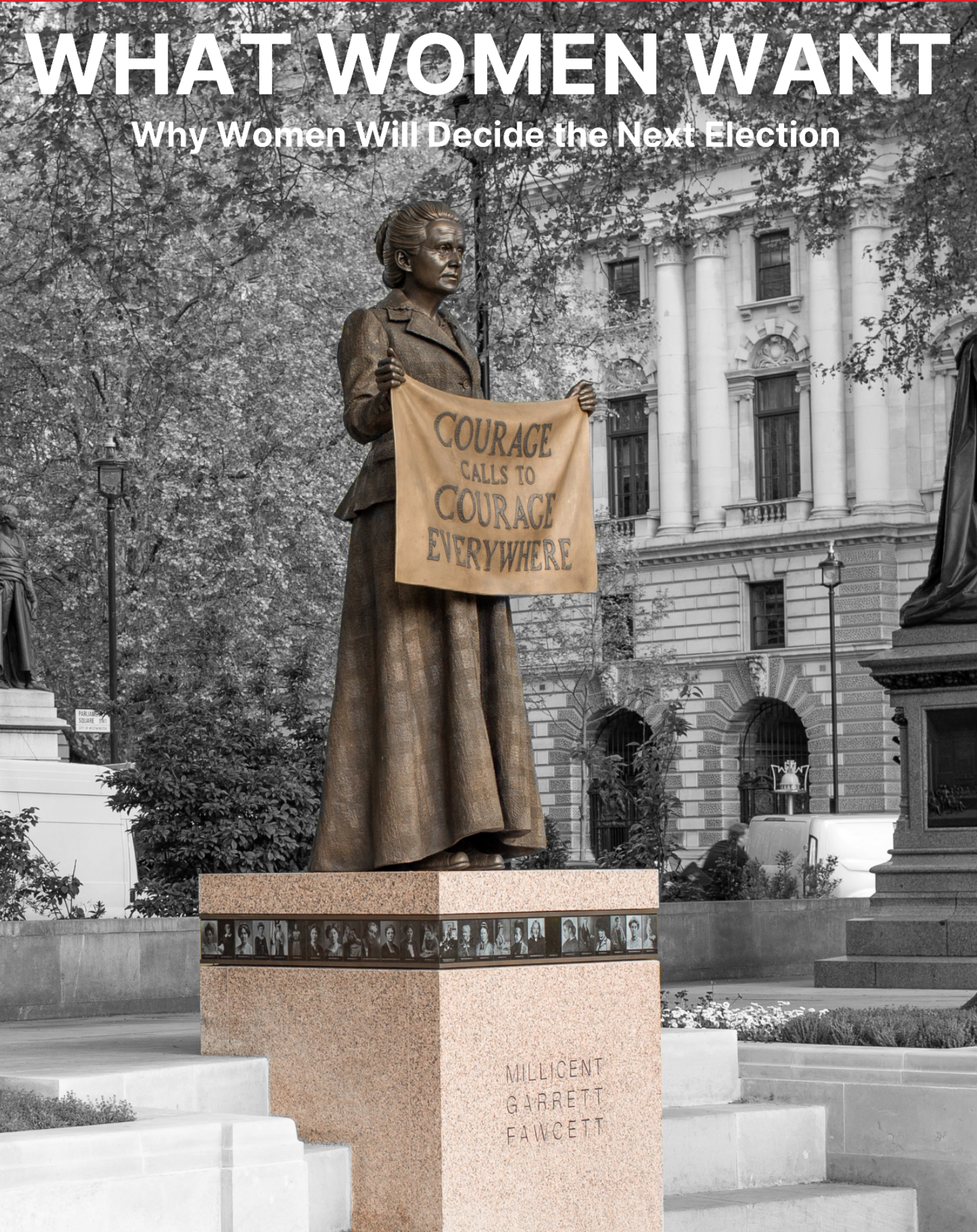


WHAT WOMEN WANT

Why Women Will Decide the Next Election



Christabel Cooper & Professor Rosie Campbell

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Executive Summary

In advanced democracies across the world, the last forty years have seen women move left, shifting their support from conservative to progressive parties. One country, however, proved an exception. In almost every election from 1945 to 2015, Britain's Conservative Party won more of its support from women than men. Their support contributed to the Conservative's electoral dominance in the era. In the post-war period, they governed for 48 years to Labour's 30.

In an attempt to reverse this trend, Harriet Harman and colleagues boarded a now famous pink bus during the 2015 General Election, traversing the country to win women's support. Despite her best efforts, David Cameron's party continued to collect the votes of more women than men, carrying him to a majority that few predicted.

It wasn't until the next election that the pattern began to change. In both 2017 and 2019, Labour won a significantly larger proportion of its votes from women, while the Conservatives won most of theirs from men¹. This trend continues to the present day. Labour Together's polling shows that Labour's lead over the Conservatives is 28 points among women compared to 22 points among men.²

This turnaround has received surprisingly little attention. Instead, commentators have often looked to demography to help explain the recent convulsions in British politics. They have chronicled the gradual breakdown of the historic relationship between social class and voting behaviour. They have explored how voting habits have become polarised around age, with younger voters now overwhelmingly backing Labour and older voters overwhelmingly supporting the Conservatives.³ Many have also noted the shift in the politics of university graduates who used to lean Conservative, but now mostly vote Labour, Liberal Democrat or Green.⁴ The shift in the voting intention of women, however, has gone largely unnoticed.

In April 2023, Labour Together published *Red Shift*, a report identifying six different voter segments, including two groups of voters that Labour must win. One of these segments was assigned the character of "Workington Man": an economically left wing but socially conservative voter, who handed the ex-industrial "Red Wall" seats (like Workington, in Cumbria) to the Conservatives in the 2019 General Election.

The second segment, new to the wider psephological debate, called "Stevenage Woman". These voters are economically insecure and politically disengaged, whose views hew close to the median on both economic and cultural issues. They are the largest number of voters in the electorate, and are particularly likely to be found in Conservative-Labour marginal

¹ Campbell, Rosie and Shorrocks, Rosalind. *Women Voters Taking the Wheel*, October 2021. Volume92 (Issue4) p.652 - 661. The Political Quarterly

² YouGov survey, sample size: 5,281 adults in England & Wales. Fieldwork carried out 3rd - 8th February 2023.

³ Adam McDonnell, Chris Curtis, 2019

<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/12/17/how-britain-voted-2019-general-election>

⁴ Matthew Goodwin, *The Times*, 2022

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/watch-out-tories-graduates-voting-labour-comment-matthew-goodwin-5cts0t5sz>

seats (like Stevenage, a classic bellwether seat that has chosen the winning party at each election for decades). They are also, as their name suggests, disproportionately women. Without Workington Man, Labour cannot recover the 30 Red Wall seats it lost in 2019. Without Stevenage Woman, there is no plausible path to Labour winning the rest of the 120 seats needed for an overall Labour majority government.

In setting out this claim, *Red Shift* drew attention to the importance of how women vote. This report now looks at how and why women have moved towards Labour, asks whether this trend is likely to continue, and examines how Labour can hold onto women's votes.

To answer this question, we carried out two waves of polling, looking at the differences between the attitudes and experiences of men and women, and how the genders prioritise different issues. We found three principal reasons why women are now disproportionately backing Labour:

1. **Women are more likely to feel financially insecure.** Women are nearly a third more likely than men to be very worried about the financial security of their household. This drives people towards Labour, as those who feel “very worried” about their finances are nearly six times more likely to vote Labour than Conservative.
2. **Women care about Labour issues.** Women are more likely to say that issues such as health and social care, where Labour has a particularly strong reputation, are important to them. Conversely, immigration - where Labour has historically lagged behind the Conservatives - is less likely to be considered an important issue by women.
3. **Young women are unusually progressive.** Although women of all ages are more likely to support Labour than men of a similar age, this is particularly true of young women. The youngest cohort (aged 18 to 24) is particularly socially liberal and economically left-wing. Young men, however, are more right-wing than is often realised. Eighteen to 24 year old men are now twice as likely to vote Conservative than young women, and three times more likely to support Reform.

This report contains an important caveat to those who might take women's support of Labour as a given. With the exception of young women (whose support for Labour is offset by young men's support for right-wing parties), women's support for Labour does not appear to be a fundamental ideological alignment.

Instead, women are supporting Labour on the grounds of economic insecurity and because the party is seen as being better at dealing with the issues they care about. This makes their support contingent on Labour continuing to put forward a more convincing offer than the Conservatives on these issues. No one can take women's votes for granted.

It is also worth noting that there is much that we do not know about how women will vote at the election that must be called by December 2024. On average, women are less politically engaged than men and, when polled, are more likely to say that they “don't know” who they will vote for.

This does not, however, translate into women being less likely to vote. Women do vote, but they make their minds up later than men. As a result, election campaigns matter. Most of the voters who are undecided when the starting gun is fired are women.

On the surface, Labour making up ground with women voters is good news for the party. But there are caveats. Women's support for Labour is not guaranteed. As recently as 2015, the Conservatives won most of their support from women. In 2019, the Conservatives won the support of women by a 5 point margin.

Going into the next General Election, many women's votes are still up for grabs. Any campaign that fails to speak to women, either Labour or Conservative, could lose millions of potential voters - more than enough to swing an election.

What Women Wanted

In their paper *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change Around the World*, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris identified a trend that played out across the developed world. As women moved into higher education and paid employment in greater numbers, they shifted to the left of men.⁵ In doing so, this reversed the gender gap that had stood until this point, where women were more often supporters of conservative parties than men.

There are two necessary conditions for a gender gap to emerge. Firstly, men and women must differ in their attitudinal or value positions. Secondly, the two main parties must diverge on these issues.

In America, this was certainly the case. From 1980 onwards, the Republican Party moved strongly to the right on social issues, such as abortion, where men and women are often divided. As a result, women voters - who had backed the Republicans up until this point - turned to the Democrats, with women disproportionately voting for the Democratic candidate in Presidential elections from 1980 onwards.

In the UK, the same did not take place. Britain's right-wing party, the Conservatives, did not adopt extreme positions on issues like abortion. And although Britain might often feel like a divided nation, polarisation around social issues in the UK is in fact far lower than in the United States.⁶ It would also be remiss not to mention that, between 1979 and 1990, the Conservative Party, and the British government, were led by a woman: Margaret Thatcher.

In the post-Thatcher era, a relatively liberal social consensus existed between the New Labour and Cameron governments, which perhaps presented too little ideological difference to persuade women voters to start backing Labour. New Labour's landslide victories saw Labour win many more votes than the Conservatives, amongst both women and men. However, in 1997, Labour was still winning more of its votes from men. Following the 2005 and 2010 elections, where the percentage of men and women voting Labour nearly equalised, David Cameron re-opened the gender gap in 2015, with women representing 54% of all Conservative voters.⁷

It wasn't until 2017 that British politics began to look a bit more like American politics, with the Conservatives winning more of their votes from men, and Labour winning more of theirs from women - a trend that is illustrated in figure A below.

⁵ Inglehart, Ronald, and Pippa Norris. 2003. *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change Around the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ John Burn-Murdoch, *The Financial Times* <https://www.ft.com/content/a2050877-124a-472d-925a-fc794737d814>

⁷ British Election Study data. See Appendix for details

Mind the Gender Gap

Gender Gap by Party 1970 - 2019

(excluding Did Not Vote)

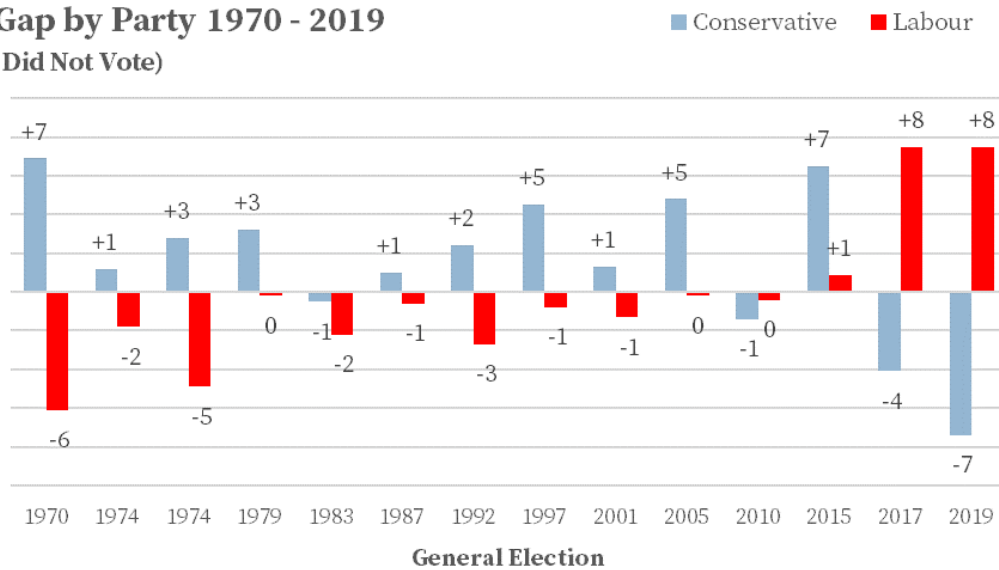


Figure A: The Gender Gap for Labour and Conservatives, 1970-2019.⁸

The “Gender Gap” shows where parties are receiving the majority of their support. A positive score shows that a party is winning more votes from women than men. A negative score shows that they are winning more votes from men than women. From 1970 to 2015, the Labour Party failed to register more support from women than men - a negative “gender gap”. The Conservatives tended to gain more of their support from women - a positive “gender gap”.

In 2017, a dramatic reversal took place. For the first time, the Conservatives won more support from men than women, and the Labour Party won significantly more of their votes from men. To this day, Labour continues to win the support of more women than men.

According to Labour Together’s most recent polling, Labour’s lead over the Conservatives amongst women is 28 percentage points (52% to 24%). Labour’s lead amongst men, while still considerable, is proportionally smaller: 22 percentage points (46% to 24%).

⁸ British Election Study data. See Appendix for details.

What Women Want

In 2017, the Labour Party began to win more of its support from women than men - a trend that has continued to this day. In this section, we explore the depth of that support and try to uncover its root cause.

Leftwards to Labour

Women voters have a clear preference for Labour. Excluding those who do not know who they will vote for, or if they will vote at all, Labour’s support is currently higher amongst women than men (52% to 46%).

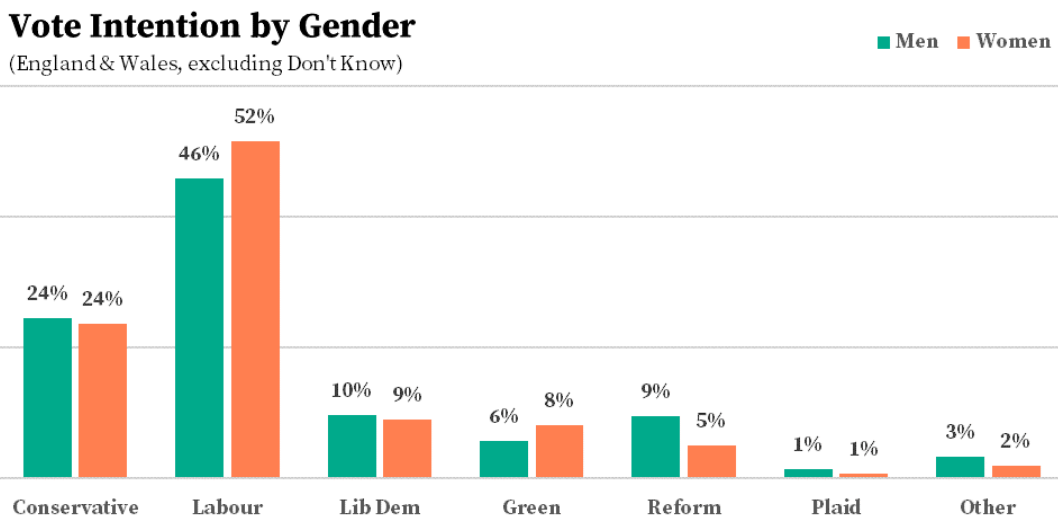


Figure B: Vote intention by gender, excluding Don't Knows

The leftward lean of women voters is even starker if the votes of those parties considered to be left-wing or liberal (Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens and Plaid Cymru) and those considered to be right-wing (Conservative, Reform and UKIP) are combined. By this measure, 69% of women support progressive or liberal parties, only 29% support right-wing ones - a progressive lead of 40 points. The equivalent figures for men are 63% and 35%, a progressive lead of 28 points.

The voting gender gap is widest among young women. In the youngest age group support for Labour is 16 points higher among women. The gap then narrows dramatically in older generations. In the oldest age group, aged 65 and above, it is just 2 points. The oldest groups of women are also slightly more likely to support the Conservatives than the oldest groups of men. This is largely because the unpopularity of Reform among women means that more right-wing women stick with the Tories rather than moving further to the right.

	18 - 24	25 - 49	50 - 64	65+
Labour	16.3	6.9	6.1	1.7
Conservative	-5.4	-3.3	2.1	2.6
Lib Dem	1.0	2.3	-3.7	-2.8
Green	-0.9	3.8	2.6	1.3
Reform	-5.0	-4.9	-3.8	-3.2
Plaid	-2.3	-1.0		0.1
Other	-3.7	-3.8	-3.0	0.3

Figure C: The “gender gap”, by age. Blue shading indicates a positive “gender gap” (a higher proportion of women). Red indicates a negative “gender gap” (a higher proportion of men).

Men aren’t from Mars and women aren’t from Venus

There is no doubt that a gap now exists between the voting behaviour of men and women. To understand why, we looked at whether there was an equally large difference in the values and attitudes of men and women.

On economic issues, there is very little difference in attitudes. We asked five questions that allowed us to place men and women voters on an economic left-right scale.⁹ While both men and women lean towards the left, we found little overall difference between the sexes.¹⁰ Likewise there was no significant gap between men and women when asked whether the government should cut taxes and spend less on health and social services, or increase taxes and spend more on those areas.

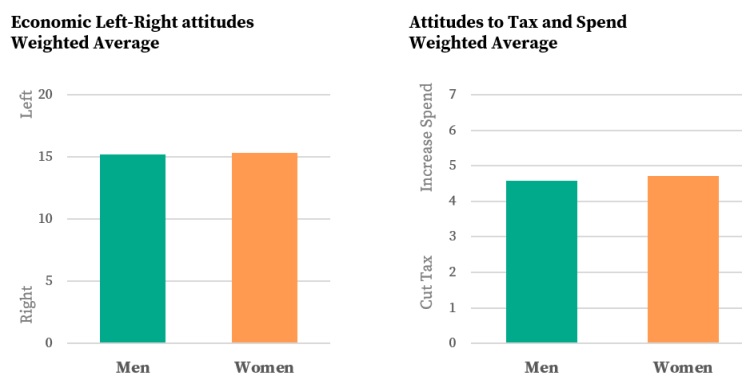


Figure D: Men and women’s attitudes to economic issues

⁹ The scale was created using the level of agreement or disagreement with these statements: “Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth”, “Big business takes advantage of ordinary people”, “Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off”, “There is one law for the rich and one for the poor”, “Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance”

¹⁰ The cronbach’s alpha for the five economic inequality questions is .843 indicating that the items are all closely associated enough to contribute to the same underlying scale, hence the combined scale is a reliable measure.

On social issues, the story is much the same. We placed men and women on a scale from liberal to authoritarian¹¹ and also explored their attitudes towards immigration. In doing so, we discovered that there is virtually no difference between men and women on the liberal-authoritarian scale and only a very small difference in attitudes towards immigration.¹²

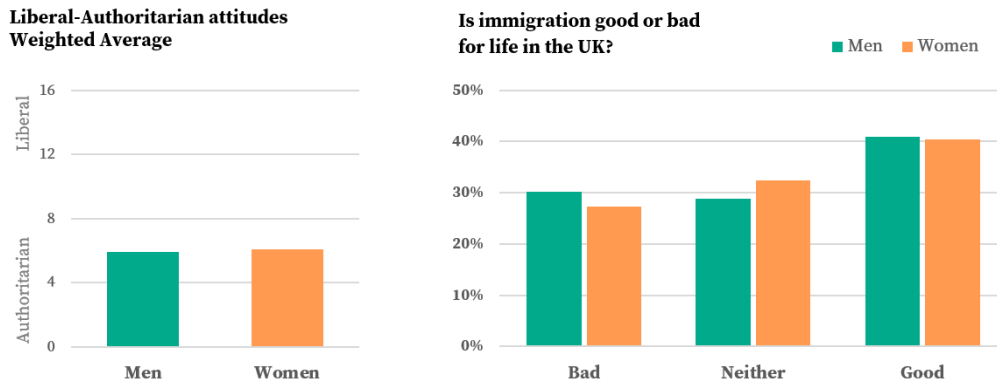


Figure E: Men and women’s attitudes to social issues

In one area, however, there was a notable difference: attitudes towards marginalised groups. There is long standing evidence that women are more socially liberal in their attitudes towards minorities, for example towards ethnic minorities and LGBT people. The generational decline in racial prejudice has also happened more rapidly among women than men.¹³ Our data bears this out. Women from every age group are less likely than men to think that equal opportunities have “gone too far” for ethnic minorities, lesbians and gays, and women.

¹¹ The scale was created according to the level of agreement/disagreement with the following statements: “Young people today don’t have enough respect for British values”, “People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences”, “Schools should teach children to obey authority”, “The purpose of prisons is to punish offenders rather than rehabilitate them”. The statement “Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards” was not included as previous research indicates that women often believe this relates to pornography and their answers to this question do not necessarily correlate with answers to the other questions.

¹² Cronbach’s alpha for Lib/Auth without the censorship item is 0.795

¹³ Ford, Robert. 2008. *Is racial prejudice declining in Britain?* British Journal of Sociology 59(4):609-34.

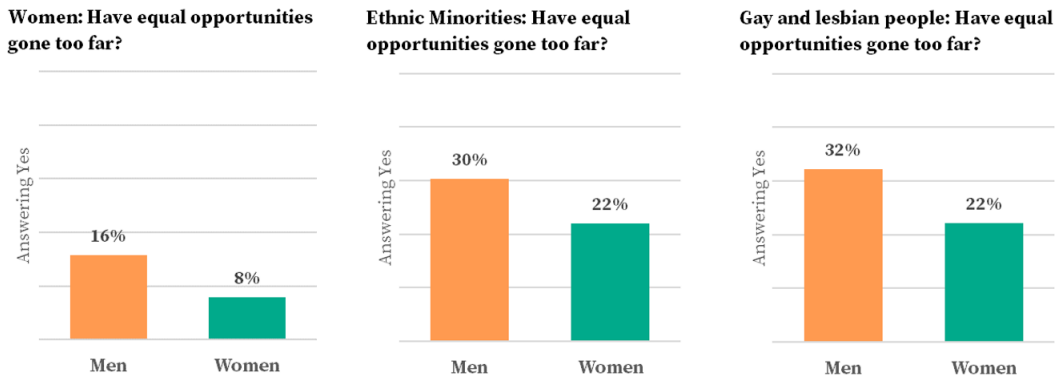


Figure F: Men and women’s attitudes to marginalised groups

One might assume that these results would disadvantage the Conservatives among women voters. However, the gap between the two UK party’s voters when it comes to attitudes towards historically marginalised communities is much smaller than in the United States. This is not merely a question of perception. It was a Conservative government under David Cameron which brought in Equal Marriage. And, as they are understandably fond of pointing out, the Conservatives have had three women leaders and produced Britain’s first ethnic minority Prime Minister.

Money matters

If values and economic views cannot explain our gender gap, then we need to look elsewhere. In trying to understand why voters might be turning to the Labour Party, their bank balances are an obvious place to start. There is no doubt that feeling financially insecure pushes voters towards Labour. In *Red Wall, Red Herring? Economic Insecurity and Voter Intention in Britain*, Jane Green and Roosmarijn de Greus illustrated that a lack of economic security is linked with voting Labour and, conversely, that being economically secure drives voters towards the Conservatives.¹⁴

Our own polling provides further evidence to support this. We found that around 60% of those who are ‘very worried’ about their household finances say they would vote Labour. Amongst those who are ‘not worried at all’ about their finances, just 30% say they will vote Labour. The opposite pattern is true of the Conservative vote. Hardly anyone who feels ‘very worried’ about their finances supports the Conservatives. The only group where they retain a lead over Labour is among those who have no anxieties at all about their financial situation.

¹⁴ Green, Jane and de Gues, Roosmarijn. May 2022. *Red Wall, Red Herring? Economic Insecurity and Voter Intention in Britain*. Nuffield Politics Research Centre - Elections Unit https://politicscentre.nuffield.ox.ac.uk/media/5142/nprc-econ-insecurity-report_bridges_final.pdf

Worries about finances and voting intention

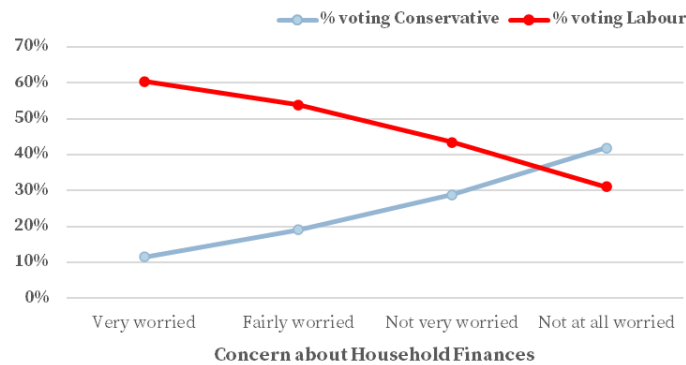


Figure G: Concerns about household finances and voting intention

With more women backing Labour than men, and financial insecurity predictive of support for Labour, it is unsurprising to find that women feel more financially insecure than men. Anna Sanders and Rosalind Shorrocks have shown that younger women’s greater support of Labour in 2017 and 2019 was driven by higher levels of pessimism about, amongst other things, their personal finances.¹⁵ In 2023, women continue to be more likely to report financial insecurity than men (58% say they are worried, compared to 49% of men). Overall women are a little more pessimistic than men about the likelihood of the UK’s financial position worsening over the next twelve months (54% of women expect it to worsen, compared with 49% of men). In every age group, women are more concerned about their household finances than men.

Worries about finances and gender

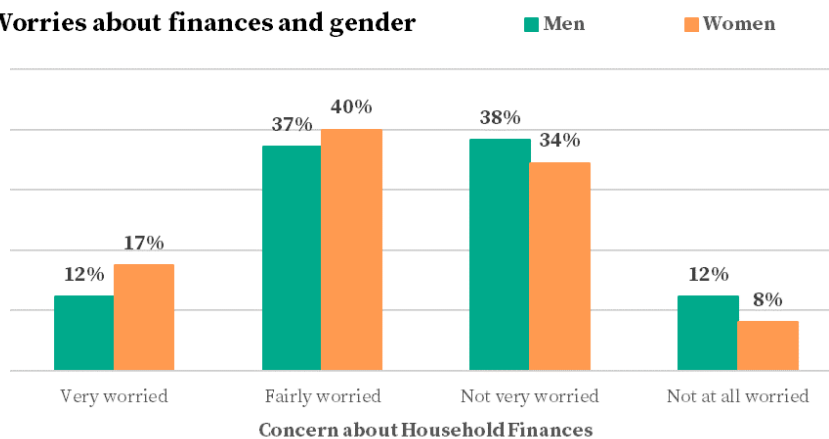


Figure H: Men and women’s concerns about household finances

¹⁵ Sanders, Anna and Shorrocks, Rosalind *All in this together? Austerity and the gender-age gap in the 2015 and 2017 British general elections*, British Journal of Politics and International Relations, vol. 21, no. 4, 2019, pp. 667–88.

Worries about finances and voting Labour

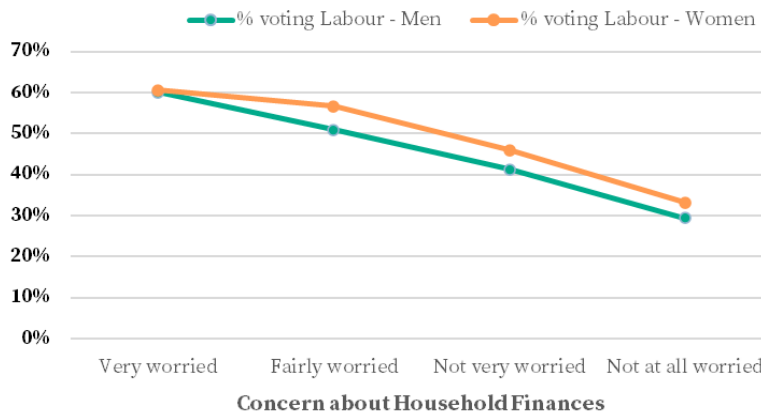


Figure I: Men and women’s concerns about household finances and voting intention

The difference in financial insecurity can only partly explain women’s higher support for Labour, however. As figure I shows, women who are “fairly worried”, “not very worried” and “not at all worried” are still more likely to vote Labour than their male peers.

There must, therefore, be other factors driving the difference.

To whom it most concerns

In one other way, men and women do vary significantly. While their attitudes might be largely the same, as we saw earlier in this section, men and women prioritise different issues. In our survey, respondents were asked to name the most important issues facing Britain today. There is a long history of women citing healthcare and education as more of a priority than men, and our data also shows significant gaps between the percentage of men and women who believe these are among the most important issues facing the country. Women are also more likely than men to prioritise “social care” and the “cost of living”. Men, meanwhile, were more likely to prioritise the “economy” more generally, “defence and security”, “immigration”, our “energy supply” and “tax”.

	Female	Male	Difference
Cost of living	64.3	58.1	6.2
Health	45.9	37.0	8.9
Economy	44.4	48.4	-4.0
Energy supply	30.8	34.1	-3.3
Immigration	24.6	27.9	-3.4
Environment	23.5	22.1	1.4
Social care	21.5	13.7	7.7
Brexit	14.6	17.7	-3.1
Housing	13.6	11.4	2.2
Education	13.4	8.3	5.1
Crime	11.6	12.0	-0.4
Defence and security	7.4	11.2	-3.9
Tax	7.0	9.7	-2.7
Childcare	6.1	3.8	2.3
Welfare	5.8	5.8	0.0
Pensions	5.5	6.2	-0.8
Job security	3.7	2.7	1.1
Transport	2.5	3.1	-0.6

Figure J: How men and women prioritise issues. Blue shading indicates that women prioritise this issue more than men. Red shading indicates that men prioritise this issue more than women.

Looking at these results, one thing is clear: women prioritise the issues where Labour leads the Conservatives by wide margins. According to the IPSOS Political Monitor, Labour has a lead over the Conservatives on all issues except defence¹⁶. But Labour Together’s polling shows that on the issues which women tend to prioritise over men, Labour’s lead is much larger.¹⁷ For instance, Labour has enormous leads on health (42 points), social care (41 points) and education (27 points). In areas which men tend to prioritise over women, meanwhile, such as immigration and the economy, Labour’s lead is under 10 points.

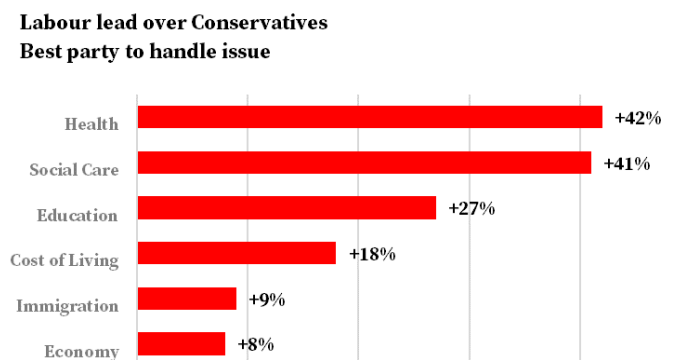


Figure K: Labour’s lead on key issues

¹⁶ IPSOS June 2023 <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/british-public-think-labour-have-best-policies-on-key-issues>

¹⁷ YouGov survey, sample size: 1,972 adults in England & Wales. Fieldwork conducted 13th-14th July 2023.

Taken together, we now have a more complete picture. To complete our analysis, we conducted a regression analysis which found that financial insecurity on its own, reduces but does not eliminate the gender gap. However, when we accounted for the differences in issue prioritisation between men and women, the gender gap became insignificant.¹⁸ Unlike in the United States, men and women do not appear to be significantly divided by their attitudes to social or economic issues. Instead, the regression model confirms that by factoring in both women's experience of financial insecurity *and* the issues that women prioritise, we can explain the Labour Party's greater appeal to women voters.

¹⁸ See Appendix for full details of the model

Talkin' 'Bout My Generation

Throughout this paper, we have shown that the attitudes of men and women are, with a few exceptions (namely: a slight difference in attitudes to marginalised groups), very similar.

Amongst one group of women, however, this is not in fact true. As we have shown already, financial insecurity and issue prioritisation explains much of the gender gap between women and men. Amongst young men and young women, however, there is a difference in prioritisation. Young women prioritise the environment significantly more than young men, for instance. They also prioritise cost of living, health and social care - where the difference between young women and young men is particularly wide.

	18 - 24	25 - 49	50 - 64	65+
Cost of living	6.8	4.9	10.0	5.2
Health	14.4	8.5	10.5	4.6
Economy	-9.6	-4.3	-2.1	-3.7
Energy supply	-6.6	-0.3	-0.1	-11.3
Immigration	-9.3	-6.9	-1.5	0.9
Environment	10.7	-1.1	0.1	3.5
Social care	7.0	6.3	10.6	6.1
Brexit	-1.1	-1.7	-3.1	-6.4
Housing	18.4	0.7	-0.3	0.4
Education	6.9	6.4	3.6	4.0
Crime	-5.7	0.1	-1.8	2.1
Defence and security	-1.5	-3.4	-6.0	-4.6
Tax	1.4	-3.7	-2.9	-2.3
Childcare	4.4	4.2	0.1	0.5
Welfare	4.8	-0.4	-1.1	-0.3
Pensions	1.8	0.8	-1.3	-5.1
Job security	3.0	0.7	0.8	1.4
Transport	-0.4	-0.2	-1.5	-0.4
Don't Know	-12.9	-0.4	-0.8	-0.2

Figure L: Women’s prioritisation of issues compared to Men’s by age group. Blue shading represents that an issue is more likely to be prioritised by women. Red suggests it is prioritised more by men.

Different prioritisation of issues is not the only story here, however. Unlike amongst older age cohorts, young women and young men view the world differently. In their attitudes to both economics and society, young women are significantly more progressive than young men.

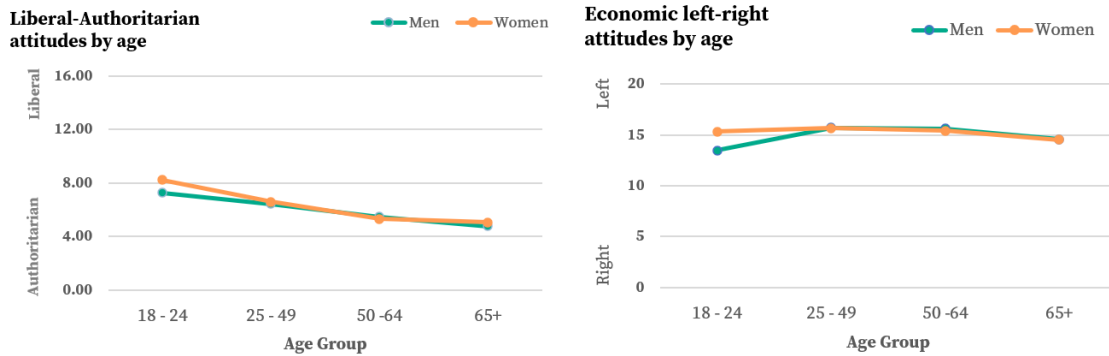


Figure M: Young women and young men’s economic and social attitudes

One area where this divide is particularly notable is in young men’s attitudes to gender equality. A startling finding from our research is that on the question of giving equal opportunities to women, young men are *less* liberal than older men. Young men are significantly more likely than men aged over 65 to believe that gender equality has “gone too far”. This is in marked contrast to their other social attitudes - such as towards ethnic minorities or gay and lesbian people - where men tend to become less liberal as they grow older.

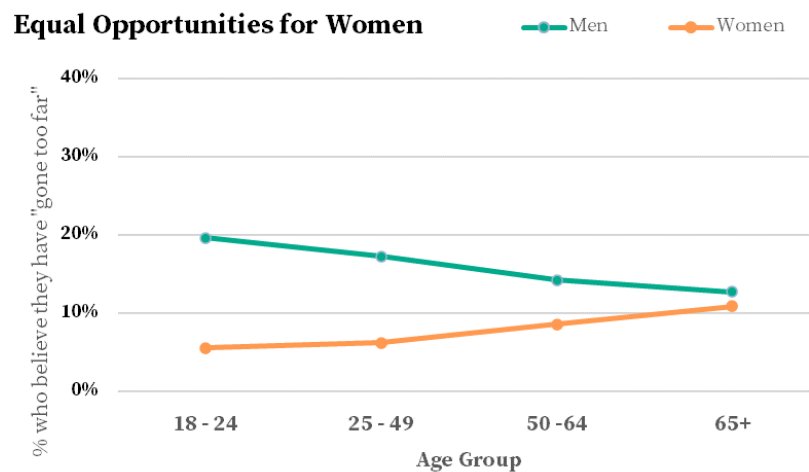


Figure N: Attitudes to equal opportunities for women

It should be noted that only a minority (20%) of young men believe that equal opportunities for women have gone too far. This large minority is visible in other data, however. Take a recent YouGov poll which asked about attitudes to controversial social media influencer Andrew Tate. Tate has gained notoriety for his misogynistic comments and is currently

charged with rape and human trafficking.¹⁹ Despite that, YouGov's poll found that 27% of 18-29 year old men hold a favourable view of him, compared to 6% of women the same age. Again, it should be made clear that *most* young men (58%) have an unfavourable view of Andrew Tate. However, this poll and our research points to the existence of a substantial minority of young men who believe that equal opportunities for women have gone too far - and are open to the influence of misogynists like Tate.

This has political as well as social implications. Only 12% of the young men who believe that women's equality has gone "too far" intend to vote Labour, compared to 32% of young men who do not. Though this is not enough to disrupt Labour's commanding lead amongst young men overall, it does point to a troubling trend.

Particularly worrying are the levels of disenchantment among young men towards mainstream politics. Although young men pay roughly about the same amount of attention to politics as young women, they are more likely to say either that they "don't know" who they would vote for, or that they will not vote at all. Those young men who believe that women's equality has gone too far are twice as likely (28%) to say that they would not vote as those who do not believe this (14%). Young men were also more likely to say that they did not know what the most important issues facing the country were, with a nearly 13 percentage point gap between 18 to 24 year old men and women. In other countries, and at other times, this kind of disillusion has spurred the rise of populism. Though we are still talking about a minority of young men, it bears close attention. While young women represent a strong base of future support, Labour cannot bank upon the backing of this particular cohort of young men.

¹⁹Matthew Smith

<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/articles-reports/2023/05/23/how-many-britons-agree-andrew-tates-views-women>

Time to Decide

Thus far, this report augurs well for the Labour Party. There is one important caveat, however. Many women are still weighing up how they will vote at the next election and their support therefore cannot be assumed.

When asked how they intend to vote at the next election, nearly a quarter (23%) of women record that they “don’t know”, compared to 13% of men. Most polling companies exclude these “don’t knows” when they report voting intention. History tells us that those who tell a pollster that they “don’t know” who they will vote for tend to return to the party they voted for at the previous election. Should this happen, Labour’s headline lead is likely to be overstated (or at least with those polling companies who do not account for this in their model).

Our research suggests that this could be true for men, who currently lean towards the Conservatives. A quarter (25%) of men who currently report that they “don’t know” who they will vote for also say that they are “likely” to vote Conservative. The figure for Labour is smaller at 17%.²⁰ Women, however, make up the majority of undecided voters and they are more evenly split. When undecided women voters are asked how they are “likely” to vote, 21% are likely to vote Conservative and 20% are likely to vote Labour.

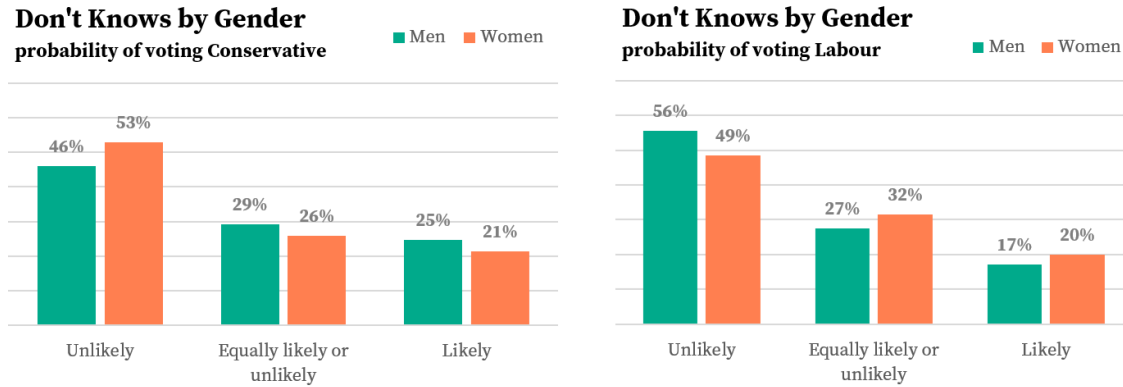


Figure O: How the “don’t knows” might vote

²⁰ Respondents were asked about their probability of voting for both the Conservatives and Labour on a 0-10 scale. Those answering 6 or above were considered “likely” to vote for that party.

Nothing, however, is certain. The period between now and the next election, and the campaign in particular, will be important. In the last two elections, women were much more likely to answer “don’t know” at the beginning of the election campaign than men. At the start of the campaign period in 2017 and 2019, between a fifth and a quarter of women were undecided about who to vote for, compared to less than 10% of men.²¹ By the time of the election itself, the vast majority of these undecided women had made up their minds (with just 7 percent of women in 2017 and 8 percent in 2019 only deciding on polling day itself). Right now, the women who are yet to decide how they will vote amount to nearly five million voters. That’s more than enough to sway the outcome of an election.²²

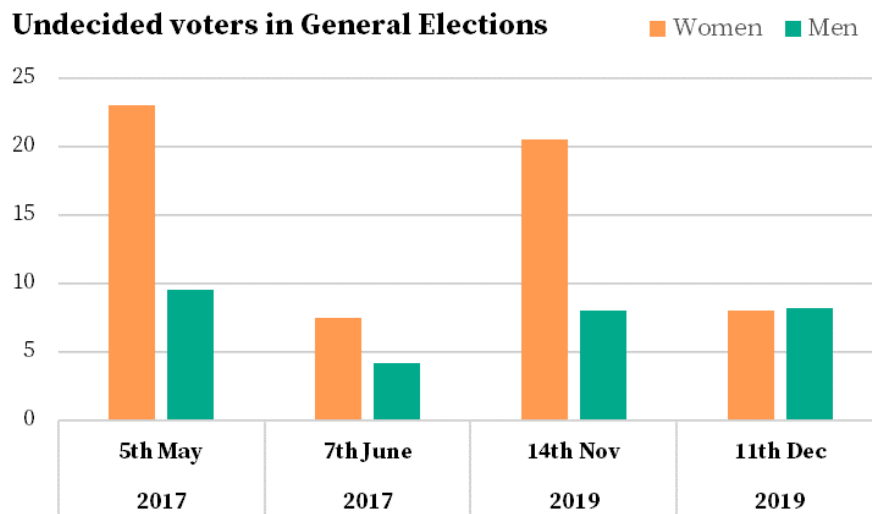


Figure P: Undecided voters during 2017 and 2019 elections

²¹ British Election Study, Internet Panel wave 12 (2017 campaign wave) and wave 18 (2019 campaign wave). Data are weighted. Chart Adapted from R.Campbell, R. Shorrocks *Women Voters Taking the Wheel*, 2021

²² R.Campbell, R. Shorrocks *Women Voters Taking the Wheel*, 2021

Conclusion

For seven decades, between 1945 and 2015, women disproportionately backed the Conservative Party, contributing to their long period of electoral dominance. Now, Labour is winning amongst women. This brings Britain in line with other developed democracies, where women have moved from supporting right-wing parties to supporting progressive ones. The fact that this happened so much later in Britain is important, however, because their support is built on shakier ground.

As this report has shown, men and women do not differ substantially in their attitudes towards the economy. Nor do they differ in their attitudes to social issues, though women do tend to have more progressive views around historically marginalised groups.

Instead, our analysis shows that the driving factors behind the gap in voting intention are that women are more likely than men to feel financially insecure (which is correlated with intending to vote Labour) and that women are more likely than men to prioritise issues on which Labour is more highly regarded, like health and education.

The Conservative Party, in its current form, is badly placed to turn this trend around. Their political strategy appears to be an attempt to focus public debate around issues like immigration, which women are less concerned by than men. Meanwhile, few voters think they are dealing well with the cost of living crisis, which women feel more acutely and consider a higher priority.

The Conservative party has always had a chameleon-like ability to adapt itself to changing circumstances, however. In a country which is less polarised around cultural issues than some others, a right-leaning party could easily embrace the more liberal values of women voters. If the Tories were also able to regain a reputation for competently managing the economy and public services, this combination could prove attractive to many women voters.

Labour cannot expect its advantage to continue indefinitely unless it fights for it. In Britain, left-wing parties cannot take the support of women voters for granted. Their votes must always be won. Any complacency about the support of left-leaning younger women, meanwhile, should be set against a concern about increasingly illiberal young men.

Finally, Labour must remember that most of the undecided voters that it needs to win over during a General Election campaign will be women. In recent years, we have seen a volatile electorate swing between parties during the weeks running up to an election.

Tongue in cheek, we titled this report *What Women Want*. Romcom references aside, the title contains a serious point. In other countries, like the United States, politicians in left-wing parties have disproportionately secured the votes of women for decades. In Britain, the same is not true - women voters are not tribal. A party that wishes to win the votes of women must earn them first. With five million women voters still undecided, the next election could well be determined by whether Keir Starmer or Rishi Sunak best understands *What Women Want*.

Appendix

Unless stated otherwise, all the polling cited in this report was from two polls conducted by YouGov for Labour Together. These polls were carried out between 3rd-8th February 2023, with a representative sample of 5,281 adults in England & Wales, and between 13th-14th July 2023, with a representative sample of 1,972 adults in England & Wales.

Voting Intention

If there were a general election held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?

	Men					Women				
	18 - 24	25 - 49	50 - 64	65+	Total	18 - 24	25 - 49	50 - 64	65+	Total
Conservative	16%	15%	25%	41%	24%	9%	11%	27%	44%	24%
Labour	53%	58%	42%	28%	46%	70%	64%	48%	30%	52%
Lib Dem	2%	8%	12%	13%	10%	3%	10%	8%	10%	9%
Green	13%	7%	5%	3%	6%	11%	10%	7%	4%	8%
Other	3%	4%	4%	2%	3%	2%	2%	2%	1%	2%
Plaid Cymru	5%	1%	0%	1%	1%	3%	0%	0%	1%	1%
Reform	8%	8%	11%	12%	9%	2%	2%	7%	9%	5%

Behaviour of Don't Knows

On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means you 'will definitely NOT vote for them', and 10 means you 'definitely will vote for them', how likely are you to vote for each of the following parties at the next election?

Table contains responses only from those whose voting intention is “Don't Know”

	Probability of voting Conservative		Probability of voting Labour	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
0	29%	30%	25%	21%
1	3%	5%	5%	8%
2	4%	5%	5%	4%
3	2%	6%	8%	7%
4	8%	6%	14%	8%
5	29%	26%	27%	32%
6	11%	8%	6%	9%
7	9%	9%	6%	7%
8	4%	3%	3%	3%
9	0%	1%	0%	1%
10	1%	1%	2%	1%

Left-Right Economic Scale

0 represents the most right-wing position, 20 represents the most left-wing position

The scale was created using the level of agreement or disagreement with these statements: “Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth”, “Big business takes advantage of ordinary people”, “Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off”, “There is one law for the rich and one for the poor”, “Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance”

	18 - 24	25 - 49	50 - 64	65+	Total
Men	13.48	15.72	15.64	14.58	15.20
Women	15.35	15.69	15.42	14.52	15.30

Authoritarian-Liberal Scale

0 represents the most authoritarian position, 16 represents the most liberal position

The scale was created according to the level of agreement/disagreement with the following statements: “Young people today don’t have enough respect for British values”, “People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences”, “Schools should teach children to obey authority”, “The purpose of prisons is to punish offenders rather than rehabilitate them”. The statement “Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards” was not included as previous research indicates that women often believe this relates to pornography and their answers to this question do not necessarily correlate with answers to the other questions.

	18 - 24	25 - 49	50 - 64	65+	Total
Men	7.27	6.43	5.48	4.77	5.92
Women	8.22	6.61	5.30	5.07	6.07

Worries about Household Finances and Voting Intention

To what extent, if at all, are you worried about the following at this moment in time? The financial situation of your household?

	Very worried	Fairly worried	Not very worried	Not at all worried
Conservative	12%	19%	29%	42%
Labour	61%	54%	43%	31%
Lib Dem	9%	8%	11%	10%
Green	8%	7%	6%	5%
Other	4%	3%	2%	2%
Plaid	1%	1%	1%	1%
Reform	5%	8%	6%	9%

Worries about Household finances split by gender

	Men				Total	Women				Total
	Very worried	Fairly worried	Not very worried	Not at all worried		Very worried	Fairly worried	Not very worried	Not at all worried	
Con	13%	18%	28%	42%	24%	10%	20%	29%	42%	24%
Green	6%	6%	6%	3%	6%	10%	8%	7%	7%	8%
Labour	61%	51%	41%	29%	46%	61%	57%	46%	33%	52%
Lib Dem	9%	7%	12%	12%	10%	8%	9%	10%	6%	9%
Other	4%	4%	3%	2%	3%	4%	2%	1%	2%	2%
Plaid	3%	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%
Reform	4%	13%	7%	11%	9%	6%	4%	6%	7%	5%

Issue Handling

Which political party would be the best at handling the following issues?

	Labour	Conservative
Health	62%	20%
Social Care	60%	19%
Education	52%	25%
Inflation	50%	32%
Immigration	41%	31%
Economy	45%	37%

Most Important Issue by age and gender

Which of the following do you think are the most important issues facing the country at this time? Please tick up to four. Table shows the percentage of men and women in each age group who picked each issue as a top priority.

		18 - 24	25 - 49	50 - 64	65+
Health	Men	21.1	36.2	40.1	42.7
Health	Women	35.5	44.7	50.6	47.3
Immigration	Men	17.4	19.4	34.0	42.5
Immigration	Women	8.0	12.4	32.6	43.4
Crime	Men	8.9	10.9	14.6	12.9
Crime	Women	3.2	11.0	12.8	15.1
Economy	Men	47.8	46.3	47.7	53.5
Economy	Women	38.2	42.0	45.6	49.8
Tax	Men	9.8	12.1	8.3	6.5
Tax	Women	11.2	8.5	5.4	4.2
Pensions	Men	1.4	2.0	7.8	14.9
Pensions	Women	3.2	2.8	6.5	9.7
Education	Men	9.7	7.7	9.7	7.2
Education	Women	16.6	14.1	13.2	11.2
Childcare	Men	3.1	5.8	2.4	1.9
Childcare	Women	7.6	10.1	2.5	2.5
Housing	Men	6.2	13.7	11.3	9.8
Housing	Women	24.6	14.4	11.0	10.3
Environment	Men	19.5	25.4	21.5	17.9
Environment	Women	30.2	24.3	21.5	21.3
Brexit	Men	13.4	17.3	18.6	19.5
Brexit	Women	12.2	15.6	15.5	13.1
Transport	Men	5.1	2.8	2.8	3.1
Transport	Women	4.7	2.5	1.3	2.7
Welfare	Men	3.2	5.6	6.7	6.3
Welfare	Women	8.1	5.1	5.6	6.0
Defence and security	Men	3.6	7.6	14.2	18.4
Defence and security	Women	2.1	4.2	8.2	13.8
Social care	Men	3.6	9.4	17.3	22.9
Social care	Women	10.6	15.7	27.9	29.1
Job security	Men	3.2	3.5	2.8	0.6
Job security	Women	6.2	4.2	3.6	2.0
Cost of living	Men	50.1	63.6	58.2	51.3
Cost of living	Women	56.9	68.5	68.2	56.5
Energy supply	Men	19.5	31.9	36.5	42.7
Energy supply	Women	12.9	31.5	36.4	31.4
None	Men	3.8	1.8	0.5	
None	Women	1.7	0.9	0.2	0.3
Don't Know	Men	21.6	5.9	1.8	0.6
Don't Know	Women	8.7	5.5	0.9	0.4

Vote share in elections 1970 - 2019

Table shows the percentage of men and women who voted for either the Conservatives or Labour in each election. The numbers are calculated as a percentage of total validated votes only where available. The BES team uses local authority data to confirm whether voters participated in the election, but they cannot check the party voted for.

The difference between women’s vote share and men’s vote share for each party was used to calculate the “gender gap”.

	Conservative vote share		Labour vote share	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
GE1970	42%	49%	48%	42%
GE1974	37%	39%	42%	40%
GE1974	35%	37%	45%	40%
GE1979	45%	49%	38%	38%
GE1983	46%	45%	30%	28%
GE1987	44%	45%	31%	30%
GE1992	46%	48%	35%	32%
GE1997	26%	31%	49%	48%
GE2001	27%	29%	46%	44%
GE2005	29%	34%	39%	38%
GE2010	39%	38%	32%	31%
GE2015	38%	44%	33%	34%
GE2017	44%	40%	39%	46%
GE2019	49%	42%	28%	35%

Table shows how the total votes for the Conservatives and Labour in each election split by gender.

	Conservative vote		Labour vote	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
GE1970	46%	54%	53%	47%
GE1974	49%	51%	51%	49%
GE1974	48%	52%	53%	47%
GE1979	48%	52%	50%	50%
GE1983	50%	50%	52%	48%
GE1987	49%	51%	50%	50%
GE1992	49%	51%	52%	48%
GE1997	46%	54%	50%	50%
GE2001	49%	51%	51%	49%
GE2005	46%	54%	50%	50%
GE2010	51%	49%	50%	50%
GE2015	46%	54%	49%	51%
GE2017	52%	48%	46%	54%
GE2019	54%	46%	44%	56%

Source for both tables: British Election Study data

2019 BES

Fieldhouse, E., Green, J., Evans, G., Prosser, C., de Geus, R., Bailey, J., Schmitt, H., van der Eijk, C., Mellon, J. (2022). *British Election Study, 2019: Post-Election Random Probability Survey*. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 8875, DOI: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-8875-1

2017 BES

Fieldhouse, E., Green, J., Evans, G., Schmitt, H., van der Eijk, C., Mellon, J., Prosser, C. (2019). *British Election Study, 2017: Face-to-Face Post-Election Survey*. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 8418, DOI: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-8418-1

2015 BES

Fieldhouse, E., Green, J., Evans, G., Schmitt, H., van der Eijk, C., Mellon, J., Prosser, C. (2019). *British Election Study, 2015: Face-to-Face Post-Election Survey*. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 7972, DOI: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-7972-1

2010 BES

Whiteley, P.F. and Sanders, D., *British Election Study, 2010: Face-to-Face Survey [computer file]*. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], August 2014.

Regression model

In our survey we asked respondents how likely they would be to vote Labour if there were an election tomorrow. We then analysed the impact of socio-demographics (age, education and social grade), and the areas identified in this report that might explain women’s greater support for labour, namely household financial insecurity and most important issues (health, housing, the environment and social care).

The final model, included sociodemographics (age, gender, an interaction term for age and gender, social grade, holds a university degree), household financial insecurity, health, social care, housing and the environment as most important issues. In this model gender does not have a statistically significant impact on likelihood of voting Labour.

Coefficients

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	13.137	0.785		16.74	<.001
gender	0.487	0.34	0.062	1.433	0.152
age	-0.028	0.011	-0.12	-2.609	0.009
age*gender	-0.011	0.007	-0.104	-1.684	0.092
Education (degree)	1.168	0.122	0.146	9.583	<.001
Social Grade	-0.107	0.041	-0.04	-2.644	0.008
Worried about household finances	0.846	0.114	0.108	7.433	<.001
Health as important issue	-1.141	0.113	-0.144	-10.086	<.001
Housing as important issue	-0.912	0.167	-0.078	-5.474	<.001
Environment as important issue	-0.772	0.132	-0.084	-5.854	<.001
Social Care as important issue	-1.007	0.147	-0.099	-6.86	<.001

Dependent variable: Likelihood of voting Labour

Cover image: iStock.com/Raylipscombe