International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-025-09549-x

Political Socialisation in the UK: Describing Generational Changes of Values

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Accepted: 28 October 2025
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Abstract

A growing bulk of research examines intergenerational shifts in attitudes and the extent to which they are attributable to new cohorts of voters being socialised under different socioeconomic and cultural climates. This paper sets off from this research and provides an overview of how age and generational gaps across economic and sociocultural value dimensions have developed in the context of the United Kingdom. The paper further describes how demographic characteristics such as class, education, and gender affect attitudinal differences between and within generations. Tracing changes in values across a 30-year period, we find that economic attitudes are cyclical rather than veering in a particular direction. Sociocultural values, however, have been consistently shifting towards social liberalism – a change that is driven primarily by generational replacement. Moreover, against growing speculation of increasing ideological polarisation between different age groups, our analysis of British electoral data suggests that age gaps in attitudes, rather than growing, are either stable or decreasing in magnitude throughout the period examined.

Keywords Value Change · Political Socialisation · Political Behaviour · Generational Replacement · Politics and Gender · Political Cleavages

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Published online: 13 November 2025

Introduction

The importance of political socialisation for the development of attitudes and behaviours is well established. The generational literature has highlighted how the period in which a generation is socialised has an important impact on the formation of political values and patterns of political behaviour (see, e.g., Mannheim, 1952; Franklin, 2004; Grasso, 2016; Grasso et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2018; Smets & Neundorf, 2014; Tilley & Evans, 2014). Grasso et al. (2019) explored the relationship between political socialisation and value change, finding that in the United Kingdom (UK), political generations socialised under protracted periods of Conservative governance were more likely to hold Thatcherite values than would be expected otherwise. This paper builds on that research to examine the extent to which different generations in Britain hold distinctive values that set them apart from one another, and what are some of the more relevant potential new drivers of attitude-change between and within generations alike.

Recent research has moved beyond political socialisation alone to focus on specific demographic characteristics which have increasingly become relevant for making sense of contemporary political cleavages, and which may influence value change and development. Key among these are class (e.g., Evans & Tilley, 2012; Evans et al., 2022; Heath, 2018), education (e.g., Surridge, 2016; Stubager, 2008, 2010; Simon, 2021, 2022; Scott, 2022), and gender (e.g. Shorrocks, 2018, 2021; Shorrocks & Grasso, 2020; Dassonneville, 2021). In the UK in particular, age has become increasingly relevant in discussions about political cleavages and is an important indicator of political attitudes and voting behaviour (Curtice, 2023; Serra, 2023, 2024). This was marked in terms of how Brexit voting was patterned along a major age gradient. Moreover, older voters display a strong preference for right leaning parties such as the Conservative party and Reform UK, and generally hold worldviews that are more nationalistic and socially conservative. Younger voters rather increasingly favour the Labour party, as well as smaller left leaning parties such as the Greens and the Liberal Democrats.

This widening gap is believed to stem at least in part from generational shifts in values, with younger voters generally adopting more progressive, socially liberal views with respect to some indicators, and to increasingly aligning with left-leaning parties; older generations instead tend to resist these changes in what has been described as a *cultural backlash* (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Yet the idea that recent electoral divisions by age are driven by heightened ideological polarisation alone has been challenged. For instance, O'Grady (2023) and Schäfer (2022) find that, rather than increasing, ideological polarisation between age groups is stable overtime, and that while younger groups are consistently more liberal than older ones on the so-called "new-politics" issues (e.g. gender and homosexuality, the environment, migration), they are on average more right-wing than older groups on economic issues (e.g. welfare, taxation and redistribution).

In this view, this paper aims to build on the existing research on political generations to trace how political attitudes and behaviours are formed and change over time. The paper begins with a review of the existing theories on the effects of socialisation and demographic characteristics on value formation, and then moves forward

to describe how value development differs between and within generations in the context of the United Kingdom.

Political Socialisation

The importance of socialisation was first theorised by Émile Durkheim (1922) and later applied to political science by Hyman (1959). Mannheim (1952) in his *Problem of Generations* proposed a seminal account of how formative experiences during impressionable years of young adulthood provide the engine for social change through the replacement of older cohorts by new ones coming of age in new contexts and presenting different values and behavioural patterns. The key moment of socialisation is thus understood to occur during an individual's formative years, a period that roughly falls between adolescence and early adulthood. During this period of life it is understood that young people have not yet established solid political attitudes and habits, making them more malleable in their ways and receptive to various external influences, such as personal, social, cultural, political, and historical experiences (e.g., Alwin & Krosnick, 1991; Bartels & Jackman, 2014; Erikson et al., 2002; Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; Grasso, 2014; Niemi & Jennings, 1981; Sears & Levy, 2003).

Political socialisation and attitude formation are further believed to be influenced by certain *socialising agents*. In Durkheim's view (1922), chief amongst these socialising agents is education, to which he ascribes the inculcation of rules, values, and social norms necessary for the safeguarding and cohesion of society. As such one way through which socialisation occurs is through *schooling*, but also (and perhaps most notably) with *parental upbringing*. A considerable bulk of research explores the parent-to-child transmission of political attitudes and behaviours, for example Taylor et al. (1994), Campbell et al. (1960), Jennings and Niemi (1974), Kroh and Selb (2009), among others, examined the impact that parental socialisation has on party identification. Percheron and Jennings (1981), and more recently Iyengar et al. (2018), examined the impact it has on ideology, while Hatemi and Ojeda (2020) studied its effect on values, and Beck and Jennings (1982), Quintelier (2015), Gidengil et al. (2016), and Dahlgaard (2018) explored how parents affect their children's patterns of political participation.

At the same time, the advent of social media has intensified research on the influence that *conversations with peers* have on political attitudes and behaviours. Studies on the socialising effects of new social media reveal that these platforms are often homophilic, whereby people interact primarily with those who share similar ideological outlooks (e.g., Barberá, 2015; Barberá et al., 2015). The degree to which this occurs is influenced by individuals' political orientations (Boutyline & Willer, 2017), as well as their personal circumstances and the characteristics of their online networks (Vaccari et al., 2016).

Schooling, parenthood, and peer networks are considered to be individual effects because they influence the attitudes and participations of individuals. However, other effects can impact the socialisation of entire groups. In particular, political contexts and historical events have been found to have a major influence on the attitudes and beliefs held by those socialised during certain periods of time since they shape the

context around individuals' formative years, and thus affect generations coming of age at that time simultaneously.

As new generations of voters are socialised during periods when various political parties are in power and different issues are prominent, these influences can be seen as forming relatively distinct political generations (Mannheim, 1952) made up of individuals whose enduring preferences are likely shaped by the prevailing political forces that were influential during their formative years (Tilley & Evans, 2014). For example, Grasso et al. (2019)'s study of intergenerational value change in Britain found that those socialised during the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major (a period that lasted 18 years) were more Thatcherite in their values than previous generations (see also Tilley, 2002). As per Gamble (1988), Thatcherite values include a combination of market liberalisation (e.g. support for a smaller state, financial markets deregulation, and industries privatisation) and social conservatism (e.g. strengthening law and order by extending police powers, increasing sentencing, and antagonising trade unions). Moreover, the entrenchment of right-authoritarian values during this period of protracted Conservative governance *trickled-down* to the generation who came of political age under Tony Blair's New Labour governments, as these individuals also exhibited political values that were more right-leaning to what would be expected at their age, as evidenced by their below-average levels of support for redistribution and assistance to the unemployed, and increased support for tougher criminal sentencing.

In this view, a fundamental implication of political socialisation is that the attitudes and behaviours established during these formative periods tend to remain stable over the life course and distinguish generations even as they age. Therefore, as new generations develop their value-sets and preferences in early adulthood and maintain these as they grow older, and as older generations die out, this process brings about societal change in the aggregate (see, e.g., Inglehart, 1971, and Inglehart & Abramson, 1994, on how generational replacement contributed to the move from *materialism* to *post-materialism*). The following section provides a descriptive overview of how these values have shifted across generations in the UK.

Data and Methods

To trace how political attitudes have shifted across both time and demographic groups, we analyse post-elections survey data gathered as part of the British Election Study (BES). The BES surveys have been running since 1964, but consistent measuring of political attitudes only began in the 1980 s, so our analysis considers value development over the period 1987–2019 (the last election year available in the current data). Our two main dimensions of interest are economic attitudes (i.e. the extent to which people are left or right leaning on economic policy) and sociocultural attitudes (i.e. the extent to which people are liberal or authoritarian on social policy). We measure economic attitudes as a factor of three survey questions; (1) if there is a different law for the rich and the poor, (2) if ordinary people receive a fair share of the nation's wealth, and (3) if wealth should be redistributed. Sociocultural attitudes are measured as a factor of four survey items; (1) if criminals should receive harsher

sentences, (2) if the death penalty should be reinstated for certain crimes, (3) if young people lack respect for traditional British values, and (4) if censorship is necessary to maintain moral standards. The sociocultural dimension may be more complex and here the elaboration does not include important aspects that are part of the so-called 'new politics' issues, such as attitudes towards gender and sexual identities, ethnic minorities, immigration, and the environment (opinions on these aspects were not asked consistently over the period examined and they are therefore excluded from the analysis), but the items included in our indicators are the standard, validated measures of social and economic liberalism in the UK (see, e.g., Evans et al., 1996; Surridge, 2016) and they are well-suited to illustrate how attitudes have changed over a considerably long period of time.

It should be noted that our analysis does not aim to test a set of hypotheses or establish causal patterns. Rather, this paper aims to provide an overview of the main trends in British value development across time, age, and other demographic groups, describing how attitudes have shifted between and within generations in recent decades. In this view, our analysis is descriptive rather than explanatory.

Generational Value Change in Britain

Societal attitudes are typically mapped along two value scales: economic values and sociocultural or liberal-authoritarian values (Evans et al., 1996; Kitschelt & Hellemans, 1990; Kriesi, 1998). The former tap into attitudes towards the role that the state should have in the economy, whereas the latter concern the role the state should have on individuals' rights and freedoms. Views on both values sets rarely remain fixed, rather, they change over time. If on the one hand economic attitudes are likely to depend on the economic situation present at any given time of socialisation and therefore present a more complex pattern, changes in attitudes on so-called 'sociocultural' issues may follow a more linear trend, suggesting growing social liberalism on the basis of certain indicators. For example, over the years, public opinion appears to have moved overall from more generally conservative positions on women's rights, ethnic minorities, gender and sexuality, to more liberal stances on these same issues. These changes are largely believed to be driven by *generational replacement* (e.g., Tilley, 2005; Tilley & Evans, 2007; Van der Brug, 2010; Storm et al., 2017).

Figure 1 depicts these overtime changes in the British context. The panels display predictive margins of age on values over time. The left-hand panel shows trends on economic values, while the right-hand panel displays trends on sociocultural, or liberal-authoritarian, values. In both graphs, negative values indicate positions closer to the economic left (left-hand panel) or social liberalism (right-hand panel). Conversely, positive values indicate positions closer to the economic right (left-hand panel), or to social authoritarianism (right-hand panel). As shown in the figure, younger and older groups appear relatively uniform in their economic outlooks. The notable spike of left-leaning economic attitudes in 1997 corresponds to the year New Labour gained power after eighteen years of Conservative governance, and hence illustrates the population's shift in party preferences. Nevertheless, in relation to the findings of Grasso et al. (2019), during the New Labour governments of 1997–2010,

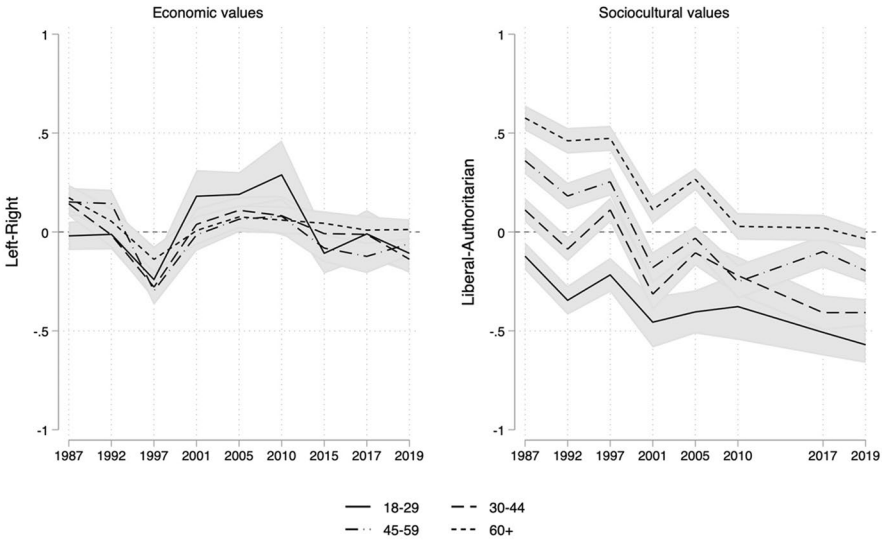


Fig. 1 Economic and sociocultural value change by age

it is interesting to note that on economic values, younger voters were more Thatcherite than older groups. In recent years, however, voters in general and young voters in particular have shifted once again towards the left – a change that could be explained by the socialisation of this cohort during a period of austerity following the global financial crisis, which is associated with increased support for redistributive policies (see, e.g., Neundorf & Soroka, 2017; Justino et al., 2024).

While economic attitudes fluctuate across left and right positions over the period, sociocultural attitudes display a consistent over-time shift towards increasingly liberal views for all age groups. A notable implication of these trends is that attitudinal divides between generations appear to be stable across the period, which contrasts claims of growing ideological polarisation between age groups (see, e.g., Erk 2017; Ross, 2018; Pickard, 2018; Ehsan and Sloam, 2018), and reflects similar recent findings by O'Grady (2023). Younger age groups are consistently more liberal than older ones, but the ideological gap between them is also consistent over time.

The difference between the linearity of the sociocultural values trend and the cyclical nature of economic attitudes likely depends on the nature of the items used in the two indexes. The economic index contains attitudes towards big businesses, economic fairness, and redistribution, which, as noted earlier, tend to depend on the political and socioeconomic context present during voters' formative years, as well as at the time of answering the survey. The sociocultural index contains attitudes on morality and authority, which are aspects where most citizens have come to adopt liberal views through broad cultural changes and generational replacement.

While age continues to be an important driver of attitudes and behaviour, other demographic characteristics are known to play a significant role in the formation of political opinions, and a growing bulk of research examines the extent to which these

characteristics interact with age and generations. The following sections therefore illustrates the main trends around how aspects such as class, education, and gender impact different generations political attitudes in Britain.

The Impact of Demographic Background: Stability or Change?

Class

Throughout the twentieth century, the idea of structural voting – whereby political attitudes and vote-choice are determined by one's socioeconomic background – was the most dominant paradigm for understanding and predicting political behaviour. In their seminal book on voting in Britain, Butler and Stokes (1969) proposed that social class, determined by factors like occupational status and further influenced by aspects such as housing tenure and geographic location, led to long-lasting partisan loyalties formed through socialisation within families and communities. According to their interpretation, these loyalties were the predominant influence on voting behaviour. Generally, working-class voters (who in the UK are traditionally intended as individuals employed in unskilled or semi-skilled labour) tended to support the Labour party, while middle-class voters (intended as *petty bourgeoisie* and white-collar workers) leaned towards the Conservatives – although this pattern was not without exceptions (e.g. see McKenzie & Silver, 1968; Parkin, 1968).

Since the 1980 s, however, class in Britain and elsewhere has stopped being the defining cleavage in voting behaviour. This has been attributed to changes in the make-up of the working class, as its members experienced social mobility and a change in their financial conditions which increasingly blurred the line between working and middle classes (Clarke et al., 2004; Dalton, 2008), as well as to partisan dealignment, as the growth of the political resources available to individuals meant that partisan cues were increasingly replaced by cognitive mobilisation (Dalton, 1984).

Yet, recent research has questioned the traditional assumptions around the decline of class voting. Evans and Tilley (2012) argue that falls in class voting were not due to a weakening of working-class socialisation, rather, they occurred through the depoliticisation of the issues that defined class voting, most notably inequality and redistribution. The Labour Party, like several other Western European left parties, shifted towards centrist social democracy by moving to the ideological centre in an effort to become a "catch-all" party with broader appeal beyond its traditional working-class base (Mair et al., 2004; Webb, 2004). In this view, class voting declined not because of bottom-up changes in the size of the working class, rather, because of top-down changes in parties' policy platforms (Evans & Tilley, 2012). More recently, scholars have challenged the extent to which class voting declined at all, arguing instead that it has merely changed the way in which it operates. Evidence suggests that the working classes have stopped supporting left-leaning, workers' parties in favour of either abstention (see, e.g., Heath, 2018; Heath & Serra, 2024) or support for anti-immigrant parties, such as those aligning with the populist right (Evans et al., 2022) – a trend that is consistent with similar realignments in Western Europe (Bornschier & Kriesi, 2012).

Figure 2 illustrates trends in the development of class-based political attitudes across the period 1987–2019 in the United Kingdom. As with the earlier figure pertaining age, here too the left-hand panel displays attitudes towards the economy along left and right positions, while the right-hand panel displays sociocultural attitudes along liberal and authoritarian positions. Over the period examined, working class Britons lean left on the economy and right on social values. However, while class-based differences on economic attitudes have contracted across the period and appear to be relatively stable since 2005, class-based differences on sociocultural attitudes have increased as voters who identify as middle-class have sharply moved towards increasingly liberal positions compared with voters who identify as working class or to those with other or no class identifications. Figure 3, which displays how the impact of class on these attitudes varies by generation, suggests that these shifts might be driven by generational replacement. The gap between middle class and working class Britons on economic values contracts across generations. In contrast, the impact of class on sociocultural attitudes seems to create growing generational differences over time: Millennials are much more liberal-leaning than older generations on average, and the gap between working class and middle-class Millennials is considerably larger than it is for older generations.

Education

A further change that has taken place in recent decades concerns the emergence of a new cleavage: education. Previous studies have highlighted the influence of education on liberal-authoritarian values, suggesting that individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to hold liberal views, while those with less education tend to adopt authoritarian perspectives (e.g., Harrop & Miller, 1987; Hyman & Wright,

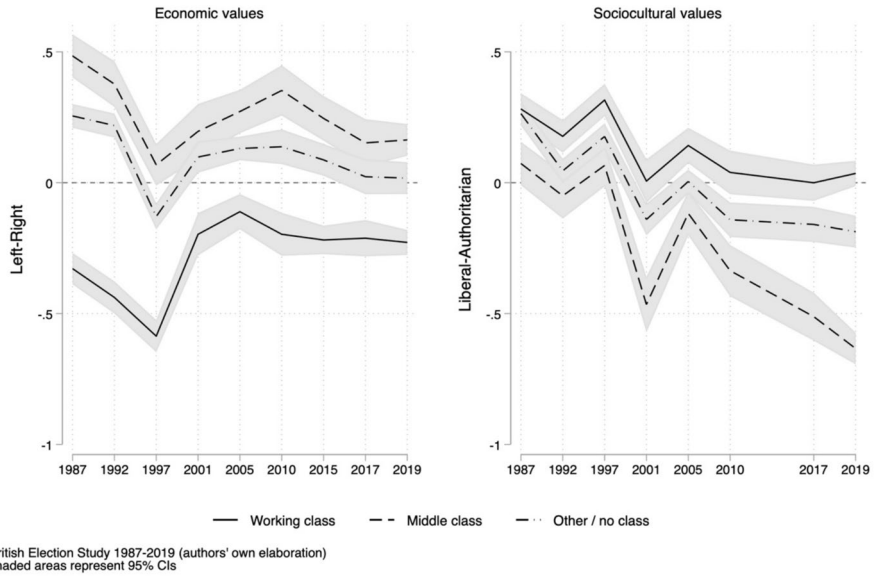


Fig. 2 Economic and social value change by class

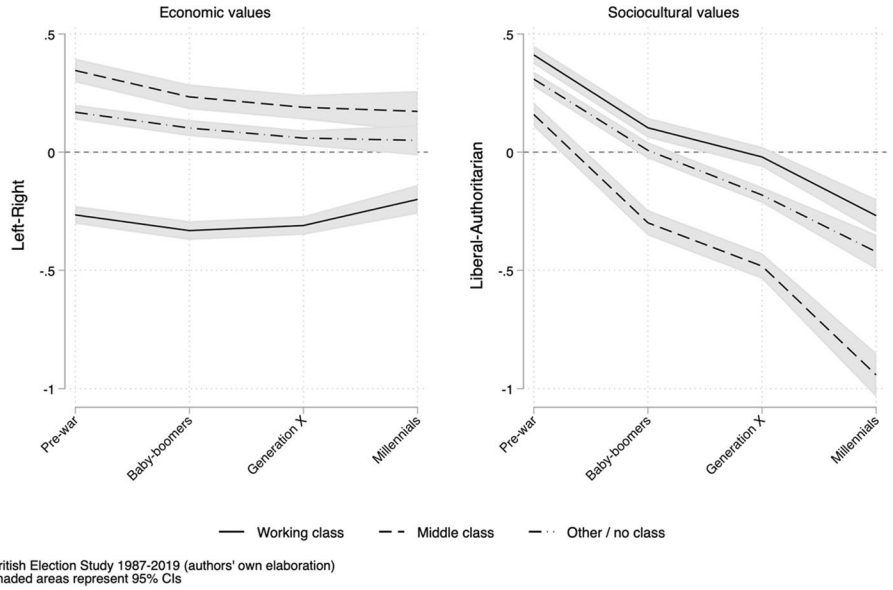


Fig. 3 Economic and social value change by class and generation

1979; van de Werfhorst & de Graaf, 2004; Enyedi, 2008). The association between value-formation and higher education has become particularly central to political discourse because the number of graduates has increased exponentially in recent years. In the UK, for example, the Office for National Statistics reported that the proportion of graduates across the population aged 21–64 stood at 24% in 2002, a figure that rose to 42% fifteen years later, and has now surpassed 50% (Department for Education, 2020). A similar change has occurred in the United States, where university graduates now account for almost half of the population aged over 25 (Forbes, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2022), as well as across Europe (Eurostat, 2024).

In most established democracies, the division between socially liberal and authoritarian attitudes (also understood in terms of cosmopolitan and nationalist attitudes, or universalist and more parochial concerns etc.), coincides with the division in education levels. This conflict is characterised by a divide whereby highly educated individuals are generally more accepting of social and cultural diversity. Conversely, those with lower levels of education tend to be more critical of multiculturalism (see, e.g., Storm et al., 2017; Ford & Jennings, 2020). This education-based cleavage has political implications, as nationalist parties gain significant support from voters with lower and middle education levels, while socially liberal parties tend to attract voters with higher education levels (Bovens & Wille, 2017; Ford & Jennings, 2020). The mechanism behind this association is believed to revolve around the emergence of certain "winners and losers" of globalisation, an argument first developed by Kriesi et al., (2008, 2012) with their focus on the integration-demarcation divide. In this view, education contributes to the establishment of diverging value sets because those with higher levels of education are more financially secure (see, e.g., Britton et al., 2021; Blundell et al., 2022) and thus less fearful of the consequences of globalisation, such as increased migration. Individu-

als with lower levels of education tend to be in lower-paid and more unstable employment, a situation which may cause them to be more concerned by foreign influences and to exhibit stronger nationalistic sentiments (see also Teney et al., 2014). While in the past social democratic parties and stronger welfare states championed the needs of these social groups, often leading to cross-class alliances with the more educated middle classes supporting more socially liberal and open values, the growth of neoliberal politics and the increased vulnerability of workers in manual sectors has imploded this historical alliance, as highlighted also by the fall of centre-left parties and the rise of challenger parties taking up different concerns in various guises.

While the link between education and political values is well-established (e.g. seeStubager, 2008, 2010, 2013; Surridge, 2016; Cavaille & Marshall, 2018), the reasons behind this association are less straightforward. One explanation can be found in the *socialisation model*, which suggests that the interactions with peers and educators during formal and informal educational experiences play a crucial role in shaping liberal values that have a lasting influence (e.g., Stubager, 2008). In contrast, the *cognitive model* suggests that people who are more knowledgeable and cognitively advanced are generally more tolerant and liberal (see also Dalton, 1984 on the association between cognitive development and political mobilisation). This is thought to happen because education helps individuals recognise diversity among people and apply their understanding to different situations beyond their own experiences (see, e.g., Nunn, 1978; Nie et al., 1996; Weakliem, 2002). The *allocation model*, on the other hand, suggests that education affects value formation by contributing to the development of lifestyles that are more conducive to certain value-sets. In this view, higher levels of education lead to better work prospects and living conditions, which in turn reduce fear of competition from outgroups (e.g., Kriesi, 1998; Scott, 2022). More recently, studies have considered whether the association between higher education and liberalism is the product of self-selection, whereby people who already lean towards liberal attitudes are more likely to obtain a university degree than those who do not (e.g., Simon, 2021, 2022), and whether these self-selection effects may begin as early as with high-school subject choice (Martin et al., 2025).

Figure 4 displays overtime shifts in values across different levels of education. Here too the left-hand panel displays economic policy preferences. In the early part of the period examined, different levels of education would be associated with specific economic attitudes – so that those with higher levels of education were more right-leaning, and those without qualifications were more left-leaning. More recently, however, education effects have begun to overlap, and most individuals are now close to the centre-left irrespective of educational qualifications. It thus appears that when it comes to economic values, education in Britain is no longer associated with a growing cleavage in attitudes. The right-hand panel, on the other hand, shows that educational attainment continues to be associated with clear divisions on sociocultural values, whereby graduates are consistently more likely to hold liberal positions than those with qualifications below the degree level. The association between degree status and liberalism seems to have increased in magnitude over the years, whereas the association between lacking qualifications and authoritarianism has shrunk, which again may be attributable to the entrenchment of liberal values via generational replacement, as well as the expansion of access to higher education.

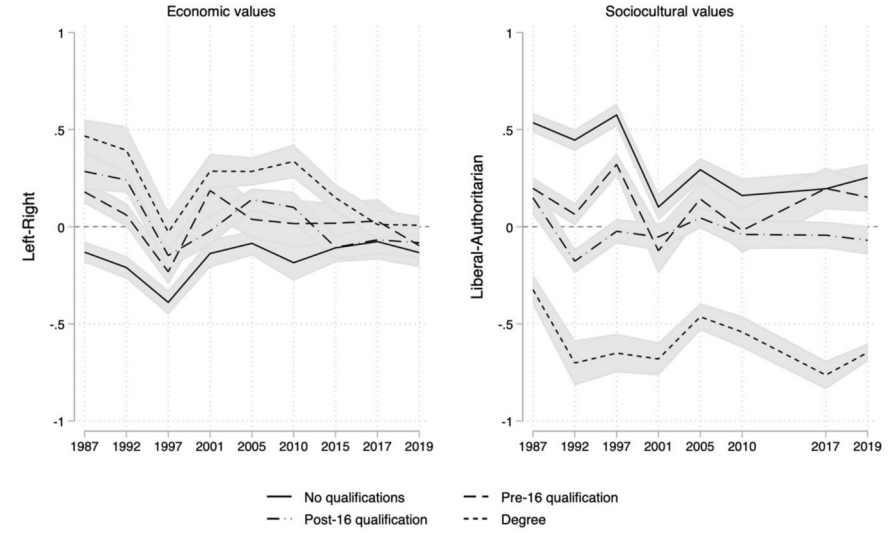


Fig. 4 Economic and sociocultural value change by education

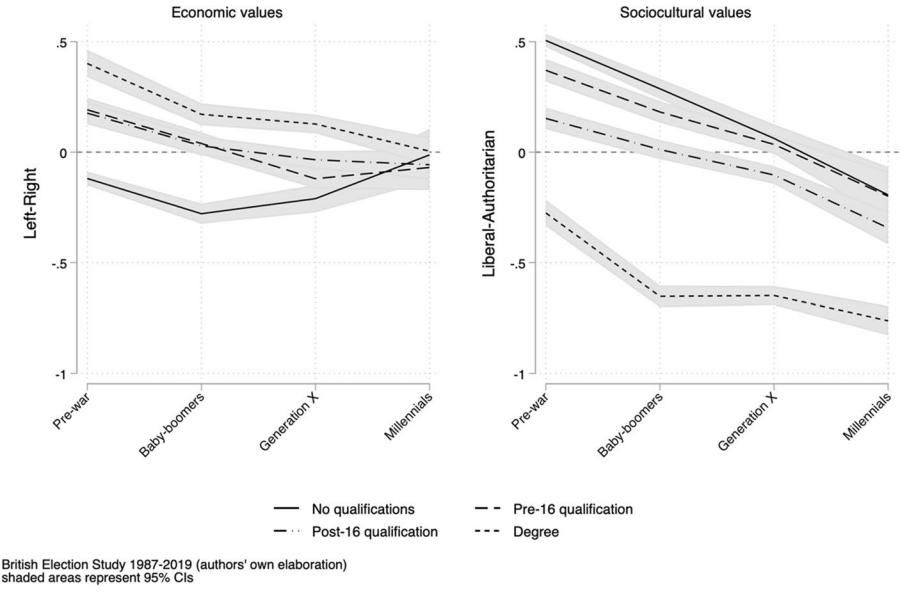


Fig. 5 Economic and sociocultural value change by education and generation

Figure 5 illustrates how these effects differ across generations. In both dimensions, education-related gaps appear to narrow over time. Among the Pre-War and Baby Boom generations, individuals with higher education levels were more inclined toward right-leaning values, but this distinction diminishes among Gen X and virtually disappears

among Millennials. Regarding sociocultural values, although a gap remains across generations, younger cohorts are consistently more liberal than their predecessors. Furthermore, the education gap in sociocultural orientations narrows among Millennials, indicating that such differences may be shrinking rather than expanding. This pattern supports the idea that for generations socialized in increasingly liberal contexts, external liberalizing forces – such as education – exert a weaker influence on shaping attitudes.

Gender

Much like education, gender-based ideological divides are increasingly attracting interest in both academic and public discourse. As recently reported by prominent pieces in The Financial Times (2024) and in the Atlantic (2024), young men and women across a number of established democracies appear to be growing apart in their political attitudes, with women leaning closer to the left and men closer to the right. Yet political scientists have challenged the extent to which the gender divide is indeed new or widening, noting instead that women have started displaying more liberal attitudes than those of men since at least the 1990s (see, e.g., Dassonneville, 2021) and that gender-based ideological divides also differ across the left–right economic and sociocultural scales (Shorrocks, 2018; Shorrocks & Grasso, 2020; Shorrocks & Sanders, 2019).

Recent evidence, however, does suggest the emergence of a growing divide that is especially prevalent across younger cohorts (e.g. see Off et al., 2022, 2025; Abou-Chadi, 2024), and that is also reflected at the polling booth – e.g. in the UK, women have traditionally been more likely to support the Conservatives over Labour, but since the mid-2010s the divide has reversed. This shift was largely attributed to a realignment of younger age groups (Shorrocks, 2022) and the political context, such as the discourse around the Brexit vote (Shorrocks, 2022; Green and Shorrocks, 2021; Shorrocks & Campell, 2023). Gender-based differences across the youngest age groups were also evident at the 2024 UK General Election, where although the majority of voters aged 18–24 supported the Labour party, support for smaller parties depended greatly on gender. As reported by YouGov (2024), young men were twice as likely to support populist-right party Reform UK than young women (12% vs 6%). Conversely, young women were twice as likely to support the Green party (23% vs 12%).

Plotting the gender divide on the same value dimensions presented earlier (Fig. 6) gives some credit to these observations. British women are on average closer to the economic left than men across the period, and the gap appears to widen after 2015. On sociocultural values, on the other hand, women are on average *less socially liberal* than men, but the gap contracts over the period and gender-based differences – at least on the dimensions examined here – are not statistically significant.

The impact of gender on intergenerational differences (Fig. 7) in attitudes also appears to be largely stable across both dimensions. The only significant gender gap pertains to the liberal-authoritarian attitudes of Gen X – whereby men are on average slightly more liberal than women – but this difference contracts across Millennials, suggesting that gender-based attitudinal divides might be shrinking rather than growing. However, it should be reiterated that the items used to measure sociocultural attitudes do not include questions on gender and sexuality, the environment, or ethnic minorities – all aspects that may be experiencing diverging gendered attitudes. More

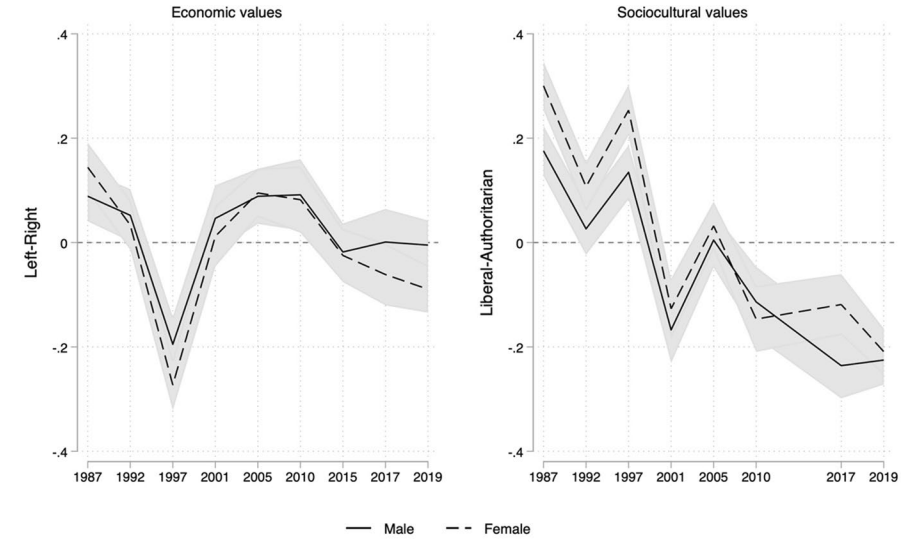


Fig. 6 Economic and sociocultural value change by gender

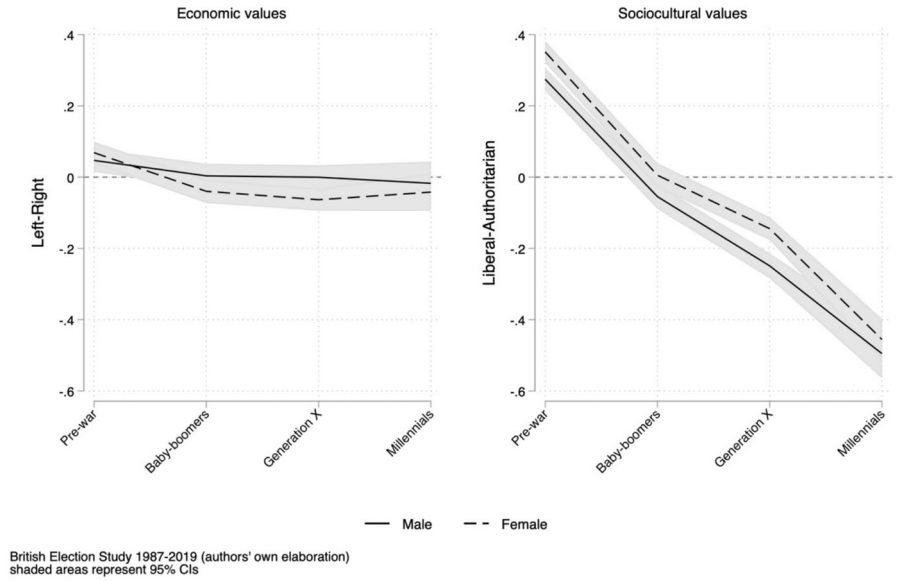


Fig. 7 Economic and sociocultural value change by gender and generation

research should therefore unpack which specific issue areas are theatre of an emerging divide across gender lines, as well as what might be motivating this divide (see also Grasso & Smith, 2022; Grasso & Giugni, 2024). For example, recent research on the attitudinal gender gap across younger cohorts (Off, 2024; Off et al., 2022,

2025) finds that young men across Europe are not more conservative than women in their attitudes towards immigration, but they are more conservative than women in their attitudes towards sexism, as they increasingly believe that in today's society women are somewhat better off than men are. Moreover, the literature on intersectionality suggests that other aspects should be further studied along age and gender, such as ethnicity or migration background (see also Grasso, 2013), as these may further diversify experience of different social groupings.

Conclusion

In Britain, age and age-related characteristics have traditionally been strong predictors of political behaviour. This association has become even more pronounced in recent years as the political preferences of younger and older citizens have grown increasingly distinctive, generating renewed interest into examining how different generations come to develop their political value sets.

In this view, this paper set out to examine the development of attitude-change in Britain by tracing the history of research into political socialisation and generational value change, and describing overtime time trends in age and other demographic value cleavages.

While generational replacement continues to matter a great deal for triggering political value change – as evidenced by the consistent shift towards social liberalism across various demographic groups – certain demographic characteristics have changed the way in which they impact the formation of opinions both between and within generations. Social class, once the most clear-cut predictor of political values and voting behaviour, now influences individuals in less straightforward ways. For example, across younger generations, the class with which individuals identify now exerts a greater impact on sociocultural attitudes than on economic values. There are also notable changes in the influence of education on value formation. Different education levels no longer seem to engender large differences in opinions on economic values, and on sociocultural values too the education gaps appear to be narrowing.

Besides class and education, opinion-formation in the UK further seems to be increasingly driven by gender, with data showing that differences between men and women are somewhat larger across younger than older cohorts.

As the impact and prevalence of these aspects varies over time, these are all promising areas for further research into how demographic characteristics intersect with age in driving opinions and ultimately vote-choice. Moreover, following on from Grasso et al. (2019) research on generational political socialisation in Britain, a further promising area for research pertains to the impact that the protracted period of Conservative governance between 2010–2024 may have had on individuals socialised during this time. As the same party was in power for fourteen years and oversaw significant political crises – from the response to the global financial crisis, to the UK exit from the European Union, and the Covid-19 pandemic (Grasso et al., 2021) – there is reason to believe that both period and cohort effects may have contributed to generate distinctive political attitudes across the cohorts that came of age during this period.

Appendix A

Comparing Age and Generational Effects on Values

Fig. 8 illustrates the impact of generations on economic and sociocultural attitudes over the period. As can be glanced from the figure, trends broadly reflect those identified in Fig. 1 in the main paper, whereby there are no significant age/generational differences on economic values, but large differences on sociocultural values. Younger generations are consistently more socially liberal than those preceding them

Comparing Economic and Sociocultural Value Factor Dimensions and Individual Survey Items

Note: the interpretation of responses on individual survey items is different from that of the factor variables insofar as with factors, values below 0 indicate left or liberal positions, and values above 0 indicate right or authoritarian positions. The individual items are measured as agree-disagree scales – except for attitudes towards redistribution, which are coded as positive, neutral, and negative to harmonise changes in the question wording across the various survey years).

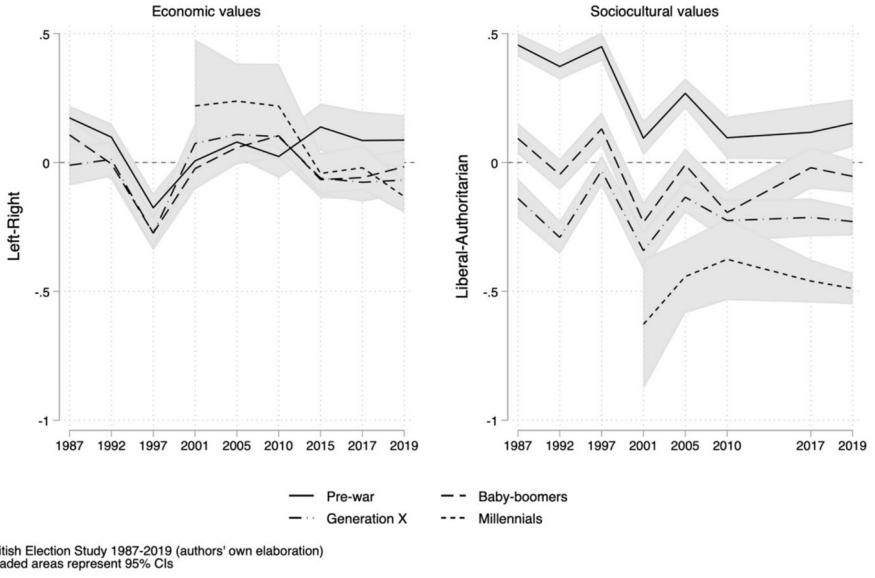


Fig. 8 Generational effects on values

Age Effects on Values

Economic values: on redistribution, the age gap has remained somewhat stable over the years, whereas on the other two measures of inequality, young people where further to the right but have caught up with older groups in last two elections.

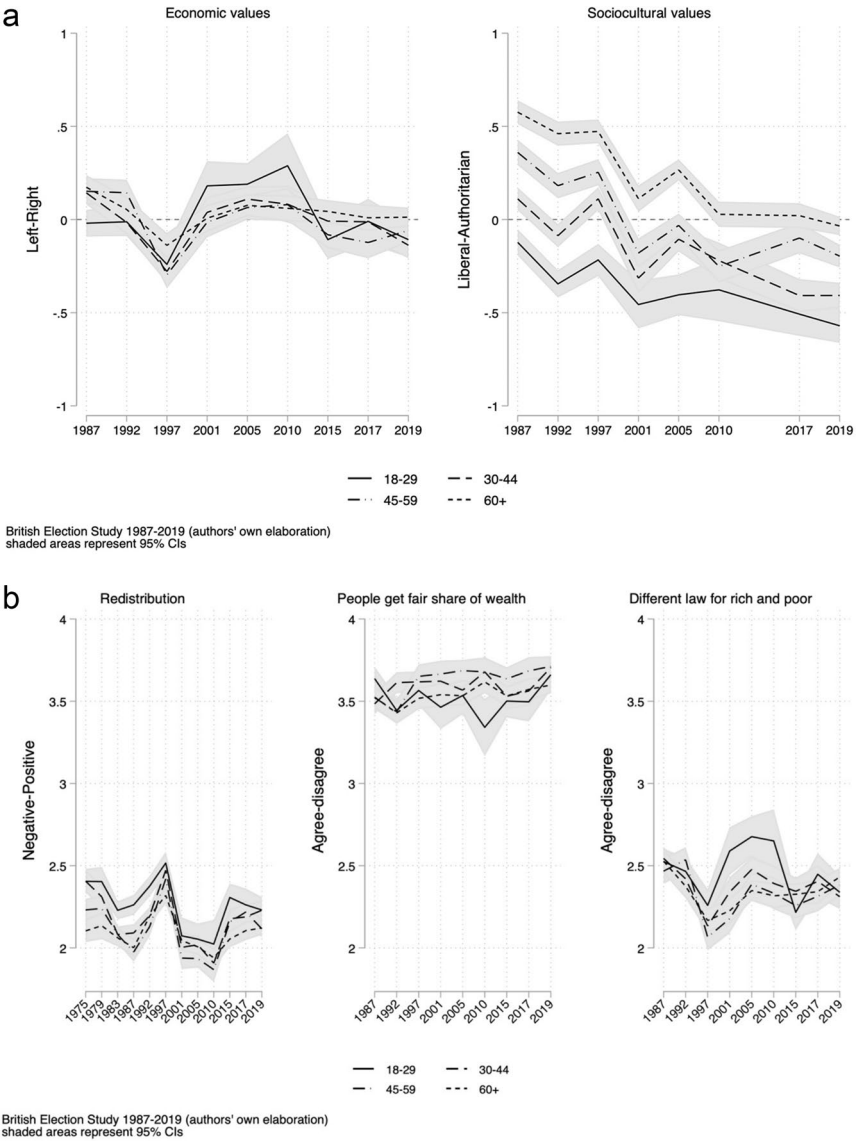


Fig. 9 a Age effects on value change (factor dimensions) b Age effects on value change (economic values, individual items) c Age effects on value change (liberal-authoritarian values, individual items)

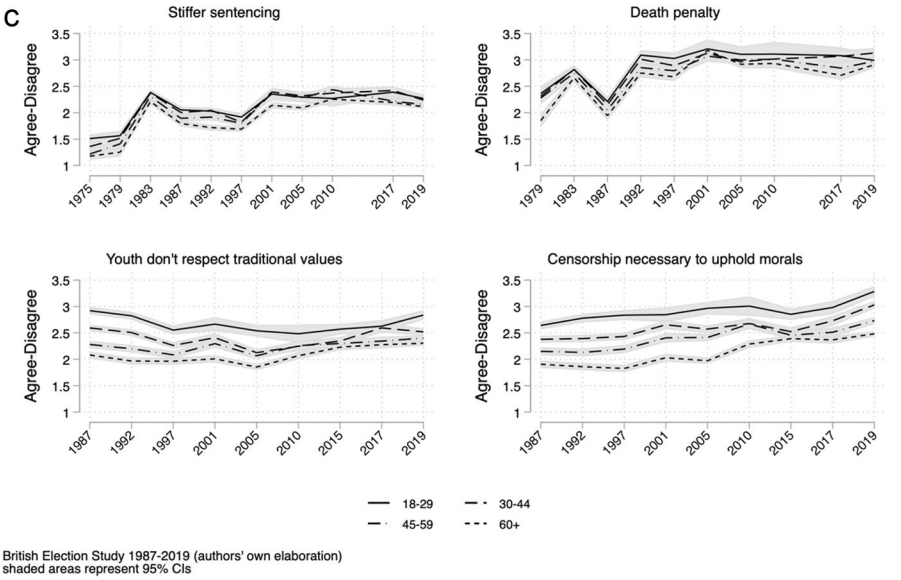


Fig. 9 (continued)

Sociocultural values: the youth is consistently more liberal than older groups, but the age gap is smaller in responses to questions on criminal sentencing and the death penalty, and larger for censorship and morality (though on the latter the gap has narrowed over the years).

Overall, there is no significant difference between factors and the individual items.

Education Effects on Values

Economic values: on redistribution, for the majority of the early period, the degree-educated are the least left-leaning, but the gap narrows and disappears in recent years; on inequality, the degree-educated were the least left-leaning but have overtaken the other groups to become the most left-leaning in recent years; on 'different law for rich and poor', the degree-educated are consistently the least left-leaning, but the gap has narrowed.

Sociocultural values: across all four measures of liberal-authoritarian values, the degree-educated are the most liberal, and the gap with the other educational categories is relatively stable over the period.

Overall, there are no significant differences between factors and the individual items.

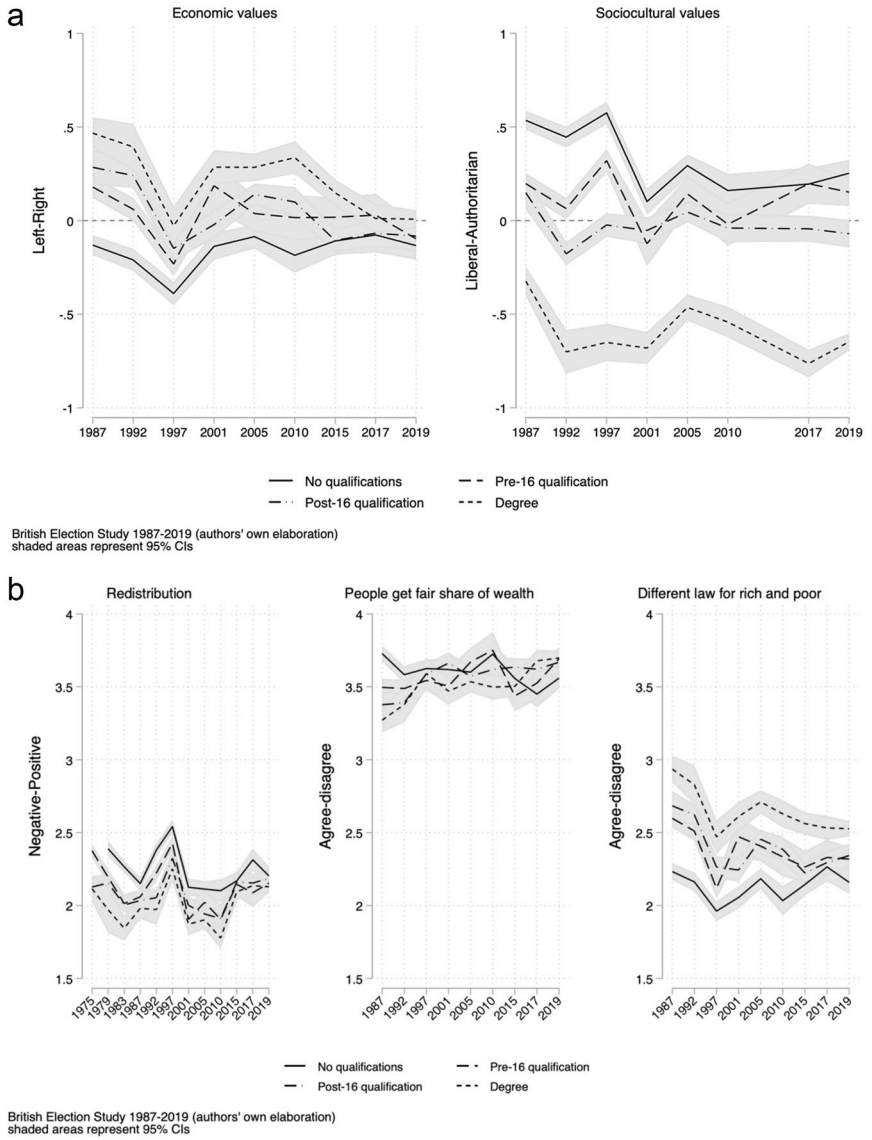


Fig. 10 a Education effects on value change (factor dimensions) b Education effects on value change (economic values, individual items) c Education effects on value change (liberal-authoritarian values, individual items)

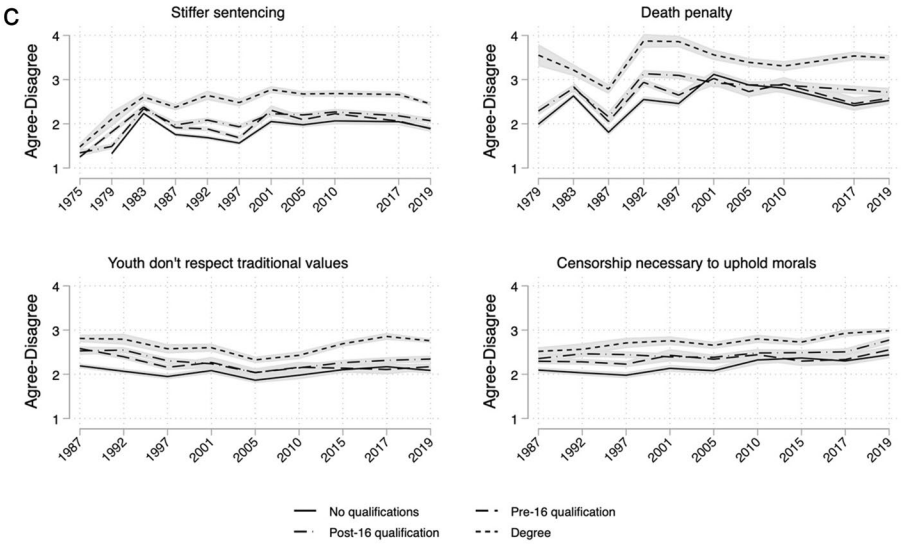


Fig. 10 (continued)

Gender Effects on Values

Economic values: on redistribution and inequality, women are more left leaning than men and the gap has widened in 2019; there are no gender-based differences on 'different law for rich and poor'.

Liberal values: on criminal sentencing, men are slightly more liberal, while on the death penalty and on youth's respect for traditional values, women are. The largest gap is on censorship, where men are significantly more liberal. This uncharacteristically large gap is likely due to women's tendency to be more sensitive to interpersonal harm and place a higher priority on safeguarding others (see, e.g., Stimpson et al., 1992; Campbell & Childs, 2015; Armstrong et al., 2019). They perceive sexual media content as having greater negative impacts on both themselves and others, and are more likely than men to view hate speech as harmful and violent (see, e.g., Cowan & Khatchadourian, 2003; Cowan et al., 2005; Downs & Cowan, 2012).

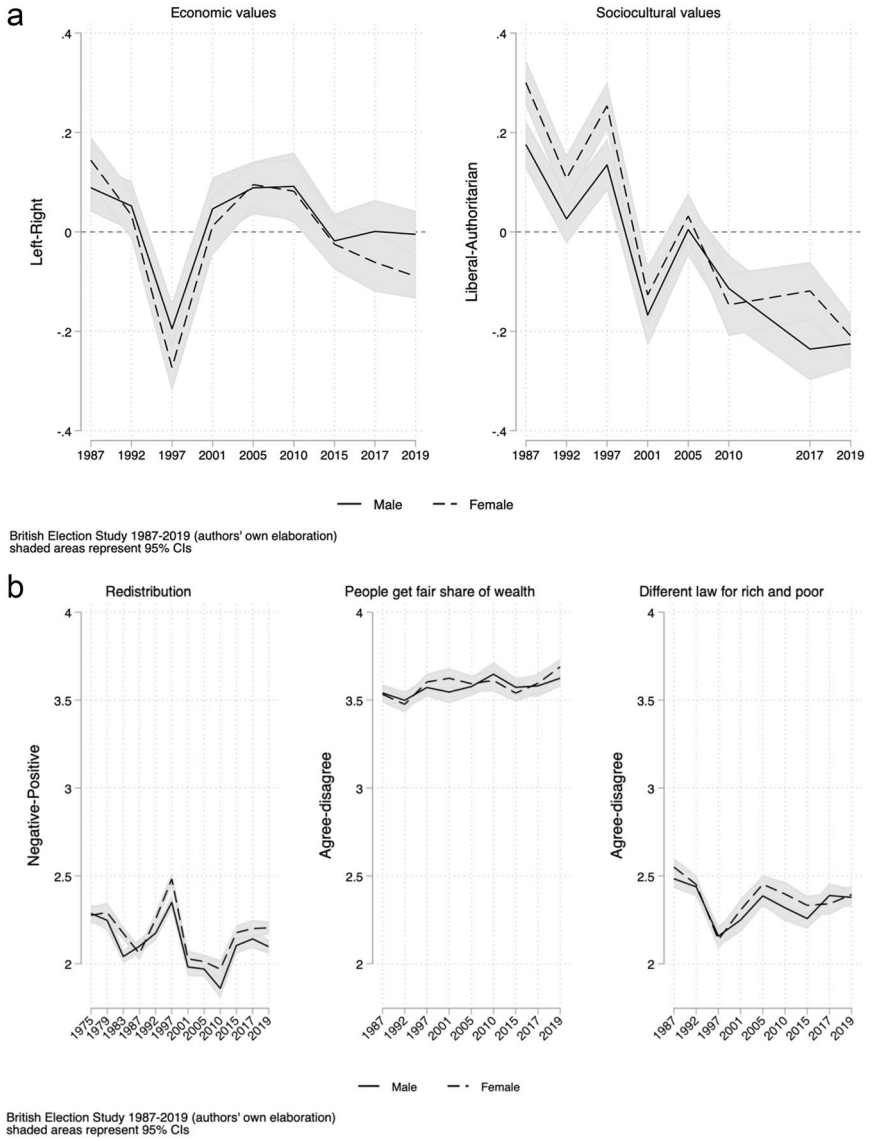


Fig. 11 a Gender effects on value change (factor dimensions) b Gender effects on value change (economic values, individual items) c Gender effects on value change (liberal-authoritarian values, individual items)

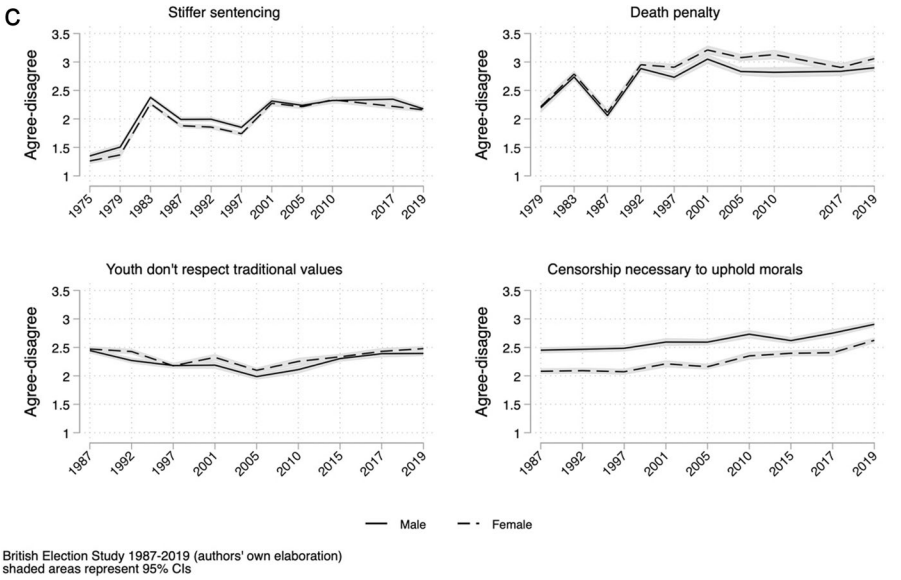


Fig. 11 (continued)

Class Effects on Values

Economic values: on redistribution and inequality, working class individuals are more left-leaning than individuals who identify as middle or other class. The gap between the three types of class identification narrows towards the later part of the period.

Liberal values: on liberal values, working class individuals are generally less liberal than those who identify are middle or other class, and these gaps widen towards the later part of the period, especially in regards to views on the death penalty and on young people's respect for traditional British values.

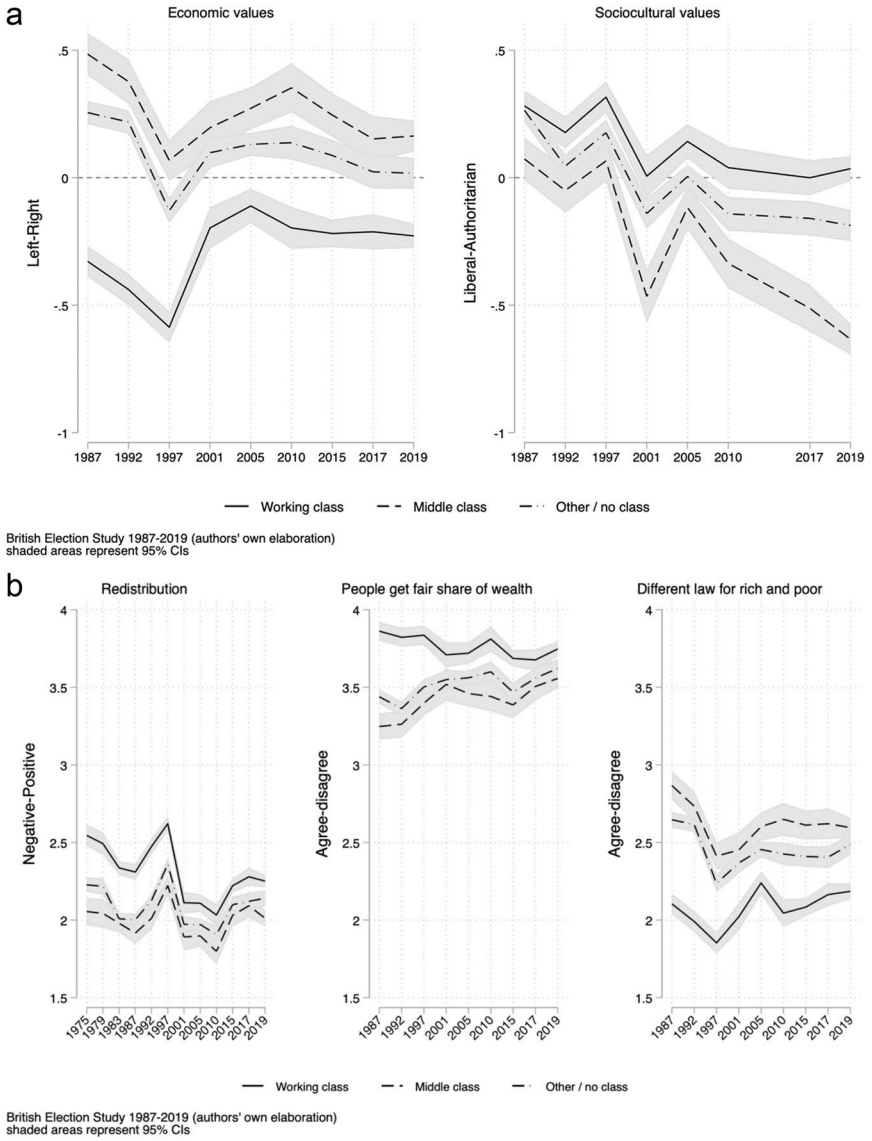


Fig. 12 a Class effects on value change (factor dimensions) b Class effects on value change (economic values, individual items) c Class effects on value change (liberal-authoritarian values, individual items)

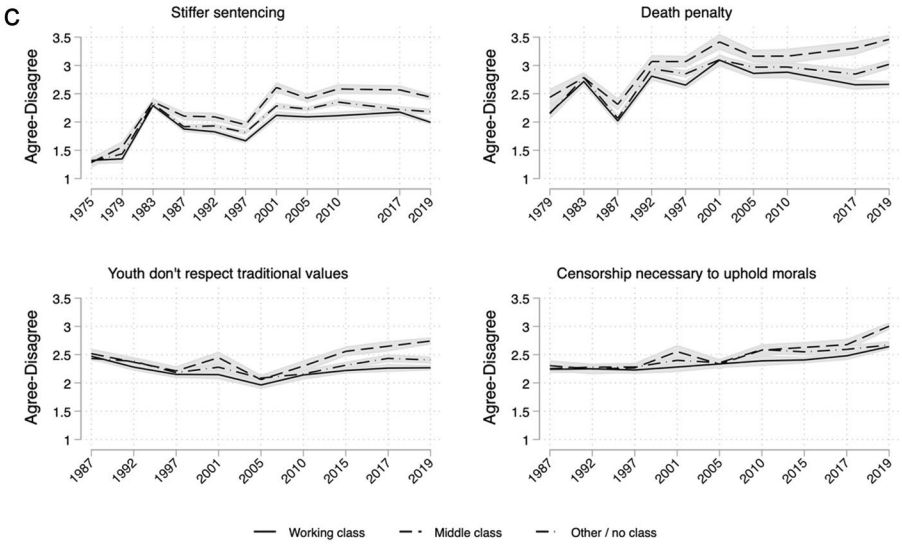
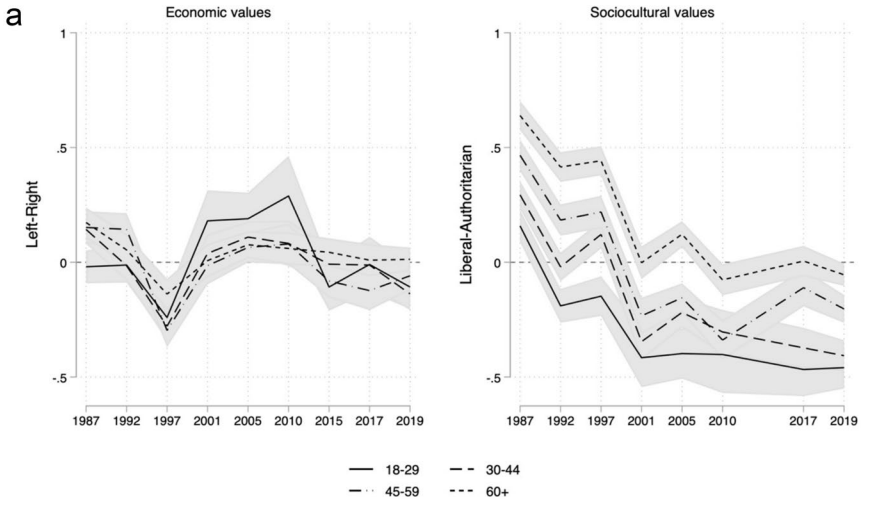


Fig. 12 (continued)

Appendix B

Robustness Tests – Replicating the Analysis Removing the Question on Youth Respect For Traditional Values

The figures presented in earlier in this Appendix highlights variation by year, age, education, class and gender on the individual survey items included in the economic and sociocultural attitudes indexes. One survey item in particular is of interest because the nature of the question – whether young people have enough respect for traditional British values – might affect the responses of young people. Therefore, an alternative analysis which removes this item from the index was performed. Results are reported in Figs. 5–12 below. Overall, trends are in line with those reported in the main paper.



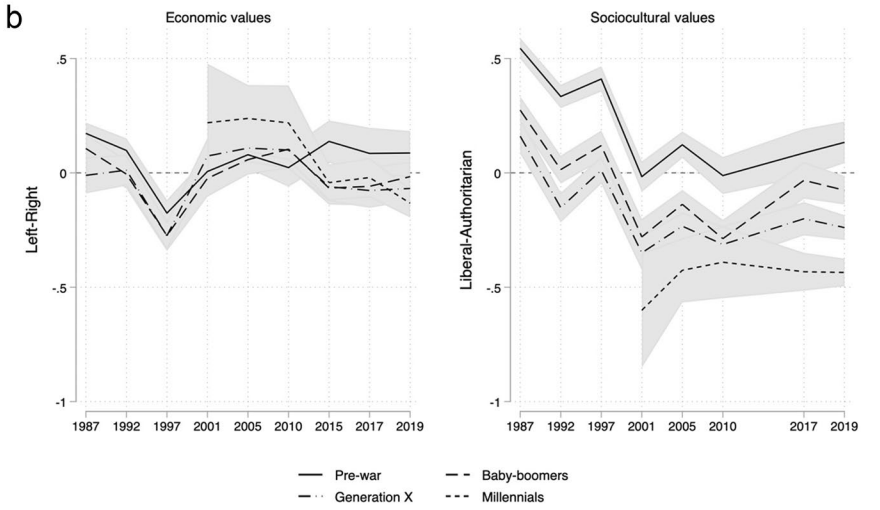
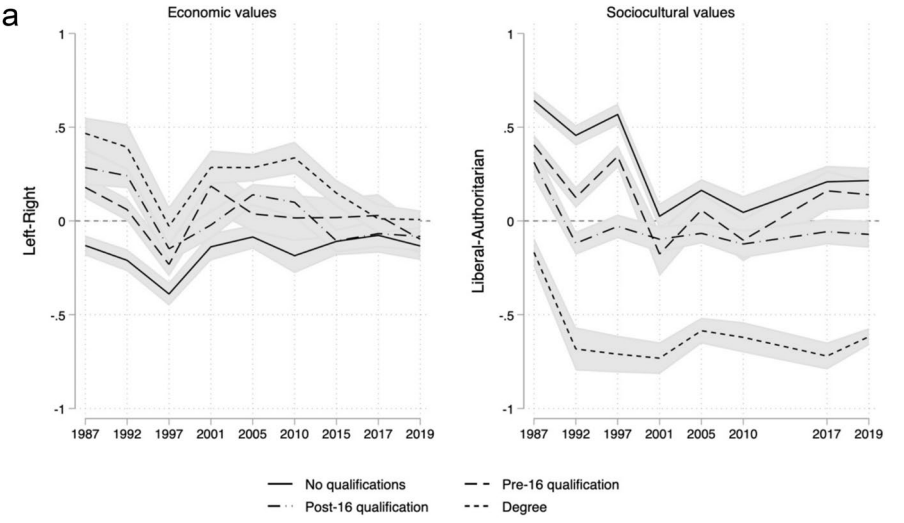


Fig. 13 a Age effects on value change b Generation effects on value change



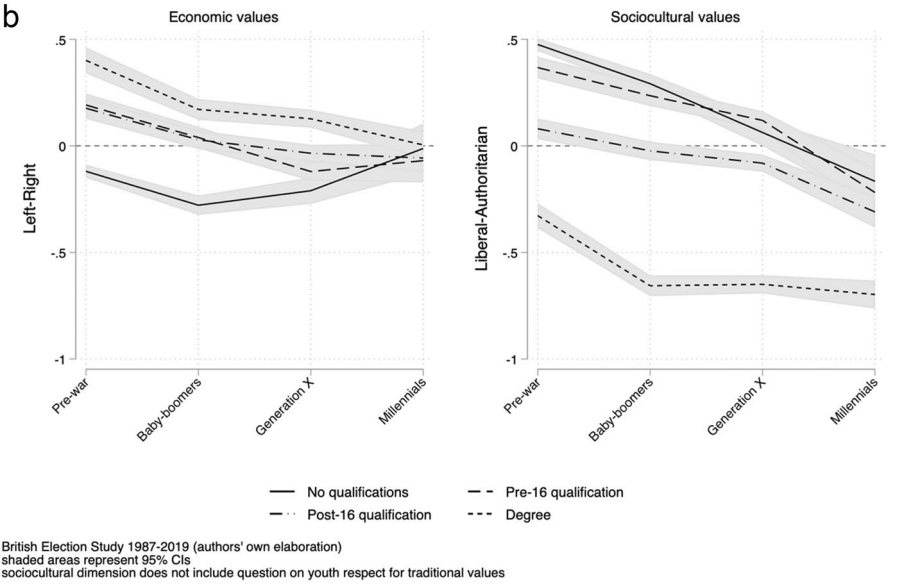


Fig. 14 a Education effects on value change (by year) b Education effects on value change (by generation)

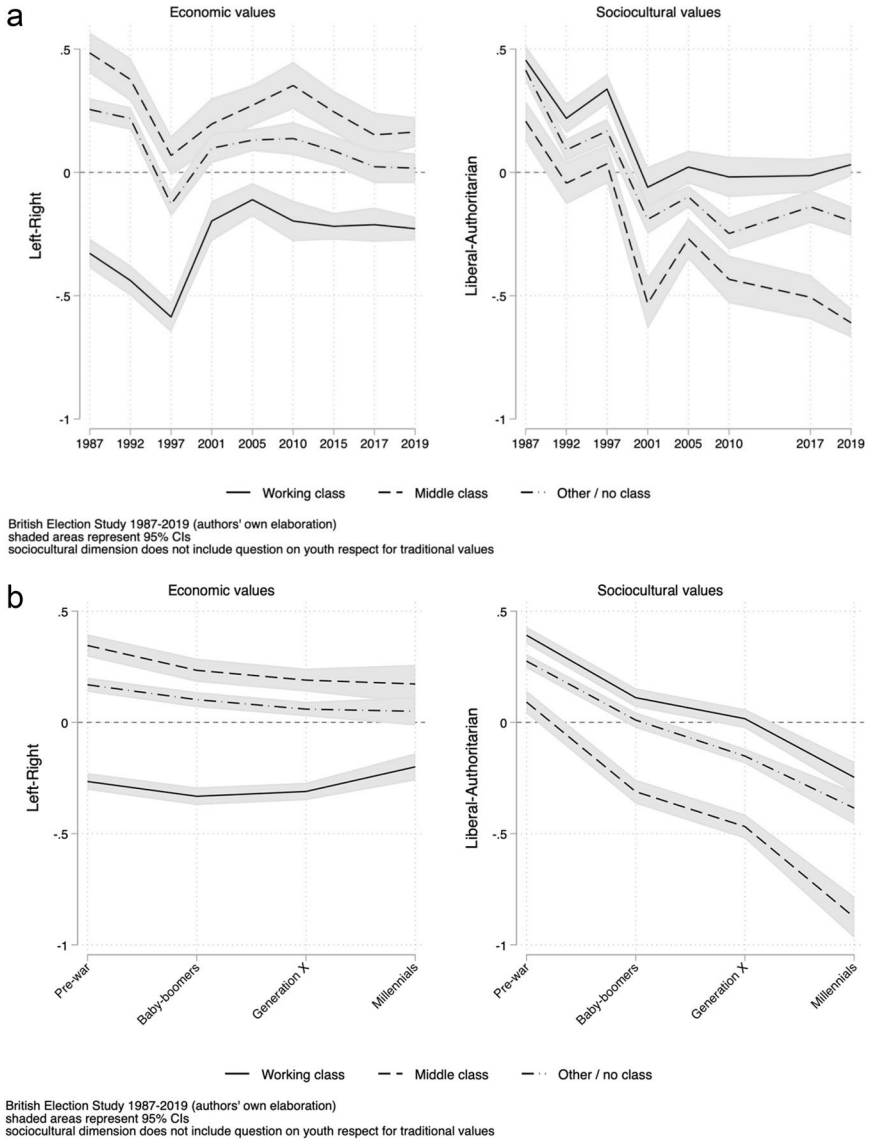


Fig. 15 a Class effects on value change (by year) b Class effects on value change (by generation)

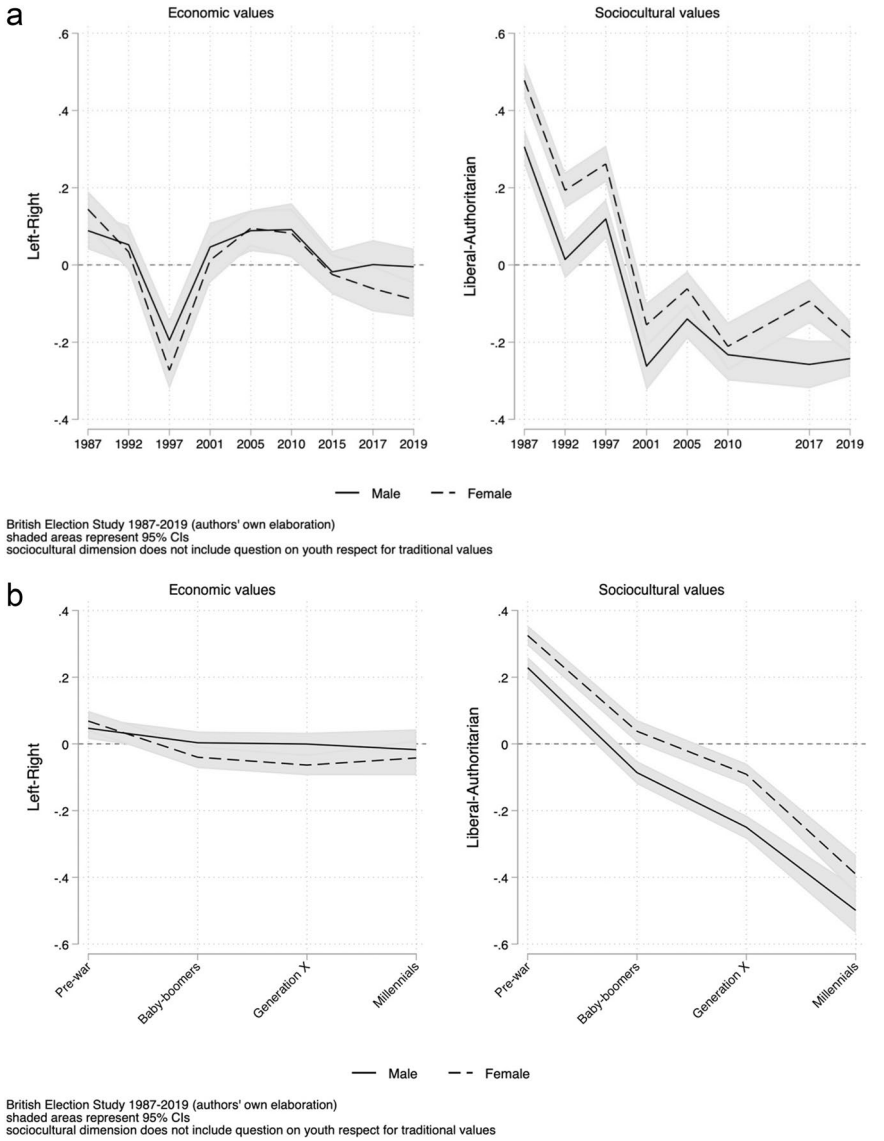


Fig. 16 a Gender effects on value change (by year) b Gender effects on value change (by generation)

Funding The Authors did not receive financial support from any organization for the submitted work.

Data Availability The research presented in this paper relies on secondary data publicly available from the British Election Study website (available at: https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/).

Declarations

Conflict of interest The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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