Resolution Foundation

Intergenerational Commission

BRIEFING

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VOTEY McVOTEFACE

Understanding the growing turnout gap between the generations

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Summary

This paper is the second report of the Intergenerational Commission, which has been brought together to explore questions of intergenerational fairness that are rising up the agenda. In particular, the Commission will offer solutions for fixing imbalances in living standards between the generations, both now and as they are expected to evolve in the future.

Renewing the intergenerational contract rests on policies related to labour market outcomes, the accumulation of wealth and assets, and the role of the welfare state. It also relies on broad engagement in the democratic process across the generations. This is not least the case because any new policy agenda will require public support, in order for democratically-elected politicians to pursue it. And politicians appeal and respond to the motivations of those who they expect to vote. Of course these motivations need not be governed by self-interest; people are often as concerned for the prospects of their families and neighbours as they are for their own. But very often individual interests, in particular in relation to a person's age, are perceived as dominating.

In this light, the generational turnout gap that has opened up since the late-1990s – and was recently laid bare by voting patterns in the EU referendum – is a cause for concern. A growing divide between young and old means that generation X and the millennials have voted in lesser numbers than previous generations did during early adulthood, with the millennials so far around one third less likely to vote during their 20s than the baby boomers were. This generational turnout gap endures when we account for the sharp decline in overall turnout in recent years.

At the last General Election in 2015, 67 per cent of baby boomers voted, compared to 56 per cent of generation X and just 46 per cent of millennials of voting age. Combined with the impact of their large cohort size, this resulted in a four million person ballot box advantage for the baby boomers over the millennials. The superficial correlation between generational voting blocs and the tax and benefit policies being implemented this parliament, which deliver a net benefit to those aged 55-75 set against large losses for those aged 20-40, is evident.

What has driven the growing divisions in voting behaviour between the generations? A combination of factors appear relevant, including:

- *A decline in voting when first eligible, which is a strong determinant of subsequent voting behaviour.*
- *Changing living patterns. Renters are much less likely to vote than homeowners, so the suggestion is that far lower levels of home ownership among younger generations may have contributed to the turnout decline. We speculate that as well as being associated with higher incomes, ownership engenders a stronger attachment to communities and therefore engagement with politics, not least in terms of voter registration.*
- *Growing turnout divisions between subgroups within generations. In particular, within recent generations the renter-homeowner and degree-educated-to-non-degree-educated turnout gaps have widened significantly.*
- *A shift in attitudes among young people, in particular around trust in politicians, party identification and interest in election results.*

This situation should not be considered intractable. Most other developed economies have both higher overall turnout and a smaller turnout-by-age-gap than the UK does, suggesting that improvement is possible. A number of practical options for arresting and

reversing the generational turnout divide have been suggested, including compulsory first-time voting, online voting, greater efforts to maximise voter registration and a more robust citizenship education programme. The Intergenerational Commission will consider these and other options in its deliberations, with a view to putting the social contract between the generations on a firmer footing for the long term.

Democratic engagement across the life cycle is an essential part of a strong and sustainable intergenerational contract

The first report of the Intergenerational Commission highlighted a range of areas in which the living standards prospects of younger generations appear under threat.[1] Millennials have so far earned £8,000 less than the generation that came before them – generation X – during their 20s; are far less likely to own a home at age 30 than either generation X or the baby boomers; and have much less put aside for retirement when we compare their defined contribution pensions to the defined benefit schemes many (though not all) of their parents joined. These trends are a concern in the here-and-now, and crucially they raise the question of whether today's younger generation might be the first not to match or exceed the living standards of previous ones over the life course.

As well as the role of broad market forces, such as the changing world of work, and of families providing support and sharing resources across generations, our first report highlighted the key role of the state in determining these outcomes. This is evident in decisions made about the taxes and benefits that form our redistributive welfare state, but also relates to broader priorities including public spending on education and state intervention in housebuilding. The Intergenerational Commission will be digging into these and other areas in more detail, and developing policy proposals as part of a renewal of the intergenerational contract that underpins our society.

But stepping back from the specific changes that may be needed, it's important to consider whether and how they can be achieved via the political process. We live in a democracy, so politicians appeal and respond to the motivations of the electorate. But they can only respond if people make their voices heard.

It is well-documented that electoral turnout in the UK has been declining overall, and that turnout for young people tends to be much lower than the average.[2] This was most recently brought to the fore by the result of the recent referendum on membership of the European Union, in which preferences between young and old were extremely polarised. So much so that the turnout gap by age (although it now appears smaller than first reported) and the exclusion of 16 and 17 year olds who were allowed to vote in the Scottish independence referendum may well have been critical to the outcome.[3]

With this background in mind, this paper explores how the turnout-by-age-gap manifests itself in each generation's propensity to vote over the life cycle. It examines how the overall drop in turnout has played out for people at different life stages, and

1 L Gardiner, *Stagnation generation: The case for renewing the intergenerational contract*, Resolution Foundation, July 2016

2 A Dar, *Elections: Turnout*, House of Commons Library SN 1467, July 2013

3 T Helm, 'EU referendum: youth turnout almost twice as high as first thought', *The Observer*, 10 July 2016

the democratic weight of different cohorts when we account for their relative size. We explore possible drivers of the generational turnout gaps we observe, and raise options for discussion as to how we might combat this phenomenon.

Turnout has fallen over time, with the drop sharpest among younger groups

This paper assesses a broadly-defined measure of turnout – those who voted as a proportion of the voting age population – at each UK General Election since 1964. Box 1 provides details on this measure, the underlying data used and our analysis methods. Using this measure, Figure 1 shows that the well-established decline in overall turnout over time is more accurately described as a sharp drop in the likelihood of voting around the turn of the millennium, with turnout falling by around 15 percentage points.

i Box 1: Defining and measuring turnout

Our analysis of turnout in this paper draws on successive waves of the British Election Study (BES), a survey conducted immediately after each UK General Election since 1964.

Turnout is conventionally defined as the number of people who voted as a proportion of the electorate – this is what most official turnout figures are based on. However, in this analysis we use a broader definition: those who voted as a proportion of those of voting age.

This is partly because accurate information on electoral registration is only available on more recent BES datasets so can't be captured consistently for different age groups over the whole period. But more substantively, measuring turnout in relation to the whole population – and so capturing changes in registration behaviour within the measure – provides a broader and more consistent picture of democratic engagement across generations and life stages. This is particularly important as evidence suggests electoral registration has been declining over time, and is particularly low for young people.[1]

It should be noted that resident non-citizens who are not allowed to vote are included in the base of the calculation in this measure of turnout – it's not possible to exclude them when disaggregating by age. For this reason, our measure unavoidably understates votes as a proportion of all those who ought to be registered, and will be affected by changes over time to the share of non-citizens in the population statistics.

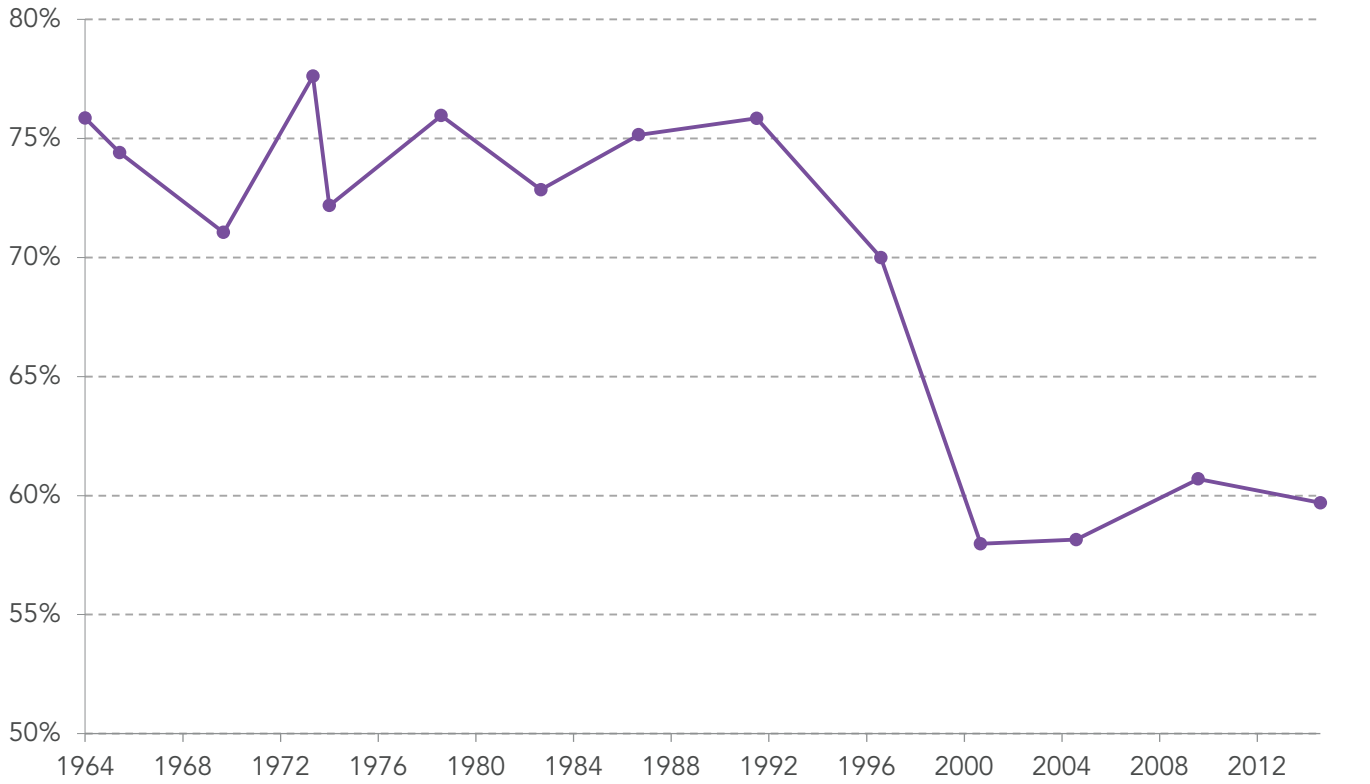
We use non-validated voting measures (as opposed to those cross-checked against the electoral register) by age group from the BES, which are then scaled to published turnout figures (the same as the approach recently taken by the House of Commons Library[2]). Non-validated data is known to overstate turnout; our approach corrects for this on the assumption that errors are consistent across age groups. We do not use validated turnout as this is only available for the 1987 election onwards, and, after scaling to published turnout rates, results for this period are extremely similar whether validated or non-validated turnout is used.

Where available we use population figures by single year of age (including for sub-groups like homeowners and renters) to estimate a weighted average of turnout for each generation; when we don't have these we use bases derived from the BES itself.

1 The Electoral Commission, *The quality of the 2014 electoral registers in Great Britain: Research into the last registers produced under the household registration system*, July 2014

2 A Dar, *Elections: Turnout*, House of Commons Library SN 1467, July 2013

Figure 1: **Turnout in General Elections: 1964-2015, UK**

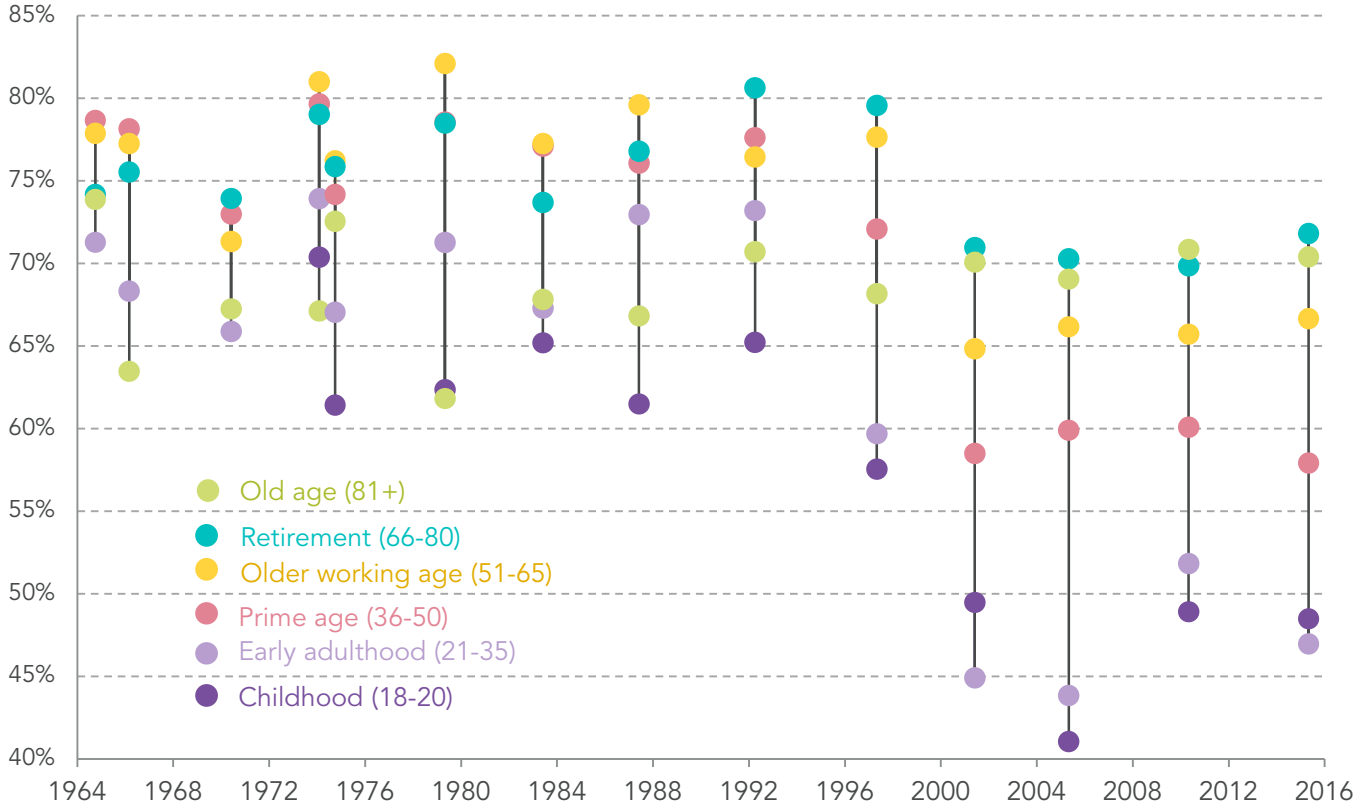


Notes: Turnout is defined as the number of people who voted as a proportion of those of voting age, rather than the conventional definition of the number of people who voted as a proportion of the electorate. See Box 1 for further details.

Source: *UK Political Info*; ONS, *Mid-Year Population Estimates*

Using the broad life stages defined in the first report of the Intergenerational Commission, Figure 2 shows that the well-documented turnout-by-age-gap has grown substantially over time. In 1964 the gap between turnout of those in retirement (66-80 year olds) and those in early adulthood (21-35 year olds) was just 3 percentage points (the gap between the highest and lowest life stages stood at 8 percentage points). The retirement-to-early-adulthood gap then grew, particularly around the turn of the millennium, peaking in 2005 at 26 percentage points. In 2015 the retirement-to-early-adulthood gap was 25 percentage points.

Figure 2: **Turnout by life stage at General Elections: 1964-2015, UK**



Notes: This analysis is based on non-validated turnout by age group in each election derived from the British Election Study survey data, which is then scaled to overall turnout figures. See Box 1 for further details, including how we define turnout.

Source: RF analysis of *British Election Study*; *UK Political Info*; ONS, *Mid-Year Population Estimates*

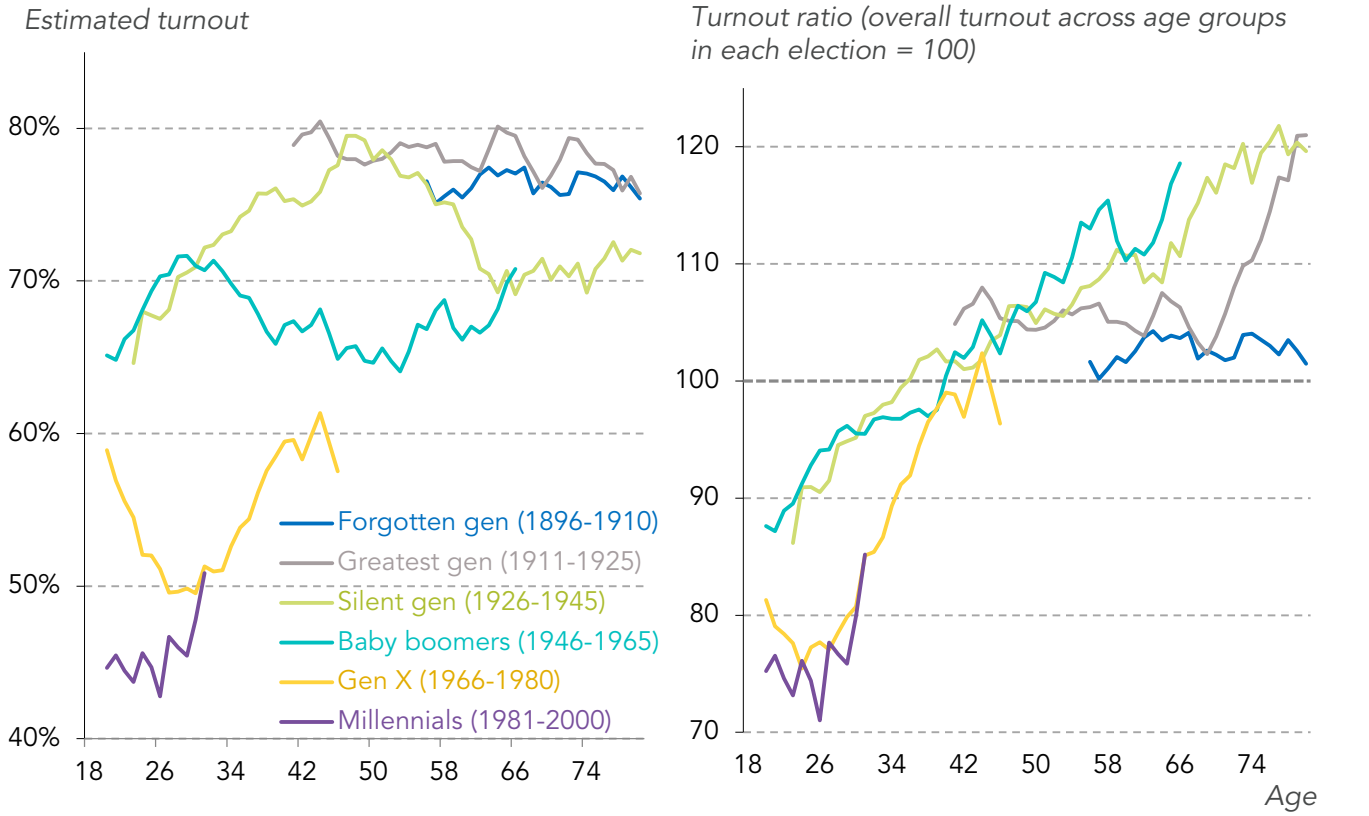
The concurrence of the overall decline in turnout and the growth of the turnout-by-age-gap is evident, with the biggest changes coming at the 1997 and 2001 elections. This suggests that much of the overall decline is explained by the changing behaviour of younger people in particular. Turnout among 66-80 year olds in retirement was only 2 percentage points lower in 2015 than in 1964; for 21-35 year olds in early adulthood, the drop was 24 percentage points.

To illustrate the impact of this divergence on our democratic process as a whole, we consider a scenario in which the relative difference between turnout of those aged 35-and-under and overall turnout had remained constant since 1964. In this case, there would have been an average of 1.2 million additional voters in each of the past five General Elections, and overall turnout in 2015 would have been 2.6 percentage points higher.

Falling youth turnout means recent generations have been less likely to vote during early adulthood than their parents were

Figure 3 converts this life stage picture into a generational one. The left-hand panel shows average turnout for each generation at each age. The clearest divergence is between the behaviour of generation X and the generations that came before in early adulthood, with a gap of as much as 20 percentage points opening up in the late 20s. Turnout at the beginning of adulthood is lower still for millennials (though the generation-on-generation drop is less dramatic), meaning that millennials in their 20s have so far been around one third less likely to vote than the baby boomers were at the same age.

Figure 3: **Turnout at General Elections by generation: 1964-2015, UK**



Notes: This analysis is based on non-validated turnout by age in each election derived from the British Election Study survey data, which is then scaled to overall official turnout figures. Figures for each generation are derived from a weighted average of estimates by single year of age for each single-year birth cohort within that generation. The results are smoothed using five-year rolling averages across the age range. See Box 1 for further details, including how we define turnout.

Source: RF analysis of *British Election Study*; *UK Political Info*; ONS, *Mid-Year Population Estimates*

Also noticeable in the left-hand panel in Figure 3 is the overall decline in turnout around the turn of the millennium hitting each generation's propensity to vote – generation X in their late 20s and 30s; the baby boomers in their 40s and 50s; and the silent generation in later life. The right-hand panel controls for this, by expressing turnout as a ratio to overall turnout in each individual election. We find that although generational progression is more uniform on this relative measure, lower turnout during early adulthood for both the millennials and generation X endures. Indeed, these results show that less than half of the turnout gap that has opened up between baby boomers and subsequent generations during the 20s is explained by the overall decline in voting behaviour – divergence between different age groups dominates.

The right-hand panel in Figure 3 also highlights that when measured relative to overall turnout in each election, the baby boomers and the silent generation have voted in consistently high numbers right across the life course.

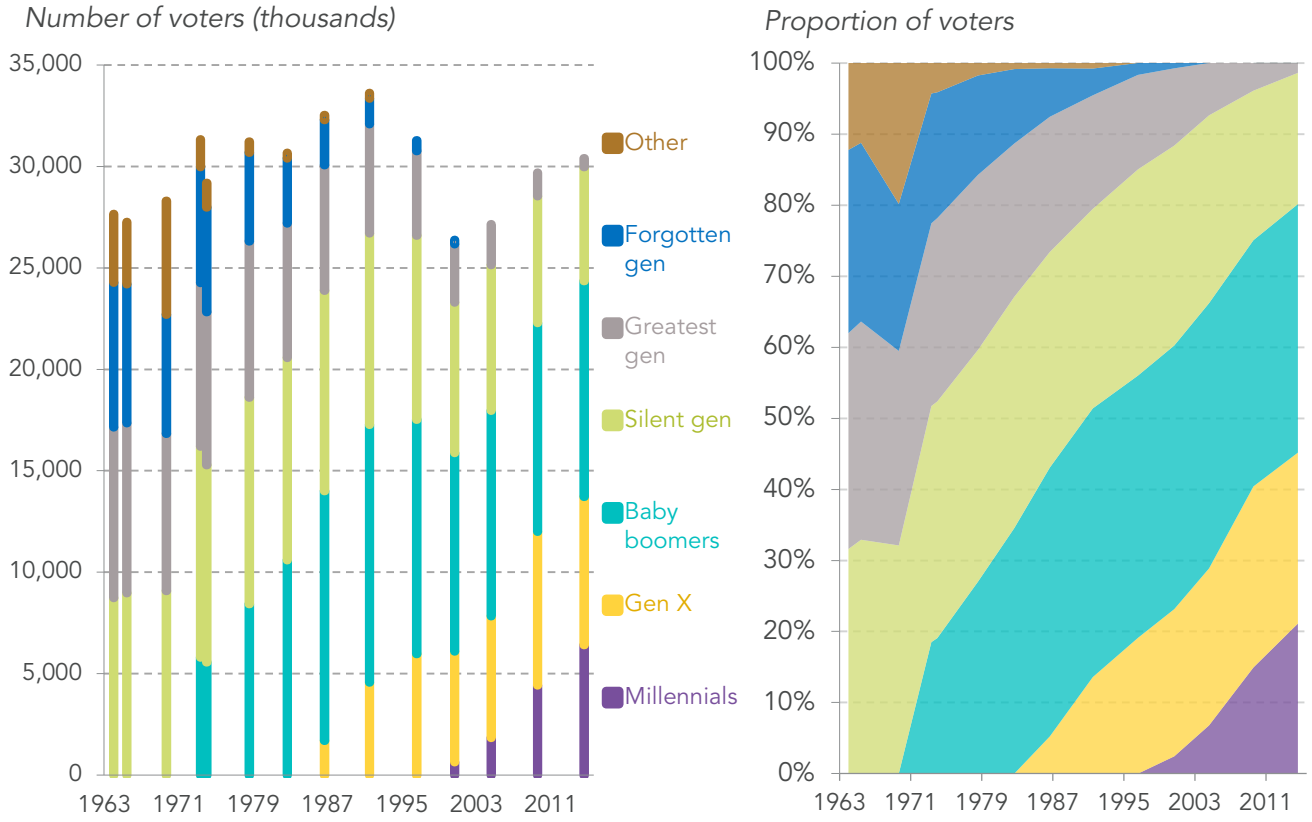
High turnout, plus a large cohort, has resulted in a large voting bloc of baby boomers

When thinking about the responsiveness of politicians to age- or life stage-specific concerns and spending priorities, it's not just turnout that matters. Generational democratic weight can be thought of as reflecting the combination of relative turnout and cohort size. As we've said, both the baby boomers and the silent generation have scored consistently highly on the former. And as the first report for the Intergenerational Commission set out (and as their name suggests), the baby boomers dominate on the latter, due to both high birth numbers and longevity improvements.[4]

This combination has translated into a large voting bloc for the boomers, illustrated in Figure 7. In the last eight General Elections (each one since 1983) more than 10 million baby boomers have voted, and more than one third of voters were a member of the baby boomer generation. In 2015, for example, 35 per cent of those who voted were baby boomers (10.6 million, at 67 per cent turnout), 24 per cent were members of generation X (7.3 million, at 56 per cent turnout), and 21 per cent were millennials. (6.4 million, at 46 per cent turnout among those who had reached voting age). The baby boomers therefore had a ballot box advantage of more than three million votes when compared to generation X, and more than four million votes when compared to the millennials.

4 L Gardiner, *Stagnation generation: The case for renewing the intergenerational contract*, Resolution Foundation, July 2016

Figure 4: **Voters at General Elections by generation: 1964-2015, UK**



Notes: This analysis is based on non-validated turnout by age group in each election derived from the British Election Study survey data, which is then scaled to overall official turnout figures. See Box 1 for further details, including how we define turnout.

Source: RF analysis of *British Election Study*; *UK Political Info*; ONS, *Mid-Year Population Estimates*

It should be noted that this picture is somewhat overstated due to the generational labels spanning periods of differing lengths. For example, the baby boomers were born over a 20-year period, whereas members of generation X were born over a 15-year period. And the millennials, although they span 20 birth years, hadn't all reached voting age in 2015. We can control for this by comparing single-year birth cohorts within generations: for example, at the 2015 general election each millennial who voted was joined at the ballot box by an average of 400,000 people born in the same year; each member of generation X was joined by 485,000 people sharing their year of birth; and each baby boomer by 530,000. To the extent that political priorities are similar among those born at the same time, this equates to a 33 per cent bloc boost for the baby boomers over the millennials in 2015.

As we highlighted at the outset, this democratic weight is not a trivial thing. The expectation is that politicians appeal most strongly to the needs and preferences of what they expect to be the largest blocs of voters, defined in terms of a number of unifying characteristics including (but certainly not limited to) age.

Of course, voters do not only act in self-interest. People live their lives within families and communities, and are often as concerned for the interests of their children, grand-children, parents and neighbours as they are for their own. And politicians and the

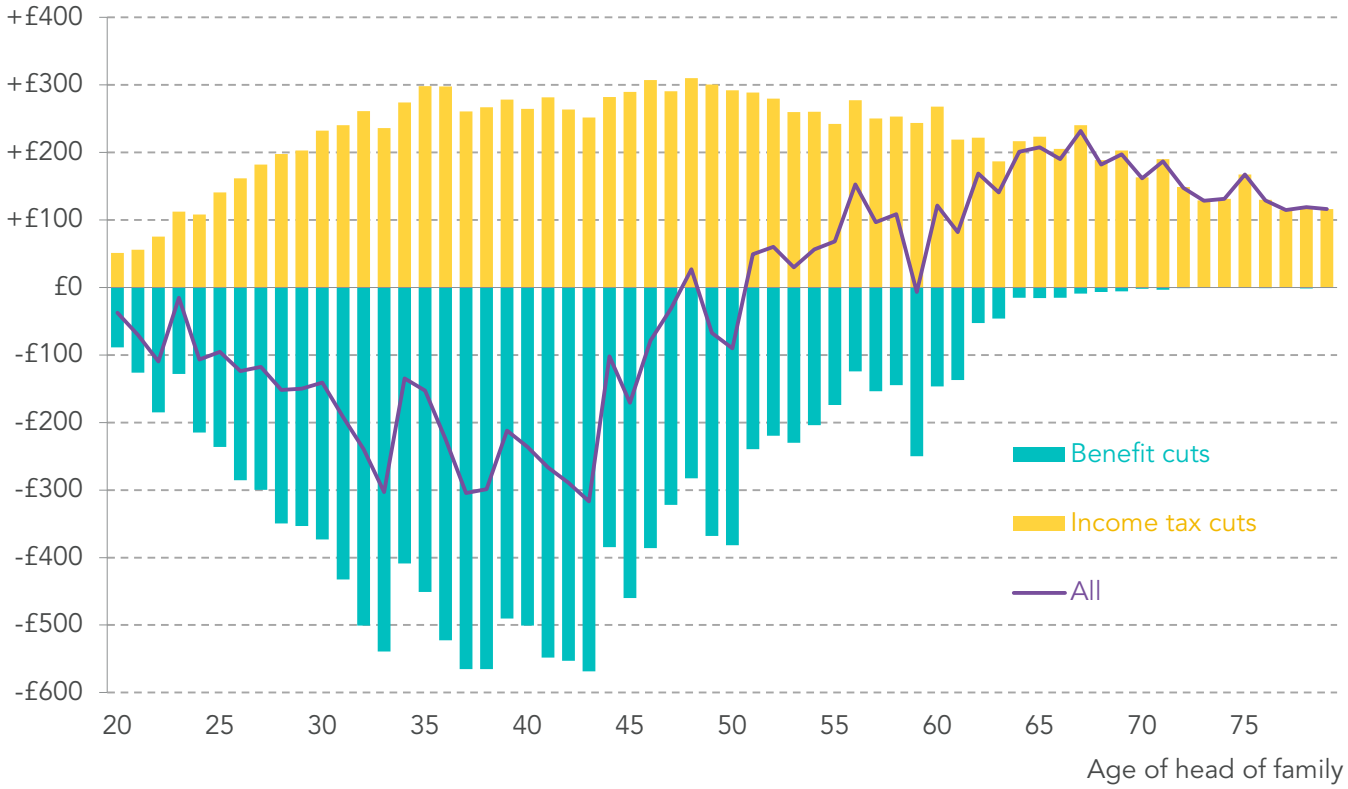
media can shape these motivations in terms of how the debate is framed. But it remains the case that very often the interests of individuals, often viewed through the prism of their age, appear to dominate.

For example, previous research has estimated that those who did not vote in the 2010 election – in particular younger, poorer households – faced cuts of 20 per cent as a result of the 2010 Spending Review. For those who did vote the figure was 12 per cent.[5]

Similar patterns may be at play in the tax and benefit policies planned for implementation in this parliament (and offered to the electorate within the 2015 Conservative manifesto). These are displayed in Figure 5[6], which shows that the baby boomers (aged

Figure 5: **Key tax and benefit policy being implemented in this parliament, by age: 2020-21, UK**

Mean change in annual net family income (before housing costs, cash)



Notes: Income tax cuts are based on the 2015 Conservative Manifesto commitments to a £12,500 Personal Tax Allowance and £50,000 Higher Rate Threshold (compared to a scenario in which both rise in line with CPI inflation from their 2016-17 values); benefit cuts include freezes to the value of various working age benefits and cuts to Universal Credit, assuming half the UC population are new or changed claims and half benefit from transitional protection at this point (compared to a scenario in which UC cuts are reversed and benefits rise in line with CPI inflation from their 2016-17 values). Inflation projections pre-date the EU referendum.

Source: RF analysis based on OBR, *Economic and Fiscal Outlook*, March 2016, using the IPPR tax-benefit model

5 S Birch, G Gottfried & G Lodge, *Divided democracy: Political inequality in the UK and why it matters*, IPPR, November 2013

6 Figure 5 shows policy changes against the backdrop of economic projections prevailing at the time of the 2016 Budget. We expect projections to be altered significantly at the Autumn Statement in light of the result of the EU referendum, and will be updating our modelling in coming weeks.

55-75 in 2020) are the clear winners due to the commitment to protect the real value of pensioner benefits. In contrast, the millennials (aged 20-40 in 2020) are hit hardest due to the concentration of welfare cuts among those of childrearing age. While we don't suggest that the offer across political parties is entirely about appealing to the largest generational voting bloc, the superficial alignment between the baby boomers' democratic weight and their experience of tax and welfare reforms over this parliament is evident.

Explaining the generational turnout gap I: *Entry behaviour and habit*

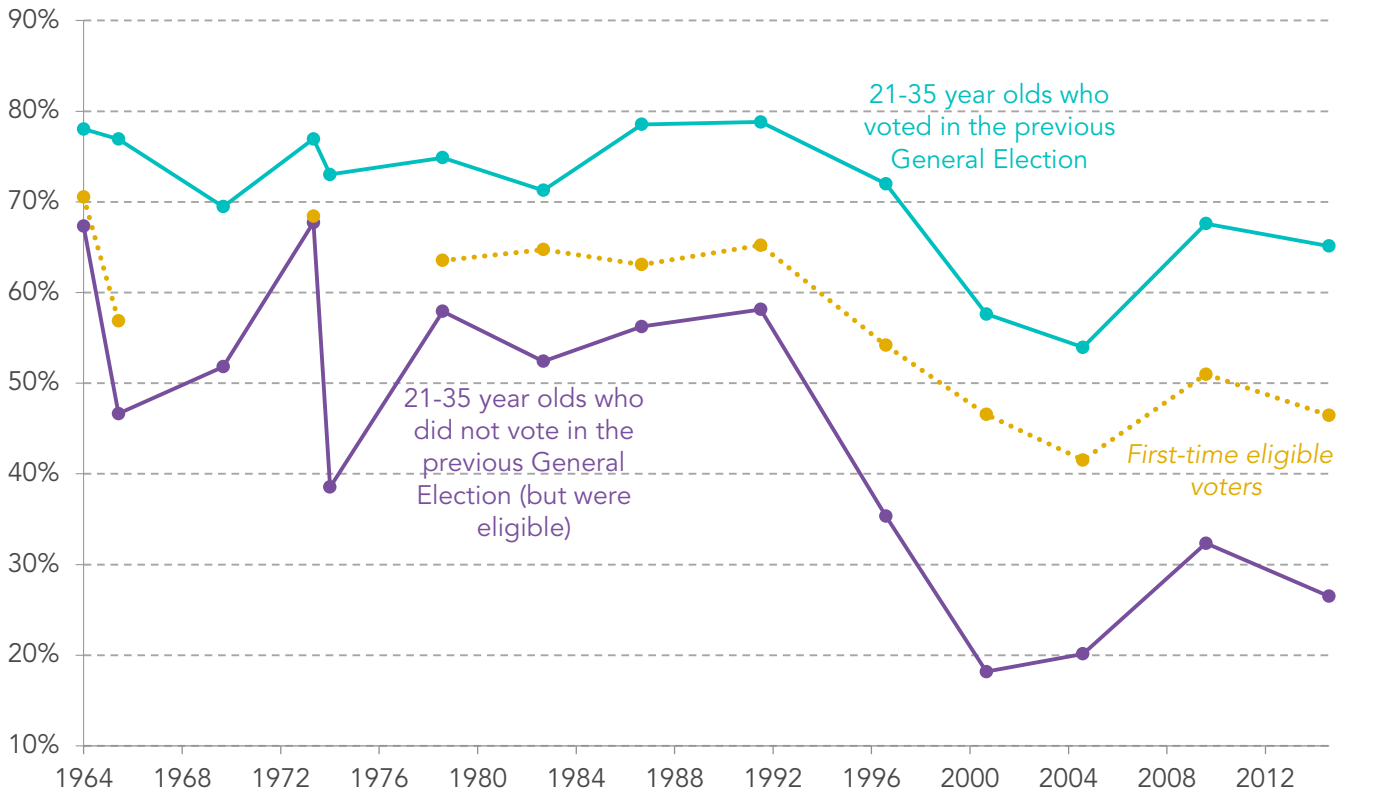
Having set out broad trends in General Election turnout across generations, in the following sections we consider how any why these might have come about. The potential drivers we observe are overlapping and interrelated, and the direction of causation is not always clear. Nonetheless, these insights offer useful food for thought in terms of how and why we might address turnout-by-age-gaps and the overall turnout decline.

Our first consideration is the changing behaviour of first-time eligible voters and how this feeds through to future behaviour, shown in Figure 6. Unsurprisingly given the trends we have so far observed, we find that first-time eligible turnout has been falling: it was 65 per cent in 1992 but by 2015 had fallen to just 46 per cent.

The other series in Figure 6 show turnout for the rest of the 35-and-under population split into two groups: those who voted at the last General Election and those who didn't. Chiming with previous research,[7] we find that past behaviour is a good predictor of a person's future propensity to vote. And importantly, this relationship appears to have become stronger in recent years, with the turnout decline in early adulthood more pronounced for the group who didn't vote last time round. (The pattern is very similar when we look at all those of voting age, rather than just those in early adulthood.) This growing 'path dependence' raises concerns about the prospects for a quick reversal in the overall turnout decline, with implications for the democratic legitimacy of future elections.

7 S Birch, G Gottfried & G Lodge, *Divided democracy: Political inequality in the UK and why it matters*, IPPR, November 2013

Figure 6: **Turnout at General elections for different groups aged 35-and-under: 1964-2015, UK**



Notes: This analysis is based on non-validated turnout by age in each election derived from the British Election Study survey data, which is then scaled to overall official turnout figures. See Box 1 for further details, including how we define turnout. Breaks in the first-time eligible voter series reflect small sample sizes. See Box 1 for further details, including how we define turnout.

Source: RF analysis of *British Election Study*; *UK Political Info*; ONS, *Mid-Year Population Estimates*

The suggestion, then, is that one of the forces underpinning the turnout gap for millennials and generation X is that there is a growing pool of people who don't vote when first eligible, and getting into the habit in subsequent elections takes relatively longer than it did in the past. Boosting turnout at the first election in which young people can vote can therefore have ripple effects as cohorts age through life stages.

Explaining the generational turnout gap II: *The changing make-up of generations and divisions within them*

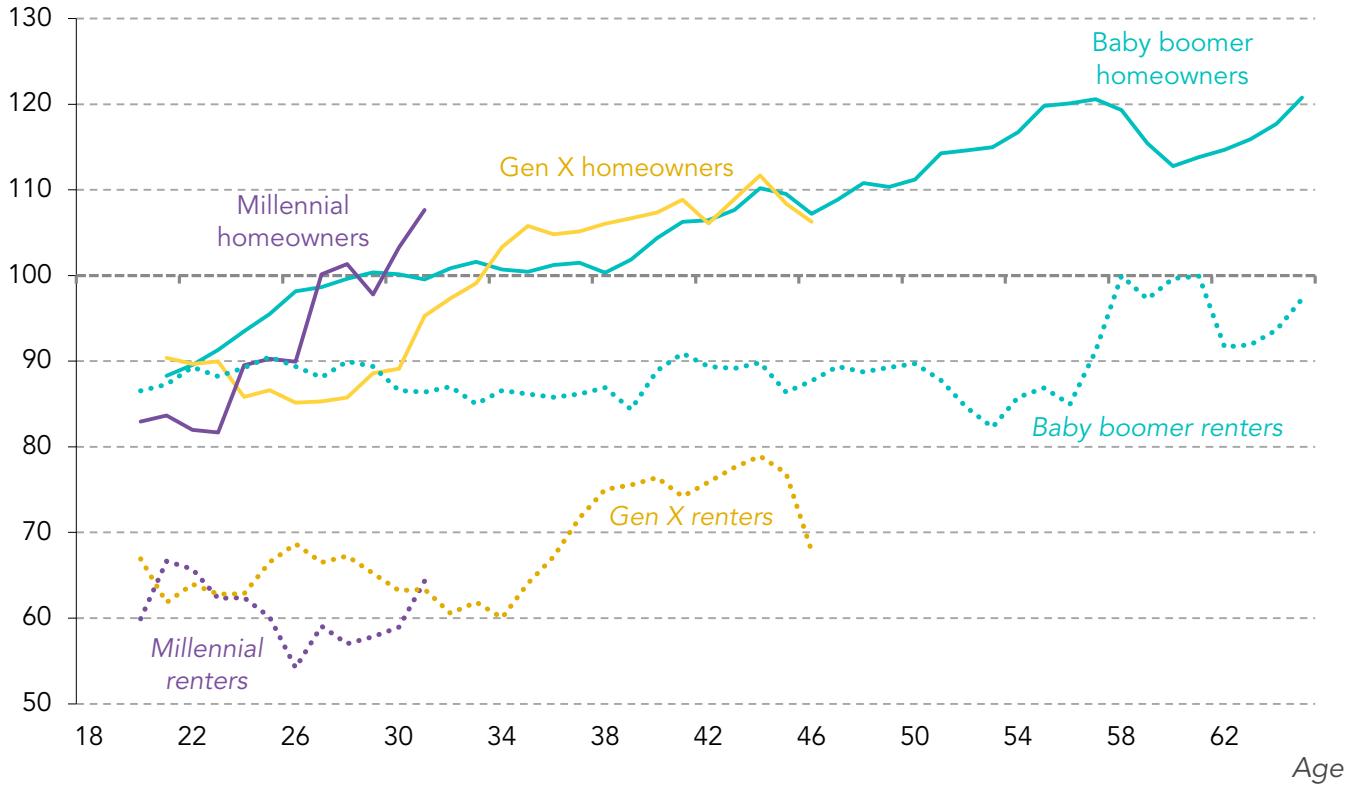
The second area in which we delve for insights on the generational turnout decline is the prevalence of different sub-populations within generations, and how the propensity of members of these groups to vote has changed between generations. Partly driven by data availability and consistency over survey datasets, we focus on sex, ethnicity, housing tenure and education level. Again, we do not prove causation in either direction, but rather highlight correlations and speculate on what these might signify.

Turning first to sex, we find no prominent differences between men and women in terms of either overall turnout behaviour, or how this has changed over time.

But shifts in housing patterns *do* appear important. This is true both in terms of the changing tenure composition *across* generations, and in terms of divergence *within* generations between renters and homeowners. First, as Figure 7 shows, renters of any generation vote in lesser numbers than their homeowner counterparts of the same age. As such, there is a correlation between the far higher proportion of generation X and particularly millennials who rent (62 per cent of millennial households were renting at age 28 compared to just 35 per cent of baby boomer households[8]) and their lower turnout.

Figure 7: **Turnout ratio at General Elections by generation and housing tenure: 1964-2015, UK**

Turnout ratio: overall turnout across age groups in each election = 100



Notes: This analysis is based on non-validated turnout by age in each election derived from the British Election Study survey data, which is then scaled to overall official turnout figures. Figures for each generation are derived from a weighted average of estimates by single year of age for each single-year birth cohort within that generation. The results are smoothed using five-year rolling averages across the age range. See Box 1 for further details, including how we define turnout.

Source: RF analysis of *British Election Study*; *UK Political Info*; ONS, *Mid-Year Population Estimates*; DWP / ONS, *Family Resources Survey*; ONS, *General Household Survey*; ONS, *Family Expenditure Survey* (IFS datasets)

8 L Gardiner, *Stagnation generation: The case for renewing the intergenerational contract*, Resolution Foundation, July 2016

Second, while homeowners have a similar likelihood of voting across generations (when we scale results to overall turnout in each election to control for the decline over time, as Figure 7 does), the owner-renter gap has widened for both generation X and the millennials. For example, baby boomer renters aged 30 were 16 per cent less likely to vote than their homeowner counterparts; for millennials this figure has so far increased to 43 per cent. The suggestion, then, is of growing turnout divergence within generation X and the millennials according to housing situation.

What might explain these turnout patterns by housing tenure? They are likely to be partly a function of the higher average incomes of homeowners compared to renters, with previous research showing a positive correlation between turnout rates and household income levels.[9] Beyond this, we speculate that motivations to vote are stronger when people feel more settled in and attached to their communities, and buying a house may be an important driver of such emotions. So to the extent that some members of younger generations will eventually age their way into home ownership (just later in life than previous generations), we might expect turnout in prime age to catch up somewhat.

In terms of the growing owner-renter turnout gap for more recent generations, we point to the structural shift towards private renting and away from council or housing association tenancies among young non-homeowners. Social renting is generally less transient and so may engender the feelings of community attachment described above to a greater extent. Indeed, focusing on registration patterns which partly underpin turnout on the broad measure we use, the Electoral Commission highlights private renting as the housing tenure with the lowest electoral register completeness, just 63 per cent in 2014.[10]

The relationship to qualification level appears more mixed. It is well-established that across democracies more highly-educated people are more likely to vote,[11] so improvements in educational attainment might be expected to boost turnout. Figure 8 bears this out to some extent: millennials with degrees are as likely if not more likely to vote than those with degrees in the two preceding generations (when we scale to overall turnout). And rising attainment means they are a far bigger group within younger generations: for example, in 2015 39 per cent of 25-29 year olds were degree educated, compared to just 23 per cent of 50-64 year olds.[12]

However, the growing turnout gap between the degree educated and the rest appears to have counteracted this to some extent: baby boomers without degrees were around 15 per cent less likely to vote during their 20s than degree-holders; for millennials, the gap has so far opened to around 40 per cent. Again, there is evidence of growing divergence in the propensity to vote between subgroups in the more recent generations.

9 S Birch, G Gottfried & G Lodge, *Divided democracy: Political inequality in the UK and why it matters*, IPPR, November 2013

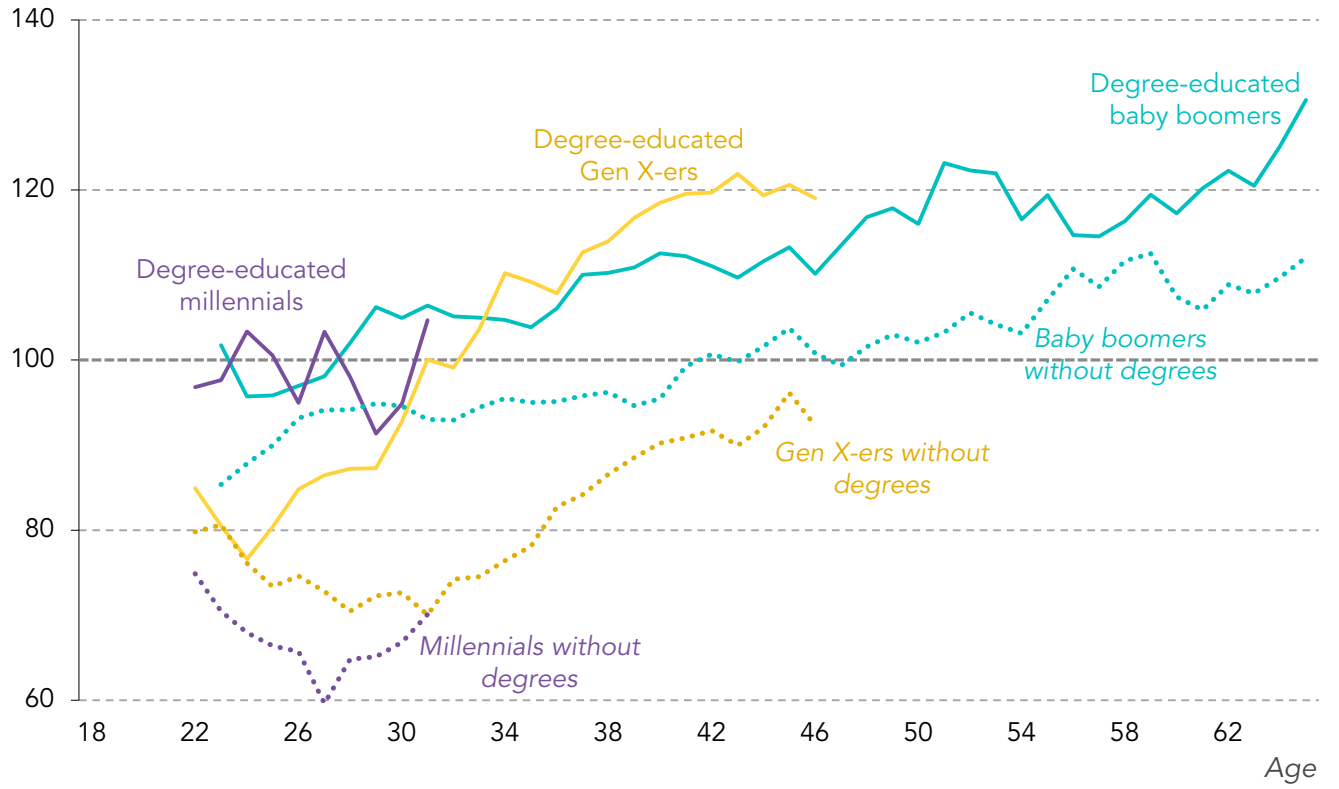
10 The Electoral Commission, *The quality of the 2014 electoral registers in Great Britain: Research into the last registers produced under the household registration system*, July 2014

11 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Society at a Glance 2011: OECD Social Indicators*, April 2011

12 And a minority of the latter group will have achieved this qualification in later life rather than by their early 20s. Source: ONS, *Annual Population Survey*.

Figure 8: **Turnout ratio at General Elections by generation and qualification level: 1979-2015, UK**

Turnout ratio: overall turnout across age groups in each election = 100



Notes: This analysis is based on non-validated turnout by age in each election derived from the British Election Study survey data, which is then scaled to overall official turnout figures. Figures for each generation are derived from a weighted average of estimates by single year of age for each single-year birth cohort within that generation. The results are smoothed using five-year rolling averages across the age range. See Box 1 for further details, including how we define turnout.

Source: RF analysis of *British Election Study; UK Political Info;* ONS, *Mid-Year Population Estimates*

As well as shifting tenure patterns and education levels, the make-up of younger generations is more ethnically diverse than previous ones. However, there does not appear to be a link between ethnicity and the generational turnout gap that has opened up. While members of minority ethnic groups are overall slightly less likely to vote than white people, this appears to be an older-person phenomenon: turnout rates in early adulthood have been very similar between white and Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups since the 1980s.

Overall, there appears to be a strong association between the growing turnout-by-age-gap and both housing tenure and education levels. In terms of the changing composition of younger generations these things pull in opposite directions. Lower home ownership is associated with lower turnout but higher educational attainment is associated with higher turnout. And in both cases, there is evidence of a growing within-generation divide between these sub-groups underpinning the rising generational turnout gap.

This raises concerns about *intra*-generational democratic engagement, with less-educated renters staying away from the polling booth in increasing number, compared to

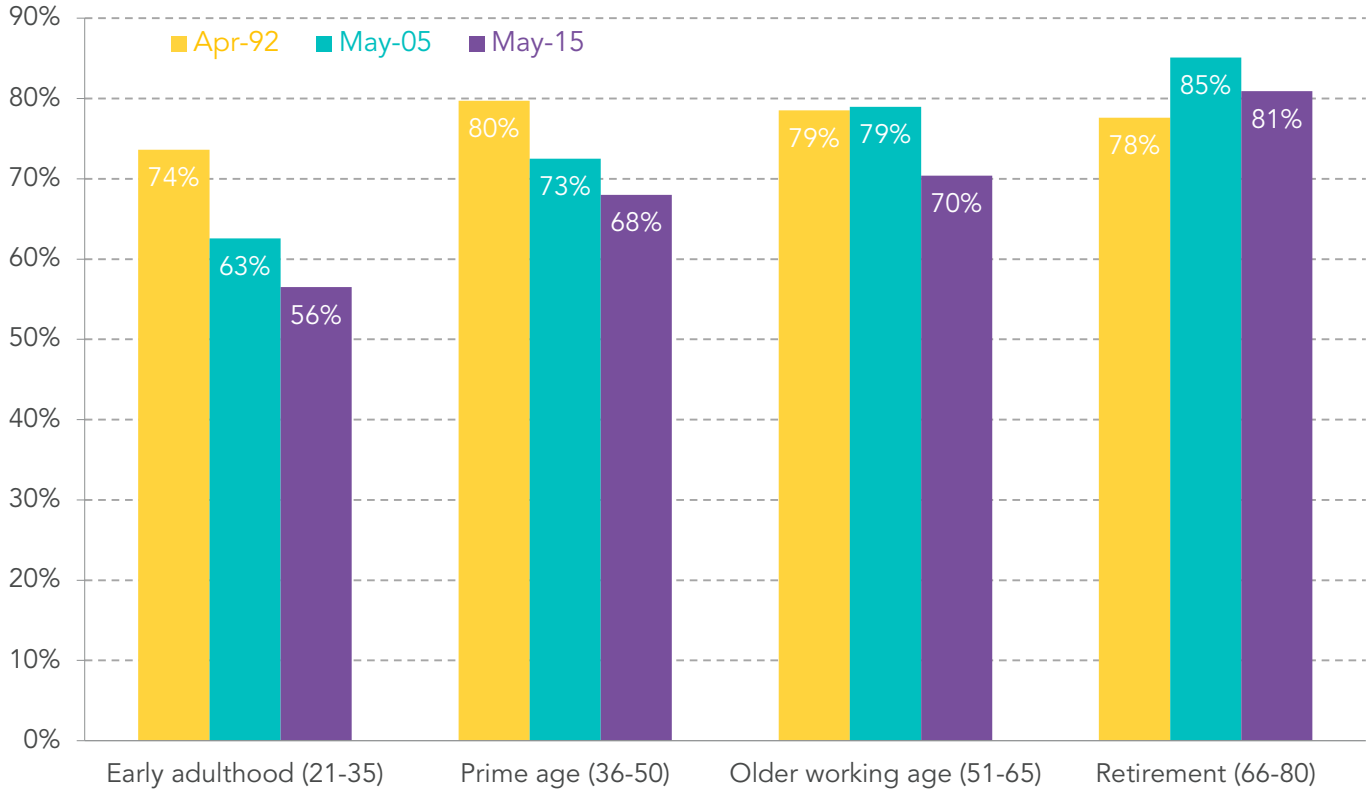
steady turnout rates for their more highly-educated homeowner peers. Concerns about the headline generational turnout gap should not obscure other important divisions in democratic engagement such as these.

Explaining the generational turnout gap III: *Changing attitudes*

The third area we explore for an explanation of the growing turnout divide between generations is a shift in attitudes, in particular towards politicians and the political process. Past studies have highlighted declining trust in politicians by young people over time, and a growing perception that politicians are self-serving and don't represent their interests.[13] Of course, to the extent that politicians respond predominantly to the interests of those who vote, it is possible that such perceptions are self-reinforcing.

Figure 9: **Interest in electoral outcomes by life stage at recent General Elections: 1992-2015, UK**

Proportion who say they cared 'a great deal' which party won the recent election



Notes: Excludes non-respondents and those who didn't express a view.

Source: RF analysis of *British Election Study*

Our analysis bears these kinds of shifts out. Comparing the last election before the sharp decline in turnout (1992) to more recent elections, Figure 9 shows a significant

13 S Birch, 'Citizens excluded', in G Lodge & G Gottfried (eds.), *Democracy in Britain: Essays in honour of James Cornford*, IPPR, February 2014

decline in the proportion of people in early adulthood who cared which party won, from nearly three quarters (74 per cent) in 1992 down to a little over half (56 per cent) in 2015. In contrast, the proportion of those in retirement who cared about the outcome of the election has increased slightly over this period.

In a similar vein, we find a sharp rise in the proportion of young people who do not identify with any political party. At the February 1974 election, just 9 per cent of 21-35 year olds did not identify with any individual political party, but by the 2010 election, this figure had risen to nearly one quarter (23 per cent).

On the basis of this evidence, how politicians, political parties and the democratic process appeal to and engage younger generations should be a key consideration when looking for explanations of the generational turnout gap that has opened up.

The growing generational turnout gap should not be considered intractable: conclusions and policy options

This paper has described how the well-known phenomenon of young people's lower propensity to vote has become more pronounced over time, fuelling a generational turnout gap that has opened up for generation X and especially the millennials. Combined with the impact of their large cohort size, this resulted in a four million person ballot box advantage for the baby boomers over the millennials in the most recent General Election.

A mixture of factors appear related to, and potential drivers of, the growing divisions in the voting behaviours of young and old. These include:

- A decline in voting when first eligible that tends to embed the habit;
- Changing living patterns, with far lower levels of home ownership among younger generations;
- Growing turnout divisions between sub-groups within generations; and,
- A shift in attitudes among young people.

Combatting growth in this generational gap in turnout is critical for two reasons. First, given the habitual nature of voting behaviour, we might expect successively lower turnout rates when young to feed through to lower turnout across the life course as cohorts age. This would exacerbate the sharp decline in overall turnout rates that occurred around the turn of the millennium, representing a threat to democratic legitimacy in future elections.

Second, who votes – and who politicians expect to vote – matters for what policies are pursued in a democracy. In their offer to the electorate, politicians are motivated to appeal most strongly to the needs and preferences of the largest blocs of voters, defined in terms of a number of characteristics including (but certainly not limited to) age. In

particular, policies that address the inequalities in living standards that have opened up between the generations will be more politically feasible if democratic engagement across the generations is ensured.

This situation should not be considered intractable, in particular given that electoral turnout is both higher and more even across younger and older populations in most other European countries[14] and developed economies.[15]

Just as a strong democracy rests on high turnout overall, engaging all generations in the political process will be essential to the strong and renewed intergenerational contract that our country needs. And a number of practical solutions are already on the table, including:

- **Mandatory first-time voting,** which has been proposed by the IPPR and others as a means of engendering the voting habit without placing onerous requirements on the electorate as a whole.[16] Voters would be required only to turn out, and would have the option of voting 'none of the above' if they wished not to select a candidate.

- **Extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds**, in particular so that the institutions of schools and the family can be harnessed to embed voting behaviour. This has been proposed by the academic Sarah Birch,[17] and was offered as an option for consideration by the recent select committee inquiry into voter engagement in the UK.[18]

- **Online voting**, which might appeal more to young people and reduce the perceived barriers to or hassle associated with voting. This was also suggested by the select committee inquiry.

- **A more determined approach to enforcing what is effectively compulsory voter registration in the UK**, given evidence that young people have much lower registration rates than average. Options include automatic registration and greater enforcement of penalties for non-compliance. Both Sarah Birch and the select committee inquiry offer this suggestion.

- **A renewed citizenship education programme** to address young people's shifting attitudes towards politics and democratic engagement, potentially including formal examinations. This was also proposed by Sarah Birch.

We're not advocating any approach at this stage, and a range of options may exist in addition to those listed here. Because engaging all generations in the political process will be essential to the strong and renewed intergenerational contract that our country needs, the Intergenerational Commission will consider how we might arrest and reverse the growing generational turnout gap and put our democracy on a firmer footing for the long term.

14 S Birch, G Gottfried & G Lodge, *Divided democracy: Political inequality in the UK and why it matters*, IPPR, November 2013

15 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Society at a Glance 2011: OECD Social Indicators*, April 2011

16 S Birch, G Gottfried & G Lodge, *Divided democracy: Political inequality in the UK and why it matters*, IPPR, November 2013

17 S Birch, 'Citizens excluded', in G Lodge & G Gottfried (eds.), *Democracy in Britain: Essays in honour of James Cornford*, IPPR, February 2014

18 House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, *Voter engagement in the UK: Fourth Report of Session 2014–15*, November 2014

Resolution Foundation

Intergenerational Commission

Resolution Foundation is an independent research and policy organisation. Our goal is to improve the lives of people with low to middle incomes by delivering change in areas where they are currently disadvantaged. We do this by:

undertaking research and economic analysis to understand the challenges facing people on a low to middle income;

developing practical and effective policy proposals; and

engaging with policy makers and stakeholders to influence decision-making and bring about change.

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