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# **Future Identities: Changing identities in the UK – the next 10 years**

**DR 14: What are the distinguishing generational, life course and historical drivers of changing identities?**

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# Contents

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2. Religious identity and church attendance .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. Party identification and party support.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4. Class identification and class voting .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>5. Other identities and value-orientations.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>6. Conclusions: The future of identity in Britain .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>13</b>

# 1. Introduction

This Driver Review examines extant empirical evidence for different types of socio-political identities and their relevant behavioural expressions in Britain. These identities and behaviours are: religious identity and church attendance, party identification and party support, class identification and class voting, identification with alternative (or 'new') political movements and participation in protest politics, libertarian-authoritarian value-orientations, and British identity. The focus of this report is on the way in which these identities are driven by generational, life-cycle and historical factors. In turn, this allows for an assessment of what will be the likely future patterns of identity in Britain in the next ten years or so.

There is a large literature in sociology and political science, but also in other fields such as epidemiology and demography, which focusses on 'disentangling' age, period and cohort effects for various outcomes. This is since these three different types of age-time effects have very different implications for what we can expect in the future in terms of various outcomes. The need to analyse the generational, life-cycle and historical drivers of different types of identities emerges if one wants to distinguish those identities which are likely to remain stable in the population in the future (provided that the ratio between birth and mortality rates does not change dramatically) and those which instead are likely to change.

The literature on the subject places particular importance on crucial 'formative experiences' which new generations undergo in the period of their adolescence (approximately 15-25 years of age). For example, Plutzer (2002) showed that it takes the experience of the first three elections for someone to become an habitual voter – or, non-voter. Formative experiences are understood to crystallise and differentiate generations in the population even as they mature through the life-course. This type of thinking about generations emerged with Karl Mannheim's (1928: 232) classic work on *The Problem of Generations*, who argued that "youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems may be said to be part of the same actual generation". This key idea has been very influential and the mainstay in the literature in terms of making sense of social change – such as for example changing identities in the population over time.

Indeed, social change is normally understood to emerge out of a process of intergenerational replacement. As Franklin (2004: 216) points out: "older people are, on the whole, too set in their ways to be responsible for social and political change, so most long-term change comes about by way of generational replacement." As such, it is the birth of a new generation of citizens, socialised in new political contexts and behaving in ways that are significantly different from those of their predecessors that drives social change over time. As older people behaving in one way die out and are replaced by new generations behaving in new ways, aggregate patterns of behaviour in society change due to intergenerational replacement. In this context, therefore, increased longevity in the population only matters for changing identities in that population replacement is slowed down slightly.

On the other hand, historical events of particular magnitude have a great importance for the future of identity, since young people coming of age at that time will be particularly impressed by these events and therefore will exhibit characteristics and behaviours markedly different from those of generations preceding them. The patterns of behaviour of older people on the whole, as Franklin (2004) argued, tend to be more stable, and less influenced by events experienced when they have already matured and have already formed behavioural habits. The recent economic crisis is an example of an important 'period effect' which is likely to have differential impact on young (greater) and old (smaller). For example, Laurence and Lim (2012)

#### DR14 What are the distinguishing generational, life course and historical drivers of changing identities?

have recently shown that individuals who experience even a single experience of displacement (i.e. job redundancy) will go on to participate less in volunteering activities than non-displaced individuals, even long after they've found another job – but that this effect is particularly acute amongst those who experience displacement in their youth.

Therefore, in this driver review, special attention will be devoted to identifying those identities which have important generational drivers since these are the identities that are most likely to change in the future - for example as a result of the current economic crisis – and therefore modify the aggregate patterns of identification of the British public.

## 2. Religious identity and church attendance

The first type of identity which this driver review examines is religious identity. Religious identity can be measured in different ways. One can ask individuals to identify with a religion, for example, or measure the extent of their religious identity by examining those behaviours which reflect their religiosity, in other words, the levels of church attendance.

Tilley (2003a) examined the nature of age differences in religious identity by focussing on differences in levels of church attendance in Britain. More specifically, Tilley (2003a) examined how age-related family formation factors, such as marriage and childrearing, affected church attendance. The study (Tilley 2003a) employed both British Election Study (cross-sectional) and British Household Panel Study (panel) data and showed that family formation alone could not account for differences between age groups in church attendance. Rather, generational differences were found to be responsible for both age disparities and large declines in over-time church attendance (Tilley 2003a).

Given that generational differences were found to be the main reason for underlying age disparities and decline in over-time church attendance, this suggests that church attendance in Britain is bound to decline in the future. As younger, less religious, generations come of age and replace older generations, due to mortality, church attendance will continue to decline in the population as a whole. It is highly unlikely that historical events (period effects) will alter this trend in the future: this would require an event (or events) so important as to lead the younger generations to become more religious / attend church more than their parents.

However, when considering the decline of religiosity in the future, one must also consider 'floor effects'. Given that religious identification has already witnessed a steep decline and is already very low amongst the youngest cohorts – it is likely that religiosity will plateau at a low level but not necessarily decrease further. In other words, it is likely that there will remain a small group of religious adherents even in the youngest generations. For example, Tilley (2003a) presents evidence of a floor effect of about 20 per cent of Britons who still go to Church. This means that even given intergenerational replacement, it is unlikely that this proportion will decrease further in the future.

This evidence about generational differences accounting for age differences in religious identification and church attendance is further corroborated by Voas and Crockett (2005). Using both data from British Household Panel Survey and the British Attitudes Survey, this study provides evidence that religious belief, affiliation and attendance have all been eroded in Britain due to intergenerational replacement and also shows that "only about half of parental religiosity is successfully transmitted, while absence of religion is almost always passed on" (Voas and Crockett 2005). Given the evidence for generational differences, this study thus also suggests that religious identity will continue to decline in the population in the future as older, more religious, generations are replaced by less religious ones.

However, there are other factors that need to be considered in order to develop conclusions regarding the future of religious identity in Britain as a whole. These are: the higher religiosity of immigrants, the rates of religious retention amongst immigrant groups, and differential fertility rates amongst the religious and non-religious populations.

In this respect, evidence presented in Crockett and Voas (2006) confirms that the decline in religiosity (affiliation, belief and worship) is overwhelmingly generational in nature but also

## DR14 What are the distinguishing generational, life course and historical drivers of changing identities?

shows that immigration mildly offsets this trend in declining religiosity in the population. This is since the non-white immigrant minority in Britain is far more religious than the majority white-British population (Crockett and Voas 2006). However, evidence presented in Crockett and Voas (2006: 581) also shows that the rates of intergenerational decline (between immigrant parents and their second generation, British-born, children) are fairly similar to those amongst the white-British majority population. McAndrew and Voas (forthcoming) also finds evidence of secularisation amongst the children of minority immigrants in Britain, though this pattern differs between different minorities to an extent.

The study presented in Crockett and Voas (2006: 581) also considers the question of differential (higher) fertility among some of the non-white ethnic minority groups and concludes that given convergence in levels of religiosity amongst the second generation, this in itself will not be enough to offset the decline; the study also found no significant differences when looking at female fertility by regularity of church attendance in the British Household Panel Study data. Taken together, these factors suggests that in the absence of very substantial increases in immigration, immigration will not reverse declining religiosity – but perhaps slow the rate of decline for a time (Crockett and Voas 2006: 581).

Most recently, Kauffman *et al.* (2011) investigated religiosity in Europe as a whole with European Values Study and European Social Survey data for 1981-2008 and showed that the decline in religiosity is mainly occurring in Catholic southern European countries; it has effectively ceased among post-1945 birth cohorts in six North-western European societies where secularisation began early. To address demographic factors (fertility and immigration), they provide a cohort-component projections of religious affiliation using fertility, migration, switching, and age and sex-structure parameters from census data which shows that Europe may be more religious at the end of the century than it was at the beginning.

Additionally, the study by Voas and Fleischmann (2012, in print) examines the question of religiosity amongst second generation Muslim immigrants in particular. While modernisation accounts would support the narrative of secularisation – in other words, the idea, as supported by evidence in Crockett and Voas (2006) and McAndrew and Voas (forthcoming), that the second generation of ethnic minority immigrants will converge in their levels of religiosity with the majority white population – there are other factors which suggest that the children and grandchildren of Muslim immigrants, in particular, will retain their religious identity (Voas and Fleischmann 2012, in print).

Islam's ability to provide a clear set of moral values in the face of what can be perceived by more traditional groups as the decadence of Western liberal society, Islam's potential to provide a coalescing identity for those who feel that they are unjustly discriminated and victimised by "Islamophobia" in Western societies, and evidence that second generation Muslim immigrants are choosing specific elements of Islam and Muslim practices to signal their "otherness" and resentment towards a mainstream society which they feel has failed them - are all cited as reasons why (reactive) religious identity may not decline amongst younger generations of Muslim ethnic minority citizens (Voas and Fleischmann 2012, in print). On the other hand, there is also a great deal of evidence from previous episodes of large scale migration which suggests that immigrants eventually do end up losing their distinctiveness – as Voas and Fleischmann (2012, in print) conclude: "while Muslims in the West will remain highly religious into the medium term, it seems likely that the secular, nominal, lapsed or inactive will ultimately outnumber the committed."

#### DR14 What are the distinguishing generational, life course and historical drivers of changing identities?

Taken together, in terms of the future of religious identity, the evidence presented suggests that the decline in religious identity in the British population in the next ten years or so is likely to be slowed down, or potentially offset, for a while, by the presence of more religious immigrant minority groups in the population. The long-term picture is more uncertain but it is likely that even Muslim minorities will decline in religiosity to match their host country levels.



### 3. Party identification and party support

Partisanship refers to individuals' preference for, or identification with, a party over others. Partisanship can also be measured in strength, or degree of closeness, and in this respect surveys often also ask individuals 'how strongly' they feel about their preferred party. Evidence shows that strength of partisanship is not driven by generational factors: younger cohorts are always generally less likely to identify with a party (Tilley 2003b). Moreover, there is evidence of party de-alignment since the 1970s with all cohorts being less likely to identify with a party (Tilley 2003b). What seems to be most important for strength of partisanship is the length of time individuals have spent in the electorate – the longer the period of time that people have spent as part of the electorate, the more likely they are to claim 'very strong' partisanship (Tilley 2003b). Given that there is no generational basis to strength of partisanship, we would not expect this to change in the future as age effects tend to be relatively stable.

On the other hand, the study by Tilley (2001) provides evidence that individuals who entered the electorate during periods of Conservative ascendancy were more likely to support Conservatives than previous generations, net of period and age effects. It is thus also likely that individuals who came of age during the last 13 years of Labour governments will be more likely to identify with the Labour Party than previous generations.

Taken on its own, this evidence would suggest that the generation that is currently coming of age (and particularly so if the Conservatives were to win the next election/s) will be more Conservative than previous generations and therefore will preserve these higher levels of Conservative identification into the future. Moreover, given population replacement, this could lead to higher levels of Conservative support in the population as a whole in the future.

However, more recent evidence suggests that a political context of party de-alignment and the rise of support for smaller parties (with the concomitant decline in share of the vote going to the mains parties), leads to a weakening of the effect of socialisation during a given party's ascendancy for providing a basis for durable patterns of future party identification as cohorts age. A recent study by Goerres (2008) examined voting behaviour and party identification in Britain and West Germany and showed that increasingly de-aligned systems breed smaller generational differences in party identification. In more recent elections, older British voters have begun to exert party preferences more akin to younger voters: in other words, generational differences matter less for vote choice in de-aligned contexts (Goerres 2008).

These results suggest that the nature of the political context has an important effect on whether there will be durable generational differences in identification with parties based on the period of political socialisation of new cohorts of young voters. While socialisation during the highly ideological times of Thatcherism might have led young voters at that time to become more strongly Conservative than previous generations, it is unlikely that a similar effect will materialise amongst more recent cohorts socialised during the current Conservative government – given the narrowing ideological differences between the parties.

Predictions of what will happen to party identification in Britain in the future largely depend on what we expect with respect to the actions of parties and their political choices in terms of ideological stances. While coming of age during the ascendancy of a given party clearly mattered for subsequent patterns of party identification in the past, it is unclear whether this sort of generational effect on party identification will subsist in the current climate marked by de-alignment and the weaning of polarisation between party ideological positions. In the



#### DR14 What are the distinguishing generational, life course and historical drivers of changing identities?

absence of an increase in ideological party polarisation and / or a decline in de-alignment trends, it is likely that socialisation during the ascendancy of a given party will cease to have particularly important influences on party identification in the future. Additionally, this is likely to translate into party identification having a decreased influence on voting behaviour in the future, as fewer individuals will hold stable party allegiances influencing their vote choice. Rather, short-term considerations will increasingly become more important.

## 4. Class identification and class voting

There is some evidence that class identification has declined in Britain. The study by Heath, Curtice and Elgenius (2009) provided evidence that while British citizens are not less likely to assign themselves to a social class, there has nonetheless been a noticeable decline in the strength of individuals' class identification. Additionally, evidence supported the view that individuals are less likely to base their class identification on occupation – whether their own or their fathers' – and that this is most likely driven by social mobility patterns (Heath, Curtice and Elgenius 2009). The most striking finding from this study was the dramatic decline in the strength of the relationship between class identity and Labour partisanship: this reflects New Labour's shift to the centre since 1994 and emphasises the crucial importance of the role of parties in politicising class and constructing it as a fundamental “normative reference group” underpinning political behaviour (Heath, Curtice and Elgenius 2009).

The theme of the declining importance of class identification for political behaviour is the subject of a wide-ranging literature on the decline of class voting (see Evans 2000 for an extensive review of the literature). This decline in class voting most commonly understood to be the result of “bottom-up” processes: in particular, economic development is seen to drive the development of a less structured society, where classes become amorphous and the traditional distinction between white-collar (middle class) and blue-collar (working class) occupations loses meaning and importance. For example, Clarke *et al.* (2004: 2) show that there has been a sharp decline in voting differences between manual and non-manual workers and conclude that “at the end of the twentieth century class has come to play a very limited role in determining the voting preferences of the British electorate”.

A second perspective on the decline of class voting on the other hand emphasises “top-down” processes: in particular, the role of parties and their ideological positions for structuring and politicising cleavages in society. Illustrative of this position is Przeworski (1985: 100-1), who argues that class voting (and to an extent, class identification) at the individual level are “an effect of the activities of political parties”. In other words, if parties politicise class, then individuals will be more likely to identify with political classes subjectively and to vote in line with their perceived class interests. In this sense then, even if the working class may have shrunk in size relative to the service class in structural terms, the importance of class identity and of class voting is for the main determined by the salience that parties accord to this identity. As such, while structural factors may have an impact on the strategies of parties, under this perspective, it is Labour's move to the centre of the ideological spectrum and its transformation into a “catch-all” party which is to be understood as the main driver for the decline of the political importance of class identification for voting behaviour in Britain.

In the most recent and up-to-date study of class voting in Britain, Evans and Tilley (2012: 149) show that the gap in Labour support between the upper service class and the working class declined from over 50 per cent in the 1960s to below 20 per cent in the 2000s; the gap in Conservative support between the upper service class and manual workers declined from almost 40 per cent in the 1960s to around 20 per cent in the 2000s; there is very little evidence of a class basis to support for third parties, including the Liberals, but there is evidence for a rise in non-identification amongst the working class.

The fact that the decline in the gap is sharper for Labour is consistent with the idea that Labour's move to the centre has been one of the most important drivers in class convergence (Evans and Tilley 2012: 150). Moreover, this study also presents evidence which shows that

#### DR14 What are the distinguishing generational, life course and historical drivers of changing identities?

the convergence in ideological party positions does not map on neatly to the timing of the changes in class sizes, and that upper class support for Labour would have been much lower had Labour not moved to the centre, becoming a catch all party (Evans and Tilley 2012). This means that the decline of class voting is greatly influenced by the political decisions taken by party elites in terms of their strategic positioning. In 1987, 46 per cent of people believed that Labour looked 'very closely' after the interests of working-class people, in 1997 this was down to 33 per cent and by 2005 only 10 per cent thought so (Curtice 2007). This suggests that the link between class identification and party support – in other words, class voting – is very likely to continue to decline in the future. Even where people still identify with a given class, the impact this has on vote choice is likely to become increasingly weaker as parties converge on the ideological spectrum and no longer make class appeals for voter choice.

Adding to this evidence for the declining importance of class identification and class voting, a recent study by Van der Brug (2010) provides evidence for a Europe-wide decline in structural and ideological voting and more so amongst the younger generations coming of age after 1950s. These generations were not socialised in the period of "cleavage politics", when class in particular was a highly salient dimension. Evidence also shows that the youngest cohorts, socialised during less ideological periods are much more likely than older generations to base their electoral choices on short-term considerations (the stances of parties on certain issues, the characteristics of leaders, etc.) than on a sense of party identification (Van der Brug 2010). This suggests that class voting will be likely to further decline in the future as younger generations, who base their vote choice on ideological and structural factors much less than older generations come to replace them in the electorate in the future.

## 5. Other identities and value-orientations

This report also considers the future of three other types of identities and behaviours in Britain: identification with alternative (or 'new') political movements and participation in protest politics, libertarian-authoritarian value-orientations, and also British identity.

The study by Grasso (2010) employing European Values Study and European Social Survey data for ten Western European countries shows that relative to the baby-boomer generation coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s, subsequent generations coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s and 2000s are less likely both to participate in alternative (or 'new') social movements and to engage in protest activities such as demonstrations, occupations and boycotts; there are no generational differences in signing petitions however. This evidence suggests that unlike what has been suggested by theorists which claim that higher levels of education and 'cognitive mobilisation' will lead to an increase in 'elite-challenging' publics in the future, that protest mobilisation and new social movement activities are rather more likely to decline in the population, as the more politicised 'baby-boomer' generation begins to be replaced by younger cohorts in the population. In this context, this evidence reinforces the evidence for declining political engagement presented in the literature on 'conventional participation' (voting, joining political parties, contacting politicians, etc.); more recent generations are less politicised and active than older generations, and this holds also for forms of engagement which have traditionally been more popular amongst young people.

The study by Tilley (2005) provides evidence that the British electorate has become more likely to identify with libertarian over authoritarian values in the last thirty years and that this change is based in generational differences between younger and older cohorts. This suggests that the British public is likely to become more libertarian-leaning in the future as older, more authoritarian, cohorts are replaced by younger, more liberal, cohorts in the population.

As for feelings of 'Britishness', studies by Tilley and Heath (2007) on national pride and Heath and Roberts (2008) on British identity are consistent in showing that younger generations are less strongly attached to Britain – though there is some evidence that 'Thatcher's children' have stronger feelings of identity and that generational differences are more marked in Scotland for certain types of indicators. Bar these caveats, the extant evidence suggests that the decline in feelings of national pride and British identity are likely to be a result of generational replacement, with younger generations replacing older generations which held greater feelings of pride and attachment. This decline is likely to continue in the future as younger generations replace older ones in the population.

## 6. Conclusions: The future of identity in Britain

Based on the most up-to-date published empirical evidence reviewed and presented in this Driver Review, what are the conclusions to be drawn for the future of various types of identity and their concomitant patterns of behaviour in Britain in the next ten years or so?

- While religious identity and church attendance are likely to continue to decline in the White-British majority population in the future due to generational replacement, it is possible that higher rates of religiosity, higher religious retention and higher fertility rates amongst the ethnic minority population will slow down, or potentially offset, the overall decline in religiosity in the population in the mid-to-short term, at least.
- In the absence of an increase in ideological party polarisation, it is likely that younger generations will be increasingly less likely than older generations to display stable patterns of identification with political parties. Additionally, this is likely to mean that party identification will have a decreased influence on voting patterns in the future, as fewer individuals will hold stable party allegiances influencing their vote choice. Rather, short-term considerations will likely become more important for vote choice.
- While individuals' likelihood to identify with a social class might not decline in the future, it is highly likely that the effect of class on voting will continue to decline as younger generations, who base their vote choice on ideological and structural factors much less than older generations, come to replace them in the electorate in the future.
- Identification with alternative political movements and participation in protest politics is likely to decline in the future as the more politically active baby-boomers come to be replaced in the population by younger, more disengaged cohorts. However, this change is likely to occur over the longer term (the baby-boomers are still relatively young and therefore this decline is unlikely to occur in the next ten years or so). Moreover, this declining pattern is highly likely to be subject to period effects. The tumultuous changes taking place in the 1960s/70s are generally seen to have provided the backdrop and spur for the political radicalism of 'the protest generation' coming of age in this period. As such, it is not impossible that future generations could become more politicised if the political context changes. For example, if economic and political tensions were to be exacerbated as a result of the current economic crisis, generations coming of age in the future might become politicised into activism in alternative, radical political movements and increasingly engage in protest activism.
- The British electorate is highly likely to increasingly identify with libertarian value-orientations over authoritarian ones in the future, as older generations come to be replaced by younger more libertarian-oriented generations in the population.
- British identity and feelings of national pride are likely to decline in the future as younger generations with lower feelings of attachment come to replace older ones.

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**DR14 What are the distinguishing generational, life course and historical drivers of changing identities?**

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