Briefing: Low-income voters in UK general elections, 1987-2017

This report draws on three decades of high-quality survey data to present one of the most comprehensive studies of low-income voters to date. It presents seven key messages for Britain's two main parties, as well as all those in the political arena more generally, to tackle the injustice of poverty and embrace an agenda which unlocks opportunities for people on low incomes.

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Key messages:

1. Low-income voters are 'up for grabs' like never before. In 2017 Labour enjoyed their highest support among low-income voters since the heyday of Tony Blair, and the Conservatives enjoyed their strongest support among low-income voters since the era of Margaret Thatcher. Although people on low incomes are still more likely to vote Labour than the Conservatives, both parties increased their share of the vote among this group relative to 2015 (Labour by 13 percentage points and the Conservatives by five percentage points).

2. Low-income voters have become more volatile over time. Today, they are less tribally loyal to one party. Between 2010 and 2017, consistently more than 50% of low-income voters either changed whether they voted or not between elections, or changed which party they supported. This means that they are more open to being persuaded to change sides; this further underlines why the parties should engage with them.

3. Low-income voters are engaging in politics to a greater degree. Between 2015 and 2017, their rate of turnout increased by seven percentage points. This is the first noteworthy increase for 30 years. After a long period in which their political voice had diminished, low-income voters have become more involved in politics and want to talk to the parties.

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4. Low-income voters are feeling squeezed by changes in the economy. Today, they are just as likely to say that their households are struggling financially as they were during the 1992 and post-2008 crises. Furthermore, they are not sure who to blame for the current situation, which underlines how both Labour and the Conservatives could benefit by making a clearer case about how they will improve the economic situation of low-income voters.

5. All of our findings reveal why Britain's main parties need to focus on this key group and refresh their offer. For Labour, this is necessary to retain their historic lead over the Conservatives, which in recent years has been declining. For the Conservatives, reviving their offer to low-income voters could help them build and expand upon their recent gains. To do this, Britain's main parties will have to appeal to low-income voters' desire for greater economic redistribution, as well as be sensitive to their values preferences. These voters are 'cross-pressured'; they lean to the left on economic issues but often lean to rightwards on issues like law-and-order, migration and Brexit.

6. Our findings suggest that amid a volatile and divisive Brexit debate concerns to do with economic fairness between rich and poor are once again at the fore of voters' decision-making. Older 'left-right' divides have re-emerged and are once again important. In terms of winning over low-income voters there are very good reasons for the main parties to redouble their efforts to offer more redistributive policies, especially amid Britain's ongoing Brexit debate.

7. All of these findings and the implications for the main parties were reflected at the outcome of the 2017 general election. Labour was more successful in low-income Britain because they tapped into the left-wing economic views of low-income voters. They can build on this success, but they need to be mindful about low-income voters' attitudes towards crime and law and order, as well as Europe, and think about how they can bolster living standards. The Tories have considerable potential among this group because they are closer to low-income voters on issues like Europe and crime. If the Conservatives switch toward an economic message that has more resonance among low-income voters they could unlock even more support. Put simply, there are good reasons for both of the main parties to adapt their position.

Introduction

British politics is going through a period of considerable flux. In the space of just three years the country witnessed an independence referendum in Scotland in 2014, a surprise Conservative majority at the 2015 general election, the rise of Jeremy Corbyn to become leader of the Labour Party, a referendum on Britain's European Union (EU) membership in 2016, and another general election in 2017, which against most predictions produced a hung parliament.

The 2016 referendum and its outcome injected a new and divisive issue into the heart of British politics. It also produced a series of knock-on events that have rattled the political system: the resignation of Prime Minister David Cameron; the arrival of Prime Minister Theresa May; the refusal of parliament to endorse May's proposed Withdrawal Agreement, which included the single biggest defeat of a sitting government in British history; the calling and then defeat of a vote of no confidence in Mrs May; and the extension of Article 50. It also saw the outcome of the 2019 European Parliament elections, in which the insurgent pro-Leave Brexit Party came from nowhere to finish in first place and the pro-Remain Liberal Democrats and Greens enjoyed a resurgence of support; and then, in June 2019, the resignation of Theresa May as leader of the Conservative Party.

Amid all this churn and change, some also argue that the underlying 'dividing lines' in British politics are changing in important ways.

The traditional view of British politics is that the 'left versus right' divide is the principal organizing feature of electoral competition. Since 2015, this left-right view of the world has been underlined by the rise of Jeremy Corbyn, who claims to speak 'for the many not the few' and argues that Britain should raise tax on high-earners and corporations in order to spend more on low-income and workers who are being held-back, as well as people trapped in poverty.

At the same time a second dividing line has long been evident in British politics, often referred to as the 'liberal versus authoritarian' divide. Whereas the left-right divide generally refers to concerns to do with economic equality and collectivism, liberal-authoritarian values relate more strongly to matters of personal freedom (Rokeach 1973). This relates more to the role that government should play in society rather than the economy. Seen through this alternative lens, what matters to people is not just whether parties are satisfying their economic needs but also whether they are reflecting traditional values, upholding stability and adopting a tough stance on law and order.

But amid Britain's tumultuous debates over Brexit there has emerged another view which emphasises the role of cultural values and identity related to nationalism versus internationalism. Since 2014, some have argued that these value divides have become key to explaining why Britain experienced things like rise of the UK Independence Party, the 2016 vote to leave the EU and further changes that followed, like the rise of the Brexit Party[i].

In this report we pay special attention to these core values and attitudes and examine the role they are playing in reshaping British politics. In particular we examine the extent to which values have changed in modern Britain, and the extent to which they matter politically now compared to the past. Are left-right values as important as they once were? Is there evidence of a liberal-backlash and an authoritarian turn? And how does the issue of Europe cut across patterns of political support?

Amid all of these debates lie the people who we are interested in exploring: low-income voters. As we will see, people who are struggling to get by on low incomes have played a critical role in shaping the recent period of turbulence in British politics and look set to remain central to the outcome of elections. Low-income voters, as we have shown in three previous reports with JRF, are important for several reasons. First, they were far more likely to vote to leave the EU than people from wealthy households, not least because many have faced what we call a 'double whammy', with their own lack of qualifications being compounded by a lack of opportunities in their local areas. Second, low-income voters were also key to explaining Jeremy Corbyn's surprisingly strong result at the 2017 general election, although their electoral potential was still not fully mobilized. And, third, low-income voters are also key to deciding the fate of Britain's main parties in an area that will become central to explaining the outcome of the next general election: Scotland. In short, there are multiple reasons why all of Britain's political parties would do well to think about how to appeal to, win over, mobilise and hold people on lower incomes.

In this report, we help people fulfil this task by presenting the most comprehensive overview of low-income voters in Britain that has ever been undertaken. We look at how the turnout, volatility, political choices and attitudes of low-income voters have all evolved over the past three decades, from 1987 until 2017. We take a step back and examine the bigger picture - and one that will need to be looked at by our political parties if they are serious about winning power at the next election.
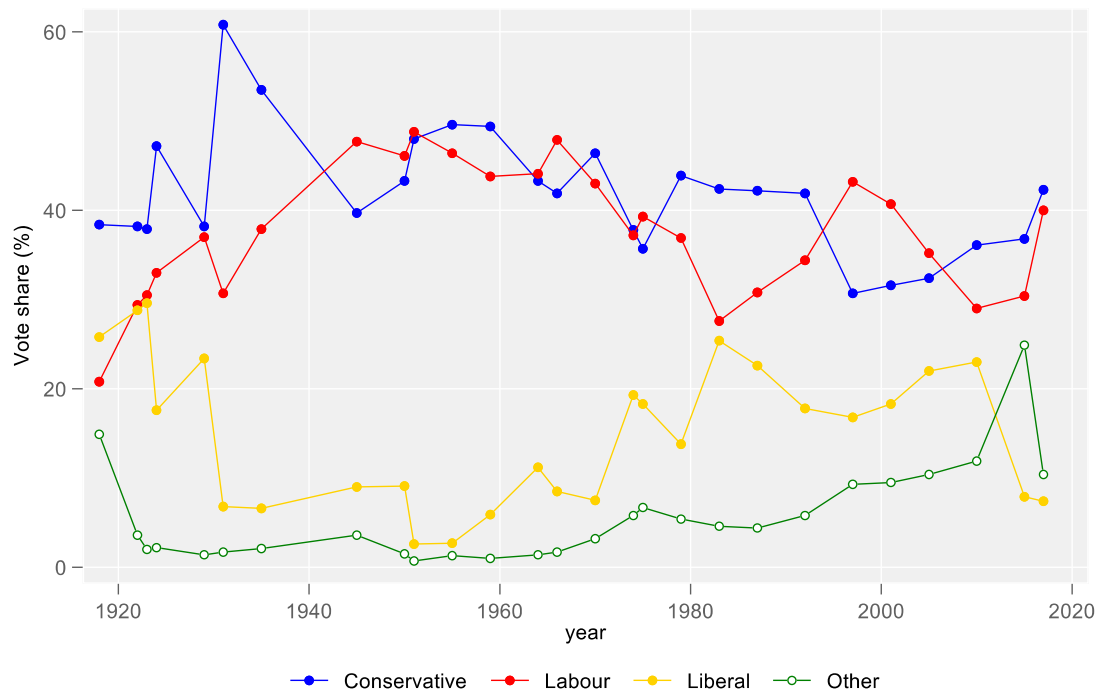
Political background

Recent general elections have been highly unpredictable. In June 2017 Britain went to the polls for a nation-wide vote for the third time in two years, and for the third time the result confounded expectations. The Conservatives were widely tipped to win an improved majority but ended up losing ground in an election that produced a hung parliament.

For the incumbent Conservative Party, a general election that had been called to stamp its authority on parliament ended in a retreat. Under the leadership of Theresa May, who had become the party's leader only eleven months earlier, the Conservative Party polled 42.3% of the vote, an increase of 5.4 points on its result in 2015 and its highest share of the vote since Margaret Thatcher's landslide in 1983 (see Figure 1). But in the eyes of many it was a pyrrhic victory. The Conservatives won only 317 seats, thirteen fewer than in 2015 when David Cameron had won a small but surprising majority.

For the Labour Party, meanwhile, an election that some had feared would culminate in a historic loss and perhaps a devastating split instead ended with heroic defeat. Prior

to the campaign, when in some polls Labour had languished 21 points behind the Conservatives, some had talked of the party slumping to its lowest number of seats since the 1930s. But under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, Labour outperformed the final opinion polls by an average of five points, receiving 40% of the vote – the party's highest share since Tony Blair's second landslide in 2001 and the third highest since 1970.
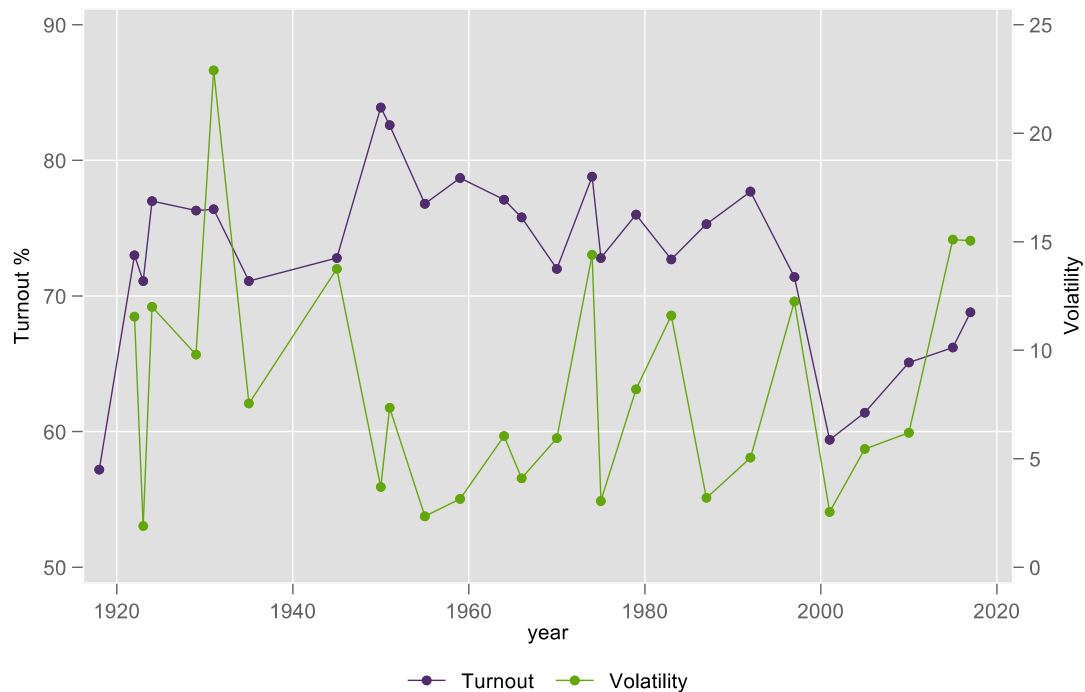
Figure 1: General election results in the UK, 1918-2017

Yet despite neither party managing to secure an overall majority, one feature of the election was the return to dominance of the two main parties. In 2017 both the Conservatives and Labour polled over 40% of the vote each for the first time in a general election since 1970.

Such trends were mirrored in a slump of public support for 'the others', with the share of the vote going to parties other than Labour or the Conservatives falling from 32% in 2015 to just 17.5% two years later. The collapse of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which had campaigned for Brexit, was especially noticeable. Compared to 2015, when UKIP had received almost four million votes, only two years later UKIP's share of the national vote dropped from almost 13% to just 1.8%. The Scottish National Party (SNP), Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Greens also recorded declines in their vote share.

After decades when elections had provided voters with echoes rather than choices, the 2017 contest was also one where there was a more meaningful policy difference between the main parties: Theresa May's vision of a 'hard Brexit' versus Jeremy Corbyn's anti-austerity platform and populist cry to represent the 'many not the few'. Faced with a clear and compelling choice, the 2017 election engaged voters to an extent not seen for the last twenty years, with turnout at 69%, the highest since 1997 (see Figure 2).

Yet the return to two-party politics and upturn in participation does not mean that mass parties in British politics are now back in the same position as they were in the 1960s when they dominated the political landscape. Recent elections have taken place in a context of extremely high electoral volatility – with more churn than at any other time since the end of the Second World War (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Turnout and volatility in general elections, 1918-2017

This volatility is a major reason why elections have been so unpredictable. Since 2001 – when turnout reached its lowest level since the extension of the Franchise in 1918, both turnout and volatility have steadily increased. As more people enter, or re-enter, the political process, they appear to be less tied to any one particular political party and more likely to switch which party they vote for. In 2017 both main parties managed to attract votes from the smaller parties, but there is no guarantee that this uneasy coalition will hold. And as the recent European Elections illustrate there is a great deal of potential for political fragmentation to increase once again.

In this context of high volatility and political churn, set against the backdrop of Brexit uncertainty, the potential for major upheavals in the next general election is substantial. While the 2017 general election result defied predictions and also easy explanations, the next election – whenever it is called – will also have the capacity to surprise. In this report we examine the long-term trends and shine a light on the emerging political divides in order to better understand the political trajectory that the country is on.

We do so with particular focus on the attitudes and behaviour of those on low incomes.

Data and methods

To examine the political behaviour and attitudes of people on low incomes we analyse a specially constructed dataset which combines each of the face-to-face British Election Studies (BES) since 1987[ii]. This series covers thirty years, eight elections and consists of more than 26,000 interviews. The BES face-to-face survey represents the gold standard for analysing the behaviour and attitudes of voters in British politics. It is based on a nationally representative probability sample and conducted by a team of specially trained investigators, who carry out the face-to-face interviews with respondents in their homes. Investigators make repeated attempts to contact selected respondents, which means that people who are hard to reach or do not typically take part in surveys are still included (Mellon and Prosser, 2016). This makes the survey much more representative than online or internet surveys.

Another advantage of the BES is that it is carried out just after people voted at a general election, when the issues and their voting decision are still fresh in their mind. This is particularly important when it comes to turnout, which is not possible to analyse in a robust or reliable way using internet surveys which tend to include over-engaged samples.

The questions in the BES cover a range of topics, from the social and demographic backgrounds of respondents to what they think about key issues of the day. Our key interest though is the behaviour and attitudes of different income groups, particularly those on low incomes. For this report, we use a measure of equivalised household income before housing costs, which takes into account the total household income and adjusts it for the number of adults living in the household and whether or not there are any children living at home[iii]. We then construct income groups based on quintiles in each election year. We define those on low incomes as the bottom quintile and those on high incomes as the top quintile (the highest 20%).

This measure of equivalised income provides a more detailed and robust measure of income than we used in our previous reports. We also use high quality face-to-face survey data rather than internet samples. As a result some of our estimates differ to those published previously.
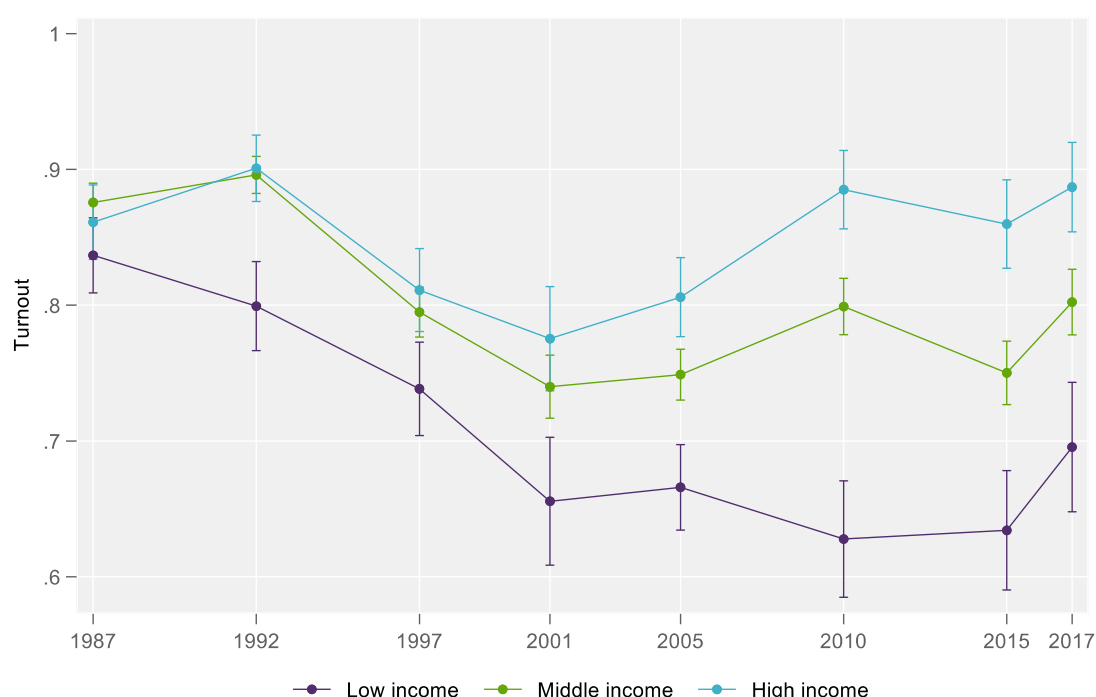
Low-income voters: turnout, voting behaviour and volatility

Following the 2017 general election, there was a debate about turnout. At 69%, turnout was the highest that it had been for two decades, since Tony Blair and New Labour's first landslide election victory in 1997 (Heath and Goodwin, 2017). Much of the debate focused on the magnitude of a pro-Labour 'Youthquake'. Turnout among people aged under 30 years old increased by about nine percentage points, though whether this qualified as a 'Youthquake' was contested. While some analysts have argued that a sizeable 'Youthquake' did in fact occur (see here and here), others suggest that this has been overstated.

One neglected aspect in this debate on turnout concerns low-income voters. Between 2015 and 2017, turnout among people on low incomes increased by about seven percentage points. This increase is all the more remarkable as it represents the first time in 30 years that turnout among those on low incomes has noticeably increased.

Figure 3 displays the probability of voting in a general election for those on high incomes and low incomes since 1987[iv]. The vertical bars indicate the 95 confidence intervals – or margin of error. As can be seen, those on low incomes have generally been somewhat less likely to vote than those on high incomes, though the size of the turnout gap between the two groups has increased substantially since the 1980s. In 1987, there was no significant difference in the rates of turnout among people on low or high incomes. Both registered about the same level of turnout. However, since the 1980s a significant turnout gap between the two income groups has emerged. And whereas turnout has been on the increase among those on high incomes since the low water mark of 2001, turnout among those on low incomes has stagnated. In 2015, the difference in reported turnout between those on high incomes and those on low incomes was 22 percentage points, compared to less than just three percentage points in 1987.

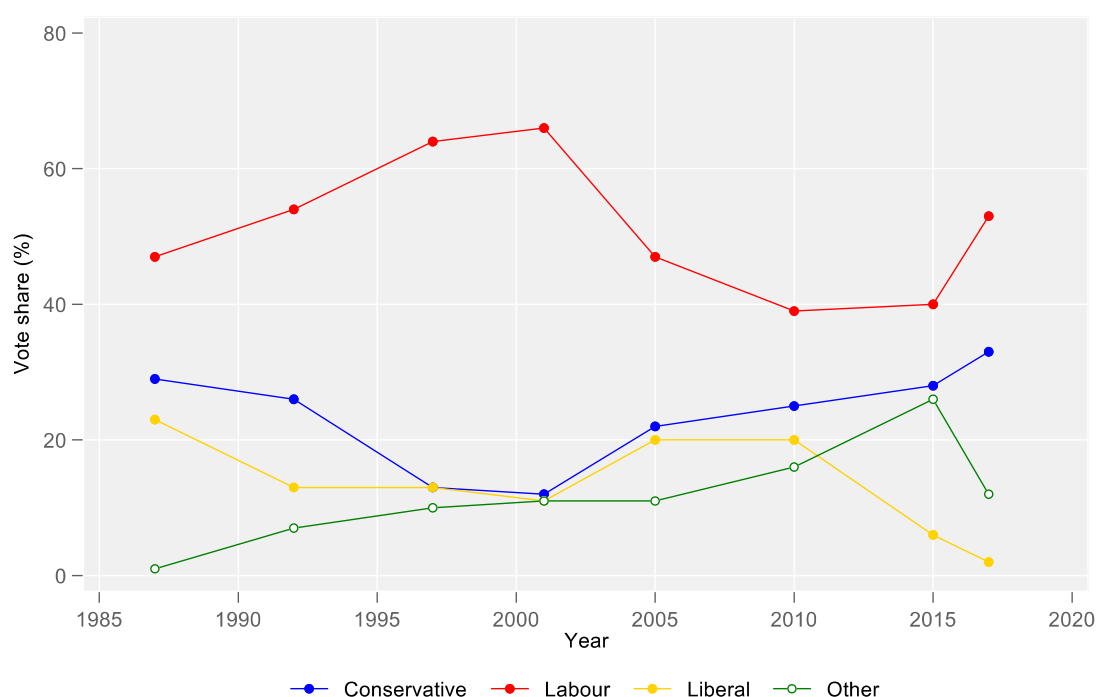**Figure 3: turnout by income, 1987-2017**

The general election of 2017 was the first such contest in thirty years to buck the trend of declining turnout among low-income voters. This pattern still holds even if we control for a wide variety of other demographic characteristics, such as age, education, gender and occupation. After a long period in which their political voice had diminished, there is some evidence that low-income voters have once again become more involved in the political process.

Where did these extra votes from people on low incomes go? At first glance, there are reasons to think that both Labour and the Conservatives benefitted. As we documented in an earlier report, in 2017, and for the first time in a generation, both of Britain's main parties made a concerted effort to pitch for people on low incomes, albeit in slightly different ways. Whereas Prime Minister Theresa May and the Conservatives had talked about tackling 'burning injustices', the leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, offered these voters a range of specific policies amid an economically populist agenda, promising to work for 'the many not the few' (Goodwin and Heath, 2017).

Figure 4 shows the percentage of low-income voters who supported Labour, the Conservatives, the Liberals or another party in each general election since 1987, using British Election Study face-to-face data. Broadly speaking, those on low incomes are much more likely to vote for Labour than the Conservatives or other parties. This was particularly true in 1997 and 2001 in the heyday of New Labour when over 60% of low-income voters supported the party. Support for Labour among those on low incomes declined markedly in 2005 – by nearly 20 percentage points, and fell further in 2010 and 2015 to just 40 percentage points. Meanwhile, support for the Conservatives among low-income voters increased during this period. This underlines why Labour and the Conservatives have more reason than ever to take low-income voters seriously and ensure that the offer to them remains compelling; for Labour, this is about retaining a clear lead over the Conservatives among this group while for the Conservatives this is about building on recent gains among low-income voters in 2017.

Figure 4: party support among low-income voters, 1987-2017
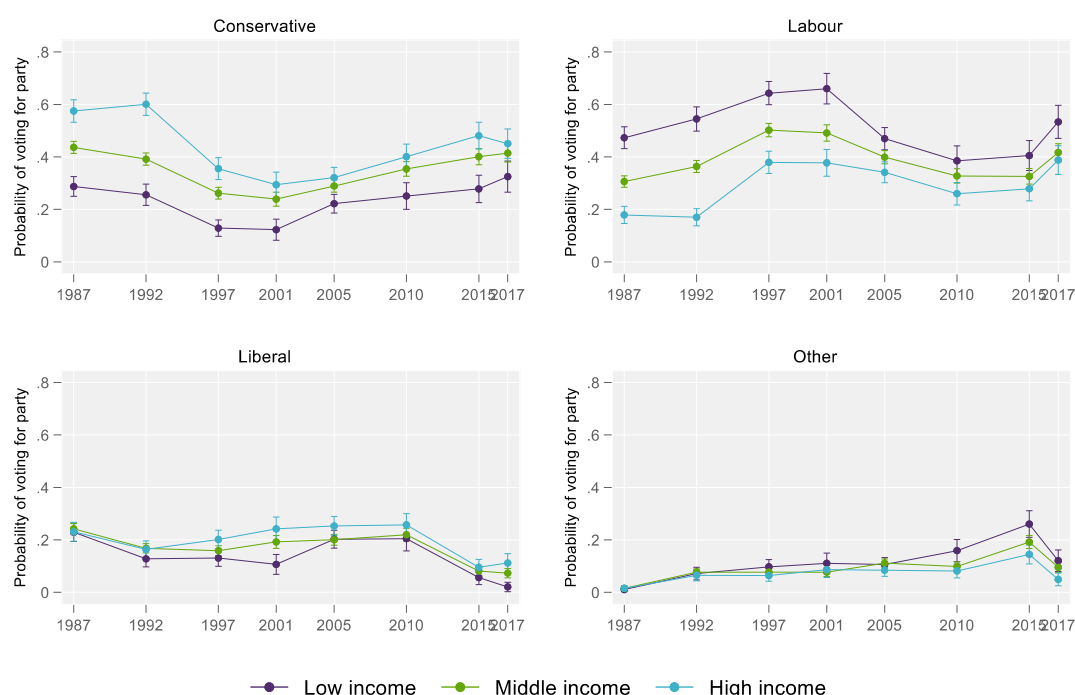

In 2017 both of the main parties increased their support among low-income voters. Under Jeremy Corbyn, support for Labour increased by 13 percentage points among those on low incomes to reach 53%. This was the first time that Labour enjoyed majority backing among low-income voters since Blair's second term. Support for

Conservatives increased by just under five percentage points to reach 33% among people on low incomes. Even though this was the Conservative Party's highest level of support among low-income voters since the era of Margaret Thatcher it still left them some 20 percentage points behind the Labour Party among this key electoral group.

We can get a clearer sense of the role that income plays in shaping voting behaviour by examining how support for each party varies across different income groups. Figure 5 displays the probability of voting for each party for those on high incomes and low incomes for every general election since 1987. From the top left panel of Figure 5, we can see that people on high incomes have generally been more likely to vote Conservative than people on low incomes, and from the top right panel we can see that the reverse is true for Labour. So, in 1987, support for the Conservatives was about 30 percentage points higher among people on high incomes than it was among those on low incomes, while support for Labour was about 30 points higher among those on low incomes than it was among those on high incomes. During this period then a person's level of income made a big difference to their probability of supporting each of the two main parties.
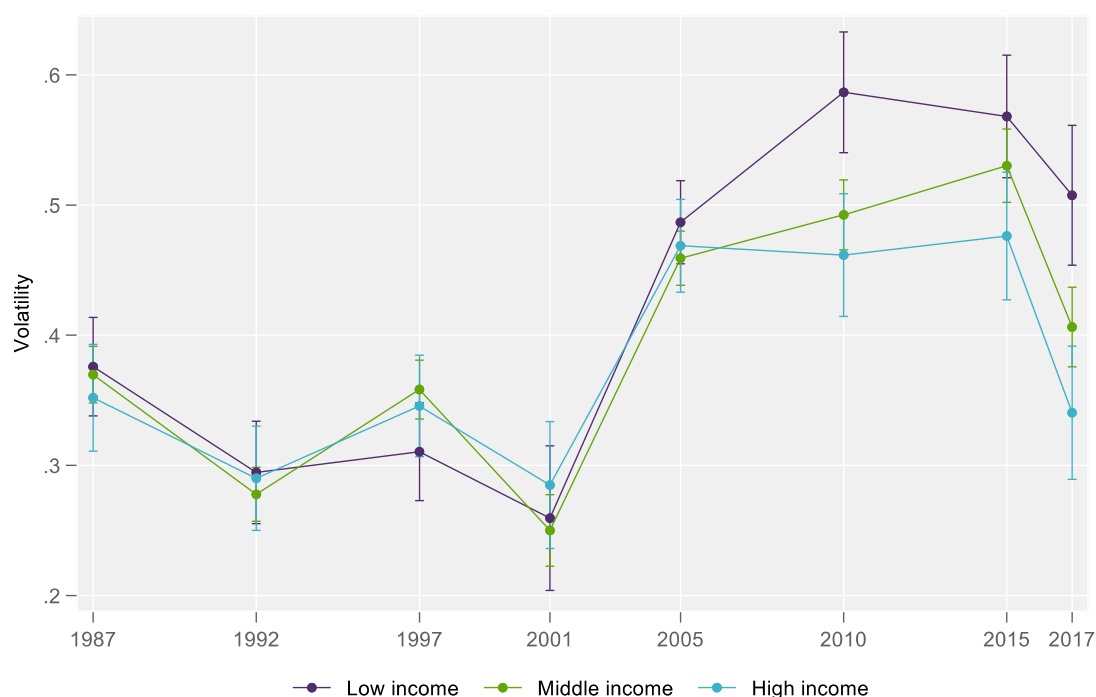
Figure 5: party support by income, 1987-2017

Over time though these differences in party support between income groups have become somewhat less pronounced, though they are still visible. In 2017, support for the Conservatives was just 12 points higher among people on high incomes than it was among those on low incomes while support for Labour was 14 points higher among those on low incomes than among people on higher incomes. Both parties have therefore become less distinctive in terms of which income groups vote for them. Part of the reason for this narrowing is that low-income voters are now somewhat more likely to vote Conservative than they were previously and people on high incomes are somewhat more likely to support Labour now than they were previously. Nonetheless, 2017 was notable in that both parties saw their vote share among low-income voters

increase (and the Tories saw their vote share among those on high incomes decline somewhat).

These findings indicate that, in 2017, low-income voters were more incorporated in the mainstream of British politics than they had been for a generation. With turnout among low-income voters up, and these voters becoming more visible in the electorates of both Labour and the Conservatives, this group has thus come to occupy a more important position in shaping the outcome of elections. Both of the main parties have good reasons to think seriously about how to keep or attract this group.

Figure 6: rate of volatility by income, 1987-2017

One way to illustrate this is with respect to 'electoral volatility', namely the extent to which people switch their votes from one party to another, from one election to the next. Volatile voters are people who either change the party that they vote for between elections or change whether they vote or not. Whereas the overall rate of volatility in British politics remained low in the 1980s and 1990s, since the turn of the millennium it has increased significantly (Mellon, 2017; Fieldhouse et al. 2019). But we can drill down and look in particular at low-income voters.

Figure 6 reveals how, in recent years, these voters have become more volatile, either switching their votes among the various parties or switching in-and-out of voting. In each election since 2010 more than 50% of low-income voters have either changed whether they voted or not between elections, or changed which party they voted for. And in 2017 they were significantly more likely than people on middle or high incomes to do so. With low-income voters less predictable or stable in their voting behaviour than they were in the past, this suggests that parties today have a better chance of persuading them to shift their support, provided they offer such voters the right messages and policies. This could reap big rewards. Given that 50% of those on the
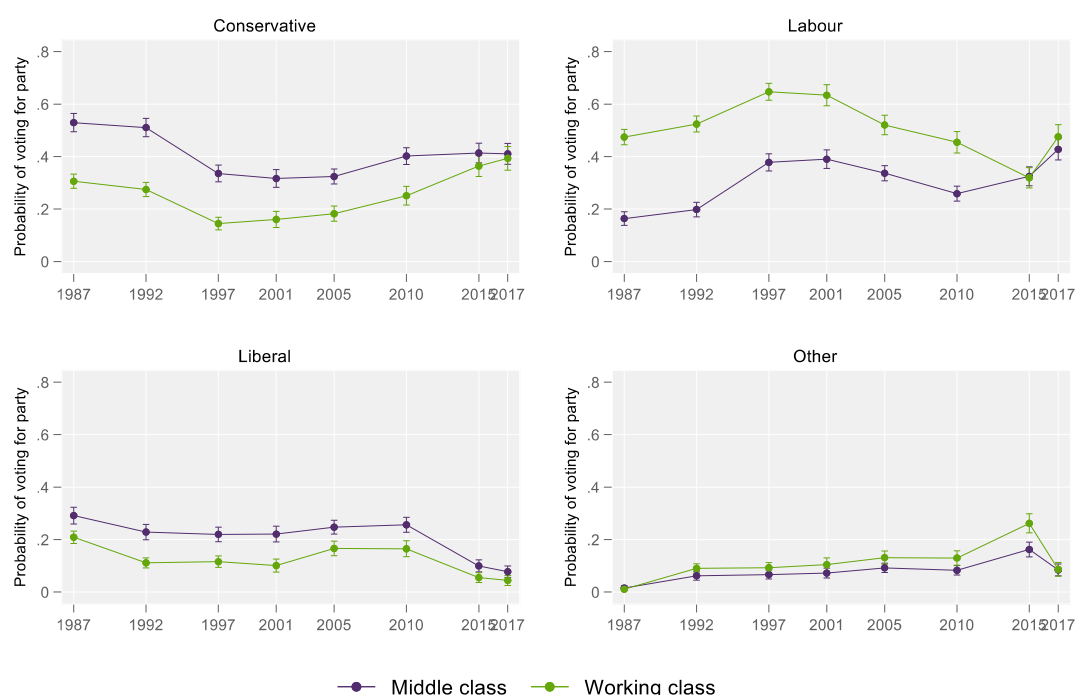
lowest 20% of incomes are 'volatile' this could equate to 10% of the electorate – or around four million 'volatile' low-income voters who are up for grabs[v].

Income, occupation, economic evaluations and vote choice

How do income divides in Britain compare to other social and economic divides in the country? And which of these are most important when it comes to people choosing who to vote for at elections? The study of social inequality in Britain has long been concerned with questions of class, measured in terms of people's occupation. "Class is the basis of British party politics", said academic Peter Pulzer in 1967, "all else is embellishment and detail".

But whereas class was once considered key to understanding British politics, today, in the shadow of the 2016 referendum, the prevailing wisdom is that class is less decisive relative to other factors, such as age, which some herald as the new dividing line (YouGov, 2017). We can further interrogate this by exploring how different classes voted at every general election since 1987. Figure 7 presents the probability of voting for each party among the middle-class and working-class. We measure class in terms of occupation, derived from a modified version of the 'Goldthorpe class schema'.

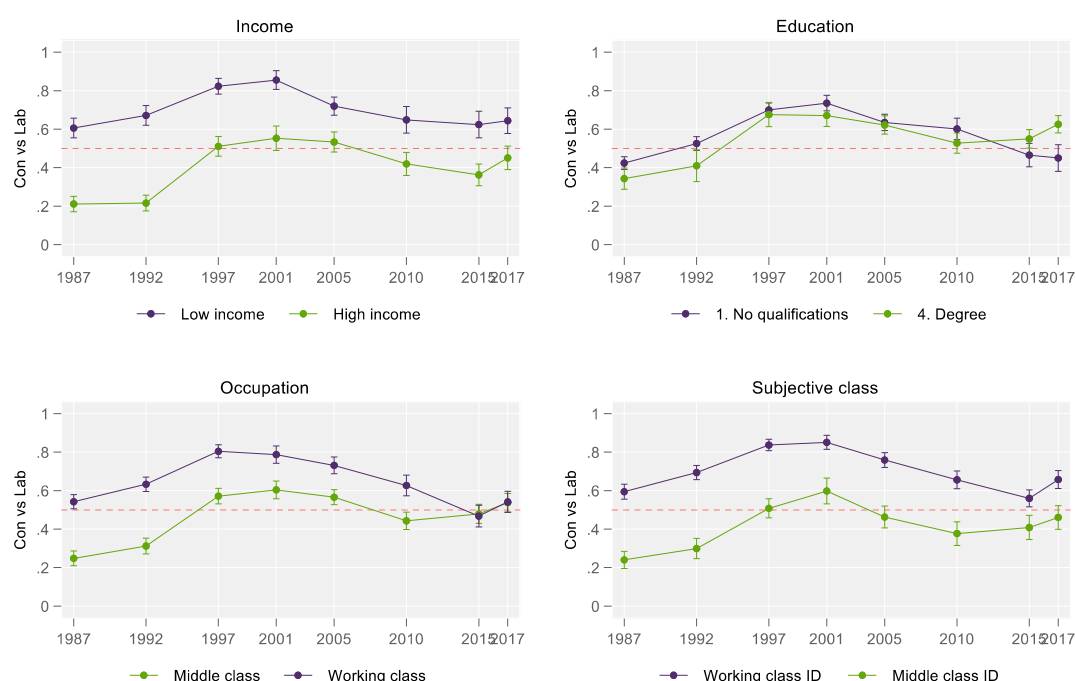**Figure 7: Voting by Occupational Class, 1987-2017**

What do we find? Over the last thirty years the difference between the working class who traditionally supported Labour and the middle class who traditionally supported the Conservatives has narrowed. In the 1960s, support for Labour was some 40 points higher among the working class than the middle class. By 2010 this gap had narrowed to less than 20 points. In 2017 it was just five percentage points. In addition, working-class voters have become more likely to vote for parties other than Labour. In 2017,

the Conservatives received their highest ever share of the vote among the working class and were just as popular among the working class as they were among the middle class (Heath and Goodwin, 2017). This underlines why the next Conservative leader would do well to reflect on how his party's base has been changing over the years and how Conservatives can expand their gains among working-class and low-income voters.

Some interpret the blurring of these boundaries between the choices of the working class and middle class to imply that class is no longer important and that other factors like age and education are now far more key. However, socioeconomic status is still important. It is just that it is increasingly difficult to measure based on people's occupation. The decline of traditional industry means that there are fewer manual working-class jobs available while the expansion of the middle class has meant that it has become increasingly heterogeneous, and contains people from a whole variety of different jobs who may or may not share similar political preferences.

To put this in perspective, next we consider which of the two main parties different social groups prefer – and how the political salience of these social divides has changed over time.

Figure 8: the changing balance of party support between Conservatives and Labour among different social groups, 1987-2017

For simplicity, we focus just on the two-party share of the vote and whether people prefer Labour or the Conservatives. Figure 8 plots which of the two parties different 'sub-groups' prefer and how this has changed over time, controlling for demographics[vi]. If a group is evenly split between the two parties – and gives equal support to each - then the probability of supporting one party over the other is 0.5 (or fifty fifty). This is illustrated with a red dotted line in each of the figures. Values above 0.5 indicate that the group in question is more likely to vote for Labour than the

Conservatives and values below 0.5 indicate that the group in question is more likely to vote for the Conservatives than Labour.

Generally, we can see that those groups most at risk of being trapped in poverty are more likely to vote Labour than Conservative (their probability of doing so is generally greater than 0.5) – and are more likely to do so than those groups less at risk of being trapped in poverty. However, we can see that the divide between different groups varies, and also varies over time. The divide between Labour and Conservatives in terms of income is greater than it is with respect to occupational class. That is whereas in 2017 both the middle class and working class are pretty much evenly split between whether they vote Labour or Conservative, those on low incomes are still more likely to prefer Labour and those on high incomes are still more likely to prefer the Conservatives.

People's subjective social class also matters, though somewhat less than it used to. People who think of themselves as working class are more likely to vote Labour, regardless of their actual occupation. By contrast people who think of themselves as middle class are marginally more likely to support the Conservatives. Interestingly, the way in which education is related to vote choice has recently changed. Historically, there wasn't much difference between which party those with different levels of educational qualification supported, once we took account of their occupation and income. But in 2017, for the first time, graduates are more likely to prefer Labour over the Conservatives, and are more likely than those without any qualifications to do so. For the first time then there is evidence of an educational divide in support for the two main parties.
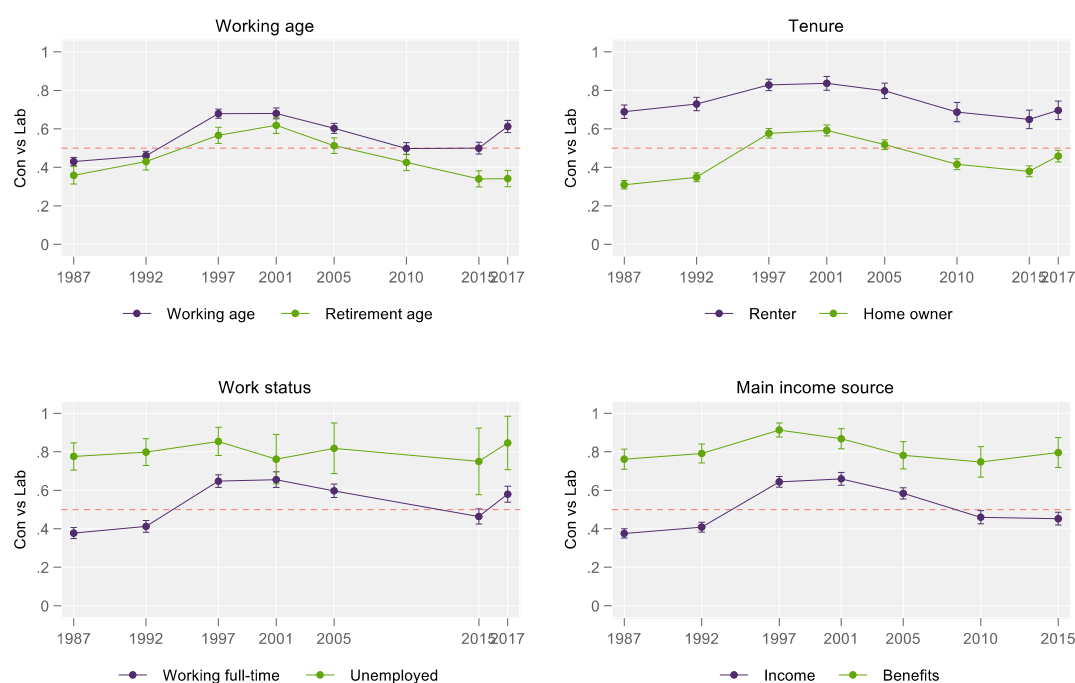
The results indicate that claims that class and inequality do not matter politically any more have been over-stated. The way in which they matter may have changed – but class based on income still plays an important role in shaping how people vote in modern Britain, with those on low incomes and people who are the most at risk of poverty behaving differently to those on high incomes.

This is also evident in Figure 9, which considers additional indicators of poverty. People who are of working age are far more likely than retired people to vote Labour rather than Conservative. This divide was somewhat stronger in 2017 than in previous elections, reflecting the growing importance of age as an electoral divide. People who own their own home, either outright or with a mortgage, are more likely than renters (either private, social or council) to vote Conservative rather than Labour. This divide has stayed relatively even over time. It is surprising giving the squeeze on property in recent years that this has not emerged as a stronger dividing line in party support.

People who are unemployed are much more likely than those working full-time to vote Labour than Conservative. And welfare-recipients are much more likely to vote Labour than people whose main source of income comes from work. Although this divide narrowed somewhat during the Blair years it is now just as pronounced as it was during the late Thatcher years and Major government. Though many of these differences disappear when we control for someone's level of income, suggesting that they do not have an independent effect on vote choice over and above how much

money someone earns (though of course they may be a contributing factor to their level of income in the first place).

Figure 9: the changing balance of party support between Conservatives and Labour by work status, 1987-2017
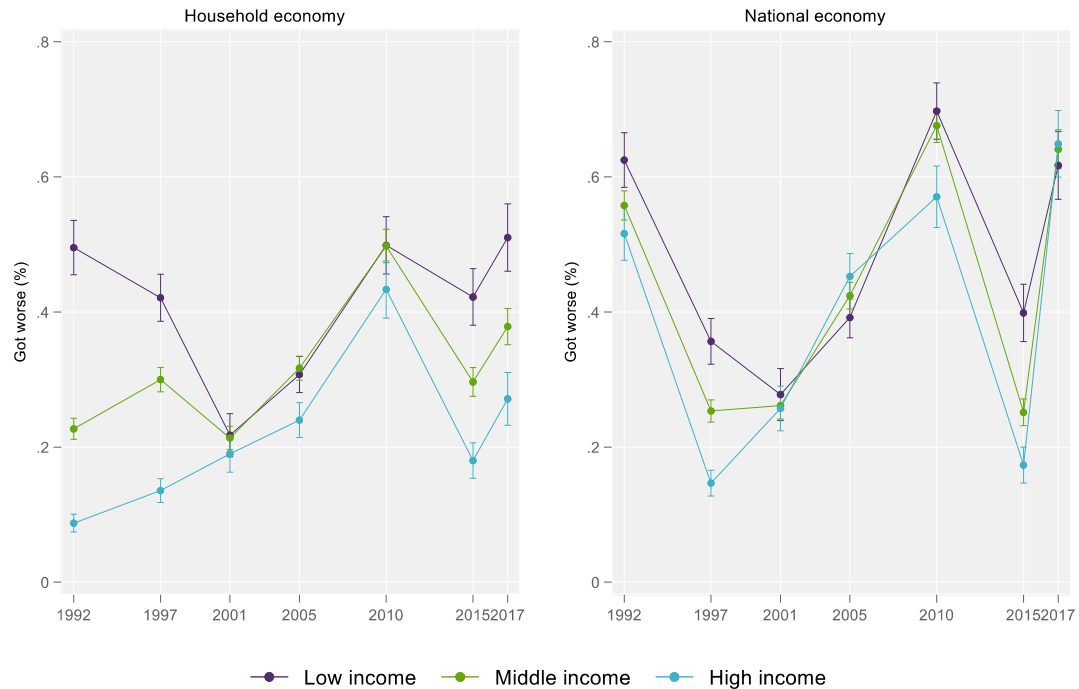

We can drill down further by exploring differences in people's subjective experiences of economic well-being. Evaluations of the economy are often thought to be very important determinants of voting behaviour. According to something called the 'reward-punishment model', people tend to reward the government for good economic performance by voting for them again or punish them for bad economic performance by voting for the opposition. Figure 10 shows how people's perception of their household's economic situation and also that of the economy varies by their level of income.

Generally speaking, people on low incomes are much more likely than those on high incomes to say that the financial situation in their household has deteriorated over the last year, particularly during periods when there have been pronounced downturns. During the Blair years, people on low incomes were much more positive about their household financial system than they have been at other periods. But, today, people on low incomes are just as likely to say that their household is struggling now as they were in the immediate aftermath of the financial crises in 2010, and 1992. By contrast, people's evaluations of whether the national economy has got better or worse over the last year do not vary much by income. This suggests that even as Britain has moved away from the post-2008 financial crisis and into some more positive macroeconomic shifts, such as rising employment, falling unemployment and real wage growth, those on low-incomes simply do not believe it. As far as Britain's low-income voters are concerned, they are just as pessimistic about their household's financial position as they were during the economic crises of the early 1990s and post-2008 climate. This should worry the Conservative Party, which as we noted above has made up some

good ground in recent years among these voters. Clearly, these voters are asking for further help to improve their household's financial position.
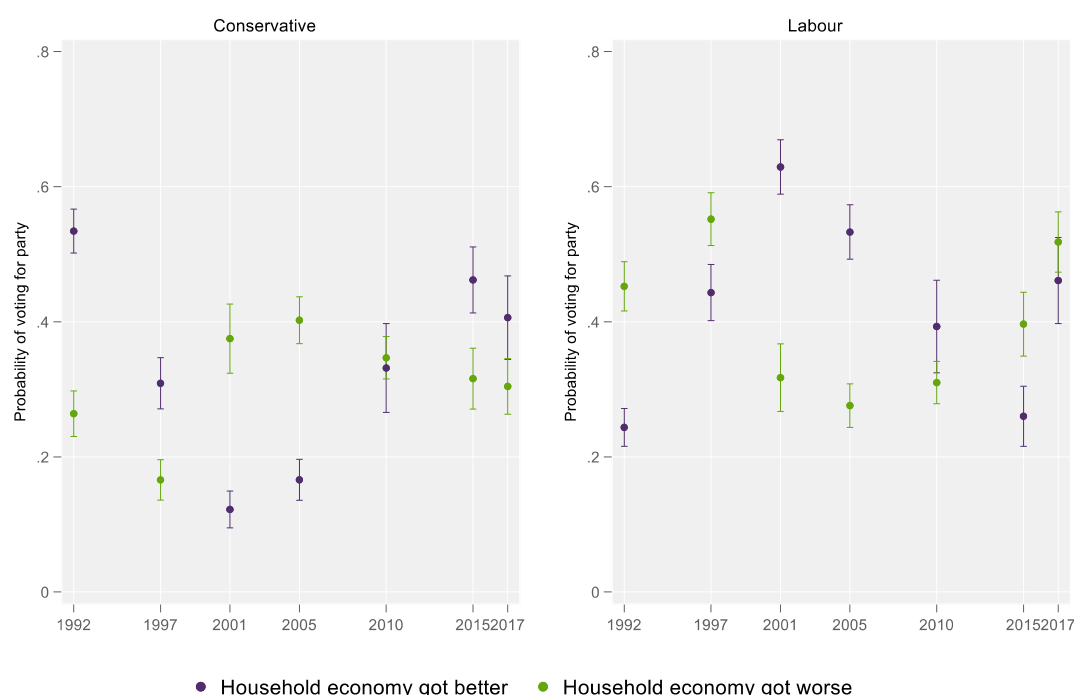
Figure 10: evaluations of the economy (saying it got a lot worse) by income

While controlling for other factors, like demographics, people who felt that their household's finances had deteriorated during the past year are generally more likely to vote for the opposition than people who think that their household's economic situation improved (see Figure 11). This is in line with the 'reward-punishment' model of voting behaviour. So, when the Conservatives were the incumbent government in 1992 and 1997, people who thought that their household finances had got worse were more likely to vote Labour than people who thought they had improved. And when Labour were the incumbent the pattern reversed, and people who thought their household situation had got worse were more likely to vote Conservative.

In recent years, though, these subjective evaluations of the economy appear to be somewhat less important than they were previously, perhaps because voters are unclear about who to blame for the current economic situation and so are unsure who to punish or perhaps because they are unclear about whether things would improve much under a Labour-led government and so are unsure who to reward. In either case, both parties would stand to benefit from making a clearer case about how their policies might help to improve the financial situation of people's households, particularly those on low incomes.

Figure 11: household economic evaluations and party support, 1992-2017

● Household economy got better   ● Household economy got worse

Low-income voters and value divides in Britain, 1987-2017

So far, we have seen how low-income voters tend to vote Labour while those on higher incomes tend to vote Conservative, although they have become more volatile in recent years. This indicates that economic inequality continues to be an important influence on people's choices at elections. Yet low-income voters, and people who are in, or at risk of, poverty, also face competing pressures.

People on lower incomes tend to have fewer educational qualifications and so are often more likely to favour leaving the European Union and endorsing a range of other socially 'authoritarian' policies, like strengthening law and order (Ford and Goodwin 2014). Such views might lead them to vote for the Conservatives. But, at the same time, people with few qualifications and those on low incomes also tend to give more support to left-wing economic policies, such as a more assertive approach to redistributing resources from 'the few to the many', which may lead them towards Labour (Goodwin and Heath, 2017).

The main parties need to think seriously about these competing influences because they were on full display at the 2017 general election. Labour and the Conservatives sought to appeal to low-income voters in different ways. While Conservatives pitched to the identity concerns that were held by low-income voters, promising to deliver Brexit and reduce immigration, Labour pitched to their economic concerns by promising to oppose austerity, curb inequality and raise their living standards. In this way, the 2017 general election pulled these groups in different directions.

This is linked to a wider debate, as we noted at the outset, about the relative importance of different 'dividing lines' in politics; whereas some argue that the

traditional 'left versus right' dividing line is still key, others contend that this is now making way for a 'liberal versus authoritarian' dividing line or a 'nationalist-internationalist' dividing line which puts value divides rather than debates over economic competition at the heart of our politics.

We can explore this more closely by investigating how these divides have evolved over the longer-term; what people think about a range of economic and cultural issues; how their attitudes have changed over time; and to what extent, if at all, they are influencing people's decisions at the ballot box.

To examine support for the more traditional economic 'left-right' divide, we create a multi-item index based on people's attitudes towards economic fairness, redistribution and inequality. We draw on three questions that have consistently been asked in more or less the same way[vii]: 'Do you agree or disagree that there is one law for the rich and one law for the poor?'; 'Do you agree or disagree that ordinary working people get their fair share of the nation's wealth?'; and 'Some people feel that government should make much greater efforts to make people's incomes more equal. Other people feel that government should be much less concerned about how equal people's incomes are. Where would you place yourself on this scale?'. Taken together, these questions tap into whether or not someone holds a broadly left-wing outlook or a broadly right-wing outlook. The index is created using a statistical technique called 'principal components analysis', which combines all the responses to these questions into a single scale with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. Negative values therefore indicate a more left-wing position and positive values indicate a more right-wing position.

To examine support for socially authoritarian values we create a multi-item index based on attitudes towards the death penalty, prison sentences, traditional values and censorship. Again, we draw on questions that have been asked more or less in the same way across all of the surveys. These include asking people whether or not they agree with statements like: 'For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence'; 'People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences'; 'Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values'; and 'Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards'. As before, the index is created using principal components analysis. Negative values indicate a more socially authoritarian position and positive values indicate a more socially liberal position[viii].

To examine attitudes towards the EU, we draw on a series of questions that have been asked about Britain's relationship with Europe. Questions about the EU have not been asked in a completely consistent way so we have to be a little cautious in terms of how we interpret the results. From 1987 to 1997, respondents were asked whether Britain should continue or withdraw from the EEC/EC. From 2001 to 2010, respondents were asked whether they approved or disapproved of Britain's EU membership. And, in 2017, respondents were asked how they would vote if there was another referendum, whether they would vote to leave or remain in the EU. We distinguish between whether respondents are broadly supportive of the EU (continue/approve/remain), broadly negative towards the EU (withdraw/disapprove/leave) or whether they are unsure/neutral. This question also taps into the broader 'nationalist-internationalist'

value divide and as past research has shown is also strong related to attitudes towards immigration ([Ford and Goodwin 2014](#)).

All of this allows us to paint a comprehensive picture of how values have evolved in modern Britain and how attitudes toward left-right issues, liberal-authoritarian issues and Britain's relationship with Europe have changed over time among different income groups. Figure 12 begins by showing the pattern with respect to support for left-right and liberal-authoritarian values.

The first thing to notice is that people on low incomes tend to hold much more left-wing attitudes than people on high incomes. This was the case in 1987 and it is the case now. There is not much evidence of any long-term change in these values in one direction or the other. There is some evidence of short-term change though. Britain's electorate as a whole drifted somewhat to the left during the Conservative years, between 1987 and 1997, and then drifted somewhat to the right during the Blair years, from 1997 to 2005. This is consistent with what the academic John Bartle calls the 'thermostat' of British public opinion, whereby public opinion moves in response to governmental activity. So when government policy goes too far to the right the public shifts to the left, and when government policy goes too far to the left the public shifts to the right. Since the financial crisis of 2008, there is evidence that the electorate has once again tacked towards the left, although this appears to be more pronounced among people on high rather than low incomes.

By contrast, there is evidence of a much more gradual and consistent change with respect to attitudes towards the 'liberal-authoritarian' issues, particularly among those on high incomes. Between 1987 and 2017, people on high incomes have become gradually and markedly more liberal, and there has been a clear and noticeable change since 2010. The steady liberal march was also evident among those on low incomes, particularly up until the turn of the century. However, since 2010 there has been an 'authoritarian turn', and people on low incomes are now much more socially authoritarian than they were at the beginning of the new millennium. This pattern holds even if we control for other factors such as age and education.

Because of these deeper changes, this means that today there is more polarization between those on low incomes and high incomes on liberal-authoritarian issues than there was in previous years. Whereas those on high incomes are more liberal than ever before, those on low incomes are not. There is greater cultural disconnect between these two groups than there was in the past. Although this disconnect was visible long before Britain voted for Brexit, it has certainly sharpened in the period since the 2016 referendum.

There is now also more polarization between income groups on liberal-authoritarian issues than there is on left-right issues. In 2017, the gap between those on high incomes and low incomes is nearly twice as large on liberal-authoritarian issues as it is on left-right issues (1.04 vs 0.52). This general pattern still holds if we control for other demographics such as age and education, though the difference is somewhat smaller.

Figure 12: value change by income group, 1987-2017

Left-Right values   Authoritarian-Liberal values

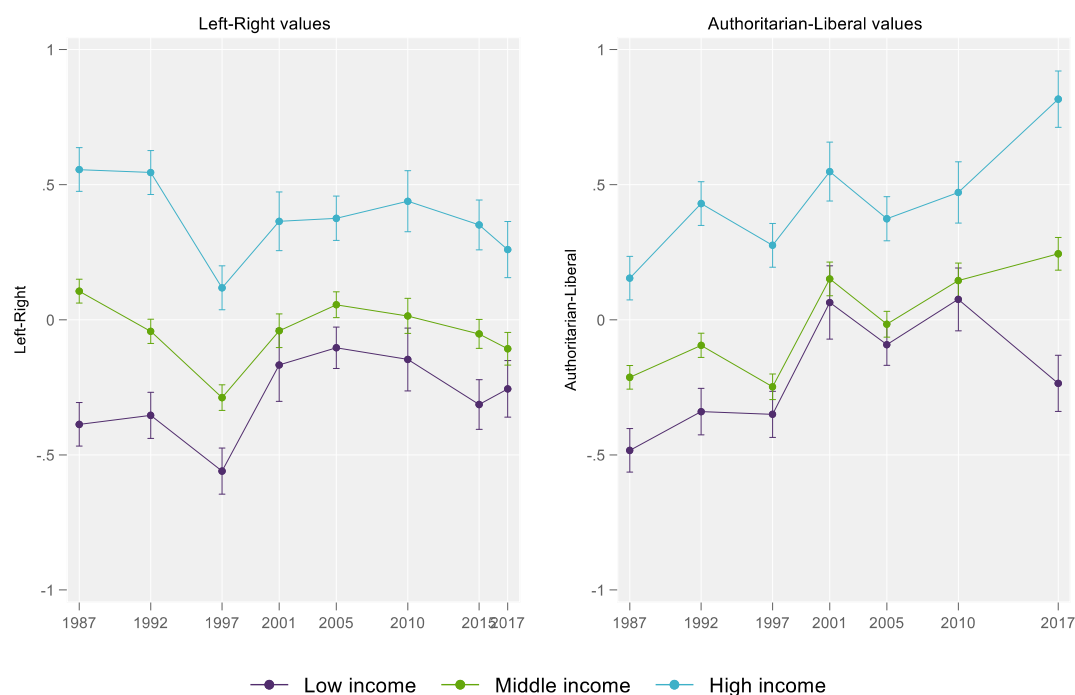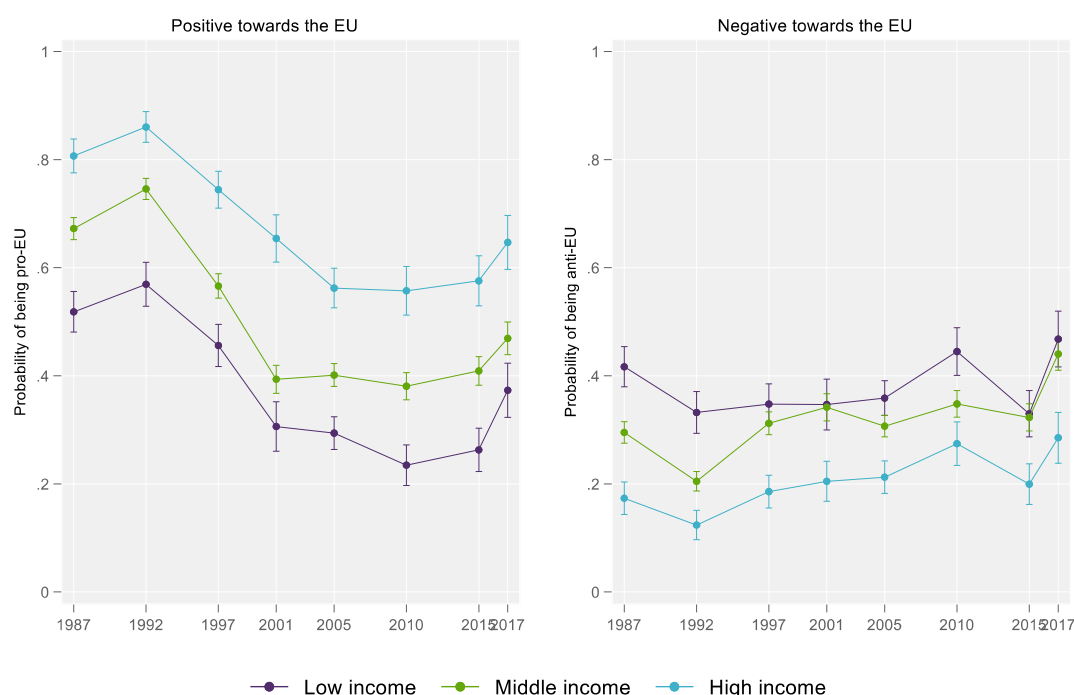Low income   Middle income   High income

Figure 13 shows how attitudes towards the specific issue of Europe have changed among the different income groups since 1987. We focus on those who have a broadly positive outlook towards the EU and those who have a broadly negative outlook. Respondents who were unsure or neutral about the EU are treated as a separate category (but not shown). What is striking is that regardless of how the question is phrased, the pattern is remarkably consistent. Those on high incomes are much more positive towards Europe than those on low incomes, and those on low incomes are much more negative towards Europe than those on high incomes.

The gap between those on high incomes and low incomes has stayed fairly constant, indicating that the structure of these divides are relatively stable over the long-term, and thus unlikely to fade anytime soon. And lastly, whereas there is some evidence that attitudes towards Europe have become somewhat less positive over time – much of this change has been driven by people becoming more unsure. Opposition to Europe among low-income voters has been remarkably stable over the past thirty years; with about 40% consistently expressing a negative outlook on Britain's relationship with Europe.

Figure 13: attitudes towards the EC/EU, 1987-2017

Bringing it all together: how can parties win over low-income voters?

How then do low-income voters choose which party to vote for at elections? Are they influenced more by their attitudes toward traditional left-right issues like economic fairness and redistribution, or are they more strongly influenced by their attitudes and values on the liberal-authoritarian axis? What about the role of Europe? And how might the influence of these things have changed over time?

In this final section, we answer these questions by exploring the relative impact of these values and political issues on people's voting decisions since 1987, both in the electorate as a whole and then specifically among low-income voters. We present the results from a series of models. In each model, we control for basic demographics, such as income (in the full model only), age, education, and gender and examine how the impact of different values on vote choice vary by year.

In Figure 14, we look at the impact of left-right values on vote choice (left-hand panel) and the impact of liberal values on vote choice (right-hand panel) in the electorate at large. The figures show the average marginal effect of different values, controlling for the effect of the demographic variables already mentioned. So, being right-wing increases the probability of voting for the Conservatives by about 20 points in 1987 (and reduces support for Labour by about the same amount)[ix]. By contrast, being right-wing in 2001 only increased support for the Conservatives by about 10 points (and reduced support for Labour by less than just 5 points). We can see then that the impact of left-right values on vote choice was very important in the 1980s and 1990s, but became much less important during the Blair years when the two lines sharply converged. Since then though, there has been a re-emergence of left-right issues as an electoral divide and the lines have once again diverged.
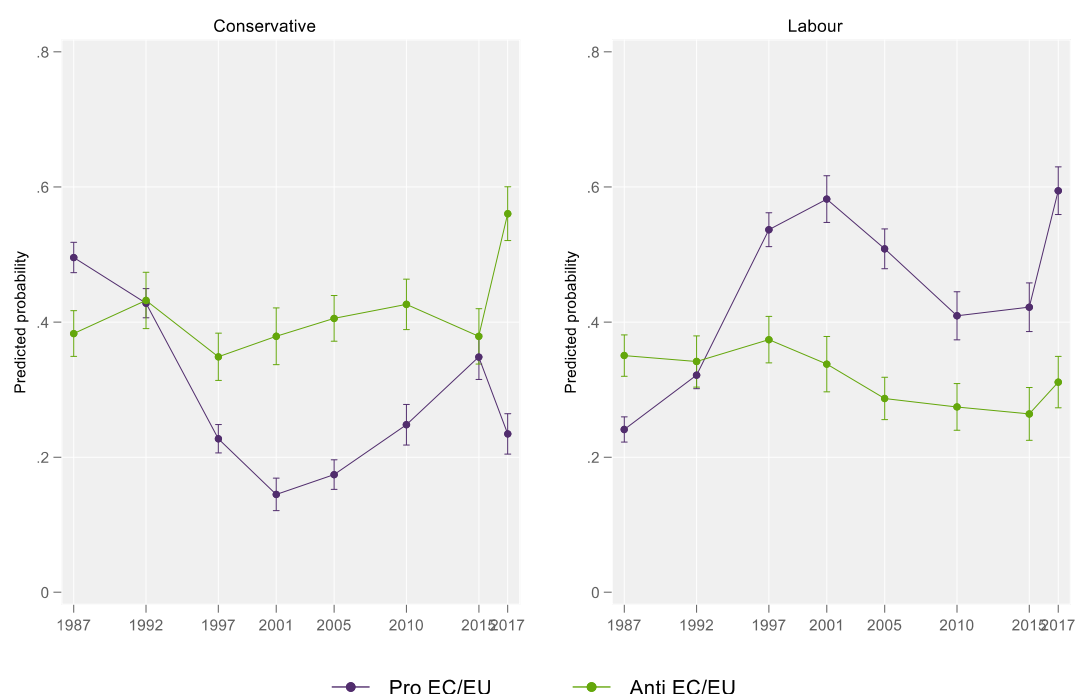
Figure 14: impact of values on vote choice

Turning to the right-hand panel in Figure 14 we can see that socially liberal people have always tended to be more likely to support Labour, by about 5 to 10 percentage points. There is not much evidence that this has changed substantially over time. Indeed, the impact of liberal values on vote choice appears to be remarkably constant over the time period that we investigate.

In the 1980s and 1990s, left-wing attitudes were far more important determinants of vote choice than liberal-authoritarian values. During the New Labour era, left-right attitudes became much less important, largely because New Labour's more centrist policies meant that there was little ideological difference between the main parties. However, since Blair stepped down these left-right issues have become increasingly important once again. Despite increased polarization on authoritarian issues in society at large there is as yet no evidence that they are more important in elections (though they were very important in the referendum). Yet just because they have not yet been politically activated, there is no reason why authoritarian values could not be activated in the future. Indeed, in the current context concern about crime would appear to be ripe for political mobilization.

What then of Europe? Figure 15 shows how support for the Conservative party and Labour party are influenced by attitudes towards Europe, controlling for people's background demographic characteristics. In the 1970s and 80s many on the left viewed the European project with suspicion. We can see that in the late 1980s Eurosceptics were in fact more likely than Europhiles to vote Labour and Europhiles were more likely than Eurosceptics to vote Conservative. So, at the time when Jeremy Corbyn first entered parliament being anti-Europe was more strongly associated with support for the left than it was the right. During the Blair years though this quickly changed and support for the Labour party was some 20 points higher among people who were pro-European than it was among people who were anti-European. The political significance

of Europe declined in importance during the Cameron years, particularly with respect to support for the Conservative party, but since the vote for Brexit the issue has exploded and is now more divisive than ever before.

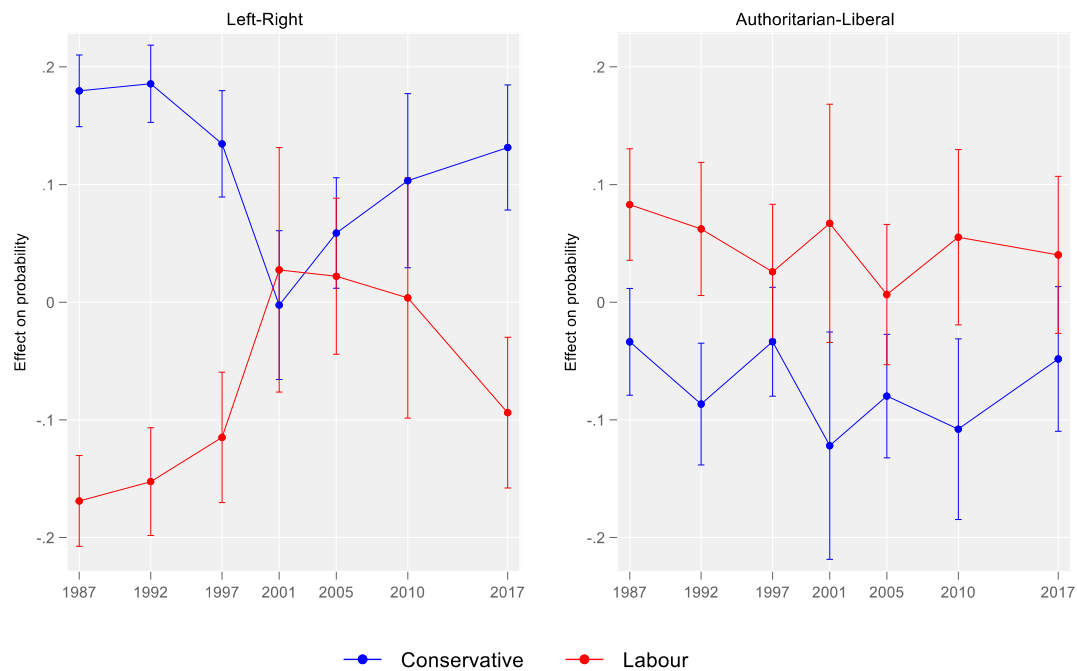**Figure 15: impact of attitudes towards Europe on vote choice**

This goes to show the power of political activation. Even though negative attitudes towards Europe have not changed much over the last thirty years or so, they are now much more politically salient. Conservative voters in 2015 were not particularly Eurosceptic – and there was no significant difference between whether pro-Europeans or anti-Europeans voted for the party. Yet in 2017 the Tories' approach to Brexit activated the issue of Europe to a much greater extent than previously seen. This had the benefit to the party of increasing its support among people who were hostile to Europe. But it also led to a decrease in support from people who were positive towards Europe, of which there were many.

Meanwhile, Labour's more ambiguous stance on Brexit succeeded in not alienating people who were anti-Europe – who voted for the party at roughly the same level as previously; while at the same time attracting the votes of pro-Europeans, who were much more likely to vote for Labour this time out, perhaps because they regarded the party as the lesser of two evils rather than out of any strong commitment.

Given that people on low incomes tend to be more left-wing than average, but also somewhat more authoritarian and Eurosceptic –the 2017 general election presented low-income voters with a clear and compelling choice for the first time in a long time: Theresa May's socially conservative vision of a 'hard Brexit' versus Jeremy Corbyn's anti-austerity platform and populist cry to represent the 'many not the few'. The clarity of this choice is no doubt one reason why both turnout among low-income voters increased and also support for each of the two major parties increased. But how did they navigate this choice?

To answer this question, we examine the impact of values on vote choice among low-income voters (once again controlling for other demographic factors such as age and education). Figure 16 illustrates the impact of left-right attitudes on vote choice and authoritarian-liberal values on vote choice among this group. Figure 17 shows the impact of attitudes towards Europe.

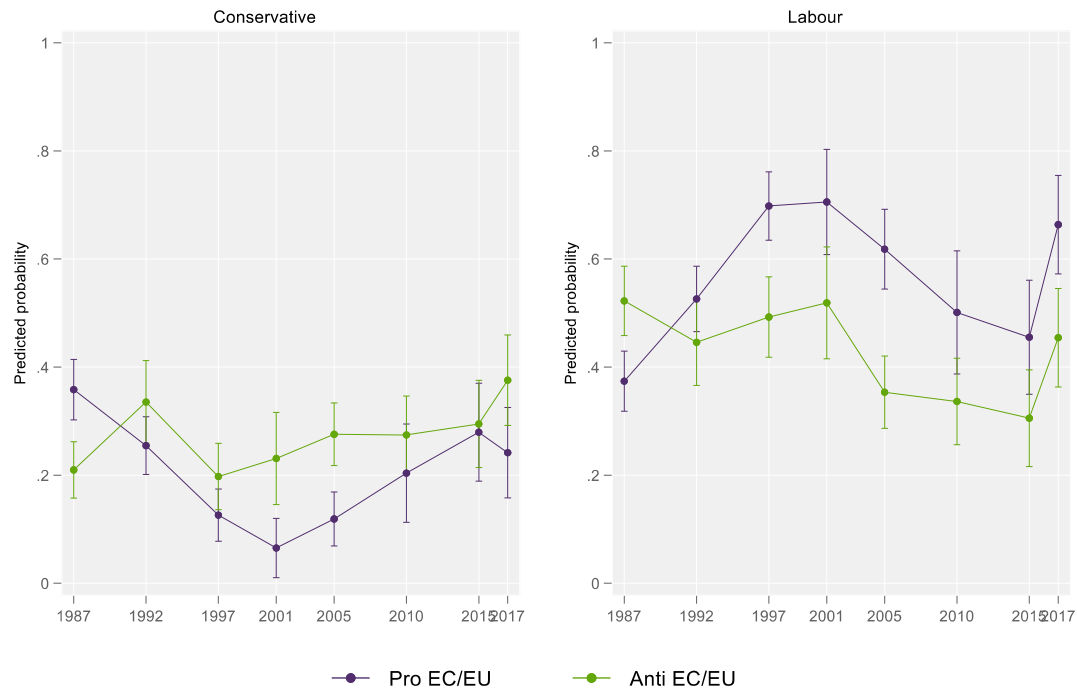**Figure 16: impact of values on vote choice among low-income voters, average marginal effect**

Even though people on low incomes are more socially authoritarian than people on high incomes, and have recently moved in a more authoritarian direction, there is little evidence that socially authoritarian people on low incomes vote differently to more socially liberal people on low incomes. As the right-hand panel of Figure 16 shows, the confidence intervals of the two lines overlap in many election years, including 2017, indicating that there is no significant difference between whether liberal (or authoritarian) people on low incomes vote Labour or Conservative. However, we do see a clear pattern with respect to left-right values. People on low incomes are more left-wing economically than people on high incomes, and the more left-wing a low-income person is the more likely they are to vote Labour. This was particularly important in 2017 compared to more recent elections.

The picture with respect to Europe among low-income voters is much less pronounced than it is among the electorate on the whole. Although there is some evidence that people on low incomes with a negative view of Europe are more likely to vote Conservative than people with a positive view of Europe, the difference is not great. This may be because their preference for left-wing economic policies acts as a buffer against them voting for the Conservatives on this issue, even though the party is closer to their views on the matter. Nonetheless, there is some evidence that support for the

Conservatives increased in 2017 among people on low incomes who held a negative view of Europe.

Figure 17: impact of Europe on vote choice among low-income voters, average marginal effect

Conclusion and implications

Low-income voters occupy an increasingly important place in British elections. They are more likely to vote than previously, more volatile than other voters and at recent elections have been shifting their votes more than previously. They are, therefore, more 'up for grabs' than they have been for many years and they could yet make a big difference to who wins the next election.

In 2017 somewhat unusually, both of Britain's main parties made a pitch for their votes. On the one hand, the Conservatives made a bold play to appeal to the Brexit majority. On the other, Labour pitched to the material interests of those on low incomes by putting forward an unashamedly economically left-wing agenda. To a certain extent both of these strategies worked. Turnout among low-income voters was at its highest level for twenty years and both main parties saw their vote share among low-income voters increase. The Tories saw their highest vote share among low-income voters in thirty years. Labour saw their highest vote share among low-income voters since Tony Blair's second term.

Yet ultimately Labour's strategy can be seen as more successful as they registered the larger increase in the share of the vote among people on low incomes. People on low incomes are more left-wing economically and left-right issues played a particularly important role in the election, both in the electorate at large and among low-income voters in particular. Moreover, by de-emphasizing Brexit, Labour diffused an issue that could potentially have worked against them with this group.

Nonetheless, the Tories also have the potential to make greater inroads with these voters. They have seen their share of the vote among low-income voters increase in every election since 2001. The Tories are also closer to low-income voters on Europe, and support for social conservativism and law and order. By targeting an economic message that has more resonance with low-income voters they would help to break down an obstacle that is holding back their support. Putting the economic concerns of low-income voters centre stage could unlock this group for the Conservatives. There are, therefore, very good reasons for the two main parties to take the findings of this report seriously.

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Notes

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Acknowledgements

About the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent social change organisation working to solve UK poverty. Through research, policy, collaboration and practical solutions, we aim to inspire action and change that will create a prosperous UK without poverty.

We are working with private, public and voluntary sectors, and people with lived experience of poverty, to build on the recommendations in our comprehensive strategy - We can solve poverty in the UK - and loosen poverty's grip on people who are struggling to get by. It contains analysis and recommendations aimed at the four UK governments.

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