

Degrees of separation: The education divide in British politics

BRIEFING

November 2023

SMF

Social Market Foundation

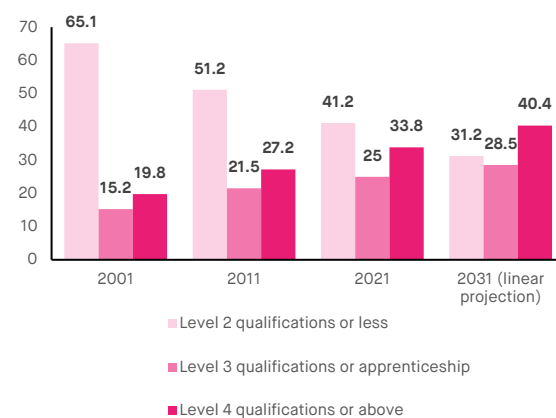
KEY POINTS

- British voters have been deeply divided by education in three successive national contests – the 2016 EU referendum and the general elections of 2017 and 2019. Education as a political divide is new in British politics.
- Graduates and school leavers are now roughly matched in electoral power – and in the coming decade graduates will become the largest educational group for the first time.
- The Conservatives are on course for their worst performance with graduates since at least 1979, but are still polling better with school leavers than they were in 2015. The Labour story is a near-mirror image.
- Now, education pulls voters in the opposite direction to economic circumstances.
- Any election strategy which polarises voters on education – like recent campaigns focused on immigration or climate change – risks putting one or other of the ‘red wall’ and ‘blue wall’ groups of seats at risk.
- Labour cannot form a majority in the next election without bridging the education divide. The two types of seat clusters it needs to secure a majority are diametrically opposed to one another when it comes to education.
- If current trends continue, more educated voters will only become more electorally important: by 2030, the majority of constituencies are set to contain more graduates than school leavers.

British voters have been deeply divided by education in three successive national contests – the EU referendum of 2016 and the general elections of 2017 and 2019. The voters who left schooling earliest backed Leave and then swung behind the Conservatives. University graduates backed Remain and then swung behind Labour. All of this is new. Before 2016, educational background told you little about someone’s politics. Now it is one of the best questions to ask to predict how they vote.

While graduates have long held distinctive values and priorities, in the past university was the province of a fortunate few, so any electoral contest pitting graduates against school leavers would be a rout. As recently as a decade ago, those with the most and those with the least education also did not have a firm sense of themselves as distinct groups with opposed interests. Recognising these changes, political parties are increasingly mobilising around education.

Figure 1: Shares of England and Wales residents by qualification level 2001-2021¹



Notes: Share of all 16 plus residents (2011, 2021); share of residents aged 16-74 (2001). 2031 estimates are based on a linear projection of 2011-21 trends.

¹ See the full report for detailed Census definitions

Kindly supported by

UK IN A
CHANGING
EUROPE

To read the full report, scan the QR code



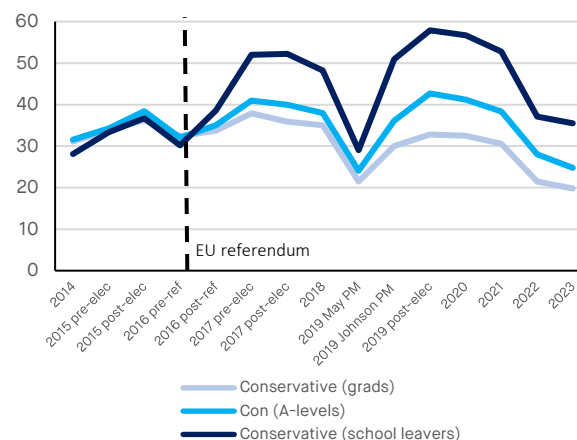
Just two decades ago, school leavers² outnumbered university graduates three to one. Since then the graduate share of the electorate has doubled, while the school leaver share has fallen by nearly 25 percentage points (see Figure 1). Graduates and school leavers are now roughly matched in electoral power – and in the coming decade graduates will become the largest educational group for the first time ever.

The opportunities generated by educational expansion are exercised almost entirely by the younger generations who come of age after educational expansions. Graduates now dominate among the under 45s, with the proportion of school leavers rising the older we go.

Education and vote choice

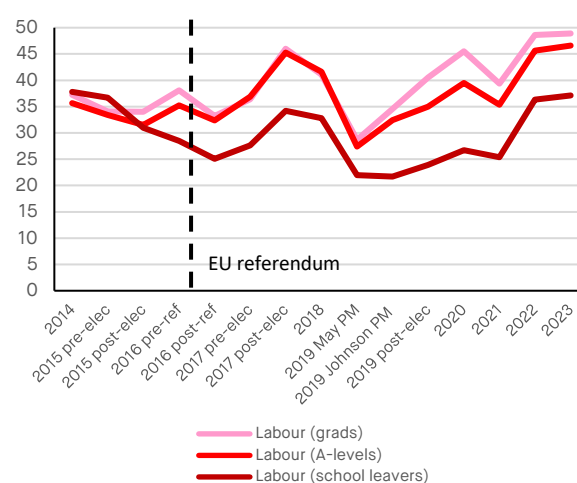
These big aggregate shifts and generational gaps matter because education is now a powerful predictor of vote choice. Figures 2 and 3 show the education divide in reported support for the Conservatives and Labour for the period 2014-2023, using the British Election Study internet panel (BESIP).³ Graduates and school leavers backed the Conservatives at similar rates in 2014 and 2015, before diverging sharply from 2016 onwards. Conservative support among school leavers rose from the mid-30s to well over 50%. Theresa May and Boris Johnson won majority support from school leavers in their 2017 and 2019 election campaigns. Graduate Tory support was flat in 2017 and 2019 even as the Conservatives advanced overall. The Conservatives’ slump since 2020 has occurred across all education groups, leaving education divides intact. The Conservatives are on course for their worst performance with graduates since at least 1979, but are still polling better with school leavers than they were in 2015.

Figure 2: The education divide in Conservative support, 2014-2023



Source: British Election Study internet panel 2014-2023

Figure 3: The education divide in Labour support 2014-2023



Source: British Election Study internet panel (BESIP) 2014-2023

The Labour story (Figure 3) is a near-mirror image. Graduate and school leaver support for Labour began to diverge in late 2015 following Jeremy Corbyn’s election as party leader, and this trend has accelerated since the EU referendum. Jeremy Corbyn secured more than 40% support from graduates in both 2017 and 2019, putting Labour ahead of the Conservatives with graduates in both elections. But Labour support among school leavers was barely 30% in 2017 and slumped to around 20%

² Defined throughout as those who left school at the earliest legal opportunity with, at most, exit exam qualifications such as O-levels or GCSEs.

³ The BESIP is a very large academic project conducting very large (12,000-25,000 person) survey of public political views since 2014.

in 2019. Labour's recovery since 2020 has been broad-based, leaving the education divide intact. Labour won an average of 49% from graduates in 2022, and 46% from voters with A-levels – ten points higher than pre-Brexit averages. Support among school leavers sits in the mid-30s, substantially below the share Labour received as recently as 2015.

The current education divides are a reversal of earlier patterns. In every election from 1979 to 2010, school leavers backed the Labour party at higher rates than graduates, while the Conservatives generally did a little better with graduates than school leavers. They also sit in tension with the parties' traditional economic positions. University graduates – who tend to have higher incomes, more secure jobs, and higher home ownership rates – now align with Labour, traditionally the party of the underprivileged. School leavers – who have worse outcomes and prospects on these and other economic indicators – now back the Conservatives, the traditional party of privilege.

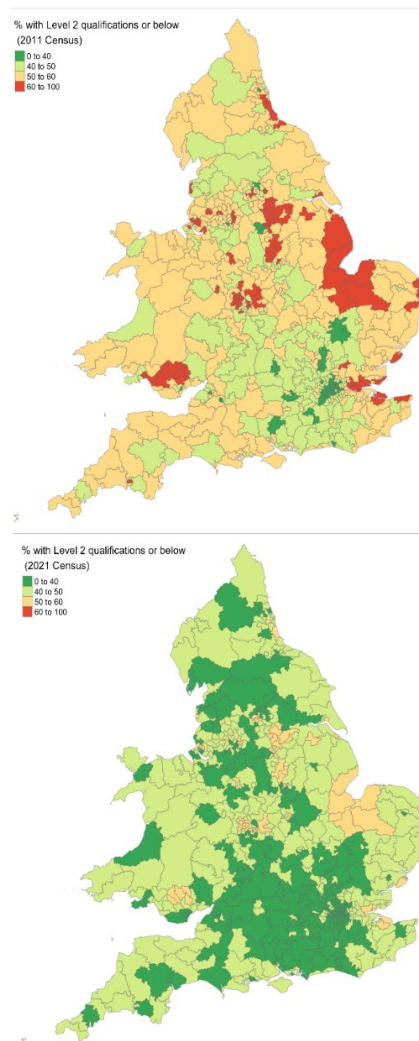
Education is now one of the strongest predictors of voting – of the socio-demographic factors we looked at, only age has a bigger impact. In the most recent general election, the education divide loomed much larger than traditional economic divides such as social class, income or housing tenure. The division between A-level voters and school leavers, while smaller, is still substantial. The difference in Conservative and Labour support among school leavers and A-level voters in 2019 was as large as the difference between the highest and lowest income groups, or between middle class professionals and unskilled manual workers.

The changing geography of education

The education divide also has a geographical dimension – graduates and school leavers tend to live in different places, and their profile are changing (Figure 4). In 2011, there were very high concentrations of school leavers – 60%+ – in the industrial North East, East Anglia bordering the Wash, the Thames Estuary, and South Wales (red). Only small clusters of seats in the London commuter belt and near large universities had electorates with fewer than 40% school leavers (dark green). The picture in

2021 is very different. There are no seats where school leavers have a share above 60%, and only a few clusters where school leavers are a majority. School leavers have fallen below 40% of the electorate in huge swathes of Southern England, and in much of the rural Midlands and North too.

Figure 4: Proportions of school leavers in each constituency, 2011 census (top) and 2021 census (bottom)



Source: Census 2011 and 2021

The same trend of rapid and uneven change is also evident when we look at the growing graduate electorate. While many seats had graduate shares below 20% in 2011, very few still did in 2021. The largest concentrations of graduates come in London and in the large home counties commuter belt around it, with other clusters near large universities. London is

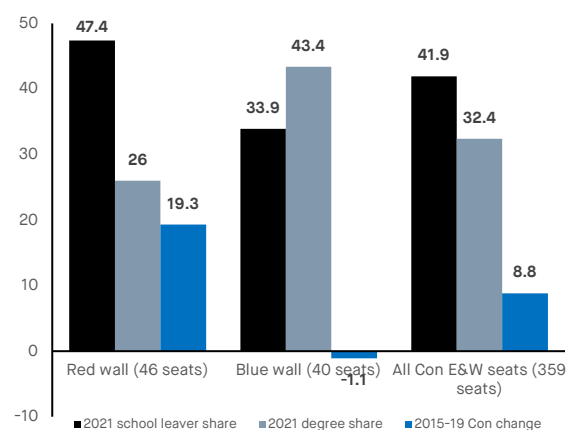
at the heart of this cluster and is rapidly becoming a graduate-dominated city – graduates had a 40% share or more in 28 of London’s 73 seats in 2011; by 2021 that figure had risen to 53.

Education divides at the next election

The changing education divide poses challenges for all the parties. Conservative success in the past two elections has been built on surging support among school leavers offsetting losses among graduates. Now the tide has turned, they face the challenge of defending seats on two very different fronts: the ‘red wall’ seats taken from Labour since 2015, and the ‘blue wall’, where they are under threat from the Lib Dems.

The Conservatives cannot afford to lose many seats in either cluster if they want to retain power. But the two fronts are poles apart in their education profiles. The ‘red wall’ seats are places where school leavers are, on average, close to a majority of residents, while a quarter have degrees. In the ‘blue wall’, only one in three residents is a school leaver, and graduates are dominant. Any election strategy which polarises voters on education – as for example recent campaigns focused on immigration or climate change are likely to do – risks putting one or other of these two groups of seats at risk.

Figure 5: Graduate and school leaver shares, and change in Conservative support 2015-19 in ‘red wall’, ‘blue wall’ and all Conservative seats

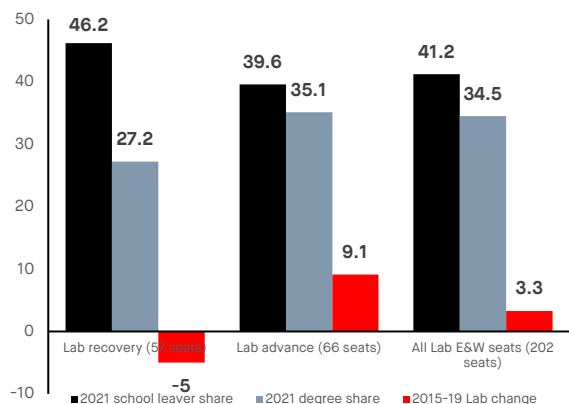


Source: 2021 Census, BBC elections team results database

The emergence of the ‘blue wall’ also illustrates a second consequence of the education divide. Graduates are attracted to the London labour market above all else, and as a result a growing swathe of traditionally Conservative seats in the London commuter belt are becoming graduate-dominated. While Labour is strong in central London, it is the Liberal Democrats who provide the main competition to the Conservatives in much of London’s suburban fringe. The mobilisation of the education divide therefore raises the possibility that a new heartland could emerge for the third party in London suburbia. The higher the share of graduates in a Conservative vs Lib Dem seat, the bigger the Lib Dem advance since 2015 has been. The Conservatives’ post-Brexit decline with graduates has presented the third party with a host of opportunities in this swathe of South England in the next election.

As Labour seek a return to office after 14 years of opposition, they too face dilemmas from the education divide. To secure a Commons majority, they must gain at least 120 seats. We can define two clusters of seats where they will have to make major gains – the “recovery” cluster of seats lost to the Conservatives since 2015, and the “advance” cluster of winnable seats where Labour have gained ground since 2015. To win a majority, Labour will most likely need to gain the bulk of the seats in both groups. But these two groups are poles apart on the education divide. The “advance” seats where the Labour vote has been growing have higher than average shares of graduates, while in the “recovery” seats school leavers are dominant and only around one voter in four are graduates. Labour cannot form a majority in the next election without bridging the education divide.

Figure 6: Graduate and school leaver shares, and change in Labour support 2015-19, in Labour's "recovery" targets and "advance" targets



Source: 2021 Census, BBC elections team results database.

An increased reliance on graduate votes poses a second problem for Labour – graduates tend to live together. Many of the constituencies with the largest Labour leaning graduate populations are, as a result, seats Labour already holds with large majorities. A further advance among graduates therefore risks piling up votes in safe seats. There are 62 Labour vs Conservative constituencies in England and Wales with graduate shares above 40%, and Labour already hold 44 of these including 16 of the 17 Labour vs Conservative seats with graduate majorities.⁴

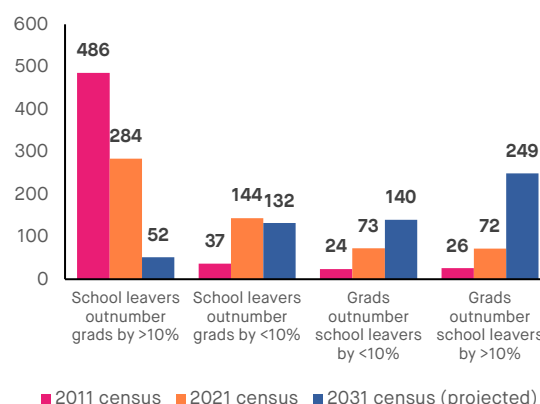
Yet while graduates are not efficiently distributed at present, the electoral landscape is still changing, and things will look very different again in another decade. If current trends continue, a majority of constituencies contested in the 2030s will have more graduates than school leavers in their electorates. Seats where school leavers are dominant, outnumbering graduates by 10% or more, will have almost disappeared. There were 486 such the seats in England and Wales in 2011 – this number fell to 284 in 2021 and on current trends will fall further to just 52 seats in 2031. The school leaver-heavy electoral territory won over by the Conservatives in 2015-19 is already disappearing. Within a decade, it will be almost gone. By contrast, the kind of graduate-dominated seat where the Tories have

⁴ The Greens' sole 2019 victory came in Brighton Pavilion – another seat with the same characteristics.

struggled since Brexit, and both opposition parties have prospered, is becoming far more common. There were only 26 seats where graduates outnumbered school leavers by more than 10% in 2011. This rose to 72 seats in the 2021 census. By 2031, on current trends, there will be 249 seats where graduates dominate. The numbers will continue rising from there.

The education divide that has opened up over the last decade is therefore very likely to change the political landscape once again in the decade to come, as the relentless process of demographic change continues to reshape the electoral map. Before 2011, neither party could afford to alienate school leavers if it aspired to government – this was the dominant group almost everywhere. After 2031, a hostile graduate electorate will become similarly fatal to electoral prospects. That change is certain to come. The only question is how quickly the political parties get the message and respond.

Figure 7: The balance of school leavers and graduates across constituencies in England and Wales 2011-2021, and projections for 2031



Source: Census 2011-21, linear projection of seat level trends forwards to 2031

About Professor Rob Ford

Rob Ford is Professor of Political Science at the University of Manchester and Senior Fellow at the UK in a Changing Europe. He is the author of several award winning books on elections, public opinion and politics, including *Revolt on the Right*; *Sex, Lies and the Ballot Box*; *Brexitland*; and *The British General Election of 2019*. Rob has worked with the BBC elections analysis team since 2005, covering local, devolved, European and general elections, the Scottish independence referendum and the EU referendum, and helping to produce the exit polls for the last five elections. He comments regularly on British politics for a wide range of outlets, including the Observer, the New Statesman, various BBC outlets and Sky News.

Hannah Bunting

Hannah Bunting is a Lecturer in Quantitative British Politics at the University of Exeter.

Ralph Scott

Ralph Scott is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data and a Research Associate on the British Election Study.

Maria Sobolewska

Maria Sobolewska is Professor of Politics at the University of Manchester and the author of *Brexitland* (with Robert Ford) and *The Political Integration of Ethnic Minorities in Britain* (with Anthony Heath, Stephen Fisher, Gemma Rosenblatt and David Sanders)

About UK in a Changing Europe

UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE) is funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and hosted by King's College London.

Led by Professor Anand Menon and supported by an in-house team, UKICE works with its team of Senior Fellows and numerous other academics to promote quality, timely and accessible social science research. It provides a platform allowing academics across the UK and beyond to ensure their research reaches a wider audience.

Its work explores the numerous domestic challenges confronting the UK, its evolving relationship with the European Union, and its place in the world. Within these three broad themes, the research draws on experts on politics, society, economics and law. UKICE represents a reliable source of analysis of the key challenges confronting the UK.