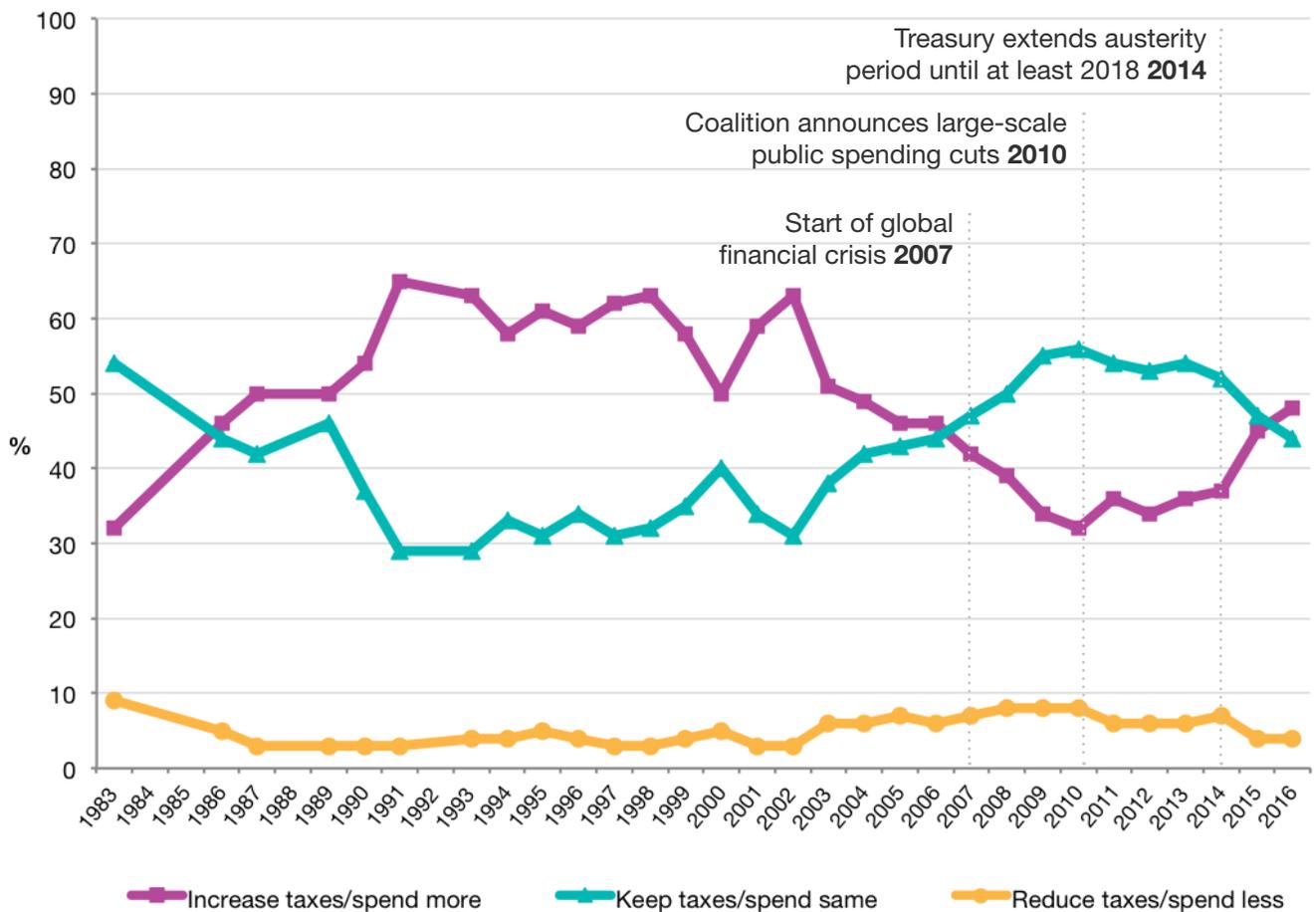


# Role of Government

## 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.

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## 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
<b>... provide health care for the sick</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Definitely	81	84	68	82	67
Probably	16	12	27	16	29
<b>... provide a decent standard of living for the old</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Definitely	69	79	58	74	52
Probably	26	17	36	22	41
<b>... provide industry with the help it needs to grow</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Definitely	38	n/a	27	58	31
Probably	50	n/a	54	33	52
<b>... reduce income differences between the rich and the poor</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Definitely	32	n/a	25	41	31
Probably	30	n/a	38	28	34
<b>... provide decent housing for those who can't afford it</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Definitely	34	n/a	24	38	29
Probably	50	n/a	57	44	50
<b>... keep prices under control</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Definitely	40	53	31	54	29
Probably	41	38	49	35	53
<b>... provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed</b>	%	%	%	%	%
Definitely	26	n/a	10	21	14
Probably	46	n/a	40	38	42
<b>... provide a job for everyone who wants one</b>	%	%	%	%	%
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

**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**

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.

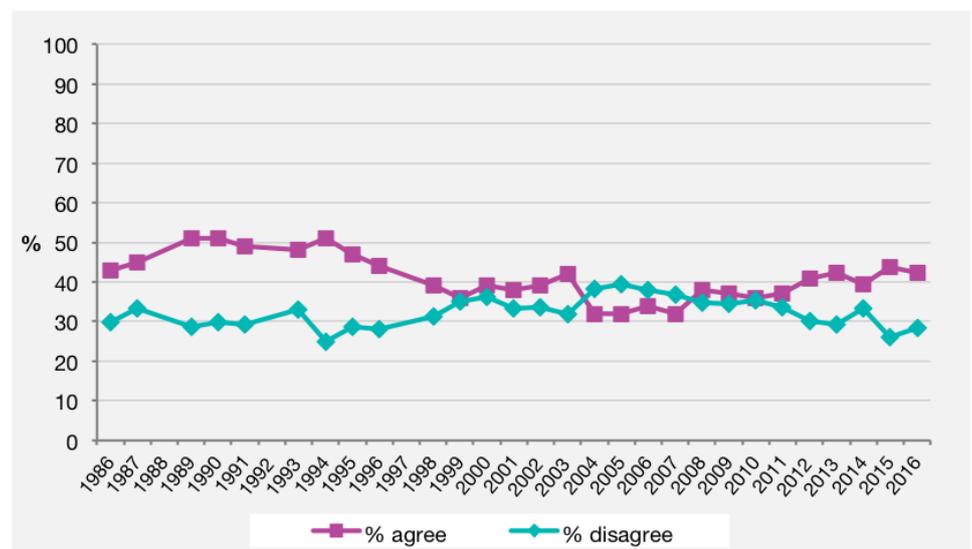
Yet these partisan differences do not mean that the balance of opinion amongst voters as a whole has not altered over time. The most marked change has been in respect of providing a job for anyone who wants one. Twenty years ago, around three-quarters (76%) believed it was either definitely or probably 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

**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
<b>Support for industry to develop new products and technology</b>	%	%	%
In favour	86	81	83
Against	1	2	1
<b>Government financing of projects to create new jobs</b>	%	%	%
In favour	84	72	83
Against	3	6	3
<b>Support for declining industries to protect jobs</b>	%	%	%
In favour	62	57	56
Against	13	16	14
<b>Reduce the working week to create more jobs</b>	%	%	%
In favour	37	28	25
Against	30	32	36
<b>Less government regulation of business</b>	%	%	%
In favour	40	40	34
Against	14	10	19
<b>Cuts in government spending</b>	%	%	%
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
<b>View on level of taxation and spending</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
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
<b>View on level of taxation and spending</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
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
<b>View on level of taxation and spending</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
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
<b>View on level of taxation and spending</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
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.

<b>Table A.1 View of redistribution, 1986-2016</b>									
	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996
<b>The government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
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
<b>The government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
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
<b>The government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
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						
<b>The government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off</b>	%	%	%						
Agree	39	44	42						
Disagree	33	26	28						
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2376	3670	2400						