

# It's like Uber, but for deepening political inequality.

Estimating the impact of gig work on political participation

## The problem.

This thesis considers two distinct phenomena:

- Voter turnout is in decline across rich democracies. In the UK, **voter turnout has decreased ~16 percentage points** on average since the 1950s (Fig. 1)
- As a result of neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, **the UK labour market is growing increasingly more insecure**, leading to higher rates of “casual,” or unprotected work, including a recent rise in “gig economy” work.

### What is gig economy work, and why should we be worried about it?

The “gig economy” is often used as a shorthand for any digitally-mediated exchange of services, usually through use of an online platform (e.g. Uber, TaskRabbit, Amazon Mechanical Turk). In the UK, the growing popularity and adoption of platform-mediated services has led to a spike of gig economy employment, with the percentage of working adults doing gig work **increasing from 6 to 15 percent, or 4.4 million workers**, in the past five years.

Gig workers are often designated as “**independent contractors**,” and as such, they do not enjoy many employment benefits such as guaranteed hours, pension, etc. The financial stress (and possible physical stress, in the case of many manual gig jobs) creates a working environment sometimes described as **precarious**, which can have multiple negative downstream effects, including possibly **impacting an individual’s interest in politics and turning out to vote**.

**RQ:** This thesis asks how gig work might be a new driver of voter turnout decline and increased political inequalities in the UK.

## Key findings.

1 Gig workers can be differentiated across two main axes: **Manual vs Non Manual** and **Casual vs Reliant**. Non manual workers are far more likely to have some higher education, whereas manual workers are more likely to be male, younger, have a migrant background, and have children (see Figure 2). Both groups are more likely to report financial difficulties than in the control group of non gig workers.

Gig workers who are more reliant on gig income (20 hrs+/month) tend to be older, skew more male, have a migrant background, and have multiple jobs and be considered “self-employed,” compared with more casual gig workers.

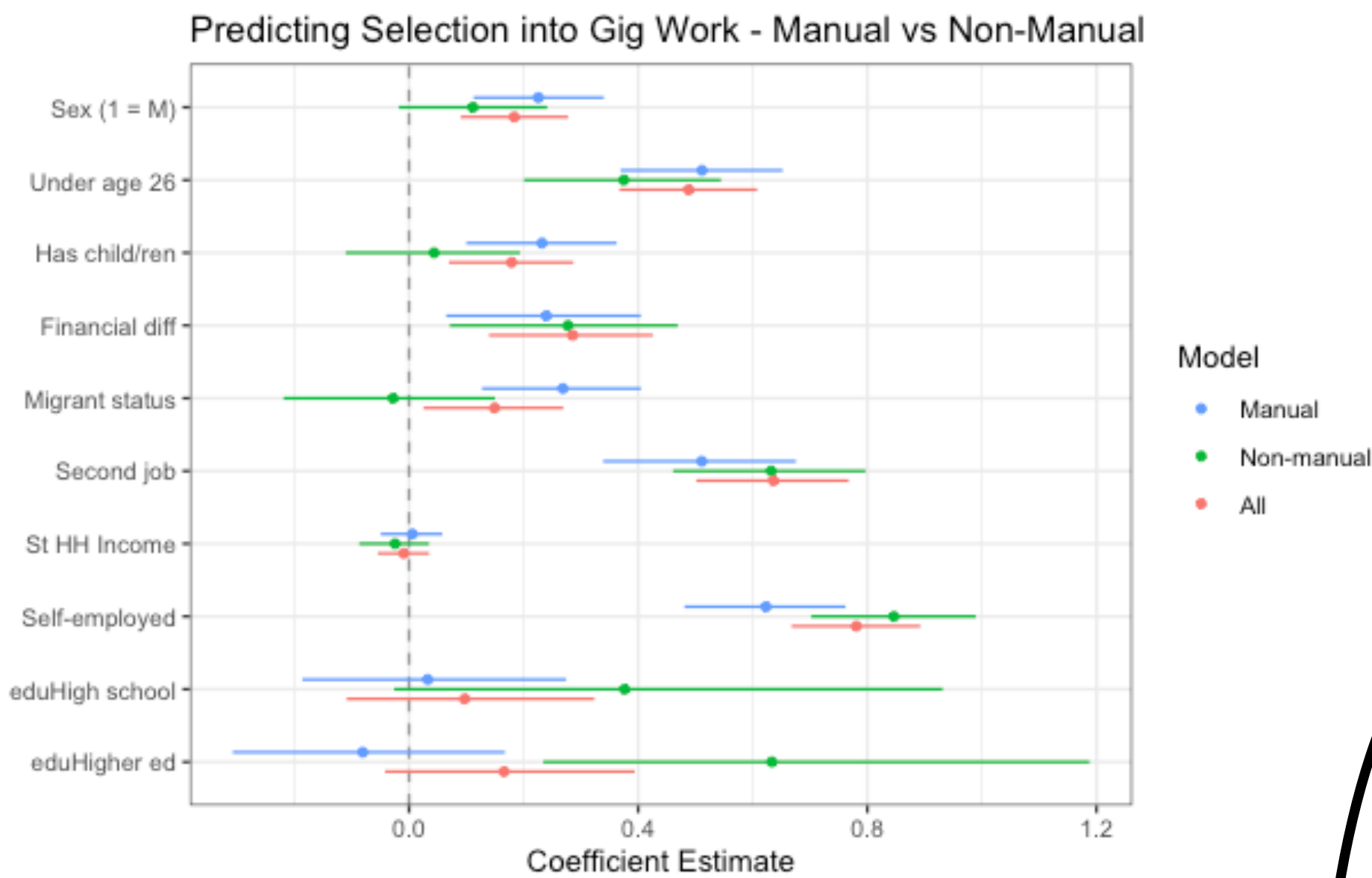


Figure 2. Coefficient plot of key predictor variables for selection into gig work (95% confidence intervals)

## Modelling and analysis.

My analysis is broken down into three main parts, all estimated using Probit regression modelling:

- 1 **Understanding selection into gig work.** Who decides to become a gig worker? How do they differ from the general population, and how do they differ from each other? The answers to these questions inform relevant control variables in Parts 2 and 3.
- 2 **Estimating the likelihood of gig workers being interested in politics.** After controlling for relevant covariates explored in Part 1, are gig workers more or less likely to report being politically interested?
- 3 **Estimating the likelihood of gig workers turning out to vote in general elections.** Controlling for similar covariates, how likely are gig workers to vote compared with the general UK voting population?

This study utilizes data from **Wave 11 (Y2020) of the UK Household Longitudinal Study**, which is the first wave to start capturing gig economy participation.

2 On average, **gig workers are no less likely to report political interest** than in the non gig worker control group, with **non manual gig workers in fact reporting higher rates of political interest** than the controls. This is a surprising finding, given the many work-related stresses many gig workers face, and the extensive literature connecting variables like financial stability and developing civic skills in the workplace to developing political interest. All four categories of gig work predicted as-high or higher likelihoods of having political interest, even when controlling for various combinations of socioeconomic, workplace precariousness, and political inclusion variables explored in Part 1.

3 Despite having close to average political interest, manual gig workers are predicted to be **nearly 7 percentage points less likely to vote** than the non gig control group, when relevant covariates are controlled (see Table 1). In contrast, **non manual gig workers are more likely to vote** than the non gig control group. Though mechanisms underlying these differences in voter turnout are not explored, it is possible that differences in educational attainment are at work here.

Prob Δ (Gig work - Non gig work)

Model Types		All	Non Manual	Manual	Casual	Rely
		-0.023	+0.101	-0.098	-0.020	-0.026
	With controls	-0.010	+0.118	-0.068	+0.008	-0.0287

Table 1. Probability changes for likelihood of voting across different categories of gig work

## Takeaways.

First, this study finds that gig workers are not a monolith: there is **quantitative evidence to support differentiating gig workers** to reflect different characteristics and outcomes. This finding has important ramifications for labour market researchers and political economists considering potential effects of the growing gig economy.

Second, to my knowledge this is **the first quantitative study which connects gig work explicitly with political outcomes**, and the findings are quite compelling: an almost **7 percentage point decrease in voter turnout for manual gig workers**. Further research is needed to understand causal mechanisms underlying this relationship, but at least on the face of it, this downstream effect of the gig economy could mean **problems for the future of traditional electoral politics**, particularly if casual and precarious work continues to grow.

Third, I find that **gig workers do not lack political interest, and yet for some, they do see depressed voter turnout**. This helps to rule out low political interest as the underlying mechanism, but does beg the question: **why does political interest not translate into voting for some gig workers?** This suggests that political interest could be channelled into other forms of political action such as demonstrations or organizing (another topic for further research).

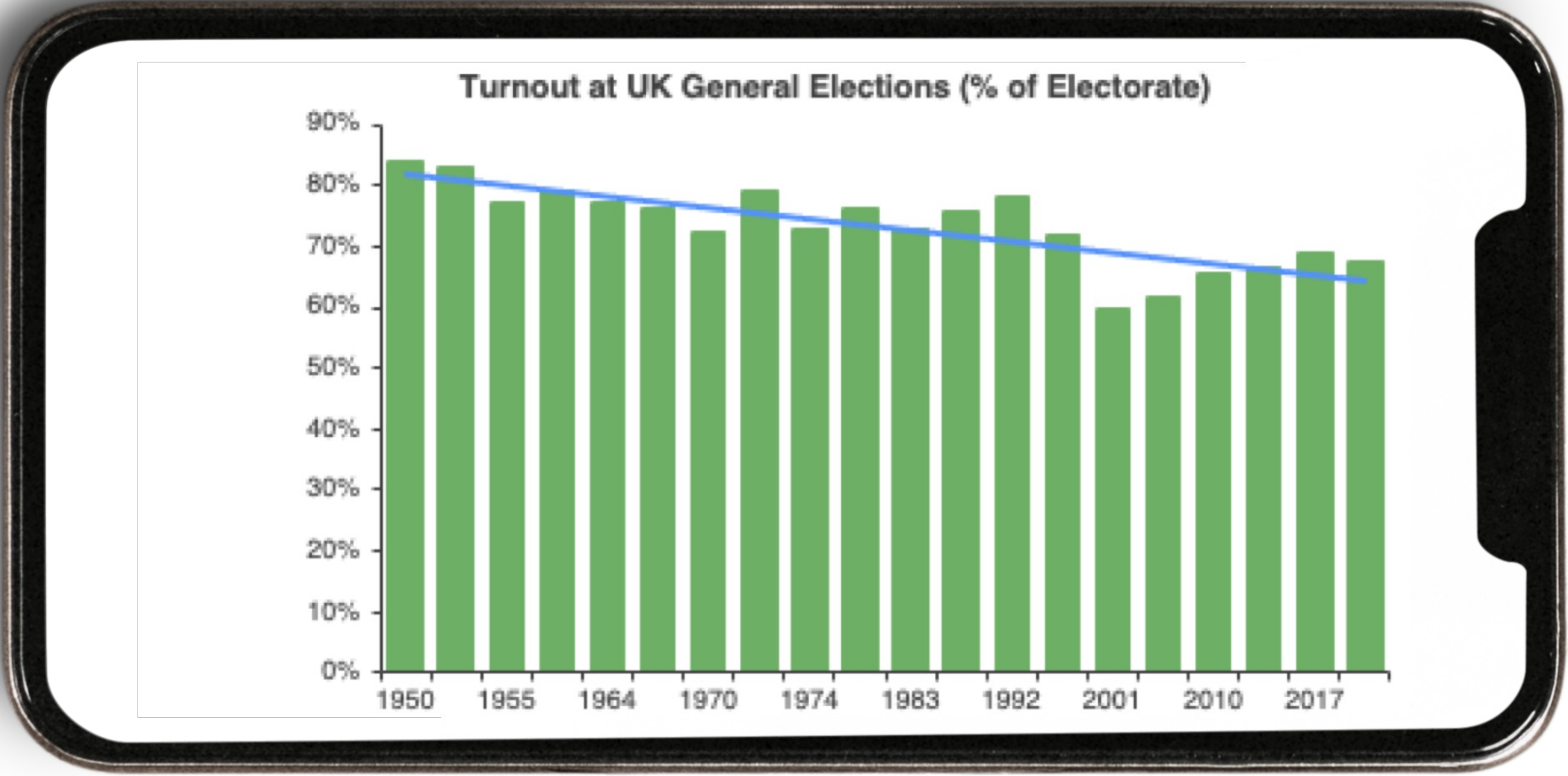


Figure 1. Bar chart displaying voter turnout by election year in the UK. Data source: House of Commons Library (2021). Smartphone image by rawpixel.com.

## Get in touch.

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Want to find out more? Scan to access my GitHub repository, containing my replication code and the full thesis text.