

Degrees of separation

The education divide in British politics

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SMF

**Social Market
Foundation**

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FOREWORD

Dr Aveek Bhattacharya, Interim Director, Social Market Foundation

“I love the poorly educated”. When it comes to the education divide, as in so many areas of politics, it falls to Donald Trump to make the subtext text in the crudest fashion. Though other politicians of the right might dress it up in more sensitive language, Trump is not alone in being heartened to find more support among those with lower qualifications.

That trend has a mirror on the left, which characteristically has greeted the rising educational attainment among its supporters with hand wringing as much as celebration. Thomas Piketty’s description of progressive parties’ new voters as the ‘Brahmin left’ is more poetic than Trump’s wording, but it represents another aspect of the same phenomenon, just with added progressive anguish about losing touch with traditional voters.

So I’m very pleased to publish this important and timely analysis led by Professor Rob Ford examining how British voters have split along educational lines in the past decade. The scale and speed of the phenomenon he and his team document is truly remarkable. In 2014, graduates and school leavers were similarly likely to support the Conservative or Labour Party. Despite Labour’s towering poll lead, they are still doing worse among school leavers now than they were in 2015, while the Conservatives are on course for their worst performance with graduates since at least 1979.

If I were allowed one question to deduce which party you intend to vote for, asking for your highest qualification would be a good one to choose, perhaps bettered only by asking your age. Ten years ago it would have given me no help at all.

This is of vital importance and interest to electoral strategists and psephologists, for the reasons that Rob and his colleagues lay out. The rise in the number of graduates, and decline in the least educated, means the electoral weight of these two groups is now much more evenly matched. In key electoral battlegrounds, politicians find themselves having to straddle the divide or see new openings to take advantage of this demographic shift. If the Conservatives are to hold power, they need to hold on to ‘red wall’ seats still dominated by school leavers while fending off the Liberal Democrat challenge in ‘blue wall’ seats with big graduate populations. Conversely, for Labour the short term task is winning back school leaver heavy seats lost to the Conservatives since 2015, while in the long term they may profit from the growing number of graduate heavy seats.

For the Social Market Foundation, as a policy-oriented think tank, our interest is in the deeper social issues this creates and problems it raises for policymakers. While it is unclear that the education divide is fundamentally caused by education policy, some politicians already seem to be jumping to that conclusion. If current trends continue, expect Conservative politicians to continue to ask the question, increasingly loudly, why they are spending so much money subsidising the educating students to be turned against them. The risk on the Labour side is less obvious, but each new constituency brings a risk of clientelist politics: could we see a more populist approach to student fees and debt as in Scotland or the US?

The implications are broader. Underpinning the education divide is a gap in identity and social values, prised open by the Brexit referendum and still gaping today. Graduates see their education as core to their identity, and are less likely to see themselves as English or British. School leavers are more authoritarian, more opposed to immigration and more sceptical of environmental policies.

To some extent it is healthy to have such debates out, but as we have seen, if they are left to linger and ossify they can become corrosive to trust and social cohesion. Finding a way to bring these sides together and unite them around a shared social and political project is one of the biggest medium term challenges for our leaders in the years ahead.

In the US, thinkers like Michael Sandel and Arlie Hochschild have been trying to map a way through, puncturing the meritocratic hubris that Michael Young foretold on this side of the Atlantic many decades ago. Graduates must learn to recognise that being better educated does not make them intrinsically superior. Both sides must find ways to listen to and learn from one another. Keir Starmer's continued emphasis on the importance of 'respect' – picking up a theme from Baroness Tina Stowell's 2021 SMF paper – suggest that he is alert to the challenge. A paper I wrote earlier this year examined the tensions between the goal of universal respect and the rhetoric of 'social mobility' – how to give everybody the opportunity to succeed without denigrating those that fail to get on in life.

The key thing is for more politicians to see that the education divide is there to be healed, not just to be exploited. This paper, which we're honoured to be presenting with Rob and his team, lays bare the task ahead of them.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rise of education divides

- Voters have been divided by education in three successive national contests – the EU referendum and the general elections of 2017 and 2019. School leavers, with the lowest levels of formal education, backed Leave in 2016 and then swung behind the Conservatives in 2017 and 2019. Graduates backed Remain and then Labour. Education now has a stronger relationship with vote choice than most demographic or economic variables. Only age divides are stronger.
- These divides are new. Before 2016, school leavers leaned towards Labour in every election since at least 1979, while graduates have leaned towards the Conservatives in most elections.
- Educational expansion is transforming the electoral politics of the education divide – the graduate electorate is growing rapidly and the school leaver electorate is shrinking. Only one in five voters was a graduate in 2001. Now the figure is one in three. The share of school leavers has fallen from two-thirds in 2001 to 4 in 10 now. By 2031, graduates will outnumber school leavers for the first time.
- The education divide is also a generational divide. Graduates outnumber school leavers among those aged under 50. School leavers are the dominant group among pensioners. Graduates are a far larger group among new voters turning 18 than among the older voters who pass away each year, so even if educational expansion ceased generational replacement would continue tilting the electoral playing field towards graduates.
- Education cuts across traditional economic divisions. Normally, well-off groups lean right, while poorer groups lean left. With education divides it is now the opposite – better-off graduates lean left; poorer school leavers lean right.

Education and political choice

- The Conservatives' increased vote share in 2017 and 2019 was driven by a near doubling of support among school leavers between 2015 and 2019. Conservative support among graduates has steadily declined and is now at its lowest level in at least 45 years. Since 2020, Conservative support has fallen across the board, leaving deep education divides intact.
- Labour support among school leavers began to fall after Jeremy Corbyn became party leader in 2016. The decline accelerated after the EU referendum. Labour's increased vote share in 2017 was driven by a surge in support among voters with higher levels of qualifications offsetting this decline. Labour's decline in 2019 was driven by a slump among school leavers; graduate support held up. Labour's recovery since 2020 has been broad based, leaving large education divides intact.
- The current education divide is closely related to Brexit. Education is one of the strongest predictors of Brexit preferences: school leavers backed Leave by a 2:1 margin, graduates backed Remain by a similar margin. The strong link between Brexit stances and vote choice has been a major channel mobilising education divides into politics in the last two general elections.

Education, identities and values

- Education strongly predicts social identities, as well as being a source of social identity in itself. University graduates see their education and their jobs as more important to their identities, are more likely to identify as middle class, less likely to identify as English or British, and more likely to identify as European. School leavers are more likely to identify as working class, hold stronger local and national identities, and hold narrow views of identity, including a strong rejection of European identity.
- Education is the strongest predictor of voters' social values, with university graduates expressing much more liberal values while school leavers tend to hold authoritarian views. However, education has little impact on voters' economic values, which are driven more by social class and economic circumstances.
- The rise of education divides reflects the political mobilisation of social identities and social values, both directly by political parties and indirectly through the strong links between social identities, social values and Brexit preferences – with the latter in turn driving vote choices.

Education divides in the next election and beyond

- The issues currently at the top of the agenda – the economy and the cost of living – are issues where education divides voters little, and economic divisions pull voters in a different dimension. However, there are still several big issues on the agenda which divide voters deeply by education, including immigration and the environment.
- Graduates and school leavers are spread across the country in distinctive ways, and the local balance of educational group is changing rapidly in many seats. School leavers are declining rapidly as a share of the electorate everywhere, with particularly steep declines in many competitive 'red wall' seats. Graduate shares are growing fastest in seats in and around London, and a growing swathe of 'blue wall' seats in the London commuter belt have graduate majorities.
- Changing demographics pose deep electoral dilemmas for the Conservatives. The governing party cannot afford to lose more than 40 seats if it wishes to return for a fifth term in office, but this will require holding onto many seats at opposite poles of the education divide, consolidating gains in the 'red wall' areas where school leavers are declining but still dominant while stemming losses in 'blue wall' seats where graduates who now shun the party are rapidly growing. Yet any strategy which appeals to one of these groups is likely to alienate the other.
- The sharp rise of graduate voter shares in the London commuter belt, and the Conservatives' alienation of graduates, has opened up an opportunity for the Liberal Democrats to build a geographically and demographically coherent heartland in this region. Many of these seats are Conservative-Liberal Democrat contests where Labour are locally moribund, and where the Liberal Democrats have posted major gains since 2015.

- Labour also face an education dilemma as they seek to take office for the first time since 2010. The opposition needs over 120 seat gains to win a majority, requiring a large rebound in school leaver dominated seats lost to the Conservatives since 2015, and a major advance in the graduate heavy seats where Labour support has been growing. Winning in both sets of seats requires a campaign which bridges the education divide.
- The electoral landscape is still changing. The school leaver heavy seats which delivered the Conservative majority of 2019 are disappearing – the vast majority will be gone within a decade. Graduate dominated seats, where the Tories have struggled since Brexit, are becoming far more common.
- Before 2011, neither party could afford to alienate school leavers if it aspired to government – this was the dominant educational 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.

CHAPTER ONE – DIVIDED BY EDUCATION?

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 were swayed by the Vote Leave promise to “Take Back Control”, supported Theresa May’s campaign for “Strong and Stable Government” and then backed Boris Johnson to “Get Brexit Done” by overwhelming margins. Those who had stayed in formal education longest, university graduates, rejected each of these causes: backing Remain by a heavy margin in 2016 and then swinging away from the Brexit-embracing Conservatives in 2017 and 2019.

All of this is new. Before 2016, educational background told you relatively little about someone’s politics. Now it is one of the best questions to ask. Understanding why requires looking beyond the ballot box to the underlying identities and values which motivate voters and shape their preferences. This report examines the roots of the rising education divide, looking at how and why voters with different experiences of formal education have come to see themselves as distinct groups with different priorities, and considering the implications of this new divide for the next election and beyond.

Researchers studying voter behaviour use a three-part formula to identify when a social divide has become a “cleavage” which organises and structures electoral choice. First, the division must involve a conflict between two (or more) large groups. If groups don’t disagree, there is no contest. And unless both groups are large, the contest doesn’t matter: contests between two small groups are inconsequential, contests between a large group and a small one are (usually) one-sided. Second, the conflict must be between groups who are conscious of themselves as groups, with members holding distinct identities, values and interests. A sense of who “we” are, what “we” want, and why we oppose “them” is needed to organise voters into opposing blocs. Finally, a social division needs to be mobilised by political parties, who articulate the different values, loyalties and priorities of the opposed groups and translate them into competing messages and policies.

Education has been politically unimportant in the past because it failed to meet at least one of these criteria. While graduates have long held distinctive social values¹ (in the past university was the province of a fortunate few), so any electoral contest pitting graduates against school leavers would be a rout. And as recently as a decade ago, those with different educational experiences had little sense of themselves as distinct groups with opposed interests. The education divide, and the identity and value divides associated with it, were also not a typical focus of political mobilisation or competition between political parties.

All of this has now changed. Decades of expanding access to post-16 and higher education have driven a demographic revolution. Just two decades ago, school leavers, with the lowest level of formal education², outnumbered university graduates three to one. The graduate share of the electorate has doubled since 2001, and continues to grow, while the school leaver share is in steady decline. Graduates and school leavers are now roughly matched in electoral power – and in the coming decade graduates will become the largest educational group in the electorate for the first time ever. This demographic change has become politically relevant because a growing share of voters now see education as a source of social and political identity. While this was true even before 2016, the EU referendum campaign of that year accelerated the process, polarising voters by education, and generating “Leave” and “Remain” as powerful, widely shared political identities, identities which are rooted in the education divide. The issue agenda has also accelerated the rise of education divides – issues which divide voters by education such as immigration, the environment and Brexit have become much more prominent. The parties have become more divided on these issues, articulating distinct perspectives which further mobilise education divides into political choice. The education divide has thus become a central feature of our electoral landscape in the last decade, and navigating it poses challenges for all the parties in the next general election and beyond.

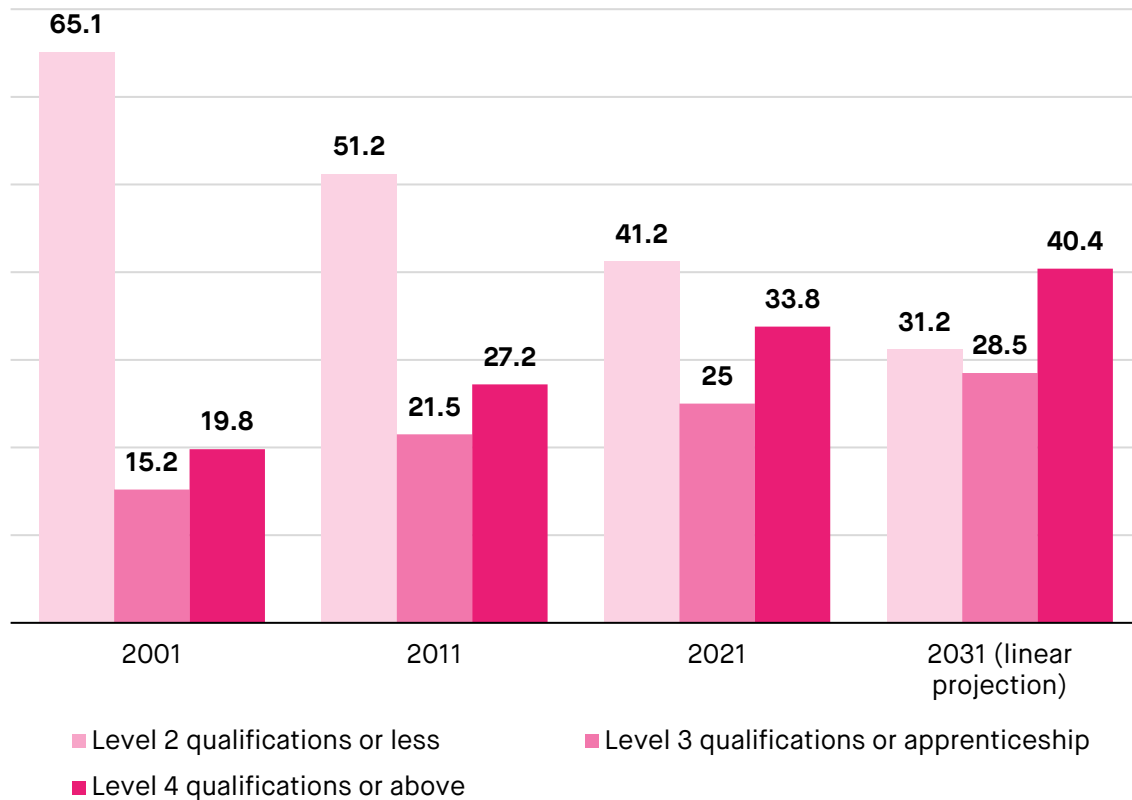
CHAPTER TWO – A SHIFTING BALANCE: DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND THE RISE OF EDUCATION DIVIDES

The British model of education was elitist until quite recently. As recently as the 1980s, a majority of the British electorate had left education at the earliest opportunity, while fewer than 1 in 10 attended university.³ While the university educated were hugely over-represented in the political elite, graduates were too small a group to impact election outcomes, so parties had no incentive to focus on issues which divided voters by education. Education divides therefore rarely disturbed a settled pattern of competition focused on economic arguments between richer and poorer classes over redistribution, public services and the role of the state.⁴

Decades of rapid educational expansion have changed this picture.⁵ The Robbins report of 1963, which called for a dramatic expansion of higher education to meet the needs of a modern economy, began the process. It accelerated with the passage of the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 and gained further impetus under the New Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, which invested heavily in higher education, with the goal of raising HE attendance rates to 50%, while also mandating that all young people should remain in education or training until 18.⁶ Expansion of education participation has continued under the Conservative governments of the past 13 years, with a further influx of funds to universities and incentives to expand following the 2012 rise in domestic student fees to £9,000 a year, while the share of 16-17 year olds participating in education and training has risen to well over 90%.⁷

In this report we focus on education divides in England and Wales. While education divides are likely to play an important role in Scotland and Northern Ireland, both the education system and the party system of Scotland are now very different to England and Wales. The party system of Northern Ireland is also very distinctive, and most academic political studies do not gather separate data on Northern Ireland, making changing patterns of voting harder to analyse. Both constituent nations also have their own statistical agencies, complicating access to data such as census data which we need to assess changing education divides.

Figure 2.1: Shares of England and Wales residents by qualification level (2001-2021 censuses)⁸



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.

Educational expansion is transforming the electorate. Figure 2.1 shows the mix of education levels reported in the last three censuses for adult residents of England and Wales, plus a projection of what compositions might look like in 2031.⁹ Two-thirds of the adult population were school leavers as recently as 2001; this had declined to just over 40% in 2021, and could fall below a third of residents by 2031. The share of voters with post-16 qualifications such as A-levels and apprenticeships has risen from 15% in 2001 to 25% in 2021, while the share of graduates has risen even more, from one in five voters in 2001 to one in three in 2021. If current trends continue, university graduates will become the largest group in the electorate before the next census is due in 2031. The impact of educational expansion in any given year is slow and easy to overlook. But the cumulative effect is dramatic: in the first three decades of this century, Britain will shift from an electorate where school leavers outnumbered graduates three to one to an electorate where graduates are the largest voter group for the first time.¹⁰

The education divide is also a generational divide

While there is growing policymaker interest in mature study and ‘lifelong learning’¹¹, most British voters’ contact with the formal education system occurs during childhood and early adulthood. Each generation’s mix of qualifications therefore reflects the opportunities available when its members were young, and the opportunities opened up by educational expansion are exercised by younger generations who come of age after reforms are implemented. Changes in educational experiences therefore change rapidly from one cohort to the next, while shifts in the overall mix of voters are slower, as they are driven generational replacement. The education divide is also a generational divide, as generations who passed through very different education systems co-exist within the electorate.

Figure 2.2 ((a) and (b)) illustrates this generational education divide using data from the last two censuses. There is a strong generational gradient in both years: older groups have fewer graduates and more school leavers. But the balance in each age group is shifting as educational expansion works its way through the population. In 2011, school leavers outnumbered graduates heavily in every age category except the youngest (aged 25-34), where the groups were about the same size. By the time of the 2021 census, graduates had become substantially the larger group in all the age categories under 50, while school leavers remained larger among 50-64 year olds, and formed a majority of pensioners. Education divides in politics are therefore likely to overlap with, and manifest as, generational divides. The current demographic landscape means a politically mobilised education divide is certain to pit mostly younger graduates against mostly older school leavers, even if age or generation had no further impact on the choices voters make.

Figure 2.2: (a) Shares (%) of each age group with level 2 qualifications or less, 2011-21

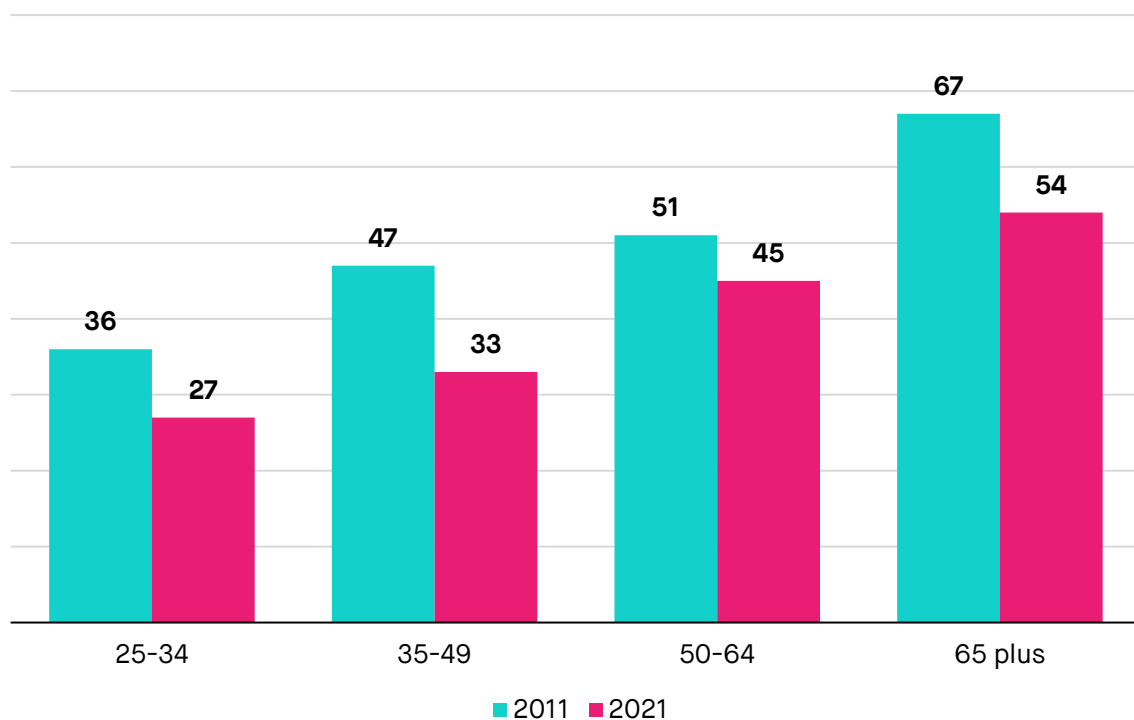
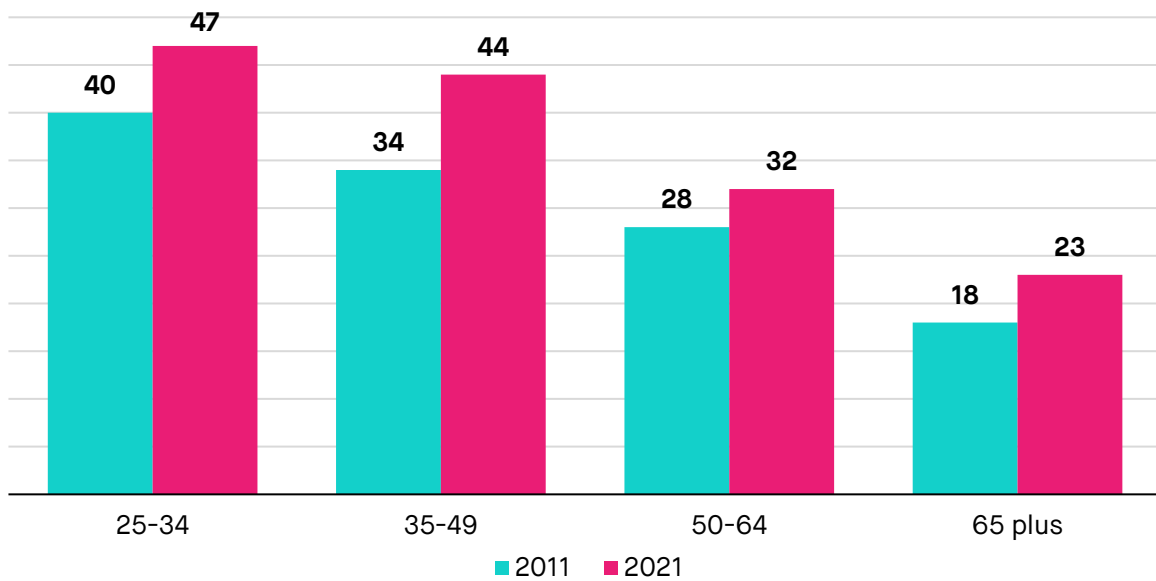
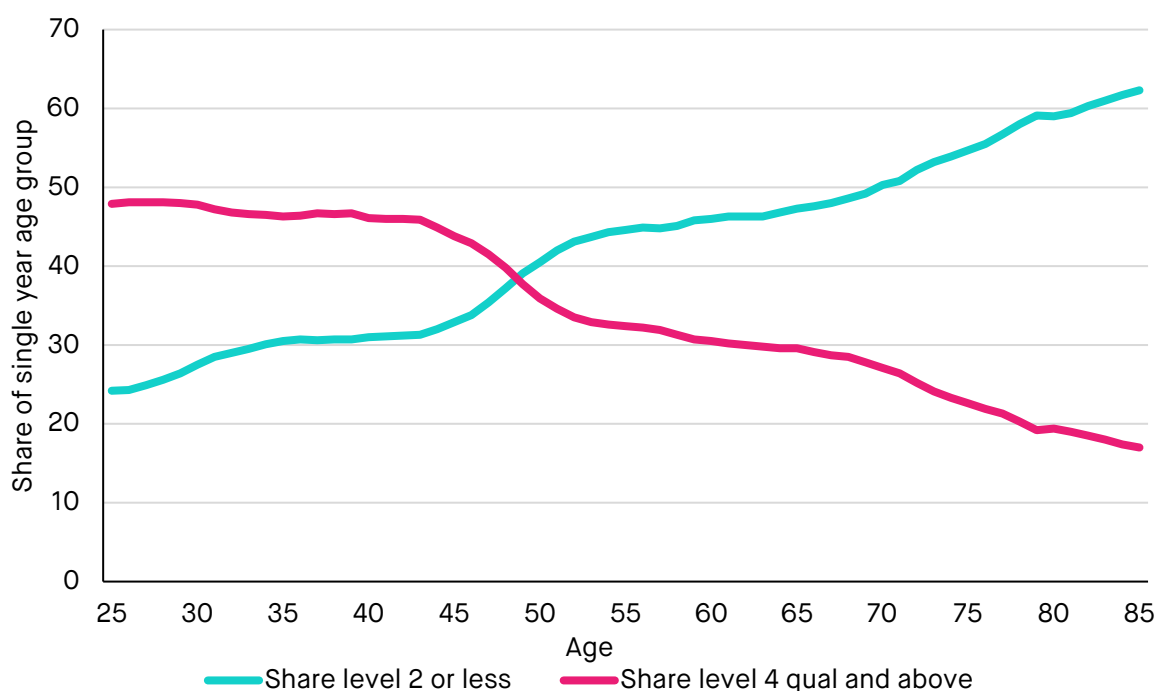


Figure 2.2: (b) Shares (%) of each age group with level 4 qualifications or more, 2011-21



We can use finer grained age breakdowns in the 2021 census to zoom in further: Figure 2.3 shows the share of school leavers and graduates in each single year age group. Three distinct patterns are evident. Firstly, graduates are the dominant group among the under 45s, making up over 40% of every year group from 25 to 45. Secondly, there is a sharp “cross-over” around age 45 to 55, with graduate shares declining and school leaver shares rising. This is in part the legacy of the 1992 conversion of polytechnics into universities, which greatly expanded access to degree equivalent qualifications for those in this age band. But this is clearly not the only factor – the sharp decline in school leavers suggests a large increase in the share acquiring post-16 qualifications too. Thirdly, school leavers are the dominant group among all of the over 55s and get steadily more dominant the older we go. The oldest voters came of age when the education system offered very restricted access to all post-16 education options, something which sets them apart from all younger generations.

Figure 2.3: Shares of school leavers and graduates in each single year age group, ages 25-85 (2021 Census)



Notes: Figure shows share of residents in one year age bands with level 2 qualifications or less and share with level 4 qualifications or more

Education overlaps with other demographic factors beyond age and, in a society where education is often the passport to opportunity, qualification levels are also strongly linked to voters' economic circumstances. Table 2.1 illustrates some of these linkages. Ethnic minorities are more likely to be graduates than white voters, reflecting both the youthfulness and higher university participation rates of Britain's ethnic minority communities¹², and the impact of immigration, as BAME migrants are typically more likely to have degrees.¹³ There is no overall gender gap in education levels, but there are gender gaps within cohorts – higher female university participation in the youngest cohorts is currently balanced by higher male participation in older cohorts.¹⁴

There is a clear link between education and income – graduates dominate the higher income quartiles, while a majority of people in the lowest income quartile are school leavers. Graduates are over-represented among both homeowners and private renters, while a majority of those in council housing are school leavers. Graduates dominate the professional/managerial classes (AB), while school leavers are over-represented in all working class categories (C2DE), and form a majority of the unskilled working class (D) and the casual/non-working class (E).¹⁵ There is also a link between education levels and disability: those reporting limiting disabilities tend to have lower levels of formal education than those without. This is not due to age differences – within every generation, those reporting life limiting disabilities tend to have lower levels of formal education.

Table 2.1: Educational composition of various demographic and economic groups

	Share school-leavers	Share A-level or equiv	Share graduates
<i>Cohort</i>			
1940s or earlier	55	15	30
1950s	45	19	36
1960s	40	22	39
1970s	35	20	46
1980s	26	21	53
1990s or later	18	38	44*
<i>Ethnicity</i>			
White	36	23	41
Ethnic minority	18	23	58
<i>Sex</i>			
Male	34	24	42
Female	34	23	43
<i>Income</i>			
Lowest quartile (Q1)	52	23	25
Q2	39	25	36
Q3	25	22	53
Highest quartile (Q4)	16	18	66
<i>Housing status</i>			
Own outright	40	20	40
Own with mortgage	25	20	55
Rent privately	28	25	47
Rent from council	58	22	20
<i>Social class</i>			
Professional/manager (AB)	18	19	63
Clerical, administrative, junior professional (C1)	27	26	47
Skilled manual (C2)	44	28	28
Unskilled manual (D)	52	22	26
Casual/lowest grade; non-working (E)	57	19	24
<i>Disability status</i>			
None	29	24	46
A little limitation	42	22	36
A lot of limitation	51	20	29

Source: British Election Study internet panel, wave 24 (December 2022) *This youngest cohort includes respondents who have not completed higher education, which depresses the graduate share.

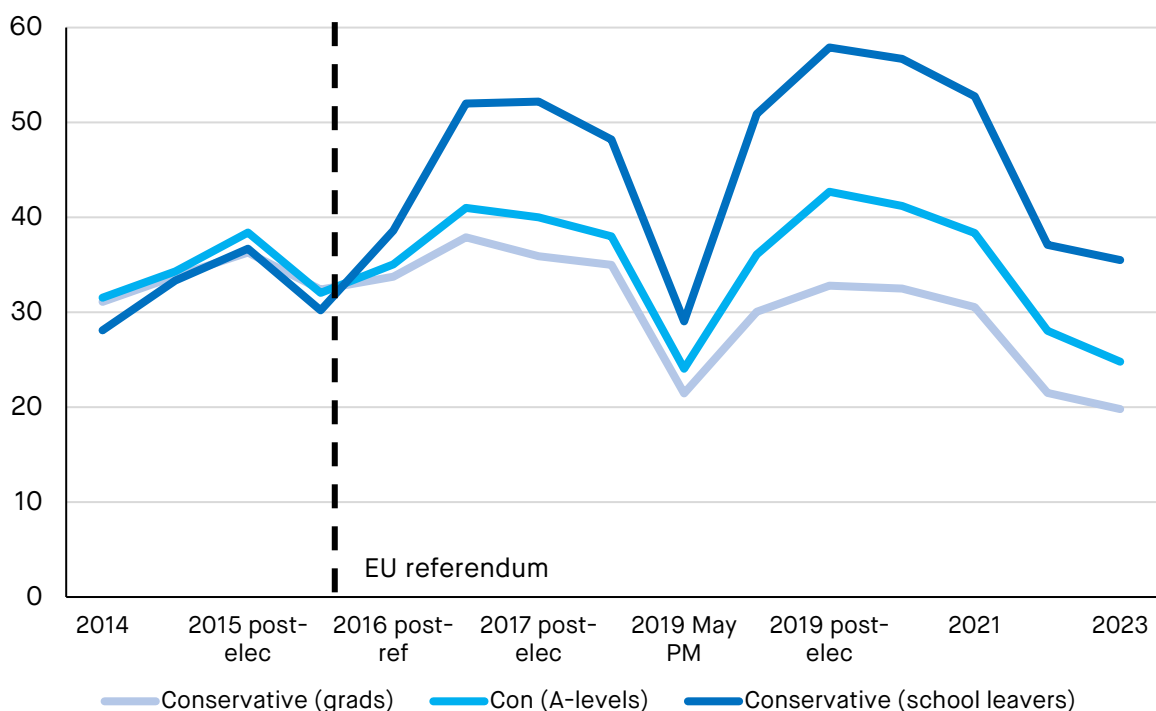
The wide range of overlaps between educational experiences and both demographic background and economic outcomes means we must take care when examining political education divides. Voters with different education levels may think and behave differently not because of education itself but instead due to differences in background or circumstances that happen to overlap with their education. For this reason, in all our subsequent analysis we do, we employ a statistical technique called regression modelling to separate the impact of education from other related factors, and to compare the strength of education effects with other demographic and economic influences.

CHAPTER THREE – EDUCATION AND POLITICAL CHOICE

Our first task is to map the emergence of the education divide. We use the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP), a major academic project which has surveyed very large samples of the public since 2014.¹⁶ Figures 3.1 and 3.2 below show the education divide in reported support for the Conservatives and Labour over this period.¹⁷ Graduates and school leavers backed the incumbent Conservative party 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 both won majority support from school leavers in their general election victories. Support among school leavers has declined more recently as part of a general slump in Conservative support. However, even in May 2023 Tory support among school leavers remained higher than it was at the 2015 general election.

University graduates, by contrast, have been falling out of love with the Conservative Party since 2016. Graduate Tory support was flat in 2017 and 2019 even as the Conservatives advanced overall, and in 2023 graduate support for them fell to a historic low. Only around one in five graduates supported the Conservatives in the most recent BESIP waves, a level of graduate support which is more than 10 points below that achieved under David Cameron. If this is repeated at the coming general election, it will be the Conservatives' worst electoral performance with graduates in at least 45 years. Voters with A-level qualifications or equivalent fall in between the other two education groups but track closer to university graduates than school leavers. Conservative support in 2023 was substantially below its pre-Brexit levels among this group too.

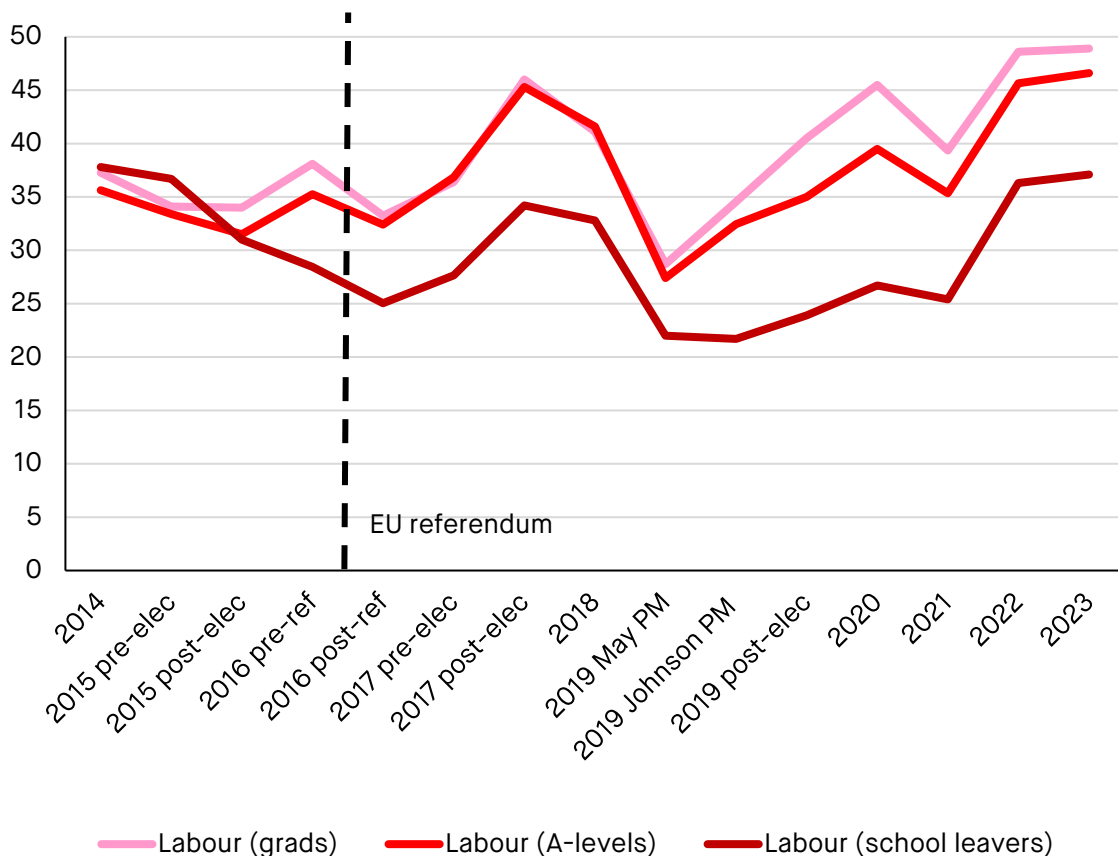
Figure 3.1: The education divide in Conservative support, 2014-2023



Source: British Election Study internet panel 2014-2023

The Labour story is almost – but not quite – a mirror image of the Tory trend. There was no education divide in Labour support in 2014 and 2015, but graduates and school leavers began to diverge a little earlier, following Jeremy Corbyn’s election as Labour leader. This divergence then accelerated in the wake of the EU referendum, and a large education divide has been evident ever since. Jeremy Corbyn secured more than 40% support from graduates and from voters with A-level or equivalent qualifications in the 2017 election, putting Labour ahead of the Conservatives in both groups. The Conservatives’ narrow 2017 victory was driven by Labour’s slump (and the Tory surge) among school leavers, which more than offset stronger Labour performances among other education groups. The Labour education divide was even deeper in 2019 – support among graduates remained over 40%, but the party now fell back among A-level voters and slumped to a new low among school leavers. Labour has made a broad recovery since 2020, with large rises in support in every educational group. However, this rising tide has left the new education divide intact. Labour won an average of 49% from graduates in 2023, and 47% from voters with A-levels – both figures are ten percentage points higher than pre-Brexit averages. But Labour support among school leavers sits in the mid-30s – while this is a big rebound from the 2019 low ebb, it is also still below the support Labour received as recently as 2015.

Figure 3.2: The education divide in Labour support 2014-2023



Source: British Election Study internet panel (BESIP) 2014-2022.

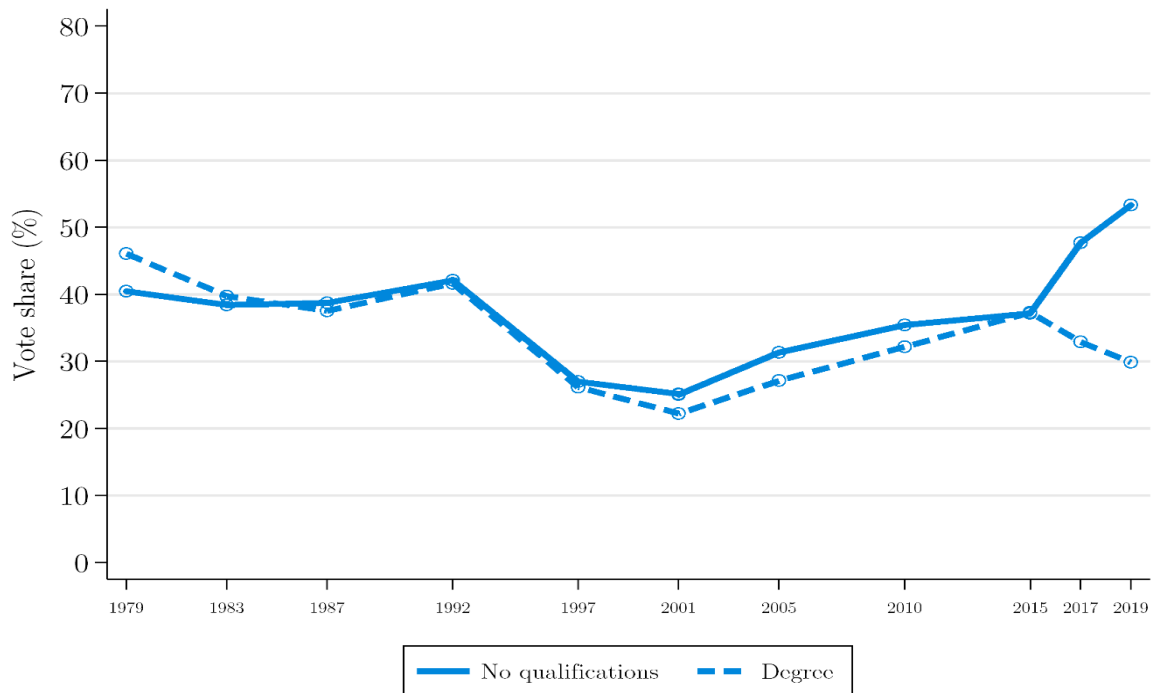
The current education divides are a reversal of earlier patterns, as Figures 3.3 and 3.4 illustrate. In every election from 1979 to 2010, school leavers backed the Labour party at higher rates than graduates, while the Conservatives generally did a little better with graduates than school leavers. Education in this period behaved like most other economic divides – the better-off group (graduates) leaned Conservative, the disadvantaged group (school leavers) leaned Labour. The education divide today runs in the opposite direction. 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 on these and other economic indicators – have backed the Conservatives, traditionally party of privilege. This abrupt reversal has not happened on other economic dimensions of vote choice – income, economic security, housing tenure and so on all divide voters in similar ways now as in earlier periods.¹⁸ The disruptive potential of the education divide lies both in its novelty and its tendency to pull voters in a different direction to economic forces, opening up new opportunities and risks for both parties.

Figure 3.3: The education divide in Labour support 1979–2019



Source: Analysis of 1979–2019 British Election Study face to face surveys in Ford et al (2021) “The British General Election of 2019”.

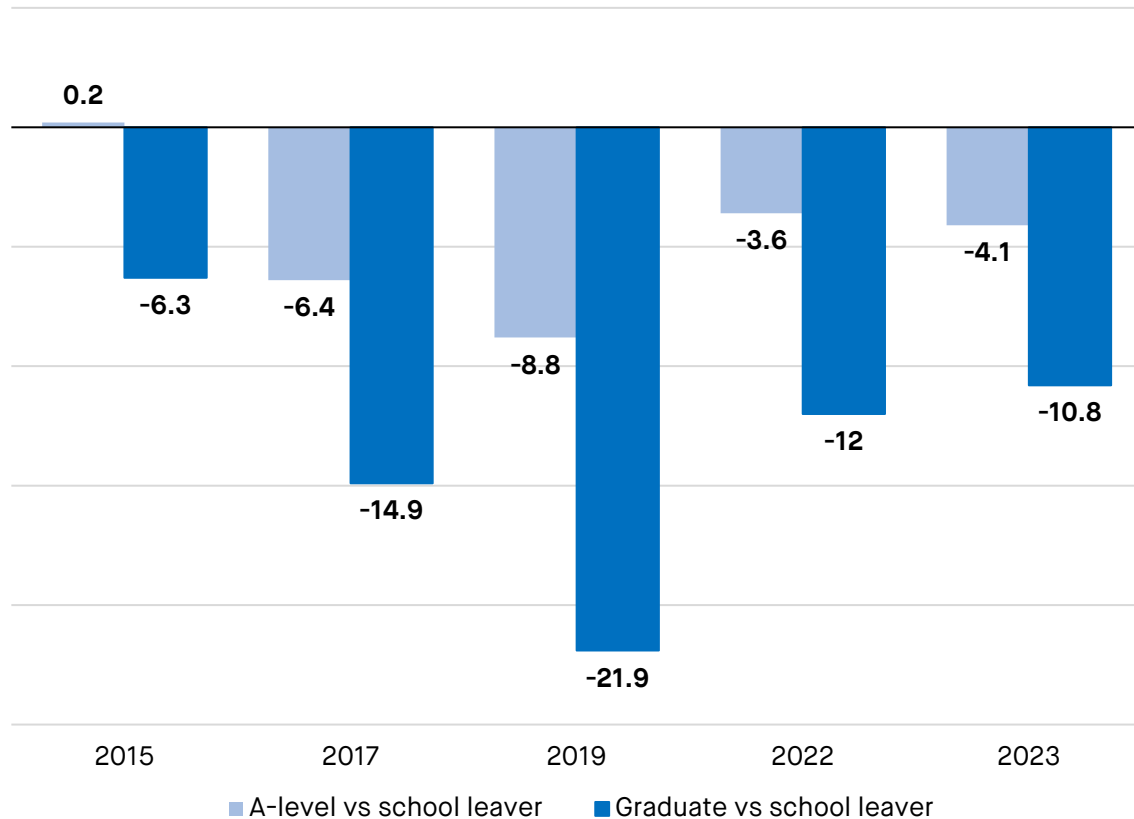
Figure 3.4: The education divide in Conservative support 1979-2019



Source: Analysis of 1979-2019 British Election Study face to face surveys in Ford et al (2021).

Education is associated with many other differences in demographic background and economic outcomes, so education could be acting as a proxy for something else. With statistical modelling, we can test for competing influences, separate out the education divide from other differences between educational groups, and compare the strength of education divides with other demographic and economic divisions. Education continues to divide voters deeply even after account for other demographic and economic factors. Figure 3.5 shows the effects of education on Conservative support in the BESIP after controls for other factors are added. Predicted Conservative support was nearly 15 points lower among graduates than among school leavers in the 2017 election, and over 6 points lower among those with A-level qualifications, even after accounting for the demographic and economic differences between these groups. These education gaps got even bigger in 2019 – support among graduates was nearly 22 points below school leavers; support among the A-level group nearly 9 points lower. Education divides have shrunk somewhat in the 2022 and 2023 BES waves, but are still substantial – predicted graduate support for the Conservatives in the final May 2023 wave is still 11 points below that of school leavers, with a 4 point A-level/school leaver gap too.

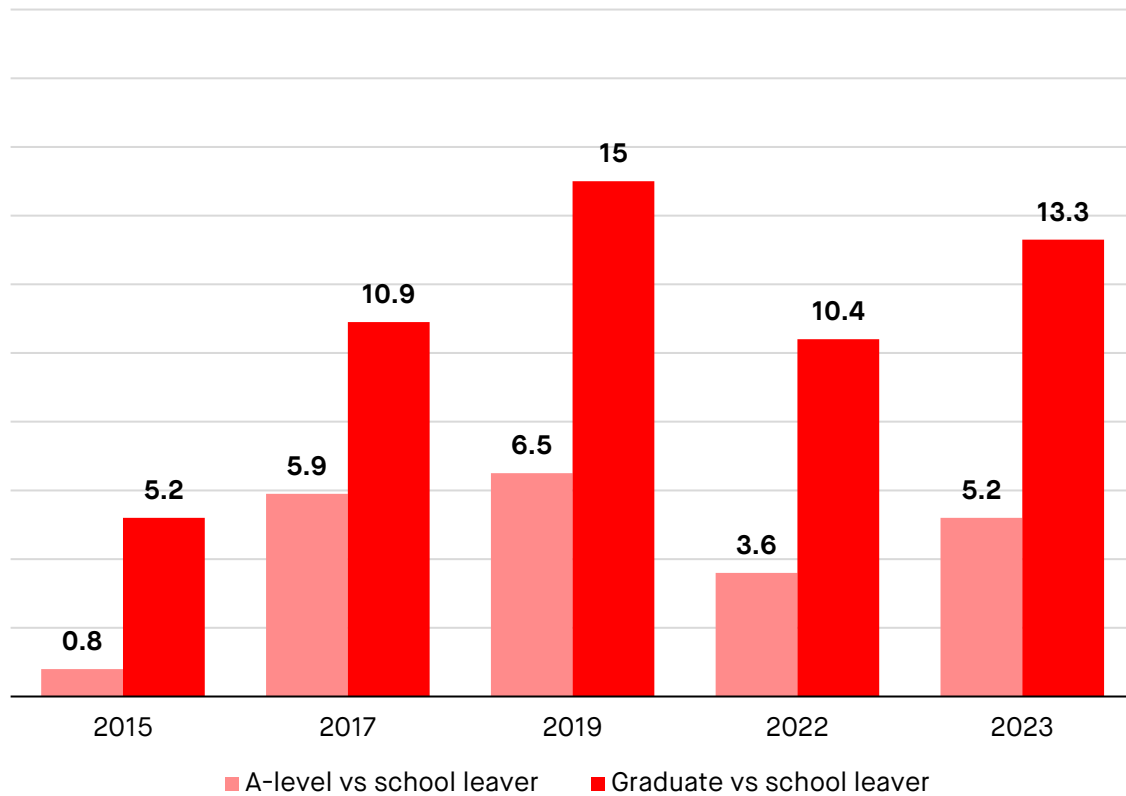
Figure 3.5: Effects of having A-levels (light bars) or degrees (dark bars) on support for Conservatives in England 2015-2023



Source: Logistic regression modelling of voting for Conservatives vs voting for everybody else in England only. Effects show mean change in Conservative support level with all other variables at their average values. Other variables statistically controlled for: generation (range of birth years); gender; ethnicity; social class; income; housing tenure; disability status.

The story for Labour is similar – the education divide remains substantial after controlling other demographic and economic variables. Predicted Labour support among graduates was already eight points higher than among school leavers in our statistical model of 2015. This gap grew to 11 points in 2017 and 15 points in 2019. The divide has narrowed a little since 2020, as Labour has recovered across the board, but support among graduates was still 13 points higher in the final May 2023 wave. School leavers and voters with A-levels behaved identically in 2015, but since then voters with A-level qualifications have leant 4-6 points more towards Labour.

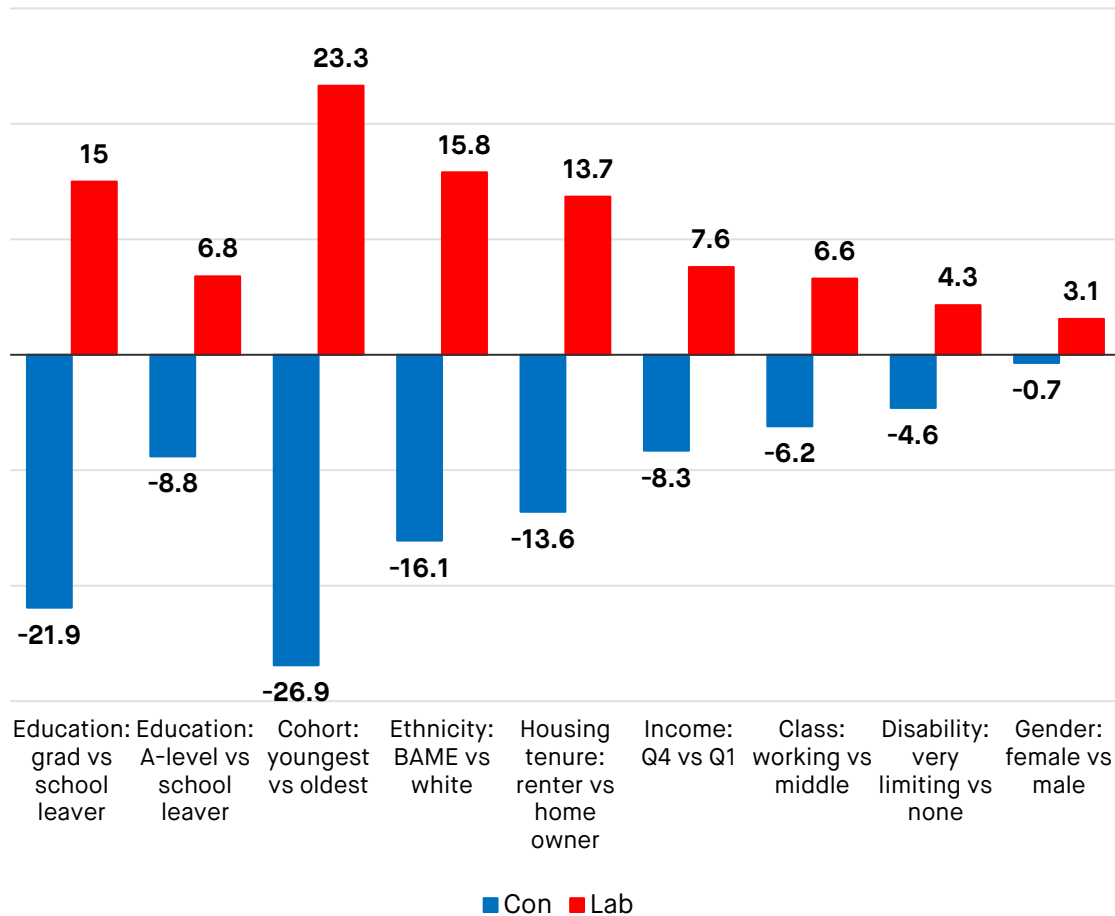
Figure 3.6: Effects of having A-levels (light bars) or degrees (dark bars) on support for Labour in England 2015-2023



Source: Logistic regression modelling of voting for Labour vs voting for everybody else in England only. Effects show mean change in Conservative support level with all other variables at their average values (average marginal effects). Other variables statistically controlled for: generation (range of birth years); gender; ethnicity; social class; income; housing tenure; disability status

In Figure 3.7, we put the education divide into broader context, comparing the strength of education effects in models of 2019 election choices with the effects of other demographic and economic factors. The graph plots the predicted change in support for each party as we move between two ends of each demographic divide, with the different groups detailed on the horizontal axis. The education divide is one of the largest divides in the model – only the age divide is larger.¹⁹ 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.

Figure 3.7: Education differences compared with other demographic and economic differences, 2019 post-election BES wave (England only)



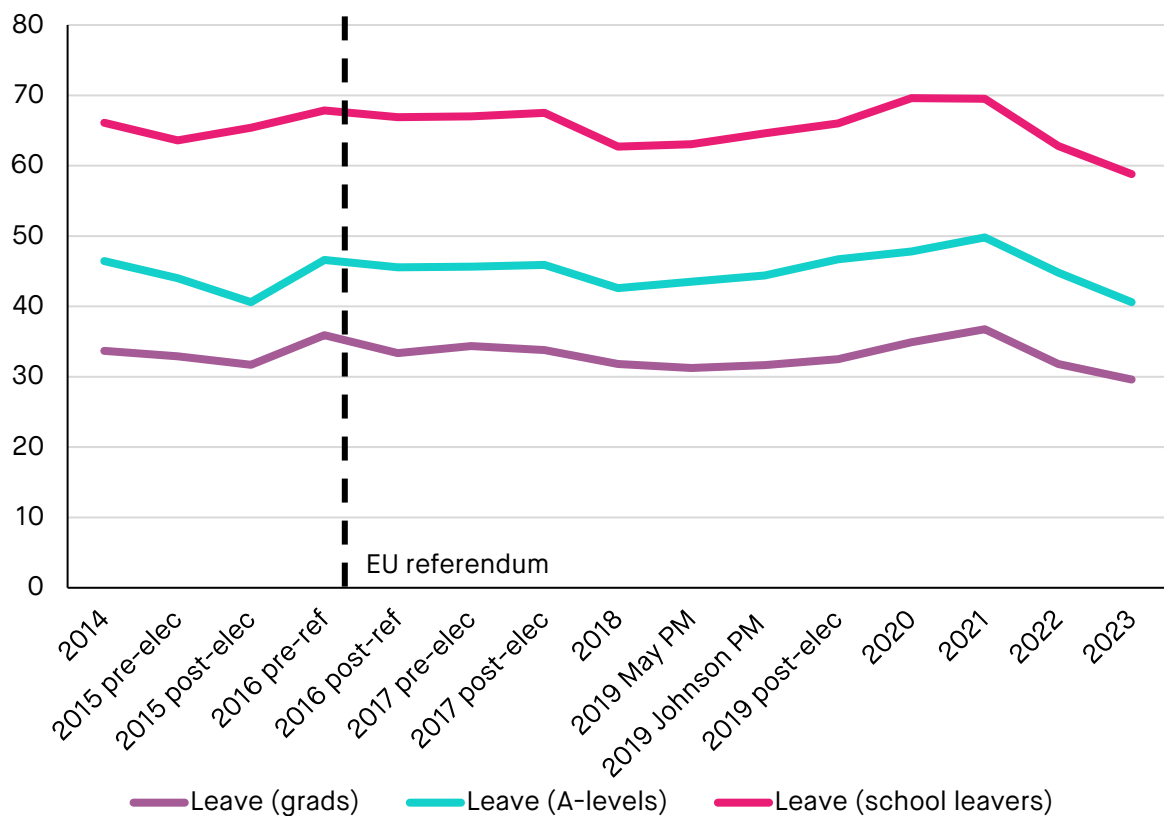
Source: Logistic regression analysis of Conservative and Labour voting in the 2019 election (BESIP wave 19). Results show change in probability of party support when shifting between the two named categories in each variable, with all other variables held constant at their mean values.

Something happened after 2015 to change the relationship between education and vote choice, opening up a deep political education divide. If only graduates had voted in 2017 or 2019, Labour would have comfortably won both elections. If only school leavers had voted, the Conservatives would have won two landslides. The timing of this education realignment suggests an obvious candidate – the EU referendum of 2016. Brexit was the dominant issue in British politics for much of this period, acting as a powerful new force pulling voters out of traditional allegiances. Is Brexit also the key to explaining the new education divide?

Education, Brexit and party choice

Education and Brexit preferences are certainly linked. Even before the referendum was held, the EU polarised voters strongly by education and, as Figure 3.8 illustrates, that polarisation has persisted throughout the past decade. School leavers consistently back Leave by a 2:1 margin, while graduates break for Remain in similar numbers. Voters with A-level qualifications are evenly divided, but lean slightly Remain. Education was one of the strongest predictors of choices in the 2016 referendum, and has remained one of the strongest predictors of Brexit preferences ever since.²⁰ The Brexit divide is an education divide.

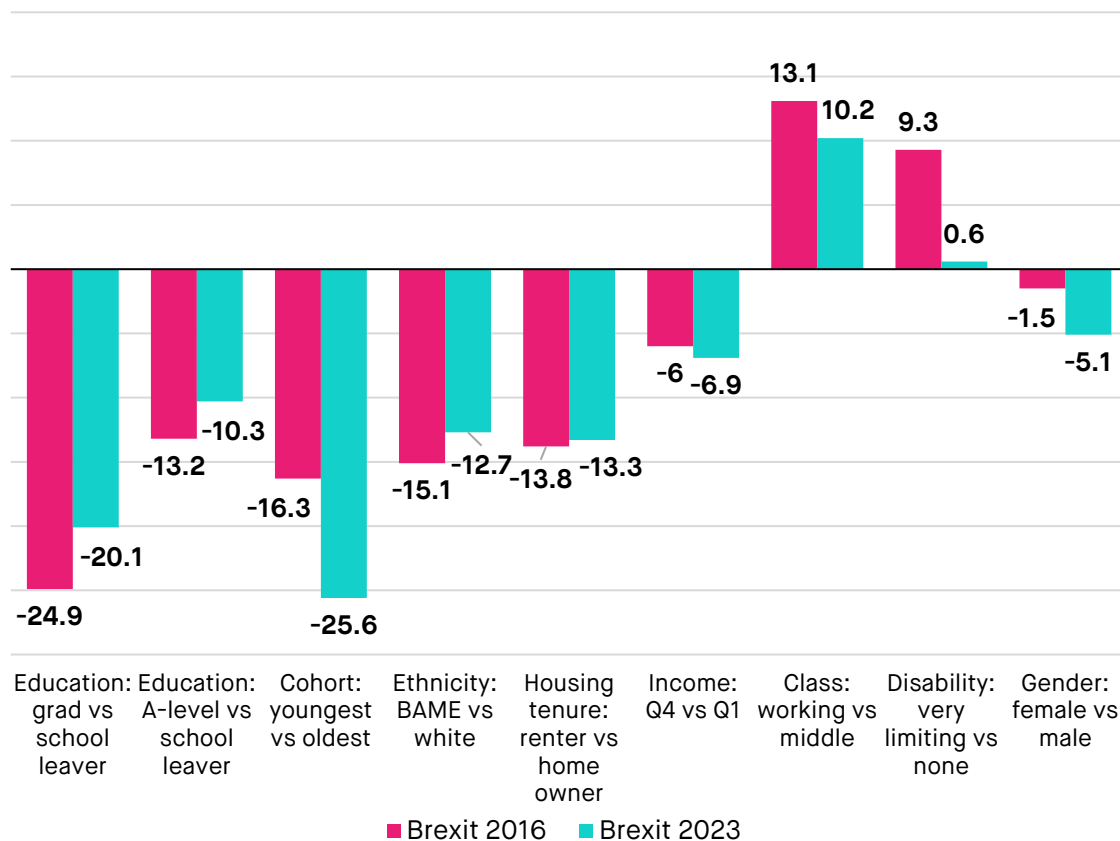
Figure 3.8: The education divide in Leave preferences 2014-2023



Source: British Election Study internet panel 2014-2023

Brexit has, however, proved to be more than just a one-off choice. Powerful new political identities were forged in the aftermath of the EU referendum, with most British voters identifying as “Leavers” or “Remainers”. Despite some decline since 2020, particularly on the Leave side, more voters continue to identify with one of the Brexit tribes than identify with any political party.²¹ Large majorities of both graduates and school leavers consistently express an allegiance with either ‘Leave’ or ‘Remain’, and there is a deep education divide in Brexit identities: most graduates see themselves as Remainers, most school leavers see themselves as Leavers, while voters with A-level qualifications divide more evenly. Researchers probing the strength of the bonds voters feel to their Brexit ‘tribes’ have found that these are remarkably powerful and deeply felt. In the early years after Brexit, for example, more than half of both graduates and school leavers reported saying ‘we’ instead of ‘they’ when talking about their Brexit identity, and to report a sense of connection to others who belonged to the same Brexit divide. The demographic predictors of Remain and Leave support have also remained remarkably stable, with education (along with age/generation) the strongest predictors in May 2023, as they were seven years earlier (see Figure 3.9).

Figure 3.9: Demographic predictors of Leave vote preferences in England, 2016 and 2023

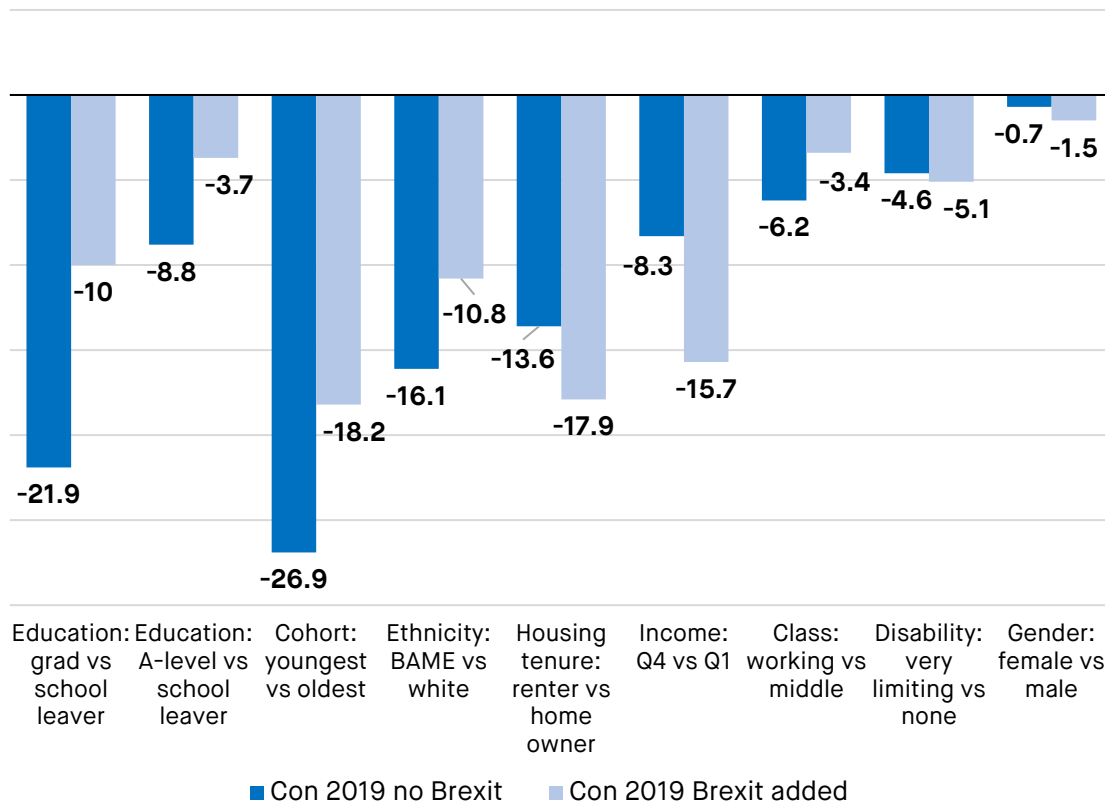


Source: BESIP wave 9 (post EU referendum) and wave 25 (May 2023). Data from wave 9 is reported EU referendum vote choice, data from wave 24 comes from a question asking how people would vote in a second referendum – “Leave” or “Rejoin”. Results show change in probability of Leave support when shifting between the two named categories in each variable, with all other variables held constant at their mean values.

The stability and endurance of Brexit divisions raises a puzzle. If patterns of Brexit allegiance are not changing, why has overall support for Brexit declined in recent years? One answer is demographic change – while patterns of voting within each group are stable, the relative sizes of these groups is changing.²² The education divide favoured the Leave campaign in 2016 because, at that point, school leavers substantially outnumbered university graduates. That advantage is now largely gone – the Leave aligned school leaver group has shrunk, while the Remain aligned graduate electorate has grown. Both trends will continue in coming years. If voters divided by education in exactly the same way as in 2016 in a second referendum held a decade later, demographic change alone would deliver a substantial Remain victory.²³

Brexit divides voters deeply by education. And Brexit is indeed a major factor driving the rise of education divides in general election vote choice. We can test this by looking at what happens to our earlier statistical models of vote preferences once we add in voters' Brexit allegiances. In Figure 3.10, we show how adding Brexit changes the predictors of Conservative voting in 2019.²⁴ Adding Brexit into our voting models dramatically reduces the impact of both education and age/cohort, suggesting both the education divide and the generation gap in recent voting were in large part channelled through differences in Brexit allegiances. Most of the other effects in the model also shrink, though the effect of income increases once Brexit is added – suggesting, in accordance with other evidence, that Brexit allegiances cut across traditional economic divides.²⁵ While adding Brexit reduces education effects, it does not eliminate them. Even with Brexit in our statistical model, the differences in Conservative and Labour support between graduates and school leavers in 2019 are still larger than the differences between working class and middle class voters, and not far behind the differences by income or ethnicity.

Figure 3.10: Demographic and economic predictors of 2019 Conservative support in England, with and without Brexit



Source: BESIP wave 19 (post 2019 general election). Results show predicted change in Conservative support when shifting between the two named categories in each variable, with all other variables held constant at their mean values.

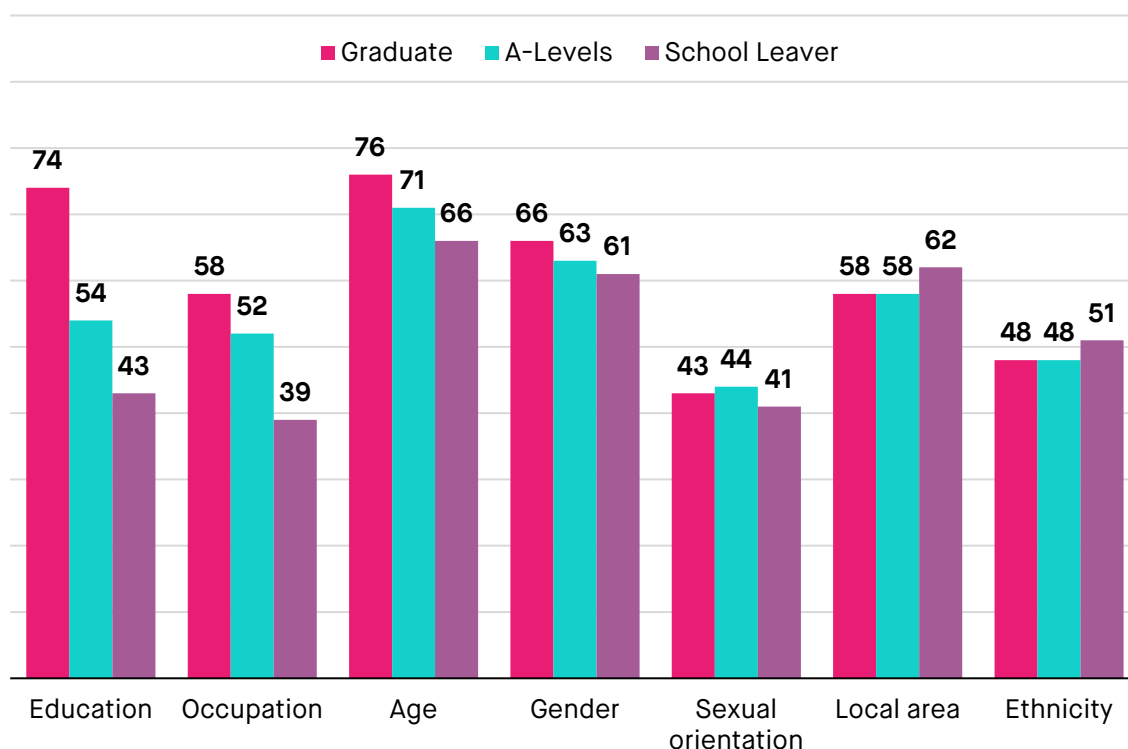
Brexit has clearly played a central role in the mobilisation of education divides. Education is consistently one of the strongest predictors of whether voters back Leave or Remain, as well as a strong predictor of public preferences in every other aspect of the long Brexit debate. That alignment between education and Brexit preferences has, in turn, acted as a major channel to mobilise education divides into party choices in the last two general elections. Educational background shape Brexit preferences, and Brexit preferences shape party choices. But this still leaves some big questions unanswered – what is it about education that makes it such a powerful predictor of Brexit preferences? And why is the current education divide so different to past socio-economic divisions? To answer both of these questions, we need to take step further back, and examine how education influences the social identities and social values which in turn shape both Brexit preferences and party choices.

CHAPTER FOUR – THE DEEP ROOTS OF THE EDUCATION DIVIDE: SOCIAL IDENTITIES AND SOCIAL VALUES

Education as a social identity

Identity is about an active sense of affiliation to a group and the sense that the group generates a shared connection with others.²⁶ Educational background can be one channel through which a past set of choices and experiences can inform group affiliations and loyalties. Recent research by the academic Elizabeth Simon has highlighted how education can act as a direct source of social identity for many British voters, with large numbers of both graduates and non-graduates expressing attachment to their educational group and antagonistic attitudes towards those belonging to other educational groups,²⁷ confirming a pattern also observed in other European countries.²⁸ University graduates also show a consistent preference for fellow graduates across multiple experiments where voters choose between political representatives.²⁹ All of these patterns – in-group bias, outgroup antagonism and candidate preference – show a degree of asymmetry, with stronger group identities evident among graduates than among non-graduates.

A 2018 question on the BES internet panel, asking people to rate the importance of different social characteristics to “your sense of who you are”, confirms that education is an important source of social identity, and that it is particularly important for graduates. Three-quarters of graduates reported their education level as either ‘important’ or ‘very important’ for who they are, while the figure for school leavers is just over 40%. Education was the second highest rated category for graduates, but among the lowest rated for school leavers. Graduates were also more likely to say their occupation was important to their sense of who they are – and as many work in jobs requiring degrees this is also a form of identity shaped by educational experience. Unfortunately, such questions were not asked frequently enough on the BESIP for us to employ them directly in our analysis of political choices, but graduates’ direct attachment to education as a social identity is likely to be another important source of political education effects.

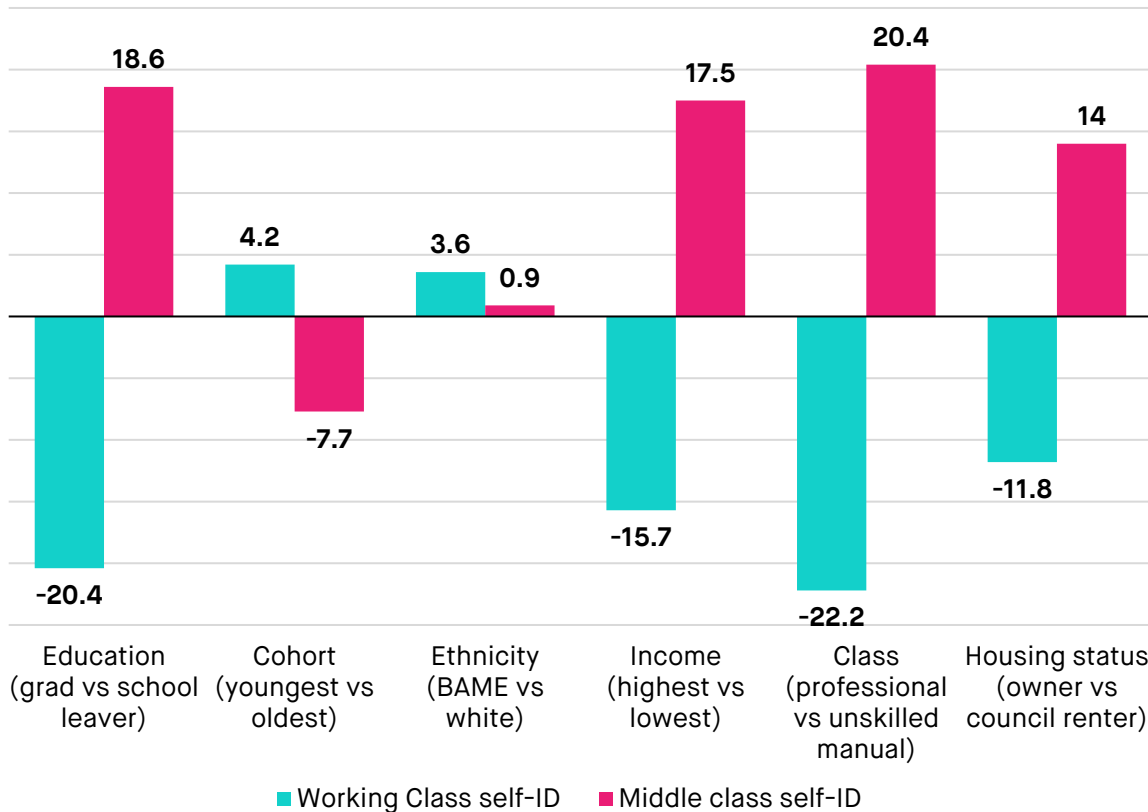
Figure 4.1: Importance of categories and group identities to graduates and school leavers

Source: BESIP wave 14 (2018); share saying each category is “important” or “very important” to their sense of who they are

Education shapes other social identities

Educational experiences can also shape other social identities which matter to people. This is indeed what we find: graduates and school leavers do express distinct patterns of loyalty to other social groups such as social classes and forms of national identity, though of course it is only one amongst many possible drivers of identity attachments. We can use regression analysis to test whether the education-identity link holds up when controlling for other factors. Education is a surprisingly strong predictor of self-assessed class identities, as Figure 4.2 illustrates. As we might expect, both income and occupation weigh heavily – professionals and those with high incomes identify as middle class, unskilled manual workers and those on the lowest incomes as working class. Yet, remarkably, past educational experience has just as large an impact on class allegiances as the jobs people do and the incomes they earn. Graduates are more likely than school leavers to identify as middle class, and to reject a working class identity, while school leavers hold the opposite pattern of allegiances. Being middle class is now as much about having a degree as it is about having a high income or a professional job.

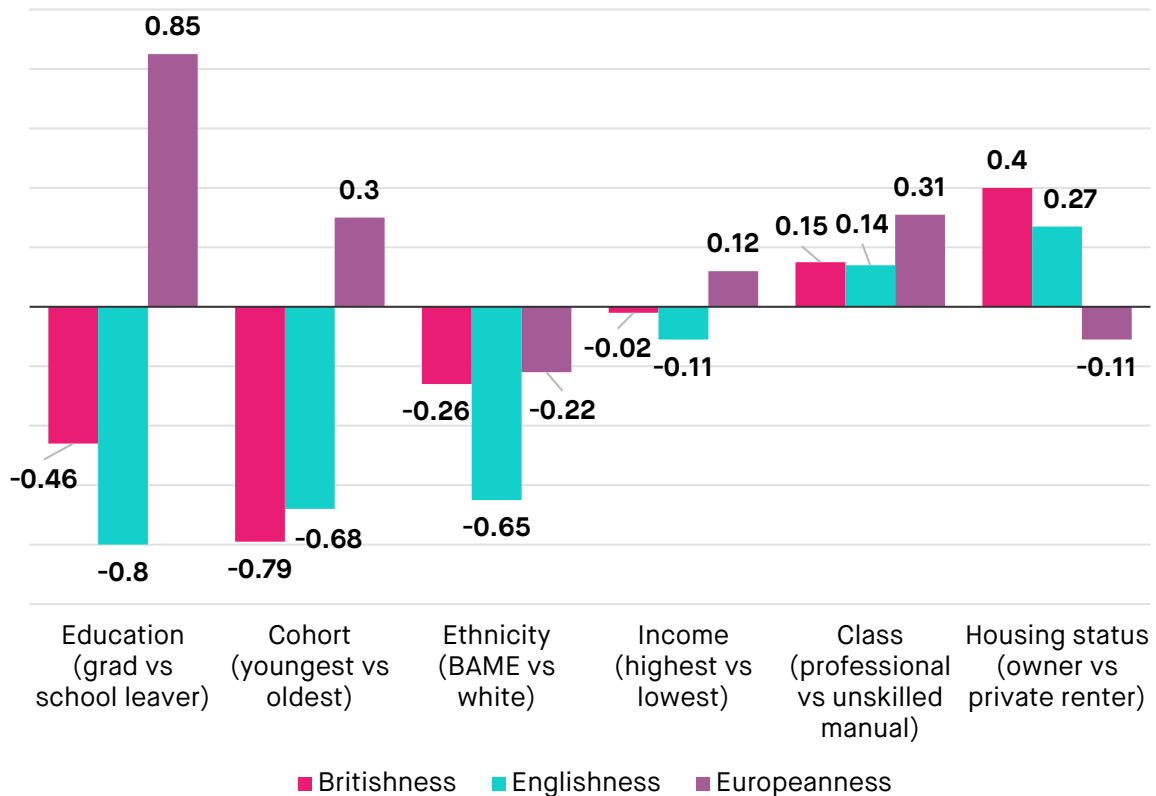
Figure 4.2: Impact of education and other predictors on likelihood of identifying as working class (teal) or middle class (pink)



Source: BESIP wave 25 (May 2023). Results show change in probability of self-identifying as working class or middle when shifting between the two named categories in each variable, with all other variables held constant at their mean values. Model also controls for gender and disability status.

As Figure 4.3 illustrates, education is even more important as a predictor of national identity attachments. University graduates express much lower levels of British and English national identity, and much higher levels of European identity. The impact of education on both forms of national identity is as large as the effects of age and of ethnicity, and much larger than any economic factor. The education divide in European identity is larger than any other demographic or economic predictor – university graduates are far more attached to Europe as a social identity than any other group.

Figure 4.3: Impact of education and other predictors on expressed levels of British (pink), English (teal) and European identity (purple)



Source: BESIP wave 25 (May 2023). Results show change in level of expressed attachment on a seven point scale when shifting between the two named categories in each variable. Model also controls for the effects of gender and disability status.

Social identity, then, provides several channels through which education is mobilised into politics. Education itself is a source of social identity. And graduates and school leavers also express different national and social class allegiances. These education divides in social identity are as large as, or larger than, differences between generations, between classes, between rich and poor or between white and ethnic minority citizens. Arguments which mobilise such social identities will tend to produce political education divides, as voters with different educational experiences align with their different educational, national or class “tribes” and vote accordingly.

Education shapes social values – but not economic values

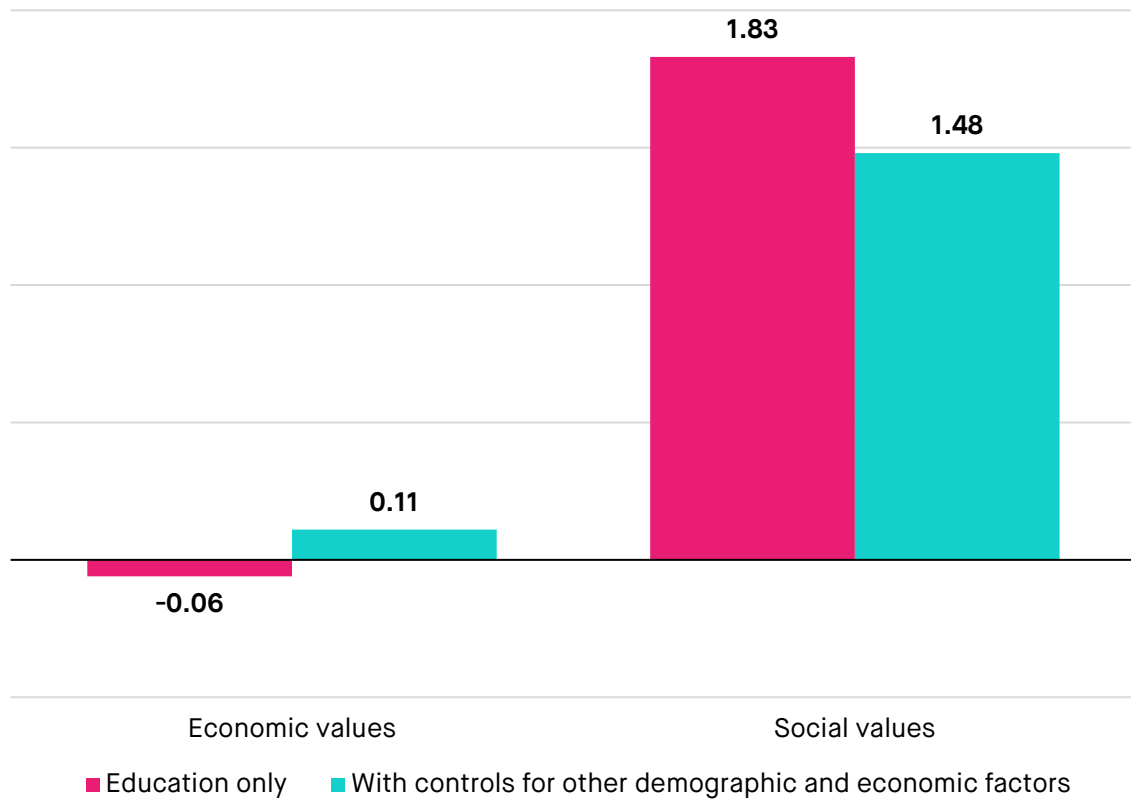
Education shapes how voters see themselves and see others. But politics is not just about who voters think they are – it is also about what they value and what they want. Social values are at the heart of democratic political competition – citizens have different senses of how society should be organised, what ultimate goals it should pursue and hence and what the government should or should not do. If education also shapes the core social values voters hold, this is likely to provide another powerful mechanism linking educational background and political choice as such values act as “crowning postures [which] serve as a... glue to bind together many more specific attitudes and beliefs.”³⁰ Voters with different values will take different stances on a wide range of issues.

People often talk about a single dimension of ‘left’ and ‘right’ political values, a shorthand dating back to the French Revolution, when supporters of the Ancien Regime sat on the President’s right in the National Assembly, with supporters of the revolution on the left. The ‘right’ are seen as supporters of order and tradition, while the left back liberty and reform. Yet evidence from a wide variety of European countries has shown that this one-dimensional view of politics is misleading, with voters in developed democracies arranged on (at least) two distinct value dimensions.³¹ The first is economic ideology, relating to issues such as inequality, redistribution, and the role of markets and the state in the economy. Class, income and wealth have traditionally been strong predictors of economic values – better off, middle class voters tend to the economic right, while poorer, working class voters tend to the left.

The second dimension goes under several names³² but for ease of reference we will refer to it as “social values.” This dimension is more complex, and has variously been understood as reflecting beliefs about the relative importance of personal freedom and social order³³; arguments over international political and economic integration³⁴; or conflicts over identity between authoritarian nationalists and liberal cosmopolitans.³⁵ While economic ideology divides voters by class and income, education and age are typically the strongest dividing lines for social values – younger voters and university graduates tend to the social “left”, with older voters and school leavers align on the social “right”.

The British Election Study has well established measures of both value dimensions. In Figure 4.4, we once again employ regression modelling to test the impact of education on both value dimensions. There is virtually no difference between the economic values of graduates and school leavers when we look at education alone (pink bar). But graduates are a little more economically left wing once we include controls for other factors (teal bar) – graduates are not as right wing as we would expect them to be given they are a better off group. The effect is, however, small – and the impacts of education on social values are much larger. Graduates are dramatically more socially liberal than school leavers when we look at education differences alone, and this education divide gets only a little smaller when we control for other factors (light bar). On issues of law and order, traditional values, the death penalty, censorship and much else besides, university graduates and school leavers are poles apart.

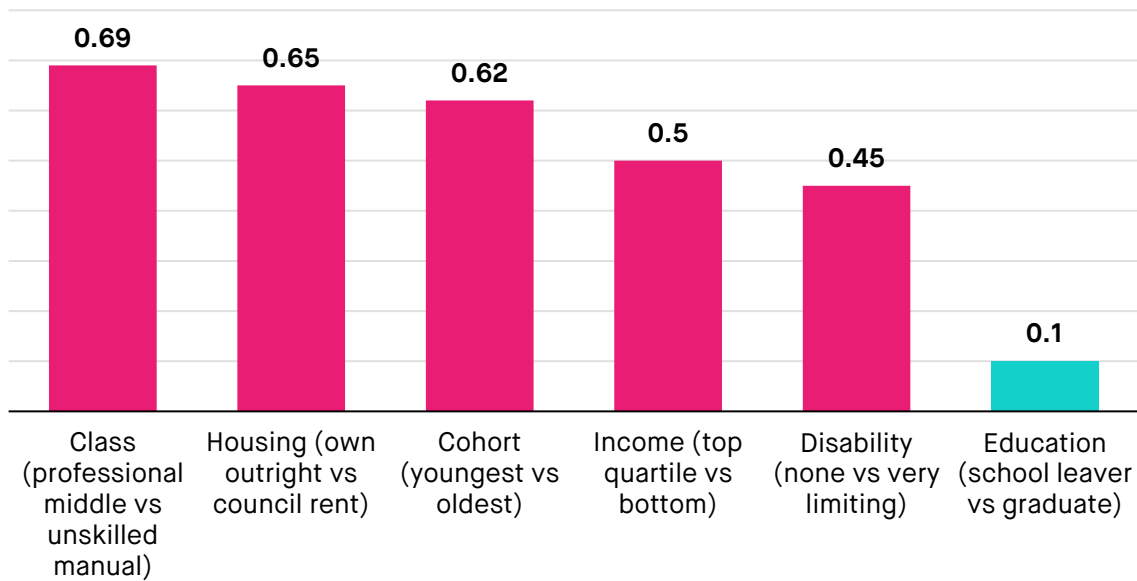
Figure 4.4: Impact of education on economic and social values



Source: BESIP, wave 25 (May 2023); results show difference in values between graduates and school leavers, on 0-10 scales, with higher scores meaning graduates are more left (economic) or liberal (social).

There is a similarly stark contrast when we compare the impact of each factor in our regression models in Figure 4.5 and 4.6. Education is among the weakest predictors of economic values, which are shaped most by economic circumstances, but with age divides also looming larger than education divides. The young are more economically left wing, but this is not due to their higher rates of university attendance – younger graduates and non-graduates alike lean left on economic values.

Figure 4.5: Effects of education and other demographic factors on economic left-right values



Source: BESIP, wave 25 (December 2023). Effects shown are the largest absolute differences on each variable on the 0-10 values scale

It is a very different story with social values, where education is the strongest predictor. While the young, the middle class, home owners and white voters all also tend to be more socially liberal, these effects are dwarfed by the gulf between graduates and school leavers. Based on these patterns, we can expect much deeper education divides in political choices when issues which activate social values top the agenda than when the agenda focusses on issues mobilising economic values.

Figure 4.6: Effects of education and other demographic factors on social values



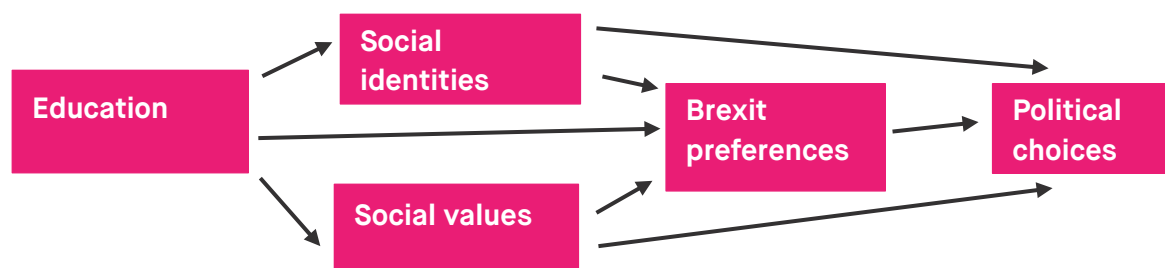
Source: BESIP, wave 25 (May 2023). Effects shown are overall difference in value score on each variable on the 0-10 values scale

Putting it all together: From identity and values to Brexit allegiances to political choices

Educational background has emerged as a powerful predictor of vote choice in recent years, a distinct ‘education divide’ which retains its force in models controlling for other demographic and economic differences between voters. Brexit has been one big factor mobilising this education divide – graduates align with Remain, school leavers with Leave. Both the education divide and the Brexit divide are in turn rooted in the distinctive social identities and social values of different educational groups. And with a long and polarised Brexit debate dominating politics in the last two election cycles, Brexit became the primary channel through which the identity and value divides associated with education were mobilised into political choice.

In a combined statistical model which includes social identities, social values, and Brexit preferences, education no longer has any remaining direct effect on voters’ choices. Figure 4.7 illustrates this model – all of the links summarised with arrows show robust relationships emerging in our statistical modelling. This is already a model with lots of moving parts, but it is still a major simplification – for example social identities, social values and Brexit preferences are themselves expressed through voters’ policy preferences and priorities, and are potentially shaped by the policy proposals and campaign messages of the political parties. But this schematic model gives at least a sense of the distinctive ways in which education has shaped voter choices in recent elections. We now turn to consider the implications for the next election and beyond.

Figure 4.7: The education divide since 2016 summarised



CHAPTER FIVE – THE EDUCATION DIVIDE IN THE NEXT ELECTION AND BEYOND

The education divide and the issue agenda

The next contest will be fought on very different terrain to the last two. Issues with high potential to mobilise identity and value differences, and hence divide voters by education – in particular immigration and Brexit – dominated the agenda in 2016–2019 but have declined in importance since. Issues more likely to divide voters by their economic circumstances and values – the economy, the cost of living and creaking public services – have risen up the agenda.

Table 5.1 and 5.2 illustrate how shifts in the issue agenda may influence the role of education divides. These table summarise how strongly voters divide by education on each issue, and whether education divides reinforce or cut across age and class/income divides. The economy and the cost of living crisis are both issues where education divides are small and cut across other divides. Graduates and school leavers differ little on these issues, and when they do education pulls voters in a different direction to age and economic circumstances. Graduates are more economically secure, and hence less exposed to the negative impacts of a weak economy and high inflation, and less likely to prioritise these issues. This sets them at odds with the other two left leaning groups – younger age groups and lower income working class voters – who are more exposed to a weak economy and rising bills, and emphasise these issues. Conversely, school leavers are more economically exposed, which puts them at odds with other right leaning groups – older and wealthier voters. The economic anxieties currently dominating the agenda therefore have the potential to cut across education divides, and instead pull voters back towards older class and income divisions, while also deepening the new age divide between economically more secure older voters and the insecure young.

Table 5.1: Strength of education divides in issue preferences, and effect of education compared with age/cohort and economic effects for issues at the top of the 2023 political agenda

	Education divide?	Education vs age/cohort effects	Education vs class/income effects
Inflation/cost of living (37%)	Small	Cross-cutting	Cross-cutting
Economy (34%)	Small	Cross-cutting	Cross-cutting
NHS/Health (28%)	Moderate	Reinforcing	Reinforcing
Immigration (21%)	Very large	Reinforcing	Reinforcing
Environment (16%)	Large	Reinforcing	Reinforcing
Anti-politics (14%)	Moderate	Reinforcing	Cross-cutting
EU/Brexit (8%)	Large	Reinforcing	Reinforcing

Source: BESIP, waves 23 and 24 (2022); appropriate items for housing (14%), education (11%) and crime (6%) were unavailable

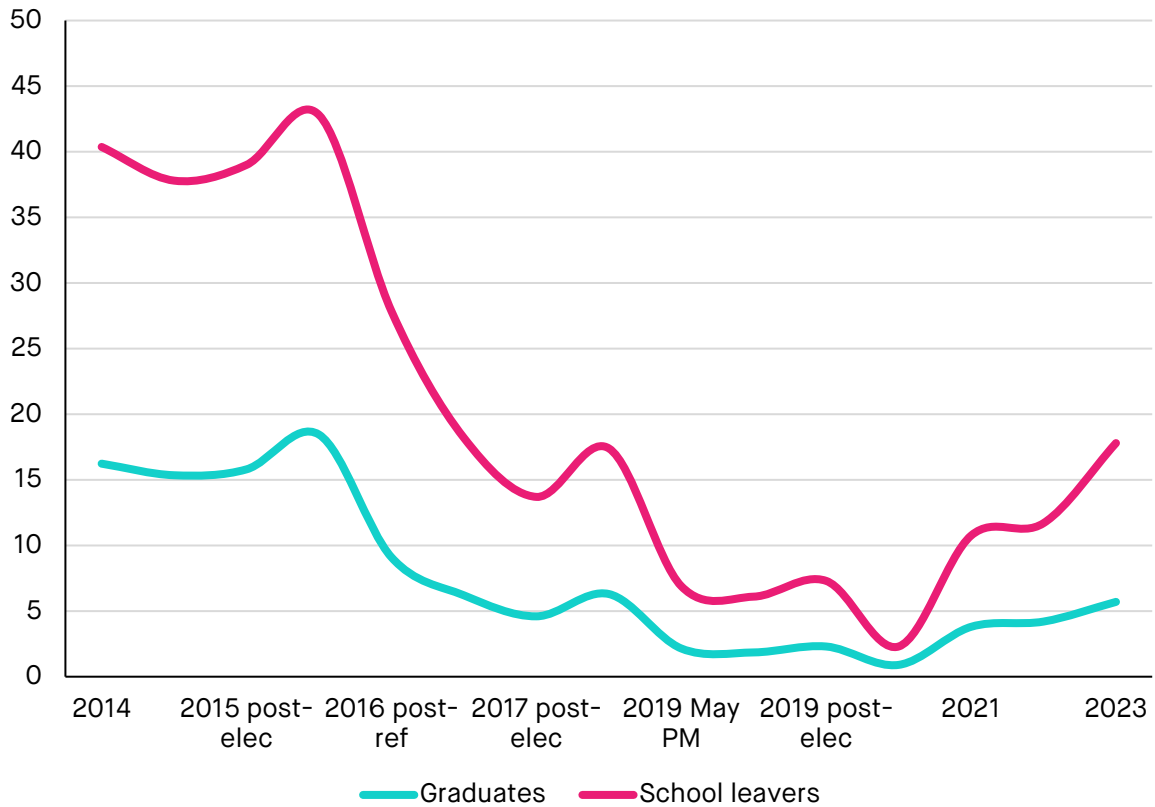
Table 5.2: Strength of education divides in issue salience, and effect of education compared with age/cohort and economic effects for issues at the top of the 2023 political agenda

	Education divide?	Education vs age/cohort effects	Education vs class/income effects
Inflation/cost of living (37%)	Small	Reinforcing	Reinforcing
Economy (34%)	Very small	Cross-cutting	Cross-cutting
NHS/Health (28%)	Large	Cross-cutting	Reinforcing
Immigration (21%)	Very large	Reinforcing	Reinforcing
Environment (16%)	Very large	Reinforcing	Cross-cutting
Anti-politics (14%)	Large	Cross-cutting	Larger, same direction
EU/Brexit (8%)	Very large	Cross-cutting	Cross-cutting

The rest of the current issue agenda, however, suggests more reason to think education divides will persist in the next election, but expressed on a somewhat different agenda. There are substantial education divides, which reinforce age and economic divides, in most of the other issues currently emphasised by voters, including the NHS, immigration and the environment. Concerns about immigration, though down sharply on the 2010-2019 period, remain substantial and have risen again in the past year. Brexit may no longer feature directly as a top tier political concern, but the effects of Brexit feed into many of the other issues on the agenda, and Brexit political identities remain, as we have seen, a powerful force shaping behaviour.

Education could also influence the political agenda through differences in the priorities of graduates and school leavers. A comparison of immigration and climate change provides a case study of how this could play out. Education has a very strong link with policy preferences on immigration³⁶, but one side of the education divide – migration sceptical school leavers – persistently prioritises the issue much more, as Figure 5.1 illustrates. When immigration was at the top of the agenda in the run up to Brexit, more than 40% of school leavers named immigration as their top concern, making it the most named issue by this group in every BES wave from February 2014 to June 2016. The share of graduates prioritising immigration never went above 20%, and it has never been the top issue named by graduates.

Figure 5.1: Share of graduates and school leavers rating immigration as the most important problem 2014-2023



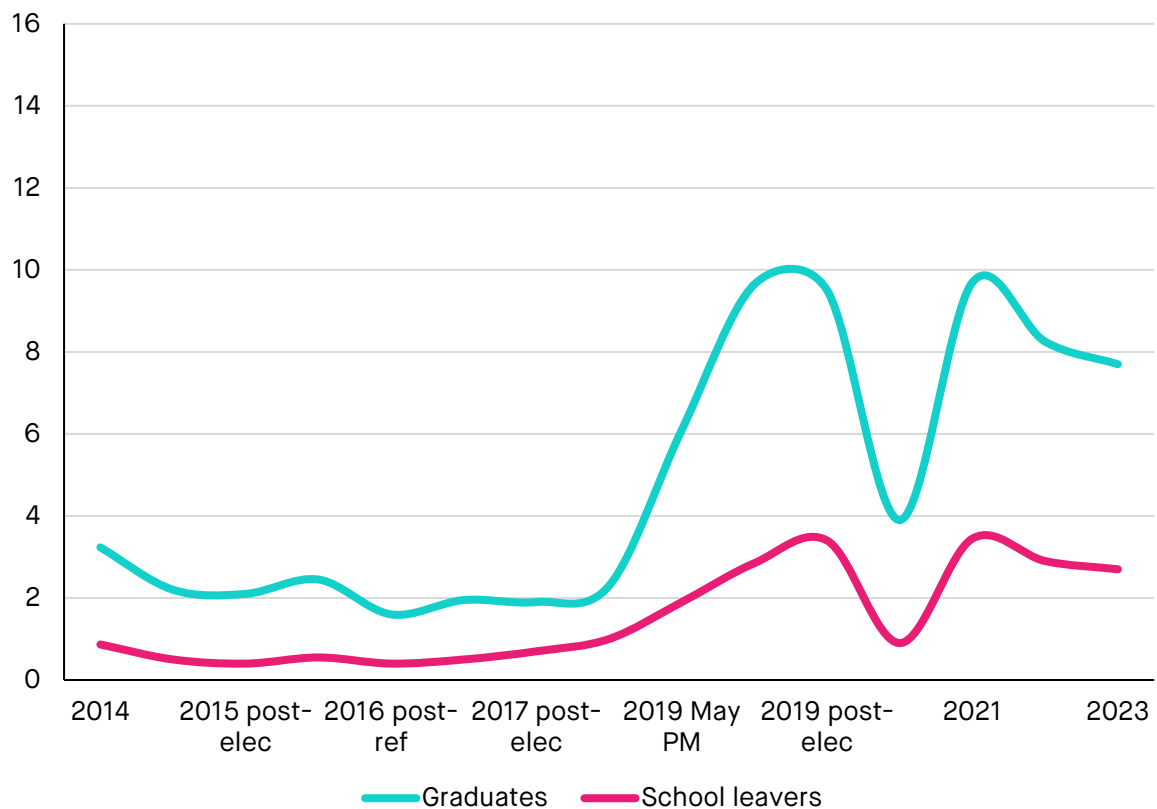
Source: British Election Study internet panel 2014-2023

The recent return of immigration onto the agenda, driven both by declining attention to COVID and Brexit, and the mobilising effects of media and political discussion of small boats carrying irregular migrants across the English Channel, has once again mainly mobilised school leavers, more than 10% of whom have named it as a top priority in recent waves. Meanwhile, less than one graduate in twenty have raised immigration as a top priority in recent BESIP waves.

The strong asymmetry in attention to immigration not unique to Britain – across the world, opponents of immigration are much more likely to prioritise the issue, reflecting basic differences in how the issue is perceived by sceptics and supporters.³⁷ Migration is inherently problematic for many socially conservative school leavers, who see it as a threat to social order, and to the narrower forms of social identity they value. Graduates do not see immigration as a problem – to them it is a beneficial outcome of a well functioning open society. As graduates don't see migration as a problem to solve, they focus their attention elsewhere.

The environment is the mirror image to immigration, as Figure 5.2 illustrates. Here it is graduates who perceive an urgent problem, and therefore mobilise, while school leavers do not perceive climate change as a priority, and direct their attention elsewhere. The rise of environmental concerns up the agenda in recent years has been driven by graduate mobilisation – around 10% of graduates named the environment as a priority every year since 2019 except the peak COVID year of 2020. School leavers show little interest in the issue, with the share prioritising it never rising above 4%. Graduates, who are more likely to favour strong action on climate change, are also more likely to prioritise the environment, which therefore weighs heavier when they judge political parties. Just as immigration can pose a problem for social liberals because pro-migration voters pay it less mind than migration sceptics, so climate change poses a problem for social conservatives, because climate scepticism doesn't mobilise their core school leaver electorate but climate activism does mobilise graduate liberals.

Figure 5.2: Share of graduates and school leavers rating the environment as the most important problem 2014-2023

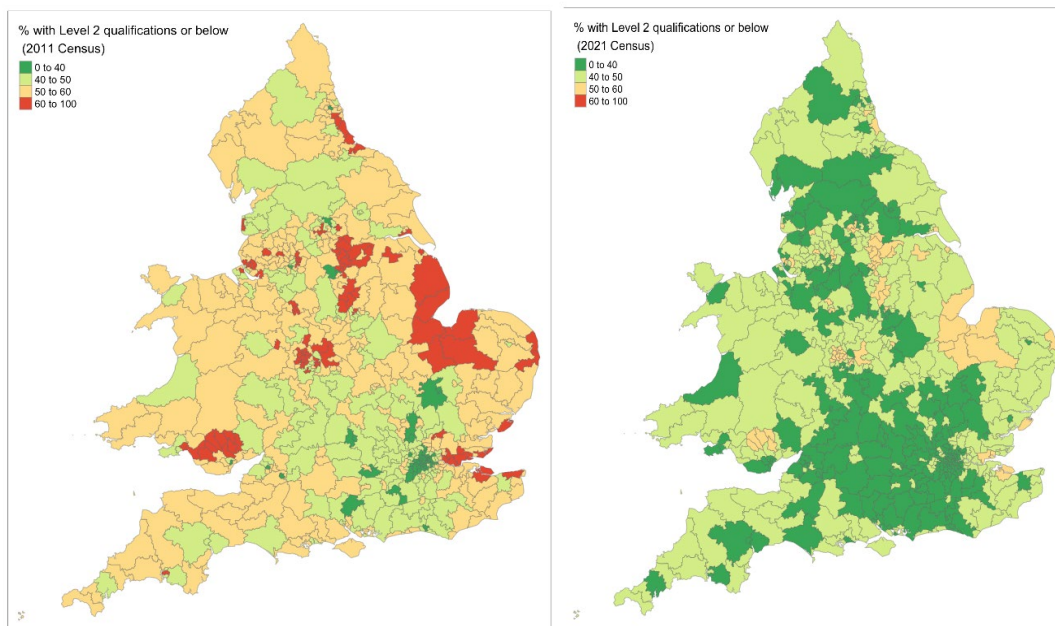


Source: British Election Study internet panel 2014-2023

The changing electoral geography of the education divide

The education divide also has a geographical dimension which is very important for its political expression in Britain's constituency focused "first past the post" electoral system. Graduates and school leavers concentrate in different parts of the country, and the mix of voters in different seats is changing at different rates. The result is large and often growing differences in constituency education profiles. We start by taking a look at the proportions of school leavers and graduates resident in each constituency in the last two censuses.³⁸ Figure 5.3 shows the distribution of school leavers in 2011 and 2021. In 2011, we find very high concentrations of school leavers – 60% plus – in the industrial North East, East Anglia bordering the Wash, the Thames Estuary, and South Wales (coloured red), while large swathes of the country, particularly along the East coast, in the South West and in Wales, had majority school leaver electorates in 2011 (coloured yellow or 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 local 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.

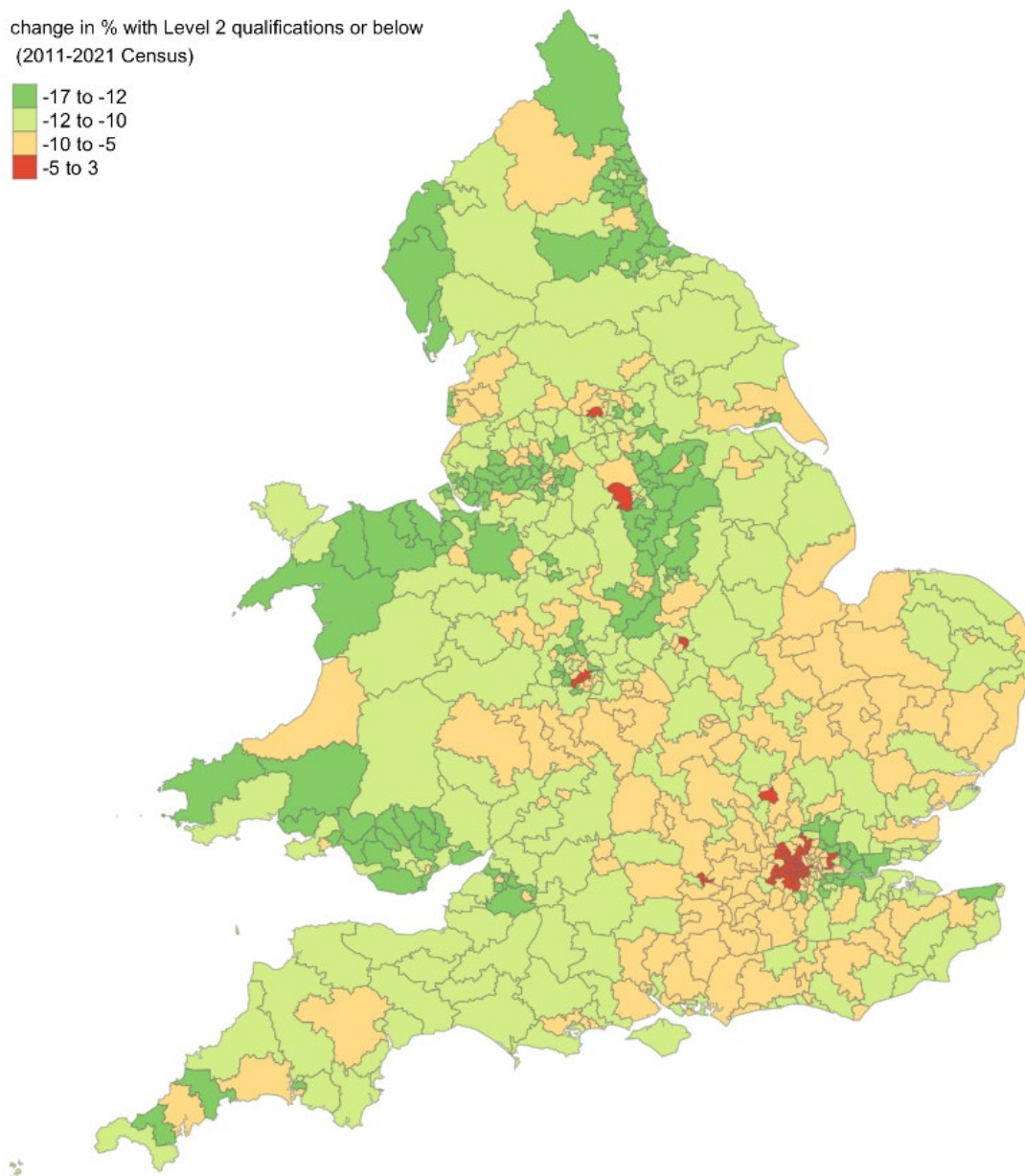
Figure 5.3: Proportions of school leavers in each constituency, 2011 census (left) and 2021 census (right)



Source: Census 2011 and 2021.

The decline in school leavers has been substantial almost everywhere, but there are some clear clusters of seats showing particularly steep falls, as Figure 5.4, mapping the change in school leaver shares, reveals. These include a large band of seats along the North East coast, another band running across the urban North West and into North Wales, a third band running through the East Midlands and into South Yorkshire and a fourth band on either side of the Thames Estuary east of London. The first three are all key electoral battlegrounds where the Conservatives have made substantial gains over the past decade by winning over school leavers, while the fourth is a onetime swing region where the Conservatives have dominated in recent contests. The rapid decline of school leavers in these areas will make the Conservatives recent school leaver focussed election successes hard to replicate in future.

Figure 5.4: Change in share of school leaver residents, 2011-21



Source: Census 2011 and 2021

Table 5.3 underlines the problem for the Conservatives by detailing the 10 Conservative held seats with the most rapidly shrinking school leaver electorates. These include several of the highest profile “red wall” breakthrough seats, including Workington, home of the widely discussed “Workington man³⁹”; Blyth Valley, site of an iconic early Conservative breakthrough on 2019 election night; and Ashfield, home to polarising Conservative Vice-Chairman (and former Labour councillor) Lee Anderson. Almost all these are in the clusters visible on the above map, and almost all saw very large rises in Conservative vote share in 2010-2019. The electoral power of the school leavers mobilised by the Conservatives to win seats such as these is fast declining, which will complicate efforts to retain them in the next election.

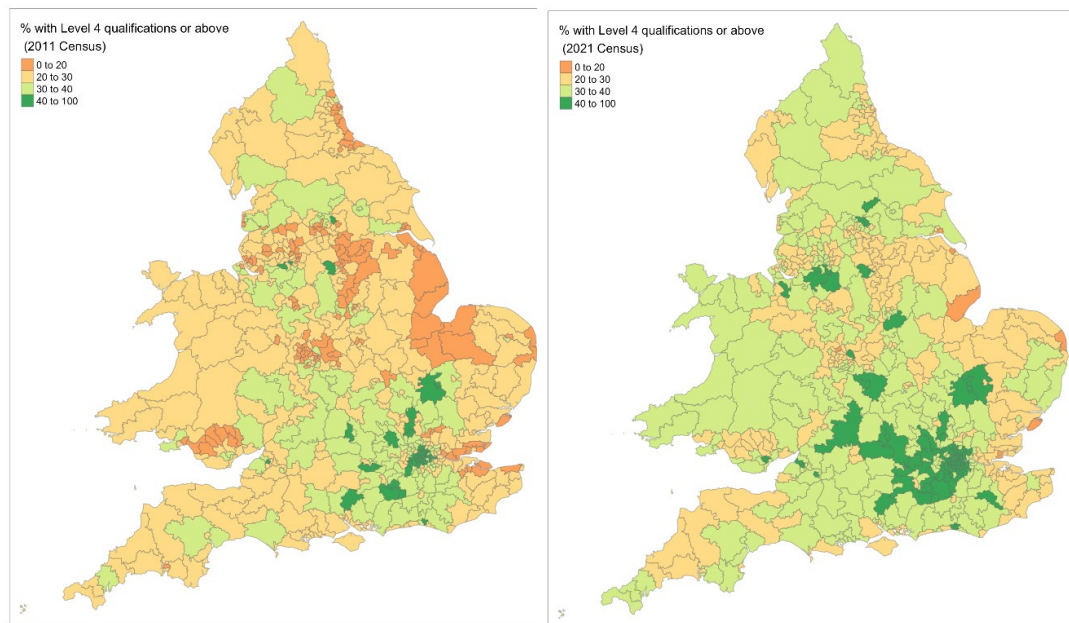
Table 5.3: Conservative marginal seats with the largest falls in school leaver shares 2011-21

Seat	Region	Conservative majority 2019 (%)	Change in Con vote 2010-19 (percentage points)	Share of school leavers 2011 (%)	Share of school leavers 2021 (%)
Birmingham Northfield	W Mids	3.8	12.7	61	45.8
Workington	N West	10.0	15.9	58.5	44.8
Redcar	N East	8.6	32.3	60.2	46.5
Bolsover	E Mids	11.5	22.9	64.2	50.5
Stoke North	W Mids	15.7	28.4	66.6	53.1
Ashfield*	E Mids	14.9*	17.1	65.2	51.9
Blyth Valley	N East	1.7	26.1	59.1	45.8
Barrow & Furness	N West	12.6	15.6	52.6	39.3
Delyn	N Wales	2.3	9.0	56.0	42.7
Leigh	N West	4.2	24.3	59.0	45.9

* Majority over Labour – an independent finished second in Ashfield in 2019; Source: BBC elections team results database

The same trend – rapid overall change which is unevenly spread – is also evident when we look at the growing graduate electorate. The areas with the lowest shares of graduates largely match those with high of school leavers – the North East, the East coast around the Wash, the Thames estuary and South Wales. But the rapid rise in graduates is evident even in these areas – while many seats had graduates 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 to large universities across England and Wales. These are also the areas which show the most rapid graduate growth. resulting in the emergence of a substantial band of seats in and around London, coloured dark green, where the census recorded a graduate electorate of 40% or above in 2021. 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.

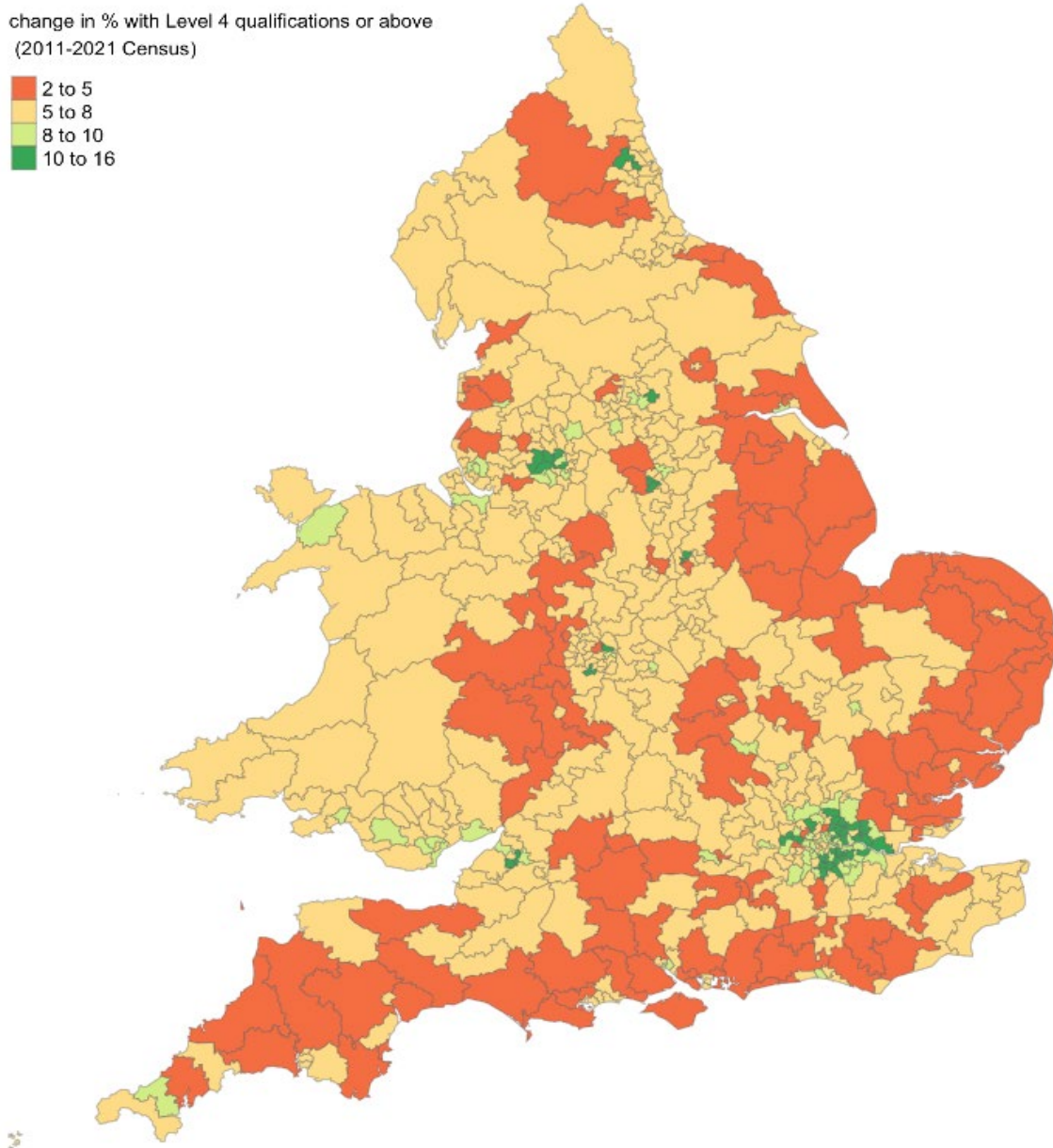
Figure 5.5: Graduate share of constituency residents, 2011 and 2021



Source: Census 2011 and 2021

London’s magnetic attraction to graduates is also evident when we look at changes between 2011 and 2021. By far the largest cluster of seats with rapidly rising graduate populations is in and around London, including many seats on the eastern borders of the capital where property is more affordable for young graduate professionals. The various other specks of green on the map correspond to towns and cities near to large universities, testament to the growing knowledge economy that has sprung up around higher education institutions, which not only generate large numbers of new graduates but also create large numbers of graduate jobs in teaching, research and innovation.

Figure 5.6: Change in constituency graduate shares 2011-21



Source: Census 2011 and 2021

Table 5.4 illustrates the problems posed by a growing graduate electorate for a Conservative party which has alienated graduates in recent elections. The table shows the ten Conservative held seats with the highest graduate shares of residents in the 2021 Census. The bulk of the seats are in and around London, along with seats near to major universities in Cambridge and Manchester. The Conservative vote share has dropped, often sharply, in every one of these seats, and only one of the ten has a comfortable majority. In most cases the local opposition is not Labour, but the Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives would struggle to hold many seats like these if there is even a modest swing against them in the next election, and with graduate shares set to continue rising sharply, such seats will be both more common and harder to recover in future elections unless the Conservatives find a way to narrow the education divide in their support.

Table 5.4: Conservative marginal seats with the highest graduate shares 2021

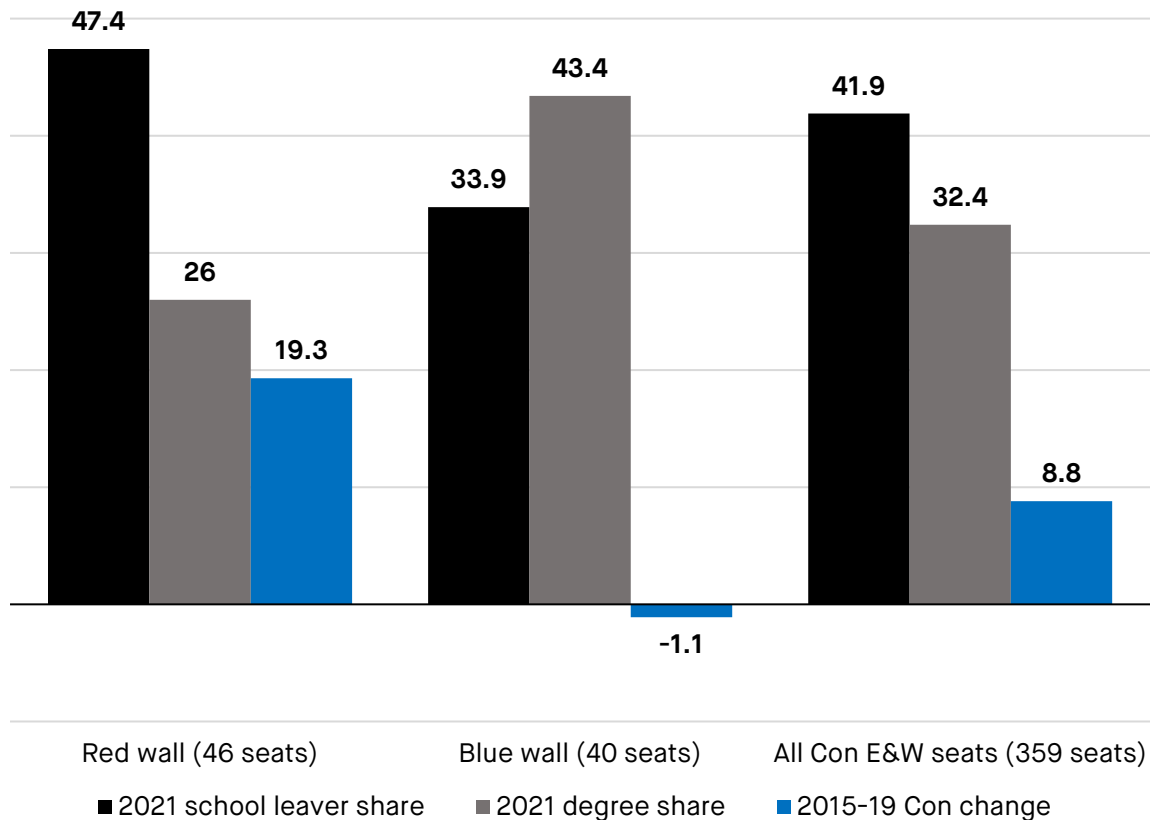
Seat	Region	Second party 2019	Con majority 2019 (%)	Change in Con vote 2010-19 (percentage points)	Share of graduates 2011 (%)	Share of graduates 2021 (%)
Wimbledon	London	Lib Dem	1.2	-10.7	54.4	61.8
Cities of London & Westminster	London	Lib Dem	9.3	-12.3	54.5	61.4
Chelsea & Fulham	London	Lib Dem	24.0	-10.6	53.7	61.3
Kensington	London	Labour	0.3	-11.7	52.2	59.6
Finchley & Golders Green	London	Lib Dem	11.9	-2.1	46.5	52.9
Esher & Walton	South East	Lib Dem	4.3	-9.6	42.8	52.0
Hitchin & Harpenden	Eastern	Lib Dem	11.7	-7.5	43.1	50.6
South Cambridgeshire	Eastern	Lib Dem	4.3	-1.1	41.8	49.1
Altrincham & Sale West	North West	Labour	11.2	-0.9	40.3	48.7
Chipping Barnet	London	Labour	2.1	-4.1	39.3	48.4

Source: BBC elections team results database

The education divide and party competition in the next election and beyond

The education divide has reshaped party competition, posing new challenges for all three of the largest Westminster parties in England and Wales. 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, as Figure 5.7 illustrates. Here we show the balance of graduates (black bar) and school leavers (grey bar) in two larger clusters of seats and compare it to the average figures for all Conservative held seats in England and Wales. The 'red wall' is the 46 seats the Conservatives have taken from Labour since 2015; the 40 seats of 'blue wall' combines seats where the Conservatives face a credible challenge from the Lib Dems with half a dozen similar seats where Labour are the challenger.

Figure 5.7: Graduate and school leaver shares in ‘red wall’, ‘blue wall’ and all Conservative seats



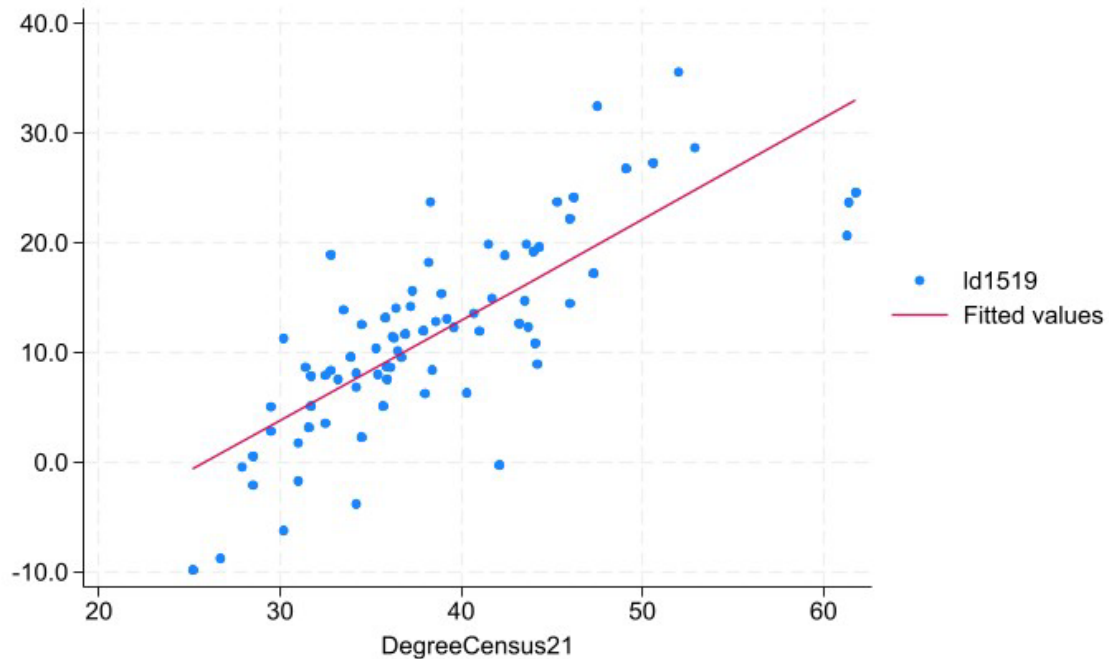
Source: 2021 Census, BBC elections team results database. ‘Red wall’ defined as seats which were Labour in 2015 and then won by Conservatives in 2017 or 2019. ‘Blue wall’ defined as (1) Conservative seats with Lib Dems second and a majority under 30% in 2019 (34 seats) (2) Conservative seats with Labour second, 40% plus graduates and majority under 15% (6 seats)

The Conservatives cannot afford to lose more than 40 seats if they want to retain power after the next election, so large losses on either of these fronts would mean likely defeat. But the two fronts are poles apart in terms of the education divide. The ‘red wall’ seats won from Labour are places where school leavers are still, on average, close to a majority of residents, while only a quarter of residents on average have degrees. In the ‘blue wall’, only one in three residents is a school leaver, and graduates are the dominant group with an average share of 43%. Any election strategy which polarises voters on education – as for example recent campaigns focussed on immigration or climate change are likely to do – risks putting one or other of these two groups of seats at risk.

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 large and growing swathe of traditionally Conservative seats in the London commuter belt are rapidly becoming graduate dominated. While Labour are strong in London itself and other graduate heavy central urban areas, the Liberal Democrats are the main opposition to the Conservatives in much of London’s suburban fringe. The mobilisation of the education divide has therefore raised the possibility that a new heartland could emerge for the third party in these increasingly graduate

dominated swathes of London suburbia. As Figure 5.8 illustrates, 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 a demographically and geographically coherent swathe of South England in the next election, with further growth in graduate numbers offering a chance to consolidate and extend this heartland in future.

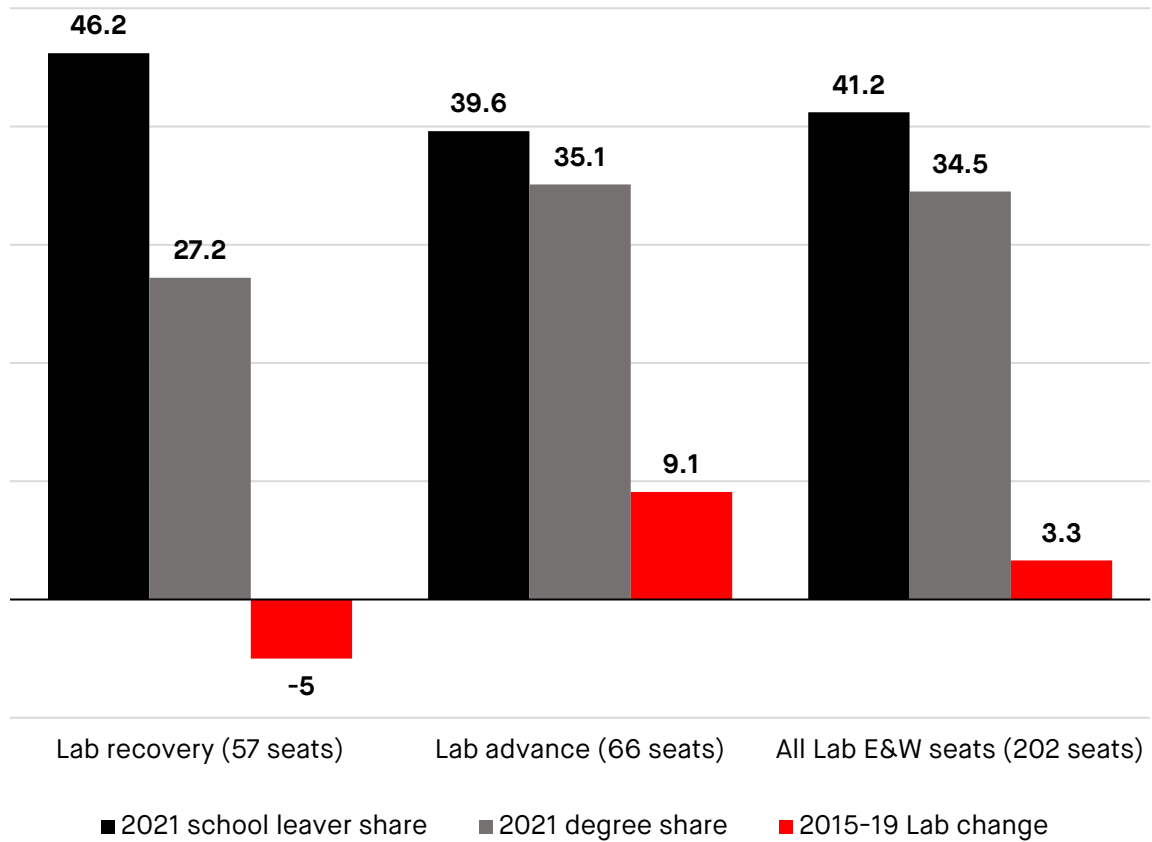
Figure 5.8: Liberal Democrat performance in Conservative vs Lib Dem seats 2015-2019, by 2021 graduate share



Source: BBC elections team results database, 2021 Census

As Labour seek a return to office after 14 years of opposition, they too face education divide dilemmas. To recover from their worst seat slump since 1935 and secure a Commons majority, Labour must gain at least 120 seats. This will require advancing on at least two fronts: recovering seats where the party has declined since 2015 and accelerating progress where the party has gained ground. We can again illustrate the dilemma facing Labour using two clusters of seats. The first cluster – “recovery” – are the 57 winnable seats in England and Wales which Labour held in 2015, then lost in the two subsequent elections, and where Labour is now in second place to the Conservatives. The second cluster – “advance” – are the 66 winnable seats where Labour starts in second place and where it has increased its vote by five percentage points or more 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 graduate shares, much like the seats Labour already hold, with an average of 35% graduates and 40% school leavers. The “recovery” seats are very different – school leavers are close to a majority on average and only around a quarter are graduates. Labour, like the Conservatives, cannot win a majority in the next election without bridging the education divide.

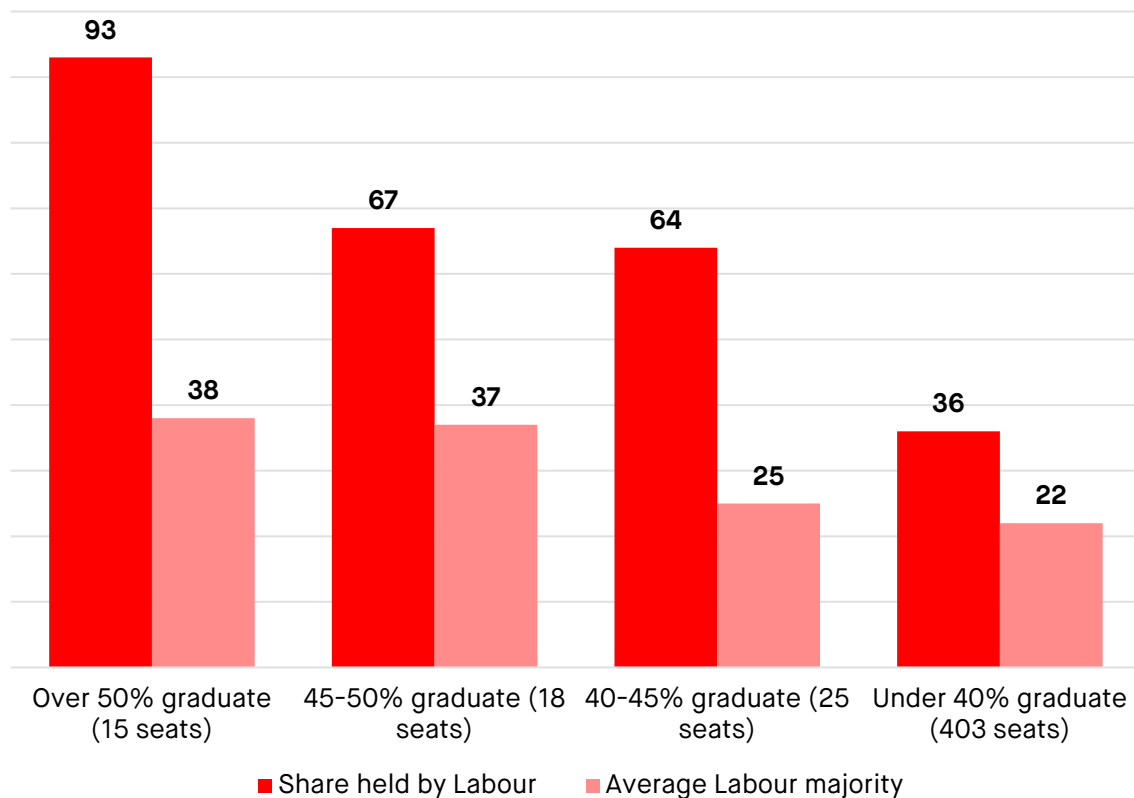
Figure 5.9: Graduate and school leaver shares in Labour’s “recovery” targets and “advance” targets



Source: 2021 Census, BBC elections team results database. ‘Labour recovery’ defined as seats where Labour was second in 2019, with a majority of under 35% which Labour won in 2015, and the Labour vote share in 2019 was lower than it was in 2015. ‘Labour advance’ defined as seats where Labour were second in 2019, with a majority under 35%, and where Labour’s vote share was 5 percentage points or more higher in 2019 than in 2015.

An increased reliance on graduate votes poses a second problem for Labour – graduates tend to cluster. 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 increasing the bias of the electoral system against Labour by piling up extra votes in safe seats.⁴⁰ Figure 5.10 illustrates this problem. There are 62 Labour vs Conservative constituencies in England and Wales with graduate shares above 40% – Labour already hold 44 of these – 70% of the total – including 16 of the 17 Labour vs Conservative seats with graduate majorities.⁴¹ Labour’s majorities in their most graduate heavy seats are typically larger than their majorities in their other seats (light red bars), so if the party gains support among graduates overall, a substantial part of that gain will be wasted padding out the majorities of already secure Labour MPs.

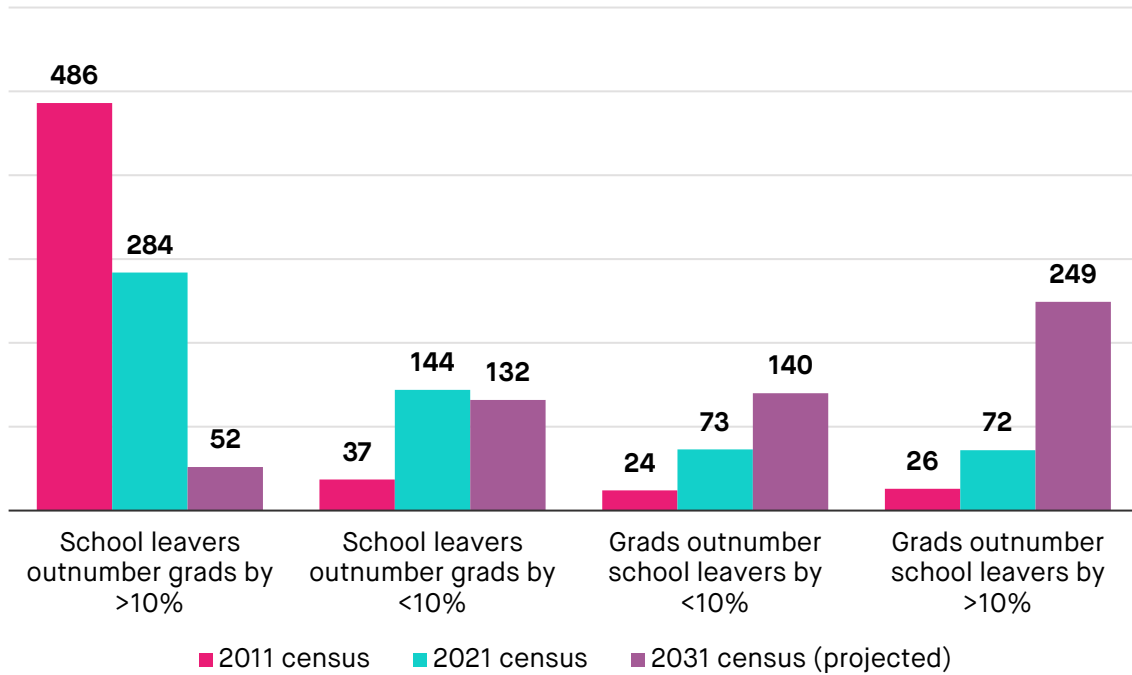
Figure 5.10: Share of Labour vs Conservative seats already held by Labour in 2019 (dark red) and average Labour majority (light red) in seats with different share of graduates



Source: 2021 Census, BBC elections team results database.

Yet while graduates are not efficiently distributed at present, the electoral landscape is still changing, and will look very different again in another decade, as Figure 5.11 illustrates. If current trends continue, a majority of constituencies contested in the 2030s will have more graduates than school leavers among their residents. Seats where school leavers are locally 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 disappearing. Within a decade, it will be almost gone. By contrast, the kind of graduate dominated where the Tories have 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.

Figure 5.11: 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

The education divide that has opened up over the last decade is therefore very likely to change 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.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See for example, analysis of education divides in many social attitudes in the long running British Social Attitudes survey report – e.g. Park and Rhead (2013); Swales and Attar Taylor (2017); Clery (2023)

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 Sobolewska and Ford (2020): pp 21-24.

⁴ The exceptions are themselves instructive. Labour governments passed socially liberal legislation on immigration, race relations, and crime. These were the subject of frequent, and often successful, Conservative campaigns aiming to mobilise the more authoritarian views of the large school leaver majority. Immigration, in particular, proved very successful as a “wedge issue” enabling the Conservatives to win over working class voters (Sobolewska and Ford (2020), chapter 3)

⁵ For more on Britain’s experience with educational expansion see Mandler (2020).

⁶ Implementation of this legislation was staged so it only came into full force in 2015.

⁷ Participation rates have, however, fallen somewhat since 2016 due to the decline of apprenticeships and the impact of the COVID pandemic – see Office for National Statistics (2023) “Participation in education, training and employment aged 16 to 18”, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-in-education-and-training-and-employment#content>.

⁸ The Census defines qualifications as follows: Level 2 qualifications: 5 or more GCSEs (A* to C or 9 to 4), O levels (passes), CSEs (grade 1), School Certification, 1 A level, 2 to 3 AS levels, VCEs, Intermediate or Higher Diploma, Welsh Baccalaureate Intermediate Diploma, NVQ level 2, Intermediate GNVQ, City and Guilds Craft, BTEC First or General Diploma, RSA Diploma; Level 3 qualifications: 2 or more A levels or VCEs, 4 or more AS levels, Higher School Certificate, Progression or Advanced Diploma, Welsh Baccalaureate Advance Diploma, NVQ level 3; Advanced GNVQ, City and Guilds Advanced Craft, ONC, OND, BTEC National, RSA Advanced Diploma; Level 4 qualifications: degree (BA, BSc), higher degree (MA, PhD, PGCE), NVQ level 4 to 5, HNC, HND, RSA Higher Diploma, BTEC Higher level, professional qualifications (for example, teaching, nursing, accountancy) (Office for National Statistics, 2023).

⁹ 2021 Census results for Scotland were not available at the time of writing, and differences in the Scottish educational system complicate matters, so we focus on England and Wales in this chart. Educational expansion has proceeded at broadly similar rates in Scotland. See Bolton (2023).

¹⁰ Policy or behavioural changes which reduced university attendance rates, or increased rates of departure from schooling with low qualifications, could slow this aggregate shift. High rates of university participation have attracted some critical attention from politicians recently, with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak calling the Blair Labour government’s 50% HE participation target “one of the great mistakes of the last 30 years” (Morgan, 2023). This rhetoric has not, however, translated into any policy shift towards restricting HE access or reverse HE expansion as yet and the trend so far this decade has been in the opposite direction, with university attendance rates continuing to rise, further accelerating the demographic transformation. Higher education entry rates in 2021 and 2022 were the highest and second highest ever recorded, respectively (Bolton, 2023).

¹¹ The Lifelong Loan Entitlement, which will be implemented from 2025, will enable anyone under 60 to take out loans to cover up to four years of tuition fees (see Lewis and Bolton, 2023). This has the potential to greatly expand access to higher education among older cohorts who did not participate in HE after leaving school, but even if uptake is high, it will be many years before this changes the generational distribution of education.

¹² A number of studies have found young people from BAME backgrounds go on to higher education at rates ten percentage points or more higher than those from white backgrounds. See Richardson et al (2020) for a recent review.

¹³ See Office for National Statistics (2023b).

¹⁴ The gender gap in HE participation in younger cohorts is, however, large and growing, with female participation rates 10 points or more higher than male in recent years (Richardson et al, 2020). If such a gap continues, then a gender gap in education levels is likely to emerge in coming years.

¹⁵ For in-depth analysis of the linkages between education and social mobility, see Brown et al (2013).

¹⁶ Each BESIP survey wave has between 12,000 and 25,000 respondents. The sample – drawn from the YouGov panel – is not perfect, and under-represents some groups (see, for example, Ford et al, 2015). It does however provide the largest and richest available regular polling dataset for examining the linkages between demographics, identities, values and political behaviour.

¹⁷ There are substantial education divides in support for smaller parties also – the Liberal Democrats do consistently better with university graduates (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2004), as do the Green party (Dennison, 2016), while support for both the UK Independence Party and its successor the Brexit Party has been strongly concentrated among school leavers (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

¹⁸ The effects wax and wane but the direction is always the same. The influence of social class, for example, has faded dramatically in recent decades. While the causes of this shift are much debated (Evans and Tilley, 2017), there is no doubt that the link between the jobs voters do and the parties they back is very much weaker now than it was in the early post-war decades, when class was the dominant feature structuring elections and parties (Butler and Stokes, 1971).

¹⁹ Several studies have confirmed the age divide is currently the deepest divide in British politics – see BES team (2021) and Curtice (2023).

²⁰ Curtice and Montagu, 2019; Simon, 2022

²¹ Hobolt et al, 2020; Tilley and Hobolt, 2023

²² Another factor in the recent shift is that those who did not participate in the 2016 referendum – either because they stayed home or because they were at that point too young to vote – have tended to split heavily towards Remain (Curtice, 2023). This group is also steadily growing in size over time, as citizens who were children at the time of the EU referendum have joined the electorate.

²³ For further analysis on this point, see Ford and Sobolewska, 2018; Larik et al, 2022

²⁴ For reasons of space we focus just on the Conservatives here – the pattern is very similar for Labour. We don't show Brexit effects in the chart as they would dwarf everything else.

²⁵ See, for example, Ford et al (2021), chapter 14; Curtice, 2021

²⁶ Huddy, 2002; Noury and Roland, 2020

²⁷ Simon, 2023

²⁸ Stubager, 2010; Ford and Jennings, 2020

²⁹ Simon and Turnbull-Dugarte, 2023

³⁰ Converse, 1964

³¹ See for example Kriesi et al 2008; Hooghe and Marks, 2018

³² See discussion in Ford and Jennings, 2020

³³ Inglehart, 1997

³⁴ Kriesi et al, 2008

³⁵ Hooghe and Marks, 2009

³⁶ Ford and Morris, 2022

³⁷ Kustov, 2022

³⁸ Data constraints mean we once again focus on England and Wales, and we use the 2010-2019 constituency boundaries to enable concrete examination of voting patterns without the complications introduced by boundary changes.

³⁹ Tanner and O'Shaughnessy, 2019

⁴⁰ This bias is already substantial – estimates by John Curtice suggest the Conservatives would win 23 seats more than Labour if the parties had identical shares of the vote, and while the Conservatives require a 5 point vote lead to win a majority, Labour need a lead of 12 points (Curtice et al, 2021 in Ford et al (eds) 2021)

⁴¹ The Greens' sole 2019 victory came in Brighton Pavilion – another seat with the same characteristics.