

The UK's sexuality gap: LGB voters remain significantly more supportive of the Labour Party

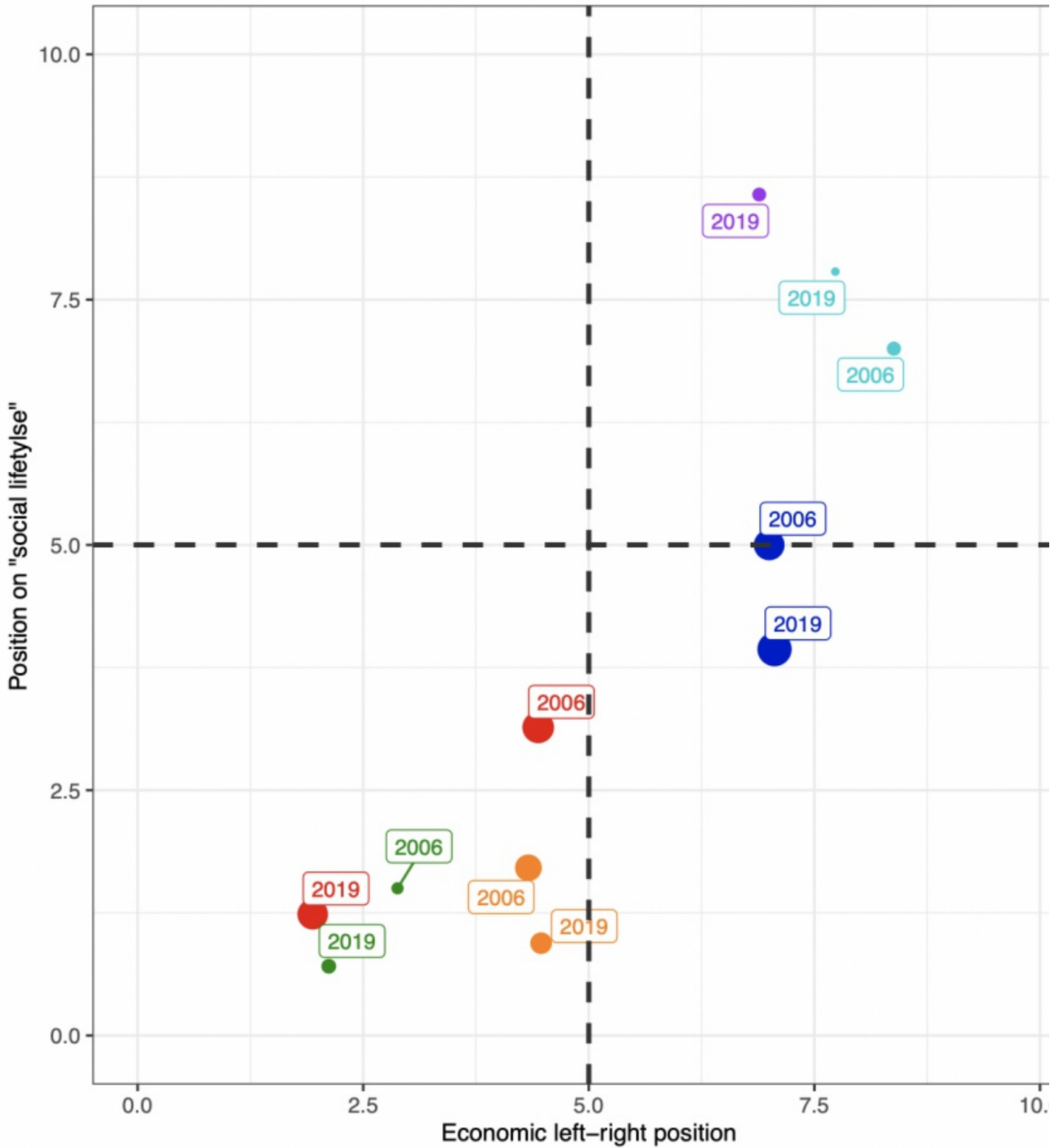


***Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte** provides the first case study analysis of a sexuality gap between heterosexuals and self-identified lesbian, gay and bisexuals (LGB) in Britain. He finds that LGB voters are almost 10 percentage points more likely to vote for Labour and 14 percentage points more likely to vote for any socially liberal party via-à-vis their heterosexual peers.*

Until David Cameron's rise as leader of the Conservative Party, there was a clear division between the UK's mainstream parties on where they stood on LGBT+ rights. On the one side were the Conservatives, whose Margaret Thatcher once said that children who were told they could be gay were being [robbed of a solid start in life](#), and on the other side was Labour which, particularly under the Blair and Brown years, adopted a number of policies aimed at advancing LGBT+ rights. Over time, however, the Conservatives moved away from conservative positions on issues of social morality (Figure 1). Indeed, unlike their right-leaning counterparts in a number of other states, the legalisation of same-sex marriage in England and Wales was introduced under the Conservative-led coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

In a recent study, I sought to assess if this move has also reduced the [sexuality gap](#) in voters' electoral choices. Using data from the UK Household Panel Study ([Understanding Society](#)) I tested whether LGB voters harbour distinct electoral preferences to the heterosexual majority. Whilst transgender individuals (T) make up an integral part of the LGBT+ community, they are, unfortunately, not considered in this study as the survey data used does not ask respondents about their gender identity beyond the male-female binary, nor does it allow individuals to report if their current gender identity is the same as that assigned at birth.

Figure 1: Party position change between 2006 and 2019



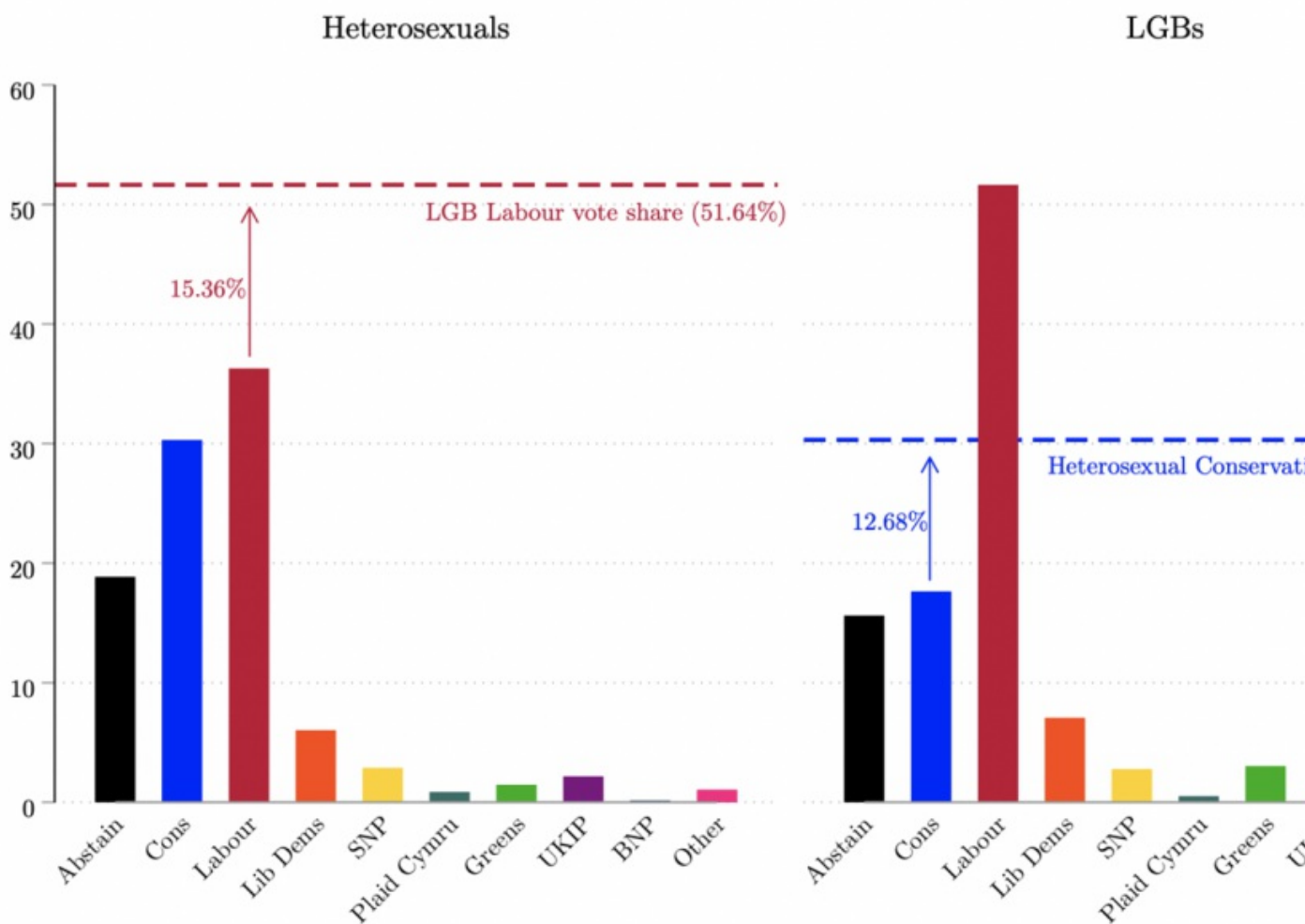
Data: [Chapel Hill Expert Survey](#); Note: Observations are scaled to vote share at time of data collection.

Results

Figure 2 displays individuals' self-reported vote choice in the 2017 general election. The left-hand side panel displays the proportion of votes for each party (and abstentions) for heterosexual voters, and the right-hand side panel illustrates the distribution for LGB individuals. A simple comparison between the sexuality-stratified groups already displays notable differences between the two blocks – a majority of LGB voters (52%) report to have cast a ballot for the Labour Party; support for Labour amongst the heterosexual bloc was some 15 points lower. In the case of support for the Conservatives, one third of heterosexuals claim to have voted for Theresa May's party whilst Conservative support trailed 13-points behind amongst LGB voters.

Of course, this simple comparison may mask the true divergence between the stratified blocs. Given the propensity for LGB citizens to opt to live in more urban environments, it may be the case that being an urban voter, or other socio-demographic confounders, is what drives this raw comparison in behaviour. To test for this, I also compare the divergence between LGB and heterosexual citizens whilst controlling for the potential confounding effect of other predictors of vote choice such as gender, age, income, education, employment status and whether individuals live in a city or town.

Figure 2: Vote share of UK parties among heterosexual (left) and LGB (right) voters

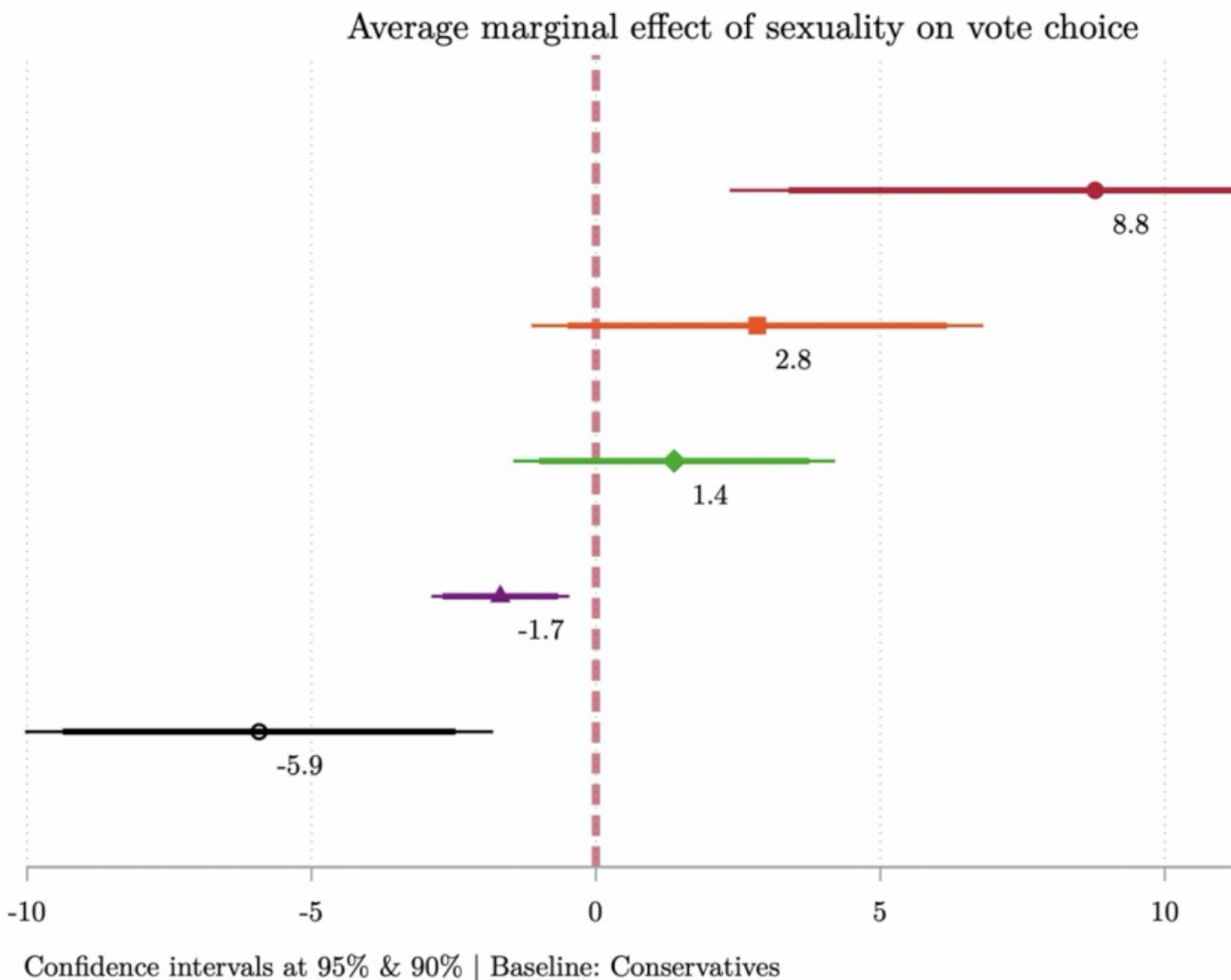


Data: [Understanding society \(wave 9\)](#).

Figure 3 displays the main findings and plots the average marginal effect of identifying as LGB on the probability of voting for either Labour, the Lib Dems, the Greens, UKIP or abstaining when compared to voting for the Conservatives. The effects can be interpreted as the percentage-point change in the probability of voting for each of the parties associated with sexuality whilst controlling for other socio-demographic variables. As illustrated, sexuality exhibits a strong and independent effect of electoral choices, particularly in paired comparison between Labour and the Conservatives. There is a positive effect for some of the UK's smaller left-leaning and socially liberal parties, but the effect is not significant. In line with published research that shows sexual minority voters are [more prone to be supportive of the EU](#), the findings show that UKIP was significantly less supported by LGB voters in 2017.

Finally, the results show that LGB voters are far less likely to abstain on polling day. These findings are in line with our [other research](#) that shows that such voters are far more likely to be politically interested and active in politics.

Figure 3: Effect of sexuality on voting for different parties compared to the Conservatives



Data: [Understanding society \(wave 9\)](#).

These findings suggest that the '[golden years](#)' of LGBT+ rights advances under New Labour have provided the party with bolstered support amongst the primary beneficiaries of these policies. Whilst the partisan divide over issues like same-sex marriage may have dissipated with the Conservatives under Cameron's One Nation Conservatism, reputational associations, as well as a general lack of support for sexual minorities likely still play a role in shaping voters' perceptions of where parties stand on LGBT+ rights.

The results also suggest that when it comes to understanding the motivations behind voters' electoral choices in Britain, sexuality should not be ignored. Nevertheless, the Conservative Party's current leader and Prime Minister, who in 1999 described gay men as '[tank-topped bumboys](#)', in 2000 called Labour's desire to repeal Section 28 'appalling', and in 2001 compared same-sex marriage to bestiality, may do little to remedy the party's anti-LGBT+ image and attract those citizens to cast a vote for his party at the ballot box.

Note: the above is based on the author's published work in [Politics, Groups and Identities](#).

About the Author



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