

Is support for democracy eroding in the UK?

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All over Europe and beyond, strongman leaders have been gaining traction. Leaders such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Viktor Orban in Hungary or Donald Trump in the United States of America have risen to prominence. Once in power, they tend to expand their power through a process of executive aggrandizement – undermining checks and balances designed to limit their arbitrary power (Bermeo, 2016). This process of executive aggrandizement, and the broader erosion of democratic norms attached to it, rests not only on strongmen leaders seeking more power, but also on citizens supporting their expanded authority (Crimston et al., 2021). That is, the erosion of democratic norms often rests both on ambitious leaders *and* on citizens who are willing to support them.

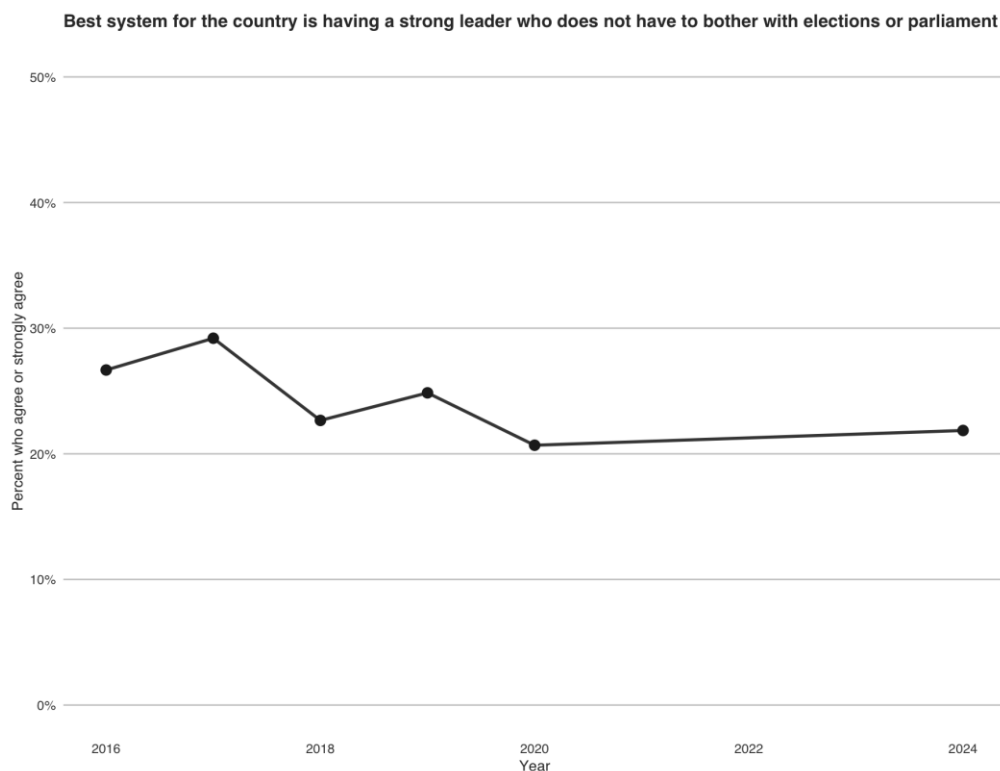
Are we witnessing a similar increase in support for a strong leader, able to bend democratic norms in the UK? This topic has merited recent public attention, but data sources have pointed in different directions. Some surveys now indicate that at least one in five Britons under the age of 50 would prefer a strong leader (FGS Global Radar Survey, 2024). A recent Channel 4 report has also suggested that more than half of Gen Z – the generation born between 1997 and 2012 – support this idea (Channel 4, 2025). Other reports have however challenged these estimates. For example, a survey experiment conducted by KCL has showed that support for strong leaders drops when the phrase “not caring about elections or parliament” is emphasized, or when “strong leader” is replaced with “dictator.” These changes reduced agreement by 11% and 17%, respectively (Duffy & Morini, 2025).

Against this backdrop, this report seeks to address two central questions: (1) how widespread is support for a strong leader who is able to circumvent parliamentary procedures and electoral processes in the United Kingdom, and (2) who is more likely to endorse such a model of governance — a question that has, to date, received relatively limited attention in public debates. In pursuing these aims, this report engages critically with the methodological implications of survey design, highlighting how variations in question framing can significantly shape the levels of reported support for authoritarian leaderships. Furthermore, it situates support for strong leaders within a broader constellation of political attitudes and behaviours, which may help to explain generational, educational, and ideological divides. The analysis draws on a range of recent data sources, including the British Election Study (BES) (Fieldhouse et al., 2024), the FGS Global Radar Survey (2024), and an experimental survey conducted by King’s College London (Duffy & Morini, 2025).

Support for strong leaders: how widespread is it?

In the BES, respondents have been asked the following question since 2016: “The best way to run the country would be to have a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections” (5-point scale from “disagree strongly” to “agree strongly”). This data suggests that in 2024, around 22% of British citizens support the statement that a strong leader who does not have to bother with elections or parliament is the best way to run the country. There has been a slight decrease in support for this claim over the past eight years, from around 27% in 2016. Despite this drop, there is no clear downward trend – support has fluctuated from year to year.

Figure 1. Support for a strong leader in the UK (2016-2024)

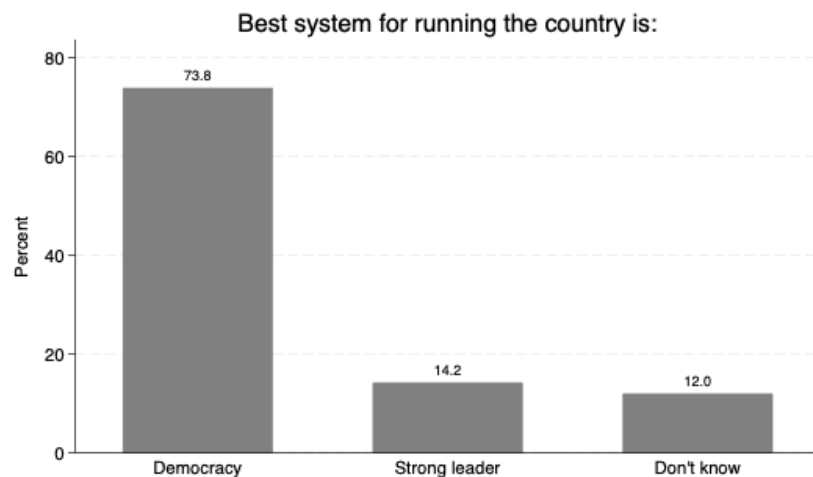


Source: British Election Study (Wave 11-27).

Does this mean around 20% of British citizens are willing to support a strong leader who disregards democracy? It is unlikely that that is the case, for three main reasons. First, if respondents are asked to indicate whether they prefer a strong leader *or* a democracy (instead of just asking how they feel towards having a strong leader), the number of respondents supporting strong leaders tends to decrease. This is the evidence from the FGS survey report

of 2024, where only 14% of respondents claimed to support ‘a strong leader who does not care about parliament’ over a democracy (Figure 2)¹.

Figure 2. Democracy or strong leader who does not care about elections? Positions across the UK Population (2024)



Source: OM Radar Survey, FGS (2024)

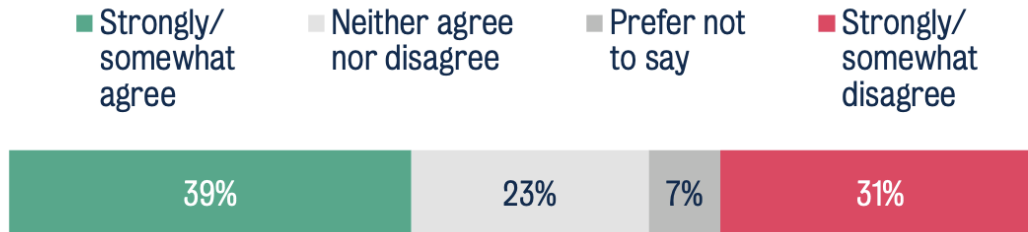
Second, it is important to recognise that many respondents who say they support a strong leader do not necessarily see this as a rejection of democracy. For some, the idea of a “strong leader” implies a desire for more decisive and stable leadership, but still within democratic boundaries. In other words, they do not view strong leadership and democracy as mutually exclusive.

This interpretation is supported by findings from a recent survey experiment conducted by KCL (Duffy & Morini, 2025) (Figure 3). In this experiment, specifically targeted to members of Gen Z (18-27 year olds), researchers tested how much wording matters. According to the survey, 39% of Gen Z’s agree with the statement that the UK would be in a better place if a strong leader was in charge who did not have to bother with elections or parliaments. When the phrase “does not have to bother with parliament or elections” was emphasised, support for the statement dropped by 11%. And when “strong leader” was replaced with “dictator,” support dropped even further – by 17%. These results suggest that many people are uncomfortable with leaders who outright ignore democratic institutions, even if they initially say they support stronger leadership.

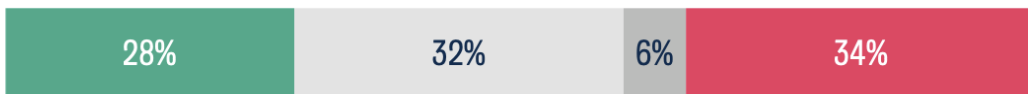
¹ As noted in the report “Do Gen Z really want a dictatorship?” (Duffy & Morini, 2025), this type of forced-choice question (strong leaders vs. democracy) is difficult to design well, as the two statements need to be clear opposites and exclusive, and it is arguable whether these two statements meet said criteria. It is nonetheless worth making the point that, if forced to choose between the two options, the proportion of respondents supporting strong leaders tends to decline.

Figure 3. Support for strong leaders and disregard for elections – survey experiment

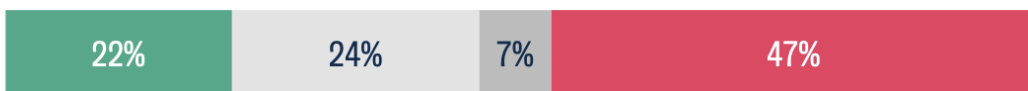
To what extent do you agree or disagree that the UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections?



To what extent do you agree or disagree that the UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge **WHO DOES NOT HAVE TO BOTHER WITH PARLIAMENT AND ELECTIONS?**



To what extent do you agree or disagree that the UK would be a better place if a dictator was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections?



Source: Duffy & Morini (2025).

Who supports strong leaders in the UK?

To answer this question, a logistic regression model was conducted, which predicts the effect of several sociodemographic features (age, gender, occupation, education, ethnicity, and UK nations) on the probability of agreeing with the statement that a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections is the best system for the UK.

This regression points to several statistically significant differences in support for strong leaders, which will be explored in detail next. First, in terms of generation of birth, Baby Boomers (b. before 1960), Gen X (1961-1980) and Millennials (1981-1996) are significantly more likely to support strong leaders than the reference category (Gen Z, b. after 1996). Second, university graduates are less likely to support strong leaders than non-graduates. Third,

working-class respondents are more likely to support strong leaders than respondents in other occupations. Fourth, those with a Southeast Asian background are more likely to support strong leaders than White British. And those on the lowest income scale (below 20,000£) are less likely to support a strong leader than those on the higher income scale (more than 35,000£).

Table 1. The effect of sociodemographic variables on support for strong leaders who do not have to bother with parliament or elections in the UK (2024)

Dependent variable: Support for strong leaders	Average Marginal Effects
Generation of birth (reference: <i>Gen Z (b. 1997-2012)</i>):	
<i>Baby boomers (Before 1960)</i>	0.09** (0.02)
<i>Gen X (1961-1980)</i>	0.11** (0.02)
<i>Millennial (1981-1996)</i>	0.10** (0.02)
Female	0.01 (0.01)
University graduate	-0.10** (0.01)
Occupation (reference: <i>Working-class</i>):	
<i>Self-Employed</i>	-0.04* (0.02)
<i>Professionals/Managers</i>	-0.09** (0.02)
<i>Lower Professional/Managers</i>	-0.07** (0.01)
<i>Intermediate</i>	-0.04** (0.01)
Ethnicity (reference: White British):	
<i>Other White</i>	0.03 (0.03)
<i>Mixed background</i>	0.03 (0.03)
<i>Southeast Asian</i>	0.09** (0.03)
<i>Black Caribbean</i>	0.03 (0.08)
<i>Black African</i>	0.09 (0.05)
<i>Other background</i>	-0.02 (0.04)
Annual Income (ref. More than 35,000£):	
<i>Less than 20,000£</i>	-0.03* (0.01)
<i>20,000£ - 35,000£</i>	-0.08 (0.07)
Intercept	-1.32** (0.17)
Observations	14,179

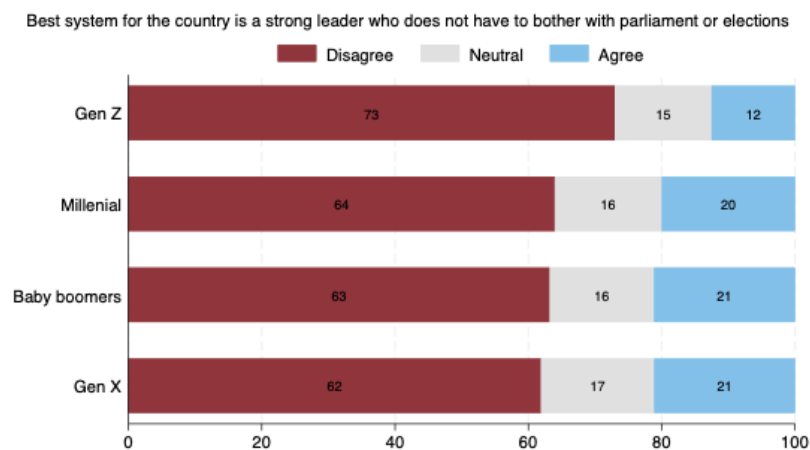
Note: ** p<0.01; * p<0.05. Model is also adjusted for place of residence (England, Scotland or Wales).

Source: British Election Study (Wave 27).

Generational differences

There is quite a stark contrast between generations in levels of support for strong leaders as the best way to run the country (Figure 4). Gen Z's, the youngest generation (those born between 1997 and 2012), emerges as the generation with the lowest levels of support for strong leaders as the best system for the country – 12% of Gen Z's agree with this statement, compared to 20% among Millennials, and 21% among Baby Boomers and Gen X's.

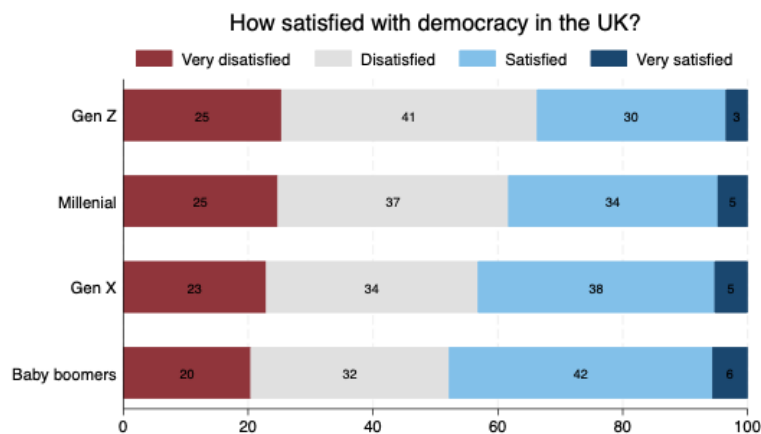
Figure 4. Support for strong leaders by generation of birth (2024)



Source: British Election Study, Wave 27.

At the same time, levels of satisfaction with democracy are much lower for members of Gen Z than for other generations (Figure 5). According to BES data, around 66% of Gen Z's are dissatisfied with democracy, compared to only 62% of Millennials (b. 1981-1996), 57% of Gen X's (b. 1965-1980) and 52% of Baby Boomers (b. before 1964).

Figure 5. Satisfaction with democracy, by generation of birth (2024)



Source: British Election Study, Wave 27.

Younger generations also appear to have different priorities than older generations (Table 2). Concerns about cost of living and the economy rank the highest for all generations, except for those aged over 60 years. Beyond this, however, immigration is one of the key issues facing the country for all generations, except Gen Z's. At the same time, the environment is one of the key issues for Gen Z's – and not for other generations.

Table 2. The main issue facing the UK in 2024, according to different generations

	Baby Boomers (Before 1964)	Gen X (1965 – 1980)	Millennials (1981-1996)	Gen Z (1996 -2012)
Issue #1	Immigration	Living costs	Living costs	Living costs
Issue #2	Economy	Immigration	Economy	Economy
Issue #3	Health	Economy	Immigration	Environment

Source: British Election Study, Wave 27.

It is hard to say for certain whether these generational divides reflect deep-rooted generational differences or simply different stages of life. Take concern for the environment, for example — do Gen Z's care more about climate change because they grew up with it as a defining issue? And will that concern stick with them as they age, or will it give way to the kinds of worries that dominate older age groups, like immigration or pensions? These are questions that require long-term data to fully answer.

Still, there are clear generational patterns in political attitudes, which help explain why different age groups report dissatisfaction with democracy and support for strong leaders for different reasons.

- 60% of Gen Z and 54% of Millennials want the government to play a stronger role in reducing economic inequality, compared to just 36% of Baby Boomers and 46% of Gen X.
- 52% of Gen Z believe that efforts to reduce racial inequality have not gone far enough, compared to 39% of Millennials, 25% of Gen X, and just 19% of Baby Boomers.
- On LGBTQ+ rights, 49% of Gen Z feel that equal opportunities for gay and lesbian people have not been fully achieved, versus 36% of Millennials, 23% of Gen X, and only 14% of Baby Boomers.

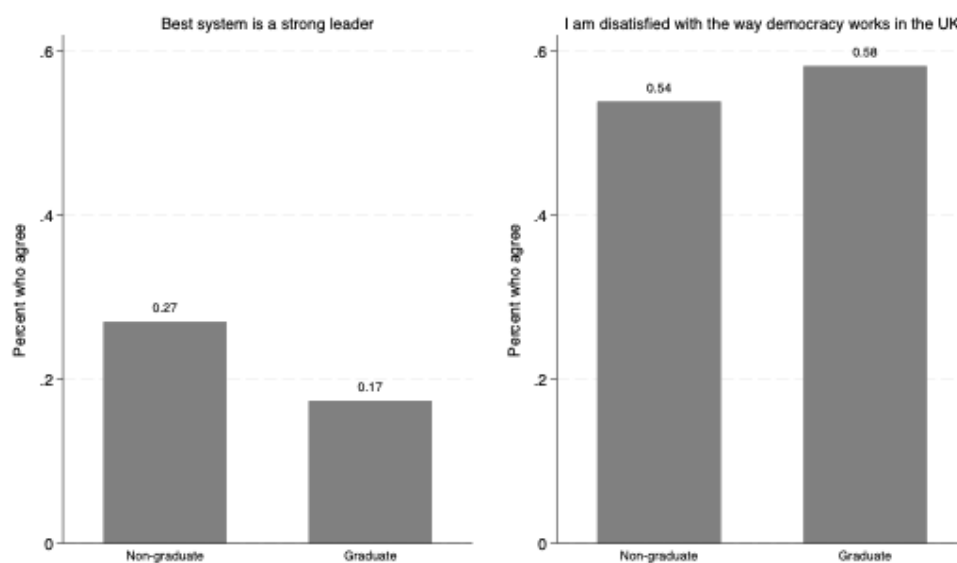
While dissatisfaction with democracy is high across all generations, it does not mean the same to everyone. Almost everyone is frustrated by the economy and the rising cost of living. But beyond that, the reasons behind that dissatisfaction diverge. Younger generations tend to want a more active, interventionist government – one that tackles climate change, addresses inequality, and expands rights. Older generations, on the other hand, are more likely to be concerned about immigration.

These differing priorities also shape how people respond to the idea of strong leadership. For instance, those who want tougher immigration controls are more likely to favour a strong leader who promises to take decisive action. Meanwhile, those who advocate for a more redistributive state tend to be less supportive of that kind of leadership.

Education divides

Education is one of the most consistent dividing lines when it comes to support for strong leaders. As shown in Table 1, university graduates are 10% less likely to support a strong leader than those without a degree – even after controlling for other sociodemographic factors. In many ways, the pattern mirrors what we saw with Gen Z. University graduates tend to be more dissatisfied with democracy, but that dissatisfaction does not usually translate into support for strong leaders who bypass democratic institutions (Figure 6).

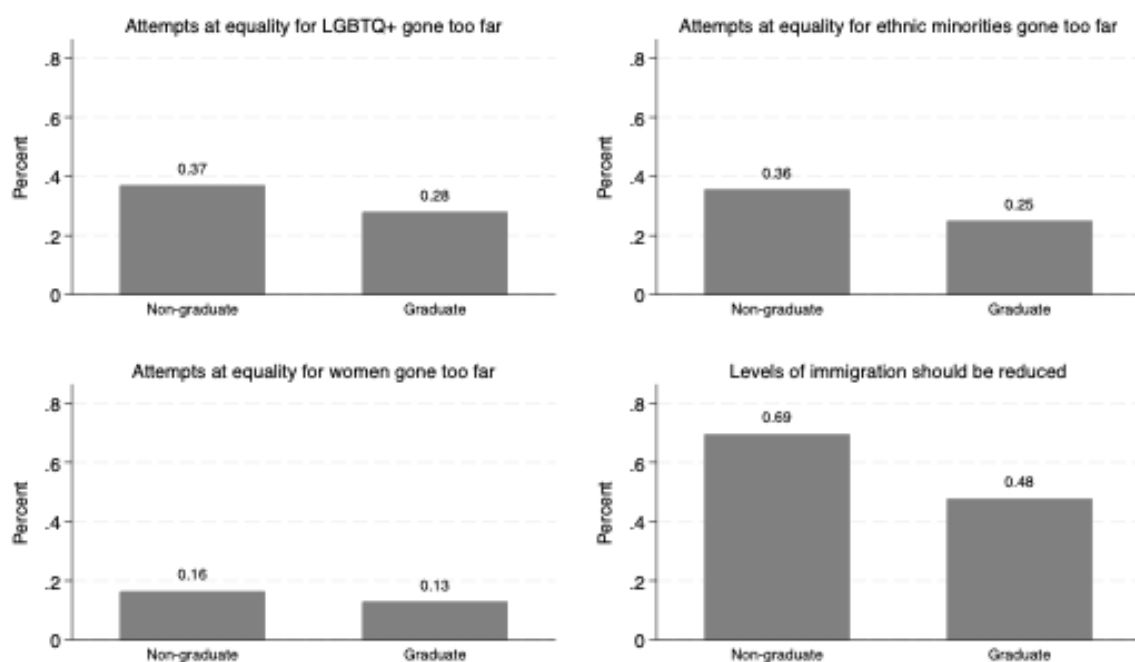
Figure 6. Support for strong leaders, by level of formal education in the UK (2024)



Source: British Election Study (Wave 27).

This difference is also part of the broader attitudinal differentiation between graduates and non-graduates (visible, for example, on the electoral alignments around Brexit – see, for example, Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). Figure 7 shows that 36% of non-graduates believe that efforts to promote equal opportunities for ethnic minorities have gone too far, compared to 25% of graduates. Similar gaps appear when it comes to views towards the LGBTQ+ community: 37% of non-graduates claim that attempts at equality for this community have gone too far, compared to 28% of graduates. Differences are even clearer in attitudes towards immigration: 69% of non-graduates agree that it should be reduced, compared to 48% of graduates.

Figure 7. Support for strong leaders, by level of formal education in the UK (2024)



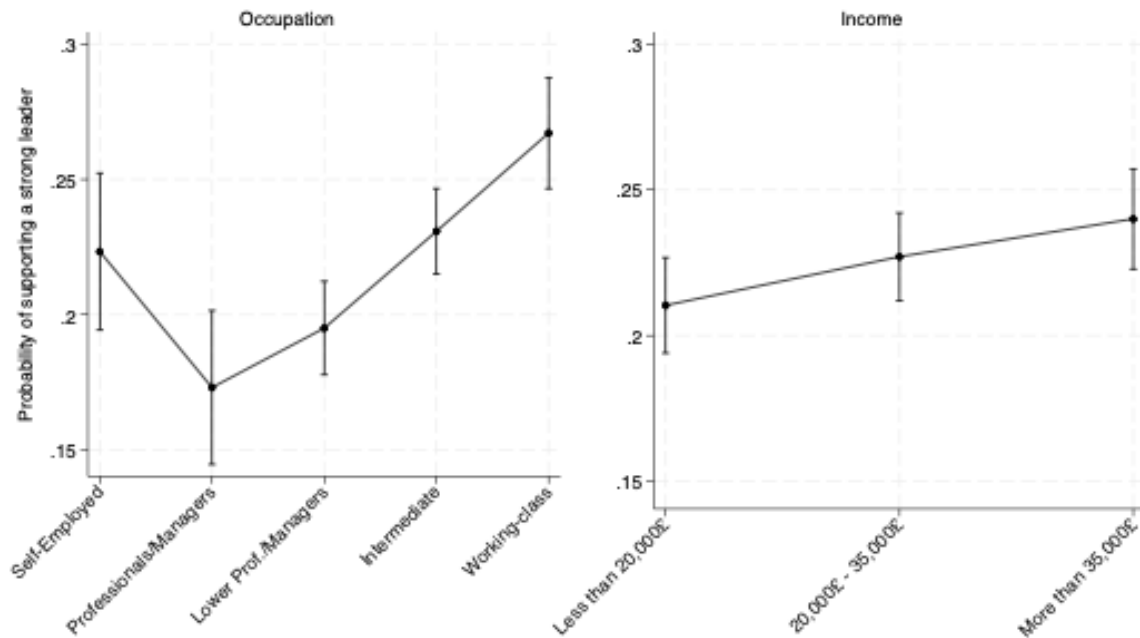
Source: British Election Study (Wave 27).

Class: occupation and income

Class also plays a complex role in shaping support for strong leaders (Figure 8). Looking at occupation, people in working-class occupations are more likely to support strong leaders than those in other occupations – particularly those in higher-status professions, like managerial or professional roles. Nonetheless, this trend does not hold when looking at income. In fact, those with the *lowest* incomes are *less* likely to support strong leaders than those in the highest income brackets. This disconnect between income and occupation highlights that

different aspects of class matter in different ways. Support for strong leaders may be more closely tied to feelings of cultural displacement or lack of influence—often more strongly felt among the working class—than to absolute material hardship. In contrast, low-income individuals may prioritize redistribution and state support over strongman-style leadership.

Figure 8. The effect of occupation and income on support for strong leaders in the UK (2024)

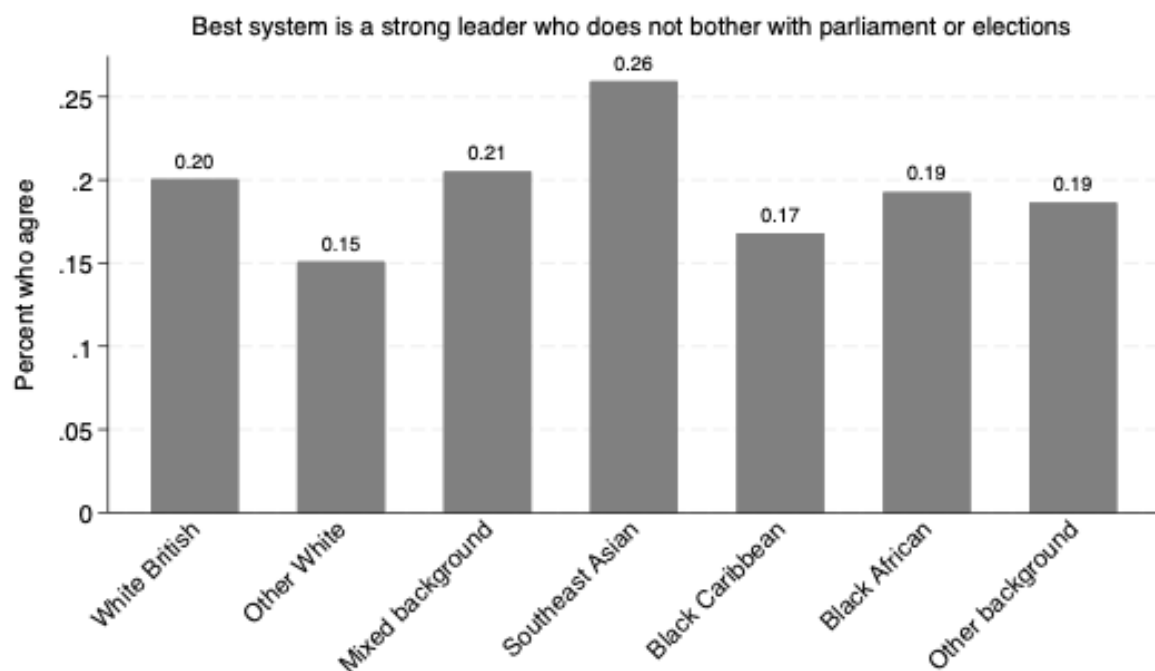


Source: British Election Study (Wave 27). 95% Confidence Intervals. Estimates based on Table 1.

Ethnic background

Ethnic background also appears to shape attitudes toward strong leadership, though the evidence here requires careful interpretation. Among all ethnic groups, individuals with a Southeast Asian background seem more likely to support the idea of a strong leader who can bypass elections or parliament. However, the sample sizes for ethnic minority groups in most surveys remain relatively small, which limits our ability to draw firm conclusions. To make stronger claims about how ethnic background influences support for authoritarian leadership, future research would need larger, more targeted samples - ideally through booster samples or dedicated studies. For now, the patterns are suggestive rather than definitive.

Figure 6. Support for strong leaders in the UK, by ethnic background



Source: BES (Wave 27).

Conclusions

High levels of dissatisfaction with democracy are evident across all segments of the UK population, and concerns about economic stagnation and living standards are widely shared. Yet support for a strong leader who bypasses democratic processes remains a minority view and appears contingent on how the concept is framed.

While certain groups – particularly older generations, those with lower educational attainment, and members of the working-class – appear to be somewhat more likely to express support for strong leadership, this support is nuanced. Many respondents appear to conflate strong leadership with effectiveness rather than authoritarianism, and approval declines when undemocratic implications are made explicit.

The findings suggest that attitudes toward strong leaders are shaped by a complex interplay of generational, educational, occupational, and ideological factors. These patterns reflect differing priorities and grievances rather than a uniform shift toward anti-democratic sentiment. Future research will need to track how these preferences evolve over time, especially as political dissatisfaction remains high and public debate continues over what effective leadership looks like in a democratic society.

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