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Anxiety, Insecurity, and Redistribution in the UK 'Red Wall': Have Policy Preferences Changed Since the COVID-19 Pandemic?

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Abstract
Anxiety is often seen as a driver of far-right politics in British political culture that is strategically irrational insofar as the consequences of the policies pursued by such parties contribute to an increase in poverty and inequality, which are drivers of anxiety. This article shows that anxiety can also drive voter support for strategically rational, progressive policies, which hold out a real prospect for addressing the threats that voters face. Moreover, once established, those preferences appear to outlast occurrent anxiety experiences. Previous studies have found cross-sectional associations between socioeconomic status and anxiety and support for Basic Income, as an archetypal redistributive social security measure, on the other. In this article, we present the results of a novel longitudinal study of red wall voters' ($n = 304$) policy preferences over two waves between 2022 and 2024 in the run-up to the UK General Election, using a fixed effects model examining associations between socioeconomic status, anxiety, and changes in public policy preferences. We also examine cross-sectional associations between various socioeconomic and demographic variables and Basic Income support in the 2024 wave (total $n = 1988$ [red wall $n = 913$]) in comparison to the 2022 wave (red wall $n = 805$). While overall longitudinal levels of anxiety have reduced, real income levels—taking into account inflation—and support for Basic Income remain remarkably stable, with a slightly significant positive association between increased faith in politicians and support for Basic Income. The findings suggest a relationship between socioeconomic status, anxiety, and support for social security-enhancing measures. This suggests that progressive parties can satisfy psychosocial needs via redistributive reform and gain popular support as a consequence.

Keywords Fear · Anxiety · Policy · Red wall · Basic income · Social determinants

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Introduction

Anxiety and fear have figured in British political analysis and scholarship for hundreds of years, stretching back at least to the sixteenth century and Thomas Hobbes, who thought that politics was sustained not by 'mutual human benevolence' but 'men's mutual fear' (Hobbes, 2017, p. 24; Jakonen, 2011). Such psychological phenomena seemed to assume a more central role at the turn of the millennium, particularly after 9/11 and the London bombings of 2005. Since then, fear has been a key analytical concept and object of criticism. For example, Füredi (2006a, 2006b) advanced the concept of a 'culture of fear' to describe the proliferation of expert discourses and advice that frames the world as brimming with threats. Bauman (2006) picked up on the same trend but suggested that it gave rise to a more diffuse type of emotional phenomenon that he called liquid fear. However, both come to the same conclusion: the spread of fear is an existential threat to freedom and democracy. In contrast to analyses of the culture of fear, critiques of the 'politics of fear' target the deliberate use of fear by political leaders and organizations to manipulate certain groups of people—especially conservatives and the far right—usually for purposes that are antithetical to democratic values. Influential proponents of such analyses include, for example, Wodak (2021) and Nussbaum (2018), within a much larger literature (Enroth, 2017).

These critiques of fear contribute important insights to our understanding of contemporary British political culture. But they are liable to lead us astray when it comes to solving the underpinning dissatisfaction with political responses to issues of poverty, inequality, and general decline. Their apparent upshot is that fear has no place in politics and policymaking. To see why this is problematic, we need a clearer understanding of what fear and anxiety are.

Fear is an emotion directed at a perceived threat. It often involves certain subjective feelings, like a sense of unease; physiological changes, like increased heart rate; cognitive and attentional effects, like a focus on the threat; and motivations, like a desire to avoid the threat (Tappolet, 2009). Anxiety is a closely related affective phenomenon. Often, it is defined as a mood. Anxiety as a mood shares certain features with fear, including subjective feelings of unpleasantness and tension. However, it differs from fear in that it is not directed at a specific threat; instead, like other moods, it is free-floating or directed at the subject's world in general (Mitchell, 2021). The mood of anxiety primes the subject for fear and turns into fear when it settles on a particular object. Anxiety can also be understood as an emotion related to but distinguishable from fear. On this understanding, a key difference between anxiety and fear is that the former is directed at a potential threat while the latter is directed at an immediate and concrete threat. According to the proponents of this understanding, this difference tracks other morally and politically salient differences between anxiety and fear, such as what the subject's attention is pulled toward and what they want to do (Kurth, 2018).

Political critics of fear, such as Füredi, Bauman, Wodak, and Nussbaum, tend to define their target widely (or vaguely) enough to encompass fear and anxiety in both of the above senses. They broadly agree on three things. Firstly, they think that people's fear and anxiety tend to be *cognitively irrational*; that is, they misperceive the objects of their fear as threats (De Sousa, 1990, pp. 163–164). Secondly, and

relatedly, they think that people's fear and anxiety tend to be *strategically irrational*; that is, fear and anxiety result in responses that are not aligned with people's values or interests. Thirdly, the political critics of fear think that what people affectively perceive as threats and appropriate responses to those threats are often the result of actors with distinct clusters of interests. Those actors include self-serving experts (e.g. Füredi, 2006a, 2006b, pp. 80–1), far-right populists (Wodak, 2021, p. 189), or other elites (Bauman, 2006, p. 159).

For example, Nussbaum (2018) observes that working-class Americans face the real and difficult problem of a declining standard of living caused by globalization and automation. But instead of facing those difficulties, they 'grasp after villains', such as immigrants, whom they effectively misperceive as a threat (p. 2)—i.e. cognitive irrationality. A 'fantasy' then takes shape for those working-class individuals, according to Nussbaum: 'if "we" can keep "them" out (build a wall)… "we" can regain our pride' (p. 2). However, that will not serve their interests by addressing the problem they face, i.e. strategic irrationality. Finally, Nussbaum observes that public figures like Trump actively construct immigrants as a threat to working-class living standards and frame policies meant to eject and keep them out as the solution (Nussbaum, 2018, p. 59). Others have made similar arguments about fear's cognitive and strategic irrationality in the context of electoral politics and beyond (Füredi, 2006a, 2006b, p. 20; Wodak, 2021, p. 260).

These concerns have merit. People's fears can be and have been shaped by a range of social forces (Harbin, 2022). One way this can occur is through the construction of fear narratives, which explain what the relevant threats are and what people can do about them. Such narratives may be parasitic on pre-existing fears, for example, by linking them to additional objects and strategies (Döring, 2022). Think, for example, of someone who has recently lost their job and is anxious about how they will provide for their family. They might be exposed to a fear narrative that explains their job loss in terms of the threat of illegal immigration and argues for the need to curb it. Thereby, the person's original anxiety has been extended to encompass a new object and strategies for action.

Yet, the political critics of fear are wrong to conclude from this that fear is politically poisonous, that good policymakers should shun the politics of fear, that anxious people are predisposed to far-right politics, or that responses to anxiety need only be regressive. Clearly, this is not always the case. A significant body of theoretical and qualitative political scholarship argues that fear can and often has played a cognitively and strategically rational role in politics, directing people's attention and effort toward real threats and plausibly effective solutions (Degerman, 2022; Degerman et al., 2023; Kingston, 2011; Mouffe, 2018; Shklar, 1989). The evident role of fear in the service of progressive political ends, such as curbing climate change, is arguably an example of this (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017).

However, there is also quantitative epidemiological evidence contradicting the critics of fear (Helminen et al., 2022; M. T. Johnson et al., 2023a). A considerable proportion of anxiety is grounded in the material basis of people's lives, rising and falling based on how resources and opportunities change (Villadsen et al., 2024). Notably, several recent empirical studies have shown that financial income is closely related to self-reported levels of anxiety in the long term. Akanni et al.

(2022), for example, found that over a 10-year period decreasing household income levels and stability predicted increasing levels of anxiety, while increasing levels of income stability predicted decreasing levels of anxiety (Parra-Mujica et al., 2023). The same relationship appears to apply on a considerably shorter timescale. Nettle et al.'s Changing Cost of Living Study found that increased financial insecurity has an immediate impact on mental distress as people face the existential threat of destitution (Bateson et al., 2025; Nettle et al., 2024). The upshot is this: anxiety resulting from financial insecurity may render people more open to policies that increase financial security. Indeed, in our 2022 cross-sectional analysis of support for Basic Income, our Structural Equation Modelling found that greater socioeconomic disadvantage predicts stronger support for Basic Income, with part the association mediated by psychological distress (PHQ-8 depression, GAD-7 anxiety, and lack of perceived control), which is strongly associated with socioeconomic disadvantage, but socioeconomic disadvantage is also associated with lower faith in government, which reduces people's belief that policy will be enacted (M. T. Johnson et al., 2023b).

What the empirical findings above indicate is that the primary object of their emotion—namely, financial insecurity—is real and that their anxiety is responsive to the threat that this object poses to them. This article builds on these findings and explores how anxiety shapes preferences for radical, progressive public policies that are strategically rational insofar as they address social determinants of poverty and inequality. We explore preferences among a cohort of 304 voters within 'red wall' constituencies 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. This electorally critical group of constituencies has been presented as culturally conservative (M. Johnson et al., 2022a; Kanagasooriam & Simon, 2021; MacKinnon, 2020) and strategically irrational in favouring measures, such as Brexit, and far-right political parties, such as UKIP, Brexit, and Reform, that actually increase social determinants of anxiety by intensifying neoliberal reforms to the economy (M. Johnson et al., 2022a). In contrast to the critics of fear and anxiety, who argue that these emotions lead people to support strategically irrational far-right policies in response to cognitively irrational threats, we show that anxiety can increase support for radical progressive policies that address cognitively rational threats. We do this by using GAD-7, a screening tool for generalised anxiety disorder to measure both 'ordinary' and clinical anxiety. We begin by setting out our survey method.

Methods

We followed the methods outlined in our previous studies on this topic (E. A. Johnson et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; M. Johnson et al., 2022a; M. T. Johnson et al., 2023b). These included adversarial co-production of narratives with firm opponents—'haters'—of policies to persuade people like them to support policies with which they have been presented. The narratives were then presented to a larger group of participants to establish levels of support for policies pre- and post-presentation of narratives. Participants were red wall adult voters. Given the studies noted

above, our main confirmatory predictions were that socioeconomic status and anxiety would be associated with levels of policy approval. Our materials are available at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF, IO/ for the 2022 wave, and https://osf.io/3ux4m/files/osfstorage for 2024.

Survey 1: 2022

We obtained 805 responses from red wall constituencies in Wales and the North and Midlands of England (E. A. Johnson et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c) between 28 February and 9 March 2022 via prolific.co, a crowdsourcing platform for psychological and social research. The period was towards the end of the COVID-19 restrictions, but in the first week of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and before the full impact of the cost-of-living crisis was felt. Participants from 'red wall' constituencies were identified by the first part of postcodes, meaning that a small number of participants may have lived just outside relevant constituencies. A full description of methods is provided in Johnson et al. (2023a), but in summary, participants were presented with the following description of a Basic Income as welfare reform:

> a system in which every adult British citizen would be given a payment each month that meets your basic needs. Unlike current welfare, it is not affected by whether you work or how much money you have. Its supporters come from across the political spectrum (Nettle et al., 2022).

They were then shown a randomised 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. Participants were then asked to provide basic demographic data and socioeconomic data, including self-rating status on the MacArthur ladder of subjective socioeconomic status, which is a 10-rung ladder used to measure where people see themselves from highest to lowest status (Adler et al., 2000), and perceived risk of destitution on a 100-point sliding scale, health status, including depression PHQ-8 (Kroenke et al., 2001), anxiety GAD-7 (Spitzer et al., 2006a), political affiliation, voting intention, and faith in politicians established by six items in prior project iterations (M. T. Johnson et al., 2023a). GAD-7 includes questions such as whether respondents have felt 'nervous, anxious, or on edge', been 'worrying too much about different things', or had 'trouble relaxing'. These experiences may constitute signs of clinical anxiety if they occur frequently and significantly impair a person's ability to cope with their responsibilities and relationships (Spitzer et al., 2006b). As those experiences form part of ordinary experiences of fear and anxiety (Horwitz & Wakefield, 2012), GAD-7 serves as an effective proxy. We asked participants to rate from strongly disagree to strongly agree the following six items to evaluate faith in government: 'Politicians are all the same'; 'Politics can be a force for good'; 'It doesn't matter which party is in government'; 'Politicians don't care about people like me'; 'Politicians want to make things better'; 'We shouldn't rely on government to make things better' (M. T. Johnson et al., 2023a). Participants were paid £5 for completion of a 20-min survey and provided informed written consent.

Survey 2: 2024

We conducted a second survey via prolific.co in both red wall and non-red-wall constituencies between 20 and 26 January 2024 to establish levels of support for progressive policies in the run-up to the first post-pandemic UK General Election. It contained the same set of questions as the first survey. Participants were also asked to rate nine other policy areas, including a Green New Deal, public utilities, health and social care, childhood and early years, education, housing, transport, democratic reform, and taxation (E. A. Johnson et al., 2024a, 2024b). We obtained 1988 responses overall, 916 from red wall constituencies, of which 304 had also completed the first survey in 2022. These participants were identified by the Prolific IDs. Participants received £4.50 in remuneration. We use pre-treatment (before adversarially co-produced narratives were shown once again) support for Basic Income at this stage to avoid exposing participants to two different types of narratives.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed in Julia, a computer programming language (Julia, 2024). Raw data and scripts are freely available at https://triplepc.northumbria.ac.uk/actnow/v3-v4-stats.html. We used a fixed effects model to account for the multiple responses from each participant. Fixed effects models 'treats unobserved differences between individuals as a set of fixed parameters that can either be directly estimated or partialed out of estimating equations' (Allison, 2009, p. 2). Categorical variables were contrast coded. Net household income was annualised in Wave 1 and inflated based on consumer price index (CPI) inflation to 2024 levels. Our confirmatory predictions were that changes in socioeconomic status would be associated with changes in GAD-7 and PHQ-8 and with changes in support for Basic Income. In addition, using simple regressions, we expected that the associations between socioeconomic status, GAD-7 and PHQ-8, and support would be broadly in line with those from 2022 (Johnson et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). Specifically, those who strongly rejected welfare reform would be homeowners, express low risk of destitution on a scale of 0–100 (<30), and intend to vote Conservative in 2024. The rest of the analyses are considered exploratory.

In the 2022 wave, we also used cross-sectional structural equation modelling (SEM) in R package 'lavaan' (Rosseel, 2012) as described by Johnson et al. (2023b). SEM 'estimates directional pathways in complex models based on longitudinal or cross-sectional data where randomised control trials would either be unethical or cost prohibitive' (Hartwell et al., 2019). In this instance, it enables exploration of the relationship between socioeconomic status, mental distress, and policy preference.

For the cross-sectional analysis of the 2024 wave, we used simple ordinary least squares OLS regression across the whole sample (red wall and non-red-wall) of variables, including net (non-equivalised) household income, risk of destitution, the MacArthur ladder, GAD-7 and PHQ-8 scores, and support for Basic Income. OLS models.

> assume that the analysis is fitting a model of a relationship between one or more explanatory variables and a continuous or at least interval outcome vari-

able that minimizes the sum of square errors, where an error is the difference between the actual and the predicted value of the outcome variable. (Zdaniuk, 2014)

We then included a variable for those residing in red-wall constituencies to examine the specific sample.

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

Results

Longitudinal Panel Demographic Characteristics

Relative to the results in the July 2024 General Election, our longitudinal sample appears to have overrepresented people who voted (65% in sample vs 53% of whole population, though red wall turnout is unclear), strongly overrepresented Labour voters (77% in voting sample vs 41% in the red wall at the election (Butcher, 2024)), and underrepresented Conservative voters (just 8% vs 24%). Contemporary voting intention for red wall constituencies as of 26 January 2024, before Nigel Farage declared that he would stand for Parliament and that the Reform Party would stand in a majority of seats (which increased their support), recorded the following: Labour 48%, Conservative 28%, Reform UK 14%, Green 5%, Liberal Democrat 4% (Redfield & Wilton, 2024). The election results for the main parties in the red wall showed: Labour 41%, Conservatives 24%, Reform UK 22% (Butcher, 2024). The final result reflected low turnout among those who indicated Labour as a voting intention, possibly because (a) they were likely to be younger and younger people are less likely to vote overall (Uberoi, 2023) and (b) because polling leads suggested a decisive Labour victory and reduced competitive pressure to avoid an alternative outcome.

The joint sample included 165 respondents who identified as female, 135 as male, and 4 as non-binary or self-described in another way. As Table 1 indicates, there were clear trends away from Conservative support and toward intending not to vote or not knowing who to vote for.

Table 1 Panel political preferences (percentages may not total 100 due to rounding)

Political party	Voting intention 2022	Voting intention 2024
Conservative	12.17%	4.93%
Labour	46.38%	50%
Lib Dem	5.2%	1.97%
Nat/Green	6.9%	6.9%
Brexit 2022/Reform 2024	6.9%	0.99%
Won't vote/don't know/refused	22.37%	35.2%

Table 2 indicates that the median annual non-equivalised household income was higher than the national median income for the year ending 2023 of £32,500 but fell slightly between 2022 and 2024. However, mean incomes remained remarkably stable in real terms. Perceived risk of destitution, measured on a 100-point scale, with 0 representing extremely low risk and 100 extremely high risk, and MacArthur ladder score, with 1 representing the worst off in society and 10 the best off, remained relatively stable.

GAD-7 scores are categorised as follows: 0–4, minimal anxiety; 5–9, mild anxiety; 10–14, moderate anxiety; > 15, severe anxiety. The mean score fell from mild anxiety to minimal anxiety between 2022 and 2024. PHQ-8 scores of > 5 are considered above the minimum threshold for depression, while > 10 is consistent with moderate or greater depressive symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2009). As such, the mean score fell from above to below the minimum threshold for depression over the two years. The mean faith in government score from the six-item measure fell very slightly from 11.98 to 11.92.

Cross-sectional Demographic Characteristics

The 2024 red-wall and non-red-wall cross-sectional sample included 51% female, 48% male, and 1% who described themselves in another way. Within the sample, 30% percent were Conservative voters in 2019, 30% Labour, 7% Lib Dem, 6% Green, SNP or Plaid Cymru, 6% Brexit Party or other, and 21% did not vote. Conservative voters were, therefore, underrepresented but to a lesser extent than in the longitudinal sample. The median age was higher than in the 2021 England and Wales Census (Office for National Statistics, 2022), and the median annual non-equivalised household income was higher than the national median income for the year ending 2023 of £32,500. The overall sample had slightly higher mean GAD-7 and PHQ-8 scores than those in the longitudinal sample (Table 3).

Table 2 Demographic and socioeconomic statistics of the longitudinal panel (2022) figures uprated by CPI all items index for purposes of comparison

Variable	Mean 2022	Median 2022	Standard deviation 2022	Mean 2024	Median 2024	Standard deviation 2024
Left right	45.97	50	21.01			
Household net income Pa	£39,897	£37,133	19,452.46	£39,913	£35,000	20,229
Perceived risk of destitution	29.14	20.0	26.17	26.72	19.00	26.37
MacArthur ladder score	5.24	5	1.55	5.22	5.00	1.57
GAD-7	6.21	5.00	5.36	4.80	3.00	4.84
PHQ-8	5.94	4.00	5.53	4.29	2.00	4.96
Faith in government	11.98			11.92		

Table 3 Demographic and socioeconomic statistics of cross-sectional sample

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

Table 4 Levels of support

Sample	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Lovers (≥ 70) %	Haters (≤ 30) %	100/100%	0/100%
2022	76.97	81.00	22.61	70.72	5.59	21.94	0.65
2024	74.51	80	25.50	65.16	9	21.61	0.65

The 2022 larger red-wall only cross-sectional sample, with results summarised narratively below, similarly overrepresented Labour voters and underrepresented Conservative voters, though with application of post-stratification weights in analysis to make the sample representative of the constituencies with respect to 2019 voting behaviour (M. T. Johnson et al., 2023b).

Levels of Support

We compared post-narrative levels of support for Basic Income in the 2022 survey with pre-narrative support in 2024 since this ensured that the participants had been provided with comparable information about the policy (Table 4).

Support was very high, with more than 1 in 5 rating the policy 100/100 and around 2/3 rating it 70 or over. Support was relatively stable, though the proportion of 'lovers' reduced slightly and 'haters' increased slightly.

In terms of the larger 2024 red-wall and non-red-wall sample, cross-sectional regression (see supplementary Table 2) revealed that lower socioeconomic status had strongly significant associations with higher levels of support for Basic Income, including each higher rung on the MacArthur ladder (-1.678, $p<0.001$, 95% CI [$-2.534, -0.822$]) and > 70 risk of destitution (6.996, $p<0.001$; 95% CI [3.124, 10.868]). Each higher GAD-7 anxiety score (0.407, $p<0.001$, 95% CI [0.158, 0.657]) and PHQ-8 score (0.498, $p<0.001$, 95% CI [0.241, 0.755]) were significantly associated with higher support for Basic Income. While red wall residence was associated with higher average support scores (2.639, $p=0.040$, 95% CI [0.121, 5.157]), there is good reason to believe that this may be driven by socioeconomic,

rather than cultural, differences between red wall and non-red-wall constituencies, given the well-recognised regional inequality within England (Bambra, 2022; Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022; M. Johnson et al., 2022b; M. T. Johnson et al., 2023b).

Structural Equation Modelling

As discussed in the "Methods" section, we fitted the SEM shown in Fig. 1 to the data, collapsing across narrative conditions. The comparative fit index was 0.88; > 0.90 is generally taken to indicate adequate model fit (Bentler, 1990). The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) statistic was 0.09; < 0.05 is generally taken to indicate a very good fit and < 0.10 a reasonable fit (Fan et al., 1999).

Standardised model parameters are shown in Fig. 1 (for full model output, see Table 1 in the supplementary file). 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 et al., 2023) and policy

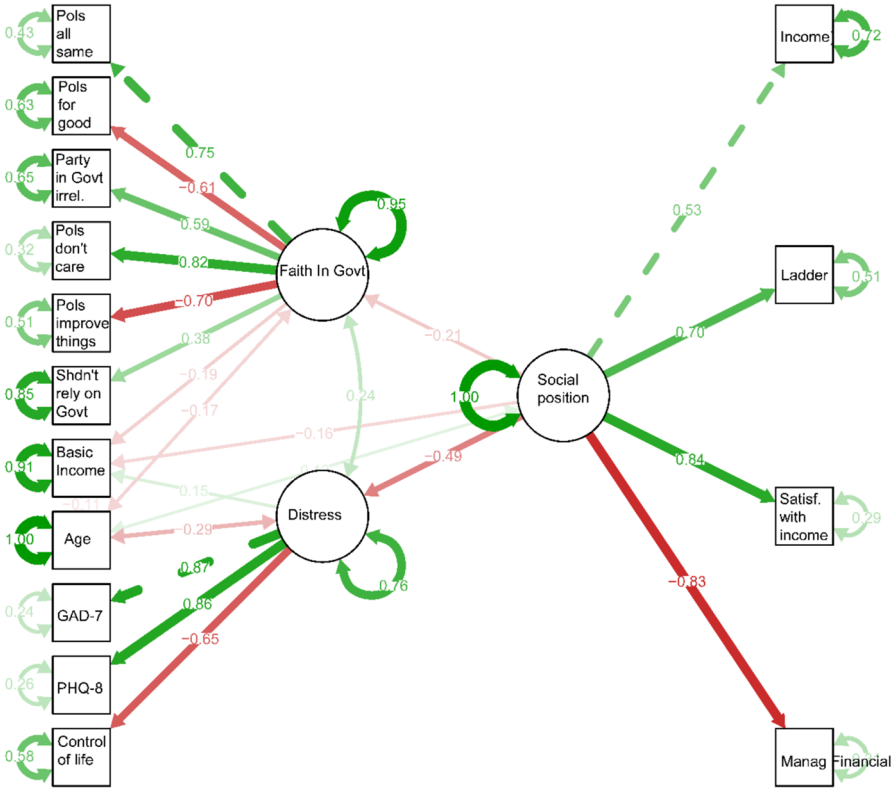

Fig. 1 Structural equation model predicting support for tax reform. Boxes show measured variables, and ovals inferred latent variables

preferences (Howard et al., 2023, 2024; M. T. Johnson et al., 2023a). Socioeconomic position affected support for Basic Income via three separate pathways:

1) A direct pathway with a weak negative coefficient: lower socioeconomic position is associated with higher support.
2) An indirect pathway via mental distress: lower socioeconomic position was strongly associated with more mental distress, and more mental distress was weakly associated with greater support for Basic Income reform.
3) An indirect pathway via faith in government, with lower socioeconomic position associated with less faith in government, which in turn weakly reduced support for the policy.

Importantly, even though 3 acts to reduce support as a result of lower socioeconomic position, it is less impactful than 1 and 2 combined.

There was also a significant association between older age and lower support for the policy, independent of the effects of age on socioeconomic position, mental distress, and faith in government. This is partially explained by the association between age and distress, as older participants were less likely to be distressed.

Changes in Participant Characteristics and Changes in Policy Preferences

The fixed effects model found no significant associations between changes in socioeconomic status or anxiety and depression scores and support for Basic Income. However, as supplementary Table 4 indicates (https://triplepc.northumbria.ac.uk/actnow/v3-v4-stats.html), there was a slightly significant positive association (0.828, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI [0.108, 1.547]) between faith in politicians and support for Basic Income. This suggests that even though material conditions and levels of anxiety and depression changed, an increase in faith in politicians among participants was associated with an increase in support for Basic Income.

Discussion

As we have seen, many political scholars—including Füredi (2006a, 2006b), Bauman (2006), Wodak (2021), and Nussbaum (2018)—appear to assume that anxiety leads people to endorse strategically irrational policies and parties often in response to perceived threats that are themselves cognitively irrational. Recall that a threat perception is cognitively irrational if the object it is directed toward is not actually a threat, while the endorsement of a policy is strategically irrational if it does not align with the values and interests of a person or group (De Sousa, 1990, pp. 163–164; Scarantino & de Sousa, 2021). Broadly speaking, from the point of view of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, examples of the latter include endorsement of policies like Brexit and parties such as the Conservatives in 2019, both of which have failed to address and had little prospect of addressing concern over immigration while increasing poverty and inequality. Our findings show that this connection is far from

necessary. In fact, they show people who experience heightened levels of anxiety and financial insecurity are more likely to support progressive socioeconomic policies that offer concrete possibilities for reducing the threats they face.

This support is only partially explained by anxiety. The cross-sectional findings indicate that there may well be a desire from the public—following a long era of austerity politics and the economic insecurity of the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis—to shift away from small state, unrestricted free-market thinking toward a larger, more interventionist public sector (Common Sense Policy Group, 2024a; Nettle et al., 2021). The cost-of-living crisis has continued to highlight the threat to financial security not from increased taxation but from rising costs of essentials currently provided largely by the private sector. Although using a small sample size with an overrepresentation of Labour voters and with only two waves, there are indications in the longitudinal sample that support for Basic Income established during the period around the COVID-19 pandemic (Nettle et al., 2021) may not be as susceptible to within-individual changes in anxiety and socioeconomic status (i.e. an individual's changes in levels of anxiety and income) as might have been expected from the cross-sectional results above. There may be several reasons for this.

First, the changes in anxiety and depression (here measured by GAD-7 and PHQ-8 scores) may not be the result of changes in income and economic conditions as have been observed in previous work (Parra-Mujica et al., 2023; Reed et al., 2024; Villadsen et al., 2024). Instead, alleviation of the broader—and recently unprecedented in a UK context—social instability of the pandemic period, including large-scale deaths of friends and family, may be driving some of these trends. Supporting this is the fact that the mean household income has barely changed in real terms. While the median has reduced, perhaps indicating growing inequality, the income side of the equation has remained remarkably stable. The risk of destitution has also reduced from 29.14 to 26.72, again perhaps reflecting the change from a pandemic to a post-pandemic environment. Previous explanations for the pandemic effect, such as the urgency of the need for social security and simplicity and efficiency of the Basic Income administration to satisfy that need (Nettle et al., 2021), are partially validated. But it seems that the reduction in urgency has not significantly reduced people's endorsement of Basic Income as a social security measure. People's exposure to risk of destitution may have an existential role in motivating support for policies that enhance material security.

Second, it may simply be that the sample size over just two waves was insufficient to pick up on the associations at a smaller level between socioeconomic changes and anxiety and depression symptoms on the one hand and support for Basic Income on the other. This explanation may be supported by the findings of Nettle and colleagues' Changing Cost of Living Study, that changes in levels of financial insecurity have immediate impacts on anxiety and depression (Nettle et al., 2024). In addition, the substantial overrepresentation of Labour voters may have played a role in relatively fixed perceptions of Basic Income, as Labour voters may be more likely to endorse progressive policies, regardless of the Labour Party's position on Basic Income itself.

Regardless of any overrepresentation of Labour voters, it is notable that support for Basic Income as a redistributive policy that supports social security remained high in the two waves, and even after occurrent experiences of anxiety appeared to decrease. This is in keeping with a body of evidence demonstrating an increase in support for redistributive policy since the Global Financial Crisis, the onset of austerity measures, the effects of Brexit, but particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis (Common Sense Policy Group, 2024a; M. Johnson et al., 2022a; M. T. Johnson et al., 2023a). In prior work, we have found that a higher perceived risk of destitution is associated with greater anxiety, which was, in turn, associated with increased support for Basic Income because people recognise that the policy offers means of alleviating anxiety caused by risk of destitution (M. T. Johnson et al., 2023a). In this study, even though the average rates of anxiety decreased, support remained high for the policy, reducing only by a non-statistically significant small margin. This suggests that some of the support for social security-enhancing measures are now longer-term preferences, being baked into people's understanding of necessary reforms to Britain (Degerman et al., 2024).

Further research is required to establish the extent to which the trends we have described in this article persist. However, it appears that even if the immediacy of sources of anxiety has reduced, there remains recognition that British society is socially insecure and requires substantive reform, a recognition to which the anxiety plausibly contributed. This appears to involve a cultural component: there is shared understanding that the present socioeconomic system cannot deliver the security desired. There is then genuine scope for a range of possible policy responses, both strategically rational, such as Basic Income, and irrational, such as austerity and increased conditionality, with rationality determined by the likelihood of the impact of the policies on the fundamental drivers of anxiety—poverty and inequality. There has clearly been fluidity in party political preferences across the 2017, 2019, and 2024 General Election cycles as well as the Brexit Referendum. However, a concern for security has been apparent in each cycle. The success of particular parties has, at least in part, been attributable to their capacity to present their favoured policies as mechanisms for improving security. In the red wall, this has been seen in the success of Leave, then the Conservatives in 2019, and the growth of Reform, but is has also been seen in the consistent support for redistributive measures across that period (M. Johnson et al., 2022a). It is important to note that, while there is considerable research on the association between material insecurity and support for right-wing populist parties (Bossert et al., 2023; Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Foster & Frieden, 2017; Guiso et al., 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2017), the association between the two appears contingent, with considerable scope for progressive policy to enhance security via redistributive measures that right-wing parties are likely to reject (Common Sense Policy Group, 2024b).

There is a genuine challenge for the Labour Government, insofar as it has campaigned both to change Britain and secure workers, but also to reject, for both political and ideological reasons, the very tax and spend policies that evidence suggests are needed to deliver those outcomes (Common Sense Policy Group, 2024a). Having secured only 33.8% of the vote against a largely discredited Conservative Party, failure to improve social security may result in a longer-term cultural shift against Labour and politics in general as an ineffective vehicle of change. Conversely, bold

public investment to increase material security is likely to increase support for progressive parties and policies (Common Sense Policy Group, 2024b; M. T. Johnson & Flinders, 2024; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025). This is supported by the Structural Equation Modelling and the fixed effects modelling, the former of which indicates an association between faith in government and support for policies, and the latter shows that increasing faith is associated with increased support. The evidence provided here indicates that a government that demonstrates its capacity to increase material security is likely to increase faith in government among citizens and, in turn, support for it as a political actor. Not taking decisive progressive action is likely to have the opposite effect, since the long-term stagnation associated with fiscal conservatism seems unlikely to be resolved by those same policies.

Conclusion

This article has explored the connection between anxiety and policy preferences. Critics of anxiety and fear in politics have argued that these emotions lead people to adopt strategically irrational far-right policies in response to cognitively irrational threats. We have shown that this presents, at best, an impartial picture of the role of anxiety in British political culture. Our findings show that anxiety can lead people to support strategically rational progressive policies, such as Basic Income, in response to the concrete, epistemically warranted threats they face. Moreover, our findings show that these preferences outlast decreases in occurrent anxiety experiences. In light of this, we suggest that calls for policymakers to shun the politics of fear are misconceived. Such calls rest on an unjustified pathologization of fear and anxiety that politically marginalises people who have good reasons to be afraid and anxious (Degerman, 2022). They have also justified policymakers' failure to engage substantively with these emotions. Patently, this does not mean policymakers on the centre and left *never* appeal to fear. Sometimes, they clearly do, as evidenced by recent political events and movements, including the Brexit referendum (Browning, 2018) and the climate change movement (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). However, these engagements are often occasional, as with Brexit, or relatively marginal, as with the climate change movement. When it comes to the everyday fears of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, however, mainstream policymakers have effectively given the far-right, and others engaged in a destructive politics of fear, free rein to channel fear and anxiety toward innocent targets and harmful actions. Contrary to calls for policymakers to abandon the politics of fear altogether, our findings suggest that policymakers instead need to engage in a new politics of fear, one that takes seriously the anxiety of financially vulnerable groups and provides a fear narrative both validates it and outlines how the causes of the anxiety can be addressed. Voters are receptive to policies that they believe will mitigate social insecurity. As political fluctuations in the red wall since the Global Financial Crisis have indicated, there are many different means of presenting policies in ways that can achieve that end. Against a backdrop of ever-rightward policies on migration and cultural issues, there are good reasons for progressive politicians to focus centrally on redistributive

mechanisms that actually can deliver change. This is a key means of increasing their popularity.

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Declarations

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