

Introduction

Social attitudes in post-Brexit Lockdown Britain

A momentous year

The early months of 2020 were momentous. At the end of January, the UK terminated nearly 50 years' membership of the European Union (EU), after the outcome of the December 2019 general election broke the parliamentary stalemate that had hitherto made it impossible to bring the Brexit process, instigated in 2016, to a conclusion. Then just seven weeks later, on 23 March, the UK and devolved governments announced that there was to be a UK-wide lockdown in the wake of an outbreak of a new disease, COVID-19, that was proving highly infectious and had already resulted in loss of life. In short, one of the most momentous public policy decisions taken since 1945 was followed almost immediately by the biggest public health crisis in a century, a crisis that is still leaving its mark on the country's social and economic life some 18 months later.

Historians and social scientists will doubtless be assessing the significance and long-term consequences of both Brexit and the pandemic – and their relative importance – for many years to come. For a project like British Social Attitudes (BSA) which has been endeavouring since 1983 to trace how the climate of public opinion evolves in the wake of social, economic and political change, such a confluence of events poses an obvious, immediate question – what imprint, if any, has it left on the country's social attitudes? After all, the debate about Brexit aroused many a passion in the years leading up to the UK's withdrawal and we might imagine that both 'Leavers' and 'Remainers' will have reacted strongly – if perhaps differently – to the eventual outcome. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic saw the state intervene in social and economic life on a scale unprecedented in peacetime, an experience that might be thought to have challenged – or, perhaps, reinforced – people's views about the proper role of government in a 21st century society. These questions are the central preoccupation of this year's BSA report.

Has COVID-19 changed attitudes?

The chapter, 'New values, new divides?', by John Curtice, Dominic Abrams and Curtis Jessop addresses the impact of COVID-19 on social attitudes directly. It suggests that while some existing trends remained in evidence, and sometimes continued further during the pandemic, there is little sign that the pandemic has instigated any marked shift of attitudes in a new direction. It appears that the tight regulation of people's social activities during the pandemic may have

helped fuel a more questioning outlook towards the role of the law and the value of conformity – but that is a trend that was already in evidence before the pandemic. It appears too that an existing tendency for people to have become somewhat more supportive of the provision of welfare for those of working age held steady during the pandemic but did not become a yet more popular view. The only new shift of any note is some sign that slightly more people now regard Britain as an unequal society, and that this shift may have been especially in evidence among younger people, many of whom have been particularly affected by the impact of the pandemic on employment. Even so, the proportion who now feel that Britain is too unequal is far from being the highest it has been over the last four decades. All in all on the evidence we have so far, it looks as though the landscape of public opinion with which policy makers will have to deal in the post-pandemic world may well look relatively familiar.

Indeed, we are reminded of just how stable social attitudes can sometimes be in Hannah Morgan's chapter on attitudes towards the payment of child maintenance when a couple's relationship has come to an end. Although it has been a decade since we last examined this issue in any depth, the level of support for requiring fathers (who do not have care of the children) to pay maintenance, albeit depending on their level of income, remains as high as ever. Indeed, in an age when marriage and parenthood are much less likely to be regarded as synonymous with each other than was the case thirty years ago, the chapter also shows that nowadays most people's views are not affected by the parent's marital status.

Of course, while the pandemic may not have had much impact on people's attitudes towards broad areas of public policy, it may still have made a difference to their outlook on their own everyday lives. Many a person's work practice has changed during the pandemic, as a result of people being encouraged to work from home rather than in the office, a practice facilitated by widespread access to a high quality domestic internet connection. There are indications in the chapter, by Eleanor Woolfe, that looks specifically at people's perceptions of the relationship between work and health, that what has been a radical change in many people's working lives has made a difference to their views about the world of work. In particular, people have become more likely to regard paid work as being very beneficial for physical and mental health – though this view is less widespread among those for whom working from home has been a novel experience, while the increased recognition has been more marked among older people. Meanwhile, people are now more likely to take the view that employers should be willing to accommodate the health needs of their employees when agreeing the nature, timing and location of their work, an indication perhaps that the flexibility that both employers and employees were forced to demonstrate during the pandemic is an attribute that many people hope will be retained in the post-pandemic world.

The legacy of Brexit

In last year's report we reported on how the parliamentary stalemate over Brexit had been accompanied by a decline in people's trust and confidence in how they were governed, a trend that was apparent among both those who had voted Remain and those who backed Leave (Curtice and Montagu, 2020a). In returning to this subject in this year's report, John Curtice and Alex Scholes show in their chapter on democracy that the eventual delivery of Brexit has been accompanied by a reversal of this trend among Leave supporters but that there has been little change among those who backed Remain. As a result – and in what represents a remarkable turnaround – those who are sceptical about the EU are, for the first time, more trusting and confident about how they are governed than are those who can be classified as 'Europhile'. Indeed, it has often been argued that the vote to Leave was in part an expression of voters' discontent with how they are governed. However, while some of that discontent may have been addressed by the delivery of Brexit, what has been left in its stead is a relatively high level of distrust among those on the other side of the EU referendum debate. Past divisions about Brexit have not simply been replaced by a new consensus.

One of the consequences of Brexit is that Britain has had to develop public policies in areas where previously the rules were wholly or partly set by the EU. Nowhere was this more important than immigration, where the EU applies the principle of 'freedom of movement'. Public attitudes towards aspects of post-Brexit public policy, including immigration, was also one of the topics that we covered in last year's report, when we presented the results of surveys on the subject conducted via the NatCen mixed mode random probability panel (Curtice et al., 2020; Jessop, 2018). This year, in the chapter on immigration, John Curtice and his colleagues present the results of another aspect of their research by showing how attitudes towards immigration and immigration policy changed after people were given the chance to debate the subject with each other and to quiz a balanced panel of experts on the issue. The authors show that, after engaging in discussions that typically touched upon both moral and self-interested arguments for and against a range of policy options, participants became more likely to regard immigration as economically and culturally beneficial, yet nevertheless also became somewhat more likely to support a rather stricter approach to immigration control. While the former movement primarily occurred among Leave voters, the latter took place mostly among Remain supporters, thereby reducing some of the differences between them. At the same time, however, the results of the exercise also suggest that the government's focus on skill and income as the criteria for determining who should be admitted to the UK after Brexit are not necessarily the ones that are regarded as important by members of the public.

Meanwhile, one of the consequences of Brexit in Scotland (which voted in favour of staying in the EU) has been to re-ignite the debate about independence (Curtice and Montagu, 2020b). One of the points of contention that has emerged in that debate is whether, as suggested by some unionists, the values of people in Scotland are much the same as those of people in England, or whether, as some nationalists argue, the outlook of people in Scotland is closer to the more egalitarian culture that is thought to prevail in the Nordic countries. In the chapter on social inequality, Chris Deeming addresses this debate by systematically comparing the views of people in Scotland on inequality with, on the one hand, those of people in England and, on the other, the results of surveys in Denmark, Finland and Norway. He shows that, for the most part, people in Scotland appear to be somewhat more egalitarian in outlook than their counterparts in England but are not as egalitarian as those living in Nordic countries. His analysis therefore suggests that both sides in the independence debate are at risk of exaggerating the extent to which the evidence supports their point of view – though doubtless this will not stop the post-Brexit debate about Scottish independence from continuing in earnest.

Interviewing in a pandemic

The onset of COVID-19 has not simply posed important questions about how attitudes may have changed in its wake. It also created a challenge as to how best to collect the necessary evidence at a time when the traditional method for conducting BSA – interviewing a random selection of people face-to-face in their own homes – had been rendered infeasible. Various strategies have been adopted to meet this challenge. The 2020 BSA itself was conducted by inviting a random sample of households to complete the survey online; further information is provided in the Technical details. However, this change of method creates a risk that any differences we identify between the results of our latest survey and those of previous BSAs might in part at least be occasioned by the change of method rather than reflect real change in public attitudes. The Technical details outline how we have analysed and weighted the data to minimise that risk. Meanwhile, in some chapters we also use a second survey conducted during the pandemic. This was undertaken using NatCen’s mixed mode random probability panel, which consists of people who have responded to BSA surveys conducted before the pandemic. The fact that on occasion we have two sets of readings for 2020, collected using two different approaches to data collection, helps minimise the risk that any differences we identify with previous BSAs are simply a consequence of methodological change. Meanwhile, the chapters on attitudes towards inequality and on attitudes towards post-Brexit public policy are not reliant on making comparisons with the results of previous BSA surveys.

The value of evidence

Compiling this report has then been both a methodological challenge and a substantively important exercise. However, while they should be evaluated with care, our findings raise questions about some of the claims that have been made about the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the conclusion of Brexit. The experience of the pandemic may have influenced our attitudes towards how we work, but it has not unveiled a public that now regards the proper role of government and public policy very differently from how it did beforehand. Rather than serving simply to raise the level of trust and confidence in how Britain is governed, Brexit has changed who does and who does not have trust and confidence, while it has potential ramifications in Scotland that might yet pose an even bigger challenge to the future health of the body politic in the UK. Doubtless, the full effects of COVID-19 and Brexit have yet to be fully realised, but this report already underlines the importance of undertaking analysis of those effects rather than relying on assumptions – and future BSA reports will endeavour to trace developments in public attitudes as they gradually unfold.

References

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