

The impact of party appeals on age differences in voting

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ABSTRACT

Age is an increasingly significant driver of how citizens vote across established democracies. This paper contributes to the growing research in this area by assessing whether party appeals directed at younger voters have an impact on the growing age gap in party support. I test this in the context of the UK, one of the countries with the largest age gap in party support, with a survey experiment containing group appeals adapted from the Labour and Conservative 2019 electoral manifestos. These age-based appeals are both symbolic and substantive in nature, and cover both economic and cultural issues. Results show that appeals directed at the youth do not trigger a decrease in support from older voters. This is the case even for appeals containing young citizens' cultural policy preferences. Moreover, while the Labour party has a clear advantage on youth support, the Conservative party is able to close this gap with proposals in line with the preferences of this cohort – especially around the issue of higher education funding.

1. Introduction

Across established democracies, age and age-related characteristics are increasingly important drivers of political attitudes and behaviours. In Britain, for example, the gap in the rate at which younger and older citizens support the Labour and Conservative party respectively has grown at every election since 2015 (Serra, 2024), and age is now considered to be the single best predictor of vote-choice (Curtice, 2023). In the United States, younger voters have been more likely to support Democrats over Republicans at every election since 2008 (although the gap is smaller than in the UK, and is stable over the years). At the Polish 2023 parliamentary elections, young voters were believed to be largely responsible for the left-leaning Civic Coalition's surprising win (McMahon, 2023; Euronews, 2023), as well as for bringing the Left-coalition to victory at the French legislative elections in July 2024 (Berezin, 2024; Tidey, 2024). In Australia, age and education levels were the most important demographic variables in the Coalition's loss of support between the 2019 and 2022 elections (Biddle and McAllister, 2022). Within this context, a growing bulk of research has sought to identify the reasons behind this growing age gap in party support, focusing in particular on the precarious economic conditions experienced by young adults, and the growing impact non-economic socio-cultural issues have on voting (see, e.g., Sloam, 2014; Sloam and Henn, 2018; Henn et al., 2017).

Most existing explanations of why certain age groups vote the way they do revolve around bottom-up, demand-side factors, and typically

consider how certain voter characteristics influence political attitudes. This strand of research provides important insights into the effect that individuals' demographic characteristics have on political preferences and behaviours, but they also overlook the role played by parties themselves in shaping issues and attracting voters. There is reason to believe that certain age groups hold distinctive voting patterns not only because they share demographic features, but also because of the appeals political parties target towards these groups. Recent research by Thau (2017, 2018) explored the extent to which political parties use group-based appeals and how these have changed over the years. Looking at electoral manifestos in Britain between 1964 and 2015, they find that both the frequency of appeals and range of groups targeted have increased over the years, and that these appeals are increasingly geared towards 'non-economic groups' such as the elderly, the youth, the ill, families, and parents. While their analysis is aimed at exploring the range and frequency of appeals, rather than their effect on voting, they do identify the young and old as part of the groups being targeted more frequently. Most of the other studies on the effects of group appeals in campaign rhetoric primarily focus on traits such as gender, race, religion (e.g. Hersh and Schaffner, 2013; Holman et al., 2015; Kam et al., 2017; Ostfeld, 2019; Philpot, 2007; Swigger, 2012; Weber and Thornton, 2012) or class (e.g. Robison et al., 2020; Horn et al., 2020), but not age. A further lacuna in the current literature on group appeals is that research in this realm tends to only consider appeals that directly mention the groups involved (e.g. 'workers', 'business owners', 'single parents'), but previous research has highlighted how the issues

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championed by different age groups are not always obviously linked with group members themselves. For example, high levels of support for same-sex marriage are associated with the youth much more than with older cohorts (e.g. [Fischer, 2017](#)), yet the issue of same-sex marriage *per se* does not have age connotations.

This study contributes to this debate by shifting the focus from voters to parties and assessing whether age-based group appeals have an impact on the age gap in party support. If voters are indeed responsive to the cultural and economic climate present in the run up to an election, it can be expected that policy offerings that are formulated along the age-divide will have an impact on this gap. I test this via a specially designed survey experiment fielded on a nationally representative sample of the British population in May 2022. As noted earlier, age is an increasingly important predictor of political attitudes and behaviour across several established democracies, but this association is particularly marked in the United Kingdom, where there has been a longstanding (and growing) age-gap in party support. The UK hence provides a particularly fitting context where to examine the extent to which targeted appeals might affect age differences in party choice.

The paper is organised so that the first section reviews the existing research on group appeals and their effect on voting, the second section outlines the hypotheses stemming from this review, the third section describes the experiment design, the fourth section presents the results of the experiment, and the final section discusses these results and their implications for electoral mobilisation.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. How the content of appeals affects behaviour: a review of the literature on spatial and group voting

Several theories have been developed to examine the ways in which voters judge the policy stances of candidates. *Proximity theories* assume that voters prefer candidates whose proposals are closest to their own preferences ([Downs, 1957](#)). *Discounting theories* hold that voters know candidates cannot fully deliver on their pledges, and therefore choose candidates who can best deliver on the most desirable outcomes ([Grofman, 1985; Fiorina, 1992](#)). *Directional theories* posit that voters perceive the political space as two-sided and would normally choose the candidate on the same side as themselves ([Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989](#)). But besides the closeness to one's personal preferences, the issues that matter most to voters are often tied with the *groups* these voters belong to. A group perspective on political behaviour thus takes collective factors such as the protection of shared interests as the basis for candidate support. Political cohesion may be especially likely when multiple identities converge ([Huddy, 2015](#)). [Rocca and Brewer \(2002\)](#), for example, developed the concept of *identity overlap* and measured it as the degree to which groups share similar members or attributes, which is in turn expected to generate stronger or less complex identities (see also [Bornschier et al., 2021](#)). Cultural and socio-economic identities have converged in this way in recent years, generating stronger partisan identities that counteract the process of dealignment triggered by the decline of class conflict and class voting. In fact, despite this decline, there is abundant evidence that objective social structural location continues to matter for electoral preferences. For example, recent research has identified how the British working class – whose members used to display strong support for the Labour party – no longer associates itself with any party in particular, and is rather increasingly tending towards abstention (see, e.g., [Evans and Tilley, 2017; Heath, 2018; Heath and Bennett, 2023; Heath and Serra, 2024](#)). This supports the theory of electoral realignment rooted in evolving, rather than fixed, social structures. Left- and right-wing parties are located at opposite poles of a new divide that crystallised in the 80s and 90s throughout North America and Western Europe – a divide centred heavily on issues like cultural liberalism and immigration, the environment, but also redistribution. The changing meanings of left and right politics and the

relative impact they have on voting were first theorised by Kitschelt and Kriesi (see, e.g., [Kitschelt and Hellemans, 1990; Kitschelt, 1994; Kriesi, 1998; Kriesi, 2010; Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015](#)), who noted how traditional economic attitudes had been supplemented, rather than replaced, by new politics or 'second dimension' issues, generating new political affiliations and identities. More recently, [Ford and Jennings \(2020\)](#) describe it as a new cleavage structure, and outline how interlocking and economic developments are transforming the composition of European electorates, creating conditions where new cleavages have emerged. These changes include the expansion of higher education and the emergence of graduates as a distinctive electorate (e.g. see [Stubager, 2008, 2010, 2013](#)); the growth of ethnic minority communities; the reactions to political marginalisation of socially conservative, ethnic majority voters with low levels of formal education; the growth in size of older cohorts due to increases in life expectancy; and the emergence of geographical cleavages reflecting the cosmopolitan-conservative divide. Against this background, social identities are important for explaining recent electoral outcomes, as subjective identities affect vote-choice both via informing programmatic policy demands and via non-programmatic mechanisms such as group norms ([Bornschier et al., 2021](#)).

While we know that age has come to constitute an increasingly important identity demarcation because of the socio-economic characteristics and cultural attitudes associated with different life stages and age groups, we still know very little about the ways in which political parties respond to this divide, and even less about how this response affects participation. Previous studies on group-appeals can guide research into the matter. [Hersh and Schaffner \(2013\)](#), for example, conducted an experiment to examine the impact of Latinos-targeted appeals directed at in-group and out-group members, and found that, against expectations, group appeals have no effect on increasing support among group members, but they have a *negative effect* on the support of non-group members. Their results thus warned against the possible consequences of mistargeting appeals.

The success of appeals in driving support can also depend on whether these are *symbolic*, i.e., they merely mention certain groups in society but do not put forward specific policies aimed at these groups, or *substantive*, i.e., they identify group interests and offer clear policies that these groups could benefit from. In this respect, [Robison et al. \(2020\)](#) find that in both the US and Denmark, appeals to the working class increase support among members of this group, and that policy-based appeals have the same effect as symbolic appeals in mobilising working class support. Politicians may therefore choose symbolic appeals over policy-focused ones in an effort not to alienate voters with strong pre-existing policy preferences (e.g. see [Dickson and Scheve, 2006](#)). The finding is echoed by [Tomz and Van Houweling \(2009\)](#), who also report that voters are as likely to support ambiguous candidates as they are to support candidates who offer more specific proposals. Importantly, they find that ambiguity can increase support among those who do not have strong partisan affiliations, while it makes no difference for those who do. This is possibly because when voters know less about a candidate, they can project their own values and preferences upon them.

Besides the content of appeals, candidate traits can also influence support across different groups. For example, [Han \(2008\)](#) found that appeals disclosing some personal details on the person making the appeal are more effective in mobilising participation – although the extent to which *shared* demographic characteristics influence participation has been questioned more recently (e.g. see [Broockman et al., 2022](#)). [McDonald and Deckman \(2021\)](#) found that Generation Z (i.e. those born after 1996) have distinct candidate preferences from those of previous generations. For example, they are more likely to prefer women and ethnic minority candidates, who have been historically penalised by other cohorts. A further way in which candidate traits can affect support is by defying or complying with the expectations voters have of them. In this respect, [Hayes \(2005\)](#) found that candidates who display a trait not normally associated with the party they represent can have a positive

effect on support. By testing the effect of candidate evaluations on vote-choice in seven US presidential elections, they find that voters are more likely to support a Democrat when they present themselves as unusually strong leaders, and Republicans when they come across as especially empathetic. The pattern persists even when broken down by the respondents' own party identification.

2.2. How political and socio-economic priorities affect behaviour: a review of the literature on age-based attitudes and preferences

As theorised by [Lipset \(1959\)](#), one factor affecting political participation is how relevant government policies are to the individual and the groups these individuals are part of. Groups that see a visible effect of policy on their well-being have a greater stake in government activity and have higher turnout rates than would be expected of them. The elderly are a case in point because their socio-economic background, often characterised by low incomes and low education levels, would suggest low participation levels. Yet they are arguably the group that votes at the highest rates. [Campbell \(2002, 2003\)](#) identified their dependence on welfare as the reason behind their activism. She describes how in the United States, Social Security has stimulated and shaped senior citizens' political participation, which, in turn, has greatly influenced policy making for Social Security. Before Social Security, seniors participated equal to, or even less than, younger groups of Americans; afterwards they became the most active segment of the population. Moreover, Campbell's analysis of roll-call voting of conservative Republicans in Congress reveals seniors' political leverage. Despite their anti-government conservatism, these legislators vote in a more pro-Social Security direction as the proportion of elderly constituents in their state or district rises. [Nygård and Jakobsson \(2013\)](#) drew similar conclusions regarding elderly populations in Finland, who reported increased activism in both institutionalised and unconventional forms of participation around the time of the 2005 Finnish pension reform, as well as when they perceive negative attitudes towards their group.

In this view, due to the changing nature of socio-economic conditions over time, people from different age groups and generations emphasize different political values and priorities, and the political age-gap present today is unprecedented over at least the last half century. Across much of the Western world, the youngest generations of adults, popularly known as "Millennials" and "Gen Z", have developed distinct political leanings that are much closer to the parties on the left than before (see, e.g., [Fisher, 2017](#); [Sloam and Henn, 2018, 2019](#); [Serra, 2023](#)). In the US, for example, [Fisher \(2017\)](#) finds that on policy issues such as gay marriage, defence spending, immigration, government services, global warming, aid to the poor, and abortion, Millennials are more liberal than the Silent or Pre-war Generation. The differences in some of these preferences are so large that generational replacement can be expected to change public policy on these matters. Similar changes have occurred in the UK, where voters under the age of 30 are twice as likely as their older counterparts to consider the environment the most important political issue and to express feelings of anxiety in relation to climate change ([YouGov, 2019b](#); [ONS, 2021](#)), as well as to hold progressive views on sexual minority and transgender rights ([YouGov, 2020](#)). While the trend of young people espousing stronger left-leaning attitudes than older ones is well-established as opinions are expected to shift rightwards in middle-age, a remarkable change occurred in recent decades pertains to the persistence of these attitudes over the lifetime: Millennial adults are the first generation who seems to be defying the trend of becoming more conservative as they grow older ([Serra, 2023](#); [Duffy, 2023](#)), a trend that is particularly pronounced in the UK but that appears to also be growing in the US ([Financial Times, 2022](#)). The extent to which political parties tap into the issues that matter most to certain groups of voters therefore matters not just in the short-term, but also for the establishment of long-lasting voting patterns.

A lot of the growing age divide in political attitudes is attributed to

diverging views on the new politics issues described above, but while the salience of these issues has certainly increased in recent years, economic issues continue to exert a great impact on voting across all age groups (see, e.g., [Neundorf and Pardos-Prado, 2022](#); [Abou-Chadi and Kurer, 2021](#); [Gozgor, 2022](#)). In this view, part of the reason why young adults appear to be increasingly disaffected towards right-wing parties, may pertain to the perceived lack of socio-economic benefits associated with supporting these parties. In the United Kingdom, for example, the protracted period of Conservative governance between 2010 and 2024 has coincided with the fall-out from the global financial crisis and the imposition of austerity measures that disproportionately affected young adults. While older cohorts benefit from pension protection policies and other forms of financial support ([Cribb et al., 2023](#); [Portes, 2023](#)), today's young Britons political socialisation has occurred amidst budget cuts to youth services and child support benefits, rising youth unemployment, increased demand for higher educational qualifications, and a largely inaccessible housing market ([Sloam and Henn, 2019](#); [Resolution Foundation, 2024](#)). This has had a three-fold impact on youth political behaviour: young adults are taking longer to complete schooling, earn less than previous generations at their age did, and delay key life stages such as forming a family and buying a house ([Pew Research Center, 2018](#); [Office for National Statistics, 2020](#); [Billari and Liefbroer, 2010](#)) – all of which impact their position in society and, consequently, their support for certain policies and parties.

3. Research contribution

The previous section outlined the key developments in academic research on the effect of group appeals on political behaviour, and the issues that matter most to certain age-groups in particular. While there is a growing body of research examining how the content and targets of appeals affects behaviour, the aspect of age-based appeals in particular remains unexamined. As the age-gap in voting preferences appears to be growing in a number of countries, most notably in the United Kingdom, it is a particularly timely aspect to investigate further. Research concerning the effect of age on political attitudes and behaviours usually looks at the question from the demand-side – that is, by examining how characteristics such as those related to an individual's age impact political preferences (see, e.g., [Smets, 2016](#) on the impact that changes in the timing of life-cycle effects have on young adults' turnout rates; [Cornelis et al., 2009](#) on how different age groups' personality traits affect their propensity towards conservatism; [Stoker and Jennings, 1995](#) on how life-cycle transitions and marital status impact political participation; [Russell et al., 1992](#) on ageing and conservatism; or [Inglehart, 1971](#) seminal research on generations and political value change). This extensive research area helps us understand how changes in individuals' life trajectories affect changes in their political preferences and behaviours, but leaves open the question as to how parties respond to these changes and shape issues that attract these voters. In this view, this paper contributes to existing academic research in three ways. It adds to research on the effect of group appeals by examining (1) the extent to which age-targeted symbolic appeals can be as powerful a mobilising factor as substantive policy-focused appeals, as well as (2) whether appeals targeted at certain age groups have a de-mobilising effect on other groups, and (3) whether economic or sociocultural issues have a stronger impact in mobilising support from certain age groups.

As noted in earlier sections, the United Kingdom is a particularly well-suited context where to examine the impact of age-based party appeals on voting behaviour. While age is an increasingly relevant driver of political preferences in many countries, this association is most marked in the UK, where the party-choice gap between the Labour-leaning youth and Conservative-leaning elderly voters has grown substantially at each election since 2015, and most recently amounted to over 30 percentage points ([YouGov, 2024a](#)). While these gaps are particularly pronounced in two-party systems, similar gaps are emerging across European multi-party systems too. In a recent study examining

the extent to which the supposed ‘youthquake’ phenomenon of young adults increasingly leaning left is attributable to changes in party competition, [Dassonneville and McAllister \(2025\)](#) identify considerable gaps across most established democracies, and attribute the difference in their magnitude to changing policy platforms, whereby parties who have adopted more socially progressive stances tend to be rewarded by increased youth support.

A further reason for choosing to run this study in the context of the United Kingdom is that, to the best of my knowledge, it is the only country where a political party (Labour) dedicated an entire manifesto to policies aimed specifically at young voters. The party appeals presented to respondents in this experiment are based on a selection of the policies pledged in that manifesto (an overview of these is described in the Data & Methods section below). However, while these policies were proposed by a British party in a British context, similar proposals have been advanced by left-wing parties elsewhere (see, e.g., [Dassonneville and McAllister, 2025](#)). Therefore, findings from this research contribute to knowledge on political mobilisation efforts beyond the United Kingdom. The following section outlines the expectations that can be drawn from existing research and the experimental set-up.

4. Hypotheses

The studies discussed in the previous sections are helpful in defining some expectations on what effect age-based group-appeals could have on party support. For example, within the context of increasing political antagonism between young and old voters, do these groups respond differently to symbolic and substantive appeals? Does appealing to one group hamper support across the other? And do candidates who defy the expectations voters have of them perform better or worse compared with those who do not? Drawing from the studies reviewed earlier, it seems plausible to assume that if there were greater policy offerings geared towards the issues most relevant to young voters, political parties would be able to attract increased youth support. How this would affect the support levels of other cohorts, however, is less clear. If on the one hand it could be expected that it would also have a positive impact, or no impact at all, it may well be that focusing on “youth-friendly” policies – especially the more controversial ones, such as those around gender and sexuality – could push older cohorts to retaliate.

Considering spatial theories of voting and the existing evidence on what drives youth turnout, the first hypothesis to be investigated postulates that.

H1. *Voters will display higher support for the party whose appeals are closest to the preferences of their age group, so that young voters will display higher support for a party championing young people’s issues.*

Considering spatial theories of voting, as well as previous evidence on voters penalising parties who mistarget them (e.g. [Hersh and Shaffner, 2013](#)), the second hypothesis postulates that.

H2. *Voters will penalise a party whose appeals are directed towards an age group they do not belong to, so that older voters will penalise a party championing young people’s issues.*

Considering the mixed evidence on whether voters prefer parties who make policy proposals with clear aims and goals over vague appeals (e.g. [Robison et al., 2020](#); [Tomz and Van Houweling, 2009](#)), two competing hypotheses can be investigated.

H3a. *Substantive economic and cultural appeals will have a larger effect on support than symbolic appeals.*

H3b. *Substantive economic and cultural appeals will have the same effect on support as symbolic appeals.*

Considering evidence that candidates holding traits not expected by voters can have a larger effect in swaying support (e.g. [Hayes, 2005](#)), the final hypothesis postulates that.

H4. *Appeals not expected by a certain party (e.g. a Conservative candidate*

pledging to scrap tuition fees or to expand transgender people’s rights) will have a larger effect on support than those from expected parties.

5. Data and methods

The extent to which appeals to certain age groups affect the voting behaviour of these groups can be best tested through a survey experiment. This is in line with most of the research previously undertaken to examine how campaign rhetoric affects support and behaviour. In this case, the best type of experiment is a *priming* experiment in which participants consider a number of campaign appeals and policy proposals by a political candidate before being asked whether they would support that candidate in an election. These include both *substantive* and *symbolic* appeals, and both economic appeals (such as proposals towards tuition fees) and cultural “postmaterialist” appeals (such as proposals on environmental and identity issues).

5.1. Experimental design

In the experiment, respondents are randomly assigned across a 2x5 factorial design wherein they are asked to evaluate a Labour or a Conservative candidate for the Westminster parliament. Voters rely on cognitive shortcuts to determine which politician deserves their vote, and chief among these is partisanship ([Campbell et al., 1960](#)). Moreover, the presence of a party cue here is crucial because it provides an anchor against which respondents can evaluate the candidate in the absence of an age-based appeal. As people are likely to already have some beliefs about the relationship between parties and age groups, the party cue also means that we can tell whether candidates from the two parties can both appeal to the same group, or if their reputation washes out such efforts. Therefore, the partisanship of the candidate is randomly assigned such that they are either from the Conservative Party or the Labour Party.

First, all respondents are asked demographic and political behaviour questions. Participants are then randomly assigned to five groups.

- Control group: generic electoral appeal with no age connotation
- Treatment group 1: symbolic appeal pitting the young vs the old
- Treatment group 2: substantive cultural/post-materialist appeal
- Treatment group 3: substantive economic (age-based) appeal
- Treatment group 4: substantive economic appeal (no age connotation)

The experiment was fielded by polling agency Survation in May 2022. The survey was answered by 1026 respondents, but the treatment assignment was repeated twice to reach the target of at least 400 respondents in each treatment group. This is well above the generally agreed minimum requirement of 100 respondents per treatment group ([Mutz, 2011](#)), ensuring high power and curtailing the possibility of Type I and Type II errors – false positive or false negative results. The final experimental sample thus contains 2052 observations. The Appendix reports the treatment distribution, as well as the sample distribution by age, gender, educational attainment, income and voting patterns.

5.2. The content of the party appeals: age-based group appeals from the 2019 UK general election

To maximise the study’s external validity, the appeals used in this study are adapted from real party appeals made during the 2019 UK General Election campaign. In the run-up to that election, most parties devoted some sections of their manifestos to policies geared towards the youth, and the Labour party even launched a dedicated “Youth Manifesto”. Of all the policies proposed by the three main British parties – which ranged from mental health provisions to university fees, environmental protection, employment, housing, sexual minority rights, broadband and transport – the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats

presented the most detailed proposals, with clear aims and funding plans, while the Conservatives made vaguer pledges. For instance, on LGBT and gender issues, Labour promised a string of measures including the establishment of a large Cultural Capital Fund, reforming the Gender Recognition Act of 2004, eliminating areas of discrimination in law, and reforming school curricula to include content on inclusive relationships and sex education. By contrast, the Conservatives proposals on the matter only included hosting an international LGBT conference. Public opinion on this policy area is particularly divided along age lines – a [YouGov \(2020\)](#) study found that twice as many respondents aged 18–25 are accepting of trans people and believe changing one's legal gender should be made easier than respondents aged over 65 – and therefore provides a good test of the effect that a party making this proposal might have on the voting behaviour of young and older citizens.

Tuition fees are a less divisive issue insofar as about half of young and elderly Britons alike believe them to be “fair” – although the proportion is marginally higher across citizens aged over 65 ([YouGov, 2024b](#)). However, proposals to scrap tuition fees would mostly benefit young respondents (who enrol at university at significantly higher rates than other age groups). Therefore, this educational and economic policy is well-suited to examine the extent to which it might attract or reduce support across the age groups that are most and least concerned by it. Similarly, the issue of minimum wage increases is not particularly divisive along age lines (although a small majority of elderly respondents perceive current wage levels to be sufficient than younger people do). However, the British minimum wage system – similar to that of other countries – is tiered by age, whereby, at the time of writing, workers aged 16–17 and 18–21 earn significantly less than those in older age brackets. This disparity and its impact on young adults’ financial situations have generated repeated calls for the minimum wage to be implemented consistently across the nation (see, e.g., [Resolution Foundation, 2024](#)) – a policy that was also reflected in the Labour 2019 Youth Manifesto. Therefore, this economic policy too is well-suited for testing the differential impact it may have on the voting behaviour of different age groups that are more or less likely to benefit from the reform.

Importantly, the policies outlined above cover both salient socio-cultural issues (gender and sexuality) and economic issues (tuition fees and workers’ wages), allowing us to test the extent to which certain age groups of voters may be more impacted by one policy type over another. Moreover, these are tested alongside a symbolic appeal with no specific policy content, so as to examine whether these types of appeals too have a differential impact on candidate support.

All respondents first see the following message:

Suppose that there was a candidate from the [Labour/Conservative] Party running to represent your constituency in the House of Commons.

Each treatment group then receives an extension of this message:

[Group 1 – generic appeal/control condition] Suppose the candidate recently said: “If elected, I will do everything to fulfil the wishes of my constituents”.

[Group 2 – symbolic age-based appeal] Suppose the candidate recently said: “A lot of attention has been given to the elderly in recent political debates. We in the [Conservative/Labour] Party believe it is time for politicians to prioritise the interests of the youth”.

[Group 3 – substantive cultural appeal: transgender rights] Suppose the candidate recently said: “Gender identity is an important aspect of people’s lives and should not cause undue suffering. We in the [Conservative/Labour] Party will make it easier to change one’s legal gender, expand transgender people’s rights and freedoms, and promote inclusive education in schools”.

[Group 4 – substantive economic appeal] Suppose the candidate recently said: “Young people increasingly face economic hardship when pursuing further education and paying off education debt. We in the

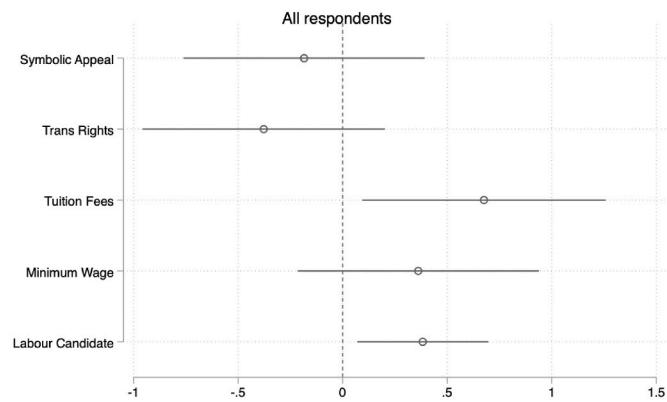


Fig. 1. Treatment effects on likelihood to support candidate (0–10 scale).

[Conservative/Labour] Party believe it is time to scrap tuition fees, reinstate maintenance grants, erase previous loans interest rate payments and make university more accessible to all”.

[Group 5 – substantive economic appeal with no age appeal] Suppose the candidate recently said: “With rising inflation, Britons increasingly face economic hardship. We in the [Conservative/Labour] Party believe it is time to introduce a Real Living Wage of at least £10 per hour for all workers aged 16 and over and ban zero-hour contracts”.

Finally, all respondents are asked:

On a scale of 0 to 10 – where 0 corresponds to “would not vote for this candidate” and 10 to “certain to vote for this candidate” – how likely are you to vote for this candidate?

5.3. Study limitations

A possible limitation of this study pertains to the fact that it was run in a non-election period and therefore does not account for all the other possible issues and political developments that might affect voters’ preferences during an actual election, including any discussion around the policies used here. However, the main aim of this study is to compare the impact of various types of appeals on the likelihood to support certain candidates by certain groups, and the study design is well-suited to achieve that.

A further possible limitation pertains to the fact that appeals may be perceived as unrealistic when proposed by a candidate that belongs to a party not traditionally associated with certain stances. For example, a Conservative candidate is very unlikely to propose the expansion of gender recognition legislation. However, one of the hypotheses tested in this study pertains specifically to examining whether an appeal that defies individuals’ expectations has an alienating or positive effect on support likelihood. Randomly assigning the partisan affiliation of the candidate so that some would be perceived as making unrealistic appeals, is therefore an essential part of the study.

6. Results

Fig. 1¹ reports the effects of each treatment condition on candidate support levels compared to the control group for all respondents of the survey. To account for partisan effects, the analysis also controls for whether the appeals were made by a Labour candidate. Notably, only the appeal on tuition fees has a positive and significant effect, suggesting that the issue of higher education costs matters to most voters

¹ The regression models behind all figures presented in this paper are reported in Tables 1–5 in the Appendix.

irrespective of their age group or partisanship.

Fig. 2.1 reports the effect of the different treatment conditions on the support levels of voters under 35 and over 60 when compared to the control group. As evidenced by the plot, for young voters most treatment conditions have a significant positive effect on candidate support, except for the cultural appeal concerning the rights that should be attributed to the trans community, which has a positive but not significant effect. It thus appears that, for younger voters, economic and symbolic appeals exert a greater influence on candidate support than sociocultural policies. Wald tests on the coefficients confirm this, as for young voters the effect of the minimum wage appeal is significantly larger than the effect of the trans rights appeal ($p = 0.02$).

Turning to older voters, none of the party appeals appear to have a statistically significant effect on their support levels compared to the control condition. This suggests that older voters do not increase their support for candidates advocating youth-friendly policies, but neither do they penalise them for espousing a policy that does not benefit the interests of their age group. This is true even in the case of symbolic appeals that go directly against their interests. Moreover, for older voters too it seems that economic appeals have a larger effect than cultural ones, as Wald tests show that the effect of the tuition fees appeal is significantly larger than the effects of both the symbolic and cultural appeals (tuition fees vs. symbolic appeal $p = 0.01$; tuition fees vs. trans rights $p = 0.03$; tuition fees vs. minimum wage $p = 0.07$).

To examine the extent to which these effects might be driven by certain ideological sub-groups within younger and older respondents, robustness tests were undertaken which replicate the analysis by breaking down the two age groups by political ideology measured as progressive or conservative.² Results are reported in Fig. 2.2 in the Appendix. It appears that the treatment effects on young voters are largely driven by the progressive majority of the British youth. Across young voters who identify as supporters of liberal and progressive parties, every treatment has a positive and significant effect on the candidate support likelihood (except for the symbolic and trans rights appeals which are positive but not significant), while none of the effects are significant across young conservatives. It should be noted, however, that the British youth overwhelmingly espouse left leaning and progressive attitudes,³ which suggests that while these effects are more evident across the more progressive faction of these voters, they also speak to the attitudes of the youth more broadly. This is further reflected in the fact that no treatment is significant across older respondents regardless of ideology.

Fig. 3.1 reports the predictive margins on candidate vote likelihood, by whether the fictional candidate was from the Labour or Conservative party. In all cases but that of older voters, the Labour candidate has an advantage in the control condition. However, the appeals seem to close the partisan gap. This is the case even for younger voters who display the strongest pro-Labour support. On the issue of tuition fees in particular, the effect of the two appeals becomes indistinguishable for this cohort.

Even more striking is perhaps the effect of the appeal to increase the minimum wage on older respondents. For this group, a Conservative candidate making the appeal triggers an increase in support that is twice as large as coming from a Labour candidate. Moreover, none of the appeals that would traditionally not be associated with the Conservative party results in a *decrease* in support.

Fig. 3.2 unpacks these effects further by considering whether

respondents are Conservative or Labour supporters.⁴ The top left panel displays the treatment effects on young Conservative voters. The large and overlapping confidence intervals of the control condition are probably due to the very small size of this group (only 11 Conservative respondents who were under 35 were randomly assigned to this group). However, there are no statistically significant differences on the other treatment conditions either. This suggests that it is not clear whether appeals from the Labour party are able to close the gap with the Conservatives for this group of voters, or whether this is due to the comparatively small size of the group (there are 106 under-35 Conservative voters in the sample, as opposed to 302 Labour voters from the same age group).

Looking at the treatment effects on young Labour voters in the top right panel, on the other hand, does seem to suggest that for this cohort appeals matter more than the partisanship of the candidate making them. The partisan gap evidenced in the control condition disappears when respondents are presented with the appeals, suggesting that a Conservative candidate advocating these policies can increase their support likelihood to match that of a Labour candidate.

While youth-oriented policies enable the Conservative party to close the gap with Labour among young voters, these appeals do not seem to affect the support levels of older voters in either direction. For both Conservative-voting and Labour-voting respondents aged over 60, the policy appeals do not have effects that differ significantly from the control group, except in two cases: (1) older Conservative voters are significantly more likely to support a Labour candidate if presented with the appeal on tuition fees; (2) older Labour voters are significantly *less* likely to support the Labour party if presented with the appeal on raising the minimum wage, with the opposite being true if the candidate making the same appeal is from the Conservative party. In other words, for older Labour voters the effect of the minimum wage proposal on candidate support is smaller than that of other appeals if the candidate is from the Labour party, but it is larger than that of other appeals if the candidate is from the Conservative party. While this could seem counterintuitive, it could be explained by considering that the Labour party *owns* the issue of wage increases. Therefore, this appeal may seem less striking to a Labour voter if made by a Labour candidate, whereas it would have a more significant impact if made by a Conservative candidate. This aligns with the findings of Hayes (2005), who also noted how candidates that hold certain unexpected traits are more likely to appeal to voters who would not normally support their party family. Moreover, the appeal mentions a wage increase that is barely above the existing wage levels⁵ for workers over 20 years of age, making it even less likely to sway older Labour voters support levels, while it contains significant benefits for younger voters, who are indeed more likely to support the party making these proposals.

Although the appeals do not seem to have a significant role in shifting the voting patterns of older voters, it is notable that they generally do not have a negative effect on support either. This means that a Conservative candidate advocating *non-Conservative* policies to their own elderly voter base does not seem to trigger a backlash from this cohort, reconfirming the notion that the Conservative party would benefit from adopting progressive youth-oriented policies without necessarily risking wider vote-share losses.

7. Results discussion

This research set out to answer two questions. The first pertains to whether party appeals designed to attract the support of different age

² In the absence of questions that tap into respondents' ideology, this measure is derived from party identification. Parties that espouse progressive attitudes (Labour, Liberal Democrats, Green) are coded as progressive, whereas parties that espouse conservative attitudes (Conservative, Reform UK, UKIP) are coded as conservative.

³ The combined support for the parties on the left (Labour, Liberal Democrats, Green) across the British youth amounts to over 70 % which reflects national trends.

⁴ Partisanship is measured as vote intention at the next general election. This measure was chosen over past general election vote because 43 % of under-35 respondents reportedly abstained in that election, whereas only 11 % are reportedly undecided about their next general election vote intention.

⁵ When the experiment was run in May 2022.

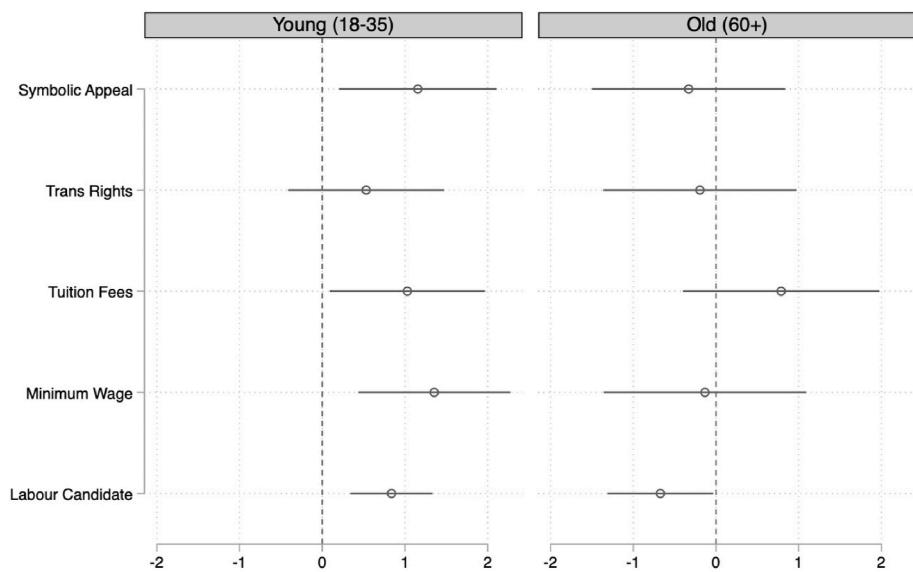


Fig. 2.1. Treatment effects on young and old voters.

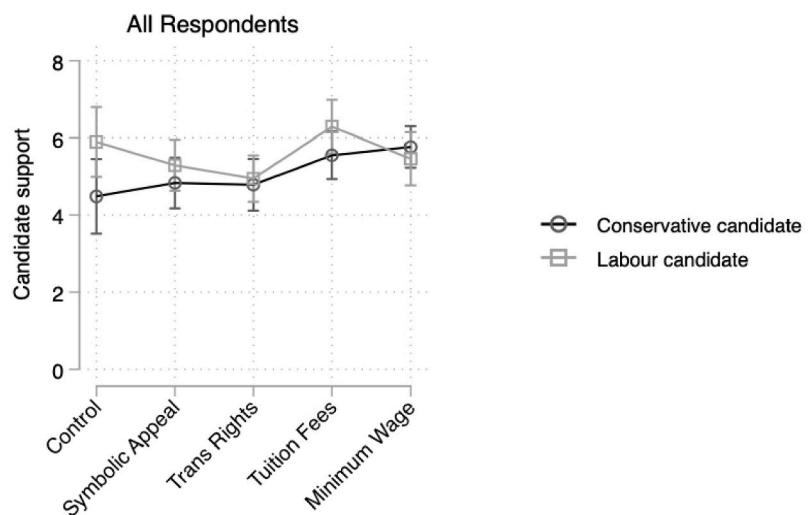
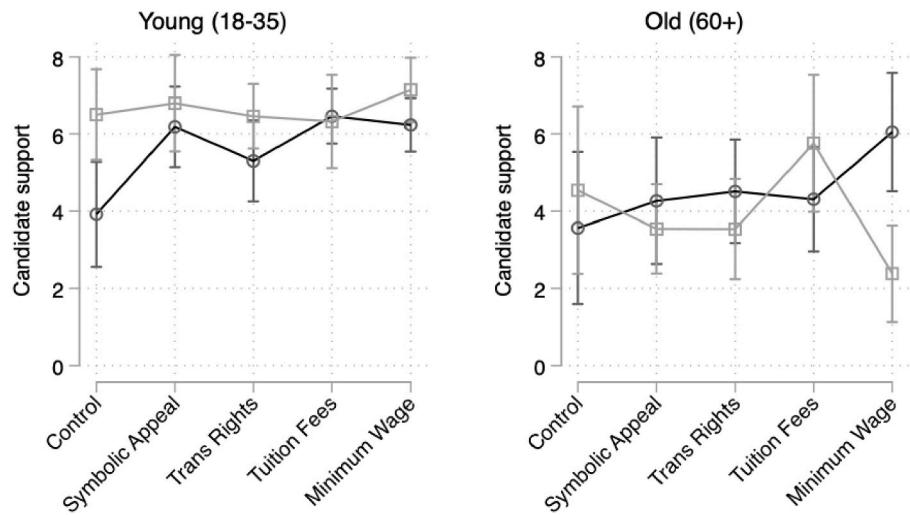


Fig. 3.1. Effect of labour and Conservative appeals.

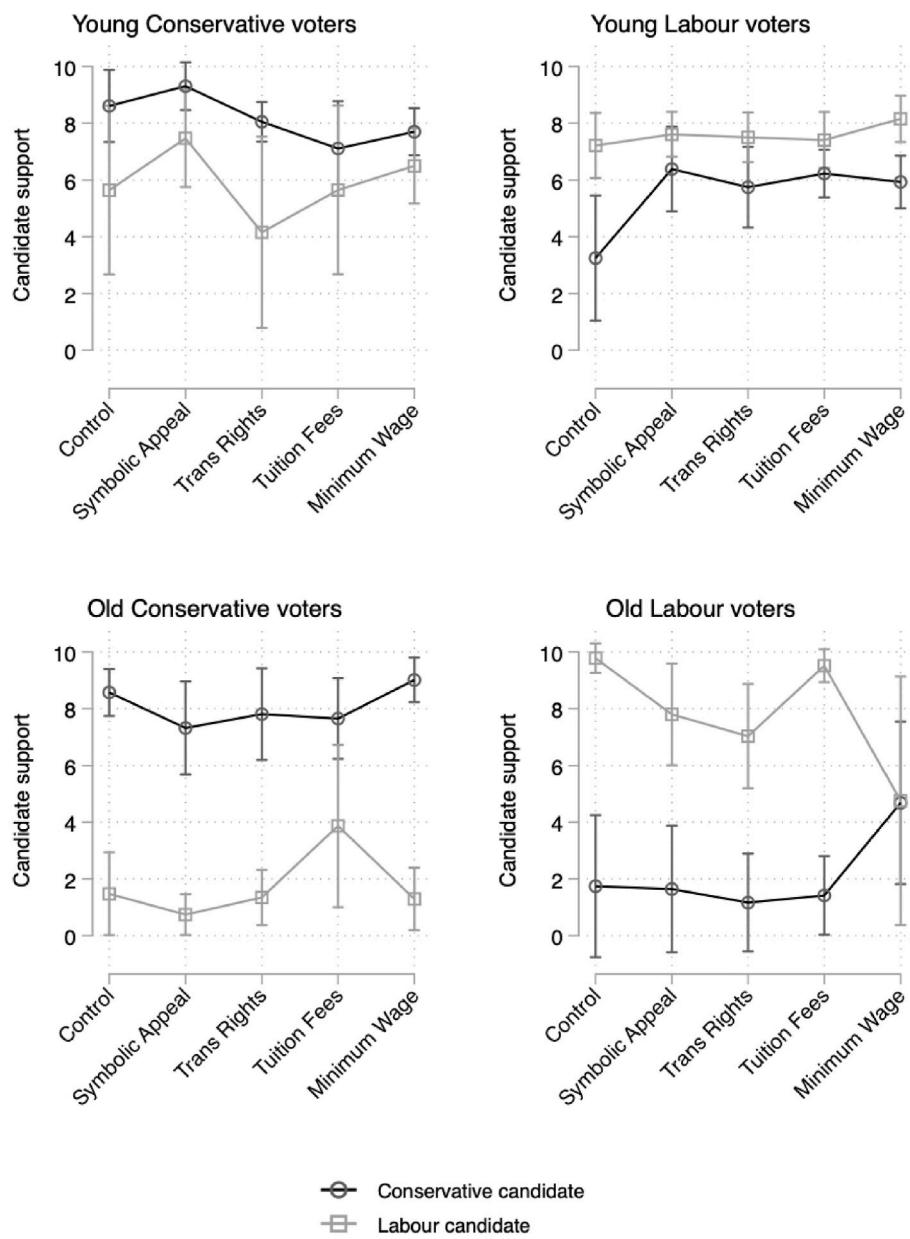


Fig. 3.2. Effect of Labour and Conservative appeals.

groups would have an effect on the age gap in partisanship. The second pertains to whether certain appeals have a larger effect than others, and which groups are most affected by this. Results from the survey experiment are largely in line with prior expectations (see Table A in the Appendix for an assessment of the hypotheses). Young voters do display higher support for parties advocating policies close to the preferences of their age group. Importantly, this holds true regardless of partisanship. One of the expectations associated with this was that increased attention to the youth would be accompanied by a backlash from older voters, who might penalise a candidate that either expressively states they want to focus less on the elderly (as in the 'Symbolic' vignette), or espouses policies that have traditionally been preferred by younger voters (as in the 'Cultural' and 'Economic' vignettes). However, these proposals actually have no effect on the support likelihood of older voters. If anything, some of them seem to appeal to them too, such as proposals to scrap university tuition fees. This is not entirely surprising considering that the costs associated with higher education are a significant burden for students and parents alike. Moreover, this finding is in line with recent research from [Grant et al. \(2022\)](#) on intergenerational

inequalities in economic wellbeing, who find that elderly citizens' economic solidarity with younger generations is enhanced by concerns for younger relatives.

In terms of the content of appeals, in general the ones tapping into economic issues seem to have a larger effect on swaying support than the ones pertaining cultural issues. This is true regardless of age. For younger voters, symbolic appeals too are effective in attracting support, and more so than cultural appeals, suggesting that candidates pledging to look after the interests of this cohort – *whatever these may be* – are as effective in mobilising these voters as candidates advocating for specific economic policies. This finding is particularly relevant in a context where young voters are increasingly associated with prioritising socially progressive issues. While these values probably still matter a great deal (this study only addressed one such issue, trans rights) it seems as though for the youth too the economy is a top priority – a finding that is consistent with recent cross-national survey research noting that young voters consistently mention the economy, and in particular unemployment and the cost of living, as the most important political issues facing their country (see, e.g., [Eurobarometer 2024](#) for European countries;

Gallup 2024 for the USA; Ipsos 2024 for Australia; Afrobarometer 2024 for South Africa; IPESPE 2024 for Brazil).

A further aspect that this study sought to examine pertains to age polarisation – that is, whether the age gap in partisanship also translates into political antagonism between the two groups. The fact that older voters do not seem to reject youth-friendly policies suggests otherwise. This implies that parties would benefit from an increased focus on the interests of younger cohorts, without risking alienating older ones. This is the case even for the British Conservative party, who has been less vocal in – and possibly more reluctant to – appealing to young voters. It should be noted, however, that the economic appeals presented in this experiment did not explicitly pit the two age groups against each other (e.g. by proposing that minimum wage increases would be funded via reductions in pension protections). While this may constitute a limitation of the study, it also reflects the way political parties present these policies and make these pledges, as no party would explicitly promise to curb funding allocated towards a (highly politically active) demographic group in favour of another. At the same time, the fact that the policy appeals were effective in swaying youth support but had no effect on older voters may also be attributable to the well-established notion whereby older individuals have long-held partisan attachments which make them more resistant to change (see, e.g., Sears and Funk, 1999; Dinas, 2013). The findings derived from this experiment seem to support this thesis, which in turns provides interesting insights for party mobilisation strategies, and youth mobilisation in particular, as they show that a party could effectively win youth support with targeted policy appeals without risking losses across older age groups.

8. Conclusion

The study used a specially designed survey experiment with age-based group appeals adapted from the Labour and Conservative 2019 electoral manifestos to assess the impact these have on the voting behaviour of younger and older voters. Results suggest that young voters show higher levels of support for parties advocating policies that align with the preferences of their age group – a finding that wouldn't be surprising if not for the fact that this appears to hold true regardless of party affiliation. Moreover, contrary to expectations, appeals directed at young adults do not seem to trigger a decrease in support from older voters. This is the case even for appeals that contain young people's cultural policy preferences. But overall, it is economic issues which were found to have the greater impact on swaying support.

Recent years witnessed young adults across established democracies increasingly turn their back against conservative, right-wing parties. This dynamic is most pronounced in countries that have a two-party

system – such as the UK, USA, and Australia – but similar shifts have been identified across multi-party systems too (see, e.g., Dassonneville and McAllister, 2025). This is particularly significant electorally because research on political socialisation and generational replacement suggests that if young adults do not develop certain attachments early in their lives, they are less likely to do so in middle-age (see, e.g., Tilley, 2002). In this view, the findings stemming from this study contribute to existing academic research across four areas. First, they contribute to research on party mobilisation strategies by suggesting that political parties should place renewed efforts into winning back the support of young voters in order to reap electoral benefits in the long term, as results show that policy proposals directly tapping into young adults' socio-economic interest – such as higher education access and funding, and wage levels – could have a significant impact on swaying youth support without risking retaliation from other age groups. Second, they contribute to research on the content of group appeals by finding that symbolic appeals can be just as effective as policy-focused appeals in swaying voters' support – a similar finding to that of Robinson et al. (2020) in their study on how the content of working-class targeted appeals mobilise these voters. Third, they contribute to the literature on value effects on voting by highlighting how economic attitudes persist as the top priority across age groups even during periods when economic conditions are not particularly challenging.⁶ Finally, these findings also provide some insights for research on inter-group polarisation by suggesting that older groups do not necessarily retaliate against parties that choose to increase their focus on younger cohorts. If anything, certain issues (such as tuition fees), despite being a matter that mostly affects young adults, can generate cross-group support and possibly enhance intergenerational solidarity.

It should be noted that the policies examined in this study are only a small selection of all the probable policies that would be presented and debated during a real election. Given the limited scope of the study and the fast pace at which certain political issues become more and less salient over time, it was not possible to include a wider range of group appeals. But the identification of significant effects amongst the policies that were tested, and the fact that these effects seem to trump partisan affiliations, can guide further research into how political parties can mobilise (age) groups in an increasingly polarised political environment.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix

Survey experiment sample distribution

Table A
Survey experiment sample distribution

Treatment condition	Obs.	Percent
Control	216	10.77
Symbolic Appeal	445	22.18
Cultural Appeal: Trans Rights	456	22.73
Economic Appeal: Tuition Fees	430	21.44
Economic Appeal: Minimum Wage	459	22.88

(continued on next page)

⁶ The experiment was conducted in May 2022, a period during which the effects of the cost of living crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and the war between Russia and Ukraine were not felt as intensively as they came to be in the months and years that followed.

Table A (continued)

Treatment condition	Obs.	Percent
Total	2006	100.00
Age groups	Obs.	Percent
18–35	680	33.14
36–59	918	44.74
60–92	454	22.12
Total	2052	100.00
Gender	Obs.	Percent
Female	1106	53.90
Male	946	46.10
Total	2052	100.00
Highest educational qualification	Obs.	Percent
Level 2/Apprenticeship/Other	476	23.20
Level 3	372	18.13
Level 4+	826	40.25
No qualifications/Level 1	378	18.42
Total	2052	100.00
Income	Obs.	Percent
£0 - £19,999	716	34.89
£20,000 - £39,000	822	40.06
£40,000	514	25.05
Total	2052	100.00
2016 EU Referendum vote	Obs.	Percent
Did not vote	662	32.26
Leave	714	34.80
Refused	10	0.49
Remain	666	32.46
Total	2052	100.00
2019 General Election vote	Obs.	Percent
Brexit Party	20	0.97
Conservative	640	31.19
Did not vote	606	29.53
Green Party	54	2.63
Labour	520	25.34
Liberal Democrats	92	4.48
Other	36	1.75
Plaid Cymru	14	0.68
Refused	10	0.49
Scottish National Party	60	2.92
Total	2052	100.00
General Election vote intention	Obs.	Percent
Conservative	524	27.67
Labour	726	38.33
Liberal Democrats	148	7.81
Green	64	3.38
SNP	70	3.70
Plaid Cymru	16	0.84
Reform UK	38	2.01
UKIP	20	1.06
Other	50	2.64
Undecided	228	12.04
Refused	10	0.53
Total	1894	100.00

Table B

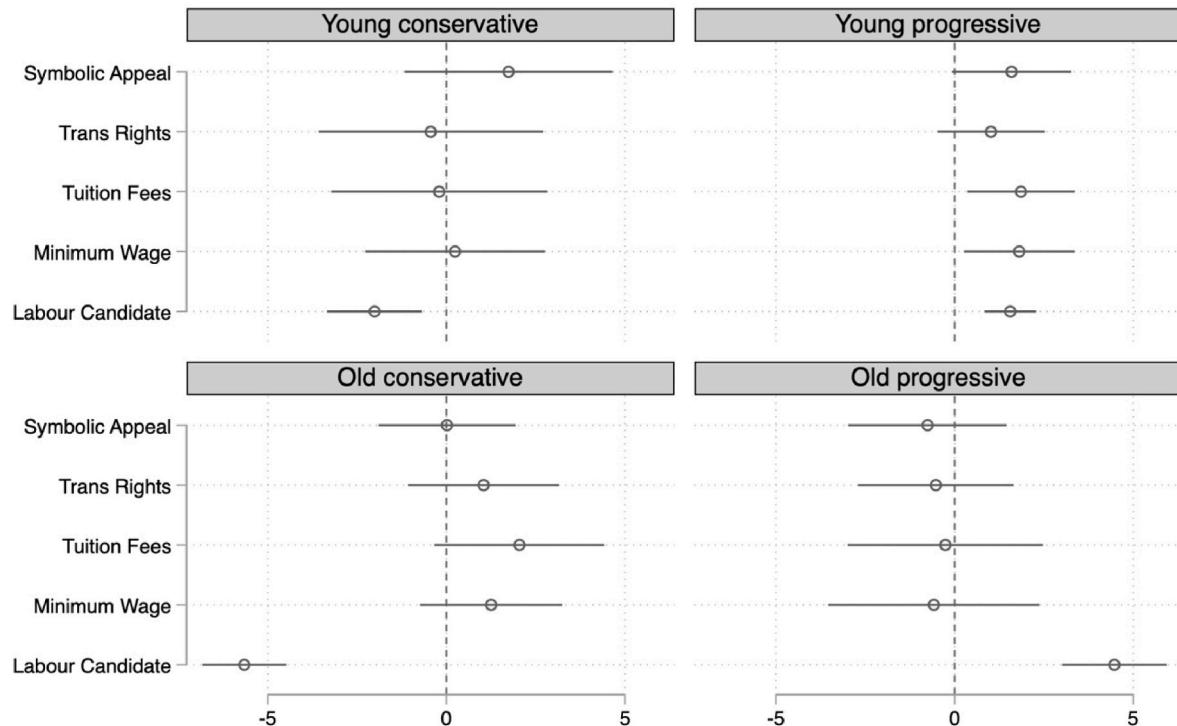
Summary of results and hypotheses evaluation.

Hypotheses	All respondents	Young respondents	Old respondents
H1 – Voters will display higher support for the party whose appeals are closest to the preferences of their age group, so that young voters will display higher support for a party championing young people's issues	–	Accepted	–
H2 – Voters will penalise a party whose appeals are directed towards an age group they do not belong to, so that older voters will penalise a party championing young people's issues	–	–	Rejected (all treatments not significant)
H3a – Substantive economic and cultural appeals will have a larger effect on support than symbolic appeals	Accepted, but only for economic appeals	Rejected, substantive economic and symbolic appeals have the same effect, and both are larger than cultural appeal	Accepted for substantive economic appeal on tuition fees only

(continued on next page)

Table B (continued)

Hypotheses	All respondents	Young respondents	Old respondents
H3b – Substantive economic and cultural appeals will have the same effect on support as symbolic appeals	Rejected	Accepted	Accepted for all treatments except economic appeal on tuition fees (which has larger positive effect)
H4 – Appeals not expected by a certain party (e.g. a Conservative candidate pledging to scrap tuition fees or to expand transgender people's rights) will have a larger effect on support than those from expected parties	Accepted, Conservative appeals are able to close the support gap, especially on minimum wage	Accepted, Conservative appeals close the support gap and the appeal on tuition fees even has larger effect than Labour's equivalent	Accepted, Conservative appeals have larger effects than Labour's, especially on minimum wage

Regression models of reported figures**Fig. 2.2.** Treatment effects on young and old voters by political ideology**Table 1**
Treatment effects on likelihood to support candidate (Fig. 1).

	β (SE)
Symbolic Appeal	-0.184 (0.294)
Cultural appeal: trans rights	-0.377 (0.296)
Economic appeal: tuition fees	0.676* (0.297)
Economic appeal: minimum wage	0.362 (0.294)
Labour Candidate	0.383* (0.160)
Constant	5.051*** (0.257)
Observations	1995

b coefficients from OLS regression analyses.

Standard errors in parentheses.

 $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$.

Table 2
Treatment effects on likelihood to support candidate (Fig. 2.1).

	Respondents 18-35	Respondents 60+
Symbolic Appeal	1.156* (0.485)	-0.330 (0.595)
Cultural appeal: trans rights	0.531 (0.480)	-0.193 (0.595)
Economic appeal: tuition fees	1.029* (0.477)	0.788 (0.604)
Economic appeal: minimum wage	1.354** (0.468)	-0.133 (0.623)
Cultural appeal: trans rights	0.837*** (0.253)	-0.671* (0.326)
Constant	4.914*** (0.421)	4.569*** (0.533)
Observations	590	572

b coefficients from OLS regression analyses.

Standard errors in parentheses.

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

Table 3
Treatment effects on likelihood to support candidate (Fig. 3.1).

	All respondents	Respondents 18-35	Respondents 60+
Symbolic Appeal	0.349 (0.586)	2.269** (0.868)	0.704 (1.296)
Trans Rights	0.302 (0.585)	1.384 (0.871)	0.949 (1.210)
Tuition Fees	1.067 (0.582)	2.544** (0.781)	0.746 (1.213)
Minimum Wage	1.283* (0.559)	2.318** (0.773)	2.487* (1.258)
Labour candidate	1.412* (0.675)	2.586** (0.915)	0.980 (1.488)
Symbolic Appeal # Labour candidate	-0.954 (0.845)	-1.974 (1.225)	-1.706 (1.757)
Trans Rights # Labour candidate	-1.252 (0.756)	-1.427 (1.138)	-1.957 (1.589)
Tuition Fees # Labour candidate	-0.668 (0.763)	-2.722* (1.158)	0.471 (1.607)
Minimum Wage # Labour candidate	-1.719* (0.777)	-1.680 (1.007)	-4.652* (1.828)
Constant	4.481*** (0.492)	3.917*** (0.693)	3.563*** (1.000)
Observations	2006	664	440

b coefficients from OLS regression analyses.

Standard errors in parentheses.

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

Table 4
Treatment effects on likelihood to support candidate (Fig. 3.2).

	Young Conservatives	Young Labour	Old Conservatives	Old Labour
Symbolic Appeal	0.697 (0.759)	3.135* (1.347)	-1.253 (0.926)	-0.099 (1.737)
Trans Rights	-0.560 (0.723)	2.497 (1.313)	-0.763 (0.914)	-0.576 (1.517)
Tuition Fees	-1.500 (0.999)	2.976* (1.178)	-0.923 (0.827)	-0.326 (1.428)
Minimum Wage	-0.909 (0.756)	2.680* (1.209)	0.442 (0.577)	2.937 (1.874)
Labour candidate	-2.969 (1.612)	3.965** (1.258)	-7.097*** (0.844)	8.037*** (1.275)
Symbolic Appeal # Labour candidate	1.128 (1.863)	-2.741 (1.493)	0.522 (1.198)	-1.883 (1.672)
Trans Rights # Labour candidate	-0.925 (2.305)	-2.208 (1.545)	0.635 (1.198)	-2.173 (1.751)
Tuition Fees # Labour candidate	1.508 (2.198)	-2.782 (1.416)	3.315 (1.853)	0.062 (1.429)
Minimum Wage # Labour candidate	1.765 (1.672)	-1.740 (1.331)	-0.620 (1.099)	-7.964** (2.890)
Constant	8.610*** (0.633)	3.249** (1.116)	8.572*** (0.418)	1.744 (1.249)
Observations	106	302	182	116

b coefficients from OLS regression analyses.

Standard errors in parentheses.

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

Table 5
Treatment effects on likelihood to support candidate (Fig. 2.2).

	Young conservatives	Young progressives	Old conservatives	Old progressives
Symbolic Appeal	1.738 (1.451)	1.596 (0.846)	0.014 (0.968)	-0.757 (1.115)
Trans Rights	-0.440 (1.568)	1.019 (0.763)	1.041 (1.066)	-0.525 (1.096)
Tuition Fees	-0.202 (1.509)	1.859* (0.761)	2.042 (1.199)	-0.260 (1.373)
Minimum Wage	0.240 (1.256)	1.810* (0.785)	1.251 (1.003)	-0.581 (1.486)
Labour Candidate	-2.015** (0.664)	1.561*** (0.366)	-5.659*** (0.593)	4.473*** (0.736)
Constant	7.756*** (1.279)	4.509*** (0.783)	6.681*** (1.046)	2.561** (0.856)
Observations	110	374	206	166

b coefficients from OLS regression analyses.

Standard errors in parentheses.

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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