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# Do Gen Z really want a dictatorship?

Evidence from existing studies  
and a new survey experiment

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# Introduction

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A recent Channel 4 study suggested 52 per cent of 13- to-27-year-olds agree that ‘the UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections.’ This was compared with 40 per cent of 45- to 65-year-olds.

It created a stir in the media, with just about all major outlets covering the results, and dozens of opinion pieces guessing why that might be the case, and how we should respond. A selection of headlines give a flavour of the interpretation, and how commentators see Gen Z.

- ‘More than half of Gen Z believe Britain should be ruled by a dictator with no elections, new poll shows’ – Daily Mail.
- ‘Voting’s such a hassle... of course Gen Z like dictators’ – The Times.
- ‘Of all the days to discover Gen Z’s misguided affection for dictators’ – Metro.
- ‘Here’s a shocking finding, Gen Z – democracy isn’t perfect’ – The Observer.
- ‘I’m sick of tedious Gen Z shunning booze, idolising dictators and perving over Bonnie Blue’ – The Sun.

But are the findings a true reflection of Gen Z opinion, and is the implication about Gen Z more generally fair? There are reasons to be sceptical.

And this is important to get right. The scale of coverage and acceptance of the interpretation in much of it – specifically that Gen Z want a

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‘dictator’ – creates two problems, if it’s not an accurate reflection of Gen Z opinion.

First, it adds to sense of generational division, and particularly that our current young are the ‘worst ever’. This is far from new – it’s a sentiment we can trace back to Socrates in 400BC, with his famous diatribe against young people of his day: ‘The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, they show disrespect for authority and love gossip in place of activity’. But you can go to any era and find the same sort of opinion: I like this one from a letter to Town and Country magazine in 1771, which called young people of that day ‘a race of effeminate, self-admiring, emaciated fribbles’.

It’s a deep human trait for older people to think the worst of the young, and it’s been supercharged for us today by social media and media environments where generational labels have become helpful shorthand for spreading stereotypes and division.

Second, there is a risk that this type of striking discussion encourages a sense that this is in fact the norm among the generation themselves. We need to be careful not to suggest that a lot of media coverage of one poll means it will become immediately true among that generation, but we do know perceptions of what the norm is for our group can have powerful effects on our own views and behaviours.

If we do have concerns about Gen Z’s connection to liberal democracy (and there are good reasons to have real worries, as we’ll see), we should be mindful not to spread an exaggerated negative view.

And it does seem that these findings, and particularly the way they’ve been picked up in media discussions, are not a full and accurate picture of Gen Z’s views. We will look first at the results for similar questions in other studies and then outline the findings from a new experimental survey we conducted to explore the issue further.

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# 1. Should we be concerned about this particular study – how does it compare with other similar survey measures?

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There are two major ongoing studies that ask a very similar question to the one released by Channel 4 – the British Election Study (BES) and the World Values Survey (WVS). These are very large-scale academic studies, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and are major investments in our national survey infrastructure. The results from the latest waves of these are over page.

This is the first sign that we should be cautious. In 2024, the BES online panel found only 13 per cent of Gen Z across Great Britain agree or strongly agree that ‘the best way to run the country would be to have a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections’.

In 2022, the WVS found 27 per cent of Gen Z in Britain think that ‘having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections’ is a very or fairly good way of governing the country.

So the BES finding is around a quarter the level found in the Channel 4 study, and the WVS finding is around half the level. Together, these suggest we should be extremely cautious in putting too much weight on the Channel 4 finding.

As an aside, you may be wondering why we see such a difference between these two larger, more rigorous studies, with the WVS measure twice the level seen in BES. But this is very likely to be related to

the differences in the response categories used: the BES study uses a five-point agree/disagree scale, which includes a midpoint, and the WVS study uses a four-point good/bad scale, without a midpoint. Respondents are forced to say whether they think it’s good or bad in WVS, but in BES you can select ‘neither agree nor disagree’, which 13 per cent of Gen Z do in BES.<sup>1</sup>

The Channel 4 study used a five-point agree/disagree scale, so the most direct comparison is the BES study, which adds to the sense that we need to be very cautious with the Channel 4 study estimate.

Source	Question	Response scale	Sample and population covered	Results
<b>Channel 4 (2024)</b>	The UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections	Unknown, but likely a five-point agree/disagree scale, similar to BES	3,000 13- to 65-year-olds in the UK, comprising 2,000 13- to 27-year-olds and 1,000 28- to 65-year-olds	<b>52%</b> of 13-27s agree
<b>WVS (2022)</b>	I’m going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?  Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections	Very good Fairly good Fairly bad Very bad	2,605 people aged 18+ in Britain surveyed between 1 March and 9 September 2022	<b>27%</b> of adult Gen Z aged 18-26 say very or fairly good
<b>BES (2024)</b>	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?  The best way to run the country would be to have a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections	Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree Don’t know	30,445 people aged 18+ in Britain, fielded by YouGov between 24 May and 7 June 2024	<b>13%</b> of adult Gen Z aged 18-28 agree or strongly agree

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## 2. Why are the results so different?

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There are a number of possible explanations for the very large differences between the Channel 4 study and these long-term academic studies.

### Timing

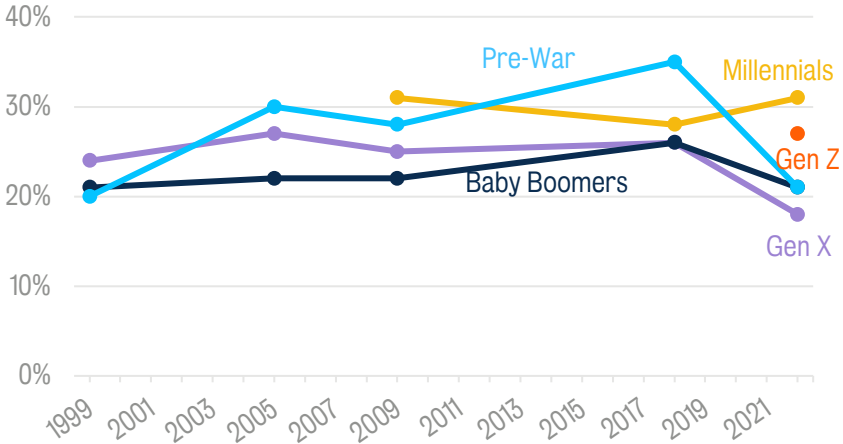
One could be timing: opinions can be affected by the immediate context, and move around if there are significant events. The Channel 4 study was conducted in May 2024, and, while the fieldwork for WVS was in 2022, the latest BES study was actually at a very similar time to the Channel 4 study, in June 2024. It therefore seems very unlikely that the context could explain such a gap.

More generally, this measure does not seem that susceptible to short-term contexts, as we can see when looking at trends for the major academic studies, in the charts below. These show a pretty stable pattern over time, and never approach the levels seen in Channel 4 study. This doesn't just apply to the Gen Z figure – the 40 per cent found for older generations in the Channel 4 study is not reflected either: Gen X, Baby Boomers and the Pre-war generation are down at less than half that level on the most comparable measure from BES.



Below are various types of political systems. Please indicate what you think about each as a way of governing this country. **Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections.**

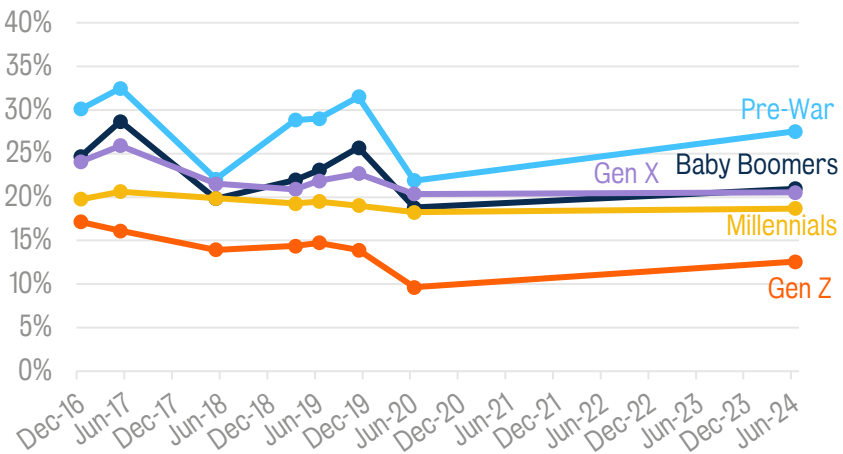
% who say very/fairly good way



Source: World Values Survey (2022).

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?  
**The best way to run the country would be to have a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections**

% who strongly agree/agree



Source: British Election Study (2024).

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## Mode, questionnaire context and sample effects

So why are we seeing such a big difference?

We can dismiss one common cause of differences in survey estimates pretty quickly – so-called ‘mode effects’. These are where *how* the data is collected affects the results you get, where the most powerful influence is often whether there is an interviewer asking the questions or the respondent completes the survey on their own, either online or on paper. The argument is that the presence of an interviewer can make respondents bend their answers, through effects such as ‘social desirability bias’, where they are conscious of how they come across to the interviewer and so may be less honest.

However, the BES study is conducted fully through online self-completion methods, the same as the Channel 4 study, and the WVS study is a mix between interviewer-administered and self-completion. Differences in mode cannot therefore explain the difference in results.

One further explanation could be questionnaire ‘context effects’, where the questions asked before the question we’re focusing on can influence responses. However, looking at the overall questionnaires for the studies, they are a similar wide mix of political and social questions, without particularly leading contexts.

This points to possible sample effects – that is, that there are significant differences in how well the different samples are representing the population, in this case Gen Z.

First of all, it’s worth noting that the age ranges for Channel 4 study are different from those used in our analysis of Gen Z in BES and WVS. For the latter two studies, we use the common definition of Gen Z as starting with those born in 1996, and these studies only interview those aged 18+. If younger teenagers are significantly different from older teenagers and those in their 20s, part of the explanation could be this difference in the population each study is looking to represent.

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However, having looked at the data from our own experimental study that matched the Channel 4 population definition of 13- to 27-year-olds (outlined in a later section), we see no significant difference between younger and older people within this age range. Again, this does not seem likely to be a particularly important explanation of such a large difference.

This points to sample differences being key.

The WVS is conducted as a very expensive random probability survey, not an ‘access panel’, as the Channel 4 study was. That is, respondents in WVS are selected randomly using addresses from the Postcode Address File and called at until they either take part, refuse or just can’t be contacted.

Access panels, on the other hand, consist of people who sign up to join an online panel and answer questions in return for small payments. This is how the vast majority of polling is done in the UK, and generally it is accepted as producing valuable measures of opinion, particularly as it is so much cheaper than random probability methods. Some studies do point to the limitations and inaccuracies of access panels, and have shown that non-probability access panels produce less accurate estimates than probability samples compared to external population benchmarks.<sup>2</sup>

However, the BES online panel study is also based on an access panel, conducted by YouGov.

The evidence may therefore seem to be pointing towards this being a sample issue with this particular poll, where the Channel 4 study had an unusual group of respondents. It is possible, even with the best of methods, to get samples that are just unrepresentative – a rogue poll.

However, this is not the first example of an online access panel poll achieving a very high estimate for a very similar question. A study conducted in May 2022 by JL Partners for the think tank Onward

actually resulted in a *higher* estimate than the Channel 4 study: this found that 61 per cent of 18- to 34-year-olds thought that ‘having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections’ is a very or fairly good way of governing the country.

This wording and scale is identical to the WVS question, which finds only 27 per cent of Gen Z saying the same.

This does not seem like a one-off rogue poll, but rather something about the combination of asking this particular question in surveys that use standard online access panels.

Source	Question	Response scale	Sample and population covered	Results
<b>Channel 4 (2024)</b>	The UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections	Unknown, but likely a five-point agree/disagree scale, similar to BES	3,000 13- to 65-year-olds in the UK, comprising 2,000 13- to 27-year-olds and 1,000 28- to 65-year-olds	<b>52%</b> of 13-27s agree
<b>WVS (2022)</b>	I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?  Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections	Very good Fairly good Fairly bad Very bad	2,605 people aged 18+ in Britain surveyed between 1 March and 9 September 2022	<b>27%</b> of adult Gen Z aged 18-26 say very or fairly good
<b>BES (2024)</b>	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?  The best way to run the country would be to have a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections	Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree Don't know	30,445 people aged 18+ in Britain, fielded by YouGov between 24 May and 7 June 2024	<b>13%</b> of adult Gen Z aged 18-28 agree or strongly agree
<b>Onward/JL Partners (2022)</b>	Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections - Would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?	Very good Fairly good Fairly bad Very bad	8,004 UK adults aged 18+, 5 to 25 May 2022. Online panel sample	<b>61%</b> of 18-34s say very or fairly good

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## 3. Our suggested explanations and hypotheses

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In survey methods, we think about *representation* and *measurement* errors. That is, surveys can give us an inaccurate view of opinion when there is something wrong with the samples of people completing the study (representation) or how the question itself was designed, answered or analysed (measurement).

For this particular example, it seems the explanation for the large differences in results could be an interaction between both. On representation, while the BES measure draws on the same access panel method, in contrast with the other polls, this is a major academic study, with a very large sample of 30,000 overall, drawing on YouGov's proprietary panel and with some emphasis on the importance of the study to respondents (they are told at the start they are taking part in the British Election Study and many respondents take part in repeated waves).

We think the very large gaps we see on this particular question may be driven by variations in sample quality and respondent motivation interacting with features of the question that make it susceptible to much higher estimates on cheaper, quicker online access panels.

The first active element of the statement is whether you'd like a 'strong leader'. Our hypothesis is that that people get to that point and think, 'Of course, who wouldn't want a strong leader' – and then pay less attention to the second half of the proposition, that those leaders shouldn't bother with elections or parliament.

This is related to a potential problem survey researchers are trained to avoid in their basic questionnaire design courses – 'double-barrelled'

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statements. These are questions where it's possible to agree with one half of the statement but disagree with the other half. In this case, it is perfectly feasible to want a strong leader, but also be vehemently against doing away with elections or ignoring parliament.

The intention of the question is clear if you carefully read the full statement and consider its combined meaning. But if you are paying less attention, you may miss or not fully take on board the second part.

The variation in results across different studies suggest there may be a particular issue with this question in some survey contexts. When asked in regular online access panel studies, where respondents are perhaps more likely to be speeding through quickly than in major studies from high-quality sample sources, respondents may be more likely to provide quick, 'good enough' answers (which is called 'satisficing' in the survey methods literature), rather than carefully considered answers ('optimising'). Reviews of the key drivers of satisficing point to the importance of how motivated respondents are to optimise their answers, which is likely to be higher in major studies than regular access panel polls.<sup>3</sup>

From the evidence and theory, we therefore have a core suggested explanation, and our first hypothesis to test:

### **Hypothesis 1**

The higher estimates seen for this question in some online access panel polls are partly explained by the question being particularly susceptible to some respondents not reading or taking account of the meaning of the full statement.

There is, however, a different type of potential problem with this question, more related to how it is interpreted and, in particular, presented in the media. As you can see from the headlines, the 52 per cent of Gen Z who agreed with the statement are said to be calling for a 'dictatorship', or, alternatively, rejecting democracy.

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But it is not at all clear that this is what this question is actually measuring. This is related to another type of measurement error we care about in survey research, called ‘specification error’, where the concept being measured by a survey question does not accurately reflect the concept that we want to get at – or, in this case, the interpretation that’s ascribed to it in media reporting. We need to understand whether the measure has ‘construct validity’ – that is, whether the question actually measures what it is designed to measure, or how it is being represented.

This question is a longstanding measure, developed by academics, and often used as part of a battery of questions, such as on the WVS and the European Values Survey. It is not generally interpreted as a measure of support for a ‘dictatorship’. For example, Professor Pippa Norris uses it as one indicator of an ‘authoritarian reflex’, where people are saying: ‘They want a strong leader who can push back. A transgressive leader, who doesn’t care if it’s politically correct.’<sup>4</sup>

And there are good reasons to be cautious in linking responses to this question too directly to support for truly autocratic leadership. One experimental study asked the ‘strong leader’ question, but then followed up with respondents to test their preference for different vignettes of actual leaders. Even those that said they wanted the strong leader were more likely to prefer candidates who were willing to compromise, respect the courts, constitution, parliament and future elections.<sup>5</sup> This does not sound like support for a ‘dictator’.

There are also strong indications that this question should not be equated with an outright rejection of democracy. We can see an indication of this by comparing results from the Channel 4 study with another very recent poll, carried out for the FGS Global Radar report (conducted by online access panel). This study asked people to choose which is the best system for running a country, where one option was ‘A strong leader who doesn’t have to bother with elections’ and the other was ‘Democracy’.

Source	Question	Response scale	Sample and population covered	Results
<b>Channel 4 (2024)</b>	The UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections	Unknown	3,000 13- to 65-year-olds in the UK, comprising 2,000 13- to 27-year-olds and 1,000 28- to 65-year-olds	<b>52%</b> of 13-27s 'would welcome' this
<b>WVS (2022)</b>	I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?  Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections	Very good Fairly good Fairly bad Very bad	2,605 people aged 18+ in Britain surveyed between 1 March and 9 September 2022	<b>27%</b> of adult Gen Z aged 18-26 say very or fairly good
<b>BES (2024)</b>	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?  The best way to run the country would be to have a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections	Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree Don't know	30,445 people aged 18+ in Britain, fielded by YouGov between 24 May and 7 June 2024	<b>13%</b> of adult Gen Z aged 18-28 agree or strongly agree
<b>Onward/JL Partners (2022)</b>	Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections - Would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?	Very good Fairly good Fairly bad Very bad	8,004 UK adults aged 18+, 5 to 25 May 2022. Online panel sample	<b>61%</b> of 18-34s say very or fairly good
<b>FGS Global Radar report (2024)</b>	Which would be the best system for running a country effectively?  A strong leader who doesn't have to bother with elections OR Democracy	A strong leader who doesn't have to bother with elections Democracy Don't know	2,084 adults surveyed between 15 and 17 Nov 2024. Data was weighted to be representative of the whole population	<b>20%</b> of 18-34s say strong leader

This type of forced-choice question is difficult to design well, as the two statements need to be clear opposites and exclusive, and it's arguable whether these two statements really meet those criteria.

However, it is useful in making the point that when forced into this choice, a much lower proportion of young people than seen in the



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Channel 4 study – 20 per cent – choose the strong leader option over democracy. This is much closer to the estimates seen in the more highly specified studies, and suggests a much smaller proportion of Gen Z really would like to reject democracy.

This leads to the second hypothesis that we wanted to test:

### **Hypothesis 2**

Gen Z are not equating support for a ‘strong leader’ with calling for a dictator to run the country.

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## 4. Our experiment

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We wanted to test these hypotheses through a new experimental survey. We therefore conducted a survey of 2,032 UK respondents aged 13 to 27 years old, to match the survey population from the Channel 4 study. This was conducted using a simple online access panel, which is likely to be similar to the ones used by Channel 4 and JL Partners. We did not attempt to increase respondent motivation to optimise responses (rather than satisfice), by, for example, particularly emphasising the importance of the study or paying more than standard survey completion costs.

To test our hypotheses, respondents were split into three representative sub-samples and asked different versions of the question:

- One with identical wording to the Channel 4 study survey.
- A version that attempted to draw attention to the whole statement used in the question, by simply capitalising and bolding the second half of the statement: ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree that the UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge **WHO DOES NOT HAVE TO BOTHER WITH PARLIAMENT AND ELECTIONS?**’ (Hypothesis 1)
- A version that attempted to measure direct support for a dictator by changing the statement to: ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree that the UK would be a better place if a dictator was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections?’ (Hypothesis 2)

This resulted in a three-way split-sample, where independently representative samples were asked either i) the question as in the Channel 4 study, ii) the bold-capitalised version or iii) the ‘dictator’ version.

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In addition, we followed up with all those who agreed with any of these statements, asking three further questions:

- You said [eg the UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections] – does this mean you think it would be better for the UK if that leader faced no checks or control of their actions by MPs in parliament, or not? Yes, No, Don't know.
- And does this mean you think it would be better for the UK if that leader could avoid holding any national elections at all, or not? Yes, No, Don't know.
- In your own words, what did you have in mind when you said you agreed that [eg the UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections]? WRITE IN.

There are limitations to this direct questioning approach, where respondents may feel they are being challenged, and it cannot pick up the likely nuance in opinion that we could explore through more qualitative methods. However, they still give some sense of the thinking behind responses.

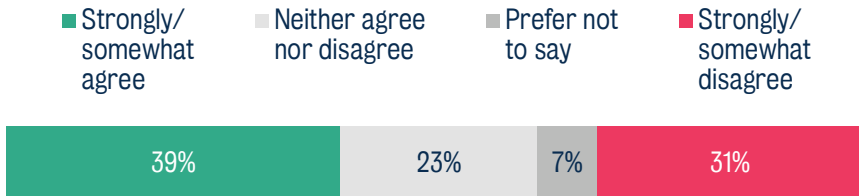
And the results are striking. On the first set of questions, we see a clear gradient of agreement, where the highest levels are seen for the question as asked in the Channel 4 study: 39 per cent agree, compared with 52 per cent in that research. This is a significantly lower estimate – but it is still a large proportion of the Gen Z population.

However, when we bold and capitalise that second half of the question, the level of agreement among Gen Z, with the *identically worded* statement, decreases to 28 per cent. Our results support our first hypothesis, suggesting that some respondents are only taking account of the first part of the statement and skipping over the implications of the second part.

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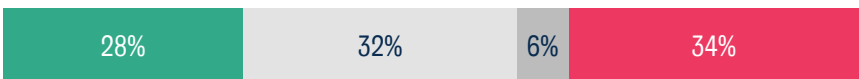
Agreement falls further when we replace the words ‘strong leader’ with ‘dictator’ in the statement: the proportion of Gen Z agreeing the UK would be a better place reduces to 22 per cent, supporting our second hypothesis.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections?



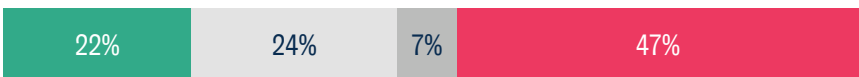
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To what extent do you agree or disagree that the UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge **WHO DOES NOT HAVE TO BOTHER WITH PARLIAMENT AND ELECTIONS?**



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To what extent do you agree or disagree that the UK would be a better place if a dictator was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections?



These are clearly significant effects, bringing the results much closer to the findings from major studies like WVS and BES.

However, this still seems like a worrying level of support for such radical changes to how we’re governed. Even when we emphasise the more autocratic elements of the statement or explicitly include the term

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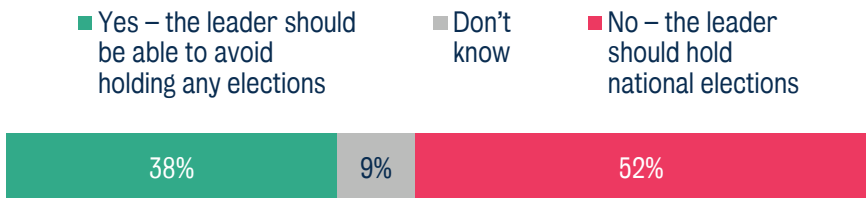
‘dictator’, we still get significant minorities of Gen Z agreeing with the statements.

However, the additional questions we included in the study indicate we need further caution in interpreting what this actually means to respondents.

As the chart over page shows, over half of those who agreed with the original statements go on to say, no, they don’t want a ‘leader [who] faced no checks or control of their actions by MPs in parliament’. For example, 61 per cent of those who agreed with the question as asked in the Channel 4 study suggest they would actually want controls and checks on the strong leader from MPs in parliament.

Similarly, 52 per cent of those who agree with any of the strong leader/dictator variations of the question go on to say that actually ‘no – the leader should hold national elections’.

And does this mean you think it would be better for the UK if that leader could avoid holding any national elections at all, or not?



We can, then, combine the results from across these measures, to get, perhaps, a fairer representation of real extent of Gen Z support for a dictator and their rejection of democracy.

The proportion of Gen Z who agree that the UK would be a better place if a dictator was in charge, that that dictator should face no checks or control from MPs in parliament, and could avoid holding national elections is actually *just six per cent*. This is unlikely to have drawn quite as much media attention as a finding suggesting ‘more than half’ wanted this outcome.

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You said that the UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections.

Does this mean you think it would be better for the UK if that leader faced no checks or control of their actions by MPs in parliament, or not?

- Yes – the leader should not face checks or control of their actions by MPs
- Don't know
- No – the leader should face checks or control of their actions by MPs



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You said that the UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge **WHO DOES NOT HAVE TO BOTHER WITH PARLIAMENT AND ELECTIONS.**

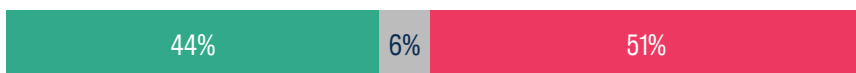
Does this mean you think it would be better for the UK if that leader faced no checks or control of their actions by MPs in parliament, or not?



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You said that the UK would be a better place if a dictator was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections.

Does this mean you think it would be better for the UK if that leader faced no checks or control of their actions by MPs in parliament, or not?



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Aggregate measure of % who agree the UK would be a better place if a dictator was in charge who faced no control of their actions by MPs and was able to avoid holding any elections

■ Supports all of these elements ■ Does not support all of these elements

6%

94%

Finally, it is worth looking at what people wrote in their own words to explain what they were thinking when agreeing with any version of the statement. The main theme is the focus on the ‘strong leader’ element of the statement, with the majority of comments suggesting they just want someone who can get things done:

Need someone with backbone.

Someone just needs to take charge and make important decisions, based off of information provided.

This was often accompanied by a sense of how ineffectual parliament is, and limited faith in elections:

I believe that a strong leader without the parliament can make decisions faster improving the state of the country at a quicker pace as parliament and elections tend to hold over periods of time.

I think a better leader with great policies will effect better change and make impact without passing through the parliament or election which is always a distraction.

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But a number of responses also highlighted the difficulty some had in interpreting the question:

I'm confused, I think the statement confused me. I think we should have elections, but parliament is a scam to me. It feels like they earn so much and don't help the common folk. But we need representation for the country.

I believe the first half of the statement, in that we need someone strong and experienced, however elections and parliament should still be considered.

I believe that strong leaders can bring decisive actions, clear direction and stability. It's more about the need for effective leadership rather than disregarding democratised [sp] principles.

Taken together, the results suggest both our hypotheses are supported, and more generally that we need to rethink how this question is interpreted and, especially, how it is reported in the media. There is no reasonable way to conclude over half of Gen Z support a dictatorship, with any meaningful understanding of that term.

This does not mean we have no challenges with Gen Z's connection to and belief in liberal democracy and its institutions (we do, as we'll outline next), but this characterisation of Gen Z is a damaging distraction.

### Survey experiment details

Fieldwork was conducted via Focaldata's in-house platform, with API integration to an online panel network. Data collection took place between 7 and 14 February 2025, with a total of 2,023 interviews among a representative sample of 13- to 27-year-olds, weighted by exact age, gender, and region. The sample was randomly split into three representative samples, with 1,003 respondents answering the 'dictator' version of the question. This 'dictator' sample was similarly weighted to the nationally representative profile, and forms the basis of the key finding that only 6% think the UK would be a better place if a dictator was in charge who did not face control from MPs or hold any national elections.



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# Conclusions – and the real problem

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We think the high estimates and overinterpretation of the Channel 4 results risk adding to two serious problems: creating an exaggerated sense of division between generations and actually shaping Gen Z opinion, through misrepresentation of the social norm for their generation.

But there's a third problem – that the noise around this distracts us from real and serious issues with Gen Z's engagement with UK political systems and institutions. We risk labelling a whole generation as 'authoritarian' when the real problem is a lack of confidence in the delivery of democratic institutions and systems.

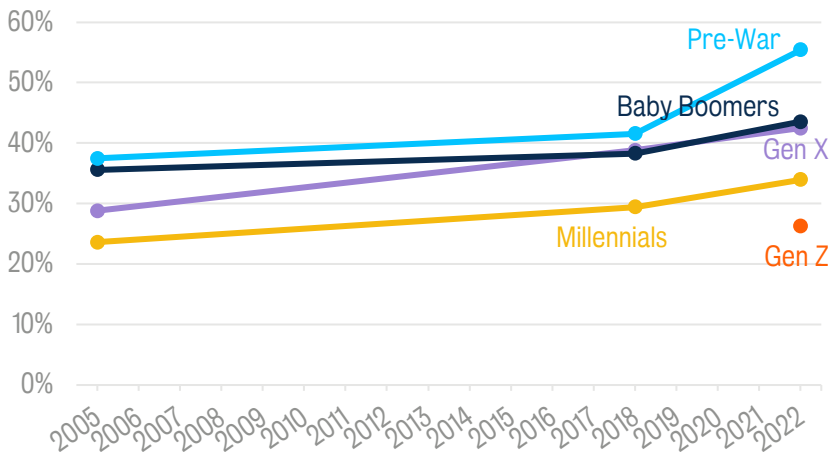
Our key conclusion from a programme of analysis of the WVS results<sup>6</sup> was that there is no deep issue with the *principle* of democracy among the UK public or younger generations; it's perceptions of *delivery* that are the problem.

First, the WVS shows that younger generations don't really feel that the country *is* democratic, much less so than older generations. This is perhaps understandable when so many policy decisions – from pensions and housing to support for the costs of education and childcare – have favoured older generations.

It's not surprising then that confidence in parliament and government are lower among younger generations. This isn't just Gen Z, however: all but the oldest generations have dire and declining levels of trust.

And how democratically is this country being governed today? Again, using a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means that it is “not at all democratic” and 10 means that it is “completely democratic”, what position would you choose?

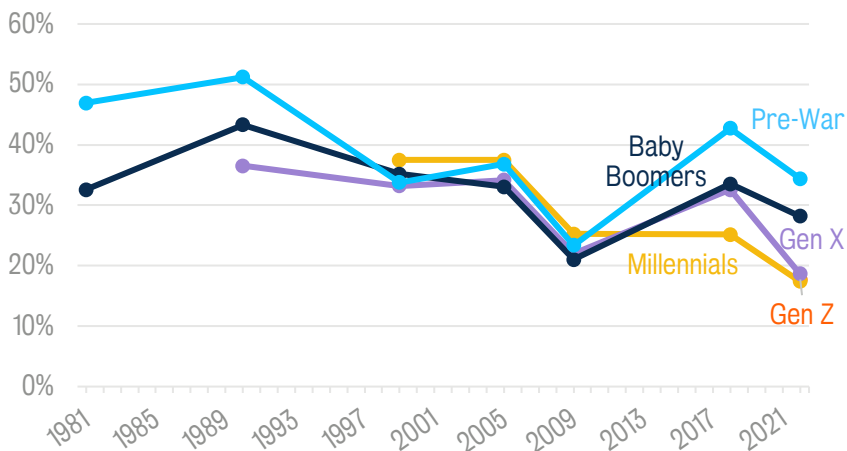
% who say highly democratic [8–10] by generation in Britain



I am going to name a number of organisations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all?

**Parliament**

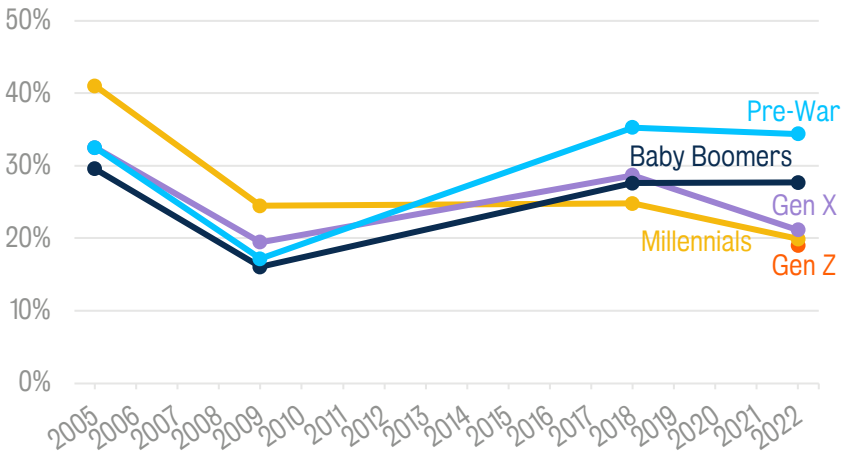
% who say a great deal/quite a lot of confidence by generation in Britain



I am going to name a number of organisations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all?

### The government

% who say a great deal/quite a lot of confidence by generation in Britain



And there is one particularly worrying finding for Gen Z specifically – that they have uniquely low levels of confidence in the police. This trust in the police has generally declined over recent decades, but Gen Z are coming into the adult population with an extraordinarily low sense of confidence, at just over 40 per cent, compared with around 70 per cent for all other generations.

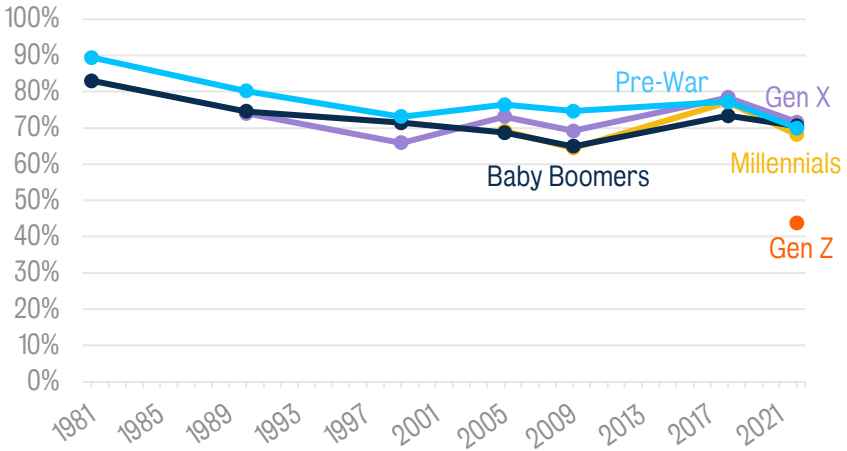
This is just one data point, so we need to bear in mind it may change as Gen Z age – but the worrying aspect here is we haven't seen a similarly low starting point for previous generations of young people: Millennials, for example, had fairly average levels of confidence when they were a similar age to Gen Z now.

These are the sorts of more precise and direct patterns we should be concerned about and focused on.

I am going to name a number of organisations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all?

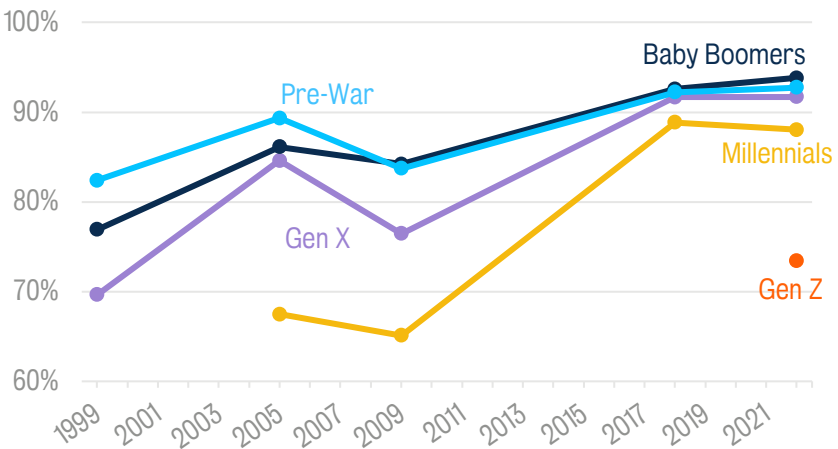
**The police**

% who say a great deal/quite a lot of confidence by generation in Britain



I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country? **Having a democratic political system**

% who say very/fairly good by generation in Britain



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And this is related to a final point. The Channel 4 report is couched in generational labels – ie that this is a problem specific to ‘Gen Z’, not young people or 13- to 27-year-olds. The use of generational labels in these one-off snapshot polls risks suggesting that we can know this is a ‘cohort effect’ – that is, something unique to Gen Z, rather than something related to their age. In a one-off poll, we can’t know whether young people have always answered in a similar way, and then grown out of as they get older (a ‘lifecycle effect’).<sup>7</sup>

You can only get a picture of this if you track change over time, and so can compare this current generation of young with now older generations back when they were young.

There’s a very relevant example of this in the WVS, on whether people think having a democratic system is a good way of governing. If you took a snapshot of the UK in 2009, you’d have been extremely worried that Millennials were much less supportive of the idea of democracy, with only around 65 per cent thinking it is a good way of governing, compared with over 80 per cent among the older generations. But roll forward a few years to 2018 and 2022, and Millennials are now much more in line with older groups, and nearly 90 per cent think democracy is a good system.

If you just took that snapshot again in 2022 and looked at Gen Z, you’d also think we were in trouble with the new youngest generation. But having seen the trajectory of Millennials, we can be much more reassured that this support for democracy can increase as they age.

Assigning generational labels to age-based patterns is another way in which we add to the exaggerated sense of drama and separation between the generations – and we have enough to worry about without that.

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# References

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1. BES also shows a 'don't know' option on-screen, while that is not included on options presented to WVS respondents: 17 per cent of Gen Z select don't know in BES, but only four per cent volunteer that response on WVS.
2. Cornesse, C., Blom, A. G., Dutwin, D., Krosnick, J. A., De Leeuw, E. D., Legleye, S., Pasek, J., Pennay, D., Phillips, B., Sakshaug, J. W., Struminskaya, B., & Wenz, A. (2020). A review of conceptual approaches and empirical evidence on probability and nonprobability sample survey research. *Journal of Survey Statistics and Methodology*, 8(1), 4–36. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jssam/smz041>; Pew Research Center. (2023). Comparing Two Types of Online Survey Samples. <https://www.pewresearch.org/methods/2023/09/07/comparing-two-types-of-online-survey-samples/>
3. Roberts, C., Gilbert, E., & Eisner, L. (2019). Satisficing in surveys: A systematic review of the literature. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10087616/1/Roberts%20et%20al%20satisficing%20review%20%28preprint%29%20200919.pdf>
4. Gibson, L. (March-April 2020). The Authoritarian Reflex', *Harvard Magazine*. <https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2020/02/feature-the-authoritarian-reflex>
5. Snagovsky, F., & Werner, A. (2024). Using survey experiments for construct validation: 'strong leader' questions and support for authoritarian leadership. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2024.2341127>
6. See the results from the WVS programme: <https://www.uk-values.org/research>
7. You can find more on these lifecycle, period and cohort effects at: [generations-book.org](https://generations-book.org)





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