

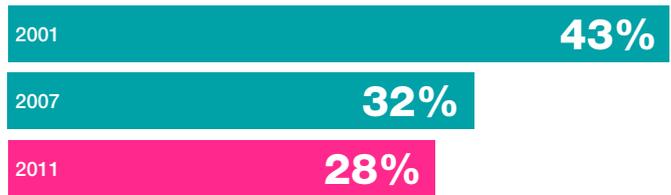
Welfare

Are tough times affecting attitudes to welfare?

In previous economic downturns, the public has responded with increased sympathy for welfare recipients and support for spending on welfare benefits. But as the coalition government begins to apply extensive reforms to the benefit system, is that still the case?

Role of government

Support for government's main role in providing welfare support and for increasing spending on benefits has declined markedly in the past decade.

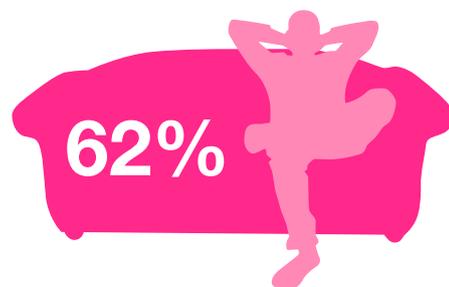
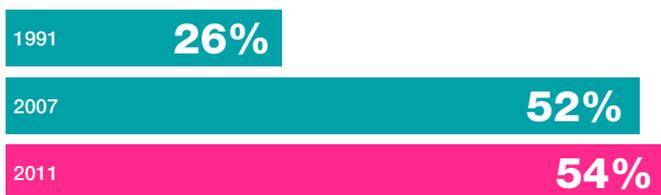


In 2001 88% agreed that government should be mainly responsible for ensuring **unemployed people** have enough to live on; 59% think this now.

In 2001 43% thought that the **government should spend more** on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes, compared to 32% in 2007 and 28% now.

Attitudes to benefit recipients

People are more sceptical about whether benefit recipients deserve the help they receive than during the last recession in the early 1990s and attitudes show little sign of softening.



In 1991, 26% agreed that, if benefits were less generous, people would stand on their own two feet. This proportion rose to 52% in 2007, before the onset of recession, and now stands at 54%.

62% agree that unemployment **benefits are too high** and discourage work, more than double the proportion who thought this in 1991 (27%) and a significantly higher proportion than said this was the case in 2007 (54%).

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During previous times of economic difficulty, the public has tended to be more sympathetic towards benefit recipients and more supportive of increasing welfare spending

Introduction

Welfare has become a highly-charged political issue in recent years. The Welfare Reform Act, which passed into law in 2012, is routinely being described as legislating for the biggest change in the welfare system for more than 60 years. Its main elements, to be implemented over a decade, are designed to limit eligibility for a range of benefits, to incentivise employment for those able to work, and to streamline the system in ways that will achieve a sustainable long-term reduction in levels of welfare spending. There are grounds to expect the views of the public, and those of supporters of the Conservative Party in particular, to be moving in a similar direction. Certainly, an equivalent trend occurred from the late-1990s, when New Labour repositioned itself on issues such as equality and government intervention, and the views of the public in general, and the Party's supporters in particular, subsequently became less pro-welfare (Curtice, 2010). With the coalition government debating and implementing more far-reaching policies to reduce government provision of welfare in Britain, we might expect to see pro-welfare attitudes decline further.

Major reform is, however, being pursued by the coalition government at a time of double-dip recession in the economy, and the highest levels of unemployment seen for almost two decades. British Social Attitudes surveys have demonstrated that, during previous times of economic difficulty, the public has tended to be more sympathetic towards benefit recipients and more supportive of increasing welfare spending (Taylor-Gooby, 2004). Clearly a shift in opinion along those lines would place the public in increasing opposition to a major plank of the Coalition's policy platform, if it were repeated during the current economic downturn. But is that really happening? Are public attitudes to welfare adhering to the cyclical pattern observed in the 1980s and 1990s, or is this recession turning out somehow to be different? And, if so, is this a result of the public's views moving in line with the welfare agenda of the Coalition?

This chapter addresses these questions by exploring the public's views on various aspects of the welfare system. We begin by considering what people think the proper role of government should be in welfare provision and attitudes towards levels of spending on welfare. We then explore attitudes towards benefit recipients and the extent to which they are deemed to deserve help from the state. Next we examine opinions about the way the welfare system operates in practice and how it could be improved. Throughout, we consider attitudes to different types of benefits and benefit recipients, to determine whether the public adopts a holistic stance on welfare or whether attitudes are more nuanced.

Having outlined current trends in attitudes to welfare, we move on to examine whether these are occurring in all sections of the population or whether the views of particular groups are moving in quite different directions. How far do individuals' attitudes match those of the political parties with which they identify? Do those who rely on, or are more likely to rely on, benefits hold different views to those who are more economically advantaged? In addressing these questions, we aim to discover whether the British public is becoming more or less united in its aspirations and expectations for welfare, and whether unsuspected social divisions could impede the government's agenda for reform.

Setting the scene

We begin by outlining the two developments which we might expect to inform public attitudes to welfare in Britain in 2011 and beyond.

In 2011, Britain entered the first double-dip recession since 1975, having experienced the deepest recession since World War II in 2008–2009 as a result of the financial crisis. The impact of the recessions on individuals' lives and employment, examined in the chapter on Work and wellbeing, means that a larger proportion of the public might now have experience of welfare than would be the case in better economic times. This is reflected in the fact that the unemployment rate rose to 8.1 per cent (2.57 million people) in August 2011, the highest level witnessed since 1996, following the early-1990s recession, after which unemployment peaked at 10.4 per cent in 1993.¹ In such circumstances, we might logically expect attitudes towards welfare to become more sympathetic. Individuals would be more likely to recognise the need for welfare support, from media discussion or in their own neighbourhoods or workplaces, require such support themselves or know someone else who does. This expectation is endorsed by the results of British Social Attitudes surveys conducted during previous recessions in the 1980s and early-1990s (Taylor-Gooby, 2004), which have shown that attitudes to the poor and those on welfare benefits have grown more sympathetic in times of recession. Indeed, a review of public attitudes to welfare at the start of the economic crisis revealed the first signs of such a change (Curtice and Park, 2010), with attitudes to those on benefits appearing to become slightly more sympathetic.

However, developments in government policy, as mentioned earlier, might lead us to expect attitudes to welfare to move in the opposite direction. The Welfare Reform Act, which received royal assent on 8 March 2012, legislates for far-reaching changes to the benefits and tax credits system. These, over time, are intended to reduce the underlying demand for welfare support. More immediately, as set out in the March 2012 budget, the government is aiming for welfare cuts of £10 billion by 2016 (HM Treasury, 2012). The Welfare Reform Act sets out a variety of short- and longer-term strategies intended to contribute to spending reductions. Eligibility for a range of benefits is being restricted, alongside reductions in the actual levels of specific benefits being paid, while strategies have been designed to incentivise individuals to move off benefits where possible. For example, Child Benefit will be reduced for households where an individual is earning more than £50,000 and will not be available when an individual is earning more than £60,000, while Housing Benefit entitlement will be limited for social housing tenants whose accommodation is deemed larger than they need. An overall cap has also been introduced, limiting the total amount of benefits that can be claimed to no more than the average earnings of a working family. Among measures designed to make the welfare system more efficient, the introduction of a Universal Credit, from 2013, stands out. This will provide a single streamlined payment for people of working age, aimed at improving work incentives. The government is introducing a range of other changes intended to incentivise employment for those considered capable of work. Around half a million working-age people out of the two million claiming Disability Living Allowance are expected to lose their entitlement after 2013, when it is replaced by a more rigorously tested Personal Independence Payment.

There are reasons to predict that opinion has not followed the pattern of previous recessions, because the public has embraced a more tough-minded view of welfare

How might we expect these changes in policy to impact on the public's attitudes? Existing evidence from British Social Attitudes surveys shows how the supporters of particular political parties, when they have come to trust their party's standpoints, can be expected to adopt and replicate these when asked about their own views (Butler and Stokes, 1974). This tendency was especially noticeable under the 1997 to 2010 Labour government when attitudes among its supporters became markedly less pro-welfare as the party repositioned itself on issues such as equality and government intervention (Curtice, 2010). As a consequence, there are reasons to predict that opinion has not followed the pattern of previous recessions, because the public – under the long-term influence of Labour's stance as well as that of the current coalition – has embraced a more tough-minded view of welfare than it held in the past. We might also suspect that recent political and media debate about the government's welfare reforms – including claims that large numbers of welfare recipients do not really deserve their payments – will have influenced attitudes, inclining people to be less supportive of benefits and those who receive them.

To find out which of these two potential scenarios is closer to the truth – or whether the reality is rather more complex – we begin by considering how far the public endorses the role of the government as the main provider of welfare in Britain.

The role of government

Public attitudes to welfare spending are inevitably framed by people's views about the nature and extent of the government's role in providing welfare. Since the late-1990s, British Social Attitudes has asked respondents whether they think the government, employers or individuals should provide financial support for individuals in different scenarios. Specifically, we ask respondents who should mainly be responsible for ...

... paying for the cost of health care when someone is ill?

... ensuring people have enough money to live on in retirement?

... ensuring that people have enough to live on if they become sick for a long time or disabled?

... ensuring people have enough to live on if they become unemployed?

Table 1.1 presents the public's views over time in relation to government responsibility for welfare. It shows how the public discriminates to a considerable degree in its response to the four scenarios. In 2010, the latest year for which data for three of the items is available, almost nine in ten thought the government should be mainly responsible for paying for the cost of health care when someone is ill, while more than eight in ten thought the same about ensuring the long-term sick or disabled have enough to live on. However, when responding to scenarios that do not involve illness or disability, the public is far less certain that government should take the lead. When it comes to ensuring that people who become unemployed have enough to live on, the proportion in 2011 saying government should mainly be responsible declines to six in ten, and, in 2010, to little more than half in the case of ensuring people have enough to live on in retirement. The fact that the public shows the least approval for the government having the main responsibility for providing welfare for those in retirement stands in direct contrast to the hierarchy set out by David Cameron in his speech of 25 June 2012 (Cameron, 2012), when he sought to reassure the public that current welfare provision for the retired would be protected, before outlining how support for the sick, disabled and unemployed would be reduced. This priority given by the Coalition to maintaining the government's role as a provider of support for the retired is clearly at odds with the views of the public.

Table 1.1 Views on government responsibility for providing welfare, 1998–2011

% agree government should be mainly responsible for ...	1998	1999	2001	2003	2005	2008	2010	2011
... paying for the cost of healthcare when someone is ill	82	85	87	83	86	86	88	n/a
... ensuring that people have enough to live on if they become sick for a long time or disabled	80	83	84	83	83	84	84	n/a
... ensuring people have enough to live on if they become unemployed	85	87	88	81	n/a	n/a	n/a	59
... ensuring people have enough money to live on in retirement	56	58	62	58	56	58	52	n/a
<i>Weighted base</i>	3146	3143	3287	3276	3210	3333	3297	3311
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3146	3143	3287	3272	3193	3358	3297	3311

n/a = not asked

The distinction people make between health-related welfare and support for the unemployed or elderly has become more pronounced

Looking back over time, it is also clear that the distinction people make between health-related welfare and support for the unemployed or elderly has become more pronounced. The relatively high proportions who say government should be mainly responsible for providing welfare when someone is ill or disabled have fluctuated only slightly since the late-1990s. However, the proportion thinking the government should be responsible for providing an adequate retirement income now stands 10 percentage points below its highest point, which was reached in 2001. Agreement that the government should be mainly responsible for ensuring unemployed people have enough to live on has fallen even more sharply – from just over eight in ten in 2003, to less than six in ten now. (Because of the absence of data for the intervening period, we cannot be sure whether endorsement of the government's role declined steadily across the eight years, or whether this change occurred within a more narrowly-defined period.)

If an increasing number of people are disinclined to think that government should take the lead in providing welfare for those who are unemployed or retired, whose responsibility do they think it should be? Replies to our question suggest that the proportions thinking that employers or individuals themselves or their families should be responsible for ensuring sufficient retirement income have increased somewhat over time. More than one in three (35 per cent) say individuals and families should take the main responsibility, while around one in ten (11 per cent) point towards the person's employer. More strikingly, when it comes to support for the unemployed, one in three (33 per cent) think the individual or their family should mainly be responsible, compared with one in ten (10 per cent) who thought this in 1998.

Although these questions were not asked during previous times of recession, we might have expected a greater endorsement for government's role in providing welfare in 2010 and 2011, compared with previous years, given that the need for such support would be more apparent in difficult economic circumstances. Conversely, our findings suggest a growing minority view that it is not the state's role to ensure the unemployed have an adequate income; however, we need to investigate further before interpreting this as a particular endorsement of the government's welfare reforms. The public, after all, remains strong in its view that government should provide for the long-term sick and disabled, whose benefits are also being reassessed. So, having established that the public differentiates between different types of welfare support and its recipients, we next consider how far these distinctions are reflected in attitudes towards government spending on welfare.

Welfare spending

Attitudes to government spending on benefits do not operate within a vacuum. They are likely to be informed by attitudes to government spending and taxation in general, which, rather than remaining static, have been shown to be influenced by comparisons of what the government is perceived currently to be spending with the respondent's 'ideal' level of spending (Wlezien, 1995; Soroka and Wlezien, 2005). Attitudes to spending on welfare may also be influenced by the public's understanding of the current levels of individual benefits and the extent to which these are perceived to be adequate; previous analyses have demonstrated that individuals hold varied and often inaccurate understandings of the value of individual benefits, and express quite different views about their adequacy when asked about the real levels of benefit payments (Hills, 2001). The extent to which the public prioritises spending on welfare will also inevitably be influenced by the priority they ascribe to other areas of government spending. Moreover, an individual might have different attitudes to spending on different types of welfare benefits; as we have seen, there is a far greater endorsement of the government's role as a provider of welfare for the sick and disabled, compared to those who are retired or unemployed, and this might link with greater support for government spending on benefits for these groups.

To start examining people's views in this context, we first look at attitudes to government taxation and spending in general. Since 1983, British Social Attitudes has invited respondents to say which of three options the government should choose:

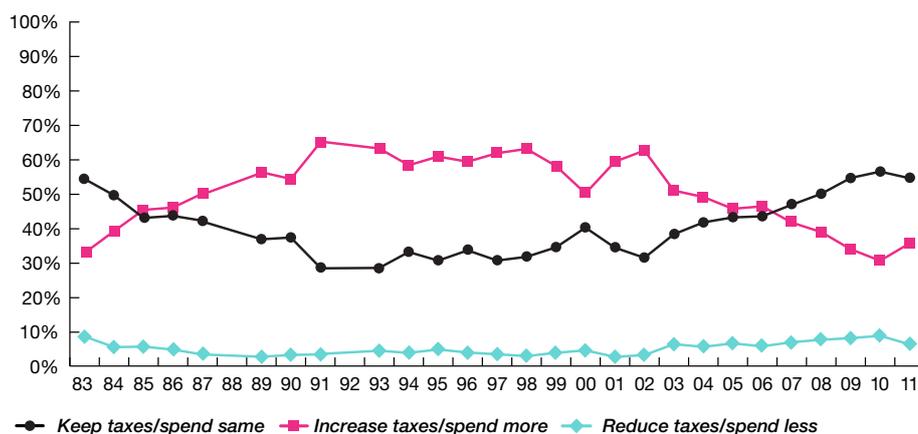
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits

Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now

Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits

The responses provided over time are presented in Figure 1.1. This shows that the proportion thinking the government should increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits has declined steadily between 2002 and 2010. Rather than interpret this trend as crude evidence that the public is disenchanted with public spending in those areas, previous reports have emphasised the likelihood that additional spending will appear less necessary in times when public expenditure is known to be increasing rapidly – as it was under the last Labour government, especially on health and education (Curtice, 2010). However, to this we might add that when the government – as now with the Coalition – is embarked on a much-heralded attempt to reduce its budget deficit by cutting overall spending, that too might be expected to convince people that extra spending is either undesirable or just not possible. Certainly in 2010 just three in ten respondents recommended an increase in taxation and spending, which was only half the proportion who did so as recently as 2002. However, we can see in Figure 1.1 that this historical trend may now be reversing, as the proportion who recommend higher taxes and spending has increased by five percentage points in the latest survey, with a comparable decrease in the percentage advocating less taxation and spending. It is too early to lay claim to a new trend, but it is just possible that this shift marks the start of a reaction against the Coalition's spending cuts and a growing acceptance of the claims repeatedly made by Labour that the government has been cutting 'too far and too fast'. However, Figure 1.1 also shows us that currently the most popular option among the three identified in our question is that of keeping taxes and spending on health, education and welfare benefits at the same level as now.

In 2010 just three in ten respondents recommended an increase in taxation and spending; only half the proportion who did so in 2002

Figure 1.1 Attitudes to taxation and spending, 1983–2011

The data on which Figure 1.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

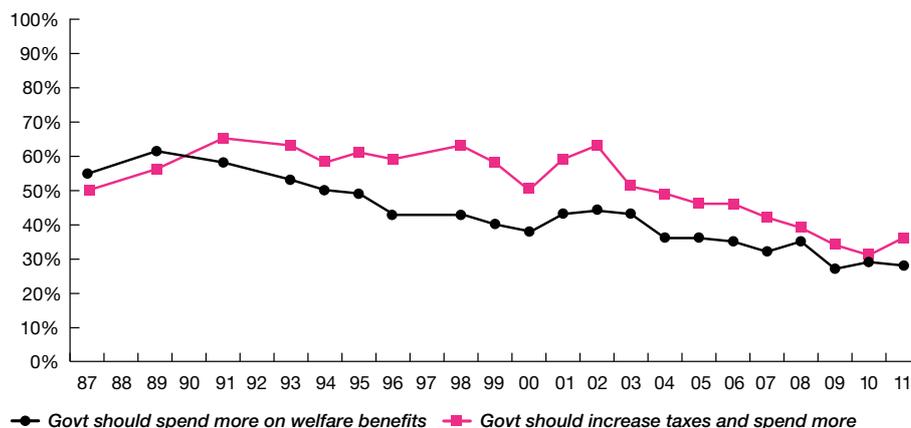
While it is evident that the majority do not currently favour tax rises and spending increases across the three specified areas, it is useful to know which of the three – health, education or social benefits – is considered the greatest priority by the public. To explore this issue, we can examine responses over time to a question that invites people to identify their top two preferences for (hypothetical) extra government spending. The answers (reported more fully in the chapter on Health) show that, over almost 30 years, people’s preferences have remained fairly stable, with health and education consistently identified as the top two priorities by more than half the population. “Social security benefits” not only receives a lower priority but, having been a top choice for 12 per cent of respondents in 1983, in the wake of the early-1980s recession, it is now prioritised by just four per cent.

Another, more specific question routinely asks respondents whether they agree or disagree that:

The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes²

The latest responses suggest that the public is divided on this issue, but with a slight bias towards reducing current benefit spending levels. Almost three in ten (28 per cent) think the government should spend more, while four in ten (39 per cent) disagree with the idea. More than one in three (32 per cent) neither agree nor disagree – demonstrating that it is certainly not the case that most people have a clear view on this issue. In Figure 1.2 we show how the proportion agreeing that the government should spend more on welfare benefits has altered over time, plotted alongside the proportion, discussed previously, who think the government should increase taxes and spend more. For much of the last 25 years, support for these two viewpoints has tended to move in tandem. We also see that levels of support in both cases have declined over most of the last decade, but that the public has generally been more accepting of the case for increased taxation and spending on “health, education and social benefits” in general, than on spending more on “welfare benefits” in particular. It is also interesting that although support for a more general increase in taxation and spending grew a little in the latest survey, support for spending more on welfare benefits did not. Instead, support for extra spending on benefits has gone on declining through the first recent period of negative growth in 2008–2009 and on to the second recessionary ‘dip’, and remains at an historically low ebb.

Figure 1.2 Attitudes to government spending on welfare benefits and taxation and spending in general, 1987–2011



The data on which Figure 1.2 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

The next issue we will try to resolve is whether, within the overall welfare budget, there are any particular types of benefit that the public is more prepared to support with extra spending than others. We asked people to say if they would like to see more spending on:

Benefits for unemployed people

Benefits for disabled people who cannot work

Benefits for parents who work on very low incomes

Benefits for single parents

Benefits for retired people

Benefits for people who care for those who are sick and disabled

Support for extra spending on benefits for disabled people who cannot work has fallen by 21 percentage points since 1998

Their responses and those obtained in previous years are presented in Table 1.2. This shows that public support for extra spending on all types of welfare benefit has declined since the late-1990s – with, in many cases, much of this decline being very recent. Most markedly, support for extra spending on benefits for disabled people who cannot work has fallen by 21 percentage points since 1998 and by 10 percentage points in the last three years. This is perhaps another reflection of the emphasis that Labour, when in government, as well as the Coalition, have placed on reducing the cost of long-term disability benefits, with public announcements that claims have grown faster than any likely increase in the incidence of illness and disability. People's changing views may, therefore, reflect a belief that people are being incorrectly classed as disabled or unable to work, rather than any 'hardline' view that disabled people do not deserve to be helped. Earlier we saw a record level of support for the view that government should be the main provider of welfare for the long-term sick and disabled, something that would seem to support this interpretation.

We can also see that support for extra spending on benefits for retired people has fallen markedly over time: by 16 percentage points since 1998. This could be symptomatic of an increasing view, noted previously, that government should not necessarily take the main responsibility for providing financial support for older people in retirement. Public attitudes towards benefits for unemployed people also stand out: partly because there is less support for extra spending here than in other areas – but also because, unlike the other categories, such support as exists has remained broadly level since 2004 at around 15 per cent. Much of the decline in support for extra spending on the other types of benefits has occurred since 2008 when these questions were last fielded. Even in the case of added benefits for those caring for sick and disabled people – consistently the most popular category – there has been a 10 percentage point decline in support since 2008 to 75 per cent.

Table 1.2 Attitudes to government spending on different benefits, 1998–2011

% would like to see more government spending on benefits for ...	1998	1999	2002	2004	2006	2008	2011
... unemployed people	22	25	22	15	16	15	15
... disabled people who cannot work	74	74	72	65	64	63	53
... parents who work on very low incomes	70	71	71	64	68	69	58
... single parents	35	34	40	36	39	38	29
... retired people	73	71	74	74	73	73	57
... people who care for those who are sick or disabled	84	84	84	82	84	85	75
<i>Weighted base</i>	3146	3143	3435	3199	3228	3333	3311
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3146	3143	3435	3199	3240	3258	3311

The survey evidence reviewed so far does seem to suggest that the current government's policies to reduce spending on benefits and restrict eligibility are either having some impact on public attitudes towards welfare, or – as an overlapping possibility – being driven by them. We have also seen that the prolonged economic downturn has, so far at least, done little to negate this. It is particularly striking that support for extra spending on unemployment benefits remains remarkably low, despite unemployment having reached its highest level since our question was first asked in 1998.

To further understand people's attitudes to the level of unemployment benefits, we asked respondents which of the following statements comes closest to their view:

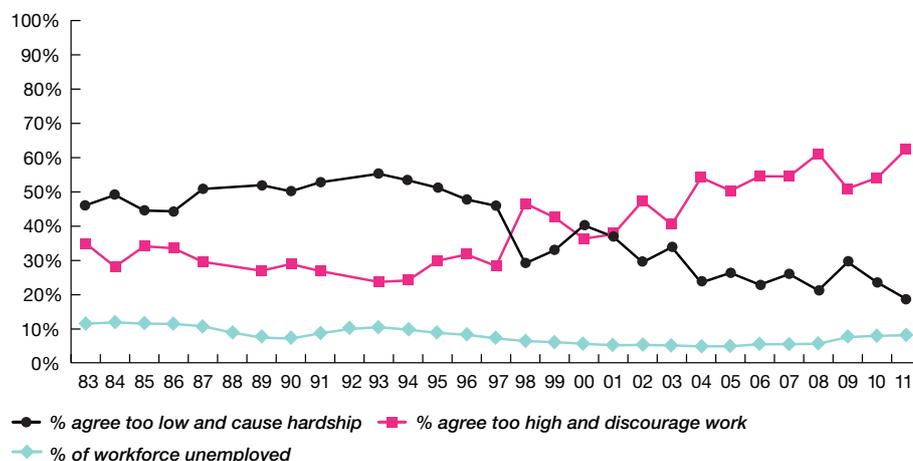
Benefits for unemployed people are too low and cause hardship, or

Benefits for unemployed people are too high and discourage them from finding jobs?

Unemployment stands at its highest point in 15 years, yet this appears to have made no obvious dent on the view that unemployment benefits are too high

Figure 1.3 presents responses over time, alongside the proportion of the UK workforce who were unemployed when each reading was taken. Responses to this question have shifted dramatically over time. Following the recession of the early-1980s, when unemployment stood at 11 per cent, a minority of just over one in three (35 per cent) took the view that benefits for unemployed people were too high and discouraged them from finding jobs. By the early-1990s recession, the proportion expressing this view had declined to a quarter (24 per cent in 1993 – when unemployment stood at more than 10 per cent). But adherence to this view then rose steadily from the late-1990s, to a point where almost two-thirds (62 per cent) of the public takes this view today. Despite some fluctuations, it also appears that the current, prolonged economic downturn has had little discernible impact; unemployment stands at its highest point in 15 years, yet this appears to have made no obvious dent on the view that unemployment benefits are too high. This is not at all the trend we would have expected based on experience of the previous recession. Yet once again we see that public opinion is broadly in line with government policies to restrict welfare.

Figure 1.3 Attitudes to unemployment benefits by unemployment rate, 1983–2011



The data on which Figure 1.3 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter
 Source for unemployment data: International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook Database, April 2012

The picture we have painted so far is one of a sharp decline in public enthusiasm for increased spending on welfare benefits over the past decade. But is this a reflection of the wider antipathy towards public spending increases noted previously, or is it linked to particular views the public holds about the people receiving benefits and their entitlements? We turn next to consider this possibility.

Attitudes to benefit recipients

Respondents to British Social Attitudes are regularly asked whether they agree or disagree with the following three items, which measure the extent to which benefit recipients are seen as 'deserving' of government support:

Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help

Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one

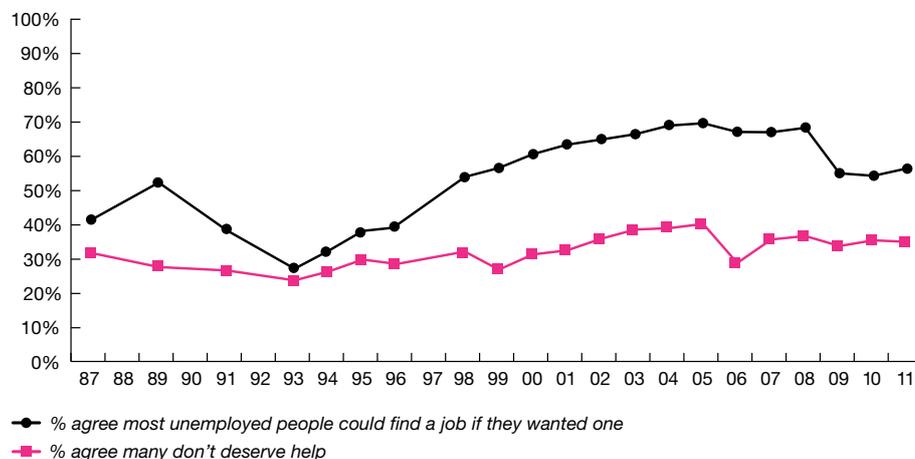
Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another

37%

of the public believe that most people on the dole are “fiddling”

Looking at the results obtained between 1987 and 2011 for the first two measures, we see that a considerable section of the public clearly do view welfare recipients, and people receiving unemployment benefits in particular, as undeserving. More than a third (35 per cent) currently think that many getting social security “don’t really deserve any help” – while the proportion has fluctuated between just above 20 per cent and 40 per cent over time. However, the most pervasive negative view is that “around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they wanted one”. Support for this proposition was at its lowest around the time of the early-1990s recession, but rose steadily during much of Labour’s time in office until around the start of the current economic downturn. The level of agreement has dropped since then from seven in ten to under six in ten (while only two in ten disagree). Yet this may still be considered a strikingly high level of scepticism given the growth in unemployment. A perception that most people on the dole are “fiddling” is also quite widespread and has more or less tracked the proportion who believe that many people receiving social security “don’t really deserve any help”; in 2011, 37 per cent of the public believes that most people on the dole are “fiddling”.

Figure 1.4 Attitudes to welfare recipients, 1987–2011



The data on which Figure 1.4 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

Negative perceptions of welfare recipients are a pretty constant strand in British public opinion

It would be tempting to conclude from this that declining support for the government’s role as a main provider of welfare, and for extra spending on benefits, is a direct consequence of the public’s view that many social security recipients are undeserving. However, we have seen how negative perceptions of welfare recipients are a pretty constant strand in British public opinion – and also that, while they are more common than we might have expected in a recession, they have dipped below their peak levels. Could it be that the relatively low support for extra spending on benefits during the current recession reflects popular objections to the concept of welfare and the welfare state itself, as much as a view of benefit recipients as undeserving? This is the issue we next consider.

Attitudes to the welfare state

To find out if attitudes to the welfare state are becoming less supportive we invited people to agree or disagree with these four statements:

If welfare benefits weren't so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet

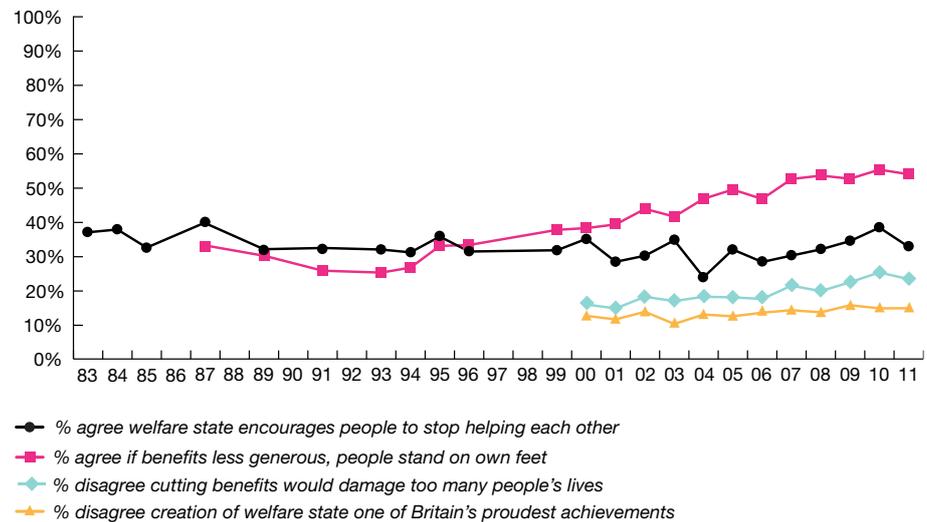
The welfare state encourages people to stop helping each other

Cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people's lives

The creation of the welfare state is one of Britain's proudest achievements

Figure 1.5 presents the proportions of the public, over time, who express a negative view of the welfare state based on these questions. It shows quite clearly that only a little more than one in ten people disagree that the creation of the welfare state is “one of Britain’s proudest achievements” (if our chart presented the proportions taking a ‘positive’ view, it would show that 51 per cent agree with the statement). However, markedly larger proportions agree with the suggestions that welfare encourages dependence and discourages other forms of help. Slightly more than half (54 per cent) believe that people would “stand on their own two feet” if benefits were less generous, while only 20 per cent disagree. This is the reverse of the situation in 1993, when only 25 per cent agreed and 52 per cent disagreed with the statement. It consequently provides a strong indication that this change in perceptions could be an important contributing factor to the public’s current lack of support for spending more on welfare benefits. We see that most of the increase occurred during Labour’s long period in government. But the view now shared by half the population – that current welfare benefits encourage dependence – clearly also chimes with the rationale claimed by the Coalition for its welfare reforms. The onset of recession and higher unemployment do not appear to have dampened this view.

Figure 1.5 Attitudes to the welfare state, 1983–2011



The data on which Figure 1.5 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

1 in 3

people agree that the welfare state encourages people “to stop helping each other”

Less strikingly, we see that one in three people (33 per cent) agree that the welfare state encourages people “to stop helping each other” – a proportion broadly in the mid-range of fluctuating levels since 1983. By contrast, although only one in five (23 per cent) nowadays take issue with the view that cutting benefits would “ruin too many people’s lives”, the proportion is higher than when the question was first asked in 2001 and at any point since, with the exception of 2010. We should, therefore, note that it is the two statements here that ask about “welfare benefits” rather than the “welfare state” that have seen an increase in negative sentiments over time. This may reflect the fact that “welfare state” is often taken to include health and education which – as we have seen – are viewed as greater spending priorities by the public than welfare benefits.

To tap further into people’s views about the effectiveness and efficiency of the current benefit system, we also included a number of new questions in the latest British Social Attitudes survey inviting people to agree or disagree that it ...

... supports people in low-paid work

... targets benefits only at those who really need them

... is far too complicated

... is slow to respond to changes in circumstances

... effectively encourages recipients to move off benefits

Table 1.3 details the responses obtained, together with an overall assessment for each measure (calculated by subtracting the percentage taking a negative view from those with a positive view and indicating whether the public generally views the welfare system positively or negatively in relation to each issue). Clearly, on most issues, the public’s views tend to be negative. A notable exception is the agreement of slightly more than half with the statement that the benefits system “supports people in low-paid work”. However, less than a quarter agree that it “targets benefits only at those who really need them”, while more than a third disagree. This accords with our earlier finding that a significant minority of the population consider many benefit recipients to be undeserving. Moreover, four in ten people agree that the benefit system is “far too complicated” and that it is “slow to respond to changes in circumstances”. More than a third disagree that it is effective in encouraging recipients to move off benefits. Meanwhile, fewer than one in ten give a positive response to any of these three questions.

Table 1.3 Attitudes to the welfare system

Attitudes to the current benefits systems (positive view)	Positive view	Neutral view	Negative view	Overall assess-ment*	Weighted base	Un-weighted base	
It supports people in low-paid work (agree)	%	53	19	13	40	2841	2845
It targets benefits only at those who really need them (agree)	%	23	21	35	-12	2841	2845
It is far too complicated (disagree)	%	8	26	39	-31	2841	2845
It is slow to respond to changes in circumstances (disagree)	%	5	26	43	-38	2841	2845
It effectively encourages recipients to move off benefits (agree)	%	9	19	36	-27	2841	2845

*(positive view - negative view)

It seems the welfare system is widely viewed as inefficient and poorly targeted – both in terms of who receives support and in terms of its ability to prevent long-term dependency. Since these perceptions are broadly in line with the presumptions underpinning the government’s Welfare Reform Act, it seems likely that its implementation will, if attitudes persist, enjoy considerable public support.

Further evidence for this impression can be found in the responses to a question asked in the 2010 survey, inviting people to identify their two highest priorities for government to improve the benefits system. In Table 1.4 we see that targeting benefits “only at those who really need them” is the most popular option, picked by one in three respondents as their highest priority and placed among the top two priorities by more than half. We can also see that “providing benefits for those who cannot work” receives a considerably lower priority rating than “rewarding those who work or look for work”, “making sure those who are entitled to money claim it”, “reducing fraud” or “making sure those who save are not penalised”. On this basis, we may reasonably speculate that the tendency in recent years for politicians of all parties to emphasise their support for ‘hard-working families’ during welfare debates has reflected or influenced the public’s view.

Table 1.4 Priorities for improving the benefits system, 2010

Priorities for improving the benefits system	Highest priority	First or second highest priority
	%	%
Targeting benefits only at those who really need them	33	53
Rewarding those who work or look for work	18	37
Making sure those who are entitled to money claim it	14	26
Reducing fraud	13	32
Making sure those who save are not penalised	12	26
Providing benefits for those who cannot work	6	14
Making sure payments are fast and accurate	3	7
<i>Weighted base</i>	3297	
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3297	

Having found yet more evidence that public attitudes to welfare (and to unemployment benefits in particular) are closer to the thrust of government reforms than might have been expected during a recession, it remains to be considered whether these views are shared by all groups in society, or only some.

How do views vary and whose views have changed?

To assess whether the public is moving towards a shared consensus on welfare or becoming more divided in its views, we focus on three of the measures where we have already identified a striking change in attitudes in recent years. These are:

- whether the government should be mainly responsible for providing welfare support for those who become unemployed;
- whether unemployment benefits are too high and discourage work;
- whether, if benefits were less generous, people would “stand on their own two feet”.

Those who are socio-economically more advantaged are least likely to endorse the government's role as the main provider of welfare

The fall in the proportion of the population who think the government should be mainly responsible for providing support for the unemployed is one of the most dramatic changes we have observed, from around eight people in ten in 2003 to under six in ten now. However, by re-analysing the results to examine the views held by different social groups we find this is not an opinion held equally strongly by all sections of society and that the decline in support has not affected all groups to a similar extent. It is immediately apparent from Table 1.5 that those who are socio-economically more advantaged – who would tend to depend least on government support if they became unemployed – are least likely to endorse the government's role as the main provider of welfare. Thus, little more than half of respondents in a professional occupational group agree that the government should have the main role in providing support for the unemployed, compared with two in three of those in a routine occupational group. (On a similar note, 70 per cent of those in the lowest quartile of household incomes in 2011 think the government should mainly be responsible, compared with just 49 per cent of those in the highest income quartile). Less marked differences, though still significant, can be found between people who receive state benefits themselves or whose spouses do so, and non-recipients, with the latter group being less likely to favour the government being the main provider of support for the unemployed. Political affiliations also make a difference. While only half of those who identify with the Conservative Party agree that the government should be the main provider of welfare for the unemployed, the same is true of two-thirds of those who identify with Labour.

No less interestingly, Table 1.5 shows us that public opinion has become more divided on this issue in recent years. In 2003 something approaching a consensus existed across occupational groups and among supporters of the main political parties. For instance, around eight in ten supporters of the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats agreed that providing support for the unemployed was mainly a job for government. Overall support for that proposition has fallen by 22 percentage points. However, it has fallen almost twice as steeply among people in professional or intermediate occupational groups, compared with those in routine occupations. And among Conservative supporters, it is down by 29 percentage points, compared with 17 percentage points among those who identify with Labour.

Table 1.5 Agreement that government should be the main provider of support to the unemployed, by demographic characteristics, 2003 and 2011³

% agree government should be main provider of support to the unemployed	2003	2011	Change since 2003
Party affiliation			
Conservative	80	51	-29
Labour	83	66	-17
Liberal Democrat	82	56	-26
Occupational class			
Professional	81	53	-27
Intermediate	82	57	-24
Routine	81	67	-14
Receipt of benefits			
Respondent or spouse in receipt of benefits	82	62	-20
Neither in receipt of benefits	79	55	-25
All	81	59	-22

As the question considered previously was not asked between 2003 and 2011, it is not possible to determine whether the views of different groups became more divided with the onset of recession or whether these differences developed in earlier years. However, such analysis is possible for the next two items we consider.

Turning to opinions about whether unemployment benefits are too high and discourage work, Table 1.6 shows that in 2003 around four in ten people in most sectors of society adhered to this view, with those affiliating with the Conservative Party being substantially more likely to do so. While this difference by party identification persists in 2011, the views of groups defined by occupational class and benefit receipt also appear to have become more divided. As in the previous analysis, we see that a negative view of welfare has grown fastest among people in higher occupational groups and among those not in receipt of any state benefits. The proportion of people in receipt of benefits who agree that unemployment benefits are too high and discourage work increased by 19 percentage points between 2003 and 2011, among those not in receipt of such benefits it increased by 27 percentage points. More markedly, between 2007 and 2011, a period marked by the onset of recession, the belief that unemployment benefits are too high and discourage work increased more than three times as much among those not in receipt of any state benefits as among those receiving them. And, among occupational groups, negative views have risen most among those in professional occupations and least among those in routine occupations – though there is little evidence of greater differentiation in views following the onset of recession.

Table 1.6 Agreement unemployment benefits are too high and discourage work, by demographic characteristics, 2003, 2007 and 2011^a

% agree unemployment benefits are too high and discourage work	2003	2007	2011	Change since 2003	Change since 2007
Party affiliation					
Conservative	56	67	77	+21	+10
Labour	36	49	55	+19	+6
Liberal Democrat	36	51	55	+20	+5
Occupational class					
Professional	40	55	65	+25	+10
Intermediate	44	57	66	+23	+9
Routine	38	50	58	+20	+8
Receipt of benefits					
Respondent or spouse in receipt of benefits	40	55	59	+19	+4
Neither in receipt of benefits	41	54	68	+27	+14
All	40	54	62	+22	+8

When we look at the way different social groups have responded over time to the proposition that less generous benefits would encourage people to “stand on their own two feet”, similar trends are evident. As shown in Table 1.7, there was no great consensus between Conservative and Labour supporters in 2003, but support for this view increased by comparable proportions in each of the two groups between 2003 and 2007, and between 2007 and today. However, for groups defined by socio-economic characteristics we see that the level of agreement has increased by markedly different degrees. Again, we can see a possible impact of the recession among those in a routine occupational group; their agreement with the idea people would “stand on their own two feet” if benefits were less generous has declined by three percentage points since 2007 – while agreement among those in a professional occupational group has risen by a similar amount. And, as before, while agreement has risen across society, regardless of benefit receipt, the rise has been greatest among those not in receipt of any benefits.

Table 1.7 Agreement with view that if benefits were less generous, people would stand on their own two feet, by demographic characteristics, 2003, 2007 and 2011⁵

% agree if benefits were less generous, people would stand on their own two feet	2003	2007	2011	Change 2003-2007	Change since 2007	Change 2003-2011
Party affiliation						
Conservative	56	67	69	+11	+2	+13
Labour	36	46	48	+10	+2	+12
Liberal Democrat	27	42	40	+15	-2	+13
Occupational class						
Professional	37	49	54	+12	+4	+16
Intermediate	47	59	59	+12	-1	+12
Routine	44	57	54	+12	-3	+9
Receipt of benefits						
Respondent or spouse in receipt of benefits	43	53	53	+10	+0	+10
Neither in receipt of benefits	42	55	58	+13	+3	+15
All	43	54	55	+11	+1	+12

 **The increase in negative attitudes towards welfare during the past decade affected certain groups more than others** 

Clearly, the increase in negative attitudes towards welfare during the past decade, while occurring in all sections of society, has affected certain groups more than others. While supporters of the main political parties are no more divided in their attitudes to welfare than they were a decade ago, the same is not true of groups defined by occupational class and benefit receipt. The growth of anti-welfare views among the least advantaged groups and those likely to rely most on benefits has been slower than among more advantaged groups, and there is some evidence that the speed of change has slowed, stopped or reversed since the onset of recession. Equally clearly, the support we have seen for elements and assumptions of the Coalition's reform programme is not simply about party politics; on two out of three measures, we have seen negative views about benefits increase among Labour and Conservative supporters at a similar rate. So, while the direction of government policy goes some way to explaining movement in attitudes to welfare among the public as a whole, the recession does also appear to have had its expected impact – but only for those groups in society most likely to need to rely upon the welfare state as a result.

Conclusions

In recent years public attitudes to welfare in Britain have appeared to stand at a crossroads. On the one hand, looking at the direction taken by policies under successive governments – both Labour and the Coalition – we might expect opinion to be growing less sympathetic to benefit recipients and less supportive of the government's continued role in funding welfare. On the other, acknowledging the prolonged economic crisis and trends during previous recessions, we might expect attitudes to have grown more sympathetic to welfare and benefit recipients as unemployment increased.

What our data clearly show is that, while attitudes to different aspects of welfare are behaving in a far from uniform way, they are generally moving in line with the current direction of government policy, rather than responding as they have previously to the onset of recession. We see that the public is becoming less supportive of the government taking a leading role in providing welfare to the unemployed, and even to the elderly in retirement. There is less enthusiasm about public spending on all types of benefits and an increasing belief that the welfare system encourages dependence.

As the economic crisis continues to run its course, we may yet see a polarisation of opinion that places real obstacles in the way of government

We have argued that this shift of opinion was nurtured by a tougher stance towards welfare under the previous Labour government. It can also be read as evidence that the coalition government's radical Welfare Reform Act is in tune with public opinion, chiming as it does with so many changing attitudes and assumptions. However, we have also seen how public attitudes to welfare are not moving in the same direction or at the same rate in all demographic groups. Indeed, the fact that these divisions run along socio-economic lines should strike a warning note. Advantaged groups who seem best-placed to weather the recession, and are least likely to rely on welfare if they do fall on hard times, are becoming markedly less supportive of welfare in principle and in practice. So while public opinion overall is moving in the same direction as the current welfare reforms and their underpinning assumptions, there is by no means a consensus – with views on some issues being more divided than they were a decade ago. As the economic crisis continues to run its course, we may yet see a polarisation of opinion that places real obstacles in the way of government, as it pursues the prolonged task of implementing its reforms.

Notes

1. Data on the percentages of the UK labour force who were unemployed, using the harmonised ILO definition, were accessed using the International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook Database, April 2012, available at: www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2012/01/weodata/index.aspx
2. This question is one of eight items that contribute to the British Social Attitudes 'welfarism' scale, used to derive an overall measure of support for welfare. Further details about the welfare scale can be found in Technical details.
3. Bases for Table 1.5 are as follows:

	2003		2011	
	<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
Party affiliation				
Conservative	814	806	881	926
Labour	1200	1203	1062	1039
Liberal Democrat	365	368	247	253
Occupational class				
Professional	1115	1093	1155	1177
Intermediate	1066	1062	1014	1028
Routine	985	1012	963	955
Receipt of benefits				
Respondent or spouse in receipt of benefits	1968	2122	1954	2128
Neither in receipt of benefits	1283	1126	1315	1140
All	3276	3272	3311	3311

4. Bases for Table 1.6 are as follows:

	2003		2007		2011	
	<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
Party affiliation						
Conservative	814	806	773	819	881	926
Labour	1200	1203	1052	1058	1062	1039
Liberal Democrat	365	368	282	293	247	253
Occupational class						
Professional	1115	1093	1101	1120	1155	1177
Intermediate	1066	1062	1007	1001	1014	1028
Routine	985	1012	866	881	963	955
Receipt of benefits						
Respondent or spouse in receipt of benefits	1968	2122	1860	2043	1954	2128
Neither in receipt of benefits	1283	1126	1212	1040	1315	1140
All	3276	3272	3082	3094	3311	3311

5. Bases for Table 1.7 are as follows:

	2003		2007		2011	
	<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
Party affiliation						
Conservative	230	223	678	720	773	811
Labour	320	309	886	882	873	860
Liberal Democrat	96	99	237	251	223	226
Occupational class						
Professional	318	304	975	989	1027	1049
Intermediate	273	272	845	845	852	864
Routine	244	254	687	693	802	787
Receipt of benefits						
Respondent or spouse in receipt of benefits	502	540	1549	1704	1666	1811
Neither in receipt of benefits	353	304	1036	884	1113	972
All	858	847	2590	2593	2792	2796

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Acknowledgements

NatCen Social Research is grateful to the Department for Work and Pensions for their generous financial support, which enabled us to ask the questions reported in this chapter. The views expressed are those of the author alone.

Appendix

The data for Figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5 are shown below:

Table A.1 Attitudes to taxation and spending 1983–2011

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spend less	9	5	6	5	3	3	3	3	4
Keep taxes and spending the same	54	50	43	44	42	37	37	29	28
Increase taxes and spend more	32	39	45	46	50	56	54	65	63
<i>Weighted base</i>	1761	1645	1769	3066	2766	2930	2698	2836	2945
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1719	1675	1804	3100	2847	3029	2797	2918	2945

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spend less	4	5	4	3	3	4	5	3	3
Keep taxes and spending the same	33	31	34	31	32	34	40	34	31
Increase taxes and spend more	58	61	59	62	63	58	50	59	63
<i>Weighted base</i>	3469	3633	3620	1355	3146	3143	2302	3287	3435
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3469	3633	3620	1355	3146	3143	2292	3287	3435

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spend less	6	6	7	6	7	8	8	9	6
Keep taxes and spending the same	38	42	43	43	47	50	55	56	55
Increase taxes and spend more	51	49	46	46	42	39	34	31	36
<i>Weighted base</i>	3276	2130	2167	3228	3082	2184	1134	3297	3311
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3272	2146	2166	3240	3094	2229	1139	3297	3311

Table A.2 Attitudes to government spending on welfare benefits and taxation and spending in general, 1987–2011

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996
% agree government should spend more on welfare benefits	55	61	58	53	50	49	43
<i>Weighted base</i>	1243	2529	2428	2595	2957	3145	3103
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1281	2604	2481	2567	2929	3135	3085
% agree government should increase taxes and spend more	50	56	65	63	58	61	59
<i>Weighted base</i>	2766	2930	2836	2945	3469	3633	3620
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2847	3029	2918	2945	3469	3633	3620
	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
% agree government should spend more on welfare benefits	43	40	38	43	44	43	36
<i>Weighted base</i>	2546	2478	2991	2821	2929	873	2610
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2531	2450	2980	2795	2900	881	2609
% agree government should increase taxes and spend more	63	58	50	59	63	51	49
<i>Weighted base</i>	3146	3143	2302	3287	3435	3276	2130
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3146	3143	2292	3287	3435	3272	2146
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
% agree government should spend more on welfare benefits	36	35	32	35	27	29	28
<i>Weighted base</i>	2697	2813	2663	2956	963	2810	2841
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2699	2822	2672	3000	967	2791	2845
% agree government should increase taxes and spend more	46	46	42	39	34	31	36
<i>Weighted base</i>	2167	3228	3082	2184	1134	3297	3311
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2166	3240	3094	2229	1139	3297	3311

Table A.3 Attitudes to unemployment benefits by unemployment rate, 1983–2011

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
% agree too low and cause hardship	46	49	44	44	51	n/a	52	50	53	n/a
% agree too high and discourage work	35	28	34	33	29	n/a	27	29	27	n/a
% unemployed in UK	11	12	11	11	11	9	7	7	9	10
<i>Weighted base</i>	1761	1645	1769	3066	2766	n/a	2930	2698	2836	n/a
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1719	1675	1804	3100	2847	n/a	3029	2797	2918	n/a
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
% agree too low and cause hardship	55	53	51	48	46	29	33	40	37	29
% agree too high and discourage work	24	24	30	32	28	46	42	36	37	47
% unemployed in UK	10	10	9	8	7	6	6	6	5	5
<i>Weighted base</i>	2945	3469	1199	3620	1355	3146	3143	3426	3287	3435
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2945	3469	1234	3620	1355	3146	3143	3426	3287	3435
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	
% agree too low and cause hardship		34	23	26	23	26	21	29	23	19
% agree too high and discourage work		40	54	50	54	54	61	51	54	62
% unemployed in UK		5	5	5	5	5	6	7	8	8
<i>Weighted base</i>		3272	3199	3210	3228	3082	3333	1134	3297	3311
<i>Unweighted base</i>		3276	3199	3139	3240	3094	3258	1139	3297	3311

n/a = not asked

Source for unemployment data: International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook Database, April 2012

Table A.4 Attitudes to welfare recipients, 1987–2011

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996
% agree many don't deserve help	31	28	26	24	26	30	28
% agree most unemployed people could find a job if they wanted one	41	52	38	27	32	38	39
<i>Weighted base</i>	1243	2529	2428	2595	2957	3145	3085
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1281	2604	2481	2567	2929	3135	3103
	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
% agree many don't deserve help	32	27	31	32	36	38	39
% agree most unemployed people could find a job if they wanted one	54	56	60	63	65	66	69
<i>Weighted base</i>	2956	2478	2991	2821	2929	881	2610
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3000	2450	2980	2795	2900	873	2609
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
% agree many don't deserve help	40	29	36	37	34	35	35
% agree most unemployed people could find a job if they wanted one	69	67	67	68	55	54	56
<i>Weighted base</i>	2697	2813	2663	2956	963	2810	2841
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2699	2822	2672	3000	967	2791	2845

Table A.5 Attitudes to the welfare state, 1983–2011

	1983	1984	1985	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994
% agree welfare state encourages people to stop helping each other	37	38	32	40	32	27	32	31
% agree if benefits less generous, people stand on own feet	n/a	n/a	n/a	33	30	26	25	27
% disagree cutting benefits would damage too many people's lives	n/a							
% agree creation of welfare state one of Britain's proudest achievements	n/a							
<i>Weighted base</i>	1610	1522	1502	1243	2529	2428	2595	2957
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1650	1562	1530	1281	2604	2481	2567	2929
	1995	1996	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
% agree welfare state encourages people to stop helping each other	36	31	32	35	28	30	35	24
% agree if benefits less generous, people stand on own feet	33	33	38	38	39	44	42	47
% disagree cutting benefits would damage too many people's lives	n/a	n/a	n/a	16	15	18	17	18
% agree creation of welfare state one of Britain's proudest achievements	n/a	n/a	n/a	13	12	14	10	13
<i>Weighted base</i>	3145	3085	2478	2991	2821	2929	881	2610
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3135	3103	2450	2980	2795	2900	873	2609
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	
% agree welfare state encourages people to stop helping each other		32	28	30	32	34	38	33
% agree if benefits less generous, people stand on own feet		49	47	52	54	53	55	54
% disagree cutting benefits would damage too many people's lives		18	18	21	20	22	25	23
% agree creation of welfare state one of Britain's proudest achievements		12	14	14	14	16	15	15
<i>Weighted base</i>		2697	2813	2663	2956	963	2810	2841
<i>Unweighted base</i>		2699	2822	2672	3000	967	2791	2845

n/a = not asked

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Publication details

Park, A., Clery, E., Curtice, J., Phillips, M. and Utting, D. (eds.) (2012), *British Social Attitudes: the 29th Report*, London: NatCen Social Research, available online at: www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk

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First published 2012

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ISBN 978-1-907236-24-2