



The Evolution of Nostalgia in Britain 1979–2019

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This paper uses the British Election Surveys from 1979 to 2019, together with the 2016–2019 CSI Brexit online panel, to explore how nostalgia has changed over time. Our interpretation of the data is that there was a shift in the content of nostalgia from regret about the decline of traditional ways of life and family values toward regret over the rise of inequality and the emergence of social media. At the same time, we find continuity in the kinds of people who are likely to feel nostalgic: they tend to be members of older generations and to be less well educated (which we take as a proxy for being “left behind” culturally and economically). However, we also find that, on the items for which we have comparable time series—on immigration, same-sex relations, ethnic equality, and gender equality—both age and educational level have reducing explanatory power over time. In contrast, for these items, there is a trend toward greater politicization and an increased influence of an English national identity. Political divisions show increasing explanatory power as sociodemographic divisions decline.

KEYWORDS: culture shift; generations; nostalgia; politicization; social change; social media.

INTRODUCTION

Nostalgia—a yearning for a traditional but disappearing way of life—was a prominent aspect of the political campaign to take the UK out of the European Union. In this regard, Brexit fits into a wider trend of political messages used by the populist radical right, including the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States, where political campaigns used nostalgia to depict “the national past as glorious” (Elgenius and Rydgren 2019; Kenny 2017; Smeekes et al. 2021:90). Supporters of Brexit appeared to be nostalgic for the Britain that existed (or was believed to have existed) before the time when the UK joined the European Economic Community (EEC; as it was then termed) on January 1, 1973 (Green 2016). Britain’s lost sovereignty, particularly the limits on the UK acting independently from the EU, symbolized by the dark blue passport that Nigel Farage used to brandish on the campaign trail, was a particular focus. But perhaps, too, there was also a yearning for a more ethnically homogeneous Britain and for a more traditional way of life and set of

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values than the dominant “politically correct” values endorsed by the liberal elite of the twenty-first century.

In the context of Brexit, as with support for the radical right and populist parties elsewhere, nostalgia is intertwined with debates about the so-called “left behind” voters. The “left behind” were initially identified as those who had missed out on the benefits of economic development and globalization, whose standard of living had been undermined by immigration of workers from Eastern European, and who therefore had a feeling of relative deprivation (Goodwin and Heath 2016). But the “left behind” concept rapidly expanded to include those who felt left behind culturally as well as economically. From the perspective of the liberal elite, “left behind” came to signify British citizens who were not just economically marginalized but were also unhappy with social and cultural changes (Kenny 2017), a growing cultural divide separating those with a cosmopolitan outlook and greater openness to immigration from those with more traditional and local (non-globalized) views who felt more comfortable with an ethnically homogeneous Britain (Bhambra 2017; Goodhart 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2016). Older people are often quoted as feeling that they no longer “feel at home” in a contemporary Britain that is socially and culturally different from the one they grew up in (Gaston and Hilhorst 2018).

Brexit may therefore have mobilized people who were nostalgic not so much for Britain’s lost sovereignty but for the more ethnically homogeneous and culturally traditional Britain of the era before joining the EEC. Indeed, the latter may be a more appropriate application of the term nostalgia. We can think of nostalgia as an emotion about one’s remembered past experiences, as “a sentimental longing for one’s past” (Sedikides et al. 2008), with the added implication that this is a lost past to which one would ideally wish to return.

While one may have a rose-tinted rather than an accurate memory of the past, on this account nostalgia is rooted in past experience of social relationships and ways of life rather than being a response to an abstract concept such as sovereignty. While people may regret the loss of Britain’s sovereignty and may have a preference for the kind of constitutional arrangements that were found in the past, it is hard to see what the term nostalgia adds to our understanding of this preference since such preferences can be held as easily by young people who have never lived in a sovereign Britain as by those who lived through the Second World War, at a time when Britain really was on its own. Indeed, voting for Brexit may have been an expression of a desire for change not directly associated with the European Union (Gest et al. 2018; Green and Shorrocks 2021). On the other hand, nostalgia may be a helpful and appropriate concept when thinking about people’s responses to their lived experience of social change.

The basic sociological premise in this article is that any period of disruptive social change will be accompanied by nostalgia for the remembered, and valued, way of life that has disappeared or is in the process of disappearing. In particular social changes that are disruptive and unsettling—such as the de-industrialization of Britain in the 1980s and the consequential collapse of many working-class communities—are likely to evoke nostalgia for the more settled way of life that had preceded it. It is this connection between disruptive social change and nostalgia that explains why nostalgia is likely to be disproportionately associated with “left behind” people

and places, such as Britain's de-industrialized towns of the midlands and north which continue to have disproportionately high unemployment rates (Gest 2016; Mattinson 2020).

A second premise is that the ways of life that people value will be influenced, *inter alia*, by their socialization and formative experiences when growing up. Following Mannheim (1952 [1928]) and Inglehart (1971, 1977), we draw on the generational theory of value change. People's value priorities will derive primarily from the social and cultural context of their youth. This has been described as a "settled dispositions model, which emphasizes the continuing influence of durable dispositions acquired early in life." However, we should also acknowledge an alternative model, termed an "active updating model, [which] emphasizes the role of changing discourses, environments, and interactions on attitude formation" (Kiley and Vaisey 2020:478). As we will see later, there is evidence in support of both these models and we therefore expect nostalgia to have a selective character and to be focused on the durable dispositions acquired early in life. Kiley and Vaisey's research on the US found that attitudes concerning gender, family, and race conformed with the settled dispositions model, and we therefore expect these to be particular foci of nostalgia.

A third premise is that a range of external influences can also shape the salience and potency of people's sentiments of nostalgia. Political rhetoric in particular has been identified as a major factor in mobilizing nostalgic feelings about the past in support of political projects such as Brexit (Bonikowski and Stuhler 2022; Elgenius and Rydgren 2019; Smeeke et al. 2021). While causality will run in both directions, populist political parties may be able to amplify the salience of nostalgia and channel it to their electoral advantage (Jackson and Grusky 2018).

Given these premises, we expect that what people feel nostalgic about—the content of nostalgia—will change over time and generations. In the 1970s, when Britain joined the EEC, older citizens had lived through the rapid social changes of the 1960s and early 1970s, with a decline of church attendance, increasing numbers of married women going out to work, the decline of the nuclear family, the emergence of the "permissive society" of the 1960s with its changed sexual morality, and the first waves of immigration from the Commonwealth (See Heath et al. 2018 for an account of social change in Britain). Forty-three years later, when Britain voted to leave the EU, only the oldest people will have had lived experience of the "traditional" way of life of the 1950s. Nostalgia based on lived experience would necessarily take a different character in the 2010s—perhaps a nostalgia for the Britain of the pre-digital age without modern forms of social media, or perhaps for the working-class jobs and communities that disappeared following the de-industrialization that occurred during the 1980s after Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives came to power.

At the same time, we also expect that the people most likely to feel nostalgic will remain broadly similar over time. Specifically, older generations who have experienced disruptive social and cultural change and the accompanying loss will be at greatest risk of nostalgia. In contrast, those who have benefitted from social change, such as the upwardly mobile and highly educated who have benefitted from increasing economic returns to education may have little yearning for a past that lacked in opportunities. In other words, nostalgia might appeal to those for whom social

change has been most disruptive, economically, socially, or culturally, in every era—and more specifically to older groups, to the less educated, and to the economically unsuccessful who are nostalgic for their lost status (Gest 2016; Gest et al. 2018; Green and Shorrocks 2021). In short, we expect there to be a changing content to nostalgia but continuity in the kinds of people who are susceptible to nostalgia.

A third expectation is that the political salience and divisiveness of nostalgia will vary over time, reflecting the nature of the programs on which the parties stand and the extent to which their leaders adopt populism as a political strategy. Moreover, given the classic tenets of party identification theory, namely that partisans will tend to take their cues from the party with which they identify, divisions between the parties may be mirrored in divisions between their voters (Campbell et al. 1960). In this respect, contemporary feelings of nostalgia may have a top-down as well as a bottom-up character.

The aim of this paper therefore is to explore how the content and profile of nostalgia has changed over time, and whether it has become more politicized and divisive in recent years. To investigate these questions, we use data from the long-running series of British Election Surveys to make comparisons between foci of nostalgia in 1979, 1987, 1997, and 2019. In all four of these surveys, a number of questions were asked about whether specific changes had “gone too far,” were “about right,” or had “not gone far enough.” Two questions, on reforms to improve equal opportunities for women and for ethnic minorities, were asked in all four surveys, while a third question on reforms to improve equal opportunities for homosexuals/gays and lesbians was asked in the three later surveys. We treat the “gone too far” response as potentially indicative of sentiments of nostalgia. While there are some problems with detailed wording changes over this 40-year period, these questions can start to give us a handle on how the content of nostalgia over this 40-year period may have changed. We can also include questions on whether there has been too much immigration, which were asked in the same way in the 1979 and 2019 surveys. These four topics cover some of the most salient elements of what has been termed “traditional” nostalgia (Richards et al. 2020).

We can supplement these items with a range of additional items which were asked in the two earlier surveys in 1979 and 1987, and with a set of questions on nostalgia asked in a 2018 online survey, to see which other changes in society might have triggered the feelings of nostalgia.

DATA AND METHODS

The British Election Study (BES) is a series of high-quality post-election surveys that have been conducted in general election years in Britain ever since 1964, and as such comprise the longest running series of nationally representative surveys of Great Britain (but excluding Northern Ireland) (Heath et al. 1999). We use data from four time points: 1979, 1987, 1997, and 2019, all of which included items about various social changes that have “gone too far” or “not gone far enough.” Each survey is intended as a representative snapshot of the population at that point in time, and each uses random probability sampling. The electoral register was used as the

basis for the random samples in 1979, 1987, and 1997. In 2019, the sampling was based on the Postcode Address File but selected only those in sampled households who were eligible to vote (Crewe et al. 1981; Fieldhouse et al. 2021; Heath et al. 1993, 1999).

One of the challenges of working with these data is comparability over time, as the surveys were conducted in a changing political landscape, meaning that new questions were added on current issues, and some old ones with declining salience were dropped. However, there is good comparability across the time points on many items. We have two items on whether attempts to improve equality for women and equality for black people and Asians have “gone too far” spanning all four time points, and a similar item on equal opportunity for gays and lesbians spanning the latter three surveys. We can also draw on items in 1979, 1987, and 2019 on whether there have been too many immigrants. Additional “gone too far” items are available in 1979, 1987, and 1997, and we show these in Tables II–IV. In 2019, which has just the four core items, we supplement the BES with data from the CSI Brexit Panel, an online panel study with a wave conducted in 2018 which we use (see Richards et al. 2020). The CSI Brexit Panel included a battery worded in terms of whether social changes have “made life better” or “made life worse.”

In all years, the primary data collection method for the British Election Surveys was face-to-face interviews supplemented with a self-completion section, though in 2019 the interview methods were mixed mode (in-person, online, post) due to the pandemic interrupting fieldwork (Fieldhouse et al. 2021). The response rate in 1979 was 61% (the technical report notes that this is lower than usual for the period but was lowest among members of a panel component, i.e., of people who had been interviewed at the previous October 1974 BES), and shows a close match to census data in terms of sociodemographic coverage. The response rate in 1987 was 64% for the main survey, and of these 89% filled in the self-completion supplement. In 1997, the response rate was 62%, and 86% of respondents filled in the self-complete module. The 2019 survey had a response rate of 48%. Of these, 64% completed the self-complete module. In 1987, 1997, and 2019, the self-completion module is the source of several sociodemographic variables and attitudinal covariates included in parts of our analysis but the main “gone too far” items were all included in the main survey. We rely mainly on descriptive bivariate analysis, but run a set of robustness checks with logistic regression models with a set of controls including gender, age, level of education, social class, party identification, and national identification (the Supplementary analysis is available from the authors on request).

As weights are not consistently available across all waves of the BES, we report unweighted data for BES but have carried out checks using design weights for the 1987, 1997, and 2019 BES surveys (available in the Supplementary analysis). The design weights in practice make only small differences to the results shown in Tables III–VI. However, as the 2018 data from the CSI Brexit Panel are from an online survey with quota sampling, we use weights here to correct for demographic factors and voter turnout. Table I shows the descriptive for the explanatory variables (Tables II–VI showing the distributions of the outcome variables).

Table I. Descriptives

	BES 1979	BES 1987	BES 1997	BES 2019	CSI Brexit Panel 2018
<i>N</i> (on nostalgia items)	1,860–1,871	3,810–3,795	3,603–3,609	3,762–3,766	3,002
Age (mean)	46.2	46.1	48.4	52.5	48.3
Male (%)	48.3	48.0	45.6	45.8	48.4
Party: Labour (%)	31.0	26.1	37.8	28.6	28.3
Party: Conservative (%)	38.7	36.7	20.3	43.1	28.1
Party: Other/none (%)	30.4	37.1	41.9	28.3	43.6
Education: Degree/other higher ed (%)	5.3	8.0	10.6	44.4	46.9
Education: A-Level (%)	12.5	21.6	25.9	18.1	20.7
Education: GSCE (%)	34.5	29.5	29.2	17.3	26.0
Education: No quals (%)	47.7	40.9	34.4	20.2	6.4
Class: Higher salariat or equiv (%)	8.8	9.9	12.7	14.3	28.7
Class: Lower salariat or equiv (%)	11.4	14.9	16.0	27.1	24.3
Class: Junior nonmanual or equiv (%)	12.0	17.8	12.1	11.9	13.0
Class: Petty bourgeoisie or equiv (%)	6.0	7.1	8.1	8.3	–
Class: foremen and skilled or equiv (%)	19.4	16.8	15.4	7.6	6.1
Class: Semi- and un-skilled or equiv (%)	18.0	32.4	30.8	21.4	17.5
Class: Other (%)	24.6	1.2	4.9	9.4	10.5

Note: Sociodemographic variables only; unweighted; distribution of dependent variables (nostalgia) shown in Tables II–VI. CSI data use a different class scheme, reporting best fitting equivalents of the BES categories.

BES, British Election Study.

RESULTS

Nostalgia in 1979

The 1979 general election was a political turning point, with the defeat of Jim Callaghan's Labour government and the election of Margaret Thatcher with her brand of free-market economics that has dominated Britain ever since. 1979 also marked the reversal of the long-term decline of economic inequality and the 1980s saw a rapid increase in economic inequality, moving Britain from one of the more equal countries in Europe to one of the least equal. Thatcher's first administration also initiated a major program of privatization of publicly owned industries and de-regulated the economy, reversing much of the post-war consensus around the benefits of the mixed public/private economy.

The late 1970s also saw the continuation of the trends initiated in the 1960s toward greater participation of women in the labor market, immigration from the Caribbean plus increasing flows from the Indian subcontinent and East Africa, expanding higher education and also cultural liberalization—especially reform of the legislation on divorce, abortion, and homosexuality (see Heath et al. 2018 for

accounts of the trends). In addition, the 1970s had seen the rise of protest including student protests, anti-Vietnam protests, and the miners’ strike that had brought down Edward Heath’s Conservative government in 1974.

Many of these changes were expected to be politically salient in the 1979 election, and the designers of the 1979 BES included a good spread of changes in their battery of “gone too far” items. Table II shows the frequencies together with measures of their relationships with age (the age gap between respondents who said “gone too far” and those who said “not gone far enough”) and political partisanship (the ratio of Conservative vs. Labour identifiers’ odds of reporting “gone too far” vs. “not gone far enough”).

Top of the list of changes which the overall British public was unhappy about were immigration, where over 70% of respondents felt that too many immigrants had been let in, and “the right to show nudity and sex,” where 65% felt that this right had gone too far. Age differences were particularly marked in the responses to this latter item, probably reflecting the discontent of older generations with the permissive society that had emerged in the 1960s, symbolized by the acquittal of D H Lawrence’s novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* of charges of obscenity in 1960 despite its graphic account of sexual encounters between Lady Chatterley and her gamekeeper.

Next in the list comes “challenges to authority,” which would have been highly topical following the miners’ challenge to Prime Minister Edward Heath in 1973, the subsequent general election campaign in early 1974 in which Heath focused on the question of “who rules Britain,” and the 1978/1979 “winter of discontent” where

Table II. Perceptions of Social Changes, 1979

	Gone too far	About right or do not know	Not gone far enough	Age gap between “gone too far” and “not gone far enough” respondents	Level of politicization (Cons:Labour odds ratio)
Too many immigrants let in	71.9	20.4	7.7	7.0	3.6
The right to show nudity and sex	64.9	30.7	4.3	16.6	1.0
People challenging authority	60.4	27.7	11.9	7.1	2.8
The reduction of Britain’s military strength	57.3	31.0	11.7	3.9	3.4
The welfare benefits that are available to people today	48.7	34.8	16.5	3.9	6.6
The change toward modern methods in teaching children	45.2	43.8	12.1	6.9	4.1
The availability of abortion on the NHS	40.7	48.6	10.7	20.2	1.2
Attempts to ensure equality for colored people	28.1	44.4	27.4	8.9	2.1
Attempts to ensure equality for women	21.7	50.1	28.2	5.7	2.2

Note: The item on immigration asked respondents whether or not they thought that “too many immigrants have been let into this country or not?” They were then asked “How strongly do you feel about this - very strongly, fairly strongly, or not very strongly?” We coded the “not very strongly” responses into a middle category roughly corresponding to the mid-category of the “gone too far” items.

Source: BES 1979, unweighted data, *Ns* = 1,860–1,871.

militant trade unionism was associated with a wave of unofficial strikes and uncollected rubbish in the streets.

The “reduction in Britain’s military strength” also comes high up in the list. Labor, partly because of budgetary constraints and partly perhaps because of pacifism within the Parliamentary Party, had been reducing expenditure on defense as well as Britain’s contribution to NATO. Margaret Thatcher in contrast was something of a cold war warrior and the Conservative Party’s 1979 manifesto had contained a section on “A strong Britain in a free world,” indirectly appealing to nationalist sentiment.

Next come the availability of welfare benefits and progressive teaching methods. The latter had become salient with controversies over the introduction of new child-centered teaching methods recommended in the 1967 Plowden Report *Children and their Primary Schools*. Perhaps the best known of all education reports, it was much maligned by traditionalists who published a series of high-profile “Black Papers” in defense of traditional teaching methods. Teaching methods and standards fit clearly on a traditional/progressive dimension, whereas welfare benefits fit less obviously and have a more natural affinity with the “left/right” dimension of government expenditure and intervention in the economy. There had however been media concern about “welfare scroungers” and Thatcher’s administrations (and subsequent Conservative administrations) were to cut back the generosity of Britain’s social security provision from the kinds of levels characteristic of the social democratic Nordic model toward an American model of individual self-reliance and a minimal welfare state.

Next in the list was the availability of abortion on the NHS, which had been legalized following a “free vote” in 1967 on a private member’s bill proposed by the Liberal Party MP David Steel. Some way behind come the two issues of race and sex equality, the latter being the only item where more people felt that reforms had not gone far enough than felt they had already gone too far. The low position of these two items on the list may also reflect the question wording, which focused on attempts to ensure equality for women and for “colored people.” According to the 1983 British Social Attitudes survey, a substantially higher percentage, around 40%, took a traditionalist view of gender relations at the time in their support of the statement “the job of the man is to earn money and the job of the woman is to look after the home and family.”

Despite the differences in the absolute levels of support that they command, many of these items in their different ways tap into a general dimension of traditional versus progressive attitudes to social legislation (also termed the traditional/rational-secular value dimension; see Inglehart 2006).⁴ In a factor analysis, a single dimension captures the data well the item on authority having the highest loading at 0.48 and the abortion item the weakest at 0.31. Military expenditure and welfare benefits, despite not being so obviously related to social traditionalism, have load-

⁴ In his cross-national study using the World Values Survey Inglehart measured the traditional/rational-secular dimension with the following five items: God is very important in respondent’s life; It is more important for a child to learn obedience and religious faith than independence and determination; Abortion is never justifiable; Respondent has strong sense of national pride; Respondent favors more respect for authority.

ings of 0.35 and 0.40, respectively. (Details are available in the Supplementary material on request from the authors.)

All the items also have significant (bivariate) relationships with age. In column 4 of Table II, we show the difference between the average age of respondents who agreed that the changes “had gone too far” and of those who felt that they “had not gone far enough.” As we can see, the strength of the relationship with age varies considerably. The right to show nudity and sex and the availability of abortion on the NHS have by far the strongest relationships with age (gaps of 16 and 20 years, respectively) and there are substantial age differences in the cases of equality for non-whites, immigration, challenges to authority, and progressive teaching methods. Availability of welfare benefits has the smallest age gap.

While there are the well-known identification issues in the interpretation of age differences (see e.g., Firebaugh 1997), some of the large age gaps can probably be interpreted in generational terms and can give us a pointer to the possible role of nostalgia. The pattern of age differences is at least consistent with the interpretation that people who had grown up in the 1950s or earlier, before the progressive reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, tended to be more nostalgic for a white, ethnically homogeneous Britain and a socially traditional order of society with its emphasis on what might be termed family values than were people who had been brought up later when these reforms had already been enacted.

Some of these topics such as abortion were the subject of free votes in the House of Commons, that is were not politicized, but many of the other topics such as the miners’ challenges to authority and the Black Paper attacks on progressive teaching methods were highly politicized in the two-party political system of the time. Column 5 of Table II shows the relationship between Conservative and Labour partisanship (as measured by the standard BES party identity question) and the “gone too far” versus “not gone far enough” responses. We use the odds ratio as statistic, a ratio of 1 indicating that there is no relationship between partisanship and these sentiments about social changes and higher ratios indicating greater partisan divisions.

As we can see, the most highly politicized topics (as judged by the magnitude of the odds ratio) were welfare benefits, modern teaching methods, immigration, and challenges to authority. In contrast, the least politicized were nudity/sex and abortion, for both of which the odds ratio is close to unity and is non-significant. The issue of welfare benefits, as we noted above, has left–right connotations, the left–right political dimension still being the principal line of political division between Labour and the Conservatives in 1979. The other highly politicized issues from the list are less obviously related to the left–right dimension and their politicization may well reflect Margaret Thatcher’s brand of nationalism and “authoritarian populism” (Hall 1979).

We can also see that there is a striking inverse association between the degree of politicization and the size of the age gap. The age gap is largest in the case of the two non-politicized items of nudity/sex and abortion, while it is smallest (although still significant) for the highly politicized item on welfare benefits. A possible interpretation of this inverse relationship is that partisanship can over-ride generational differences by uniting party supporters, irrespective of their age, on the party’s political platform.

Nostalgia in 1987

We next turn to the results from the 1987 BES to examine how sentiments about these social changes had evolved over time, and whether the pattern of their relationships with age and partisanship continued to hold true.

The political context of 1987 was very different from that of 1979. Margaret Thatcher was now at the height of her career, before she over-reached with the poll tax which led to her fall in 1990. By 1987, her administrations had gradually privatized substantial proportions of the nationalized industries (“selling of the family silver” as Harold MacMillan, a former Conservative Prime Minister had said) as well as selling off council houses to the tenants; they had gradually reduced trade union power and had defeated a second major miners’ strike after a bitter battle—leading to the closure of coal mines across the north of England and south Wales. Her economic policies, and unwillingness to subsidize loss-making industries, had also led to a major loss of manufacturing industry and collapse of many communities that depended on manufacturing. However, her more populist instincts had also taken her to make important steps in a chauvinist direction, for example changing British nationality legislation in a more ethnic, less civic, direction.

Reflecting the changing political context, the BES team changed many of the “gone too far” items, dropping some and adding others which related more to the new political context (such as council house sales) than to traditional ways of life. On most of the new items, there was a fairly even balance between “gone too far” and “not gone far enough” responses, with small age differences and high levels of politicization. They do not seem to be good candidates for nostalgia, and we do not report them in detail. There were also some important wording changes to existing items, which we discuss below, and the previous item on immigration was also brought into the “gone too far” battery (and accordingly had to be slightly reworded too). In addition, one very useful new question on “equal opportunities for homosexuals—that is gays and lesbians” was introduced. The Wolfenden Committee had reported in 1957, recommending the decriminalization of private homosexual activity between consenting adults over the age of 21, but the legislation was not passed until 1967, with a free vote as in the case of abortion law reform. (Labour and Liberal MPs were mainly supportive while Conservative MPs were mainly opposed.) It is surprising that this had not been included in 1979.

Table III shows the patterns for the selected 1987 items, laid out as in Table II. Heading the list, exactly as in 1979 and with surprisingly similar percentages for the “gone too far” option, are immigration and the right to show nudity and sex. Both these items continue to show substantial age differences with respect to the “gone too far” and “not gone far enough” options, and levels of politicization remain low.

The new item on equal opportunities for homosexuals comes in at number three, with a very large age gap, and relatively low level of politicization. This mirrors the profile of the other items that are most closely linked with traditional family values, such as nudity/sex and abortion.

We then have two items that have been substantially re-worded and are not equivalent to the 1979 items although perhaps tapping similar dimensions. Thus in place of the 1979 item “people challenging authority” we have “the right to have

Table III. Perceptions of Social Changes, 1987

	Gone too far	About right or do not know	Not gone far enough	Age gap between “gone too far” and “not gone far enough” respondents	Level of politicization (Cons:Labour odds ratio)
Immigration into Britain	73.8	22.2	4.0	9.4	2.4
The right to show nudity and sex	65.4	31.1	3.4	12.7	1.4
Equal opportunities for homosexuals	52.1	39.9	8.0	16.1	3.1
Right to protest and demonstrate	33.6	56.7	7.0	11.7	9.3
The movement toward comprehensive schooling	28.5	54.3	17.1	5.8	9.5
The availability of abortion on the NHS	28.4	62.8	8.7	9.7	1.1
Equal opportunities [for] black and Asian people	28.3	43.9	27.8	6.9	2.4
The welfare benefits that are available to people today	24.0	42.3	33.6	5.8	10.2
Equal opportunities [for] women	8.4	49.7	41.9	2.8	1.9

Note: Not included are political issues such as sale of council houses where “gone too far” percentages were similar to the “not gone far enough” percentages and which were not included in other BES surveys. BES, British Election Study.

Source: BES 1987, unweighted data, *Ns* 3,810 to 3,795.

protest marches and demonstrations.” And in place of “modern methods of education,” we have the now more topical “movement toward comprehensive schooling.” The percentages responding “gone too far” are much lower in 1987 than they had been for the two 1979 items, but we have no way of knowing whether this reflects changing sentiments among the public or the change in the nature of the items. It is striking however that, unusually, both items show quite large age differences as well as high levels of politicization.

Next, we come to the availability of abortion. Here, there is a substantial drop in the percentage saying that it had “gone too far” (down from 41% to 28%). Since the question was asked in exactly the same way as in 1979, and there had been no major change in legislation or practice during the intervening years, we can be fairly sure that this reflects a real shift in public sentiment in a liberal direction. It is also striking that the age gap fell markedly (while politicization remained low). Here, there may well have been increasing public acceptance of abortion, generational replacement, or a bit of both.

There is an even bigger drop in the percentage feeling that welfare benefits had gone too far (down from 49% to 24%), although our preferred explanation is very different. Here there had been change in the real world to which respondents might well have been reacting. The Conservative reforms in reducing the replacement value of benefits such as unemployment benefit had probably brought their generosity more into line with the sentiments of Conservative voters, who had shifted from the “gone too far” option toward “about right.” The level of politicization had also

increased markedly, the Conservative:Labour odds ratio of 10.2 being the highest one of all in Tables II–VI.

In contrast, there was little change in the sentiments about ethnic minorities—no longer termed “colored,” which had become an unacceptable term, and renamed black people and Asians. (There was also a non-trivial wording change from “equality” to “equal opportunities.”) The age gap also remained substantial while the level of politicization remained low.

Finally, there was a substantial drop in the proportion feeling that equal opportunities for women had “gone too far” (down from 22% to 8%). The age gap had also dropped, and it is tempting to suggest that there was a growing public consensus over gender equality. Unfortunately, however, the BES team had changed the question wording from “equality” to “equal opportunities.” We cannot therefore be at all sure whether there was a real change here.

Overall, though, there is reasonably clear evidence of continuity between 1979 and 1987 with respect to immigration, the right to show nudity and sex, and opportunities for ethnic minorities. Levels of regret and disappointment appear to have been fairly stable, age gaps remained large, and politicization remained low. Sentiments about homosexuality also join these three items with a high level of regret, a large age gap, and a low level of politicization. On the other hand, there were some changes with respect to abortion and equality for women. Possibly, these were becoming more accepted and consensual. So still high levels of nostalgia among members of older generations for some aspects of 1950s Britain before the rise of immigration and the coming of the permissive society, but also increasing acceptance of other social reforms such as abortion and gender egalitarianism. The content of nostalgia was beginning to change.

Nostalgia in 1997

The political and social context had changed radically by 1997. Under their new leader, John Major, the Conservatives had won an unexpected victory at the 1992 election but had then been blown off course by rising inflation and balance of payments problems, and the UK was forcibly ejected from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism on “Black Wednesday” (September 16, 1992), after wasting billions of pounds in a futile attempt to defend the value of the pound. While the resulting flexible exchange rate did prove financially successful and the economy recovered, John Major’s reputation and that of the Conservatives never recovered and they went down to a heavy defeat at the 1997 General Election.

Meanwhile, Tony Blair had become the leader of the Labour Party, and with Gordon Brown (who became the Chancellor of the Exchequer) he moved Labour away from socialist policies and toward the center ground, sharply reducing policy gaps between Labour and the Conservatives. Indeed, Labor took over many of Margaret Thatcher’s policies. For a time, then, British politics had become much less divisive and polarized than it had been at any time since 1979.

Unfortunately, from our point of view, the 1997 BES included only a pared down set of “gone too far” questions and failed to include the item on whether there

had been too much immigration into Britain. The only item on immigration asked was “has immigration by black people and Asians had been very good for Britain, fairly good, neither good nor bad, fairly bad or very bad for Britain.” While this does in a fashion capture sentiments about immigration, the major differences in question wording mean that it is hopeless to try to compare levels of support over time.

In Table IV, we show the results, in the same format as before, for this new immigration question and the four surviving “gone too far” items (the three “equal opportunities” items plus the abortion item).

Top of our (short) list comes the item on equal opportunities for homosexuals, where the pattern is very similar to that which saw in 1987. There are signs that there was growing acceptance of homosexuality, but age differences remain very large while the level of politicization remains low.

The patterns for the other three “gone too far” items are also largely unchanged. The three items remain in the same order and at similar levels as in 1997. Age differences remain large for the abortion item, while levels of politicization remain low for all three. The only real surprise is the increased age gap with respect to equal opportunities for women.

Politicization is also very low in the case of immigration. This may seem surprising today, but independent polling evidence from Ipsos MORI showed that less than 10% of adults said that immigration was among the most important issues facing

Table IV. Perceptions of Social Changes, 1997

	Gone too far (bad for Britain)	About right or “do not know” (neither good nor bad)	Not gone far enough (good for Britain)	Age gap between “gone too far” and “not gone far enough” respondents	Level of politicization (Cons:Labour odds ratio)
Equal opportunities for homosexuals	39.8	41.9	18.3	15.6	2.8
Has immigration by black people and Asians been [good or bad] for Britain	(35.6)	(43.3)	(21.1)	(3.8)	(1.7)
The availability of abortion on the NHS	29.4	62.0	8.6	10.2	1.5
Equal opportunities [for] black and Asian people	25.3	46.5	28.3	5.1	2.3
Equal opportunities [for] women	9.1	50.2	40.8	6.9	2.9

Note: The response codes for the item on immigration were “very bad for Britain,” “fairly bad for Britain,” “neither good nor bad for Britain,” “fairly good for Britain,” and “very good for Britain.” We have (as with the “gone too far” items) combined the two “bad” response categories together, and similarly combined the two “good” response categories.
Source: BES 1997, unweighted data, *Ns* 3,603–3,609.

the country in 1997 (Duffy 2021). The importance of immigration then rose sharply until 2007/2008, at the time when European enlargement brought a large increase in immigration from Eastern Europe. It then reached an even higher peak in 2016 when the refugee crisis was at its height, before dropping sharply after the Brexit referendum.

It is hard then, given the lack of suitable questions, to know how far the content of nostalgia had evolved by 1997, but at least in the case of equal opportunities for gays and lesbians there does seem to have been some evolution in a more liberal direction.

Nostalgia in 2019

After the 1997 BES, the next three election surveys completely dropped all the “gone too far” items, but a few of the most important ones from our point of view were reinstated in the most recent 2015, 2017, and 2019 BES surveys. We focus on the 2019 BES, which also included the original 1979 question on immigration, asked in exactly the same way as in 1979. (The items on ethnic minorities and women also used the 1979 wording of “equality” rather than the “equal opportunities” wording of 1987 and 1997).

The social and political context of 2019 was very different from that of 1997. Politically, there had of course been the Brexit Referendum in 2016, and the political gap between the two main parties had grown very substantially under Jeremy Corbyn’s left-wing leadership of the Labour party and Boris Johnson’s right-wing leadership of the Conservatives. Ethnically Britain had become much more diverse, while independent polling from the British Social Attitudes surveys showed that attitudes to gender roles had shifted very substantially in an egalitarian direction over the previous decades (since 1983), as had attitudes to same-sex sexual relations and, but to a lesser extent, tolerance of intermarriage and racial prejudice (Phillips et al. 2018; Storm et al. 2017).

Table V shows the results for our four surviving items, which show some major and intriguing changes over the four decades from 1979 to 2019. First, although a plurality of respondents still feel that too many immigrants have been let in to Britain, the figure (45%) is sharply down from 1979 (when the question had been asked in exactly the same format). However, the age gap was 7 years in both 1979 and in 2019, while the degree of politicization had increased from an odds ratio of 3.6–4.8.

Second, there had also been a sharp fall in the percentage feeling that equal opportunities for gays and lesbians had gone too far, down from 52% in 1987 to 17% in 2019. The age gap halved from 16.1 years to 8.1, while the degree of politicization had crept up from an odds ratio of 3.1–4.4.

Third, there is a similar story with respect to equality for blacks and Asians with a major fall in the level, down from 28% in 1979 to 13% in 2019 (much of the fall coming since 1997). Once again the age gap had halved, while the level of politicization had increased, in this case almost doubled.

Finally, in the case of equality for women, there was a major fall in the percentage feeling that it had gone too far, down from 22% in 1979 to 12% in 2019,

Table V. Perceptions of Social Changes, 2019

	Gone too far	About right or do not know	Not gone far enough	Age gap between “gone too far” and “not gone far enough” respondents	Level of politicization (Cons:Labour odds ratio)
Too many immigrants let in (coded in same way as in 1979)	44.8	27.1	28.0	6.9	4.8
Equal opportunities for gay and lesbian people	17.0	49.9	33.1	8.1	4.4
Attempts to ensure equality for black and Asian people	12.8	41.4	45.8	4.0	3.9
Attempts to ensure equality for women	11.6	39.3	49.0	−0.3	2.8

Source: BES 2019, unweighted data, *Ns* = 3,762–3,766.

although the change happened quite early—between 1979 and 1987. Strikingly, the age difference disappeared in 2019 while a low level of politicization persisted. The proportion of the electorate, then, who felt nostalgic for 1950s Britain with its traditional social norms and absence of immigrants had fallen substantially. Traditional nostalgia was in decline, although had by no means disappeared.

We can contextualize this story of the changing content of nostalgia with a broader range of data from 2018. Here we draw on the online survey described above which asked respondents whether various social changes had made life better or worse. We asked the 3,000 respondents: “Do you think Britain was a better place to live 50 years ago?” The modal answer was “yes” at 45%, 31% of people said “no,” and the remaining 24% “I don’t know.” More young people “did not know” than older people, perhaps unsurprisingly since this group has fewer lifetime experiences on which to draw. Respondents were then asked: “Here are some of the things that have changed in the last 50 years. Do you think these aspects of modern life make life worse, or make life better?” Respondents indicated whether life was made better, made worse, made no difference, or “do not know” for 11 different aspects of social change. We selected social changes giving broad coverage (i.e., are not just about immigration and ethnicity) and also that are common knowledge and uncontroversial. They include some of the same themes (though with different wording) as the core BES items that we have been using. The wording of the 11 social change items is seen in Table VI.

We lay out the results in Table VI in the same format as in the previous tables on the BES data, showing age differences and politicization using the same procedures as before. Top of the list of changes that have made life worse in Britain comes inequality, which as we mentioned above has been one of the major social changes in Britain since 1979. There are substantial age differences, with older people who will have known Britain as it was before the great increase in inequality during the 1980s

Table VI. Perceptions of Social Changes, 2018

	Made life Worse	Makes no difference or do not know	Makes life better	Age gap between “made life worse” and “makes life better” respondents	Level of politicization (Cons:Labour odds ratio)
Higher levels of economic inequality	56.3	31.3	12.5	7.6	1.0
Fewer working-class politicians	55.4	36.6	8.1	10.8	1.0
New ways of communicating such as Facebook and Instagram	40.7	29.6	29.7	10.0	2.4
Greater ethnic diversity in British towns and cities	29.3	34.1	36.6	10.1	4.1
Fewer people going to church	25.7	62.6	11.8	13.0	4.2
New technological devices such as mobile phones	22.4	23.6	54.0	2.0	1.3
More open same-sex couples	22.3	45.3	32.4	10.5	4.9
More women working instead of staying at home	18.2	36.8	45.1	6.5	2.2
More choice in TV and entertainment	17.4	37.6	45.0	0.5	1.3
More ethnic minority and female politicians	15.6	41.6	42.8	3.3	2.6
Greater numbers of young people going to University	15.3	39.7	45.0	5.7	2.8

Source: CSI Brexit Panel Wave 5 (Heath and Richards 2022), data collected July–August 2018; $N = 3,002$, weighted data.

being more likely to say that the change had made life worse. Surprisingly however, we find that views are not related to political partisanship: there appears to be equally low enthusiasm for inequality among both Labour and Conservative partisans. (Multivariate analysis, in our Supplementary analysis, however finds that Conservative partisans are significantly less likely to say that inequality makes life worse than Labour partisans, once we have controlled for age. In addition, larger numbers of Conservatives answer “makes no difference.”)

High up the list comes social media such as Facebook and Instagram, with older people much more likely to feel that they make life worse than are younger people. Interestingly, there is a much lower level of discontent with devices such as mobile phones, and the age gap is very small. It would be quite wrong therefore to think of older generations as technophobes. They do not feel that all changes have been for the worse. Older people have also embraced the increasing choice in TV and entertainment.

Of particular interest are the results on ethnic diversity, same-sex relationships, and gender roles which we covered in the BES. Here we find a spread of opinion, substantial age gaps, and a relatively high level of political polarization on both ethnic diversity and on same-sex relationships while there is more agreement, and smaller age differences, on women working rather than staying at home. Despite the

differences in the way the questions have been framed, the basic picture from the 2019 BES and the 2018 CSI data is the same with relatively low levels of nostalgia for traditional social customs.

Overall, then, there are strong indications that the content of nostalgia changed between 1979 and 2018/2019 not least because society, economics, and technology had all changed too. In 1979, regrets about the permissive society and immigration were top of the list; by 2018 new developments in society meant that inequality—which was not yet an issue in 1979—and social media—not invented in 1979—were main foci of regret. There are also clear indications that some changes had been broadly accepted across society by both old and young alike. Back in 1979, equality for women did not appear to be all that controversial, even among the elderly, and had become even less controversial by 2018/2019, while the evidence suggests that same-sex relationships had become much more accepted too. Even immigration, which remained a matter of regret for many people in 2019, had become more acceptable than it had been before.

Generational Change

A useful way to summarize these results is to compare the sentiments of different birth cohorts with respect to the four main repeated items—those on immigration, gay and lesbian relationships, equality for minorities, and equality for women. These are graphed in Figs. 1–4. In these figures, we distinguish four broad birth cohorts: a prewar/wartime birth cohort (born 1945 or earlier) who would have been at least 34 years old in 1979 and at least 74 years old in 2019; a post-war cohort, often termed the “baby boomers” (because of the increase in birth rates after the

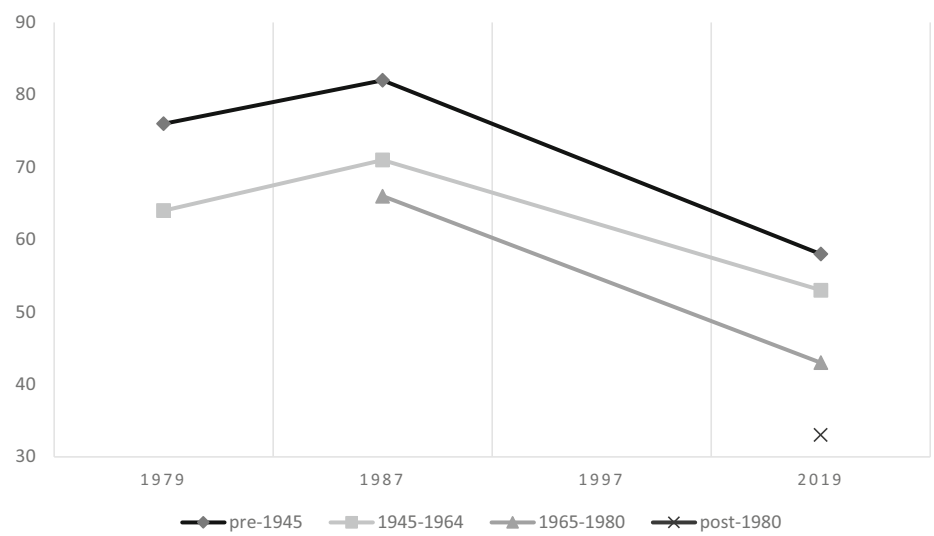


Fig. 1. Attitudes toward immigration: Too many immigrants (not asked in 1997).

war), born from 1945 to 1964; “generation X,” a cohort born from 1965 to 1980 (who would only have started entering our surveys in 1987); and a “millennial” cohort born from 1981 onwards (but only entering the 2019 survey).

Figure 1 plots the changing perceptions of immigration. It shows a classic picture of generational differences combined with “period” changes. Thus, the earliest (pre-1945) generation has throughout the highest level of regret at the numbers of migrants entering Britain, and each succeeding generation enters the electorate at a lower level of regret, the millennials who entered in 2019 having the least regret. The natural interpretation of this is that the older generations, who were brought up when Britain was still relatively homogeneous, retained a positive sentiment toward the more homogeneous Britain of their youth. (However, we should remember that Britain has never been entirely homogeneous and would have had, even before the war, a substantial Irish contingent as well as many refugees from Russia after the revolution and from central Europe after the rise of Fascism.)

Simultaneously, all generations alike seem to have become increasingly accepting of immigration over time, perhaps reflecting the increasing diversity of Britain and increasing positive contact with immigrants or the children of immigrants. In other words, there was a culture shift as well as generational replacement. This may seem somewhat paradoxical given the polling evidence of opposition to immigration peaking around the time of the Brexit referendum, as judged by the question on the most important issue facing the country. But judgments of relative importance of issues are quite volatile, and tap a different concept. British Social Attitudes data on the other hand confirm that sentiments toward ethnic minorities resident in Britain have ameliorated over time, and several sources concur on softening attitudes to immigration (Blinder and Richards 2020).

At any rate, our interpretation of Fig. 1 is that the proportion of the public who feel nostalgic about the disappearance of any ethnically homogeneous Britain remains quite substantial but has declined over time, even among older generations who will have lived their early lives in a predominantly white Britain.

Figure 2 shows initially a similar story to Fig. 1, with substantial generational differences (around 25 percentage points) on equality of opportunity for gays and lesbians in 1987 and a culture shift thereafter. What is strikingly different from Fig. 1 however is the generational convergence in 2019: the decline in opposition is particularly marked in the oldest birth cohort. There is still, in 2019, a non-trivial level of opposition to equal opportunities for gays and lesbians, and more recent birth cohorts are more liberal than earlier birth cohorts, but the generational differences are much reduced (down from over 30 percentage points in 1997 to 12 points in 2019) and nostalgia for “straight” society is surely a smaller part of this story in 2019 than it is for immigration.

In Fig. 3, in contrast, generational differences are rather muted throughout, never getting as high as 10 percentage points, and the most noticeable feature is the culture shift between 1997 and 2019 in sentiments about opportunities for black people and Asians. The changed wording of the question makes interpretation somewhat problematic, but we can safely compare the 1979 and 2019 results, which used exactly the same wording. On this evidence, all generations are broadly consensual over equality for ethnic minorities with little in the way of generational culture war.

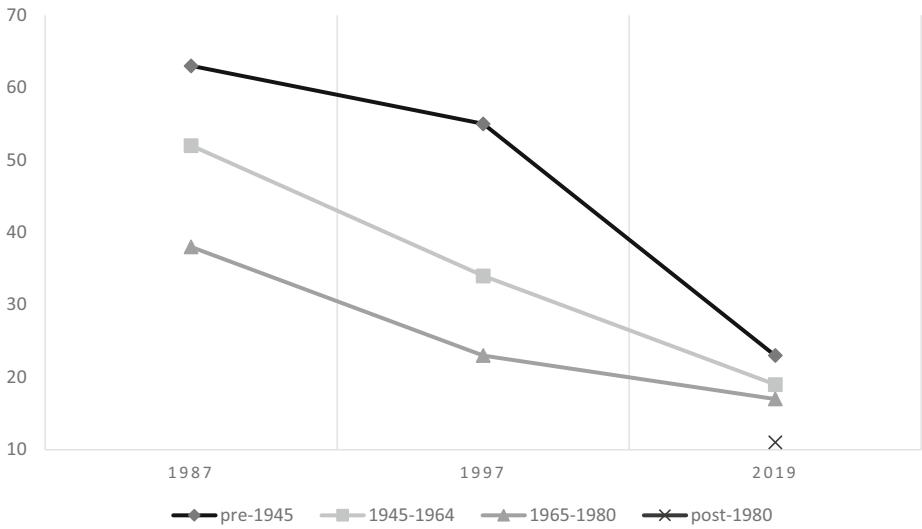


Fig. 2. Equal Rights for Gays and Lesbians: Gone too far (not asked in 1979).

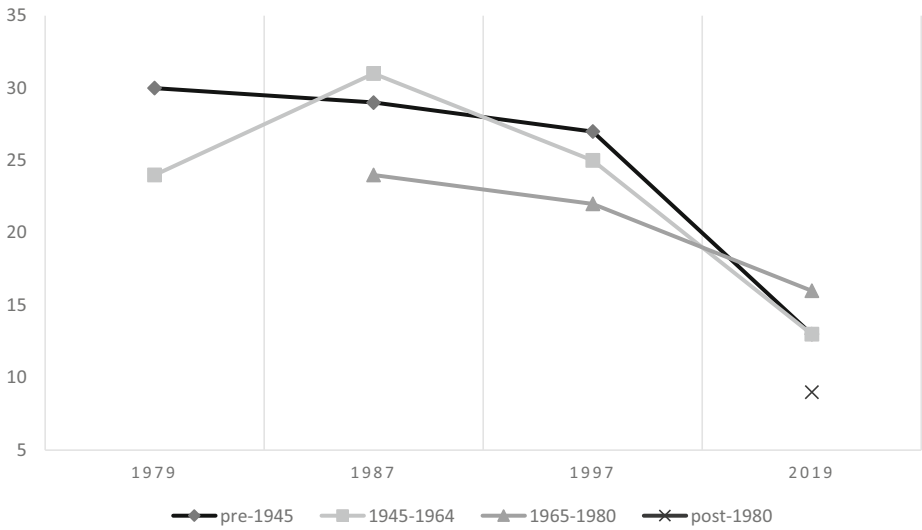


Fig. 3. Equal rights for Blacks and Asians: Gone too far.

Finally, Fig. 4 shows an almost complete absence throughout of generational culture war. Generational differences are consistently small, levels of opposition to women's equality are consistently low and have clearly declined between 1979 and 2019. Nostalgia for traditional gender roles seems unlikely to be a part of the story. (There is, however, interesting evidence that perceived discrimination against men relates to Brexit preference, see Green and Shorrocks (2021), though this too may have little to do with nostalgia.)

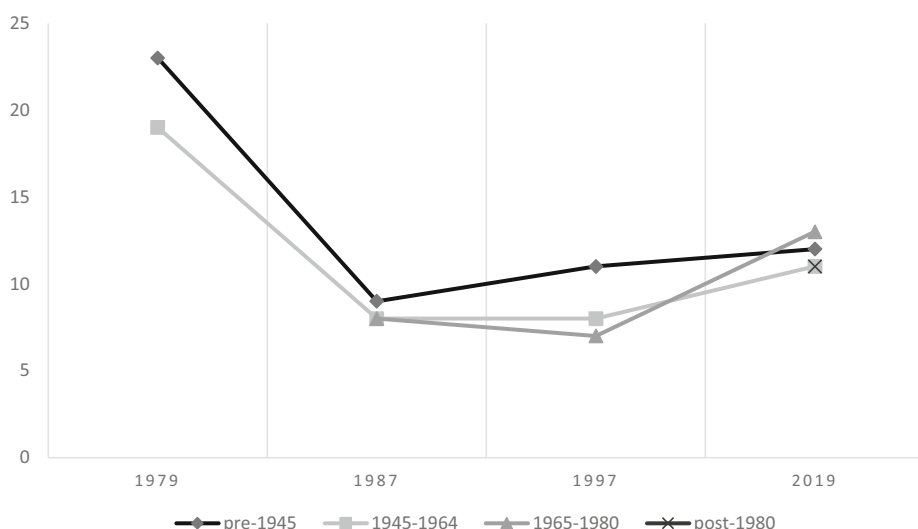


Fig. 4. Equal rights for women: Gone too far.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis suggests that the content of nostalgia is very likely to have changed over time. In 1979, according to the BES data, older generations who had grown up before the arrival of the permissive society or of large-scale immigration from the New Commonwealth in the 1960s did feel regret about the disappearance of an ethnically homogeneous Britain and of the traditional family values that they had grown up with. In contrast, in 2018/2019 older generations who had grown up 40 years later had much less regret on these scores and more regret about the disappearance of equality and about the arrival of new social media.

There are of course important methodological issues, since we do not have direct measures of the emotion of nostalgia or of people's lived experiences. We only have measures of people's feelings about the social changes that have occurred in their lifetimes. But if we theorize nostalgia as people's responses to their lived experience of disruptive social changes, it makes sense that the baby boomer generation born after the war, who grew up in the permissive 1960s and 1970s but were in their sixties or seventies at the time of the 2018/2019 surveys, are unlikely to feel all that nostalgic about a traditional way of life that they never had much direct experience of. It makes more sense to suppose that they will feel nostalgic about the disappearing Britain that they had had experience of—the Britain of the 1970s that was much more equal than it has been since and a Britain where social media, with its opportunities for trolling or circulating racist or misogynistic material, had not yet been invented. Our interpretation of the survey data, then, is that there has been a shift in the content of nostalgia from regret about the decline of traditional ways of life and family values toward regret over the disappearance of equality and the emergence of social media.

Moreover, there has also been a major culture shift involving older as well as younger generations. Many of the older generations have accepted social changes such as married women working, the decline of church-going, tolerance for same-sex sexual relationships, and even more recent changes such as the digital revolution and mobile phones. Older generations have clearly shared in Britain's cultural changes, despite starting from more socially conservative starting points.

The one partial exception is immigration where there are still major generational differences and where the culture shift has been more modest. But this makes sense as immigration has been a continuing process rather than a one-off reform or step change as most of the other social changes were.

While the content may have altered, there is continuity as well as change. As we might expect, it is older people who are more likely to have regrets about the changes they have lived through. In 2018, older people were more likely than younger people to feel nostalgic for a more economically equal society in just the same way and to the same extent as, in 1987, older people were more likely than younger people to feel "traditional nostalgia" over same-sex relationships (see Richards et al. 2020 on traditional and egalitarian nostalgia).

The other strong demographic predictor of nostalgia is level of education, with graduates tending to be less nostalgic than non-graduates. There are a number of potential reasons for this association with nostalgia: graduates tend to be more cosmopolitan in orientation; they also may be able to adapt to social change by virtue of their graduate qualifications which bring greater economic returns in the modern high-tech world than do lower-level qualifications. But here the data are less clear about the extent of continuity over time.

Finally, what of politicization? While there is much contemporary talk about culture wars, it is striking that, in Tables II–VI, by far the highest values for politicization came in 1987. The Conservative:Labour odds ratios were 10.2 for welfare benefits, 9.5 for comprehensive schooling, and 9.3 for the right to protest. The politicization in 1987 makes sense given the right-wing character of Margaret Thatcher's brand of Conservatism (which as Stuart Hall pointed out also embraced social issues as well as economic ones) and the relatively left-wing character of the Labour Party under Neil Kinnock. (It was only after the 1987 general election that Kinnock set in motion the policy review that began the process of moving Labor back toward the center ground.) Politicization was, then, at its height in the 1980s and clearly embraced social issues such as schooling as well as economic issues.

It is unfortunate that these items have not been repeated in the most recent surveys. We cannot therefore make any definitive comparisons over time. Nevertheless, the evidence on our four repeated questions—on immigration, same-sex relations, ethnic equality, and gender equality—shows that the Conservative: Labour odds ratios were somewhat higher in 2019 than they had typically been in the earlier surveys. There does seem to have been some politicization of these social issues. Our findings here chime with Bonikowski and Stuhler (2022) who show that nostalgia in politics is long-standing and non-partisan in nature, though heightened at times of cultural contention.

We were also able, in the 1997 and 2019 BES surveys, to include a measure of national identity in our multivariate analyses. In both these surveys, the BES

included an identically worded item on whether people felt “English not British,” “English more than British,” “Equally English and British,” “British more than English,” and “British not English.” The remarkable finding is that an English national identity, an ethnic identity in contrast to the more civic British identity, had strong and highly significant relationships with nostalgia in 2019 but much less so in 1997. Most remarkably, national identity had no relationship at all in 1997 with sentiments about women’s equality, but a major and highly significant one in 2019. (Analysis available in supplementary file from the authors).

What do these patterns of findings tell us about our three theoretical premises of nostalgia? Looking at the associations over time (we also draw here on the multivariate analysis in the Supplementary materials, available on request from the authors), first for immigration, we find that older people are consistently more likely to feel that immigration has gone too far, despite the culture shifts across generations. This implies that both socialization effects and “active updating” are at work. However, the declining education effect suggests that any role of being “left behind” is declining over time. As others have shown (e.g., Pampel 2016), sociodemographic differences are likely to decline once the new norm (here pro-immigration, in 2019) takes hold. For those remaining nostalgic in this regard, then, it seems that it is external forces—in the shape perhaps of political rhetoric—that is increasingly the important antecedent of nostalgia.

We also see the pattern of the declining importance of being left behind (as indicated by educational attainment in our supplementary analysis) holds true in the case of nostalgia for a straight and ethnically homogeneous society, but here age gaps have also shrunk. And while these sociodemographic covariates tell us less over time about who is nostalgic, here too we see increasing politicization. Nostalgia for traditional gender roles shows little association with sociodemographic factors in our multivariate models, perhaps suggesting any effect of being left behind on gender nostalgia had declined even before 1979. Yet, here too, we see a small decrease in age effects accompanied by a subtle increase in politicization.

Thus, it is apparent, on the items for which we have comparable time series, that our first two premises—socialization/cohort effects and being “left behind”—have reducing explanatory power over time. In contrast, our third premise of external forces, in the shape of political rhetoric, shows increasing explanatory power as sociodemographic divides decline. Most remarkable is the rise of an English national identity in 2019 as a major correlate of reported nostalgia. The rise of English national identity in the twenty-first century, and its populist character, has been well documented (Wyn Jones et al. 2012). Our 1997 data strongly suggest that English national identity does not have an intrinsic relationship with personal feelings of nostalgia in the way that age does. Instead, we suggest that these feelings of English identity, and the sentiments of nostalgia that accompany them, are recent social and political constructions. In the terms offered by Smeekes et al. (2021), the nature of the nostalgia appears to be moving from the “personal” to the “national.” In contrast to the “bottom up” nostalgia based on lived experience in the twentieth-century and twenty-first-century versions appear to have a more “top down” character reflecting the agendas of nationalist political leaders.

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