

Author

Roger Harding,
Head of Public Attitudes, The National
Centre for Social Research

Key findings

A kind-hearted but not soft-hearted country

Context

The National Centre for Social Research's BSA 34 comes at a time when Britain seems split in two on many of the biggest questions. A close referendum decision to leave the European Union has been followed by a snap UK election resulting in a hung parliament.

Before that, we had a narrow majority UK government itself preceded by another hung parliament. And in Scotland specifically, the country was split by the question of whether to remain a part of the United Kingdom. Each vote produced an outcome in which the country seemed starkly but often evenly divided.

At each moment there were strident voices on every side and sometimes higher than usual turnout. Fears about political apathy have been displaced by worries about national unity. The results have seen some accuse fellow citizens of 'betrayal' or 'revenge', of voting with their 'gut' not their heads, or of being 'naive', 'stupid' or 'selfish' (Foges, 2017; Perring, 2017; Ridley, 2016; Wilkinson, 2016; Woodward, 2016). One commentator has even asked whether the country is 'ungovernable' (De Quetteville, 2017).

Despite all of this, we have seen great moments of national unity, like One Love Manchester and the Great Get Together, but these have sadly too often been in response to acts of terrorism. After moments of togetherness, too many of us are left wondering whether we really know or understand our neighbours and fellow citizens. Overlapping theories now abound about whether we are seeing a fundamental realignment in previously firm views, trends and dividing lines.

For some, the country is divided into what author David Goodhart calls the 'anywheres' and 'somewheres'; a split evident in the EU vote (Goodhart, 2017). 'Anywheres' are the degree-educated geographically mobile who embrace new people and experiences, and define themselves by their achievements. In contrast, 'somewheres' have an identity rooted in their hometown and find rapid change, such as that brought on by immigration, unsettling.

Others have drawn parallels with the US and suggested we might be beginning our own 'culture wars' (Bagehot, 2017). Here the dividing lines are no longer class or left versus right, but a clash between liberalism and a resurgent conservatism, with the latter angered by issues like same-sex marriage and a sense of runaway multiculturalism.

Before this, there was the suggestion that this is the age of the ‘open’ versus the ‘closed’: those embracing an open economy and tolerant society versus those looking to lock out competition and change¹.

For some, however, the splits and trends in society today are still best seen through the lens of economics and class; a lens which contrasts those who are successfully riding the waves of globalisation and technological change and those increasingly ‘left behind’ by the market, austerity and automation (Doane, 2016). On this view the rising inequality of the late 20th century and the consequences of the financial crash underpin much of the changing political currents we see today.

The stark split in voting behaviour by age in the recent general election² has also reignited debates about whether we are seeing a clash of generations; contrasting baby-boomers against a ‘jilted generation’ left without secure jobs, good pensions and affordable housing (Howker & Malik, 2010).

Finally, many have picked up a growing feeling of ‘anti-politics’ (for example: Clarke et al., 2016) bridging left and right that encompasses all or part rejection of current politics and parties, scandal-hit institutions, ‘political correctness’, and/or an ‘elite’ or ‘establishment’.

Our conclusion is that none of these theories tells the whole story. Instead, every BSA survey seeks to look beyond the headlines to uncover the deeper attitudes and trends that shape our country. This year is no different, and we have found that the country, while divided on many questions, does have an underlying state of mind - that of a kind-hearted but not soft-hearted community.

‘Narratives’ and conclusions about events are now formed rapidly, often before basic information is known and verified. The BSA survey unashamedly takes a slower, more considered approach, rooted in some of the most rigorous social research available.

Key findings

In this year’s report we explore the trends and divides that lie beneath recent events to see how Britain is changing. We do this by examining attitudes to the EU, immigration, a mix of personal issues, benefits and tax, the role of government and civil liberties.

The result is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a diverse set of trends, some suggesting national unity and others showing important divisions. Together they resist simple dichotomies and conclusions but broadly we find a country that is becoming kinder-hearted but unmistakably not soft-hearted, more socially liberal but very divided on immigration and Brexit.

1 Tony Blair (then prime minister) speaking to the Trade Union Congress conference, Brighton, 12th September 2006. Full text available here <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/sep/12/tradeunions.speeches>

2 Prof. John Curtice, speaking at NatCen 14th June 2017, footage and presentation available here: <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/events/upcoming-events/2017/june/breakfast-with-john-curtice/>

Kinder: after 7 years of government austerity, public opinion shows signs of moving back in favour of wanting more tax and spend and greater redistribution of income. We also find that attitudes to benefit recipients are starting to soften and people particularly favour prioritising spending on disabled people.

Not soft-hearted: the public in general continues to take a tough line on the response to threats at home and abroad. The majority want the authorities to be given strong powers to respond to terrorism and crime, and record numbers want defence spending increased.

After pensions being protected from austerity, the public are losing sympathy with the idea that this should be a priority for further spending.

The public takes a dim view of benefit fraud and tax evasion, with many thinking that exploiting “legal loopholes” is also wrong. Further, more people consider benefit fraud wrong than tax evasion. While the proportion who prioritise more spending on increasing the benefits for disabled people has risen, there is little support for more spending on benefits for the unemployed, perhaps because half of people think the unemployed could find a job if they wanted to.

Socially liberal: the onward march of social liberalism continues with record proportions of people being comfortable with same-sex relationships, pre-marital sex and abortion, among other issues. While younger people are still more liberal on these subjects than older people, the difference is narrowing.

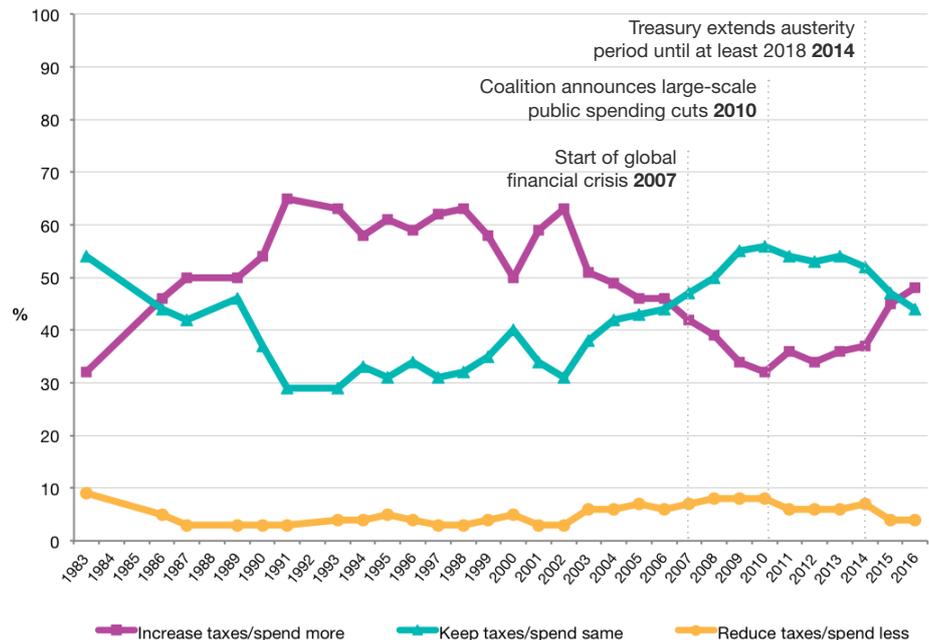
Divided: the country is however clearly divided by age and education on views about the EU and immigration; young degree holders are much more positive about both than older people with no formal qualifications.

A backlash against austerity?

After seven years of government austerity programmes by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and then Conservative majority government, the public is turning against spending less.

For the first time since the financial crash of 2007-8, more people (48%) want taxation increased to allow greater spending, than want tax and spend levels to stay as they are (44%). More people (42%) agree than disagree (28%) that government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well-off. Shortly before the financial crisis fewer people supported redistribution than opposed it (34% and 38% respectively in 2006).

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



However, while these represent notable changes as compared with recent years, they still only represent a partial move back to an earlier mood. The 48% of people who now want more taxation and spending compares with a joint-record low of 32% in 2010, but highs of 63% in 1998, and 65% in 1991.

People's top priorities for more spending remain as they have always been – health and education. Around 8 in 10 think the government should spend more or much more on health (83%); 7 in 10 on education (71%), and 6 in 10 on the police (57%).

A major focus of the austerity programme was on policies to reduce welfare spending on those of working age via reductions in benefit levels and new assessments of who could receive what support (DWP, 2015). As many of these changes have now been implemented it is interesting to see two notable changes in how favourably people view benefit recipients. First, the proportion who say most dole claimants are “fiddling” has dropped from 35% in 2014 to 22% in 2016 – its lowest level since the question was first asked on the survey in 1986. Secondly, we find the proportion of people (21%) that agree that most social security claimants do not deserve help is at a record low, down from 32% in 2014. We will need to see whether these drops are still in evidence in future years before we can be sure they represent a major change of outlook. In the meantime, depending on your outlook, you can either see this as the response to successful efforts to ensure benefits go to those most in need; or, more negatively, more people feeling that recent changes have shown recipients to be more deserving than previously thought.

In contrast to help for those of working age, retirement age benefits have largely been protected from austerity and the State Pension

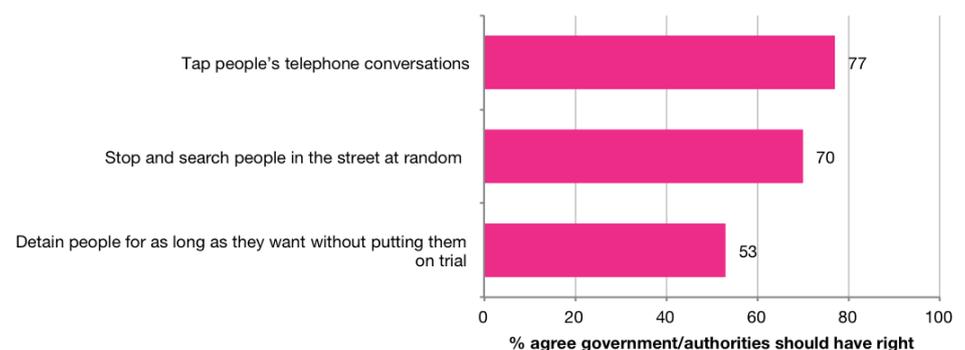
has in fact had significant growth due to the ‘triple lock’³ (Thurley & Keen, 2017). Whether the ‘triple lock’ should be kept became one of the key battlegrounds of the recent election. This year, for the first time in more than 30 years, pensions are not the public’s top priority for extra spending on benefits. The proportion identifying retirement pensions as being among their top two priorities for extra welfare spending is now just 60%, down from 72% in 2014 and the lowest it has ever been. It seems that the public have recognised the fact that successive governments have been successful in raising the relative incomes of pensioners and this may be an area where people are beginning to feel increased spending is no longer needed.

Tough on threats home and abroad

While attitudes haven’t moved in a constant direction, the growing desire for more tax and spend sits alongside continued high support for a strong state on issues of crime and terrorism. This is with fieldwork being completed before the recent terrorist attacks in Manchester and London.

During a time of suspected terrorist attack, half of the public (53%) support the government being able to detain people indefinitely without putting them on trial. The current legal limit is just 14 days. Outside of the two world wars, internment has only briefly been permitted twice during the 20th and 21st centuries. Once was very controversially in Northern Ireland between 1971 and 1975, as an attempt to deal with ‘the troubles’. The other occasion was in respect of international - and therefore non-UK - terrorist suspects, between 2001 and 2005 following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US. In addition, the majority of the public (70%) also support authorities having the right to stop and search people at random during times of terrorist attack.

What should the government be allowed to do at the time of a suspected terrorist attack?



³ The ‘triple lock’ is a guarantee that the basic State Pension will rise by the higher of inflation, average earnings or 2.5%.

One issue raised by recent terrorist attacks is whether the security services have adequate powers of surveillance in order to stop an attack in the first place. A significant majority (80%) think the government should have the right to monitor people by video in public areas, and 50% think the government should also have the right to monitor emails and other information exchanged on the internet.

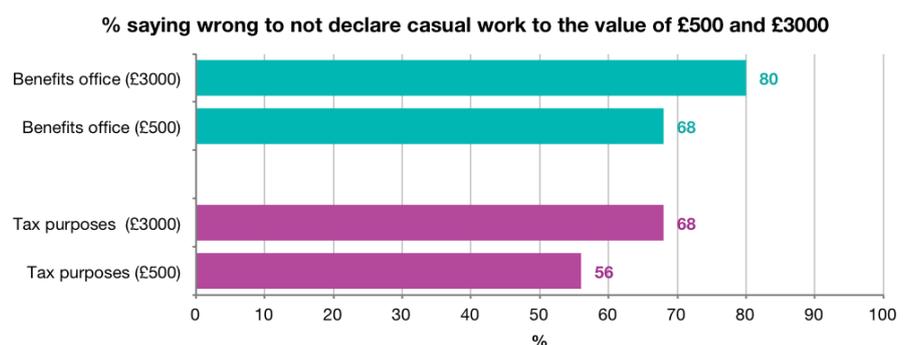
On international threats, 4 in 10 people (39%) back more spending on defence, whereas only 2 in 10 (20%) want to see it cut. Support for more defence spending has never been higher, even though – and perhaps in some instances because – no less than 72% think the government has been successful at dealing with threats to Britain’s security. The trend may also be a reaction against the long-term decline in UK defence expenditure, and the uncertainty created by well-publicised conflicts in Ukraine and Syria where the post-Cold War sense of order and international rules have been up-ended (Observer, 2016).

Tough on benefits fraud and tax evasion

While the public is softening its attitudes to benefit recipients, it is nonetheless clear that benefit fraud is wrong, even if the abuse does not involve eye-watering sums. Nearly everyone (91%) thinks that using false information to support a claim is usually wrong, and this falls only slightly if the person is using a “legal-loop-hole” (to 61% and 48%, respectively). This suggests it is the spirit of the rules that often matters for people, not just whether the strict legal rules have been obeyed.

Overall, people are slightly tougher on benefit fraud than tax evasion. Sixty-eight per cent of people think it is wrong to not declare casual work to the benefit office to gain £500, compared with 56% thinking that it is wrong not to declare casual work for tax purposes to gain £500. This gap suggests that for some, money taken from the public purse is worse than money denied to it. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, we find that those on higher incomes and those who are on the right are more relaxed about tax loopholes. Conversely, those on the left tend to be more relaxed about people using benefit loopholes.

Public are more disapproving of benefit fraud than a paid employee tax dodging



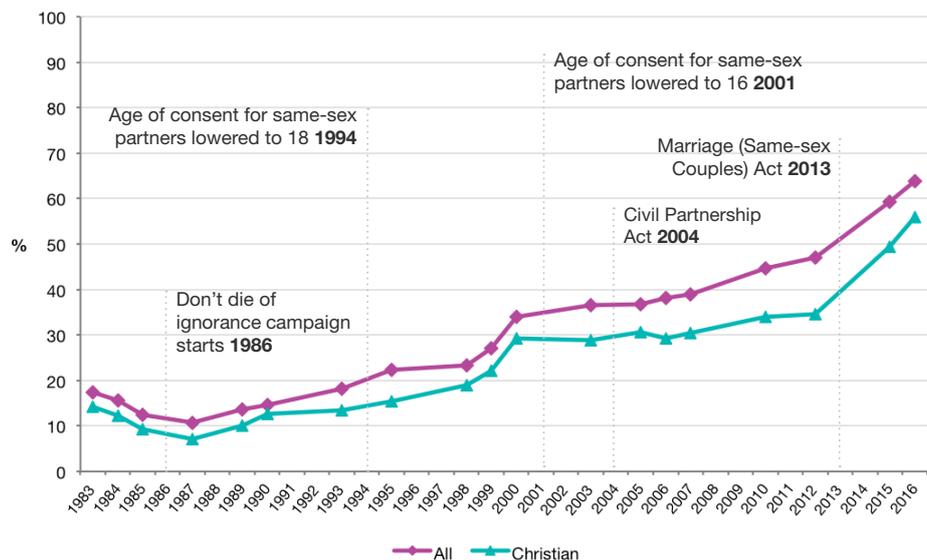
Personal freedom: the continued rise of social liberalism

The EU referendum vote result led some on the left and right to speculate that this was the result of a backlash against greater social liberalism (Eagle & Baird (2017); Lawson (2016)). We find no evidence that there has been a public turn against same-sex relationships, or indeed on many other personal issues. In fact, on some issues such as same-sex relationships, the long-term increase in socially liberal attitudes has actually accelerated.

Two-thirds of people (64%) now say that same-sex relationships are “not wrong at all”, up from 59% in 2015, and 47% in 2012. On pre-marital sex, a significant majority of people (75%) say that it is “not at all wrong”, an increase of 11 percentage points since 2012. Interestingly, this liberalisation in attitudes to both same-sex relationships and pre-marital sex is occurring in every age cohort.

Record levels of people say an abortion should be allowed if a woman decides on her own she does not want the child (70%) or if a couple cannot afford any more children (65%). Most remarkably, the proportion of Catholics who agree an abortion should be allowed if a woman does not want the child has increased from 33% in 1985 to 61% in 2016, which precedes a recent softening of the Catholic Church’s position on abortion during 2015-16 (Povoledo & Stack, 2016).

Acceptance of same-sex relationships has increased quickly in the last four years, especially among Christians



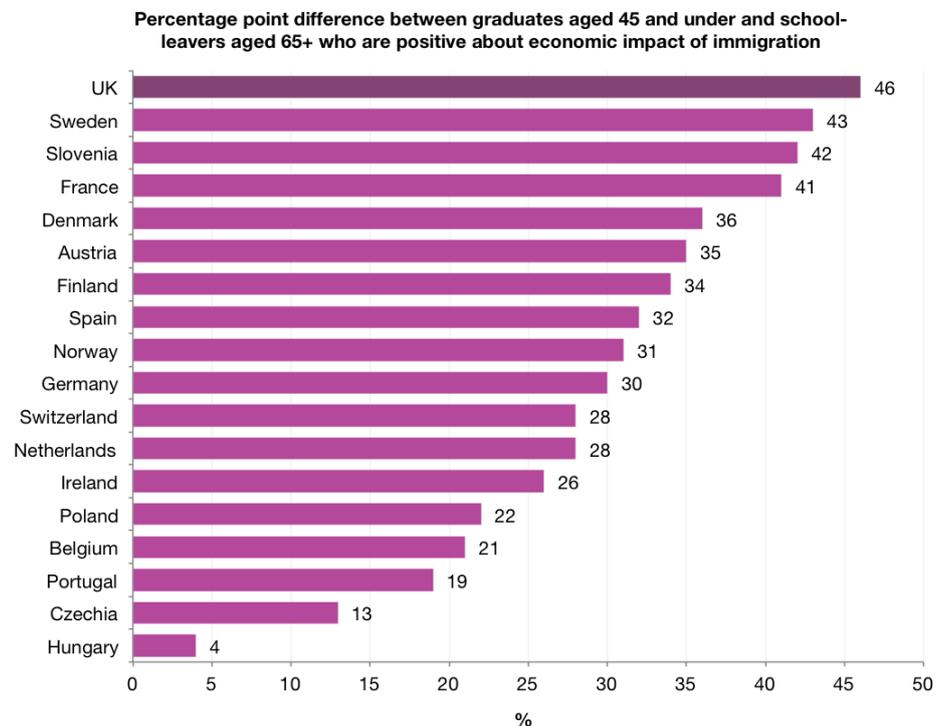
Prejudice about transgender people is examined for the first time in this year's report. We find that the vast majority of the public (84%) describe themselves as "not prejudiced at all" towards transgender people. However, less than half of people say that a suitably qualified transgender person should definitely be employed as a police officer or primary school teacher (43% and 41% respectively), suggesting that there is a notable gap between the theory and practice of people's attitudes.

So on personal issues, Britain emerges an increasingly socially liberal country. However, it is important to add that we should not assume that this applies to other issues. One important area, for example, not covered here and needing further research is our attitude to race; forthcoming work by NatGen suggests that no such similar liberalisation of attitudes has occurred in that area (Kelley et al, 2017).

Brexit and immigration: a country divided

What the 2016 EU referendum decision actually gave a mandate for in the Brexit negotiations is a matter of near-daily debate in parliament and the media. While our report does not address this issue, it can help settle the hotly contested topic of what issues were at stake when voters went to the polls.

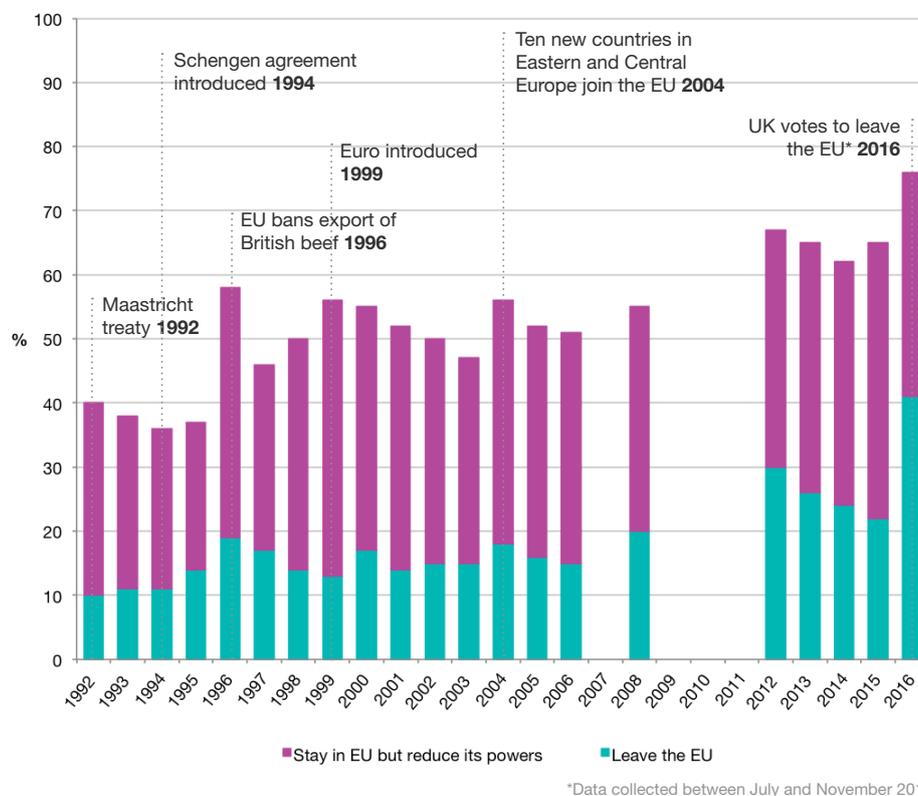
Issue of economic impact of immigration is most socially divisive in the UK



Our analysis suggests that the idea that the referendum was a lightning rod for a rising 'anti-politics' tide is wide of the mark. People's level of trust in government at most played only a minor role in influencing how they voted. Instead, the result reflected the concerns of older, more 'authoritarian' or social conservative voters

who were particularly worried about immigration. Any suggestion that immigration was not at the heart of this vote runs counter to what we have found.

Post Brexit, Britain is more Eurosceptic than ever



The division about immigration that was evident in how people voted in the EU referendum is mirrored in attitudes to immigration itself. In the years leading up to the vote there was a stark and growing divide between young people with a degree education and older people with no formal qualifications in their views about the economic impact of immigration. For example, 62% of those with a degree, and 48% of those aged 18-29 now believe immigration has a positive impact on the economy. In contrast, just 29% of those with GCSEs as their highest level of qualification or no qualifications and just 29% of those aged over 70 hold the same view. Our analysis of the latest European-wide data on this subject shows that this social divide in attitudes towards immigration is bigger than anywhere else in Europe.

Although views about attitudes towards immigration may have polarised, it is not clear that people have become more concerned about immigration. However, there is widespread agreement that the country should be selective in who it allows to come here. Significant majorities feel the ability to speak English (87%, up from 77% in 2002), a commitment to the British “way of life” (84%, up from 78%) and possessing needed skills (82%, up from 71%) are important criteria for selecting migrants.

Conclusion

We started by highlighting the range of theories that now abound to explain the current state of the nation. Our report shows that none of them quite tells the whole picture.

The differences in EU Referendum vote choice were more marked by education level than class, and early indications from the recent general election suggest the differences were most marked by age. Therefore, the ‘anywhere’/‘somewhere’, ‘open’/‘closed’ and ‘culture wars’ theories seem worth exploring more. However, they all suggest or imply that the social conservatism of older people will hold out against the liberalism of the young. This thought does not sit easily with the liberalisation of older people’s attitudes to pre-marital sex and same-sex relationships, especially as the change seems to be accelerating. Generational divides on these issues remain, but they are closing. If anything, views on personal relationships are now a source of growing cross-generational unity rather than division.

The idea that a rising ‘anti-politics’ was at the heart of the EU referendum decision is also found wanting. While it is a factor, it is apparently only a small one. The theory that we are split between those doing well economically from globalisation and those ‘left behind’ is not, in contrast, undermined, but it is not the only or even necessarily the most significant divide on the EU question. Working-class people did lean towards Brexit, but a person’s education level was far more important in identifying how they voted than class. Cultural concerns about immigration, identity and sovereignty mattered, not just concerns about the economic consequences of globalisation. We are, it seems, a country split on the intertwined issues of the EU and immigration, and especially between younger graduates and older people without qualifications. Indeed, it seems that the gap on attitudes towards immigration is widening and has become one of the most significant in Europe.

Looking down more traditional left versus conservative political lines, supporters from either side can be buoyed by these findings (they would therefore be wise to not just read the parts of the report they find most appealing). For those on the left, it does seem that the country is tiring of austerity. There are also signs that attitudes to benefit recipients are softening, and the majority think even low-level tax evasion is unacceptable. However, conservatives can be reassured that people remain committed to wanting a strong response to crime and terror, and the proportion wanting an increase in defence spending is the highest yet. While most people are tough on tax evasion, they are even tougher on benefit fraud. In both cases many of the trends that we see in these areas are important but not revolutionary. Anyone looking to use them to make stark claims about the end of this or that era, ideology or creed will not be someone too troubled by actual evidence.

It is perhaps always the National Centre for Social Research and the BSA survey's job to cut across our desire to explain events with simple narratives. However, on balance, we do seem more socially liberal, keener on more tax and spend and tough on law, order and security, while we are very clearly divided on the EU and immigration. Whatever our views, let us hope there is always unity on the need to explore our differences with civility, and on the importance of robust social research to measure them.

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The data for Figure 1 are shown below.

Table A.3 First and second priorities for extra spending on social benefits, combined, 1983–2014

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995
Benefits for disabled people	58	55	58	58	54	60	59	58	51	57	58
Retirement pensions	64	66	64	65	68	67	65	63	63	64	68
Child benefits	20	22	23	23	24	30	32	35	31	34	33
Benefits for single parents	21	16	18	18	16	17	18	19	18	14	12
Benefits for the unemployed	32	35	31	33	33	25	21	22	32	26	25
None of these	1	1	1	*	1	*	1	*	1	1	1
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1761	1675	1804	3100	2847	3029	2797	2918	2945	1167	1234

	1996	2000	2001	2003	2005	2007	2010	2012	2014	2016
Benefits for disabled people	54	61	57	54	53	54	53	59	60	67
Retirement pensions	71	74	76	79	80	78	72	72	67	60
Child benefits	30	33	35	38	39	42	42	35	37	36
Benefits for single parents	12	15	14	16	15	15	14	14	17	18
Benefits for the unemployed	26	13	12	10	8	7	11	12	13	13
None of these	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	4	3
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3620	3426	3287	3272	3193	3094	3297	3248	2878	2942