

Broken Britain? Public attitudes in an era of crisis

The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) is Britain's largest independent social research organisation. For more than 50 years, we have been generating evidence that uncovers the reality of people's lives in the UK.

Since 1983, our British Social Attitudes survey has been tracking social, political and moral attitudes. Every year we ask a representative sample of the population what it's like to live in Britain and what they think about how Britain is run.

Here is what the latest findings show.

Being in government has perhaps never been more challenging in the post-war era. Even though the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic now seems to be behind us, the new government is having to deal with a series of actual and potential crises that, between them, would seem to leave little room for the pursuit of its own policy agenda.

The most immediate of these challenges, of course, is a 'cost of living crisis' that threatens a severe drop in living standards, especially for the less well off. Yet, at the same time, the health service is struggling, the integrity

of the Union is under threat from developments in Scotland and Northern Ireland, reducing regional disparities in economic and social wellbeing remains unfinished business, the deep political division over a Brexit that is still not fully 'done' now seems to be part of a wider 'culture war', while climate change potentially poses an existential threat to the whole world.

This year's British Social Attitudes (BSA) report provides a wealth of evidence on where the public stand on the various challenges that the government faces.



Tackling the 'cost of living crisis'

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in record levels of spending and taxation. While many are concerned about the impact of these on the UK economy, others would maintain that the pandemic has reinforced an unacceptable level of inequality in British society, with both morbidity and mortality, as a result of COVID-19, proving to be higher in less affluent areas.

For some the pandemic exposed an unacceptable level of inequality in British society

In any event, the government has now had to intervene in the 'cost of living crisis' on a scale that matches the actions it took in the pandemic, not least because of the anticipated disproportional impact that food and energy inflation will have on the less well off.

Our research on attitudes towards taxation and spending, inequality and welfare suggests that, despite the dramatic impact that it had on everybody's lives, the COVID-19 pandemic did not occasion large

changes in public opinion on these issues. Public opinion broadly swung in favour of more taxation and spending on health, education and social services from 2016. Meanwhile, so far at least, the public have not reacted against the increase in government intervention by swinging away from backing increased taxation and spending – suggesting that the public face the 'cost of living crisis' with just as much appetite for potentially expensive government intervention as they had during the pandemic.

Public opinion broadly swung in favour of more taxation and spending on health, education and social services

Much the same pattern is evident in attitudes towards the provision of welfare. After two decades of a largely critical outlook on the impact of welfare benefits, the years prior to the pandemic had witnessed a substantial swing towards a more supportive attitude towards welfare. The balance of opinion did not shift further during the pandemic, but the new mood was maintained, a mood that might be thought to have been reflected in the government's decision to

implement a temporary uplift in the main welfare benefit for people of working age, Universal Credit. Meanwhile, there is evidence that the pandemic was accompanied by the highest level of concern about unequal wealth distribution since the 1990s. Support for redistribution is also higher than it has been since the 1990s, with 49% supporting government redistribution of income from the better-off to the less well off.

Key findings: Taxation, welfare and inequality

- 52% 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
- 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



Key findings: NHS and social care

- 36% of the public are satisfied with the way in which the NHS runs nowadays, a 17 percentage point drop since 2020, now standing 24 points lower than before the pandemic. This is the lowest level of satisfaction recorded since 1997
- This is accompanied by an increase in dissatisfaction, from 25% in 2020 to 41% now – the largest year-on-year rise in dissatisfaction recorded by the BSA
- 76% think the NHS should definitely be free of charge when you need it and 67% believe it should definitely be available to everyone
- 54% think the NHS should definitely be primarily funded through taxes
- 49% of people in both Scotland and England feel that people who do not hold citizenship should not have access to publicly funded health care
- 60% of people in Scotland say that poverty is a major cause of poor health – compared with 51% in England

The NHS under pressure

The health service was inevitably in the front line of the COVID-19 pandemic. But, as well as dealing with the influx of people suffering from the disease, it is left with a legacy of increased demand for treatment from those who delayed seeking help during the pandemic, together with a backlog of patients whose treatment was postponed during the public health crisis. The public have noticed the pressures under which the service is now operating.

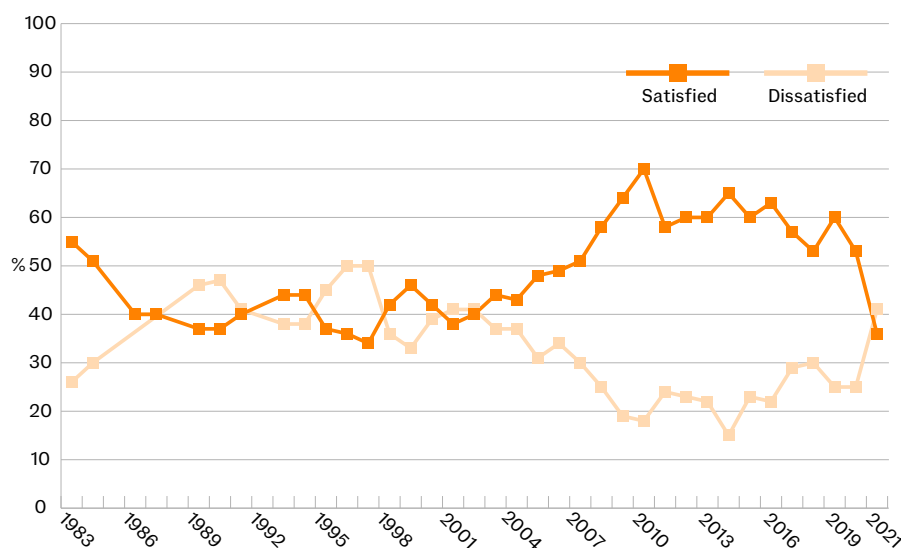
Our work on attitudes towards the NHS reveals that satisfaction with the health service as a whole has fallen sharply to its lowest level since 1997. This trend is replicated in drops in satisfaction across all individual NHS services, but has been sharpest in respect of GP services, from 68% to 38% between 2019 and 2021. Once the most popular part of the NHS, GPs are, of course, the most used service and thus this was the service where the impact of the pandemic was most widely visible. Satisfaction with social care (largely provided by local authorities) has also dropped steeply – from 29% to 15% between 2019 and 2021.

The biggest source of dissatisfaction appears to be waiting times, a complaint that echoes perceptions of the service in the 1990s. This finding is underlined in separate research that compares attitudes towards health care in Scotland and England, which shows that waiting

times appears in both countries to be the biggest barrier to people's ability to access care during the pandemic. Meanwhile, although the increase in NHS funding during the pandemic has been accompanied by some increase in the perception that the service wastes too much money, public opinion remains supportive of the NHS as a universal service, free at the point of use and primarily funded by taxes.

Satisfaction with the health service as a whole has fallen sharply to its lowest level for more than 20 years

Percentage satisfied/dissatisfied with the way in which the NHS runs nowadays



The state of the Union

The years since the EU Referendum have seen some turbulence in attitudes to voting systems, devolution and the United Kingdom itself.

For the first time since 1983, our survey found a slim majority for electoral reform. 51% of people wished to change the voting system “to allow smaller political parties to get a fairer share of MPs”, while 44% preferred to keep the voting system as it is “to produce effective government”. Previously, there had always been a majority for the existing system, though this had narrowed by 2015.

British citizens have become more supportive of Northern Ireland remaining part of the Union

In Scotland, the parallel Scottish Social Attitudes survey found a majority in favour of Scottish independence for the first time in 2019. This was 51% in 2019 and stayed at a similar level of 52% in 2021. Support for independence has strengthened since 2016, while support for the current devolutionary settlement has

ebbed (from 49% in 2015 to 38% in 2021). Support for abolishing the Scottish Parliament was just 8% in 2021 similar to the level for the previous five years. Meanwhile, people living in England remain in favour of Scottish devolution, with 54% in favour, with only 25% supporting independence – a finding that is broadly consistent with previous years.

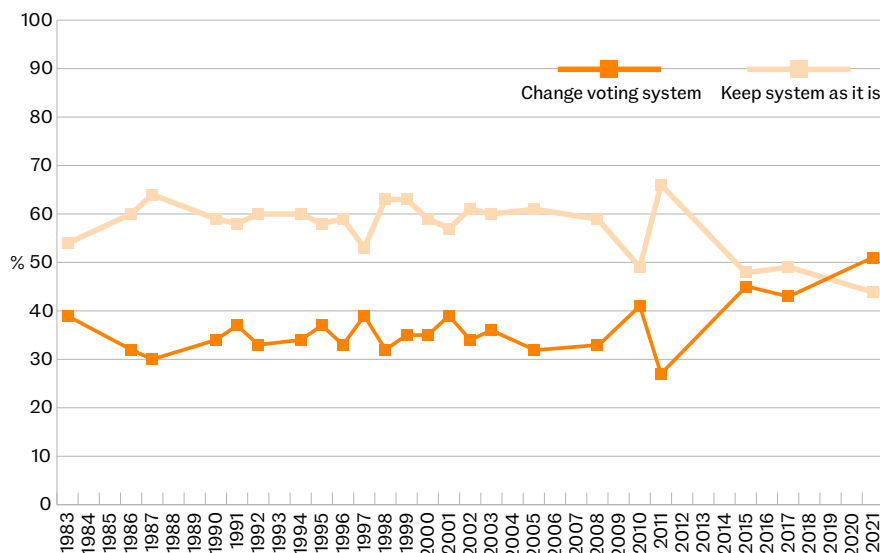
People living in Great Britain have become more supportive of Northern Ireland remaining part of the Union. In 2000, only 25% supported this proposition, while 57% favoured “unification” with the rest of Ireland; in 2021, 49% supported Northern Ireland remaining in the UK, and 41% supported “unification”. Opinion in Northern Ireland, as surveyed in the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, has moved in a different direction: 49% supported remaining in the UK in 2021 (down from 66% in 2007), while 30% supported “reunification” with the rest of Ireland (23% in 2007).

In relation to the government of England, 58% of respondents in England say the country should be governed as it is now, with 20% supporting an English Parliament and 19% favouring regional assemblies. These views have remained broadly stable over the last 20 years.

Key findings: Constitutional reform

- For the first time in the survey’s history, more people favour introducing proportional representation (PR) for elections to the House of Commons than keeping the voting system as it is
- Conservative and Labour supporters have drawn apart from each other in their attitudes towards how the UK should be governed
- A majority of Labour supporters (61%) now favours electing MPs using PR, up from 27% in 2011. 69% of Liberal Democrats, but only 29% of Conservatives, favour electoral reform
- Support in Scotland for Scottish independence and in Northern Ireland for Irish reunification has increased in recent years, particularly among supporters of nationalist parties
- 82% of SNP supporters now back independence, up from 51% in 2012
- The proportion of Sinn Féin identifiers who back Northern Ireland being part of the UK has fallen from 37% in 2010 to just one in ten (10%) now
- Support in Northern Ireland for Irish reunification has increased from 14% in 2015 to 30% now
- Just over half of people in Scotland (52%) favour independence, up from 23% in 2012, when the UK government agreed to the independence referendum that was held two years later
- Only one in four (25%) of people in England think that Scotland should be independent, unchanged from 2012
- In 2011, 24% of Conservative supporters in England said that Scotland should become independent, as did 25% of Labour supporters. Now only 16% of Conservatives express that view, compared with 30% of their Labour counterparts

Attitudes towards electoral reform, 1983–2021





Regional disparities in England

One of the most striking commitments of Boris Johnson's administration was to 'level up' the country. The stated aim was to reduce disparity in economic wellbeing between the north and south of the country, in particular through the provision of improved infrastructure, in the belief that this would promote the economic health of the country as a whole.

It might be thought that the less well off North would be particularly keen on government intervention that might reduce inequality in British society. Yet, one of the striking findings of our research on regional differences in attitudes in England is that those living in the North are only slightly more likely than those in the South to say that Britain is unequal and that the government should take action to reduce inequality, while the two regions hardly differ at all in their attitudes to welfare. This represents a striking contrast to the position in the 1980s and 1990s when there was a

marked difference in outlook between the North and the South – and suggests that the relative strength that Labour still enjoys in the north of England (despite its loss of a number of 'red wall' seats) may rest more on traditional support for the party than on current commitment to a more equal society.

The biggest regional difference in attitudes now is between London and the rest of England

Rather, the biggest regional difference in attitudes now is between London and the rest of England. People in London are both more supportive of welfare and are markedly more likely to express socially liberal views on subjects such as law and order, obedience to authority and the need to uphold traditional values. This difference may be one factor in the resilience or even strengthening of Labour's vote in the capital in recent general and local elections.

Key findings: Regional differences

- 61% people in the North can be classified as left-wing (tending to believe that economic resources are unequally distributed and favouring their redistribution to the less well-off), compared with 56% in the South
- 47% of people in London can be classified as pro-welfare, compared with 30%-37% in other English regions
- 34% of Londoners can be classified as socially liberal (that is supporting the right to individual freedom over conformity to common rules and practices), compared with 20% in the South and 17% in the North

The ‘culture wars’

One of the key challenges facing the new government will be whether it can replicate Boris Johnson’s success in 2019 in appealing to Leave voters. For the most part Leave voters have more socially conservative views than Remain supporters on traditional values and law and order. It has been suggested that the Brexit divide might be rekindled if the parties take divergent stances on so-called ‘culture war’ issues, which also divide socially conservative Leavers and socially liberal Remainers.

There does appear to be the potential for ‘culture war’ issues to maintain the Brexit divide in British politics

Two prominent ‘culture war’ issues concern personal and national identity. First, how much should society do to recognise the culture, identity, and weaker economic position of some minority groups who are argued to face disadvantage because of their personal characteristics. Second, should Britain apologise for or take pride in its past, and especially its history as an empire?

In our work on attitudes towards ‘culture war’ issues, we find that both Leave supporters and social conservatives are less inclined than Remain supporters and social liberals to recognise and accommodate the position of minority groups and are more inclined to express pride in Britain. To that extent, there does appear to be the potential for ‘culture war’ issues to maintain the Brexit divide in British politics.

However, the popularity of such stances has diminished in recent years, such that what

was once often a widespread (more socially conservative) point of view is now more of a minority outlook – a cultural change with which perhaps some social conservatives are uncomfortable.

Since 2011, BSA has asked whether immigration has been positive or negative. In 2011, the largest group (42%) viewed immigration as having a bad impact economically, with 21% saying it had a good impact, and 36% expressing a neutral view. In 2021, the positions had sharply reversed, with only 20% saying immigration was bad economically, 50% saying it was good, and 30% expressing a neutral view. This switch in views, which accelerated after 2016, can be seen across all occupational classes, though professionals continue to have the most favourable view.

Opinions on gender recognition have also changed in recent years, as the issue has become more intensely debated. In 2016, 58% of people agreed that transgender people should be able to change the sex on their birth certificate; in 2021, 32% of people agreed that transgender people should be able to change the sex recorded on their birth certificate (note slight change in question wording).

The public are more committed in principle to equal opportunities for disabled people than for some other minority groups

Among the minority groups covered are Black and Asian people and those who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual. The chapter looked, in particular, at whether attempts to give them equal opportunities have gone too far or not far enough.

The report also contains a chapter that examines attitudes towards equal opportunities for disabled people in the workplace. It shows that while the public are even more committed in principle to equal opportunities for disabled people than they are for some other minority groups, they are not always happy with the idea that they themselves might have to work with a disabled person, especially someone with a mental health condition. Support for equal opportunities in principle may not necessarily be realised in practice.

Key findings: Culture wars

- Only 17% say it is very important for being truly British to be born in Britain, down from 48% in 1995
- 45% say that equal opportunities for Black and Asian people have not gone far enough, up from 25% in 2000
- Twice as many Leavers (66%) as Remainers (31%) consider themselves to be very strongly British
- 49% think attempts to give people with physical impairments an equal chance in the workplace have not gone far enough
- 55% would be comfortable having someone with depression as a colleague and 39% would be happy having a colleague with schizophrenia. In contrast, 71% would be comfortable having someone with a mobility impairment as a colleague
- Whereas 72% would be happy having someone with a mobility impairment as their boss, only 46% would be happy having someone with depression as their boss



Addressing climate change

Beyond more immediate challenges, the new administration – along with the rest of the world – faces the threat of climate change caused by the increase in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere as a result, inter alia, of the burning of fossil fuels. In November 2021, the United Kingdom hosted the international conference on climate change, COP 26. However, now the new government is having to deal with the sharp rise in the price of (and potentially a threat to supplies of) fossil fuels in the wake of the post-COVID recovery and the Ukraine war.

Our research on the environment, based on data collected before these latest developments, reveals that public concern about climate change is markedly more widespread than it was a

decade ago, and that most people accept that it has been primarily occasioned by human activity. However, even at the time of the survey, willingness to pay more in prices or taxes in order to protect the environment was no higher than it was in the 1980s.

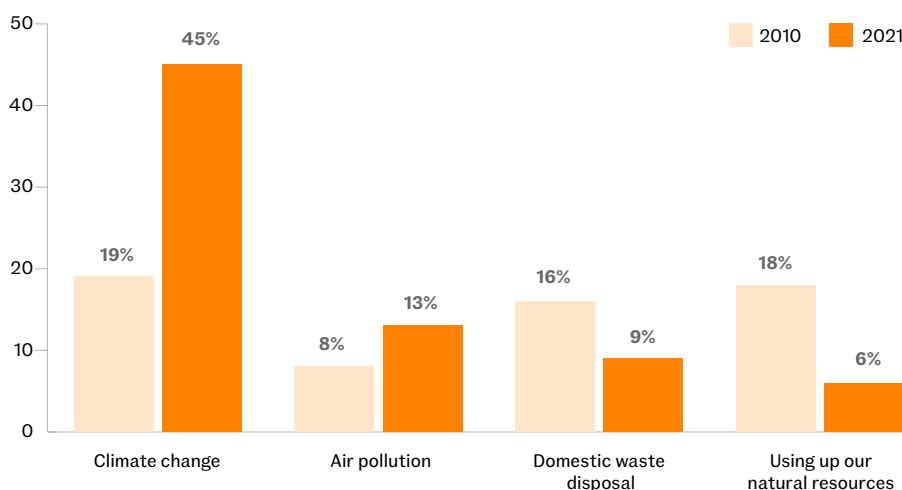
Public concern about climate change is markedly more widespread than it was a decade ago

Meanwhile, in what may well be a guide to how opinion might be affected by the 'cost of living crisis', willingness to do so fell sharply shortly after the financial crash of 2008-9. Future surveys will establish whether this pattern is repeated, as voters face higher fuel bills.

Key findings: Environment

- 40% are very concerned about the environment, almost double the proportion who reported this in 2010 (22%)
- The proportion who considers the environment to be one of the two most important issues facing Britain increased from 8% in 2010 to 21% now
- 45% view climate change as the most important environmental issue, up from 19% in 2010
- 64% see a rise in the world's temperature caused by climate change as extremely or very dangerous – comparable to the proportions that see air pollution caused by industry (62%) or pollution of Britain's rivers, lakes and streams (62%) as dangerous
- 57% say they are willing to pay for the environment either through higher prices, higher taxes, or by a change in their standard of living, while 18% are unwilling to pay in any of these ways

Most important environmental problem for Britain, 2010-2021



Across this year's BSA report, our research certainly suggests why Britain might appear divided, buffeted, and 'broken'.

The perception that Britain is an unequal country has long been widespread but is now noticeably higher than it was before the pandemic. The health service is widely thought not to be providing the timely service that people need and expect. Support for leaving the UK has grown in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and how Britain should be governed has become much more of a divisive issue. While England outside of London seems less divided in its attitudes towards inequality and

welfare, a new attitudinal gap on attitudes to welfare and social issues has opened up between the capital and the rest of the country. The sometimes sharp divisions over 'culture war' issues could potentially become part of our politics, thereby helping to perpetuate the Brexit divide. Meanwhile the public are worried about climate change – but may, perhaps, in current circumstances, be less willing to take the action needed to combat it.

Nobody ever said being in government was easy – but our research highlights some pressing and formidable challenges in bringing Britain together.



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BRITISH SOCIAL ATTITUDES 39

The 39th British Social Attitudes report is published by the National Centre for Social Research. It comprises eight chapters covering:

- **Taxation, welfare and inequality:** The shape of post-COVID public attitudes
- **Constitutional reform:** Controversy or Consensus on how the UK should be governed?
- **Culture Wars:** Keeping the Brexit divide alive?
- **Regional differences in values in England:** North vs South or London vs the rest?
- **Environment:** Has climate change become our main concern?
- **Disabled people at work:** Accepted as equals?
- **NHS and social care:** What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on satisfaction with the NHS and social care?
- **The NHS in Scotland and England:** Attitudes towards health and health care in Scotland and England during COVID-19

The full report, along with the Technical Details outlining our method of survey and analysis, can be downloaded and read at bsa.natcen.ac.uk