BSA 42 | Repairing Britain: Attitudes towards the economy, taxation and public services

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Attitudes towards the economy, taxation and public services

The Labour government elected in July 2024 inherited significant policy challenges. Public spending and taxation have increased to record levels, but public services are struggling to deal with the legacy of the pandemic. Meanwhile, persistently low economic growth and an inflationary spike resulted in flatlining living standards during the last Parliament. In this chapter we assess where public opinion stands on the challenges facing the country and on attitudes towards some of Labour's policies for addressing them.

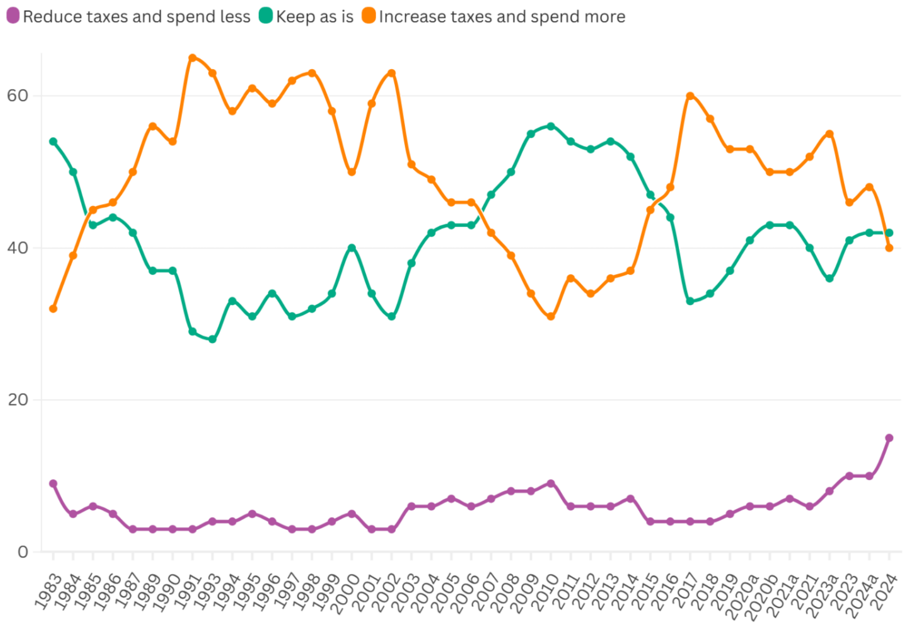
Widespread difficulty and discontent

- A record 26% are struggling on their current income.
- A record 59% are dissatisfied with the health service.
- Over half (53%) are dissatisfied with social care.

Divisions over tax and spend

- For the first time less than half (45%) support more spending on benefits for disabled people who cannot work. But only 29% feel it is too easy to claim disability benefits.
- 61% believe that taxes for people on low incomes are too high – but 44% believe that taxes for those on high incomes are too low.
- Support for increased taxation and spending fell from 46% in 2023 to 40% in 2024. But the figure is still well above the 31% recorded in 2010, after the financial crash.

Attitudes towards taxation and spending, 1983 – 2024



Doubts about building infrastructure

- Less than half (41%) support more houses being built in their area.
- Less than half (44%) want it made easier to build electricity pylons across the countryside.
- Less than half (43%) favour building new nuclear power stations.

Introduction

The Labour Party came to power in July 2024 when the country was facing substantial policy challenges. The 2019-2024 Parliament witnessed a significant expansion in the size of the state, both in terms of taxation and spending (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2025a). In 2019/2020, public spending represented 39.6% of GDP. The following year, when the COVID-19 pandemic was at its height and the government was paying the wages of those unable to work because of lockdown, the proportion ballooned to 53.0%. It still stood at 44.7% in the last full year of the Parliament (2023/2024), the highest level (other than briefly after the financial crash) since the mid-1970s, and is expected to be as high as 43.9% at the end of the current Parliament. Meanwhile, the proportion of the economy taken in taxes during the last Parliament increased from 33.2% to 35.5%, the highest level since 1950, and at present is on course for a record high of 37.7% (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2025b).

Nevertheless, despite the increase in spending, public services have been struggling to recover from the pandemic on multiple fronts. The number of NHS patients in England waiting for consultant-led elective care increased from an already very high level of 4.57 million at the end of the 2019 to 7.62 million in June 2024, a figure that has only fallen slightly since (British Medical Association, 2025). The picture is much the same in the rest of the UK (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2023; Warner, 2024; StatsWales, 2025). Absence from school, and especially unauthorised absence, is still higher than it was before the pandemic (Hunt et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the supply of publicly funded social care has been failing to keep pace with increased demand since well before the pandemic (Bottery and Jefferies, 2025).

At the same time, the government is fiscally constrained. Public sector net debt rose from 85% at the end of 2019 to 96% in June 2024, the highest level since the early 1960s (Office for National Statistics, 2025a). In combination with increased interest rates, this ensured that by 2023/4 nearly 9% of government spending, that is nearly 4% of GDP, was being spent on debt interest payments, only slightly below the record post-war high of GDP of 4.3% the previous year (Keep, 2025; Office for Budget Responsibility, 2025a; 2025c). An attempt by Liz Truss in September 2022 to break out of this constraint by reducing tax rates while not reducing spending – in the hope that this would stimulate growth and thus revenues – instigated a dramatic sell-off of government bonds. Meanwhile, the fiscal pressure is not made any easier by a worsening of the geostrategic environment, not least as a result of the Russia-Ukraine war, with resultant calls, after many years of low spending, for more expenditure on defence, together with an increase in welfare spending on people of working age not in employment because of disability and poor mental health (Latimer et al., 2024; 2025). Yet, at the same time, the Labour government has also pledged not to increase rates of income tax, employee national insurance, and VAT (Labour Party, 2024a).

The government hopes to break out of this fiscal constraint primarily by increasing economic growth (and thus fiscal revenues), which totaled just 1% across the whole of the last Parliament (Office for National Statistics, 2025b). Achieving this objective would also help improve living standards, which have largely flatlined in the wake of the financial crisis and more recently, a period of high inflation (Ray-Chauduri et al., 2024). The government hopes to stimulate the economy by improving the country's infrastructure, including not least the supply of housing and, with a view to addressing climate change with low carbon energy (HM Treasury, 2025). However, it has ruled out any major reversal of the decision to leave the EU, a decision that is estimated by the Office for Budget Responsibility to have reduced the UK's productivity by 4% (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2025d).

This chapter analyses to what extent the stances adopted by the UK Labour Government towards the country's policy challenges are consistent with the contours of public opinion as they have emerged from the twin shocks of the pandemic and the 'cost of living crisis'. First, it considers to what extent the public are concerned about the state of the economy and of public services – and how far it looks to government to address their concerns. Second, we assess attitudes towards taxation and spending, and thus how the public feel the fiscal challenge facing the country should be met. Third, we examine public attitudes towards some of the measures that the government hopes will increase economic growth. In each case, we are particularly interested in assessing whether the public expectations of what government should and should not do have been affected by the difficult circumstances and/or the expansion of taxation and spending of the last five years.

How might the public have reacted: thermostatic theory

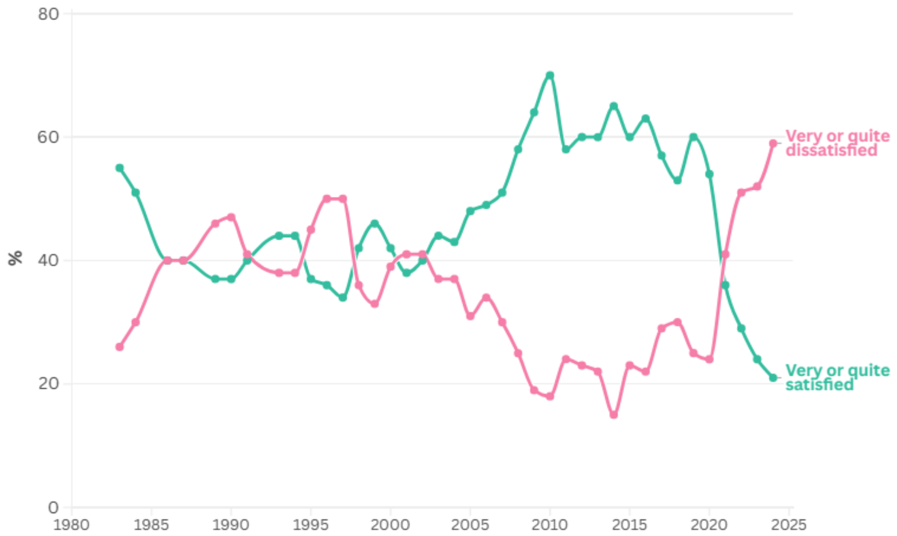
One influential body of academic literature at least provides us with a clear steer about how the public are likely to have reacted to the expansion of the state – they should have swung against the marked increases in the level of taxation and spending (Wlezien, 1995; Soroka and Wlezien, 2005). According to this theory, people have a sense both of how much tax they feel they should have to pay and of what public services they should receive from government spending. Consequently, when taxes and spending go up then, after a while, more and more people come to feel that they are too high – and look for a reduction in their tax bill. But equally, when taxes and spending fall, then people become more concerned about the state of public services and start to seek increases in taxation and spending. In short, because their expectations of government are largely stable, the public react to changes in the size of the state in much the same way as a radiator thermostat responds to changes in the temperature of a room (see also Curtice, 2010).

This perspective would lead us to anticipate that the public should have reacted against the expansion of the state during the 2019-2024 Parliament, and that people are now looking to the government to curb and ultimately reverse the rising tide of taxation and spending. Labour's election promise not to increase rates of personal taxation would appear to be a tilt in that direction. However, this assumes people's expectations of government and thus their attitudes towards the desirable level of taxation and spending remain constant over time. In practice, the advent of globalisation in the 1980s and 1990s witnessed – not uncontroversially – a reduction in the role and significance of the state that was embraced by both Conservative and Labour governments (Curtice and Scholes, 2023). Perhaps now the role of the state in protecting public health and the economy during a pandemic, that had a profound impact on people's lives has, much like war in the past, increased the public's expectations of what the state should be doing (Ansell, 2023). Or maybe, at present at least, improving the performance of struggling public services is a higher priority for people than reducing their tax bills. Alternatively, perhaps the struggling performance of public services and the flatlining of the economy have undermined public confidence in the ability of government to meet their social and economic needs and occasioned a swing in public opinion in favour of a smaller, less active state. Either way, it is possible that the public may not have reacted to the expansion of the state in the way that thermostatic theory – and perhaps the government – would expect.

Challenges and responsibilities

How do the public feel about the state of the country's public services and living standards after the difficult circumstances of recent years? As we have already noted, with much lengthened waiting lists and waiting times, the health service is struggling to recover from the pandemic. As Figure 1 shows, this has had an adverse impact on people's satisfaction with the service. In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, as many as 60% were satisfied with the NHS overall, while just 25% were dissatisfied. Now just 21% are satisfied with the NHS overall, while 59% are dissatisfied.[1] Never before have the public registered so negative a judgement on the performance of the health service (Taylor et al., 2025). Much of the fall in satisfaction occurred during the years of the pandemic (by 2022, just 29% were satisfied while 51% were dissatisfied), but levels of satisfaction have continued to decline over the past two years. Dissatisfaction is particularly high for how long it takes to secure a GP appointment (61%), a hospital appointment (63%) or to be seen in Accident and Emergency (68%).

Figure 1 Satisfaction with the NHS, 1983–2024



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

The funding and provision of social care has been a perennial problem for which the last UK Government proposed a solution on more than one occasion but never succeeded in implementing (Allen et al., 2024). Now the current government has referred the issue – not for the first time – to a commission to address (Holt and Burns, 2025). Meanwhile, difficulties in providing social care for people who are ready to be discharged from hospital is having a significant adverse impact on the availability of beds – and thus NHS waiting times (Powell et al., 2024).

Table 1 shows that levels of satisfaction with social care were already in decline before the pandemic. The proportion who said they were dissatisfied rose from 29% in 2013 to 37% in 2019. However, dissatisfaction has since become even more pronounced. During the pandemic it rose to 57% in 2022 and 2023, while the picture has changed little since. In our latest survey, as many as 53% are dissatisfied with social care, while just 13% are satisfied.

Table 1 Satisfaction with social care, 2013-2024

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Satisfied	29	31	26	26	23	26	29	15	14	13	13
Dissatisfied	29	30	33	35	41	34	37	50	57	57	53
Unweighted base	*1063*	*971*	*1062*	*974*	*1002*	*973*	*1075*	*1039*	*3362*	*3374*	*3123*

Meanwhile there is also considerable concern among the public about living standards. Since 1986, the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey has regularly included the following question:

Some people say there is very little **real poverty** in Britain today. Others say there is quite a lot.

Which come closest to **your** view…
…that there is very little real poverty in Britain,
or, that there is quite a lot?

A majority have always felt that that there is “quite a lot” of poverty in Britain. That remains very much the case now. As Table 2 shows, the proportion expressing that view did fall back somewhat under New Labour, but it then became more widespread again in the wake of, first, the financial crash and then, under the Conservative-led administrations from 2010 onwards. By 2019, shortly before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the proportion had reached a near record high of 68%. It rose even further during the pandemic (to 73% in 2023), and while it has now fallen back a little, it still stands at that otherwise near record high of 68%.

Table 2 Perceptions of the prevalence of poverty in Britain, 1986-2024

	1986	**1989**	**1994**	**2000**	**2003**	**2006**	**2009**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very little poverty	41	34	28	35	41	45	39
Quite a lot	55	63	71	62	55	52	57
Unweighted base	*1548*	*1516*	*1167*	*3426*	*3272*	*3240*	*3421*
	2013	**2018**	**2019**	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Very little poverty	35	31	29	28	25	29	
Quite a lot	62	65	68	69	73	68	
Unweighted base	*3244*	*2884*	*3224*	*3310*	*3284*	*3046*	

Meanwhile, since the pandemic and the subsequent ‘cost of living crisis’, people have become more likely to report that they themselves are struggling to live on their current income. As Table 3 shows, up to and including 2020, consistently around a half said their household was living comfortably on their current income, while around one in six indicated that they were struggling. However, the picture changed during the pandemic and now just over a third (35%) say they are living comfortably, while just over one in four (26%) indicate that they are struggling. Underpinning this shift is the fact that record numbers – 70% in 2023 and 67% in 2024 – are now saying that their incomes have failed to keep up with prices over the last year. Both figures are well above the previous high (since the question was introduced in 1984) of 55% recorded in both 1985 and 1991.

Table 3 Feelings about current household income, 2010-2024

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2023	2024
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Living comfortably	49	44	46	45	49	53	50	47	41	36	35
Neither	33	34	34	35	32	32	33	35	37	36	38
Struggling	17	21	19	20	19	15	16	17	21	26	26
Unweighted base	*3297*	*1096*	*3248*	*3244*	*2878*	*2942*	*2884*	*3955*	*1132*	*5578*	*4120*

Given the heightened levels of concern and dissatisfaction noted above, what has happened to people's expectations of the role of government in the wake of the pandemic? Is their dissatisfaction and concern accompanied by a wish for government to do more, or has it led them to doubt whether it should be doing as much?

During the last 40 years, the BSA survey has regularly asked whether the government should or should not take on each of seven possible roles and responsibilities, as presented in Table 4. These include a number of actions that touch upon the policy challenges facing the current government, including providing health care for the sick, keeping prices under control, and providing industry with the help that it needs to grow. Across all the actions the proportion who say they should "definitely" or "probably" be the government's responsibility has almost never fallen below half. Consequently, in Table 4 and the subsequent discussion, we focus on the proportions who provided either of those two responses.

Table 4 Perceptions of the responsibility of government, 1986-2024

Should it be the government's responsibility to...	1985	1986	1990	1996	2000	2002	2006	2012	2016	2022	2024
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Provide health care for the sick											
Definitely should be	85	84	84	81	87	84	68	82	67	89	82
Probably should be	13	14	14	16	11	12	27	16	29	9	16
Provide a decent standard of living for the old											
Definitely should be	77	80	77	69	80	79	58	74	52	81	76
Probably should be	19	18	20	26	16	17	36	22	41	18	22
Keep prices under control											
Definitely should be	59	52	47	40	64	53	31	54	29	68	63
Probably should be	31	37	39	41	31	38	49	35	53	26	29
Provide industry with the help it needs to grow											

Definitely should be	52	39	41	38	n/a	n/a	27	58	31	63	53
Probably should be	40	48	50	50	n/a	n/a	54	33	52	32	38
Reduce income differences between the rich and poor											
Definitely should be	45	46	40	32	n/a	n/a	25	41	31	53	50
Probably should be	24	27	30	30	n/a	n/a	38	28	34	28	26
Provide a job for everyone who wants one											
Definitely should be	36	30	23	26	39	33	16	27	14	34	30
Probably should be	32	33	38	39	36	39	36	36	34	38	35
Provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed											
Definitely should be	42	39	30	26	n/a	n/a	10	21	14	38	27
Probably should be	38	44	46	46	n/a	n/a	40	38	42	43	47
Unweighted base	*1530*	*1321*	*1197*	*989*	*2008*	*1911*	*930*	*956*	*1563*	*2175*	*1022*

n/a – question not asked

Some possible responsibilities have consistently been more popular than others. Nearly everyone believes it should be the government's job to provide health care for the sick and provide a decent standard of living for the old. In contrast, providing a decent standard of living for the unemployed and providing a job for everyone who wants one has consistently been markedly less popular. This remains the case today; 82% think that the government should definitely provide health care for the sick and 76% believe it should provide a decent standard of living for the old – while just 30% think it should definitely provide a job for everyone who wants one and 27% that it should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed.

That said, the popularity of most of the items as measured by the proportion who have said an action should definitely be the government's responsibility has varied over time, suggesting that attitudes towards the role of the state are not necessarily constant. Indeed, following a marked jump in our 2022 survey, taken during the pandemic and at the outset of the subsequent 'cost of living crisis', in most instances levels of agreement are currently still relatively high. In 2022 the proportion saying it was definitely the government's responsibility rose in the case of five of the seven possible actions to a record high. In particular, as many as 63% felt it was definitely the government's job to provide industry with the help it needs, five points higher than on any previous occasion (in 2012), while 68% believed it was the government's responsibility to keep prices under control, four points higher than before (in 2000). The pandemic had clearly raised the public's expectations of government and, it seems, especially its role in the economy.

Now in our latest survey the proportion who say it definitely is the government's responsibility is somewhat lower. However, in all but one instance the figure is still at least as high – and in most instances higher – than it was in 2012, after the financial crash. While some of the pandemic-induced increase in people's expectations of government has receded somewhat,[2] it remains the case that it has far from disappeared entirely. It appears that the public are still looking heavily to government to deal with the country's challenges in improving the economy and its public services.

Meeting the fiscal challenge

So, although the level of taxation and spending have increased in the wake of the pandemic, so also have dissatisfaction with what the government has achieved and concern about the economic circumstances in which people find themselves. At the same time, expectations of what government should do remain relatively high. But do these considerations mean the public have not reacted thermostatically to the rise in taxation and spending – or have voters, nevertheless, still become more concerned about how much they are now having to pay in tax?

We begin this part of our investigation by looking at attitudes to the funding of specific services, most notably the NHS, social care and, in the wake of the changing geostrategic situation since the Russian-Ukraine war, defence. Thereafter, we examine how people feel about the level of tax for different income groups. Finally, we assess how people respond when asked to choose between lower taxes and more spending, and whether the way people answer that question now is different from the past.

No other aspect of government spending has grown more in recent years than spending on health (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2024; Stoye et al., 2024). Yet, in our latest survey, just 8% say that the government is spending "too much" on the NHS, while over two-thirds (69%) think it is spending "too little". Moreover, those who are dissatisfied with the NHS (73%) are a little more likely than those who are satisfied (64%) to say the government is spending too little. When presented with a list of possible priorities for extra spending, more people pick health (48%) than any other area, as has been the case every year since the first BSA survey in 1983.

That said, there has been some decline in support for aspects of how the NHS is currently run. Just 43% now say that "the principle that the NHS should primarily be funded through taxes" "should definitely apply to the NHS today", lower than the 54% who stated this view when the question was first asked in 2021, with support falling continuously in the intervening period. Although those who say the principle should "definitely" or "probably not" apply are still very much a minority, they now constitute nearly two in ten (19%) of the public, compared with around one in eight (13%) in 2021. Moreover, they are disproportionately represented among those who are "very dissatisfied" with the NHS, 25% of whom question whether the taxpayer should primarily be funding the bill. Meanwhile, only 56% now say that the NHS should definitely "be available to everyone", a significant drop from 67% in both 2021 and 2023. Nearly two in five (39%) of those who are "very dissatisfied" with the NHS say that it should not be universally available, nearly double the proportion (22%) across the public as a whole. It appears that dissatisfaction with the health service can lead some people at least to question the model through which the NHS is currently funded and accessed, though it still remains a service that most people wish to see succeed in its current form.

In contrast to the NHS, public funding for social care in England and Wales depends on people's financial circumstances. Moreover, as Table 5 shows, the idea that government should pay the whole cost, regardless of people's circumstances, remains a minority view. At 38%, the proportion who currently say that government should pay the full cost is little different from the 41%

who expressed that view in 2017, and is down on the 48% who did so in 2012 and 2015 when the level of dissatisfaction with social care was much lower than it is now. That said, what has become more popular since 2017 is the idea that there should be a lifetime limit or cap on how much people have to pay for care, with the government picking up the full tab for those who reach that limit – a proposal that implies the government taking on more of the cost than it does at present. This option is now favoured by 36%, compared with 25% in 2017. Funding social care in this way was initially proposed by a commission headed by Sir Andrew Dilnot (Dilnot, 2011) and subsequently put into law. However, implementation was subjected to repeated delays, cancellation and then a revival under the Conservatives only now to have been abandoned by Labour, at least for the time being, until yet another commission has reported (Bottery, 2024). The public may be hoping Labour's decision does not prove to be the last word.

Table 5 Attitudes towards who should pay for social care, 2012-2024

	2012	2015	2017	2020	2021	2023	2024
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Government	48	48	41	35	34	43	38
Individual	1	2	2	1	1	2	3
Individual pay what they can, government the rest	22	25	30	28	28	22	21
Individual up to a capped amount, government rest	27	22	25	36	38	31	36
Unweighted base	*1103*	*1062*	*3004*	*2407*	*2207*	*1276*	*1072*

Sources: 2020: July 2020 wave of NatCen Panel; 2021: June 2021 wave of NatCen Panel.

Meanwhile, as has already proven to be the case, any attempt by the government to reduce spending on disability benefits, the bill for which is growing significantly, seems set to receive a mixed reception (Brewer et al.,

2025) – even though support for spending more on benefits for disabled people has fallen markedly. As Table 6 shows, backing for that point of view now stands at a record low of 45%. Not only is that as much as 11 points down on our previous reading in 2021, but it stands in sharp contrast to the position in the late 1990s when nearly three in four were in favour. Even though those who think there is "quite a lot" of poverty are more likely to favour more spending (52%), the public appear to have reacted thermostatically against the increase in spending on disabled people.

Table 6 Attitudes to spending on disability benefits, 1998-2024

	1998	1999	2002	2004	2006	2008	2011
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Spend more	72	72	69	63	62	61	53
Spend less	2	2	2	3	3	4	5
Unweighted base	*3146*	*3143*	*3435*	*3199*	*3240*	*3358*	*3311*
	2013	**2015**	**2017**	**2020**	**2021**	**2024**	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Spend more	54	61	67	57	56	45	
Spend less	4	3	4	4	4	11	
Unweighted base	*3244*	*3266*	*2963*	*2407*	*1065*	*3046*	

Sources: 2020: July 2020 wave of NatCen Panel.

That said, although seven points up on 2021, only 11% believe spending on disability benefits should actually be cut. At the same time, although 29% believe it is "too easy" for people to be able to claim disability benefit, just as many, 29%, feel it is "too difficult". More popular than either view is the perception that it is currently "neither too easy nor too difficult" to make a claim (35%). Meanwhile, a majority (62%) believe the requirement that exists for people with a disability who are claiming benefit "to take measures to find appropriate work" is "about right", while only 11% believe it is "too weak". Indeed, despite the rise in the number of claimants, the distribution of responses to this latter question is still much the same now as it was when it was previously asked in 2011. Although overall sentiment towards disability benefits has become less favourable, the public will not necessarily endorse specific ways of making it more difficult to claim them.

But if there is less pressure now from the public to spend more on disability benefits, there is certainly more pressure for an increase in spending on defence. As our chapter on security threats and military spending shows, after years of spending cuts, the balance of opinion is now in favour of an increase in spending on defence. This stands in contrast to the period following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 when the balance of opinion was clearly in favour of spending less, albeit that the most common response, typically provided by at least two in five or so, was to maintain the status quo. Here there has perhaps not only been a thermostatic reaction but also an increased appetite for government to do more.

Despite record levels of public spending, it appears then that, for the most part, the pressure for the government to spend more is greater than calls for it to do less. However, there is another side to the equation on taxation and spending – how people feel about the current level of taxation. Perhaps people feel that they and their fellow citizens are paying too much? In Table 7, we show how people have responded when asked whether, for each of those on "high incomes", "middle incomes", and "low incomes", "taxes in Britain today" are "too high", "too low", or "about right".

Perhaps unsurprisingly, people have consistently been much more likely to say that taxes for those on high incomes are too low than they are to say the same of those on middle or low incomes; this is currently the case for 44%, 7% and 2% respectively. Indeed, a majority (currently 61%) have always expressed the view that those on low incomes are taxed too highly. Moreover, Table 7 also shows that while the proportion who believe that taxes on those on low incomes are too high is nine points higher than in 2016, and in the case of those on middle incomes 13 points higher, at the same time the proportion who think taxes on those on high incomes are too low is ten points up on 2016. We should thus bear in mind that any support for higher taxation does not necessarily represent a personal willingness to pay more tax. It might instead represent a belief that those who are thought to be better off should pay more.

Table 7 Perceptions of levels of taxation for different income groups, 1991-2024

	1991	1996	2006	2009	2016	2023	2024
High incomes	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Too high	13	17	26	25	21	21	25
About right	35	32	37	37	37	25	24
Too low	48	42	27	33	34	46	44
Unweighted base	*1445*	*989*	*930*	*967*	*1563*	*1217*	*1073*
	1991	**1996**	**2006**	**2009**	**2016**	**2023**	**2024**
Middle incomes	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Too high	25	30	43	42	31	n/a	44
About right	65	56	46	48	54	n/a	44
Too low	6	8	3	4	7	n/a	7
Unweighted base	*1445*	*989*	*930*	*967*	*1563*	*1217*	*1073*
	1991	**1996**	**2006**	**2009**	**2016**	**2023**	**2024**
Low incomes	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Too high	74	69	62	72	52	n/a	61
About right	20	22	28	21	37	n/a	31
Too low	3	1	2	2	3	n/a	2
Unweighted base	*1445*	*989*	*930*	*967*	*1563*	*1217*	*1073*

n/a – question not asked

However, we should also note that in the case of all three groups, the proportion who think that taxes are too high now is not significantly higher than it was in 2006, a time when there had also been significant recent increases in direct taxes on personal incomes (Browne and Phillips, 2010; Keep, 2024). Given that, at 35.5%, the total tax, take as a proportion of GDP in 2023/4, was two points above that in 2005/6 (33.4%), and stood at its highest level since the early 1950s (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2025a), it might have been anticipated that the reaction against the recent increase in taxes would have been more marked than it has seemingly proven to be.

In practice, of course, the new government has set its face against increasing personal tax rates, both for those on low and higher incomes. One policy, however, that it has implemented, and which might be thought to be targeted at those on higher incomes, has been to make the fees that parents pay to send their children to schools outside the state system subject to VAT, a change that has been followed by the closure of some schools but which is intended to pave the way for more spending on state schools (Furneaux, 2025).

Indeed, critics of private schools appear to be more numerous than they were. As many as 32% now believe that state schools would benefit "if there were fewer private schools in Britain today"; up from 26% when we last asked the question in 2010 and almost double the 17% who expressed that view in 1984. That would seem to suggest that Labour's move could prove relatively popular. At the same time, however, there has also been an increase – up from 13% in 2010 to 25% now – in the proportion who feel that state schools would suffer if there were fewer private schools. As a result, the balance of opinion is, as before, only tilted a little in favour of the view that having fewer private schools would be beneficial for the state system. Rather than private schools becoming less popular, attitudes appear to have become more polarised, thereby making Labour's policy potentially more controversial than it might once have been.

Despite the marked increase in recent years then, reducing government spending does not look politically easy in the current attitudinal climate. Voters want more spent on defence, incline towards a policy that implies more government spending on social care, and are for the most part more inclined to the view that the NHS is under than over-funded. Even curbing the growing bill for disability benefits does not look straightforward. There are, in short, few signs of a thermostatic reaction against the growth in the size of the state. Yet, while there may not have been as marked a reaction as might have been anticipated against the rise in taxation that has also taken place, it does seem that, for many people, the scope for raising more revenue is limited to those on higher incomes. But how do people respond when invited to choose directly between, on the one hand, higher taxes and higher spending and, on the other, lower taxes and lower spending?

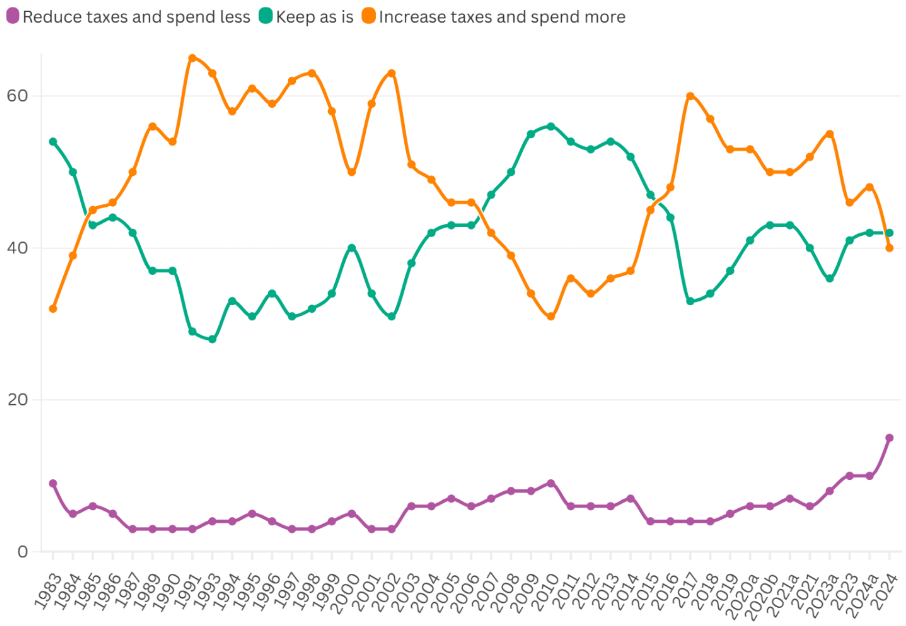
Ever since the first survey in 1983, BSA has regularly included the following question:

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

*Reduce taxes and spend **less** on health, education and social benefits*
*Keep taxes and spending on these services at the **same** level as now*
*Increase taxes and spend **more** on health, education and social benefits*

The responses obtained in 2024, and on previous occasions when the question has been asked, are presented in Figure 2. It provides clear evidence of how previously voters have responded thermostatically to changes in taxation and spending – but raises questions about whether the public have reacted in a similar way to the most recent increase in the size of the state.

Figure 2 Attitudes towards taxation and spending, 1983 – 2024



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

Between 1983 and the mid-1990s, public spending and taxes both fell (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2023; 2024). At that time, as we saw earlier in Figure 1, there was a relatively high level of dissatisfaction with the health service. Against this backdrop, support for increased taxes and spending rose from 32% in 1983 to 65% in 1991, and still stood at 62% shortly after New Labour came to power in 1997. After a while, that government increased both taxes and spending. At the same time, satisfaction with the health service improved markedly. Then in 2008-2009, a banking crisis required costly emergency government action to stabilise the financial system. By 2010, only 31% supported increasing taxes and spending.

This cyclical pattern then repeated itself as Conservative-led administrations sought to cut spending in order to improve the public finances. Although initially there was only a limited shift in attitudes, by 2017, when satisfaction with the health service was beginning to slip somewhat, support for increasing taxes and spending had risen to 60%. It still stood at 53% in 2019, just months before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, contrary to what we might by now have anticipated, as recently as early 2023 there was no sign of any public reaction against the marked increases in taxation and spending that had occurred in the wake of that pandemic. Still as many as 55% were saying that taxation and spending should be increased. Even as recently as July 2024, that is, shortly after the general election, 48% were still expressing that view.

That said, in our most recent survey, just 40% stated that taxes should be increased, while a record 15% felt both should be reduced. However, the current level of support for higher taxes and spending, is still above the 31% to which it fell in 2010, even though, at 35%, taxes are higher as a proportion of GDP than they were then (32%), while spending (45% of GDP) is at a similar level to then (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2023; 2024; Office for Budget Responsibility, 2025b). Given past form we might have anticipated that support for increased taxation and spending would have fallen further than it has done so far. It seems possible at least that the experience of government spending to prop up the economy, and especially jobs, during the pandemic, together with the legacy it has left in terms of the length of waiting lists for NHS treatment, may have caused some people at least to have reset their thermostat in favour of a somewhat larger state than hitherto.[3] As a result, it may be that Labour were too cautious in the promises they made at the election to keep taxes down. This certainly seems to be the case among those who voted for the party in 2024, 58% of whom are in favour of higher taxes and spending. Indeed, despite the similarity of the policy positions adopted by Labour and the Conservatives on tax and spend, there is as much as a 30-point difference between their respective voters in their level of support for more tax and spend, a bigger gap than at any other recent election.

Going for growth

As we noted in the introduction, the government hopes to stimulate the economy – and thus fiscal revenues – by improving the country's infrastructure. This includes increasing the supply of housing, and, with a view also to addressing climate change, facilitating the provision of low carbon energy. In part, it plans to achieve these aims by speeding up the process for securing planning consent. At the same time, it proposes to strengthen the rights of employees, in the belief that a better-paid, more secure workforce will consume more and so help stimulate the economy (Rayner, 2024; Department for Business and Trade et al., 2025). However, it has eschewed the prospect of rejoining the EU single market and customs union, opting instead for a softening of some of the terms on which the UK left the EU (Cabinet Office, 2025).

Housing

In its election manifesto, Labour pledged to build 1.5 million new homes in the next five years, with a focus in particular on building more social and affordable housing. Not only does the government anticipate this will stimulate economic activity, but also that it will reduce the current high cost of housing. According to the Office for National Statistics, people in full-time employment in England can expect to pay 7.7 times their earnings to purchase a home in the local authority area within which they currently work, double the equivalent figure for 1997 (Office for National Statistics, 2025c). Meanwhile, private sector rents increased by 24% between January 2022 and December 2024, far outstripping increases in wages (Office for National Statistics, 2025d).

Indeed, our latest survey revealed that as many as 72% believe that the cost of renting from a private landlord is too high. But that does not mean that people would necessarily welcome new homes being built in their area. The possibility of disruption and noise in the short term and the possible loss of valued views and access to green space in the long term could all lead people to oppose development. Our survey evidence on attitudes towards the building of new homes (see Table 8) suggests that in recent years such concerns may have become more prominent in people's minds.

When the BSA survey first addressed the issue in 2010, shortly after the financial crash of 2008-2009 which occasioned a sharp fall in house prices, more people (45%) opposed than supported (30%) new homes being built in their area. By 2013, however, the position had reversed; now 47% of people supported the building of new homes in their area, while 31% opposed this. Support subsequently peaked in 2018 reaching 57%, while just 23% were opposed. However, the pandemic witnessed a sharp fall in support, perhaps because the requirement to spend much more time at home – and the continued higher level of working from home ever since – led some people to value more the quality of the neighbourhood in which they were living. In any event, in 2021, just 34% supported the building of new homes in their area, while almost as many (31%) were opposed. While support has since crept back up to 41%, it remains well below the level that pertained before the pandemic. It looks as though Labour's attempt to build more houses is at greater risk of being faced with local objections than would have been the case before the pandemic. Indeed, among those who currently own their homes, opponents of building new homes in their area (36%) are as numerous as those who are in favour (35%).

Table 8 Attitudes towards the building of new homes, 2010-2024

	2010	2013	2014	2016	2017	2018	2021	2023	2024 (1)
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Support	30	47	56	57	55	57	34	41	39
Neither support nor oppose	22	20	20	17	20	17	34	30	29
Oppose	45	31	21	24	21	23	31	29	32
It depends	2	2	3	2	3	3	0	0	1
Unweighted base	*3297*	*929*	*2449*	*2525*	*2617*	*2510*	*3138*	*5578*	*1782*

Sources: 2024 (1): July 2024 wave of NatCen Panel.

Green energy

In addition to building more houses, the Labour government wishes to develop the infrastructure needed to create and distribute green energy. It argues that its 'Green Prosperity Plan', which is intended to deliver a zero carbon electricity industry by 2030, will help turn Britain's economy around, cut bills, create jobs, and deliver greater energy security (Labour Party, 2024b).

Delivering this objective requires, inter alia, the development of green energy infrastructure. Apart from building wind farms on land and not, as was the policy of the previous government, only doing so out at sea, the government wants to build more pylons that can carry electric power lines across the countryside and, for the first time since the 1990s, build new nuclear power stations.

Both pylons and nuclear power stations have long been the subject of considerable controversy. Indeed, Table 9 reveals, while there is widespread support for building more wind farms on land – as many as 70% are in favour – less than half support making it easier to build new pylons (44%) or nuclear power stations (43%). True, many say they "neither support nor oppose" these ideas, rather than indicate opposition, but there would seem at best a degree of ambivalence or uncertainty in many people's minds about the merits of these steps.

Table 9 Attitudes towards building green energy infrastructure

	Building more wind farms on land	Making it easier to build pylons	Building new nuclear power stations
	%	%	%
Support	70	44	43
Neither support nor oppose	16	32	28
Oppose	12	22	27
Unweighted base	*1072*	*1072*	*1072*

Employment rights

A key element of employment rights legislation introduced by the Labour government is to limit the use of so-called 'zero hours' contracts. These contracts enable an employer to offer different hours of employment from one week to the next, including the possibility that no work is offered at all. Their use was the subject of considerable controversy during the last Parliament, and at one stage, Labour promised to outlaw them entirely. In the event, the party said it would end 'exploitative' zero hours contracts (Labour Party, 2024a). In practice, the new legislation requires employers to offer a minimum hours contract to anyone whom they employ on a regular basis, while leaving the door open to their use for casual or irregular employment.

We asked our respondents the following question on this topic:

Flexible working contracts are employment contracts where the hours of work someone is offered vary from week to week. They could be offered a lot of work or they could be offered no work at all.

Some people think these contracts are a good thing because they can give workers flexibility in the hours they work. Other people think they are a bad thing because they don't provide workers with the same security as a standard contract.

What do you think? Are flexible working contracts…
…Good,
Neither good nor bad,
Bad?

Their responses confirm that this is a subject on which public opinion is currently divided. Although one in three (34%) say that such contracts are "bad", a quarter (25%) feel that they are "good". Meanwhile, nearly two in five (39%) say they are "neither good nor bad", an indication perhaps that some feel their merits depend on the circumstances in which they are used. In restricting their use, while not banning them entirely, the government may well have found a closer fit to the balance of public opinion.

Brexit

Finally, Labour have felt obliged to respect the decision to leave the EU that was made by the referendum held in 2016. As a result, it is opposed to rejoining the EU single market or customs union. It is pursuing instead a more limited 'reset' of the UK's post-Brexit relationship with the EU (Cabinet Office, 2025).

Yet attitudes towards the EU have shifted since the referendum in 2016. Our latest survey suggests that, among those who say they voted in 2016 and who indicate whether they would vote to rejoin or stay out of the EU in a referendum that was held now, support for rejoining is seven percentage points higher than the level of support for Remain in 2016. Meanwhile, among those who say they did not vote in 2016, nearly half of whom were too young to do so, as many as 86% of those who state a preference say they would vote to rejoin the EU. Depending on how many of the latter group would actually vote, these two patterns together suggest that over three-fifths (63%) might now vote to rejoin the EU.

It has been argued that, as compared with the estimated negative impact of Brexit on the economy, the proposed 'reset' of the UK's relationship with the EU will make relatively little contribution to growth (David, 2025; Menon, 2024; Portes, 2023). Moreover, as has been argued elsewhere, not least of the reasons why public opinion has swung against Brexit, is concern about its economic consequences (Curtice, 2025). Indeed, our latest survey shows that as many as 69% believe that the economy is worse off as a result of Brexit, well up on the 40% who anticipated such an outcome in 2015, not long before the referendum. Even among those who voted Leave in 2016, as many as 38% now feel that Brexit has damaged the economy. Not only is that well up on the 12% who expected such an outcome in 2017, shortly after the referendum, but it clearly outnumbers the 21% in this group who feel that the economy is now better.

Still, Labour's stance on Brexit reflects a belief that, to win the 2024 election, the party would need to reconnect in particular with those of its former supporters who voted Leave in 2016 and went on to back Boris Johnson in 2019. In practice, however, Labour's support came overwhelmingly from those who say they would vote to rejoin the EU. In our survey, no less than 85% of those who voted for the party in 2024 say they would vote in favour of rejoining the EU (as discussed further in our chapter on British democracy). Inevitably this means those who voted Labour are also heavily critical of the economic consequences of Brexit. Over eight in ten (86%) of this group say the economy is worse off, with as many as 59% saying it is "a lot" worse off.

That there has been a shift in attitudes towards the EU is affirmed by the pattern of response to a more nuanced question that provides five different options for Britain's relationship with the EU, ranging from being outside the EU to working for the formation of a single European government (for further details see Curtice and Scholes, 2022). Faced with a wider range of choices, only 21% say that the UK should be outside the EU, the lowest proportion to do so since 2008. That said, as many as 32% would like the UK to be a member of an EU that is less powerful than it is at present. In combination, as many as 54% can be regarded as 'Eurosceptic'. To that extent, Labour's attempt to move closer to the EU – but not too close – is seemingly not entirely at odds with public opinion. But whether that will satisfy those who voted for the party in 2024, just 38% of whom fall into that category, is another matter.

Conclusion

The policy challenge facing the Labour government was clear the moment Sir Keir Starmer entered Downing Street for the first time as Prime Minister – how to turn around public services and an economy, neither of which was meeting voters' expectations. What perhaps was less certain was how, in the different world bequeathed by the pandemic and the 'cost of living crisis', the public were hoping those objectives would be achieved. Were they, as many politicians from across the political divide seemed to believe, looking for a return to lower taxes and a smaller state? Or had the pandemic increased their appetite for tax and spend? And how might voters react to Labour's plans for turning around the economy through, for example, building infrastructure, enhancing employment rights, and softening the Brexit deal?

The public are certainly well aware of Britain's problems – not least those of a failing health service and an economy in which many are struggling to make ends meet. Yet rather than turning their back on the state, for the most part the public are still inclined to look to government to provide solutions. And while they feel that most people on low and middle incomes are already paying enough tax, they suspect that some of the better off could pay more. As a result, while voters have perhaps now begun to react against the marked increase in the size of the state during the last Parliament, that reaction still seems relatively muted – and especially so among those who voted Labour. In making very specific promises in the election campaign on tax rates, Labour may have bound their hands more than was necessary. Equally, public opinion – and certainly those who voted Labour – might, in the hope it could help turn around the economy, also be more ready to accept a greater softening of the Brexit deal than Labour have anticipated.

Yet this does not mean that voters are necessarily clearly ready to back the various remedies that Labour have been offering to overcome the country's difficulties. They are not necessarily prepared to embrace a dash for more infrastructure building, including perhaps not least anything that appears in their own back yard. Enhancing employment rights, tightening up on disability benefits and putting VAT on private school fees are all potentially controversial too, as in some instances the government has already discovered. The political difficulty with these policies is that they are ones where there are potentially identifiable winners and losers, and it is often the losers who shout the loudest. Pursuing economic growth rather than tax rises as the route out of fiscal constraint will not necessarily be the easier path for Labour to tread.

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Appendix

Table A.1 Satisfaction with the NHS, 1983-2024

	1983	1984	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very or quite satisfied	55	51	40	40	37	37	40	44	44	37
Very or quite dissatisfied	26	30	40	40	46	47	41	38	38	45
Unweighted base	*1761*	*1675*	*3100*	*2847*	*3029*	*2797*	*2918*	*2945*	*3469*	*3633*
	1996	**1997**	**1998**	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very or quite satisfied	36	34	42	46	42	38	40	44	43	48
Very or quite dissatisfied	50	50	36	33	39	41	41	37	37	31
Unweighted base	*3620*	*1355*	*3146*	*3143*	*3426*	*2188*	*2287*	*2293*	*3199*	*3193*
	2006	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**	**2015**
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very or quite satisfied	49	51	58	64	70	58	60	60	65	60
Very or quite										

dissatisfied	34	30	25	19	18	24	23	22	15	23
Unweighted base	*2143*	*3078*	*3358*	*3421*	*3297*	*1096*	*1103*	*1063*	*1937*	*2167*

	2016	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Very or quite satisfied	63	57	53	60	54	36	29	24	21	
Very or quite dissatisfied	22	29	30	25	24	41	51	52	59	
Unweighted base	*2942*	*3004*	*2926*	*3224*	*1275*	*3112*	*3362*	*3374*	*3123*	

Table A.2 Attitudes towards taxation and spending on health, education and social benefits, 1983-2024

	1983	**1984**	**1985**	**1986**	**1987**	**1989**	**1990**	**1991**	**1993**	**1994**
Which should the government choose..	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits	9	5	6	5	3	3	3	3	4	4
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	54	50	43	44	42	37	37	29	28	33
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	32	39	45	46	50	56	54	65	63	58
Unweighted base	*1761*	*1675*	*1804*	*3100*	*2847*	*3029*	*2797*	*2918*	*2945*	*3469*
	1995	**1996**	**1997**	**1998**	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**
Which should the										

government choose..	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits	5	4	3	3	4	5	3	3	6	6
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	31	34	31	32	34	40	34	31	38	42
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	61	59	62	63	58	50	59	63	51	49
Unweighted base	*3633*	*3620*	*1355*	*3146*	*3143*	*2292*	*3287*	*3435*	*3272*	*2146*
	2005	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**
Which should the government choose..	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spend less on health,										

education and social benefits	7	6	7	8	8	9	6	6	6	7
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	43	43	47	50	55	56	54	53	54	52
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	46	46	42	39	34	31	36	34	36	37
Unweighted base	*2166*	*3240*	*3094*	*2229*	*1139*	*3297*	*3311*	*3248*	*3244*	*2878*
	2015	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020a**	**2020b**	**2021a**	**2021**	**2023a**
Which should the government choose..	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits	4	4	4	4	5	6	6	7	6	8
Keep taxes and spending on these										

services at the same level as now	47	44	33	34	37	41	43	43	40	36
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	45	48	60	57	53	53	50	50	52	55
Unweighted base	*3266*	*2942*	*2963*	*2884*	*3224*	*2404*	*3964*	*2204*	*2073*	*2400*
	2023	**2024a**	**2024**							
Which should the government choose..	%	%	%							
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits	10	10	15							
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	41	42	42							
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	46	48	40							
Unweighted base	*1103*	*1776*	*4120*							

Data for 2020a, 2021a, 2023a and 2024a are taken from the July 2020, June 2021, January 2023 and July 2024 waves of the NatCen Panel respectively.

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Footnotes

1. As noted in the Technical Details to this report, for the first time, the 2024 BSA survey included participants living in Northern Ireland and those aged 16 and 17. The figures for 2024 reported in Figure 1 include those respondents, as do all the statistics quoted in this chapter. Their inclusion does not materially affect any of the figures that are reported and thus our analysis of changes over time. ↑

2. We might note, in particular, the ten point drop in the proportion who say that it is definitely the government's responsibility to provide industry with the help it needs to grow and the 11 point fall in the proportion who believe it should definitely be the government's responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed. It may be that these falls reflect the ending of some of the particular challenges of the pandemic, when the state was furloughing workers and providing loans to tide companies over. ↑

3. We might also note that in response to a question that invited respondents to state whether taxes and spending on health (alone) should increase, fall, or remain the same, 46% said taxes and spending should increase, down just two percentage points on 2023. ↑

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