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British Social Attitudes: The Verdict on Five Years of Coalition Government

- **Muted reaction to public service reform**
- **UKIP: more than a protest vote**
- **Pressures on the next government**

The past five years in British politics have exposed a fragmented political system at a time of spending cuts and significant reform of Britain's longest standing public sector institutions. The 32nd annual NatCen British Social Attitudes Report examines how the public has responded to this changing political landscape and to the policies of the Coalition Government.

British Social Attitudes asks: How has the public responded to the Coalition's programme of public sector reform? Who are the supporters of the largest of the new force in British politics, UKIP? And what will be the pressures on the next administration?

The verdict on the Coalition

The UK's first and only coalition government since 1945 has undertaken radical public service reform. Supporters claimed reform was necessary at a time of austerity. Opponents viewed them as a threat to essential public services. So how has the public responded to life under the Coalition and a reform programme that has included a hike in tuition fees, restructuring of the NHS in England and reform of the benefits system?

Coalition government is less popular than it has ever been. However the public has largely accepted reforms and cuts to public services, with little increase in support for higher taxes to increase spending.

- **Concerned about coalitions?** Pollsters tell us that a hung parliament is increasingly likely, yet support for coalition government has consistently been lower during this parliament than at any time in the past 30 years. Less than a third (29%) now prefer coalition to single party government, compared with 45% back in 2007, before the Coalition was formed.
- **Little reaction to cuts?** After falling from 63% in 2002 to 32% in 2010, the proportion who want to see higher taxes to pay for more spending on health, education and social benefits has only increased slightly to 37%. Despite increasing poverty among working age people, even fewer, only 30%, want to see more government spending on welfare benefits. This is little different from the 27% who backed that view in 2009 and just half the proportion (61%) that did so in 1989. Nearly three quarters endorse the government's benefits cap; 73% agree that no household should receive more in benefits than the national average income.
- **Satisfied with the health service?** At 65%, satisfaction with the health service is only slightly down on the record 70% figure in 2010, and is up five points on 2013. Despite the controversy about waiting times, satisfaction with A&E services has actually increased in the last year from 53% to 58%. However, the proportion who think that the health service has got better in the last five years has fallen from 40% in 2010 to just 26% now.
- **Fine about fees?** Most people in England believe that at least some students should pay tuition fees (67% say some should and 11% that all should pay) and perhaps surprisingly the views of young people are very similar to older people. Support for fees

has changed little since before 2010, in spite of the Coalition's tuition fee rise and high profile pre-election Lib Dem promise not to increase fees. Meanwhile, the proportion of people in England who think students should take out loans to cover their living costs is now at its highest level (46%), far higher than the 27% who said this in 1995. However, despite the extra financial support given to students from poorer backgrounds as many as 57% believe a student from a well-off background is more likely to take up a university place.

Rachel Ormston, Co-Head of Social Attitudes, NatCen Social Research said: "Despite the fact that the public has gone off the notion of coalition government, it has seemingly accepted many of the coalition's big reforms. In spite of the government's narrative of austerity, or perhaps because of it, NHS satisfaction is back up, there is broad acceptance of tuition fees, and at least some cuts to benefits are popular."

The emergence of UKIP: more than a protest vote

If the five years of coalition government has seen relative stability in the public's attitudes to public services, the opposite can be said of party politics. The prospect that the UK Independence Party (UKIP) could be the third largest party in terms of votes in the General Election is symptomatic of the disruption of Britain's party system. But who are UKIP supporters? Will they be satisfied with a referendum on the EU or do they have other shared political beliefs that make them distinct from the supporters of other parties?

Like the two Conservative MPs who defected to the party, UKIP supporters are strongly Eurosceptic. We also find, unsurprisingly, that UKIP supporters are anti-immigration and socially conservative. But they also have things in common with Labour Party supporters; they are predominantly working class and are unhappy about the gap between rich and poor.

- **Older, Working class:** The party's support is twice as high among those in more working class occupations (11%) than it is among those in salaried managerial and professional positions (5%).
- **Conservative with a small c:** UKIP supporters are considerably more likely than the population as a whole to support the death penalty (75% vs. 48%). They also favour tougher sentencing for criminals (86% vs. 73%), and are more likely to believe young people don't have enough respect for British values (86% vs. 66%). Twice as many UKIP supporters agree (46%) as disagree (23%) that people who want to have children should get married.
- **Railing against inequality:** Three quarters of UKIP supporters (76%) believe that there is one law for the rich and one for the poor (compared with 59% of the public as a whole) and that ordinary people do not get their share of the nation's wealth (76% of UKIP supporters compared with 60% of the public hold this view). However, although UKIP supporters are more concerned about economic unfairness than the wider population only two fifths of them (40%) would like to see government redistribute wealth, little different from the 39% that back that view amongst the population as a whole.

But UKIP supporters also have many of the hallmarks of an anti-establishment protest vote; they don't trust politicians and feel powerless to influence government, so going into government could be a big turn-off for many UKIP supporters.

- **Disdainful of politicians:** UKIP supporters are only half as likely as the public as a whole to say they tend to trust the government (20% vs. 40%) and they are also markedly less likely to trust the Parliament (26% vs. 42%).

- **Powerless and disenfranchised:** 70% feel that they don't have any say about what the government does, compared with 44% amongst the public as a whole. 79% don't think the government cares about what they think, much higher than the 53% figure for the country as a whole.

Naomi Jones, Co-Head of Social Attitudes, NatCen Social Research: "Should UKIP find itself in a position of influence in the next parliament, its leadership will have some big decisions to make. UKIP supporters have a set of strong, distinctive views, beyond Euroscepticism. Notably, they are fed up with politicians and distrust government, so any kind of wheeling and dealing with the other parties could alienate their supporters."

Future pressures

The latest British Social Attitudes survey also identifies some of the potential pressure points for the next government.

The next Parliament may bring a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU. While the British people are still more inclined to remain in the EU than leave, there will be real pressure on whoever is in power to return some powers to the UK Parliament.

- **In Europe:** Given a straight choice more than half of people (57%) would remain in the EU, while 35% want to withdraw. More people (35%) think that closer links with the EU would strengthen Britain economically than think such links would weaken it (17%).
- **Not run by Europe:** However, a majority of the public can be considered Eurosceptic. When given more options about Britain's relationship with the EU, 62% want either the UK to leave the EU (24%) or for there to be a reduction in the EU's powers (38%). Support for one or other of these two options has consistently been higher during this parliament than at any point during the previous two decades. If Britain does stay in the EU, the public will be looking for a reduction in Brussels' powers.
- **The immigration question:** Public concern about the level of immigration in the UK is well documented. Given the limits on its ability to reduce EU migration, the next Government could come under pressure to focus on areas it can influence, such as so-called "benefits tourism". Significant minorities think that immigrants from both the EU (29%) and outside (40%) who have arrived in the UK looking for work should not have access to benefits at all, a further 30% think that EU jobseekers should only be able to claim benefits for a maximum of 6 months.

There is widespread acceptance that there is a funding crisis in the NHS, but the public is not clear what should be done about it.

- **An NHS funding crisis:** Almost everyone (92%) believes that the NHS is facing a funding problem and as many as 45% think it will not be free at the point of use in ten years' time. However, a majority (58%) are opposed to diverting money from other public services to pay for the NHS..
- **Raising money:** There is no consensus about the best way to raise more funds for the NHS. While 41% favour some kind of tax increase, 27% reckon the NHS should live within its existing means. Just 14% back a £10 charge for visiting GPs or A&E.
- **Saving money:** Pressed as to the best ways the NHS could save money most (48%) would prefer the NHS to stop providing treatments that are not value for money. Only 24% back restricting access to non-emergency treatment and just 7% think people should have to wait until they are sicker before they get care.

The major parties are all committed to cutting the national debt and balancing the budget, so with welfare and pensions amounting to 37% of public spending according to the government's

own figures it would seem essential that the next government will have to find new ways to keep the welfare budget in check.

- **Protecting pensions:** Despite the cost, at the moment all parties are committed to protecting the value of the state pension. However while pensions are still relatively popular, the proportion who place pensions among their top priorities for extra spending on benefits has fallen from a high of 80% in 2005 to 67% now.
- **Keep benefit bill down:** Although Labour and Conservative supporters are increasingly divided in their attitudes to welfare, only 44% of Labour supporters believe that more should be spent on welfare, while 50% reckon the unemployed could find a job if they wanted one. Whatever its partisan colour the next government is likely to be under continued pressure to keep the benefit bill down.

And what of the election itself – will this be Britain’s first Facebook election?

- **The telly rules:** The internet is not as yet a panacea for getting the public talking about politics. Only 14% of people have expressed political views online. Although as many as four in ten (40%) get political news from the internet at least weekly, more than six in ten (64%) get it from television and almost five in ten (46%) from newspapers.

Rachel Ormston, Co-Head of Social Attitudes, NatCen Social Research said: “The next government faces some big decisions on issues that the public does not have a settled position on. Be it Europe, the NHS or welfare benefits, whoever is in power will have their work cut out trying to take the public with them. This is a challenge for every government, but it takes on greater importance when Britain’s most longstanding and revered public sector institutions, the NHS and welfare state, are at stake.”

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NOTES TO EDITORS

- **NatCen Social Research**, Britain’s largest independent social research organisation, aims to promote a better-informed society through high quality social research (www.natcen.ac.uk).
- **British Social Attitudes: the 32nd Report** is published on 26 March 2015 and is freely available at: www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk
- **The editors** are Rachel Ormston and Prof John Curtice.
- **History** –The British Social Attitudes survey has been conducted annually since 1983. Since then around 100,000 people have taken part in the survey.
- **Sample and approach** – The 2014 survey consisted of 2,878 interviews with a representative, random sample of adults in Britain. Interviewing was mainly carried out between August and October 2014, with a small number of interviews taking place in November 2014. Addresses are randomly selected and visited by one of NatCen Social Research’s interviewers. After selecting one adult at the address (again at random), the interviewer carries out an hour long interview. Most questions are answered by the participant selecting an answer from a set of cards.

- **Topics** – the topics covered by the survey change from year to year, depending on the identities and interests of its funders. Some questions are asked every year, others every couple of years, and others less frequently.
- **Funding** – The survey is funded by a range of charitable and government sources, which change from year to year. Questions in the 2014 survey were funded by the following: Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Transport, the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the King's Fund, the Health Foundation, the Vegetarian Society and the Economic and the Social Research Council (ESRC).
- The **views expressed** in this report are those of the report authors and editors alone.
- The 32nd Report includes the following **papers**:
 - Key Findings: Five years of coalition government: Public Reactions and Future Consequences
 - A Revolt on the Right? The Social and Political Attitudes of UKIP Supporters
 - Benefits and welfare: Long-term trends or short-term reactions?
 - Britain and Europe: Are We All Eurosceptics Now?
 - Disengaged and disconnected? Trends in political attitudes
 - Health: Public attitudes towards the NHS in austere times
 - Higher Education: Investing in the future? Attitudes to University
- Data on **NHS satisfaction** were released in January 2015 by The King's Fund.