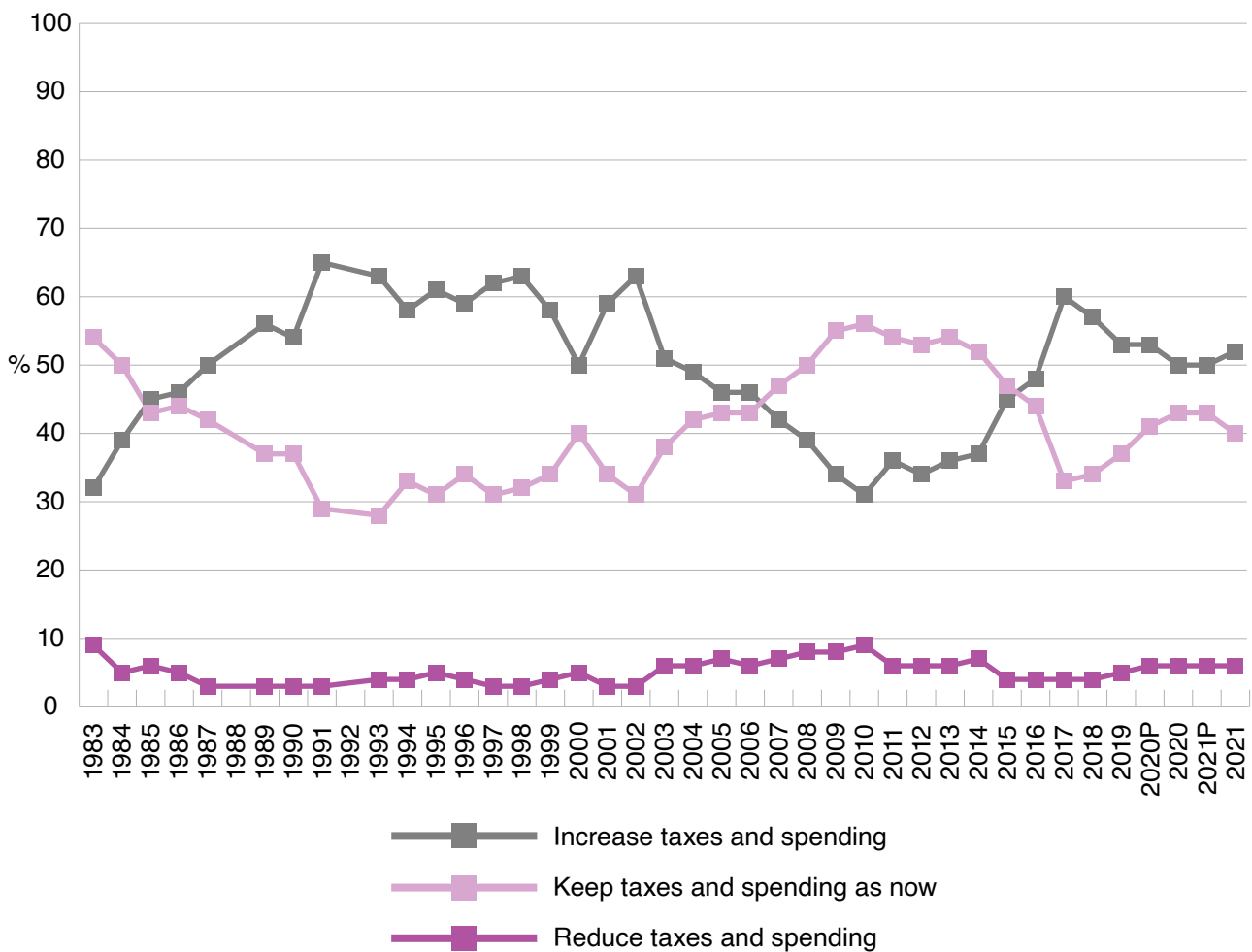


Taxation, welfare and inequality

The shape of post-COVID public attitudes

The COVID-19 pandemic witnessed unprecedented levels of government spending and much discussion of the impact of inequality on health. Now the country is facing a ‘cost of living crisis’ that seems set to have most impact on the less well-off and is resulting in calls on the government to spend large amounts of money mitigating the consequences. This chapter examines the public mood on tax and spend, welfare, and inequality in the wake of the pandemic and assesses the implications for how the public might wish the government to react now to the ‘cost of living crisis’.

Attitudes towards taxation and spending on health, education and social benefits, 1983-2021



Source: British Social Attitudes apart from additional data points in 2020 and 2021 from NatCen Panel

Overview

A majority of the public remains in favour of higher taxation and government spending

There is little evidence as yet of the public turning against further government spending, despite the high levels of government intervention necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 52% say they are in favour of increasing taxes to spend more on health, education and social benefits, similar to the 53% who said this in 2019, shortly before the pandemic.
 - There is only a modest difference between Conservative (46%) and Labour Party supporters (61%) in their level of support for more government spending.
-

More people now think that Britain is unequal

Following the pandemic, more people now think that Britain is unequal – and an increased level of support for redistribution to the less well-off has been maintained.

- Two-thirds (67%) agree that ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth, up ten percentage points since 2019.
 - 49% now agree that the government should redistribute income to the less well off. The proportion agreeing with this statement was consistently higher during the pandemic than it was before 2012.
-

The public has remained relatively pro-welfare throughout the pandemic

There were signs, pre-pandemic, that public opinion had become more pro-welfare than it had been during New Labour's tenure in office. This more pro-welfare stance was sustained, though did not strengthen, during the pandemic.

- During 2020-21, an average of 40% disagreed that most people on the dole were fiddling it one way or another, compared with just 24% who agreed. Before 2014 more people agreed than disagreed with this statement.
- Rather than agreeing with the proposition, by 2019, the public were evenly divided on whether people would stand on their own two feet if welfare benefits weren't so generous. Opinion remained evenly balanced in 2021; 39% agreed with this statement while 38% disagreed.

Author

John Curtice

Senior Research Fellow, National Centre for Social Research and Professor of Politics, University of Strathclyde

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic witnessed unprecedented levels of government intervention and spending in order to keep the economy afloat, not least a ‘furlough’ scheme that paid up to 80% of the wages of those who could no longer work because of the public health restrictions. At the same time, it also resulted in debate about the level of inequality as it emerged that levels of morbidity and mortality from the disease were higher among those living in less well-off neighbourhoods. The government responded to this debate by providing a temporary uplift in welfare benefit for those in receipt of Universal Credit and by extending the provision of free school meals for children from less well-off backgrounds during school holidays.

However, these measures – together with increased funding for the health service necessitated by the pandemic – came with a cost. Indeed, the government’s Office for Budget Responsibility forecast that the government would find itself presiding over record levels of both taxation and spending for the remainder of its term of office (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2021). In the meantime, however, it has become apparent that while the worst health consequences of the pandemic may now be behind us, the economic consequences are not. Rather, Britain, along with the rest of the world, faces high inflation as a post-COVID recovery in demand meets the constraint of supply chains that have not yet recovered, while in the wake of the war in Ukraine, energy prices in particular have increased dramatically. As a result, living standards are expected to suffer their worst drop since 1945, and especially so for those who are least well off (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2022; Office for National Statistics, 2022). Consequently, the government is once again finding itself facing demands that it intervenes and spends substantial amounts of money, in this instance to mitigate the impact of the rise in energy prices.

This ‘cost of living’ crisis has given public attitudes towards taxation, welfare and inequality a new importance. But how have these attitudes emerged from the pandemic? Have people embraced the increased taxation and spending on which the government found itself having to embark, or would they prefer for them to return to more normal levels? Are we now more concerned about inequality and more willing to support welfare provision that might help to reduce it? We addressed these questions extensively in last year’s BSA report and also published a subsequent briefing that focused on the findings of two special surveys of public attitudes conducted during the pandemic using the NatCen Panel (see Curtice et al., 2021; 2022 and the appendix to this chapter for further details). We can now update our analysis by incorporating findings from the latest British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, which took place in the autumn of 2021. By that stage, most of the public health restrictions that had been introduced to control the spread of COVID-19 had been lifted, life was beginning to return to ‘normal’, and a policy of ‘learning to live with COVID’ was being pursued. It was thus an opportune time to

assess whether any shifts in attitudes during the pandemic were short-term or were showing signs of being a longer-term legacy. This chapter assesses which of these characterisations appears to be the more accurate – and considers the potential implications as the government attempts to deal with the ‘cost of living crisis’.

Taxation and spending

Ever since its inception in 1983, the BSA survey has ascertained people’s attitudes towards the level of taxation and spending by asking the following question:

Suppose the government had to choose between the three options on this card. Which do you think it should choose?

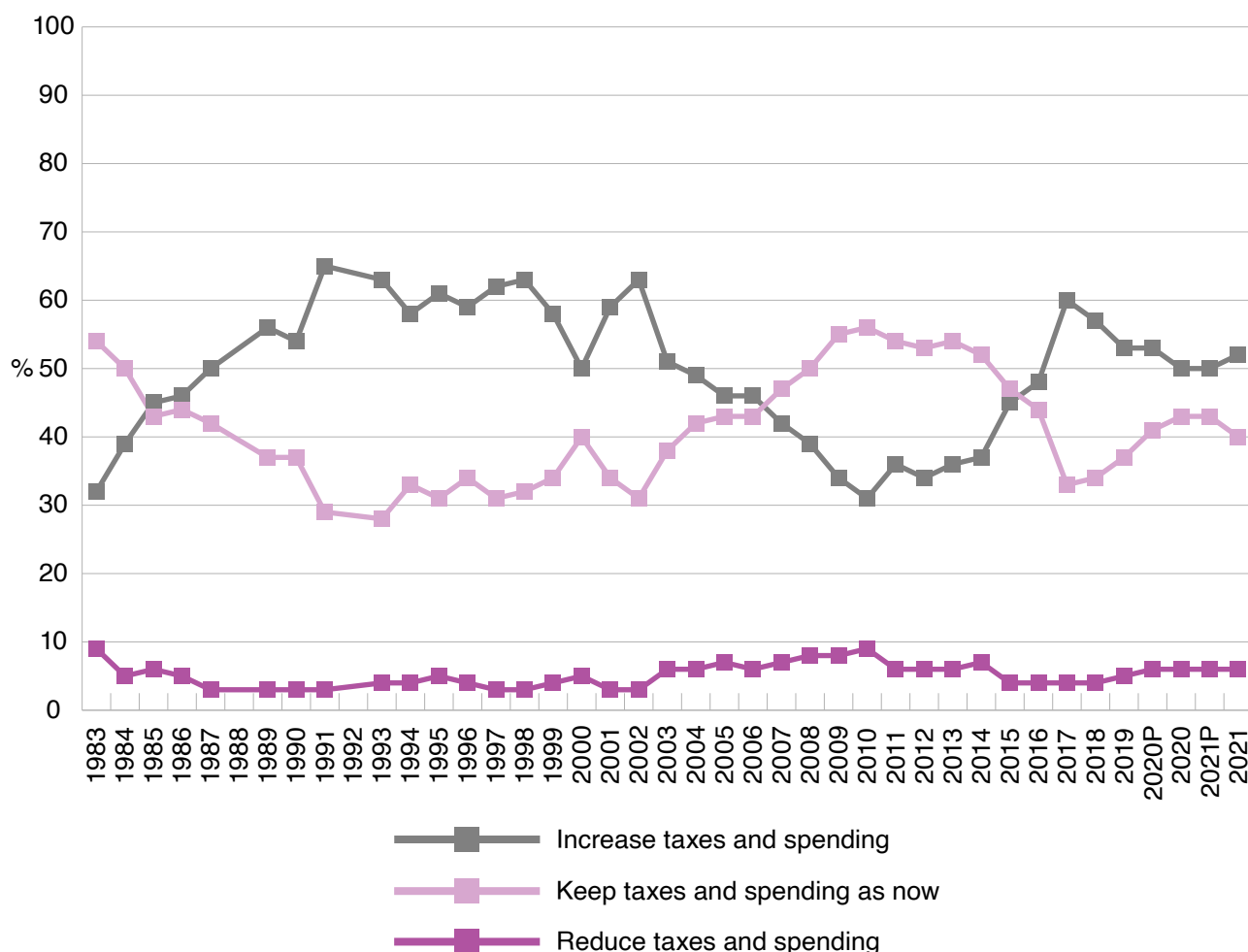
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits

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

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

Consistently, very few people have responded by saying that taxation and spending should be reduced. However, Figure 1 reveals that there has been considerable variation over time in the proportion who say that taxation and spending should be kept at the same level as now and those who say it should be increased. In particular, the public reacted in the 1990s to the attempts by the then Conservative government to curb taxation and spending by swinging in favour of higher taxation and spending – and then moved back in the opposite direction when the Labour government that came to power in 1997 started to increase public spending. Such a pattern has been described as a ‘thermostatic’ reaction, as voters respond to changes in public spending that move it above or below the level that people find comfortable (Wlezien, 1995).

Figure 1 Attitudes towards taxation and spending on health, education and social benefits, 1983-2021



Source: British Social Attitudes apart from additional data points in 2020 and 2021 from NatCen Panel

The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in Table A.1 in the appendix to this chapter

Meanwhile, in the decade before the pandemic, following a policy of ‘fiscal austerity’ that was pursued by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition of 2010-15 in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008-09, public opinion eventually swung back again in favour of increased taxation and spending. Indeed, by 2017 as many as 60% were espousing that view, albeit this figure was still somewhat lower than that recorded in the 1990s and early 2000s before the Labour government embarked on its increase in spending. By 2019, on the eve of the pandemic, the figure had eased back somewhat to 53%, but was still well above the 31% to 37% recorded between 2009 and 2014.

If the public have responded ‘thermostatically’ to the increase in expenditure recorded during the pandemic, we would have expected that figure to have fallen further. But of this there is little sign. Although the proportion backing an increase in taxation and spending dipped to 50% on the 2020 BSA, in our latest survey the

figure stands at 52%. In short, it does not appear that, so far at least, the public have reacted against the increase in taxation and spending that has occurred in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, it may be that voters have yet to appreciate the growth in the size of the state that has occurred and thus any reaction may prove to be delayed. However, even if that eventually proves to be the case, our evidence still suggests that Britain approaches the ‘cost of living crisis’ with an appetite for government intervention that is as strong as it was on the eve of the pandemic – and may signal a willingness to accept that measures to tackle the ‘cost of living crisis’ have to be taken on a similar scale.

Still, we might wonder whether voters of different political persuasions have reacted differently. Perhaps Conservative supporters, whose party often claims to be a party of low taxation and fiscal discipline, have reacted against the increase in the size of the state over which they have found their party presiding. In contrast, perhaps Labour supporters, whose party is often associated with more taxation and spending, have reacted to the experience of the pandemic by becoming more likely to back a greater level of government intervention.

Table 1 shows the recent evolution of attitudes among Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat identifiers, together with those who do not identify with a party at all. (Details of how respondents’ party identification is obtained are to be found in the Technical Details). It finds little support for the idea that Conservatives and Labour supporters have reacted differently to the rise in taxation and spending in the wake of the pandemic. Indeed, we should note that at any one point in time the attitudes expressed by Conservative and Labour supporters are not as divergent as the supposed stances of their parties might lead us to anticipate. While Labour supporters are somewhat more likely than their Conservative counterparts to say that taxation and spending should be increased, the gap between them is not necessarily that wide. In 2017, for example, when, among the public as a whole, support for taxation and spending was at its height, a majority (53%) of Conservative supporters thought that taxation and spending should be increased, while at two-thirds (67%), the equivalent figure among Labour supporters was only 14 percentage points higher. In the meantime, while support for more taxation and spending among Conservative identifiers is, at 46%, seven percentage points lower than in 2017, the drop among Labour supporters – six points – is much the same. In short, there is little sign that Conservative supporters have reacted particularly adversely to the expansion in the size of government activity in the wake of the pandemic.

Table 1 Attitudes towards taxation and spending on health, education and social benefits, by party identification 2017-21

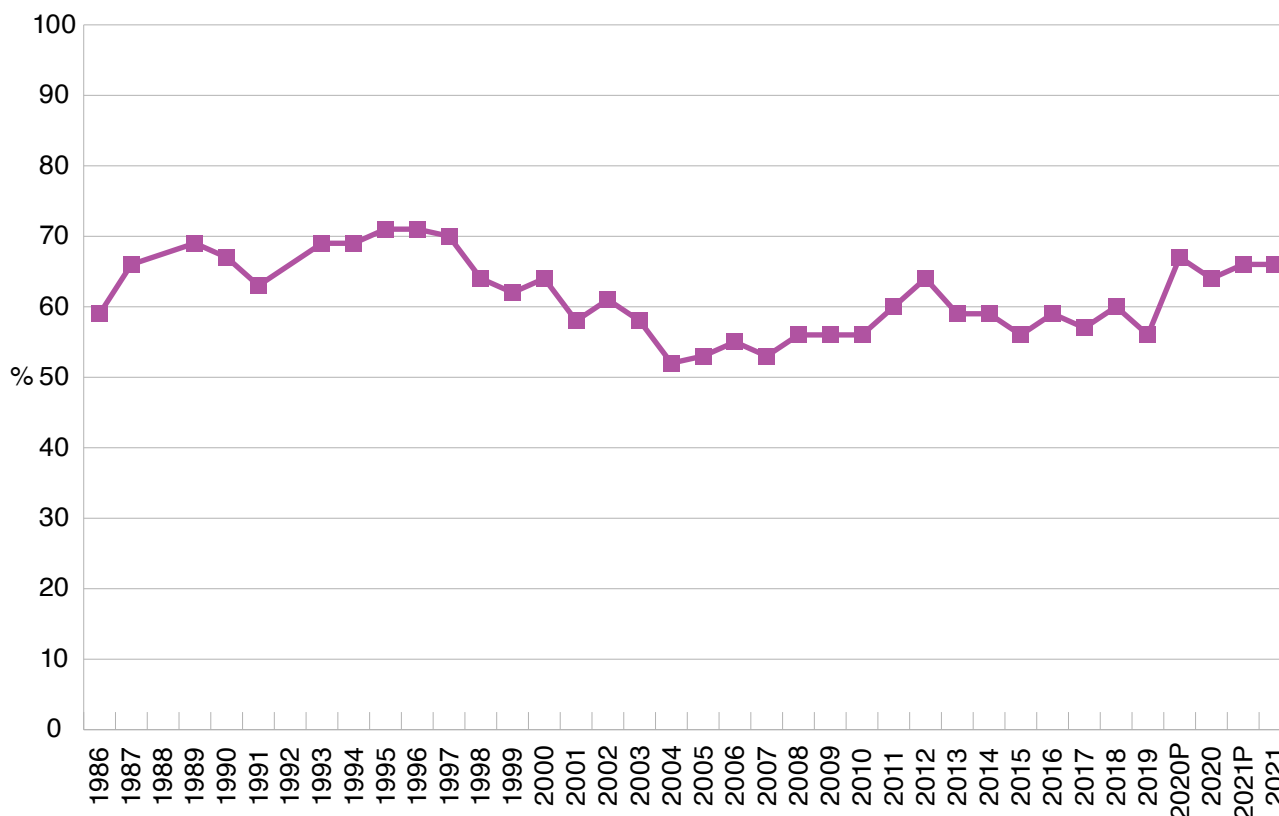
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	None
2017	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spending	4	4	1	7
Keep taxes and spending as now	40	26	20	42
Increase taxes and spending	53	67	76	45
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	946	1068	177	406
2019	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spending	4	5	2	8
Keep taxes and spending as now	40	35	21	45
Increase taxes and spending	52	57	74	37
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	963	816	331	497
2020	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spending	5	5	2	11
Keep taxes and spending as now	53	35	29	57
Increase taxes and spending	41	60	69	28
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	1349	1281	349	363
2021	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spending	7	2	4	13
Keep taxes and spending as now	45	36	36	48
Increase taxes and spending	46	61	59	35
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	661	657	179	172

Inequality

There are two key facets to any debate about inequality. The first is the extent to which people think that society is or is not unequal. The second is what, if anything, they think the government should do about it. BSA has been measuring attitudes towards both aspects of this debate since the mid-1980s.

Figure 2 shows how people have responded when asked whether they agree or disagree that “there is one law for the rich and one for the poor”. This was a widespread impression in the 1990s, when the proportion agreeing reached as high as 71% – only for it to fall back to around six in ten in most years thereafter, while it stood at 58% on average in the three BSA surveys between 2017 and 2019. All four surveys conducted during the pandemic showed an increase on that figure, recording an average level of 66% support. While perhaps still not quite as high a level of agreement as that registered in the 1990s, here perhaps is a first sign that Britain emerged from the pandemic with more people regarding the country as unequal.

Figure 2 Proportion who agree that there is “one law for the rich and one for the poor”, 1986-2021

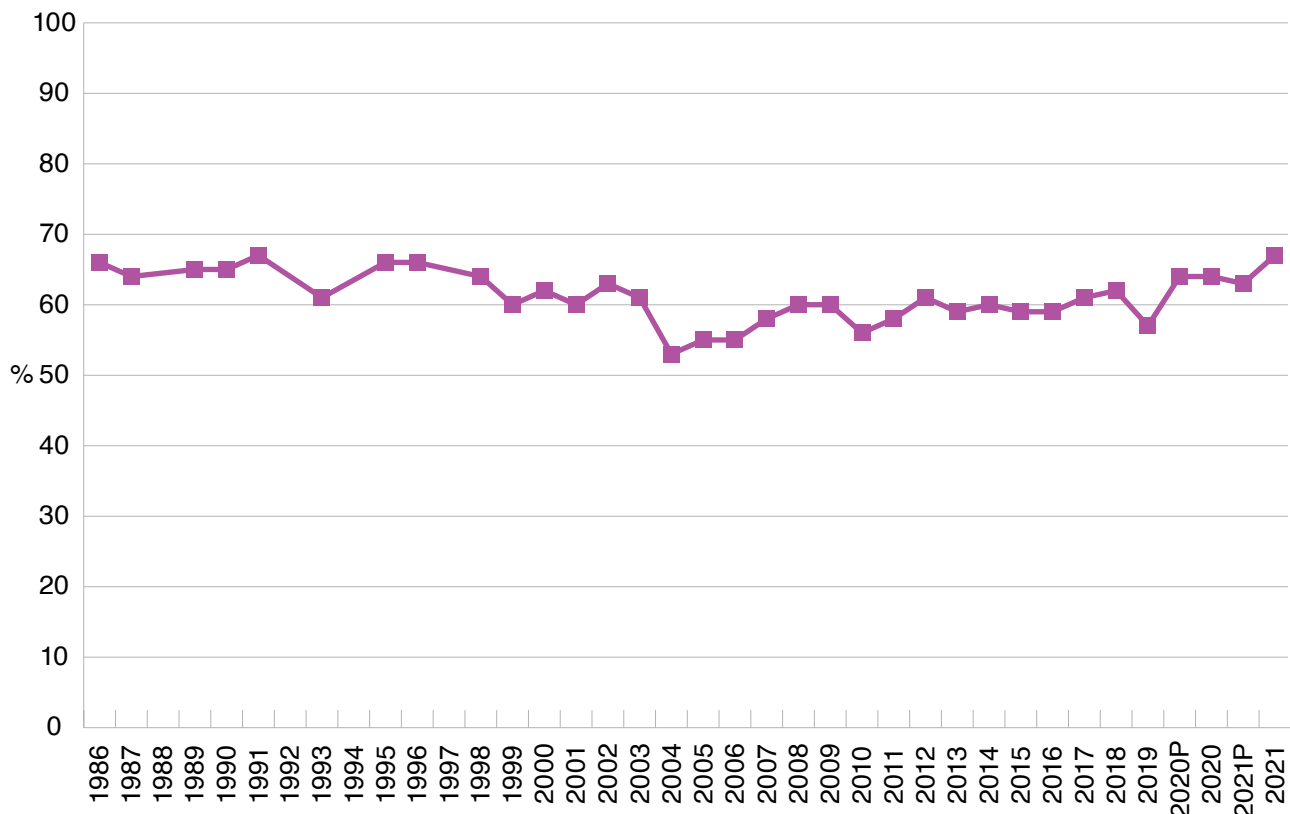


Source: British Social Attitudes apart from additional data points in 2020 and 2021 from NatCen Panel

The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in Table A.2 in the appendix to this chapter

However, perhaps we need to be cautious about the responses to this particular item. ‘It’s one rule for them, another for the rest of us’ was an accusation frequently made by Labour of Boris Johnson’s government, including not least in response to the revelation that the COVID-19 public health regulations were not always observed in Downing St (Nunn, 2021). Perhaps some of the responses to this question echo that criticism rather than simply reflect people’s perceptions of inequality. To pursue the issue further, in Figure 3 we show how people have responded when asked whether they agree or disagree that “ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth”. The pattern of responses has proved relatively stable over the years, though there is some echo of the trend towards a somewhat lower level of agreement from the turn of the century onwards. In any event, at 60%, the average level of agreement between 2017 to 2019 is similar to what had been recorded over much of the previous decade.

Figure 3 Proportion who agree that “ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth”, 1986-2021



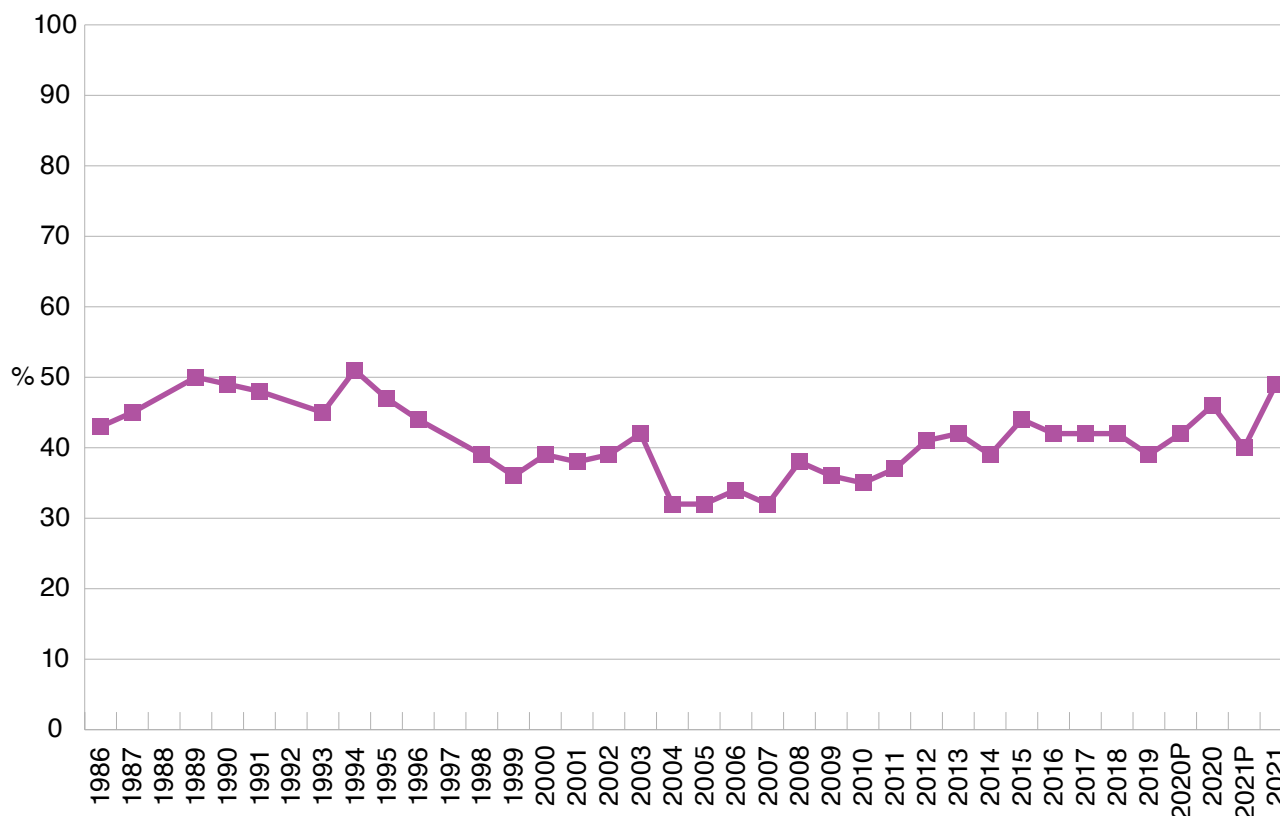
Source: British Social Attitudes apart from additional data points in 2020 and 2021 from NatCen Panel

The data on which Figure 3 is based can be found in Table A.3 in the appendix to this chapter

Yet there are signs here too that during the pandemic people were rather more likely to agree with the proposition. On average our four surveys recorded a figure of 65%, and it stood as high as 67% in our most recent survey, a figure that matches the previous record high (in 1995). Here, perhaps, is rather firmer evidence that, in the wake of the pandemic, people in Britain are somewhat more likely to regard the country as unequal – and thus may be more sensitive to the potentially adverse impact of the ‘cost of living crisis’ on the less well off in particular.

But if that is the case, does it mean that people are now more likely to favour government action to reduce inequality? Figure 4 presents the pattern of responses since 1986 to the proposition that “government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off”. The level of agreement with this statement has always been lower than with our two statements on the existence of inequality – it has only twice reached a half or more. Evidently not everyone who thinks Britain is unequal necessarily backs action that might remedy it. Yet the trend over time has been one with which we are becoming familiar. Until 1998 the level of agreement never fell below 40%, while from then until 2012 at least it was rarely above it. At 41%, the average figure between 2017 and 2019 was in line with the readings that had been obtained since 2012.

Figure 4 Proportion who agree that “Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off”, 1986-2021



Source: British Social Attitudes apart from additional data points in 2020 and 2021 from NatCen Panel

The data on which Figure 4 is based can be found in Table A.4 in the appendix to this chapter

There is some evidence that the level of agreement that the government should take action on inequality is now higher. On average, in the four surveys we conducted during the pandemic, it has stood at an average of 44%, while in our most recent survey it has reached 49%, the highest level since 1994. That said, there is some inconsistency between the findings of the two most recent BSA surveys and those of the two additional surveys that we undertook during the pandemic via the NatCen Panel. So, some caution may be in order in concluding that support for redistribution has increased – but it would seem that, at a minimum, Britain approaches the ‘cost of living crisis’ with the rather higher level of support for such action that has been in evidence during the last ten or so years still in place.¹

¹ We can also combine the answers to the three questions presented in Tables 3-5 with those to another two items on the theme of inequality that all together can be used to form a left-right scale. Further information about this scale is to be found in the Technical Details. On this scale, the lower the score, the more people gave a ‘left-wing’ response that indicates recognition of inequality and a wish to do something about it. On our latest survey, the average scale score was 2.35. This compares with scores of 2.42 on the two additional surveys, 2.44 in 2020 and 2.54 in 2019, 2.49 in 2018 and 2.52 in 2017. Thus, our left-right scale as a whole does suggest there was some movement to the ‘left’ during the course of the pandemic.

Welfare

One of the key instruments that is available to any government that wishes to reduce inequality is the provision of welfare benefits to those who are less well off. Indeed, as we have already noted, the government increased the amount payable to those on Universal Credit during the pandemic, while in its initial measures to mitigate the 'cost of living crisis' the government scheduled extra financial help to those in receipt of benefits. Meanwhile a society that is concerned about inequality might be expected to be supportive of a system that helps people in a pandemic and in a 'cost of living crisis', both of them economic shocks for which they are evidently not responsible.

Figure 5 shows how people have responded since 1987 when they have been presented with one criticism that is sometimes made of the welfare state, that is, "if welfare benefits were not so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet". The pattern of responses has undergone some marked changes over the last 35 years. Until 1996, those who disagreed with the statement outnumbered those who agreed. But thereafter, until recently, the opposite was true. Only in 2019 was the balance of opinion reversed, with 34% agreeing and 37% disagreeing, a consequence of a trend in that direction that had been apparent since 2016. In short, on this measure at least, Britain entered the pandemic with a somewhat more supportive stance on welfare than had been in evidence over the previous twenty years, albeit one that was still not as supportive as that in place in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Between them the four surveys that we conducted during the pandemic suggest that, while this new mood was largely sustained, public opinion did not shift any further in that direction. Rather opinion continued to appear more or less evenly divided. On average across these surveys, 37% agreed with the statement, while 36% disagreed.

Figure 5 Proportion who agree/disagree that “if welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet”, 1987-2021



Source: British Social Attitudes apart from additional data points in 2020 and 2021 from NatCen Panel

The data on which Figure 5 is based can be found in Table A.5 in the appendix to this chapter

A similar result can be observed when people were presented with another statement expressing a similar negative sentiment about welfare, that is, that “many people who get social security don’t really deserve any help” (see Figure 6). Here the balance of opinion was tipped in favour of disagreeing until 2001, but thereafter, until 2014, apart from one year, more people agreed than disagreed. By the time the pandemic was approaching, the pattern of response was again very different. Between 2017 and 2019, on average, slightly less than one in five (19%) agreed while over two in five (42%) took the opposite view.

The pattern of responses to this question obtained during the pandemic again suggests that while the new more pro-welfare mood was sustained, it did not become any stronger. On average, the proportion who agreed was again 19%, while 44% disagreed, figures that are little different from the averages for the BSA surveys conducted between 2017 and 2019. Moreover, in this instance the balance of opinion is even more supportive of welfare than it was between 1987 and 1996. While during that period the average level of disagreement with the statement was, at 46%, slightly higher than in our pandemic surveys, the proportion who agreed (28%) was much higher too.

Figure 6 Proportion who agree/disagree that “many people who get social security don’t really deserve any help”, 1987-2021



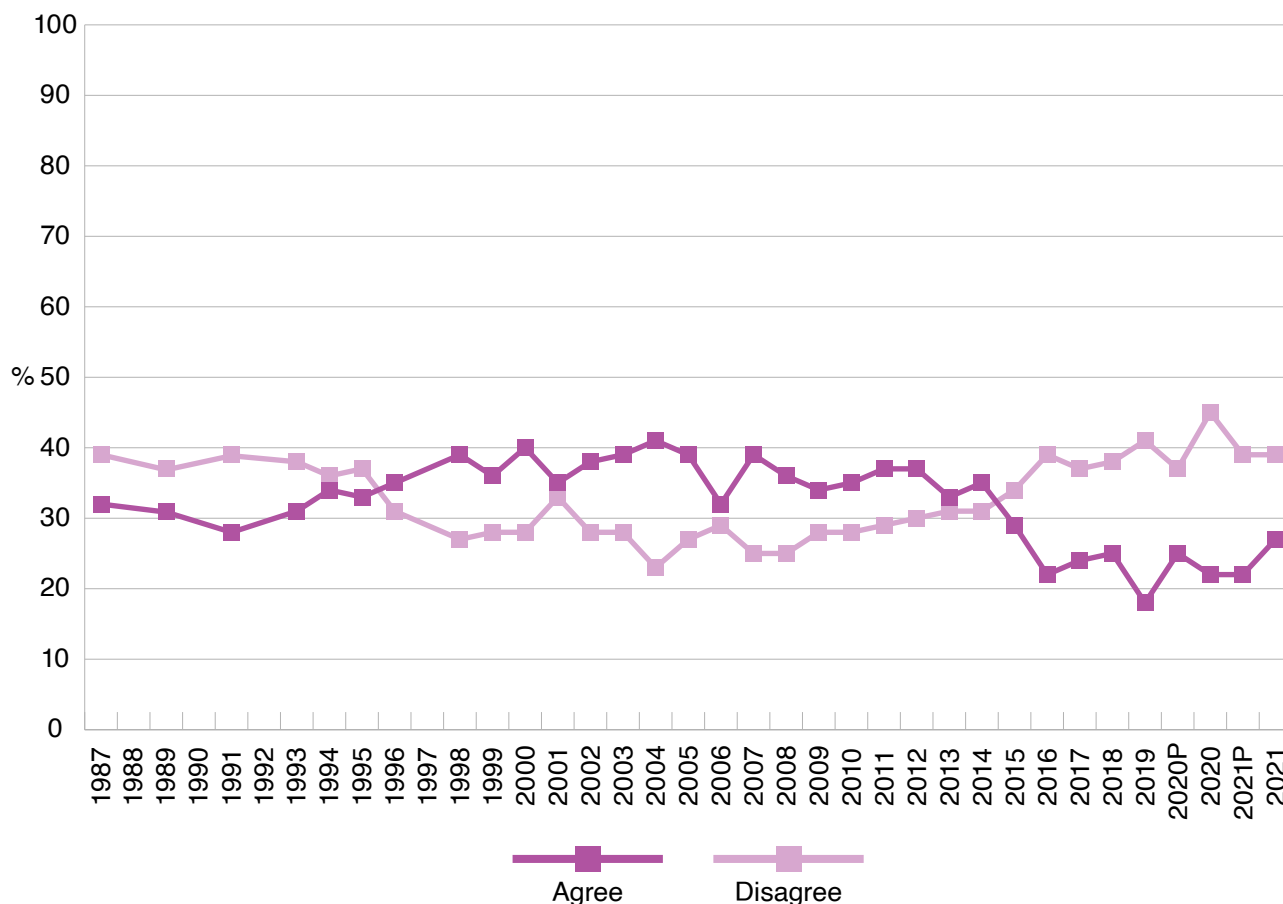
Source: British Social Attitudes apart from additional data points in 2020 and 2021 from NatCen Panel

The data on which Figure 6 is based can be found in Table A.6 in the appendix to this chapter

Responses to a third item that again expresses a negative sentiment about welfare, that is, that “most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another” exhibit much the same picture (Figure 7). Until the late 1990s slightly more people disagreed than agreed with the statement, but thereafter, through to 2014, the opposite was the case. But by 2017 to 2019, only just over one in five (22%) were in agreement, while nearly two in five (39%) disagreed. Those figures did not change much during the pandemic; on average 24% agreed and 40% disagreed. The relatively new mood on welfare prevailed, but did not become any stronger.²

² We should though note that in response to a further item that was not included on our two additional pandemic surveys, but which were asked on the 2020 and 2021 BSA surveys, there was some easing of the new more pro-welfare outlook. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that “the government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes”. Between 2017 and 2019 on average 42% disagreed with this statement, and only 26% agreed. On the 2020 and 2021 surveys combined the figures are 37% and 33% respectively. While these figures indicate a somewhat higher level of support for spending more on welfare than was evident between 2009 and 2011, in the immediate wake of the financial crash, they are not otherwise very different from the figures that were in evidence between 2004 and 2016. Of course, it may be that respondents’ answers were influenced by the fact that Universal Credit had been increased during the pandemic.

Figure 7 Proportion who agree/disagree that “Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another”, 1987-2021



Source: British Social Attitudes apart from additional data points in 2020 and 2021 from NatCen Panel

The data on which Figure 7 is based can be found in Table A.7 in the appendix to this chapter

Conclusions

In some respects, perhaps the most surprising feature of public attitudes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic is that they shifted so little. Despite the enormous impact that the event had on people’s lives, as well as on the government’s policy agenda, people’s attitudes towards taxation and spending and towards welfare are much the same now as they were before COVID-19 struck. However, in both cases this was against the backdrop of a swing in favour of increased taxation and spending and a more supportive attitude towards the provision of welfare that had already taken place in the years before the pandemic. The public may have been willing to accept the expansion of government spending in general, and on welfare in particular, because that was a direction in which their policy preferences had already shifted.

Much the same can also be said about perceptions of inequality, where there were already signs before the pandemic of an increase in the proportion who regarded Britain as unequal and were willing to back government action to reduce it. However, here there are signs

that that opinion may have shifted further in that direction during the pandemic. Indeed, public concern about the issue may be as high as it has been at any point since the mid-1980s.

This evidence on the mood of post-COVID Britain suggests that the public may have high expectations of government as it tries to deal with the new challenge that the country now faces, the 'cost of living crisis'. So far at least, the public seem to have accepted rather than reacted against the higher spending and higher taxes that have been bequeathed by the pandemic – and thus may well be in a mood to accept that action of a similar scale has to be taken to deal with the 'cost of living crisis'. People continue to take a more supportive attitude towards welfare and those who receive it, while they are more sensitive to the issue of inequality. Dealing with the anticipated adverse impact of the 'cost of living crisis' via the welfare system may well, therefore, also be on the public's agenda. It will, of course, be up to the government to decide how best to match this public mood.

Acknowledgements

The costs of collecting the additional survey data collected during the pandemic were funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of UK Research and Innovation's COVID-19 initiative (grant no. ES/V009788/1).

References

- Curtice, J., Abrams, D. and Jessop, C. (2021), 'New values, new divides: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public attitudes', in Clery, E., Curtice, J., Frankenurg, S., Morgan, H., and Reid, S., *British Social Attitudes: the 38th report*. Available at: <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-38/new-values-new-divides.aspx>
- Curtice, J., Abrams, D., and Jessop C. (2022), *A Turning Point in History? Social and Political Attitudes in Britain in the Wake of the Pandemic*, London: NatGen Social Research. Available at: <https://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/2166750/Social-and-Political-Attitudes-in-Britain-in-the-Wake-of-the-Pandemic.pdf>
- Nunn, B. (2021), "'One rule for them": how a simple slogan changed the political landscape', *The Observer*, 26 December. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/26/one-rule-for-them-how-a-simple-slogan-helped-change-the-political-landscape>
- Office for Budget Responsibility (2021), *Economic and Fiscal Outlook, October 2021*, CP 545, London: HM Treasury. Available at: <https://obr.uk/efo/economic-and-fiscal-outlook-october-2021/>
- Office for Budget Responsibility (2022), *Economic and Fiscal Outlook, March 2022*, CP648, London: HM Treasury. Available at: https://obr.uk/docs/dlm_uploads/CCS0222366764-001_OBR-EFO-March-2022_Web-Accessible-2.pdf
- Office for National Statistics (2022), *Energy prices and their effect on households*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/articles/energypricesandtheireffectonhouseholds/2022-02-01>
- Wlezien, C. (1995), 'The public as thermostat: dynamics of preferences for spending', *American Journal of Political Science*, 69 (4): 981-1000.

Appendix

In this chapter, evidence from BSA is supplemented by data collected during the pandemic via the NatCen Panel in July 2020 and June 2021. The NatCen Panel comprises people who were originally interviewed (face-to-face) as part of NatCen's annual British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, and who have agreed to answer occasional follow-up surveys either (mostly) online or on the phone. The data are weighted to make the sample representative of the British adult (18+) population. The weighting adjusts for unequal chances of selection and non-response to the recruitment survey, refusal to join the panel, and non-response in the survey of panel members.

Table A.1 Attitudes towards taxation and spending on health, education and social benefits, 1983-2021

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991
The government should...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits	9	5	6	5	3	3	3	3
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	54	50	43	44	42	37	37	29
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	32	39	45	46	50	56	54	65
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1761	1675	1804	3100	2847	3029	2797	2918
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
The government should...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits	4	4	5	4	3	3	4	5
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	28	33	31	34	31	32	34	40
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	63	58	61	59	62	63	58	50
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2945	3469	3633	3620	1355	3146	3143	2292
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
The government should...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits	3	3	6	6	7	6	7	8
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	34	31	38	42	43	43	47	50
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	59	63	51	49	46	46	42	39
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3287	3435	3272	2146	2166	3240	3094	2229
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
The government should...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits	8	9	6	6	6	7	4	4
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	55	56	54	53	54	52	47	44
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	34	31	36	34	36	37	45	48
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1139	3297	3311	3248	3244	2878	3266	2942
	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P	2021	
The government should...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits	4	4	5	6	6	6	6	
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	33	34	37	41	43	43	40	
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	60	57	53	53	50	50	52	
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2963	2884	3224	2413	3964	2217	2073	

Source: British Social Attitudes apart from 2020P, 2021P: NatCen Panel.

Table A.2 Proportion who agree/disagree that there is “one law for the rich and one for the poor”, 1986-2021

	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995
There is one law for the rich and one for the poor	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	59	66	69	67	63	69	69	71
Neither agree nor disagree	17	14	14	14	14	15	15	13
Disagree	22	19	16	18	21	15	15	13
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1321	2493	2604	2430	2702	1306	2957	3135
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
There is one law for the rich and one for the poor	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	71	70	64	62	64	58	61	58
Neither agree nor disagree	16	15	19	20	18	22	19	22
Disagree	12	14	15	17	17	19	18	18
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3085	1087	2531	2450	2980	2795	2900	3621
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
There is one law for the rich and one for the poor	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	52	53	55	53	56	56	56	60
Neither agree nor disagree	25	25	24	25	23	22	24	20
Disagree	21	21	19	20	18	20	19	19
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2609	3559	3748	3578	3990	2942	2791	2845
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
There is one law for the rich and one for the poor	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	64	59	59	56	59	57	60	56
Neither agree nor disagree	19	20	21	22	22	22	21	25
Disagree	15	19	18	19	17	19	18	18
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2855	2832	2376	3670	2400	3258	3065	2636
	2020P	2020	2021P	2021				
There is one law for the rich and one for the poor	%	%	%	%				
Agree	67	64	66	66				
Neither agree nor disagree	19	19	20	18				
Disagree	13	16	14	15				
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2413	3964	2217	6250				

Source: British Social Attitudes, apart from 2020P, 2021P: NatCen Panel.

Table A.3 Proportion who agree/disagree that “ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth”, 1986-2021

	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1995	1996
Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	66	64	65	65	67	61	66	66
Neither agree nor disagree	19	17	18	19	15	24	19	22
Disagree	14	17	16	15	15	14	12	11
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1321	2493	2604	2430	2702	1306	3135	3085
	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	64	60	62	60	63	61	53	55
Neither agree nor disagree	23	25	23	26	23	23	28	27
Disagree	11	13	13	13	12	13	17	16
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2531	2450	2980	2795	2900	3621	2609	3559
	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	55	58	60	60	56	58	61	59
Neither agree nor disagree	29	26	25	24	27	27	25	28
Disagree	14	14	12	14	15	14	12	11
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3748	3578	3990	2942	2791	2845	2855	2832
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020
Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	60	59	59	61	62	57	64	64
Neither agree nor disagree	25	27	27	26	26	30	26	23
Disagree	13	12	11	12	10	10	9	12
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2376	3670	2400	3258	3065	2636	2413	3964
	2021P	2021						
Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth	%	%						
Agree	63	67						
Neither agree nor disagree	26	22						
Disagree	10	11						
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2217	6250						

Source: British Social Attitudes, apart from 2020P, 2021P: NatGen Panel.

Table A.4 Proportion who agree/disagree that “Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off”, 1986-2021

	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995
Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	43	45	50	49	48	45	51	47
Neither agree nor disagree	25	20	20	19	20	21	23	22
Disagree	30	33	29	30	29	33	25	29
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1321	2493	2604	2430	2702	1306	2929	3135
	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	44	39	36	39	38	39	42	32
Neither agree nor disagree	26	28	27	24	28	25	24	28
Disagree	28	31	35	36	23	34	32	38
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3085	2531	2450	2980	2795	2900	3621	2609
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	32	34	32	38	36	35	37	41
Neither agree nor disagree	27	27	29	25	27	28	28	26
Disagree	39	38	37	35	34	35	34	30
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3559	3748	3578	3990	2942	2791	2845	2855
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020P
Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	42	39	44	42	42	42	39	42
Neither agree nor disagree	26	26	28	28	27	27	31	27
Disagree	29	33	26	28	30	29	27	30
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2832	2376	3670	2400	3258	3065	2636	2413
	2020	2021P	2021					
Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off	%	%	%					
Agree	46	40	49					
Neither agree nor disagree	23	29	23					
Disagree	30	30	27					
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3964	2217	6250					

Source: British Social Attitudes, apart from 2020P, 2021P: NatCen Panel.

Table A.5 Proportion who agree/disagree that “if welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet”, 1987-2021

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998
If welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	33	30	25	26	27	33	33	40
Neither agree nor disagree	21	23	23	22	23	21	23	26
Disagree	46	46	50	52	49	44	42	32
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1281	2604	2481	2567	2929	3135	3085	2531
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
If welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	37	38	39	44	42	47	49	47
Neither agree nor disagree	27	25	24	24	27	27	24	26
Disagree	34	35	36	30	29	24	25	25
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2450	2980	2795	2900	873	2609	2699	2822
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
If welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	53	54	53	55	54	53	53	53
Neither agree nor disagree	22	24	23	23	23	23	22	23
Disagree	22	20	22	20	21	22	22	23
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2672	3000	967	2791	2845	2855	2832	2376
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P
If welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	52	43	43	39	33	39	34	36
Neither agree nor disagree	22	25	25	27	28	29	25	30
Disagree	24	29	30	32	37	32	40	34
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2781	2400	3258	3065	2636	2413	3964	2217
	2021							
If welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet	%							
Agree	39							
Neither agree nor disagree	23							
Disagree	38							
<i>Unweighted base</i>								

Source: British Social Attitudes, apart from 2020P, 2021P: NatCen Panel.

Table A.6 Proportion who agree/disagree that “many people who get social security don’t really deserve any help”, 1987-2021

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998
Many people who get social security don’t really deserve any help	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	31	28	26	24	26	30	28	32
Neither agree nor disagree	21	27	25	25	24	24	28	29
Disagree	45	45	47	50	47	43	42	36
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1281	2604	2481	2567	2929	3135	3085	2531
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Many people who get social security don’t really deserve any help	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	27	31	32	36	38	39	40	29
Neither agree nor disagree	31	30	30	31	30	33	33	37
Disagree	40	37	36	31	29	25	25	32
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2450	2980	2795	2900	873	2609	2699	2822
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Many people who get social security don’t really deserve any help	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	36	37	34	35	35	35	33	32
Neither agree nor disagree	35	34	33	35	35	35	35	35
Disagree	27	27	32	28	29	27	29	32
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2672	3000	967	2791	2845	2855	2832	2376
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 P	2020	2021P
Many people who get social security don’t really deserve any help	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	28	21	21	20	15	19	18	16
Neither agree nor disagree	37	39	39	38	37	39	32	39
Disagree	33	38	37	41	47	41	49	43
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2781	2400	3258	3065	2636	2413	3964	2217
	2021							
Many people who get social security don’t really deserve any help	%							
Agree	22							
Neither agree nor disagree	34							
Disagree	43							
<i>Unweighted base</i>	6250							

Source: British Social Attitudes apart from 2020P, 2021P: NatCen Panel.

Table A.7 Proportion who agree/disagree that “Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another”, 1987-2021

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998
Most people on the dole are fiddling one way or another	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	32	31	28	31	34	33	35	39
Neither agree nor disagree	28	31	31	30	29	28	32	32
Disagree	39	37	39	38	36	37	31	27
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1281	2604	2481	2567	2929	3135	3085	2531
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Most people on the dole are fiddling one way or another	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	36	40	35	38	39	41	39	32
Neither agree nor disagree	35	31	29	31	31	33	32	37
Disagree	28	28	33	28	28	23	27	29
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2450	2980	2795	2900	873	2609	2699	2822
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Most people on the dole are fiddling one way or another	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	39	36	34	35	37	37	33	35
Neither agree nor disagree	32	37	36	34	33	31	34	33
Disagree	25	25	28	28	29	30	31	31
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2672	3000	967	2791	2845	2855	2832	2376
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P
Most people on the dole are fiddling one way or another	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	29	22	24	25	18	25	22	22
Neither agree nor disagree	35	37	37	35	38	37	33	37
Disagree	34	39	37	38	41	37	45	39
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2781	2400	3258	3065	2636	2413	3964	2217
	2021							
Most people on the dole are fiddling one way or another	%							
Agree	27							
Neither agree nor disagree	34							
Disagree	39							
<i>Unweighted base</i>	6250							

Source: British Social Attitudes, apart from 2020P, 2021P: NatCen Panel.

Publication details

Butt, S., Clery, E. and Curtice, J.(eds.) (2022), British Social Attitudes: The 39th Report. London: National Centre for Social Research

© National Centre for Social Research 2022

First published 2022

You may print out, download and save this publication for your non-commercial use. Otherwise, and apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the National Centre for Social Research.

National Centre for Social Research
35 Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0AX
info@natcen.ac.uk