

The fragmentation of the electoral left since 2010

Paula Surridge

The left in British electoral politics has become more fragmented, particularly in the past decade; those with *economically* left values are increasingly divided by cultural attitudes. It will be vital for Labour to find ways to bridge this growing divide if the party is to be electorally successful.

The shape of electoral politics in Britain has been changing over the past decade, with those with 'left-wing' economic values becoming fragmented by their positions on other issues. This article considers how the 'left' in British electoral politics has been changing, by considering the values, attitudes and socio-economic positions of those within the electorate who are positioned on the 'left' as defined by their *economic* core values. It draws on data from British Election Study face-to-face surveys between 1992 and 2017 in order to look at how the 'left' has evolved over the last 25 years.

To measure who is *economically* 'left', four survey items are used, based on responses to the following statements:

Ordinary people get their fair share of the nation's wealth

There is one law for the rich and one for the poor

There is no need for strong Trade Unions to protect workers' rights

Private enterprise is the best way to solve Britain's economic problems.

In each case people are asked to express how much they agree or disagree with the statement on a five-point scale. The responses to the items are averaged to form a

scale, with low values representing the 'left' of the scale and higher values the right (the scale runs from one to five, with a notional mid-point of 3, the score that would be achieved by answering 'neither agree or disagree' to each item). Those with scores on this scale between 1 (the most 'left-wing' position) and 2.5 are defined as economically 'left-wing'.

Using this scale, the proportion of the electorate on the 'left' – and it is important to stress that in this article the term 'left' is being used to refer to individuals whose views are economically on the left as defined above – has been broadly stable at around 55 per cent since 2005. Yet at the three general elections since that date the parties of the left have not been able to secure an electoral majority. My argument is that by further understanding the social positions, values and identities of this group of the electorate, as well as their voting choices over this period, we are able to think more clearly about who 'the left' are and where they may be divided by social positions and values beyond the economic.

Values

Much writing on the left (broadly conceived) in recent years has identified 'two lefts', one defined by economic values and one by cultural values.¹ This second cultural set has been given various names and labels over time but here we discuss values in terms of a 'Liberal-Authoritarian' spectrum, following the labelling of those who first developed measures of it in the UK.² Five items are used to measure these values:

Young people don't have enough respect for traditional values

Censorship is necessary to uphold moral values

We should be tolerant of those who lead unconventional lifestyles

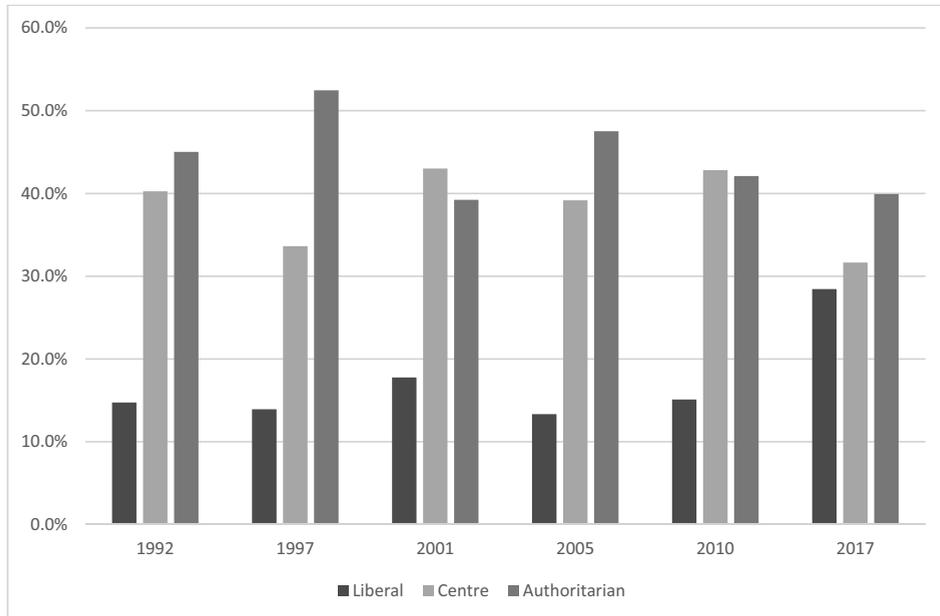
For some crimes the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence

People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences.

The scale again runs from one to five, with low values being liberal and high values authoritarian. It is divided into three parts, a 'liberal' part (values 1 to 2.6), a 'centre' part (values 2.61 to 3.40) and an 'authoritarian' part (3.41 to 5). We can then identify three fractions on the 'left' and compare their social locations as well as their political behaviour over time.

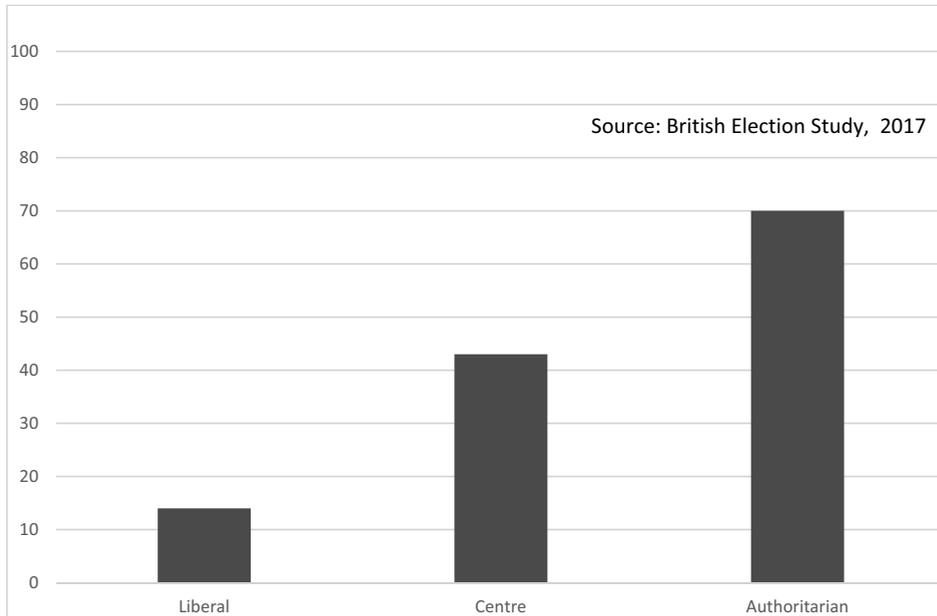
Key to understanding the evolution of political behaviour on the 'left' over this twenty-five-year period are the positions these voters take on other issues not reducible to the debate between the economic left and right. As Figure 1 shows, the position of the 'left' on this second dimension is deeply divided and has changed over the last twenty-five years. (The figures shown are for election years, but, due to the omission of two of the key items on the Liberal-Authoritarian scale in the 2015 data, this election is not included in the time series presented here.)

Figure 1: The changing shape of the 'left' electorate



From the 1980s onwards, the rise of 'new' issues and new social movements associated with them, notably the feminist, anti-racist, environmental and LGBT+ movements, were associated with the left of British politics and the Labour Party in particular. But as Figure 1 shows, even in 2017, the year with the highest figure for the 'liberal' grouping, liberals represented less than a third of the electorate on the 'left', and prior to this they accounted for less than one in five of voters with economically left-wing values. The proportion of those on the left also in the 'liberal' part of the electorate has roughly doubled over the period since 1992, from 15 per cent to 28 per cent, but this change occurred almost entirely between 2010 and 2017. The proportion in the 'authoritarian' part has fallen a little, from a high point in 1997, but it remains the largest group overall, at 40 per cent. Those in the 'centre' of this liberal-authoritarian divide account for less than one-third of the 'left'-leaning electorate in 2017. These figures clearly illustrate the key challenge for those on the 'left' of British politics: the electorate that are amenable to their economic policies are increasingly opposed to each other on more 'cultural' issues. The EU referendum has thrown this into sharp focus.

Figure 2: percentage vote to Leave EU among the 'left' leaning electorate



Among the 'liberal-left' 86 per cent voted to remain in the EU, while among the 'authoritarian-left' 70 per cent voted to leave. This reflects two differences between the groups – on attitudes to immigration, and connectedness to the political process. When asked if Britain had accepted too many immigrants, 20 per cent of the liberal group agreed, compared with almost 90 per cent of the authoritarian group (the perceived consequences of this are explored further below). This might be expected given the close links between attitudes to immigration and the liberal-authoritarian value scale. However, there is also a very clear divide between the two groups in their views about politics and politicians (a key factor affecting people's adoption or otherwise of 'populist' positions, itself strongly linked to EU referendum voting).

A sense of political efficacy

Several commentators have suggested that the EU referendum vote was (at least in part) driven by a desire to give the political 'elite' in London a 'bloody nose', arising out of a sense of disconnection with politics and political representatives.³ This is an important process to explore, not only for better understanding the EU referendum result, but also, more generally, for thinking about ways to ensure the health of representative democracy and democratic ideals. It is not unusual to find that those

who did not vote for the current government feel more disconnected and less satisfied with democracy than those who did so; and we might therefore expect those who are economically 'left' generally to feel some disconnection from a government broadly on the right. However, as Table 1 shows, this sense also varies substantially according to positions on the 'liberal-authoritarian' scale.

Table 1: Political efficacy on the 'left'

	Liberal	Centre	Authoritarian
<i>% 'agreeing' with the statement</i>			
Politicians don't care what people like me think	36	50	71
It is often difficult for me to understand what is going on in government and politics	40	56	68
People like me have no say in what government does	44	58	75
Politicians look out for their own interests rather than for the people they represent	38	48	69
<i>% 'saying no or don't know'</i>			
Would you say that any of the parties in Britain represent your views reasonably well?	27	44	59

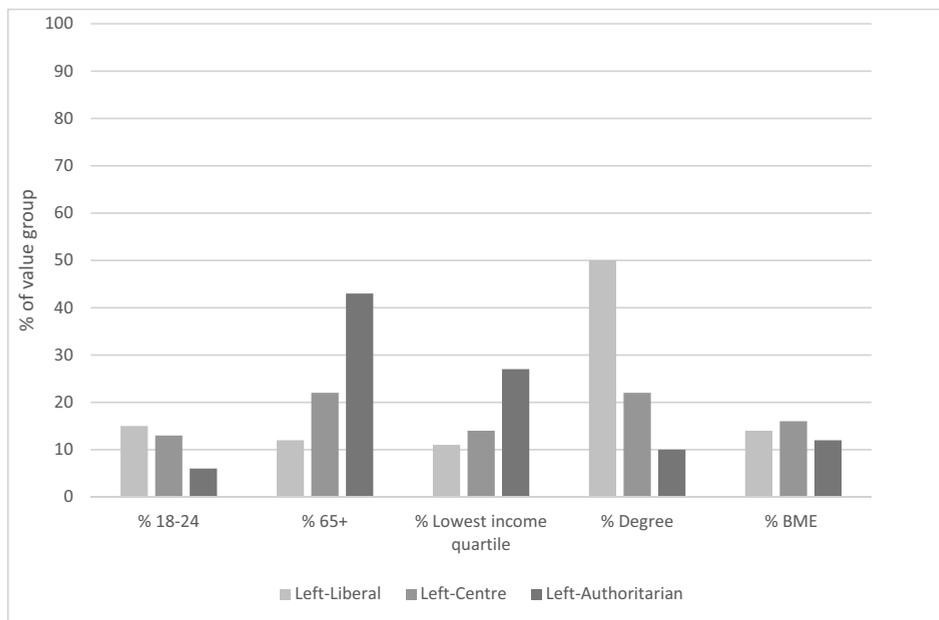
Each of the measures of people's sense of political efficacy has more than two-thirds of the 'authoritarian-left' giving a negative response (i.e., feeling in some sense that they do not have a say in government); the figure is around 40 per cent among the liberal left in each case. While these figures are high for all groups, there is clearly a greater sense of political engagement among the 'liberal' group than the 'authoritarian' group. The reasons for this are complex, and in part are related to the relative levels of education of the groups (it is a well replicated finding that those with higher levels of education have higher levels of political engagement, though exactly why remains contentious).⁴ However, these patterns give an indication as to why some parts of the left are more open to populist appeals – which pit the people against the political elite.

It is also revealing that three out of five voters on the authoritarian left feel that no party in Britain represents their views. This may not be an unreasonable assessment. Data from the Comparative Manifesto project, which uses content analysis of manifestos to derive and code policy positions, has shown a lack of political representation for the 'left-authoritarian' quadrant of the value space in most European societies.⁵

Variations according to socio-economic position

Immediately after the 2017 election, when the Labour Party gained ground in relatively affluent, well-educated constituencies but lost ground in those that were more ‘working-class’, there was considerable debate about exactly who the party now represented.⁶ But moving beyond the characteristics of areas allows for a better understanding of the social divides within the left, and the ways in which these connect to the value divides described above.

Figure 3: Social characteristics of the ‘Left’ groups, 2017



Source: British Election Surveys

Figure 3 shows the social characteristics of the economically ‘left’ vote within the groupings defined by their position on the liberal-authoritarian scale. Data shown are for 2017; the relationship between social position and positions on this ‘liberal-authoritarian’ dimension has changed little over this period. Those in the liberal group are on average younger and better educated than those in the centre or in the authoritarian group. Around half of those in the ‘liberal-left’ are degree-educated (with a further 6 per cent currently in full-time education); whilst just one in ten of the ‘authoritarian-left’ have degrees. There has been increasing interest in this education divide in recent months, though often it

focuses on the divide between the well educated and the wealthy, rather than the divide on the left between the well-educated and those with few educational qualifications.⁷

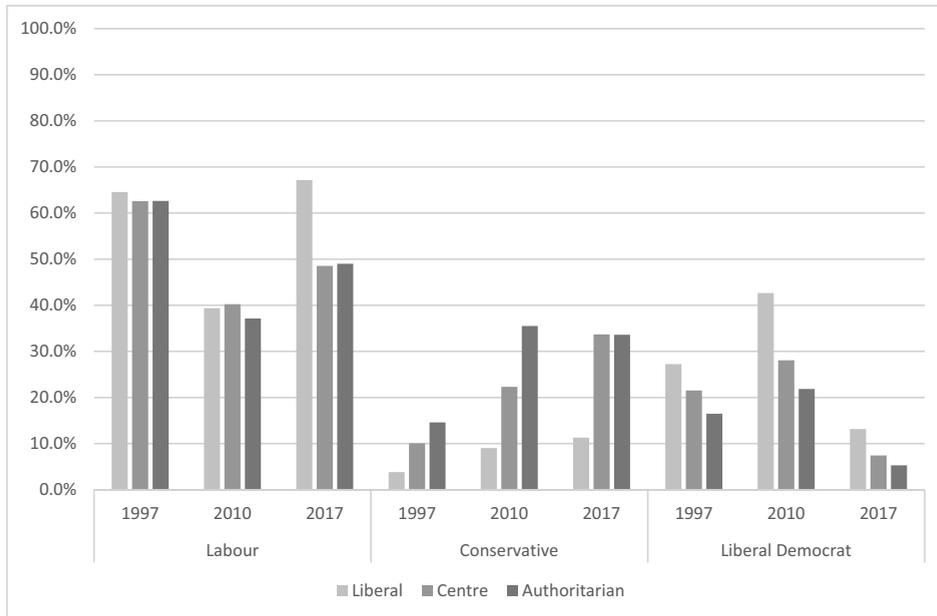
Whilst the divide based on education is the widest, there is also a substantial difference in the age profiles of the groups. Over 40 per cent of the authoritarian left are aged 65 or over, whilst this group accounts for only 12 per cent of the liberal left. There are also differences in household incomes, with those in the liberal group less likely to be in low income households.

These figures reflect the relationship between socio-economic position and values; education level and age are key influences on people's positioning on this liberal authoritarian scale and so it is not surprising to find these reflected here. However, divides according to income are also evident, further complicating the task of finding the right electoral framing to bridge these gaps.

Voting behaviour

These divides on the left of British politics, and the way they have evolved, have clear consequences for behaviour in the polling booth. Whilst thrown into the spot-light by the EU referendum, crucially, these changes *pre-date* the 2016 vote. In 1997 Labour won the votes of roughly three out of five voters on the economic 'left' regardless of how liberal they were. This percentage dropped to two in five in 2010 but the pattern remained largely unchanged, with proportional levels of support remaining the same among all groups on the liberal/authoritarian spectrum of the economic left. However, in 2010 voters on the left were not even in their support for Labour. The liberal-left voted heavily for the Liberal Democrats, who were the first-choice party among this group, winning over 40 per cent of the vote share; they were, as the saying went, 'with Nick'. In contrast, the Conservatives increased their share of the authoritarian left vote in 2010 (pre-dating the rise and collapse of UKIP and the EU referendum). In both 2010 and 2017 the Conservatives were able to attract the votes of around one in three of authoritarian/economic left voters, but in 2017 they were also able to attract the same proportion of all the 'not liberal' left-leaning voters (i.e. authoritarians and those in the centre of this spectrum).

Figure 4: Share of the vote according to liberal-authoritarian spectrum



Turnout in 2017 was also related to these cross-cutting value positions. The BES team were able to check the marked registers for those in their study who gave permission; this is important as there are several issues in using self-reported turnout, most critically a significant over-reporting of voting. Using this ‘validated’ vote measure, around one quarter of those on the ‘liberal’ left did not turn out to vote; around one third of those in the centre of the authoritarian/liberal divide did not vote; and two fifths of those in the authoritarian left group did not vote. This further reinforces the pattern of this (large) group on the economic left in British politics who feel disengaged from politics and political parties. Critical to the success of any left-leaning party in the future will lie in its ability to reach out to these voters and reconnect them with the political process.

The challenge

The electorate on the left in Britain is fragmented by social/cultural values. Since 2010 this has increasingly been reflected in the political behaviour of these groups; those on the left economically who are not also ‘liberal’ in their social values have become less likely to vote Labour, whilst the ‘liberal’ left have become more likely to do so (reflecting the collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote). But the economic ‘left’ are not predominantly ‘liberal’; its ‘not liberal’ constituency outnumber the ‘liberals’ by around 2 to 1. To be able to pursue progressive policies, the votes of all these

groups are essential. There are too few voters currently in ‘liberal-left’ positions to rely solely on these votes, and so a willingness to listen to and attempt to understand the motivations of those on the ‘not-liberal’ left is critical.

However, the scale of this challenge cannot be underestimated. These groups on the economic ‘left’ have some values that are at odds with each other on some of the most salient issues in current British politics. As shown in Figure 2, the liberal left voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union, while the authoritarian left voted overwhelmingly to leave. This is an expression of the divide which is further reflected in attitudes to minority and/or immigrant groups.

Attitudes to minorities/immigrants on the left

	Liberal	Centre	Authoritarian
% ‘agreeing’ with the statement			
Minorities should adapt to the customs and traditions of Britain	51	74	85
Immigrants are generally good for Britain’s economy	91	62	40
Britain’s culture is generally harmed by immigrants	8	35	53
Immigrants increase crime rates in Britain	10	30	54
The will of the majority should always prevail, even over the right of minorities	16	34	54

More than half of the authoritarian left agree that British culture is harmed by immigrants; with a similar percentage agreeing that immigrants increase crime. Fewer than 1 in 10 of the liberal left hold these positions. Perhaps of greater concern for those worried about the appeal of the radical (authoritarian) right, more than half of those with authoritarian values believe that ‘The will of the majority should always prevail, even over the rights of minorities’.

These attitudes to immigration are coupled with a more ‘ethnic’ conception of the nation and national identity among the authoritarian left. Over half of this group say it is ‘very important’ to be born in Britain to be ‘truly British’, and almost 2 in 3 of this group say it is very important to follow ‘Britain’ customs and traditions’. In contrast, fewer than 1 in 5 of the liberal left take the same positions. Together these views on national identity, minority groups and disengagement from politics provide a worrying cocktail of values on which the ‘radical right’ prey.

Thus, it is these divides which those on the economic left most urgently need to find ways to bridge. It is not the scope of this piece to suggest solutions: the positions

and debates are complex, and simple solutions will not be easy to find. It is worth pointing out, however, that despite being deep-seated, values are not immutable; on the other hand, it is unlikely that telling people they are wrong, or racist, or immoral in increasingly loud tones will win over hearts, or votes. Recognition of the shared agenda of inequality, economic insecurity and disconnection from political elites is far more likely to generate the sense of solidarity necessary to pursue a progressive agenda than to sneer disapprovingly at the values of others on the economic left. Sincere attempts to engage with and understand the positions of other groups with whom the liberal left share broad economic policy agreement will not only make it more likely that progressive economic politics may prevail, but may also help make a more progressive and positive view of democracy possible. Failure of parties on the left to engage with these voters leaves the space open for those on the (radical) right to fill, and poses a threat to democratic values and ideals well beyond the positional politics of left and right.

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Further information

Data are available from www.britishelectionstudy.com.

Notes

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