

New values, new divides?

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public attitudes

There has been much debate about whether the COVID-19 pandemic might create an opportunity to introduce major changes in public policy and the structure of society. Looking at welfare, inequality, and the role of law and conformity, this chapter assesses whether there is evidence of new patterns in public attitudes that might facilitate the introduction of such changes. It does so by comparing the results of two NatCen Social Research surveys conducted after the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020 with the findings of British Social Attitudes (BSA) surveys conducted since 1983.

An already more favourable attitude towards welfare for the unemployed has been maintained

- Between 2005 and 2019 the proportion who agreed that most unemployed people could find a job if they wished fell from 69% to 51%. In our two surveys undertaken during the pandemic the figures are 51% and 42%.
- The proportion who agreed that most people on the dole are fiddling fell from 41% in 2004 to 18% in 2019. In our most recent two surveys 25% and 22% express this view.
- In 2011 people were three times more likely to say that benefits for the unemployed were too low than they were to say they were too high. In 2019 the public was evenly divided in its views, and this has remained the case since lockdown.

There are signs that more people now think Britain is unequal but redistribution has not become more popular

- In 2019 56% agreed that there was ‘one law for the rich and one for the poor’. In our two most recent surveys this has risen to 64% and 67%.
 - Whereas in 2019 57% agreed that ‘ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth’, our latest two surveys put the figure at 64%.
 - 27% disagreed in 2019 with the proposition that ‘the government should redistribute income from the better-off to the less well-off’. Now the figure stands at 30%.
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An existing trend towards a more liberal attitude to law and conformity has continued during the pandemic

- In 2019 only 23% disagreed that the law should always be obeyed even if it is wrong. In our two surveys conducted during the pandemic, the figures are 32% and 31%.
 - The proportion who agreed that schools should teach children to obey authority had already fallen from 85% in 2004 to 72% in 2019. More recently, it has fallen further to 68% and 62%.
 - In 2007 77% agreed that young people did not have enough respect for traditional values. By 2019 this had dropped to 60%, while in our latest surveys it has been 56% and 52%.
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Authors

John Curtice

Senior Research Fellow, The National Centre for Social Research, and Professor of Politics, University of Strathclyde

Dominic Abrams

Professor of Social Psychology, and Director, Centre for the Study of Group Processes, University of Kent

Curtis Jessop

Research Director, The National Centre for Social Research

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the biggest public health crisis for a century. In order to curb the spread of the disease, for much of 2020 and 2021 the UK and devolved governments have employed emergency powers to limit social and economic life and have provided extensive financial support to businesses and individuals. The scope and scale of these measures have outstripped anything seen since the Second World War. At the same time, the security of many people's lives has been undermined by the risks to their health and the possibility of lost income and employment. Although a programme of mass vaccination has now reduced the spread and severity of the disease, the period spent living under COVID-19 restrictions is probably an experience that the country will not forget for a long time.

But what imprint, if any, might that experience leave on public attitudes? We might wonder whether it has led people to question how they should run their lives and how society should be organised. That certainly appears to have been an assumption made by many commentators. Newspaper columns, broadcast and digital media, and academic journals have all been replete with discussions about how collective social and political life might change in the wake of the pandemic (see, for example, BBC, 2020; Benach, 2021; British Academy, 2021; Macmillan, 2020; Susskind et al., 2020).

However, any change of policy in a post-pandemic world will be implemented against the backdrop of whatever public attitudes and expectations emerge from the crisis. These might, indeed, have changed. The expanded role taken on by the state and the experience of unanticipated economic insecurity may have persuaded some people that the state should take on a larger role in economic life, not least through providing a stronger social security net for those of working age. The additional public exposure, afforded by the pandemic, to the relationship between social deprivation and poor health might have persuaded some people of the need to create a more equal society. At the same time, the fear of disease might have persuaded some people that more emphasis should be placed on communal social order and security and less on individual liberty (Helzer and Pizarro, 2011; Murray and Schaller, 2012; Henderson and Schnall, 2021).

Yet there is no guarantee that any of these changes will happen (Briggs et al., 2020; Duffy et al., 2021). People may regard the pandemic as an exceptional situation from which they wish to return to 'normal'. Rather than changing their attitudes and values, they might instead frame the experience in a way that is consistent with their previous preferences and views (Festinger, 1957). Previous research has found that when public spending rises above what people regard as a desirable level they react by calling for spending to be reduced (Wlezien, 1995). Further, those who are relatively well-off may not embrace redistributive measures designed to create a

more equal society. Meanwhile, rather than generating a wish for social order, the restrictions imposed on people's lives during the pandemic might have stimulated a wish to see better protection of individual liberties in the future.

We should also bear in mind that the impact of the pandemic has varied across society. For example, while the virus put older people at most risk of suffering serious illness and death, younger people have been hit hardest by the public health measures intended to try and curb its spread. Younger people are more likely to have been employed in industries that were forced to close for much of the pandemic (Office for National Statistics, 2021a), were less likely to have accommodation that was suitable for working from home, and were more likely to have their personal lives adversely affected by lockdown (Leavey et al., 2020). They have also been at the back of the queue for vaccination. While older people with relatively secure employment, incomes and homes may perhaps be ready for post-pandemic Britain to return to 'normal', younger people might be keener to see an enhanced role for a state that creates a more equal and less precarious society – though at the same time they might be looking for the state to be less interventionist in their social lives.

The legacy of data collected by British Social Attitudes (BSA) since its inception in 1983 provides a unique opportunity to examine the impact that the pandemic has had on public attitudes. The annual surveys have included many indicators of values and attitudes that have been measured on a regular basis during that time. The surveys thus not only provide us with a point of comparison in the immediate run-up to the pandemic, but also enable us to obtain an early indication as to whether the post-pandemic public mood might be different from anything seen during the last four decades. Meanwhile, we have access to two surveys conducted since the introduction of the first COVID-19 UK-wide lockdown in March 2020. The first was undertaken in July 2020 using NatCen Social Research's mixed mode random probability panel (Curtice et al., 2020), which is comprised of people who have participated in previous annual BSA surveys and who have indicated a willingness to respond to further surveys (Jessop, 2018). This survey consisted almost entirely of questions asked on previous BSA surveys. The second is the most recent BSA wave undertaken between the end of October and the beginning of December 2020. This survey included many of the same questions.

As the Technical details explain, because of the social restrictions imposed in the wake of the pandemic, the 2020 BSA survey was undertaken differently from its predecessors. While previous surveys have been conducted face-to-face (with a self-completion paper supplement), in 2020 most respondents completed the survey online. There is thus a risk that any differences (or lack of) between the findings of this survey and that of its predecessors are a consequence of methodological change and not a reflection of a real change in the public mood. However, the fact that our questions also appeared on the earlier NatCen Panel survey that uses yet a different

methodology means that we have a second source (albeit one conducted earlier in the pandemic) that can also be used to assess whether attitudes have changed. If the patterns that we identify in BSA 2020 are also present in our panel survey, the risk is at least reduced that any change that we identify is simply a consequence of the change of methodology.

We begin by examining the extent to which attitudes have or have not changed across the public as a whole. We first look at attitudes towards welfare, and in particular, given the very substantial government intervention in the labour market during the pandemic, at support for those who are unemployed. After looking at attitudes towards the government spending in general, we focus on some indicators of attitudes towards inequality and the role that the state should play in trying to address it, and at some measures of the extent to which people value law and conformity. Finally, we assess whether any change of attitude is more in evidence among younger people than their older counterparts.

Attitudes towards welfare in an age of income insecurity

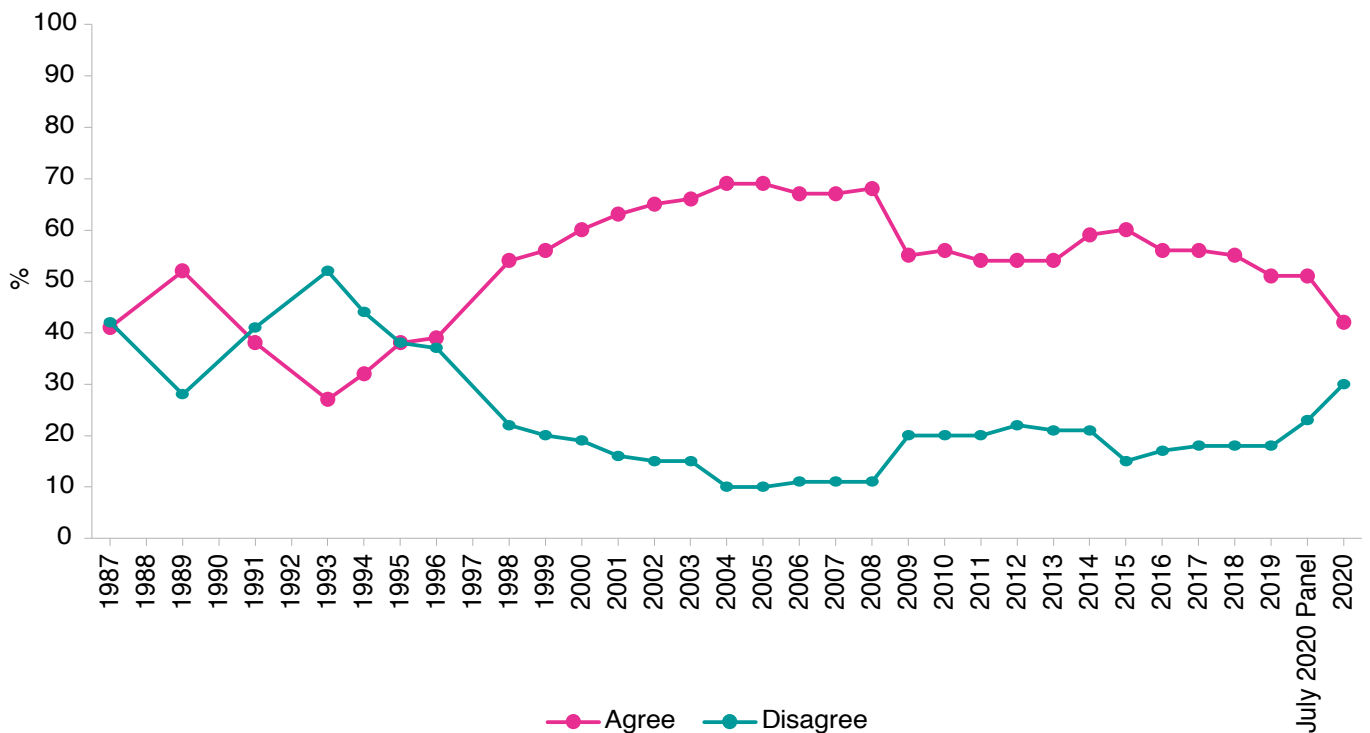
The shutdown of much business activity – and the associated decline in economic activity – threatened many people’s livelihoods, including those of people who previously had had no reason to seek income support during their working lives. Much of the potential increase in unemployment was stemmed by the introduction of a furlough scheme that provided employers with the funds to pay 80% of the normal earnings of those employees for whom there was temporarily no work. At its height, nearly nine million people, more than a quarter of the workforce, were having their wages paid via this scheme (Office for National Statistics, 2021b). The scheme helped ensure that registered unemployment only increased from 4% when the first lockdown was introduced in March 2020 to 5% at the end of the year (Office for National Statistics, 2021c).

The furlough scheme was never portrayed as a welfare payment. However, the widespread experience of being out of work and reliant on the state might have led some people to adopt a more sympathetic attitude towards the unemployed and the provision of welfare for those of working age (de Vries et al., 2021). Indeed, the government itself seemed to acknowledge that this might be the case with its decision to increase the amount paid by its main welfare benefit for those of working age, Universal Credit, by £20 a week.

Our first indications of attitudes towards unemployed people are provided by the pattern of responses to two questions that are part of a suite designed to tap into people’s attitudes towards welfare in general (see Technical details). The first asks people whether they agree or disagree that ‘around here, most people who are unemployed could find a job if they really wanted one’. Asked as the

question has been on a regular basis since 1987, Figure 1 reveals that attitudes changed considerably in the 30 years leading up to the pandemic. In most, though not all years between 1987 and 1996, there was more or less an even balance between those who agreed and those who disagreed with the proposition. But once New Labour came to power – committed as it was to reducing the government’s welfare bill (Atkins, 2011; Hills, 2004) – there was a sharp increase in the proportion who agreed. It reached a high of 69% in 2004 and 2005, and the figure remained at close to that level until in 2009 – in the immediate wake of the financial crash that initially looked as though it might result in a sharp increase in unemployment – there was a sharp drop to 55%. Thereafter, the proportion agreeing stayed at around 55%, until in 2019, the figure dropped to 51%, at which level it remained in the July 2020 Panel survey. However, at 23%, the proportion who disagreed in the Panel survey was higher than at any time since 1996. Meanwhile, in our latest BSA survey, the proportion who agree has fallen to just 42%, while as many as 30% disagree. People are still more inclined to feel that the unemployed could find a job than they were for much of the 1980s and 1990s, but this view has seemingly become less common than it was during the previous 20 years.

Figure 1 Proportion who agree/disagree that ‘Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one’, 1987-2020

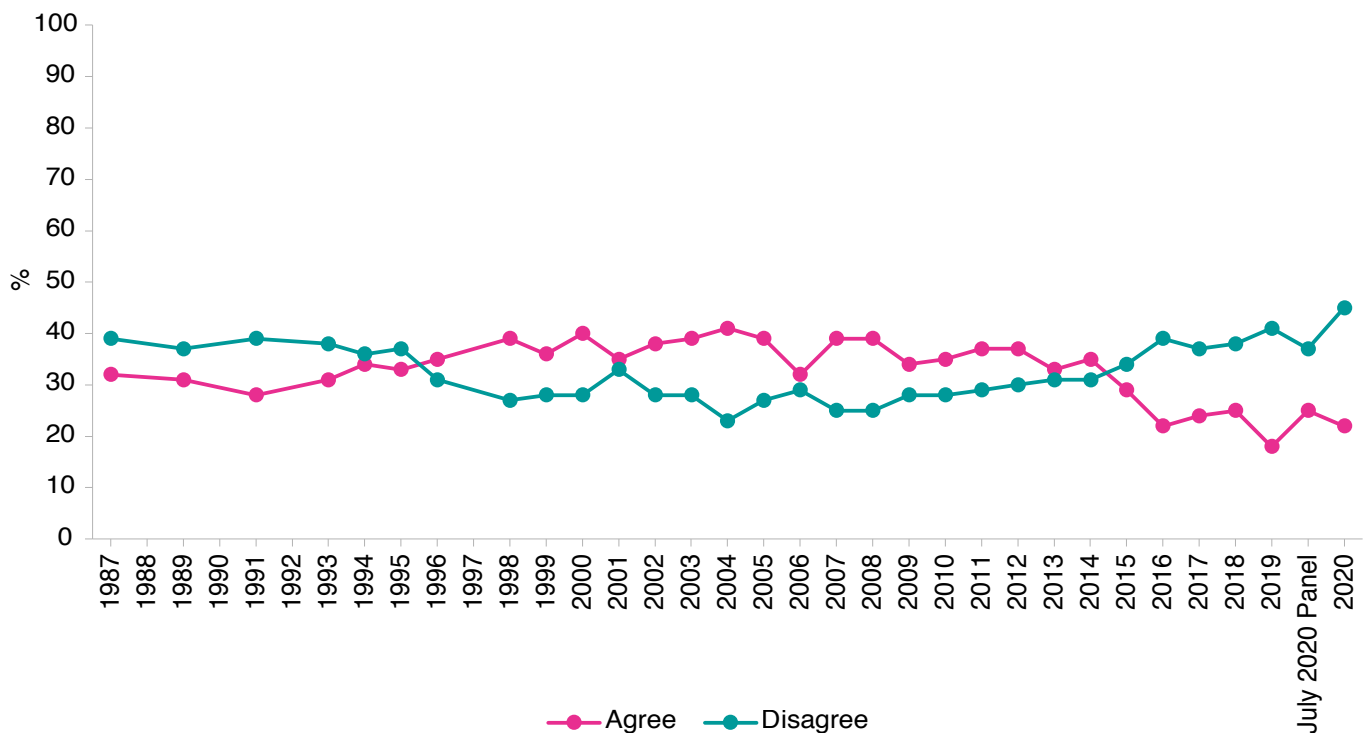


Source: 2020 BSA online survey

The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.1 of this chapter

Still, the question summarised in Figure 1 might be thought to tap into people’s perceptions of the state of the labour market locally rather than whether they think the unemployed are deserving of support. Our second question addresses this issue more directly; it asks respondents whether they agree or disagree that ‘most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another’. Between 1987 and 1996 those who disagreed with the proposition tended to outnumber slightly those who agreed; on average during this period 32% said that they agreed, while 37% disagreed (see Figure 2). But the balance had begun to tilt in the other direction in 1996 and did so quite consistently throughout the years of the New Labour Government and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition of 2010-15. However, between 2016 and 2019 the proportion who disagreed (on average, 39%) was back to the level of the late 1980s and early 1990s, while the proportion who agreed was even lower than it had been then (22%). And while our July 2020 panel survey saw the proportion in favour return to the level registered in 2018, in our latest BSA survey the balance of opinion is tilted as much in favour of disagree as it had been in 2019. Fiddling the system at least appears to have become less of a concern for the public in recent years, a change that has been maintained during the pandemic.

Figure 2 Proportion who agree/disagree that ‘Most people on the dole are fiddling one way or another’, 1987-2020



Source: 2020 BSA online survey

The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.2 of this chapter

However, does the fact that people are now more likely to express more favourable sentiments towards the unemployed translate into support for measures to assist them? Our first measure of this comes from responses to a question that BSA has asked regularly since 1983. It reads:

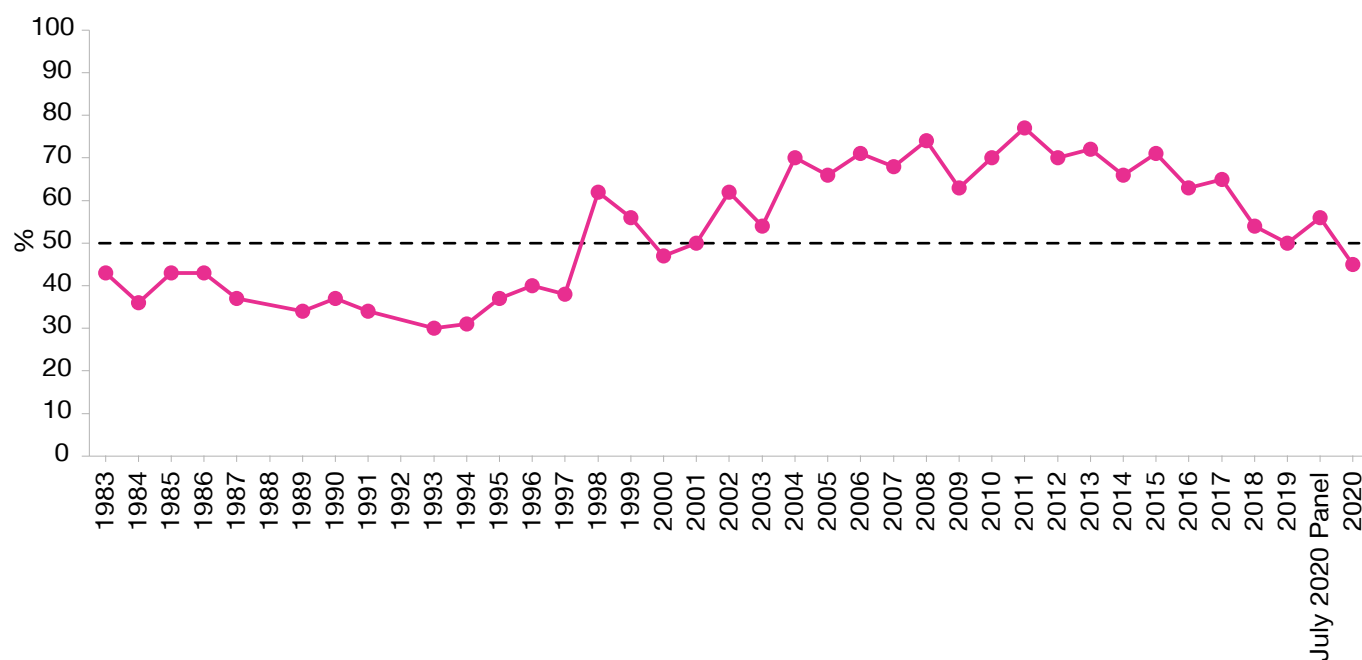
Opinions differ about the level of benefits for unemployed people. Which of these two statements comes closest to your own view...

...benefits for unemployed people are too low and cause hardship,

or, benefits for unemployed people are too high and discourage them from finding jobs?

Some people are reluctant to make this choice and, as a result, a relatively high proportion have often responded ‘neither’, a response that BSA interviewers have recorded. Indeed, in 2019 a record 21% replied in that way. However, because both the NatCen Panel survey of July 2020 and the BSA 2020 survey were conducted predominantly online without an interviewer present, respondents could not be afforded the same flexibility. On the panel survey, it was decided to offer ‘neither’ as a possible response, and 31% picked that answer. In the light of that experience, the decision was taken for BSA 2020 not to offer ‘neither’ as a response, and thereby encourage respondents to take one position or the other (of whom 93% did so). These variations in how the question was administered mean that the pattern of responses needs to be interpreted with care – and in Figure 3 to simplify matters we show the proportion who said ‘too low’ among just those who said either ‘too low’ or ‘too high’ (thereby excluding entirely those who said ‘neither’ or any other response).

The figure reveals that the balance of responses has changed considerably over time since the question was first asked in 1983, doing so broadly in line with the changes of sentiment that we saw in Figures 1 and 2. Until the late 1990s, more people said that benefits for the unemployed were too low and caused hardship than said they were too high and discouraged people from finding a job. However, the advent of a New Labour Government in 1997 was soon followed by a sharp swing in favour of the view that benefits were too high, and for 20 years this was nearly always the more common response. However, after peaking at 77% in 2011, early in the life of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, the proportion saying that benefits for the unemployed were too high began to fall, and especially so from 2016 onwards – a trend that in part at least has been ascribed to Labour’s criticisms of the coalition’s reduction in welfare provision (Curtice, 2020). By 2019, the year before the pandemic, the figure had fallen to 50%. In short, here too there were already signs before the pandemic that attitudes towards the provision of welfare for the unemployed were becoming more favourable.

Figure 3 Attitudes towards benefits for unemployed people 1983-2020

This figure shows the percentage who said that benefits for unemployed people are 'too high' as a percentage of those who said they are either 'too low' or are 'too high'. Those saying 'neither' or any other response are excluded.

Source: 2020 BSA online survey

The original data on which Figure 3 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.3 of this chapter

Our two post-pandemic surveys suggest that this outlook has remained in place. Although our July 2020 survey saw a reversion to slightly more people saying that benefits were too high than too low (54% expressed that view), our latest BSA survey (on which neither was not offered as an option) finds that those who think that benefits are too high (45%) are clearly outnumbered by those who believe that they are too low (55%). However, even if people in Britain are now more inclined to view benefits for the unemployed as too low, it is not as widespread an opinion as it was in the 1980s and most of the 1990s when on average 63% held that view. The change of mood is still relatively modest – and much of it predated the onset of the pandemic.

Further evidence that attitudes towards benefits for unemployed people may already have started to become more favourable before the pandemic – and perhaps are now even more so – comes from the answers that have been given when people have been asked which of five possibilities (as detailed in Table 1) would be their highest and second highest priorities for extra spending on social benefits.¹ Up to and including 1996 an average of 28% of adults said that benefits for unemployed people were either their first or second priority. This hardly meant that they were the most popular of benefits, but it was

¹ Respondents were asked, 'Thinking now only of the government's spending on social benefits, which, if any of the following would be your highest priority for extra spending,' followed by (if they named a benefit), 'And which next?'

enough to put them on a par with child benefits (also mentioned by 28% on average during this period) and meant they were more likely to be regarded as a high priority than benefits for single parents. But between 2000 and 2016 on average only 10% selected benefits for the unemployed. Instead, the public's top priority was clearly retirement pensions, which over 70% selected every time the question was asked between 1996 and 2012. Voters appeared to be very much in tune with a governmental policy that at the time was generous in its annual uprating of the state pension but which sought to cut back on welfare provision for those of working age (Pearce and Taylor, 2013).

Table 1 Priorities for extra spending on social benefits, 1983–2020

| First or second highest priority for extra spending | 1983 | 1984 | 1985 | 1986 | 1987 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 2000 | 2001 | 2003 | |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | |
| Retirement pensions | 64 | 66 | 64 | 65 | 68 | 67 | 65 | 63 | 63 | 64 | 68 | 71 | 74 | 76 | 79 | |
| Benefits for disabled people | 58 | 55 | 58 | 58 | 54 | 60 | 59 | 58 | 51 | 57 | 58 | 54 | 61 | 57 | 54 | |
| Child benefits | 20 | 22 | 23 | 23 | 24 | 30 | 32 | 35 | 31 | 34 | 33 | 30 | 33 | 35 | 38 | |
| Benefits for single parents | 21 | 16 | 18 | 18 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 18 | 14 | 12 | 12 | 15 | 14 | 16 | |
| Benefits for the unemployed | 32 | 35 | 31 | 33 | 33 | 25 | 21 | 22 | 32 | 26 | 25 | 26 | 13 | 12 | 10 | |
| None of these | 1 | 1 | 1 | * | 1 | * | 1 | * | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | <i>1761</i> | <i>1675</i> | <i>1804</i> | <i>3100</i> | <i>2847</i> | <i>3029</i> | <i>2797</i> | <i>2918</i> | <i>2945</i> | <i>1167</i> | <i>1234</i> | <i>3620</i> | <i>3426</i> | <i>3287</i> | <i>3272</i> | |
| | 2005 | 2007 | 2010 | 2012 | 2014 | 2016 | 2018 | 2020 | | | | | | | | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | | | | | | | | |
| Retirement pensions | 80 | 78 | 72 | 72 | 67 | 59 | 56 | 54 | | | | | | | | |
| Benefits for disabled people | 53 | 54 | 53 | 59 | 60 | 65 | 64 | 52 | | | | | | | | |
| Child benefits | 39 | 42 | 42 | 35 | 37 | 35 | 34 | 43 | | | | | | | | |
| Benefits for single parents | 15 | 15 | 14 | 14 | 17 | 17 | 20 | 15 | | | | | | | | |
| Benefits for the unemployed | 8 | 7 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 13 | 15 | 24 | | | | | | | | |
| None of these | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 6 | 2 | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | <i>3193</i> | <i>3094</i> | <i>3297</i> | <i>3248</i> | <i>2878</i> | <i>2942</i> | <i>2884</i> | <i>3964</i> | | | | | | | | |

Source: 2020: BSA online survey

However, there were already signs in the years running up to the pandemic that this mood was beginning to change. In 2014, the proportion prioritising retirement pensions dropped below 70% for the first time in nearly 20 years, while by 2018 it had fallen to 56%. In 2018, the proportion who were selecting benefits for the unemployed as one of their two priority areas for extra spending had edged up to 15%. Now – and in line with the evidence of the pattern of responses to a different question on benefits for the unemployed that was asked on the July 2020 Panel (Curtice et al., 2020)² – our latest BSA survey shows that 24% name benefits for the unemployed as a first or second priority. Although retirement pensions together with benefits for people with a disability are still the most popular forms of welfare provision, it appears that, with a record 43% also saying that child benefits are now a priority (and children are a group that like people with a disability may be felt to have little control over their financial situation – see Oorschot, 2000), the pandemic may have furthered an existing trend towards a higher public recognition of the potential needs of those of working age and their families than has been in evidence during the previous 20 years.

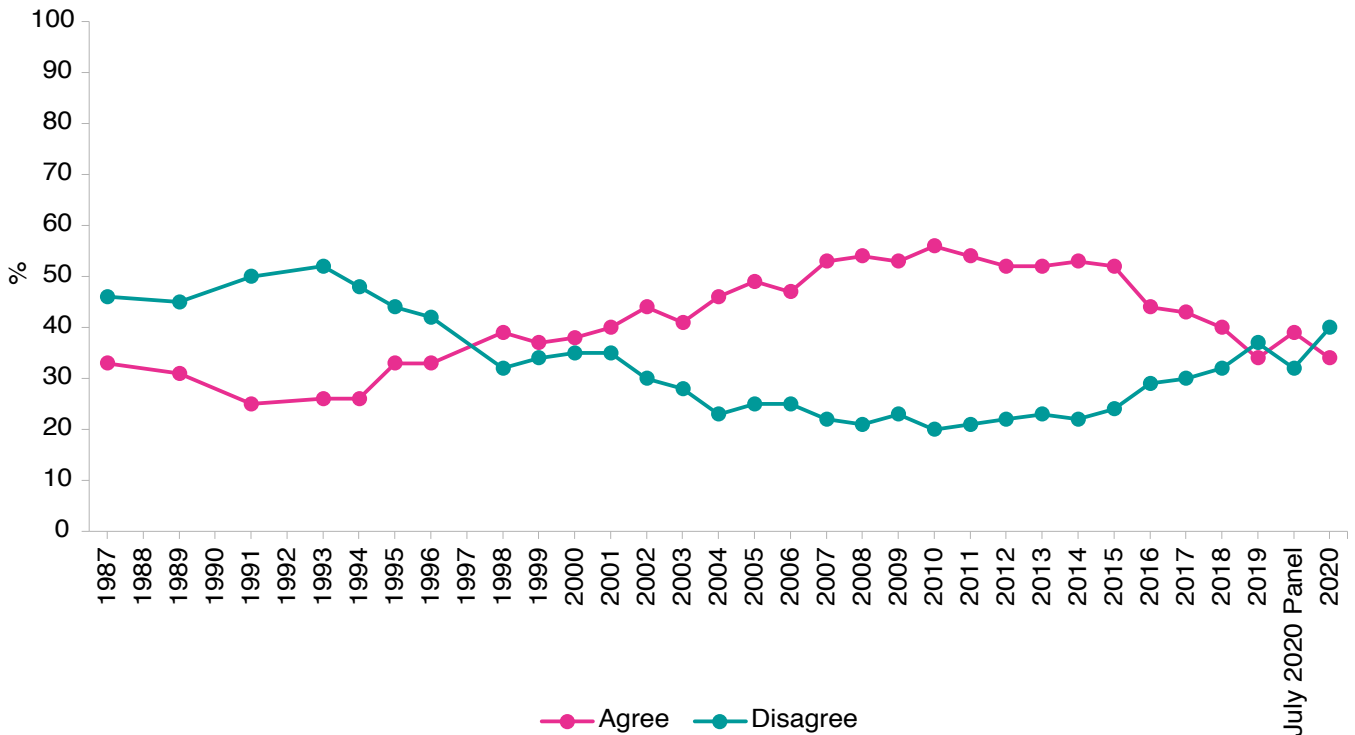
Attitudes towards welfare provision for the unemployed were then already becoming more favourable before the introduction of the COVID-19 lockdown. That more favourable outlook was certainly maintained during the pandemic and opinion may have swung a little further in that direction as it has progressed (see also de Vries et al., 2021). That said, on most of our measures attitudes towards the unemployed are still less favourable than they were in the 1980s and 1990s. At the moment at least, it cannot be said that the pandemic looks set to inaugurate an era in which the public is keener than ever before for the welfare state to provide a substantial safety net for those of working age.

These patterns are also to be found in attitudes towards welfare more generally. This is illustrated in Figure 4, which shows how people have responded when asked whether they agree or disagree that ‘If welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet’. In what is by now a familiar pattern, between 1987 and 1996 those who disagreed with this proposition outnumbered those who agreed, whereas thereafter the opposite was the case – until 2019. Although the July 2020 survey detected a small shift back in the opposite direction to a figure similar to that seen in 2018, our latest BSA survey again finds that those who disagree outnumber those who agree to a slightly greater extent than in 2019. Much the same pattern is also to be found in response to another question on welfare that asks people whether they agree or disagree that ‘many people who get social security don’t really deserve any help’. It seems that the pandemic occurred at a time when there had already

² Respondents were asked, ‘Would you like to see more or less government spending than now on benefits for unemployed people?’. In 2017, when the question was last asked on BSA, 20% replied more and 37% less. On our July 2020 panel survey, in contrast, 28% said more and 28% less. See Curtice et al. (2020) for further details.

been a substantial shift in attitudes towards welfare provision in general, a change that remains in place but one which still leaves Britain largely less generous in its attitudes towards welfare than it was when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister.

Figure 4 Proportion who agree/disagree that ‘if welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet’, 1987-2020



Source: 2020 BSA online survey

The data on which Figure 4 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.4 of this chapter

Government spending

The pandemic has led to a substantial increase in government spending. Apart from increased spending on support for businesses and those without work, the government has had to give extra resources to a NHS that was having to cope with the sickness and need for infection control caused by the pandemic, and to schools that had to adapt their premises and working practices in order to be able to operate during the pandemic. With declining tax revenues and increased spending, the government’s fiscal deficit as a proportion of GDP rose from just under 3% in 2019/20 to over 14% in 2020/1, a record high level in peacetime (Keep, 2021; Office for National Statistics, 2021d), while the share of the economy accounted for by government spending rose to over half.

But how has the public reacted to this change? One possibility is that the experience has persuaded them that the government can and should play a greater role in the country’s economic life, including through the provision of enhanced public services. Alternatively,

however, they may regard the expansion of the state as undesirable and/or fiscally irresponsible in the longer term, and want to see the level of government activity return to something like pre-pandemic levels. That is certainly the implication of previous research that has suggested that the public reacts thermostatically to rises and falls in public spending, swinging in favour of lower spending when it has gone up and in favour of higher spending when it has been cut (Wlezien, 1995).

Table 2 shows how people have responded since 1983 when they have been asked:

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

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

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

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

The pattern of responses over the last 40 years certainly suggests that the public is inclined to react thermostatically to recent changes in taxation and spending. The attempt by Conservative governments in the 1980s and 1990s to reduce taxation and spending saw the proportion who backed an increase double from 32% in 1983 to 65% in 1991. However, once the New Labour Government had presided over a sharp increase in spending, support fell back sharply and by the time Labour's period in office had come to an end in 2010 it once again stood at 31%. Meanwhile, although the attempt by Conservative-led administrations thereafter to reduce the fiscal deficit that had been occasioned by the financial crash did not initially result in much of a thermostatic reaction, by 2017 the proportion wanting increased spending was back up to 60%, and it was still above 50% on the eve of the pandemic.

Thus, as in the case of attitudes towards spending on welfare, the pandemic occurred at a time when voters had already been looking for a while for the government to become more active. Meanwhile, the two surveys we conducted in 2020 register only marginal changes in the pattern of responses, despite the substantial change in spending levels. This may be a signal that voters have indeed reset their expectations of what government should do and that the growth that has occurred in public spending during the pandemic has so far not sated their appetite for increased spending. However, perhaps voters have yet to take on board the expansion of spending that has occurred (or may simply be regarding it as exceptional) – and that when they do (and the pandemic has abated) many will be looking for government spending to fall back down again.

Table 2 Attitudes towards taxation and spending on health, education and social benefits, 1983-2020

| Which should the government choose ... | 1983 | 1984 | 1985 | 1986 | 1987 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|-----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits | 9 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 |
| Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now | 54 | 50 | 43 | 44 | 42 | 37 | 37 | 29 | 28 | 33 | 31 | 34 | 31 | 32 | 34 |
| Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits | 32 | 39 | 45 | 46 | 50 | 56 | 54 | 65 | 63 | 58 | 61 | 59 | 62 | 63 | 58 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 1761 | 1675 | 1804 | 3100 | 2847 | 3029 | 2797 | 2918 | 2945 | 3469 | 3633 | 3620 | 1355 | 3146 | 3143 |
| | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits | 5 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 8 | 9 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 7 |
| Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now | 40 | 34 | 31 | 38 | 42 | 43 | 43 | 47 | 50 | 55 | 56 | 54 | 53 | 54 | 52 |
| Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits | 50 | 59 | 63 | 51 | 49 | 46 | 46 | 42 | 39 | 34 | 31 | 36 | 34 | 36 | 37 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 2292 | 3287 | 3435 | 3272 | 2146 | 2166 | 3240 | 3094 | 2229 | 1139 | 3297 | 3311 | 3248 | 3244 | 2878 |
| | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | July 2020 Panel | 2020 | | | | | | | | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | | | | | | | | |
| Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 6 | | | | | | | | |
| Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now | 47 | 44 | 33 | 34 | 37 | 41 | 43 | | | | | | | | |
| Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits | 45 | 48 | 60 | 57 | 53 | 53 | 50 | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 3266 | 2942 | 2963 | 2884 | 3224 | 2413 | 3964 | | | | | | | | |

Source: Panel: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel, July 2020; 2020: BSA online survey

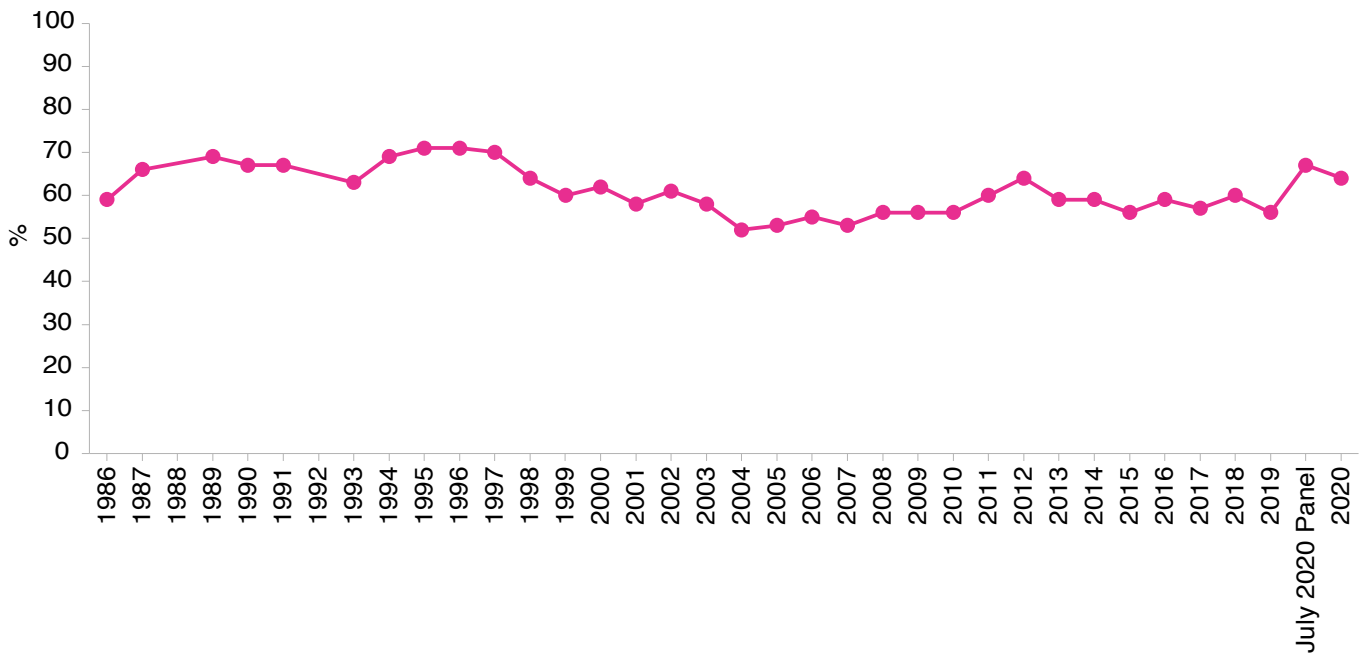
The debate about financial inequality

The pandemic has also given rise to further debate about the extent and impacts of income inequality in British society. Levels of morbidity and mortality as a result of the virus tended to be higher in regions with higher levels of deprivation (Woodward et al., early view). Those in office-based white-collar jobs were most likely to be able to switch to working (in relative safety) at home and remain in

employment (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Children from less advantaged backgrounds were less likely to profit from online lessons when schools were closed (Montacute and Cullinane, 2021), while ensuring continued access to free school meals for those who are less well-off became a particular issue of contention (Butler, 2021). But has any of this debate had any apparent impact on people’s attitudes towards inequality?

One of a number of questions that BSA has asked on a regular basis in order to measure attitudes towards inequality asks people whether they agree or disagree that there is ‘one law for the rich and one for the poor’. Reactions to this statement may be thought to provide an indication of whether or not people think that inequality in Britain has a significant impact on people’s life chances and opportunities. Figure 5 shows that a majority has felt that it does ever since the question was first asked in 1986. Support was most widespread in the mid-1990s when the proportion agreeing reached the 70% mark. While subsequently it fell to not much above a half during the middle years of the New Labour Government, it then rose again to around the 60% mark thereafter.

Figure 5 Proportion who agree/disagree that ‘There is one law for the rich and one for the poor’, 1986-2020



Source: 2020 BSA online survey

The data on which Figure 5 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.5 of this chapter

Our two readings taken during the course of the pandemic both suggest that there may have been an increase in the proportion who agree with the proposition. Whereas between 2011 and 2019 on average 59% agreed that ‘there is one law for the rich and one for the poor’ (and in 2019 just 56% agreed), our panel survey in July 2020 found that 67% agreed, while our latest BSA survey puts the figure at 64%. Both readings are higher than those obtained in any previous year (bar one) since 1997. While they do not represent enough of a change to suggest that the pandemic has resulted in a dramatic shift in people’s perceptions of inequality in Britain, it may be that a few more people do now reckon that Britain is an unequal society.

Still, it is possible that responses to this particular item might have been affected by high-profile instances of some of those in power not following the rules and guidance that others were expected to follow, such as for example when, in May 2020, the Prime Minister’s principal adviser at the time, Dominic Cummings, made a 250-mile trip from London to Durham after suspecting that he and his wife might have caught COVID-19 (Fancourt et al., 2020). However, we see a similar pattern if we examine how people have responded to a second proposition, that ‘ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth’ (see Table 3). Once again, we see that the proportion who agreed with the statement fell somewhat after New Labour came to power, only to rise again in the later years of that administration. Thereafter, between 2011 and 2019, the proportion who agreed on average stood at 60% (including 57% in 2019). In contrast, our two surveys conducted during the pandemic have both found 64% in favour of the proposition, higher than in any year since 1998. So, here too, there is some suggestion that in the wake of the pandemic slightly more people now feel that Britain is an unfairly unequal society.

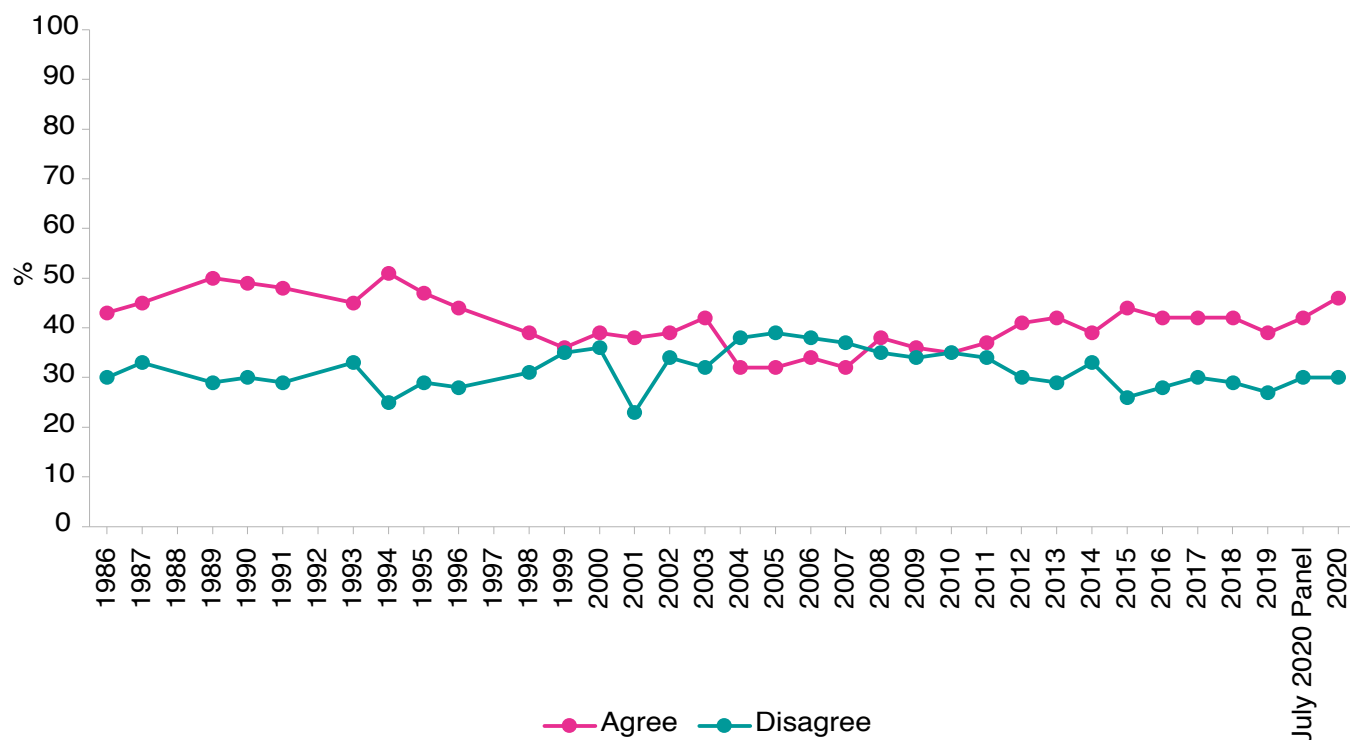
Table 3 Proportion who agree/disagree that 'Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth', 1986-2020

| | 1986 | 1987 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1995 | 1996 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 66 | 64 | 65 | 65 | 67 | 61 | 67 | 66 | 64 | 60 | 62 | 60 | 63 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 19 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 15 | 24 | 19 | 23 | 23 | 25 | 23 | 26 | 23 |
| Disagree | 14 | 17 | 16 | 15 | 15 | 14 | 12 | 11 | 11 | 13 | 13 | 13 | 12 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 1321 | 2493 | 2604 | 2430 | 2702 | 1306 | 3135 | 3085 | 2531 | 2450 | 2980 | 2795 | 2900 |
| | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 61 | 53 | 55 | 55 | 58 | 60 | 60 | 56 | 58 | 61 | 59 | 60 | 59 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 23 | 28 | 27 | 29 | 26 | 25 | 24 | 27 | 27 | 25 | 28 | 25 | 27 |
| Disagree | 13 | 17 | 16 | 14 | 14 | 12 | 14 | 15 | 14 | 12 | 11 | 13 | 12 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 3621 | 2609 | 3559 | 3748 | 3578 | 3990 | 2942 | 2791 | 2845 | 2855 | 2832 | 2376 | 3670 |
| | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | July 2020 Panel | 2020 | | | | | | | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | | | | | | | |
| Agree | 59 | 61 | 62 | 57 | 64 | 64 | | | | | | | |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 27 | 26 | 26 | 30 | 26 | 23 | | | | | | | |
| Disagree | 11 | 12 | 10 | 10 | 9 | 12 | | | | | | | |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 2400 | 3258 | 3065 | 2636 | 2413 | 3964 | | | | | | | |

Source: Panel: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel, July 2020; 2020: BSA online survey

However, the fact that many people in Britain feel that the country is unequal does not necessarily mean that they support measures to reduce the extent of that inequality. Indeed, as Figure 6 shows, it has always been the case that in any one year fewer people have agreed that the 'government should redistribute income from the better-off to the less well-off' than have said that there was one law for the rich and one for the poor or that ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth. Indeed, in the middle years of the New Labour administration, between 2004 and 2007, more people disagreed than agreed that the government should redistribute income from the better-off to the less well off. More recently, as the perception of inequality increased, so support for redistribution rose again somewhat too; on average between 2012 and 2019, 41% said that they agreed while 30% disagreed. However, in this instance our NatCen Panel survey in July 2020 emerged with very similar figures – 42% agreed and 30% disagreed – and although the latest BSA survey found 46% in favour, higher than at any point since 1996, we will need further corroborating evidence before we can be sure that there has been an increase in support. In any event, what does seem clear is that so far, at least, the pandemic has not resulted in unprecedented levels of support for governmental action to reduce inequality.

Figure 6 Proportion who agree/disagree that 'Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off', 1986-2020



Source: 2020 BSA online survey

The data on which Figure 6 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.6 of this chapter

The debate about inequality stimulated by the pandemic may have resulted in the continuation of an existing trend that had seen some increase in the proportion who believe that Britain is unequal. However, there had already been some movement in that direction before the pandemic, and it has not necessarily translated into greater support for redistributive measures designed to tackle that inequality. The issue is likely to remain a contentious one in post-pandemic Britain.

Law and conformity

During the pandemic, the state not only increased in size but also regulated people's everyday social and personal lives to an unprecedented degree. But what impact, if any, has this experience had on people's attitudes towards the role of law and the value of conformity in our society? Some have argued that it was both unnecessary and undesirable that the state should have taken on such extensive legal authority to regulate people's freedom of movement and interactions with others (Hope, 2020; Sumption, 2020), and perhaps this criticism has raised doubts in some people's minds about the role of law and the value of conformity in our society more generally. On the other hand, previous research has suggested that fear of contagion can result in people becoming more wary of those who engage in behaviours that are thought to be out of tune

with social and cultural norms (Helzer and Pizarro, 2011; Murray and Schaller, 2012; Henderson and Schnall, 2021). In a public health crisis, non-conforming (let alone illegal) behaviours may be more likely to be interpreted as a threat to the safety and security of others, an attitude that, *inter alia*, might well be reflected in people's responses to breaches of the regulations that limited social activity during lockdown.

Each year BSA presents respondents with a number of propositions designed to tap into whether people have an 'authoritarian' outlook that values social conformity and adherence to the law, or whether they have a more 'liberal' perspective, prioritising the need for people to be free to make their own choices about how they behave (see Technical details). Table 4 shows the pattern of responses to one of these items, which asks people whether they agree or disagree that 'schools should teach children to obey authority'. This has long been a very popular proposition – between 1986 and 2012 the proportion in favour rarely dipped below 80%. However, even before the pandemic there were signs that a somewhat more liberal mood was beginning to emerge. Between 2017 and 2019 on average only 71% said they agreed. Yet both our measures taken since the outbreak of the pandemic have reported figures below 70%. On this evidence, even before the pandemic Britain was already becoming a little more likely to question the role of authority, and it appears that, if anything, the pandemic may have reinforced that trend.

Table 4 Proportion who agree/disagree that 'Schools should teach children to obey authority', 1986-2020

| | 1986 | 1987 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 83 | 83 | 84 | 79 | 78 | 87 | 82 | 83 | 81 | 83 | 83 | 84 | 82 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 9 | 11 | 11 | 13 | 14 | 8 | 12 | 10 | 12 | 11 | 11 | 11 | 11 |
| Disagree | 7 | 6 | 5 | 7 | 7 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 1321 | 1281 | 2604 | 2430 | 1257 | 1306 | 2929 | 3135 | 3085 | 2546 | 2478 | 2980 | 2795 |
| | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 82 | 83 | 85 | 84 | 83 | 83 | 83 | 81 | 82 | 83 | 81 | 79 | 79 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 11 | 10 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 10 | 11 | 13 | 11 | 11 | 11 | 13 | 13 |
| Disagree | 5 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 7 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 2900 | 3621 | 2609 | 3559 | 3748 | 3578 | 3990 | 2942 | 2791 | 2845 | 2855 | 2832 | 2376 |
| | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | July 2020 Panel | 2020 | | | | | | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | | | | | | |
| Agree | 76 | 74 | 71 | 70 | 72 | 68 | 62 | | | | | | |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 15 | 17 | 18 | 18 | 18 | 19 | 22 | | | | | | |
| Disagree | 7 | 7 | 9 | 11 | 8 | 13 | 16 | | | | | | |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 3670 | 2400 | 3258 | 3065 | 2636 | 2413 | 3964 | | | | | | |

Source: Panel: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel, July 2020; 2020: BSA online survey

Still, respect for authority may not be unconditional. A more controversial proposition is whether or not 'the law should always be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong'. As Table 5 shows, while those who agree with this proposition have always outnumbered those who disagree, the proportion who do so has always been well under 50%. The distribution of responses has tended to be relatively stable. Between 2007 and 2019, on average 40% said that they agreed, little different from the equivalent figure for the period from 1986 to 2000 of 42%, while, at 24%, the proportion who disagreed was lower than the 30% who did so in the earlier period. In short, there was no indication on this item of attitudes becoming more liberal prior to the pandemic.

Table 5 Proportion who agree/disagree that 'The law should always be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong', 1986-2020

| | 1986 | 1987 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 45 | 46 | 44 | 45 | 37 | 42 | 40 | 41 | 37 | 39 | 41 | 39 | 39 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 22 | 23 | 26 | 25 | 24 | 28 | 29 | 29 | 29 | 31 | 32 | 31 | 31 |
| Disagree | 31 | 30 | 29 | 29 | 37 | 29 | 30 | 28 | 32 | 29 | 26 | 28 | 27 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 1321 | 1281 | 2604 | 2430 | 1257 | 1306 | 2929 | 3135 | 3085 | 2980 | 2795 | 2900 | 3621 |
| | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 40 | 41 | 39 | 42 | 39 | 41 | 41 | 44 | 40 | 43 | 40 | 40 | 38 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 32 | 31 | 33 | 32 | 34 | 33 | 33 | 33 | 32 | 33 | 34 | 36 | 35 |
| Disagree | 26 | 27 | 27 | 25 | 26 | 24 | 24 | 22 | 26 | 22 | 25 | 23 | 24 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 2609 | 3559 | 3748 | 3578 | 3990 | 2942 | 2791 | 2845 | 2855 | 2832 | 2376 | 3670 | 2400 |
| | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | July 2020 Panel | 2020 | | | | | | | | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | | | | | | | | |
| Agree | 40 | 36 | 40 | 36 | 39 | | | | | | | | |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 34 | 35 | 35 | 32 | 30 | | | | | | | | |
| Disagree | 25 | 28 | 23 | 32 | 31 | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 3258 | 3065 | 2636 | 2413 | 3964 | | | | | | | | |

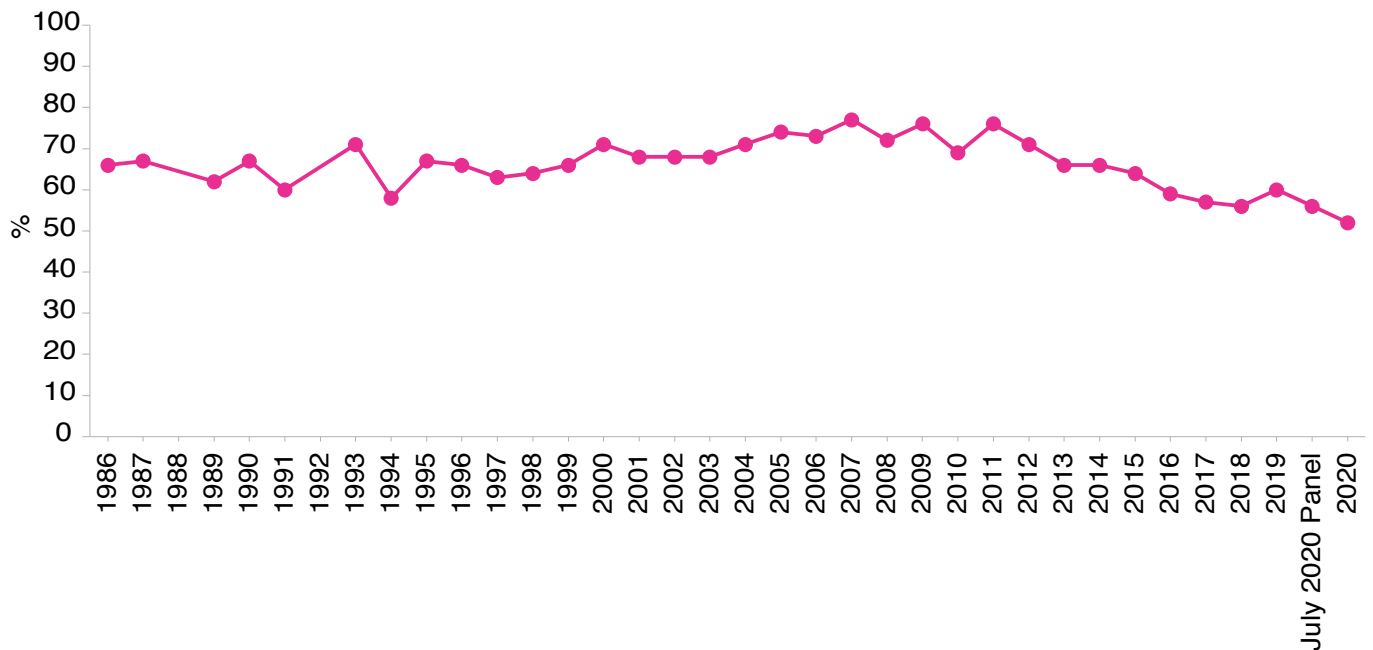
Source: Panel: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel, July 2020; 2020: BSA online survey

Our two readings during the pandemic suggest that there may have been a swing against unconditional adherence to the law. At 36% on the July 2020 panel and 39% on the latest BSA survey, the proportions who say they agree are similar to some other recent estimates. However, at 31% and 32% respectively, the proportions who disagree that 'the law should always be obeyed' are higher than the figure has been at any time since 1996. There is thus some sign that the pandemic may have resulted in making people a little more liberal in their attitude to the law than they were before.

The extent to which people feel that there may be some undermining of what they regard as society's 'traditional' norms and values is measured by a third item. This asks people whether they agree or disagree that 'young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values' – a wording that might be thought particularly pertinent given that during the pandemic younger people have sometimes appeared less likely to maintain the rules and guidance on social distancing (Office for National Statistics, 2021e). As with the item on schools teaching children to obey authority, this proposition has widespread support but at the same time there was some sign before the pandemic that attitudes were becoming more

liberal (see Figure 7). As recently as 2009 and 2011, 76% said they agreed, while fewer than one in ten disagreed. However, between 2016 and 2019 on average only 58% agreed while 15% disagreed. That trend has certainly not been reversed since the pandemic. At 56% agreeing and 17% disagreeing, the figures in our panel survey were similar to those of recent years, while in our 2020 BSA survey only 52% agreed and 23% disagreed.

Figure 7 Proportion who agree/disagree that 'Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values', 1986-2020



Source: 2020 BSA online survey

The data on which Figure 7 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.7 of this chapter

There were already some signs before the pandemic that Britain was becoming somewhat more 'liberal' in its outlook. Indeed, this is also true of the pattern of response to other items in our surveys on crime and punishment (including the death penalty, as discussed in our chapter on Democracy) and on censorship. Contrary to the expectations of the literature on the impact of the fear of contagion, there is no sign in any of our items that this trend has been reversed and it may be that the unprecedented intrusion of the law into social life may in some instances have resulted in a reaction that has furthered that trend towards greater liberalism somewhat. If there is to be a debate in Britain after the pandemic about the proper role of the law, it will not just be a reaction to the experience of COVID-19 restrictions, but also a reflection of a change of mood that was in evidence before the pandemic.

An age divide?

We have, then, detected only modest changes in the pattern of attitudes towards welfare, inequality and the role of law and authority. However, as we noted at the beginning of this chapter, younger and older people have had rather different experiences during the pandemic. Perhaps, therefore, the influence of the pandemic on people's attitudes has varied by age?

Younger people have, for example, been more exposed to the risk of being out of work. We might anticipate therefore that they might have been particularly likely to have become more sympathetic to welfare provision for the unemployed. Table 6 tests this possibility by showing the proportion in the 2019 BSA survey and in our two surveys in 2020 who agree that 'around here, most people who are unemployed could find a job if they really wanted one', broken down by age group. We can see that there has been as much as a 10 percentage point fall between the 2019 and the 2020 BSA surveys in the proportion of those aged 18-34 who express agreement. However, this is more than matched by a 15-point fall among those aged 65 and almost equalled by an eight-point fall among those aged between 55 and 64. It is thus not obvious that attitudes towards the unemployed have shifted particularly sharply among younger people.

Table 6 Proportion agreeing that 'Around here, most people who are unemployed could find a job if they really wanted one', by age group, 2019-20

| Agree | 18-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+ |
|-----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| | % | % | % | % | % |
| 2019 | 49 | 55 | 47 | 51 | 55 |
| July 2020 Panel | 48 | 56 | 53 | 51 | 48 |
| 2020 | 39 | 50 | 44 | 43 | 40 |
| Change 2019-20 | -10 | -5 | -3 | -8 | -15 |

Source: Panel: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel, July 2020; 2020: BSA online survey

The bases for this table can be found in part 2 of the appendix to this chapter.

Much the same is true of our other items on attitudes towards unemployed people. For example, although there was a seven-point increase between 2019 and 2020 in the proportion of those aged 18-34 who disagreed that 'most people on the dole are fiddling one way or another', this was almost matched by a five-point increase over the same period in those aged 65 and over. Meanwhile, the proportion who selected benefits for unemployed people as one of their two highest priorities for extra social security increased between 2018 and 2020 by similar amounts in all age groups. It appears that even though younger people were more likely to have found themselves in a precarious position in the labour market during the pandemic, this did not have any particular impact on their attitudes towards welfare provision for the unemployed.

The same, however, is not true of their attitudes towards inequality. Table 7 shows that the proportion who think that Britain is unequal and the proportion who support the redistribution of income has risen more sharply among those aged below 45 than it has among those who are older. For example, between 2019 and 2020 there was a 15-point increase in the proportion of those aged 18-44 who agree that there is ‘one law for the rich and one for the poor’, while there was only a four-point increase among those aged 45 and over. Meanwhile, among those aged less than 45 there has been a 12-point increase in the proportion who think that the government should redistribute income from the better-off to the less well-off, compared with one of just four points among those 45 and over. Moreover, this pattern of support increasing most among those who are younger was in evidence in our July 2020 panel as well as in our most recent BSA survey – and thus is less likely to be an artefact of the change in our survey methodology. As a result, whereas before the pandemic there was relatively little difference between our age groups in the proportion who agreed with each of the three propositions in Table 7, now in each case support is at its highest among those aged 18-34.

Table 7 Attitudes towards inequality, by age group, 2019-20

| % agree | 18-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+ |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| One law for the rich, one for the poor | | | | | |
| 2019 | 52 | 52 | 56 | 59 | 60 |
| July 2020 Panel | 71 | 67 | 64 | 66 | 66 |
| 2020 | 68 | 66 | 61 | 64 | 60 |
| Change 2019-20 | +16 | +14 | +5 | +5 | 0 |
| Ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth | | | | | |
| 2019 | 57 | 56 | 58 | 59 | 58 |
| July 2020 Panel | 73 | 63 | 62 | 62 | 58 |
| 2020 | 70 | 70 | 63 | 62 | 55 |
| Change 2019-20 | +13 | +14 | +5 | +3 | -3 |
| Government should redistribute income from the better-off to the less well-off | | | | | |
| 2019 | 37 | 37 | 39 | 45 | 38 |
| July 2020 Panel | 51 | 40 | 39 | 40 | 40 |
| 2020 | 50 | 48 | 43 | 44 | 45 |
| Change 2019-20 | +13 | +11 | +4 | -1 | +7 |

Source: Panel: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel, July 2020; 2020: BSA online survey

The bases for this table can be found in appendix Part 2 to this chapter.

However, there is not the same consistent evidence of an age difference in people's attitudes towards law, authority and traditional values. Table 8 does suggest that there was an especially sharp drop between 2019 and 2020 in the proportion of 18-34 year olds who agree that 'schools should teach children to obey authority'. However, on the other two items in the table there is no consistent evidence that the tendency for people to be somewhat more liberal in 2020 than they were in 2019 was especially marked among those in the youngest age group. The attitudes of younger people are undoubtedly more liberal than those of their older counterparts, but this was true long before the pandemic, and the pandemic itself has seemingly not served to widen the gap between younger and older people in their attitudes towards the role of law and the value of conformity.

Table 8 Attitudes towards Liberal-Authoritarian issues, by age, 2019-20

| % agree | 18-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+ |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| Schools should teach children to obey authority | | | | | |
| 2019 | 68 | 70 | 69 | 74 | 80 |
| July 2020 Panel | 54 | 68 | 69 | 73 | 75 |
| 2020 | 49 | 60 | 64 | 69 | 72 |
| Change 2019-20 | -19 | -10 | -5 | -5 | -8 |
| The law should always be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong | | | | | |
| 2019 | 31 | 41 | 40 | 42 | 47 |
| July 2020 Panel | 23 | 37 | 39 | 40 | 44 |
| 2020 | 28 | 37 | 41 | 42 | 49 |
| Change 2019-20 | -3 | -4 | +1 | 0 | +2 |
| Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values | | | | | |
| 2019 | 47 | 58 | 64 | 64 | 70 |
| July 2020 Panel | 38 | 62 | 58 | 57 | 65 |
| 2020 | 38 | 54 | 54 | 59 | 60 |
| Change 2019-20 | -9 | -4 | -10 | -5 | -10 |

Source: Panel: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel, July 2020; 2020: BSA online survey

The bases for this table can be found in the appendix to this chapter.

Conclusions

Our two surveys suggest that during its first year at least the pandemic did not have a dramatic impact on people's attitudes and values. That said, some changes that occurred before the pandemic have been maintained while some trends may have continued a little further. A more favourable attitude towards the provision of welfare

for the unemployed and for those of working age generally has remained in place, and may have helped pave the way for the government's substantial intervention in the labour market. Similarly, there appears to have been a swing before the pandemic in favour of more 'tax and spend' in general, a mood that the growth of government expenditure during the pandemic did not unsettle. There were signs before the pandemic too that people had become somewhat more likely to regard Britain as unequal, a perception that the pandemic may well have reinforced though this may not have translated into greater support for redistribution. At the same time, a pre-pandemic trend towards a more 'liberal' outlook towards the role of law and the value of conformity is certainly still in place and may have continued a little further. Meanwhile, nowhere do we see any sign of recent trends being reversed.

At the same time, in those instances where there does seem to have been some further shift of attitude during the pandemic, younger and older people have often moved to the same extent. However, there are signs that the apparent increase in concern about inequality during the pandemic has been greater among younger people. It may be that the exposure they have had during the pandemic to relatively high levels of precarity in their early adult years will prove a formative experience that leaves a legacy of a more egalitarian generation – only future survey research will affirm whether or not that proves to be the case.

However, even where the pandemic may have had some impact, our results suggest it has not created an unprecedented public mood. This may be surprising, given the scale of impact the pandemic has had on people's lives. However, it may be more understandable given that attitudes had already shifted somewhat and that in the early months of the COVID-19 restrictions at least people may have been suspending their judgement until the possible shape of the post-pandemic world had become clearer. In any event, the pandemic has not so far at least created a degree of change or a public mood that is radically different from anything that the public has experienced during the last 40 years. Attitudes towards unemployment benefit and welfare in general are still not as favourable as they were during the 1980s and 1990s. The level of support for more government spending is far from unprecedented, while concern about inequality is no higher than it was 40 years ago. What is true is that Britain is as liberal as it has ever been in its attitude towards the role of law and the value of conformity – but that is a trend that set in well before the pandemic.

Policy makers may therefore find themselves presented with a relatively familiar attitudinal landscape as they consider their plans for post-pandemic Britain. For the public, at least, the pandemic has so far not proven a 'reset' moment that has persuaded them of the need for radical social or political change, rather it may have simply re-enforced existing trends. If substantial changes to public policy are to be introduced, the public is likely to require to be persuaded of their

merits, while the debate that accompanies such proposals may have a familiar ring to it. The ‘new normal’ may well look much like the ‘old normal’, so far as people’s attitudes and values are concerned.

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Appendix: Part 1

Table A1 (Figure 1) Proportion who agree/disagree that ‘around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one’, 1987-2020

| | 1987 | 1989 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 41 | 52 | 38 | 27 | 32 | 38 | 39 | 54 | 56 | 60 | 63 | 65 | 66 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 16 | 19 | 19 | 20 | 22 | 22 | 22 | 22 | 22 | 19 | 19 | 18 | 17 |
| Disagree | 42 | 28 | 41 | 52 | 44 | 38 | 37 | 22 | 20 | 19 | 16 | 15 | 15 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 1281 | 2604 | 2481 | 2567 | 2929 | 3135 | 3085 | 2531 | 2450 | 2980 | 2795 | 2900 | 873 |
| | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 69 | 69 | 67 | 67 | 68 | 55 | 56 | 54 | 54 | 54 | 59 | 60 | 56 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 19 | 19 | 20 | 19 | 19 | 23 | 23 | 24 | 21 | 22 | 19 | 23 | 25 |
| Disagree | 10 | 10 | 11 | 11 | 11 | 20 | 20 | 20 | 22 | 21 | 21 | 15 | 17 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 2609 | 2699 | 2822 | 2672 | 3000 | 967 | 2791 | 2845 | 2855 | 2832 | 2376 | 2781 | 2400 |
| | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | July 2020 Panel | 2020 | | | | | | | | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | | | | | | | | |
| Agree | 56 | 55 | 51 | 51 | 42 | | | | | | | | |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 25 | 25 | 29 | 26 | 27 | | | | | | | | |
| Disagree | 18 | 18 | 18 | 23 | 30 | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 3258 | 3065 | 2636 | 2413 | 3964 | | | | | | | | |

Source: Panel: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel, July 2020; 2020: BSA online survey

Table A2 (Figure 2) Proportion who agree/disagree that 'Most people on the dole are fiddling one way or another', 1987-2020

| | 1987 | 1989 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 32 | 31 | 28 | 31 | 34 | 33 | 35 | 39 | 36 | 40 | 35 | 38 | 39 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 28 | 31 | 31 | 30 | 29 | 28 | 32 | 32 | 35 | 31 | 29 | 31 | 31 |
| Disagree | 39 | 37 | 39 | 38 | 36 | 37 | 31 | 27 | 28 | 28 | 33 | 28 | 28 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 1281 | 2604 | 2481 | 2567 | 2929 | 3135 | 3085 | 2531 | 2450 | 2980 | 2795 | 2900 | 873 |
| | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 41 | 39 | 32 | 39 | 39 | 34 | 35 | 37 | 37 | 33 | 35 | 29 | 22 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 33 | 32 | 37 | 32 | 32 | 36 | 34 | 33 | 31 | 34 | 33 | 35 | 37 |
| Disagree | 23 | 27 | 29 | 25 | 25 | 28 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 | 31 | 34 | 39 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 2609 | 2699 | 2822 | 2672 | 3000 | 967 | 2791 | 2845 | 2855 | 2832 | 2376 | 2781 | 2400 |
| | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | July 2020 Panel | 2020 | | | | | | | | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | | | | | | | | |
| Agree | 24 | 25 | 18 | 25 | 22 | | | | | | | | |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 37 | 35 | 38 | 37 | 33 | | | | | | | | |
| Disagree | 37 | 38 | 41 | 37 | 45 | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 3258 | 3065 | 2636 | 2413 | 3964 | | | | | | | | |

Source: Panel: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel, July 2020; 2020: BSA online survey

Table A3 (Figure 3) Attitudes towards benefits for unemployed people 1983-2020

| Benefits for unemployed people are ... | 1983 | 1984 | 1985 | 1986 | 1987 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-----------------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Too low and cause hardship | 46 | 49 | 44 | 44 | 51 | 52 | 50 | 53 | 55 | 53 | 51 | 48 | 46 |
| Too high and discourage them from finding jobs | 35 | 28 | 34 | 33 | 29 | 27 | 29 | 27 | 24 | 24 | 30 | 32 | 28 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 1761 | 1675 | 1804 | 3100 | 2847 | 3029 | 2797 | 2918 | 2945 | 3469 | 1234 | 3620 | 1355 |
| | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Too low and cause hardship | 29 | 33 | 40 | 37 | 29 | 34 | 23 | 26 | 23 | 26 | 21 | 29 | 23 |
| Too high and discourage them from finding jobs | 46 | 42 | 36 | 37 | 47 | 40 | 54 | 50 | 54 | 54 | 61 | 51 | 54 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 3146 | 3143 | 3426 | 3287 | 3435 | 3272 | 3199 | 3193 | 3240 | 3094 | 3358 | 1139 | 3297 |
| | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | July 2020 Panel | 2020 | | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | | |
| Too low and cause hardship | 19 | 22 | 22 | 27 | 24 | 28 | 27 | 35 | 36 | 28 | 51 | | |
| Too high and discourage them from finding jobs | 62 | 51 | 57 | 52 | 59 | 48 | 50 | 39 | 35 | 34 | 42 | | |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 3311 | 3248 | 3244 | 2878 | 3266 | 2942 | 2963 | 2884 | 3224 | 2413 | 3964 | | |

Note: Those saying 'neither' or giving any other response are not shown but are included in the denominator on which the percentages are based.

Source: Panel: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel, July 2020; 2020: BSA online survey

Table A4 (Figure 4) Proportion who agree/disagree that 'if welfare benefits weren't so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet', 1987-2020

| | 1987 | 1989 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 33 | 31 | 25 | 26 | 26 | 33 | 33 | 39 | 37 | 38 | 40 | 44 | 41 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 21 | 23 | 23 | 22 | 23 | 21 | 23 | 26 | 27 | 25 | 24 | 24 | 27 |
| Disagree | 46 | 45 | 50 | 52 | 48 | 44 | 42 | 32 | 34 | 35 | 35 | 30 | 28 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 1281 | 2604 | 2481 | 2567 | 2929 | 3135 | 3085 | 2531 | 2450 | 2980 | 2795 | 2900 | 873 |
| | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 46 | 49 | 47 | 53 | 54 | 53 | 56 | 54 | 52 | 52 | 53 | 52 | 44 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 27 | 24 | 26 | 22 | 24 | 23 | 23 | 23 | 23 | 22 | 23 | 22 | 25 |
| Disagree | 23 | 25 | 25 | 22 | 21 | 23 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 22 | 24 | 29 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 2609 | 2699 | 2822 | 2672 | 3000 | 967 | 2791 | 2845 | 2855 | 2832 | 2376 | 2781 | 2400 |
| | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | July 2020 Panel | 2020 | | | | | | | | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | | | | | | | | |
| Agree | 43 | 40 | 34 | 39 | 34 | | | | | | | | |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 25 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 25 | | | | | | | | |
| Disagree | 30 | 32 | 37 | 32 | 40 | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 3258 | 3065 | 2636 | 2413 | 3964 | | | | | | | | |

Source: Panel: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel, July 2020; 2020: BSA online survey

Table A5 (Figure 5) Proportion who agree/disagree that 'There is one law for the rich and one for the poor', 1986-2020

| | 1986 | 1987 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 59 | 66 | 69 | 67 | 67 | 63 | 69 | 71 | 71 | 70 | 64 | 60 | 62 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 17 | 14 | 14 | 14 | 15 | 14 | 15 | 13 | 17 | 15 | 19 | 25 | 20 |
| Disagree | 22 | 19 | 16 | 18 | 15 | 21 | 15 | 13 | 12 | 14 | 15 | 13 | 17 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 1321 | 2493 | 2604 | 2430 | 2702 | 1306 | 2957 | 3135 | 3085 | 1087 | 2531 | 2450 | 2980 |
| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 58 | 61 | 58 | 52 | 53 | 55 | 53 | 56 | 56 | 56 | 60 | 64 | 59 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 22 | 19 | 22 | 25 | 25 | 24 | 25 | 23 | 22 | 24 | 20 | 19 | 20 |
| Disagree | 19 | 18 | 18 | 21 | 21 | 19 | 20 | 18 | 20 | 19 | 19 | 15 | 19 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 2795 | 2900 | 3621 | 2609 | 3559 | 3748 | 3578 | 3990 | 2942 | 2791 | 2845 | 2855 | 2832 |
| | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | July 2020 Panel | 2020 | | | | | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | | | | | |
| Agree | 59 | 56 | 59 | 57 | 60 | 56 | 67 | 64 | | | | | |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 21 | 22 | 22 | 22 | 21 | 25 | 19 | 19 | | | | | |
| Disagree | 18 | 19 | 17 | 19 | 18 | 18 | 13 | 16 | | | | | |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 2376 | 3670 | 2400 | 3258 | 3065 | 2636 | 2413 | 3964 | | | | | |

Source: Panel: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel, July 2020; 2020: BSA online survey

Table A6 (Figure 6) Proportion who agree/disagree that 'Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off', 1986-2020

| | 1986 | 1987 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 43 | 45 | 50 | 49 | 48 | 45 | 51 | 47 | 44 | 39 | 36 | 39 | 38 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 25 | 20 | 20 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 23 | 22 | 28 | 28 | 27 | 24 | 28 |
| Disagree | 30 | 33 | 29 | 30 | 29 | 33 | 25 | 29 | 28 | 31 | 35 | 36 | 23 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 1321 | 2493 | 2604 | 2430 | 2702 | 1306 | 2929 | 3135 | 3085 | 2531 | 2450 | 2980 | 2795 |
| | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 39 | 42 | 32 | 32 | 34 | 32 | 38 | 36 | 35 | 37 | 41 | 42 | 39 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 25 | 24 | 28 | 27 | 27 | 29 | 25 | 27 | 28 | 28 | 26 | 26 | 26 |
| Disagree | 34 | 32 | 38 | 39 | 38 | 37 | 35 | 34 | 35 | 34 | 30 | 29 | 33 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 2900 | 3621 | 2609 | 3559 | 3748 | 3578 | 3990 | 2942 | 2791 | 2845 | 2855 | 2832 | 2376 |
| | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | July 2020 Panel | 2020 | | | | | | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | | | | | | |
| Agree | 44 | 42 | 42 | 42 | 39 | 42 | 46 | | | | | | |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 28 | 28 | 27 | 27 | 31 | 27 | 23 | | | | | | |
| Disagree | 26 | 28 | 30 | 29 | 27 | 30 | 30 | | | | | | |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 3670 | 2400 | 3258 | 3065 | 2636 | 2413 | 3964 | | | | | | |

Source: Panel: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel, July 2020; 2020: BSA online survey

Table A7 (Figure 7) Proportion who agree/disagree that ‘Young people today don’t have enough respect for traditional British values’, 1986-2020

| | 1986 | 1987 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 66 | 67 | 62 | 67 | 60 | 71 | 58 | 67 | 66 | 63 | 64 | 66 | 71 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 20 | 21 | 22 | 20 | 25 | 22 | 24 | 20 | 22 | 21 | 24 | 24 | 20 |
| Disagree | 13 | 12 | 15 | 11 | 14 | 6 | 16 | 11 | 10 | 14 | 10 | 9 | 8 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 1321 | 1281 | 2604 | 2430 | 1257 | 1306 | 2929 | 3135 | 3085 | 1080 | 2531 | 2450 | 2980 |
| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 68 | 68 | 68 | 71 | 74 | 73 | 77 | 72 | 76 | 69 | 76 | 71 | 66 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 21 | 20 | 21 | 20 | 17 | 19 | 16 | 19 | 16 | 18 | 15 | 18 | 22 |
| Disagree | 9 | 10 | 9 | 7 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 11 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 2795 | 2900 | 3621 | 2609 | 3559 | 3748 | 3578 | 3990 | 2942 | 2791 | 2845 | 2855 | 2832 |
| | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | July 2020 Panel | 2020 | | | | | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | | | | | |
| Agree | 66 | 64 | 59 | 57 | 56 | 60 | 56 | 52 | | | | | |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 20 | 22 | 24 | 27 | 26 | 24 | 27 | 25 | | | | | |
| Disagree | 13 | 12 | 15 | 15 | 17 | 14 | 17 | 23 | | | | | |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 2376 | 3670 | 2400 | 3258 | 3065 | 2636 | 2413 | 3964 | | | | | |

Source: Panel: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel, July 2020; 2020: BSA online survey

Appendix: Part 2

Unweighted bases for Table 6 are shown below.

Table A8 Proportion agreeing that 'Around here, most people who are unemployed could find a job if they really wanted one', by age, 2019-20

| Agree | 18-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+ |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| 2019 | 502 | 423 | 430 | 442 | 836 |
| July 2020 Panel | 368 | 432 | 396 | 484 | 727 |
| 2020 | 865 | 658 | 650 | 736 | 1040 |

Unweighted bases for Table 7 are shown below.

Table A9 Attitudes towards inequality, by age, 2019-20

| Agree | 18-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+ |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| 2019 | 502 | 423 | 430 | 442 | 836 |
| July 2020 Panel | 368 | 432 | 396 | 484 | 727 |
| 2020 | 865 | 658 | 650 | 736 | 1040 |

Unweighted bases for Table 8 are shown below.

Table A10 Attitudes towards Liberal-Authoritarian issues, by age, 2019-20

| Agree | 18-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+ |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| 2019 | 502 | 423 | 430 | 442 | 836 |
| July 2020 Panel | 368 | 432 | 396 | 484 | 727 |
| 2020 | 865 | 658 | 650 | 736 | 1040 |

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The National Centre for Social Research
35 Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0AX
info@natcen.ac.uk