

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Exploring UK residents' views on substantive education reform: adversarially co-produced narratives indicate fluidity in support

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ABSTRACT

Substantive reform capable of addressing multiple crises within the UK education system is often rejected on the basis that public opposition to tax and investment precludes politicians from implementing reform, even though policymakers may otherwise wish to do so. Here, we analyse data from a methodologically diverse series of surveys (1) $n=693$; (2) $n=10$; (3) $n=2,200$ of adult UK residents conducted between November 2023-January 2024 examining associations between demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, health and level of support for a test case of progressive education reform. We deploy for the first time in an educational studies context adversarially co-produced narratives as a treatment to examine fluidity in preferences, particularly among those who express strong initial opposition to the policy programme, whom we term 'haters'. We find widespread support for investment in the education system, belief that removing socioeconomic barriers to educational success is important and that salient narratives can increase support among 'haters'. We find that younger age, higher risk of destitution and lower health status predict higher levels of support. We present innovative Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) of these associations and find moderately strong positive correlations with levels of support for tax reform as a possible means of funding change.

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Introduction

The UK education system is currently experiencing unprecedented challenges (Farquharson 2024; Schools Alliance for Excellence 2024) including considerable increases in the numbers of pupils with Special Educational Needs, rates of persistent absenteeism (Farquharson 2024), crumbling estates (DfE 2023; Gorard and Siddiqui 2024), chronic teacher

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recruitment and retention crises (Long and Danechi 2021; McLean, Worth, and Smith 2024; Sibbota 2020) and unsustainable Further and Higher Education funding systems (Ogden and Waltmann 2024). Alongside these challenges, the proportion of children who report strongly disliking school has almost doubled since 2010, to reach 10% in 2022 (Farquharson 2024).

Many blame government decision-making for the failing education system (Brighouse and Waters 2022), identifying four key policies in particular: Centralization (Brighouse and Waters 2022; Fisher 2012), Marketization (Adonis 2012; DfE 2016; Greany and Higham 2018), Managerialism (Day, Gu, and Sammons 2016; Martindale 2022) alongside Austerity. While proponents of centralization argue that concentrating decision-making increases the consistency and quality of educational provision and eases administrative and financial burdens placed upon leaders at the local or individual school level (Shah 2010), this practice is often associated with an erosion of autonomy, and 'one-size-fits-all' approaches that limit capacity to tailor provision according to the needs of specific individuals or contexts (Li 2023). In England, reforms introduced by successive governments have increased control of curricula and assessment systems, often without accompanying parliamentary debate or public consultation (Fisher 2012). Similarly, oversight of initial teacher education through the DfE's Market Review process has led to accusations of micro-management (Ellis and Childs 2023), the narrowing of curricula and an increasingly technicist conceptualization of both teaching and teacher education (Mutton and Burn 2024).

This process is just one example of the increasing prevalence of competition, commodification and marketization into the UK education system, which – while overtly aiming to provide greater parent and learner choice, and foster innovation – has led to the fragmentation of the school system through rapid academization (Pennington, Su, and Wood 2024). 83% of all English secondary schools were academies or free schools during the 2024–2025 academic year (Official Statistics 2025), compared with just 9% in 2009 (Hector 2023). Through positioning parents as consumers, this shift has been accompanied by growing disparities between schools, with those settings perceived to be of lower-status experiencing lower admissions, increased mobility, and greater proportions of students from low-income households or with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) – all while failing to deliver the promised benefits for learning outcomes (Greany and Higham 2018). It is estimated that the impact of austerity alone means 70% of schools have less funding in real terms than they did in 2010 (Stop School Cuts 2024).

Combined, these policies are associated with exacerbation of social inequalities, which are stubbornly persistent through compulsory, Further and Higher Education, with considerable disparities in learning and employment outcomes for those from different socio-economic backgrounds (Britton, Drayton, and Van der Erve 2021; Budd 2017; Efemini et al. 2024; Johnson 2016; Johnson et al. 2019; Wright and Mulvey 2021). For example, only half of pupils eligible for free school meals achieve a good level of development at age 5, compared with 72% of their more affluent peers, and these gaps continue to widen across primary and secondary education, with 16-year-olds from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds 29% less likely to attain good GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) outcomes than their more affluent peers (Farquharson 2024). These disparities continue into employment, with 46% of university graduates from private schools achieving top earnings, compared to 22% of those who were eligible for

free school meals (Britton, Drayton, and Van der Erve 2021; Farquharson 2024). In general, critics of this trajectory of reform have argued that the consequence has been largescale diminution of individual and collective interests and a fracturing of society more broadly (Sandel 2020).

The means of addressing these inequalities appear straightforward: large-scale public investment in educational infrastructure and in eliminating cost-related access barriers (Picketty 2014). However, there is great concern among policymakers that public investment itself is unpopular and therefore not electorally feasible, both because of concern about the role of the state in the economy and belief that any investment has to be funded from taxation on income from work (Johnson and Flinders 2024). In this article, we respond to this concern through examining public perception of a test case package for education reform which is designed to address inequality in educational outcomes by increasing spending, introducing measures to curb privatization and profit-making within the education system, and ensuring that all children and young people have access to high-quality school, Further and Higher Education provision.

We analyse a series of surveys that elicited a mix of quantitative and qualitative data conducted between November 2023 and January 2024 in the run up to the 2024 UK General Election on an archetypal programme of education reform. We deploy a combination of innovative qualitative adversarial co-production and quantitative analyses that suggest high levels of support for progressive education reform among the public as a whole. We find that lower socioeconomic status and poorer health predict higher levels of support, while older age and male gender identity predict lower levels. Our Structural Equation Modelling of relationships between latent variables (health, faith in government, etc.) selected on the basis of prior studies (Johnson, Johnson, and Nettle 2023b), shows a direct positive pathway from socioeconomic status to support for the policy, then an indirect one from socioeconomic status via mental health, but a negative impact on support via reduced faith in government. Critically, our use of adversarial co-production in an educational studies context indicates that this support is fluid and that opposition among strong opponents – ‘haters’ – can be mitigated effectively. We compare support for education with support among the same participants for tax reform needed to fund investment and find a moderately strong correlation, suggesting that respondents see justification for tax and spend on education. We conclude that there are few reasons to believe that public opinion is an obstacle to progressive education reform. The article represents the first deployment of adversarial co-production to persuade opponents within an education policy context. It addresses a gap in the literature regarding the popularity of a package of reforms in a UK context to reverse rising inequality in educational outcomes and the contribution of that educational inequality as a social determinant to inequality more broadly following an era of austerity and the COVID-19 pandemic (Maisuria and Lally 2024). We begin by setting out existing evidence on public opinion on education policies.

The context of an education system in decline and an approach responsive to public opinion

Within the UK, education is second only to health in terms of government spending, representing approximately 4.4% of national income (Farquharson 2024). However,

while spending on education as a proportion of national income remains higher than the OECD average (OECD 2023), there has nevertheless been a steady decline in funding, with OECD figures suggesting that UK expenditure has failed to keep pace with many of its counterparts, including the USA, New Zealand, and Ireland (OECD 2023). In order simply to return spending to pre-austerity levels, in 2024 there was a need to increase spending by at least 9 per cent on current education budgets overall, by 14 per cent in further education and 18 per cent in higher education (Common Sense Policy Group 2024a, 251). This is of particular concern given the findings of those such as Jackson and Mackevicius – albeit in a US context – which demonstrate the significant impact of per-pupil spending on attainment outcomes, High School graduation and entry to Higher Education (Jackson and Mackevicius 2021).

In recent years, education has seen the largest real-terms funding cuts of any of the UK's public services (Reed and Portes 2018). Cuts have been particularly severe for Higher Education and Further Education, with up to £90 per month cuts for the poorest 16–19-year-old students (Drayton et al. 2022; Reed and Portes 2018). These cuts are not experienced equally by all socio-economic groups but instead have disproportionately impacted poorer households (Reed and Portes 2018). Significant funding challenges have also disproportionately affected provision for those pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEND). Since 2016, there has been a 60% increase in the number of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) issued, the highest level of support available for pupils with SEND. However, financial pressures are also leading local authorities to limit the numbers of EHCPs issued: more than 98% of appeals are successful, with less disadvantaged households best able to push for diagnoses and support for pupils (Farquharson 2024).

Studies indicate high degrees of support for public spending on education. Bremer and Bürgisser find that around 88% of respondents agree that government should increase spending on education (Bremer and Bürgisser 2022). In part, this may be because respondents view education spending as a 'silver bullet' (Ansell 2008) to addressing wide-ranging societal issues. However, despite studies reporting consensus on the desirability of education spending, there is genuine disagreement about how education systems should be funded (Busemeyer, Garritzmman, and Neimanns 2020). More nuanced attitudes on the focus of investment in education vary according to system of governance, political ideology and socio-economic status, with divergent opinion on prioritization of different phases of education and value of spending relative to impact on the workforce (Anglum and Rhinesmith 2022; Ansell 2008, 2010). Moreover, support does appear to decline when participants are presented with trade-offs, such as increased taxation and reduced spending for other public services. For example, there was 55% support for the expansion of spending on education when this implies a cut in pensions – a reversal of position from 2017 (Bremer and Bürgisser 2022).

In terms of specific policies, there is evidence to suggest that some priorities experience universal support regardless of political ideology and socio-economic status, such as increasing spending through recruiting more teachers to reduce class sizes and extending the availability of apprenticeships (Yates 2024). For example, a Public First report (Lister and Price 2023) shows significantly more support for vocational skills offered by Further Education and apprenticeships due to perceptions of these as a viable alternative option to long term debt resulting from going to university. Conversely, education

spending relating to private schools and ‘elite-targeted’ Higher Education (Ansell 2008), can be seen to hold greater appeal for higher-income voters (Anglum and Rhinesmith 2022) due to widespread belief that private schools perpetuate social inequalities and reinforce privilege (Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission 2019). The social, cultural and economic capital linked to attending private school (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) creates a path towards Russell Group Universities (a group of elite UK institutions) and highly paid, influential careers, not open to many children from state school backgrounds. While only 7% of pupils are privately educated (Thomas 2023), many people in senior roles in politics, business and the media attended private school (Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission 2019) and these ‘ruling elite’ use their considerable resources to ensure tax and charity laws continue to operate to the benefit of the private school sector (Boden, Kenway, and James 2022). Charitable status confers many tax benefits enabling enhanced facilities, small class sizes and per pupil spending three times that in the maintained sector (Brighouse and Waters 2022). Criticism surrounds how private schools provide a ‘public benefit’ (Charity Commission 2013), with some concluding that private-state school partnerships are relatively superficial in most cases and therefore unlikely to constitute a ‘public benefit’ (Fryer 2023).

Public opinion on private schools’ charitable status varies, with 47% (YouGov 2024b) and 49% (IPSOS 2023) of respondents opposing its retention. Opposition rose to 64% for 2019 Labour voters (YouGov 2024b) and 65% of all voters in a CIVITAS poll (Lilley and Pasternack 2024). However, one poll found that only 22% of respondents supported banning private schools, despite 49% feeling that private schools harm Britain (YouGov 2025). Insights into factors shaping public opinion regarding quality of education indicate that 77% of those privately educated thought their education was ‘good or better’, while only 45% attending comprehensive schools felt the same (Smith 2021). Public opinion about the quality of education remains poor, over 70% thought this had remained the same or got worse since 2010 (Yates 2024), while 44% believed their job prospects would have been better if they had attended a private school (Smith 2021). The Labour Government has confirmed the removal of charitable status, despite claims by supporters of private education that removing tax exemption would increase costs for the state sector by increasing student numbers alongside generating £1.3-£1.5 billion in additional VAT revenue (Haves 2024).

While public support for Higher Education remains high, a Public First report (Lister and Price 2023) shows significantly more support for vocational skills offered by Further Education and apprenticeships which are seen as a viable alternative option to long term debt resulting from going to university. Indeed, Higher Education fees are a contentious issue. Of adults surveyed since 2019, around 50% believe Higher Education tuition fees to be ‘fair’ (YouGov 2024a). Generally, there is support for a reduction in the cost of tuition fees across the public, however, this is not without significant challenges (Lister and Price 2023). Building on analysis of 2019 General Election manifesto positions on tuition fees that found significant impact on potential party support following commitment to repeal fees (Serra 2025), recent polls show that 33% (YouGov 2023a) and 45% of adults across all age ranges were in favour of scrapping tuition fees entirely (Lister and Price 2023), but the support for abolishing tuition fees drops dramatically when the cost to the taxpayer is outlined, or where there is a spending choice

between tuition costs, the NHS or other parts of the education system (Higher Education Policy Institute 2024).

The question of how university fees should be funded has shown a consistent belief that those who attend university should pay either via tuition fees or a graduate tax (YouGov 2023b). There are disparities across age range and voting intention, with a much higher swing of Labour voters opting for state funding and Conservative voters opting for individualization. Voters in the 65+; 59–64 and 25–49 age categories show a much clearer correlation with each other in believing more strongly that this should be funded through tuition fee loans or a graduate tax whereas more 18–24-year-olds believe that it should be funded through the public purse. However, this is marginal. This may reflect contrasting understandings of the effect of free tuition, with some indications that removal of tuition fees can have regressive distributive impacts in relative terms if student places are restricted in number and not accompanied by progressive taxation reform (Mishkin and Straub 2014).

These complexities in public perceptions of specific education policies demonstrate the challenges faced by policymakers when seeking to garner sufficient popular support to implement reform. These challenges may be further exacerbated by the disproportionate influence of certain demographics – such as middle-class parents – with some indication that, even when policymakers may wish to shift public opinion, they have little success in doing so (Busemeyer, Garritzmann, and Neimanns 2020). Arguably, these concerns can be seen to leave policymakers at the mercy of ‘loud but noisy politics’ (Busemeyer, Garritzmann, and Neimanns 2020) whereby, partisan politics dominate decision-making around prominent education issues in the absence of coherent social attitudes, and the preferences of special interest groups are able to hold considerable sway when proposed reforms fail to capture public attention. Such concerns mean that there is considerable importance in understanding how policymakers can influence public perception of policies capable of resolving crises in education systems. In order to explore this issue, we developed an archetypal progressive educational reform programme to serve as a test case.

What could progressive education reform look like?

There have been numerous attempts to develop principles around which to shape progressive education reform (Brighouse and Waters 2022; Education Policy Institute 2023). The scale of the challenges and the dependence of each element of the system on one another mean that a programme of reform is required. For the purposes of this study, we focused primarily on a policy package that is adequate in size and scale and with an overall emphasis on public investment that breaches assumptions about large-scale investment being unpopular. The need to integrate these different aspects within a single package means that this study provides broader assessment of popularity of education reform than testing of specific interventions, such as support for removing VAT exemption on private school tuition fees, and the trade-offs between them. This approach would benefit more from, for example, conjoint methods (Nettle et al. 2025), which is a possible future direction for research.

The starting point financially is to return levels of investment to pre-austerity levels: 9% increase for schools (National Education Union 2023), 14% for Further Education (Bolton,

Lewis, and Harrison 2023) and 18% for Higher Education (Drayton et al. 2023). This constitutes an increase of £9.77 billion in spending in the first year. The next step is to commit to removing tuition fees within 5 years at a cost of £9 billion per annum (Labour Party 2019) and increase support for 16–17 year olds via a £50 per week basic income scheme and all adults of £75 per week as part of a broader cost-neutral reform of tax and welfare spending (Common Sense Policy Group 2025). This is a substantive means of mitigating the impact of the lost decade since 2010 and providing the social security by which young people can upskill and access opportunity. In order to expand the tax base and remove the advantage held by children of wealthier families, private school charitable status would first be removed and, following the example of Finland, profit making schools prohibited. The projected yield from charging VAT is £1.51 billion in 2025/26 (Seely 2025).

Alongside these funding commitments, our illustrative package of reform indicated that education would be returned to democratic control via Local Authority running of schools, removing the power of wealthy actors to control institutional design and activity via academies. This would be accompanied by a commitment to diversification and modernization of the curriculum, a reduction in social segregation via the removal of profit-making private schools and a renewed focus on academic capacity by returning teaching qualifications to graduate level. This will ensure that every young person can access high quality, life-long education without incurring large debt and in the knowledge that the overwhelming advantages of children of wealthy parents have been mitigated democratically. The approach serves as a relevant test case for public opinion assessment.

Methods

We followed the methods outlined in prior studies (Ardron et al. 2025; Johnson, Johnson, and Nettle 2023b; E. A. Johnson et al. 2023a; M. T. Johnson et al. 2023c; Johnson, Johnson, et al. 2025a). These included adversarial co-production of narratives with opponents of policies to persuade people like them to support the policies. The narratives were then presented to a larger group of participants to establish levels of support for policies pre- and post-presentation of narratives. ‘Red Wall’ constituencies are those in the North and Midlands of England and parts of Wales that were traditionally Labour voting but switched to, or came close to switching to, the Conservatives. They played an important role in the outcome of the 2019 General Election and voters in those areas therefore received significant attention from political parties (Johnson, Johnson, and Nettle 2023b; Kanagasooriam and Simon 2021; MacKinnon 2020). We therefore engaged with residents of those constituencies in narrative adversarial co-production and ensured that residents were represented within the final survey sample. Our main confirmatory predictions were that subjective economic status and other socioeconomic characteristics will be correlated with levels of policy approval and that people who are firm opponents of policies will produce narratives that can persuade individuals with similar demographic characteristics to support the policy. In exploratory analyses, we examined, whether the four types of narrative for each policy differ in persuasiveness according to the key element (e.g. Absolute gains) around which each narrative will be shaped, whether such narratives have different effects on people based on demographic characteristics or political perspectives, whether there are correlations between levels of

support for categories of policies presented and whether levels of support for policies increase overall as additional information on policies are presented. There were three survey stages.

Survey 1: screener to assess initial level of support for policies

We conducted a 15-minute screening survey with 693 participants with Red Wall constituency postcodes or, due to platform limitations, area postcodes with a large proportion of Red Wall constituencies on Prolific, an online survey panel. Within a survey presenting and assessing a number of different policy areas (see, for example, tax and welfare reform packages in the results section), we presented brief, bullet-point outlines of proposals for education reform and asked people to rate them on a 100-point sliding scale in which via a horizontal slider anchored with 0 = strongly disagree and 100 = strongly agree. This elicited very basic popularity data to enable identification of firm opponents of education reform for adversarial co-production of narratives. Participants received £2 in compensation.

Survey 2. Adversarial co-production of narratives

We identified 10 Red Wall opponents (≤ 20 levels of support for education reform reform) and invited them to develop narratives that elicit features of the policies to persuade voters like them of its merits. Participants were chosen solely on the basis of their residing within the Red Wall and their strongly opposing the policy, since prior studies indicate that opponents are more able than proponents to develop narratives that increase support for policies among initial opponents and that Red Wall constituencies are particularly prone to electoral concern about viability of progressive policies (Johnson, Johnson, and Nettle 2023b; M. T. Johnson et al. 2023c). Presentation of adversarially co-produced narratives has been found to have a significant causal effect on support for policies by articulating salient outcomes, reference points and agents to opponents (E. A. Johnson et al. 2024).

Participants produced written narratives (minimum 150 words) that we standardized for language, style and length (150 words + 10 per cent max). We co-produced four narratives around the most cohesive ideas expressed, using the text provided by participants to organize prose around four specific justificatory elements: (1) absolute gains – the impact of reform on policy that affects all members of society; (2) relative gains – the impact of reform on improving the interests of low-middle income voters at the expense of wealth voters; (3) security – the impact of reform on securing society; (4) economic benefit:

Narrative 1: Absolute Gains: At first glance you may think these policies are too radical and expensive, but we are simply reversing some of the many years of cuts. Education is a basic human right and every child should have the same opportunity to access excellent schools, progress to high quality technical and higher education, get good jobs and succeed in life. By increasing funding to pre-austerity levels, these policies give state schools, colleges and universities the resources they need to provide every child with the best start in life and to equip them with the skills that will help them flourish. By removing all state education fees, we would break down the social class barriers and ensure that we can all stay in education regardless of background. Because we all benefit when those talented, well-educated graduates go out into the workforce, we have good reasons to

stop them leaving universities with huge debts that prevent many people from even trying in the first place.

Narrative 2: Relative Gains: Our nepotistic education system is rigged against normal people. In education, ability is evenly spread, but opportunity is not. Currently, too many people's chances of getting on in life are adversely affected by where they live. Rich people are subsidised by taxpayers to buy advantages for their children by paying for tax free private education, often leapfrogging over more talented working class children. These reforms would mean that rich parents are no longer able to buy advantages and that more working class children would be able to attend university and succeed in life without worrying about high levels of student debt. Attendance at university would be more based on grades and abilities as opposed to ability to pay. Tuition fees can be covered by taxation on the wealthy, as they were for many of us in the past. These policies end the postcode lottery of life and bring our communities up to the level of more prosperous areas.

Narrative 3: Security: The UK education system is insecure. There are practical issues like defective concrete in schools, falling attendance levels since Covid and low staffing levels, particularly for those who need additional support, such as those with Special Educational Needs. When education spending was at pre-austerity levels, there was more stability within the state education system. We had smaller class sizes and funding for resources. Teachers are now leaving the profession in their droves due to demands of the job. Cost cutting hits those at the chalk face hardest. Local Authorities should have more control, removing destructive competition between schools in the new academy system that forces some schools into closure. These reforms return spending to pre-austerity levels to allow schools to pay for increased salaries, food and energy costs and to remove the normalising effect of students starting their working life with a huge debt to repay. This creates security throughout the whole system, stabilising young people's lives as they enter adulthood.

Narrative 4: Economic benefit: These reforms would put the UK ahead of other countries in terms of having a highly educated population. Children are the workforce of the future and the country as a whole depends keeping ahead of technological advancements by training suitable candidates and graduates to fill the jobs we need. These policies would lead benefit the country as a whole, stimulating economic growth. If more people earn more because they are in higher paying jobs, then it is natural that they will then pay higher taxes. Higher taxes means that more money is available to be spent on the NHS, roads and welfare. This will increase opportunities even further, increasing social mobility, improving the skills and learning of the workforce and ultimately increasing productivity in the economy. The country as a whole will benefit from having the best professional people and we may be able to attract more talent to the country, rather than the best people moving away and paying taxes in other countries.

Participants received £5 remuneration for adversarial co-production.

Survey 3: public opinion assessment

A final, 30-minute public opinion survey was conducted between 20–26 January 2024 with 2,200 adult UK residents. To ensure effective representation among Red Wall constituents, we first opened the survey to 916 residents with Red Wall postcodes or area postcodes with a large proportion of Red Wall constituencies. We then opened the survey to a further 1,305 participants across Britain. Participants were presented with a description of a series of areas of education reform as one of ten policy areas (welfare reform (Stark et al. 2025), Green New Deal (Ardron et al. 2025), public utilities (Johnson, Johnson, et al. 2025a), health and social care, childhood and early years, education, housing, transport, democratic reform, taxation), along with the impacts such reforms

evidence indicates will follow from their implementation. We focus on education reform here, but examine correlation in support for taxation reform needed to fund such investments. Participants were asked to rate their opposition or support to those policies on a scale of 0–100. They were then shown a randomized adversarially co-produced narrative and asked to rate its persuasiveness on a scale of 0–100 and then to rate their opposition or support for the policy again on a scale of 0–100. Each participant was assigned to one of the narrative groups on the basis of which group had the fewest responses at the time of their viewing the question. As such, there was an equal chance of each participant being assigned to each group, though no specific quotas on the basis of initial, pre-treatment support were used. Participants were then asked to provide basic demographic data, socioeconomic data, including self-rating status on the MacArthur ladder of subjective socioeconomic status (Adler et al. 2000), and perceived risk of destitution on a 100-point sliding scale, health status, including Depression PHQ-8 (Kroenke, Spitzer, and Williams 2001), Anxiety GAD7 (Spitzer et al. 2006), single item life satisfaction (Guney, Kalafat, and Boysan 2010; Mamani-Benito et al. 2022) political affiliation, voting intention and faith in politicians established by six items in prior project iterations (M. T. Johnson et al. 2023c). Participants received £4.50 in remuneration.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using Julia. Relative to General Election voting intention in January 2024, our sample overrepresented people who voted as compared with those who did not vote in 2019, overrepresented Labour voters and underrepresented Conservative voters (see Table 1 below). In the descriptive statistical analyses that follow, we have therefore applied post-stratification weights (Graham Stark 2024) that make our sample representative of age and contemporary voting intention as of 26 January 2024 (Politico 2024). The election result itself showed: Labour 33.7%, Conservatives 23.7%, Reform 14.3%, Lib Dems 12.2%, Greens 6.4%, SNP 2.5% and Plaid 0.7%.

Not included in the Politico polling were NI parties 2.5% and independents 2% (Baker, Pollock, and Cracknell 2024). The final result reflected low turnout among those who indicated Labour as a voting intention, possibly because they were likely to be younger and younger people are less likely to vote overall and also because polling leads suggested a decisive Labour victory and reduced competitive pressure to avoid an alternative outcome.

Categorical variables were contrast coded, and continuous variables scaled. The distribution of residuals for all models was satisfactory. All p values are two sided. Our confirmatory predictions were that those who strongly rejected a Green New Deal would be homeowners, express low risk of destitution on scale of 0–100 (<30) and intend to vote Conservative in 2024. The rest of the analyses are considered exploratory.

Table 1. Political preferences.

Political party	Voting in 2019	Intention for 2024
Conservative	30%	13%
Labour	30%	24%
LibDem	7%	5%
Nat/Green	6%	5%
No Vote/DK/Refused	21%	46%
Other/Brexit (Reform in 2024)	6%	6%

On the basis of a growing body of evidence on their association (Johnson, Johnson, and Nettle 2023b), we followed our established method (M. T. Johnson et al. 2023c) of structural equation modelling (SEM) in R package 'lavaan' (Rosseel 2012) to estimate covariance between socioeconomic position (measures above), mental health (measures above), faith in government and age and to regression relationships between those variables and support for education reform. Faith in government was assessed via a six item list of statements measured ordinally from strongly disagree to strongly agree: 'Politicians are all the same' (higher scores, lower faith), 'Politics can be a force for good' (higher scores, higher faith), 'It doesn't matter which party is in government' (higher scores, lower faith), 'Politicians don't care about people like me' (higher scores, lower faith), 'Politicians want to make things better' (higher scores, higher faith), 'We shouldn't rely on government to make things better' (higher scores, lower faith).

We hypothesized that, on the basis of our prior studies (Johnson, Johnson, and Nettle 2023b), that the latent variables would directly affect support for progressive education reform, with lower socioeconomic status, higher mental distress, younger age and greater faith in government associated with higher levels of support for the policy as a means of reducing financial insecurity (associated with lower socioeconomic status, higher mental distress, younger age) and as a possible means of improving society (associated with greater faith in government).

Raw data, Julia scripts and R scripts are freely available open source (Johnson 2024; Stark 2024b).

Results

Participant demographic characteristics

The sample included 51% female, 48% male and 1% who described themselves in another way. 85% of respondents identified as white, slightly higher than in the 2021 England and Wales Census (81.7%), and 15% identified as belonging to other ethnic groups, slightly lower than the same Census (20.3%) (Stark 2024a). Key socioeconomic and health sample characteristics are outlined in Table 2. while the median age was 48.00 (mean 47.96, s.d. 16.74), higher than in the 2021 England and Wales Census (Office for National Statistics 2022). The median annual non-equivalised household income was £34,000, higher than the national median income for the year ending 2023 of £32,500 (Department for Work and Pension 2024). Participants reported a mean score of 26.85 for risk of destitution, with 0 representing extremely low risk and 100 extremely high risk. The mean MacArthur ladder score was 5.30, with 1 representing the worst off in society and 10 the best off. The mean average control of life score was 61.41, where 0 means completely out of control and 100 means completely in control. The mean life satisfaction score was mean 61.63, where 0 means completely dissatisfied and 100 completely satisfied. The average GAD-7 score fell within the 5-9: Mild Anxiety category (Sapra et al. 2020). The average PHQ-8 score fell below the minimum threshold for depression (Kroenke et al. 2009).

Participants indicated that they sat broadly in the middle of a left-right 100-point ideological scale. As Table 1 indicates, the sample under-represented both Conservative and Labour 2019 voters, with the proportion of undecided 2024 voters much higher than in national polling. The sample showed a reduction in levels of support for both main political parties.

Table 2. Socioeconomic and health statistics.

Variable	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Age	47.96	48	16.74
Left Right	45.97	50	21.01
Household Net Income Pa	40,156.70	34,000.00	39,420.12
Perceived Risk Of Destitution	26.85	19	26.86
MacArthur Ladder Score	5.3	5	1.61
Perceived Control Of Life	61.41	65.17	22.69
Life Satisfaction Score	61.64	68	24.15
GAD-7	5.14	4	5.2
PHQ-8	4.45	3	4.96

Levels of support

Table 3 outlines pre- and post-treatment level of support for the policy among the whole respondent sample (all), ‘lovers’ ($\geq 70/100$) and ‘haters’ (< 30). There was high initial overall level of support for education reform (mean 70.73, median 77.00, s.d. 25.97). A large proportion of respondents – lovers – expressed strong pre-treatment support (58.53%). A small proportion – haters – expressed strong opposition (≤ 30 , 9.44%). Almost one in five (18.11%) chose 100 on the scale, while just 1.79% chose 0. There was a statistically significant increase ($p < .001$) in mean support among haters from 11.82 to 15.87. To examine whether time taken to complete the survey affected levels of support, we compared scores for lovers, haters and those in-between, but did not conduct broader analysis on this in-between group, which is included in the ‘all’ group for the broader analysis. We present change by quintile in Figure 3 below. Time taken to complete the survey did not predict level of support ($p = .44$). This suggests, for example, that spending more time reading the policy description in the survey did not increase or decrease subsequent levels of support for policies.

As the unweighted regression data provided in supplementary table 3 indicates, there were statistically significant differences in pre-treatment support by voting intention. Relative to those who reported being female, white British, not working and intending to vote Conservative, Labour ($p < .001$), Liberal Democrats ($p < .001$), Green/SNP/Plaid Cymru ($p < .001$), Reform Party ($p < .001$) or not intending to vote ($p < .001$) was associated with higher levels of support for education reform policies. Older age ($p < .001$) and male gender identity ($p < .001$) were associated with lower levels of support. As supplementary table 4 indicates, dissatisfaction with income ($p = .003$), low life satisfaction ($p < .001$), low MacArthur ladder score ($p < .001$), risk of destitution ($p < .001$), high risk of destitution ($\geq 70/100$) ($p < .001$), not managing well financially ($p = .002$) and ‘just getting by’ ($p < .001$) were associated with higher levels of support, while being mostly satisfied with income ($p = .004$) and home ownership ($p < .001$) predicted lower levels of support. Reporting bad and very bad health ($p = .006$), higher anxiety scores through GAD-7 ($p < .001$) and depression (PHQ-8) ($p < .001$) predicted higher levels of support.

Structural equation modelling

As discussed in the Methods section, we fitted the SEM shown in Figure 1 to the data, collapsing across narrative conditions. The comparative fit index was 0.91; > 0.90 is generally taken to indicate adequate model fit (Bentler 1990). The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) statistic was 0.07; < 0.05 is generally taken to indicate a very good fit and < 0.10 reasonable fit (Fan, Thompson, and Wang 1999).

Table 3. Level and change in support pre-post treatment.

Sample	% before	% after	Mean (Before)	Median (Before)	Standard Deviation (Before)	Mean (After)	Median (After)	Average Change in Score	(p)	Minutes taken to complete survey (mean)
All	100	100	70.73	77	26.5	71.46	78	0.72	-.269	
Lovers (≥70)	58.54	60.92	88.79			87.51		-1.29	-.052	24.39
Haters (≤30)	9.44	9.3	11.82			15.87		4.05	-<.001	25.99
In-between (31-69)										25.75
0 scores	1.79	1.19								
100 scores	18.11	17.70								

Standardized model parameters are shown in [Figure 1](#) (for full model output see Supplementary Table 6). The modelling strongly supports prior work asserting the relationship between socioeconomic status and anxiety and depression (Nettle et al. 2024; Parra-Mujica et al. 2023; Villadsen 2023) and policy preferences. Lower socioeconomic position directly leads to greater support with a weak negative coefficient. Mental distress then provides an indirect pathway as lower socioeconomic position is strongly associated with more mental distress, and more mental distress was weakly associated with greater support for education reform. Finally, cynicism about the government provides an indirect pathway, with lower socioeconomic position associated with greater cynicism about the government, which in turn weakly reduced support for the policy, acting in the opposite direction to the first two pathways. There was also a significant association between age and support for the policy (support decreasing with age), independent of the effects of age on socioeconomic position, mental distress and cynicism about the government. This is partially explained by the association between age and distress, such that older participants were less likely to be distressed.

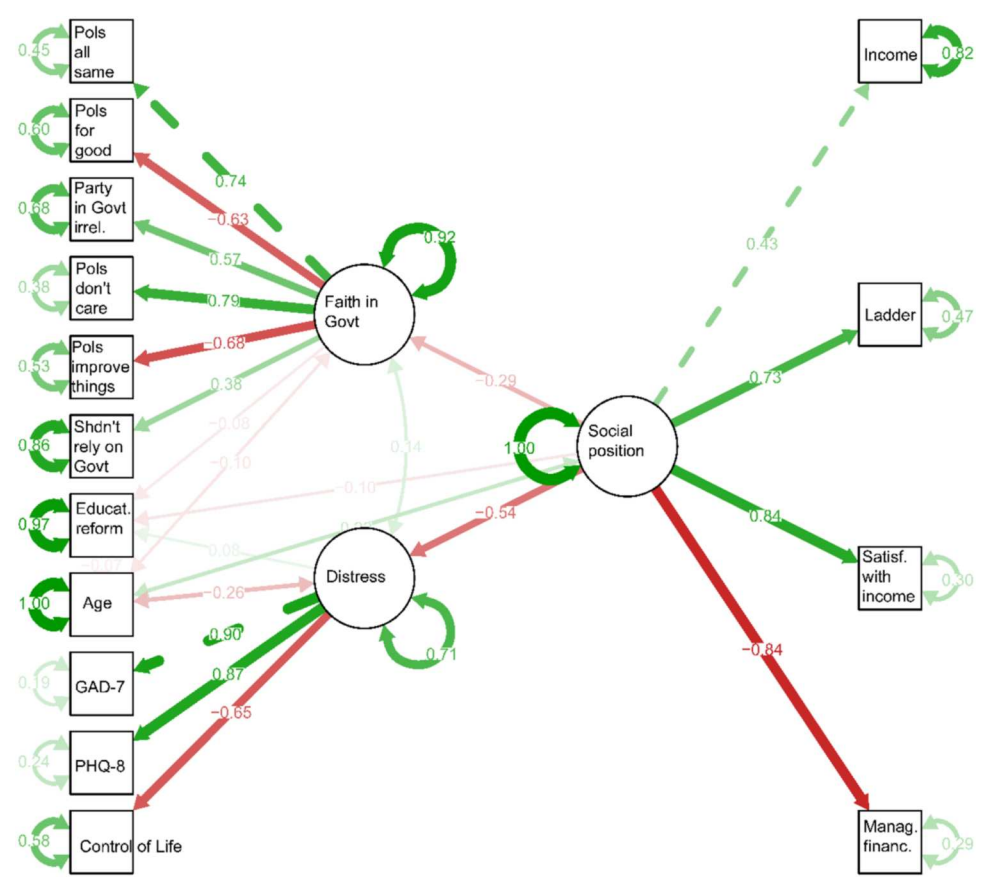


Figure 1. Structural equation model predicting support for education reform. Boxes show measured variables, and ovals inferred latent variables.

Narrative treatment and change in policy approval

As Figure 2 shows, while there was a linear impact of each narrative, there was no evidence of a statistically significant narrative treatment effect on support for education reform on participants overall, which increased by 0.72 points ($p = .2693$) on average across all narratives. However, as 18.11% chose 100 at the pre stage, there was little room on the scale for improvement among a large proportion of respondents. However, there was a large and strongly significant increase in support among pre-treatment haters of 4.04 points ($p = .0092$).

Figure 3 represents a breakdown in approval of the policy by quintiles. We have imposed ordinal-type categories on these quintiles in order to aid understanding of direction, strength and shifts in approval. It shows reduction pre-post treatment in those who completely disagree and an incremental increase in each of the top four categories of support. The most significant shift was among the 6.31% moved from the neutral to the mostly agree quintile.

As supplementary table 5 indicates, the average change in support by narrative was 0.843 for absolute gains, 1.865 for relative gains, -1.101 for security and -0.262 for economic benefit. No category of narrative differed significantly from absolute gains. Being dissatisfied, as opposed to satisfied, with income ($p = .035$) and better self-reported physical health (square root of PHQ-8) ($p = .035$) were associated with significantly higher changes in support, while high MacArthur score ($p = .027$) and being a homeowner ($p < .001$) were associated with lower levels changes in support.

Table 4 sets out average levels of persuasiveness of narratives as rated by participants. There were statistically significant treatment differences. Although the sample size is small and ought to be understood in that context, haters rated relative gains (mean 27.07, median 15.16) more highly than economic benefit (mean 17.11, median 9.87).

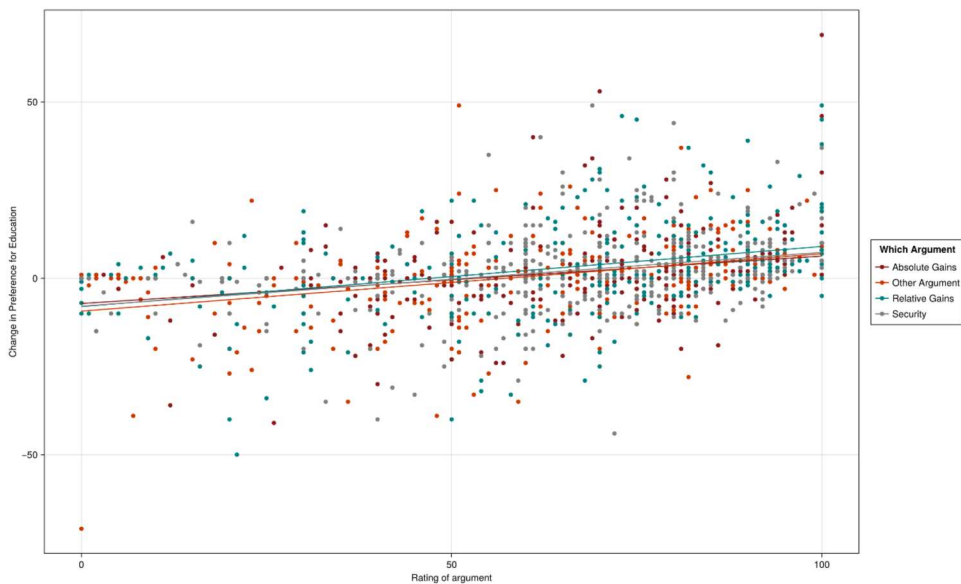


Figure 2. Scattergram of change in education preferences from pre-treatment score.



Figure 3. Change in percentages of support for education reform pre-post treatment by support categories (i.e. changes from completely disagree to mostly disagree, etc.).

Levels of support for education reform compared with levels of support for progressive taxation

Levels of support for education reform were compared with levels of support from the same participants to a separate package of clearly redistributive reforms to taxation. This package of tax reforms were presented to participants as follows:

Reforms to taxation would improve economic performance and the interests of the vast majority of society by introducing:

- wealth taxes on those with net wealth of over £2 million;
- carbon taxes on large companies that produce greenhouse gases;
- increased corporation taxes to bring the UK in line with other Western democracies, such as Germany
- conversion of all but £750 of the personal tax allowance into a cash benefit, 3% increases to basic and higher rate income tax bands and a 10% increase on the amount of income over £150,000 (e.g. someone who earns £160,000 pay 55% on the £10,000 over £150,000, but 43% on income between £37,701-£150,000 and 23% below £37,701)

Table 4. Average participant-scored persuasiveness of narratives broken down by initial levels of support for policy.

Sample	Absolute gains Mean	Absolute gains Median	Relative gains Mean	Relative gains Median	Security Mean	Security Median	Economic benefit Mean	Economic benefit Median
All	68.76	75.00	70.49	75.00	69.06	75.00	65.44	70.00
Lovers	83.15	88.00	82.25	85.00	83.55	84.00	80.30	84.00
Haters	20.67	10.00	27.07	15.16	24.89	22.68	17.11	9.87

- increased rates of tax on passive wealth (for example, on dividends from stocks and shares), so that this wealth is taxed as highly as wages.
- progressive local property taxes that increase the tax burden on the most expensive houses that are currently taxed at a lower proportion than average houses
- capital investment from people's Quantitative Easing through a National Investment Bank

Evidence suggests that some impacts of the policies include:

- Increasing the tax base to fund policies that improve the functioning of society as a whole
- Increasing the income and wealth of ordinary citizens and reducing the wealth of wealthy individuals and corporations
- Securing citizens from the threat of international socioeconomic shocks by investing in Britain's social and economic infrastructure
- Making the tax system fairer by ensuring that income from work and passive wealth are taxed equally, rather than the current system in which work is taxed more than wealth

As Figure 4 shows, results suggest that the more individuals support clearly redistributive reforms to taxation, the more they support education reform. Support for education reform was moderately positively correlated with tax reform ($r = .54, p < .001$), but may be considered strong given the nature of the individual-level data.

To assess whether participants were merely selecting the same assessment score independently of policy description, we compared with support for an illustrative programme of welfare reform. This was presented as follows:

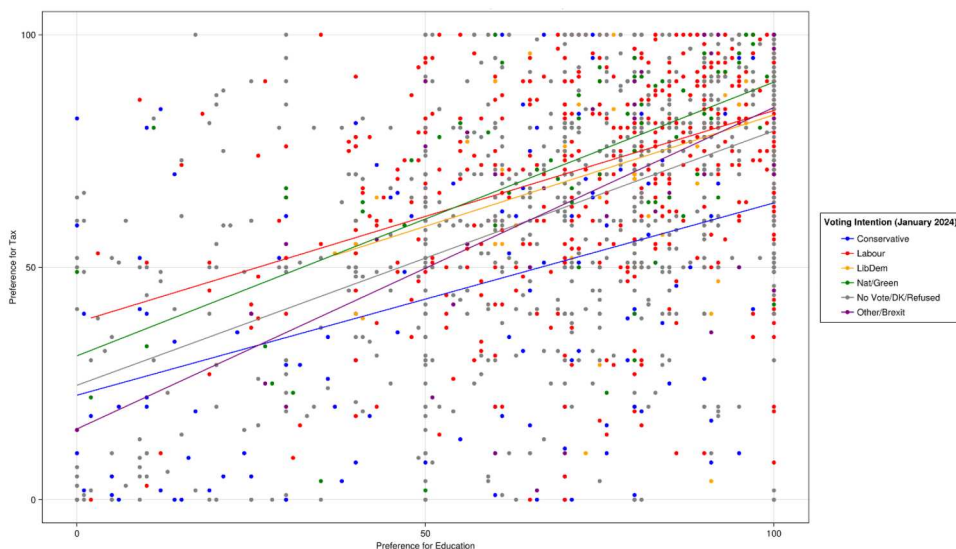


Figure 4. Scattergram of pre-treatment preferences for reform to education and tax mapped by voting intention.

A basic income is a weekly payment made to everyone that is not conditional on their health or employment status or how much they earn. It would provide social security to us all by:

- Providing immediate support to those in and out of work
- Enabling us to meet our basic needs
- Reducing economic stress that affects our health and wellbeing

Evidence suggests that impacts of the policies include:

- Protecting all citizens from economic insecurity and shocks, temporary cash flow problems and precarious work and self-employment
- Increasing the spending power of those on low-medium incomes by using tax on wealthy individuals and companies
- Removing disincentives to economic activity within the current welfare system
- Increasing efficiency and fairness of welfare

As [Figure 5](#) shows, while there was a correlation in support, this was much less strong ($r = .41$, $p < .001$) than the correlation between support for education and tax. This suggests that participants were assessing each policy programme according to elements of its description.

Discussion

The implications of support for education reform

Levels of support for highly progressive education reform were very high. Not only was the mean score high, but both the proportion of lovers and those who scored the

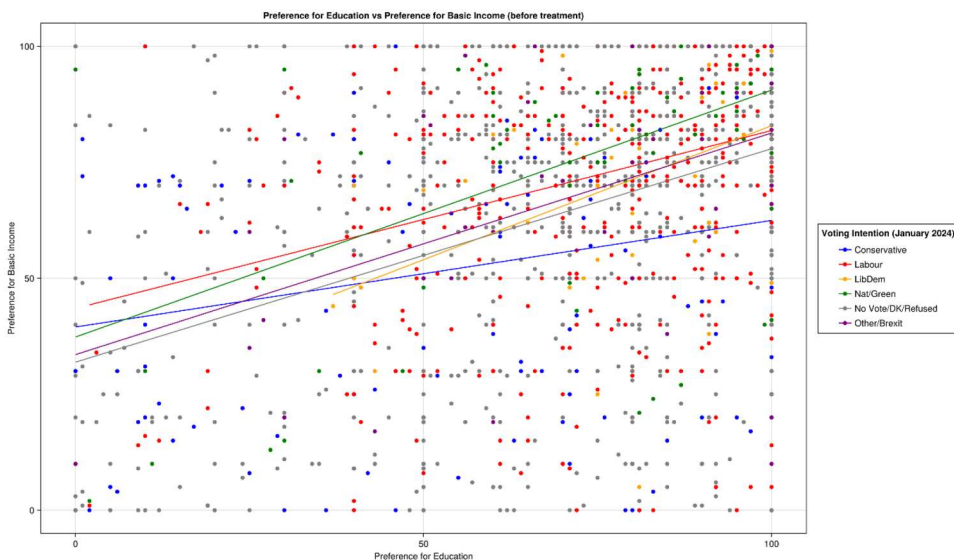


Figure 5. Scattergram of pre-treatment preferences for reform to education and welfare reform mapped by voting intention.

policy at 100 were also very high, suggesting enthusiasm across a wide body of the electorate beyond those who identify as progressive, as indicated by the high levels of support among those intending to vote for the Reform Party. While ethnicity, geography and gender were not statistically significant factors in determining levels of support, older, wealthier and healthier participants were less likely to support the policy. It is likely that differences in voting pattern by age may reflect the different degrees of exposure to risk of destitution as well as form of media consumption, with older voters more likely to hold assets, be in receipt of predictable income and to read right leaning newspapers. Conversely, those exposed to financial insecurity, ill health and mental distress were all more likely to support the policy, and to support it strongly. The impact of the pandemic, austerity, the cost-of-living crisis, and the associated increasing divides within society - particularly, the significant number of families now living in in-work poverty (Innes 2020), have had a negative impact on individuals' ability to live a decent life (Eyles, Major, and Machin 2022). It is therefore unsurprising that those who perceive themselves to be exposed to financial insecurity have strong support for education reform to further secure the future of their children.

Reforms which aim to expand the free school meal offer will have an immediate, tangible financial impact on those living in relative poverty, whilst reforms to increase teacher numbers and subsequently reduce class sizes will impact positively on the quality of education children receive. Small class sizes are a key benefit enjoyed by those attending private schools (Brighouse and Waters 2022) and policies to reflect this in the state sector have core public support (Yates 2024). Receiving a high-quality education has long been viewed as the means of addressing learning and employment disparities (2017; Britton, Drayton, and Van der Erve 2021; Social Mobility Commission 2024; Wright and Mulvey 2021). This therefore offers a key means of driving social mobility, and delivering its associated benefits, and links to absolute gains for those currently exposed to financial insecurity.

Given that younger people are exposed to greater degrees of precariousness than older generations, who have accumulated greater quantities of wealth than those generations that came before and after them, it is understandable that they would see greater value in education reform as a means of reducing debt and increasing spending power, both immediately and in the longer-term, through enhanced earning potential. This is reflected in a Public First report (Lister and Price 2023) showing post-18 educational offers which have a strong future employment focus, such as vocational skills courses or apprenticeships are becoming more attractive than traditional university study. Younger people are also exposed to greater levels of mental distress associated with that increased insecurity (Nettle et al. 2024; Parra-Mujica et al. 2023; Villadsen 2023). This interpretation may be supported by the correlation in support for progressive tax reform, which is necessarily redistributive. Interestingly, the significant increase in levels of support among haters for education reform because of the narrative treatment may indicate scope for persuasion among older, wealthier and healthier respondents. This is important insofar as these are respondents who are more likely to be vulnerable to any tax increases required to pay for the reforms.

While successive governments have heralded education as a core policy priority, a pathway to social mobility and a principal route out of poverty (Department for Education 2017; Social Mobility Commission 2024), the continued social inequalities in educational

outcomes highlighted by Britton, Drayton, and Van der Erve (2021) and Farquharson et al., among others, confirm the failure of recent policies (Farquharson 2024). Therefore, lower levels of public faith in government policy in relation to education specifically, are arguably justified and certainly reflected in recent public opinion polls, such as those relating to quality of education (Yates 2024), private schools' charitable status (YouGov 2024b) and tuition fees (Lister and Price 2023). In this regard, there are reasons to believe that there is growing agreement with Bourdieu's analysis (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) of education as means of reproducing, rather than challenging, inequalities and that progressive state intervention in education and taxation is required as a consequence. Diane Reay very clearly articulates the nature of reproduction in a UK context. She traces the nature of middle class as 'the ideal normative class' within UK system developed specifically to benefit wealthier parents and children – albeit one that ultimately harms everyone by emphasizing class-based division and presenting working class pupils as being fundamentally in need of cultural transformation (Reay 2017, 2021). The role of that class-based education in shaping society has relevance to the way in which political systems are viewed. Given that private school and elite university alumni are represented disproportionately in government, and given emerging evidence that this erodes faith in government (Kesberg and Easterbrook 2025), there is reason to believe that support for the reforms presented aligns with broader sentiment on social, economic and democratic reform (M. T. Johnson et al. 2023c; Nettle et al. 2025). While there are methodological limitations noted below, one possible reading of the SEM relating to faith in government may be that 'income and education provide distinct advantages and primarily affect economic and socio-cultural policy', meaning that education is viewed through the lens of broader concerns around inequality (Schakel, Persson and Sundell 2025, 933). This may support the notion that people view improving education systems as a 'silver bullet' like approach (Ansell 2008), that the existing system's support of private provision does not provide 'public benefit' (Fryer 2023) and that public investment is needed to eliminate cost-related access barriers (Picketty 2014).

The findings in this study suggest that negative perception of government intervention (Brighouse and Waters 2022) is contingent. There is widespread support for a programme of reform, such as the one we have examined, that reverses centralization, marketization and austerity in removing embedded privileges within the education system that are increasingly viewed at odds with the interests of the majority of citizens (Spruyt et al. 2025). Indeed, the findings here support the notion of a receptive public open to persuasion on how such programmes can be funded. The debate around the UK Government's planned reduction to 50% the Agricultural Property Relief for Inheritance Tax purposes on combined agricultural and business assets above £1 million (HM Revenue & Customs 2025) demonstrates the importance of narratives to public opinion. The farming lobby has committed substantial resources to asserting that the policy will be a 'medieval' 'Family Farm Tax' (Keck 2025; NFU 2025). In reality, it will begin to address, though nowhere near in full, embedded advantages that have been held by a small proportion of the population as part of the feudal system that was introduced to the UK a millennium ago (Johnson, Johnson, and Winlow 2025c). This advantage has been exacerbated in recent years as the very wealthy have bought up notionally agricultural land in order to avoid Inheritance Tax (Tax Justice UK 2024). The reforms will still facilitate at least a 50% reduction in Inheritance Tax, with married couples in effect able to

pass on up to £3 million to their children without paying any Inheritance Tax at all. The ability to use agricultural land effectively as a tax arrangement rather than for food production hampers rather than aids the production and growth that is regarded as essential by economists to achieving national renewal.

This example demonstrates the importance of narratives and fluidity in public opinion. Just as the farming lobby have shaped opposition to a policy that will increase equality, the Government has been successful in defending a policy that will reduce it: the Government's policy on removing the exemption from VAT for independent school fees remains a popular policy despite significant lobbying efforts as the Government has responded by demonstrating how it can improve education for the vast majority of voters. This study supports the notion that highly progressive education reform can be achieved by careful adversarial co-production of narratives. In this instance, levels of opposition among 'haters' reduced significantly. Shifting strong opposition to neutrality represents a highly significant impact in terms of public approval (Johnson, Johnson, and Nettle 2023b). The notion that the public have a fixed position of fundamental opposition to tax and spend is not supported by the evidence presented here. Within the confines of the limitations below, the findings suggest scope for persuading the public that substantive, transformative education reforms are possible. Not only was strong opposition reduced, there was also evidence of those who were neutral moving to positions of support. Indeed, the narratives presented above suggest that there is recognition among the public that the underpinning justifications for cuts, such as streamlined allocation of educational resources on the basis of merit (Labaree 1997), are no longer sustainable.

Much has been made of contrasting explanations for an apparent increase in support for merit-based education systems as the basis for unequal distribution of resources (Mijis 2022) and an increase in support for populist opposition to elites. The absolute gains narrative developed here emphasized equality of opportunity in facilitating outcomes, apparently reflecting a longer-standing belief that equality of opportunity warrants merit-based rewards in employment. However, even within this narrative, it is implied that unequal distribution of resources creates real obstacles to that equality of opportunity, harming society overall. This intuition is advanced more clearly in the relative gains narrative, which was, on average, rated the most persuasive among all respondents (marginally) and particularly among haters. This narrative describes the current system as nepotistic, allowing rich parents to pervert meritocracy by buying advantage. This supports Sandel's explanation for apparent rising support for meritocracy as a legitimizing ideology for inequality and resentment toward systems that preclude that distribution (Sandel 2022). This may be understood in the following terms: as inequality has risen over the past four decades, people may have bought into merit-based ideological assumptions bound up with the relationship between higher educational outcomes and higher incomes, but they may have also developed belief that the system does not advance their particular interests.

Such belief corresponds to evidence that indicates that policies intended to produce national absolute gains with trickle-down effects and austerity in public spending do not increase growth, especially with regard to per capita growth and national wellbeing (Common Sense Policy Group 2024b; Hardill, Johnson, and Johnson 2025; Johnson et al. 2025b). There are indications in the data that a fully fit for purpose education system

funded through progressive taxation is a key means of reversing this trend. However, it is only possible if policymakers are able to present salient argument around the impacts of policies on people's lives. Our data on adversarially co-produced narratives indicate pathways achieve do this.

Strengths and limitations

There are several limitations to this study, with some mentioned previously. In particular, participants were presented with a package of reform rather than individual interventions within a survey that included packages for a range of other policy areas. While the different policy areas received different levels of support (see further discussion below), it is not possible to evaluate the comparative popularity of individual policy items within each policy area package. We presented packages to ensure that participant load was kept to a reasonable level within the overall survey. Packaging was unavoidable in the context of such a large policy area, since each item within the package necessarily depended on the others and each tier of the education system is necessarily affected by the others. Testing of specific interventions, such as support for removing VAT exemption on private school tuition fees, the trade-offs between specific interventions and, in particular, funding mechanisms is necessarily suited to conjoint experimental methods (Nettle et al. 2025). Conjoint experiments, which were designed for marketing, establish priorities and strength of support for specific elements within a policy. This is a possible future direction for research. It is plausible to assume that participants, clearly, will prioritize and prefer specific elements within the package presented within the current study. It is not possible to ascertain these very particular assessments within data. However, the package was designed (a) to be adequate in size and scale to address compounding problems within the education system arising from the two decades' of reforms and (b) to involve a degree of public investment that breaches policymaker intuitions about large-scale public spending being unpopular. The fact that there were high levels of support may be understood as significant: if there is support for an expensive and highly progressive programme, this suggests that the intuition is not supported by the evidence.

Evidence on the impact of individual narratives must also be assessed with caution. The small sample size means that no statistically significant differences were found between the four narratives. However, the large and significant overall treatment effect among haters is important. Contrary to the claims of an Overton Window of policies that are acceptable to the public that only shifts over extended periods of time, this study indicates that perceptions among opponents of policies can be changed at scale and very rapidly by using narratives developed by fellow opponents and informed by their arguments in favour.

The length of the survey as a whole involving a number of different policy areas may have resulted in fatigue among respondents. However, within the education section and broader dataset there are a number of indications that respondents, on the whole, were attentive in their responses. Policies were not all rated at a similar level of support that might be associated with (e.g.) 'straightlining', with mean support ranging from 66.93 for the education policies to 78.68 for the health policies (Stark 2024a). The evidence from comparative correlations of support for tax reform (Figure 4) and social security (Figure 5) reform suggest that, while there is an overall trend toward support for

progressive public investment, participants viewed different policy packages differently: those who support a package of education reform are more likely to express higher levels of support for a package of tax reform than they do a package of welfare reform. Furthermore, separate analysis of the overall dataset indicates that there is a ‘principal component’ of traits within the variables that explains a high degree of variance (mean 71%) in support for each policy, ranging from 62% for democratic reform to 78% for education (Stark 2024c). This indicates that a set of traits among respondents predicts relatively consistently support or opposition for policies with an underpinning emphasis on public investment, but with smaller differences within each. This shows consistency yet variance across policy areas to suggest that, on the whole, respondents were sufficiently attentive and followed instructions throughout the survey.

Supporting this conclusion, there is a further relevant attention check in the survey. The ‘faith in government’ Likert scale has six item statements with options consistently from strongly disagree to strongly agree. However, the statements are not consistently ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. The items are: (1) ‘Politicians are all the same’; (2) ‘Politics can be a force for good’; (3) ‘It doesn’t matter which party is in government’; (4) ‘Politicians don’t care about people like me’; (5) ‘Politicians want to make things better’; (6) ‘We shouldn’t rely on government to make things better’. 1., 3. and 4. are prospectively negative. Items 2. and 5. are prospectively positive. 6. has a different framing in that it speaks to a belief in whether government should or should not play a leading role in making things better, rather than if it can/does or cannot/does not. As Figure 1 shows, a latent variable of ‘faith in government’ is associated in the expected direction with the positive and negative items, with 6. being positively associated, but with a lower strength (0.38 vs 0.57 for the next lowest strength for item 3.). Given that the ‘faith in government’ scale was the final question in the survey, it provides further evidence that respondents on the whole remained sufficiently focused.

Specifically regarding the education policy package, while the average change in support before and after treatment was large and significant among ‘haters’, respondents largely remained within their overall categories; it is not the case that haters suddenly became ‘lovers’. Further, support among lovers dropped 1.3 points after treatment, which reflects both an inability to score beyond 100, but also that those who had a positive pre-treatment opinion of the policy largely retained it after treatment. Together, this indicates that the data has not been significantly affected by random selection of choices.

There was some degree of complexity in the language used to describe policies elsewhere in the survey. However, the findings with regard to adversarial co-production relates to the importance of narrative on perception of policy among opponents. Voters are asked to make decisions at general elections based on media coverage that has regularly covered issues like quantitative easing, customs unions, measures of inflation, net migration and years spent in good health. That is not to say that voters do or must understand all issues; rather, each contributes to an overall narrative about a policy and the policy’s proposer relating to things like tax and spend and public vs private focus. For education, in particular, all items within the package were reasonably straightforward.

Conclusion

Bremer and Bürgisser pose the key question, how can voters ‘be convinced to give up some privileges and support policies that address new social risks?’ (Bremer and Bürgisser

2022, 50). We have presented here a series of possible avenues. It is important to note that there is widespread support for education as an abstract concept – people generally understand that this has lifelong impacts on various outcomes of importance to society (Ansell 2008). However, it is also true that people see trade-offs between investment and taxation. We find moderate positive correlations between support for progressive education and progressive taxation. This is significant in understanding how residents view the role of public investment in addressing cost-related barriers (Picketty 2014). The key contribution to education studies is the use of adversarial co-production to understanding how those who express initial opposition to progressive education reform can be persuaded to mitigate their opposition. In this instance, opponents' level of support increased significantly as a result of the narrative treatment, suggesting fluidity in position. Indeed, some participants who were initially neutral moved into a more supportive quintile, suggesting potential for persuading undecided participants as well. The need for coupling policy and narrative development is indicated by the associations between risk of destitution, low faith in government and support for progressive policy: put simply, those whose children and young relatives would benefit most from progressive education reform need to be persuaded that orthodox democratic government can deliver good outcomes. Policymakers should view this challenge as one that they can meet through the methods outlined in this article. Given the need for development of an education system that delivers on priorities around equality of opportunity and net social benefit overall, the evidence presented here suggests that there is substantial scope for persuasion and that reforming the education system is a key means of addressing concerns about a society that has become increasingly unequal alongside rises in support for right-wing populism.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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