

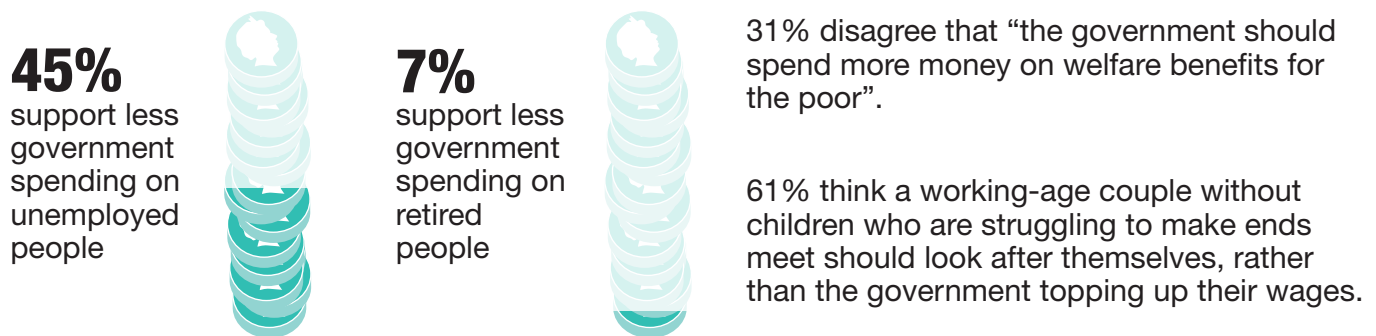
Welfare

Support for government welfare reform

This chapter examines support for two key elements of government welfare reform and whether and how this has changed since its implementation began in 2010: reducing expenditure on welfare; and limiting the circumstances in which particular benefits can be received. It assesses how attitudes vary and whether these are primarily influenced by characteristics linked to 'ideology' or 'self-interest'.

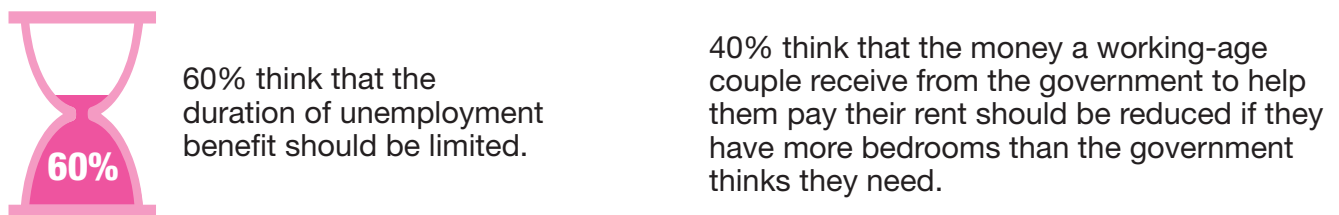
Little support for reducing spending for most groups

There is minimal support for reducing welfare spending, except in relation to the unemployed and low income working couples without children.



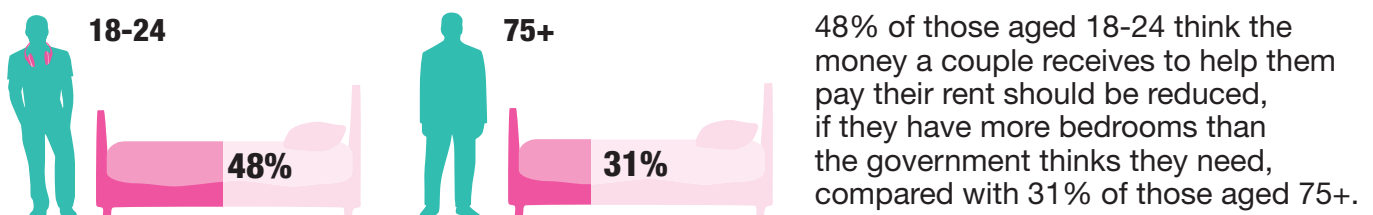
More support for limiting circumstances in which benefits can be received

A majority support limiting the circumstances in which unemployment benefit can be received, although there is less support for this approach in relation to housing benefit.



Attitudes vary by ideology and self-interest

Support for reform is strongly influenced by measures of ideology (such as political party identification). Measures of self-interest (such as age) also have a role to play. The importance of different characteristics varies in relation to different elements of reform and benefit types.



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Introduction

Since the General Election of 2010 the British government, first in the form of a Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition and latterly a majority Conservative government, has sought to implement a wide-ranging programme of welfare reform. One of the key aims of this programme has been to reduce expenditure on welfare, as part of the government’s overall objective of cutting the public sector deficit. At the beginning of the Coalition’s time in office the Chancellor, George Osborne, made a commitment to achieve cuts of 18 billion pounds to welfare expenditure by 2014-15 (HM Treasury, 2010 and 2013), a target that in practice was almost achieved.¹ Meanwhile, the Conservative Party’s manifesto for the 2015 election committed the new majority Conservative government to making a further reduction of 12 billion pounds a year by 2017-18 (Conservative Party, 2015).

Introducing welfare reform has not been without its difficulties and controversies. There has been widespread criticism of a reduction that has been made to the housing benefit paid to social housing tenants who are deemed to be living in accommodation that contains more bedrooms than they need. Widespread retesting of the capabilities of those in receipt of disability benefits in order to assess whether they still need their current level of support has attracted particular criticism too. Meanwhile an attempt in the autumn of 2015 to limit eligibility for tax credits, a benefit paid to those in low paid jobs, was rejected by the House of Lords and subsequently dropped by the Chancellor. Most recently, proposed changes to Personal Independence Payments (PIP), a payment intended to cover the cost of meeting the care needs of people with disabilities, led to the resignation of the then Work and Pensions’ Secretary Iain Duncan Smith, and the subsequent shelving of the proposed changes.

The extent of the controversy that has been engendered by the government’s reform programme raises questions about the extent to which the public actually supports the objective of reducing welfare expenditure. Have those politicians who have objected to various aspects of the government’s reform package read public opinion accurately? After all, even if the public were initially in favour of reducing expenditure on welfare, perhaps the deeper the cuts have become, the more the public have reacted against them? Or are the government’s critics misguided in their apparent belief that the public dislike the reductions in expenditure on welfare? Is there indeed, as the Conservatives appear to believe, an appetite for more?

Using data from the 2015 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, we address these questions by assessing the extent to which the public currently support two key strands of the government’s

¹ The reduction in spending on welfare achieved between 2010 and 2015 has been estimated at 16.7 billion for 2015-16 (Hood and Phillips, 2015).

The extent of the controversy that has been engendered by the government’s reform programme raises questions about the extent to which the public actually supports the objective of reducing welfare expenditure

programme of welfare reform, and examining how far attitudes are different now from what they were when the Conservative-led Coalition first came to power in 2010. Firstly, we assess attitudes towards the government's overarching aim of reducing the overall level of expenditure on welfare. Secondly, we assess how the public views one of the key approaches to achieving this aim, that is, limiting the circumstances in which particular benefits can be received. This may involve reducing the length of time for which a benefit is paid, limiting who is eligible to receive a benefit, or making tighter the conditions that have to be satisfied before a benefit is paid out.

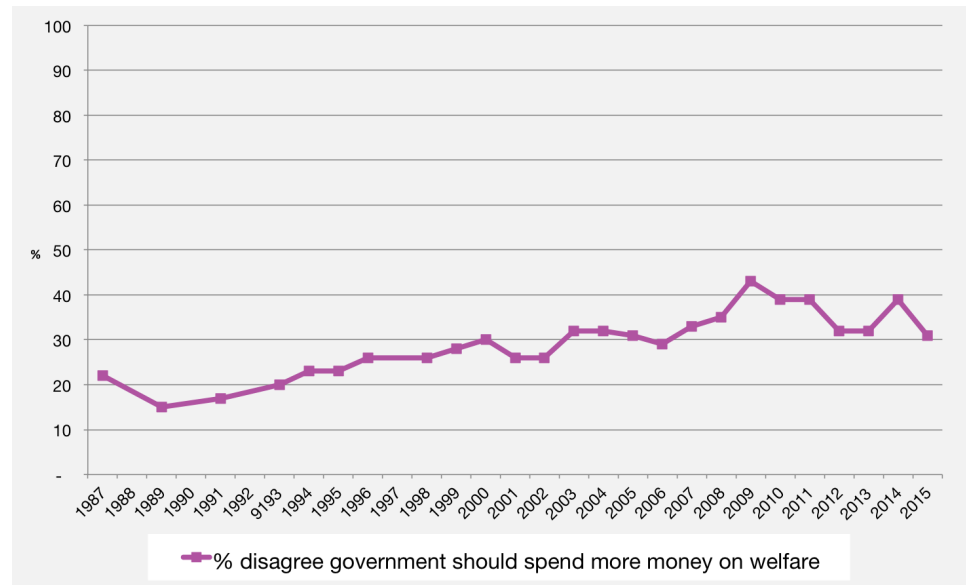
In the first part of this chapter we consider the attitudes of the public as a whole towards welfare reform, examining a wide range of questions in order to obtain as complete a picture as possible of the nature and extent of support for reform. In the second part, we consider whether and how attitudes towards different elements of welfare reform varies across different demographic groups and how this variation might best be understood. In particular, we assess whether attitudes towards welfare reform are largely shaped by people's ideological outlook or by their self-interest. We conclude by considering the implications of our findings for the future of the government's reform programme.

Does the public support a reduction in welfare spending?

Our initial task, then, is to assess how much support there is for reducing the overall level of spending on welfare, and whether the level of support has changed since the Conservatives first came to power. We do so by examining, first, attitudes towards the overall level of spending on welfare and, second, attitudes towards specific benefits and potential recipients.

Overall spending on welfare benefits

As part of a suite of questions designed to measure public attitudes to the welfare state (see Technical Details for further information), each year we ask respondents how far they agree or disagree with the proposition that "The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor". This statement is, of course, the opposite of the stance taken by the government, but how people respond to the proposition still gives us insight into attitudes towards the overall size of the welfare bill.

Figure 1 Attitudes to spending more on welfare benefits for the poor, 1987–2015

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

Figure 1 shows that around one-third (31%) now disagree with this statement – and can thus be regarded as holding a view that is potentially consistent with the direction of welfare reform. However, this group could also include those who think that spending on this area should simply remain at current levels rather than be cut. Moreover, those belonging to this group are outnumbered by the 4 in 10 who agree that more money should be spent, while another 3 in 10 neither agree nor disagree. On this evidence it would appear that a majority of the public are unsympathetic to cuts to spending on welfare benefits. Moreover, the proportion who disagree that the government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor is lower now than it was in 2010, although fluctuations up and down in that proportion since 2010 mean that there is as yet insufficient evidence to conclude that the public have begun systematically to react against the cuts that have been implemented so far. What, however, does seem to have ended is the gradual increase in the proportion opposed to more welfare spending that was in evidence before the Coalition came to power.

Spending on specific groups of benefit recipients

However, in truth, the government has not sought to curb all forms of welfare expenditure. Its focus has been on benefits paid to those of working age. Although the state pension age has been increased, otherwise benefits for pensioners have been protected; the government introduced a ‘triple lock’ for the state pension in 2011, guaranteeing that it would rise by whichever is the highest of the annual increase in earnings, prices, or 2.5%. Perhaps this selectivity reflects a public opinion that distinguishes between welfare for those still deemed to be of an age to work and those who are thought already to have done their bit for the economy? Or maybe people have come to feel that pensioners are being treated too favourably?

There is as yet insufficient evidence to conclude that the public have begun systematically to react against the cuts that have been implemented so far

In Table 1 we show the proportion who say there should be “more spending” or “less spending” on six different groups of benefit recipients. As the second half of the table shows, in most cases there is little support for cutting benefits. Fewer than 1 in 10 support cutting benefits for carers, the disabled, those on low incomes – and, indeed, the retired. Well under 2 in 10 support less government spending on benefits for single parents. The one instance where there is considerable, though still less than majority, support for reducing benefits is in respect of the unemployed.

Table 1 Attitudes to government spending on different benefits, 1998–2015

	1998	2002	2004	2006	2008	2011	2013	2015
% would like to see more government spending on benefits for...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
...people who care for those who are sick or disabled	82	82	81	82	83	74	73	75
...parents who work on very low incomes	68	69	62	66	67	58	59	61
...disabled people who cannot work	72	69	63	62	61	53	54	61
...retired people	71	73	73	72	72	57	48	49
...single parents	34	39	35	38	37	29	31	36
...unemployed people	22	21	15	16	14	15	15	17
	1998	2002	2004	2006	2008	2011	2013	2015
% would like to see less government spending on benefits for...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
...people who care for those who are sick or disabled	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2
...parents who work on very low incomes	3	4	4	4	4	5	5	5
...disabled people who cannot work	2	2	3	3	4	5	4	3
...retired people	2	2	2	2	2	3	7	7
...single parents	21	18	18	19	17	21	19	16
...unemployed people	35	36	44	45	54	51	49	45
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3146	3435	3199	3240	3358	3311	3244	3266

Moreover, there is some, albeit limited, evidence that views may have shifted somewhat in response to the cuts to spending on benefits undertaken to date. Support for reducing spending on benefits for unemployed people has fallen by six percentage points since 2011, and by nine points since 2008, despite the fact that unemployment has fallen in the interim. Meanwhile, after falling between 2008 and 2011, the level of support for increasing expenditure on those with a disability and on single parents has now returned to its pre-Coalition level. However, a similar drop between 2008 and 2011 in support for

The proportion who think that spending on retired people should be increased has fallen from 72% in 2008 and 59% in 2011 to slightly less than half (49%) now

increasing spending on carers and those on low incomes has not been fully reversed, although the idea remains a relatively popular one.

Above all, however, the one group where the balance of opinion clearly has shifted is in respect of retired people. True, the proportion who would like to see less spending on this group has only increased from a very low 2% in 2008 to a still low 7% in 2015, but the proportion who think that spending should be increased has fallen from 72% in 2008 and 59% in 2011 to slightly less than half (49%) now. This fall is consistent with evidence presented in the 32nd report that retirement pensions are now less likely to be regarded as a priority for extra spending.² So while it appears that there is still little demand for reducing spending on the retired, it would appear that the public recognise that pensioners have been treated relatively well and that consequently they may no longer feel that there is a clear case for further increased spending on this group. That said, given that around a half still back increased spending on the retired, it can hardly be said that the government's policy on this subject flies in the face of public opinion.

So, it is only in the case of unemployed people that there is support for spending cuts, and even in this case that support is now somewhat lower than it was when the Coalition first came to power. In contrast, spending more on those who are in work but are on relatively low incomes apparently remains a relatively popular proposition. We evidently should look at attitudes towards the government topping up the wages of those on low incomes a little more closely.

Topping up wages

Since the introduction of tax credits in 1997, BSA has regularly ascertained people's views on this subject. We ask first:

Some working couples with children find it hard to make ends meet on low wages. In these circumstances, do you think...

...the government should top up their wages,

...or, it is up to the couple to look after themselves and their children as best they can?

Comparable questions are then asked about "working couples without children" and about "working lone parents".

Although 'making work pay' is a principle which underpins both the payment of tax credits and the government's welfare reform agenda, recent government reforms have, nevertheless, sought to reduce spending on tax credits. From April 2013, the rates of most

² When respondents to the 2014 survey were asked for their first and second priorities for extra spending on social benefits, retirement pensions remained the most popular choice, although the proportion selecting this option as their first or second choice for extra spending had fallen from 78% in 2007 to 67% in 2014 (Taylor-Gooby, 2015).

working-age benefits, including tax credits, have risen by one per cent annually, rather than in line with inflation. More recently, the Chancellor has proposed lowering the earnings level at which tax credits begin to be withdrawn from £6,420 to £3,850, together with a speeding up of the rate at which withdrawal takes place – although, as noted earlier, these reforms were abandoned following their rejection by the House of Lords in 2015. Meanwhile the government has endeavoured to reduce the need to pay tax credits by trying to increase wage rates for the low paid; for instance, the Coalition’s Programme for Government in 2010 included a commitment to introducing arrangement to protect those on low incomes from the effect of public sector pay constraints (Coalition, 2010). More recently it has increased the Minimum Wage, now entitled the National Living Wage, by more than that the rate of inflation, and proposes further such increases between now and 2020. Against this backdrop it seems reasonable to regard opposition to the idea of the government topping-up wages as evidence of support for the current direction of welfare reform.

Two-thirds back topping up the wages of lone parents, while well over half do so in respect of working age couples with children

Table 2 reveals that, in fact, attitudes depend considerably on the circumstances of the recipient. Two-thirds back topping up the wages of lone parents, while well over half do so in respect of working age couples with children. On the other hand, only a quarter believe the government should be topping up the wages of a couple without children. This pattern has been consistent ever since we first addressed the subject in 1998. It would seem that for many people the justification for paying benefit to the low-paid rests on whether or not it helps to reduce the harm that living in a low wage environment might do to the next generation, rather than because there is a perception that the government should be trying to limit the hardship suffered by the adults in question. But this of course implies that a blanket approach to cutting tax credits, as opposed to focusing on the support received by those without children, is at odds with public opinion.

Table 2 Support for topping up wages for different types of families, 1998-2015

	1998	2000	2003	2005	2010	2013	2015
Working couples with children	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Government should top up their wages	56	61	59	58	55	59	55
Up to couple to look after themselves	31	28	29	31	31	29	29
Working couples without children	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Government should top up their wages	25	27	26	26	27	28	25
Up to couple to look after themselves	58	63	63	64	62	59	61
Lone parent	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Government should top up their wages	n/a	71	66	67	66	66	66
Up to parent to look after themselves	n/a	19	22	22	22	22	21
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2531	2980	2649	1783	2791	2832	2781

n/a = not asked

Only around 3 in 10 actually oppose increasing welfare spending on the poor

So far we have uncovered relatively little apparent support for the government's programme of welfare reform. Only around 3 in 10 actually oppose increasing welfare spending on the poor, that is the very opposite of what the government has been trying to achieve. There continues to be majority support for increasing spending on most groups of welfare recipients, and in some cases a drop in support for that view has subsequently been reversed. The one instance where there clearly has been a substantial reduction in support for more spending is in respect of the one group, retired people, who have largely been protected from the government's attempts to reduce expenditure. Only in the case of the unemployed and those on low wages who do not have children can it be claimed that the direction of public policy has been in line with that of public opinion. It would appear that apart from those two exceptions further cuts could well be met with considerable public controversy. However, what remains to be seen is whether or not this is the case for the second strand of welfare reform – that of limiting the circumstances in which benefits can be received.

Limiting the circumstances in which benefits can be received

We explore this by focusing on two particular benefits where the government has sought to restrict eligibility for benefit. The first is unemployment benefit,³ for which a revised set of more stringent sanctions was introduced in 2012, with those who do not comply with them potentially losing all or some of their benefit for a period of time. The second is housing benefit, where the removal of the spare room subsidy in April 2013 means that those who are of working age and are deemed by the government to have more bedrooms than they need now have the amount that they receive to help them pay their rent reduced accordingly.

Reducing duration and eligibility for unemployment benefit

To measure support for the idea of limiting the duration of unemployment benefit, we first of all asked whether “a person who is receiving unemployment benefits” and “who is fit and able to work” should “receive unemployment benefits for as long as it takes them to find a job” or whether instead they “should only be able to receive unemployment benefits for a limited amount of time”. The latter option is tighter than anything that has yet been proposed by the government, but nevertheless, as the first half of Table 3 shows, it is still the case that as many as three in five support the idea in principle, even if we cannot be sure what they think the limit should be. Moreover, there is no sign here of support having diminished over

³ While Jobseeker's Allowance was introduced in 1996 as the main welfare support for the unemployed (replacing unemployment benefits and income support), we use the term 'Unemployment Benefit' to describe generically the range of benefits for the unemployed that have existed across the lifetime of the survey.

time – if anything the opposite is true. On this topic it would seem there is considerable and consistent support for a relatively tough regime.

However, the picture looks a little different when we look at the responses to a second question in which respondents were asked whether “a person who is receiving unemployment benefits and who has limited job skills or work experience” should “be required to look for work straight away in order to continue receiving unemployment benefits” or instead “should be offered help to improve their job skills while continuing to receive benefits before they are required to look for work”. Here just 3 in 10 think that the person with limited job skills should be required to look for work straight away, a figure that also has remained very stable over time. Perhaps the person who is trying to improve their job skills is thought to be making an effort that the person who is unemployed for a relatively long period of time is not.

Just 3 in 10 think that the person with limited job skills should be required to look for work straight away, a figure that also has remained very stable over time

Table 3 Attitudes to the duration of unemployment benefit receipt, 2007-2015

	2007	2009	2012	2015
Duration	%	%	%	%
Should receive for as long as it takes to find job	n/a	41	36	39
Should receive for a limited time	n/a	56	52	60
Person with limited job skills / work experience	%	%	%	%
Should be required to look for work straight away	31	30	33	31
Should be offered help to improve job skills while continuing to receive benefits	67	69	66	68
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3082	3421	3248	3257

n/a = not asked

But while the public may be sympathetic to the idea of someone being on benefit while enhancing their skills, they evince little support for the idea that an unemployed person should try to find the right job for them rather than the first job that comes along. This becomes clear when we asked respondents what should happen in various scenarios where a person on unemployment benefit was offered a job that was potentially unsuitable for them in some way. We asked respondents to:

Imagine a person who is looking for work and receiving unemployment benefits. A job becomes available, which pays at least as much as they get in unemployment benefits, but it is not the kind of job they are looking for. For each of the following situations, please tell me whether you think they should take the available job, or remain on benefits while they look for a different job ...

...if the available job is paid at the minimum wage?

...if the job is on a short-term contract?**...if it is a job they are not interested in?**

As shown in Table 4, in each case, clear majorities of more than 8 in 10 think the person should take the job, rather than remaining on benefits to look for a different job. Moreover, that level of support has remained relatively stable. Although these questions do not tell us anything about what sanctions the public think should be imposed on someone who fails to take a job, they nevertheless suggest considerable support for the current direction of welfare reform – at least in relation to the unemployed.

Table 4 Views on whether person on unemployment benefits should take jobs that are unsuitable in some way, 2007-2015

	2007	2012	2015
Minimum wage job	%	%	%
Should take job	n/a	85	88
Should remain on benefits while they look for a different job	n/a	11	9
Short term contract	%	%	%
Should take	86	82	82
Should remain on benefits while they look for a different job	11	14	15
Job they are not interested in	%	%	%
Should take	79	83	83
Should remain on benefits while they look for a different job	16	14	14
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3082	3248	3257

n/a = not asked

However, we have already ascertained that attitudes towards benefits for the unemployed are not necessarily typical of attitudes towards welfare in general. We thus now turn to attitudes towards limiting access to housing benefit, and in particular to the principle behind the removal of the spare room subsidy, to see whether or not a similar picture emerges.

Limiting eligibility for housing benefit

In our latest survey we asked respondents to:

Consider a working age couple on a low income who receive money from the government to help them pay their rent. They have more bedrooms than the government thinks they need.

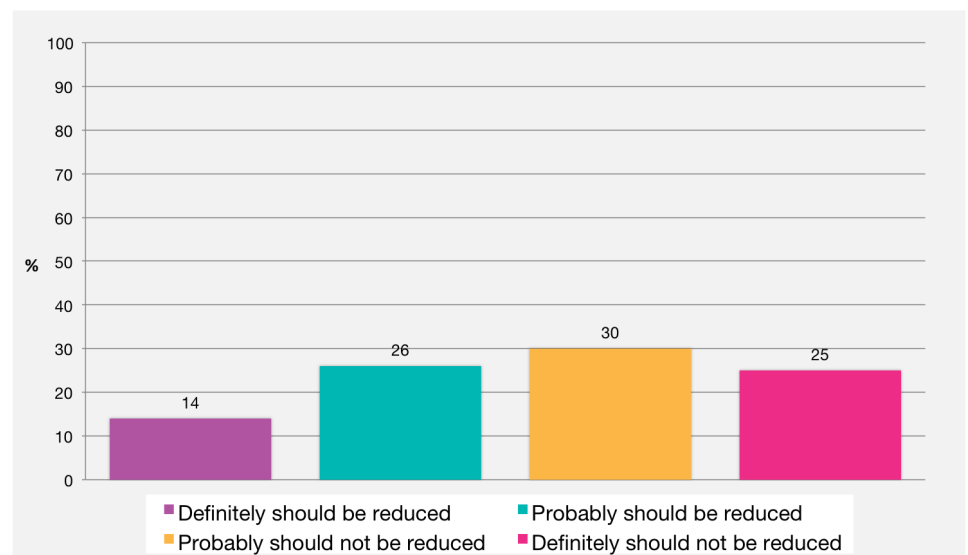
Do you think the amount of money they receive should or should not be reduced because of this?

As Figure 2 shows, there is much less support for the policy direction taken by the government on this issue than there is for

limiting eligibility for unemployment benefit. While 4 in 10 (40%) think the amount of money a working-age couple receives in these circumstances should be reduced, suggesting they are potentially supportive of the government's approach, more than half (55%) do not think it should be reduced. Indeed, as many as a quarter are "definitely" opposed to the idea.

Given this question was asked for the first time in 2015, we cannot be sure whether support for the government's approach has risen or fallen since the policy was first introduced in April 2013. However, we might note that whereas the internet polling company, YouGov, found that 49% supported this policy in March 2013 (just before its implementation), by July 2014 (some fifteen months later) it had fallen to 41%.⁴ While we cannot compare our BSA reading with these polls due to differences in sampling and question wording, it may be the case that the 40% who now support this aspect of welfare reform was rather higher in the past.

Figure 2 Views on reducing the money received from government by a working age couple with more bedrooms than they need



Unweighted base 3266

We have discovered that the public is rather more supportive of reducing the circumstances in which particular benefits can be received than they are of reducing spending on welfare. However, the substantial differences in attitudes to these two strands of reform, and to particular types of benefit and categories of recipient, implies that individuals' attitudes towards different aspects of welfare may be influenced by different considerations. It is to this question that we turn next.

The public is rather more supportive of reducing the circumstances in which particular benefits can be received than they are of reducing spending on welfare

⁴ <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/07/18/bedroom-tax-divisive-ever/>

Support for welfare reform: ideology or self-interest?

In the second part of this chapter, we consider the characteristics that appear to shape, on the one hand, attitudes towards levels of welfare spending and, on the other, attitudes towards tightening eligibility. In each case we focus on two measures. We consider what shapes attitudes towards overall levels of spending, by analysing our question on whether people agree or disagree that “the government should reduce spending on welfare benefits for the poor” and a question on one of specific topics that has recently generated political controversy, that is, whether people think that a working couple with children should “look after themselves ...as best they can”, rather than have their wages topped up by the government. Meanwhile, so far as attitudes towards eligibility are concerned, we focus on who does and does not think that unemployment benefit should only be available for a limited period, and attitudes towards reducing the housing benefit of those deemed to have a spare room.

There are two broad sets of influences that we might think shape attitudes towards these topics. First of all, we might anticipate that someone’s attitude towards welfare reform will be determined by their wider moral and political attitudes and values – such as the political party with which they identify and their general attitudes to the welfare state. So, for example, we might expect someone who is generally in favour of reducing government taxation and spending to want to see levels of welfare spending reduced. Equally, we might expect someone who is in favour of redistributing income to support increasing spending on welfare benefits for the poor and the topping up of the wages of low income families.

Alternatively, an individual’s support for elements of welfare reform might be influenced by their personal circumstances. We might envisage that someone in receipt of a particular benefit would be less likely to support reforms that would result in spending on or eligibility for that benefit being reduced. Applying this logic more broadly, those in particular income or age groups might have views that reflect the interests of ‘their’ group. So we might anticipate that those with the lowest household incomes, who would be more likely to receive benefits, would be less supportive of welfare reform than those with the highest incomes. Equally, we might anticipate that older people are less supportive of working-age benefits from which they are unlikely to benefit, even though they may not necessarily mean that they are less supportive of welfare in general (Duffy, 2013).

Support for reducing spending on benefits

Table 5 shows how the level of disagreement with the proposition that welfare spending on the poor should increase varies according to a variety of ideological and demographic indicators. So far as ideological position is concerned, opposition to increasing welfare

spending in general is higher among Conservative than among Labour supporters, among those who think that overall levels of taxation and spending should be reduced rather than increased,⁵ and, most markedly, amongst those who oppose redistribution⁶ as compared with those in favour. There are also some differences in the anticipated direction in respect of people's social background. Those on higher incomes, and those who (together with their partner) are not in receipt of benefits are more likely to oppose more welfare spending than are those on lower incomes and those who are receiving benefits. The differences are though rather smaller than they are in the case of our indicators of ideological position, while in fact there is no significant difference at all between the views of those in the youngest and oldest age groups.

Table 5 Attitudes towards reducing spending on welfare for the poor, by ideology and self-interest

	% disagree government should spend more on welfare benefits for poor	<i>Unweighted base</i>
All	31	2781
Measures of ideology		
Party identification		
Conservative	47	957
Labour	18	757
Attitude to government taxation and spending		
Should reduce taxes and spend less	45	112
Should increase taxes and spend more	17	1307
Attitude to redistribution		
Supports redistribution	19	1200
Opposes redistribution	56	762
Measures of self-interest		
Age group		
18-24	29	186
25-34	35	381
35-44	35	457
45-54	34	493
55-64	27	487
65-74	26	468
75+	26	307
Household income		
Highest quartile	39	673
Lowest quartile	22	592
Benefit receipt (respondent or partner)		
Receives any state benefit or tax credit	28	1649
Does not receive any state benefits or tax credits	35	1127

⁵ This is measured by a question that asked whether, if it had to choose, the government should 'reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits', keep taxation and spending 'at the same level as now', or increase taxes and spend more. For details of the pattern of response to this question see the chapter on politics.

⁶ Support for redistribution is measured by agreement with the statement "The government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well-off".

However, these various indicators will often be related to each other. Conservative supporters are more likely to be opposed to more government spending and redistribution as well as being more likely to live in a high income household. To establish which of these indicators really are associated with attitudes towards the overall level of welfare spending, we need to use multivariate statistical analysis that identifies which indicators are significantly associated with attitudes towards welfare spending after bearing in mind not only the size of our sample, but also after controlling for the association between those attitudes and all of the other indicators we have taken into account. A summary of the result of such an analysis, in this instance a binary logistic regression, is shown in Table 6 (Model 1).⁷

This confirms much of the impression created by Table 5. It finds that not only age but also whether someone is in receipt of benefit is not significantly associated with opposition to spending more on welfare benefits. Meanwhile, although household income is still significant the association proves to be relatively weak. In contrast, all three measures of ideology remain significant and important predictors of attitudes. This means, for example, that even among Conservative supporters, opposition to increasing spending on welfare is even greater if someone is also opposed to redistribution of income and to more government taxation and spending. In any event it seems clear that attitudes to reducing spending on welfare benefits are primarily a reflection of ideology rather than self-interest.

⁷ Further details of the logistics regression analyses undertaken are available from the author on request.

Table 6 Results of multivariate analysis of characteristics which predict support for reducing spending on welfare

	Model 1	Model 2
	Disagree that government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor	Think that working age couple struggling to make ends meet should look after themselves
Independent variables included in models		
Characteristics relating to ideology		
Party identification	+++	+++
Attitudes to welfare	not included ⁸	+++
Attitudes to redistribution	+++	+++
Attitudes to taxation and spending	+++	
Characteristics relating to self-interest		
Age group		
Household income quartiles	+	+
Benefit receipt (for respondent and partner) ⁹		+++
Whether respondent has any children in household	not included	+++

+++ = significant at 99% level

+ = significant at 95% level

However, the pattern we find for attitudes to the government topping up wages for a working couple with children is somewhat different (see Table 7). Here too, attitudes are linked to the three indicators of ideological position that we used previously. Those who support the Conservatives, who oppose redistribution and who want less taxation and government spending are all more likely to believe that the couple should make ends meet without government help. At the same time we can also see that someone who broadly has an outlook that can be categorised as anti-welfare¹⁰ is also more likely to hold that view.

On this topic, though, it appears that respondents' apparent self-interest also makes a difference. Most markedly, just 14% of those currently in receipt of tax credits think that the couple should look after themselves, compared with 31% of those not in receipt of this benefit. Equally older people, and those living in households without children are also more likely to feel that the couple should look after themselves. Evidently those who currently are benefitting from tax credits or who are of an age and a family situation whereby they might be potential beneficiaries take a rather different perspective on this subject than those who do not. This suggests that whatever

⁸ We did not include the welfarism scale (as outlined in fn. 9 below) in the analysis of disagreement with the view that the government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor, as this is one of the eight questionnaire items on which the scale is based.

⁹ For Model 1, we compared the views of those respondents who reported that they or their spouse were receiving any of the state benefits asked about. For Model 2, we compared the views of those respondents receiving tax credits (Working Tax Credit and/or Child Tax Credit) with those not receiving any tax credits.

¹⁰ BSA includes a welfare scale based on eight agree-disagree items designed to measure broad attitudes to the welfare state and welfare recipients. The Technical Details contain further information regarding how the welfarism scale is constructed and validated.

Just 14% of those currently in receipt of tax credits think that the couple should look after themselves, compared with 31% of those not in receipt of this benefit

may be the position in respect of attitudes towards welfare benefits in general, attitudes towards specific benefits reflect self-interest as well as ideological predisposition.

Table 7 Attitudes towards government topping up wages of low income childless couple, by Ideology and self-interest

	% oppose topping up wages of low income childless couple	Unweighted base
All	29	2781
Measures of ideology		
Party identification		
Conservative	46	957
Labour	18	757
Attitudes to welfare		
Pro-welfare	11	681
Anti-welfare	53	445
Attitude to government taxation and spending		
Should reduce taxes and spend less	36	112
Should increase taxes and spend more	24	1307
Attitude to redistribution		
Supports redistribution	20	1200
Opposes redistribution	45	762
Measures of self-interest		
Age group		
18-24	25	186
25-34	29	381
35-44	27	457
45-54	26	493
55-64	31	487
65-74	33	468
75+	37	307
Household income		
Highest quartile	34	673
Lowest quartile	21	592
Benefit receipt (respondent or partner)		
Receives any tax credits	14	342
Does not receive any tax credits	31	2439

This is confirmed by the results of a multivariate analysis (shown in Table 6 – Model 2). True, with the sole exception of attitudes to taxation and government spending, all of our measures of ideology remain significant predictors of attitudes to topping up wages, once the relationships between them are all controlled for. However, our measures of social and economic background play a more important role than they did in respect of attitudes towards the overall level of welfare spending. Being in receipt of a tax credit together with the

presence of children in the household remain significant predictors of views on topping up wages even after taking into account people's ideological outlook, while household income is also significantly, if less importantly, associated with people's views.

Support for limiting the circumstances in which benefits can be received

But what about attitudes towards tightening eligibility for benefits? Once again ideological outlook appears to matter. As the left hand column of Table 8 shows, those who identify with the Conservative Party, those who are opposed to redistribution and those whose overall outlook is unsympathetic to welfare are markedly more likely to believe that unemployment benefit should only be paid for a limited period of time. For example, around four in five of those who can be regarded as anti-welfare believe that the length of time for which unemployment benefit is paid should be limited, compared with only around 3 in 10 of those whose attitude to welfare in general is relatively sympathetic. At the same time, however, those who are currently in receipt of unemployment benefit are also much less likely to support the idea than are those who are not in receipt of benefit.¹¹ Similarly, there are also less marked differences between those living in high and those in low income households, and between older and younger respondents.

11 Only 65 respondents to this question reported that they or their spouse was in receipt of unemployment benefit, so caution needs to be applied to this finding.

Table 8 Attitudes towards limiting length of time someone can claim Unemployment Benefit and paying Housing Benefit for spare rooms, by ideology and social background

	% support limiting duration of unemployment benefit	% support removing spare room subsidy	<i>Unweighted base</i>
All	60	40	3266
Measures of ideology			
Party identification			
Conservative	72	49	1075
Labour	48	32	943
Attitudes to welfare			
Pro-welfare	31	23	681
Anti-welfare	84	58	445
Attitude to government taxation and spending			
Should reduce taxes and spend less	56	54	134
Should increase taxes and spend more	55	33	1505
Attitude to redistribution			
Supports redistribution	49	33	1200
Opposes redistribution	71	46	762
Measures of self-interest			
Age group			
18-24	56	48	228
25-34	57	47	479
35-44	63	45	555
45-54	57	38	567
55-64	58	31	546
65-74	65	32	514
75+	64	31	373
Household income			
Highest quartile	64	45	742
Lowest quartile	50	35	691
Benefit receipt (respondent or partner)			
Receives unemployment benefit	24	not included	65
Does not receive unemployment benefit	60	not included	3201
Receives housing benefit	not included	29	400
Does not receive housing benefit	not included	41	2866

With the exception of benefit receipt, all of these measures continue to be associated with attitudes towards limiting the duration of unemployment benefit when we include them in a multivariate analysis (see Table 9, Model 3). In this instance then, it appears that once again support for limiting eligibility for benefits is driven both by ideology and by apparent self-interest.

Table 9 Results of multivariate analysis of characteristics which predict support for limiting circumstances in which benefits can be received

	Model 3	Model 4
	Agree that duration of unemployment benefit should be limited	Support idea of working age couple with too many bedrooms giving some of benefit back to govt
Independent variables included in models		
Characteristics relating to ideology		
Party identification	+	+++
Attitudes to welfare	+++	+++
Attitudes to redistribution	+++	
Attitudes to taxation and spending		+++
Characteristics relating to self-interest		
Age group	+++	+++
Household income quartiles	+++	
Currently in receipt of benefit (respondent and/or partner)		

+++ = significant at 99% level

+ = significant at 95% level

Much the same also appears to be true of attitudes towards the spare room subsidy (Table 8, right hand column). Again Conservative supporters and those who can be regarded as anti-welfare are more likely to support cutting the housing benefit of those who are of working age and are deemed to have more bedrooms than they need. This is also the case for those who are in favour of a reduction in taxation and government spending. At the same time so also are those who live in a high income household and who are not themselves in receipt of housing benefit. But there is also one key difference between the pattern of attitudes towards this subject and what we have otherwise observed so far. Hitherto we have found that younger people are less likely to oppose topping up the wages of a low income couple and limiting the duration of unemployment benefit. However, they prove to be more likely to back cutting the housing benefit of those who have a spare room. Most likely, this reflects the fact that, on this subject, the self-interest of younger people would appear to be in tune with the government's reform. Younger people who are struggling to find somewhere to live, or at least somewhere big enough to live, may well feel that older people who are occupying properties that are bigger than their needs following the departure of their children from the family home should be encouraged to downsize to a smaller property. Indeed, when we take a multivariate analysis (Table 9, Model 4), we find that age continues to be significantly associated with attitudes towards the spare room subsidy, alongside, once again, people's ideological outlook.

Younger people are less likely to oppose topping up the wages of a low income couple and limiting the duration of unemployment benefit. However, they prove to be more likely to back cutting the housing benefit of those who have a spare room

The overall picture

Ideology evidently plays an important role in shaping attitudes towards welfare. This is true whether we are looking at attitudes towards the level of welfare spending in general or at attitudes towards specific benefits. In contrast, for the most part apparent self-interest does not play much of a role in influencing attitudes towards the level of welfare spending as a whole, but can make a difference when it comes to specific benefits. Moreover, this can mean that the attitudes of those in different social groups can vary depending on the benefit in question. In particular, while younger people appear more sympathetic to tax credits and unemployment benefit, for which they might potentially be eligible, they are less keen on continuing to pay housing benefit to those deemed to have a spare room, a position in which they are less likely to find themselves. Thus although for the most part attitudes towards the government's welfare programme will reflect voters' broad ideological outlook, irrespective of the benefit in question, they may also be influenced by a perceived self-interest that means that some reforms are more or less popular with particular groups than others.

Conclusions

Our evidence suggests that it is perhaps not surprising that on occasion the government's programme of welfare reform has aroused controversy. It seems that only a minority back the overall objective of reducing levels of spending on welfare. Meanwhile, it appears that many would like to see an increase in the benefits paid to some recipients of welfare, most notably, carers, people with disabilities and those on low incomes who have children. Attempts to cut or curb welfare for these groups seem destined to hit choppy waters, as indeed has proven to be the case. Yet, while public opinion has begun to shift in relation to spending on retirement pensions, it certainly is not the case that the government's protection of spending on benefits for pensioners has generated a backlash in public opinion; the public remain relatively favourable towards spending on this group.

But there are other groups to whom the public are much less sympathetic, including above all, the unemployed. There is widespread support for having tight eligibility rules for unemployment benefit and a belief that people should be finding another job as soon as possible, rather than seeking one that they would like to do. Meanwhile, far from being universally unpopular, the question of cutting the housing benefit of those with a spare room divides public opinion, including not least younger and older people. More generally, curbing eligibility for benefits appears to be rather more palatable to the public than cutting levels of benefit, although those most affected by any such curb are always likely to object the most irrespective of whether they are more generally in favour of cutting welfare expenditure. The issue looks set to continue to be a political minefield.

While public opinion has begun to shift in relation to spending on retirement pensions, it certainly is not the case that the government's protection of spending on benefits for pensioners has generated a backlash in public opinion

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Appendix

The data for Figure 1 are shown below.

Table A.1 Attitudes to welfare benefits, 1987–2015

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000
% disagree government should spend more money on welfare benefits	22	15	17	20	23	23	26	26	28	30
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1281	2604	2481	2567	2929	3135	3103	3000	2450	2980
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
% disagree government should spend more money on welfare benefits	26	26	26	32	31	29	33	35	43	39
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2795	2900	873	2609	2699	2822	2672	3000	967	2810
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015					
% disagree government should spend more money on welfare benefits	39	32	32	39	31					
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2841	2855	2832	2376	2754					