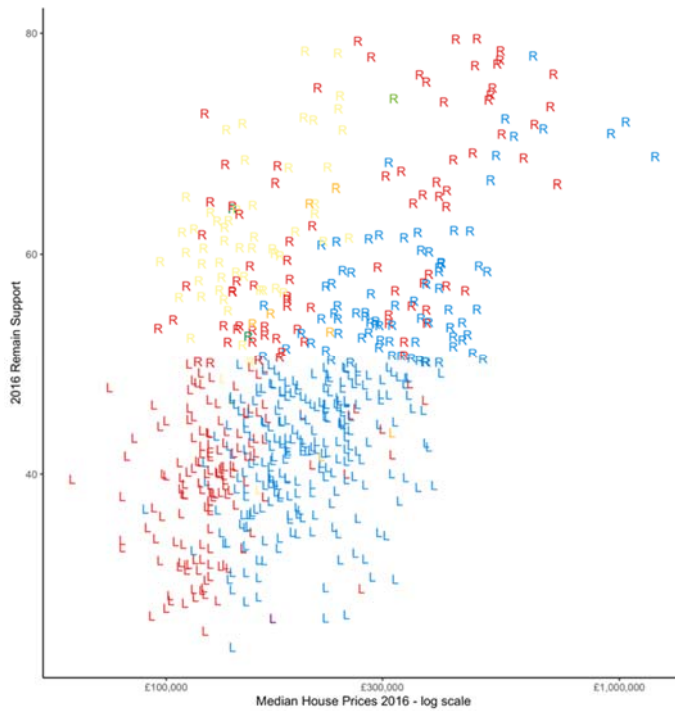


The Brexit referendum marks the turning point for the final stage of realignment in contemporary British politics. Whereas the parts of the country that had boomed over the previous few decades had been highly supportive of New Labour and the status quo of EU membership, those areas that had been 'left behind' in terms of the country's rising economic fortunes began to turn away.

Geographically this pattern is highly connected to house prices – themselves a clear reflection of how different regions of the country were valued, quite literally in this case. Adler and Ansell (2020) show that voting patterns in the Brexit referendum were strongly associated with house prices at the regional, local authority and even ward level. Moreover, homeowners in the British Election Study who lived in more expensive local authorities were more likely to vote Remain than those who lived in cheaper areas (but see Green and Pahontu (2021) for an alternative view). Casting out to the parliamentary constituency level and using data estimating constituency-level vote for Brexit (Hanretty (2017) notes referendum votes were counted at the local authority level), we see a strong positive relationship between house prices and voting Remain in Figure 13.

A couple of quite striking things jump out from the figure. First, there are no constituencies with house prices above £420,000 that voted to Leave; likewise, no constituency with house prices less than £95,000 voted to Remain. Second, Labour held a large number of the high-prices, high-remain constituencies. Third, Labour still dominated in the low-prices, low-remain seats – the famous Labour Leave constituencies.

Figure 13. House prices and voting in the 2016 EU referendum



Note: Colours reflect 2015 General Election winner. L and R labels are for Leave and Remain respectively.

Figure 14. House prices and voting in the 2019 General Election



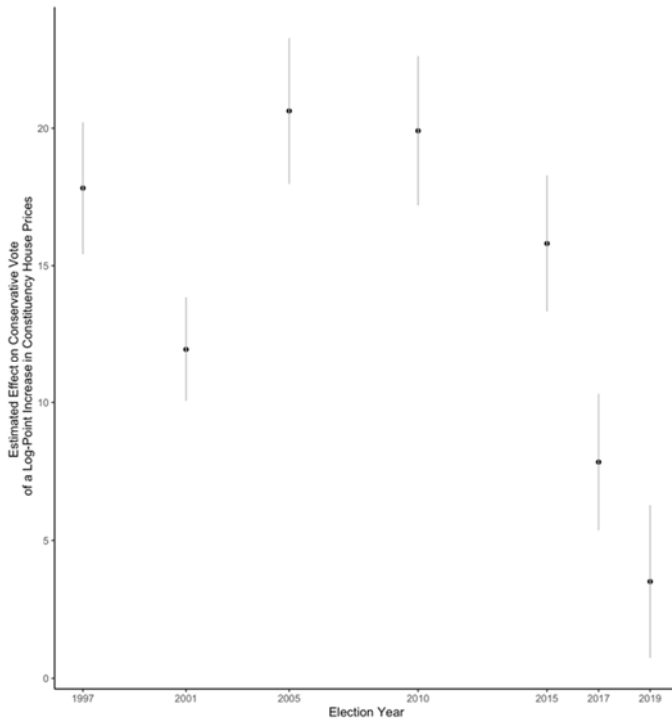
Note: Colours reflect 2019 General Election winner. L and R labels are for Leave and Remain respectively.

The General Election of 2019 marked the shift of much of this latter group of constituencies into Conservative hands. Figure 14 shows that by this point there was essentially no relationship at all between house prices and party choice. The initial first-dimension pattern of wealthier constituencies voting Conservative and poorer ones voting Labour has been overlaid by a 'second' dimension of politics based around Brexit. This dimension, as our discussion of education foreshadowed, is based around cultural norms and group identity. As the Conservative Party

became identified with Brexit and Labour with Remain, the two patterns overlaid and netted one another out. Arguably Brexit has rubbed out the traditional connection between economic inequality and vote choice in the UK.

We can see further evidence of the 'end of class geography' if we compare the relationship between constituency house prices and the Conservative vote from 1997 to 2019. Figure 15 shows that from 1997 to 2015, albeit with a dip in 2001, a log-point increase in house prices was associated with a 15–20 percentage point increase in vote for the Conservatives. In 2017 this fell dramatically and by 2019 the relationship had almost entirely vanished.

Figure 15. House prices and voting Conservative in General Elections from 1997 to 2019



This connection between local wealth and voting on the 'second dimension' of politics is not only a UK story. Adler and Ansell (2020) show it matches patterns of voting for Marine Le Pen in the 2017 French Presidential Election and Ansell et al. (2022) show, using highly disaggregated, dynamic data, that election-to-election support for populist parties in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland is negatively correlated with election-to-election changes in local house prices.

The emerging message is that 'left-behind' regions, whether measured by local wealth or by looking at trade shocks and other local economic factors that in turn determine local house prices (Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Dal Bó et al., 2018), have been increasingly attracted to political parties and political movements that activate concerns about social status and group identity. There is much debate in political science about whether the rise of populism should be understood as an economic phenomenon or a cultural one (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Focusing on local geographies helps to reconcile this debate – self-perceived status and group identity are shaped by experiences in local communities, which in turn have experienced quite distinct economic fortunes over the past two decades. Because local house prices have diverged so dramatically within countries since 1990, people in poorer areas have become 'locked out' of richer areas, unable to afford to move there due to massive property price differentials. This in turn feeds resentment against cosmopolitan 'elites' in the high-priced metropolitan core.

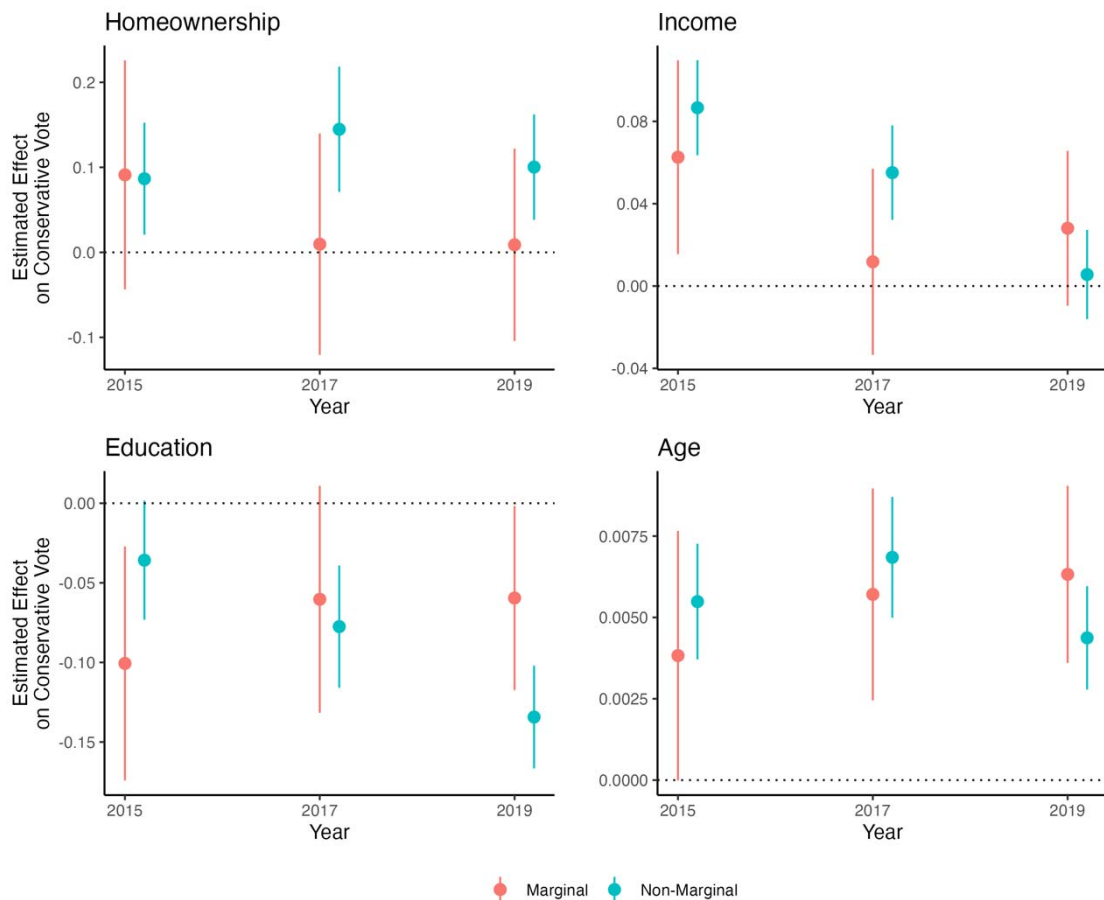
Summing up representation and participation in the UK

What have we learned from this examination of British voting behaviour and economic inequality since the 1960s? We begin with representation before turning to participation.

The first thing to note is that rising economic inequalities in income and in house prices *do not appear* to have widened political polarisation, at least in terms of party choice and representation. In fact, while there is some evidence that growing income inequality in the 1980s amplified the income gradient in voting, the impact of both family income and house prices on voting Conservative appears to have declined since the 1990s. Instead, a first dimension of class politics, which we might have anticipated would have been accentuated by rising economic inequality, has if anything been replaced by a second dimension of group-cultural preferences, most notably in the Brexit vote and in the ensuing General Elections of 2017 and 2019.

The second thing to note is that the decline in educational inequality – measured by the growing proportion of people with a degree and decline in those without qualifications – has been associated with a flip in the educational voting gradient. Whereas the more educated traditionally voted Conservative, since the 1990s and again particularly since Brexit, higher-educated people have shifted to Labour. Arguably, this has occurred because the parties have become associated with differences in second-dimension politics and people with higher education tend to be more socially liberal / cosmopolitan. Moreover, this is not simply a function of age – education matters similarly across age groups in terms of vote choice. Because people with high education tend to have higher incomes and live in more expensive areas, this has created an important *cross-pressure* on traditional class voting. In sum, the expansion of the supply of educated workers since the 1960s has reduced educational inequality and led to first a decline, then a flip, in how the educated were represented in voting.

Figure 16. Effects of demographics on voting Conservative in marginal and non-marginal constituencies, 2015–19



There is some evidence in Figure 16 that education and homeownership have become especially important in terms of polarisation across constituencies in the past decade. If we split British constituencies into those won by more or less than 10 percentage points, we can see that the importance of education and homeownership in structuring vote choice is particularly strong in 'non-marginal' constituencies (those won by more than 10 points by any party). In the case of education, this has in fact reversed since 2015, suggesting that the high- and low-educated have become increasingly sorted into non-marginal constituencies since the Brexit referendum. By contrast, income differences mattered little in either type of constituency by 2019, whereas age matters greatly in both types. The latter suggests that targeting policies towards older citizens has been an effective electoral strategy since 2015 – a matter to which we will return in our analysis of policy outcomes.

Finally, in terms of participation, the role of rising economic inequality may indeed have been to increase political inequality. Since the 1970s, there have been stark rises in turnout inequality by income, education, age and homeownership. Owning a house, moving from the bottom to the top income group, having a degree rather than no upper-secondary education, or being 25 years older are all associated with a 15 percentage point higher likelihood of voting (taken from a multivariate analysis with measures for all of these included). Since a number of these demographic measures are positively correlated it's easy to see how the already economically advantaged may have become politically still more advantaged in a period when income and wealth inequalities were rising sharply. The major push against this trend has been an association between education and turnout, with younger voters typically better educated and not yet on the housing ladder. But overall, the era of rising economic inequality has been one of rising political inequality.

4. Political inequality in descriptive representation

We now turn to examine *descriptive representation* – how far does the make-up of Parliament itself match that of broader society? As we noted in Section 2, legislatures around the world tend to be unrepresentative of the populations that elect them (and even more so of the wider population they govern). In particular, legislatures tend to be more male, older, wealthier, from more white-collar professional backgrounds, and more highly educated than populations. How does Britain compare?

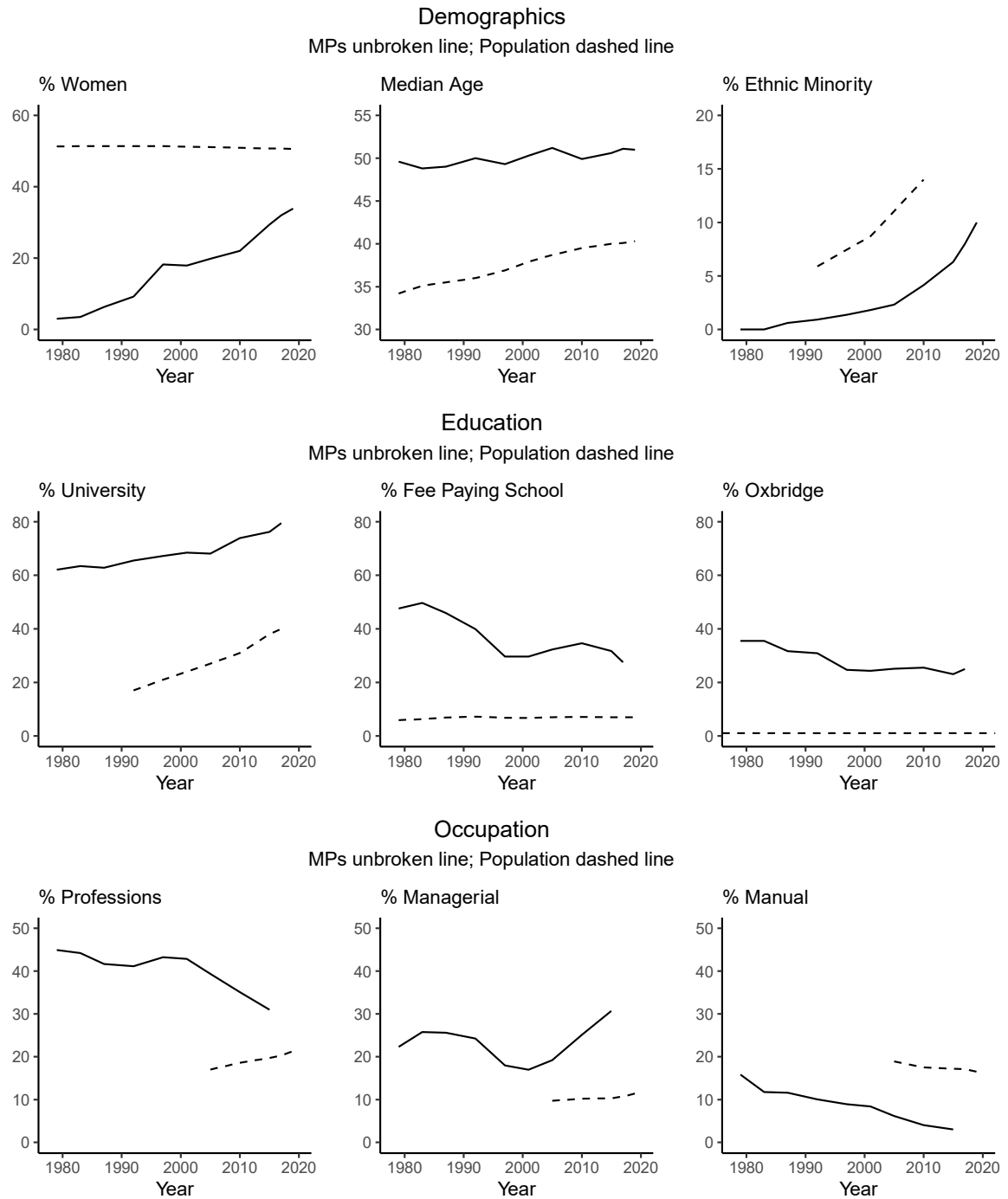
In Figure 17, we provide a series of time-series graphs demonstrating the social make-up of MPs in Parliament vis-à-vis the population as a whole. Clearly, we would not expect MPs to perfectly reflect the *population* per se, given this will include children under the voting age. However, keeping wide purview allows us to see trends in the wider population as well as among MPs.

The data on MPs here are drawn from the House of Commons Library briefing paper by Cracknell and Tunnicliffe (2022), which collects data from among Rallings and Thrasher (2009), Cowley and Kavanagh (2018 and previous editions) and Campbell and Hudson (2018). In a number of cases – for example, gender of MPs – these stretch across every General Election from 1979 to 2019. In the case of occupational data, they end in 2015.

We have matched these data to relevant population-level comparators. For gender, we have used the population-wide gender balance of the UK; for age, we have used median age in the UK; and for ethnicity, we draw from the estimates of non-white population in the 1991, 2001 and 2011 censuses (the 1991 census was the first to code for ethnicity and did not break up white into separate groups in the same ways as future censuses).

For education, we draw data on graduates from the Labour Force Survey – its estimate of the percentage of graduates in the population. The data on fee-paying schools measure the proportion of all children attending fee-paying schools at that date (so are not a measure made with reference to the full population but to the population of that cohort) and come from the House of Commons Library 'Education: historical statistics' survey by Bolton (2012). For Oxbridge attendance, we have simply placed a line for the population at just under 1% – there are no publicly available data on this.

Figure 17. Descriptive representation: Parliament and the people



For occupation, only recent data on the occupational structure of the workforce are available – NOMIS provides this from 2005 onwards. Matching population occupation to MP occupation is challenging since these are not measured using the same codes. Cowley and Kavanagh (2018) use categories of the professions (law, education, medicine, government); business; miscellaneous (politics, journalism, farming); and manual. The group coded as professions likely corresponds to the NOMIS group 2 ‘professional occupations’, and the group coded as business to NOMIS group 1 ‘managers, directors, and senior officials’. Clearly there is likely to be some mismatch here, though both sets of occupations are clearly high-skill and white-collar. For ‘manual’, we match to NOMIS groups 8 and 9 (‘process plant & machine operatives’ and ‘elementary occupations’).

How representative is Parliament of the general population in demographic, educational and occupational terms? And has this pattern changed since 1979?

Beginning with demographics, we can see that Parliament has broadly converged towards the make-up of the country since 1979. The most striking pattern is in gender balance – women made up just 3% of MPs in 1979 but over a third by 2019. Of course, full gender parity is still some distance away (just over a decade on current trends) but the Labour Party now has more female MPs than male MPs, with the Conservatives having around one-quarter female MPs.

In age terms, both the average in the country and the average among MPs have increased over the last four decades, rather more so in the former case, with the median age increasing from 34 to 40. The average age of MPs, by contrast, has only increased by a year and a half (49.5 to 51) since 1979. Unlike a number of political systems that might be archly called gerontocracies (such as the US Senate), and despite the growing importance of age in defining both turnout and vote choice, the UK Parliament remains relatively youthful.

Finally, Parliament has become substantially more ethnically diverse since 1979. Indeed, it was not until 1987 that any ethnic minority MP had been elected in the post-war era. Ethnic minorities now make up 10% of Parliament. Of course, the UK has also become more ethnically diverse over this period. Ethnicity was not added to the census until 1991 and we do not yet know the 2021 census count, but between 1991 and 2011 the share of the population identified as 'non-white' increased from 6% to 14%. As with gender, MPs do not yet reflect national demographics but there has been a substantial narrowing of proportionate difference.

Turning to education, we begin by looking at the proportion of MPs who were university graduates. This increased from just over 60% in 1979 to almost 80% by 2017. MPs were clearly always predominantly drawn from the university-educated class and have become more so. However, whereas with the case of gender and ethnicity it is Parliament that has shifted towards the population, arguably with university education the reverse is true – the country now looks more like Parliament, as we discussed in our analysis of educational expansion earlier. We lack data on university enrolments as a proportion of the population for earlier elections, but for the period we do have we see a large increase from 17% in 1992 to 40% by 2017.⁵

By contrast, with fee-paying schools and Oxbridge attendance, we return to the case where Parliament has moved towards the population rather than vice versa. In 1979 just under half of MPs had attended fee-paying schools, which by 2017 had declined to just over a quarter. The proportion of students attending such schools has been fairly stable across the period, rising slightly from 6% to 7%. As regards Oxbridge, fewer than 1% of the adult population has attended Oxford or Cambridge, whereas in 1979 over a third of MPs (and around half of Conservative MPs) had. Today around a quarter of MPs are Oxbridge graduates.

We conclude by looking at the occupational profile of Parliament vis-à-vis the workforce as a whole. White-collar professions have unsurprisingly always been over-represented in Parliament, particularly the professions. There has, however, been some convergence with the public. The proportion of professionals among MPs has declined somewhat (from 45% to 31%), whereas among the population it has grown in recent years to 21%. The public has also been more likely to enter managerial roles – rising from 9.7% to 11.4% of the workforce. Here Parliament has been more rocky – the trend largely fits the pattern of Conservative versus Labour majority – averaging around 25%. Still, putting both together, just over 60% of parliamentarians come from one of these two occupational groups (down from over two-thirds in 1979), with the proportion in the workforce rising from just over a quarter to around a third. In this case, both Parliament and the people have moved towards one another.

Finally, manual work backgrounds remain very rare in Parliament and have declined precipitously from 16% in 1979 to around 3% by 2015. By contrast, although manual work in the

⁵ Overall participation in higher education before 1990 was very limited – in 1979 just under 15% of school-leavers attended university (up from 5% in 1961) but over 30% did by 1994 (Dearing Report). Given the time lag between flow into university and the make-up of the overall population, it seems likely that before 1992 the graduate proportion of the population was well below 17%.

population as a whole is declining (from 19% in 2005 to 16.5% today), it has not done so at any such rate. O'Grady (2019) has analysed occupational change in the Labour Party – which had typically had far higher numbers of ex-manual workers than its rivals – at great depth. He finds that the share of Labour MPs with a working-class background declined from almost 30% in 1987 to 10% by 2010. Notably they were not replaced one-for-one by middle-class professionals or those with private sector experience but rather by what he terms 'careerists' – MPs whose professional experience is largely limited to working as a special advisor, for the Party itself, or in a related think tank, trade union or lobbying organisation. In other words, one of the key ways in which British Parliament may have become unlike the public is that it increasingly represents 'itself' when ever more MPs have political backgrounds.

What connections can we draw from economic inequality to political inequality in terms of descriptive representation? We lack consistent cross-time data on MP incomes, which makes a direct comparison difficult. On a class basis, arguably MPs have become *less* like the population – in the sense that the proportion of MPs from manual backgrounds has declined considerably faster than in the general public. In the case of education, however, declining educational inequality in the population means that the population increasingly converges on Parliament. Along with the growing gender and ethnic equality of Parliament, descriptive representational equality has not moved in only one direction.

MPs' background is not the only salient factor in terms of representativeness – in some cases, MPs have been able to take advantage of their time in office and enter lucrative post- (or even during-) political careers. Eggers and Hainmueller (2009), examining the 1950s and 1960s and death records of MPs and using careful causal analysis, found that serving Conservative MPs doubled their wealth relative to not having been elected, though they found no similar pattern for Labour MPs. The recent post-political careers of high-profile politicians from Tony Blair and James Purnell, to George Osborne and David Cameron, suggest that lucrative opportunities await many. Whether anticipation of 'revolving-door' opportunities motivates MPs' behaviour while in office is of course rather difficult to ascertain.

5. Responsiveness and legitimacy

The final stage of political equality focuses on outputs: both the policies produced and the public's attitudes to them. We distinguished in Section 2 between (a) policy responsiveness, which refers to the behaviour of politicians, in terms of the policies they enact and whether those reflect public opinion, and (b) public legitimacy, which refers to the degree to which the public feels that governments are responding to its preferences.

There is, of course, no necessary relationship between the two. The government might indeed produce policies that the public claims to demand and still not have that recognised; or the government might enact policies that only benefit a small section of society but find that the public believes that it has been listened to. Political rhetoric, framing, blurred accountability, and partisan bias in public opinion might all detach responsiveness from legitimacy. Nonetheless, by looking at both policy agendas and public opinion in the UK over the past few decades, we can get a sense of how well the two connect.

In so doing, we find three things. First, the public is not always supportive of greater attention to economic inequalities: there have been swings over time in public responsiveness to inequality. Second, governments are sometimes, but not always, attentive to public demands for inequality remediation. Third, there has been more general policy responsiveness to inequalities relating to the elderly than to those relating to the young. Although our analysis is only suggestive (we are not making a strong causal claim), the institutions of relatively concentrated political accountability and first-past-the-post electoral systems on the one hand, with social and economic group realignment on the other hand, create particular dynamics of responsiveness.

Policy responsiveness in the UK

How can we think about whether the UK political system is responsive to its citizens when it comes to policymaking? Traditional models in political economy assume a 'median voter' model of policymaking, where politicians reliably implement the most preferred policy of a voter with

median income (Roberts, 1977; Meltzer and Richard, 1981). If inequality rises, such theories predict that the median voter will demand higher redistribution in response and policymakers will implement that preference. To the degree that such policies are not implemented, the breakdown could come from a variety of sources: from voters – for example, the median voter not demanding redistribution, perhaps because of non-economic concerns or (over-)optimistic beliefs about their future income, or because turnout imbalance favours richer voters – or from politicians who fail to implement the median voter's preference either for partisan/ideological reasons or because of the political influence of anti-redistribution richer/older voters. To assess policy responsiveness, we begin by looking at both whether voters appear responsive to inequality and whether politicians appear responsive to public opinion at all before turning to whether the rising inequality of the 1980s and early 1990s produced countervailing policy responses.

How does the UK fare in terms of policy responsiveness?

To begin with issue attention. In general terms, scholars have found there is dynamic responsiveness to public opinion, at least in terms of what voters consider to be the 'most important topic'. Froio, Bevan and Jennings (2017) find that the number of Parliamentary Acts enacted by government in a particular issue area is quite responsive to whether the public considered that issue a 'most important topic' of the day. The same authors also show that the Acts enacted do tend to follow the proportion of the Queen's Speech devoted to particular issues and to the government's manifesto promises. Hence broadly speaking there is a chain linking public priorities to outcomes both directly – in terms of immediate responsiveness to current public opinion – and indirectly – in terms of governments enacting the manifestos on which they were elected. Jennings and John (2009) show that government programmes as laid out in the Queen's Speech appear particularly responsive in both the short and long run to public opinion on macroeconomic issues, labour and employment, and health. John, Bevan and Jennings (2011) do note, however, a decline in responsiveness to public opinion by the UK Parliament since devolution in 1998, suggesting Westminster may have taken that as an opportunity to cloud accountability.

What does this imply for actual policymaking on questions of inequality? Do voters respond to it in ways that forces government issue attention? In Section 3, we identified three areas of economic inequality that shaped this era – rising income inequality, declining educational inequality (or more precisely, the expansion of upper-secondary and higher education), and growing wealth and regional inequality. Of course, all of these forms of inequality are endogenous to policy – government spending and policy priorities reshape labour markets, educational systems, and housing policy, among other influences. Still, a crude Meltzer–Richard view of responsiveness to inequality would have suggested that there would be growing demand for redistribution to 'correct' emerging economic differences, whereas the 'undercutting' approach would suggest that cross-cutting realignment, weakening turnout by lower-income and lower-educated voters, and accumulation of wealth by influential elites all might limit responsiveness to these forms of inequality.

We take income, education and wealth in turn. Our analysis here is intended as a suggestive descriptive overview of policy with an eye to the theoretical question of responsiveness.

To begin with income inequality. As we noted above, income inequality rose dramatically from the mid 1970s to the early 1990s. This period was largely, though not entirely, coterminous with the Thatcher government. Far from countering the rise in income inequality with policies of 'pre-distribution' (e.g. labour market or corporate governance regulation) or actively redistributive policies, this era was one of deregulation, benefit cutbacks and trimming of the state. These increases in income inequality in the late 1980s and early 1990s are in part a consequence of Thatcher-era reforms to the labour market (limits on union organisation and strikes), fiscal policy (the Lawson tax cuts) and financial markets (the 'Big Bang'). The public re-elected the Thatcher government in both 1983 and 1987, even in the face of these dramatic shifts in the state, suggesting that while controversial, aspects of this agenda were popular. Arguably, early cuts to the welfare state were also in line with public opinion as it stood at the start of the 1980s. In 1983, in the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS), around two-thirds of respondents felt that taxes and spending should be kept the same or cut.

However, by the start of the 1990s, following the Thatcher cuts to the welfare state, support had flipped to two-thirds of respondents feeling that taxes and spending should be increased, a level that held through the 1990s. As income inequality neared its peak, the New Labour government of Tony Blair began a series of reforms that look more congruent with what a naïve policy responsiveness model to inequality would predict. In particular, the Blair government focused on reducing child and elderly poverty. In the former case, this was largely accomplished through the working families' tax credit (introduced in 1999 and replaced by the child tax credit and working tax credit in 2003) and in the latter by the pensioners' minimum income guarantee (1999, replaced by the pension credit in 2003) and winter fuel allowance. Whereas in 1997 over a quarter of children and pensioners were designated as living in poverty (60% of median income), by Labour's fall from office in 2010 this had declined to 17.5% for both groups (Joyce and Sibieta, 2013). Poverty rates also declined because of improvements in the labour market related to Britain's long economic boom through the 1990s to the credit crisis, and because of the introduction of the national minimum wage.

While labour market conditions were more benign, Labour did not reverse the Conservatives' reduction of benefits for working-age adults without children, and 'welfare to work' policies made receipt of unemployment benefits conditional on job-seeking behaviour (Clasen and Clegg, 2012). New Labour did introduce a minimum wage, but established an independent commission with a remit to consider employment outcomes as well as equity (the 'Low Pay Commission') in updating the level of the minimum wage. These more restrictive policies towards working-age adults were arguably also in line with general public preferences. As Cavaillé and Trump (2015) show, the public was more sceptical of 'giving' unconditional benefits than taxing the rich.

Public opinion towards taxation, spending and welfare appeared to respond thermostatically to the era of New Labour. From 2001 onwards, support for increased taxes and spending, as measured in the BSAS, declined from almost two-thirds to one-third by 2010. In this era of low unemployment, attitudes towards unemployment benefits shifted in a conservative direction, even despite the increased conditionality brought in by the Blair government. Whereas in 2001 equal numbers of people felt that unemployment benefits were too low and caused hardship versus being too high and discouraging work, by 2008 the number of people believing the latter was double those believing the former, according to the BSAS. However, as O'Grady (2022) argues, the causal direction of this relationship is not certain. O'Grady argues that negative rhetoric towards the poor (and indeed more restrictive policies) may have led, rather than followed.

When the Conservatives returned to office, in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, in 2010 they thus faced a starkly different terrain of public opinion. While both the economic growth of the 2000s and the expansion of child and elderly benefits meant income inequality had remained steady for a decade, the public was sceptical of aspects of state intervention. The 'austerity' budgets introduced under Chancellor George Osborne built on this scepticism, leading to large cuts to benefits, particularly for working-age adults with children, mostly through cuts to tax credits but also through income limits placed on the receipt of child benefit. Pensioners by contrast retained their benefits and indeed saw built-in increases through the 'triple lock' policy of pensions rising by the highest of inflation, increases in average earnings and 2.5%. Combined with the increase in higher education costs introduced by tuition fee increases, there was a sharp tilt in public spending towards retirees and away from working-age adults. Hood and Waters (2017) show that the impact of tax and benefit reforms through the 2010s was more neutral for pensioners across the income distribution, but that low-income working-age adults and children were largely worse off. However, next to these cuts, the Conservative–Liberal–Democrat coalition introduced a relatively large expansion of the minimum wage, with the introduction of the National Living Wage pushing its level up from £6.50 in 2015 to £9.50 in 2022. Arguably, the rise in the minimum wage was aimed at preventing employers from relying on (now-reduced) tax credits to keep paying low wages. From a Conservative perspective, this meant reducing the tax costs of benefits while incentivising greater workplace productivity.

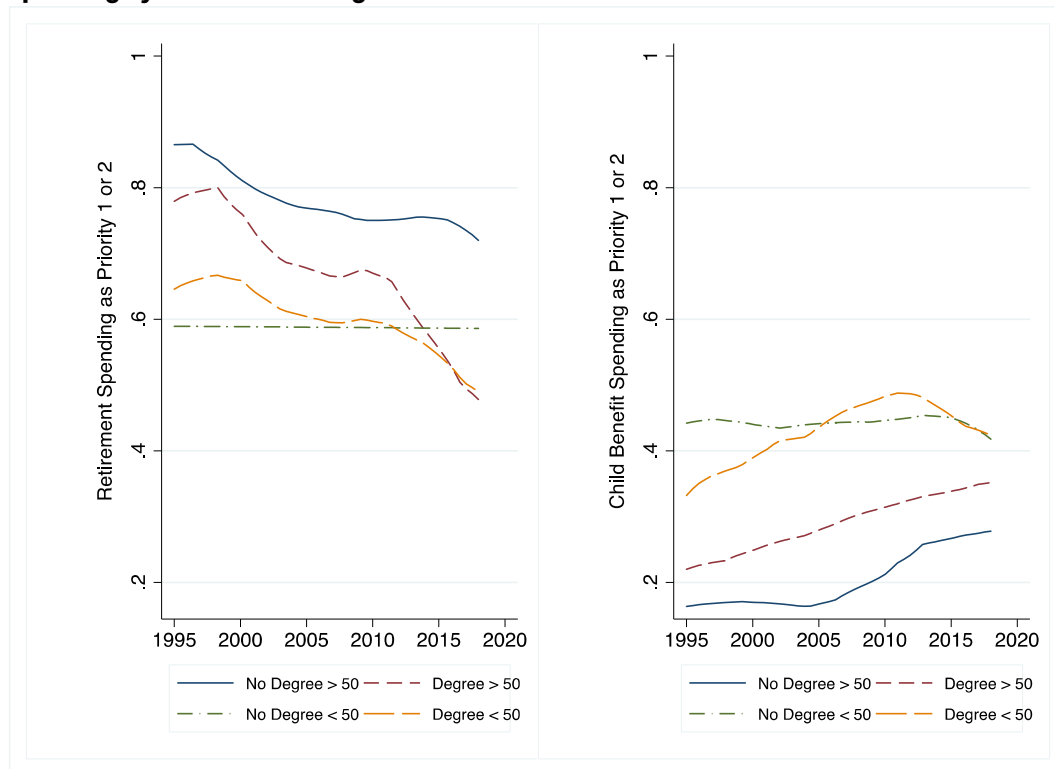
The public in turn responded to these cuts with growing support for a degree of redistribution, with public attitudes moving in a more progressive direction in the late 2010s. Whether, absent the pandemic, policy would have swung back towards more spending is unclear, but the

Conservatives' more recent 'levelling up' agenda suggests some flexibility here, even absent the pandemic.

Thus, we see close to four decades of cuts and growing conditionality for benefits for low-income working-age childless adults, but the introduction of and later growth in the minimum wage. After cuts in state pensions in the early 1980s, there has been general uprating of benefits for pensioners from the mid 1990s that has held steady through the 2010s. The Labour governments of the 2000s did substantially expand benefits for low-income families (both child and housing benefits) and some groups of working adults (through tax credits), but these benefits have proven more vulnerable over time.

What do these trends imply for policy responsiveness? Has British public policy been responsive to the growth in income inequality underway from the 1970s to the 1990s and to its stabilisation since 2000? From the vantage point of 2022, when tax take as a proportion of national income recently reached its highest point since at least the 1960s, superficially there does appear to have been a positive relationship between income inequality and tax and spending since the latter reached their nadir in 1991. Looking more closely, the pattern of spending was largely related to partisan control of government, with substantial decline over the 1980s Conservative era and a countervailing rise under New Labour. Though spending declined under the Cameron government, Conservative policy under Boris Johnson's premiership bucked the traditional partisan trend in spending, much like traditional partisan patterns of voting have dissolved since 2016.

Figure 18. British Social Attitudes Survey: preferences over retirement versus childcare spending by education and age



The British public too has reacted thermostatically, though more likely in response to government policies than to inequality itself – turning in favour of redistribution over the late 1980s and early 1990s, against after the turn of the century, and back towards redistribution in the last half decade. In this regard, we see evidence for both correcting and corrupting dynamics. On the one hand, unlike in the US, where there has been continuously growing income inequality over time but very limited redistribution, many aspects of the British welfare state, particularly under New Labour, did become more redistributive. On the other hand, the growing polarisation we saw by age in terms of both turnout and voting in Section 3 aligns with the direction of policy, which has

largely favoured older citizens in recent years. Weaker turnout and participation by younger or lower-income voters may have been in part endogenous to the disequalising economic developments of the past decades. It is possible that had poorer and younger citizens been more likely to turn out, these biases might have been corrected. Figure 18 suggests that British public opinion has moved towards spending on childcare benefits and away from retirement spending since the 1990s, despite policy moving in the other direction. This suggests there has been unequal responsiveness to citizens as a whole, if not the electorate per se.

Finally, the above discussion points to a tension that runs through the responsiveness literature. Where the public does not react fully thermostatically to income inequality (for instance, by supporting more restrictive policies towards the working-age population), then policy can be responsive to the public without being responsive to inequality itself. Ultimately, this raises broad normative questions about whether politicians should be responsive to people's direct material interests or to their perceptions.

We now turn to education. As outlined above, the key story of the past few decades has been the expansion of both upper-secondary and higher education to mass levels. In the early 1980s, fewer than a third of 17-year-olds were in full-time education. By 2011, this had increased to over three-quarters (Bolton, 2012). Higher education entry increased from fewer than a fifth of school-leavers to around a half. Politicians from both political parties contributed to mass expansion in both areas, from the 1988 Education Reform Act, to Labour's target of 50% enrolling in higher education and requirement that all under-18s be involved in some form of education or training.

To begin with compulsory education. Both the introduction of the GCSE qualification and the national curriculum (in the 1988 Education Reform Act) created a more uniform system of progression at the secondary level. Before the 1980s, young people looking to complete a lower-secondary qualification faced difficult decisions about whether to sit an O level (with higher probability of failure) or a CSE (with fewer onward opportunities). The introduction of the GCSE in 1988 provided a more uniform structure, that provided all pupils with a clearer onward pathway. However, at that point in time, the modal pupils still failed to achieve five A–C GCSEs. Indeed, in the early 1990s, only 40% of pupils received five A*–C GCSEs, effectively meaning more than half of young people did not achieve a standard lower-secondary qualification (Bolton, 2012).

Through the 1990s and early 2000s, both Conservative and Labour governments introduced a series of reforms aimed at improving performance in English and Welsh schools (with the Scottish administration and later devolved governments taking a somewhat different path) – although the effectiveness of any one of these reforms is debated. These included introducing a national curriculum (1988), expanding a quasi-market in education through grant-maintained schools and greater local management of schools (1988), the publication of school performance data (from 1992), expanding inspection through Ofsted (1992), the introduction of numeracy and literacy hours in primary schools and maximum class sizes (1999), expanding specialist schools (through the 1990s and 2000s), creating sponsored academies (2006), expanding the academy programme to converter academies (2010), devolving more power to schools on discipline (2011), increasing the education-leaving age (2018, enacted 2013) and reforming the GCSE structure (2017). Outside of compulsory schooling, there were also reforms to vocational qualifications, with the introduction (and later abandonment) of NVQs, and expansion of BTECs.

The Conservative reform acts of the 1980s also affected higher education. A 1981 White Paper announced a real reduction in funding for higher and further education of 8%. The 1988 Education Reform Act removed polytechnics from local control and set up separate higher education and polytechnic funding agencies. In 1990, the government introduced the Education (Student Loans) Act, establishing the Student Loans Company and (from 1994) reducing maintenance grants. A 1991 White Paper, followed by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, abolished the binary line between higher education institutions and polytechnics, allowing polytechnics to convert to universities. In 1992, the government further ended caps on numbers, but again reduced funding per student. In 1994, it also moved to establishing targets on student numbers.

In light of the financial pressures on universities, the Conservative government established the Dearing Commission to look at funding. It proposed a new model for funding, including tuition

fees. The Labour government in 1998 followed on Dearing, introducing the Teaching and Higher Education Act. This introduced tuition fees (capped at £1,000 per annum) and moved from maintenance grants to loans, and also altered the method of loan repayment. The Labour government's 2003 White Paper set out the groundwork for the 2004 Higher Education Act which allowed universities to top up fees beyond the £1,000 maximum set by the 1998 legislation, and in a variable way across courses. Fees rose dramatically following the Browne Review launched in 2009, with the Conservative–Liberal-Democrat coalition raising them to £9,000 per annum.

Outside of higher education, there were more limited developments in vocational education and training. The adult training scheme Train to Gain established by New Labour in 2006 was discontinued by the coalition in 2010. The Conservative Party introduced an apprenticeship levy in 2017 that applies to businesses to encourage them to support apprenticeships.

At the pre-primary level, there was less expansion in the 1980s and 1990s. The Conservative governments introduced more regulation empowering local education authorities to monitor pre-primary provision (1994) and some voucher-like funding for nursery education, but care and education for children under 4 remained a patchwork of largely private providers and private funding. The Labour government expanded both public funding and regulation for pre-primary care, introducing a statutory duty for local education authorities to coordinate early childhood care in 1999 and a 12½-hour entitlement for 3-year-olds in 1999. It further extended parental leave benefits (1999), and established additional care funding for disadvantaged 2-year-olds. The government also created Sure Start centres (1998) which provided area-based services for parents, coordinating care and supporting families (particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds). The Conservative–Liberal-Democrat and Conservative governments post-2010 further expanded the entitlement for 3-year-olds (to 15 hours), with further funding for employed parents (the 2016 Childcare Act), but did not ring-fence Sure Start from local cuts, leading to a retrenchment of these services.

In terms of aggregate spending, the early years of New Labour saw a concerted rise in spending on education, shifting from 4% to 5.5% of national income, but this declined substantially over the period of coalition government, not least because of the shift towards private funding of higher education (though the cost to the public purse of future unpaid student loans is not counted in the aggregate figure, so the reduced spending may be misleading). Public spending on education remains average by OECD standards, though with the addition of private spending, the UK is among the leading group.

Interpreting what these reforms mean for public responsiveness is difficult. Education has rarely been a high-salience issue in public opinion and the chief beneficiaries are children or young adults who are under-represented in surveys. While Labour were stronger advocates for expanding pre-primary and higher education to new (typically poorer) groups, the overall trend across governments has been expansionist. There is little survey evidence on attitudes towards educational expansion, and data on education spending tend to show support for greater spending but relatively low salience compared with other public spending items. Spending has shown clearer partisan patterns than enrolment numbers, with training and pre-primary programmes introduced by the New Labour administration cut back by the Conservative-led governments that followed. So while the overall story of British education has been a remarkable expansion – that may have led rather than followed public opinion – there is some vulnerability of education spending to political directions.

Finally, we turn to policy responsiveness in terms of wealth – specifically housing – inequality. In the 1970s and 1980s, the British housing market was volatile but generally centred on an average house price to earnings ratio of 4.5–5. From the mid 1990s onwards, by contrast, the ratio surged to between seven and eight times earnings and has not fallen back to traditional post-war ratios. Focusing on price ratios is slightly misleading in that affordability is also connected to interest rates, which declined from the 1980s and hit historically low levels in the past couple of decades. By this type of measure, unaffordability became particularly high between 2001 and 2008 but has become less pronounced in the post-financial-crisis era.

What has policy responsiveness looked like in the face of growing housing unaffordability? On the supply side, construction of public housing declined dramatically from the 1980s onwards and much of the existing stock was sold off (at large discount) through the Right to Buy scheme. Private housebuilding has been relatively invariant since that time, with around 150,000 dwellings per annum constructed in England during both the 1990s and the first two decades of the 21st century, with a slight dip around the time of the financial crisis.

There is little evidence that governments have responded to growing housing unaffordability by investing in substantial housing construction, despite the regular claims of politicians that they will build several hundred thousand houses per annum (as in, for example, the 2019 Conservative manifesto). Clearly, a constrained housing supply could have underpinned some of the real growth in house prices over this period, though scholars debate whether demand-side effects produced largely by low costs of borrowing are more important (Mulheirn, 2019). Low interest rates combined with quantitative easing do appear to have exacerbated house price growth.

Given the independence of the Bank of England, the government has had more limited leeway to respond to concerns about housing affordability on the demand side. Rather than constrain demand, governments have preferred to provide subsidies to potential homebuyers, particularly first-time buyers. The Help to Buy scheme introduced in 2013 provided a variety of shared ownership options but may have increased house prices (Carozzi, Hilber and Yu, 2020).

There is little evidence that governments have made a concerted effort to reduce housing inequality and indeed they may have benefited from rising house prices, regardless of their effects on affordability, given that the majority of the voting electorate are homeowners. Moreover, as we saw in Section 3, homeowners have been disproportionately more likely to turn out to vote in recent years. In that sense, governments are indeed responsive to the electorate's immediate interests. Arguably, responsiveness to homeowners has had rather zero-sum effects, however, in terms of its more negative effects on the sizeable minority of private and public renters.

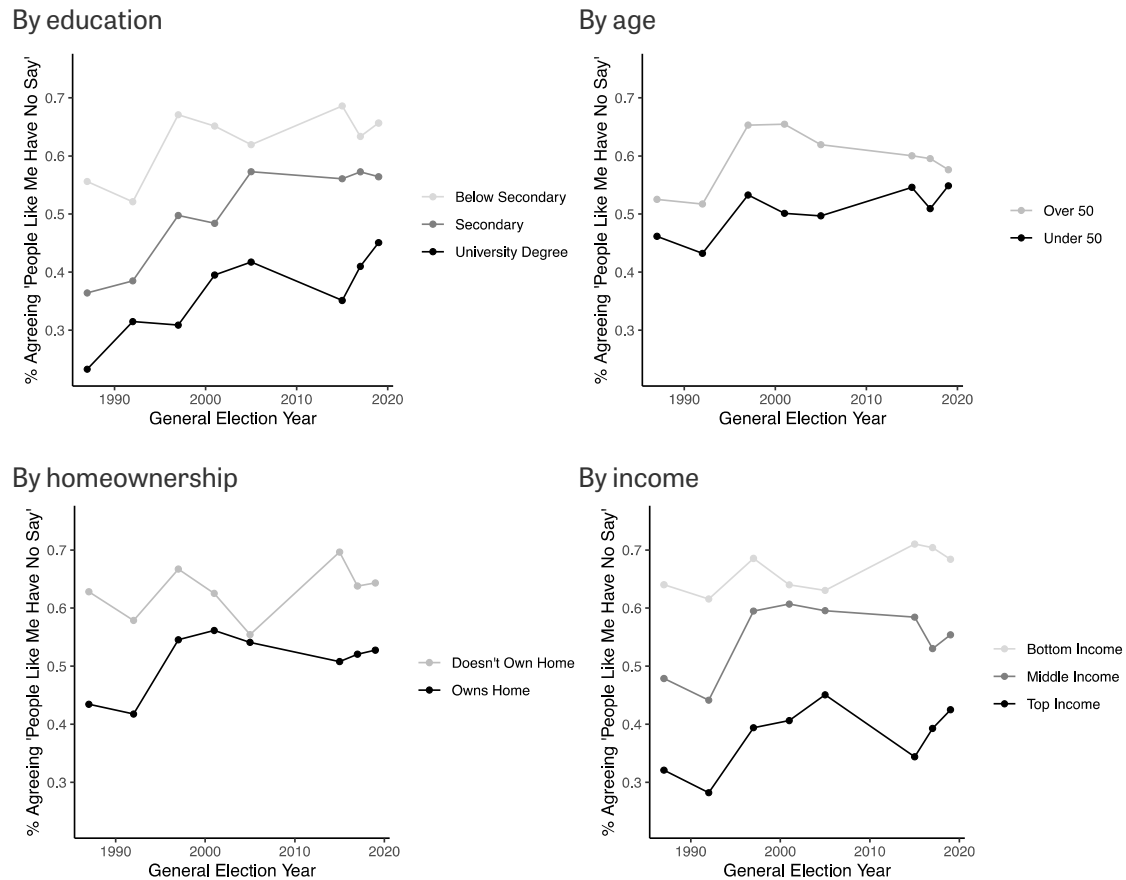
Policy legitimacy in the UK

We conclude by considering the question of legitimacy. Does the British public feel that its preferences are indeed listened to by Westminster politicians? Does it feel that politicians are indeed responsive? To tap public views about legitimacy, we can only really rely on survey responses to questions that try to tap this latent attitude. No question is perfect, and it is hard to distinguish between views that emphasise the respondent ('no-one listens to people like me') and those that emphasise politicians ('they don't listen to anyone'). Furthermore, to analyse long-run changes in legitimacy, we are forced to rely on the few questions that have been consistently asked in surveys over the past few decades.

We choose to look at one particular question asked since 1987 (except in 2010) in the British Election Study. This is a five-point scale in answer to the prompt 'people like me have no say in what the government does', from strongly disagree to strongly agree. We dichotomise this variable to separate out 'agree' and 'strongly agree' from the three other categories. The question essentially asks respondents for their views about substantive representation in the UK ('having a say' in 'what the government does'). Still, we should be careful: there are two things at work in the question – evaluation of whether particular groups are listened to ('people like me') and general government responsiveness ('what the government does'). Political equality can break down at both points.

Figure 19 examines responses to this question in election studies from 1987 to 2019, breaking down responses by groups (adjusted for sample weights). We look at four types of grouping, corresponding to those discussed in Section 3 on turnout and vote choice: education, age, homeownership and income.

Figure 19. Percentage responding agree or strongly agree that 'People like me have no say in what government does', 1987–2019



The first thing to note is that over time, the British public has become slightly more likely to agree with the prompt that they have no say in what the government does. In 1987 the average share agreeing with the statement was just under 50%, but from 1997 to 2019 this has hovered between 55% and 58%. These are not huge differences but are suggestive of a slight upward drift in lack of legitimacy.

Differences among groups are far more salient than differences across time and provide quite stark impressions of perceived political equality in terms of legitimacy in the UK. Beginning with education, we see that university graduates have long felt more listened to than those who did not complete secondary education. The gap between the two has typically been around 25–30 percentage points. However, it is notable that in the past two elections, graduates have risen sharply on this measure – likely a reflection of the political debate over Brexit, with graduates having predominantly voted to Remain in the European Union but a Leave-supporting government twice being elected. Compositional effects are also at play – the vast majority (around three-quarters) of respondents in 1987 had not completed A levels ('below secondary'), whereas this was just over 40% by 2019. Since the group with degrees has tripled in size, by contrast, it is not surprising it has converged towards the rest of the population.

The remaining three groupings are less impacted by compositional effects. In terms of age, older people have always felt slightly less listened to than the young. That gap widened sharply during New Labour's time in office but was very narrow in 2019, perhaps reflecting government policy that had arguably moved towards the interests of older citizens (triple-lock pensions being the most obvious example) since 2010, as well as reflecting partisan preferences by age.

In terms of homeownership, homeowners have always felt more represented by the government across the sample. However, this was *least* true during the New Labour era, ironically when

house prices were rising fastest, benefiting homeowners the most. This suggests again that partisan preferences have been the key driver of attitudes towards legitimacy, with renters and council tenants likely to feel unrepresented during periods of Conservative government.

Finally, when we look at income (a five-group scale where we examine groups 1, 3 and 5), we see that those with the highest incomes have always felt most represented by the government. There is no clear partisan pattern here – perhaps surprisingly. As with age and education, we do see a recent narrowing in the last couple of elections between low and high income groups but broadly there has been a consistent gap of 20–30 percentage points in perceived legitimacy between the top and bottom income groups.

The message of this survey analysis of legitimacy is that high-income and high-education groups have generally felt far more listened to by government over the past few decades. Growing education and income have not, however, translated into growing general satisfaction with the government; if anything there might have been a slight recent convergence towards general dissatisfaction!

6. Conclusion

Is the United Kingdom politically unequal? Is it becoming more so, following the general rise in economic inequality since the 1970s? Our answer to these questions is only a qualified 'yes'. In some areas, economic inequalities have clearly spilled over into rising political inequality, particularly in terms of political participation. Since the 1970s, richer, older, more educated, and property-owning citizens have become much more likely to vote. To some degree, this has fed into political polarisation, given that richer and older citizens were more likely to vote for the Conservative Party. However, many socio-economic drivers of voting have weakened in recent years. In the past few elections, income and homeownership have become less predictive of vote choice and the voting behaviour of more educated voters has entirely reversed over the past few decades. These cross-cutting patterns mean that the translation of economic inequality into political inequality electorally is not obvious, though it also means that Britain's two major political parties both have more diverse socio-economic constituencies than was the case a few decades ago.

Britain's political parties also look more like the public than they did decades ago. As we noted, some of this relates to Parliament moving to more closely mirror the public, particularly in terms of race and gender. In other cases, the shift towards higher education and service-sector work in the general public means the public looks on average more like Parliament. Whether this is an improvement in political equality is debatable, not least because Parliament contains fewer MPs from manual work backgrounds than it previously did.

Finally, in terms of responsiveness to the public, we also have a mixed, though not entirely encouraging, picture. British public opinion on government spending has been largely thermostatic – becoming more supportive in times of cuts and more oppositional when spending grows. It does not seem, however, to have responded directly to economic inequality itself. Policymakers too do not appear to have responded to the rising growth of income inequality with countervailing measures, except during the early years of the New Labour government. Since economic inequality has been fairly flat since the financial crisis, changes in government spending appear to have been more responsive to the business cycle and parties' ideological positions than to inequality *per se* since that time.

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