

Judeophobic Antisemitism among British Voters, 2016-2020

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Abstract

Through secondary analysis of survey data collected by YouGov for Campaign Against Antisemitism, this research note provides a longitudinal account of changes in Judeophobic antisemitism (that is, antisemitism articulated in relation to Jews identified as Jews) in mainland Britain from 2016-2020. Because survey responses are aggregated by most recent general election vote, the dataset facilitates comparison between those who voted for each of Britain's three main parties in the 2015, 2017, and 2019 UK general elections. (Those who voted for other parties, as well as those who did not vote and those for whom voting data are missing, are aggregated as a fourth category.) Amongst those who voted for the centrist Liberal Democrat party, levels of Judeophobic antisemitism declined throughout the period. Amongst those who voted for the left-wing Labour Party, levels of Judeophobic antisemitism began at a low level, rose to a peak in 2018, and then declined, returning to something close to their 2016 level by 2020. Changes amongst other voter groups were less clear-cut, although all voter groups saw a decline in Judeophobic antisemitism from 2019 to 2020. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to analyze trends in antizionist antisemitism (that is, antisemitism articulated in relation to Israel and its supporters), comparative figures for that form of antisemitism are provided for the years 2019–2020.

Keywords Antisemitic attitudes, Britain, Labour Party, political parties, polling, public opinion, voters, survey

The study of antisemitism was given unexpected—and unlooked-for—political relevance by Jeremy Corbyn's tenure as leader of the UK Labour Party, which ran from September 2015 to April 2020. But while it has been able to furnish political scientists and commentators with extensive scholarship on the history and nature of the antizionist form of antisemitism most strongly associated with Corbyn's segment of the political left,¹ as well as with a host of studies of the empirical relationship between this and the Judeophobic form of antisemitism more strongly associated with the political right,² the discipline of antisemitism studies has had little to say about the key political topic within any functioning democracy: that is, voters.

The question of antisemitism among ordinary voters was first raised by two high-profile left-wing blogs, in articles both published on the same day in 2018. Both of these articles used comparisons of responses to arbitrarily selected pairs of questionnaire items in two surveys of antisemitic attitudes in order to argue that antisemitism among Labour voters had fallen under (and perhaps as a result of) the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn.³ These claims went viral on social media, and appear to have motivated Channel 4 News to publish a fact-checking piece which warned that “[s]ome commentators in the Labour antisemitism row have cherry-picked data” from the surveys in question.⁴ The allegation of

cherry-picking was well-founded: the statements used in the first survey were not the same as those in the second survey, which meant that the pairs of statements being compared were not the same and that like was not being compared with like. In fact, levels of agreement with the later versions of the statements were generally lower, and not only among Labour voters.⁵

This purpose of this article is to conduct a more systematic longitudinal analysis of data from the same source: that is, the Antisemitism Barometer surveys carried out by YouGov in 2016–2020 with funding from Campaign Against Antisemitism.⁶ The first such survey, carried out in 2015, must be excluded because it used a different set of questions: a point that was glossed over by the authors of the blogs cited in the previous paragraph. These surveys were not originally intended as sources of comparative data on antisemitism among voters for political parties, but most recent general election vote is among the standard demographic variables which YouGov provides to its clients. Since 2019, the surveys have included questionnaire items designed to measure antizionist antisemitism,⁷ but as those items were not used from the beginning, they are largely ignored here. Focusing on Judeophobic antisemitism alone will mean underestimation of levels of antisemitism on the political left,⁸ but the purpose of this article is to reveal trends over time. Voters for small parties by overall vote share, such as the Green Party, Plaid Cymru, and the Scottish National Party, are necessarily aggregated together with non-voters, as are voters for UKIP (which ceased to be an effective electoral force from 2017) and the Brexit Party (which was founded only in 2019). Northern Irish voters were not polled.

For fieldwork dates and sample sizes, see Table 1, which also gives mean and standard deviation for participant age and percentages of female and male respondents. For mean numbers of Judeophobic antisemitic statements

agreed with, as well as for percentages agreeing with four or more Judeophobic antisemitic statements, see Table 2 and Figures 1 and 2. There were a total of seven Judeophobic antisemitic statements with which respondents could agree or disagree; thus, those who agreed with four were agreeing with more than half. Mean figures and percentages are weighted using demographic weights calculated by YouGov. 95% confidence intervals are provided both for the means and for the percentages.⁹ For comparison, table 3 and figures 3–4 provide equivalent statistics for antizionist antisemitism. As there were only five statements used to measure this form of antisemitism, the maximum numbers are lower.

Levels of Judeophobic antisemitism generally appear higher among voters for the Conservative Party and among voters in the aggregate category for those who voted for other parties or none, or for whom voting data was unavailable. This is unsurprising: the form of antisemitism being measured is, as noted, more strongly associated with the political right than with the political left, and Britain's most successful minor parties (in terms of overall vote share) are of the political right. However, as noted above, the focus is here on trends, and among these two categories of voters, levels of antisemitism were essentially flat (with a possible slight downward trend among Conservative voters).

There appear to be quite clear trends with regard to those who voted for the Liberal Democrats—a centrist party, despite the probable implications of its name for American readers—and the left-wing Labour Party. Among Liberal Democrat voters, there was a steady fall in Judeophobic antisemitism throughout the period, with mean numbers of antisemitic statements agreed with falling well below that of all other voter categories and with the proportion agreeing with four or more such statements falling almost to zero in 2019 (the slight uptick in 2020 is well within the margin of error, and accompanies a fall in

mean number of statements agreed with). By contrast, mean numbers of antisemitic statements agreed with by Labour voters rise from 2016 to 2018, and then fall back to what is effectively their 2016 level by 2020. However, the percentage of Labour voters agreeing with four or more antisemitic statements does not quite return to its original level, climbing more dramatically than the mean number of statements and—despite its decline in 2019 and 2020—remaining higher in every year from 2017 to 2020 than it was in 2016. This suggests the presence of a small but notable minority of unusually antisemitic voters who either (a) did not vote for the party in 2015, but did vote for it in 2017 and 2019, or (b) acquired such views in 2017 and retained them into 2020. Peak agreement among Labour voters appears to occur in 2018, when levels of Judeophobic antisemitism were as high among Labour-voting members of the sample as among Conservative voters: an extraordinary achievement, given that the political left is (as already observed) more closely associated with a different form of antisemitism. Analysis of that form of antizionism, that is, antizionist antisemitism, is beyond the scope of this article, as data are not available for the period before 2019. However, it is noted that antizionist antisemitism did *not* appear to decline among voters for the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats between 2019 and 2020, and indeed rose quite substantially among members of the sample who voted for either party (although from a lower starting point in the case of Liberal Democrat voters).

Besides sampling error, there are two primary mechanisms by which these year-to-year shifts might be explained: attitude change and vote-switching. That is, it may be that people who consistently vote for a party grow progressively more inclined to accept or reject statements. Or it may be that highly voters switch from voting for one party to voting for another, or that those who reject antisemitism most strongly make the reverse journey. Of course, it may well be that both processes play a role. Certainly, vote-

switching cannot explain changes taking place between 2017 and 2019, and nor can it explain the fact that mean numbers of Judeophobic statements agreed with fell for *all four* voter groups between 2019 and 2020 (percentage of respondents with four or more antisemitic views fell for every group except Liberal Democrat voters, where it was already very close to zero). On the other hand, it could potentially play a role in explaining the large drop in Judeophobic antisemitism among Liberal Democrat voters between 2016 and 2017: it may, for example, be that a group of people with strongly antisemitic views who voted Liberal Democrat in 2015 switched to voting Labour in 2017.

The apparent decline of Judeophobic antisemitism among Labour voters from 2018 to 2019, and among all voter categories from 2019 to 2020, requires a different explanation. Shifts in public opinion have multiple causes, and data such as these cannot provide evidence of causation, but it would be remiss not to attempt some form of interpretation here. Intensive public discussion of antisemitism arising from the Labour Party's antisemitism crisis and from the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting (which took place in October of that year) may well have played a role in discrediting antisemitic ideas, or in prompting members of the public to reflect on and potentially abandon certain prejudices. From March To August 2018, Jewish communal organisations called a series of demonstrations against antisemitism, which forced the issue onto national television. And in September 2018, the Labour Party adopted the IHRA definition of antisemitism, which may thenceforth have acted as a brake on the dissemination of antisemitic ideas (especially on social media).

Perhaps in retrospect, that will be seen as the point at which a tide was turned. It certainly provides hope for future progress.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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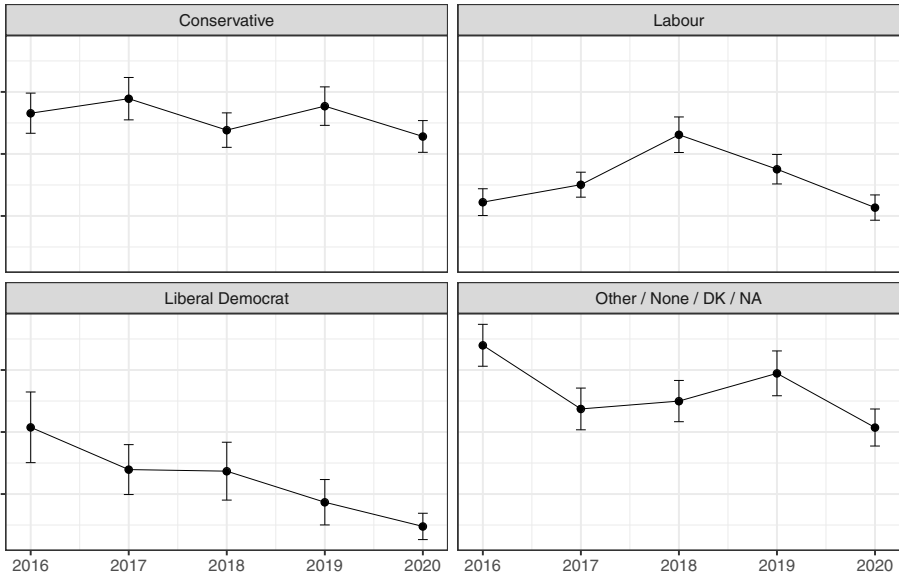


FIGURE 1. Mean number of Judeophobic antisemitic statements agreed with by most recent general election vote, 2016–2020

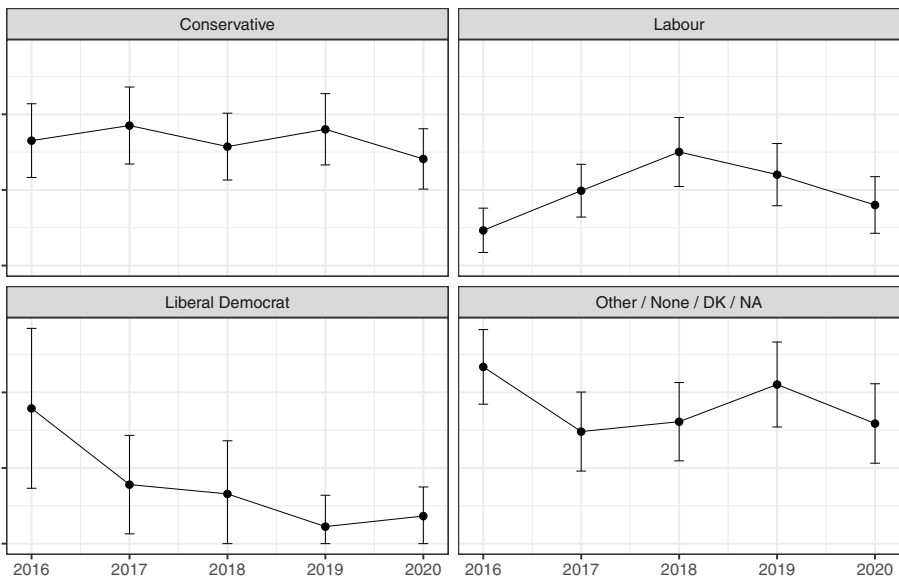


FIGURE 2. Percentage of respondents agreeing with four or more Judeophobic antisemitic statements by most recent general election vote, 2016–2020

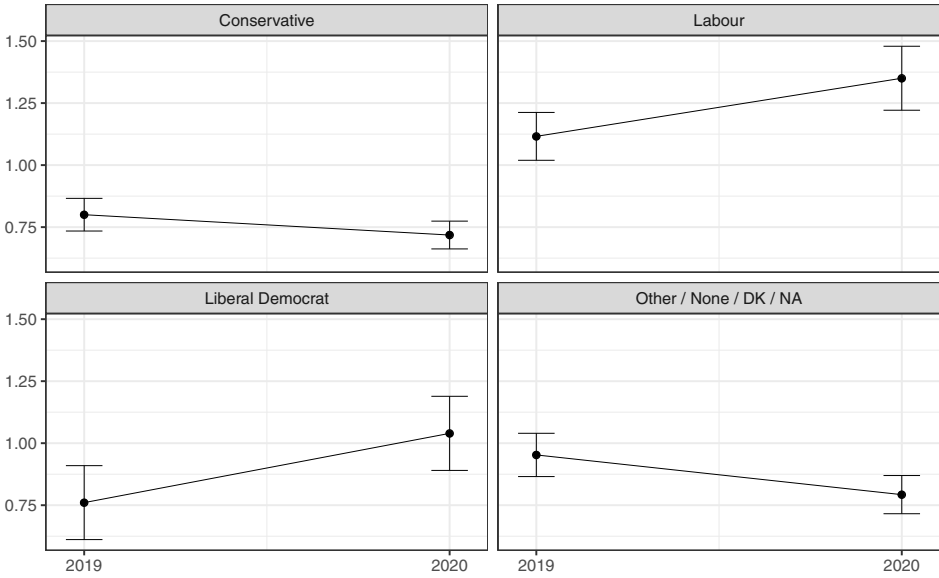


FIGURE 3. Mean number of antizionist antisemitic statements agreed with by most recent general election vote, 2019–2020

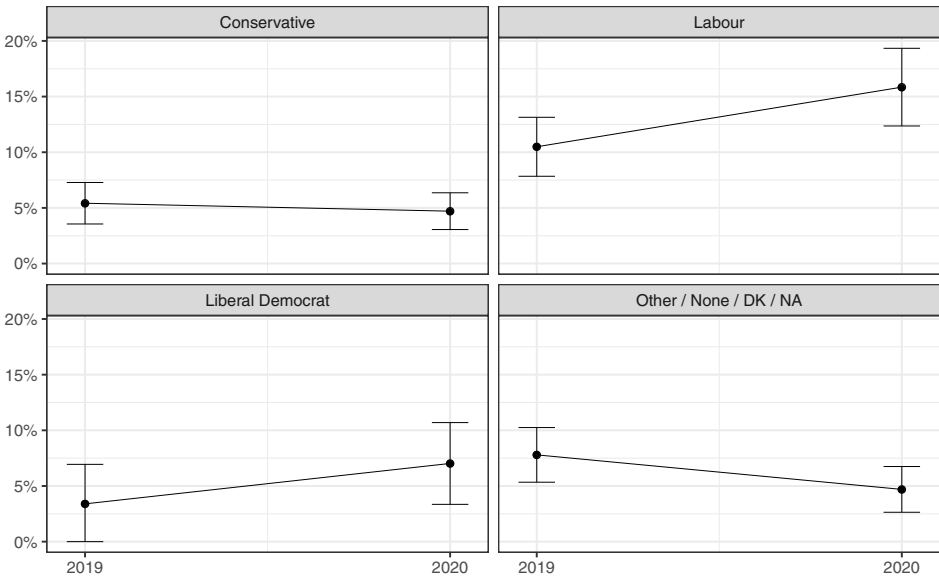


FIGURE 4. Percentage of respondents agreeing with four or more antizionist antisemitic statements by most recent general election vote, 2019–2020

TABLE 1. Fieldwork dates and descriptive statistics

Year	Fieldwork dates	N	Age (M)	Age (SD)	Female (%)	Male (%)
2016	August 18–19	1660	48.7	16.7	55.4	44.6
2017	August 2–3	1614	48.2	16.5	55.9	44.1
2018	September 6–7	1606	48.4	16.8	56.2	43.8
2019	September 24–25	1639	50.1	16.9	57.4	42.6
2020	August 26–27	1646	51.6	16.7	57.4	42.6

TABLE 2. Mean number of Judeophobic antisemitic statements agreed with and percentage agreeing with four or more Judeophobic antisemitic statements by most recent general election vote, 2016–2020

Year	Last GE	Last GE vote	N	Mean statements				4+ statements (%)		
				Est.	SD	Low	High	Est.	Low	High
2016	2015	Conservative	490	0.9	1.4	0.8	1.0	8.3	5.8	10.7
2016	2015	Labour	407	0.6	1.1	0.5	0.6	2.3	0.9	3.8
2016	2015	Liberal Democrat	112	0.8	1.6	0.6	0.9	8.9	3.7	14.2
2016	2015	Other / None / DK / NA	651	1.1	1.7	1.0	1.2	11.7	9.2	14.2
2017	2017	Conservative	498	1.0	1.6	0.9	1.1	9.3	6.7	11.8
2017	2017	Labour	594	0.6	1.2	0.6	0.7	5.0	3.2	6.7
2017	2017	Liberal Democrat	136	0.6	1.2	0.5	0.7	3.9	0.6	7.2
2017	2017	Other / None / DK / NA	386	0.8	1.5	0.8	0.9	7.4	4.8	10.0
2018	2017	Conservative	570	0.8	1.5	0.8	0.9	7.9	5.7	10.1
2018	2017	Labour	512	0.8	1.5	0.8	0.9	7.5	5.2	9.8
2018	2017	Liberal Democrat	99	0.6	1.3	0.5	0.7	3.3	0.0	6.8
2018	2017	Other / None / DK / NA	425	0.9	1.5	0.8	1.0	8.1	5.5	10.7
2019	2017	Conservative	567	0.9	1.5	0.9	1.0	9.0	6.7	11.4
2019	2017	Labour	514	0.7	1.3	0.6	0.7	6.0	4.0	8.1
2019	2017	Liberal Democrat	100	0.5	1.0	0.4	0.6	1.1	0.0	3.2
2019	2017	Other / None / DK / NA	458	1.0	1.8	0.9	1.1	10.5	7.7	13.3
2020	2019	Conservative	632	0.8	1.4	0.8	0.9	7.1	5.1	9.0
2020	2019	Labour	421	0.5	1.1	0.5	0.6	4.0	2.1	5.9
2020	2019	Liberal Democrat	186	0.4	1.0	0.3	0.4	1.8	0.0	3.7
2020	2019	Other / None / DK / NA	407	0.8	1.4	0.7	0.8	7.9	5.3	10.6

TABLE 2. Mean number of antizionist antisemitic statements agreed with and percentage agreeing with four or more antizionist antisemitic statements by most recent general election vote, 2016–2020

Year	Last GE	Last GE vote	N	Mean statements				4+ statements (%)		
				Est.	SD	Low	High	Est.	Low	High
2019	2017	Conservative	567	0.8	1.2	0.7	0.9	5.4	3.6	7.3
2019	2017	Labour	514	1.1	1.5	1.0	1.2	10.5	7.8	13.1
2019	2017	Liberal Democrat	100	0.8	1.2	0.6	0.9	3.4	0.0	6.9
2019	2017	Other / None / DK / NA	458	1.0	1.4	0.9	1.0	7.8	5.3	10.2
2020	2019	Conservative	632	0.7	1.2	0.7	0.8	4.7	3.1	6.4
2020	2019	Labour	421	1.4	1.7	1.2	1.5	15.8	12.4	19.3
2020	2019	Liberal Democrat	186	1.0	1.4	0.9	1.2	7.0	3.4	10.7
2020	2019	Other / None / DK / NA	407	0.8	1.2	0.7	0.9	4.7	2.6	6.

APPENDIX: ANTISEMITISM BAROMETER QUESTIONNAIRE (CAMPAIGN AGAINST ANTISEMITISM, 2016-2020)

Here are a number of comments that different people have made about Jewish people in Britain these days. For each of the following statements, please indicate how true or untrue you think these statements are.

- British Jewish people chase money more than other British people.
- Having a connection to Israel makes Jewish people less loyal to Britain than other British people.
- Jewish people consider themselves to be better than other British people.
- Compared to other groups, Jewish people have too much power in the media.
- Jewish people talk about the Holocaust just to further their political agenda.
- Jewish people can be trusted just as much as other British people in business.*

Answer options:

- definitely true;
- probably true;

- probably not true;
- definitely not true;
- don't know.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

- I am just as open to having Jewish friends as I am to having friends from other sections of British society.*

Answer options:

- strongly agree;
- tend to agree;
- tend to disagree;
- strongly disagree;
- don't know.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS USED TO ASSESS ANTIZIONIST ANTISEMITISM, 2019–2020

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- Israel and its supporters are a bad influence on our democracy.

- Israel can get away with anything because its supporters control the media.
- Israel treats the Palestinians like the Nazis treated the Jews.
- I am comfortable spending time with people who openly support Israel.*
- Israel is right to defend itself against those who want to destroy it.*

Answer options:

- strongly agree;
- tend to agree;
- tend to disagree;
- strongly disagree;
- don't know.

* Reverse-coded

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- 8 Allington, *The Politics of Antisemitism*, 13.
- 9 Where confidence intervals do not overlap, differences are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. However, overlapping confidence intervals may still represent significant differences, especially where there is a trend.