

Privately educated are twice as likely to be consistent Conservative voters, says UK research

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People educated at private schools are twice as likely to be consistent Conservative voters as those who had a state education, a new study has

found.

Using data from a [longitudinal study](#) of almost 7,000 British people, born in 1970, the research also found that having a private [school](#) education made people 50% more likely to hold right-wing opinions.

The study, by five researchers from University College London, is the first to follow a group of people over decades to quantify how private or state education affected their voting and attitudes during the four general elections between 1997 and 2010.

By analyzing the data, they determined the effect of private education, separate from the influence of other factors such as having well-off or highly educated parents.

The researchers are: Professor Richard Wiggins, Dr. Samantha Parsons, Professor Francis Green, Professor George Ploubidis and Professor Alice Sullivan.

In an article in *Sociology*, Professor Wiggins and his co-authors say, "Our key conclusion is that, among both males and females, there is a notable direct association between private schooling in the mid-1980s and later voting Conservative, and the expression of right-wing attitudes in midlife, which cannot be explained by [family background](#) and related factors."

"The significance of the findings arises because the political attitudes of many of those who attended private school during the 80s and 90s are important, since a disproportionate number of private school alumni have reached positions of substantive influence in public and commercial life, such as in Parliament, the cabinet, the senior judiciary, the press commentariat and CEOs of FTSE companies."

The research used the 1970 British Cohort Study survey data on 6,917 nationally-representative people born in England and Wales during one week in 1970. This recorded details of their family background, education, political attitudes at age 42 years, voting habits in the general elections of 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2010, and their [attitude](#) to trade unions at age 16 years.

Of the sample of 6,917 people, 3.0% (3.3% men and 2.8% women) attended a private primary school before beginning their secondary schooling. At secondary school 6.2% (6.8% men and 5.7% women) attended a private school.

The main findings were:

- People educated privately were twice as likely to have been consistent Conservative voters, defined as voting for the party in three or four of the four general elections.
- People educated privately were one and half times as likely to hold right-wing opinions as state-educated people, as measured in 2012 by asking them how much they disagreed with statements that 'government should redistribute income,' that 'big business benefits the owners at the expense of the workers' and 'there's one law for the rich and one for the poor.'
- The evidence for these effects was over and above the combined influence of their parents' income, education and [social class](#) on them.
- Private education had more effect on men voting Conservative than it did upon women. It had little effect upon men's holding right-wing views, but a much larger effect upon women's right-wing views.
- Getting a degree tended to make people less likely to vote Conservative, but did not make them more or less likely to hold right-wing views.

The researchers say they were investigating what "may be interpreted as a type of peer effect, whereby attitudes and assumptions are absorbed from other pupils and sometimes from teachers."

"Given that a private school community can become relatively closed—especially when it is a boarding school—these peer effects have a strong social character. Such peer effects may be long-lasting, especially if they become reinforced through post-school networks."

This was important because "studies of the education of elites have highlighted the elevated proportions of [private school](#) alumni in positions of public influence."

"There is a prima facie link between British [private schools](#) and politics, which can be illustrated by the fact that 41% of Conservative Members of Parliament were privately educated, compared to 14% of Labour MPs. This compares to 7% of the general population. More than half of junior government ministers, and a third of the British Chairs of FTSE 100 companies were privately schooled."

The study was the first to study the effect of private [education](#) by following the same group of people over time, rather than taking a series of snapshots of different people.

"A unique strength of our investigation is that it is based on longitudinal evidence for the same group of individuals measured over time where we have access to information on voter choice across four consecutive General Elections from 1997 to 2010.

"Longitudinal records on voting allow us to examine the interplay of individual characteristics. Our findings extend beyond cross-sectional conclusions because we have been able to take many more formative influences and channels into account," say the researchers.

More information: Richard D Wiggins et al, Are Right-Wing Attitudes and Voting Associated with Having Attended Private School? An Investigation Using the 1970 British Cohort Study, *Sociology* (2023). DOI: [10.25384/sage.c.6569178.v1](https://doi.org/10.25384/sage.c.6569178.v1)

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