

British Social Attitudes 43: A first look

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Introduction

The British Social Attitudes survey is a high-quality survey that has been conducted by the National Centre for Social Research annually since 1983. One of its key aims is to identify and analyse how and why social and political attitudes are evolving in Britain in the wake of social, economic and political change.

This British Social Attitudes (BSA) First Look is an initial early release and examination of some of the key findings of the most recent survey conducted in September and October 2025. It focuses on some of the major policy issues and debates that currently face the country: taxation and spending, welfare, immigration, electoral reform, and assisted dying.

Thanks to the more than 40-year legacy of BSA surveys, on each of these topics we have a long-running time series that sometimes stretches as far back as the first survey in 1983. This enables us to place current public attitudes in historical context, and to identify whether and to what extent the current public mood is distinct and unique - or whether it simply contains familiar echoes of the past.

Methodology

Fieldwork for the British Social Attitudes survey took place between 26 August and 6 October 2025. BSA was conducted using a push-to-web design, with a telephone option for those either unwilling or unable to take part online. Addresses from across the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland were randomly sampled from the Postcode Address File (PAF). At each selected address up to two adults aged 16 and over were invited to take part in the survey. In total, 4,680 fully completed interviews were obtained, with an individual response rate of 11.6% and a household response rate of 15.9%.

BSA was conducted using face-to-face interviewing between 1983 and 2019, and shifted to the current push-to-web design from 2020 onwards.

Taxation and spending

The 2019-24 parliament witnessed a notable expansion in the size of the state.^[1] Nevertheless, public services, including most notably the health service, have been struggling to recover from the pandemic.^{[2] [3] [4]} At the same time, the government is fiscally constrained; public sector net debt rose from 85% at the end of 2019 to 96% in June 2024, the highest level since the early 1960s.^[5]

Despite these pressures, at the 2024 election Labour pledged not to increase the rates of income tax, employee national insurance, or VAT.^[6] Although the government has not pulled back on these promises, it has sought to fund extra spending, including not least on health, by freezing income tax thresholds^[7] and increasing employers' national insurance^[8]. At the same time, it has endeavoured to constrain a rise in spending on welfare for those of working age who are not in employment because of disability or poor mental health.^[9]^[10] Meanwhile, the pressure on the government's fiscal position has been exacerbated by a deterioration in the geostrategic environment, which, after many years of relatively low expenditure, has led to calls for increased defence spending.

Public attitudes towards taxation and spending are sometimes said to behave in a 'thermostatic'^[11] manner. According to this theory, people have a sense both of how much tax they feel they should have to pay and of what public services they should receive as a result. When taxes and spending fall, people become concerned about the state of public services and start to seek increases in taxation and spending. However, when taxes and spending rise significantly, as they have since the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing number of people start to feel that levels are too high and instead seek a reduction in their tax burden.

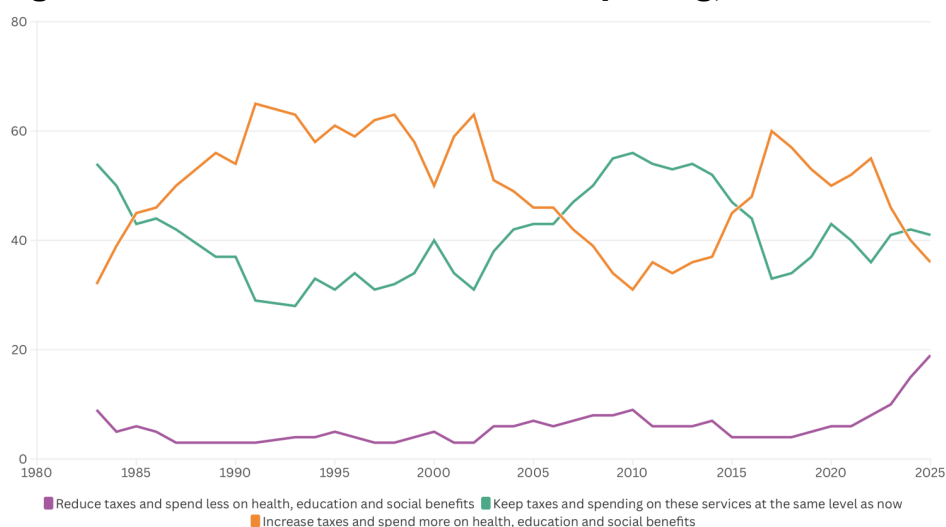
BSA has asked the following question in every one of its annual surveys since the series began in 1983:

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

1. ***Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits***
2. ***Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now***
3. ***Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits***

Figure 1 shows how the pattern of responses has evolved since 1983. In line with ‘thermostatic theory’, the public reacted to the constraints on public expenditure imposed by the Conservative governments of 1979-97 by becoming increasingly supportive of more taxation and spending. However, public opinion swung back in the opposite direction in the wake of the increase in public expenditure undertaken by the 1997-2010 Labour government – only eventually to swing back again in the years running up to the COVID-19 pandemic after the then Conservative government had pursued a programme of ‘austerity’ in the wake of the financial crash in 2008.

Figure 1 Attitudes towards taxation and spending, 1983 – 2025



Although the public did not react immediately against the expansion of the state in the wake of the pandemic, there is now clear evidence that it has done so. In our latest survey, just 36% say the government should increase taxes and spend more, down four points on 2024, and 19 points below the figure recorded in the 2022 survey. Not since 2013 has the proportion wanting more taxes and spending been so low. But even more strikingly, an all-time high of

19% now say that taxes and spending should be reduced, up four points on 2024, and more than double the proportion in 2022 (8%). Indeed, until the last three years, the proportion saying that taxes and spending should be reduced had never even been as high as 10%.

This suggests that not only has the public reacted thermostatically to the increase in taxation and spending in a similar vein as before, but also that attitudes have become more polarised. Indeed, they vary much more by party preference than was the case when there was previously a thermostatic reaction. This can be seen in Table 1, which shows how attitudes vary by party support for each of 2010 (when support for more taxation and spending was previously at its lowest), in 2022 (at the end of the pandemic, just before the thermostatic reaction began to emerge), and in our latest survey.

Table 1 Attitudes towards taxation and spending by party support, 2010, 2022, and 2025

	2010		2022		2025	
	Con/Ukip/Reform	Lab/Lib Dem/Green	Con/Ukip/Reform	Lab/Lib Dem/Green	Con/UKIP/Reform	Lab/Lib Dem/Green
Reduce	10	7	10	5	29	10
Keep the same	61	54	47	26	47	36
Increase	24	36	43	69	21	52
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>1020</i>	<i>1480</i>	<i>676</i>	<i>885</i>	<i>1479</i>	<i>1971</i>

The figure for Conservative/UKIP/Reform in 2010 includes a small number of respondents who at that time were identifying as supporters of the British National Party (BNP).

Collectively, those who support the Conservatives or UKIP/Reform have always been somewhat less likely to support an increase in taxation and spending. But in 2010, when there was also relatively little appetite for more spending among the public as a whole, there was only a twelve-point

difference between the two blocks of supporters in their level of support for that option. Now, in contrast, there is a 31-point gap between them. Just over half (52%) of Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Green supporters favour an increase in spending, compared with little more than one in five (21%) of those who identify with the Conservatives or Reform.

True, the difference between the two groups in their level of support for more spending was already wider in 2022. However, what our latest survey reveals is that there is now a marked difference between them in the level of support for reducing taxes and spending. Nearly three in ten (29%) of Conservative and Reform supporters back that option, compared with just one in ten (10%) of Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Green supporters. Although the debate about the size of the state has always been something of a dividing line in Britain's politics, it has now become a significant fault line.

Welfare

As noted above, the Labour government has attempted to reduce spending on welfare for those of working age. It has focused in particular on two groups that have grown significantly in size – younger people who are not working because of mental health difficulties, and older people who have exited the labour market before retirement age because of long-term sickness or disability.^{[12] [13]} The government's proposals for addressing the issue have proven controversial, and indeed those in respect of disability were withdrawn in the wake of opposition from Labour MPs. Meanwhile, both the Conservatives and Reform have called for reductions in spending on welfare, not least by limiting further the rights of migrants to claim benefit.

Previous BSA surveys have identified important changes in attitudes towards welfare. This is illustrated by how people have responded when, since 1987, the British Social Attitudes survey has regularly asked respondents whether they agree or disagree that:

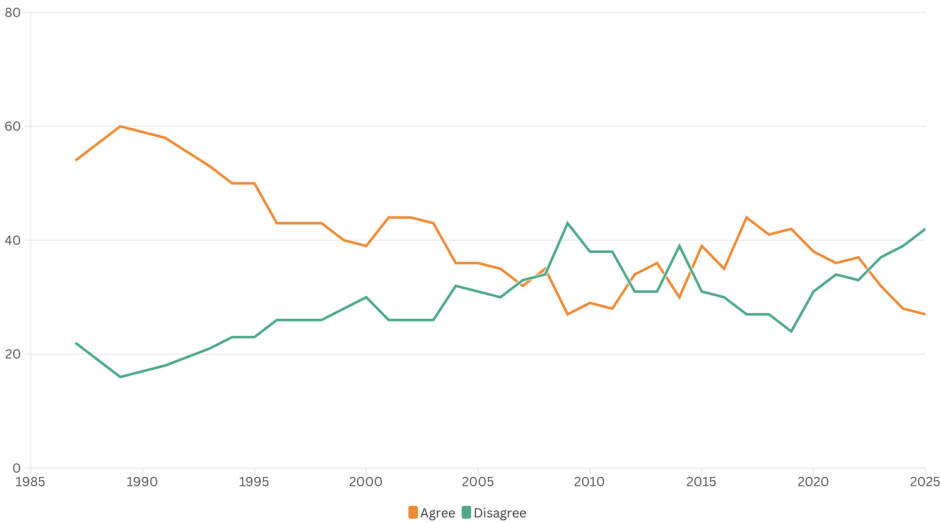
The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes.

As Figure 2 shows, support for spending more money on welfare began to fall notably at around the time New Labour came to power in 1997, when the party advocated a policy of 'welfare to work' that aimed to use the welfare system to get people back into work rather than living on long-term benefits.^{[14] [15]}

By 2009, following in the immediate wake of the financial crash, only just over a quarter (27%) agreed that the government should spend more money on welfare, half the proportion in 1987. More people now disagreed than agreed with the proposition.

However, after the Conservative government that was first elected in 2010 reduced the real value of welfare benefits, public opinion began to swing back again.^{[16] [17] [18]} By 2017, 44% agreed that welfare spending should be increased and support still stood at much the same level (42%) immediately before the pandemic.

Figure 2 ‘The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes’ (1987–2025)



The mood has now changed once again. Following falls in our 2023 and 2024 surveys, the proportion who agree that the government should spend more on welfare has dropped further in our latest survey to equal the all-time low of 27% previously recorded in 2009. Meanwhile, at 42%, the proportion who disagree is only one point below the record high of 43% in 2009. The calls of politicians from across the political divide for a reduction in welfare spending reflects what, by historical standards, is an especially high level of concern about the size of the country’s welfare bill.

Yet for all the focus in the recent policy debate on reducing benefits for people of working age, it is spending on retirement pensions that above all has become relatively less popular in recent years. This is apparent in Table 2, which shows how people have responded since 1983 when asked:

Thinking now only of the government’s spending on social benefits, which, if any of the following would be your highest priority for extra spending?

1. ***Retirement pensions***
2. ***Child benefit***

3. ***Benefits for the unemployed***

4. ***Benefits for disabled people***

5. ***Benefits for single parents***

6. ***None of these***

Twenty years ago, as many as 61% said that retirement pensions were their highest priority for more spending on benefits. But by 2018 that figure had almost halved to just 32% and is still no more than 34% in our latest survey. Although spending on pensions is still relatively popular, it is now barely any more popular than spending on benefits for people with a disability (30%), even though the latter has been the focus of some of the recent calls for a reduction. The reduction in the popularity in more spending on pensions perhaps reflects an awareness that the benefits system has been relatively generous to a group whose living standards have commonly fared better than those of most people over the last couple of decades.^[19]

Table 2 Highest Priority for More Spending on Benefits, 1983 to 2025

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Retirement pensions	41	43	41	40	47	43	42	41	42	41	46	50
Child benefit	8	9	10	11	9	14	17	17	14	17	13	12
Benefits for the unemployed	18	18	16	16	15	11	8	10	16	12	10	11
Benefits for disabled people	24	21	26	25	21	26	24	24	20	24	23	19
Benefits for single parents	8	7	6	7	6	5	7	7	7	5	6	6
None of these	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1761</i>	<i>1675</i>	<i>1804</i>	<i>3100</i>	<i>2847</i>	<i>3029</i>	<i>2797</i>	<i>2918</i>	<i>2945</i>	<i>1167</i>	<i>1234</i>	<i>3620</i>
	2000	2001	2003	2005	2007	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2025
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Retirement pensions	52	54	59	61	56	51	47	44	36	32	38	34
Child benefit	14	15	15	15	16	18	15	16	14	16	19	20
Benefits for the unemployed	4	4	3	2	2	4	5	5	5	7	13	3
Benefits for disabled people	21	19	16	14	18	19	24	27	35	33	21	30
Benefits for single parents	7	7	5	6	6	5	6	7	6	8	6	9
None of these	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	3	3	1	1

<i>Unweighted base</i>	3426	3287	3272	3193	3094	3297	3248	2878	2942	2884	3964	3102
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At the same time, at 20% and 9% respectively, the proportions who say that their highest priority for more spending is child benefit or single parents are both also at a record high. In combination, spending more on these two benefits is now also almost as popular as extra money for retirement pensions. While, with the pandemic now long since over, there is once again little support for more spending on benefits for the unemployed, it seems that the focus by both the government and the opposition on reducing working age welfare to the exclusion of any discussion about spending on pensions may not fully reflect how public opinion has evolved in recent years.

Immigration

The UK has experienced relatively high levels of migration during the 21st century. Concern about the issue was a key motivation behind the choice made by Leave voters in the 2016 EU referendum.^[20] Meanwhile, despite leaving the EU in 2020, net inward migration reached an unprecedented high in 2022/3, and more broadly has not consistently fallen below the level being experienced before the 2016 referendum.^[21] At the same time, a record number of asylum seekers have sought entry into the UK via irregular routes such as small-boat crossings.^[22]

Opinion polling suggests that concern among the UK public about immigration has increased in the wake of these developments. The topic has become the most commonly mentioned when people are asked which are the most important issues facing the country, a result that is widely interpreted as evidence that people would prefer lower levels of immigration.^[23] ^[24] But does this mean that concern about the impact of immigration has reached an unprecedented high?

Since 2011, BSA has regularly asked two questions about the impact of migration into Britain. One asks them to consider the effect that it has on the economy and the other its impact on Britain's cultural life:

On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is extremely bad and 10 is extremely good, would you say it is generally bad or good for Britain's economy that migrants come to Britain from other countries?

And on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is undermined and 10 is enriched, would you say that Britain's cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by migrants coming to live here from other countries?

Those who give a score of between 0 and 3 can be regarded as feeling that migration is bad for the economy and that it undermines Britain's cultural life. In contrast, those who proffer a score between 7 and 10 can be regarded as taking the view that migration is good for the economy and that it enriches the country's cultural life. Those with a score of between 4 and 6 can be

thought of as having views in between. In Table 3, we show the pattern of response to the two questions from 2011 to 2025 after people's scores have been collapsed in this way.

Table 3 Perceptions of the impacts of immigration: 2011 – 2025

	2011	2013	2015	2017	2018	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Bad or good for the economy	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Bad 0 – 3	42	39	28	17	16	14	20	17	28	32	33
Neither 4 - 6	36	38	38	35	36	38	30	31	33	32	33
Good 7 - 10	21	21	34	47	47	47	50	50	39	35	32
Difference:	-21	-18	+6	+31	+31	+33	+30	+34	+11	+3	-1
Good v Bad											
Cultural life undermined or enriched	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Undermined 0 - 3	40	38	33	23	18	18	21	16	25	31	34
Neither 4 - 6	33	34	35	32	36	35	30	32	36	31	33
Enriched 7 - 10	26	27	31	44	45	45	48	50	38	37	32
Difference: Enriched v Undermined	-14	-11	-2	+20	+27	+27	+27	+34	+13	+6	-2
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3311	3244	2167	1025	958	3224	3112	2258	1217	1020	1601

The public have clearly become more sceptical about the impact of migrants in the wake of the recent record levels of regular and irregular migration. In 2022, as many as 50% thought migrants were good for Britain's economy, while the same proportion felt they enriched the country's cultural life. But after falling markedly in 2023 and then somewhat further in 2024, in both

cases, the equivalent figure now is just 32%. Indeed, slightly more people now believe that migrants are bad for the economy than feel they are beneficial, while the balance of opinion is now also tilted slightly towards the view that migrants undermine rather than enrich Britain's cultural life.

However, this does not mean that concern about the impact of migration is now especially widespread. As Table 3 also shows, in 2011 only 21% thought that migrants were good for the economy, while twice as many (42%) believed they were bad. Similarly, just 26% believed that migrants enriched the country's cultural life, while as many as 40% were of the opposite view.

One of the ironies of the debate about immigration during the EU referendum campaign was that it occurred at a time when the balance of opinion about the impact of migration was already seemingly becoming more favourable. In any event, the vote to Leave the EU was certainly followed by consistently more favourable perceptions. Thus, although more recent experience of high levels of migration has been accompanied by a reversal of this relatively favourable mood, people's perceptions of the impact of migration are still noticeably less unfavourable than they were a decade and a half ago.

That said, attitudes towards migration are now politically much more polarised than they were in 2011. This is shown in Table 4, which, for each of 2011, 2022, and 2025, compares the balance of opinion on the economic and cultural impact of migration among those who support one of the Conservatives, Reform, or the UK Independence Party (Ukip) with that among Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Green identifiers combined.

Table 4 Perceptions of impact of migrants by party support 2011, 2022 and 2025

	Economy		Culture		
	% bad/ % good	% bad/ % good	% undermined/ % enriched	% undermined/ % enriched	<i>Unweighted bases</i>
	Con/Ukip/Reform	Lab/Lib Dem/Green	Con/Ukip/Reform	Lab/Lib Dem/Green	
2011	46-14	34-30	48-19	30-25	<i>CON/UKIP/REF: 1003; LAB/LIB DEM/GRN: 1345</i>
2022	27-32	8-67	28-29	8-68	<i>CON/UKIP/REF: 687; LAB/LIB DEM/GRN: 1136</i>
2025	57-13	13-53	61-9	14-53	<i>CON/UKIP/REF: 503; LAB/LIB DEM/GRN: 689</i>

The figure for Conservative/UKIP/Reform in 2011 includes a small number of respondents who at that time were identifying as supporters of the British National Party (BNP). Those who identified as Green were not separately coded in 2011.

The table shows that while Conservative and Reform supporters are heavily of the view that migration is bad for the economy and undermines the country's cultural life, over half of Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Green identifiers take the opposite view. In contrast, while in 2011 nearly half of Conservative and UKIP supporters took a negative view of the economic and cultural impact of migrants, so also did around a third of Labour and Liberal Democrat identifiers. And while in 2022, around two-thirds of Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green supporters took a positive view of the impact of migration, Conservative and Reform supporters were divided in their outlook rather than taking a predominantly negative view, as they do in our latest survey. Immigration has evidently become a much more politically contentious issue in Britain's politics.

Electoral reform

The 2024 general election produced the most disproportional outcome in British electoral history.^[25] The Labour Party won 63% of the seats despite winning just 34% of the vote across the UK as a whole. Although the Liberal Democrats' tally of 12% was almost translated into the same proportion (11%) of the seats, Reform, on 14%, were rewarded with just 1% of MPs. Both the Conservatives and the Greens lost out too. Inevitably, these divergences, together with the further fragmentation of party support in opinion polls since the 2024 election, has breathed new life into the debate about electoral reform.

Parties that benefit from an electoral system tend to favour its retention, while those that lose out often back change. Historically the most successful party in Britain, the Conservatives, have consistently been opposed to change. The other principal party of government, Labour, has mostly taken the same view. In contrast, as the third party that has often struggled to turn votes into seats, the Liberal Democrats (and before them, the Liberal Party) have long been in favour of a switch to a proportional system. However, perhaps the outcome of the 2024 election, together with the rise of Reform in subsequent opinion polls, has persuaded some parties' supporters to re-evaluate their attitude towards electoral reform?

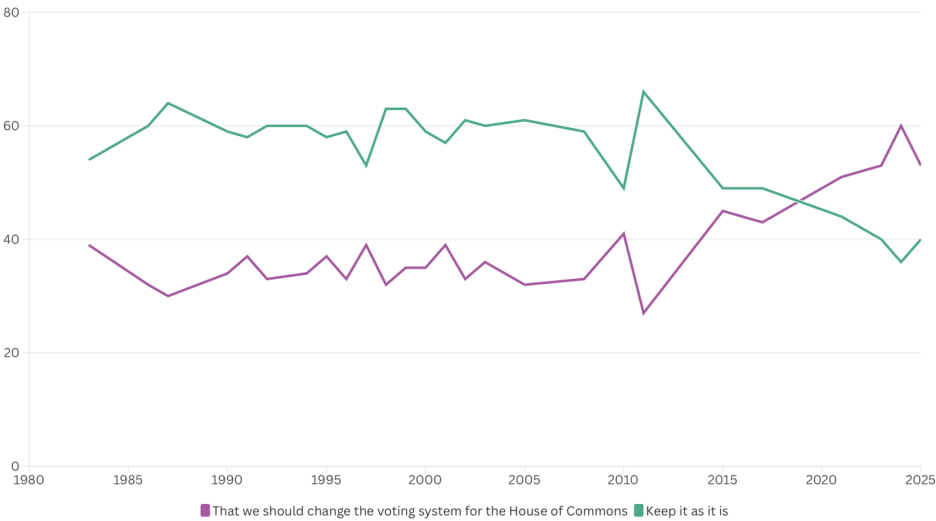
To gauge attitudes towards the topic, British Social Attitudes has regularly asked respondents the following question:

“Some people say we should change the voting system for general elections to the UK House of Commons to allow smaller political parties to get a fairer share of MPs. Others say that we should keep the voting system for the House of Commons as it is to produce effective government. Which view comes closer to your own?”

As Figure 3 shows, up to and including 2017 the level of support for keeping the existing first-past-the-post system was never much less than 50%, while, until 2015 at least, backing for a switch to a more proportional system hardly

ever exceeded 40%. Asked about in this way at least, electoral reform never looked like a popular cause. And as we would anticipate, although Liberal Democrat identifiers were on balance usually in favour of change, Conservative and Labour supporters consistently took the opposite view.

Figure 3 Attitudes towards the electoral system for the House of Commons, 1986 – 2025



Source: BSA: Except 1983 and 1992: British Election Study

However, the balance of opinion changed during the 2019-24 parliament. Our survey in 2021 found for the first time that more people (51%) were in favour of changing the electoral system than backed keeping the current arrangements (44%).^[26] The change in public attitudes was confirmed by the 2023 survey, which reported that 53% wanted to change the system while only 40% backed keeping first-past-the-post. Although Conservative supporters were still heavily in favour of keeping the current system, Labour identifiers had now joined Liberal Democrat and Reform supporters in favouring change.^[27] Their change of mind perhaps reflected the fact that, after four defeats in a row, it now appeared difficult for Labour to win an overall majority under the existing first-past-the-post system.^[28]

The very disproportional outcome of the 2024 election was followed by a further increase in support for a change in the electoral system.^[29] Now, as many as three in five (60%) were in favour of change, while only 36% backed

the continuation of the current system. Crucially, following their party’s heaviest ever defeat, for the first time slightly more Conservative supporters backed (52%) rather than opposed (48%) a change. Yet despite having done much better out of the system at the election, a majority of Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters were still in favour of reform, albeit the proportions were somewhat lower than in 2023.

Table 5 Views on electoral reform by party ID (2023-2025)

	Reform	Conservative	Liberal Democrat	Labour	Green
‘We should change the voting system for the House of Commons’	%	%	%	%	%
2023	63	24	71	60	81
2024	79	52	55	55	90
2025	61	44	60	50	76
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>2023: 54; 2024: 115; 2025: 147</i>	<i>2023: 265; 2024: 211; 2025: 143</i>	<i>2023: 97; 2024: 96; 2025: 79</i>	<i>2023: 459; 2024: 301; 2025: 283</i>	<i>2023: 74; 2024: 91; 2025: 85</i>

Our latest survey shows that support for changing the electoral system has fallen somewhat during the year since the election. It now stands at 53%, down seven points on our reading shortly after the 2024 contest. As shown in Table 3, the sharpest decline – from 79% to 61% – has occurred among Reform supporters, some of whom may have been aware of opinion poll projections that, now it was ahead in the polls, their party might profit from first-past-the-post. Meanwhile, despite witnessing sharp falls in their party’s support in the polls, both Conservative and Labour supporters are now a little less keen too. However, at 44% the level of support for change among Conservatives is still 20 points above what it was in 2023, while still as many as a half (50%) of Labour supporters back change.

Much of the changed pattern of attitudes towards electoral reform that emerged during the 2019-24 parliament and in the wake of the 2024 election still seems to be present.

Assisted dying

Since the 2024 election there has been intensive debate about assisted dying in the wake of two attempts to make it legal in certain circumstances for a doctor to help someone end their own life.

At Westminster, a private members' bill that would amend the law in England & Wales was introduced in the Commons in October 2024 by Kim Leadbeater MP.^[30] It provides for a doctor to help someone who is terminally ill and not expected to have more than six months to live to end their own life. Passed by the House of Commons in June 2025, it is currently being debated in the House of Lords, but it is currently looking doubtful that the Lords will end its consideration of the bill before the conclusion of the current parliamentary session in May. If it does not the bill will die.

North of the border, a separate private members' bill that addresses the law in Scotland was introduced at Holyrood in March 2024 by Liam MacArthur MSP.^[31] It makes provision for a doctor to help someone who has an 'advanced and progressive disease, illness or condition from which they are unable to recover and that can reasonably be expected to cause their premature death' to take their own life. The bill has now reached the final stage of the legislative process, and this is expected to take place later in February, shortly before the parliament is dissolved for the Scottish Parliament election in May.

Since 1995, British Social Attitudes has asked the following two questions on a number of occasions, including both in 2024,^[32] when the Westminster bill was first introduced, and in our most recent survey. This enables us to assess whether the considerable debate and controversy occasioned by the proposed legislation has changed public attitudes at all. The two questions were also included on the 2025 Scottish Social Attitudes survey, which was conducted alongside the most recent Britain-wide survey, enabling us to look separately at attitudes in Scotland in particular. They are:

“First, a person with an incurable and painful illness, from which they are likely to die in the next few weeks or months – for example someone dying

of cancer. Do you think that, if they ask for it, a doctor should ever be allowed by law to end their life, or not?"

"Next, a person with an incurable and painful illness, from which they will not die. Do you think that, if they ask for it, a doctor should ever be allowed by law to end their life, or not?"

The proposition in the first of these questions is relatively close to the provisions of the two bills, although the wording might be thought to include the possibility that a doctor could administer a fatal dose to someone who wishes to die, a possibility for which neither bill provides. In both cases they only permit giving someone a fatal dose to administer for themselves. The second question covers the possibility of allowing assisted dying when someone is not terminally ill, a possibility that goes beyond the provisions of the two bills. However, it enables us to assess whether the line that has been drawn by the two bills is consistent with the contours of public opinion.

Table 6 presents results for the first question where the person is expected to die within a few months. It shows that, during the last three decades, consistently around three in five have been in favour of allowing assisted dying in these circumstances (though rather more now say that assisted dying should 'probably' be allowed rather than state that it 'definitely' should).^[33]

Moreover, the debate since the introduction of the Westminster bill has not had any detectable impact on the balance of public opinion. At 79%, the proportion who in our latest survey say it either 'definitely' or 'probably' should be allowed is exactly the same as last year.

Table 6 Attitudes towards assisted dying for a person with an incurable and painful illness who will die within the next few months: 1995 - 2025

	1995	2005	2016	2024	2025
	%	%	%	%	%
Definitely should be allowed	56	51	50	47	46
Probably should be allowed	24	30	29	32	33
Probably should not be allowed	5	6	8	8	6
Definitely should not be allowed	12	10	12	9	9
Don't know	1	2	1	2	2
Prefer not to answer	1	0	0	3	3
TOTAL: SHOULD be allowed	80	82	78	79	79
TOTAL: Should NOT be allowed	17	16	20	17	16
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1234</i>	<i>2113</i>	<i>1928</i>	<i>1039</i>	<i>1045</i>

Table 7 shows that fewer people are in favour of allowing assisted dying when someone has ‘an incurable and painful illness’ that, however, is not terminal. Nevertheless, support has increased from around two in five (41%) in 1995, to three in five now (62%). Although the latest figure is a little higher than in 2024 (58%), again it appears that the debate engendered by the bills has not had a significant impact on public opinion. Meanwhile, it seems that, nowadays at least, a majority of the public might welcome a bigger change in the law than either of the two bills envisages.

Table 7 Attitudes towards assisted dying for a person with an incurable and painful illness who will not die: 1995 - 2025

	1995	2005	2016	2024	2025
	%	%	%	%	%
Definitely should be allowed	17	18	20	25	29
Probably should be allowed	24	28	30	33	33
Probably should not be allowed	18	21	22	21	19
Definitely should not be allowed	35	30	25	17	14
TOTAL: SHOULD be allowed	41	46	51	58	62
TOTAL: Should NOT be allowed	54	50	47	38	33
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1234</i>	<i>1068</i>	<i>1928</i>	<i>1039</i>	<i>1045</i>

The position is much the same in Scotland (see Table 8). Here too around four in five (81%) are in favour of assisted dying for someone with a terminal illness, while three in five (62%) say a doctor should be able to help someone to end their life if they have an incurable and painful illness that is not terminal.^[34]

So far as the pattern of public opinion is concerned, there does not seem to be any reason for the law to be markedly different on the two sides of the Anglo-Scottish border.

Table 8 Attitudes in Scotland towards assisted dying for a person with an incurable and painful illness, 2025

	Terminal	Not-terminal
	%	%
Definitely should be allowed	53	27
Probably should be allowed	28	35
Probably should not be allowed	6	18
Definitely should not be allowed	8	15
TOTAL: SHOULD be allowed	81	62
TOTAL: Should NOT be allowed	14	33
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1494</i>	<i>1494</i>

Previously when the UK Parliament has passed significant social legislation, it has done so despite a seemingly adverse public mood. Two such examples are the abolition of the death penalty for murder in 1965 and the legalisation of same-sex relationships between men in 1967.^{[35] [36]} In the case of assisted dying, however, the public have seemingly long been supportive of a change in the law, an outlook that the debate during the last twelve months has done little to disturb.

Conclusions

Our initial findings from the 2025 BSA survey show how the public have responded to some of the recent challenges faced by policy makers. People have reacted against the increase in the size of the state in the wake of the expansion engendered by the pandemic. They have become less supportive of spending on welfare in the wake of increasing expenditure occasioned by ill-health, disability and an ageing population. Meanwhile, record levels of net inward migration have been accompanied by a reversal of a once favourable perception of the impact of migration.

However, not everyone has changed their mind. Rather, we are now looking at a public that looks more divided on these subjects than hitherto. For the first time since BSA began in 1983, a significant proportion of people now endorse a reduction in taxes and spending rather than just look for increases to stop. The public are now evenly divided between those who think migrants are economically and culturally beneficial and those who believe they have a negative impact. Meanwhile, support for reducing welfare spending is still far from universal, while there now seems to be more disagreement than hitherto about who should benefit from the money that is spent.

This division alone does not make addressing these problems in a way that might satisfy public opinion any easier. But at the same time, at least, it seems that opinion has become more politically polarised, both on tax and spend and about immigration. On both issues, those who support the Conservatives and Reform have drawn far apart from those backing Labour, the Liberal Democrats or the Green Party. On both subjects, there are two groups of voters with significantly different expectations and perceptions.

Given this polarisation and division – and the fact that the country's traditional system of two-party politics seems to be facing its strongest ever challenge since 1945 – it is perhaps not surprising that there is now doubt about the suitability of the country's constitutional arrangements. Certainly, support for the first-past-the-post electoral system that has long underpinned that two-party system continues to be well below what, until a decade or so ago, was the norm. And strikingly, this is an outlook that is now

widely shared across the political divide, though, as yet at least, is not the subject of widespread discussion among politicians at Westminster.

What has received a lot of parliamentary attention – both at Westminster and Holyrood – is the issue of assisted dying. In both instances parliamentarians have been left by government to make their own decision. Yet the ensuing debate has seemingly made little impression on a public that largely seems to have made its mind up in favour of change a long time ago. In contrast to the issues with which the government and parties have been preoccupied, the picture here is one of remarkable stability and near consensus in public attitudes. But that does not necessarily mean it will be any easier for politicians to catch the public mood as they struggle with their conscience on a matter, literally, of life and death.

Appendix

Table 1 Attitudes to taxation and spending, 1983-2025

	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	Don't know	Prefer not to answer	<i>Unweighted bases</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	<i>N</i>
1983	9	54	32	-	0	1761
1984	5	50	39	4	0	1675
1985	6	43	45	3	0	1804
1986	5	44	46	2	0	3100
1987	3	42	50	2	0	2847
1989	3	37	56	2	0	3029
1990	3	37	54	2	0	2797
1991	3	29	65	2	0	2918
1993	4	28	63	2	0	2945
1994	4	33	58	1	-	3469
1995	5	31	61	1	-	3633
1996	4	34	59	1	0	3620
1997	3	31	62	1	0	1355
1998	3	32	63	1	0	3146
1999	4	34	58	1	0	3143
2000	5	40	50	1	-	2292
2001	3	34	59	1	-	3287

2002	3	31	63	1	0	<i>3435</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2003	6	38	51	1	0	<i>3272</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2004	6	42	49	1	-	<i>2146</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2005	7	43	46	1	-	<i>2166</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2006	6	43	46	1	0	<i>3240</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2007	7	47	42	1	-	<i>3094</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2008	8	50	39	1	-	<i>2229</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2009	8	55	34	1	-	<i>1139</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2010	9	56	31	1	0	<i>3297</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2011	6	54	36	1	-	<i>3311</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2012	6	53	34	1	-	<i>3248</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2013	6	54	36	1	0	<i>3244</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2014	7	52	37	1	0	<i>2878</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2015	4	47	45	1	-	<i>3266</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2016	4	44	48	1	-	<i>2942</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2017	4	33	60	1	0	<i>2963</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2018	4	34	57	1	0	<i>2884</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2019	5	37	53	1	0	<i>3224</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2020	6	43	50	1	1	<i>3964</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2021	6	40	52	1	1	<i>2073</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2022	8	36	55	-	-	<i>2400</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
2023	10	41	46	1	0	<i>1103</i>
<hr/>	—	—	—	—	—	<hr/>
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2024	15	42	40	1	1	<i>4120</i>
<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
2025	19	41	36	1	1	<i>4727</i>
<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>

Table 2 The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes, 1987-2025

Year	Agree strongly	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	Don't know	Refused	Unweighted base (N)
1987	16	38	23	19	3		1	1281
1989	18	42	23	14	2	0	1	2604
1991	15	43	23	16	2	0	1	2481
1993	14	39	25	18	3	0	2	2567
1994	10	40	25	21	2	0	2	2929
1995	11	39	25	21	2	0	2	3135
1996	10	33	29	23	3	0	2	3085
1998	7	36	29	23	3		2	2531
1999	6	34	30	25	3		2	2450
2000	7	32	31	27	3		1	2980
2001	7	37	30	23	3		2	2795
2002	7	37	27	23	3	0	2	2900
2003	6	37	29	24	2		2	873
2004	4	32	30	28	4		3	2609
2005	4	32	31	27	4		2	2699
2006	4	31	34	27	3		2	2822
2007	4	28	33	29	4		3	2672
2008	5	30	28	29	5		2	3000
2009	3	24	28	38	5		2	967

2010	4	25	31	32	6		2	2791
2011	4	24	32	33	5		2	2845
2012	6	28	32	26	5		2	2855
2013	6	30	30	26	5		3	2832
2014	5	25	30	33	6		1	2376
2015	6	33	29	27	4		2	2781
2016	6	29	34	26	4		2	2400
2017	8	36	28	23	4		2	3258
2018	7	34	31	24	3		1	3065
2019	8	34	32	21	3		2	2636
2020	9	29	30	24	7	0	0	3964
2021	10	26	29	24	10	1	0	6250
2022	11	26	29	24	9	1	0	6699
2023	8	24	31	27	10	0	0	5578
2024	8	20	32	28	11	1	0	4120
2025	6	21	30	30	12	1	0	4727

Table 3 Attitudes towards the electoral system for the House of Commons, 1983 – 2025

Year	Change the voting system for the House of Commons	Keep it as it is	Unweighted base (N)
1983	39	54	3955
1986	32	60	1548
1987	30	64	1410
1990	34	59	1397
1991	37	58	1445
1992	33	60	3534
1994	34	60	1137
1995	37	58	1227
1996	33	59	1180
1997	39	53	1355
1998	32	63	1035
1999	35	63	1060
2000	35	59	2293
2001	39	57	1099
2002	33	61	2287
2003	36	60	1160
2005	32	61	1075
2008	33	59	1128
2010	41	49	1081

2011	27	66	2215
2015	45	49	2140
2017	43	49	2009
2021	51	44	2073
2023	53	40	1238
2024	60	36	1072
2025	53	40	1013

Footnotes

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- 33.** Opposition to assisted dying for a terminal illness is heavily concentrated among those who attend a religious service at least once a week. In our latest survey, 52% are opposed and only 41% are in favour. This divergence from the majority view has been reflected in the prominence of religious leaders in expressing opposition to a change in the law. In contrast, there is relatively little difference in attitudes by age; 75% of those aged 70 or over say assisted dying should ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ be allowed, while the equivalent figure among those aged less than 35 is 79%. [↑](#)
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