Gen-Z are different

Explanations for the growing generational gap in Australian politics

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ACCENT RESEARCH

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About the Author

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Executive summary

- The partisan age gap is not a permanent reality of Australian politics. In the 1960s and 1970s younger voters were as likely to vote for the Coalition parties as they were to vote Labor. The trend of younger voters significantly favouring parties of the left appears to have only emerged in the 1990s, and has continued to grow since.
- While Baby Boomers and Gen-X have become more likely to vote for the Coalition as they grow older, Millennials and (particularly) Gen-Z are less likely to do so at the same age.
- This lower level of support for the Coalition from Millennial and Gen-Z voters has driven the emergence of the partisan age gap. However, the main beneficiary of this since the 2000s appears to be The Greens, not Labor.
- The political divergence between the generations has been driven by real social and material differences. Millennials are more likely to have a university education than older cohorts, and fewer are hitting the milestones in their 20s and 30s that may have been associated with increasing support for conservative parties as voters age, such as home ownership and family formation.
- On some of these measures, the differences between Gen-Z and older generations in particular are colossal: 56 per cent of Gen-Z voters say they have no religion, compared with 38 per cent of Gen-X and 31 per cent of Baby Boomers; 17 per cent identify as LGBTQ+, compared with eight per cent of Gen-X and four per cent of Baby Boomers; and Gen-Z are three times more likely than Baby Boomers to identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- Likely linked to these different lived experiences, a larger share of these younger generations tend to hold left of centre political preferences, particularly on social issues. Generational differences are especially large on questions about help for Indigenous Australians and immigration.
- If current trends hold (and it should not be assumed they will indefinitely), as the generational composition of the electorate changes in the future, the left-leaning politics of Millennial and Gen-Z voters may have significant electoral ramifications.

Contents

Defining the generations

There has been some criticism of the use of generational cohorts in social science research and media commentary. The very concept itself has been questioned; with some criticising it as atheoretical, with few observable differences between cohorts. These criticisms have gone so far as to question the very existence of generations as a meaningful social phenomenon (see, for instance Jauregui et al. 2020; Okros 2020; Rudolph and Zacher 2020).

However, the commonly used generational groups are a useful concept for social and political research. There is a general understanding among both researchers and in the general population about the composition of generational cohorts. One of the reasons for this is that there is important variation between the generations, driven by the lived experiences of individuals that came of age at different times in distinct circumstances. These generational differences can be electorally significant (as observed in the US by Ghitza, Gelman, and Auerbach 2023), and investigating them will provide a better understanding of the causes of political differences between the generations, and its implications.

The generational cohorts used in this paper are defined the following way:

Silent Generation — Born 1945 and earlier
Baby Boomers — Born between 1946 and 1965
Gen-X — Born between 1966 and 1980
Millennials — Born between 1981 and 1995
Gen-Z — Born 1996 and later

These classifications are adopted from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Introduction: The growing partisan age gap

Conservative political parties in Australia face a dilemma: young voters are increasingly unwilling to vote for them.

What explains this partisan age gap? There are two different understandings of the phenomenon: life-cycle and cohort effects. The first of these is the idea that voters age into conservative politics. Each generation has different politics at a given point in time, but broadly similar politics at the same age (ie, left-leaning when young, right-leaning when older). The other is that due to variation in lived experience and socialisation, generations will have different political preferences, even at the same age.

Which of these happens to be the primary driver of the partisan age gap produces a different set of potential or expected political implications. If the primary reason for the gap is life-cycle effects, it may not have a long term impact on Australian politics, as younger cohorts generally move to the political right as they age. If the causes of the age gap are largely from cohort effects, it may mean longer term political consequences, as these cohort effects are unlikely to disappear over time.

Some commentators and politicians have claimed the partisan age gap is business as usual; that young voters have always preferred the left but drift to the right with age and the responsibilities that come with it. The evidence indicates this is not the case, however. The partisan age gap actually appears to be a phenomenon of the past 30 years, and was much smaller or did not exist prior to 1990. Additionally, as documented below, survey data collected at federal elections over the past few decades suggests that life-cycle effects alone cannot explain recent trends in Australian voter behaviour.

A growing interest in generational political differences

Attention on the potential for generational differences increased significantly after the 2022 Australian federal election (see for instance Jackman 2022), where Australia's centre-right Coalition parties lost 18 House of Representative seats. Following this election, the Coalition lost government at the state level in New South Wales (Australia's most populous state); and the seat of Aston in a by-election, the first such loss by an opposition to an incumbent government since 1920.[1] At the time of writing (November 2023), the only remaining centre-right state government in the country was in Tasmania.

Although political fortunes tend to be cyclical and there is no reason to believe the Coalition will not win future state and federal elections, some commentators have speculated that this time it's different, with the Coalition's loss of support among Millennial and Gen-Z voters in particular seen as a cause for declining electoral fortunes of Australia's main centre-right parties (Read 2022; drawing on Cameron et al. 2022, 22–23). Extrapolating from recent trends, Matt Taylor, from the Centre for Independent Studies, found that if it continued, the drift away from the Coalition by Millennial and Gen-Z voters could lead to the primary vote for these parties to decline by approximately nine per cent by 2040, and a loss of 35 seats in the House of Representatives. This is not to say such a trend will continue that long without interruption, as this report acknowledges, but it does present a potentially challenging scenario for the Coalition (see Taylor 2023 for details).

[1] The 1920 Kalgoorlie by-election had been the last time an incumbent government won a seat off the opposition at a by-election before this.

One reason to suspect this may be more than a short-term political trend is that it is not unique to Australia. Similar findings have been made in other countries, with John Burn-Murdoch (2022) providing one of the more graphic displays of the generational-electoral woes facing right-of-centre parties in the United Kingdom and United States.

Research questions

If recent election results are part of longer-term political changes, and there is a generational cohort-effect shifting younger voters away from the right-of-centre Coalition parties, this may have significant political ramifications. Unless future generations shift back to the right (which it should be acknowledged is a possibility), it may become more difficult for the Coalition to form a parliamentary majority unless it changes its offerings to appeal to younger generations, impacting the ability of the political right as it is traditionally understood to affect policy change. This raises some important questions:

1. Is the partisan age gap the result of life-cycle or cohort effects, or some combination of both?
2. What factors might cause either of these, and have they changed for younger generations?
3. What are the likely political consequences of this?

Using a series of surveys of Australian voters collected at federal elections over more than five decades, and large surveys run at the last two elections, this paper not only explores whether there has been a change in support for different political parties across the generations, but also some of the potential explanations for these changes: investigating the potential impacts of both life-cycle and cohort effects on voter behaviour at Australian federal elections. In doing so, the durability and political implications of generational shifts in partisan support can be better understood.

Key findings

The results of this research show that the partisan age gap is not a permanent phenomenon in Australian politics. The idea that the young have always voted for the left in large numbers relative to older voters may be nothing more than a political myth; or at least, it has been overstated. In Australia in the 1960s and 1970s young voters were no less likely to vote for the right of centre Coalition parties than older voters. The partisan age gap only emerged in the 1990s, and has grown larger ever since. It opened up in recent decades due to the considerably more left-leaning politics of Millennial and Gen-Z voters, who generally hold issue preference to the left of older generations, particularly on social issues, and are more likely to vote for parties of the left (in particular, the Greens).

At the 2022 election, these differences were driven by both cohort and life-cycle effects for Gen-Z, and mostly cohort effects for Millennials (of the factors tested here, at least). The importance of cohort effects suggests these generational political differences may not be an entirely temporary or short term phenomenon disappearing as these voters age, but something that could be more enduring.

Life-cycles versus cohort effects

It is a common belief that ageing is associated with the acquisition of more conservative political preferences. This received wisdom, in Australian politics and the politics of English-speaking democracies generally — based on witticisms ascribed to Winston Churchill, and others — that younger voters support the left and older voters the right, is well entrenched in political lore; with former federal parliamentarian George Brandis (2023) confidently opining that "it was ever thus". This is the life-cycle theory of voter behaviour.

The life-cycle theory

According to this theory, a voters' circumstances influence their political preferences. Formal employment, higher incomes, starting a family, buying a home, and retiring, all influence economic interests (Williamson et al. 1982), change how individuals engage with the state, and help shape their political preferences; and are usually seen as being part of a process that shifts voters towards greater support for the policies, parties and candidates of the political right (Binstock and Quadagno 2001; Geys, Heggedal, and Sørensen 2022).

While the life-cycle theory of voting behaviour provides a neat story that makes a lot of sense — as voters age, take on responsibilities, gain income and wealth and pay more in tax, their political preferences generally become more conservative — empirical evidence in the Australian context at least suggests the truth may not be so simple and the received wisdom has not always been true. Survey data going back to the late 1960s indicates the age gap is not a permanent reality of Australian politics, but instead a phenomenon that emerged around 1990.

Using two related series of academic surveys,[2] we can examine trends in voter behaviour by age for a 55 year period (albeit, one with gaps; see the note on the data in the Appendix for more details). According to these surveys, from the 1960s to the 1980s, younger voters were not significantly less likely to vote for the Coalition parties as they were to vote Labor (as can be seen in figure 1). However, they have become significantly less likely to back the Coalition over the past 30 years, and more likely to vote for Labor and then the Greens; with the latter the main beneficiary of this trend since the 2000s.

Another way to look at this is by calculating the partisan age gap. Shown in figure 2, this is support for main parties of the political right (the Liberal-National Coalition parties) among voters aged 18-34, minus support for these parties by those aged 65 and older. A positive value indicates younger voters are more likely to support the Coalition, while a negative value indicates older voters are more likely to do so.

These data highlight the point made above: the expected partisan age gap did not exist in the 1960s. Despite the image in popular culture of younger voters as particularly left-wing or progressive, the gap between younger and older voters during this period was negligible, and actually slightly positive. According to these data, younger voters in the late 1960s and 1970s were approximately two percentage points more likely to vote for the Coalition parties than older voters. While this had begun to change by 1987 (at minus six per cent), the gap remained small. It has continued to grow (with peaks and troughs) since, with younger voters 19 per cent less likely to vote for the Coalition than those aged 65 and older in 1998, and possibly as much as 30 per cent less likely to do so in 2019 (back down to 19 per cent in 2022, however).

[2] The Australian Election Study (AES), which has been run at every federal since 1987; and the Australian National Political Attitudes Survey (ANPAS), which was run in 1967, 1969 and 1979.

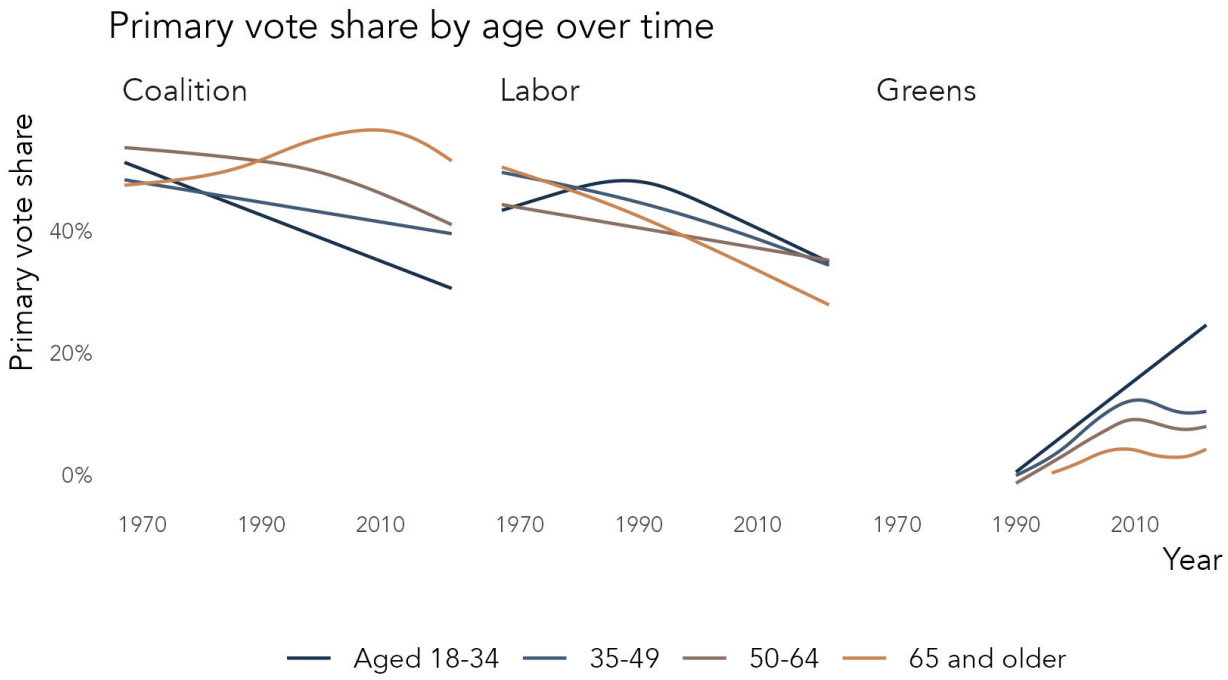

Figure 1: Support for the Coalition, Labor and the Greens by age cohort over time. Data are from the AES, 1987-2022. Curves were smoothed using generalised additive models. Survey weights were used when available.

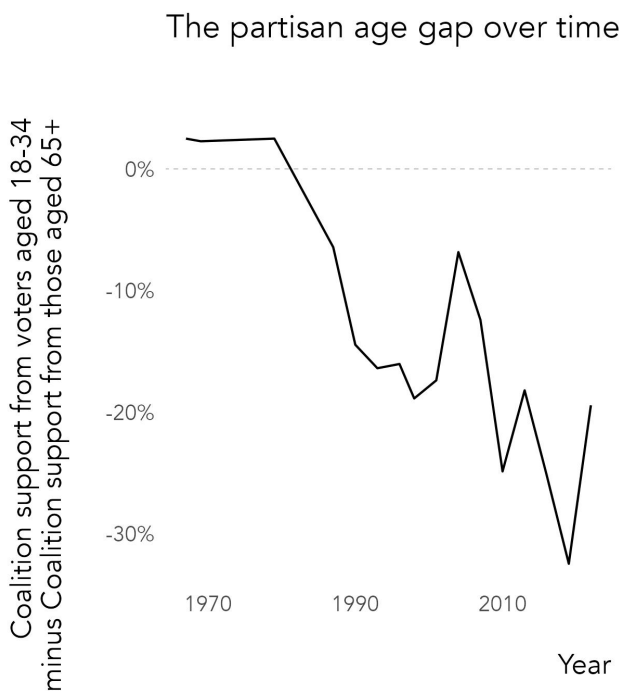

Figure 2: The curve shown in this plot is the difference between the Coalition primary share from voters aged 18-34, minus voters aged 65 and older. A positive value indicates younger voters were more likely to support the Coalition than older voters, while a negative share indicates they were less likely to do so. Data are from the ANPAS and AES surveys from 1967 to 2022. Weights were used when available.

If this partisan age gap did not always exist in Australian politics, where did it come from? One likely cause is that generational cohorts have behaved differently.

Some of the drivers for this change can be seen in figure 3. The curves in this plot show the difference between the Coalition primary support of voters in each generation, by their age at the election, and the overall Coalition support at that election. This was obtained using pooled AES and ANPAS data from 1967 to 2022. Results are smoothed using a Generalised Additive Model (GAM), to reduce the noise in the data and make overall trends clearer. Adopting this method allows us to compare voters of each generational cohort with one another at the same age.

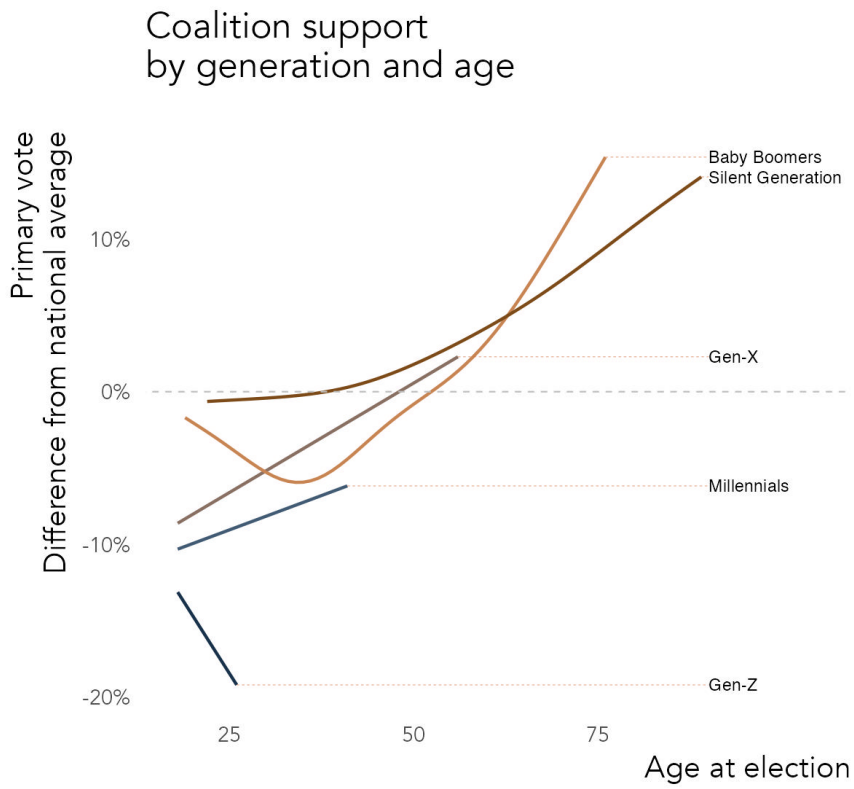

Figure 3: Support for the Coalition by age and generation over time. Data are from the ANPAS and AES surveys from 1967 to 2022. Curves were smoothed using generalised additive models. Survey weights were used when available.

The cohort effects are clear. Millennial voters are somewhat — and Gen-Z considerably — less likely to vote for the Coalition parties than earlier generations at the same age. This is potentially exacerbated by a difference in life-cycle effects. As can be seen in figure 3, support for the Coalition increases with age from the voters of the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers and Gen-X; albeit in a non-linear fashion. Millennials also appear to be shifting towards the Coalition, but perhaps slower than was the case for Gen-X as those voters aged; and Gen-Z are shifting away from the Coalition at a rapid pace (although the sample size of this cohort is small, so this result should be considered tentative).

The very low Coalition vote observed from the youngest of these groups is not something that was seen from earlier generations. These countervailing trends from different cohorts — with older generations becoming more likely to vote for the Coalition as they aged, while (so far, at least) younger generations have been far less likely to do so — drove the widening partisan age gap over the past few decades.

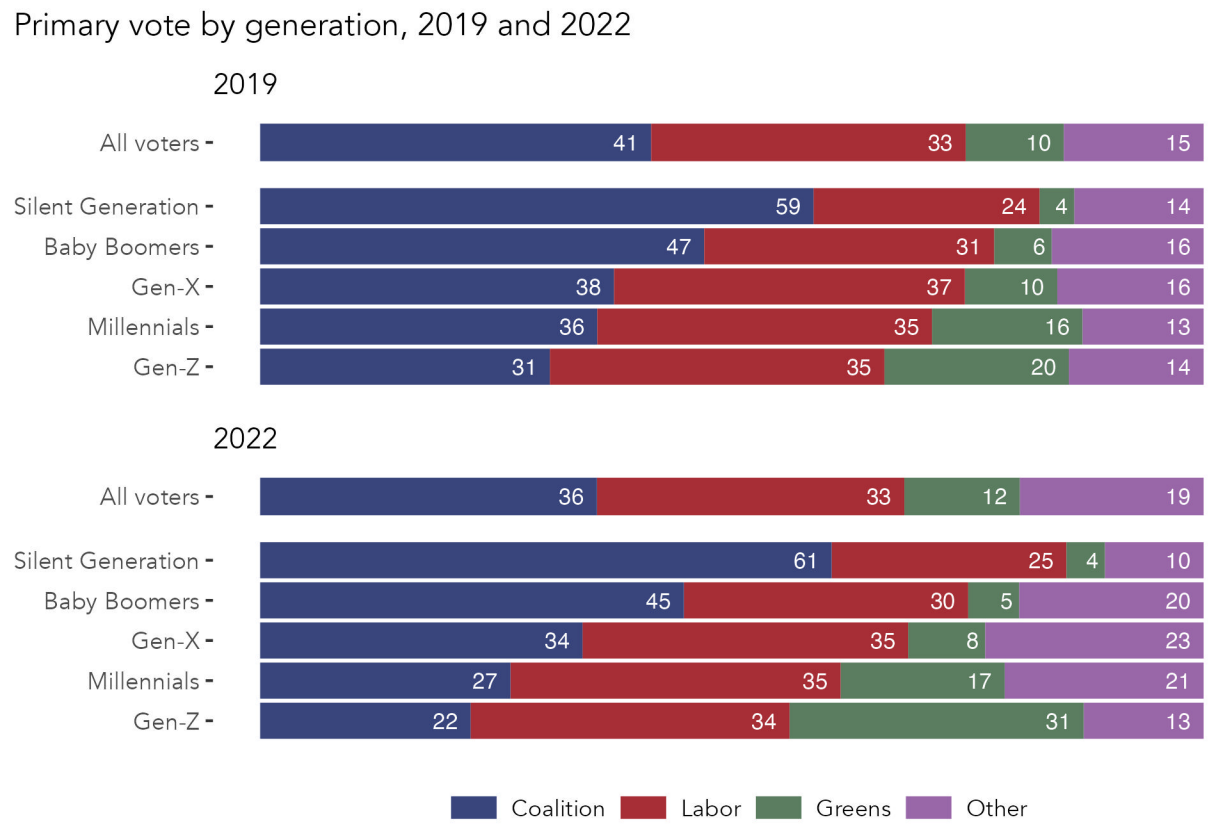

Figure 4: First preference vote by generation at the 2019 and 2022 federal elections. Data are from the 2019 and 2022 Cooperative Election Surveys (n=6,482 and 5,978 respectively).

Support for these results from the AES,[3] and the possible political implications of these patterns, can be seen in figure 4. These plots, which use data from the Cooperative Election Survey (also discussed in the appendix), show that the generational differences discussed above are not just artefacts of the AES. They also exist in these other data collected during the 2019 and 2022 election campaigns: older generations are more likely to vote for the Coalition, somewhat less likely to vote Labor and much less likely to vote Greens. Younger generations, especially Gen-Z, were more likely to vote for Labor and the Greens; especially the

[3]Which as documented in the notes on the data in the appendix, have some limitations.

Greens. According to these data, this trend grew more pronounced between 2019 and 2022, with the Coalition vote dropping considerably among Millennial and Gen-Z voters, and the Greens vote increasing, particularly among the younger generation, with 31 per cent of Gen-Z voters giving this party their first preference (nearly twice as much as Millennials, and more than six times the support from Baby Boomers).

Of course, there is nothing to suggest these trends are immutable. However, based on current evidence it appears the Coalition parties are winning lower levels of support from Millennials and (especially) Gen-Z than they enjoyed from earlier generations at the same age.

This indicates that there are real political differences between the generations, and in particular that there may have been a decisive split between Gen-Z and earlier cohorts. What explains this trend though, and what might it mean for Australian politics?

Cohort effects and generational drift to parties of the left

If the partisan age gap did not exist in Australian politics in the 1960s and 1970s, why did younger generations move away from the Coalition from the 1990s? One possible explanation is cohort effects.

While the theory of life-cycle effects on political preferences has been influential, it has not been universally accepted. One critique is that it oversimplifies the complexity of political attitudes and behaviour, neglecting other important factors such as the differences in socialisation of young (and older) voters during different periods of their life, and the impact of political events (see Tilley 2002). These may lead to generational cohort effects on voter behaviour (for example, see Ghitza, Gelman, and Auerbach 2023).

There are a few theories of how these cohort effects might work. One of the most obvious explanations is that different generations are raised in different environments. Some have grown up in times of peace and prosperity, others depression and war. These different experiences during an individual's formative years result in differences in political socialisation, leading to variation in policy and political preferences.

Ronald Inglehart and others observed that since the 1960s, younger generations in the more affluent democracies of Western Europe, North America and elsewhere had grown up during a period of peace and security (compared to generations who had come of age during the World Wars and the Great Depression), had also experienced greater rates of higher education and globalisation, and tended to exhibit more socially liberal attitudes (see Inglehart 1977, 1990, 2008; and also Dirk De Graaf and Evans 1996).

Other explanations have also invoked the role of higher education. One argument is that western democracies (at least) face elite overproduction (for a discussion about this in the UK context, see Cates 2023). The term 'elite overproduction' was coined by sociologist Jack Goldstone (1991) to describe a situation where a social system became unable to produce adequate roles of sufficient prestige and reward for aspiring elites, causing some of them to adopt reformist or even anti-system positions.

However, while it is true that Millennials are more likely to have a university degree than older generations (see figure 8 below), the assertion that it is elite overproduction driving young voters to the left is difficult to support both empirically and logically; indeed, there is a lack of empirical support for any assertion that higher education is driving younger voters to the left at all.

Only a small minority of Gen-Z and Millennial voters can be described as elites. This term was originally coined to describe the very wealthy or influential, not every individual with a university degree. Even if we expanded the definition to include all voters who went to university (which as a definition strips the term 'elite' of all useful meaning), less than half of Millennials have a bachelors degree or higher. The figure is even lower for Gen-Z, who have mostly not had the chance to obtain one yet. Additionally, according to data collected at the 2022 election, support for parties of the left was higher for Gen-Z voters without a degree as it was for those with one (particularly the Greens), and was almost as high for Millennials without a degree (see figure 5). It was actually the Coalition parties that did better with younger voters with a degree. However, this advantage drops off as voters age; not because support for the Coalition was lower for older voters with a university education (the opposite is true), but because it increased more among those without a degree (to approximately 80 per cent among the oldest Silent Generation voters without a degree).

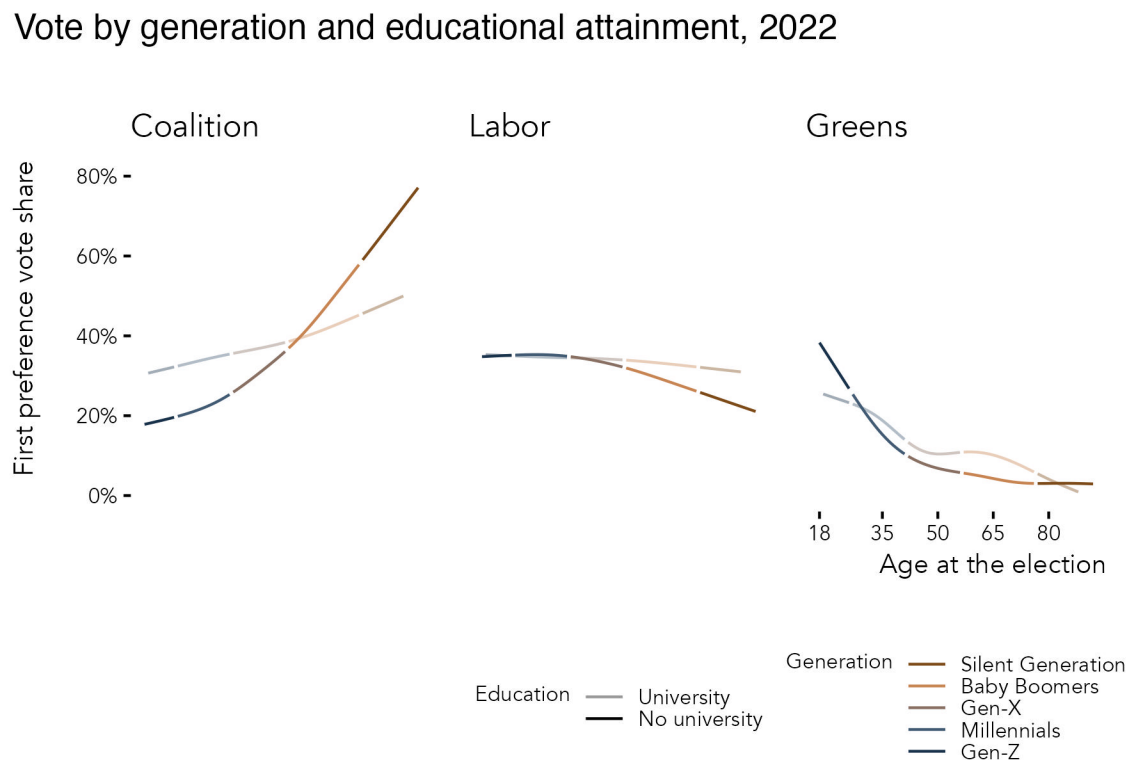

Figure 5: First preference vote by education, generation and age at the 2022 federal election. Different colour shades indicate generational cohort. Data are from the 2022 Cooperative Election Survey. Curves were smoothed using generalised additive models.

That is, the leftward shift of younger generations is not a function of them having a degree. Rather, something else is different about younger voters, who are more likely to vote for parties of the left, and less likely to vote for the Coalition, regardless of whether they have a university education.

Differential socialisation and delayed milestones

It is true that younger voters are more likely to have a university education. It does not appear to be the case, though, that this is what is driving these voters towards parties of the left. However, there are other significant differences between the younger and older generations. Cohort effects are also not the only possible explanation for generational differences. An alternative view, commonly expressed by some commentators, is that younger generations — particularly Millennials — have experienced delays in many of the life-cycle milestones associated with the development of more conservative political preferences: full-time employment, marriage, home ownership and family formation. These delayed milestones have, so the reasoning goes, resulted in fewer of these voters shifting to the right as they age (see Switzer and Blyth 2023).

An interesting place to start, when examining this argument, is a piece of research published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2022 that compares the Australians from the Baby Boomer, Gen-X and Millennial cohorts at the same age (25-39) using data from three different Censuses: 1991 for Baby Boomers, 2006 for Gen-X and 2021 for Millennials (see Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022). Some of the findings from this research are reproduced in figure 6. This provides support for the claim that Millennials are experiencing important life-cycle milestones differently from earlier generations. They are more likely to still be studying into their 20s and 30s, less likely to be cohabitating with a partner or to have started a family, and their home environment is less fixed, with fewer owning their own home or living at the same address they had been at five years earlier.

There could be two potential impacts of the delay in the milestones associated with life-cycle effects. First, and more limited, they could just delay the shift to greater support for parties of the right often associated with growing older. An alternative is that if these milestones are delayed late enough, younger generations will experience them after they are politically socialised in early adulthood — which according to research on voters in the US by Ghitza, Gelman, and Auerbach (2023) is mostly in the late teenage years and 20s — and any political impact from starting a family or buying a house will be muted.

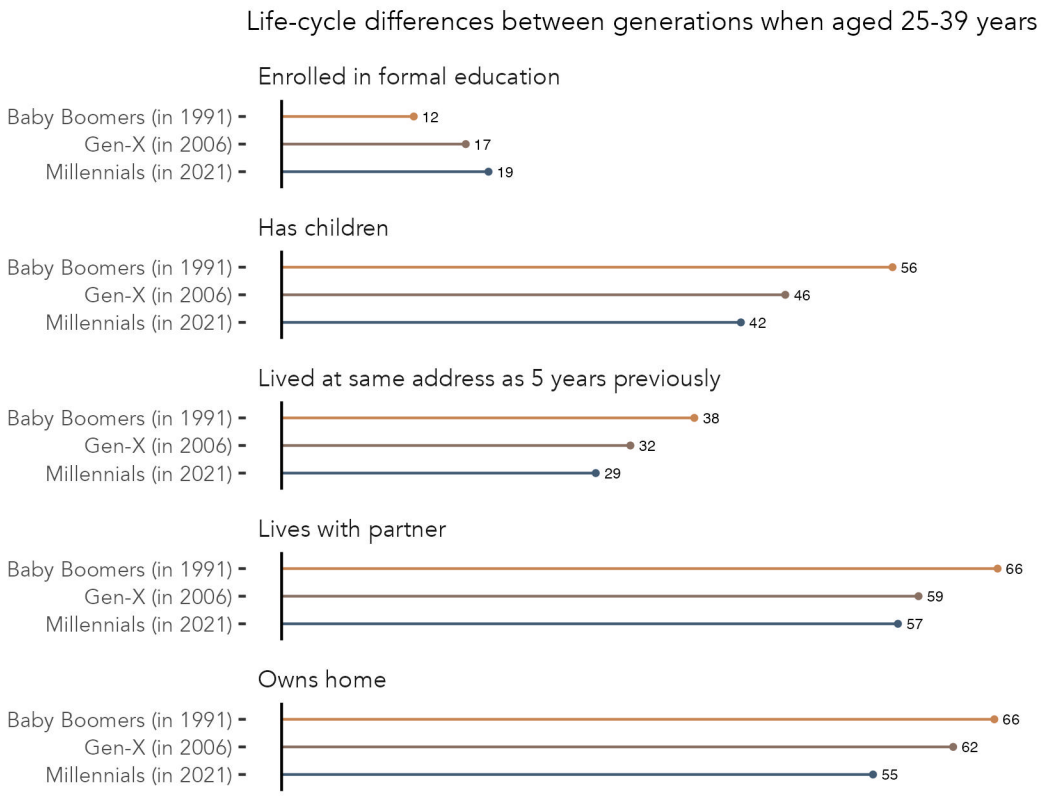

Figure 6: Lifecycle differences between Baby Boomers, Gen-X and Millennials when aged 25-39 years. Data are from the 1991, 2006 and 2021 Censuses for Baby Boomers, Gen-X and Millennials, respectively; taken from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022). To ensure that all three generations used 15-year cohorts and to allow for the use of a single census for each generation, only those Baby Boomers born from 1952 to 1966 were included in the analyses for this figure. It should be noted that these data do not just include citizens or voters, but all residents of Australia at the time of these Census, although this should not be expected to substantially change the results.

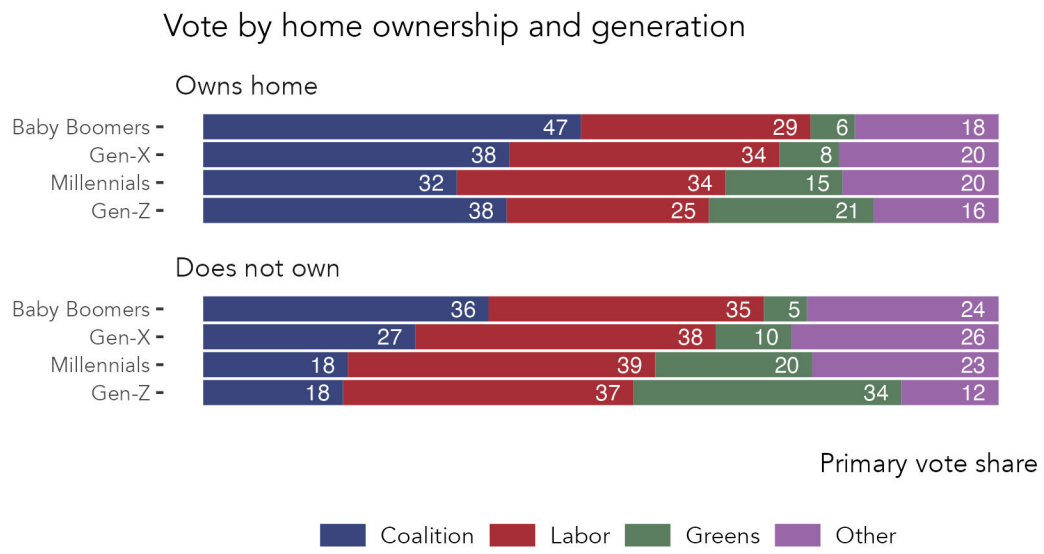

Figure 7: First preference vote by home ownership and generation at the 2022 federal election. Home owners include those with a mortgage. Data are from the 2022 Cooperative Election Survey.

The data displayed in figure 6 suggests that while fewer Millennials are experiencing some of these key life-cycle milestones during the peak years of political socialisation, it may also not be few enough to fully explain the large cohort differences and potentially slower growth support for the centre-right Coalition parties as they approach middle age (so far, at least). As figure 7 shows, home ownership explains some of the generational voting differences, but not all of them. Even among those who do not own their own home, generation remains a strong predictor of partisan support: Baby Boomers who do not own are twice as likely to support the Coalition than Millennials and Gen-Z non-owners (36 per cent for the former, compared with 18 per cent for the two latter cohorts); while Gen-Z non-owners more than six times as likely to vote Greens than their Baby Boomer counterparts (34 to five per cent). However, that said, there does appear to be a strong relationship between home ownership and political preferences, with 38 per cent of Gen-Z and 32 per cent of Millennial owners voting Coalition; around twice the rate as non-owners from the same cohorts.[4]

However, the differences between Millennials and Gen-Z on the one hand, and earlier generations on the other, are not limited to delayed milestones. There are also cohort differences that may be more fixed. As discussed above, younger and older generations are likely to have had different life experiences. These may be relatively fixed for each cohort, and lead to enduring differences in political preferences. Some of these are displayed in figure 8. These show that Millennials and Gen-Z are significantly more likely to identify as non-religious, and identify as LGBTQ+ and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

On some of these measures, the differences between Gen-Z and older generations are remarkable. According to these data (from the Cooperative Election Survey), 56 per cent of Gen-Z voters say they have no religion, compared with 38 per cent of Gen-X and 31 per cent of Baby Boomers; and 17 per cent identify as LGBTQ+ compared with eight per cent of Gen-X and four per cent of Baby Boomers. Gen-Z are also much more likely than Baby Boomers to identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.[5]

[4] Although note that the sample for Gen-Z home owners is fairly small, at n=172, and should be interpreted conservatively.
[5] These differences are similar to the Census, where a comparison is possible. See Comparing the Cooperative Election Survey to

This translates into significant political variation. For instance, voters identifying as LGBTQ+ are more likely to vote for political parties of the left, with Labor and Greens support as high as 43 and 32 per cent respectively among these voters in the Millennial cohort according to the Cooperative Election Survey data, and 22 and 55 per cent from Gen-Z, while the Coalition languished at approximately 14 per cent support from voters in the Millennial LGBTQ+ cohort, and just seven per cent from LGBTQ+ Gen-Z. The gap in partisan support is even larger for Millennial and Gen-Z women who identify as LGBTQ+: 43 per cent of Millennial women who identified as such reported voting Labor and 39 per cent for the Greens at the 2022 election, while 22 per cent of LGBTQ+ Gen-Z women voted Labor and 62 per cent voted Greens. Conversely, just eight per cent of Millennial and five per cent of Gen-Z women who identified as LGBTQ+ voted for the Coalition at the last federal election (see figure 9).[6]

This is not some insignificant group of voters, either. Eleven per cent of Millennial and 19 per cent of Gen-Z women reported being LGBTQ+ in the 2022 Cooperative Election Survey data. This may explain some of the problems the Coalition has had with young women (see for instance, Cater 2022 for an 'interesting' take on this phenomenon).

We can better test the electoral impacts of these life-cycle and cohort differences by fitting a series of multinomial logistic regressions on vote intention from these data (the 2022 Cooperative Election Survey). For this exercise, four model specifications were fit: 1) a null model with no controls, 2) with predictors for life-cycle effects, 3) with predictors for cohort effects, and 4) a model controlling for both life-cycle and cohort effects.[7] For models 2-4, the value of the life-cycle and cohort effect controls were held at the observed values for Baby Boomers, to simulate the effect of what electoral results might hypothetically look like if there were no differences between Gen-Z and Millennials and other generations on life-cycle milestones, and the lived experiences and socialisation that defines cohort effects. The predicted vote for these substantive models are then compared with the null model (estimated vote share in the null minus the same from the hypothesis testing model), to estimate the impact of life-cycle and cohort effects. The results are shown in figure 10. A result above zero in these plots indicates life-cycle or cohort effects are estimated to increase the support for a party by that generation, while below zero they reduce it.

While both life-cycle and cohort effects are shown by these models to explain the significantly lower Gen-Z support for the Coalition and greater propensity to vote Greens at the 2022 election, it is mostly cohort effects that explain Millennials' voting behaviour (based on the variables examined here, at least; which was limited by what is available in these data).

Life-cycle effects are estimated by these models to result in a six points lower Coalition vote for Gen-Z

the Census section of the Appendix.

[6] It should be noted the sample sizes for LGBTQ+ women are fairly small by generation.
For Millennials, the total sample of LGBTQ+ voters was n=161, and for women n=100. For Gen-Z the entire sample of LGBTQ+ voters was 138, and for women n=93
However, the disparity in Greens and Coalition voting means we can still be fairly confident the Coalition vote is particularly small, and the Greens vote unusually large. For all Millennials identifying as LGBTQ+, the bounds of the 95 per cent confidence intervals for Greens voting were between 24 and 40, and for Coalition support between eight and 20 per cent. For Millennial women only identifying as LGBTQ+, the bounds of the 95 per cent confidence intervals for Greens voting were between 28 and 50, and for Coalition support between two and 14 per cent. For all Gen-Z identifying as LGBTQ+, the 95 per cent confidence intervals for Greens voting were between 47 and 65, and for Coalition support between two and 11 per cent. For LGBTQ+ Gen-Z women, the 95 per cent confidence intervals for Greens voting were between 50 and 73, and for Coalition support between one and 10 per cent.

[7] The variables used in this model are:
Life-cycle effects: if they own their homes, whether they are in paid employment, whether they are studying, if they are married or in a defacto relationship. I would have also controlled for whether they had children, but this was not available in these data.
Cohort effects: if a voter has a university degree, whether they are religious or not, if they identify as LGBTQ+, and if they are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

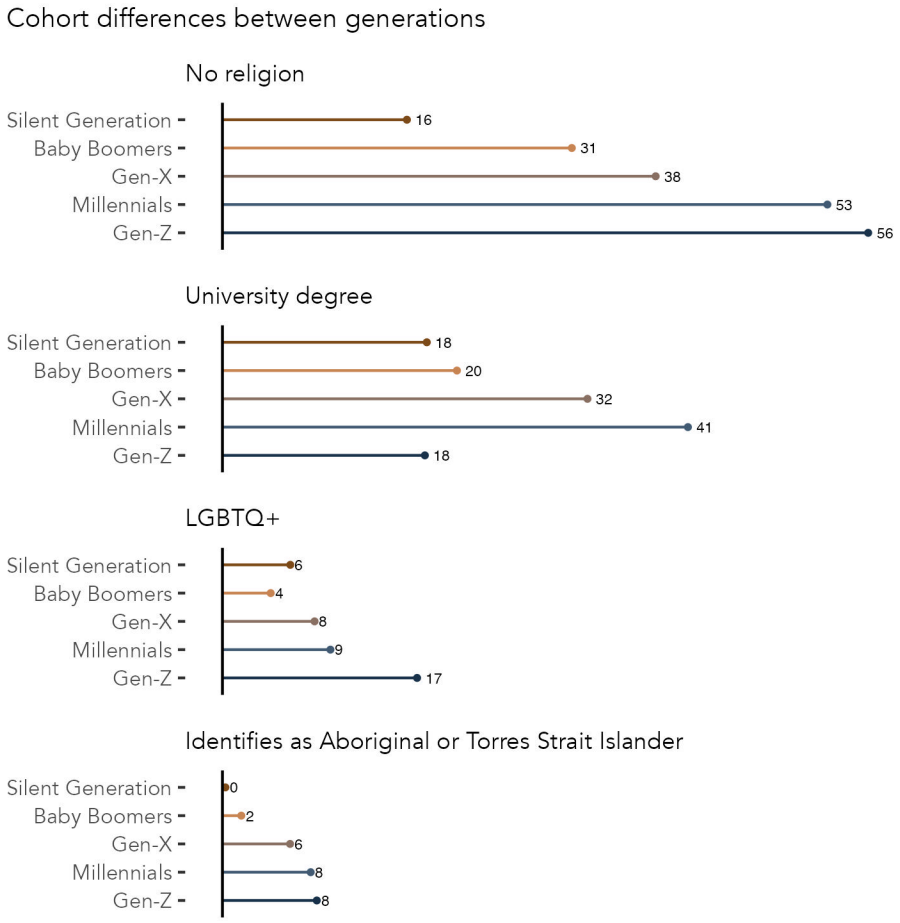

Figure 8: Cohort differences by generation. Data are from the 2022 Cooperative Election Survey. On those factors we can check against the 2021 Census, these values match the citizen counts quite closely (see the appendix for a comparison). Additionally, using the Cooperative Election Survey allows us to examine variables not on the Census (LGBTQ+ identity) and to limit ourselves to voters on the electoral roll, which is not possible with the Census.

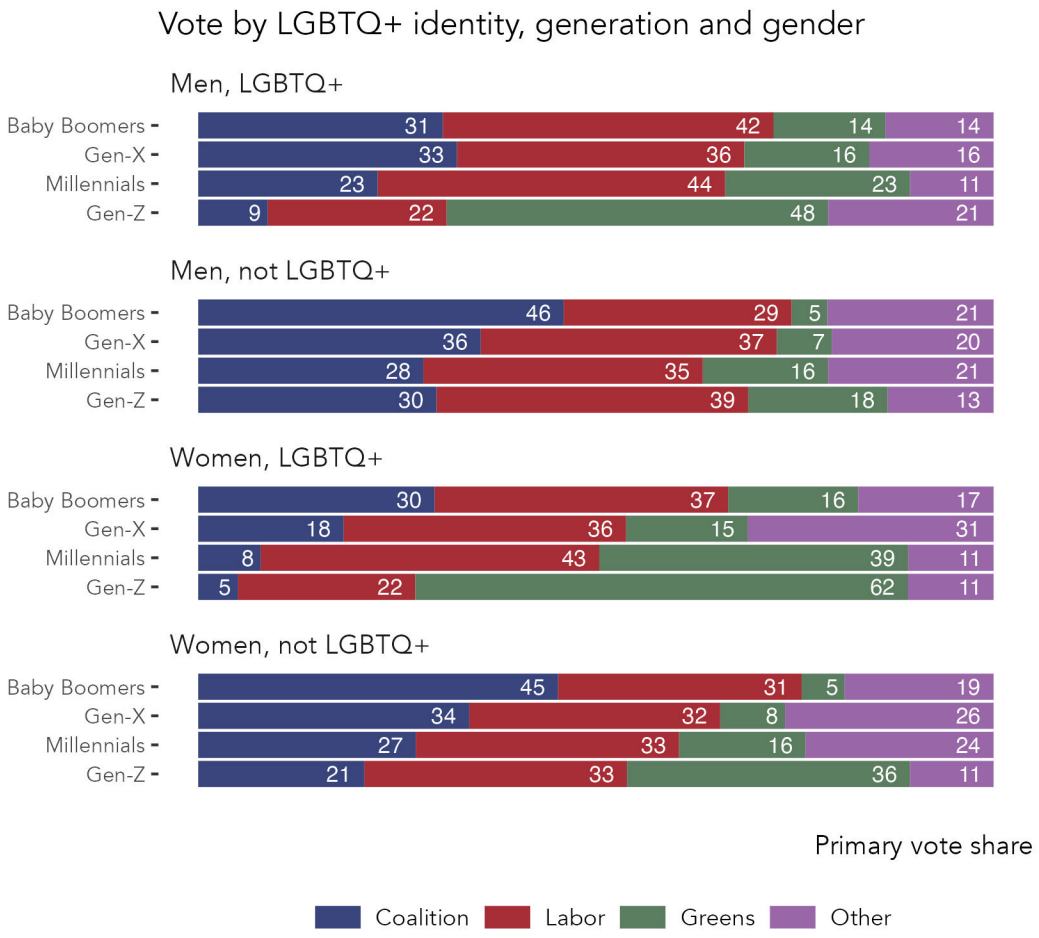

Figure 9: First preference vote by gender, LGBTQ+ identification and generation at the 2022 federal election. Data are from the 2022 Cooperative Election Survey.

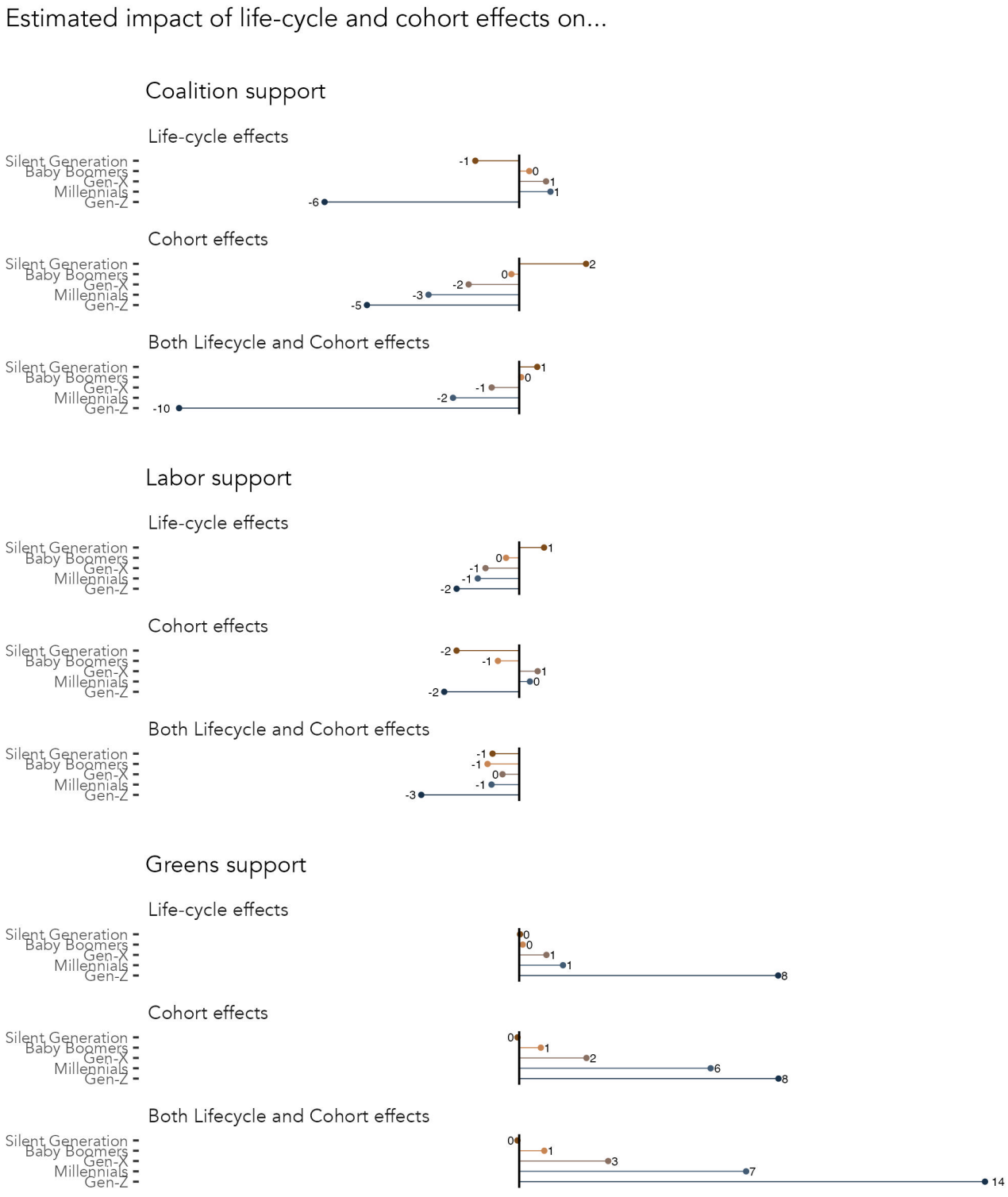

Figure 10: Estimated impact of life-cycle effects, effects and both combined on the primary vote of the Coalition parties, the Labor Party and the Greens, for each generational cohorts. A result above zero indicates that life-cycle or cohort effects are estimated to increase the support for a party by that generation, while below zero they reduce it.

voters compared to if they had the same situation as Baby Boomers, but actually one percentage point greater Coalition support for Millennial voters. They are also predicted to have an eight point increase in Gen-Z support for the Greens and a one point increase in Millennials.

Conversely, cohort effects are estimated to be associated with Coalition voting among Gen-Z that is five points lower than if they had the same cohort makeup as Baby Boomers (based on the variables tested here), and three points lower for Millennials. Similarly, these cohort effects are estimated to be associated with Greens support eight points higher than it would otherwise be for Gen-Z, and six points greater for Millennials.

Combined, both life-cycle effects are estimated to be associated with Coalition support among Gen-Z at the 2022 election 10 points lower than it would be if these voters had the same life experiences and cohort composition as the Baby Boomers in our sample, and Greens support that is 14 points higher. For Millennials, the combined effects is predicted to be a Coalition vote that was two points lower, and a Greens vote seven point higher.

What this indicates is that if Gen-Z owned their own home at similar rates to Baby Boomers, and were as likely to identify as LGBTQ+ — among other aspects of their life milestones, backgrounds and the life experiences tested here — the Coalition's deficit of support from these voters compared to Baby Boomers, and the Greens advantage, would be considerably smaller. As can be seen in figure 10, the impact of these effects is smaller on the Labor vote, but even here are estimated to be associated with a deficit in Gen-Z support of approximately three percentage points.

These results support the idea that variation in the backgrounds and lived experiences of voters from different generations result in a divergence of political preferences. This may extend to attitudes towards political issues, which are explored further in the following section.

Generational differences on issue preferences

Millennial and Gen-Z voters are different from earlier generations in important ways. They tend to have higher levels of educational attainment (at least in the case of Millennials, so far), and they are more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. However, they are less likely to have stable housing and a family than Gen-X or Baby Boomers at the same age. In this section, it is argued that the causal mechanism through which life-cycle and cohort effects translate into greater support for parties of the political left is through a different set of issue preferences informed by the differences in backgrounds and lived experiences of these younger generations.

Evidence that this has happened can be seen in figure 11. This plot shows the share of voters in each generational cohort with net-conservative policy attitudes over time, taking advantage of the consistent issue questions asked in the AES at each election, from 1990 to 2022. Plotting attitudes by generational cohort over time provides a few advantages. It offers another way of testing the life-cycle theory of politics. Do the issue preferences of voters become more conservative over time as the average age of a given cohort increases? It also allows us to compare each generation with one another at the same election.

A second test of generational differences is made by examining six issue questions asked in the 2019 Cooperative Election Survey (which includes some overlap with the AES questions; see figure 12).

According to these data, there is no evidence that any of the generational cohorts have consistently shifted to the right over time. On most of these six issues, there has been non-monotonic movement across time. On the question about the power of trade unions, voters tended to shift to the left in the 1990s to early 2000s, and then back to the right between 2007 and 2010, where they have generally remained since (on average). Conversely, on other issues, such as government help for Indigenous Australians, there has been a relatively consistent shift towards the left among all generations since 1993. On none of the six issues evaluated here has any cohort consistently shifted to the right.

Comparing differences between our cohorts, we can see that on non-economic issues (abortion, government help for Indigenous Australians, the number of migrants allowed into Australia) Gen-Z voters have been consistently less conservative than other generationals. Millennials too were generally less conservative than earlier generations, but to the right of Gen-Z. In particular, the generational differences are truly massive on the questions about help for Indigenous Australians and immigration.

According to AES data, at the 2022 election, 37 per cent of Gen-Z voters held what I have coded here as the 'left-of-centre' position on immigration (that the number of migrants allowed into Australia had not gone far enough), compared with 17 per cent who held the 'right-of-centre' position (that it had gone too far), for a net-conservative opinion share of -20 per cent (the proportion with preferences on the left minus those with preferences on the right). This is compared with net-conservative shares of attitudes of -9 per cent for Millennial voters, +4 for Gen-X and +10 per cent among Baby Boomers in the same year. The difference was even starker in 2019 (a net-conservative share of -20 per cent for Gen-Z versus +42 per cent for Baby Boomers), as the share professing right-of-centre views on this particular questions collapsed in 2022 according to the AES data; likely due to COVID-19 related immigration restrictions.

A similar pattern is evident when looking at the AES question on government support for Indigenous Australians. At the 2022 election, 53 per cent of Gen-Z voters reported holding a 'left-of-centre' position on this issue (that government help had not gone far enough), compared with 16 per cent who held the 'right-of-centre' position (that government help had gone too far), for a net-conservative opinion share of -37 per cent, compared with net-conservative preference shares of -21 for Millennials, -2 for Gen-X and -1 per cent among Baby Boomers. Although all of these generations had on balance left-of-centre views on this issue in 2022 (one of only a handful of years this was the case in the AES data), the net-conservative score of Gen-Z voters was 36 points lower than Baby Boomers.

Another way to view this was that the political preferences of Baby Boomers leant heavily to the right on the question of immigration and were relatively evenly balanced between on government support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in 2022, while Gen-Z leaned heavily to the political left on both issues.

However, on economic issues it was a different matter. Here, Gen-Z and Millennials evidenced a mix of being slightly to the left of the other generations — as was the case on the power of trade unions and big business — and to the right of older generations on the trade-off between lower taxes and higher spending on social services. On the latter issue, the generational ordering seen on the other issues, with younger generations on the left and older generations on the right, was largely turned upside down.

According to the AES data, on the question about the trade-off between taxes and social services. Gen-X has been the most right-leaning generation for the last three elections (with a net-conservative opinion

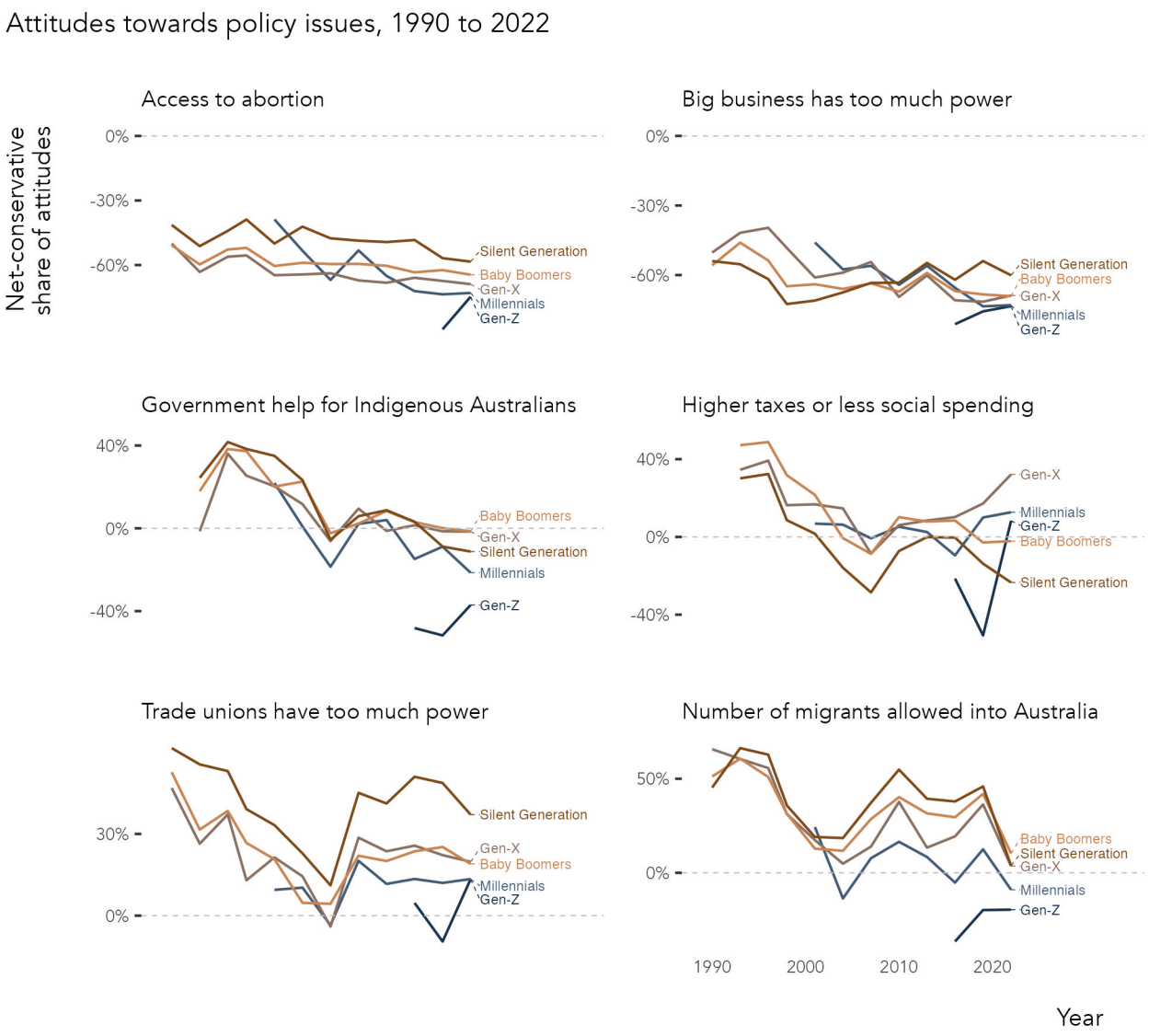

Figure 11: Share of voters with net-conservative policy attitudes, by generational cohort. Data are from the Australian Election Surveys, 1990-2022. The net-conservative share of attitudes are the percentage of voters holding the right of centre view on each issue, minus those with the left of centre view. Those coded right of centre answer: agree access to abortion should be restricted and that trade unions have too much power, and disagrees big business has too much power; that government help for Indigenous Australians and the number of migrants allowed in Australia have gone too far; favours reducing taxes over increasing spending on social services. Survey weights are used where available.

share of +32 per cent in 2022) and the Silent Generation the least (-23 per cent in 2022), while Millennials were close to the middle of these two groups for the last two elections, and Gen-Z at the last election.

These results are confirmed with a comparison with a larger high quality dataset sourced at a recent election: the Cooperative Election Survey data collected at the 2019 Australian federal election. Almost exactly the same results are produced with this second dataset (shown in figure 12), with Millennial and (particularly) Gen-Z voters shown to be more likely to hold left-of-centre issue preferences than earlier generations. However, as with the AES data, the generational differences are larger with non-economic issues, and smaller or non-existent on economic issues.

For instance, mirroring the AES results on the power of trade unions, the net-conservatism score of Gen-Z and Millennial voters was only moderately lower than those of Gen-X and Baby Boomers (+11 for both Gen-Z and Millennial voters, versus +18 and 23 for Baby Boomers) and almost identical on the minimum wage (-65 for Gen-Z compared with -68 for Baby Boomers, with all generations strongly favouring a higher minimum wage). Even on the use of negative gearing by landlords, generational difference were muted; although Gen-Z and Millennial voters were the only generations without a majority in favour of the right-of-centre proposition (that landlords should be able to use losses from rental properties as a deduction on income tax).[8]

However, on social issues like sexual harassment and assault, the rights of same-sex couples and the number of migrants allowed into Australia, very large generational differences were evident in these data. On whether the focus on sexual harassment and assault had gone too far, the net-conservative share of opinion among Gen-Z voters was 25 percentage points lower than Baby Boomers (-45 for Gen-Z compared with -20 for Baby Boomers), with a gap of an identical magnitude on the rights of same sex couples (-8 to +17), and a 42 point difference between these generations on whether the number of migrants allowed into the country had gone too far (0 versus +42)

[8]The small size of the generational gap on this issue is likely to be related to the 'limited and diffuse' opposition for this policy identified in Ratcliff, Sheppard, and Pietsch (2020). Possibly the result of the issue having low salience with those voters who were more likely to benefit from the negative gearing policy taken to the 2019 election by the Labor Party — the young, the less affluent and who did not own their own home or an investment property — who were more likely to adopt a neutral position than oppose the ability of landlords to use negative gearing.

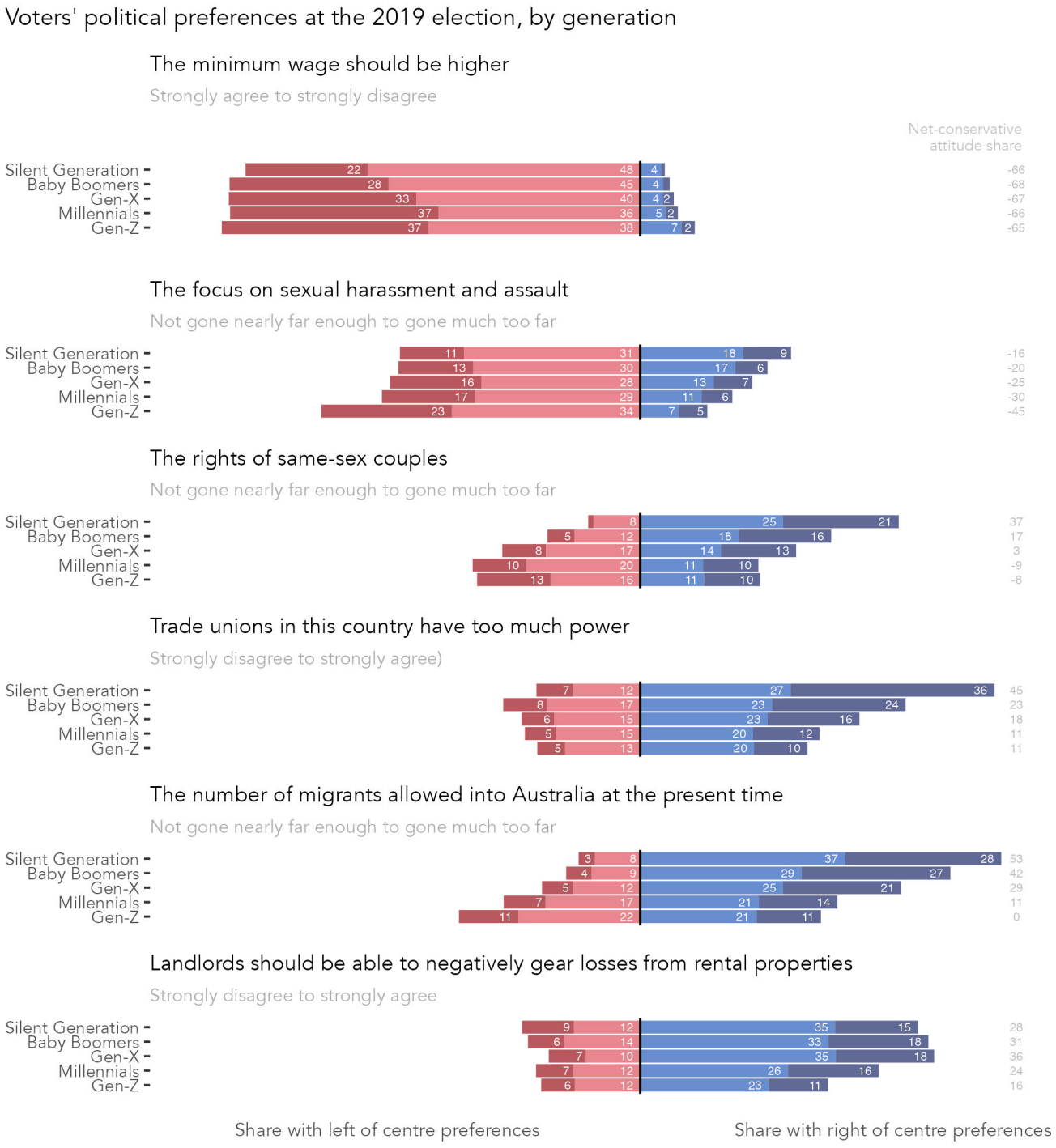

Figure 12: Policy attitudes by generational cohort at the 2019 Australian federal election. Data are from the 2019 Cooperative Election Survey. Responses are consistently coded so those reflecting the position on the political left are always shown on the left and shaded red, those that reflect the political right on the right and shaded blue. Figures shaded grey down the right axis are the net-conservative share of attitudes for each generation. A positive value indicates more voters in this cohort have right-of-centre political preferences, and negative values more left-of-centre attitudes. Voters taking neutral positions are not shown, nor included in the calculation of net-conservative attitude shares.

The political implications of these trends

The partisan age gap is large and growing, with younger voters increasingly unwilling to support Australia's major right-of-centre political parties. Much of this trend appears to be the result of generational drift, with Millennials and Gen-Z less likely to vote for the Coalition at federal elections compared to other generations at the same age; and Gen-Z potentially shifting further towards parties of the left as they get older (so far, at least).

This political divergence between the generations appears to have been driven by real social and material differences. Millennial and Gen-Z voters are more diverse than older generations, and fewer Millennials reached milestones in their 20s and 30s associated with increasing support for conservative parties, such as home ownership and family formation.

Possibly as a result of these differences, younger generations were generally more left-leaning than older groups on the political issues examined in this paper. This difference was particularly pronounced on social issues. This supports the idea that variations in generational-cohort socialisation based on different life experiences and backgrounds may have led to greater social liberalism among younger generations (as theorised by Inglehart 1977, 1990, 2008); with a larger share of Millennial and Gen-Z voters identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and LGBTQ+, for instance.

These generational differences have already had electoral impacts. According to the analysis above, if Gen-Z were identical to Baby Boomers on life-cycle and cohort effects — that is, if they owned their own home at similar rates, and were as likely to identify as LGBTQ+, among other aspects of their life milestones, backgrounds and lived experiences — it is estimated the Coalition's support from them would be 10 percentage points higher. Similarly, if this was the case, the Greens advantage with this younger group would be 14 points smaller. The role played by cohort effects in particular has the potential to be especially problematic for the Coalition. Unlike life-cycle effects, they have less chance of shifting these voters to the right over time, with it being generally implausible many of these voters will stop identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, or LGBTQ+, and perhaps only slightly more likely these factors will shift from being a liability for the Coalition to a positive.

These results also highlight the dilemma the Coalition may have placed itself in over the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to parliament. More diverse and socially liberal Gen-Z voters are much more likely than older generations to say government help for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders has not gone far enough. Polling shortly before the referendum also showed that 60 per cent of Gen-Z voters supported the Voice, compared to 33 per cent of Gen-X and 28 per cent of Baby Boomers (data from Redbridge Group 2023). For the short-term political benefits they may have expected to obtain from opposing the referendum, the leadership of the Liberal and National parties may pay a larger price, with longer term consequences, by further alienating socially liberal younger voters.

Even though the Voice referendum failed to pass, the policy impacts of the generational realignment on social issues are already visible. One example is the plebiscite to legalise same sex marriage in 2017, which highlighted two important features of cohort political views over time: generations do not necessarily become more conservative as they age (the opposite can occur, as it did in this case), and changes to the composition of the electorate may shift overall public opinion.

As late as 1990, even the legitimacy of LGBTQ+ rights were up for debate, with 50 per cent of voters

agreeing that there should be stricter laws against homosexuality, while just 24 per cent disagreed. A strong generational gradient was observable in these attitudes,[9] with just 18 per cent of voters from the Silent Generation opposed to stricter laws against homosexuality, compared with 30 per cent of those belonging to the Baby Boomer and Gen-X cohorts. The same generational pattern was observable in support for same-sex marriage in 2017. That year, 79 per cent of Millennial voters supported the proposition that same-sex marriage should be legalised, while Baby Boomers were almost evenly split (at 52 per cent) and voters belonging to the Silent Generation generally opposed (at 36 per cent).[10]

The impact of these Generational differences will become increasingly significant as the composition of the electorate shifts further, with Millennials and Gen-Z voters growing as a share of the adult citizen population, and the electoral centre of gravity moves in their favour. Absent any demographic shocks, this change will happen (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). If current trends hold — and we should not assume everything observed to date is preordained to continue indefinitely — we might expect one of two likely outcomes: either the Coalition parties will shift their appeals on at least some issues to better match the political preferences of younger generations, or the Coalition's vote share will decline (as documented in Taylor 2023).

This being said, the potential difficulties faced by the Coalition will not necessarily create a political windfall for the Labor Party, with The Greens the main beneficiaries of these electoral trends in recent decades.

A third outcome is also possible. The patterns in generational politics observed since at least the 1990s may change, and younger cohorts may become more conservative. The most likely reason for this would be a large exogenous shock, such as a war or major economic crisis that moves one or more of the younger cohorts to the political right. However, the impact of 9/11, the Iraq War, the Global Financial Crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic — none of which appear to have made Millennials more conservative — suggests that the scope of the former is limited; although this does not rule out the possibility of large shocks shifting electoral politics in the future.

Absent interventions that might have the power to change more than three decades of political trends, the first two outcomes seem more likely at present. Even if the younger generations do shift to the right with age at the same rate as Gen-X, the starting point of Millennial and Gen-Z voters — both in terms of electoral support for parties of the left and their positions on social issues — indicates that as the generational composition of the electorate changes in the future, significant electoral ramifications are likely. Whether this means a decline in the share of seats won by the Coalition parties in parliament, or a policy shift by the Coalition, it seems likely that it will become more difficult for conservative political actors to achieve policy goals across a range of issue domains, particularly on non-economic social issues.

[9] These data are from the 1990 Australian Election Study.

[10] These data are from a YouGov survey of n=1,009 commissioned by the author when at the University of Sydney. Fieldwork was completed in October 2017, during the same-sex marriage plebiscite.

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Appendix

A note on the data

This report primarily relies on three datasets.

The first is the Australian Election Study (AES), and (for some analyses) the earlier Australian National Political Attitudes Studies (ANPAS).

The AES has been run at every federal election since 1987, and has tended to use consistent question wording for most items over the 36 year period it has been run. The ANPAS surveys were run in 1967, 1969 and 1979, and contain some of the same questions as the AES. As a result of its continuity and longevity, it is a valuable resource. However, the design of this survey introduces some limitations that need to be taken into account.

The AES surveys are technically post-election surveys, with the fieldwork run largely in the weeks and months after election day, with the outcome of the contest known to respondents and potentially impacting some answers. They are also quite long (the 2019 questionnaire booklet is 24 pages), which requires substantial time to complete, which can reduce the response rate (which in 2022 was 27.9 per cent of newly recruited respondents; ie, excluding resampled panel respondents from the 2019 election, and including partial completes).

The sample per generation in a given survey is also relatively small. For instance, in 2022 the number of respondents who belonged to the Silent Generation was 269, for Baby Boomers is 1,018, Gen-X 513, Millennials 382 and Gen-Z 136. However, across the surveys the sample was larger: 14,263 for Silent Generation, 13,292 for Baby Boomers, 4,747 for Gen-X, 1,995 for Millennials, 227 for Gen-Z.

Additionally, two of the ANPAS surveys are not precisely election studies. The 1967 survey was held a year after the 1966 election, and the 1979 survey was fielded roughly a year before the 1980 election. The 1969 survey was closest to an election, with fieldwork conducted in the months after the election that year (although this introduces the same limitations of the AES post-election surveys).

While the limitations need to be taken into account when using these data, the AES is a valuable resource. It is the only election study run at every Australian election over an extended period. On its own, it allows ideas to be tested over a 36 year period; and combined with the ANPAS surveys, 56 years. It collects data on a range of demographic and political variables, mostly using consistently worded questions, enabling a range of hypotheses to be tested over a long period of time.

Two other datasets are used to both complement and act as a check on the results from the AES surveys. These are the 2019 and 2022 Australian Cooperative Election Surveys (ACES). Run during the last two federal elections by a consortium of researchers, these surveys have different strengths to the AES, making these two datasets complementary.

The primary limitation of these surveys are that they have only been asked at the last two elections and do not ask consistent questions over these elections. However, they provide generally more representative and larger samples than recent AES surveys (n=6,482 voters for 2019, and 5,978 for 2022), with these being the two largest election surveys run in Australia to date. Additionally, both surveys were fielded

during the campaign (and not after), meaning respondents' answers are more likely to reflect the attitudes and (self-reported) behaviours of voters at the election.

The research in this paper takes advantage of the strengths of both sets of data. The AES has been used in this paper to examine long-term trends in generational voting and issue preferences. The Cooperative Election Surveys were used study patterns in generational voting, political attitudes and cohort differences at the last two elections. Using both provides a more robust set of results than if just one data source was used. If the results from both datasets match, this provides greater confidence that observed voter behaviours and attitudes reflect real phenomena.

Table 1: Sample size of generations in survey data, 2019 and 2022

	Gen-Z	Millennials	Gen-X	Baby Boomers	Silent Generation
AES 2019	48	305	432	1018	303
AES 2022	136	382	513	1125	269
ACES 2019	590	1785	1483	2209	415
ACES 2022	774	1615	1321	2018	250

Comparing the Cooperative Election Survey to the Census

Table 2: Comparison of cohort differences between generations, as identified in the 2022 Australian Cooperative Election Survey (shown in figure 8 above) and the 2021 Australian Census. The data from the Census used here is limited to citizens aged 18 and older, to more closely match the ACES data, which is exlusively citizens enrolled to vote.

	Cooperative Election Survey (2022)	Australian Census (2021)
No religion		
Silent Generation	16.1	19.0
Baby Boomers	30.5	31.3
Gen-X	37.8	39.7
Millennials	52.8	52.6
Gen-Z	56.4	54.7
University degree		
Silent Generation	17.9	12.2
Baby Boomers	20.5	22.1
Gen-X	31.9	32.8
Millennials	40.7	40.2
Gen-Z	17.7	18.1
Identifies as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander		
Silent Generation	0.3	0.7
Baby Boomers	1.6	1.8
Gen-X	5.9	2.8
Millennials	7.7	3.6
Gen-Z	8.2	5.4

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