Poll position

How intergenerational voting intentions have changed since the 2019 General Election

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Acknowledgements

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Summary

The elections in 2017 and 2019 crystallised a trend that had been building over this century: age became the central fault line in British politics. But those were not normal elections: Brexit loomed large, an issue with distinctly age-divided views. So where are we now, five years on, and approaching a general election this year? This note investigates five big intergenerational shifts that have occurred since the last general election.

It is clear that each generation tends to prioritise different policy issues when it comes to elections, and even where priorities align, they often hold opposing views (for example, on leave vs. remain in the Brexit debate). With the economy currently topping the agenda this year for all generations, the coming election could be one characterised by smaller age-divides on key policy issues than we have been use to in recent elections. However, one highly age-divided policy issue has been rising in political salience recently: immigration. Views have hardened towards immigration across generations, with the share of silent generation voters who think the country should allow fewer immigrants up by 7 percentage points, the boomers by 4 percentage points, gen X by 2 percentage points and millennials by 4 percentage points.

There are also important trends in voting intentions taking place within generations that have become prominent since 2019: for example, although the young have become increasingly likely to vote Labour, those that are relatively more disadvantaged (in particular, millennial non-homeowners and non-graduates) report being no more likely to than they were in 2019 (which was a Conservative landslide victory). Instead, these groups are reporting being less likely to vote at all, with the share of non-graduate millennials reporting they are likely to vote down 12 percentage points compared to 2019. This is particularly concerning given the already huge turnout gaps among millennials in 2019, when there was a 28 percentage points homeownership turnout gap and 25 percentage points education turnout gap. These growing turnout gaps have meant that millennials as a cohort are not reporting being any more likely to vote in the next election than they were in 2019, despite voter turnout typically rising with age. This will widen the turnout advantage held by older generations (such as the baby boomer generation), who, despite shrinking since 2019 (from 34 per cent of eligible voters to 31 per cent), will outvote younger generations.

Exploring these trends in intergenerational voting intentions can help to paint a picture as to what to expect in the 2024 general election.
An intergenerational voting gap has materialised and grown in recent elections

The adage goes: ‘If you are not a liberal when you are young, you have no heart, and if you are not a conservative when old, you have no brain’. This suggests the young and old have always held divergent political views and that these evolve over the life course as individuals age. But in UK general elections, the intergenerational voting gap in party preferences is a relatively new phenomenon.

Just over thirty years ago, in the 1992 general election, those in their 70s were only slightly more likely (12 per cent, or 5 percentage points) to vote Conservative than those in their 30s (as shown in Figure 1). Fast forward to 2019, and that has changed: those aged 70 were more than twice as likely to vote Conservative as those aged 30 (60 per cent vs 28 per cent). The inverse is true when it comes to support for Labour in 2019: a 30-year-old was more than twice as likely to vote Labour than a 70-year-old.

In fact, by 2019, age had replaced what for some time had been a key predictor of party preference: income. In 1992, the steep trendline in the bottom left panel of Figure 1 highlights the increasing likelihood of voting Conservative the richer you were.¹ But by 2019, the relationship had become much weaker (as shown by the flat line in bottom right panel of Figure 1) meaning that income alone was no predictor whether someone voted Conservative.² It is now the case that the Conservatives are the party of the old rather than of the rich, and Labour the party of the young, rather than of those on lower incomes. To put this another way: poorer working-age adults were one and a half times more likely to vote Labour than Conservative in 2019, as you might expect from the party’s background, but poorer pensioners were two and a half times more likely to vote Conservative than Labour in 2019.³

¹ Income in 2019 is measured by the following question: “Which of the letters on this card represents the total income of your household from all sources before tax - including benefits, savings and so on?” Income in 1992 is measured by the following question: “Which of the letters on this card represents the total income of your household from all sources, before tax?”
² The 2019 election was an unusual election, as the Conservatives won swathes of seats in the Midlands and North of England, previously dubbed as the red wall. However, there was also a flattening of the income gradient in the 2017 election (results available on request).
³ ‘Poorer’ here refers to the bottom two income bands on the British Election Study data in 2019, which is around one in five of the respondents who disclosed their income.
FIGURE 1: Age has become a stronger predictor of party preference than income

Percentage of voters voting Conservative by age (top 2 panels) and by income (bottom 2 panels) in the 1992 and 2019 elections: GB


SOURCE: RF analysis of British Election Study, cross-sectional data.

The increasing role of age as a predictor in party preferences has led to a growing age gap between ‘safer’ Conservative and Labour seats (which we define as those with a majority greater than 10,000).4 In both 2010 and 2019, the average median age in safer Labour seats was lower than in both marginal and safer Conservative seats (see Figure 2).5 But safer Labour seats have also become younger since 2010, while safer Conservative seats have become older, with the difference in median ages rising to 11 years by 2019. The increasing median age of safer Conservative seats since 2010 has been driven primarily by the ageing of their existing majorities. On the other hand, the falling median age in safe Labour seats in part reflects changes in the overall number of safe Labour constituencies, as Labour lost their majorities in older constituencies in 2019.6

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4 Given the prevalence of the Scottish National Party in Scotland and other political parties in Northern Ireland, this assessment looks only at seat in England and Wales, when analysing the age gap between safer Conservative and Labour seats.
5 Elections before 2010 used different boundaries from the 2019 election.
But it is not only party preferences that are related to age: turnout had begun to develop a significant relationship with age before the more recent relationship between party preferences and age. Turnout was broadly similar between age groups in the 1964 general election, sitting at between 70 and 80 per cent. Other than among 18-24-year-olds, turnout gaps between age groups broadly stayed within this range until the 1997 election – when gen X were young voters – when it began to widen, as highlighted in Figure 3. The turnout gap between 25-34-year-olds and those aged 65 and above peaked at 35 percentage points at the 2017 general election, and remained significant at the 2019 election, standing at 24 percentage points.

NOTES: Marginal is defined as a majority less than 10,000. Majorities used are the 2010 election and 2019 election. If the seat has had a by-election since 2019, then the by-election majority is used. MPs who have become independent since 2019 are characterized by the Party they stood for election for in 2019. The value shown is the mean of the median ages of constituencies.


7 E Uberoi, Turnout at elections, House of Commons Library, January 2023.
8 It is clear that housing tenure has been influential here (younger voters are much less likely to be owners today than their parents were at the same age), but a substantial education gap in turnout also exists among younger voters (discussed further in point 4). See: L Gardiner, Votey McVoteface: Understanding the growing turnout gap between generations, Resolution Foundation, September 2016.
FIGURE 3: The turnout gap among younger and older votes has grown substantially since 1992

Estimated turnout at general elections by age group: GB

Looking ahead: Five things to know about intergenerational voting intentions in 2024

So the elections in 2017 and 2019 underlined how age has now become the central fault line in British politics. But voting intentions, voters’ policy priorities, and even the levels of political apathy, have all changed substantially since the last general election. This section sets out five big changes to generational voting intentions since 2019.

To do this, we analyse voting intentions using the internet panel data from the British Election Study (BES), which records self-reported intended voting behaviour. The BES panel data sets have over 30,000 observations per wave. Data from the latest available wave (Wave 25) is compared to the final wave conducted before the 2019 general election (Wave 18).  

9 The latest BES dataset is from May 2023. This is from nine months ago, but more recent polling data (based on smaller samples) confirms that headline intergenerational intentions have not changed substantially over this period. For example, in May 2023, YouGov polling had Labour substantially leading the Conservatives among 18-24-year-olds, 25-49-year-olds, 50-64-year-olds, while the Conservatives led in the aged 65 and over category. These trends remain in YouGov’s January 2024 polling, and there have been only small changes in support for the main parties since May: support for Labour rose by just 2 percentage points for 25-49-year-olds, and remained constant for 50-64-year-olds, for example. For the exact polling in May 2023 and January 2024, please see YouGov, Voting intention: Con 20%, Lab 47% (16-17 Jan 2024), January 2024.
1. Brexit has been replaced by the economy, a much less age-divided issue, as the top priority for voters

The focus of public policy discourse, political campaigns and even manifesto commitments in the coming year will in large part be determined by what the electorate sees as the top issues facing the country.

In 2019, the top priority across all generations was Europe (covering all issues relating to Brexit). Brexit was then, and remains today, a highly age-divided issue – with a substantial age divide in those voting leave and remain, and in those who today believe Brexit was a mistake. But, although the economic consequences of Brexit continue, it has collapsed as a priority issue for voters, with a more than 40 percentage point fall across all generations in the share of respondents identifying Europe as their top issue. Instead, by May 2023, the economy had very clearly become the top policy priority across all generations, with more than half of each generation naming it as their top issue.

### FIGURE 4: The economy is voters’ top priority heading into the general election

Proportion choosing issue as the single most important issue facing the country in May 2023, and change from December 2019: GB

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NOTES: Responses in Wave 18 (December 2019) and Wave 25 (May 2023) to the question: ‘As far as you’re concerned, what is the SINGLE MOST important issue facing the country at the present time?’ coded by BES to 13 categories (or which 7 are grouped here under ‘Other’. Gen Z changes not shown, as very few were over 18 in 2019.

SOURCE: RF analysis of British Election Study panel data.

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10 See, for example: The Guardian, Changing attitudes to Brexit three years on, 30 January 2023.
This represents a substantial shift in the electorate’s priorities from a highly age-divided issue to one where there is much more alignment across generations. We can also see this in particular aspects of the current economic debate. In particular, there is remarkably little difference in preferences for spending versus tax cuts among age groups.\(^{11}\) Some differences do remain in terms of spending priorities, but even here we find a large degree of agreement: for example, the majority of those aged 60 and over support increased spending on policies aimed at young adults (even at the cost of higher taxes), such as more spending on free vocational education and local affordable housing.\(^{12}\)

But, although more than half of each generation identify the economy as the biggest priority, younger generations are even more likely to say that this is so, with over 60 per cent of gen Z and millennials (as well as gen X) identifying it as their top issue. This may reflect that younger generations have been hit harder by the cost of living crisis than older adults.\(^{13}\) More generally, the economic situation facing young generations has been poor for some time, with millennials potentially becoming the first generation to fare worse economically than their parents, and falling behind on several life milestones, such as becoming homeowners or starting a family.\(^{14}\) However, it may also reflect a rising focus on immigration, which we go on to discuss next.

2. Immigration remains an age-divided issue in the UK, but views have become more negative across all generations

Immigration is an age-divided issue, with older voters reporting a bigger increase in the salience of immigration than younger voters, and having a higher share that think immigration is too high. This is visible in Figure 4, which shows that older generations are more likely to prioritise immigration as the top issue facing the country. But we can also see this in Figure 5, which shows that, in May 2023, over half of those from the silent and baby boomer generations think the country should allow fewer immigrants into the country, but only 34 per cent of millennials did.

However, attitudes towards migration have hardened across all generations, with potential voters from all generations now more likely to say that the country should allow fewer immigrants to enter the UK than was the case in 2019. For example, the share of silent generation voters who think the country should allow fewer immigrants has risen by 7 percentage points, the boomers by 4 percentage points, gen X by 2 percentage points and millennials by 4 percentage points. This is not just about generations ageing

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11 This is based on Times Radio analysis of YouGov polling from 10-11 January 2024, as reported by Matt Chorley.
13 M Broome, K Handscomb & L Try, Hoping and coping: How families were faring in March 2023, Resolution Foundation, April 2023.

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into less liberal view on immigration as they get older: we also see a similar uptick since 2019 if we analyse differences by age, rather than by generation. The uptick does coincide with the rise in net migration, which was 745,000 in 2022, up from 184,000 in 2019.\textsuperscript{15}

**FIGURE 5: Since 2019, all generations have become more likely to think there should be less immigration**

Proportion of respondents who think the UK should allow more or fewer immigrants by generation: GB

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<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>13% Many fewer</td>
<td>6% Many fewer</td>
<td>26% Many fewer</td>
<td>35% Many fewer</td>
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<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>12% Fewer</td>
<td>14% Fewer</td>
<td>26% Fewer</td>
<td>42% Fewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>13% Neutral</td>
<td>7% Neutral</td>
<td>19% Neutral</td>
<td>25% Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>12% Less</td>
<td>15% Less</td>
<td>23% Less</td>
<td>32% Less</td>
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<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>3% Don’t know</td>
<td>5% Don’t know</td>
<td>15% Don’t know</td>
<td>23% Don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>3% Don’t know</td>
<td>5% Don’t know</td>
<td>20% Don’t know</td>
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<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>3% More</td>
<td>16% More</td>
<td>21% More</td>
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<td>2023</td>
<td>3% More</td>
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<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>5% Many more</td>
<td>20% Many more</td>
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<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>6% Many more</td>
<td>20% Many more</td>
<td>17% Many more</td>
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NOTES: Responses in Wave 18 (December 2019) and Wave 25 (May 2023) to the question: ‘Some people think that the UK should allow *many more* immigrants to come to the UK to live and others think that the UK should allow *many fewer*. Where do you place yourself on this scale?’ Scale 0 – 10 (grouped as 0-1 many fewer, 2-4 fewer, 5 neutral, 6-8 more and 9-10 many more), plus don’t knows.

SOURCE: RF analysis of British Election Study panel data.

Immigration has not been a highly salient issue in the UK in the past few elections (outside the specific implications of the impact of Brexit on the freedom of movement).\textsuperscript{16} However, we should not assume that it will stay that way. The economy still remains the top priority among adults (as shown in Figure 6), but there is some indication that, as concern over inflation and the economy more generally has fallen, some voters have become more concerned about immigration. Indeed, there was a substantial decline in the share of people identifying immigration as a top issue facing the country between 2017 and 2020, reaching a low of 11 per cent in the middle of 2020. But there has been a steady rise since the back end of 2022: in October 2022, 21 per cent of the public identified immigration as an important issue facing the country, and this has risen to 39 percent in January 2024. Meanwhile, over the same time period, the economy has gone

\textsuperscript{15} ONS, Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending June 2023, November 2023

from 74 per cent of the public identifying it as an important issue facing the country to 53 per cent. Both the Conservatives and Labour have responded to this trend in public opinion, with Rishi Sunak stating that migration could “overwhelm” Europe, and Labour pledging to cut net migration to a couple of hundred thousand a year.17 Meanwhile, the Reform party is polling at 10 per cent, up from 2 per cent in May 2023.

We only have to look at some of our western European neighbours, such as the Netherlands, where there is growing support for far-right and anti-migration parties, including among younger groups, to see how this issue can quickly grow in political salience.18 But the UK has not yet seen this become a salient issue for younger voters, as shown by Figure 5, and by the fact that the Reform UK party is polling at just 3 per cent among 18-24-year-olds. Moreover, even among older voters, it is non-graduates (who tend to have lower turnout) and those already planning to vote Conservative that are most likely to prioritise reducing immigration. For example, one in four boomer voters have immigration as their top policy priority, but only one in seven undecided boomer voters do.

NOTES: ‘Immigration’ refers to ‘immigration and asylum’. Respondents are asked to select up to three issues in response to the question: “What are the most important issues facing the country?”. SOURCE: YouGov polling, The most important issues facing the country.

18 J Tilley, The kids are alt-right, BBC Radio 4, January 2024.

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The political salience of immigration, in the year of election discourse to come, will depend on the extent to which it is prioritised by those who are still undecided or likely to change their votes and those most likely to turn up to vote on the day.\textsuperscript{19}

3. Polling suggests a swing to Labour across generations, but young non-graduates and non-homeowners haven’t become more likely to vote Labour, despite becoming less likely to vote Conservative.

Labour has seen a positive swing in the polls across all generations and most demographic groups since 2019. But two notable exceptions are non-graduates and non-homeowners among the millennial generation. In 2019, millennial non-homeowners were as likely to vote Labour as the average millennial, and non-graduates were only slightly less likely to (5 percentage points), but these groups are the only ones to not have become more likely to vote Labour since 2019, as Figure 7 shows.

**FIGURE 7: Young non-graduates and non-homeowners are no more likely to vote Labour than in 2019**

Change in share responding they are planning to vote Labour at the next general election by generation, homeownership status and education level between December 2019 and May 2023: GB

But if we do the same analysis but also look at the share that plan to vote Conservative, we can get the same result: millennial non-graduates and non-homeowners are also less likely to vote Conservative now than in 2019, with the share falling by 9 percentage points and 8 percentage points respectively. How do we square this? Because, as the next issue illustrates, these groups have become less likely to vote overall.

4. The education and homeownership voter turnout gap may widen among millennials

We discussed above (and showed in Figure 3) that turnout has had a strong age pattern over many elections. But there are also big gaps within generations, with homeownership and whether someone is a graduate proving to be important predictors. For example, while almost 70 per cent of homeowning millennials reported voting in the 2019 general election, less than half of non-home owning millennials did.

FIGURE 8: Younger non-graduates and non-homeowners were much less likely to vote in the 2019 election

Estimated turnout at 2019 general election, by generation and whether a homeowner and a graduate: GB

However, although trends in housing tenure have clearly played an important role in the lower turnout of younger generations in recent elections, it doesn’t explain

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20 This is aligned with the fact that homeowners are substantially more likely to be registered to vote than renters: while just 65 per cent of private renters were registered to vote in 2022, around 90 per cent of homeowners were. 88 per cent of those buying on mortgage / shared ownership and 95 per cent of owner occupiers: The Electoral Commission, Explore the data: Who is and isn’t registered to vote? (accessed 2nd February 2023).
further divergence in the turnout gaps by homeownership, nor the education turnout gaps, which persist even within tenure groups. For example, in 2019 among millennial homeowners, graduates were 26 percentage points more likely to vote than non-graduates.

These differences are already large, and all the evidence suggests that they could get substantially wider in the next general election. Figure 9 shows that the share of non-graduate millennials responding that they are likely to vote is down 12 percentage points compared to 2019, but this share is flat for graduate millennials; there is a similar widening of the gap between millennials who are home owners and non-home owners. Although the share reporting they are likely to vote will not perfectly reflect eventual voter turnout, it is a strong indicator of political apathy among sub-groups of different generations.\footnote{A similar education turnout trend seems to be occurring in the US. Between 2019 and 2023, the share of college graduates planning to vote in the Presidential election remained high – 69 per cent in 2023, compared to 72 per cent in 2019. However, the share of young people who are not in college and do not have a degree planning to vote fell substantially, from 48 per cent in 2019 to 40 per cent in 2023. Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard youth poll, Harvard University, Autumn 2023.}

**FIGURE 9: Non-graduate and non-home owning millennials report being less likely to vote than in 2019**

Change in share responding they are likely or very likely to vote at the next general election by generation, homeownership status and education level between December 2019 and May 2023: GB

As a country, we should be worried about these widening gaps, as research has shown that voting patterns become embedded: whether we vote in the first election we
are eligible for has a knock-on effect on our likelihood to vote in future elections. More fundamentally, those who don’t vote are less likely to see their policy priorities become the priorities of parties focussed on winning elections and in the UK that may increasingly become the less well-off among younger generations.

5. Millennials share of the likely electorate may not go up

As millennials get older, we would expect their turnout rate to rise, and so their overall share of the voting electorate to increase. In particular, based on the relationship between turnout and age in 2019, we might expect that millennials’ turnout would rise from 54 per cent in 2019 to 56 per cent in 2024, as each millennial voter is now five years older. Instead, millennials are now, on average, reporting that they are less likely to vote than in 2019, while older generations report being more likely to. Based on this reported intention to vote, the millennial share of the likely electorate could instead fall at the next election, down from 30 per cent in 2019 to 28 per cent (see Figure 10).

FIGURE 10: Millennials share of the likely electorate may not go up in a 2024 general election

Share of population eligible to vote (left-hand side) and share of the population that have reported they are likely to vote (right-hand side), by generation: GB

NOTES: Intention to vote includes only those reporting they are likely or very likely to vote at the next election.
SOURCE: RF analysis of British Election Study panel data.


23 There are significant differences in the living standards of homeowning and graduate millennials compared to their counterparts. On average, homeowners and graduate millennials’ household incomes (after housing costs) were 45 per cent and 44 per cent higher than their non-owning and non-graduate counterparts respectively in 2021-22.

At the same time, the boomer generation may not experience as large a decline in their voting share as we might expect based on cohort size alone. Although the generation is becoming smaller relative to younger generations (due in part to a higher death rate), the boomers are reporting that they still plan to out vote the millennials. This is because, just as the likelihood to vote has fallen for millennials, boomers report being even more likely to vote than in 2019, and so their share has not declined as much as expected, falling by just one percentage point (from 35 to 34 per cent).

On the other hand, even if millennials do not become a more influential voting block this election, research has shown that the economic outcomes of the younger electorate can influence older relatives voting behaviour.²⁵ For example, older adults with financially struggling younger family members have been found to have different party preferences than the rest of their cohort – they were 13 percentage points less likely to support the Conservatives and 9 percentage points more likely to support Labour (not explained by the financial wellbeing of these adults themselves).

Conclusion

The date for the next UK general election has not been confirmed, but political parties have long been gearing up towards it. The large and persistent age gaps in both party preferences and voter turnout highlight the importance of looking at the next election through an intergenerational lens. This report has shown the role that intergenerational voting intentions could play on issues ranging from turnout, party preference and policy salience through five key points. A growing turnout gap among younger voters is particularly worrying – as these, already disadvantaged, groups could be increasingly neglected in a political debate focussed on winning votes, rather than targeting policies at those most in need.

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