National Centre for Social Research

BRITISH SOCIAL ATTITUDES

Secular or cyclical?

40 years of tracking public opinion

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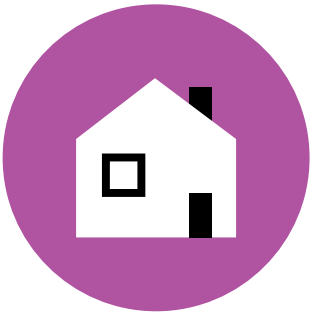
Introduction



In any country, domestically the state plays two key roles. But in both cases the way in which it exercises that responsibility is potentially contentious. Its first role is to take money in the form of taxes and allocate the proceeds through various forms of spending. This process inevitably gives rise to debate about who should be taxed and by how much, and on whom and what the money should be spent. Some argue the state should be taking decisions with a view to reducing inequality and unfairness. Others take the view that it should primarily be setting the conditions for economic growth from which all can profit. Those taking the former view typically incline to the view that government should be playing a substantial role in the country's economic life. In contrast, those supporting the latter perspective often argue that government should stand back and avoid quashing the spirit of entrepreneurial enterprise.

The state's second role is no less important – or disputed. This is to act as the country's moral and cultural compass. Any society has to make decisions about the acceptability of various behaviours. The state can be used to penalise behaviour that is deemed unacceptable, not least through the criminal sanction of the law, while incentivising actions that are thought to be socially beneficial. Society's judgements about what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable will potentially reflect both people's sense of 'right' or 'wrong', and their view as to what constitutes 'normal' behaviour. However, people can disagree about whether particular behaviours are unacceptable and take a different view about how much a society should be attempting to police the behaviour of its members in the first place.

Some people feel that securing adherence to society's moral code and cultural norms is crucial for social cohesion. Others believe that it is better to allow individuals to decide these issues for themselves.

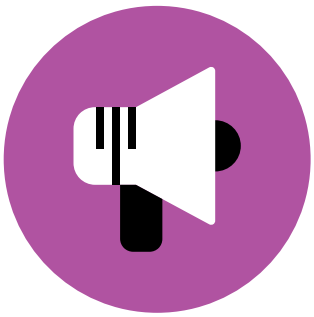
Given that both roles are the subject of debate and contention, people's views about how they should be performed could well change over time. This report is about the extent they have done so in Britain and why. Since 1983, the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) has conducted an annual survey of what people in Britain believe and think about a wide range of social and political issues. Each year NatCen's British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey has covered a varying menu of subjects in depth. At the same time, it has addressed some topics on a regular basis. As a result, the survey has charted how attitudes have evolved over what is now a 40-year period, enabling the survey to fulfil one of its central aims when it was inaugurated by NatCen's co-founder, the late Sir Roger Jowell – that is, to identify and understand long-term changes in the climate of public opinion in Britain (Jowell and Airey, 1984).

Britain has witnessed a great deal of social change since 1983, change that could well have had an impact on beliefs and attitudes. Many more people now go to university, while fewer attend any kind of religious service. More are employed in white-collar jobs and fewer in blue-collar ones. More women, including those with younger children, go out to work, while a growing population of older people means there are more men and women who are no longer working at all. Immigration has ensured the country has become more ethnically diverse, while a decline in rates of marriage has been accompanied by more diverse types of family formation, including by same-sex couples whose partnerships are now legally recognised. Reflecting these changes, debates about equality are no longer primarily focused on differences between classes, and more often are about how fairly a variety of other groups are being treated, including women, those from a minority ethnic background, and those who identify as LGBTQ+.

There have also been important political changes. In the 1980s, the state divested itself of many a nationalised industry, yet more recently has taken some responsibility for the provision of childcare. Welfare for those of working age has been cut back, while the level of the state pension has been protected. Not that all political change has been unidirectional. Between 1983 and 1997, Britain was governed by a Conservative government that aimed to reduce the size of government. Then, between 1997 and 2010, it was governed by a 'New' Labour administration that eventually increased the size of the state once again, though at the same time placed less emphasis on using the welfare system as an instrument to reduce inequality. Meanwhile, since 2010, a variety of Conservative-led administrations have been at the helm once again. They succeeded in reducing the size of the state (and the provision of welfare) once more – only to be forced into unprecedented state intervention in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, much as the previous Labour government had to do in the face of the 2007 to 2008 banking crisis. At the same time, government is now confronted for the first time since the 1980s with both the scourge of price inflation, significant industrial unrest, and serious tension between the West and Russia.

Between them, the seven main chapters in this report illustrate and analyse how far social and political attitudes towards the two key domestic roles of the state have changed in the wake of these developments. One clear theme emerges. On the one hand, attitudes towards what is and is not acceptable behaviour have often undergone profound change, such that the balance of opinion is now often very different from what it was 40 years ago. On the other hand, much like public policy itself, attitudes towards the economic role of the state, although far from unvarying, have largely not followed a secular trend in one particular direction. Meanwhile, demographic differences in attitudes towards the economic role of the state have proven to be remarkably stable.

A more liberal Britain



Nothing illustrates more clearly how attitudes towards moral and cultural issues have changed – and thus what people want the state to do in addressing them – than attitudes towards sexual and reproductive behaviour. As Elizabeth Clery demonstrates in her chapter, although sexual activity between men had been decriminalised (in England and Wales) in the 1960s, 20 years later Britain was still highly censorious about same-sex relations, a mood that was reinforced by public health concern about the spread at the time of AIDS, then often a fatal disease that was particularly prevalent among gay men. Now, most people see little wrong in such relationships, such that those who do express doubts are sometimes decried as 'homophobic'. Yet it was only 20 years ago, at around the time that civil partnerships for same-sex couples were introduced, that the balance of public opinion tilted in favour of saying that there was little or nothing wrong in two adults of the same sex engaging in sexual activity. Meanwhile, society is now divided about another issue that has come more recently to the fore – the legal recognition and treatment of transgender people.

Love and marriage were once said to go together 'like a horse and carriage'. No longer is that so. Even in the 1980s, 20 years on from the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s, less than half said that there was nothing wrong at all with having sex before getting married. Now most take that view. Meanwhile, much of the opprobrium that once greeted those who have children without getting married has largely disappeared – such that the one-time practice of cajoling unmarried mothers into giving up their babies for adoption is now being revisited with a measure of disbelief and horror (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2022).

That said, being sexually 'unfaithful' to a married partner is met with just as much disapproval now as it was forty years ago. Although attitudes towards the formal, legal form of relationships have changed, the level of regard for the value of monogamous relationships has not.

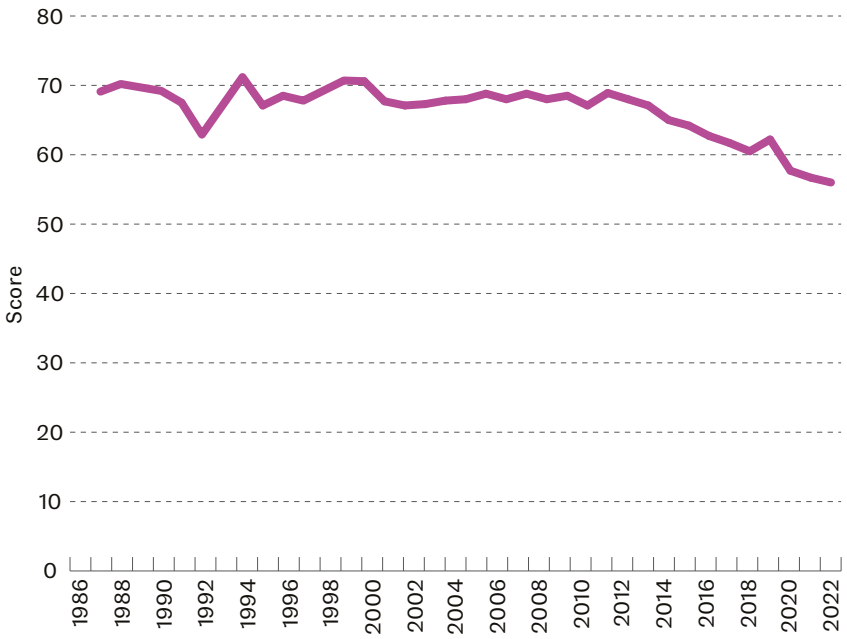
On both sides of the debate, perhaps no issue raises questions of ethics and morality to a greater extent in some people's minds than abortion. For some the issue is one of principle, but for others their view has depended on the circumstances. There has long been widespread support for allowing an abortion if either the woman's health is in danger or if there is a risk of a serious 'defect' in the baby. But back in the mid-1980s rather less than half supported allowing abortion in other circumstances, such as the women deciding for herself that she does not wish to have the child. Although it has not disappeared, that gap has now closed substantially, and a majority now support allowing an abortion in most circumstances. Most, it seems, are now inclined to the view that the decision is one for women themselves to take rather than one that sometimes at least might be made for them.

The form that families take are in part a reflection of social norms. So also is behaviour within them, including not least the division of labour between household members. In their chapter, Jules Allen and Imogen Stevenson look at how far the increased participation of women in the labour market is reflected in changed attitudes towards the role of women in a heterosexual relationship. On this topic too, much has changed. In the mid-1980s, the traditional view – that the man should go out to work while the woman should look after the home and any children – still had its supporters. Now relatively few hold that view. Meanwhile, doubts about the impact of women going out to work on children and their families, once quite widespread, have now largely receded.

That said, many still have doubts about both the mother and the father working full-time when they have young children, a reflection perhaps of concern about 'work-life' balance. The most popular option is for the father to work full-time and the mother part-time. Equally, while there is widespread support for the idea that mothers and fathers should share their entitlement to parental leave, many are inclined to the view that the mother should take the greater share. At the same time, while there has been a dramatic decline in the perception that particular domestic tasks like washing and ironing or doing household repairs should be done by the man or the woman, reported practice continues to be a long way behind, leaving women still to do what many of them regard as more than their fair share of unpaid domestic labour. It is a reminder that attitudes and behaviour do not always go hand in hand.

So far, we have looked at instances of specific behaviour and practices. However, since 1986, BSA has regularly asked a suite of questions which are designed to measure where people stand more broadly on the debate about the extent to which society should be requiring its members to follow a particular moral code and set of social norms, or whether individuals should be left to decide such issues for themselves (see the Technical Details to this report for further information). The former outlook can be termed 'authoritarian', the latter as 'libertarian'. In Figure 1, we show for each year the average score for all respondents on this value divide, where a score of 0 means that someone is highly libertarian and 100 that they are highly authoritarian. The latter perspective has always been the more popular on this measure. Nevertheless, as we might expect from what we have reported so far, Britain has now become rather more liberal on this measure, though this trend has largely only been in evidence since the middle of the last decade. As a result, whereas in 1986 the average score on this scale was 69, now it stands 56. The current debate about 'culture wars' is perhaps a symptom of the fact that the role of the state in upholding particular social and cultural values is now more contentious than it once was.

Figure 1 Liberal/authoritarian score, 1986–2022



These data on libertarian/authoritarian values are used in three chapters in this volume – that on generational differences by John Curtice, Victoria Ratti, Ian Montagu, and Chris Deeming, in the analysis by Rosie Campbell and Rosalind Shorrocks on differences between the attitudes of men and women, and in the chapter on social class by Oliver Heath and Monica Bennett. Campbell and Shorrocks show that, apart from the issue of censorship of pornography, the trend towards a more liberal view has been equally apparent among men and women, between whom there has never been much difference on this value dimension. Heath and Bennett show that those who identify as middle class and those who think of themselves as working class have also both become more liberal. Here though there is a difference – the trend is more marked among middle-class identifiers than it is among those who think of themselves as working class. As a result, the gap between the two groups has widened, a development that is also evident in attitudes towards immigration. That latter topic has, of course, received particular attention during the country's debate about Brexit, for which those from a working-class background were more likely to vote (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). Meanwhile, Curtice et al. show that the trend towards a more libertarian view is apparent in all age groups too, though it has been somewhat more marked among younger people – who throughout the last 40 years have always been at least a little less authoritarian than older people on our measure.

Such differences and trends by age raise the question as to what extent the move towards a more liberal outlook is the result of generational turnover, with younger more liberal generations gradually replacing older more authoritarian cohorts. After all, younger generations are more likely to have been to university and are less likely to identify with a religion and, in general, both attributes tend to be associated with a more liberal outlook. However, older generations could also have become more liberal over time, influenced by new arguments and changed behaviours. In practice, as Elizabeth Clery shows, the relative importance of generational turnover and people changing their minds differs from subject to subject. In particular, she shows that while the change in the balance of opinion towards marriage (and single parent families) has primarily been occasioned by generational turnover, all generations have changed their attitudes towards abortion over time. Meanwhile, both processes have been evident in the case of attitudes towards sexual relationships, with developments such as the introduction of civil partnerships for same-sex couples having an effect on all generations. Despite the very substantial change in attitudes over the last 40 years, we perhaps should not assume that Britain is necessarily set to become yet more liberal in future thanks to a process of generational turnover.

Government and inequality

In their chapter, John Curtice and Alex Scholes look directly at trends in attitudes towards the roles and responsibilities that government should perform. Some roles, most notably providing a health care system and ensuring a decent standard of living for the old, are relatively uncontentious. Others, such as providing a decent standard of living for the unemployed and making sure there is a job for everyone who wants one, tend to be less widely supported. That said, there are signs that the move to reduce the scope of state activity under the Conservative government of 1979 to 1997, and the subsequent acceptance of much of this change by the Labour government of 1997 to 2010, was accompanied by a long-term tendency for fewer people to say that the government should perform any particular role. The public had seemingly come to expect somewhat less of their government.

However, that trend was reversed in the wake of the banking crisis of 2007 to 2008, while after re-asserting itself once more, now seems to have been reversed a second time in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the government took unprecedented action to sustain employment and the economy. Indeed, record numbers of people now not only think that the government should definitely keep prices under control and help industry to grow – a reflection perhaps of the fact that the economy is now facing its biggest difficulties since the 1970s and 1980s – but also that the government should definitely reduce income differences between rich and poor. In short, while voters might have been willing for government to retreat somewhat when things were going well, they still look to government to take action when things are going badly.

If there were, for a while, at least some sign of the public accepting the move towards a somewhat more limited role for government, there has been little evidence of this happening in attitudes towards taxation and spending. Rather, until most recently at least, voters have reacted 'thermostatically' to rises and falls in taxation and spending. Falls in taxation and spending under Conservative governments in the 1980s and 1990s were greeted with demands for the trend to be reversed, as voters seemingly expressed concern about the state of the public services. Conversely, the increases in taxation and spending under the Labour government of 1997 to 2010 were met with increased satisfaction with public services and declining support for more taxation and spending. In short, if taxation and spending fell below levels with which voters were comfortable, they began to want the spending taps turned back on. But if government started to tax and spend more than voters felt was desirable, they, like a thermostat, sought to see the taps turned off.

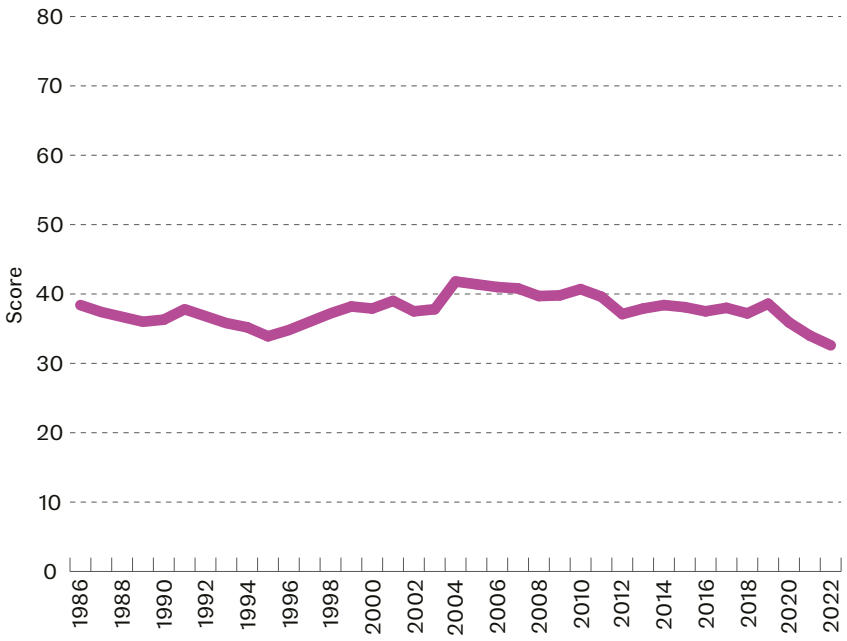
The spending cuts introduced by Conservative-led governments from 2010 onwards, cuts that came to be known as 'austerity', eventually resulted in a similar reaction, albeit support for more taxation and spending was still somewhat lower than it had been in the 1990s. However, so far at least, there is no sign that voters have begun to react against the record levels of taxation and spending that were engendered by the pandemic. This raises the prospect that the experience of the pandemic may have led voters, at least for the time being, to 'reset' their thermostat to a higher level of taxation and spending, not least, perhaps, because of dissatisfaction with the state of public services, including most notably the NHS.

Meanwhile, Ben Baumberg Geiger, Robert de Vries, Tom O'Grady and Kate Summers examine attitudes towards one of the principal instruments available to government in its attempts to reduce inequality, the provision of welfare benefits. They also present a picture of cyclical rather than secular change. Attitudes towards welfare benefits became less generous in the 1990s and 2000s. This appeared to reflect New Labour's emphasis on using welfare to get people of working age back into work rather than as a mechanism for reducing inequality. Labour supporters, in particular, seem to have taken their cue from their party on this issue.

However, following further cuts to the provision of welfare for those of working age from 2010 onwards, more recently attitudes have swung back in the opposite direction, albeit not always back to as high a level of support as in the late 1980s. However, rather than simply being a consequence of a change of outlook among Labour supporters, following their party's more sympathetic stance towards welfare under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, this swing in favour of a more generous attitude appears to have occurred irrespective of people's political persuasion or demographic position. It may represent a 'thermostatic' reaction against cuts that are thought to have gone too far at a time when many more now feel that the prevalence of poverty has increased.

Again, apart from these analyses of attitudes towards specific policy areas, we also report on data that looks at people's underlying value stance on the question of inequality and the role of government in dealing with it. Every year since 1986 we have asked a set of questions designed to identify whether people are on the 'left', that is, they are concerned about inequality and incline to the view that government should do something about it, and those on the 'right', that is, they are less inclined to such a viewpoint (see the Technical Details to this report for further information). Figure 2 shows the average score for all respondents on this measure over the last four decades, where a score of '0' means that someone is firmly on the left while one of '100' indicates that they are very firmly on the right.

Figure 2 Left/right score, 1986-2022



The figure shows that there has been some, albeit far from dramatic change in where people stand on this scale. However, such change as has occurred has been cyclical, not secular. In 1986 the average scale score on our left/right measure was 38, and indeed in 1995 it dipped to 34. However, after New Labour came to power there was some movement to the right, and by 2004 the average scale score had risen to 42. However, by 2013 it was back down to 38, and remained at or close to that figure through to 2019. Meanwhile, our most recent survey suggests that the pandemic years have witnessed a further move to the left, and that with a score of 33 in our most recent survey, the public are as left-wing in their outlook as they have been at any time since 1986.

The chapters by Curtice et al. on generational differences, on class by Heath and Bennett, and on gender differences by Campbell and Shorrocks also analyse the pattern of support for left and right-wing attitudes in further detail. Women emerge as slightly to the right of men, but the difference is very small. Yet at the same time, women tend to be marginally more in favour of higher taxation and spending than men, though the cyclical, thermostatic pattern on this issue is just as strong in both sexes. Equally, the differences between age groups in their score on the left/right scale have tended to be small, albeit that since the mid 1990s, younger people have usually emerged as a little less left-wing than their older counterparts. Meanwhile, in a reverse image of the picture among women, since 1995, younger people have been less keen than older people on more taxation and spending,

However, there is a little more to be said about the differences by age. First, the move to the left during the pandemic years has occurred primarily among younger people. As a result, there is now a discernible gap between younger and older people for the first time on our scale. However, younger people's relative reluctance to back higher taxation and spending has become more marked too. It may be that young people's difficulties in accessing the housing market together with their greater economic vulnerability during the pandemic have made them somewhat more strongly attuned to issues of inequality. Meanwhile, they may also have noticed the long-term increase in spending on health and social care that primarily benefits older people, while they themselves in some cases are having to repay the cost of their university education, a requirement that means that they are already paying a higher rate of income 'tax'. These are potentially important issues for future research.

Still, for the most part, neither gender nor age appear to have had much impact on attitudes towards the role of government in recent years, even though age has become the biggest demographic division in party support and women have become slightly more likely than men to back Labour rather than the Conservatives. But what of the division that has long marked British society and politics – social class? It has, it seems, far from disappeared. In their chapter, Heath and Bennett argue that the propensity to identify as middle class or working class is much the same now as 40 years ago, while people – and especially those who identify as working class – are more inclined than ever to the view that it is difficult for people to move between classes. Meanwhile, being aware of the difficulty of moving between classes now makes a greater and indeed substantial difference to whether people are politically on the left or the right – whereas, incidentally, it makes little difference to whether people have a libertarian or authoritarian outlook. One of Britain's older dividing lines is, it seems, still with us.

Conclusion

One way of capturing the picture painted in this report is to imagine what might happen if Dr Who's time machine were to transport a 'typical' British citizen from 1983 into the Britain of today. What would their reaction be? In truth, many of the attitudes that they would hear expressed would be decidedly unfamiliar. The celebration of same-sex relationships, references to 'partners' rather than 'husbands' or 'wives', women with young children wanting to work and expecting their (also employed) male partner do his half of the domestic tasks, all of it underpinned by a feeling that family and sexual matters should be a question of personal choice, not social conformity. Our citizen would find their 1980s moral and cultural compass of limited value – and perhaps wonder whether it will ever be of much use again.

Yet, at the same time, much else would sound very familiar to Dr Who's passenger – arguments and disagreements about taxation and spending, about how much should be spent on welfare, and on what responsibilities should fall to governments to perform. Meanwhile, people with different perspectives on social class express different views on these subjects. Our citizen of the 1980s might be amazed at how little the debate about the economic role of government has changed – and be left wondering whether a visit to the 2060s would leave much the same impression. However, we will have to await another 40 years of BSA data before we will be able to answer that question.

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Appendix

Table A.1 Liberal/authoritarian and left/right scores, 1986-2022

	Liberal/authoritarian score	*Unweighted base*	Left/right score	*Unweighted base*
1986	69	*1311*	38	*1308*
1987	70	*1277*	37	*2459*
1989	69	*2592*	36	*2580*
1990	67	*2414*	36	*2407*
1991	63	*1243*	38	*2643*
1993	71	*1296*	36	*1292*
1994	67	*2892*	35	*2886*
1995	68	*3074*	34	*3070*
1996	68	*3042*	35	*3037*
1998	71	*2487*	37	*2476*
1999	71	*2416*	38	*2403*
2000	68	*2946*	38	*2947*
2001	67	*2761*	39	*2756*
2002	67	*2840*	38	*2826*

Table A.1 Liberal/authoritarian and left/right scores, 1986-2022 (continued)

	Liberal/authoritarian score	*Unweighted base*	Left/right score	*Unweighted base*
2003	68	*3564*	38	*3531*
2004	68	*2560*	42	*2551*
2005	69	*3513*	41	*3496*
2006	68	*3706*	41	*3695*
2007	69	*3527*	41	*3481*
2008	68	*3937*	40	*3902*
2009	69	*2893*	40	*2876*
2010	67	*2745*	41	*2731*
2011	69	*2813*	40	*2799*
2012	68	*2789*	37	*2784*
2013	67	*2773*	38	*2761*
2014	65	*2352*	38	*2341*
2015	64	*3610*	38	*3597*
2016	63	*2356*	37	*2350*
2017	62	*3213*	38	*3206*
2018	61	*3024*	37	*3020*
2019	62	*2587*	39	*2579*
2020	58	*3956*	36	*3951*
2021	57	*6228*	34	*6214*
2022	56	*6673*	33	*6656*

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