

Is history repeating itself?

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*Comparing the pattern of party support in the 1990s
and now*

INTRODUCTION

There is much that is remarkably similar about the circumstances in which the Labour Party in the UK finds itself now, and where it stood on the brink of its landslide success in 1997. The party has seemingly made itself more electable in the eyes of the electorate following a tack back towards the ideological centre of British politics. Then, in an imitation of what happened after Black Wednesday in September 1992, it has been propelled into a large polling lead after the incumbent government's reputation for economic competence was severely damaged as a result of losing the confidence of the financial markets. Although the next general election could still be nearly two years away, it would seem as though history could well repeat itself.

However, there are also significant differences between today's landscape and the one that faced the party in the 1990s. One of the more obvious ones is the greater scale of the turnaround required to achieve a majority. For all the bitterness of Labour's fourth defeat in a row in 1992, John Major's Conservative government emerged with a much-reduced overall majority of just 21, while it left Labour itself just a 4 per cent swing away from the prospect of an overall majority.¹ At the 2019 general election, in contrast, not only did the Conservatives secure a majority of 80, their best result since 1987, but also Labour was left potentially requiring a swing of 12 per cent in order to obtain a majority for itself – an even bigger swing than the one of 10 per cent that Tony Blair secured in 1997.² For all the

1 Curtice J and Steed M (1992) 'Appendix 2: The results analysed' in Butler D and Kavanagh D, *The British General Election of 1992*, Macmillan

2 Curtice J, Fisher S and English P (2001) 'Appendix 1: Further analysis of the results' in Ford R, Bale T, Jennings W and SurrIDGE P, *The British General Election of 2019*, Palgrave Macmillan

government's recent difficulties, Labour's route back to power is markedly more rugged and steep than the one Tony Blair had to negotiate in 1997.

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That, though, is not all. Although the difference is less immediately visible, the political environment in which Labour is trying to find a route to victory is rather different from that of 25 years ago. Data from NatCen's British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey reveals three key differences between the pattern of political attitudes and preferences now and those of the 1990s.

First, the demographics of Labour support are different from those in the 1990s. Despite New Labour's attempt to win over middle-class voters,³ on the eve of its 1997 success the party was still markedly more popular among working-class voters than among their more middle-class counterparts. Now there is much less difference. Instead, the party finds itself, above all, the voice of younger voters. Second, the ideological divide in Britain's electoral politics is no longer simply between 'left' and 'right', but also between 'liberals' and 'authoritarians', a division on which younger and older voters tend to have very different views. Third, Labour now faces more competition from other parties for the support of those who are on the left. Between them, these differences suggest that the next general election will not simply be a repeat of that in 1997.

“the ideological divide in Britain’s electoral politics is no longer simply between ‘left’ and ‘right’”

Every year since its foundation in 1983, the BSA survey has ascertained party support by asking people whether they think of themselves as Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat and so on, or at least feel closer to one of those parties, or, failing that, who they think they might support in a general election. The survey also regularly includes sequences of questions designed to identify where people stand on two ideological dimensions.⁴ The first of these is focused on inequality and what should be done about

3 Heath A, Jowell R and Curtice J (2001) *The Rise of New Labour*, Oxford University Press

4 Butt S, Clery E and Curtice J (2022) 'Technical details' in Butt S, Clery E and Curtice J (eds) *British Social Attitudes 39*, NatCen Social Research. https://bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39487/bsa39_technical-details.pdf

it; it distinguishes those on the left, who are more concerned about inequality, and those on the right, for whom reducing inequality is less important than providing the economic incentives that facilitate growth. The second dimension distinguishes between authoritarians, who prioritise social order and tend to hold socially conservative views that prioritise cohesion and homogeneity over diversity and choice, and liberals, who are more concerned about the latter.⁵

To illustrate how the pattern of party support has changed, we use here the data collected by the 1996 BSA survey, conducted a year before Labour's landslide victory the following year, and that obtained by the most recent survey undertaken towards the end of 2021.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Peter Pulzer famously wrote in the 1960s that 'class is the basis of British politics, all else is embellishment and detail'.⁶ Thirty years later, the picture was no longer that simple. Even so, as the lower half of Table 1 shows,

Table 1. Conservative and Labour support by age and occupational classification, 1996 and 2021

Age	Conservatives		Labour	
	1996	2021	1996	2021
	%	%	%	%
18–34	23	13	43	41
35–54	27	28	43	32
55+	34	44	40	25
Occupational classification				
Managerial and professional	34	31	37	32
Intermediate	30	38	35	29
Self-employed	42	42	29	18
Lower supervisory	24	26	51	30
Semi-routine and routine	17	24	54	38

Source: BSA survey, 1996 and 2021.

Notes: In 1996, occupational class was measured by the Goldthorpe class schema of occupational coding. In 2021, it was measured via respondents' self-coding into the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification.

5 Curtice J and Ratti V (2022) 'Culture wars: keeping the Brexit divide alive?' in Butt S, Clery E and Curtice J (eds) *British Social Attitudes 39*, NatCen Social Research. https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39478/bsa39_culture-wars.pdf

6 Pulzer P (1967) *Political Representation and Elections in Britain*, Allen & Unwin

support for the Conservatives was still rather higher among those in managerial and more junior non-manual occupations than it was among those in semi-routine and routine – that is, working-class – manual occupations. The opposite was true of Labour who, despite wanting to improve its support among middle-class voters, in fact enjoyed the support of a little over half of those in working-class jobs.

Now, after a general election in 2019 in which Labour lost a number of working-class ‘Red Wall’ seats (and with the party at the time of our survey still much less popular overall than it was in 1996), the Conservatives are only marginally more popular among those in managerial and professional jobs than among those employed in working-class jobs. Equally, Labour is only a little more popular among the former than the latter. So far at least, Labour’s attempts under Sir Keir Starmer to reverse the especially heavy loss of support the party has suffered at recent elections among ‘traditional’ working-class voters appears have borne only limited fruit. In fact, the only group whose pattern of support remains as distinctive now as it was in 1996 is the self-employed who remain more inclined than any other group to support the Conservatives.

In contrast, age has now become sharply related to the pattern of party support. In 1996, Labour was no more popular among younger voters than older voters (although the Conservatives were a little less successful among younger voters, who were more likely not to support any party). Now there is a 16-point difference between the two groups (while in the case of the Conservatives the gap is twice as large as in 1996). Although Labour endeavours to present itself as the party of ‘working people’, in practice it has come to look more like the party of ‘younger people’.

“in practice [the Labour Party] has come to look more like the party of “younger people””

Younger people are somewhat more likely to be on the left politically. For example, 54 per cent of those aged under 35 agree that the ‘government should redistribute income from the better off to the less well-off’, rather more than the 49 per cent of those aged 55 and over who do so. However, they are much more distinctive in their degree of liberalism. For instance, only 23 per cent of the under-35s agree that ‘censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards’, whereas as many as 51 per cent of those aged 55 and over express that view. And herein lies a

clue as to how the value divisions in Britain's electoral politics have changed since the 1990s too.

VALUES

The point emerges clearly from Table 2. In this table we use the BSA's value dimensions to divide the public in both 1996 and 2021 into: (i) the one-third most left-wing, the one-third most right-wing and the one-third in the centre; and (ii) the one-third most liberal, the one-third most authoritarian and the one-third in between. For each group it shows the level of both Conservative and Labour support. As we might anticipate, although the relationship is far from perfect, those on the left who are more concerned about inequality are more likely to back Labour, while those on the right are more inclined to back the Conservatives. Moreover, in the case of the Conservatives this divide matters as much now as it did in 1996, although the difference in Labour support between now and then appears rather more marked among those on the left (a point to which we will return below).

Liberals and authoritarians have also long tended to differ somewhat in their political preferences.⁷ In 1996, the Conservatives were a little more popular among authoritarians, Labour among liberals. But the difference was not as big as that between those on the left and those on the right. Now, in contrast, the party politics of liberals and authoritarians are markedly further apart. Indeed, the difference between them is not far short of the gap between left and right. Whereas in the 1990s, electoral politics in Britain was largely a one-dimensional battle between left and right, now it appears to be

Table 2. Conservative and Labour support by left/right and liberal/authoritarian values

	1996		2021	
	Conservative	Labour	Conservative	Labour
	%	%	%	%
Left	11	61	12	47
Centre	25	42	28	33
Right	50	22	50	16
Liberal	17	51	10	46
Centre	31	39	32	29
Authoritarian	35	38	46	22

Source: BSA survey, 1996 and 2021.

7 Heath A, Jowell R and Curtice J (1985) *How Britain Votes*, Pergamon

a more complex two-dimensional contest in which the distinction between a more liberal and a more authoritarian perspective matters too.

It might, though, be thought that the two dimensions are but two sides of the same coin, that is, that many of those on the left tend to be liberal and those on the right tend to be authoritarian. This is not the case. In 1996, people's position on one dimension was wholly unrelated to their stance on another, and even now, the link is only a small positive one.⁸ Appealing to voters' values is no longer simply a question of adopting an appropriate stance on the question of inequality, but also one of having a position on issues of social cohesion and diversity. Irrespective of where voters stand on the left–right spectrum, support for Labour is now much higher among liberals than it is among authoritarians.

At the same time, Labour also finds itself now facing greater competition for the support of both those on the left and social liberals. Both the Greens and the Scottish National Party (SNP) are much more popular overall now than they were in 1996 – and their support is greatest among those on the left and among social liberals. As many as 18 per cent of those on the left and 20 per cent of social liberals now support the Greens or a nationalist party, compared with an equivalent figure of just 7 per cent of those on the right and among authoritarians. On either dimension, any decision to tack towards the centre now needs to balance the votes that might be gained against the trade-off of support that might potentially be lost on the left or among liberals, who may well feel they do have somewhere else they can go.

CONCLUSION

Brexit has, of course, had a hand in these developments. It helped draw pro-Remain younger voters towards the Labour Party while pro-Leave supporters, mostly older and more working class, were attracted towards the Conservatives.^{9,10} Attitudes towards the EU were correlated with where people stood on the liberal/authoritarian division, not whether they were on the left or the right.¹¹ In this parliament, Labour has been attempting

8 In 1996, the Pearson correlation coefficient between the two scales was -0.04 while in 2021 it was +0.19

9 Curtice J (2020) *Was the 2019 General Election a Success?*, NatCen Social Research. <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/analysis/was-the-2019-general-election-a-success>

10 Ford R, Bale T, Jennings W and Surridge P (2021) *The British General Election of 2019*, Palgrave Macmillan

11 Swales K (2016) *Understanding the Leave Vote*, NatCen Social Research. https://whatukthinks.org/eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/NatCen_Brexplanations-report-FINAL-WEB2.pdf

to reverse this pattern by accepting (and largely not talking about) Brexit while emphasising issues of inequality. While this might be a politics with which the party is more comfortable, it is far from clear that it is an adequate response to the political environment in which the party now finds itself. Politics in Britain is no longer just about class inequality but also about generational differences over social liberalism. As a result, unlike Tony Blair, Sir Keir Starmer has to find a way of positioning Labour effectively on both of these divides.

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POSTSCRIPT

Of course, it might be thought that things have changed in the year or so since the most recent BSA survey was conducted. After all, at the end of October 2021, just as data collection for BSA 2021 was coming to an end, the Conservatives were ahead of Labour in the polls, much as they had been for most of the time since the 2019 general election. A year on, in contrast, after the fall and rise of two Conservative prime ministers in the wake of ‘partygate’ and financial turbulence on the markets, Labour was 25 points ahead. Surely this must mean that the pattern of party support has changed too?

In practice, however, this does not appear to be the case. On average, between October 2021 and October 2022, support for Labour (in terms of vote intentions) rose among those aged 65 and over by 13 points, from 22 per cent to 35 per cent. But it increased almost as much – by 12 points (from 50 per cent to 62 per cent) – among those aged 18–24.¹² And while Labour support increased a little more among primarily manual ‘C2DE’ voters (by 19 points) than among primarily white-collar ‘ABC1’ voters (by 14 points), at 53 per cent the average level of support for the party among ‘C2DE’ voters was still little different from the 50 per cent registered among those in ‘ABC1’ occupations.¹³ Despite the dramatic rise in its support, Labour looks no more like a party that is especially

¹² Calculated from polls conducted by Deltapoll, Redfield & Wilton and YouGov closest to the end of October 2021 and 2022.

¹³ Calculated from polls conducted by Deltapoll and YouGov closest to the end of October 2021 and 2022.

successful at appealing to working-class voters than before, while the party does remain especially reliant on the backing of younger voters.

The polls do not carry the questions designed to measure people's values that appear each year on the BSA survey. However, given that how people voted in the 2016 EU referendum was strongly related to where people stood on the liberal–authoritarian dimension (and was unrelated to whether they were on the left or the right), we can use the relationship between how people voted in the EU referendum and their current vote intention as a proxy for the relationship between people's position on the liberal–authoritarian dimension and party support. This suggests that Labour continues to be more attractive to socially liberal Remainers than authoritarian Leavers. While, on average, support for Labour among those who voted Leave rose by 15 points (from 20 per cent to 35 per cent) between October 2021 and October 2022, it also rose by 15 points (from 45 per cent to 60 per cent) among those who voted Remain.

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