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BRITISH SOCIAL ATTITUDES

Poverty

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Anti-welfare attitudes

The rise and fall of anti-welfare attitudes across four decades: politics, pensioners and poverty

Over the past four decades, there have been two periods of dramatic change in our attitudes to welfare; negative attitudes increased in the late 1990s and 2000s, while attitudes have softened since 2010. While the first period of change is well understood, being largely driven by changes in the views of Labour Party voters, this chapter focuses on the second period of change. How have attitudes to welfare changed over the past decade and can a softening of attitudes be attributed to politicians, the media, changing perceptions of poverty or to changes in Britain's demographic make-up?

Falling anti-welfare attitudes

The perception that benefits recipients are undeserving has reduced substantially since 2010.

- 19% agree that most people who get social security don't really deserve any help, down from a high of 40% in 2005. Responses in 2019-22 are the lowest since the question was first asked in 1987.
- 22% think that unemployment claimants are 'fiddling in one way or another', down from a high of 41% in 2004.
- There has also been a rise in support for extra spending on benefits, but this rise has been more muted: 37% think that the government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes, up from 29% in 2010.

Poverty: prevalence and definitions

People are increasingly likely to perceive poverty in Britain and their definitions of what constitutes poverty have become substantially more generous.

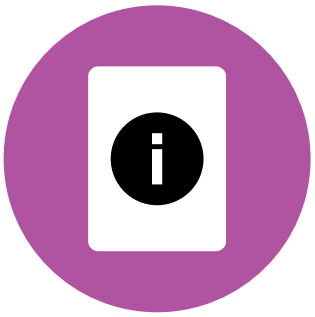
- 69% think there is quite a lot of poverty in Britain, compared with 52% in 2006 – a change of 17 percentage points.
- People are now more likely to think that poverty has risen in the past decade, compared with any point since the survey began; 78% say this, compared with 32% in 2006 (an increase of 46 percentage points).
- 39% think someone is in poverty if they have enough to buy the things they need, but not the things most people take for granted. This figure stood at 29% in 2019 and 19% in 2013.

Explaining the fall in anti-welfare attitudes

The fall in anti-welfare attitudes over the past decades has occurred to a similar degree across all groups, including readers of different newspapers, and those of different ages and education.

- The views of Labour and Conservative supporters have also softened largely in parallel. In 2005, 49% of Conservative and 35% of Labour Party supporters agreed that many benefits recipients "don't really deserve any help"; these figures now stand at 19% and 11% (a gap of 8 percentage points).
- The cause of the change in attitudes is difficult to discern and not due to one single factor. It appears to have been occasioned by a combination of several factors, including changing political discourses, more positive coverage in all newspapers, decreasing welfare generosity, and the perception that poverty has risen.

Introduction



Our welfare system today looks very different to 40 years ago. Successive waves of policy have altered *who* different benefit payments are for, the basis upon which one is entitled to payment, and *how much* one can receive.

The main minimum income scheme has morphed from Supplementary Benefit in the 1980s, to Income Support in 1988, before being replaced in turn by a plurality of benefits for different groups in the 1990s and 2000s, including Jobseeker's Allowance in 1996. The introduction of Universal Credit (UC) in 2013 saw a significant shift away from this patchwork approach, combining six of the main working-age social security benefits into one[1] (though some benefits, including disability extra costs benefits (Personal Independence Payment), remain outside of UC). For those of retirement age, Pension Credit, introduced in 2003, is the means-tested payment that sits alongside and supplements (or replaces) the state pension. The last ten years have been characterised by various cuts and freezes to benefit levels under the austerity agenda, with the important exception of the state pension which has been protected by the 'triple lock'.[2]

In this chapter, we trace how attitudes to this changing welfare system have shifted over the last 40 years, and ask whether and how these changes are related to policy shifts, material realities (that is, trends in levels of spending on welfare and experiences of poverty), and to the discourses and rhetoric in our politics and media.

1 UC combines income-related Employment and Support Allowance, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, and Income Support; Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit; and Housing Benefit.

2 The 'triple lock' is a government commitment to uprate the basic and new State Pension by the highest of earnings, prices or 2.5%.

A puzzle: explaining the rise and fall of anti-welfare attitudes

Looking at the sweep of welfare attitudes over the past 40 years, we observe two periods of dramatic change. The British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey has extensively documented the rise in 'anti-welfare attitudes' (that is, negative views of the welfare system and claimants themselves) over the late 1990s and 2000s (Curtice, 2010; Hills, 2002). This shift is well understood: newspaper coverage became more negative across all newspapers, while the Labour Party sharply changed its rhetoric on welfare, which led to sharp rises in anti-welfare attitudes, particularly among Labour voters (Baumberg, 2012; Hills, 2002; O'Grady, 2022; Sefton, 2009).

However, from the mid-2010s onwards, anti-welfare sentiment has softened substantially (Curtice, 2022; Kelley *et al.*, 2018; Park *et al.*, 2013). There are several possible reasons for this, including economic upheaval following the Great Recession, rising poverty and destitution alongside real-terms reductions in funding for public services, political turmoil, Britain's changing demographic make-up, and the COVID-19 pandemic. This is also a period in which media have diversified, and print newspapers have become ever-less important to people's political attitudes in the face of online sources and social media. The balance of these explanations, though, is poorly understood, and we currently have little evidence helping us to understand exactly why anti-welfare attitudes have weakened.

In this chapter, we firstly set out the trends in welfare attitudes from when BSA began to 2022, to see whether the recent softening of attitudes takes us back to where we were in the 1980s – or if attitudes have nevertheless changed in important ways. We then examine whether the explanations for the recent fall in anti-welfare attitudes mirror the reasons for its earlier rise. In particular, we examine:

- the way in which welfare is framed and communicated by **politicians and the media**, both print and online;
- how people define **poverty**, and whether people believe that poverty has risen, and if so, whether this has shaped welfare attitudes; and
- the role of the **changing make-up of Britain**, particularly the population getting older and more highly educated over time.

Tracking anti-welfare attitudes over 40 years

We begin by presenting key trends in welfare attitudes over the last 40 years. In doing so, we consider two issues in turn – attitudes towards spending and attitudes towards deservingness. Questions about spending give us insights into not only what the public thinks about levels of welfare payments, but also what it thinks about spending on different groups. Questions around deservingness help us to understand whether the public is sympathetic or suspicious of benefit recipients, and on what basis.

Support for welfare spending

We look first at attitudes towards spending on benefits, using two questions that differ in exactly who they refer to ("the poor" or "unemployed people"), and exactly how they frame spending on benefits (government budgets and spending or the levels of benefits to individual people or households). Since 1987, we have asked respondents whether they agree or disagree that:

> ***The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes.***

Over the same time period, we have also asked respondents the following question:

> ***Opinions differ about the level of benefits for unemployed people. Which of these two statements comes closest to your own view?***
>
> ***...benefits for unemployed people are too low and cause hardship***

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

Figure 1 shows the answers provided in 2022, and on the previous occasions on which these questions have been asked. It indicates that support for higher spending on welfare benefits for the poor has increased since around 2010[3] as has the proportion of people who see unemployment benefits as being too low. However, these increases are relatively small, and they leave public attitudes less generous than they were in the 1980s and early 1990s. There is currently no clear majority for or against more welfare spending; the public is split (with 37% expressing their support in 2022 and 33% expressing their disapproval). Similarly, when people are reminded of the potential disincentive effects of unemployment benefits, the public is more likely to say that benefits for unemployed people are too low (50% think that they are too low and cause hardship in 2019, up from 30% in 2010) – but are not quite as pro-welfare as they were in the 1980s.

Figure 1 Support for welfare spending, 1987-2022

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

3 Note that it is difficult to compare data from the question about benefits for unemployed people over time, due to the shift to an online mode of data collection in 2020; hence, data collected after 2019 is excluded from this figure.

We should bear in mind that some of the BSA questions on welfare spending – including on whether the Government should spend more on benefits for the poor, in Figure 1 above – explicitly say that rises in spending would require more taxation. This means they not only capture feelings about welfare, but also changing feelings about tax (see the chapter on the Role of Government, Curtice and Scholes, 2023). Similarly, the question on whether 'benefits for unemployed people are too low' in Figure 1 explicitly weighs this against the disincentive effects of welfare on working, and attitudes to work incentives may have changed between 1982 and 2022.[4]

It may be that, however, attitudes to different groups of welfare claimants do not reflect the patterns shown in Figure 1. We can examine if this is the case using the following question, included on the BSA survey on a regular basis between 1998 and 2021:

> ***Some people think that there should be more government spending on social security, while other people disagree. For each of the groups I read out please say whether you would like to see more or less government spending on them than now. Bear in mind that if you want more spending, this would probably mean that you would have to pay more taxes. If you want less spending, this would probably mean paying less taxes.***

Respondents are subsequently asked whether they would like to see more or less government spending than now in the following areas:

> ***'benefits for unemployed people';***
> ***'benefits for disabled people who cannot work';***
> ***'benefits for single parents';***
> ***'benefits for parents who work on very low incomes';***
> ***'benefits for retired people'; and***
> ***'benefits for people who care for those who are sick or disabled'.***

4 A separate question probes concerns about work disincentives by asking whether people agree or disagree that, 'If welfare benefits weren't so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet'. This in fact shows similar patterns to the items presented in Figure 1: agreement rose from 25% in 1993 to 55% in 2010, before falling to 38% in 2022.

The results obtained in 2021, and on selected occasions when this question was previously asked, are presented in Table 1. It shows that the public became less supportive of higher spending for all groups between 1998 and 2011, but, since then, attitudes have diverged. Support for more spending on *retired people* has continued to fall. Support for more spending on *disabled people* initially rose after 2011, but then fell during the COVID-19 pandemic (as, to a lesser extent, did support for spending on *carers of disabled people*). In contrast, support for more spending on *single parents* and *unemployed people* has risen sharply, so that, in 2021, the public was split about whether to raise or cut unemployment benefits (rather than the majority being opposed to a raise), and many more people are in favour of more vs. less spending on single parents (rather than views being split).

Table 1 Attitudes towards spending on different groups of claimants, 1998-2021

	1998	2002	2006	2011	2015	2017	2021
% would like to see *more* government spending on benefits for...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
... retired people	71	73	72	57	49	47	46
... people who care for those who are sick or disabled	82	82	82	74	75	78	72
... disabled people who cannot work	72	69	62	53	61	67	56
... parents who work on very low incomes	68	69	66	58	61	66	63
... single parents	34	39	38	29	36	42	42
... unemployed people	22	21	16	15	17	20	29
% would like to see *less* government spending on benefits for...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
... retired people	2	2	2	3	7	8	10
... people who care for those who are sick or disabled	1	1	1	1	2	1	2
... disabled people who cannot work	2	2	3	5	3	4	4
... parents who work on very low incomes	3	4	4	5	5	4	6
... single parents	21	18	19	21	16	11	15
... unemployed people	35	36	45	51	45	37	34
Unweighted base	*3146*	*3435*	*3240*	*3311*	*3266*	*2963*	*1065*

Perceptions of 'deservingness'

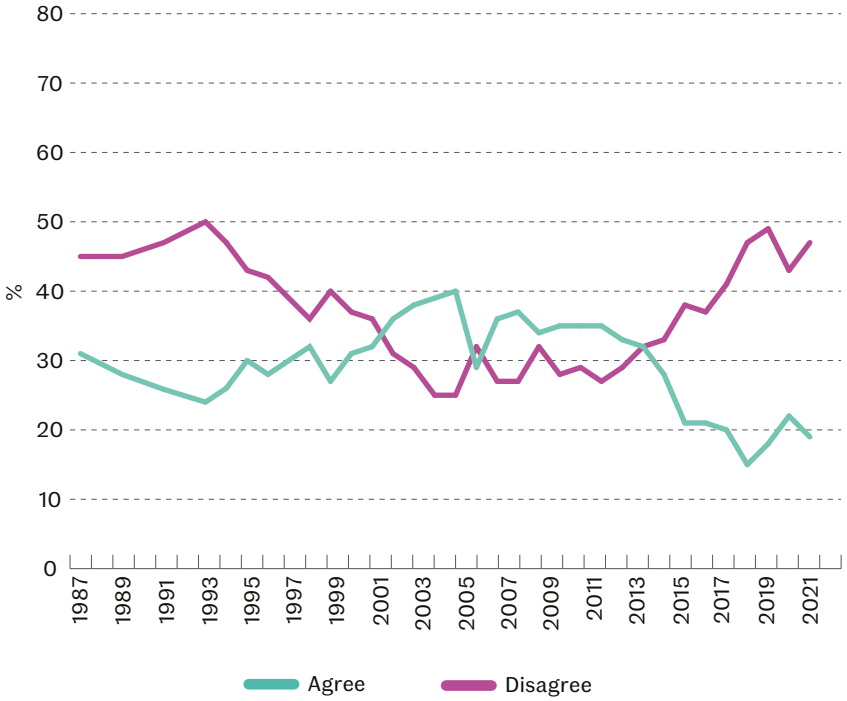
How do the modest changes in attitudes towards welfare spending compare with shifts in attitudes toward the deservingness of claimants (with 'deservingness' referring to the extent to which the public think that claimants deserve the benefits they receive)? Since 1986 we have asked whether people agree or disagree with the statement that:

Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help

The answers obtained in 2022, and on the previous occasions on which this question was asked, are depicted in Figure 2. It shows that agreement with this view rose substantially from the late 1980s/ early 1990s to a peak in 2005, when 40% of people felt that many claimants don't really deserve any help.

Since the early 2010s this sentiment has steadily eroded and today less than half as many people (19%) agree that many claimants are undeserving. If we look at the net score (agreement minus disagreement), the public now perceives claimants as more deserving of help than at any point since the BSA survey began. Notably, this change occurred prior to, rather than during, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 2 Agreement that many people who get social security don't really deserve any help, 1987-2022



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

We see a similar trend in other measures of anti-welfare feeling. For example, when asked about whether dole (unemployment) claimants are mostly "fiddling in one way or another" (see Appendix Table A.2), 22% express this view, compared with a high of 41% in 2004.

One measure which bucks this trend is people's perceptions of whether, "Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one". Here the public is now much more likely to believe that unemployed people could find a job than they were in the 1980s/early 1990s (see Appendix Table A.2). For example, 57% of people agree that most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted, compared with just 39% in 1996 (21% vs. 37% respectively disagreed).

This is notable because perceived deservingness is not just related to whether claimants are felt to be in need, but also to whether claimants are believed to be in control of their situation (van Oorschot and Roosma, 2017).[5]

It is possible that trends in relation to this question differ from those reviewed previously because it has a more local focus, revealing something about people's assessments of their local labour market rather than the national picture – with the former being less strongly influenced by political and media discourse (see below). It may also indicate that people believe that jobs are relatively available – reflecting wider economic trends including a comparatively low level of unemployment[6] – but that, nevertheless, claimants are mostly deserving (for example, because many claimants are not able to take these jobs, or because these jobs are poor quality and leave people in poverty). Still, in most respects, welfare claimants are perceived more positively in 2022 than at any time since the BSA survey began in the 1980s.

In summary then: we can clearly see a rise in anti-welfare attitudes in the mid-1990s (in terms of judging claimants to be undeserving), followed by a fall since the early 2010s – and it is this pattern that the rest of the chapter tries to explain. The scale of these shifts is striking, and the public now believes that welfare claimants are more deserving than ever before. However, we must bear in mind that the fall in anti-welfare attitudes has only partially been accompanied by support for more welfare spending. The public is slightly more supportive of higher spending than a decade ago, particularly for unemployed people and single parents; and many more people are in favour of higher rather than lower spending for most groups, even if this means tax rises (the only exception being for unemployed people, where the public is split). Yet we are still a long way from the support for more generous welfare spending that we saw in the 1980s and early 1990s.

5 Perceived deservingness in van Oorschot and Roosma (2017)'s influential model also depends on whether claimants are perceived to be grateful, to be 'like us' (sometimes in terms of class/lifestyle, sometimes in terms of citizenship/ethnicity), and whether they contribute as well as claim over their lifetime.

6 Unemployment fell from 10.4% to 8.0% to 3.7% 1987-2012-2022, while employment rose from 68.8% to 71.0% to 75.6% – see Office for National Statistics Labour Market Overview, https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/employmentunemploymentandeconomicinactivityforpeopleaged16andoverandagedfrom16to64seasonallyadjusteda02sa

Explaining the rise and fall in anti-welfare attitudes

To explain these trends, the rest of the chapter weighs the relative roles of several key factors in turn: political and media rhetoric; material realities and, in particular, poverty rates; and compositional effects (that is, the changing make-up of British society in terms of age and education levels).

It is also reasonable to think that COVID-19 would have made welfare attitudes more positive, given that it led to a large influx of claimants whose need was conspicuously not their fault. However, in practice, attitudes recorded by the BSA survey did not change much at all from 2020 (Curtice, 2022), as we similarly show above. This is probably because COVID-19 claimants were seen as exceptional and 'bracketed off' from other claimants, so that positive attitudes towards them did not extend to claimants more broadly (de Vries *et al.*, 2021). To explain the sharp fall in anti-welfare attitudes over the past decade, we need then to search for explanations rooted in changes that occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Political and media rhetoric

How politicians can change welfare attitudes

There is good reason to believe that changing political positions – particularly that of the Labour Party – are partly responsible for the rise in anti-welfare attitudes in the 1990s. Throughout the past four decades, the Conservative Party has tended to be critical of the welfare system and welfare claimants, but, from the mid/late 1990s, this messaging was also adopted by the Labour Party (O'Grady, 2022:Ch4). People tend to be particularly receptive to messages from the parties they support, and it was indeed among Labour supporters that we saw sharper rises in anti-welfare attitudes up to 2010 (Baumberg, 2012; Hills, 2002; Sefton, 2009). This is not due to compositional changes in who supported the Labour Party; if we track the same people over the 1990s, we see that attitudes changed primarily among those who were Labour Party supporters to begin with (O'Grady, 2022:225-229). Nor is it because the Labour Party were merely following public opinion; if we look closely at the timing of these shifts, then it is clear that changes in Labour Party messaging happened before changes in the attitudes of Labour Party supporters (Hills, 2002; O'Grady, 2022:214-215).

But are politicians also partly responsible for the more recent softening of welfare attitudes? This is not implausible. After a period of relatively similar welfare messaging by both main parties, the Conservative Party from 2010 attempted to create a political dividing line with Labour through particularly harsh messaging around welfare and welfare claimants, especially connected with the passage of the Welfare Reform Act 2012.

Many campaigners, academics and claimants themselves felt that this did lead to more hostile public attitudes towards claimants (Dorey, 2010; Gavin, 2021), particularly disabled claimants (Marsh, 2011; McEnhill and Byrne, 2014; Walker, 2012).

While Labour's initial responses to this approach were muted, over the following years – particularly following the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader in 2015, and largely maintained since – the Labour Party stopped criticising the welfare system and expressed far greater sympathy for welfare claimants than at any time since the 1980s (O'Grady, 2022). More recently, there has also been some softening in the welfare narratives of senior Conservatives, alongside policies addressing social need during the cost-of-living crisis. But the Conservative Party's narrative during the time of the BSA survey itself (July-October 2022) was ambivalent;[7] and moreover, the greater changes in Conservative messaging come later than the fall in anti-welfare attitudes. For the period we are examining here, Conservative messaging was largely negative, so cannot straightforwardly explain the fall in anti-welfare attitudes.

Figure 3 depicts the proportions of Labour and Conservative Party supporters who agreed with the statement that "many people who get social security don't really deserve any help", at different points in time between 1987 and 2019 (these results are not available for 2020 and beyond because of a discontinuity in the data collection approach[8]).

7 The first Cost of Living Payments (to people claiming means-tested or disability benefits, and to pensioners) and the Energy Bills Support Scheme were announced by then-Chancellor Rishi Sunak in May 2022 (Daniel Harari et al., 2023). During the brief period of Liz Truss' leadership that was at the end of the BSA fieldwork period, the Conservative Government also introduced an energy price cap – though Truss had earlier signalled both her opposition to this, and her intention to cut welfare benefits, before being forced to backtrack under pressure from the wider Conservative Party (see e.g. the story 'Truss Hints at UK Benefits Cuts, Courting New Tory Rebellion', at https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-04/truss-yet-to-decide-on-uk-benefits-as-fresh-row-looms-with-mps). These developments may themselves illustrate how politicians are sensitive to changing political attitudes. It is striking that many Conservatives were openly critical of Truss' plan to cut welfare, which may partly be because of political manoeuvring, but also probably because of the very limited public support for further welfare cuts, and how such cuts would influence the public's wider perceptions of the Conservative Party.

8 Data beyond 2019 on political party identification has been excluded from this analysis. This is a rare example of the change in the BSA survey mode potentially affecting the consistency of the data – Labour and Conservative supporters in the online 2020 survey seem different in important ways from Labour and Conservative supporters in the face-to-face 2019 survey. (This was not found to be the case in follow-up online surveys of previous BSA respondents where the same people are re-interviewed, suggesting that this is potentially a methodological issue relating to the switch in survey mode).

It shows, in the late 1990s, the widely-observed effect of the shrinking rhetorical distance between Labour and the Conservatives – the gap in perceptions of deservingness between Labour and Conservative supporters narrowed from 20 percentage points in 1996 to 12 percentage points in 1999. Indeed, if we look at the net score (agreement vs. disagreement, shown in the Appendix) then we see that a 45 percentage point difference in 1995 narrowed to a 22 percentage point difference in 1999.

If political discourses have played a significant role in the past decade, this should be visible in the data as a pronounced softening of attitudes among Labour Party supporters, alongside a less marked (or entirely absent) softening among Conservative Party supporters (and hence a substantial widening of the gap in attitudes between the two groups). However, this is not what we see in the period after 2010. Instead, the views of Labour and Conservative supporters appear to have softened largely in parallel. At 11 points, the gap between the sets of supporters in 2018 was nearly identical to the 13-point difference in 2011. (There is some sign that the Labour-Conservative gap may have widened since, but this is unrelated to the general fall in anti-welfare attitudes, which had already taken place by 2018).[9]

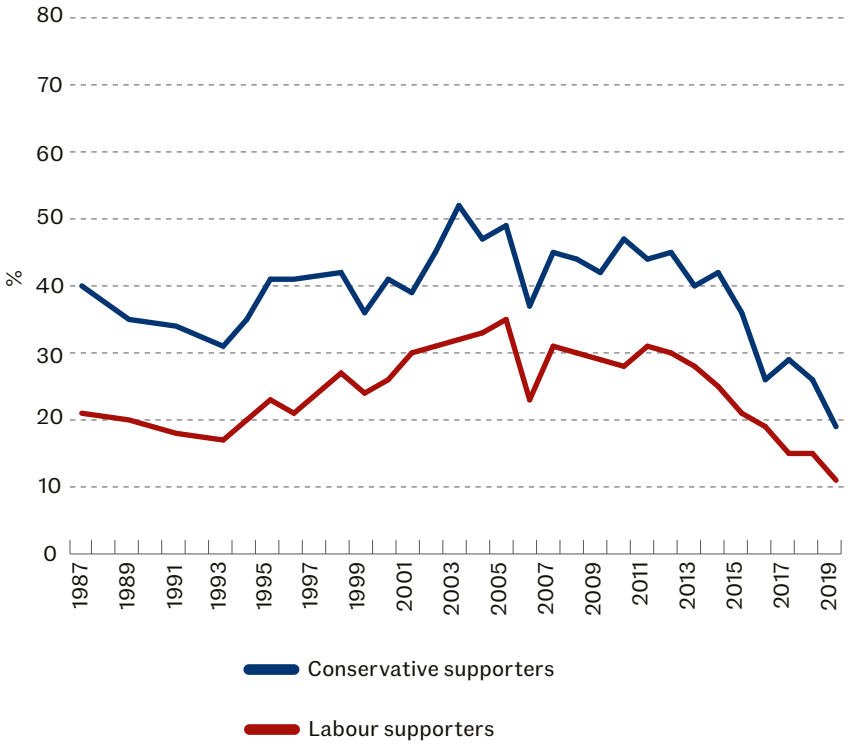
This is particularly surprising because the composition of Labour supporters changed with the tumultuous politics of the 2010s; Labour supporters from 2015 were on average less authoritarian than before[10] (with highly-educated, young, socially liberal voters being more likely to support Labour after Brexit and Corbyn), which should, if anything, have made the gap in attitudes between Labour and Conservative Party supporters even larger (as discussed in our chapter on age differences, Curtice and Ratti, 2023). Nor is there any change in the proportion of Labour, compared with, Conservative supporters between 2010 and 2019 that could help explain the fall in anti-welfare attitudes.[11] On a separate point, it is also striking that the particularly hostile language of the Conservatives around 2010-12 seems not to have led to any short-term changes in attitudes.

9 If we use the net deservingness score (agreement minus disagreement) again, then the Labour-Conservative gap is effectively unchanged after the 2010s – it goes from 33 percentage points in 2010 to 32 percentage points in 2018. The Labour-Conservative gap in the net score moves in more puzzling ways after this: it falls to 22 percentage points in 2019 (which seems to be a statistical anomaly), before rising to 42 points in 2020 and 49 points in 2022.

10 Using the BSA's 1-5 liberal/authoritarian scale, Labour supporters fell from 3.6 in 2013 to 3.3 in 2018.

11 The prevalence of Conservative supporters in BSA was relatively stable 2010-19 (falling from 29% to 28%), as was the prevalence of Labour supporters (falling from 30% to 27%).

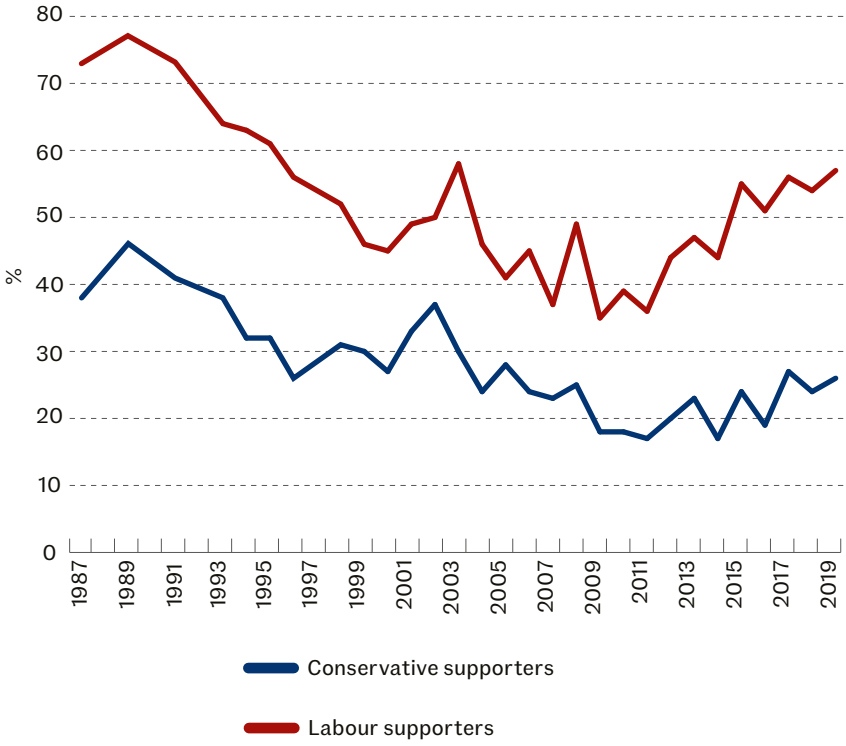
Figure 3 Agreement that many people who get social security don't really deserve any help, by political party support, 1987-2019



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

However, when we undertake a comparable analysis of preferences for welfare spending, presented in Figure 4, we see a somewhat different picture. This should not be surprising; spending-related attitudes depend not only on people's perceptions of welfare claimants, but also on their perceptions of the generosity of the current system (as we discuss below), and their attitudes towards taxation (as discussed in our chapter on the Role of Government, Curtice and Scholes, 2023). If we look at support for more spending "*on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes*", then we again see a narrowing between Labour and Conservative supporters in the late 1990s – but we also see a rising gap from 2009 to 2015 (possibly partly driven by the changes in the composition of Labour supporters mentioned above), so that partisan differences in 2019 are almost exactly the same as those in 1989.

Figure 4 Agreement that the government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes, by political party support, 1987-2019



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

Before reaching any conclusions about the role of politicians, though, we also need to look at the role of newspaper coverage of welfare.

Can newspapers change political attitudes?

While many people have suggested that the media – particularly newspapers – have played a role in the rise of anti-welfare attitudes, teasing out their actual role is difficult. Negative media coverage of welfare goes back much further than the rise in anti-welfare attitudes observed in the 1990s and early 2000s (Golding and Middleton, 1982). People also choose newspapers that agree with their pre-existing views; and journalists themselves say that they are limited by how their readership will react (McKendrick *et al.*, 2008). This makes it challenging to untangle the direction of causation. Nevertheless, there is evidence from both survey experiments (e.g. Iyengar, 1991; Nelson and Oxley, 1999; Shen and Edwards, 2006) and real-life shifts in coverage (Reeves and de Vries, 2016) to suggest that the media plays a role in shaping attitudes.

Table 2 shows how the attitudes of readers of different newspapers changed between 1987 and 2019. It demonstrates that regular readers of right-wing newspapers (in print or online[12]) generally have the strongest anti-welfare attitudes, followed by those who do not read newspapers, with those reading left-wing broadsheets having the most pro-welfare attitudes. However, while trends differ slightly between newspapers, what is most striking about these figures is that readers of *all* newspapers (and those reading no newspapers) have become significantly more pro-welfare over the 2010s.

Table 2 Proportions agreeing that many people who get social security don't really deserve any help, by regular newspaper readership (paper or online), 1987-91, 2008-11 and 2018-19

	% agree most claimants don't deserve help			Percentage point changes over time	
	1987–1991	2008– 2011	2018–2019	1989– 2010	2010– 2019
Mail or Express	33	44	24	11	-20
Unweighted base	*907*	*1072*	*708*		
The Sun	40	42	27	2	-14
Unweighted base	*869*	*880*	*265*		
The Mirror	27	39	22	12	-17
Unweighted base	*998*	*378*	*122*		
Left-wing broadsheet	9	16	4	7	-12
Unweighted base	*321*	*383*	*533*		
Other broadsheet	26	36	14	10	-23
Unweighted base	*465*	*638*	*342*		
No newspaper	26	36	19	10	-17
Unweighted base	*1973*	*4238*	*3049*		

12 We here combine information on the print newspaper that people read at least 3 times per week (1987-2019) with information on reading a newspaper on the internet at least 3 times per week (2005-9) and the favourite newspaper website of people that say they read a news/newspaper website several times per week (2010-19). The tables exclude those who report reading multiple of the listed newspapers across any formats, but we ignore readership of other newspapers and of non-newspaper online news sources (e.g. the BBC News website).

This is not the only way that newspaper readership could explain the fall in anti-welfare attitudes – the role of newspapers has declined substantially over time. In 1983, 77% of people said they normally read a (print) daily newspaper at least three times per week; this proportion had declined to 41% by 2010, and to 21% by 2019. Even after taking account of the rise in online newspaper readership,[13] the number of people with the Sun as their main newspaper has fallen sharply (from 12% in 2010 to 5% in 2019). Yet if we examine how far the fall in newspaper readership contributes to changing attitudes between 2010 and 2019 (using a technique called a 'decomposition analysis', which we explain in the Appendix), then we find that this explains only a small amount (about 5%) of the *total* fall in anti-welfare attitudes – mostly because of the relatively small differences between non-readers and those reading right-wing newspapers. And, as we have already noted, readers of *all* newspapers have become much more pro-welfare between 2010 and 2019.

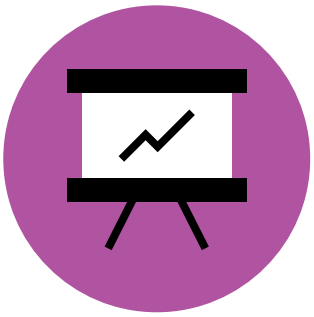
Interpreting this data is complex. Looking across the past 40 years, we can see that newspaper welfare coverage became more hostile in the late 1990s, but after a further surge in anti-welfare coverage between 2010 and 2012 – including on TV ('Benefits Street' *et al.*) – coverage became much more sympathetic across the 2010s in all the newspapers, as well as on TV (Baumberg *et al.*, 2012; Gavin, 2021; O'Grady, 2022). Given how these timings match attitude changes recorded by the BSA surveys, and wider evidence on the causal impact of media coverage, it seems likely that newspaper coverage has contributed to the rise and fall in anti-welfare attitudes alongside the softening of Labour's stance on welfare. Yet it is best to think about newspaper coverage as a contributing factor, rather than a sufficient explanation in its own right – not least because the spike in media coverage in 2010-12 was not associated with a rise in anti-welfare attitudes; indeed, if anything attitudes start to soften from 2012.

13 Overall, there has been a rise in use of news websites (with 29% using these several times a week in 2010, rising to 56% in 2019), but these only partly overlap with print newspapers, and the websites of some print newspapers are more widely-read than others. In contrast to the falling Sun readership mentioned in the main text, there were rises in readership of the Mail/Express (12% had this as their main newspaper source in 2010, rising to 13% in 2019) and the Guardian/Independent/i (rising from 6% to 10%).

Most of all, even if there has been an important shift in media coverage of welfare, and in political discourses, the question remains: what prompted this shift? Media coverage and political discourse are closely entangled – spikes in anti-welfare newspaper coverage are associated with welfare reforms (O'Grady, 2022:182-184), and the majority of welfare coverage is focused on policy reforms or (mostly Government-released) statistics (Baumberg *et al.*, 2012:39). Moreover, changing public attitudes can lead as well as follow both political and media discourse. Take the example of the Conservative MPs who criticised then-PM Liz Truss' proposed welfare cuts in October 2022:[7]. this may have affected public attitudes, but equally it is inconceivable that these MPs would have taken this position if wider attitudes had not already softened. In the remainder of this chapter, we look at other explanations that may dovetail with the trends in political and media discourses discussed in this section, starting with the material realities of welfare and poverty.

Material realities and poverty perceptions

Spending levels and support for extra spending



It is well known that attitudes shift with changes in people's perceptions of the generosity of the current system, in a way that political scientists call 'thermostatic' (Curtice, 2010; Soroka and Wlezien, 2005). This is the relatively straightforward idea that, when people have a fixed idea of the ideal level of benefits, then if benefits become less generous (or appear to), people become more likely to say they should be raised – and, if benefits become more generous, then people will become more likely to say they should be reduced.

Looking across the past 40 years, we can see that the rise and fall in support for more welfare spending does partly follow changes in welfare policy in this way. During the New Labour government from 1997-2010, there was well-publicised investment in tackling pensioner and child poverty (albeit with less attention to working-age benefits for those without children), and support for more welfare spending continually fell (as shown in Figure 1). In contrast, over the 2010s, the headline rate of working-age benefits became less generous in real terms, alongside a series of high-profile policies that further cut benefits in particular circumstances (including the two-child limit, the benefit cap, and the 'bedroom tax')[14] (Cooper and Hills, 2021:24-27).

14 *The two-child limit* means that some families with three or more children only receive child-related payments in UC for the first two children. *The benefit cap* is a cap on total benefits payments. *The 'bedroom tax'* (officially called the 'removal of the spare room subsidy') means that those claiming housing costs and living in social housing have been subject to an under-occupation penalty if they have a 'spare bedroom' that is not exempt.

Support for more spending on working-age unemployed people and single parents started to rise from 2010 when the Conservative-led Coalition came to power, and increased year-by-year as real-terms welfare cuts began to bite. This strongly suggests that spending preferences have partly been responding to the realities of the system (O'Grady, 2022:205).

This is particularly useful for understanding why support for spending on retired people has gone down, relative to other groups. Since 2012, the value of working-age benefits has fallen in real terms (Cooper and Hills, 2021:25-27), partly through specific policies such as the two-child limit, but primarily because benefits have not been raised in line with inflation. At the same time, as working-age benefits have been cut, the value of the state pension has been raised (through the 'triple lock' that raises pensions by earnings, inflation or 2.5%, whichever is higher), leading to rising spending on pensioners (Cooper and Hills, 2021:15-16). To the extent that people have noticed this difference, it is unsurprising that support for more spending on retired people has fallen, while the desire for higher spending on other groups has risen.

Yet while this may help explain views about welfare spending, other survey questions about welfare attitudes do not relate to current policy – that is, they do not ask people if spending should go up or down, but instead ask people whether claimants in general are deserving per se. However, these attitudes may still react to policy: if welfare has become less generous, and claimants are treated more harshly (sanctions rose sharply in 2012 (de Vries *et al.*, 2017)), then people may be more likely to think that claimants are genuinely in need (and vice versa, for periods where people think that that welfare has become more generous). One way of examining if attitudes have reacted to policy in this way is to look at trends in perceptions of poverty in the population as a whole, to which we turn next.

Trends in perceptions of poverty

So how have perceptions of poverty changed over the past 40 years? Since 1986 we have asked respondents to the BSA surveys the following two questions:

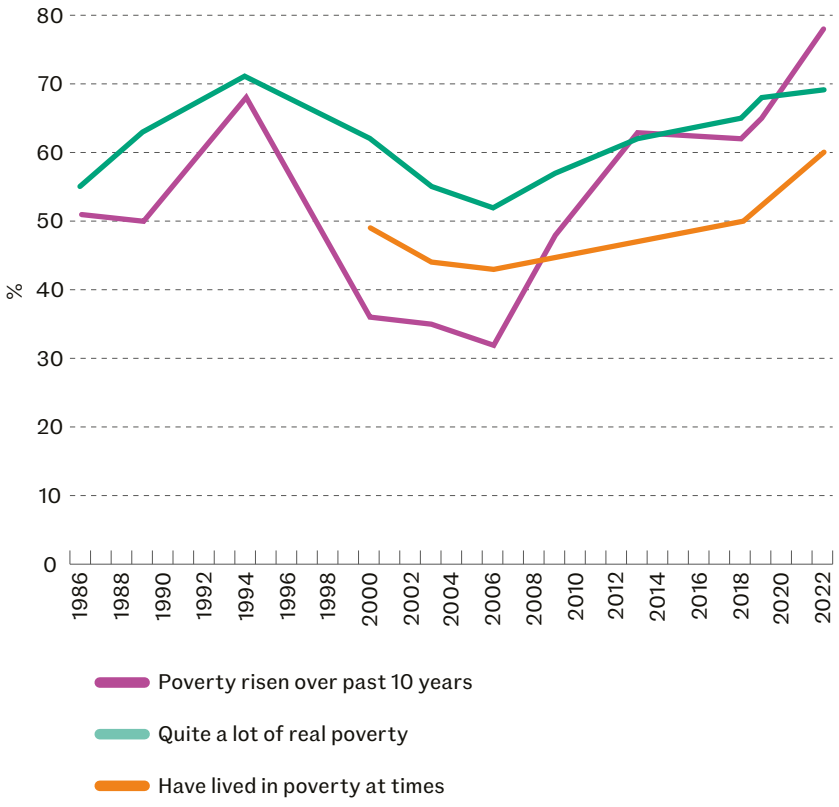
> ***Some people say there is very little real poverty in Britain today. Others say there is quite a lot. Which comes closest to your view ...***
>
> ***....that there is very little real poverty in Britain,***
>
> ***...or, that there is quite a lot?***
>
> ***Over the last ten years, do you think that poverty in Britain has been increasing, decreasing or staying at about the same level?***

To gain a measure of people's (perceived) experience of poverty, we have also asked:

> ***Looking back over your life, how often have there been times in your life when you think you have lived in poverty by the standards of that time?***
>
> ***[Never, Rarely, Occasionally, Often, Most of the time]***

The answers obtained in 2022, and on the previous occasions on which these questions were asked, are presented in Figure 5. It shows that, over the 1990s and early 2000s, the public became less likely to believe there is a lot of real poverty in Britain, or that poverty had risen over the past decade. But since 2006, the public has become much more likely to say that there is quite a lot of real poverty (rising from 52% to 69%, a change of 17 percentage points, and, in particular, that poverty has risen in the past decade (rising from 32% to 78%, a change of 46 percentage points). The belief that there is quite a lot of real poverty in Britain is now near historic highs, topped only by attitudes in 1994; while the belief that poverty has risen is now higher than at any point since the BSA survey began.

Figure 5 Changing perceptions of poverty in Britain, 1986-2022



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

The proportion who report that they themselves have lived in poverty ("rarely"/ "occasionally"' / "sometimes"/ "most of the time", rather than "never") has also fallen and then risen – but these shifts are smaller, probably because the question asks about people's experiences over their whole life, rather than at the current time. Nevertheless, 2022 is the first year since we first asked this question on the BSA survey in 2000 in which a majority of the public said that they have lived in poverty at some point in their lifetime (an experience reported by 60%, up from 50% in 2018 and 43% in 2006).

These increased perceptions of poverty mirror research that shows increasing 'deep poverty' over this period.[15] This is partly, but not solely, because of changes in welfare policy. Perceptions of poverty may also partly reflect experiences of the rising cost of living, not just in 2022 but also earlier in the decade, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Adams *et al.*, 2014). However, without questions specifically about claimants' level of need (Baumberg, 2014), we cannot be sure if these changing attitudes about poverty primarily reflect people's feelings about claimants or about the wider population.

It is not only perceptions of the amount of poverty that have changed, but also people's definitions of what counts as poverty. Since 1986, we have asked respondents to the BSA survey the following three questions:

Would you say that someone in Britain was or was not in poverty if...

... they had enough to buy the things they really needed, but not enough to buy the things most people take for granted?

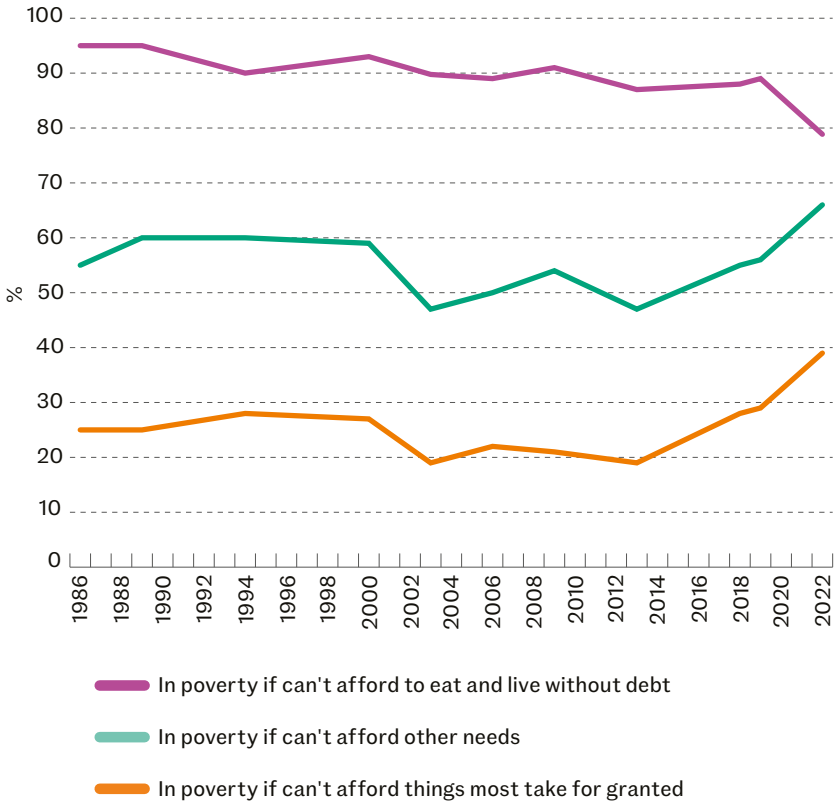
... if they had enough to eat and live, but not enough to buy other things they needed?

...if they had not got enough to eat and live without getting into debt?

15 While the headline poverty rate has barely risen – partly because it is tied to median living standards that themselves stagnated (https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/datasets/x09realaverageweeklyearningsusingconsumerpriceinflationseasonallyadjusted) – there have been stark rises in deep poverty (people living on 40% or 50% of median income, rather than the conventional relative poverty line of 60%; see https://www.jrf.org.uk/data/depth-poverty-over-time and also Edmiston, 2022), destitution (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2020) and food bank use (Irvine *et al.*, 2022).

Levels of agreement with these three definitions of poverty between 1986 to 2022 are presented in Figure 6. It shows that definitions of poverty remained largely stable from the mid-1980s to around the year 2000. Throughout this period, more than nine in ten people agreed that someone would be in poverty if they could not afford to eat and live without getting into debt. More than five in ten agreed that someone would be in poverty if they could afford to eat and live, but could not afford other things they needed. And around three in ten agreed that someone would be in poverty if they could afford what they really needed, but could not afford things that most people take for granted.

Figure 6 Agreement that someone in Britain would be in poverty in different circumstances, 1986-2022



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

There are two moments of change. Firstly, from 2000 to 2003, people's definitions of poverty became substantially stricter. In particular, 2003 saw a marked decline in the proportion who agreed with the two broader definitions of poverty. For example, in 2000, 27% of people agreed that someone would be in poverty if they could afford what they really needed but could not afford the things that most people take for granted. In 2003, this figure had dropped by 8 percentage points to 19%. (As a result, there was a substantial increase in the proportion of people who felt that someone was in poverty *only* if they could not afford to eat and live without getting into debt, and who did not agree with any of the more generous definitions).[16]

These attitudes remained largely stable until around the last decade, when the public's definitions of poverty became substantially more generous. In 2013, only 19% of people endorsed the broadest definition of poverty. By 2019, after a long period of austerity and increasing deep poverty (see footnote 15), this figure had risen to 29%. By 2022, it stood at 39% (a 20 percentage point increase on 2013). This spike in support for more generous definitions of poverty between 2019 and 2022 seems likely to be attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis. As more people experienced challenging financial circumstances both directly and indirectly, they appear to have become more open to broader definitions of poverty.

However, this period also saw a pronounced rise in what could be termed 'poverty denial'. When asked about someone who could not afford to eat and live without getting into debt, very few people have typically said that such a person was *not* in poverty. In 2019, only 11% expressed this sentiment. However, by 2022, this proportion had jumped by 10 percentage points to an unprecedented 21%. It is possible that this is explained by increased direct experiences of this form of deprivation: people who, for example, have experienced getting into debt by buying food, but who would not consider themselves to be 'in poverty'. Alternatively, it may reflect the opposite: a fraction of the population who believe that the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, and of the cost-of-living crisis has been overstated, and that claims about people being unable to afford food have been exaggerated.

16 Note that to keep the presentation of results simple, the chart does not show the proportion of respondents who agree with different combinations of these questions (including this figure on the proportion of respondents who felt that someone was in poverty *only* if they could not afford to eat and live without debt).

Do perceptions of poverty explain welfare attitudes?

It is plausible that the increase in perceived levels of 'real' poverty we describe above could explain the pronounced softening of welfare attitudes over the same period. As a greater fraction of the public comes to see that there are many people who are 'really' poor, it makes sense that they would come to see welfare claimants as increasingly deserving of help (van Oorschot, 2000), and to support increased spending on such help. However, the connection between perceptions of poverty and welfare attitudes is not straightforward, as when people perceive high levels of poverty, they are also more likely to be struggling financially themselves. This can lead to greater sensitivity to work incentives and greater resentment against benefit claimants, rather than sympathy with them (Hoggett *et al.*, 2013). This is encapsulated in an infamous remark by Chancellor George Osborne in 2012:

"Where is the fairness, we ask, for the shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning, who looks up at the closed blinds of their next door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits?" [17]

This quote also points to a distinction people may draw between people who are in 'real' poverty on the one hand, and 'benefit claimants' on the other. We saw a distinction of this sort play out during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, 'COVID claimants' – those who had begun their claim during the pandemic – were viewed very sympathetically. However, this sympathy did not translate into more positive welfare attitudes overall, likely because 'COVID claimants' were mentally bracketed away from 'benefit claimants' more broadly (de Vries *et al.*, 2021), a process which has also been found for recession-driven claimants in the United States (Erler, 2012). Overall, the evidence does not support any simple claims that societal economic downturns – in which poverty and hardship tend to rise – automatically translate into public support for welfare (Kenworthy and Owens, 2011; O'Grady, 2022:204; Roosma, 2020; Uunk and van Oorschot, 2019).

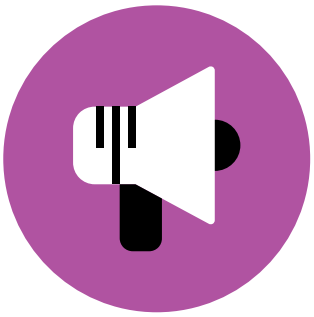
17 https://www.newstatesman.com/business/economics/2012/10/george-osbornes-speech-conservative-conference-full-text.

What do the BSA data show in practice? We find that people who see there is "quite a lot" of poverty in Britain are indeed considerably more pro-welfare than those who perceive there to be "very little" poverty. And as Figure 5 shows, the proportion of people who perceive there to be "quite a lot of poverty" has increased substantially over the same period as welfare attitudes have become more generous (from around 2013 to 2019). Yet the more striking pattern is that welfare attitudes have softened among both groups. For example, between 2013 and 2019, the perception that many claimants don't really deserve any help more than halved among those who thought that there was "quite a lot" of poverty – from 30% to 12% (a 17 percentage point difference). Among those who thought there was "very little" poverty, this figure also fell almost as sharply, from 38% to 21% (a 17 percentage point difference).

It is possible to examine statistically how far changing perceptions of poverty have contributed to changing welfare attitudes, using a technique known as a 'decomposition analysis' (see Appendix). This shows that, in fact, only around 3% of the total change in perceived deservingness from 2009 to 2019 is attributable to increasing perceptions of poverty – with the rest being explained by changing welfare attitudes among people with *the* same perception of poverty. The picture for attitudes to welfare spending is somewhat different: around 18% of the increase in support for more welfare spending over the same period is explained by increasing perceptions of poverty. However, this still leaves over 80% of this increase attributable to changing attitudes among those with fixed ideas about poverty.

Overall, while perceptions of poverty are clearly linked to welfare attitudes, increasing levels of perceived poverty in Britain do not explain the vast majority of the softening of welfare attitudes we have observed over the last decade.

The changing make-up of Britain



The past 40 years have seen enormous social change. The British population has become both older and better educated. According to the BSA data, 7% of British adults were educated to degree level or higher in 1985. By 2019, this proportion had risen to 25%.[18] Over the period between 1985 and 2022, the proportion of adults aged 65 or older rose from 15% to 26%. Both of these trends are set to continue over the coming decades. What impact, if any, have they had on attitudes towards welfare?

We do find that there are differences by age, generation[19], and particularly education in attitudes to welfare, as shown in Table 3. People with a university education have always perceived benefits claimants as much more deserving, and they are slightly more supportive of greater spending too. Wider research suggests this is because they are more socially liberal, and less authoritarian – which means they are much less concerned about morally deviant behaviour such as fraud, and less inclined to want to distance themselves psychologically from the very poorest, which is sometimes called 'last-place aversion' (Attewell, 2022; Gelepethis and Giani, 2022; McArthur, 2023).

18 From 2020 onwards the BSA changed the format of its question on education, meaning that trends pre and post 2020 are not comparable. For that reason, we end all of our analysis of education and attitudes in 2019.

19 The silent generation were born from 1928-1945, baby boomers from 1946-1964, Generation X from 1965-1980, Millennials from 1981-1996 and Generation Z from 1997 onwards.

While age tends to have little effect on attitudes,[20] generational differences are more common: generations experience different events in their youth, leading to distinctive generational values that persist (Duffy, 2022; O'Grady, in press). In the case of Table 3, we see that Generation X and Millennials are less supportive of welfare spending than older or younger generations. These 'Thatcher's children' and 'Blair's babies' came of age in eras when tax and spending was more stigmatised and hence they have also been more sceptical of government largesse (Barnes *et al.*, 2021; Grasso *et al.*, 2019). However, Millennials' welfare attitudes – which were strongly anti-welfare in 2010, with Millennials coming of age in a period of particularly negative rhetoric (O'Grady, 2022) – have shown the greatest shift since 2010 in terms of their perceptions of the deservingness of claimants (although changes in spending attitudes have changed similarly to other generations). Overall, though, generational differences in 2022 are relatively small.

20 Evidence that ageing itself causes people to become more conservative is quite elusive (Duffy 2022, O'Grady 2022b), and in the BSA data we find little evidence of uniform changes in attitudes with age.

Table 3 Deservingness attitudes by education level and generation, 1987-2022

	% disagree that 'most claimants don't deserve help'			% agree that 'should spend more on welfare benefits'		
	1987	**2010**	**2019**	**1987**	**2010**	**2019**
Educational level						
Degree	74	39	62	64	28	48
Secondary school or less	42	23	39	54	29	40
	1987	**2010**	**2022**	**1987**	**2010**	**2022**
Generation						
Silent Generation *[42-59 in 1987 / 77-94 in 2022]*	43	21	42	56	38	49
Baby Boomer *[23-41 in 1987 / 58-76 in 2022]*	55	34	45	55	30	41
Generation X *[42-57 in 2022]*		31	46		26	34
Millennials *[26-41 in 2022]*		23	46		23	32
Generation Z [18-25 in 2022]			56			41
Unweighted bases (Generation):						
Silent Generation	*377*	*697*	*403*	*378*	*697*	*403*
Baby Boomer	*468*	*929*	*2203*	*468*	*929*	*2203*
Generation X		*787*	*1730*		*787*	*1730*
Millennials		*373*	*1820*		*373*	*1820*
Generation Z			*488*			*488*
Unweighted bases (Education):						
Degree	*102*	*589*	*682*	*102*	*589*	*682*
Secondary school or less	*988*	*1610*	*1604*	*989*	*1610*	*1604*

Despite the differences noted above, socio-demographic change explains almost none of the rise and fall of anti-welfare attitudes. What is most striking in Table 3 is how different groups have shown similar patterns of change: all generations and educational groups became less supportive of the benefits system from the 1990s to the late 2000s, and then all became more supportive over the 2010s – and by about the same amounts. We can also examine the contribution of changing generations, ages and educational groups statistically (using a technique known as a 'decomposition analysis'; see Appendix). Looking first at the 1993-2008 period, the rise in anti-welfare attitudes goes in the reverse direction to what would be expected from the large increase in the number of degree holders (who tend to be more pro-welfare). For the 2008-19 period, only 5% of the change in welfare attitudes can be explained by increasing education levels and the ageing population (partly because most of the expansion in education had already occurred by the start of this period). Overall trends in attitudes, therefore, are not explained by any one group becoming more common, or by changing its views more than another. What is more, if anything the estimates in this section are likely to overestimate the role of changing education.[21] We can therefore conclude that demographic change has played a minor role at best in the overall story of evolving attitudes to welfare.

21 University students are typically more socially liberal than non-students when they begin their degrees but their views may not be altered much by the university experience itself. A recent study following British cohorts over time before and after higher education found no evidence that it had any impact on their attitudes (Simon, in press). It could be that expansions in higher education are simply drawing more socially centrist people into the system, so that the distinctiveness of graduates and non-graduates will erode over time with the expansion of higher education (McArthur, 2023).

Conclusion

Over the past 40 years, we have seen a sharp rise in anti-welfare attitudes, followed by a sharp fall. The rise in anti-welfare attitudes – that is, an increased feeling that many claimants did not deserve their benefits – occurred in the late 1990s and 2000s. This is now well-understood: this was a time in which Labour's welfare rhetoric became noticeably more negative, which prompted Labour supporters, in particular, to become more anti-welfare. The lack of competing discourses by politicians and more hostile coverage in the media may also have contributed to rising anti-welfare attitudes among the rest of the public, albeit to a lesser extent. Rising anti-welfare attitudes may also have been a response to increases in welfare spending (at least for pensioners and children), and it is clear that the public perceived that poverty was falling.

Over the 2010s, though, anti-welfare attitudes fell sharply. The public now believes that claimants are more deserving than at any point in the BSA's 40 year history (on most measures). Yet this is not a mirror image of the rise in anti-welfare attitudes that preceded it, where attitudes changed particularly among Labour Party voters. Instead, attitudes to welfare softened in parallel in nearly every group, whether we split by political party, newspaper readership, poverty attitudes, age, or education. This should not be surprising; political scientists have found that societal attitude change usually happens because all groups of the public shift their attitudes together ('parallel publics'; Page and Shapiro, 1992) (see also Coppock, 2022; O'Grady, 2022:202). It is therefore the earlier, somewhat polarised, rise in anti-welfare attitudes that is exceptional, rather than the more recent parallel shifts.

By putting together the different parts of the puzzle, we can start to understand why anti-welfare attitudes have fallen. It is clear that attitudes began to change in 2010-12, a time of hostile political and media discourses connected to the passage of the Welfare Reform Act 2012. These discourses were entwined with anti-welfare policies: benefits sanctions spiked sharply and working-age benefits fell behind inflation year-by-year (falling particularly sharply for some groups). In the aftermath of these developments, anti-welfare attitudes fell gradually over the 2010s until 2019, after which they plateaued. However there was no further change in attitudes during the COVID-19 pandemic, as increased sympathy for COVID-era claimants was bracketed off from wider attitudes to claimants (de Vries *et al*., 2021).

Teasing apart the exact drivers of softening welfare attitudes is difficult, but it is clear that there are several explanations. Changing attitudes were partly a response to welfare policies themselves: as welfare became less generous, the public increasingly believed that poverty had risen, and thus that claimants were more in need. But there was also a sharp change in political and media discourse: even papers like the Daily Mail were more sympathetic to welfare over the 2010s, and the Labour Party became more pro-welfare, particularly from 2015. It was not the case that Labour's changing discourse signalled directly to their supporters to change their views (as we have said, Conservatives' attitudes changed similarly); instead, wider attitudes seemed to change gradually as the public saw more pro-welfare views challenging anti-welfare ones. We can speculate that these changes were entwined: as welfare became harsher, representations of welfare as overly generous and claimants as undeserving simply became less convincing to the public, which then made it easier for the media and politicians to express pro-welfare views. These are therefore not competing explanations for the change; together they all contributed to the sharp fall in anti-welfare attitudes.

Politically, pro-welfare policies are therefore likely to land more positively now than in 2010-12. However, attitudes to welfare spending have not rebounded as strongly as perceptions of deservingness; more people want rises in welfare spending than in 2010, but not on the scale of the 1980s and early 1990s. This may reflect flatlining median incomes (see footnote 15) and cost-of-living pressures that have made people more sensitive to work disincentives and tax rises than before, alongside changing public understandings of the economy and the necessity of austerity (Barnes and Hicks, 2018). And, even when looking at deservingness perceptions, the public is still relatively likely to say that unemployed claimants could find a job if they really wanted one. At the same time, we should remember that while public attitudes to welfare change, they are consistently ambivalent; there has been no 'golden age' of support for welfare, even in the aftermath of World War Two when the Beveridge report was being implemented (Hudson and Lunt, 2016). Initiating large-scale shifts in policy often requires political courage, working to persuade an uncertain public whose opinions react to the arguments that reformers make.

Finally, it is difficult to speculate on how welfare attitudes will change in the coming years; while it is possible to explain past trends retrospectively, they have not followed an easily predicable path, and widespread expectations that attitudes would further soften during the COVID-19 pandemic proved unfounded. Looking forward, there are factors which might drive attitudes in both more and less generous directions. On the one hand, levels of benefits are low for many groups and there are high levels of deep poverty and destitution, which may push attitudes in a pro-welfare direction. On the other hand, the public believes that jobs are available if people want them; and there are signs that some political and media actors are starting to promote anti-welfare attitudes.[22] Much will depend on whether the Labour Party wins the next election, and if so, what choices they make about welfare policy and rhetoric. And it is difficult to know how Universal Credit will change attitudes, given that it combines various benefits – for unemployed people, disabled people, single parents, in-work benefits – that the public has tended to feel differently about. We will have to wait for the BSA's 50th anniversary edition in 2033 to see how the next decade actually unfolds.

22 See https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tax/news/britain-working-costing-calculate-pay-benefits-tax/ and https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/may/30/tories-disabled-people-benefits

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Appendix

Table A.1 Support for welfare spending, 1987–2022

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
% agreeing that...											
Benefits for unemployed people are too low	63	66	66	70	69	63	60	38	44	53	50
Government should spend more on welfare benefits	55	61	58	53	50	50	43	43	40	38	43
Unweighted base:											
Benefits for unemployed people are too low	*2275*	*2375*	*2302*	*2305*	*2636*	*993*	*2862*	*2348*	*2353*	*2593*	*2442*
Government should spend more on welfare benefits	*1281*	*2604*	*2481*	*2567*	*2929*	*3135*	*3085*	*2531*	*2450*	*2980*	*2795*

Table A.1 Support for welfare spending, 1987–2022 (continued)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
% agreeing that...											
Benefits for unemployed people are too low	38	46	30	34	29	32	26	37	30	23	30
Government should spend more on welfare benefits	44	43	36	36	35	32	35	27	29	28	34
Unweighted base:											
Benefits for unemployed people are too low	*2601*	*2406*	*2449*	*2430*	*2499*	*2481*	*2722*	*910*	*2525*	*2658*	*2386*
Government should spend more on welfare benefits	*2900*	*873*	*2609*	*2699*	*2822*	*2672*	*3000*	*967*	*2791*	*2845*	*2855*

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
% agreeing that...										
Benefits for unemployed people are too low	28	34	29	37	35	47	50			
Government should spend more on welfare benefits	36	30	39	35	43	41	42	38	36	37
Unweighted base:										
Benefits for unemployed people are too low	*2601*	*2406*	*2449*	*2430*	*2499*	*2481*	*2722*			
Government should spend more on welfare benefits	*2900*	*873*	*2609*	*2699*	*2822*	*2672*	*3000*	*967*	*2791*	*2845*

Table A.2 Trends in attitudes towards the deservingness of claimants, 1987–2022

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
% agreeing that...											
Most people on the dole are fiddling	32	31	28	31	34	33	35	39	36	40	35
Most unemployed could find a job if wanted one	41	52	38	27	32	38	39	54	56	60	63
Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help											
Agree	31	28	26	24	26	30	28	32	27	31	32
Disagree	45	45	47	50	47	43	42	36	40	37	36
Unweighted base:											
All questions	*1281*	*2604*	*2481*	*2567*	*2929*	*3135*	*3085*	*2531*	*2450*	*2980*	*2795*

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
% agreeing that...											
Most people on the dole are fiddling	38	39	41	39	32	39	36	34	35	37	37
Most unemployed could find a job if wanted one	65	66	69	69	67	67	68	55	54	56	54
Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help											
Agree	36	38	39	40	29	36	37	34	35	35	35
Disagree	31	29	25	25	32	27	27	32	28	29	27
Unweighted base:											
All questions	*2900*	*873*	*2609*	*2699*	*2822*	*2672*	*3000*	*967*	*2791*	*2845*	*2855*

Table A.2 Trends in attitudes towards the deservingness of claimants, 1987–2022 (continued)

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
% agreeing that...											
Most people on the dole are fiddling	33	35	29	22	24	25	18	22	27	22	
Most unemployed could find a job if wanted one	54	59	60	56	56	55	51	42	56	57	
Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help											
Agree	33	32	28	21	21	20	15	18	22	19	
Disagree	29	32	33	38	37	41	47	49	43	47	
Unweighted base:											
All questions	*2900*	*873*	*2609*	*2699*	*2822*	*2672*	*3000*	*967*	*2791*	*2845*	

Table A.3 Agreement that many people who get social security don't really deserve any help, by political party support, 1987-2019

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001
Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help:											
% who agree											
Conservative	40	35	34	31	35	41	41	42	36	41	39
Labour	21	20	18	17	20	23	21	27	24	26	30
Net agree vs. disagree											
Conservative	6	3	-1	-8	2	11	15	16	3	18	12
Labour	-38	-37	-42	-41	-39	-29	-30	-18	-19	-20	-9
Unweighted base: Conservative	*505*	*1069*	*918*	*861*	*860*	*837*	*859*	*657*	*638*	*840*	*646*
Unweighted base: Labour	*337*	*848*	*852*	*965*	*1181*	*1371*	*1324*	*1122*	*1024*	*1220*	*1262*

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help:											
% who agree											
Conservative	45	52	47	49	37	45	44	42	47	44	45
Labour	31	32	33	35	23	31	30	29	28	31	30
Net agree vs. disagree											
Conservative	23	31	30	31	15	25	24	19	26	27	27
Labour	-5	-2	0	6	-16	-2	-5	-11	-7	-7	-6
Unweighted base: Conservative	*728*	*227*	*688*	*696*	*759*	*739*	*1000*	*296*	*836*	*822*	*788*
Unweighted base: Labour	*1187*	*321*	*841*	*1089*	*918*	*911*	*832*	*246*	*863*	*881*	*956*

Table A.3 Agreement that many people who get social security don't really deserve any help, by political party support, 1987-2019 (continued)

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help:							
% who agree							
Conservative	40	42	36	26	29	26	19
Labour	28	25	21	19	15	15	11
Net agree vs. disagree							
Conservative	21	20	13	-5	1	-4	-21
Labour	-9	-18	-24	-28	-32	-36	-42
Unweighted base: Conservative	*736*	*653*	*957*	*856*	*1092*	*972*	*806*
Unweighted base: Labour	*924*	*684*	*797*	*698*	*1165*	*1046*	*649*

Table A.4 Agreement that government should spend more on welfare benefits, by political party support, 1987-2019

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001
Govt should spend more on welfare benefits:											
% who agree											
Conservative	38	46	41	38	32	32	26	31	30	27	33
Labour	73	77	73	64	63	61	56	52	46	45	49
Net agree vs. disagree											
Conservative	3	21	13	7	-6	-6	-19	-5	-12	-12	-3
Labour	63	70	65	51	50	45	41	32	25	21	28
Unweighted base: Conservative	*505*	*1069*	*918*	*861*	*860*	*837*	*859*	*657*	*638*	*840*	*646*
Unweighted base: Labour	*337*	*848*	*852*	*965*	*1181*	*1371*	*1324*	*1122*	*1024*	*1220*	*1262*

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Govt should spend more on welfare benefits:											
% who agree											
Conservative	37	30	24	28	24	23	25	18	18	17	20
Labour	50	58	46	41	45	37	49	35	39	36	44
Net agree vs. disagree											
Conservative	0	-7	-19	-13	-15	-24	-20	-36	-35	-38	-25
Labour	29	38	25	15	20	10	26	-2	9	8	19
Unweighted base: Conservative	*728*	*227*	*688*	*696*	*759*	*739*	*1000*	*296*	*836*	*822*	*788*
Unweighted base: Labour	*1187*	*321*	*841*	*1089*	*918*	*911*	*832*	*246*	*863*	*881*	*956*

Table A.4 Agreement that government should spend more on welfare benefits, by political party support, 1987-2019 (continued)

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019				
Govt should spend more on welfare benefits:											
% who agree											
Conservative	23	17	24	19	27	24	26				
Labour	47	44	55	51	56	54	57				
Net agree vs. disagree											
Conservative	-23	-37	-23	-24	-14	-16	-10				
Labour	23	18	37	32	39	35	40				
Unweighted base: Conservative	*736*	*653*	*957*	*856*	*1092*	*972*	*806*				
Unweighted base: Labour	*924*	*684*	*797*	*698*	*1165*	*1046*	*649*				

Table A.5 Poverty perceptions and experiences, 1986–2022

	1986	1989	1994	2000	2003	2006	2009	2013	2018	2019	2022
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Quite a lot of real poverty	55	63	71	62	55	52	57	62	65	68	69
Poverty has risen over past 10yrs	51	50	68	36	35	32	48	63	62	65	78
Have lived in poverty at times*	-	-	-	49	44	43	-	-	50	-	60
Unweighted base	*1548*	*1516*	*1167*	*3426*	*3272*	*3240*	*3421*	*3244*	*2884*	*3224*	*3310*

* 'Have lived in poverty at times' includes those saying they "rarely", "occasionally", "often" or "most of the time" have lived in poverty (vs. "never" lived in poverty).

Table A.6 What counts as being 'in poverty' in Britain? 1986–2022

Definition of poverty	1986	1989	1994	2000	2003	2006	2009	2013	2018	2019	2022
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Can't afford to eat and live without debt	95	95	90	93	90	89	91	87	88	89	79
Can afford to eat and live but can't afford needs	55	60	60	59	47	50	54	47	55	56	66
Can afford needs but can't afford things others take for granted	25	25	28	27	19	22	21	19	28	29	39
Unweighted base	*1548*	*1516*	*1167*	*3426*	*3272*	*3240*	*3297*	*3244*	*2884*	*3224*	*3310*

Decomposition analyses

At several points in the main chapter, we examine how far a particular factor (e.g. the growth in the number of people with degrees) can explain trends in anti-welfare attitudes. To do this, we use a 'decomposition analysis' (often known as a Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition, named after the economists that created it), which divides the trend in anti-welfare attitudes into two parts:

- An 'explained part', which shows how far this factor explains trends in anti-welfare attitudes. This combines estimates on how far this factor has changed over time (there are more people with degrees before) with estimates of how far this factor is associated with welfare attitudes (people with degrees are more pro-welfare).
- An 'unexplained part', which is the rest of the trend. This mostly includes changes in anti-welfare attitudes that are unrelated to this factor (i.e. the extent to which people with degrees and people without degrees have changed their attitudes to welfare over time).[23]

In practice, such decompositions are simply based on a series of regression models that look at the trend in welfare attitudes over time, both (i) before controlling for this factor and (ii) after controlling for it; and (iii) trends in the factor in question (e.g. having a degree) over time. Because our outcome of interest (anti-welfare attitudes) is binary, we use the command MVDCMP in Stata 17.0 (Powers *et al.*, 2011). The results of the decompositions in the chapter are shown in the table below.

23 Sometimes decomposition analyses include a third part, which in this case would refer to whether people with degrees changed their attitudes to welfare more than everyone else. This effect is partly about changing attitudes over time within people with degrees (the unexplained part), but this will matter more when the number of people with degrees has gone up (the explained part). In our analysis, for ease of interpretation, we bundle this together with the 'unexplained' part.

Table A.7 How far different factors contribute to the fall in anti-welfare attitudes 2008-2019

% agree that 'most claimants don't really deserve help'

	Impact	95% confidence interval	p value	% of total effect*
Overall trend 2008-19	*-22.1%*			
Age	0.3%	0.1 to 0.5%	0.001	-1.4%
Education	-1.1%	-0.6 to -1.6%	<0.001	5.0%
Newspaper readership	-1.2%	-0.5% to -1.9%	0.001	5.5%
Political party (Labour/Tory/other)	-0.2%	-0.4 to <0.1%	0.054	0.8%
Age and education combined	-1.1%	-0.6% to -1.6%	<0.001	5.0%
All combined	-1.8%	-0.9% to -2.6%	<0.001	7.9%
*Overall trend 2009-19***	*-19.7%*			
Perceived poverty****	-1.0%	-0.6 to -1.5%	<0.001	5.2%
Base 2008-19	*5214*			
Base 2009-19	*3398*			

*Negative numbers in the '% of total effect' column indicates that the factor contributes to a trend that goes into the opposite direction to the overall trend.

**Perceived poverty is not available for 2008, so a different base year is used.

***'Perceived poverty' refers to agreement with the question, 'There is quite a lot of real poverty in Britain today'

Table A.8 How far poverty attitudes contribute to the rise in support for more welfare spending, 2009-2019

% agree that 'the government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor'

	Impact	95% confidence interval	p value	% of total effect
Overall trend	*16.1%*			
There is quite a lot of real poverty in Britain today	2.9%	2.3 to 3.4%	<0.001	17.8%
Base: 3397				

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