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A Turning Point in History?

Social and Political Attitudes
in Britain in the
Wake of the Pandemic

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on everyone's lives during the last two years. But what will be its longer-term legacy? That question has inevitably been the subject of much commentary and speculation. There is, after all, plenty of evidence in the social psychology literature that when people have to change their behaviour in the wake of uncertainty, changing social norms, and appeals to the collective good, their attitudes are liable to change too (Abrams et al., 2021; Cooper, 2019; Mortensen et al., 2019; van Kleef, et al., 2019). In particular, some have suggested that the pandemic potentially represents a moment when the structure of society and of the economy could be 'reset' for the better (see, for example, BBC, 2020a; Benach, 2021; British Academy, 2021; Susskind et al., 2020) - and thus, potentially, be a 'turning-point in history' (Macmillan, 2020). However, if that is to be the case, politicians will have to bring the public with them in implementing any changes. But has the pandemic created a public mood for change that was not in evidence in Britain before the country first went into 'lockdown' in March 2020?

This report addresses that question. It utilises the findings of three surveys that were undertaken at different stages of the pandemic and on which the questions posed - on a wide range of social and political issues - were nearly all ones that had been asked on surveys conducted before the pandemic, in some instances going back over thirty years. This means that not only can we examine how attitudes have - or have not - shifted as compared with the years immediately before the pandemic, but also whether the balance of opinion is markedly different now from anything that has been in evidence over the last three decades, thereby perhaps taking us into uncharted attitudinal waters.

We begin by outlining the subjects covered in this report and in each case why attitudes might - or might not - have changed in the wake of the pandemic. We then introduce the data at our disposal. Thereafter, the report looks at the evidence in respect of two principal themes - first, inequality, welfare and the role of the state, and, second, law conformity and trust.

Questions

The pandemic has had a significant impact on the country's economic life. The lockdown saw businesses required to close and their employees consequently devoid of work. The government reacted by establishing a 'furlough' scheme that at one stage was covering the wages of nine million people (Office for National Statistics, 2021a), as well as provided various other forms of support for business in the form of tax breaks and loans. At the same time, welfare support for those on low incomes or who were unemployed was increased, most notably in the form of a £20 per week increase in the standard rate of Universal Credit. This expenditure – together with that on health and other public services to enable them to cope with the pandemic – meant that the government's fiscal deficit rose to record levels (Keep, 2021; Office for National Statistics, 2021b), a position exacerbated, of course, by the fact that a sharp drop in economic activity meant reduced tax receipts. But even now that lockdown has ended and economic activity has largely recovered (Office for National Statistics, 2021c), the government has set out plans that over the next few years will see it continue to spend at levels (relative to the total size of the economy) not seen on a consistent basis since the 1970s, while the tax burden will be at its highest since the 1950s. (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2021). Government policy, at least, seems to have embraced a bigger state.

Meanwhile, the pandemic has also raised questions about the level of inequality in Britain. Mortality and morbidity from COVID-19 have been higher among those living in more deprived communities and among those from a black or ethnic minority background (Marmot et al., 2021). The provision of free school meals for children from disadvantaged backgrounds became an issue of particular media interest in the wake of a campaign to widen their scope headed by the Manchester United footballer, Marcus Rashford, while children from such backgrounds were most likely to fail to maintain their educational progress during lockdown (Butler, 2021; Montacute and Cullinane, 2021). For some commentators (Benach, 2021; Prieg, 2021; Thomas, 2021), the pandemic exposed the consequences of what they regarded as unacceptable levels of inequality, a concern that was already reflected in the government's wish to 'level up' economic well-being and life chances across the country (Johnson, 2021).

How, though, have the public reacted to this increase in the size and scope of government support, and to the debate about inequality? One possibility is that the experience of the pandemic has persuaded them of the need for the government to play an enhanced role in the provision of public services and welfare. The sight of a health service struggling to cope with the flow of patients created by the pandemic may have persuaded them of the need for increased health spending. The difficulties faced by many children (and parents) in maintaining their educational progress during lockdown may have convinced voters that more money needs to be spent on schools in an attempt to reverse the damage.

Meanwhile, the apparent threat of widespread unemployment (albeit one that in the event has not been realised; see Office for National Statistics, 2021d) and the attention paid to inequality may have made people more sympathetic to the provision of welfare for people of working age who now find themselves in financial difficulty.

Yet none of this is guaranteed. After all, previous research has suggested that people tend to react against increases in taxation and spending. It is argued that public opinion on taxation and spending acts like a thermostat (Wlezein, 1995; 2017); while people back increased taxation and spending when these fall below what they consider desirable, they seek a reduction in taxation and spending when these rise above their preferred position. This suggests that, unless in the wake of the pandemic the public have reset their views about the desirable level of government activity, they may well have reacted against the increase that has occurred. Those who prefer a smaller state and who emphasise the importance of individual responsibility may now be reluctant to pay more taxes to fund public services, while the experience of the pandemic may have done little to persuade them that the state should be more generous in its welfare provision, let alone in spending taxpayer's cash on reducing inequality.

The pandemic not only witnessed extensive government intervention in the economy but also, in an attempt to reduce the spread of the disease, unprecedented state regulation of the country's social life. Initially lockdown meant that people were required to stay at home unless they worked in an essential industry. Although later phases of lockdown were less draconian, they still placed strong limits on people's ability to gather together, both indoors and outdoors, the closure of most venues including hospitality, entertainment and places of religion, and limitations on people's ability to travel. Wearing face-masks, long a common practice in some Asian countries but hitherto rare in Britain, became a legal requirement. Never before in peace time had government imposed such extensive controls on how people could live their lives.

These measures were, of course, intended to reduce the spread of the disease. But what impact did such wide-ranging legal powers have on attitudes to the law and the value of conformity? One possibility is that the fear of contagion if people did not follow the COVID-19 regulations helped fuel a more authoritarian outlook that demands strict adherence to the law, a strong expectation that people should conform to social norms, and a decline in people's willingness to trust others (Helzer and Pizarro, 2011; Henderson and Schnall, 2021; Murray and Schaller, 2012;). On the other hand, people may have come to feel that the state has overreached itself during the pandemic and that its actions have created unwarranted restrictions on people's civil liberties (Dickson, 2021; Hope, 2020; Sumption, 2020). That outlook might perhaps be particularly widespread if people had low levels of trust in government (Davies et al, 2021; Devine et al., 2020) and thus doubted the validity of the arguments it

was presenting in favour of its public health restrictions. In short, perhaps the pandemic may have made governing more difficult across the board.

Data

As noted above, we have data available to us from three surveys conducted at various stages during the course of the pandemic. Two of these were conducted via NatCen's mixed mode random probability panel – one in July 2020, shortly after the first wave of the pandemic, the second in June 2021, just as the country was preparing to slough off most of the restrictions under which it had been living for more than a year. The NatCen panel comprises people who were originally interviewed (face to face) as part of NatCen's annual British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, and who have agreed to answer occasional follow-up surveys either (mostly) online or on the phone (Jessop, 2018). The first of our panel surveys was answered by 2,413 respondents, the second by 2,217, 2,063 of whom were people who had already responded to the survey conducted a year earlier, thereby giving us the ability to trace how attitudes evolved at the individual level during the pandemic. All of the respondents in the two surveys had participated in either the 2018 or 2019 BSA, thereby making it possible on many questions to trace the evolution of attitudes at the individual level since shortly before the pandemic. The data from both surveys have been weighted to reflect the known demographic profile of all adults as well as the pattern of answers to previous BSA surveys.

From its foundation in 1983, BSA has always been conducted face to face (together with a self-completion supplement) with a randomly selected sample of respondents (Curtice et al., 2020). However, given the rules on social distancing, it was impossible to conduct the survey in that way during the pandemic. Consequently, the 2020 survey, which provides the third of our surveys conducted during the pandemic, was undertaken by sending by post to a random selection of households an invitation to participate in an online survey. This thus represents an entirely separate cross-section survey from our two NatCen panel surveys (and any previous BSA). A total of 3,964 people completed the survey between October and December 2020, that is, mid-way between our two panel surveys and at a time when restrictions were tightening once more in the wake of a worsening of the pandemic (Clery et al., 2021). These data have also been weighted to reflect the known demographic profile of all adults.

Clearly there is some risk in comparing the results of surveys that before the pandemic were conducted (primarily) face to face with those that were undertaken (again primarily) via an online survey. The difference in the way people's responses were collected may have had an impact on the answers they gave, while the differences in the way the interviews were obtained could have an impact on the kind of people who responded.

This position certainly means that some caution needs to be exercised in interpreting any differences between the results of our surveys and those of previous BSAs. However, we should also bear in mind that our two panel surveys were conducted differently from the 2020 BSA survey. If, nevertheless, the evidence from both these sources points in the same direction, we might conclude that this reduces the likelihood that any differences between our pandemic surveys and previous BSAs are simply occasioned by the way in which the surveys were conducted.

Inequality, Welfare and the Role of the State

Inequality

We begin by looking at attitudes towards inequality and the provision of welfare. If voters have been influenced by the debate about inequality engendered by the pandemic, we might anticipate that they are now more likely to regard Britain as an unequal society. Our first table (Table 1) suggests that this might be the case. It shows how people have responded when asked whether they agree or disagree that there is ‘one law for the rich and one for the poor’. All three of the surveys we have conducted during the pandemic suggest that there has been an increase in the proportion who agree with this proposition. Between them the three surveys suggest that two-thirds (66%) now do so, compared with an average of 58% in the three years prior to the pandemic. Indeed, although not an unprecedented high, the proportion who agree is now at its highest level since New Labour first came to power in 1997.¹

Table 1 Proportion who agree/disagree that ‘one law for the rich and one for the poor’?, 1986-2021

	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
How much do you agree or disagree that there is one law for the rich and one for the poor?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	59	66	69	67	67	63	69	71	71	70	64	60	62
Neither agree nor disagree	17	14	14	14	15	14	15	13	17	15	19	25	20
Disagree	22	19	16	18	15	21	15	13	12	14	15	13	17
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1321	2493	2604	2430	2702	1306	2957	3135	3085	1087	2531	2450	2980

¹ There is also a statistically significant difference between the views expressed by our panellists when first interviewed on BSA in 2018 or 2019 (when 59% agreed) and the opinions they held when interviewed on our most recent survey. On a paired samples t-test, $t=5.89$, which is significant at the 1% level.

Table 1 (continued)

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
How much do you agree or disagree that there is one law for the rich and one for the poor?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	58	61	58	52	53	55	53	56	56	56	60	64	59
Neither agree nor disagree	22	19	22	25	25	24	25	23	22	24	20	19	20
Disagree	19	18	18	21	21	19	20	18	20	19	19	15	19
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2795	2900	3621	2609	3559	3748	3578	3990	2942	2791	2845	2855	2832
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P				
How much do you agree or disagree that there is one law for the rich and one for the poor?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%				
Agree	59	56	59	57	60	56	67	64	66				
Neither agree nor disagree	21	22	22	22	21	25	19	19	20				
Disagree	18	19	17	19	18	18	13	16	14				
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2376	3670	2400	3258	3065	2636	2413	3964	2217				

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face except 2020, online), apart from 2020P, 2021P, NatCen Panel.

However, there is a possibility that this question is not simply tapping people's attitudes towards the degree of material inequality in Britain. It may also be reflecting one of the criticisms that was sometimes made of the government's handling of that pandemic, that is, that it did not always follow the public health regulations it expected others to follow (Elgot, 2021; Fancourt et al., 2020). Certainly, other indicators that we have available to us do not suggest that there has been as marked an increase in the proportion of people who think that Britain is unfairly unequal. Table 2 (overleaf), for example, shows that, at 64%, the proportion in our three pandemic surveys who agree that 'ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth' is only a little above the average of 60% recorded in the three surveys prior to the pandemic – while at 63% our most recent reading is almost the same as the 62% recorded in 2018.² Similarly, while on average 59% of respondents in our three pandemic surveys agreed with the proposition that 'big business benefits owners at the expense of workers', the figure is only marginally higher than the average of 57% in the three BSA surveys conducted between 2017 and 2019.³ Much the same picture is painted by the pattern of responses to the statement that 'management will always try to get

² And the 63% figure is not significantly above the proportion of our panellists who agreed with the proposition when first interviewed on BSA. (In a paired samples test $t=1.28$, which is not significant at the 5% level.)

³ Meanwhile, the proportion of respondents in our most recent panel survey who agreed (58%) is exactly the same as the proportion who did so when first interviewed on BSA in 2018 or 2019.

the better of employees if it gets the chance'.⁴ The most that can be said is that there might have been a slight increase in the proportion who regard Britain as unequal, but certainly not one that signifies a material change in the climate of public opinion.

Table 2 Proportion who agree/disagree that 'ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth?', 1986-2021

	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
How much do you agree or disagree that ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	66	64	65	65	67	61	67	66	64	60	62	60	63
Neither agree nor disagree	19	17	18	19	15	24	19	23	23	25	23	26	23
Disagree	14	17	16	15	15	14	12	11	11	13	13	13	12
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1321	2493	2604	2430	2702	1306	3135	3085	2531	2450	2980	2795	2900
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
How much do you agree or disagree that ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	61	53	55	55	58	60	60	56	58	61	59	60	59
Neither agree nor disagree	23	28	27	29	26	25	24	27	27	25	28	25	27
Disagree	13	17	16	14	14	12	14	15	14	12	11	13	12
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3621	2609	3559	3748	3578	3990	2942	2791	2845	2855	2832	2376	3670
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P						
How much do you agree or disagree that ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%						
Agree	59	61	62	57	64	64	63						
Neither agree nor disagree	27	26	26	30	26	23	26						
Disagree	11	12	10	10	9	12	10						
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2400	3258	3065	2636	2413	3964	2217						

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face except 2020, online), apart from 2020P, 2021P, NatCen Panel.

4 Between 2017 and 2019 on average 49% agreed with this statement, while in our three pandemic surveys 52% did so. Among the individual respondents to our most recent survey, 51% agreed when first interviewed compared with 53% now. (A paired sampled t-test (1.96) is just significant at the 5% level.)

Meanwhile, there is little sign of any substantially increased appetite for government action to reduce inequality. Table 3 reveals that in our three pandemic surveys on average just 43% agreed that 'government should redistribute income from the better-off to the less well-off', well below, for example, the 64% who think that ordinary people do not get their fair share of wealth, and little different from the 41% who agreed in the three most recent BSA surveys conducted before the pandemic.⁵ The proportion also remains well below the figures recorded in the 1990s before New Labour came to power. It cannot be said that the pandemic has left a legacy of a public that is looking more intently to government to create a more equal society.

Table 3 Proportion who agree/disagree that 'Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off?', 1986-2021

	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001
How much do you agree or disagree that government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	43	45	50	49	48	45	51	47	44	39	36	39	38
Neither agree nor disagree	25	20	20	19	20	21	23	22	28	28	27	24	28
Disagree	30	33	29	30	29	33	25	29	28	31	35	36	23
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1321	2493	2604	2430	2702	1306	2929	3135	3085	2531	2450	2980	2795
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
How much do you agree or disagree that government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	39	42	32	32	34	32	38	36	35	37	41	42	39
Neither agree nor disagree	25	24	28	27	27	29	25	27	28	28	26	26	26
Disagree	34	32	38	39	38	37	35	34	35	34	30	29	33
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2900	3621	2609	3559	3748	3578	3990	2942	2791	2845	2855	2832	2376
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P					
How much do you agree or disagree that government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%					
Agree	44	42	42	42	39	42	46	40					
Neither agree nor disagree	28	28	27	27	31	27	23	29					
Disagree	26	28	30	29	27	30	30	30					
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3670	2400	3258	3065	2636	2413	3964	2217					

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face except 2020, online), apart from 2020P, 2021P, NatCen Panel.

⁵ Indeed, the 40% who agreed in our most recent survey was slightly below the figure of 42% recorded when the same respondents were interviewed by BSA in 2018 or 2019.

Welfare

Still, although the pandemic may not have instigated much of an increase in concern about inequality, it might still be the case that, given the economic uncertainty created by the pandemic, the public have become more sympathetic towards the provision of welfare for those who have fallen on hard times. Table 4 provides an initial assessment of this possibility by examining how people have responded when asked whether they agree or disagree that ‘if welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet’, a claim that suggests that the provision of welfare undermines people’s sense of responsibility to look out for themselves. The data do not appear to suggest that the pandemic has occasioned a substantial change of outlook (see also De Vries et al., 2021). As the table shows, on average in our three pandemic surveys, 36% agreed with the statement, while almost the same proportion, 35%, disagreed. These figures are only marginally different from the average figures of 39% and 35% respectively in the three BSA surveys conducted between 2017 and 2019.⁶

Table 4 Proportion who agree/disagree that ‘if welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet’, 1987-2020

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
How much do you agree or disagree that if welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	33	31	25	26	26	33	33	39	37	38	40	44	41
Neither agree nor disagree	21	23	23	22	23	21	23	26	27	25	24	24	27
Disagree	46	45	50	52	48	44	42	32	34	35	35	30	28
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1281	2604	2481	2567	2929	3135	3085	2531	2450	2980	2795	2900	873
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
How much do you agree or disagree that if welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	46	49	47	53	54	53	56	54	52	52	53	52	44
Neither agree nor disagree	27	24	26	22	24	23	23	23	23	22	23	22	25
Disagree	23	25	25	22	21	23	20	21	22	23	22	24	29
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2609	2699	2822	2672	3000	967	2791	2845	2855	2832	2376	2781	2400

⁶ When first interviewed in 2018/9, 37% of the respondents to our most recent survey said they agreed, while 36% disagreed. The former figure is not significantly different from the 36% recorded in summer 2021 (Paired t-test = 0.69) and the latter only marginally so (at the 5% level) from the more recent figure of 34% (t=1.97).

Table 4 (continued)

	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P
How much do you agree or disagree that if welfare benefits weren't so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet?	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	43	40	34	39	34	36
Neither agree nor disagree	25	27	28	29	25	30
Disagree	30	32	37	32	40	34
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>3258</i>	<i>3065</i>	<i>2636</i>	<i>2413</i>	<i>3964</i>	<i>2217</i>

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face except 2020, online), apart from 2020P, 2021P, NatCen Panel.

Even so, we should also note that the near even balance of agreement and disagreement on this question is very different from the pattern that was in evidence just a few years ago (Pearce and Taylor, 2013). Between 2007 and 2015, that is, in the run up to and in the years immediately following the financial crash, consistently rather more than half (average, 53%) said they agreed with this negative statement about welfare, while less than a quarter (average, 22%) said they disagreed. This mood matched the reduction in welfare spending that was implemented as part of the government's attempt to repair the damage done to its fiscal finances by the financial crash (Hills, 2015). However, the period between 2015 and the onset of the pandemic witnessed a sharp change of mood that meant by 2019 only 34% agreed and as many as 37% disagreed with the statement about the generosity of welfare benefits. It appears that rather than precipitating a sharp change of attitude towards welfare, the pandemic occurred at a time when the public had already become markedly more sympathetic towards its provision (and then remained so), albeit they were still less sympathetic than in the years immediately before New Labour came to power.

Much the same impression is created by the pattern of responses to another item designed to tap attitudes towards welfare in general, that is, whether people agree or disagree that, 'many people who get social security don't really deserve any help'. In the last three BSA surveys to be conducted before the pandemic, on average 42% disagreed with this statement, a figure that did no more than edge up slightly to an average of 44% in our three pandemic surveys (see Table 5 overleaf).⁷ Yet here too we can see that there was a marked change of mood in the years leading up to the pandemic. On average between 2007 and 2015, only 29% disagreed with the statement, a figure that by 2019 had increased to 47%. Indeed, in this instance the figure did now match those in evidence in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

⁷ Indeed, among the respondents to our most recent survey there is hardly any change at all from the pattern of responses they gave in their initial BSA interview. On that occasion, 44% disagreed with the proposition, slightly higher than the 43% who did so in summer 2021.

Table 5 Proportion who agree/disagree that 'many people who get social security don't really deserve any help', 1987-2021

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
How much do you agree or disagree that many people who get social security don't really deserve any help?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	31	28	26	24	26	30	28	32	27	31	32	36	38
Neither agree nor disagree	21	27	25	25	24	24	28	29	31	30	30	31	30
Disagree	45	45	47	50	47	43	42	36	40	37	36	31	30
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1281	2604	2481	2567	2929	3135	3085	2531	2450	2980	2795	2900	873
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
How much do you agree or disagree that many people who get social security don't really deserve any help?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	39	40	29	36	37	34	35	35	35	33	32	28	21
Neither agree nor disagree	33	33	37	35	34	33	35	35	35	35	35	37	39
Disagree	25	25	32	27	27	32	28	29	27	29	32	33	38
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2609	2699	2822	2672	3000	967	2791	2845	2855	2832	2376	2781	2400
	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P							
How much do you agree or disagree that many people who get social security don't really deserve any help?	%	%	%	%	%	%							
Agree	21	20	15	19	19	16							
Neither agree nor disagree	39	30	37	39	32	39							
Disagree	37	41	47	41	49	43							
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3258	3065	2636	2413	3964	2217							

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face except 2020, online), apart from 2020P, 2021P, NatCen Panel.

The Unemployed

So, the pandemic itself did not witness a change of attitude towards welfare in general, but rather occurred against a backdrop that meant there was more likely to be support for increased provision, such as the £20 a week uplift in the level of Universal Credit. But we might wonder what has happened to attitudes towards the unemployed in particular. Those of working age bore the brunt of the cuts to welfare provision introduced by the coalition government between 2010 and 2015 (Hills, 2015), yet it was those currently in employment who were now at risk of no longer being able to pursue their livelihoods because of the pandemic. Did the apparent threat of unemployment created by the pandemic result in a more sympathetic attitude towards those out of work?

Table 6 addresses this question by showing the level of agreement and disagreement with the statement that ‘around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one’. This, of course, is a proposition where the answer given might vary over time according to the state of the labour market, but is also one that expresses the negative sentiment that the unemployed are ‘work-shy’ and have little reason to be out of work. In any event, there is little consistent sign that the pandemic changed attitudes towards this group of welfare recipients. In the three BSA surveys conducted between 2017 and 2019, on average 54% agreed with the statement, a figure that was already well down on that of two-thirds or more that was in evidence in the years immediately before the financial crash of 2008-9. The proportion did dip to as low as 42% in the BSA survey conducted in the autumn of 2020, but this substantial fall was not replicated on our two NatCen panel surveys. These recorded 51% and 52% support, suggesting at most no more than a marginal change.⁸ It may be that the perception that finding a job had become more difficult was higher when the 2020 BSA was conducted, which coincided with a time when the country was entering the second wave of the pandemic and thus facing renewed economic uncertainty. In contrast, by the summer of 2021 it was soon to become apparent that Britain was experiencing labour market shortages in a number of areas (Office for National Statistics, 2021e).

Table 6 Proportion who agree/disagree that ‘Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one’, 1987-2021

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
How much do you agree or disagree that around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	41	52	38	27	32	38	39	54	56	60	63	65	66
Neither agree nor disagree	16	19	19	20	22	22	22	22	22	19	19	18	17
Disagree	42	28	41	52	44	38	37	22	20	19	16	15	15
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1281	2604	2481	2567	2929	3135	3085	2531	2450	2980	2795	2900	873
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
How much do you agree or disagree that around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	69	69	67	67	68	55	56	54	54	54	59	60	56
Neither agree nor disagree	19	19	20	19	19	23	23	24	21	22	19	23	25
Disagree	10	10	11	11	11	20	20	20	22	21	21	15	17
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2609	2699	2822	2672	3000	967	2791	2845	2855	2832	2376	2781	2400

⁸ Among respondents to the 2021 Panel survey, 54% said that they agreed with the statement when first interviewed by BSA in 2018/9. The slight fall (to 52%) in our most recent survey is statistically significant at the 1% level (Paired t-test = 3.12).

Table 6 (continued)

	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P
How much do you agree or disagree that around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one?	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	56	55	51	51	42	52
Neither agree nor disagree	25	25	29	26	27	28
Disagree	18	18	18	23	30	20
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3258	3065	2636	2413	3964	2217

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face except 2020, online), apart from 2020P, 2021P, NatCen Panel.

A similar picture of relatively little change in attitudes to the unemployed is recorded in the responses to another negative sentiment about those out of work, that is, that ‘most people on the dole are fiddling one way or another’ (see Table 7). On average in the three years prior to the pandemic, 39% said that they disagreed with this statement, while between them our three pandemic surveys recorded an average figure of 40%.⁹ Indeed, this is another item where the important movement of opinion occurred in the years leading up to the pandemic – between 2002 and 2012 the proportion who disagreed had never risen above 30%. The government’s decision to provide help during the pandemic to those whose unemployment was under threat as well as more help for those who did actually lose their jobs matched a change in public sentiment towards the unemployed that had already set in before the pandemic and was then maintained during it (Curtice, 2020).

Table 7 Proportion who agree/disagree that ‘Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another’, 1987-2021

	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
How much do you agree or disagree that most people on the dole are fiddling one way or another?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	32	31	28	31	34	33	35	39	36	40	35	38	39
Neither agree nor disagree	28	31	31	30	29	28	32	32	35	31	29	31	31
Disagree	39	37	39	38	36	37	31	27	28	28	33	28	28
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1281	2604	2481	2567	2929	3135	3085	2531	2450	2980	2795	2900	873

⁹ However, as in the case of the level of disagreement with the statement about the ability of the unemployed to find a job, among those who responded to our 2021 survey there is a statistically significant fall since their initial BSA response in the proportion who disagree with this statement about fiddling on the dole (when 41% disagreed). (Paired t-test = 3.49, which is significant at the 1% level.)

Table 7 (continued)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
How much do you agree or disagree that most people on the dole are fiddling one way or another?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	41	39	32	39	39	34	35	37	37	33	35	29	22
Neither agree nor disagree	33	32	37	32	32	36	34	33	31	34	33	35	37
Disagree	23	27	29	25	25	28	28	29	30	31	31	34	39
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2609	2699	2822	2672	3000	967	2791	2845	2855	2832	2376	2781	2400
	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P							
How much do you agree or disagree that most people on the dole are fiddling one way or another?	%	%	%	%	%	%							
Agree	24	25	18	25	22	22							
Neither agree nor disagree	37	35	38	37	33	37							
Disagree	37	38	41	37	45	39							
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3258	3065	2636	2413	3964	2217							

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face except 2020, online), apart from 2020P, 2021P, NatCen Panel.

This picture is underlined by the pattern of responses when people have been asked 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?

Throughout the period from 2002 onwards, those who thought that unemployment benefit was too high consistently outnumbered by a substantial margin those who thought it was too low (Curtice et al., 2021). However, after almost coming into balance in 2018 (35% said benefits were too low, 39% too high), the proportions choosing the two options actually tipped in 2019 very slightly (by 36% to 35%) in favour of too low. In short, here too attitudes towards the unemployed had become markedly more sympathetic prior to the pandemic. However, our two panel surveys continued to find rather more saying that benefits were too high (34% in 2020, 33% in 2021) than that they were too low (28% and 27% respectively), suggesting that the pandemic itself did not instigate any further movement in favour of the view that benefits are too low.¹⁰

¹⁰ Indeed, among respondents to our most recent survey the increase since their initial BSA interview in the proportion who say that benefits are too high as opposed to saying they are too low is significant at the 1% level on a paired t-test test ($t=3.04$). It will be noted that the proportion who say either 'too low' or 'too high' is well below 100%. This is because on BSA many respondents opt to say 'neither' even though that response is not offered; 19% did so in 2018 and 21% in 2019. This led to a decision on the panel survey (which was self-administered) to offer 'neither' as an option. These responses are not taken into account in this analysis.

Social Care

One aspect of Britain's welfare state that attracted particular attention during the pandemic was the provision of social care for older people. COVID-19 proved to be a more serious health risk for older people, and resulted in a high level of mortality among those living in care homes (Burton et al., 2021; Morciano et al., 2021). This experience drew attention to a social care service that has long been regarded as under-resourced, not only in care homes but also in the level of provision available to those receiving care in their own homes (Care Quality Commission, 2020). Meanwhile, how social care should be funded has long been the subject of debate (Wenzel et al., 2018). The rules vary across the UK, but crucially in England access to government funding depends on the level of someone's assets, as a result of which only those with capital of less than £23,250 are eligible for funding. For those living in a care home at least, this raises the spectre of any house that they own potentially having to be sold to pay for their care. Long before the pandemic, this unwelcome risk had led to more than one proposal for reform, including (as in Scotland) making social care (though not the 'hotel costs' of care home accommodation) free for all, regardless of wealth or income. Meanwhile, a report prepared for the UK government a decade earlier had proposed setting a limit on the total amount anyone should have to pay for social care in their lifetime (Dilnot, 2011).

In the two panel surveys we conducted during the pandemic, we repeated a question that had previously appeared on BSA on a couple of occasions and where the options provided encapsulated the principal proposals for reform. It read as follows:

Who do you think should pay for social care for people who cannot look after themselves because of illness, disability or old age?

The government¹¹

The individual

The individual should pay what they can and the government should pay the rest

The individual should pay what they can up to a capped amount and the government should pay the rest.

Table 8 reveals that despite the concerns expressed during the pandemic about the under-funding of social care, there was no sign of increased support for the idea that the government should fund the full cost of social care. Rather, at around one in three, the proportion backing that view was well down on the 44% who did so just two years before the pandemic. Not that there was much support for the existing principle that the government only steps in when the individual has exhausted almost all their assets – still only just over

¹¹ All references to 'the government' in the question were in Scotland to 'the Scottish Government', and in Wales to 'the Welsh Government'.

one in four supported this view. Instead there was a marked increase in support for the idea that individuals should only have to pay up to a certain limit, with the government stepping in thereafter. Indeed, this was now (narrowly) the most popular option, backed by 36% and 37% in our two pandemic surveys. The UK government's announcement in September 2021 that it proposed to introduce such a system in 2023 thus seems to have been aligned with the direction in which public opinion had moved (HM Government, 2021).

Table 8 Attitudes towards the funding of social care 2012-21

	2012	2018	2020P	2021P
	%	%	%	%
Government	48	44	35	33
The individual	1	1	1	1
Individual pay what can, government the rest	22	25	28	27
Individual pay up to capped amount, government the rest	27	29	36	37

Source: 2012, 2018: *British Social Attitudes*; 2020P & 2021P: *NatCen Panel*.

The Role of The State

We have so far ascertained only limited signs that the experience of the pandemic has stimulated increased support for an enlarged state. Although attitudes towards the provision of welfare are now more sympathetic than they had been for much of the period since the advent of New Labour in 1997, this change of mood largely predated the pandemic. The public even appear to have become less keen on the state footing all of the bill for social care. Meanwhile, there does not appear to be a markedly increased appetite for measures that might redistribute income and wealth to those who are less well-off.

Still, these observations only cover certain aspects of government expenditure. In particular, they do not encompass the two most popular forms of public spending, health and education (Hudson et al., 2020), both of which have required increases in spending in the wake of the pandemic. Perhaps if we examine people's attitudes towards spending on these subjects we will obtain a markedly different picture?

Table 9 shows people have responded since 1983 when asked the following question:

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

Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits

Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now

Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits

Very few people ever say that taxes and spending should be reduced. However, there has been considerable change over time in the balance between those who think that spending and taxation should be kept at their current levels and those who think it should be increased. In particular, the attempt made by the Conservatives in the 1980s to reduce tax and spend was followed by a rise in support for increasing them, while the expansion of public spending eventually undertaken by New Labour (Chote et al., 2010) saw a swing in the opposite direction. These patterns are consistent with the argument that voters respond thermostatically to rises and falls in public spending (Curtice, 2010).

Table 9 Attitudes towards taxation and spending on health, education and social benefits, 1983-2021

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
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	5	4	3
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	54	50	43	44	42	37	37	29	28	33	31	34	31
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	32	39	45	46	50	56	54	65	63	58	61	59	62
Unweighted base	1761	1675	1804	3100	2847	3029	2797	2918	2945	3469	3633	3620	1355
	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Which should the government choose..	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits	3	4	5	3	3	6	6	7	6	7	8	8	9
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	32	34	40	34	31	38	42	43	43	47	50	55	56
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	63	58	50	59	63	51	49	46	46	42	39	34	31
Unweighted base	3146	3143	2292	3287	3435	3272	2146	2166	3240	3094	2229	1139	3297
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P	
Which should the government choose..	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits	6	6	6	7	4	4	4	4	5	6	6	6	
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	54	53	54	52	47	44	33	34	37	41	43	43	
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	36	34	36	37	45	48	60	57	53	53	50	50	
Unweighted base	3311	3248	3244	2878	3266	2942	2963	2884	3224	2413	3964	2217	

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face except 2020, online), apart from 2020P, 2021P, NatCen Panel.

Indeed, the years prior to the pandemic appeared to be witnessing another thermostatic reaction against the ‘austerity’ that was undertaken by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition that came to power in 2010 and which attempted to repair the damage done to the fiscal finances by the financial crash of 2008-9. By 2017, as many as 60% were saying that taxation and spending should be increased, although this figure had eased somewhat to 53% by 2019. Thus, as in the case of welfare, the pandemic occurred at a time when public opinion had already shifted in the direction taken by the government during the pandemic. But even so, if the public were to react to the latest sharp increase in spending in the same manner as they did the increase undertaken by New Labour, we might anticipate that support for increased spending has now begun to wane.

Of this there is some sign. At 50%, the proportion backing increased spending in our two most recent surveys is somewhat lower than in any of the BSA surveys undertaken in the period immediately before the pandemic.¹² That said, it might be thought that the decline has been small relative to the size (and anticipated duration) of the increase in public spending that has actually occurred. One possibility is that in replying to the question respondents have yet to have taken on board the increases that have occurred during the pandemic. Alternatively, it may be that the pandemic has persuaded voters of the need for increased spending for the time being – but that eventually they may be looking for reductions. Or perhaps some have indeed adjusted upwards their expectations of the proper size of the state. Only future research will be able to give a clear answer as to which of these possibilities is correct. All that we can say at this stage is that the views expressed by voters so far do not provide clear evidence that the pandemic has resulted in more support for a bigger state.

Law, Conformity and Trust

We now turn to the second main question addressed in this paper – what impact has the pandemic had on people’s attitudes towards adherence to the law, the value of conformity to social norms, and their levels of trust with each other and in how they are governed? Has the substantial intervention by government in people’s everyday lives undermined respect for the law and trust in government, or has the fear of contagion resulted in strong support for adherence and conformity – and perhaps undermined the extent to which people trust others? There is certainly evidence that levels of trust varied across different places and in different levels of authority (Abrams et al, 2021), but is there any sign of a shift in aggregate levels of trust across the population as a whole?

¹² This decline is more apparent if we compare the answers given by the respondents to our 2021 survey with those that they gave when first interviewed for BSA in 2018 or 2019. On that occasion, 57% said that spending should be increased, well above the 50% who express that view now. The difference is significant at the 1% level. (Paired t-test, $t=10.0$.) It is also the case that the three-point drop in support for increased spending between our 2020 and 2021 panel surveys is statistically significant at the 1% level (among those responding to both surveys) (Paired t-test, $t=2.95$.)

The Law

If respect for the law has been undermined in the wake of the pandemic, we might anticipate that fewer people now agree that ‘the law should always be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong’. However, as Table 10 shows this is a point of view that has consistently secured the assent of around two in five, and it was still at that figure (40%) in 2019. The only discernible long-term movement has been a slight drop in the proportion who disagree, which averaged 30% between 1986 and 1995 but stood at 24% between 2006 and 2015 – and was still down at 25% in the last three surveys to be conducted prior to the pandemic. This is evidently a topic on which the public have always been divided (and on which many appear to be unsure) and where the balance of opinion is apparently largely stable.

In our three pandemic surveys, 37% agreed with our statement, only slightly below the norm of the previous thirty years. There has though seemingly been some reversal of the long-term dip in the proportion who disagree; on average 31% expressed this view, though the figure slipped below 30% in our most recent survey.¹³ However, for the most part it does not appear that either insistence on adherence to the law or a lack of respect for legal obligations have become markedly more in evidence in the wake of the pandemic. Perhaps those who experienced increased levels of uncertainty and a sense of threat during the pandemic gravitated towards more authoritarian and restrictive outlook (Choma et al, 2021), but that at the same time those who regarded the authority that was being exercised as flawed may have become more inclined towards protest and resistance (Grant & Smith, 2021). If so, these reactions may have cancelled each other out, or, more likely, created a tension that helped maintained a steady state (cf. Packer, Ungson & Marsh, 2021).

Table 10 Proportion who agree/disagree that ‘The law should always be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong’ 1986-2021

	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	2000	2001	2002	2003
How much do you agree or disagree that the law should always be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	45	46	44	45	37	42	40	41	37	39	41	39	39
Neither agree nor disagree	22	23	26	25	24	28	29	29	29	31	32	31	31
Disagree	31	30	29	29	37	29	30	28	32	29	26	28	27
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1321	1281	2604	2430	1257	1306	2929	3135	3085	2980	2795	2900	3621

¹³ In fact, comparison of the answers given by respondents to the 2020 and 2021 surveys with those they gave when first interviewed on BSA in 2018 or 2019, indicates that there was a statistically significant increase in 2020 in the proportion who disagreed but that this was not true of our most recent survey. In their BSA interview 26% of 2020 respondents disagreed with the statement; the rise to 32% in 2020 is significant at the 1% level in a paired t-test ($t=5.00$). However, the 29% who disagreed in 2021 is not significantly different from the 27% who did so when first interviewed on BSA ($t=1.35$).

Table 10 (continued)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
How much do you agree or disagree that the law should always be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	40	41	39	42	39	41	41	44	40	43	40	40	38
Neither agree nor disagree	32	31	33	32	34	33	33	33	32	33	34	36	35
Disagree	26	27	27	25	26	24	24	22	26	22	25	23	24
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2609	3559	3748	3578	3990	2942	2791	2845	2855	2832	2376	3670	2400
	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P							
How much do you agree or disagree that the law should always be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong?	%	%	%	%	%	%							
Agree	40	36	40	36	39	37							
Neither agree nor disagree	34	35	35	32	30	33							
Disagree	25	28	23	32	31	29							
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3258	3065	2636	2413	3964	2217							

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face except 2020, online), apart from 2020P, 2021P, NatGen Panel.

Still, there are other aspects of attitudes to the law and authority around which there was once something close to a consensus but on which the balance of opinion has changed in recent years - and thus perhaps was more likely to shift during the pandemic. The respect that people feel is owed to authority more broadly is captured on BSA by the pattern of agreement and disagreement with the statement that 'Schools should teach children to obey authority'. Up to and including 2012, the proportion agreeing with this statement only slipped below four in five (80%) on a couple of occasions; since then, however, it has never reached that figure, while in the three surveys conducted between 2017 and 2019, the proportion had fallen on average to 71%.

Table 11 Proportion who agree/disagree that 'Schools should teach children to obey authority', 1986-2021

	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001
How much do you agree or disagree that schools should teach children to obey authority?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	83	83	84	79	78	87	82	83	81	83	83	84	82
Neither agree nor disagree	9	11	11	13	14	8	12	10	12	11	11	11	11
Disagree	7	6	5	7	7	4	5	5	4	4	5	5	6
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1321	1281	2604	2430	1257	1306	2929	3135	3085	2546	2478	2980	2795

Table 11 (continued)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
How much do you agree or disagree that schools should teach children to obey authority?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	82	83	85	84	83	83	83	81	82	83	81	79	79
Neither agree nor disagree	11	10	9	10	11	10	11	13	11	11	11	13	13
Disagree	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	7
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2900	3621	2609	3559	3748	3578	3990	2942	2791	2845	2855	2832	2376
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P					
How much do you agree or disagree that schools should teach children to obey authority?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%					
Agree	76	74	71	70	72	68	62	65					
Neither agree nor disagree	15	17	18	18	18	19	22	20					
Disagree	7	7	9	11	8	13	16	15					
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3670	2400	3258	3065	2636	2413	3964	2217					

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face except 2020, online), apart from 2020P, 2021P, NatCen Panel.

This trend towards a less ‘authoritarian’ outlook appears to have continued yet further during the pandemic. On average the three surveys conducted during this period put the proportion agreeing at just 65%.¹⁴ We thus might in part be witnessing the continuation of a long-term trend towards a more liberal outlook that may not necessarily have much to do with the pandemic itself. In any event, on this evidence it does not seem to be the case that fear of contagion has made people more likely to emphasise the need for social order rather than individual choice.

Much the same picture is painted by the pattern of response to the proposition that ‘people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences’ – a proposition to which it might be expected more would agree if the public health crisis had persuaded people of the need for everyone to stick to the law. Between 1998 and 2014 on average 80% said that they agreed with this statement, but on the occasion of the last two BSA surveys to be conducted before the pandemic, the proportion had fallen to around two-thirds. That drop has not only been maintained but has, if anything, continued yet further (to 62%) in our most recent survey.¹⁵

¹⁴ Among those who participated in the 2021 survey, 71% agreed with our statement when first interviewed on BSA in 2018 or 2019. The difference between that figure and the 65% recorded in 2021 is significant at the 1% level. (Paired t-test, $t=6.02$).

¹⁵ When respondents to the 2021 survey were first interviewed by BSA, 67% agreed, five points above the proportion in 2021. This difference is significant at the 1% level on a paired t-test ($t=4.47$). The three-point fall between 2020 and 2021 in the proportion agreeing is also significant at the 1% level among those who participated in both surveys (Paired t-test, $t=2.89$).

Table 12 Proportion who agree/disagree that 'People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences', 1986-2021

	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001
How much do you agree or disagree that people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	73	80	77	70	67	84	77	71	71	78	77	80	79
Neither agree nor disagree	20	15	15	21	17	12	16	20	20	16	16	14	14
Disagree	7	5	6	8	14	4	5	8	8	4	6	5	6
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1321	1281	2604	2430	1257	1306	2929	3135	3085	2546	2478	2980	2795
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
How much do you agree or disagree that people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	78	79	79	81	78	80	82	82	82	83	81	79	79
Neither agree nor disagree	15	13	15	14	15	14	13	13	11	11	11	13	13
Disagree	6	6	4	4	5	4	4	4	5	4	5	5	7
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2900	3621	2609	3559	3748	3578	3990	2942	2791	2845	2855	2832	2376
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P					
How much do you agree or disagree that people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%					
Agree	76	74	77	65	68	65	65	62					
Neither agree nor disagree	15	17	16	24	22	24	24	26					
Disagree	7	7	5	9	8	11	11	11					
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3670	2400	3258	3065	2636	2413	3964	2217					

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face except 2020, online), apart from 2020P, 2021P, NatCen Panel.

Still, what people say in response to broad statements may not necessarily be a good guide to how they might respond to particular breaches of the law. One area where there is a degree of ambivalence about acting illegally becomes apparent when people are asked about someone who is paid for a job in cash and does not declare that income to the tax authorities. Specifically, we asked:

A person in paid work takes on an extra weekend job and is paid in cash. They do not declare it for tax and so are £500 in pocket. Do you feel this is wrong or not wrong?

When this question was last asked before the pandemic, in 2016, 38% said that this was either 'not wrong' or only 'a bit wrong'. True, rather more, 44%, indicated that it was 'wrong', but just 12% that it was 'seriously wrong'. These figures were not untypical of those

obtained on four previous BSA surveys.¹⁶ However, on the two panel surveys we conducted during the pandemic, the proportion who said the behaviour was ‘seriously wrong’ rose to 21% in 2020 and 18% in 2021. There was also a similar increase in the proportion saying ‘seriously wrong’ – from 21% in 2016 to 36% and then 30% on our two panel surveys – in response to a similar question about an unemployed person pocketing £500 and not reporting it to the benefit office. However, in this latter case the figures for ‘seriously wrong’ recorded during the pandemic were far from unprecedented – the proportion was as high as 44% in 2002, and 38%-39% in both 2008 and 2010. Equally, in the case of the employed person not declaring income to the tax authorities, the proportion who said it was ‘not wrong’ or only ‘a bit wrong’ was, at 38% in 2020 and 40% in 2021, little changed. It is thus far from clear that there has been a marked change of attitude on this subject.

Political Protest

Meanwhile, one area where the public health regulations that banned or limited social mixing aroused particular controversy was that they could make it illegal to gather in order to demonstrate against a government action, including action taken in handling the pandemic. For some this represented an unwarranted limitation on freedom of expression in a democracy, and there was much discussion in particular of the ethics of holding ‘Black Lives Matter’ demonstrations in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by a policeman in the USA in May 2020 (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2021). For others, in contrast, the need to support the collective action being taken to reduce the transmission of disease during the pandemic was more important than the right to engage in political protest.

In practice, the pandemic does seem to have been accompanied by slightly lower levels of support for allowing those who wish to protest against a government action to organise ‘protest marches’ and demonstrations’. On our 2020 panel survey, 28% said that such marches and demonstrations should ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ not be allowed, as did 26% in 2021. Both figures are up on the 20% who expressed this view when the question was last posed on BSA before the pandemic, in 2016.¹⁷ At the same time, although still very much a minority view, there was an increase from 9% in 2016 to 15% in both 2020 and 2021 in the proportion who said that those who wished to protest against a government action should ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ not be allowed to organise ‘public meetings’.¹⁸ It looks as though at the margin at least the pandemic resulted in people being a little less supportive of anti-government protests, an outcome that is, perhaps, all the more surprising given the trend towards a less ‘authoritarian’ outlook we have observed on other items.

¹⁶ On average in four surveys conducted between 1996 and 2006, 42% said such behaviour was ‘not wrong’ or ‘a bit wrong’, 41% that it was ‘wrong’ and 12%, ‘seriously wrong’.

¹⁷ Which in turn is similar to average readings of 21% obtained on four previous occasions between 1994 and 2006.

¹⁸ The two figures recorded in the pandemic are not only higher than those obtained in 2016, but also on eight other BSA surveys between 1985 and 2006.

Conformity, Social Norms and Othering

Laws are, of course, an expression of and a means of securing adherence to a society's social norms. The fear of contagion during a pandemic might result in people being more likely to regard those who contravene those norms as a 'threat' and thus as 'other' – indeed anyone who is not thought by someone to be part of their 'community' might be regarded as 'other'. Social norms also sometimes embody the collective values upheld by most people in a society, values that in a pandemic they may be more likely to think should be respected.

Table 13 shows how people have responded when asked whether they agree or disagree that 'young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values'. The long-term trend it reveals is similar to that we saw earlier in respect of stiffer sentences and obeying authority, that is, a move in recent years in a more liberal direction. Until 2014 the proportion who agreed with this statement rarely fell below two-thirds (66%). However, since then it has never matched that figure, and in the last three surveys to be conducted before the pandemic averaged just 58%. Our three pandemic surveys suggest that this trend has been maintained and may well have continued further – on average just 54% agreed with the statement.¹⁹

Table 13 Proportion who agree/disagree that 'Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values', 1986-2021

	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
How much do you agree or disagree that young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	66	67	62	67	60	71	58	67	66	63	64	66	71
Neither agree nor disagree	20	21	22	20	25	22	24	20	22	21	24	24	20
Disagree	13	12	15	11	14	6	16	11	10	14	10	9	8
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1321	1281	2604	2430	1257	1306	2929	3135	3085	1080	2531	2450	2980
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
How much do you agree or disagree that young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	68	68	68	71	74	73	77	72	76	69	76	71	66
Neither agree nor disagree	21	20	21	20	17	19	16	19	16	18	15	18	22
Disagree	9	10	9	7	8	7	6	7	7	11	8	9	10
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2795	2900	3621	2609	3559	3748	3578	3990	2942	2791	2845	2855	2832

¹⁹ Among those who responded to the 2021 survey, 59% agreed when first interviewed for BSA in 2018 or 2019, five points above the proportion in 2021. This difference is statistically significant at the 1% level on a paired t-test ($t=4.99$).

Table 13 (continued)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2020	2021P
How much do you agree or disagree that young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	66	64	59	57	56	60	56	52	54
Neither agree nor disagree	20	22	24	27	26	24	27	25	29
Disagree	13	12	15	15	17	14	17	23	18
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2376	3670	2400	3258	3065	2636	2413	3964	2217

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face except 2020, online), apart from 2020P, 2021P, NatCen Panel.

Social norms can, of course, change over time. One of the most dramatic changes has occurred in respect of attitudes towards same sex relationships. Illegal in the case of men in England & Wales until 1967 (and in Scotland until 1980), by 2005 it became possible to secure legal recognition of a same sex partnership, while since 2015 same sex couples have been able to marry. These legal changes reflect a revolution in social attitudes (Swales and Attar Taylor, 2017). As recently as 1987 nearly three-quarters (74%) said that 'sexual relations between two adults of the same sex' was 'always' or 'mostly wrong'. However, by 2005 this proportion had fallen to 39%, and in the last three surveys conducted before the pandemic stood on average at just 16%. In an almost complete reversal of the position three decades earlier, as many as 67% now said that same sex relationships were 'not at all wrong', and indeed expressions of what are regarded as 'homophobia' have now widely become socially unacceptable.

However, we might wonder whether the pandemic might have stimulated a wish for social conformity that has reversed some of this trend towards an acceptance of sexual diversity. There is some sign that it may have done so. The proportion saying that same sex relationships are 'not all wrong' dropped a little to 63% on both the two panel surveys we conducted during the pandemic²⁰. It seems that the new social norm of recognising and valuing same sex relationships may have been eroded a little during the pandemic.

The same, however, cannot be said of attitudes towards another group who might be thought to be at risk of being regarded as 'other' in a pandemic, that is, migrants. Table 14 (overleaf) shows how during the last decade people have responded when asked about two forms of threat or opportunity that might be thought to arise from immigration (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) - its economic (realistic) and cultural (symbolic) impact, - as follows.

²⁰ This compares with a figure of 70% when those who participated in the 2021 survey were first interviewed in 2018 or 2019. The difference is significant at the 1% level in a paired t-test ($t=6.97$).

*On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is extremely bad and 10 is extremely good, would you say it is generally **bad** or **good** for Britain's economy that migrants come to Britain from other countries?"*

*And on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is undermined and 10 is enriched, would you say that Britain's cultural life is generally **undermined** or **enriched** by migrants coming to live here from other countries?*

When this question was first asked on BSA in 2011, people were twice as likely to give a score that indicated that migrants were bad for the economy (42%) than that they were good (21%), while those whose score indicated that they thought that immigration undermined Britain's cultural life (40%) also clearly outnumbered who reckoned it enriched that life (26%). In the three years immediately prior to the pandemic, that picture was reversed. On average, just 16% said that migration was bad for the economy, while 47% stated that it was good. Similarly, only 20% felt that migration undermined cultural life, while 45% said it was enriching.

Table 14 Perceived Impact of migrants on the economy and cultural life 2011-21

	2011	2013	2015	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2021P
Perceived impact of migrants who come to Britain from other countries								
Impact on Britain's economy	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Bad (0-3)	42	39	28	17	16	14	10	11
Neither (4-6)	36	38	38	35	36	38	35	36
Good (7-10)	21	21	34	47	47	47	54	53
Impact on Britain's cultural life	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Undermined (0-3)	40	38	33	23	18	18	16	14
Neither (4-6)	33	34	35	32	36	35	34	37
Enriched (7-10)	26	27	31	44	45	45	50	49
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3311	3244	2167	1025	952	3224	2413	2217

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face), apart from 2020P, 2021P, NatCen Panel.

Yet even though border control has been used as a way of trying to limit the spread of the virus, the pandemic has witnessed a continuation of the trend towards a more favourable attitude towards the impact of migrants. The two panel surveys we conducted during the pandemic showed a further increase in the proportion who think that migrants are good for the economy (to 53-54%), and a similar increase in the proportion who believe that they enrich the country's cultural life (to 49%-50%).²¹ It seems that Britain continues to have a

²¹ When first interviewed in 2018 or 2019, 51% of those who participated in the 2021 survey said that migrants were good for the economy. The difference between the scores they gave in 2018/9 and those in 2021 is significant at the 1% level on a paired t-test of differences of means ($t=5.63$). Meanwhile in their initial interview 48% indicated that migrants enriched cultural life. The difference between the scores they gave in 2018/9 and those in 2021 is significant at the 5% level on a paired t-test of differences of means ($t=2.52$).

very different outlook on the impact of migration from the one that was in evidence prior to the 2016 EU referendum.

Trust

But what of people's willingness to trust others? It might be thought that the fear of contagion – and the social distancing that was required during the pandemic – meant that people became warier of others (Aassve et al., 2020). To assess whether this might be the case we asked this version of a question that has often been used to measure social trust (Li et al., 2018) and has appeared frequently on BSA in recent years:

Generally speaking, would you say that people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? Please select the option that comes closest to your own view.

People can almost always be trusted

People can usually be trusted

You usually can't be too careful in dealing with people

You almost always can't be too careful in dealing with people

Can't choose

Table 15 Trust in People (Four-Point Scale) 1998-2021

	1998	2004	2007	2008	2014	2017	2018	2019	2020P	2021P
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Almost always trusted	2	1	3	2	2	3	3	2	5	5
Usually be trusted	45	45	42	43	45	51	50	47	42	44
(Trusted)	(47)	(46)	(45)	(45)	(47)	(54)	(53)	(48)	(47)	(48)
Usually can't be too careful	44	45	41	42	40	33	34	36	39	37
Almost always can't be too careful	6	5	10	10	7	9	6	8	11	11
(Can't be too careful)	(49)	(51)	(51)	(51)	(48)	(42)	(40)	(44)	(49)	(48)
<i>Unweighted base</i>	807	853	906	1986	1580	1595	2309	1741	2413	2217

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face), apart from 2020P, 2021P, NatCen Panel.

Table 15 reveals that this question has typically uncovered a relatively even balance between those who say that people can 'almost always' or 'usually' be trusted, and those who indicate that you 'usually' or 'almost always' cannot be too careful in dealing with people. True, in 2017 and 2018 there appeared to be a shift towards more people saying that people can be trusted, but much of this reversed in 2019, while our two pandemic readings are not dissimilar to those obtained before 2017.²²

²²Not all of those who participated in our 2021 survey were asked this question about social trust when they were first interviewed by BSA. But among those that were, 53% said that people can be trusted, while 43% indicated that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people. When they responded in 2021 the equivalent figures for these respondents were 50% and 47% respectively. The change in the proportion saying that people can be trusted is significant at the 1% level in a paired t-test ($t=3.47$). However, given the evidence of our 2019 survey, we cannot rule out the possibility that some of this change occurred before the pandemic.

Meanwhile, an alternative question on social trust that presents people with simply a dichotomous choice between ‘most people can be trusted’ and ‘you can’t be too careful in dealing with people’ (Hall, 1999) and which was asked on all three of our pandemic surveys, found on average 45% saying that people could be trusted, and 54% that you cannot be too careful. These figures not only point to a higher level of trust than the 41% who in 2019 said that people can be trusted (in response to this dichotomous question), but also is a little above the 42% recorded on average on a dozen BSAs between 1997 and 2013 (Curtice et al., 2020). In short, there is apparently no consistent evidence that social trust has either increased or fallen to any significant degree during the pandemic.

Whatever may or may not have happened to social trust, it is often argued that trust in government is crucial during a public health crisis. If people have trust and confidence in how they are being governed, they may be more likely to adhere to the public health regulations intended to help control the pandemic (Devine et al., 2020). But that trust might be eroded if people think the regulations are unnecessary or the public health crisis is being ineffectively handled (Lalot et al, 2020).

Low levels of trust in government has been the subject of concern and analysis for some time (Clarke et al., 2018; Curtice and Montagu, 2020a; Jennings et al., 2017). The reason is apparent in Table 16, which shows how people have responded since the mid-1980s when asked:

How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?

Just about always

Most of the time

Only some of the time

Almost never

People’s answers suggest there was a marked decline in trust in government in the early 1990s (when the then Conservative government was the subject of allegations of ‘sleaze’), a decline which has never been fully reversed since. Rather, even lower levels of trust were recorded on occasion, most notably in 2009 in the immediate wake of the MPs’ expenses scandal, and again just before the pandemic in 2019, when the Brexit process was stuck in a parliamentary stalemate. In comparison with the 15% who said in 2019 that they trust governments ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’, the average figure of 23% recorded on our three pandemic surveys represented something of an improvement – indeed the level of trust now appears to be rather higher than in any non-election year since 2002.²³

²³As can be seen from the table, trust in government has usually increased somewhat in the immediate wake of a general election.

Table 16 Level of trust in British governments, 1986-2021

	1986	1987 (1)	1987 (2)	1991	1994	1996	1997 (1)	1997 (2)	1998	2000	2001	2002	2003	2005
Trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/ Most of the time	40	37	47	33	24	22	25	33	28	16	28	26	18	26
Only some of the time	48	46	43	50	53	53	48	52	52	58	50	47	49	47
Almost never	12	11	9	14	21	23	23	12	17	24	20	24	31	26
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1548	1410	3414	1445	1137	1180	1355	3615	2071	2293	1099	2287	3299	3167
	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2016	2017	2019	2020P	2020	2021P	
Trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Just about always/ Most of the time	19	29	16	20	22	18	17	22	20	15	23	23	24	
Only some of the time	46	45	42	45	45	49	51	51	48	49	53	47	49	
Almost never	34	23	40	33	31	32	32	26	29	34	23	30	27	
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1077	992	1143	1081	2215	1103	1063	974	2986	1088	2413	1332	2217	

Source: British Social Attitudes (face to face except 2020, online), apart from 1987 (2); 1997 (2), British Election Study; 2020P & 2021P NatCen Mixed Mode Panel

Columns that are shaded indicate they are taken from surveys conducted shortly after a general election. The 2016 survey was conducted after the EU referendum.

Much the same trend is apparent when people are asked ‘how much do you trust politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner’. Scepticism about the truthfulness of politicians has long been widespread, and on the 17 occasions that the question was posed on BSA between 1994 and 2019 on average nearly a half (49%) said they ‘almost never’ trusted them to tell the truth. Against that backdrop, the average figure of 42% recorded in our three pandemic surveys would appear to represent a considerable improvement.

However, caution needs to be exercised before concluding that the pandemic may have occasioned some restoration of the level of trust in government and politicians (Curtice and Scholes, 2021). Just before the pandemic the UK left the European Union, an outcome that might have instilled a measure of trust and confidence in how they were being governed among those who voted in favour of Brexit. Indeed, almost all of the increase in trust since 2019 registered by our three pandemic surveys occurred among those who voted Leave in 2016. The proportion of Leave voters who said that they trust governments ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’ increased from 12% in 2019 to an average of 30% in our three pandemic surveys, whereas among Remain voters the increase was only from 14% to 19%. Meanwhile, only 38% of Leave voters said that they ‘almost never’ trust politicians to tell the truth, down from 61% in 2019,

while among Remain voters there was barely any change (43% in 2019 and 42% in our three pandemic surveys). On our measures at least, it looks as though the pandemic itself has not had much longer-term impact on levels of trust, and that the fact that it has been higher than it was beforehand is largely accounted for by the implementation of Brexit just weeks before lockdown was first implemented.²⁴

Conclusion

During the last two years, the pandemic has had a profound impact on the country's social life and its economic activity - and even now the route out of the disruption it has caused still appears to be a highly uncertain one. Yet our analysis suggests that the pandemic has had relatively little impact on the balance of public opinion on both (i) inequality and the role of the state in supporting people via the welfare system, and (ii) the bonds of law, conformity and trust that bind (or divide) society. In both of these areas our surveys have mostly pointed to marginal shifts of attitude at most, and in some instances, most notably a shift (for the most part) towards a less authoritarian outlook towards the role of law and conformity, the movement that has been apparent in our pandemic surveys appears to be a continuation of a trend that was already in place. Rather than having to confront an apparent 'turning-point', for the most part the pattern of attitudes and beliefs with which policy makers will have to deal when the pandemic is finally over will be a relatively familiar one, including not least on the perennial debate about what to do about inequality in Britain.

However, the pandemic did occur at a time when some important attitudes had already recently shifted in a reverse direction and of which perhaps the pandemic proved to be a finely tuned 'barometer'. The years immediately before the pandemic witnessed a substantial reversal of the relative unpopularity of welfare provision for those of working age that had set in after New Labour came to power and pursued a strategy of trying to use welfare to get people back into work (Hills, 2004), and which had been reflected in the cutbacks implemented by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. At the same time, there had also been signs of a reaction against the financial austerity that had been pursued since 2010. These developments ensured that the climate of public opinion was more likely to be supportive of the help that the government provided during the pandemic to those whose livelihoods were now under threat - though whether the public will continue to be supportive of higher levels of taxation and spending beyond the pandemic remains to be seen.

²⁴ That is not to deny that in the early weeks of the pandemic there was a 'rally to the flag' that resulted in an increase in levels of trust (Davies et al., 2021; Fancourt et al., 2021; Jennings, 2020). However, this effect had disappeared by the time of our first survey, not least because of the revelation of Dominic Cummings' trip to Barnard Castle in May 2020 (BBC, 2020b).

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