

## Key findings

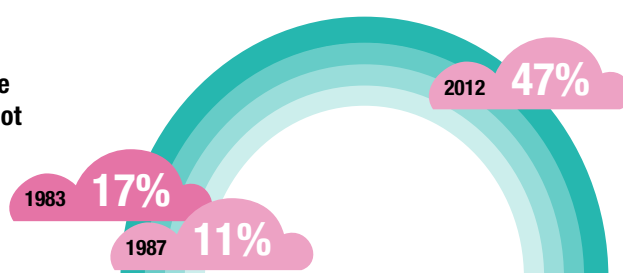
# How and why Britain's attitudes and values are changing

How have Britain's attitudes and values changed since the British Social Attitudes survey first began in 1983? This summary highlights some of the key themes in our 30th anniversary Report and teases out the different factors that underpin changing attitudes. It focuses on four areas in particular: identities; personal relationships; public spending; and politics and institutions. Where possible we also draw out what our findings mean in terms of current policy debates, and consider how attitudes might shift over the next few decades.

## Live and let live

Compared with 30 years ago, Britain takes a far more laissez-faire view of other people's relationships and lifestyles, but this does not mean differences of opinion have vanished.

In 1983 17% thought **homosexuality** was "not wrong at all", falling to 11% by 1987 (a time of great concern about HIV AIDS). Now 47% take this view, while 22% think it is "always wrong" (compared with 50% in 1983).



## Individuals and the state

Generally speaking, the last 30 years have not seen a shift towards a less collectivist Britain – the public's views on taxation, spending and social protection are very similar to those seen in 1983. However, people's attitudes towards social welfare for disadvantaged groups in society have hardened (though there are signs that this long-term trend may be starting to reverse).

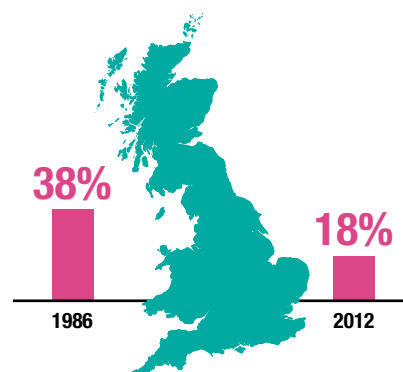
The proportion believing it is the government's responsibility to provide a **decent standard of living for the unemployed** has fallen from 81% in 1985 to 59% now (up from 50% in 2006).



## Losing faith in key institutions

Our findings show that a number of important British institutions have fallen in the public's estimation over the last 30 years, including the press, banks and politicians. However, slightly more people are interested in politics than in the mid-1980s (although still a minority), and more feel that they can influence government.

Now only one in five (18%) **trust governments** to put the nation's needs above those of a political party, down from 38% in 1986.



## Introduction

### Britain then – and now

Back in March 1983, when interviewing for the first British Social Attitudes survey began, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party was nearing the end of its first term in office. A few months later it enjoyed its second election victory, winning 44 per cent of the vote and all but wiping out Michael Foot's Labour Party as an electoral force in the south of England. The Conservatives won despite the fact that over three million were unemployed during the early 1980s, an unemployment rate of over 10 per cent. The digital world was still in its infancy: Sinclair's ZX Spectrum was the top-selling home computer while 1983 saw the launch of both the Compact Disc and the first commercially available handheld mobile phone, weighing almost 800 grams and costing over £2,000.<sup>[1]</sup> Rather than being a globalised world, the Berlin Wall still divided East from Western Europe, while Ronald Reagan's tenure as President of the United States did not seem destined to reduce Cold War tensions.

There are some similarities between today's Britain and the Britain we first surveyed back in 1983. The global financial crisis of 2008 and the recession that followed have seen unemployment increase once again, although not to the levels of the early 1980s. At the time of writing, unemployment stands at 7.8 per cent of the economically active population, or 2.51 million people (Office for National Statistics, 2013). But in many other respects – whether demographically, politically, economically or socially – Britain has clearly changed a great deal over the last 30 years. The UK population has not only grown (standing at over 63 million according to the 2011 Census, up from just over 56 million in 1983) but also become more diverse. Since 1991, the population with a non-white ethnic background has more than doubled, from three to seven million, and now accounts for 14 per cent of the UK population (Jivraj, 2012).

The structure of the job market has changed, with increases in the proportions of professional, managerial and non-routine 'service' occupations and a decline in routine administrative and non-routine manual jobs (Holmes and Mayhew, 2012). Women now form about 45 per cent of the workforce, up from 38 per cent in 1971. Our family lives have changed markedly too; cohabitation has increased considerably, as has the proportion of children born outside marriage. As in 1983, the Labour Party is in opposition, this time following three terms in office between 1997 and 2010, but today's party is much altered from its 1980s incarnation, having moved closer to the political central ground. Finally, a digital revolution has meant that, in little more than a generation, worldwide communication has become an everyday and instant occurrence, with access to the internet now considered almost a fourth utility.

### This report and its data

This report investigates whether there have been similarly widespread changes in public attitudes since the early 1980s. Have people changed their views about how much help government should give to pensioners or the unemployed? Are certain forms of sexual behaviour seen as more acceptable now than three decades ago? What has happened to public trust in government and other institutions? The report covers a wide range of topics, and here we highlight some of the key themes that emerge, teasing out the different factors that underpin changing attitudes. We focus on four subjects in particular: identities; personal relationships; public spending; and trust, politics and institutions. Where possible we also draw out what this means in terms of



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**45%**

**of the workforce is female, up from 38% in 1971**

current policy debates, and read the runes as to how attitudes might shift over the next few decades.

We can only do this by having access to robust and repeated measures of people's attitudes towards key political, social and moral issues taken over many years. Ever since NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey began in 1983 it has regularly asked a representative sample of people their views about a wide range of topics, creating a unique record of how social attitudes have evolved over the course of the last 30 years.

### What might we find – and why?

Before we dig into the data, it is worth pausing to ask: what sort of changes in people's attitudes might we anticipate? One important theory is that in a rapidly changing world, we have all become more individualist. Many argue that some of the changes we outlined earlier have transformed people's lives (Baumann, 2000; Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1999). Previously, it is argued, people lived in relatively stable societies, in which they formed strong bonds and affinities with those with whom they lived and worked, and in which there were clear lines of moral authority. Now, people have to navigate a fluid, diverse social environment in which they are free to choose their identity and moral code; individuals have to create their own lifestyles, rather than living out one inherited from their parents and reinforced by their social interactions with others. If this is true, it potentially has important implications both for how we behave and how we think about society. If individuals now create their own moral codes, they no longer need to look to the traditional social mores and conventions that once dictated acceptable behaviour. And if people are seen as having the freedom to choose, they may also be expected to take responsibility for the consequences of those choices and society may become less willing to provide collective insurance against the risks of individual misjudgement or misfortune. Social solidarity, expressed through institutions such as the welfare state, as well as a willingness to accept the duties of a common citizenship, may have given way to a more individualistic outlook.

If theories of individualism are correct, we would expect to find a steady weakening of people's attachment to traditional social identities such as class, political party and religion. We might also expect to see a transformation in how Britain thinks about marriage, relationships and parenthood, with an increasing sense of 'live and let live'. We might find a more questioning view about the role of the state in its citizens' lives, and perhaps an increasing reluctance to let it step in to help those who have fallen on harder times.

But there are other important reasons why attitudes might have changed over the last three decades. In many areas we might expect to find that attitudes have shifted in response to particular events or to the changing political or economic context. How, for example, do attitudes to government spending in general, or spending on policy areas such as the NHS in particular, relate to actual spending levels and the policy issues of the day? To what extent are our views about politicians and government affected by political scandals? How do views about welfare recipients relate to the economy – do we become more sympathetic and want to see more spending in this area during times of austerity and economic hardship? Is there any evidence that political debates about policy have an impact on how Britain thinks and feels?



**One important theory is that we have all become more individualist**



**In many areas we might expect attitudes to have shifted in response to particular events**

Questions such as these remind us that attitudes may not necessarily have moved in one direction. Opinion may have swayed to and fro in response to particular events, scandal and changes in government policy. But we should also remember that if opinion has moved in one direction, it may have done so without many individual people actually changing their mind about an issue. Rather, attitudes can change as a result of what is called ‘generational replacement’. This refers to the process by which society’s views gradually change as older generations, with distinctive views about particular topics, die out and are slowly replaced by younger generations who have different attitudes and values. As a result, the character of Britain’s attitudes and values slowly changes. When this underpins changing attitudes, there is every reason to believe that the change of outlook will prove permanent and possibly intensify.

There are many ways of defining ‘generations’. Recently, attention has focused particularly on ‘Generation Y’, born in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the more well-known baby boomer and pre-war generations (Ipsos Mori, 2012). These broad divisions can be illuminating but, because they impose a certain view of what counts as a generation, they can also mask important differences that exist within particular generations. Given our interest in a 30 year period, this is especially the case within the otherwise large baby boomer and pre-war generations. For that reason, in this report we categorise people by their decade of birth.

## Identities

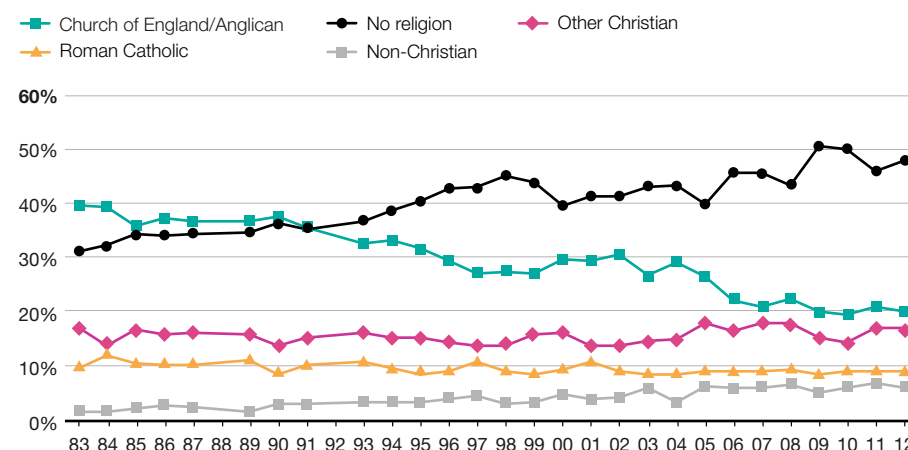
A key element of the argument that modern (or postmodern) societies such as Britain have experienced a process of individualisation is that people are now more weakly attached to traditional social identities such as religion or social class. They may well also lose their sense of affinity with traditional collective institutions of democracy, such as political parties. These identities can be regarded as the lynchpins of social attitudes. Religion, for instance, is often regarded as a key source of moral values, while people’s subjective sense of their social class is often thought to shape their outlook on economic issues. In particular, ‘feeling working class’ is often thought to provide a foundation for a collective sense of social solidarity, on the grounds that a relatively active state can help protect workers from the worst privations of a capitalist market. Finally, those who identify with a particular political party are often thought likely to be persuaded to adopt (or at least concede to) that party’s views, and are certainly more likely to feel engaged in the political process.

### Less religious attachment

We start by examining whether people’s attachments to these three identities are indeed in decline, beginning with religion. Here there is little doubt that a substantial change has taken place, with a marked decline in the proportion who describe themselves as belonging to a particular religion. In 1983, around two in three people (68 per cent) considered themselves to belong to one religion or another; in 2012, only around half (52 per cent) do so. As our **Personal relationships** chapter sets out, this decline is in practice a decline in attachment to Anglicanism; in 1983 two in five people (40 per cent) said they were Anglican, and the Church of England could still reasonably lay claim to being England’s national church (and thus, arguably, to some extent its fount of moral authority). But now only 20 per cent do so. In contrast, the proportion saying they belong to a religion other than Christianity has tripled from two to six per cent. Britain’s religious landscape has not only become smaller but also more diverse.[2]

**52%**  
belong to a religion,  
compared with 68% in 1983

**Figure 0.1 Trends in religious affiliation, 1983–2012**



The data on which Figure 0.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

### Middle or working class – or neither?

The picture is not the same, however, when it comes to social class. To assess this we ask people: “Do you ever think of yourself as belonging to any particular class?” In 2012, 50 per cent responded by saying they were either middle or working class. Those who did not respond in that way were prompted: “Most people say they belong either to the middle class or the working class. If you *had* to make a choice, would you call yourself middle class or working class?”

In fact, people are no more or less willing now to acknowledge a class identity without prompting than they were 30 years ago, and the proportion who refuse to choose a class identity, even after prompting, remains relatively small – just five per cent. Nor has the balance between those who describe themselves as middle class and working class changed as much as we might expect, given the substantial changes in the kinds of jobs people do over the last three decades. So, despite the fact that the proportion of people with a classifiable occupation that might ‘objectively’ be regarded as middle class increased from 47 to 59 per cent between 1983 and 2012, only around a third of people describe themselves as middle class (35 per cent now, compared with 34 per cent in 1983) while six in ten (60 per cent) call themselves working class.<sup>[3]</sup> Although Britain has become a majority white-collar society, subjectively it is still inclined to feel working class, albeit perhaps not as closely as it once did (Heath et al., 2009).

### Declining party loyalty

Even if people are no less likely to identify with a social class now than they were in the 1980s, they are certainly much less likely to identify with either of the political parties traditionally associated with the middle (Conservative) or working (Labour) classes. Back in 1983, 72 per cent identified with one of these parties, while 87 per cent said they supported any political party, including the then Liberal/SDP Alliance. Now less than two-thirds (63 per cent) identify with one of the two traditional class parties, and around three-quarters (76 per cent) claim an adherence to any political party.

The decline in party identification becomes even clearer if we look at how strongly people identify with whichever political party they say they support. In 1987 (when we first asked this question) nearly half (46 per cent) said they were



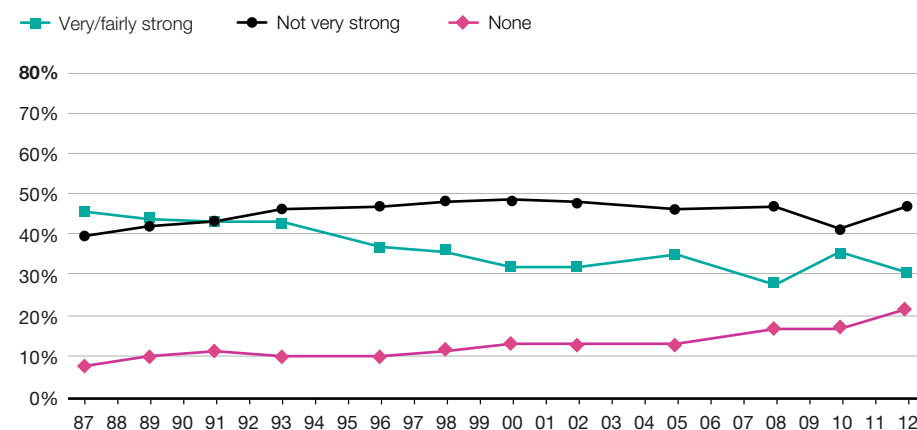
**People are no more or less willing to acknowledge a class identity than they were 30 years ago**



**Over the last 30 years, the hold that the country's political parties have on the affections of the British public has weakened**

a “very” or “fairly strong” supporter of a political party. Now the figure is under a third (31 per cent). Conversely, while in 1987 nearly half (48 per cent) said they were not a strong supporter of a party, or did not support any party at all, now over two-thirds (69 per cent) fall into this category. Over the last 30 years, the hold that the country's political parties have on the affections of the British public has weakened at least as much as that of its religious institutions.

**Figure 0.2 Strength of party identification, 1987–2012**



The data on which Figure 0.2 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

## Reflections

So far as identities are concerned, then, some of the trends of the last 30 years are in line with what we would expect were society becoming more individualised, as we see fewer people identifying with two previously important types of institution (religious institutions and political parties). As our **Personal relationships** and **Politics** chapters show, in both cases there is a clear generational element to these trends, with each new generation less religious or less likely to identify with a political party than the one before. As a result, attachment to these two types of institution is likely to continue to decline further in future.

On the other hand, it appears that what is often thought to be a particularly important social phenomenon in British life, social class, is undiminished as a source of subjective feeling. That suggests a need for caution before accepting some of the more sweeping claims relating to individualisation.

## Personal relationships

According to much traditional religious teaching, sexual activity and having children should occur only within the institution of marriage. Getting married should represent a lifetime commitment between a man and a woman, and same-sex relationships are frowned upon. Many clerics are doubtful, even strongly opposed, to the abortion of an unborn foetus. In short, both sexual activity and the life to which it potentially gives rise are regarded as sacred gifts and consequently surrounded by a moral code that individuals should not transgress.

### The changing status of marriage

Elements of this outlook were still evident in 1980s Britain. Although in 1983 only 28 per cent said it was “always” or “mostly” wrong for a man and a woman to have sexual relations outside marriage, the proportion who thought such



**Now only a small minority raise an eyebrow about sexual relationships outside marriage**



behaviour was “not wrong at all” stood at well below half (42 per cent). And in 1989 when we first asked whether “people who want children ought to get married”, a clear majority of 70 per cent agreed. Now it is only a small minority who raise an eyebrow about sexual relationships outside marriage. Just 12 per cent say this is “always” or “mostly” wrong, and an all-time high of 65 per cent see nothing wrong at all in such behaviour. Even when a couple want to have children, less than half (42 per cent) now think they ought to get married first.

Despite the transformation of attitudes towards many aspects of sex and marriage, it would be a mistake to assume that all forms of behaviour in personal relationships are now considered equally acceptable. ‘Cheating’ on one’s husband or wife, is, if anything, even more likely to be greeted with disapproval than it was 30 years ago. Now 63 per cent say that it is “always wrong” for a married person to have sexual relations with someone other than their partner, slightly more than the 58 per cent who thought this in 1984. And such behaviour is no more acceptable if undertaken by a man than by a woman. So, while we no longer look to traditional moral codes to inform all our views about sex and marriage it seems that, for many, sexual exclusivity within marriage is an ethical standard that should continue to be upheld.

### Less traditional views about gender roles

Attitudes towards the role of men and women have changed considerably too. In the 1980s there was still considerable support for ‘traditional’ gender roles. In 1984, for instance, 43 per cent agreed with the view that “a man’s job is to earn money; a woman’s job is to look after the home and family”, but now only 13 per cent take this view.<sup>[4]</sup> And while in 1989 42 per cent thought that “family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job” and two-thirds (64 per cent) that “a mother with a child under school age should stay at home rather than go out to work”, by 2012 the proportions agreeing with these views had fallen to 27 and 33 per cent respectively. However, as our **Gender roles** chapter shows, actual behaviour at home has not caught up with changing attitudes. Women still report undertaking a disproportionate amount of housework and caring activities, spending an average of 13 hours on housework and 23 hours caring for family members each week, compared with eight and 10 hours respectively for men.

### Greater tolerance of same-sex relationships

Perhaps the most dramatic attitude shift of all relates to the way in which Britain thinks about same-sex relationships. In 1983, half the public (50 per cent) said that “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex” were “always wrong”, a figure that rose to nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) over the subsequent four years, in the wake of the discovery of AIDS and its much-publicised linkage with male homosexual activity in particular. Then, only one in five (17 per cent) thought homosexuality was “not wrong at all”. Now these proportions are more or less reversed; only around one in five (22 per cent) think that same-sex relations are “always wrong” while nearly half (47 per cent) say they are “not wrong at all”.

The disapproval that many people felt about same-sex relationships in the 1980s led some to believe that gay men and lesbians should be excluded from aspects of everyday life. In 1983 only 41 per cent thought it “acceptable for a homosexual person to be a teacher in a school”, while 53 per cent disagreed with this statement. And at a time when no serving MP had ever come out as gay or lesbian, only slightly more people felt it was acceptable for a gay man or



**The most dramatic shift in attitudes is seen in the way Britain thinks about same-sex relationships**

lesbian “to hold a responsible position in public life” than felt it was not (53 and 42 per cent respectively). Such attitudes seem a world away today. Nowadays, 83 per cent think it is acceptable for a gay man or lesbian to teach in a school, and nearly everyone (90 per cent) feels comfortable with their holding a position in public life.

Even so, controversy still surrounds the position of gay men and lesbians when it comes to the sensitive subjects of children and marriage. The public is more or less evenly divided between those who think that “homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt a baby under the same conditions as other couples” (48 per cent) and those who do not. And although over half (56 per cent) agree that “gay or lesbian couples should have the right to marry one another if they want to”, that majority is far from overwhelming. Still, even here public opinion has been transformed over the last 30 years: in 1983, 87 per cent opposed the idea of ‘gay adoption’ (and just five years ago, in 2007, only 47 per cent supported ‘equal marriage’). That such issues are now being publicly debated is also a sign of just how dramatic a change in attitudes has already occurred.

### Life and death

If much of the public debate about same-sex relationships is relatively recent, the circumstances under which abortion should or should not be allowed has been a continuing subject of controversy during the last 30 years. Here too opinion has shifted, albeit less dramatically. In 1983 just 37 per cent endorsed what might be regarded as a ‘woman’s right to choose’ – if she had decided for herself that she did not want the child. The proportion rose to 46 per cent if both parents were of that view; to 47 per cent if they could not afford any more children; and to 87 per cent if the woman’s health would be seriously endangered by going ahead with the pregnancy.

What once were thus minority views (albeit in most cases only just) have now become majority ones. As many as 62 per cent now accept a woman’s right to choose for herself; 73 per cent agree that an abortion should be permitted if both parents agree they should not have the child; and 64 per cent support abortion if the couple decide they cannot afford any more children. However, most of this shift in attitudes occurred during the 1980s. Since then public opinion has shown little sign of shifting further, and there seems little reason to presume that Britain is heading towards some new moral consensus on this issue. Abortion is, however, overwhelmingly accepted in cases where the woman’s health is endangered by her pregnancy, with nine in ten (91 per cent) taking this view now.

The view that life is a sacred gift means that religious institutions often oppose euthanasia as well as abortion. This is a topic where the traditional religious view has long lacked widespread public support. Even 30 years ago (in 1983) only 23 per cent of the public agreed that if a patient has “a painful incurable disease” a doctor should *not* be allowed “by law to end the patient’s life, if the patient requests it”. The proportion now stands even lower, at just 16 per cent. But, in contrast to both abortion and same-sex relationships, this is one topic on which the country’s legislators have so far proved reluctant to align the law with majority public opinion.

### Reflections

Overall, the considerable changes we’ve seen to Britain’s moral outlook over the last 30 years support the case for individualisation. On many issues of sexuality, procreation and marriage, support for the position traditionally associated with



**The circumstances under which abortion should or should not be allowed is a continuing subject of controversy**



most major religions has declined. Individuals are in many respects deciding these issues for themselves. As our **Personal relationships** chapter shows however, the change cannot simply be accounted for by declining religious faith. Even those who still have a religious identity are now less likely than they once were to uphold a traditional moral standpoint. Individualisation has, it seems, been a process that has occurred among those still to be found (at least occasionally) in the pews or equivalent, as well as among those who do not profess any kind of religion at all.

Much of the change we have found in this area reflects the impact of generational differences in people's views. This is clearest in relation to attitudes to premarital sex and homosexuality, with each subsequent generation being successively more liberal in outlook than the one before it. Consequently, as older generations have died out and been replaced by more liberal younger generations, society's view as a whole has become more liberal. As a result, the strong likelihood is that Britain will continue to become more liberal on many of these issues over the next few decades. The caveat to this is that unforeseen events might push attitudes in the opposite direction, as happened to attitudes towards homosexuality in the immediate wake of the discovery of HIV AIDS.

## Public spending

Attitudes to the welfare state are often thought to have been affected by individualisation. If, it is argued, we see people as free to choose for themselves, we might also expect them to take responsibility for the consequences of their choices. So it follows that people may be less willing to show solidarity with each other through a welfare state that shares the risks of poor health or economic misfortune, and more reluctant to see the state engage in substantial income or wealth redistribution. However, we might also expect to see attitudes in this area respond to other influences, including changes in the economic, political and policy climate.

Attitudes towards welfare and the role of the state are also often thought to be closely linked to a person's class identity. As we noted earlier, unlike religious identities, subjective class identities have not changed over the past 30 years as much as theorists of individualisation often assume, with the majority of people still identifying themselves as working class. This might imply, in contrast to individualisation, a sustained level of support for the welfare state.

### Cyclical attitudes to tax and spend

The data show that there have been quite dramatic changes in the public mood, but not consistently in one direction. In some instances, the trend in public opinion has proved to be cyclical. Nowhere is this more obviously true than in the case of attitudes towards taxation and spending.

Every British Social Attitudes survey since the first one in 1983 has asked respondents to say which one of three options they would want government to pick if it had to choose between them:

*Reduce taxes and spend **less** on health, education and social benefits*

*Keep taxes and spending on these services at the **same** level as now*

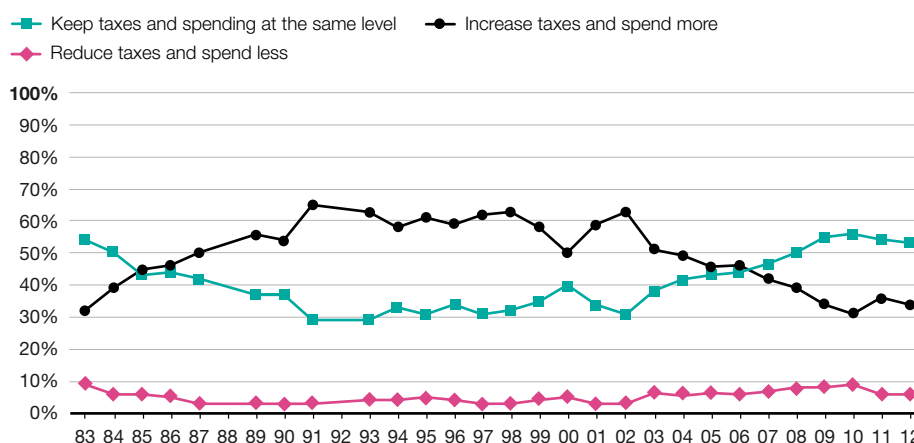
*Increase taxes and spend **more** on health, education and social benefits*



**In some instances, the trend in public opinion has been cyclical**

As the **Government spending and welfare** chapter shows, the first of these options has in fact never been particularly popular, with no more than nine per cent ever choosing it. Opinion has for the most part simply shifted between keeping taxes and spending as they are and increasing them. In 1983 as many as 54 per cent wished to keep taxes and spending as they were, while only 32 per cent wanted them to increase. The public was in a relatively conservative fiscal mood, in tune it seemed with the rhetoric of the then Conservative government led by Mrs Thatcher. As Figure 0.3 shows, that mood did not last; by 1991 two-thirds (65 per cent) wanted taxes and spending increased, and the figure remained as high as 63 per cent as recently as 2002. However, as the then Labour government oversaw a substantial increase in public spending so the public mood switched back again and, by the time that government lost power in 2010, and with the country facing a serious deficit in its public finances, just 31 per cent wanted taxes and spending to increase (the same level as in 1983). Over half (56 per cent) wanted to keep things as they were. Since then, of course, the coalition government has begun to implement substantial cuts in public expenditure (albeit with no commensurate reduction in taxation), but it is too early to say whether the latest finding – that 34 per cent support increased taxes and spending – means that the tide has now begun to turn.

**Figure 0.3 Attitudes to tax and spend, 1983–2012**



The data on which Figure 0.3 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

**Public opinion towards taxation and spending has reacted thermostatically to changes in fiscal trends**

On this issue, public opinion towards taxation and spending has reacted thermostatically to changes in fiscal trends rather than being shaped by some process of long-term social change or indeed any fixed, class-based view as to what the size of the state should be (Wlezien, 1995). When spending is cut back – perhaps with public services suffering as a result – so the public increasingly wants to see more money spent to alleviate the situation. But then when the spending tap has been turned on for a while, so the public’s appetite is sated, satisfaction with institutions such as the NHS increases, and the public mood swings back to the status quo.

**Changing views about welfare**

But not all attitudes in this area are cyclical. There are also some clear longer-term trends, including some in the direction that individualisation theorists would anticipate. Nowhere is this more obvious than in relation to attitudes to welfare benefits.



## Unemployment benefits are viewed less favourably now than they were 30 years ago

One of the most obvious ways in which the state provides collective insurance against economic risk is through unemployment benefits. And, as our **Government spending and welfare** chapter shows, those benefits are certainly viewed less favourably now than they were 30 years ago. In 1983 nearly half the public (46 per cent) said that unemployment benefits were “too low” and caused “hardship”. That figure rose over the next decade, reaching a high of 55 per cent by 1993. Since then, support for this outlook has fallen steadily, and now stands at just 22 per cent. Meanwhile, even though in other respects people’s views about the responsibilities of government have not changed very much, the proportion who think it is government’s responsibility to “provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed” has fallen from a high of 83 per cent in 1989 to 59 per cent now.

Similar trends are found in people’s attitudes towards welfare more generally, with a stark contrast between people’s views prior to the mid-1990s and their attitudes since. In 1987 we asked people whether or not they agreed with the proposition “if welfare benefits weren’t so generous people would learn to stand on their own two feet”, a statement that would seem to encapsulate the idea that individuals should take responsibility for the consequences of their own choices. Then, just 33 per cent agreed with this view, and that figure was unchanged nearly 10 years later, in 1996. But two years after that it rose to 40 per cent, reaching an all-time high of 55 per cent by 2010. In our most recent survey the figure stands at 53 per cent.

Changes to people’s perceptions of benefit fraud appear to tell a similar story; now, 81 per cent agree that “large numbers of people these days falsely claim benefits”, up from 67 per cent in 1987. However, only a minority (37 per cent) go so far as to agree that “most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another”, a figure that has changed little since the 1980s. At the same time, support for the statement that the government should spend “more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes” has fallen from 55 per cent in 1987 to 34 per cent now (up from an all-time low of 27 per cent in 2009).

While the longer-term trend is clear, it is important to note that there has been a recent (if limited) shift towards a more sympathetic stance on welfare benefits and recipients, likely to be driven by austerity and the experience of cuts to social security. For instance, 51 per cent of people now take the view that benefits for unemployed people are “too high and discourage work”, down from 62 per cent in 2011. A similar, but more marked, cyclical upturn in sympathy happened during the recession of the 1990s. But it remains the case that attitudes to the unemployed and the role of government in providing support to them are, across a range of measures, far less supportive now than they were three decades ago – suggesting the public have indeed become less ‘collectivist’ in their attitudes towards this group.

### Reflections

Do these trends represent the consequences of a process of individualisation? There are a number of reasons to doubt that they do. Firstly, as trends in attitudes to welfare and the NHS illustrate, there is nothing inevitable about the direction in which public attitudes shift; instead, they can ebb and flow in response to government spending priorities and policies. Secondly, as our **Social class** chapter sets out, people’s backgrounds continue to exert a strong influence on their views. Although – as was also the case in 1983 – neither people’s subjective nor their objective class identities are strongly linked to how they think about issues such as welfare, more specific economic interests (such

as trade union membership or being unemployed) remain key influences on attitudes and values in these areas. Finally, it is notable that there was relatively little change in attitudes towards welfare and redistribution before Labour came to power in 1997, even though the social changes that are thought to give rise to individualisation long pre-date that development. As our **Government spending and welfare** chapter shows, on many (albeit not all) of these questions the change of attitude has been most marked among Labour identifiers. It seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that what was primarily responsible for the change of mood was the experience of a New Labour government that did not, openly at least, espouse a more egalitarian society, and often seemed to adopt a relatively critical attitude towards welfare. In short, in this area at least, political developments may have been more important than social change (Curtice, 2010).

When it comes to thinking about how attitudes to welfare might change in the future, it is worth contrasting the trends we have just described with our earlier discussion about attitudes to personal relationships. There we saw clear differences between the generations in their views about ‘non-traditional’ relationships; a more liberal outlook has steadily become more common during the last three decades as older generations, with their more censorious views, have died out. By contrast, what is striking with regard to welfare is how much the attitudes of *all* groups shifted during the late 1990s, and the role that relatively short-term policy change and political debate appears to have played in shaping these changes. This opens up the possibility that perhaps in this area at least the pendulum could swing back again in response to different circumstances. After all, the country is now governed by a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition that is pursuing a programme of fiscal austerity; the high rewards received by some such as bankers have been widely criticised; and the Labour Party has sloughed off its New Labour mantle. As well as a modest rise in the proportion saying that the government should spend more on welfare, there have also been small increases in the proportions who feel that “ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth”, and that there is “one law for the rich and one for the poor”. While it is clear that Britain appears less concerned with economic inequality than it was 30 years ago, our findings raise doubts about the claim that inexorable long-term social changes are bringing about an unrelenting movement away from support for welfare or a more equal society.

At the same time, the public remains firmly committed to the founding principle of the NHS: a health care system free at the point of use for all. However, support for *increased* spending on the NHS is currently lower than at other points in the last 30 years, apparently because the increased spending under Labour means that people are less likely to feel the need. So, if the past is any guide, we might expect support for higher taxation and spending to increase as spending remains at best flat in real terms for the NHS (with real cuts in many other areas of government spending). However, views about taxation and spending will also likely be influenced by the public’s attitudes towards the reasons for the current economic stagnation and fiscal deficit, and their views about the government’s policies in regard to these problems.

## Trust, politics and institutions

What might we expect to happen to people’s sense of trust and obligation in a supposedly more individualised society? If people are choosing their own lifestyles (rather than being socialised into traditional patterns of thought and



**Perhaps in the area of welfare the pendulum could swing back again in response to different circumstances**



**Support for increased spending on the NHS is lower than at other points in the last 30 years**

behaviour), traditional common bonds of obligation – for instance, the notion that citizens have a “duty to vote” – might no longer have the force they once did. We have already seen that fewer people now identify with a particular political party; if people’s sense of involvement and participation in the political process is promoted by attachment to a political party, we would also expect this decline to have an impact on participation and on people’s views about government more generally. Perhaps we will also find an erosion of confidence in institutions outside the political arena.

### Declining trust and political engagement?

There is no doubt that politicians have become increasingly exercised by the public’s apparent lack of trust in the political process and a greater reluctance to go to the polls. In truth, Britain has never had that much trust in politicians and the political process, but trust has fallen further over the last 30 years. Back in 1986, only 38 per cent said that they trusted governments “to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party”. By 2000, this had more than halved to just 16 per cent. After rising somewhat, it returned to a similar low in the immediate wake of the MPs’ expenses scandal of 2009 and, at 18 per cent, the latest figure is only a little better. While a degree of scepticism towards politicians might be thought healthy, those who govern Britain today have an uphill struggle to persuade the public that their hearts are in the right place. So it is perhaps little wonder that there are ever-growing demands for greater transparency in the political process, ranging from how much MPs are paid to the sources of party political funding.

People have also become less likely to accept that they have a duty to vote. Back in 1987, that year’s British Election Study found that 76 per cent believed that “it’s everyone’s duty to vote”. When we revisited the issue in 1991 only 68 per cent were of that view, falling to just 56 per cent by 2008. The figure has recovered somewhat in recent years and when we last asked the question in 2011, 62 per cent thought everyone had a duty to vote. But as our **Politics** chapter shows, each generation of new voters seems to be somewhat less likely than the previous generation to accept that it has a duty to vote, suggesting that over the longer term the proportion could well fall yet further still.

However, not all our trends point clearly towards declining political engagement. Although politics has always been something that only appealed to a minority, political interest is actually slightly higher now than it was in the mid-1980s. In 1986, 29 per cent said that they had “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of interest in politics and the figure has remained at or around 30 per cent most years since then, and now stands at 36 per cent.<sup>[5]</sup> People are more likely now than in the 1980s to have signed a petition or contacted their MP, no doubt at least partly reflecting the increasing ease with which it is possible to do these things via social media. And, although a majority doubt their ability to influence what politicians do, they are no more likely to feel this now than they were in the 1980s – indeed, if anything, the opposite is the case. In 1986, for instance, 71 per cent agreed that “people like me have no say in what the government does”; now that figure is down to 59 per cent.

### Political institutions

Despite this, there are signs of growing discontent with the way in which we are governed. Back in 1983 only 34 per cent per cent believed that “some change” was needed to the House of Lords. But by 1994 that proportion had already grown to 58 per cent, and it now stands at 63 per cent, even though in the



**Britain has never had that much trust in politicians, but trust has fallen further**



**Political interest is actually slightly higher now than it was in the mid-1980s**

interim most hereditary peers were removed from the chamber. In truth, as our 2011 survey showed, only 18 per cent favour having a House of Lords that is wholly or primarily appointed, as the chamber is now. Most think at least half the membership should be elected.

Equally, living in a more globalised and diverse world has done nothing over the long term to persuade us of the merits of our membership of the European Union (EU). True, Britain's membership became increasingly popular during the 1980s, with the proportion who wanted Britain to stay in the EU rising from 53 per cent in 1983 to 77 per cent by 1991 (a point at which only 17 per cent wanted Britain to leave). However, that proved to be the high watermark of the European Union's popularity in Britain. In 1993 we asked respondents a new question about Britain's membership and, even then, more people (38 per cent) either wanted to leave the EU or to remain a member while reducing its powers than were keen to see European integration proceed even further (31 per cent). Now, however, Euroscepticism is firmly in the ascendancy, with a record 67 per cent wanting either to leave or for Britain to remain but the EU to become less powerful.

Meanwhile, as our **Devolution** chapter shows, although it is far from clear that Scottish support for independence has grown (despite the electoral success of the pro-independence Scottish National Party), there are signs of greater discontent south of the border about some of the apparent anomalies thrown up by the introduction of devolution in the late 1990s in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. For example, the proportion of people in England who think that Scotland gets "more than its fair share" of public spending has more than doubled from just 21 per cent in 2000 to 44 per cent now. Support for only allowing English MPs to vote on English laws, while always relatively high, has become even firmer. In short, the advent of devolution elsewhere in the UK seems to have raised questions about how England too should be governed, even though over half (56 per cent) of people in England think that England's laws should continue to be made by the UK parliament.

### The varying fortunes of other key British institutions

Politics and politicians are not alone in having seen their reputations harmed. Banks and bankers have suffered even more. Back in 1983, no less than 90 per cent thought that banks were "well run"; but in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, now just 19 per cent do so, probably the most dramatic change of attitude registered in 30 years of British Social Attitudes (see Table 0.1). The press too have been big losers. Now only 27 per cent think newspapers are well run compared with 53 per cent 30 years ago, a trend that might have been exacerbated by the phone hacking scandal that forced the closure of the *News of the World* in 2011, but which clearly began before then. Meanwhile, there have been more modest declines in the proportion who take a favourable view of both the police and the BBC (although our 2012 reading pre-dates the Jimmy Savile scandal that may well have done further harm to the BBC's reputation).



### Euroscepticism is firmly in the ascendancy



### Devolution seems to have raised questions about how England should be governed

# 19%

think banks are well run, compared with 90% in 1983



**Table 0.1 Perceptions of how well major institutions are run, 1983–2012**

% saying institution is well run	1983	1986	1987	1994	2009	2012	Change 1983–2012
The police	77	74	66	68	62	65	-12
BBC	72	70	67	62	49	63	-9
NHS	52	36	35	33	54	54	+2
Trade unions	29	27	27	47	35	33	+5
The press	53	48	39	47	39	27	-26
Banks	90	92	91	63	19	19	-72
<i>Weighted base</i>	1610	1315	1181	986	1022	950	
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1650	1321	1212	970	1017	956	



### The monarchy seems to have recovered much of its lost public affection

Yet it would be a mistake to presume that we have witnessed a generalised loss of confidence in institutions. As we might have anticipated, this is not true of the NHS. More surprisingly perhaps, it is also not true of trade unions, perhaps because they are now less likely to be regarded as powerful institutions that are too ready to strike. Meanwhile, there is one other national institution whose reputation did appear to be on the slide for a while, but which now has made a substantial recovery. In 1983, as many as 65 per cent said it was “very important” for Britain to continue to have a monarchy. Little more than 10 years later that figure had slumped to 32 per cent and by 2006 was just 27 per cent. Numerous items of bad news for the royal family, including the break-up of the first marriage of the Prince of Wales and the subsequent death of his first wife, Diana, seemed to take their toll. Now, however, the figure has risen back up to 45 per cent, while only four per cent think keeping the monarch is “not important at all” and five per cent say “the monarchy should be abolished”. One of the country’s most traditional institutions seems to have recovered much of its lost public affection, demonstrating that the reputational decline of large public institutions is not an inevitable feature of modern Britain; indeed we might expect to see a further increase in support for the monarchy following the birth of baby Prince George Alexander in July 2013.

### Reflections

As with public spending, we should be careful about presuming that any of the developments described in this section are simply the result of some inevitable process of individualisation. In fact, many are more likely to reflect the ways in which changing debates, controversies and events can influence the public mood. So, on Europe, for example, we have seen attitudes become more favourable and then less so again – perhaps in part reflecting Labour’s switch from being Eurosceptic to Europhile in the 1980s and then the Conservatives’ move in the opposite direction. Here, as with attitudes to welfare, political and policy debate appears to be entwined with public opinion. Equally, the decline in trust in politicians is likely at least partly to reflect particular events including the actions of politicians themselves – ranging from the allegations of sleaze in the 1990s to the MPs’ expenses scandal of 2009 – rather than from any more questioning outlook amongst the public or any more general loss of trust. There is certainly little evidence, despite much commentary to the contrary (for example, Puttnam, 2000) that people are markedly less willing to trust their fellow citizens. At 39 per cent, the proportion of people who say that “most people can be trusted” is little different now from the 43 per cent recorded when asked on a survey as long ago as 1981.[6]

## Conclusions

So what do 30 years of the British Social Attitudes survey tell us about how and why modern Britain differs from the Britain we first surveyed in 1983? We conclude by summarising some of the key themes of our 30th Report.

### Live and let live

Compared with 30 years ago, British people are far more likely to take a laissez-faire view of one another's relationships and lifestyles. Far fewer people now feel that marriage must come before sex, let alone children, or indeed that someone's sexual orientation is anybody's business but their own. When we began the survey back in 1983, it was impossible to imagine a Conservative Prime Minister advocating gay marriage; now public opinion suggests that widespread acceptance of gay marriage and gay adoption is very much here to stay.

Generational trends make it likely that this shift towards a more 'live and let live' approach to other people's personal lives will continue, although it is important to recognise that events can upset even seemingly long-term and deep-rooted shifts in opinion; one such example is the impact that the discovery of HIV AIDS had on attitudes to homosexuality in the late 1980s.

It is also true that, despite growing tolerance over time, a considerable minority of the public remain very uncomfortable with less 'traditional' relationships. Among the political parties, this poses a particular challenge for the Conservative Party in trying to balance their new social liberalism with the fact that their supporters are currently among the least liberal on these matters.

### Losing faith in key institutions

The last 30 years have seen a number of important institutions fall from grace very publicly, and the impact of this is clear in our findings. The banking sector, the press and politicians are all now judged far more critically than they were in the early 1980s, and there is a clear sense that people have lost faith in some of Britain's most important institutions. This certainly applies to politicians and the political process. Although Britain has never had that much trust in government or those who serve within it, now only one in five (18 per cent) trust governments to put the nation's needs above those of a political party.

However, there is little evidence of a steady and general decline in trust. Public opinion, at least partly, reflects the behaviour of the people and institutions in question – whether they be politicians, journalists or bankers. So their future public standing lies to a large extent within their own hands. Indeed, the royal family provides an excellent example of how an embattled institution can rise in the public's opinion: although the monarchy is still seen as less important now than it was in 1983, as many as 45 per cent now see its continuation as "very important", up from a low of 27 per cent in 2006.

### Our changing cultural attachments

The sense of attachment that people have to different British institutions has changed markedly over the last three decades. In the early 1980s most people readily identified with a religion and with a political party. Now, only half (52 per cent) define themselves as religious (the change almost entirely accounted for by a decline in identification with the Church of England) and, though three-quarters (76 per cent) still identify – if pushed – with a political party, only 31 per cent would describe their support as "very" or "fairly strong". In both cases, the

decline is long-term and likely to continue as older generations, who are most likely to identify with a religion or a political party, gradually die out.

True, some social identities persist. In particular, Britain retains an intriguing attachment to a working class identity, with far more thinking of themselves in this way than would objectively be defined as working class nowadays, given the current profile of the job market. However, the pull that subjective or even objective class exerts on how a person thinks or feels about the world is weaker now than it was in the 1980s.

### **The tension between individual and state responsibility**

The last three decades have seen a dramatic decline in support for welfare benefits aimed at disadvantaged groups, particularly the unemployed. Britain is more inclined than it was in the 1980s to feel that people should stand on their own two feet economically, and is less likely to favour increased spending on welfare benefits. A majority still think it is mainly up to government, rather than an individual and his or her family, to provide the unemployed with a decent standard of living, but the proportion who think this has fallen dramatically. Although there have been some signs recently of a shift towards a more sympathetic view of welfare benefits and their recipients, likely to be driven by austerity, it remains the case that Britain now has a far less collectivist view of welfare than was the case in the 1980s. This largely happened after New Labour came to power in 1997, suggesting the source of the change lay in the character of that government rather than in deeper rooted social change.

It remains to be seen what impact the coalition government's welfare reform agenda will have on public attitudes, and whether the small recent upturn in sympathy we have seen marks the beginning of a trend. Looking ahead to the next election, it is clear that marked differences still exist between the views on welfare of those supporting different political parties, despite some convergence over the last thirty years. Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters remain markedly more likely than Conservative supporters to want to see higher spending on welfare, and are less likely to express concern about benefit levels being too high. So the challenge for the Liberal Democrats will be to reconcile their role within the coalition government with the fact that their supporters' views lie some way to the left of those supporting their coalition partners. Meanwhile the challenge for Labour will be to decide whether it wishes to carve out its own distinctive position on welfare, and if so, how it can best tackle the imprint that New Labour appears to have left on how the public think about this area.

All this by no means implies that Britain is turning away from the state altogether. Only six per cent would like to see a reduction in taxes and public spending on health, education and social benefits, and the public remain strongly wedded to the founding principle of the NHS. Indeed, a near unanimous 97 per cent think it is the government's responsibility to provide health care for the sick and a similar proportion think the same about government's responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the elderly.

### **Britain in 2043**

These findings give us valuable clues about the way Britain might think and feel in another 30 years' time. But, in truth, Britain's changing social attitudes are in no way the product of inevitable social trends. Instead they are often the result of how the public's identities, values and preferences interact with events, or with the words and deeds of those in positions of power and influence. How

that interaction will play out in the next 30 years will depend both on the choices made by this group and on longer term social and demographic change.

We look forward to findings from the British Social Attitudes survey over the next 30 years, giving the public a voice by providing essential independent and robust evidence about their experiences, attitudes and values.

## Notes

1. [www.theregister.co.uk/2012/04/23/retro\\_week\\_sinclair\\_zx\\_spectrum\\_at\\_30/page4.html](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2012/04/23/retro_week_sinclair_zx_spectrum_at_30/page4.html).
2. The difference between the proportions of the population identified as belonging to a religion by the 2011 Census and British Social Attitudes can be partly explained by question wording: the Census asks respondents “What is your religion?” – implying that the respondent has one – while the British Social Attitudes survey asks “Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?” The difference may also be due to the response options offered; with the Census listing the major world religions, and British Social Attitudes listing specific denominations; respondents answering the former would be most likely to see this as a question concerned with ‘cultural classification’ rather than religion (Voas and Bruce, 2004). Finally, the context of the questions is significant, with the Census question following one on ethnicity, arguably causing ‘contamination’ of responses (ibid.).
3. The objective figures represent the proportions in one of the Registrar General’s socio-economic groups 1–6.
4. When this question was originally developed in 1984, it asked about “a husband” and “a wife” rather than “a man” and “a woman”. This was replaced by a variant of the question using the latter terminology in 1994.
5. This finding is sharply at variance with that reported by the Hansard Society’s annual Audit of Political Engagement in 2012 and 2013, which found that there had been a marked decline in interest in politics. We would note that the change in the level of reported interest in that survey coincided with a change in the contractor undertaking it and thus perhaps might be a consequence of a change in how the survey was conducted (Hansard Society, 2013).
6. This 1981 figure comes from the World Values Survey as reported in Hall (1999).

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## Appendix

The data on which Figure 0.1 is based are shown below.

**Table A.1 Trends in religious affiliation, 1983–2012**

	83	84	85	86	87	89	90	91	93	94	95	96	97	98
Religion	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Church of England/ Anglican	40	39	36	37	37	37	37	36	32	33	32	29	27	27
Roman Catholic	10	12	11	10	10	11	9	10	11	9	9	9	11	9
Other Christian	17	14	17	16	16	16	14	15	16	15	15	15	14	14
Non-Christian	2	2	2	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	3
No religion	31	32	34	34	34	34	36	35	37	38	40	43	43	45
<i>Weighted base</i>	1719	1645	1769	2766	2766	2930	2698	2836	2945	3469	3633	3620	1355	3146
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1761	1675	1804	3100	2847	3029	2797	2918	2945	3469	3633	3620	1355	3146

	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12
Religion	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Church of England/ Anglican	27	30	29	31	27	29	26	22	21	23	20	20	21	20
Roman Catholic	9	9	11	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Other Christian	16	16	14	14	15	15	18	16	18	18	15	15	17	17
Non-Christian	3	5	4	4	6	3	6	6	6	7	5	6	7	6
No religion	44	40	41	41	43	43	40	46	46	43	51	50	46	48
<i>Weighted base</i>	3143	3426	3287	3435	4432	3199	4268	4290	4124	4486	3421	3297	3311	3248
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3143	3426	3287	3435	4432	3199	4268	4290	4124	4486	3421	3297	3311	3248

The data on which Figure 0.2 is based are shown below.

**Table A.2 Strength of party identification, 1987–2012**

	87	89	91	93	96	98	00	02	05	08	10	12
<b>Strength of party identification</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very/fairly strong	46	44	43	43	37	36	32	32	35	28	36	31
Not very strong	40	42	43	46	47	48	49	48	46	47	41	47
No party identification	8	10	11	10	10	11	13	13	13	17	17	22
<i>Weighted base</i>	2766	2930	2836	2836	3620	3145	3426	3435	2766	4484	3294	2983
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2847	3029	2918	2945	3620	3145	3426	3435	2847	4483	3294	2985

The data on which Figure 0.3 is based are shown below.

**Table A.3 Attitudes to tax and spend, 1983–2012**

	83	84	85	86	87	89	90	91	93	94
<b>Government should ...</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
... reduce taxes and spend less	9	6	6	5	3	3	3	3	4	4
... keep taxes and spending at the same level	54	50	43	44	42	37	37	29	29	33
... increase taxes and spend more	32	39	45	46	50	56	54	65	63	58
<i>Weighted base</i>	1719	1645	1769	3066	2766	2930	2698	2836	2945	3469
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1761	1675	1804	3100	2847	3029	2797	2918	2945	3469

	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04
<b>Government should ...</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
... reduce taxes and spend less	5	4	3	3	4	5	3	3	6	6
... keep taxes and spending at the same level	31	34	31	32	35	40	34	31	38	42
... increase taxes and spend more	61	59	62	63	58	50	59	63	51	49
<i>Weighted base</i>	3633	3620	1355	3146	3143	2302	3287	3435	3276	2130
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3633	3620	1355	3146	3143	2292	3287	3435	3272	2146

	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12
<b>Government should ...</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
... reduce taxes and spend less	7	6	7	8	8	9	6	6
... keep taxes and spending at the same level	43	44	47	50	55	56	54	53
... increase taxes and spend more	46	46	42	39	34	31	36	34
<i>Weighted base</i>	2167	3228	3082	2184	1134	3297	3311	3248
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2166	3240	3094	2229	1139	3297	3311	3248



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