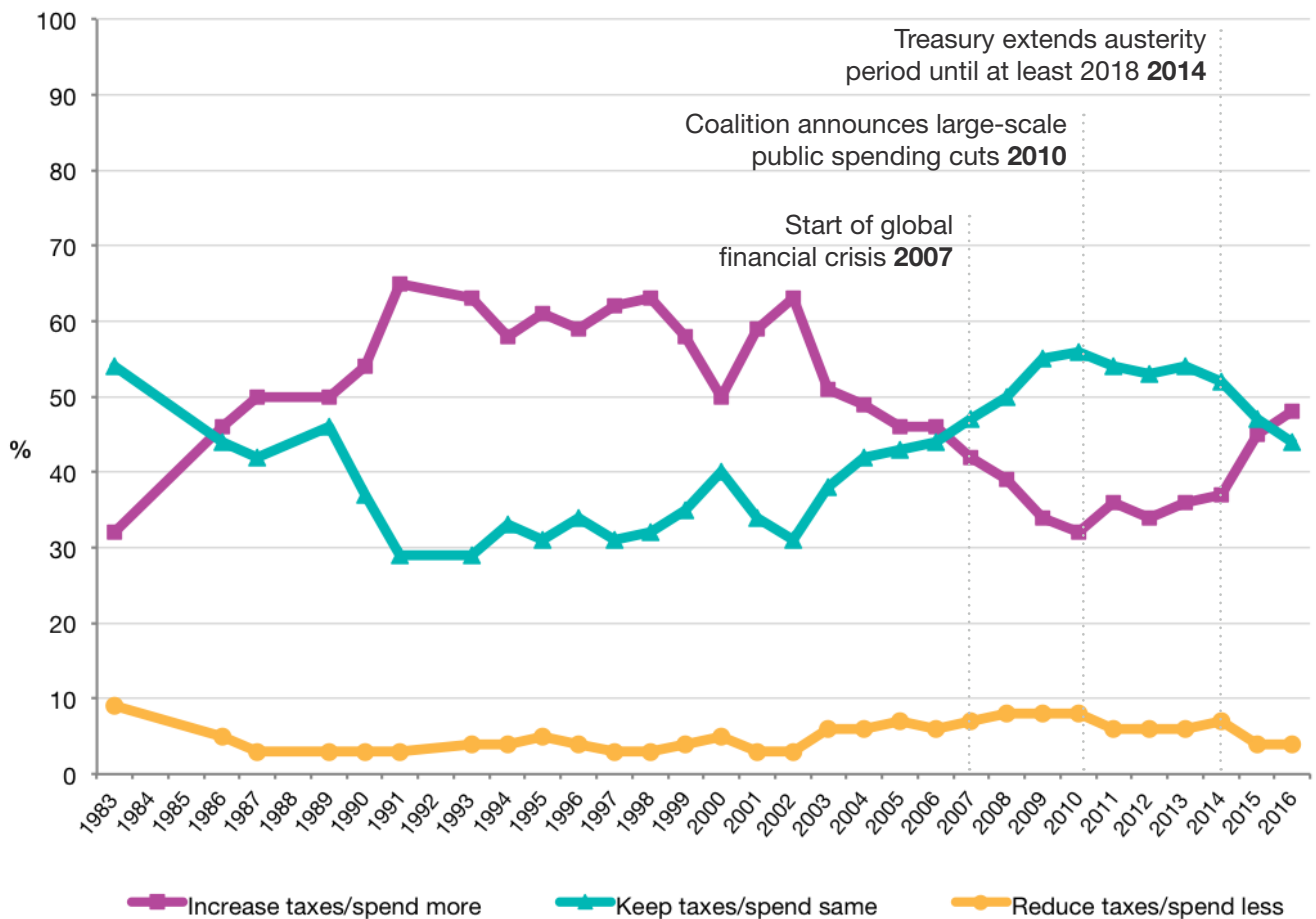


Role of Government

What do we want Government to do?

There are signs of a reaction against the fiscal discipline of recent years, 48% now say the government should increase taxes and spend more, a higher proportion than at any point during the last 10 years.

Support for 'tax more, spend more' at highest level in a decade



Overview

This chapter looks at trends in attitudes towards the proper role and responsibilities of government during the last 20 years. It looks in particular at the extent to which these trends appear to represent a reaction to recent developments in the pattern of public spending and to changes in external circumstances. Both seem to have played a role in changing views, as evidenced both by trends in attitudes towards the responsibility that government has for the welfare of pensioners and the unemployed in particular, and towards the merits of cutting public expenditure in general.

Pensioners

Improving the standard of living of pensioners has become less of a priority.

- 52% now think that the government “definitely” has a responsibility for providing a decent standard of living for the old, down from 69% in 1996.
 - 55% are now in favour of spending more government money on pensions, compared with 76% in 1996.
-

The unemployed

There is less support for government meeting the needs of the unemployed.

- Only 48% now think the government has a responsibility to find a job for everyone who wants one, down from 65% in 1996.
 - Support for more government spending on unemployment benefits has fallen from 33% in 1996 to just 16% now.
-

Government spending

There are signs of a reaction against the fiscal discipline of recent years.

- Only 29% now support cuts in government spending as a way of helping the economy, whereas 43% did so in 1996.
- As many as 48% now say the government should increase taxes and spend more, a higher proportion than for over a decade.

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Introduction

One of the perennial issues of political debate is what role and activities government should undertake and what should be left to others to do, be they private companies, charitable institutions or, indeed, individuals themselves. At one end of the spectrum are those who think government should play a minimal role, providing law and order and national security, but otherwise leaving decisions and activities predominantly in the hands of the market and individuals. At the other end are those who think that government should not only provide public services and a system of welfare benefits, but also run key industries itself. An inclination towards the former perspective is often regarded as being a ‘right-wing’ view, while expressing views more akin to the latter outlook is typically regarded as being on the ‘left’.

However, there is no necessary reason why the role of government should be regarded as a question of ideological preference. It is quite possible that citizens take a more pragmatic, even reactive attitude towards what government should do. When they feel there is a problem that needs solving they look to government to fix it. But equally, when they reckon there is not any particular difficulty that needs addressing, they may be happy for government to step back.

This insight has previously led to the suggestion that citizens’ attitudes react rather like a ‘thermostat’ when it comes to the role and activity of government (Wlezien, 1995; Seroka and Wlezien, 2005; 2010). If government starts spending more money on something, and as a result the quality and/or quantity of a service improves, voters gradually come to the view that no further action needs to be taken. If on the other hand, government cuts back on spending and as a result the service comes to be seen as less satisfactory, then there are calls for government to spend more. However, we might anticipate that people’s perceptions of the role of government depend not only on how much it is currently spending but also on external circumstances. People may be more inclined to want government to be active when there is believed to be a problem and less inclined to want it to take action when they feel that the status quo is satisfactory. Thus, for example, people may want the government to be active in dealing with unemployment when many people are out of job, but are less concerned for it to do something when joblessness is low (Blekesaune and Quadango, 2003; Blekesaune, 2007). Similarly, they may want the government to be more active in regulating business if there has been recent evidence of corporate misbehaviour than if there has not.

In this chapter, we look at trends in attitudes towards the role of government during the last 20 years. We assess how far attitudes seem to reflect a stable, long-term orientation towards what government should and should not do, and how far they appear to vary in the light of changing circumstances. Our data come principally from questions that were asked as part of a module on

People may be more inclined to want government to be active when there is believed to be a problem and less inclined to want it to take action when they feel that the status quo is satisfactory

the role of ‘government’ that were included on the 2016 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey as part of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) (about which more details can be found in the Technical details). These questions were also fielded as part of the same programme in 1996 and 2006, while in some instances they have also been asked in other years too. In addition, we refer to the findings of some additional questions on government spending and activity that have appeared regularly in BSA surveys.

Much, of course, has happened during the last 20 years. After an initial period of fiscal constraint, the Labour government that came to power in 1997 presided over a considerable expansion of public spending. That, and a lot more, came to a halt in 2008 thanks to the worst financial crash since the 1930s and a subsequent depression that blew a large hole in the country’s fiscal finances. Although economic growth has since picked up once more – while wage restraint helped ensure that the depression did not result in a sustained increase in unemployment – a period of public spending restraint has still left the country spending more than it raises in taxes. In short, if public attitudes towards the role and activity of government are influenced by changes of circumstances, there is every reason why attitudes might have changed during the last 20 years.

What should Government do?

Table 1 shows for a range of possible activities and objectives how many people during the last 20 years have said that they should “definitely” or “probably” be the responsibility of government. (To make the table easier to follow the figures for those saying they definitely or probably should not be the responsibility of government are not shown.) At first glance, what perhaps is most striking is just how wide-ranging the responsibilities of government are thought to be. Only in the case of one of the items in the table, the provision of a job for everyone, do less than half think it should either definitely or probably be the responsibility of government – and even in that case the figure is only just under half (48%). Most of us appear to think that the government has at least some responsibility for everything from the provision of health care to ensuring that the unemployed have enough to live on.

Most of us appear to think that the government has at least some responsibility for everything from the provision of health care to ensuring that the unemployed have enough to live on

Table 1 Perceptions of the responsibilities of government, 1996-2016

| Should it be the government's responsibility to ... | 1996 | 2002 | 2006 | 2012 | 2016 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|
| ... provide health care for the sick | % | % | % | % | % |
| Definitely | 81 | 84 | 68 | 82 | 67 |
| Probably | 16 | 12 | 27 | 16 | 29 |
| ... provide a decent standard of living for the old | % | % | % | % | % |
| Definitely | 69 | 79 | 58 | 74 | 52 |
| Probably | 26 | 17 | 36 | 22 | 41 |
| ... provide industry with the help it needs to grow | % | % | % | % | % |
| Definitely | 38 | n/a | 27 | 58 | 31 |
| Probably | 50 | n/a | 54 | 33 | 52 |
| ... reduce income differences between the rich and the poor | % | % | % | % | % |
| Definitely | 32 | n/a | 25 | 41 | 31 |
| Probably | 30 | n/a | 38 | 28 | 34 |
| ... provide decent housing for those who can't afford it | % | % | % | % | % |
| Definitely | 34 | n/a | 24 | 38 | 29 |
| Probably | 50 | n/a | 57 | 44 | 50 |
| ... keep prices under control | % | % | % | % | % |
| Definitely | 40 | 53 | 31 | 54 | 29 |
| Probably | 41 | 38 | 49 | 35 | 53 |
| ... provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed | % | % | % | % | % |
| Definitely | 26 | n/a | 10 | 21 | 14 |
| Probably | 46 | n/a | 40 | 38 | 42 |
| ... provide a job for everyone who wants one | % | % | % | % | % |
| Definitely | 26 | 33 | 16 | 27 | 14 |
| Probably | 39 | 39 | 36 | 36 | 34 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 989 | 1911 | 930 | 956 | 1563 |

n/a = not asked

That said, only in one case, the provision of health care, is there a widespread belief that this should “definitely” be the responsibility of government. In this instance two-thirds (67%) currently take that view. Otherwise only the provision of a decent standard of living for the old is also regarded by more than half of citizens as definitely the responsibility of government – and then only just (52%). In all other instances, it is always the case that more people say that an activity or objective should “probably” be the responsibility of government than say it “definitely” should. It seems that there is something of an ‘it depends’ character to many people’s perceptions of what

government should do, not least, perhaps, because in many of these areas people feel that government is but one of several actors with a role to play.

As we would anticipate, those who say they support the Labour party are generally more likely to say that something should be a government responsibility than are those who support the Conservatives. However, the gap varies. It hardly exists at all in respect of the provision of a health service or providing help for industry. While 70% of Labour supporters think providing a health service should definitely be a government responsibility, so also do 65% of Conservative identifiers. Similarly, while 34% of Labour supporters say that government should provide industry with the help that it needs to grow, so also do 30% of Conservatives. Where, in contrast, the two sets of party supporters do particularly disagree is in respect of activities and objectives that imply government action in support of greater equality. Thus, for example, while 45% of Labour supporters think it should definitely be the government's responsibility to reduce income differences between rich and poor, and another 37% believe it probably should be, the equivalent figures amongst Conservative supporters are only 14% and 29% respectively. Much the same picture pertains in respect of the government providing a decent standard of living for the unemployed.

Yet these partisan differences do not mean that the balance of opinion amongst voters as a whole has not altered over time. The most marked change has been in respect of providing a job for anyone who wants one. Twenty years ago, around three-quarters (76%) believed it was either definitely or probably the responsibility of government; now, as we have already noted, a little under half (48%) take that view. The proportion has dropped both amongst Conservative and amongst Labour supporters, albeit more especially amongst the latter (Soroka and Wlezien, 2010; Chap. 8). This drop is just what we might expect to have happened given recent trends in unemployment (Office for National Statistics, 2017a). In the third quarter of 1996 unemployment stood at 8.1%, having been at a peak of 10.3% just three years earlier. By 2006 it was as low as 5.5% and had been at around 5% or so for the last five years. Equally, after (briefly) being almost as high in 2012 (7.9%) as it had been in 1996, unemployment was even lower, 4.8%, by the third quarter of 2016. In short, unemployment itself has, for the most part, been lower in recent years and, as a result, voters may well be more likely to feel that anyone who wants a job should be able to secure one, and should not have to rely on the government to find employment. Indeed, as noted in the chapter on 'Tax avoidance and benefit manipulation', whereas in 1996 39% agreed that "around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one", by 2006 that figure had risen to 67%, and is still as high as 56% now. This may also help explain why the proportion who think

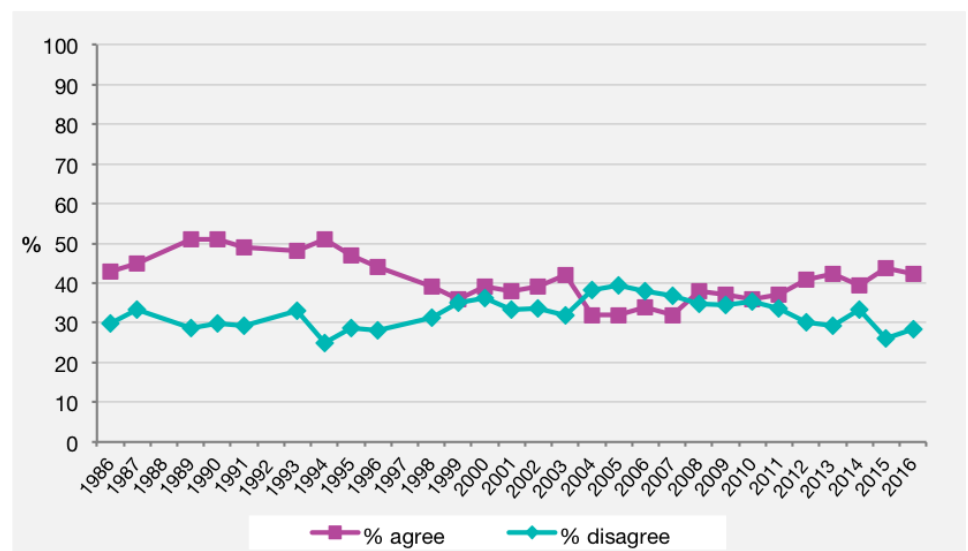
Those who say they support the Labour party are generally more likely to say that something should be a government responsibility than are those who support the Conservatives

There is relatively little change over time in the combined totals of those who say that something is either definitely or probably the government's responsibility

the government has a responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed has also fallen somewhat during the last 20 years.

Otherwise, however, there is relatively little change over time in the combined totals of those who say that something is either definitely or probably the government's responsibility. For example, in 1996 62% said that the government should reduce income differences between rich and poor, and 20 years later the figure is, at 65%, still much the same. Relative stability is also in evidence in response to another question about income inequality that is asked regularly on BSA. This asks respondents whether they agree or disagree with the proposition that "the government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well-off". Now, 42% say they agree with this proposition while 28% disagree, figures that are virtually identical to those that pertained in 1996 (44% and 28% respectively). True, the proportion who agreed was lower (and the proportion who disagreed higher) during much of the period in between (just as the proportion saying reducing income differences was definitely the government's responsibility was relatively low in 2006) but, as yet at least, there is no sign that support for redistribution is returning to the level that was in evidence on this measure before the late 1990s (on which see also Curtice, 2010). But then this, perhaps, is just what we might expect given that after rising sharply in the 1980s, there has not been any consistent long-term trend in income inequality during the last 20 years (McGuinness, 2017).

Figure 1 View of whether the government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well-off, 1986-2016



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

However, in many instances there have been changes in the balance between those saying that an objective is "definitely" a government responsibility and those saying that it "probably" is. Indeed, a similar

The proportion who think that the government should definitely be responsible for providing a decent standard of living for older people is, at 52%, rather lower than it was in 2006 (58%)

pattern can be observed across many of the items in Table 1. In most cases, there was a decline between 1996 and 2006 in the proportion who said that something was “definitely” the government’s responsibility. The proportion then rose again in 2012, only for the most part to return once again to what it was in 2006. It may be that the relatively benign economic circumstances that had long been in place by 2006 served to reduce the strength of the demand that the government should be taking responsibility for people’s welfare and that, after the hiatus of the financial crash, that mood has now returned once more.

That said, there is one other item where the pattern of change over time is of particular note. The proportion who think that the government should definitely be responsible for providing a decent standard of living for older people is, at 52%, rather lower than it was in 2006 (58%). At the same time, the overall drop since 1996 in the proportion who assign the government definite responsibility for this objective, is second only to the equivalent drop in respect of providing a job for everyone. This is a subject to which we will return later in this chapter.

Managing the economy

One of the key arguments about the role of government is what it should do in order to manage the economy. Some will argue that it should primarily focus on providing a benign macroeconomic environment and then allow the private sector to get on with delivering economic growth. Others will feel that government has a more active role to play, not only providing some of the infrastructure that might help increase economic growth, but also providing financial help for specific industries and projects. In Table 2 we show how attitudes towards some of the things that the government might do for the economy have evolved during the last 20 years. The items were introduced as follows:

Here are some things the government might do for the economy. Please show which actions you are in favour of and which you are against

In the top half of the table we show attitudes towards some of the ways in which government might intervene directly in the economy, not least as a way of boosting employment, while in the bottom half we look at some of the ways in which government might be expected to step back in order to promote the economy.

Table 2 View of government actions for the economy, 1996-2016

| | 1996 | 2006 | 2016 |
|--|------|------|------|
| Support for industry to develop new products and technology | % | % | % |
| In favour | 86 | 81 | 83 |
| Against | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Government financing of projects to create new jobs | % | % | % |
| In favour | 84 | 72 | 83 |
| Against | 3 | 6 | 3 |
| Support for declining industries to protect jobs | % | % | % |
| In favour | 62 | 57 | 56 |
| Against | 13 | 16 | 14 |
| Reduce the working week to create more jobs | % | % | % |
| In favour | 37 | 28 | 25 |
| Against | 30 | 32 | 36 |
| Less government regulation of business | % | % | % |
| In favour | 40 | 40 | 34 |
| Against | 14 | 10 | 19 |
| Cuts in government spending | % | % | % |
| In favour | 43 | 35 | 29 |
| Against | 26 | 29 | 39 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 989 | 930 | 1563 |

Attitudes towards the ways in which the government might actively intervene in the economy have been relatively stable

There is rather less support now for reducing government regulation of business than there was 10 years ago

For the most part, attitudes towards the ways in which the government might actively intervene in the economy have been relatively stable. In the case of each of the items in the top half of the table, the proportion who favour the action now is much the same as it was 20 years ago. There is, it seems, almost universal and consistent support for government action that might promote new products and new jobs, that is, what might be regarded as the engines of economic growth. There is, though, rather less support for 'propping up' declining industries, and indeed this is one activity where support does seem to have declined somewhat (from 66% to 57%) during the last 10 years. Meanwhile, there is remarkably little enthusiasm for the idea of reducing the length of the working week

But if attitudes towards various forms of government intervention in the economy have been relatively stable, those towards ways in which government might step back have changed. There is rather less support now for reducing government regulation of business than there was 10 years ago. Now only 34% feel that way compared with 40% 10 years ago. This drop could conceivably have been occasioned by the experience of the financial crash, which might in part be thought to have been a consequence of inadequate

regulation of the banking sector (Crotty, 2009), together with continuing arguments about the level and oversight of executive pay (House of Commons Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, 2017).

However, the biggest change has occurred in respect of attitudes towards cuts in government spending. Now only 29% feel that this would be beneficial to the economy, compared with 35% 10 years ago, and as many as 43% in 1996. Even more strikingly, perhaps, more people now say that they are opposed to such a policy than say they are in favour. This is not simply a partisan reaction to the fiscal constraint introduced by Conservative-led administrations. Although Labour supporters (23%) are less likely to be in favour of cutting expenditure than their Conservative counterparts (36%), there has been as much as an 11 point decline in support since 1996 amongst Conservatives, a drop that is almost as big as the 14 points drop over the same time period amongst Labour supporters. This trend comes, of course, at the end of a six-year period in which government has been trying to reduce the fiscal deficit by reducing (or, more accurately, stemming the overall increase in) government expenditure (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2015a). Public spending as a proportion of GDP fell from just under 48% in 2009-10 to 41% in 2016-17. Perhaps voters are beginning to react against the curb on public spending during this period?

Further evidence that this may be the case comes from the responses to a question that has been asked every year by BSA since the first survey in 1983. It reads as follows:

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

Table 3 Attitudes to taxation and spending on health, education and social benefits, 1983–2016

| | 1983 | 1984 | 1985 | 1986 | 1987 | 1988 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| View on level of taxation and spending | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Increase taxes/spend more | 32 | n/a | n/a | 46 | 50 | n/a | 50 | 54 | 65 |
| Keep taxes/spend same | 54 | n/a | n/a | 44 | 42 | n/a | 46 | 37 | 29 |
| Reduce taxes/spend less | 9 | n/a | n/a | 5 | 3 | n/a | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 1761 | n/a | n/a | 3100 | 2847 | n/a | 3029 | 2797 | 2918 |

| | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| View on level of taxation and spending | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Increase taxes/spend more | n/a | 63 | 58 | 61 | 59 | 62 | 63 | 58 | 50 |
| Keep taxes/spend same | n/a | 29 | 33 | 31 | 34 | 31 | 32 | 35 | 40 |
| Reduce taxes/spend less | n/a | 4 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | n/a | 2945 | 3469 | 3633 | 3620 | 1355 | 3146 | 3143 | 2292 |

| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| View on level of taxation and spending | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Increase taxes/spend more | 59 | 63 | 51 | 49 | 46 | 46 | 42 | 39 | 34 |
| Keep taxes/spend same | 34 | 31 | 38 | 42 | 43 | 44 | 47 | 50 | 55 |
| Reduce taxes/spend less | 3 | 3 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 8 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 3287 | 3435 | 3272 | 2146 | 2166 | 3240 | 3094 | 2229 | 1139 |

| | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| View on level of taxation and spending | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Increase taxes/spend more | 32 | 36 | 34 | 36 | 37 | 45 | 48 |
| Keep taxes/spend same | 56 | 54 | 53 | 54 | 52 | 47 | 44 |
| Reduce taxes/spend less | 8 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 4 | 4 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 3297 | 3311 | 3248 | 3244 | 2878 | 3266 | 2942 |

n/a = not asked

As Table 3 shows, following a marked increase in public spending during much of the first decade of the twenty-first century, support for increased spending in response to this question fell away markedly from 63% in 2002 to just 32% in 2010. Now, having remained at little more than one third for a number of years, support has risen once again to 48%, higher than at any time since 2004. It would seem that voters are now beginning to react against the

‘austerity’ of recent years, just as we might expect them to do if they were behaving like a thermostat, though we should also note that support for more spending on this measure is still, as yet, to reach the 60% or so level that was commonplace for much of the 1990s.

Public spending

This, however, still leaves the question of what precisely government should spend money on. In Table 4 we show how people have responded when asked the following question:

Listed below are various areas of government spending. Please show whether you would like to see more or less government spending in each area. Remember that if you say “much more”, it might require a tax increase to pay for it

In each case respondents were presented with a set of five possible answers ranging from “spend much more” to “spend much less”. In the table, we show the proportion who say that the government should spend either “much more” or just “more” combined.

The table reveals that some forms of spending are persistently more popular than others. Just as in Table 1 we saw that providing health care for the sick was more likely to be regarded as a government responsibility than any other activity, so spending on health has always been the most popular option for increasing spending. On the other hand, only a distinct minority has ever favoured spending more on culture and the arts, albeit that that minority appears to be slightly bigger now than 20 years ago.

Table 4 View of government spending levels in different policy areas, 1996-2016

| % in favour of more government spending | 1996 | 2006 | 2016 |
|---|------------|------------|-------------|
| Health | 90 | 78 | 83 |
| Education | 82 | 69 | 71 |
| Police and Law Enforcement | 70 | 58 | 57 |
| Old Age Pensions | 76 | 69 | 55 |
| Environment | 41 | 53 | 41 |
| The Military and Defence | 17 | 28 | 39 |
| Unemployment Benefits | 33 | 13 | 16 |
| Culture and the Arts | 6 | 10 | 13 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | <i>989</i> | <i>930</i> | <i>1563</i> |

That said, there have been some marked long-term changes in the popularity of increased spending for some particular items. First of all, in line with the decline in the proportion who think that the government has a responsibility for ensuring that unemployed people have a decent standard of living, support for increased spending on unemployment benefits is, at 16%, only around half the level it was

It would seem that voters are now beginning to react against the ‘austerity’ of recent years, just as we might expect them to do if they were behaving like a thermostat

Support for increased spending on unemployment benefits is, at 16%, only around half the level it was 20 years ago

20 years ago. This finding is also consistent with the evidence of a further question about benefits for the unemployed that has been carried regularly on BSA. In 1996 as many as 48% said that benefits for unemployed people were “too low and cause hardship”, but this figure had fallen to 23% in 1996 and was still only 24% in 2015. So here, it seems, is evidence further to that in Table 1 that the lower levels of unemployment in recent years has resulted in less demand to spend money on those who do find themselves without have a job.

Second, there has been a marked decline in support for extra government spending on old age pensions. Only 55% now think that more should be spent on funding pensions, compared with 69% 10 years ago, a drop that is evident irrespective of the party someone supports. This would appear to echo what we noted in Table 1 in relation to the drop in the proportion who felt that the government had a responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for older people. It is also reflected in the fact that, in response to a different question on the survey (see the Key Findings), only 60% now say that retirement pensions are among their two top priorities for more government spending, less than have done so in any BSA survey since the series began in 1983.

Thanks to the introduction of a ‘triple lock’ whereby the state old age pension has been increased each year by whichever was the highest of wage inflation, price inflation or 2.5%, pensioners have largely been protected from the government’s attempts to reduce spending on welfare. Together with increased access amongst older people to private pensions, this policy has helped ensure that the standard of living of pensioners has grown more rapidly in recent years than it has amongst younger people (Office for National Statistics, 2017b).

It would appear this relative success in increasing the standard of living of older people has been recognised by many voters. In response to another question in the survey, as many as 41% now think that the government is successful at “providing a decent standard of living for the old”, well up on the 30% who were of that view in 2012, let alone the 27% who felt that way in 2006. And it is this recognition that seems to have helped persuade some voters that spending on old age pensions is now less of a priority than it was. Amongst those who think that the government has been successful in providing a decent standard of living for older people, just 41% are in favour of more spending on pensions, whereas amongst those who think the government has been unsuccessful the figure is still as high as 76%. Interestingly, the decline in support for more spending on pensions is by no means confined to younger people of working age. Even amongst those aged 65 and over, support for more spending has fallen from 85% in 1996 to 53% now.

Third, although starting from a low level of just 17% in 1996, there has also been a substantial increase, to 39%, in the proportion who would like more spending on the military and defence. This is despite the fact that the proportion who think that the government has been

As many as 41% now think that the government is successful at “providing a decent standard of living for the old”, well up on the 30% who were of that view in 2012

Although starting from a low level of just 17% in 1996, there has also been a substantial increase, to 39%, in the proportion who would like more spending on the military and defence

successful at “dealing with threats to Britain’s security” has increased from 40% in 1996 to 55% in 2006 and 72% now. However, in this case it seems that a perception of success does not necessarily persuade voters to think that more money does not need to be spent. In our most recent survey, for example, those who thought that government was “very successful” at dealing with threats to security were actually more likely (43% were in favour) of spending more on the military and defence than were those who thought that government had neither been successful nor unsuccessful. This suggests that for some voters at least, past success in dealing with security threats is evidence that money spent on defence is money well spent (see also the chapter on ‘Civil Liberties’). Meanwhile, we should bear in mind that the proportion of national income spent on defence by Britain has been in long-term decline, a trend that has continued during the last 20 years despite the cost of the country’s military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2015b). So, once again, voters could be reacting to the recent trajectory in public spending.

Conclusion

Voters still, it seems have relatively high expectations of government. Most think it has some role at least both in managing and growing the economy and in providing universal public services such as health, education and pensions. Meanwhile, within that broad envelope, voters’ priorities for what the government should do have changed little. The health service has consistently been the public’s number one priority, while, conversely, meeting the needs of the unemployed has consistently been regarded as less important. At the same time, Labour supporters have always been somewhat more inclined than their Conservative counterparts to back a more active state.

Yet this does not mean that attitudes have not changed. Our analysis has uncovered three important trends during the last 20 years. First, voters have become less keen on the government becoming involved in meeting the needs of the unemployed. Second, there is now felt to be less urgency about spending more on pensions and on the financial needs of older people. Third, and in a sense despite these two trends, support for curbing public expenditure in general has fallen.

None of these trends appear to be result of partisan responses, confined to either Conservative or Labour supporters, but rather appear to have occurred across the political spectrum. Rather, all three seem to provide evidence of the public reacting to changing circumstances, including the recent trajectory in public spending. Unemployment has been relatively low during the last two decades and there is a relatively widespread feeling nowadays that anyone who wants a job should be able to find one. It is thus not surprising that voters should think that devoting scarce public resources to

The health service has consistently been the public’s number one priority, while, conversely, meeting the needs of the unemployed has consistently been regarded as less important

Voters themselves appear to think that government has been relatively successful at meeting the financial needs of pensioners and it seems that some have now come to the view that spending more money on older people has become less of a priority too

tacking unemployment and its consequences has become a less pressing priority. Meanwhile, although their incomes are still lower than those in employment, the incomes of pensioners have grown more rapidly in recent years. Voters themselves appear to think that government has been relatively successful at meeting the financial needs of pensioners and it seems that some have now come to the view that spending more money on older people has become less of a priority too.

But while unemployment has been relatively low and many pensioners have seen a growth in their incomes, the last seven years have been ones of relative famine so far as public expenditure is concerned. It appears that gradually the public are beginning to react against that experience, as reflected in declining support for cutting expenditure as a way of helping the economy and some increase in support for spending on public services. True, the call for more spending is still well below what it was by the late 1990s, but it looks as though the tide may at least have begun to flow back in that direction.

For many a politician, what the government should or should not do is a question of belief, a largely unchanging ideological preference for either a government that does a little less or one that does rather more. However, it seems that many voters take a more pragmatic view. When a problem arises they often look to government to fix it. Once that problem is solved they look to government to shift its attention elsewhere. It means that a politician who looks for plaudits for what they have achieved is always at risk of being disappointed – for voters' focus is always on today's difficulty, not yesterday's achievement.

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Appendix

The data for Figure 1 are shown below.

| Table A.1 View of redistribution, 1986-2016 | | | | | | | | | |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 1986 | 1987 | 1989 | 1990 | 1991 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 |
| The government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 43 | 45 | 51 | 51 | 49 | 48 | 51 | 47 | 44 |
| Disagree | 30 | 33 | 29 | 30 | 29 | 33 | 25 | 29 | 28 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 1321 | 2493 | 2604 | 2430 | 2702 | 1306 | 2929 | 3135 | 3085 |
| | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 |
| The government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 39 | 36 | 39 | 38 | 39 | 42 | 32 | 32 | 34 |
| Disagree | 31 | 35 | 36 | 33 | 34 | 32 | 38 | 39 | 38 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 3085 | 2450 | 2980 | 2795 | 2900 | 3621 | 2609 | 3559 | 3748 |
| | 2007 | 2008 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 |
| The government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Agree | 32 | 38 | 32 | 38 | 37 | 36 | 37 | 41 | 42 |
| Disagree | 37 | 35 | 37 | 35 | 34 | 35 | 34 | 30 | 29 |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 3578 | 3990 | 3578 | 3990 | 2942 | 2791 | 2845 | 2855 | 2832 |
| | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | | | | | | |
| The government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off | % | % | % | | | | | | |
| Agree | 39 | 44 | 42 | | | | | | |
| Disagree | 33 | 26 | 28 | | | | | | |
| <i>Unweighted base</i> | 2376 | 3670 | 2400 | | | | | | |