

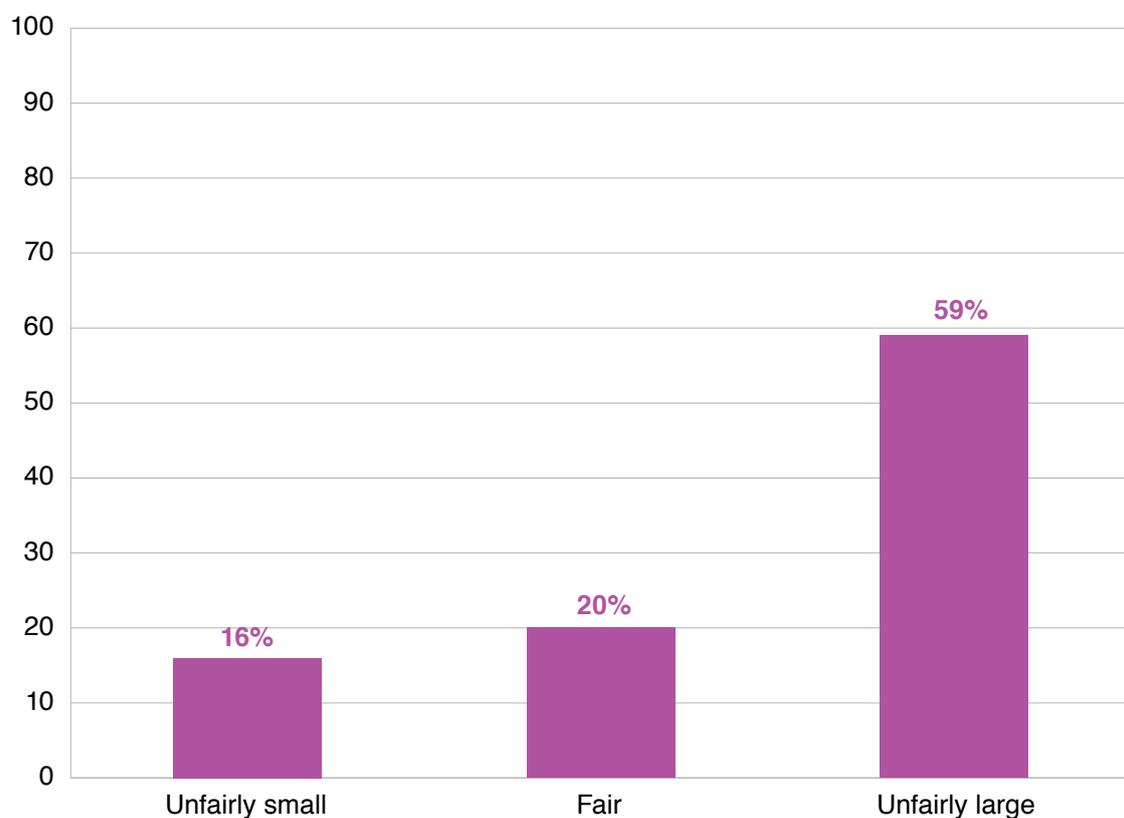
Fairness and justice in Britain

Using data collected through the European Social Survey (ESS) this chapter explores the extent to which the British public believes that the political and judicial system and the distribution of wealth in Britain is fair and just, drawing comparisons with citizens of other Western European countries. Concerns about fairness and justice may lead to discontent with the way politics operates, and we also consider the relationships between people's perceptions of fairness and justice and their attitudes towards a number of key institutions in British public life, and the ways in which they engage with politics in Britain.

Spotlight

Only 20% of the British public think that differences in wealth in Britain are fair, whilst a majority (59%) think that wealth differences in Britain are unfairly large and a further 16% think that differences in wealth are unfairly small.

In your opinion, are differences in wealth in Britain unfairly small, fair, or unfairly large?



Overview

Pessimism prevails

The British public does not think that British society is particularly fair or just.

- The majority of the British public believe that wealth differences are unfair while fewer than four in ten agree that justice prevails over injustice or that people get what they deserve.
 - But attitudes towards fairness and justice in Britain are not very different from those recorded in other large Western European democracies.
-

Greater differences in political equality

Disadvantaged citizens are much less likely to think the political system facilitates political engagement.

- People whose main income comes from benefits are the least likely to think that the political system does a lot to ensure everyone has a fair chance to be involved in politics.
 - People with a university degree are the most likely to think the political system does a lot to encourage participation.
 - The differences between socio-economic groups are less pronounced when looking at perceptions of fairness of wealth differences in Britain.
-

The broader political relationship

Views on fairness and justice appear to be associated with a set of wider political attitudes and behaviours.

- People who think Britain is not fair or just report lower levels of political satisfaction and trust.
 - People who think the political system encourages participation are more likely to vote.
 - People who are concerned about justice and wealth differences are also more likely to have engaged in political action outside of the electoral system.
-

Authors

Hannah Morgan

Senior Researcher
The National Centre for Social Research

Isabel Taylor

Research Director
The National Centre for Social Research

Introduction

For people to feel that they have a fair chance to succeed, they need to believe that they are subject to the same rules as their fellow citizens. They want to be treated fairly in their everyday interactions, but they also want the world in which they live to operate in a fair and just way. While a fair and just society may be a noble end in itself, it may also offer knock-on benefits for other aspects of political and economic life. In particular, political equality contributes to a better-informed citizenship, more responsive government and a more representative policy-making process (Dalton, 2017) while procedural justice can encourage law compliance (Hough, 2010) and – if the conception of justice is shared throughout a society – cooperation between individuals, even outside the judicial system (Tyler, 2012).

There is not, however, a common understanding of what constitutes fairness. Although it is often associated with the notion of equality, these two ideas are not interchangeable. For some people, fairness and equality may closely align if they believe that fair outcomes see everyone receiving a comparable amount of a particular resource. For others, fairness may actually be in conflict with equality if they believe that individuals should be rewarded for their effort or abilities. Therefore income inequality (reflecting differences in ongoing financial incomings and outcomings) and wealth inequality (reflecting differences in the financial resources accumulated over time) are likely to be considered fair by people who believe that these inequalities reflect differences in individuals' hard work or talents. Nonetheless, wealth inequalities in particular risk embedding economic advantages among those citizens who can accumulate and hand down wealth to future generations.

For questions relating to political equality and access to justice, the question of fairness is a less contentious issue. There is a broad consensus that the political system is fair if and when all citizens have an equal chance to participate in politics and that everyone should be equal in the eyes of the law. These are, in fact, key principles in most modern democracies. However, questions as to who holds power and privilege in Britain are as salient as ever. More than 100 years after the Representation of the People Act extended the right to vote in a General Election beyond property-holding men, large disparities remain in political participation (Bale et al, 2019) and political representation in the UK today (Lamprinakou et al, 2017). At the same time, many persistent disadvantages found in health, educational, economic and employment outcomes that were heightened by the 2007 Great Recession and a decade of austerity (Blandon & Machin, 2004; Li & Heath, 2020; Marmot, 2020) have gained greater attention through the Black Lives Matter movement and the uneven impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

As public opinion can shape government policy, concerns about levels of fairness and justice in Britain may lead to government action to address these issues. However, such concerns could also lead to a broader discontent with government, if it is seen as unable or

unwilling to create a more fair and just society. And citizens' support for the system of government is crucial in a democratic society. This support helps a democratic government to remain legitimate, even if citizens disagree with that government's policy aims (Easton, 1975). A large amount of government legitimacy, therefore, comes from citizens believing that the structures of government and society treat everyone fairly and deliver just outcomes to all. Therefore, perceptions of fairness and justice are important for society as a whole as well as for individuals who want to have a fair chance to succeed at life.

This chapter explores how perceptions of fairness and justice vary within British society, and if these perceptions are related to citizens' attitudes towards government and engagement with politics in Britain. We use data collected through the European Social Survey (ESS) to investigate whether any perceived lack of fairness and justice in Britain risks undermining the legitimacy of the system of government, and if it may impact different forms of political activity. This is particularly important because long-term concerns over fairness and justice may lead to deep-rooted discontent with the way politics operates, particularly amongst people who consistently believe that government is neither willing nor able to address these concerns. The first part of our analysis investigates the extent to which the British public believes that the political and judicial system and the distribution of wealth in Britain is fair and just, and how this varies within the British population. We also look at comparisons with citizens of other Western European countries. We then look into the relationships between people's perceptions of fairness and justice and their attitudes towards a number of key institutions in British public life, and the ways in which they engage with politics in Britain.

How fair is Britain today?

This chapter uses data collected in Britain as part of the ninth wave of the ESS which took place from which took place mainly between late 2018 to early 2019. The ESS is a biennial survey that has been conducted since 2002. Each round contains two modules on key social themes. Round 9 of the ESS included a module of questions on fairness and justice. This included questions about how fair and just people consider different aspects of life in Britain to be. These questions, included for the first time in the ESS, were also included in equivalent surveys in 30 other European countries.¹ They asked respondents to share their views on a wide range of measures relating to the economic and political structures of their society as well as the opportunities that have been available to them and their fellow citizens.

General ideas of fairness and justice in Britain

Individual citizens may have different views on levels of fairness and justice when they are asked about different aspects of society.

¹ Data for four countries were yet to be released so this chapter includes data from 26 countries.

Although political, social and economic institutions are interlinked, they may perform—or be perceived to perform—differently within society. People who think that the political system is unfair, for example, will not necessarily believe that people do not have equal access to justice or that wealth is shared unfairly across society. By investigating four different aspects of fairness in Britain, we can see which parts of British society the British public considers to be more or less fair. We can also investigate how these views differ between different groups in Britain.

In this chapter, we use four different questions from the ESS to investigate the British public's views of different aspects of fairness in Britain. The first of these questions asked respondents to evaluate access to the political system through the question:

How much would you say that the political system in Britain ensures that everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics?

They were also asked how much they agree or disagree with the following statements relating to fairness and justice:

I think that, by and large, people get what they deserve

And:

I am confident that justice always prevails over injustice

Another measure asked respondents about differences in wealth in Britain. This question did not simply ask respondents if they considered the distribution of wealth in Britain to be fair or unfair, but it also gave them the opportunity to indicate if they considered differences in wealth to be unfairly high (suggesting support for greater equality) or unfairly low (suggesting support for bigger differences in financial rewards):

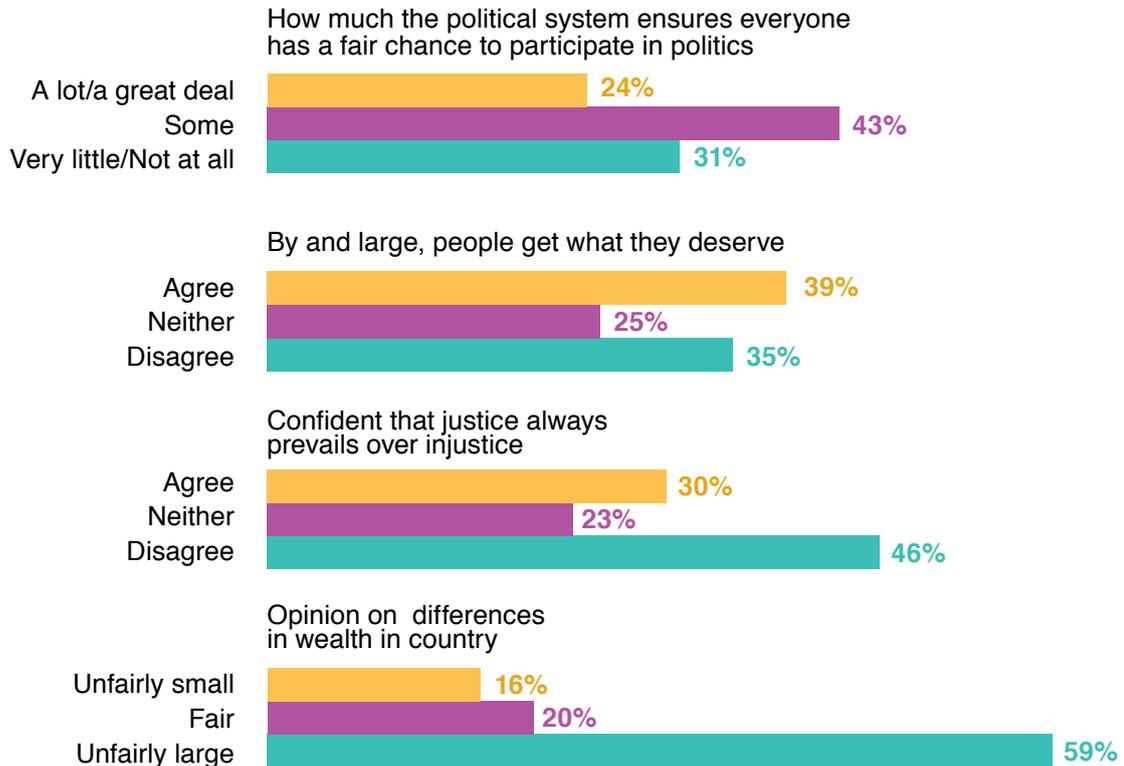
In your opinion, are differences in wealth in Britain unfairly small, fair, or unfairly large?

Respondents were prompted to answer this question using a 9 point scale, from -4 to +4. The value of minus 4 was labelled as “unfairly small”, zero was labelled as “fair” and plus 4 labelled as “unfairly large”. For this analysis we have grouped scores ranging from -4 to -1 as “unfairly small”, 0 as “fair” and +1 to +4 as “unfairly large”.

Responses to these questions show that a sizable proportion of the public believe that there are inequalities of various kinds engrained in British society. As Figure 1 shows, while around one in three think that the political system in Britain does “not a lot” or “very little” to ensure that everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics, only around a quarter think that it does “a lot” or “a great deal”. Although only three in ten respondents (30%) in Britain agreed that they were confident that justice always prevailed over injustice, general perceptions of fairness are more positive; four in ten (39%) agreed that people generally get what they deserve. But views of the distribution of wealth in Britain are particularly negative. Only 20%

think that differences in wealth in Britain are fair, whilst a majority of respondents (59%) think that wealth differences in Britain are unfairly large and a further 16% think that differences in wealth are unfairly small.

Figure 1 Overall attitudes towards fairness and justice in Britain



Source: European Social Survey wave 9 (2018/19), adults aged 18+ in Britain
The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in Table 1

How does Britain compare with its neighbours?

Although these findings paint a pessimistic picture of the British public's attitudes to fairness and justice in Britain, these views are not, in general, any more negative than those recorded in many other large Western European countries. For example, the proportion of people who think that the political system does "a lot" or "a great deal" to ensure everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics is much lower in France (14%), Spain (8%), or Italy (2%), than in Britain (25%). The German public is, however, more positive about equal access to politics, with 39% believing their political system does "a lot" or "a great deal" to ensure everyone can participate equally (Table 1).

Table 1 Attitudes to fairness and justice in Britain and Europe

	Britain	France	Germany	Italy	Spain
How much the political system ensures everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics	%	%	%	%	%
A lot/a great deal	24	14	39	2	8
Some	43	32	38	22	29
Very little/Not at all	31	50	21	70	54
By and large, people get what they deserve	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	39	28	41	34	23
Neither	25	27	30	28	21
Disagree	35	43	27	36	51
Confident that justice always prevails over injustice	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	30	27	39	44	27
Neither	23	23	28	27	20
Disagree	46	48	32	27	47
Opinion on differences in wealth in country	%	%	%	%	%
Unfairly small	16	28	24	18	21
Fair	20	9	11	5	7
Unfairly large	59	57	59	68	62
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>2091</i>	<i>1967</i>	<i>2273</i>	<i>2664</i>	<i>1612</i>

Source: European Social Survey wave 9 (2018/19), adults aged 18+

The British public is, however, more likely to agree that “by and large, people get what they deserve” than their counterparts in France, Italy or Spain, where no more than 34% of respondents agreed with this statement (compared to 40% in Britain and 41% in Germany). In Spain, half of respondents disagree with this statement (compared to 35% in Britain and only 27% in Germany). While the Italian public is less likely to agree with this statement than people in Britain, they are much more likely to say that they are “confident that justice always prevails over injustice” than the British public. In Italy, 44% agree with this statement, compared to around three in ten in Britain, France or Spain. In each of these three countries, almost half of respondents disagreed with this, compared to only 27% in Italy and 32% in Germany.

Like in Britain, a majority of people in France, Germany, Italy and Spain believe that differences in wealth in their country are unfairly large. Although a small minority of respondents in all countries believe that wealth differences are fair, the British public is actually more likely to think that differences in wealth are fair (19%) compared to their counterparts in France (9%), Germany (11%), Italy (5%) and Spain (7%). However, in France, Germany and Spain, respondents are more likely to say that differences are unfairly small than in Britain while in Italy they are more likely to say they are unfairly large. Thus, while citizens’ views on fairness and justice vary between countries—even those with relatively

similar political and economic set-ups—it is not uncommon for people to be pessimistic on these issues.

How perceptions of fairness and justice differ within the British population

Although the British public as a whole has rather negative views on fairness and justice in Britain, there are clear differences in these attitudes between different groups. We see differences that appear to be related to individuals' personal situation; for example, people whose main income comes from benefits are very unlikely to think that the political system ensures fair participation in politics. We also see differences that appear to be more likely related to people's understanding of the structures of society, rather than their own lived experience within it; for example, people with a university education are likely to have higher earning potential but are more likely than those with the lowest level of education to think that differences in wealth in Britain are unfairly large.

Gender

In the political sphere, women have historically been excluded from, and continue to be underrepresented in, the political system. The “me too” movement has, in recent years, highlighted sexual abuse crimes against women, and power differentials between men and women in society. It could therefore be expected that there would be different views on fairness and justice between men and women. Table 2 shows that there are indeed significant differences between men's and women's views on justice. Women are significantly less likely to agree that “by and large people get what they deserve”, with 33% of women agreeing with this statement compared to 45% of men. Women are also significantly less likely to agree that they are confident that “justice always prevails over injustice” – 27% of women agree with this statement compared to 33% of men. However, we see no significant difference in the proportion of men and women who believe that the political system does very little or nothing to ensure that everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics, nor in men's and women's attitudes to the distribution of wealth in Britain.

Age

Differences in political and social attitudes can often be found between age groups in Britain. The most high profile of these differences has been the considerable divide between older and younger people in Britain in relation to Brexit, with younger people being more likely to vote to remain in the European Union (EU), and older people more likely to vote to leave. This difference in attitudes towards the EU has, if anything, strengthened in the years following the referendum (Curtice and Montagu, 2018) and these differences extend to cultural and social issues relating to Brexit,

including immigration. We might, therefore, expect divisions around attitudes to fairness and justice between age groups. However, as Table 2 shows, differences between age groups are generally not large, and one age group is not consistently more positive or negative than another in their attitudes. While the oldest age group are the most likely to agree that “by and large people get what they deserve” (with 44% of those aged 65 or over saying that they agree with this statement compared with 37% of those aged 18-34), they are less likely than the youngest age group to think that wealth differences in Britain are fair (20% compared with 25%). So overall there is no strong evidence of a division between young and old when it comes to perceptions of fairness and justice.

Table 2 Attitudes to fairness and justice, by gender and age

	Gender		Age			All
	Male	Female	18-34	35-64	65+	
How much the political system ensures everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics	%	%	%	%	%	%
A great deal/a lot	27	21	22	25	26	24
Some	41	45	50	40	42	43
Very little/Not at all	30	32	26	34	29	31
By and large, people get what they deserve	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree strongly/agree	45	33	37	39	44	39
Neither	23	26	27	24	23	25
Disagree/disagree strongly	31	40	36	36	33	35
Confident that justice always prevails over injustice	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree strongly/agree	33	27	33	29	27	30
Neither	22	25	27	22	21	23
Disagree/disagree strongly	45	47	39	48	51	46
Opinion on differences in wealth in Britain	%	%	%	%	%	%
Unfairly small	17	16	15	17	18	16
Fair	21	19	25	17	20	20
Unfairly large	59	59	57	61	56	59
<i>Unweighted base</i>	954	1137	397	1066	628	2091

Source: European Social Survey wave 9 (2018/19), adults aged 18+ in Britain

Income

We might expect to see differences in attitudes to fairness and justice between people on differing incomes, particularly in their attitudes to wealth distribution. People whose main income comes from benefits or grants may also have different perceptions of fairness and justice from those whose income comes from employment. This is not only because they rely on a level of benefits that is determined by the

British government but also because they are likely to interact with the British state and its institutions in different ways than those who do not receive benefits.

As Table 3 shows, people with higher household incomes are more likely than those with lower household incomes to believe that the British political system facilitates equal political participation. In the highest income quintile, respondents are more likely to say that the political system does “a great deal” or “a lot” to ensure that everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics (29%) than that it does “very little” or nothing at all (22%). In comparison, around four in ten respondents whose household income falls into the lowest and second lowest quintiles think the political system ensures everyone can take part in politics either “very little” or “not at all”. We do not, however, see any significant differences in people’s attitudes to justice or the distribution of wealth when comparing respondents across these household income quintiles. In fact, a majority of respondents in all income quintiles think differences in wealth in Britain are unfairly large.

Table 3 Attitudes to fairness and justice, by household income quintile

	1 st quintile (lowest)	2 nd quintile	3 rd quintile	4 th quintile	5 th quintile (highest)	All
How much the political system ensures everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics	%	%	%	%	%	%
A great deal/a lot	17	18	27	29	29	24
Some	39	41	46	42	47	43
Very little/Not at all	42	39	27	28	22	31
By and large, people get what they deserve	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree strongly/agree	46	40	35	36	37	39
Neither	24	26	26	22	27	25
Disagree/disagree strongly	29	35	38	42	36	35
Confident that justice always prevails over injustice	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree strongly/agree	32	31	26	27	29	30
Neither	21	22	25	20	26	23
Disagree/disagree strongly	45	45	49	52	45	46
Opinion on differences in wealth in Britain	%	%	%	%	%	%
Unfairly small	19	17	15	17	16	16
Fair	15	18	21	18	19	20
Unfairly large	60	62	60	64	62	59
<i>Unweighted base</i>	452	339	308	364	313	2091

Source: European Social Survey wave 9 (2018/19), adults aged 18+ in Britain

People who rely on benefits have particularly negative views about participation in the political system. Respondents whose main income comes from benefits or grants are considerably less likely to feel that the political system ensures everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics than those whose income mainly comes from a salary or pension (Table 4). Around half of those whose main income is benefits or grants think that the political system does “very little” or “not much at all” to ensure everyone a fair chance to participate in politics compared with around three in ten of those whose main income is wages or earnings, or pensions. Furthermore, only around one in ten people whose main income comes from benefits or grants think that the British political system does “a lot” or “a great deal” to ensure that everyone can participate in politics. For people whose main income comes from wages or pensions, this figure is around a quarter.

There are however no significant differences between people with different sources of income when it comes to general attitudes towards justice, with all groups generally pessimistic about justice in Britain. Only around four in ten respondents (no matter their main source of income) agree that “by and large people get what they deserve” and even fewer (around three in ten) agree that they are “confident that justice always prevails over injustice”.

However, those whose main income is benefits or grants are the least likely to say that they think differences in wealth in Britain are fair (12%) compared with those whose main income is wages or earnings (21%) or pensions (19%).

Table 4 Attitudes to fairness and justice, by income source and level of education

	Main source of income			Highest level of education			All
	Wages or earnings	Pension	Benefit or grants	GCSE or lower	Intermediate	Degree	
How much the political system ensures everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
A great deal/a lot	26	26	11	18	24	30	24
Some	45	41	30	43	42	44	43
Very little/Not at all	28	30	53	35	33	24	31
By and large, people get what they deserve	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree strongly/agree	38	42	36	47	40	32	39
Neither	26	24	23	25	25	24	25
Disagree/disagree strongly	36	34	40	27	35	43	35
Confident that justice always prevails over injustice	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree strongly/agree	31	27	26	36	27	27	30
Neither	24	19	25	24	24	21	23
Disagree/disagree strongly	45	53	48	38	48	50	46
Opinion on differences in wealth in Britain	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Unfairly small	15	18	17	16	17	16	16
Fair	21	19	12	25	18	19	20
Unfairly large	60	57	63	49	62	62	59
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1131</i>	<i>624</i>	<i>203</i>	<i>582</i>	<i>891</i>	<i>612</i>	<i>2091</i>

Source: European Social Survey wave 9 (2018/19), adults aged 18+ in Britain

Education

As with age, education levels can also be seen as a dividing line in Britain for a range of political and social attitudes and behaviours. Having a degree, in particular, is strongly associated with more positive attitudes towards immigration, concern for the environment and support for welfare benefits as well as greater political activity (Brennan et al, 2015). From the ESS data, we can see that people in Britain with a higher level of education appear to be more positive than their counterparts with fewer or no educational qualifications about political equality but more critical about economic fairness and general ideas of justice. People with a degree-level qualification or above are the most likely to say that the political system in the UK gives everyone a fair chance to participate—30% of this group say it does “a lot” or “a great deal” to make sure everyone can participate, compared with 18% of those whose highest educational qualification is GCSE-level or below (Table 4).

However, when it comes to more general attitudes around fairness and justice, people with a degree-level qualification are considerably less likely to agree that “by and large people get what they deserve” (32%) than those whose highest qualification is GCSE-level or below

(47%). Respondents with a degree or intermediate qualifications (qualifications above GCSE level, but below degree level, such as A-levels, Higher National Diplomas and foundation degrees) are also less likely to agree that they are confident that “justice always prevails over injustice” (27%) compared with those whose highest qualification is GCSE-level or below (36%). Those with fewer formal qualifications are also less critical of the distribution of wealth in Britain than those with higher educational qualifications; a majority of people with either intermediate or degree-level (62%) qualifications think that wealth differences in Britain are unfairly large, compared with around half of those with GCSE-level qualifications or below.

This offers clear evidence that people with higher levels of education are more likely to be concerned about levels of fairness and justice in Britain. Although those with lower levels of education are likely to have less wealth themselves than those with degree-level qualifications, they are still less likely to say that differences in wealth are too large. This suggests that these perceptions are not simply driven by an individual’s personal interest and experience of British society. However, people with higher levels of education are not universally cynical about how power and resources are distributed in Britain as they are the most likely to believe that the political system works to ensure everyone can participate in British politics.

Political action and attitudes

We have seen that the British public has quite pessimistic views about how fair and just British society is today, and there is relatively little variation in these views within the British population. If people believe that government should have a role to play in ensuring that society is arranged and operates in a fair and just manner, then these views are likely to be related to people’s views on how well the institutions of government operate and how they engage with the system of government in Britain. Indeed, levels of political satisfaction, trust and attitudes towards procedural fairness in public life and trust tend to be lower in less equal societies (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). Therefore, perceptions of unfairness and injustice may be related to people’s views on the actions, policies and outputs of an incumbent government (Easton, 1975), which could be resolved if a new party comes to power or if government action changes. However, without such a remedy, it could also lead to deeper discontent with the ways in which politics and society are arranged and the principles that underpin them.

Although our analysis cannot establish the direction of causality between people’s views on fairness and justice and their political attitudes and behaviours, we can see from our data that there are strong associations between how people perceive the society in which they live and both their assessments of political institutions and their engagement in political activities.

Satisfaction with institutions

If people think that the society in which they live is unfair, they may hold the political and economic institutions that shape this society responsible for this. To investigate this further, we look at respondents' satisfaction with the way politics and the economy operates in Britain, through three questions. Each of these questions asked respondents to rate their level of satisfaction on a scale from 0 ("Extremely dissatisfied") to 10 ("Extremely satisfied"):

Thinking about the British government, how satisfied are you with the way it is doing its job?

On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Britain?

On the whole how satisfied are you with the present state of the economy in Britain?

Table 5 shows the mean levels of satisfaction for each statement, counting "Extremely satisfied" as 10 and "Extremely dissatisfied" as 0, so that a higher mean score indicates a higher level of satisfaction. Overall, the British public reports higher levels of satisfaction with democracy and the economy in Britain than with the national government (Table 5). Given that people tend to show greater support for the principles of democracy than the ways in which government operates across Western democracies (Norris, 1999), this is not surprising.

Table 5 also shows mean levels of satisfaction according to people's responses to the attitudes towards fairness and justice that are discussed above. Satisfaction with the national government is particularly low among people who believe that the political system does little to ensure everyone can participate in politics. The mean level of satisfaction with government among this group is only 2.5; it is almost twice as high (4.7) for people who believe the political system does a lot to ensure everyone has a fair chance to participate. People who believe that the political system does very little or nothing to ensure everyone can participate in politics also have the lowest levels of satisfaction with democracy (which sets the representative principle of the British political system) and the economy.

Levels of satisfaction with government, democracy and the economy are also higher among people who agree that "people get what they deserve" and agree that "justice prevails over injustice" than they are for people who disagree with these statements. While we cannot say whether perceptions of unfairness drive dissatisfaction with government or vice versa, we do find that those who believe that there is a lack of equal access to political participation, fair distribution of wealth or deserved outcomes have more negative assessments of the way politics and the economy works in Britain.

Table 5 Satisfaction with institutions, by attitudes to fairness and justice

Mean scores	Satisfaction with...			<i>Unweighted base</i>
	National government	Democracy	Economy	
All respondents	3.8	5.1	4.8	2091
How much the political system ensures everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics				
A great deal/a lot	4.7	6.4	5.6	503
Some	4.2	5.4	5.0	875
Very little/Not at all	2.5	3.6	3.7	668
By and large, people get what they deserve				
Agree strongly/strongly	4.3	5.3	5.1	836
Neither	3.8	5.3	4.9	509
Disagree/disagree strongly	3.2	4.6	4.3	736
Confident that justice always prevails over injustice				
Agree strongly/strongly	4.6	5.8	5.3	587
Neither	4.0	5.5	5.0	470
Disagree/disagree strongly	3.1	4.3	4.3	1016
Opinion on differences in wealth in Britain				
Unfairly small	3.5	4.8	4.7	363
Fair	4.8	5.7	5.6	399
Unfairly large	3.5	4.9	4.5	1220

Source: European Social Survey wave 9 (2018/19), adults aged 18+ in Britain

Trust in institutions

Trust is an important resource in a representative democracy as it helps to give legitimacy to the system of government and facilitates the policy-making process (van der Meer & Dekker, 2013). But political trust (like satisfaction with democracy and social trust) tends to be lower in societies with higher levels of economic inequality and which are perceived to be less fair (Schäfer, 2010; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005; You, 2012). Therefore, people may be less willing to trust the representative and administrative institutions of government if they do not believe that they are capable of delivering fair and just outcomes.

To collect information on people's levels of trust in government, respondents were asked how much they trust a range of government institutions including parliament, politicians, political parties, the legal system and the police. These responses (measured on a scale from 0 meaning "No trust at all" to 10 meaning "Complete trust") allow us to compare the mean levels of trust respondents reported in different institutions, and how they vary depending on people's views about how fair British society is today. Table 6 shows the mean levels of trust for each institution, counting "Complete trust" as 10 and "No trust at all" as 0, so that a higher mean score indicates a higher level of trust.

The British public reports lower levels of trust in the political institutions of government (parliament, politicians and political parties) than in administrative institutions (the legal system or the police) (Table 6). Those who believe that the political system does little to ensure everyone can participate in politics have particularly low levels of trust. Not only do they report the lowest levels of trust in political institutions, but they also have less trust in the legal system and the police than those who think that the political system does a lot or a great deal to ensure that everyone can take part in politics. This suggests that negative views of the political system likely extend beyond the representative institutions of government to other state institutions that are not, in Britain, directly political. In fact, people who believe that the political system does little to ensure fair political participation report, on average, lower levels of trust in the legal system (4.7 compared to 5.2) and in the police (5.8 compared to 6.2) than those who say that they are not confident that justice prevails over injustice.

People who believe that the differences in wealth in Britain are fair also report significantly higher levels of trust in political institutions and actors (parliament, politicians and political parties) than those who think that these differences are unfair (either unfairly large or unfairly small). Although this suggests that people who believe that wealth is not fairly distributed across British society have more negative views of state institutions, this is not necessarily driven by their views on the distribution of wealth in Britain. We have seen already that people with higher levels of education are more likely to say that wealth is not fairly distributed in Britain, and they are also likely to report lower levels of trust (Dalton, 2005). Nonetheless, Table 6 shows that people who think that British society is not fair or just tend to report lower levels of trust in public institutions.

Table 6 Levels of trust in institutions, by attitudes to fairness and justice

Mean scores	Trust in...					Unweighted base
	Parliament	Politicians	Political parties	Legal system	Police	
All respondents	4.3	3.5	3.6	5.8	6.6	2091
How much the political system ensures everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics						
A great deal/a lot	5.5	4.4	4.3	6.7	7.3	503
Some	4.7	3.8	4.0	6.1	6.9	875
Very little/Not at all	2.9	2.3	2.5	4.7	5.8	668
By and large, people get what they deserve						
Agree strongly/agree	4.5	3.6	3.7	5.9	6.7	836
Neither	4.3	3.4	3.6	5.9	6.8	509
Disagree/disagree strongly	4.1	3.4	3.4	5.7	6.5	736
Confident that justice always prevails over injustice						
Agree strongly/agree	5.0	4.1	4.2	6.6	7.2	587
Neither	4.5	3.7	3.8	6.1	6.8	470
Disagree/disagree strongly	3.7	3.0	3.1	5.2	6.2	1016
Opinion on differences in wealth in Britain						
Unfairly small	4.1	3.3	3.4	5.6	6.5	363
Fair	5.0	4.1	4.0	6.0	6.8	399
Unfairly big	4.1	3.4	3.5	5.9	6.7	1220

Source: European Social Survey wave 9 (2018/19), adults aged 18+ in Britain

Political engagement

People who believe that society is unfair may be motivated to take action to try to change this. This action could be within the established structures of the political system (such as voting or contacting a politician) or outside of the political system (such as attending a demonstration), if they believe it will bring about the change they desire. However, they may alternatively be disengaged from politics if they do not believe that their actions can make a difference.

To investigate this, we can compare how political behaviour varies within the British public depending on their attitudes towards fairness and justice in Britain. Respondents were asked if they had engaged in a range of political activities over the previous 12 months, including contacting their local politician and posting about politics online. They were also asked if they had voted in the last national election in Britain. As we can see from Table 7, voting was by far the most popular form of political activity with a majority of respondents (74%) reporting having voted in the last election. Only around a quarter said they had posted about politics online or boycotted certain products, around one in five (18%) that they had contacted a politician and only one in 20 that they had attended a demonstration.

Table 7 Political activities, by attitudes to fairness and justice

		Contacted politician	Attended demonstration	Posted about politics online	Boycotted certain products	Voted in last election	Unweighted base
All respondents	%	18	5	24	25	74	2091
How much the political system ensures everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics							
A great deal/a lot	%	21	5	25	29	80	503
Some	%	16	4	22	24	71	875
Very little/Not at all	%	19	8	28	24	74	668
By and large, people get what they deserve							
Agree strongly/ agree	%	14	3	18	17	71	836
Neither	%	18	4	23	23	70	509
Disagree/ disagree strongly	%	23	9	33	35	78	736
Confident that justice always prevails over injustice							
Agree strongly/agree	%	12	3	17	18	73	587
Neither	%	16	3	23	21	68	470
Disagree/disagree strongly	%	24	7	30	32	77	1016
Opinion on differences in wealth in Britain							
Unfairly small	%	20	4	20	28	74	363
Fair	%	13	2	17	17	68	399
Unfairly big	%	19	7	29	28	76	1220

Source: European Social Survey wave 9 (2018/19), adults aged 18+ in Britain

However, these figures do vary when broken down by respondents' views of fairness and justice in Britain. Unsurprisingly, those with the most positive views of the British political system are the most likely to report having voted in the last national election. They are, in contrast, less likely than those who believe it does little or nothing to ensure everyone can take part in politics to have attended a demonstration in the previous 12 months.

People who disagree with the statements "I think by and large, people get what they deserve" and "I am confident justice always prevails over injustice" are more likely than other respondents to engage in any of the political activities asked about. For example, around a quarter of people who disagree with the statements "I think by and large, people get what they deserve" and "I am confident justice always prevails over injustice" report having contacted a politician in the previous year, compared to only 14% and 12% respectively of those who agree with each statement. Similarly, around one third who disagree with the two statements had boycotted certain products in the last 12 months, compared to less than 1 in 5 who agreed with these statements. This suggests that political activity both inside and outside the current political system is associated

with a sense of injustice and, potentially, a desire to change things. This is also seen when we break down levels of political activity by individuals' attitudes towards differences in wealth in Britain. Those who think these are fair are less likely than those who think differences in wealth are either unfairly small or unfairly big to take part in any of the forms of political action asked about.

Nonetheless, we cannot say that these attitudes are driving these levels of political activity in Britain. As we have seen, people with a university degree are more likely than those with a lower level of education to say that wealth differences are unfairly large and to disagree with the two statements above. As levels of political participation tend to be higher amongst more highly educated people (Persson, 2013), it may be higher levels of education, rather than feelings of injustice, that are driving greater political engagement amongst this group. However, what is clear is that those who think that Britain is unjust or unfair are more likely to engage in political activity than those with less negative views in these areas.

Conclusions

The British public does not appear to believe that British society is particularly fair or just. Views on differences in wealth are particularly negative, with a majority of respondents indicating that they believe wealth differences in Britain are unfairly large. These attitudes towards differences in wealth are largely consistent across different groups in society. However, they are also not uncommon across our European neighbours, although people in Britain are less likely than those in France, Germany or Italy to say that differences in wealth are unfairly small.

Views about justice are a little less negative, though only three in ten Britons agree with the idea that “justice always prevails over injustice” and only four in ten think “people get what they deserve”. However, there are notable differences in these attitudes that cannot easily be explained by personal experiences alone; while men and older people, for example, are more likely to say that people get what they deserve, people with a higher level of education are less likely to agree with this.

Political fairness also appears to be wanting in Britain. Only a quarter of the British public thinks that the political system does “a lot” or “a great deal” to ensure that everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics, but this drops drastically among the most disadvantaged groups in society; only one in ten people whose main income comes from benefits believe that the political system does “a lot” or “a great deal” to ensure everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics. Among people with a degree-level qualification or above, this figure is almost three times higher. This suggests that the political system is failing to ensure that some of the most disadvantaged members of British society have, or feel like they have, a fair opportunity to take part in politics.

These findings highlight concerns among the British public about the way British society is structured and how fairly it operates, though

many of these are shared by many of our European neighbours. Perceptions of unfairness and injustice may impact how people interact with each other and their government. As we have seen in this chapter, people who believe British society is unfair or unjust report lower levels of satisfaction with the way politics works in Britain, and lower levels of trust in public institutions. This may be a troubling sign for the current system of government in Britain, especially if people who do not feel it delivers fair and just outcomes look to more radical outlets to express their beliefs and bring about institutional change.

But pessimistic attitudes about the system of government do not extend to a widespread disengagement with politics. In fact, those who appear to be happiest with the status quo are the least likely to say that they are interested in politics. People who are not confident that “justice prevails over injustice” or that “people get what they deserve” report that they are more likely to vote than those who agree with these ideas, while all other political activities are more common among members of the British public who do not believe that British society is fair and just. If critical assessments of the way in which British society operates therefore lead to a greater involvement with the political system—and the potential mechanism to change this—then this may in fact be a sign of an increasingly engaged citizenry that is able and willing to demand more from their government. However political activity in Britain has been dominated by older and more highly educated people, and socio-economic disparities in politics may simply reinforce or exacerbate a lack of—or a perceived lack of—fairness in the way Britain operates.

Acknowledgements

The European Social Survey (ESS) is a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC). Participating countries contribute to the central coordination costs of the ESS ERIC as well as covering the costs of their own fieldwork and national coordination. In the UK these funds are provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The views expressed are those of the authors alone.

References

- Bale, T., P. Webb, and M. Poletti. 2019. *Footsoldiers: Political Party Membership in the 21st Century*. Taylor & Francis.
- Blanden, Jo, and Stephen Machin. 2004. ‘Educational Inequality and the Expansion of UK Higher Education’. *Scottish Journal of Political Economy* 51(2): 230–49.
- Brennan, John et al. 2015. ‘The Effect of Higher Education on Graduates’ Attitudes: Secondary Analysis of the British Social Attitudes Survey’.
- Curtice, John, and Ian Montagu. 2018. ‘Do Scotland and England & Wales Have Different Views About Immigration?’ NatCen.

- Dalton, Russell. 2005. 'The Social Transformation of Trust in Government'. *International Review of Sociology / Revue Internationale de Sociologie* 15.
- Dalton, Russell J. 2017. 'Political Equality as the Foundation of Democracy'. In *The Participation Gap*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Easton, David. 1975. 'A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support'. *British Journal of Political Science* 5(4): 435–57.
- Hough, Mike et al. 2010. 'Procedural Justice, Trust, and Institutional Legitimacy'. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 4(3): 203–10.
- Lamprinakou, Chrysa, Marco Morucci, Rosie Campbell, and Jennifer van Heerde-Hudson. 2017. 'All Change in the House? The Profile of Candidates and MPs in the 2015 British General Election'. *Parliamentary Affairs* 70(2): 207–32.
- Li, Yaojun, and Anthony Heath. 2020. 'Persisting Disadvantages: A Study of Labour Market Dynamics of Ethnic Unemployment and Earnings in the UK (2009–2015)'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46(5): 857–78.
- Marmot, Michael. 2020. 'Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On'. *BMJ* 368.
- Norris, Pippa. 1999. *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*. OUP Oxford.
- Persson, Mikael. 2013. 'Education and Political Participation'. *British Journal of Political Science* 45: 1–15.
- Rothstein, Bo, and Eric M Uslaner. 2005. 'All for All: Equality, Corruption, and Social Trust'. *World Pol.* 58: 41.
- Schäfer, Armin. 2012. 'Consequences of Social Inequality for Democracy in Western Europe'. *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* 6(2): 23–45.
- Tyler, Tom R. 2012. 'Justice and Effective Cooperation'. *Social Justice Research* 25(4): 355–75.
- van der Meer, Tom, and Paul Dekker. 2013. 'Trustworth States, Trusting Citizens? A Multilevel Study into Objective and Subjective Determinants of Political Trust'. In *Political Trust: Why Context Matters*, ECPR Press Studies in European Political Science, eds. S. Zmerli and M. Hooghe. ECPR Press.
- You, Jong-sung. 2012. 'Social Trust: Fairness Matters More Than Homogeneity'. *Political Psychology* 33(5): 701–21.

Publication details

Curtice, J., Hudson, N., and Montagu, I. (eds.) (2020) British Social Attitudes: The 37th Report. London: The National Centre for Social Research

© The National Centre for Social Research 2020

First published 2020

You may print out, download and save this publication for your non-commercial use. Otherwise, and apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to The National Centre for Social Research.

The National Centre for Social Research
35 Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0AX
info@natcen.ac.uk
ISBN: 978-1-5272-4448-1