

# Benefits and welfare

## Long-term trends or short-term reactions?

British Social Attitudes has been tracking changing attitudes to the welfare state for over 30 years. This paper examines long-term trends in attitudes to spending on welfare in general and on specific groups of claimants in particular. It also assesses whether and how public opinion has shifted over the more recent period since 2010, when a combination of government policies aimed at reducing welfare spending and the continuing economic impacts of the recession of 2007-8 might have been expected to lead to shorter-term changes in attitudes – either among the public as a whole or among those who identify with particular political parties.

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## Public support for welfare spending has been in long-term decline

The last five years have seen, at most, a very small reversal of the long-term decline in support for welfare spending.

- Support for increasing taxes and spending more on health, education and social benefits fell from 63% in 2002 to 32% by 2010 – and had only increased slightly to 37% by 2014.
  - The level of agreement with spending more on welfare benefits for the poor fell from 61% in 1989 to 27% in 2009, and remained low, at 30% in 2014.
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## Some benefits are more popular than others

When it comes to extra spending on benefits, the public is far more likely to prioritise pensions and benefits for disabled people, and far less likely to prioritise spending on benefits for single parents or unemployed people.

- Sixty seven per cent place spending on pensions first or second in their priorities for extra spending on welfare, followed by 60% who chose benefits for disabled people.
  - In contrast, just 13% said benefits for unemployed people should be one of the top two priorities for additional spending.
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## There is a widening gap between Conservative and Labour supporters

Since 2010, those who identify with the Labour Party have become more supportive of spending more on welfare and more sympathetic to the unemployed, while the views of Conservatives have changed less or not at all.

- In 2014, just 17% of Conservative identifiers agreed with spending more on welfare, compared with 44% of Labour supporters.
  - Seventy one per cent of Conservative identifiers believe that benefits for unemployed people are too high and discourage work, compared with just 38% of those who identify with Labour.
  - In both cases, the gap in attitudes was wider in 2014 than it was in 2010.
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## Introduction

Reform of the welfare state has been a key plank of Conservative policy since the party, with its Liberal Democrat coalition partners, took power in 2010. Their policies – aimed at reducing ‘welfare dependency’ and reversing an alleged ‘tidal wave of worklessness’ (Conservative Party, 2010) – have been associated with widespread controversy. On the one hand, the Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith has claimed that the changes make the system fairer by (i) ensuring that work always pays more than benefits, and (ii) supporting those who are able to work to find a job, while sanctioning those who refuse to ‘play by the rules’ (Department for Work and Pensions, 2010). On the other hand, critics claim it has removed the ‘safety net’ for the poorest families and exacerbated hardship and poverty (e.g. see Taylor-Gooby, 2013).

The reforms introduced since 2010 have been wide-ranging. Key policies include:

- Abolishing (in April 2013) the spare-room subsidy (a policy commonly referred to by critics as ‘the bedroom tax’), meaning that housing benefit was reduced for working age benefit claimants in social housing who were deemed to have one or more spare bedrooms.
- The introduction of a benefit cap, again from April 2013. This was intended to ensure that benefit claimants receive no more than the average household income after tax, by capping the total level of benefits a household can receive, currently at £26,000 per year for couples and single parent households with dependent children, and £18,200 per year for single adult households with no dependent children.
- The introduction of Universal Credit (UC). This policy was introduced in the North West of England in 2013 and was gradually expanded to a small number of other areas in 2014, following delays in initial plans for its roll out. UC is being expanded nationally in 2015.
- A revised system of sanctions has been introduced – claimants could lose part, or in some cases all of their benefit for a period if they do not comply with requirements designed to get them into work or to increase their earnings.
- Changes to benefit uprating – from April 2013, the main rates of most working age benefits and tax credits were set to rise by 1% a year, rather than in line with inflation, effectively cutting the real value of many benefits.
- The introduction of measures to limit migrants’ access to benefits. For example, EU jobseekers can now only claim Jobseeker’s Allowance, Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit for three months (unless they can provide compelling evidence that they still have a genuine prospect of work).
- For the state pension, a ‘triple lock’ was introduced in 2011, which guarantees that the state pension will rise by either earnings, prices, or 2.5% - whichever is higher. So pensioners are a key group of benefits claimants who have arguably become better off since 2010.

As we approach a general election in 2015, welfare reform remains at the heart of current political debate. The Conservative Party is committed to continuing the current programme of reform. At the same time, the Labour Party is also now taking a tough line on elements of the welfare state, including retaining the benefit cap and introducing a compulsory jobs guarantee, whereby those who are able to work must take up job offers or risk losing their benefits (Helm, 2013). However, Labour has also pledged to reinstate the spare room subsidy and to increase the minimum wage.

But of course, how the public responds to these various policy offers at the ballot box will depend on how it now views the welfare state as a whole and its individual components. In this paper, we use data from the British Social Attitudes survey to look at attitudes to the welfare state and how much they have changed over the years, with a particular focus on the years from 2010-2014. We consider whether the changes in policy of the last five years are reflected in changes in public opinion – either softening in response to cuts and sanctions on claimants, or perhaps hardening in response to the arguments about being ‘tough and fair’ on claimants now being made by politicians on both sides of the divide. At the same time, reforms since 2010 followed a deep recession in Britain in 2007-2008, and have taken place against a backdrop of ongoing economic uncertainty and sluggish growth in jobs and wages. This too may have had an impact on views – either increasing sympathy for those who might have lost their jobs as a result of recession, or, perhaps, hardening attitudes towards those who rely on the state when government spending is already squeezed.

British Social Attitudes has included questions on attitudes to the welfare state over many years. In this paper, we examine attitudes to:

- Public spending on the welfare state in general.
- Attitudes to spending on specific groups of claimants – pensioners, the unemployed, disabled people, single parents and child benefits.
- Attitudes to specific policies introduced since 2010, including the benefit cap and restrictions to benefits for migrants, as well as perceptions of the overall fairness and effectiveness of the current system.

In this election year, we then focus particularly on examining the extent and nature of partisan divides in attitudes to welfare. As we have seen above, on some areas of welfare policy, there is arguably less to separate the Conservative and Labour parties than there was prior to 2010. But are the views of their supporters distinctive, and have any partisan divides among the public become more or less intense over the last four years?

## General attitudes to public spending and welfare

Before we consider attitudes to welfare benefits and those who receive them in particular, we first consider people’s more general views about whether too much or too little is spent on welfare and

public services – and whether taxes accordingly are too high or too low. Ever since its first survey in 1983, British Social Attitudes has asked its respondents whether taxes and public spending should go up, go down or stay at the same level as they are now. The question reads:

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

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

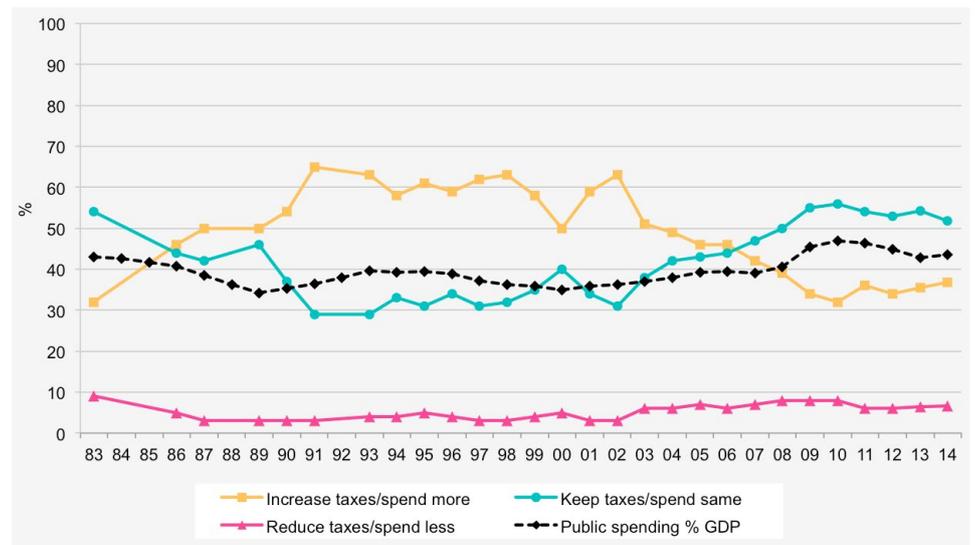
Previous analysis of British Social Attitudes data (Curtice, 2010) has indicated that public responses to this question act like a ‘thermostat’. As a room gets warmer or colder, we want to turn the heat down or up, even if our ideal temperature is unchanged. When it comes to public spending, this would mean that when people think spending is being increased, they may be more likely to want to reduce the level of public spending, even if their view about the ideal level is unchanged. Conversely, if they think the level of spending is falling, they may be more likely to want it to increase again.

This ‘thermostatic’ reaction could clearly be seen in the 1980s, when public spending fell in real terms as a percentage of GDP and support for increasing both taxes and public spending increased steadily, from 32% in 1983 to 65% by 1991 (Figure 1<sup>1</sup>). It then fluctuated between 58% and 63% for the remainder of the 1990s. Support for increasing taxes and public spending remained above 50% until 2004 and was 63% as recently as 2002. However, from 2004 onwards support for a policy of higher tax and spend began to tail off. Curtice (2010) has argued that this was a ‘thermostatic’ response to the higher levels of public spending in the second two terms of Labour Government. By 2010, when the Coalition took office, just 32% wanted to see higher levels of taxation and spending – a figure some 18 percentage points lower than that recorded a decade earlier. The dominant view from 2007 onwards was simply that the level of taxes and spending should be kept the same – very few actually reported wanting cuts in the level of tax and spend.

So what of the picture since 2010, when public spending has fallen back as a share of GDP (albeit remaining above the level it was for most of the previous three decades)? Figure 1 shows a slight reassertion in support for higher spending – up 5 percentage points from 32% in 2010 to 37% in 2014. However, this increase is clearly minor compared to that of the late-1980s: the overall picture remains that most people (52% in 2014) think taxes and spending should remain at the level they are now at. The ‘thermostat effect’ appears to have been weaker in recent years, with spending cuts no longer immediately followed by demands for higher spending. Perhaps the more challenging economic climate following the recession of the late 2000s, in combination with rhetoric from the largest political

parties about keeping far tighter control over public spending, has resulted in a weakening of any link in the mind of the public between current spending levels and preferences for future spending levels. Or perhaps the fact that spending on health and schools has been largely protected from spending cuts means that potential public concern about overall spending levels has been assuaged. In any event, support for actually reducing the overall level of public spending on areas like health, education and social benefits certainly remains low – 7% in 2014.

**Figure 1. Attitudes to taxation and spending on health, education and social benefits, 1983–2014, and public spending as a percentage of GDP**



**37% want more taxes and spending – up just 5 percentage points since 2010.**

Public spending %GDP source: UK Public Spending

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

## Attitudes to welfare benefits

The question discussed above invites people to think about spending on public services in general (and the taxes to pay for them) rather than the money that the government hands over to individuals in the form of welfare payments. To assess how people feel about these in particular we can examine how people respond when invited to say whether they agree or disagree with the following three statements:

- ***The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes***
- ***Cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people's lives***
- ***Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help***

In contrast to the seemingly cyclical pattern of attitudes to spending on services in general, public support for spending more on welfare benefits in particular has been in long-term decline (see Figure 2). In 1989, 61% agreed that the government should spend more on welfare; by 2009, this figure was just 27%. There was an initial slight recovery in public support for welfare in the early years of

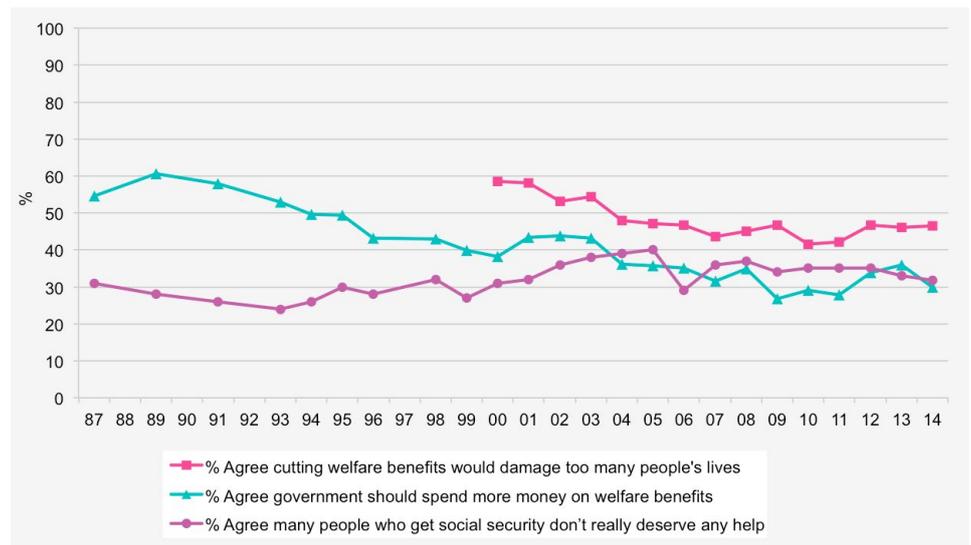
**Only 30% want more Government spending on welfare for the poor.**

the Coalition – by 2013, 36% said they supported more spending. However, this figure has now dropped again, to 30%. So while the long-term trend towards a less generous public attitude to welfare spending may have bottomed out, on this evidence it appears to be showing little sign of reversing in response to either a harsher economic climate or tighter government policies on benefit levels and entitlements.

A second question, on whether cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people’s lives, has been included since 2000; here too, public attitudes appear to have become harder. In 2000, 59% agreed that cutting benefits could have such detrimental effects; by 2010, this figure had fallen by 17 percentage points to 42%. The level of agreement that cutting benefits damages lives has increased slightly since, to 46% in 2014 (20% disagree, 32% neither agree nor disagree), but again the extent of any recent reversal appears to be very modest.

In contrast, there has been no consistent trend when people are asked whether “many people on social security don’t really deserve any help”. Just under one in three (32%) agree with that view, which was also the position when the question was first asked in 1987 (31%). While it has fluctuated a little over the intervening 27 years, there is no obvious pattern. It seems that the principle that those who have fallen on hard times should get some help is just as popular (or unpopular) as it has ever been. What the public appear to have become more circumspect about is whether additional money should be spent on implementing that principle.

**Figure 2. Attitudes to welfare benefits, 1987–2014**



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

Broadly speaking then, recent government policies which have sought to constrain the overall level of public spending and to minimise spending on welfare in particular, appear to have reflected the general direction of public opinion prior to 2010. Meanwhile, any reversal in this lower level of support for increased public spending

and welfare spending has been at best muted. As we enter an election year, it appears that the public would be reluctant to accept a blanket policy of higher taxes and spending or higher spending on welfare.

But of course, ‘welfare’ encompasses a very wide range of benefits targeted at a number of different groups in society. Perhaps the public would be happier to see spending increased on some specific groups of benefit recipients rather than others.

## Attitudes to spending on different groups

To examine whether people’s views of welfare spending on different groups are indeed different, British Social Attitudes asks people to choose from a list of benefits targeted at specific groups which would be their first and second priorities for extra spending on social benefits. The benefits listed are: retirement pensions, child benefits, benefits for the unemployed, benefits for disabled people, and benefits for single parents. Previous analysis of British Social Attitudes data (e.g. Pearce and Taylor, 2013) has indicated that people are broadly supportive of benefits that are likely to be available to many people across the course of their lives (like state pensions and child benefits) and of benefits for disabled people. However, they are less likely to support increasing spending on more targeted benefits for people of working-age (e.g. benefits for the unemployed and for single parents).

This is certainly the picture emerging in Figure 3. In every year this question has been asked, retirement benefits have topped people’s priorities for extra government spending, followed by spending on benefits for disabled people. At the same time, in every year since 1994, benefits for the unemployed and for single parents has come bottom of the public’s priorities for extra spending. Over the longer term, to the mid-late 2000s, support for additional spending on pensions increased, from 64% in 1983 to a high of 80% in 2005. The numbers prioritising extra spending on child benefits also increased between 1983 and 2007, from 20% to 42%. In contrast, the proportion prioritising extra spending on the unemployed, while never particularly high, declined further, from 35% in 1984 to just 7% in 2007.

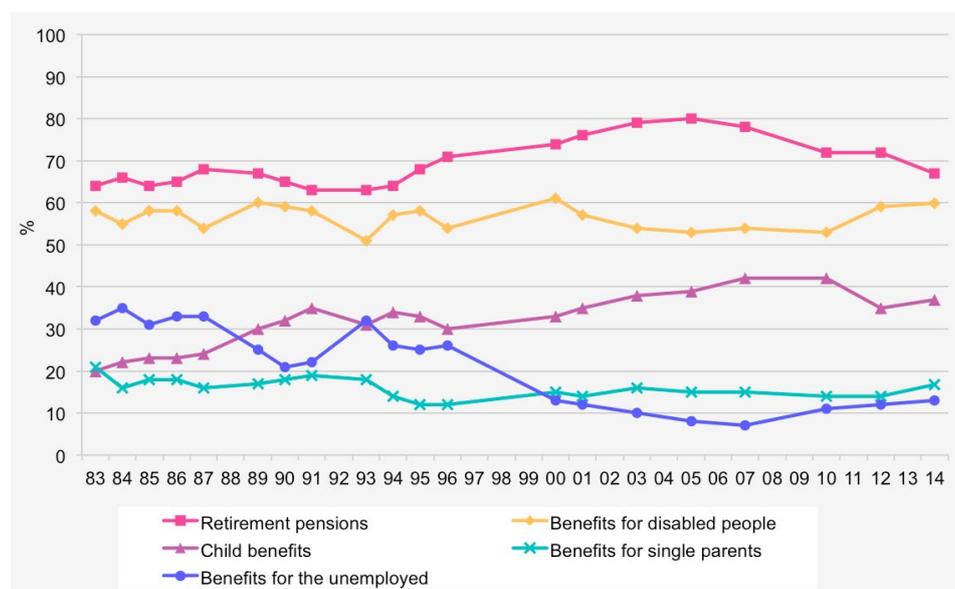
Looking in more detail at the period since 2010, two key findings emerge. First, the relative priority given to these five areas of welfare spending has changed very little – retirement pension remains the benefit the public most favours spending any extra money on, while benefits for unemployed people remains bottom of their priority list. However, there is some evidence that changes in the actual levels of welfare spending on particular groups may have had a marginal impact on public views of where further spending should now go. For example, the proportion saying that pensions would be their first or second priority for extra spending has fallen slightly, from 78% in 2007 (the last point prior to the 2010 election when this question was asked) to 67% in 2014. This may reflect real improvements in pensioners’ living standards and, perhaps, a general awareness of

 **Support for pensions getting extra spending has fallen, but they remain top of the list.** 

policies (like the ‘Triple Lock’) that have protected the rate of the state pension (although the age at which one can claim pension has also increased).

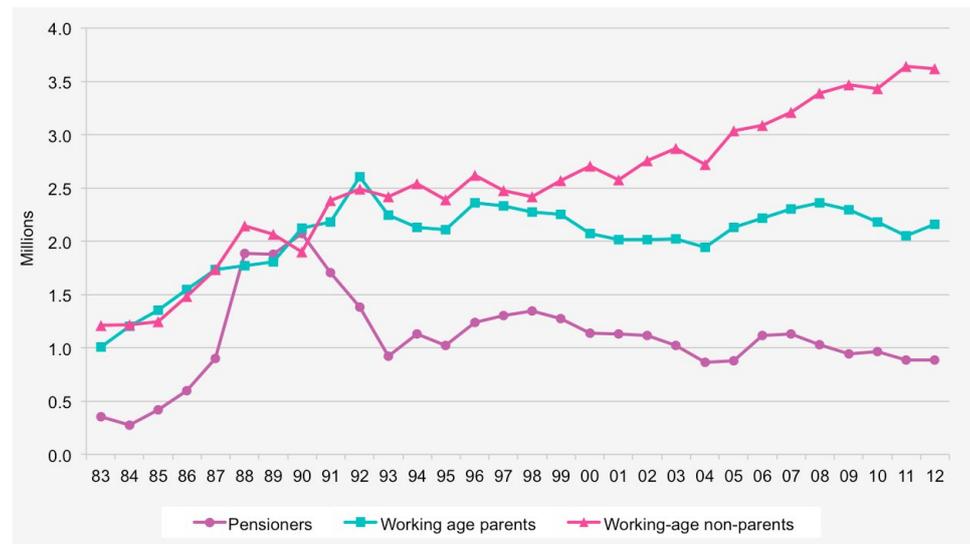
The value of benefits for unemployed people has fallen in real terms as a result of the change in the level of uprating, set at 1% a year, which was below the rate of inflation at the time this uprating decision was set. And the proportion of people that think that benefits for unemployed people should be the focus of extra government spending has increased slightly – from 7% in 2007 to 13% in 2014. Meanwhile, the proportion favouring extra spending on benefits for disabled people has increased during the tenure of the Coalition (from 53% in 2010 to 60% in 2014), a result, perhaps, of controversy created by government policies designed to achieve ‘a 20% reduction in caseload and expenditure’ in Disability Living Allowance (HM Treasury 2010, p.36; Harrington, 2012; Public Accounts Committee, 2013) (although the increase was first in evidence in 2012 when our survey coincided with - but largely preceded<sup>2</sup> - the London Paralympics that may have had a positive impact on attitudes to people with disabilities (ONS, 2014)).

Figure 3. Priorities for extra spending on social benefits, 1983–2014



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

Meanwhile, Figure 4 highlights the extent of the mismatch between public priorities for extra spending and trends in poverty among particular sections of the population. While pensioners remain the top priority for additional spending, pensioner poverty has declined since the late-1980s. At the same time, the number of those of working age without children who are in poverty increased almost continually from the early 1980s to 2012. In combination, Figures 3 and 4 indicate that it is the poor of working age who receive the lowest public priority for additional welfare spending (at least via benefits for the unemployed) even though they (increasingly) experience the greatest poverty.

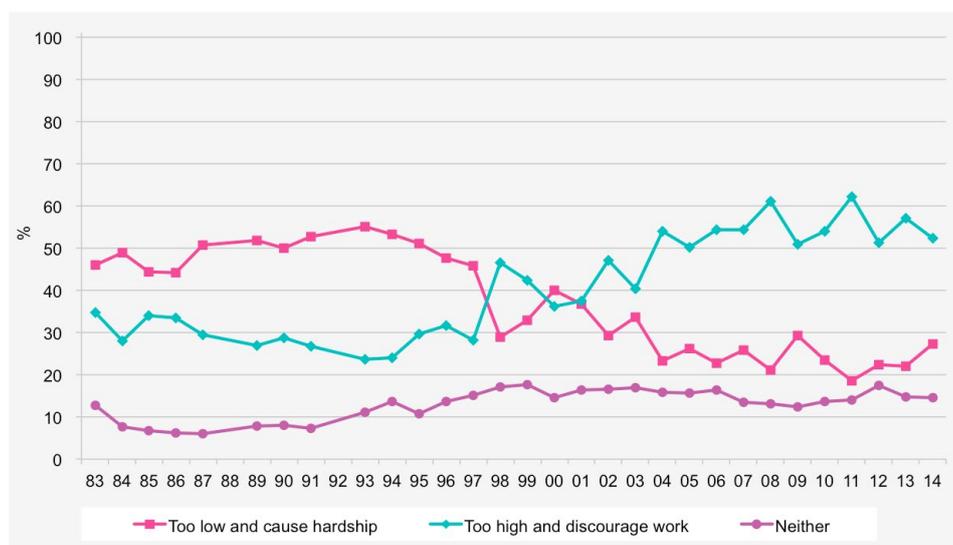
**Figure 4. Poverty and inequality statistics, 1983–2012 (poverty, millions)**

Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies (2014)

The data on which Figure 4 is based can be found in Table A.4 in the appendix to this paper. The figures shown are based on the numbers below 50% of national household median income after housing costs

## Benefits for the unemployed – discouraging work or causing hardship?

Figure 5 examines attitudes to benefits for unemployed people in more detail. British Social Attitudes taps into people’s beliefs about the current level of spending on benefits for the unemployed by asking people whether they think that the level of benefits for unemployed people is “too low and causes hardship” or is “too high and discourages them from finding jobs”. Two decades ago, the most common response among those interviewed was that benefits were “too low and cause hardship” (between 44% and 55% from 1983 to 1997). After the election of a Labour Government in 1997, this view declined, and the proportion who felt they were too high and discouraged work increased, from 28% in 1997 to 51% in 2009. Although there was a slight increase in the proportion who said that benefits for the unemployed were too low and caused hardship between 2013 and 2014 (from 22% to 27%), overall the picture from 2010 onwards has changed little – most people (52% in 2014) still think that benefits for the unemployed are too high and discourage work.

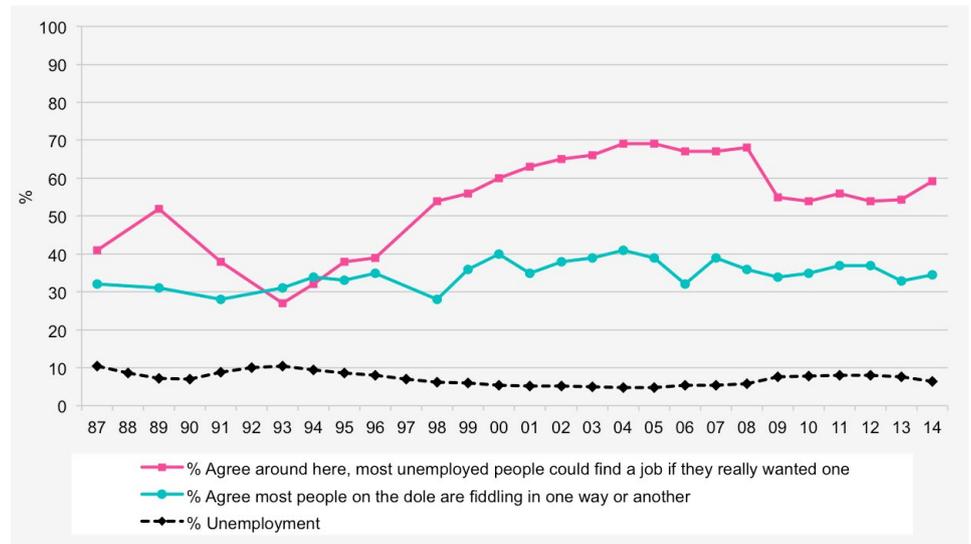
**Figure 5. Perception of level of benefits for unemployed people, 1983–2014**

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

Figure 6 shows responses to a pair of statements about the unemployed. In part at least it reinforces the view that the public's views of unemployed people have hardened over the last two decades. In 1993, only 27% agreed that “around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one”. By 2008, this figure had risen to 68% - following a fall in unemployment from around 10% to around 5% over that period. As unemployment rose from 2008 onwards, the proportion agreeing that most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one did drop back a little (to between 54% and 56% from 2009 to 2013). However, it remained far higher than the levels of agreement seen in the 1990s. Most recently, the proportion agreeing increased again slightly, from 54% in 2013 to 59% in 2014, perhaps reflecting the fall in unemployment over the same period. What is again clear, however, is that since the 2008 recession there has been at most a modest softening in attitudes to unemployed people – public opinion remains far more inclined to view unemployment as an individual responsibility than it was in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

On the other hand the perception that “most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another” has not changed very much. During the last quarter of a century the proportion agreeing with this statement has rarely been less than 30% or more than 40%, and has shown no sign of moving consistently in one direction or the other, including since the recession of 2008. It seems that there has simply always been a fair degree of suspicion that many of those receiving unemployment benefit are not necessarily playing wholly by the rules.

Figure 6. Views on the behaviour of unemployed people, 1987–2014



The data on which Figure 6 is based can be found in Table A.6 in the appendix to this paper. Unemployment source: International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook Database (2014)

## Attitudes to recent government policies

So far we have examined a variety of relatively general indicators of people’s attitudes towards welfare and how they have changed over time. We have seen that the public is less willing than it once was to support increases in spending on welfare. However, this does not necessarily mean that the public is willing to endorse any particular cut. So what do the public make of some of the specific policies that have either been implemented by the Coalition or at least advocated by its ministers during the course of the last four years? Are these popular with the public or not?

### Capping and restricting benefits

As discussed in the introduction, from April 2013, the UK Government introduced a ‘benefit cap’, meaning that no household could receive more in benefits than the average household income (£26,000 at that point). This policy has been contentious, with critics arguing it risks significantly increasing family and child poverty and supporters claiming it is essential to ensuring the benefits system is viewed as fair by the public as a whole. So how does the public view this policy? Overall, about three quarters (73%) agree that “no household should receive more in benefits than the national average income”. In other words they endorse the ‘benefits cap’.

**73% agree with the benefit cap.**

Conservative ministers in the Coalition have also on more than one occasion suggested that those aged less than 25 should be ineligible for housing benefit, though the proposal has not been implemented. When asked whether people aged under 25 should or should not be able to claim a benefit in the same way as an older person in the same circumstances, less than half (43%) said that they should have

exactly the same level of entitlement. On the other hand, 20% said they should have access to most of the same benefits, while just one in three believed they should have access to only a few, or none at all. That suggests that persuading the public of the merits of making such a change in future will depend on persuading them of the merits of doing so in any particular case.

At the same time, Conservative ministers have also floated the idea that some welfare payments should be made in the form of a voucher that only covers the kind of expenditure for which the benefit was intended. This perhaps is more clearly a popular idea. As many as 60% say that, “benefits should be paid in such a way that it is clear what each benefit should be spent on, for example, like in other countries where food stamps are given to go towards the cost of food”. Only 38% endorse instead the view that, “benefits should be paid like a regular salary, with the person or family receiving the benefits being responsible for budgeting and using them to pay for the different things required”. Not only is there apparent widespread reluctance to spend more on welfare but also a wish to ensure that the money that is spent is spent ‘appropriately’.

## Benefits for immigrants

One area where the government has seemingly been under particular pressure to make the benefits system more restrictive is the ability of migrants to claim benefits. Migration in general has become a central subject of political debate during the course of the last four years, fuelling and fuelled by a dramatic increase in support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) (discussed in Curtice’s UKIP paper<sup>3</sup> in this collection). It has been suggested by those who would like to see tighter controls on immigration that some migrants are attracted to the UK by its supposedly relatively ‘generous’ welfare system (see for example Farage’s comments to the BBC, 7 January 2014). At present, migrants need to pass a strong Habitual Residence test to be able to claim benefit, while jobseekers from the EU need to be able to show that they have resided in the UK for three months to be able to claim Jobseeker’s Allowance (House of Commons Library, 2014). Meanwhile, as noted earlier, EU jobseekers can now only claim Jobseeker’s Allowance, Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit for three months. They are unable to access Housing Benefit at all.

The 2014 British Social Attitudes asked people how long they thought that migrants who arrive in Britain, out of work but looking for a job, should be able to claim the same benefits as British citizens who are out of work. The question was asked separately about migrants from countries outside the European Union and those from within the EU. As Table 1 shows, very few people believe that migrants, whether from within the EU or outside it, should have a perpetual right to access benefits in the same way as a British citizen. In fact, some 40% believe that migrants from outside the EU should never be able to claim the same out of work benefits as British citizens, while 29% think the same of EU citizens. However, almost 2 in 5 (39%) believe EU citizens should be able to claim them for up to a year or longer, while 21% feel they should be able to claim them for up to six months. Analysis of whether or not most people

would prefer EU jobseekers to be able to claim for longer than the current three month limit is complicated by the fact that our answer options did not explicitly include this – it is possible that some of those who chose “up to six months” would in fact have selected “up to three months” if this option had been available. However, it is clear from these data that the length of time migrants should be eligible for benefits is an issue on which the public is divided.

**Table 1. Attitudes to how long migrants who arrive in Britain out of work but looking for a job should be able to access the same welfare benefits as British citizens**

	Outside the EU	Within the EU
	%	%
They should always be able to access these benefits	5	8
For up to 5 years	6	7
For up to 2 years	8	10
For up to a year	14	15
For up to six months	19	21
For up to a month	7	9
They should not be able to access these benefits at all	40	29
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2878	2878

## Perceived fairness and effectiveness of the current system

British Social Attitudes 2014 also included two questions designed to tap into overall perceptions of the fairness and effectiveness of the current welfare system. People were asked to say for the current benefit system how strongly they agreed or disagreed that:

- ***It supports people in low paid work (fairness)***
- ***It effectively encourages recipients to move off benefits (effectiveness).***

As Table 2 shows, a majority (56%) believe that the current system is fair, at least in terms of supporting people in low paid work. However, the public is more skeptical about its effectiveness in encouraging people off benefits – just 18% agree that it does this.

**Table 2. Attitudes to whether the current benefit system ...**

	Supports people in low paid work	Effectively encourages recipients to move off benefits
	%	%
Agree	56	18
Neither agree nor disagree	18	20
Disagree	20	54
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2376	2376

## A growing political divide?

Previous British Social Attitudes reports have included more detailed discussion of differences in attitudes to welfare and public spending between different demographic groups. For example, in relation to age, Pearce and Taylor (2013) showed that in general younger people were less favourable than older people to more government spending on welfare benefits. Pearce and Taylor also analysed differences in attitudes by socio-economic class, while Clery (2012) examined differences in attitudes between those who themselves were and were not on benefits at the time. We refer the reader to these earlier reports for more detail of these and other demographic differences. In the remainder of this paper, however, we focus on differences in attitudes to welfare and benefits between those who identify with different political parties.

As we noted at the beginning of this paper, while some of the Coalition's cuts to welfare spending have been controversial – perhaps most notably abolishing the spare room subsidy – not all have been opposed by the Labour Party. Indeed, Labour has proposed its own cuts, not least through limiting increases in child benefit to 1% a year. However, the Conservatives envisage that in the first two years of the next parliament further cuts in spending on welfare of £12 billion (all focused on those of working age) should make a substantial contribution to a target for reducing the overall public spending deficit that is more ambitious than Labour's plans.<sup>4</sup> There is also disagreement between the Conservatives and their Liberal Democrat coalition partners on this issue, with the latter doubting whether cuts on such a scale are either necessary or desirable.

In short, despite a common acceptance of a need to reduce welfare spending – except on pensioners – there are some significant differences between the stances of the parties on the future of welfare. But how far are these differences reflected in the attitudes of their supporters? And is there any evidence that these differences have grown, perhaps because those who are unhappy with the cuts made so far – and the possibility of many more – at least find Labour's stance somewhat more appealing? Or will the next government find itself under pressure from its own supporters to keep a lid on welfare spending irrespective of its partisan colour?

## Taxation and Spending

To answer these questions we look first of all at the issue of the balance between taxation and overall spending. In Table 3 we show the proportion in favour of increasing taxation and spending in 2010, shortly after the Coalition came to power, and in our most recent survey (2014), by party political identification. In the case of the latter we include in our analysis those who now identify with UKIP, though the number of respondents who did so in our 2010 survey was too small to provide us with a robust figure.

4. See Osborne (6 January 2014) available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/new-year-economy-speech-by-the-chancellor-of-the-exchequer>, accessed 6 March 2015

'Party identification' encompasses a broad spectrum of support, from active supporters to those who simply say they would probably vote for a particular party. It is derived from answers to a series of questions. Respondents are asked, first, whether or not they think of themselves as a supporter of any political party. Those who are not party supporters are asked whether they think of themselves as a little closer to one party than to others. Those who respond negatively to that question are asked who they would vote for if there was a general election tomorrow.

**Table 3. Attitudes to taxation and spending, by party identification, 2010 and 2014**

	Conser- vative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	UKIP	None*	All
<b>% say increase taxes and spending on health, education and social benefits</b>						
2010	25	36	34	-	26	31
2014	28	46	39	36	31	37
Change 2010-14	+4	+10	+5	-	+5	+6
<i>Unweighted base (2010)</i>	<i>943</i>	<i>1011</i>	<i>411</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>532</i>	<i>3297</i>
<i>Unweighted base (2014)</i>	<i>760</i>	<i>838</i>	<i>144</i>	<i>268</i>	<i>466</i>	<i>2878</i>

Note: There were too few people who identified with UKIP in 2010 to provide a reliable estimate for that group

\* 'None' includes those who do not think of themselves as a supporter of any party or as closer to any party over others, and who say they would not be likely to support any party in particular if there was an election tomorrow.

Two key points emerge. Despite the fact that questions of taxation and spending are often regarded as the focal point of election campaigns, there was only a modest difference in 2010 between the various groups of party identifiers in the pattern of the responses to our question. While only a quarter (25%) of Conservative identifiers wanted more taxation and spending, at 36% the equivalent proportion among Labour identifiers was only 11 percentage points higher. However, the difference between the two groups has now widened somewhat to 18 percentage points. So this issue has apparently become somewhat more divisive between Conservative and Labour (with both Liberal Democrat and UKIP supporters sitting in between). But even Labour identifiers have relatively modest aspirations for more spending these days (with fewer than half supporting this in 2014), as compared with the higher level of support for additional spending among the population as a whole recorded two decades ago (Figure 1).

## Welfare Benefits

A rather larger gap between Conservative and Labour identifiers is, however, more in evidence when it comes to the specific issue of whether more should be spent on welfare. Over half of Conservative identifiers (55%) disagree with the idea of spending more on welfare benefits for the poor, while less than one in five agree (17%). In

Since 2010, the gap between Labour and Conservative supporters' attitudes to welfare has widened.

contrast, Labour identifiers are much more likely to agree (44%) than disagree (26%) with the proposition. Moreover, whereas among Labour identifiers the balance of opinion has shifted somewhat between 2010 and 2014 towards agreeing with the idea of more welfare spending, no such movement is evident among those backing the Conservatives. So what was already a relatively divisive issue between the two groups is now even more so. Were Labour to succeed in leading the government after the May 2015 election, those who voted for it would have rather different expectations of what that government should do so far as spending on welfare benefits are concerned.

Once again the balance of opinion among Liberal Democrat supporters is in between that of Conservative and Labour identifiers, leaving them more or less evenly divided between those who back more spending (30%) and those who do not (33%). On the other hand, when it comes to welfare spending in particular, rather than public spending in general, UKIP identifiers prove to be just as disapproving of the idea of spending more as Conservative identifiers.

**Table 4. Attitudes to spending more on welfare, by party identification, 2010 and 2014**

Government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	UKIP	None*	All
<b>2010</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	18	39	28	-	32	29
Disagree	52	30	39	-	30	39
<i>Unweighted base (2010)</i>	836	863	364	-	393	2791
<b>2014</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	17	44	30	19	29	30
Disagree	55	26	33	53	36	39
<i>Unweighted base (2014)</i>	653	684	128	230	349	2376

Note: There were too few people who identified with UKIP in 2010 to provide a reliable estimate for that group

\* 'None' includes those who do not think of themselves as a supporter of any party or as closer to any party over others, and who say they would not be likely to support any party in particular if there was an election tomorrow.

Much the same pattern is in evidence when people are asked whether cutting benefits would risk damaging lives. On the one hand, there is perhaps rather less enthusiasm among Conservative identifiers for the idea of actually cutting welfare benefits as opposed to stopping any further increases in spending – 31% agree that cutting benefits would damage lives, compared with just 17% who agree the government should spend more on welfare. However, while 31% of Conservatives agree that cutting benefits would cause damage, just as many (31%) disagree. Moreover, their responses still set them apart from Labour identifiers, no less than 59% of whom agree that cutting benefits would damage lives, while just

15% disagree. However, here the difference between the two groups is much the same as it was four years ago. Moreover, while UKIP supporters are largely at one with Conservative identifiers on this issue (35% agree with the statement and 29% disagree), the prospect of actually cutting welfare sees Liberal Democrats supporters take much the same view as Labour identifiers. Over half of Liberal Democrats (51%) agree that cutting benefits would do harm, while less than one in five (18%) disagree.

## The unemployed

Not only are Conservative and Labour identifiers divided in their attitudes towards welfare in general, but they are also distinctive in their attitudes towards the unemployed and the benefits that they receive. Table 5 shows the proportion of Conservative and Labour identifiers who, during the course of the last twenty years, have felt that benefits for the unemployed were too high and could discourage people from looking for a job. There has always been a difference on this issue between those who identify with the Conservative party and those who are closer to Labour. But this difference is bigger now than ever before. No less than 71% of Conservative identifiers believe that benefits for the unemployed are too high, compared with just 38% of those who back Labour. Although that still means that Labour identifiers are more critical of benefits for the unemployed than they were during the first term of the last Labour government, the proportion who fall into that category has fallen by seven percentage points since 2010. In contrast, the proportion of Conservatives who feel unemployment benefit is too high has not dropped at all from the 70% who were of that view in 2010.

Meanwhile, Liberal Democrat identifiers, 54% of whom now think that benefits for the unemployed are too high, again appear on balance to hold views in between those of Conservative and Labour identifiers, as has usually (though not always) been the case in previous years. And on this issue - in contrast with their views about welfare spending in general - this is where UKIP identifiers now also appear to lie, 58% of whom say that benefits for the unemployed are too high.

**Table 5. % saying that benefits for unemployed people are too high and discourage them from finding jobs, by party identification, 1995–2014**

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Conservative	47	48	44	61	54	52	49	61	56	69
Labour	18	21	17	39	38	28	33	40	36	44
Liberal Democrat	36	30	30	49	41	36	39	45	36	51
All	30	32	28	46	42	36	37	47	40	54
<i>Unweighted base (All)</i>	1234	1355	1355	3146	3143	3426	3287	3435	3272	3199
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Conservative	65	68	67	73	66	70	77	67	75	71
Labour	46	46	49	54	40	45	55	43	46	38
Liberal Democrat	41	53	51	53	43	54	55	47	57	54
All	50	54	54	61	51	54	62	51	57	52
<i>Unweighted base (All)</i>	3193	3240	3094	3358	1139	3297	3311	3248	3244	2878

Note: There were too few people who identified with UKIP prior to 2014 to provide reliable estimates for that group, so they are not included in this table

All bases can be found in Table A.7 in the appendix to this paper

Further evidence that Conservative and Labour identifiers are now more divided in their attitudes towards the unemployed emerges when we look at whether people feel that the unemployed could find a job if they really wanted one. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of Conservative identifiers take that view, whereas four years ago rather less than two-thirds (63%) did so (Table 6). In contrast, the balance of opinion among Labour identifiers has barely changed (49% in 2010; 50% in 2014). Moreover, on this subject Labour's views are much the same as their Liberal Democrat counterparts (51% in 2014), while once again UKIP supporters (64%) prove to be a little less unsympathetic to the unemployed than Conservative identifiers (72%). That said, it looks as though, irrespective of its partisan colour, the next government will be under continued pressure from its supporters to get the unemployed 'into work and off benefits' and thereby reduce the 'benefits bill'. Indeed, even among those who identify with Labour, only 22% currently agree that the current benefit system "effectively encourages recipients to move off benefits", while the views of other parties' identifiers are inclined to be even more critical of its effectiveness. Equally, no less than 69% of Labour identifiers support the benefit cap, while more than half (55%) would set a six month limit at most on the ability of job-seeking EU migrants to claim the same benefits as British citizens.

**Table 6. Attitudes to ability of unemployed to find a job, by party identification, 2010 and 2014**

Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they wanted to	Conser- vative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	UKIP	None	All
<b>2010</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	63	49	49	-	54	54
Disagree	13	25	23	-	22	20
<i>Unweighted base</i>	836	863	364	-	393	2791
<b>2014</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	72	50	51	64	62	59
Disagree	10	28	27	18	20	21
<i>Unweighted base</i>	653	684	128	230	349	2376

## Spending priorities

Whatever the extent of the differences between the various groups of party identifiers in their attitudes to the level of spending on welfare in general and towards the unemployed in particular, one thing is clear – for none are the unemployed a priority when it comes to the money that is available to be spent. As Table 7 shows, even among Labour identifiers, only 16% say that benefits for the unemployed are a first or second priority for extra spending. For them, along with every other set of supporters, that position is occupied by retirement pensions and benefits for disabled people. The one difference of note is that for Conservative and UKIP identifiers, over three-quarters of whom say they are a priority, retirement pensions are even more likely to be a priority than they are for Labour and Liberal Democrat identifiers, around three-fifths of whom pick out this benefit. It is evidently going to be difficult for any government to do anything other than largely protect pensions from whatever cuts it may propose to implement without going against the views of its own voters.

**Table 7. Priorities for extra spending on welfare, by party identification**

	Conser- vative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	UKIP	None	All
<b>% First or second priorities for extra spending on welfare</b>						
Retirement pensions	76	61	58	76	64	67
Benefits for disabled people	61	62	59	63	54	60
Child benefits	36	37	48	30	37	37
Benefits for single parents	11	20	19	13	23	17
Benefits for the unemployed	8	16	13	12	14	13
<i>Unweighted base</i>	760	838	144	268	466	2878

## Conclusions

The last four years have witnessed relatively little change in people's attitudes towards welfare, although support for more spending, for giving priority to benefits for single parents, and for giving more priority to and more generous treatment of the unemployed seem to have risen somewhat. At first glance this pattern of relative stability might seem to suggest that there is relatively little to interest students of attitudes to welfare in this period. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. For the relative lack of change comes after years of a steady decline in support for spending on public services in general and on welfare in particular. And it comes in the wake of the most severe and long-lasting recession in living memory, five years of a government intent on reducing welfare expenditure and an increase in poverty among working age people with no children. In short, the public have remained relatively unsympathetic to spending on welfare even though the last five years would seem to have created circumstances that might – based on previous trends – have encouraged them to change their minds.

Consequently, neither the 'thermostat' approach, nor the claim that there is a continuing long-term shift in attitudes towards welfare (Pearce and Taylor, 2013) has been immediately reinforced. There has been no decisive shift in attitudes corresponding to the shift in government policy or in the level of need, although there are indications (discussed above) that the public mood may now be responding to the pressures of the recession and the austerity that has followed it. Perhaps the most striking finding is that even though people of working age make up by far the majority of those in poverty, and that poverty among those of working age without children has risen, this appears to have had little effect on attitudes.

Not that all forms of welfare are unpopular or that welfare spending is equally unpopular with the supporters of all political parties. Retirement pensions and benefits for the disabled remain relatively popular, which helps explain why none of the parties are proposing cuts to pensions (as opposed to increases in the age at which it can be claimed) and perhaps why changes to assessments of fitness to work for people with disabilities have caused controversy. At the same time, Labour identifiers are less unsympathetic to welfare spending than supporters of other parties and the division between them and their Conservative counterparts appears to have grown during the tenure of the Coalition. Even so, they can hardly be regarded as enthusiasts for more welfare spending, and would much prefer that people of working age were in work and thus less reliant on benefits in the first place. Whether the rhetoric of the next government proves to be the same as that of the current Coalition remains to be seen, but whatever party or parties are in power, that government looks more likely to win plaudits for keeping the cost of welfare for working age people down than for any attempt to be markedly more generous.

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## Appendix

The data for Figure 1 are shown below.

**Table A1. Attitudes to taxation and spending on health, education and social benefits, 1983–2014, and public spending as a percentage of GDP**

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993
<b>View on level of taxation and spending</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Increase taxes/spend more	32	n/a	n/a	46	50	n/a	50	54	65	n/a	63
Keep taxes/spend same	54	n/a	n/a	44	42	n/a	46	37	29	n/a	29
Reduce taxes/spend less	9	n/a	n/a	5	3	n/a	3	3	3	n/a	4
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1761	n/a	n/a	3100	2847	n/a	3029	2797	2918	n/a	2945
Public spending %GDP	43.0	42.6	41.7	40.8	38.4	36.3	34.3	35.2	36.5	38.0	39.7
	<b>1994</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>
<b>View on level of taxation and spending</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Increase taxes/spend more	58	61	59	62	63	58	50	59	63	51	49
Keep taxes/spend same	33	31	34	31	32	35	40	34	31	38	42
Reduce taxes/spend less	4	5	4	3	3	4	5	3	3	6	6
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3469	3633	3620	1355	3146	3143	2292	3287	3435	3272	2146
Public spending %GDP	39.2	39.4	38.9	37.2	36.2	35.8	34.9	35.8	36.2	36.9	37.9
	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	
<b>View on level of taxation and spending</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Increase taxes/spend more	46	46	42	39	34	32	36	34	36	37	
Keep taxes/spend same	43	44	47	50	55	56	54	53	54	52	
Reduce taxes/spend less	7	6	7	8	8	8	6	6	6	7	
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2166	3240	3094	2229	1139	3297	3311	3248	3244	2878	
Public spending %GDP	39.2	39.4	39.1	40.6	45.5	47.0	46.3	44.9	42.8	43.5	

The data for Figure 2 are shown below.

**Table A2. Attitudes to welfare benefits, 1987–2014**

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001
% agree cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people's lives	n/a	59	58								
% agree government should spend more money on welfare benefits	55	61	58	53	50	50	43	43	40	38	43
% agree many people who get social security don't really deserve any help	31	28	26	24	26	30	28	32	27	31	32
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1281	2604	2481	2567	2929	3135	3103	3000	2450	2980	2795
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
% agree cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people's lives	53	54	48	47	47	44	45	47	42	42	47
% agree government should spend more money on welfare benefits	44	43	36	36	35	32	35	27	29	28	34
% agree many people who get social security don't really deserve any help	36	38	39	40	29	36	37	34	35	35	35
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2900	873	2609	2699	2822	2672	3000	967	2810	2841	2855
	2013	2014									
% agree cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people's lives	46	46									
% agree government should spend more money on welfare benefits	36	30									
% agree many people who get social security don't really deserve any help	33	32									
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2832	2376									

The data for Figure 3 are shown below.

**Table A3. Priorities for extra spending on social benefits, 1983–2014**

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995
Retirement pensions	64	66	64	65	68	67	65	63	63	64	68
Benefits for disabled people	58	55	58	58	54	60	59	58	51	57	58
Child benefits	20	22	23	23	24	30	32	35	31	34	33
Benefits for single parents	21	16	18	18	16	17	18	19	18	14	12
Benefits for the unemployed	32	35	31	33	33	25	21	22	32	26	25
None of these	1	1	1	*	1	*	1	*	1	1	1
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1761	1675	1804	3100	2847	3029	2797	2918	2945	1167	1234

	1996	2000	2001	2003	2005	2007	2010	2012	2014
Retirement pensions	71	74	76	79	80	78	72	72	67
Benefits for disabled people	54	61	57	54	53	54	53	59	60
Child benefits	30	33	35	38	39	42	42	35	37
Benefits for single parents	12	15	14	16	15	15	14	14	17
Benefits for the unemployed	26	13	12	10	8	7	11	12	13
None of these	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	4
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3620	3426	3287	3272	3193	3094	3297	3248	2878

The data for Figure 4 are shown below.

Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies (2014)

**Table A4. Poverty and inequality statistics, 1983–2012 (poverty, millions)**

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993
Pensioners	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.6	0.9	1.9	1.9	2.1	1.7	1.4	0.9
Working age parents	1.0	1.2	1.4	1.5	1.7	1.8	1.8	2.1	2.2	2.6	2.2
Working-age non-parents	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.5	1.7	2.1	2.1	1.9	2.4	2.5	2.4

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Pensioners	1.1	1.0	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.0	0.9
Working age parents	2.1	2.1	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.1	2.0	2.0	2.0	1.9
Working-age non-parents	2.5	2.4	2.6	2.5	2.4	2.6	2.7	2.6	2.8	2.9	2.7

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Pensioners	0.9	1.1	1.1	1.0	0.9	1.0	0.9	0.9	n/a	n/a
Working age parents	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.3	2.2	2.1	2.2	n/a	n/a
Working-age non-parents	3.0	3.1	3.2	3.4	3.5	3.4	3.6	3.6	n/a	n/a

The data for Figure 5 are shown below.

**Table A5. Perception of level of benefits for unemployed people, 1983–2014**

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995
<b>Benefits for unemployed people are ...</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Too low and cause hardship	46	49	44	44	51	52	50	53	55	53	51
Too high and discourage work	35	28	34	33	29	27	29	27	24	24	30
Neither	13	8	7	6	6	8	8	7	11	14	11
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1719	1675	1804	3100	2847	3029	2797	2918	2945	3469	1234
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
<b>Benefits for unemployed people are ...</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Too low and cause hardship	48	46	29	33	40	37	29	34	23	26	23
Too high and discourage work	32	28	46	42	36	37	47	40	54	50	54
Neither	14	15	17	18	15	16	17	17	16	16	16
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3620	1355	3146	3143	3426	3287	3435	3276	3199	3139	3240
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014			
<b>Benefits for unemployed people are ...</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%			
Too low and cause hardship	26	21	29	23	19	22	22	27			
Too high and discourage work	54	61	51	54	62	51	57	52			
Neither	14	13	12	14	14	17	15	15			
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3094	3258	1139	3297	3311	3248	3244	2878			

The data for Figure 6 are shown below.

**Table A6. Views on the behaviour of unemployed people, 1987–2014**

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001
% agree around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one	41	52	38	27	32	38	39	54	56	60	63
% agree most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another	32	31	28	31	34	33	35	28	36	40	35
% unemployment*	10.4	7.2	8.9	10.4	9.5	8.6	8.1	6.3	6.0	5.5	5.1
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1281	2604	2481	2567	2929	3135	3103	3000	2450	2980	2795
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
% agree around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one	65	66	69	69	67	67	68	55	54	56	54
% agree most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another	38	39	41	39	32	39	36	34	35	37	37
% unemployment*	5.2	5.0	4.8	4.9	5.5	5.4	5.7	7.7	7.9	8.1	8.0
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2900	873	2609	2699	2822	2672	3000	967	2810	2841	2855
	2013	2014									
% agree around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one	54	59									
% agree most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another	33	35									
% unemployment*	7.6	6.3									
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2832	2376									

\* Unemployment figures taken from IMF World Economic Outlook Database

Base figures for Table 5 are shown below.

**Table A7. Base figures for % saying that benefits for unemployed people are too high and discourage them from finding jobs, by party identification, 1995–2014**

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
<i>Unweighted base (Conservative)</i>	319	1012	378	818	785	937	743	856	806	831	802
<i>Unweighted base (Labour)</i>	561	1528	560	1398	1333	1394	1481	1400	1203	1038	1291
<i>Unweighted base (Liberal Democrat)</i>	160	391	129	324	323	341	412	383	368	404	397
<i>Unweighted base (All)</i>	1234	1355	1355	3146	3143	3426	3287	3435	3272	3199	3193
	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014		
<i>Unweighted base (Conservative)</i>	843	819	1087	334	943	926	866	818	760		
<i>Unweighted base (Labour)</i>	1063	1058	934	292	1011	1039	1090	1052	838		
<i>Unweighted base (Liberal Democrat)</i>	374	293	312	89	411	253	200	194	144		
<i>Unweighted base (All)</i>	3240	3094	3358	1139	3297	3311	3248	3244	2878		