

Contrary to media narratives, higher education has little impact on students' political views

*It is often taken as a given that higher education shapes the politics of students. However, drawing on evidence from the British Election Study, **Tom Fryer** finds students' political attitudes do not change radically during their studies. Instead, students make modest movements to the left and become less ethnocentric, indicating overall a slight shift of position, rather than a wholesale change of attitude.*

The question of whether students' political attitudes change during their time in HE has increasingly become part of a national debate in the UK. There is a range of recent political science research that has noted the division between younger, urban-dwelling graduates, on the one hand and older, town-dwelling non-graduates on the other. In this way, experience of HE has become an accepted factor in our contemporary political divisions.

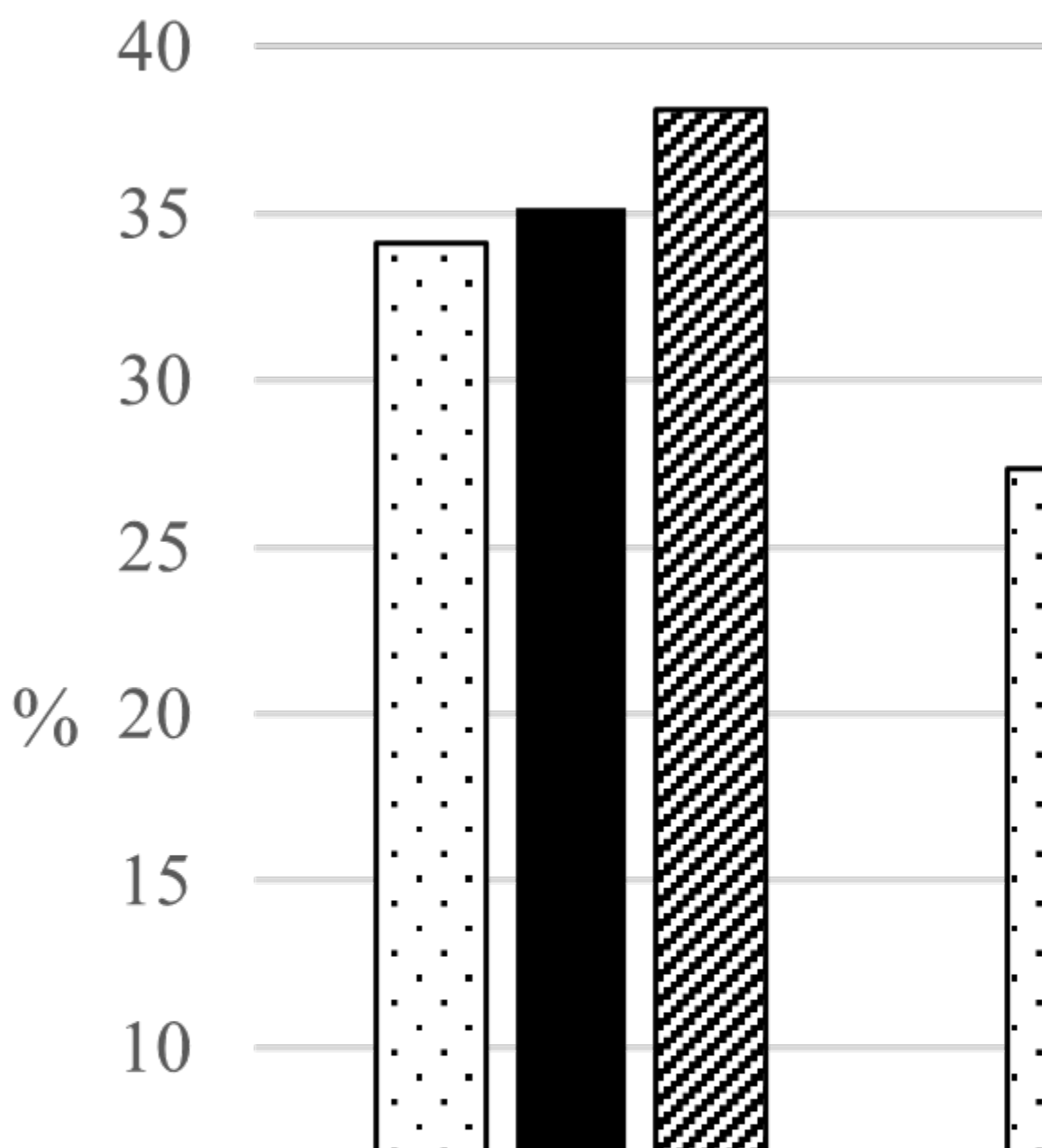
Some commentators have gone further, claiming not only that experience of HE is linked to political divisions, but that *universities are active causes of this polarisation*. These more exaggerated claims position universities as sites of left-wing indoctrination, producing a steady flow of 'radical Marxists'. This assumption that HE has some causal role to play in shaping political attitudes, albeit shed of the more exaggerated claims, is also held by much of the political science literature.

However, despite this widespread debate about universities and their impact on students' political attitudes, there is surprisingly little evidence in this area. This condemns any debate to conjectures and counter-conjectures, rather than evidence-based discussion.

To [address this](#), I used data from the British Election Study (BES) to assess whether students' political attitudes change during their time in HE. I considered two attitudes: 1) identity on a left-right scale and 2) attitudes to immigration, which is a proxy for

ethnocentrism. My study used data from 574 students in the UK, all of whom completed the BES in three consecutive academic years at some point between 2016 and 2020.

Over their time in HE, students tended to make modest shifts to the left (see Figure 1). Overall, there was a 3.1 percentage point increase in those identifying on the left in Year 3, compared with Year 1. Similarly, there was a shift of 0.2 points to the left on an 11-point scale, when comparing the mean position of Year 1 and Year 3.



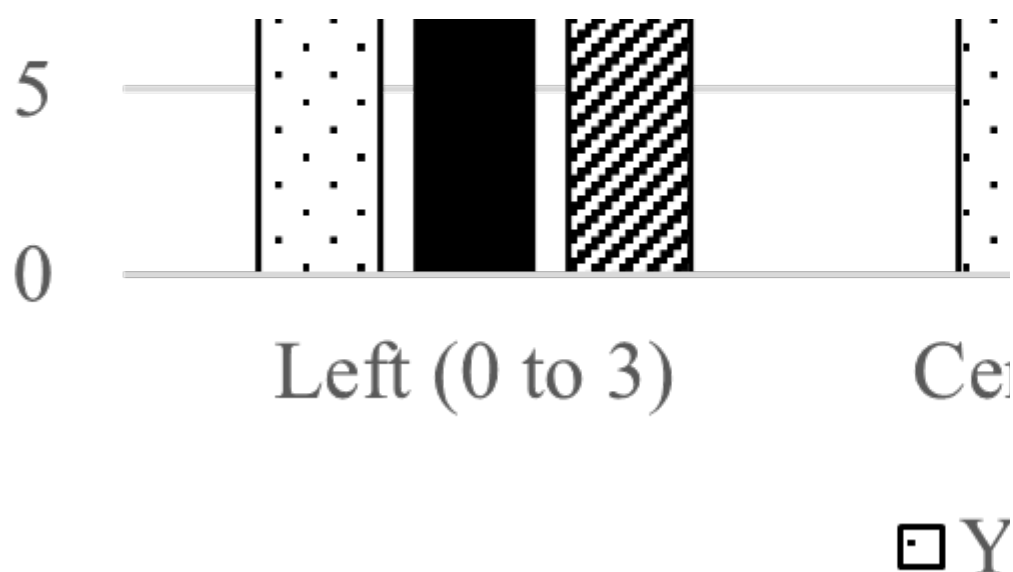


Fig.1: Self-identify of students on a left-right scale, by year of study in HE (taken from Fig 3, Fryer 2022)

Figure 1 shows the changes in the overall student sample. However, it is possible that this underestimates the changes in individual students' political attitudes, because those moving to the left and the right could largely cancel out. To assess this, the analysis went on to consider the extent of political changes for individual students. Again, modest changes were found. Only 1.6% of students moved from a position on the right in Year 1 to a position on the left in Year 3.

Modest changes were also found for the second political attitude, ethnocentrism (see Figure 2). Students shifted to be slightly less ethnocentric, with an 8.1 percentage point increase in those reporting pro-immigration attitudes from Year 1 to Year 3 (an anti-immigration position was defined as reporting 1, 2 or 3 and a pro-immigration position was defined as reporting 5, 6 or 7 on the 7-point scale). Similarly, there was a change of 0.4 points towards a more pro-immigration position, when comparing the mean of Year 1 and Year 3.

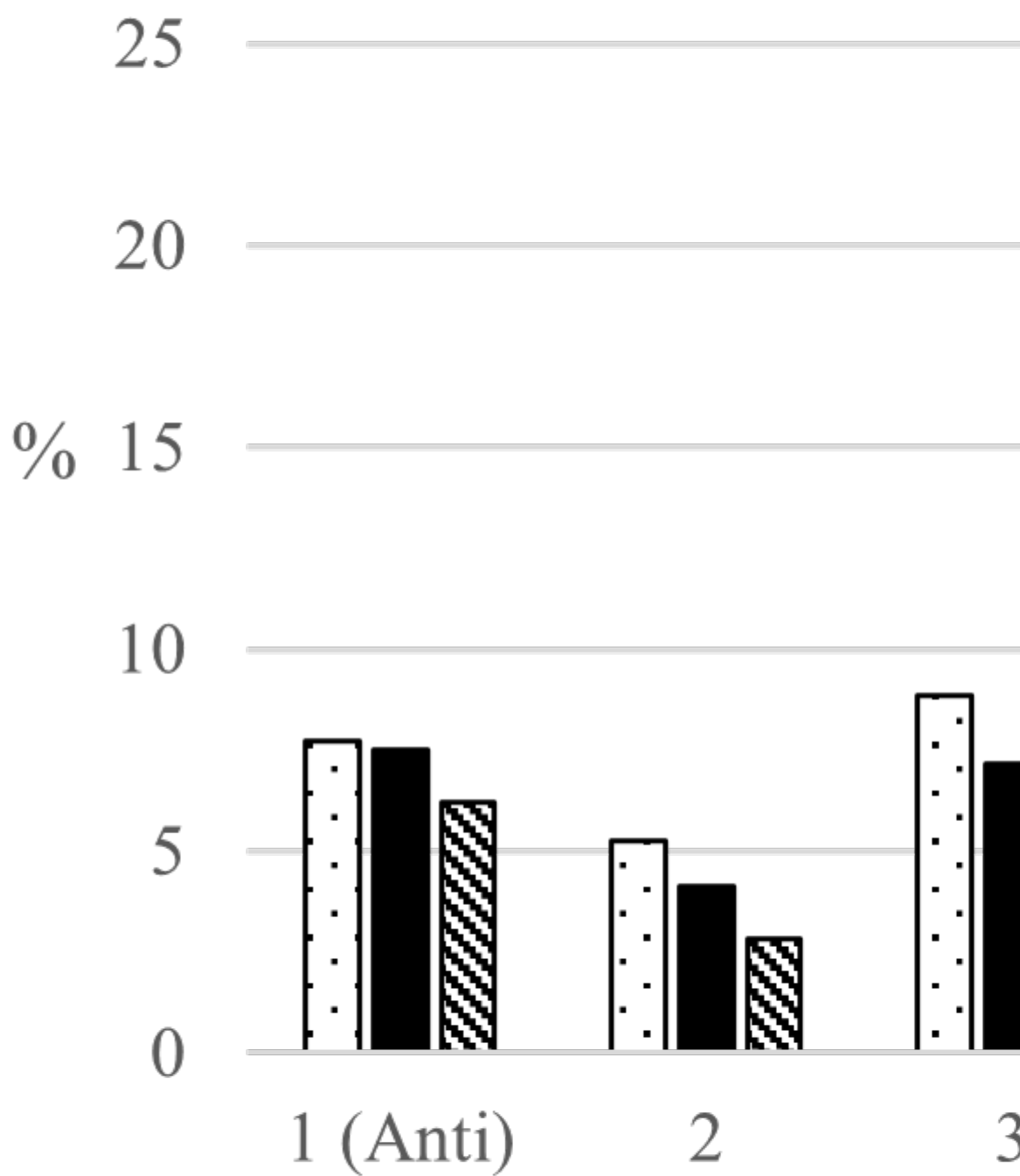


Fig.2 Students' attitudes to the cultural impact of immigration, by year of study in HE (Taken from Figure 5, Fryer, 2022)

There was also little evidence of widespread individual level change in political attitudes concerning ethnocentrism. Only 4.1% of students moved from a position of anti-immigration in Year 1, to one of pro-immigration in Year 3.

These findings suggest that students tend to experience modest shifts in political attitudes during their time in HE. There was a tendency for students to make a small shift to the left, and to make a slightly larger shift to be less ethnocentric during their studies. However, it was rare for students to undergo radical changes of attitude. This suggests that HE *could* have a causal role to play in influencing these political attitudes—however, this study remains descriptive and it provides no evidence about *how* HE might influence students' political attitudes. Further in-depth and intensive studies are needed to explore this area.

One stronger conclusion that can be made on the basis of this descriptive research is that there is little support for the idea that universities are places of radical political change and sites of indoctrination. The modest changes in attitudes contradict these claims.

This blog is based on the author's recent open access paper, '[Do the political attitudes of students change during their time in higher education?](#)' published in Higher Education.

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