
Public attitudes to poverty and welfare, 1983- 2011

**Analysis using British Social
Attitudes data**

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone.

Figure conventions

1. In time series line charts, survey readings are indicated by data markers. While the line between data markers indicates an overall pattern, where there is no data marker the position of the line cannot be taken as an accurate reading for that year.
2. Full data for the time series line charts is presented in the accompanying Appendix.
3. The markers of political party in power in the time series line charts reflect either the political party in power or, where two parties were in power within a given year, the party which was elected to power in that year.
4. The markers of UK recessions in the time series line charts indicate whether the UK was in recession at any point within a given year (rather than precisely indicating the months in which the UK was in recession).

Executive Summary

Aims and approach

The aim of this analysis was to explore how far patterns of change in public attitudes to poverty and welfare relate to (and may be explained by) political and economic developments and experiences, both at the individual and societal level.

Focussing on long-standing measures of attitudes in these areas, analysis of data collected through the British Social Attitudes survey over the past three decades was undertaken to explore:

- public attitudes to poverty and welfare and how these have changed over time;
- whether attitudes have changed in consistent ways and directions for different sections of society (defined by age, party political affiliation and socio-economic grouping); and
- how attitudinal changes link with, and might be explained by, political party policy and rhetoric and economic circumstances (both of the individual and within Britain as a whole).

Key findings

Attitudes to and expectations for poverty levels are closely linked to economic circumstances and bear little relation to the targets and policies of political parties in power. However, changes in perceptions of causality reflect shifts over time in governmental approaches in this area.

- Over the past three decades, the ways in which the public define poverty have remained relatively stable and do not appear to have been influenced by economic circumstances or government policy.
- Assessments of and expectations for poverty levels in Britain are closely linked to current or recent economic experience and bear little relation to the focus of government policy or targets, though perceptions of past and current poverty levels did become more positive during the period Labour was in office. Perceptions of current poverty levels and predictions of how these will change in the future are less positive during and after times of economic hardship.
- While views about the causes of poverty have remained generally stable, the popularity of a ‘societal’ explanation has declined to some extent in favour of an ‘individualistic’ explanation. This trend was particularly pronounced for Labour Party supporters during the period in which Labour was in government.

Current attitudes and expectations for child poverty sit at odds with the targets of successive governments, yet public perceptions of its causes favour individualistic over societal explanations, reflecting the current direction of Coalition policy.

- While the majority of the public perceive there to be significant levels of child poverty in Britain, perceptions of how these levels have changed in the past decade and are likely to change in the next ten years are far from positive.
- The public endorse the importance of reducing child poverty and view this as a task for government. While they recognise its causes are multi-faceted, the most

popular explanations for child poverty relate to the characteristics and behaviour of parents and families, rather than broader societal factors.

- Those aged 65+ and Conservative Party supporters are the least likely to perceive significant levels of child poverty in Britain and the most likely to subscribe to a societal explanation for its existence. Those in the lowest social class are the most likely to view its causes as societal rather than individualistic.

While expectations for future levels of poverty are far from optimistic, support for welfare spending, which can be regarded as one potential solution, is at a historical low and appears to be moving in line with political policy and rhetoric, rather than economic circumstances.

- Support for government spending in general, on welfare benefits in particular and on a range of specific benefit types, is historically low.
- Support for spending on welfare benefits has declined over the past three decades, with this decline being most marked among Labour Party supporters, suggesting their views have followed the direction of their party's policies.
- Attitudes to welfare spending bear little relation to economic circumstances, even among those groups most likely to be affected by them and to require welfare provision as a result. However, there is some evidence that unemployment benefits are prioritised among benefit types in times of economic hardship.

Where attitudes to the welfare state and welfare recipients have changed over time, they have become more negative, with change being particularly pronounced among Labour Party supporters and the young.

- Views about the extent to which welfare recipients are 'deserving' have remained relatively stable over time, with the exception of the belief that the unemployed could find a job; opinions on this issue are strongly linked to experience of recession but also became much more negative during the period in which Labour was in office.
- The view that the generosity of welfare benefits encourages dependence has become more prevalent; much of this change occurred when the Labour Party was in office and economic circumstances appear to have had little impact.
- Changes in attitudes have been concentrated among the youngest in society and Labour Party supporters. The views of different social classes have behaved in very similar ways, suggesting attitudes in this area have a stronger relationship with political policy and rhetoric than with economic circumstances or considerations.

1 Introduction

Poverty and welfare have been a substantive area of policy focus for all recent governments in Britain. Since its inception in 1983, the British Social Attitudes survey has sought to regularly measure public attitudes to these issues, so as to obtain and disseminate accurate data on what the public thinks about these topics and how views are changing – to encourage policy to be formulated and evaluated with reference to the views of all sections of the population.

This report examines how public attitudes to poverty and welfare have changed over the past three decades. Its focus is on discerning how far changes in attitudes are linked to particular economic circumstances (either of the individual or within Britain as a whole) and to the policies and rhetoric of particular political parties. Inevitably, such an approach does not allow us to draw conclusions about the causality of attitudinal change with complete certainty; however, it allows us to begin to untangle how public attitudes behave in particular political and economic circumstances, why this might be the case, whether the nature and direction of these relationships have changed over time and how confident we might be in predicting how attitudes in these areas might change in the future.

1.1 Methodology

Analysis was undertaken of data collected as part of the British Social Attitudes survey. Initiated in 1983, British Social Attitudes is an annual cross-sectional study of the British public's attitudes to a range of political, social and moral issues, with a primary aim being the analysis of long-term attitudinal change and the factors underpinning this.

The analysis involved two strands. Firstly, long-standing measures of public attitudes towards poverty and welfare were mapped against both the political parties in power across the duration of the study and the occurrence of recession within the UK (which was interpreted as a broad measure of economic hardship). These population-level analyses enabled us to assess how far developments in public attitudes have moved in line with the directions of government policy and economic circumstances, at the societal level.

Secondly, cross-sectional sub-group analysis was undertaken to depict how the attitudes of particular groups have changed, both over time and in line with changes in the political and economic circumstances within Britain described above. This enabled an exploration of a number of issues relating to the relationship between attitudinal change and political and economic factors, both at the individual and the societal level. For instance, do the views of supporters of particular political parties respond in certain ways when 'their' party is in power?; do the attitudes of those most likely to be affected by economic hardship change in a more pronounced way in times of recession?

Specifically, cross-sectional sub-group analysis was undertaken by:

- **Age:** respondents were assigned to four age groups of a roughly equal size.
- **Political party identification:** British Social Attitudes includes a series of questions as standard to identify the political party, if any, with which each respondent identifies.

- **Social class:** the way in which this concept has been measured in social survey research and official statistics has evolved over time. As our focus was on examining attitudinal change in specific sub groups across the life-time of the survey, the primary interest was in using a measure which is broadly consistent across the past three decade. Analysis was undertaken using the Goldthorpe-Heath 5-category class scheme between 1987 (when it was first introduced on the survey) and 2000, and the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NSSEC) in 2001 and thereafter. This approach involved the creation of five categories which are conceptually alike over time – traditionally labelled as ‘Salarial’, ‘Intermediate (white collar)’, ‘Independent’, ‘Intermediate (blue collar)’ and ‘Working Class’. The subsequent analyses by social class present data for the two largest groups over time – Salarial (termed ‘highest social class’) and working class (termed ‘lowest social class’).

The proportions of respondents in each sub group at three points in time across the life-time of the study are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.1 Respondent political party identification, social class and age, 1987, 1999 and 2011			
<i>Base: All respondents</i>	<i>British Social Attitudes</i>		
	1987	1999	2011
Political party identification	%	%	%
Conservative	38	25	27
Labour	29	43	32
Liberal Democrat	7	10	7
None	8	13	19
Social class	%	%	%
Salarial (highest social class)	24	29	40
Intermediate (white collar)	22	22	16
Independent	7	8	8
Intermediate (blue collar)	5	7	12
Working class (lowest social class)	36	31	22
Age group	%	%	%
18-34	33	28	28
35-49	28	29	27
50-64	23	23	23
65+	16	20	21
<i>Bases</i>	<i>2847</i>	<i>3143</i>	<i>3311</i>

Inevitably, the composition of the sub groups defined by the three aforementioned characteristics and the proportions of the population in each have not remained static over time. As shown in Table 1, breakdowns of the population by political party identification, social class and age have fluctuated over the past three decades – as a

result of various developments including an ageing population and changing birth rate, changing political allegiances and developments in the nature and composition of the workforce. It is important to remember that, for example, the attitudes of Labour supporters may change over time because the composition of this group of supporters has changed, rather than as a result of the views of those who consistently support the Labour Party necessarily changing. While this analysis will demonstrate how attitudes have changed at a societal level and within particular sub-sections of society (and how this links with political and economic developments), it cannot ascertain how individual attitude change links with political and economic developments, due to the cross-sectional design of the study.

1.2 Structure

The report contains four substantive chapters, specifically examining public attitudes to poverty, child poverty, welfare spending and the welfare state and welfare recipients. Each chapter presents attitudinal change over time for a range of measures, mapped against experience of recession in the UK and the identity of the political parties in government. These data are used to consider whether developments in attitudes are more strongly related to economic circumstances or political policy and rhetoric or whether neither factor appears to have had an impact. The initial conclusions drawn are then further explored through the analysis of attitudinal change over time for specific sub groups using the three socio-demographic variables described above –age group, political party affiliation and social class. These analyses are used to demonstrate whether attitudinal change at the societal level within Britain is consistently reflected in all groups or whether it is concentrated in particular groups and how this might be explained on the basis of links between developments in public attitudes, economic circumstances and political policy and rhetoric.

The report ends with a conclusion which seeks to identify the broad direction of change in public attitudes to poverty and welfare over the past three decades and the extent to which economic circumstances and political policy and rhetoric appear to have influenced the direction and level of change. On the basis of these conclusions, we suggest what this might mean for public attitudes in this area over the coming decade.

2 Attitudes to poverty

- Over the past three decades, the ways in which the public define poverty have remained relatively stable and do not appear to have been influenced by economic circumstances or government policy.
- Assessments of and expectations for poverty levels in Britain closely reflect economic circumstances and bear little relation to the aims or focus of government policy or targets in this area (though perceptions of current past levels of poverty became more positive when Labour was in office).
- While views about the causes of poverty have remained generally stable, the popularity of a societal explanation has declined to some extent in favour of an individualistic explanation. This trend was particularly pronounced for Labour Party supporters during the Labour administration.

2.1 Poverty: overview of policy background

Poverty levels in Britain increased rapidly during the 1980s and early 1990s, to the highest levels in Western Europe. The election of a Labour government in 1997 was accompanied by an unprecedented focus on poverty, with a range of policies designed to achieve its reduction and to meet a set of targets, including a target to eradicate child poverty completely by 2020. Since 1997 some modest reductions in poverty, as defined by the government, have been achieved, though during the recession of the late 2000s these have begun to be reversed. Over this period, different groups have become more and less likely to be 'in poverty'. Using a definition of poverty as having an income of less than 60% of the median in a given year, the proportion of pensioners in poverty declined from 35% in 1991 to 17% in 2010/11, while the opposite trend occurred for working-age adults without children over a longer time-period (7% in 1981, 20% in 2010/11) (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012).

2.2 Attitudes to poverty; change over time

Since the mid-1980s the British Social Attitudes survey has regularly included a set of questions designed to measure public definitions of poverty, perceptions about its prevalence and understandings of its causes. This section considers how the public's views on these issues have changed over the past 25 years and whether they appear

to have responded or been influenced by changes in economic circumstances and political party policy and rhetoric.

2.2.1 Definitions of poverty

As poverty is a subjective construct, any discussion of public attitudes in this area must be underpinned by a consideration of the range and prevalence of definitions adopted by the public. Since the mid-1980s, we have sought to capture the public's understanding of the term 'poverty' by asking the following series of 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?

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

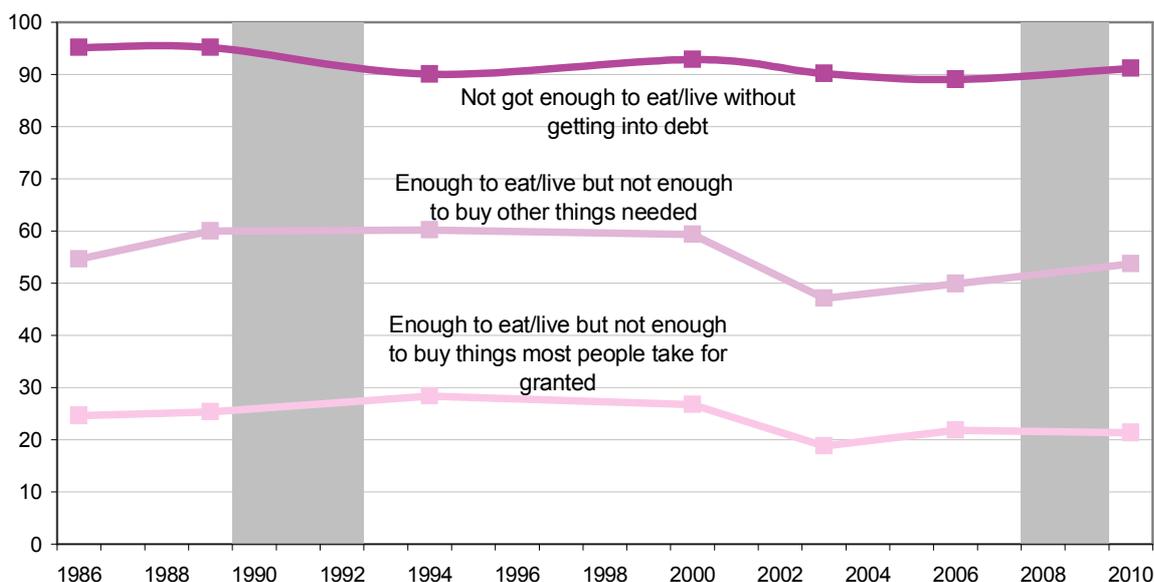
... they had not got enough to eat and live without getting into debt?

These different options reflect academic debates around definitions of poverty, and can be regarded as encapsulating definitions involving relative poverty, minimum standards and absolute destitution (Taylor-Gooby and Martin, 2008). However, it should be borne in mind that these definitions in themselves should not be seen as static, given individual definitions of what an individual "really needed" or the things "most people take for granted" will also change over time.

In 2009, when these questions were last fielded, around nine in ten (91%) respondents accepted an 'absolute destitution' conception of poverty, stating that someone would be in poverty if they had not got enough to eat and live without getting into debt. However, there was less consensus concerning more lenient conceptions. Slightly more than half (54%) thought someone would be in poverty if they had enough to eat and live, but not enough to buy the other things they needed. Only around one in five (21%) thought someone would be 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.

As shown in Figure 1, the proportions of the public subscribing to different definitions of poverty have remained relatively stable over the last three decades, though there has been a greater level of fluctuation around the two more 'lenient' measures.

Figure 2.1 Public definitions of poverty, by UK recessions, 1986-2010



While we might expect definitions to be affected by experiences of economic hardship (when what individuals regard as ‘poverty’ might become more commonly encountered and thus acceptable or concerning circumstances to them) this does not appear to have been the case. The extent to which different benchmarks for poverty are accepted by the public in 2009 were very similar to those measured in 1986 (though this does not mean underlying definitions of terms such as “things most people take for granted” have not evolved over the same time period).

2.2.2 Levels of poverty

As there is not a shared consensus among the public as to what constitutes ‘poverty’, estimates of its prevalence will inevitably be influenced by the types of circumstances the individual considers it appropriate to measure when considering this concept.

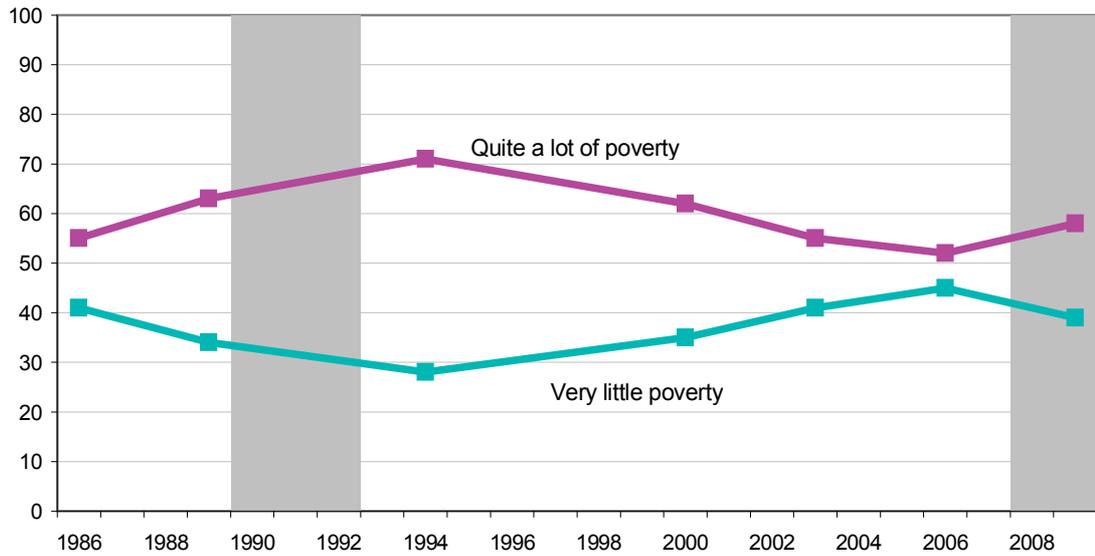
To capture public perceptions of the extent of poverty in Britain, we have asked respondents since 1986:

Some people say there is very little real poverty in Britain today. Others say there is quite a lot. Which come closest to your view ... that there is very little real poverty in Britain, or, that there is quite a lot?

In 2009, around four in ten (39%) thought there was “very little” real poverty in Britain, while almost six in ten (58%) thought there was “quite a lot”. Perceptions of the levels of poverty in Britain have varied considerably over the past three decades and can be seen to link both with economic circumstances and the direction of government policy.

We might expect the view that poverty is widespread to increase in times of recession, with individuals being more likely to hear about or know personally individuals or families who meet their definition of poverty. The data in Figure 2 confirm that this is the case, with the proportion claiming there to be “quite a lot” of poverty in Britain increasing after the recession of the early 1990s and during the later 2000s recession.

Figure 2.2 Public perceptions of levels of poverty in Britain, by UK recessions, 1986-2009



However, the view that there is “quite a lot” of poverty in Britain also increased during much of the Conservatives’ term in office, as shown in Figure 3, and declined for the first eight years of the period the Labour Party was in government. This may have resulted from the focus of the Blair government on poverty reduction and the moderate success which they experienced in relation to this. The fluctuations in the perception that there is “quite a lot” of poverty in Britain to some extent mirror changes in actual poverty levels – though this relationship may result from media coverage of this issue, rather than respondents’ own experiences of poverty.

Figure 2.3 Public perceptions of levels of poverty in Britain, by political party in government, 1986-2009



To ascertain how individuals think levels of poverty in Britain have changed in the past and may change in the future, we asked respondents the following questions:

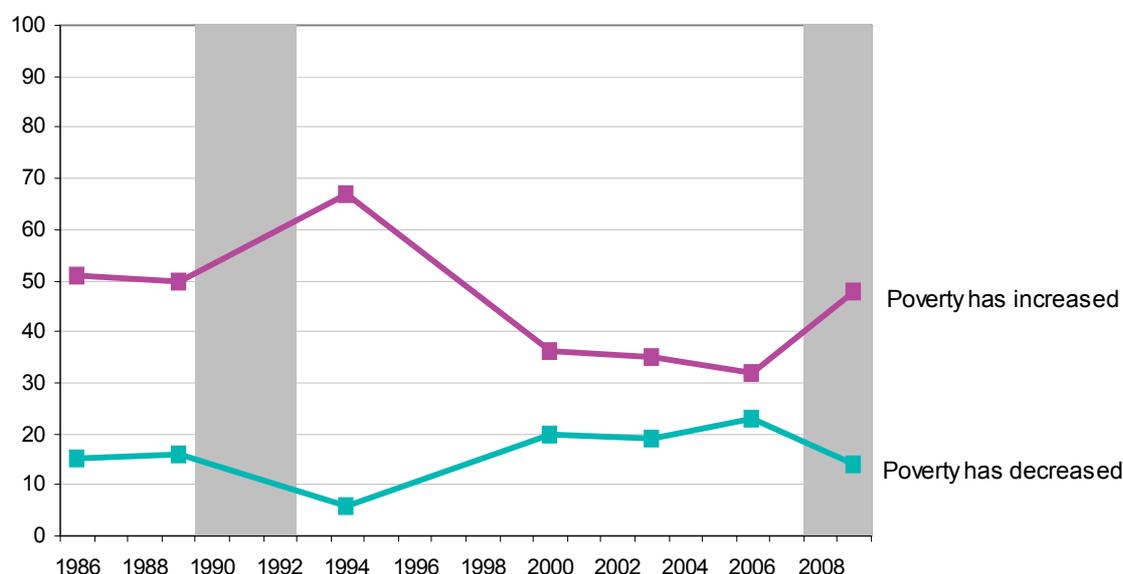
Over the last ten years, do you think that poverty in Britain has been increasing, decreasing or staying at about the same level?

And over the next ten years, do you think that poverty in Britain will increase, decrease, or, stay at about the same level?

As shown in Figure 4, the public's view regarding recent changes in the prevalence of poverty in 2009 was very similar to that reported in 1986. In 2009, almost half (48%) thought poverty had increased in the last ten years, around one third (34%) thought it had stayed the same and slightly more than one in ten (14%) thought it had decreased. Interestingly, these assessments are more negative than an examination of the public's assessment of poverty levels over time would have suggested. In 1986, 58% thought there was "quite a lot" of poverty in Britain, compared with 62% in 2009. Yet the vast majority think that poverty levels have increased or stayed the same within that period. As well as reflecting issues with recall regarding the precise period being considered, this apparent contradiction could also reflect changing definitions of poverty, meaning a respondent might classify an individual as being in poverty in 2009, who might not have met this definition in 1999.

As with estimates of current levels of poverty, perceptions of recent changes in poverty levels are clearly linked to economic circumstances, with the view that poverty has increased in the last 10 years increasing sharply after the early 1990s recession and during the late 2000s recession. This trend suggests that, when reflecting on the past decade, respondents may be overly influenced by current and recent experiences.

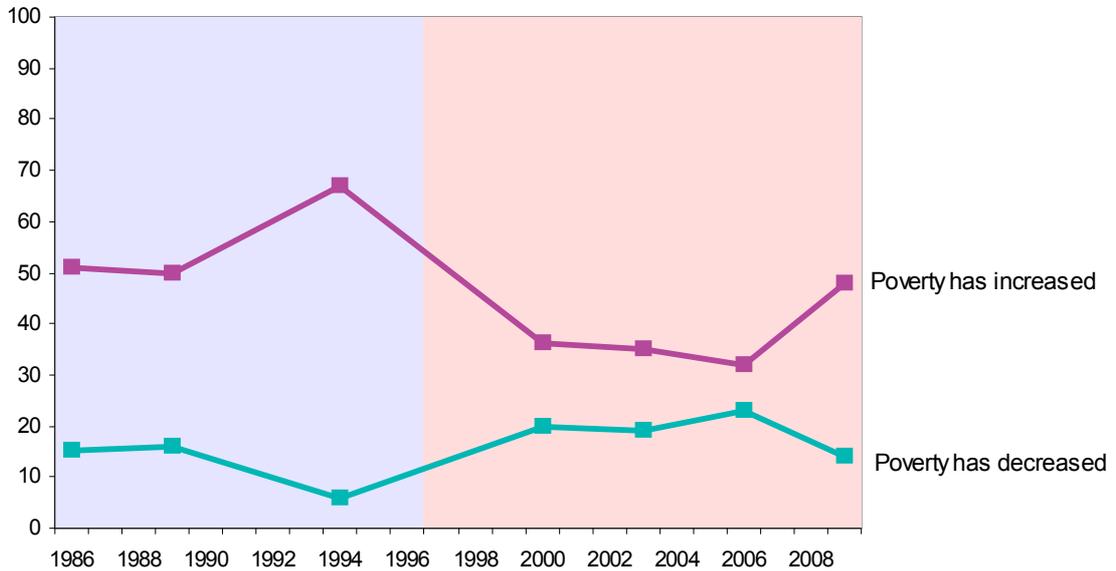
Figure 2.4 Views on changes in poverty levels in past decade, by UK experience of recession, 1986-2009



In 1994 the view that poverty had decreased during the last ten years stood at a historical low, being expressed by just 6%. While the proportion of the public expressing this view more than trebled to 20% in the next six years, the absence of data for the intervening period means that we cannot conclude with any certainty whether this change was prompted by the end of recession or the focus of the Labour government, elected in 1997, on reducing poverty and public perceptions of its success in doing so. Nevertheless, it is clear from Figure 5 that, regardless of economic circumstances, public assessments of trends in poverty levels over the past

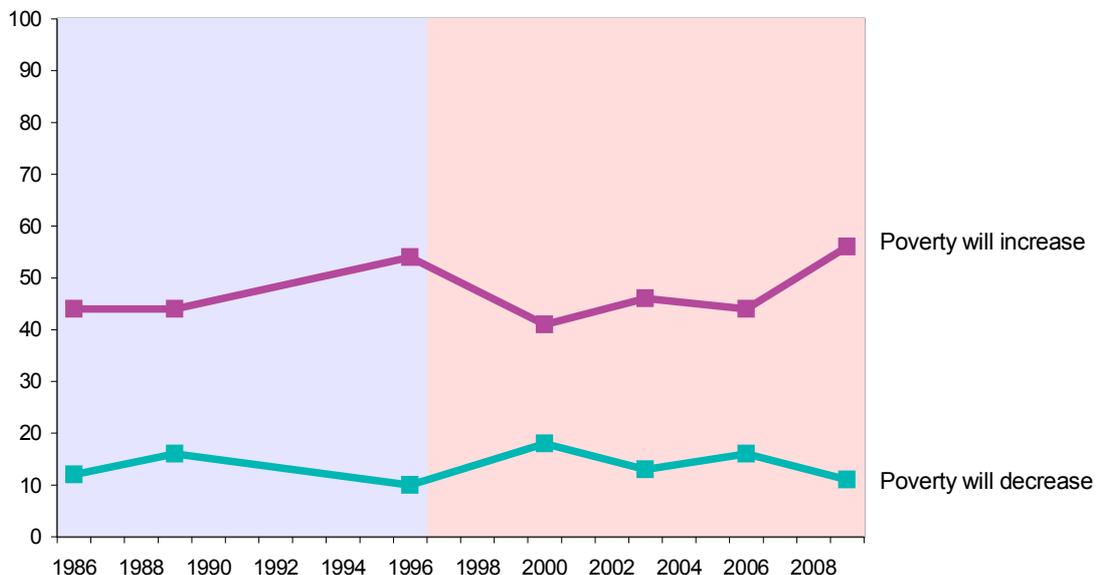
decade were generally more positive under the Labour government than the Conservative government which preceded it.

Figure 2.5 Views on changes in poverty levels in past decade, by political party in government, 1986-2009



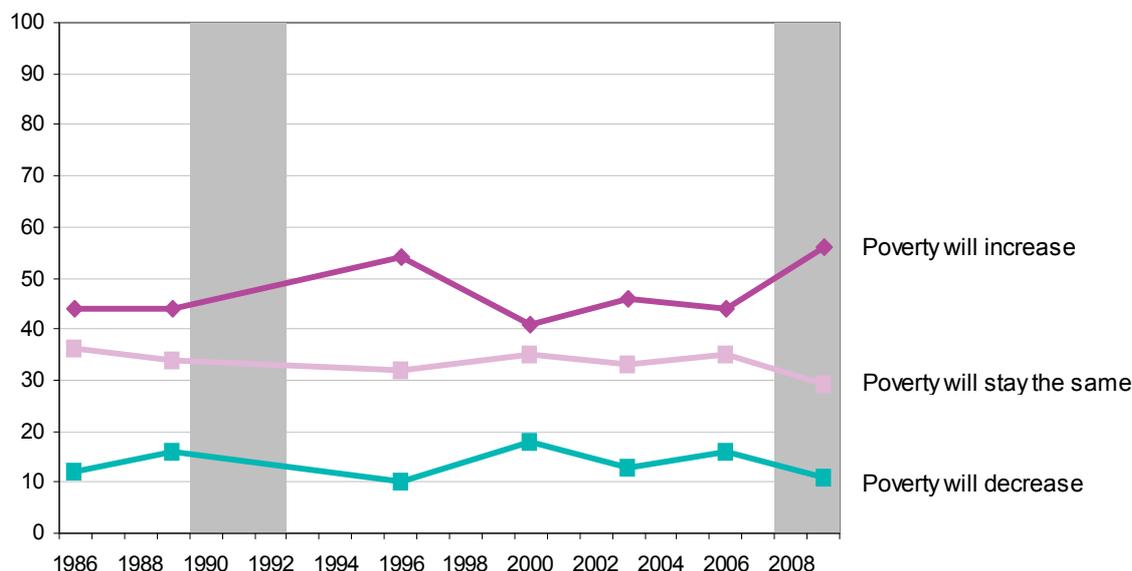
The public's predictions about levels of poverty in Britain over the next 10 years are far less volatile, as depicted in Figure 6. In 2009, more than half (56%) thought poverty would increase over the next decade, while around three in ten (29%) thought it would stay the same and just one in ten (11%) thought it would decline. These proportions have remained relatively stable since these questions were first asked in 1986. It appears that the election of a Labour government with a focus on poverty and associated targets (such as the eradication of child poverty by 2020) did not have a discernible effect on public expectations for the next decade.

Figure 2.6 Views on changes in poverty levels in next decade, by political party in government, 1986-2009



Nevertheless, just as estimates of the prevalence of poverty and views on how this had changed in the past decade became more negative during and after periods of economic hardship, so too predictions about levels of poverty in the future also became more negative in these circumstances, as depicted in Figure 7.

Figure 2.7 Expectations for poverty levels in next decade, by UK experience of recession, 1986-2009



Most recently, the proportion who stated that levels of poverty would increase in the next decade increased from 44% in 2006 to 56% in 2009, reflecting the magnitude of change experienced after the early 1990s recession.

2.2.3 Causes of poverty

To gauge public beliefs about the causes of poverty, we asked the following question in 2010 and previous years:

Why do you think there are people who live in need? Of the four views on this card, which one comes closest to your own?

- Because they have been unlucky*
- Because of laziness or lack of willpower*
- Because of injustice in our society*
- It's an inevitable part of modern life*
- None of these*

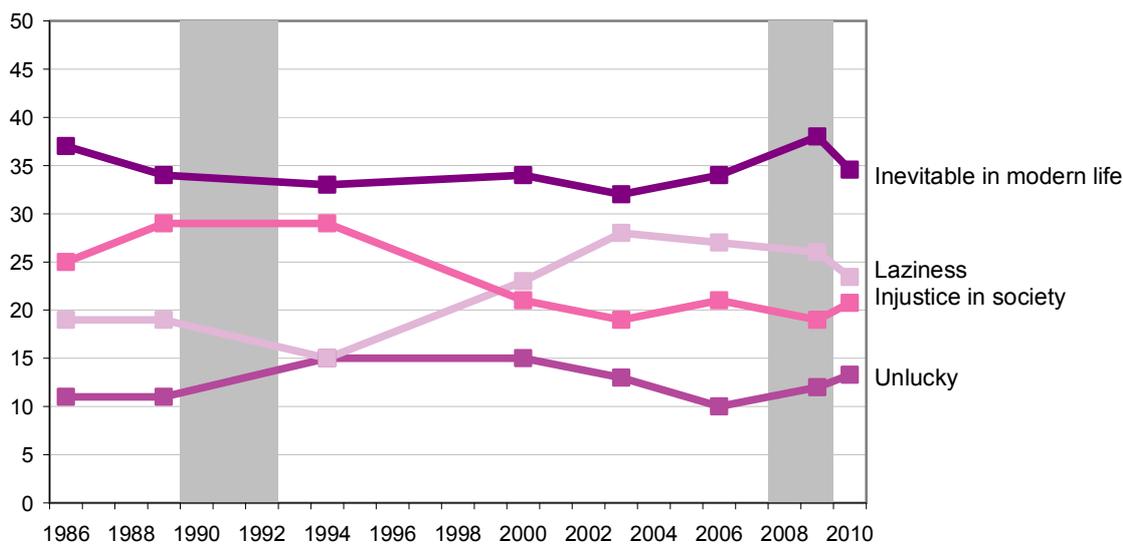
Perceptions of the causes of poverty in 2010 are not very different from those observed in 1986, with the public expressing relatively mixed views on this matter. More than one third (35%) thought living in need was “an inevitable part of modern life”, while slightly more than two in ten in each case, stated this was due to laziness or a lack of willpower (23%) or injustice in our society (21%). Slightly more than one in ten (13%) thought people live in need because they have been unlucky.

Nevertheless, there has been considerable fluctuation in perceptions of the causes of poverty over time. Specifically, the explanation that living in need is due to the individual’s own characteristics and behaviour (“laziness or lack of willpower”) has

gained popularity at the expense of a societal explanation (“injustice in our society”). 15% of the public in 1994 thought people live in need because of laziness or a lack of willpower, compared with 23% in 2010. During the same period, adherence to the view that people live in need because of injustice in our society declined from 29% to 21%.

As shown in Figure 8, there is some evidence that perceptions of the causes of poverty change in response to particular economic circumstances.

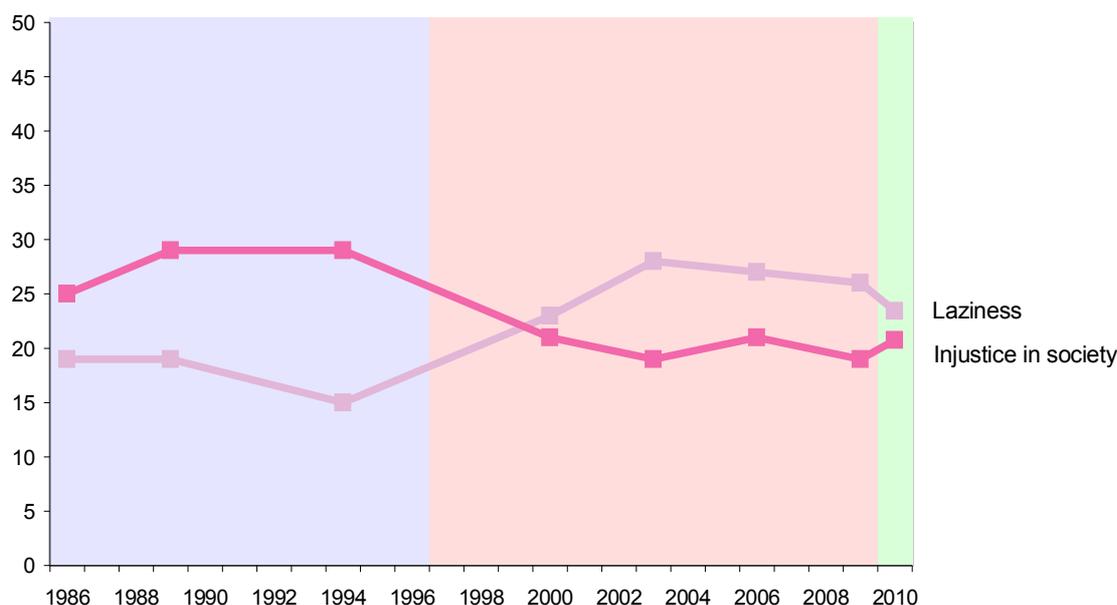
Figure 2.8 Views on causes of people living in need by UK experience of recession, 1986-2010



The view that people live in need because they have been unlucky, whilst never widely held, increased during the early 1990s and late 2000s recessions, while the view poverty is caused by laziness or a lack of willpower declined in during the same periods. This may result from the greater recognition, when times are bad, that individuals have little control over economic circumstances and their impacts upon them – as well as the greater likelihood that the respondent themselves might have experienced economic hardship during these periods (which they would be less likely to depict in a negative light).

However, as shown in Figure 9, the marked shift between a societal and individualistic explanation for people living in need occurred during the period in between the two recessions – suggesting it cannot be wholly attributed to experiences of economic hardship. We cannot be certain about the exact timing of this trend and whether it began before or during the early years of the Labour government, before levelling off at a higher level than ever before. Whilst a societal explanation, based on injustice or inequality, seems more attune with the traditional policy direction of the Labour Party, there is considerable evidence elsewhere that the more right-wing policies adopted by the Blair government led to the views of society in general, and Labour supporters in particular, becoming less left-wing during their term in office (Curtice, 2010). This may help to explain why an individualistic, rather than societal, explanation for poverty gained favour, and was more popular than it had been at any time in the 1980s, during this period. Further, the sub group of Labour Party supporters during this period was historically large, and will have included individuals who would previously have expressed a different party allegiance (and may have held more right-wing attitudes than traditional Labour supporters).

Figure 2.9 Views on causes of people living in need by political party in government, 1986-2010



The data considered provide some evidence that public attitudes to poverty have been influenced by economic circumstances and the direction of government policy during the last 25 years. We next explore these hypotheses in more detail, by considering whether attitudinal change was particularly pronounced in the sections of society, which we might expect to be more susceptible to the influence of particular economic circumstances and political developments.

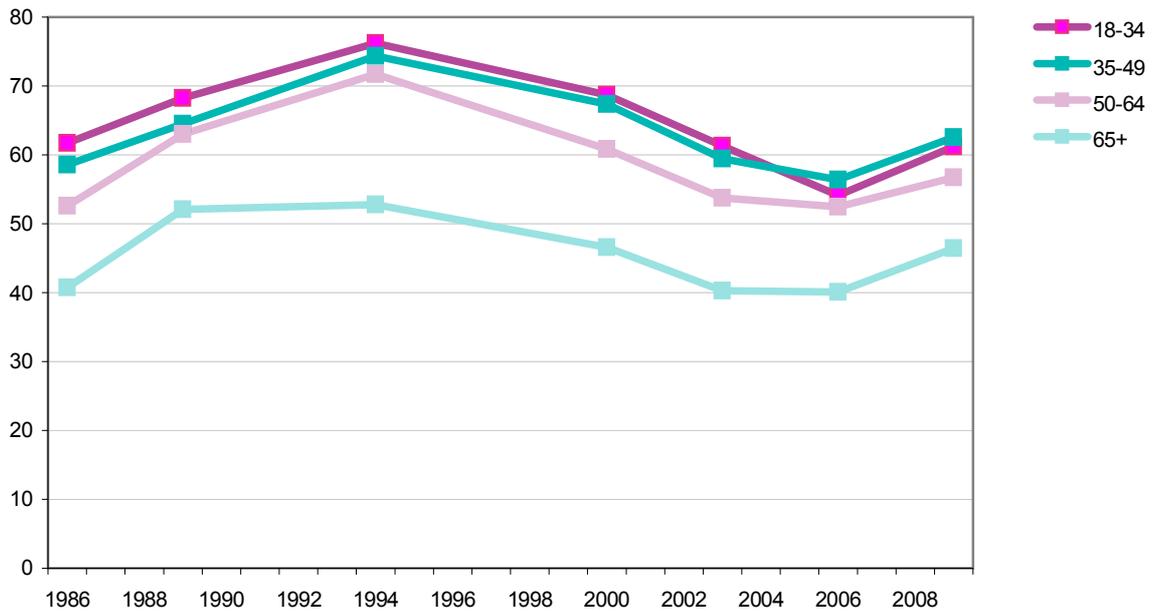
2.3 How attitudes vary across the public

2.3.1 Levels of poverty

We have seen that the proportion holding the view that there is “quite a lot” of poverty in Britain is similar in 2009 to that observed in 1986, though this proportion has risen in the intervening period in times of economic hardship, and was in decline during the period the Labour government focussed its efforts on poverty reduction. By considering how the views of different sub groups have changed over time, we can test further the assumptions that economic and political circumstances interacted with public perceptions in these ways.

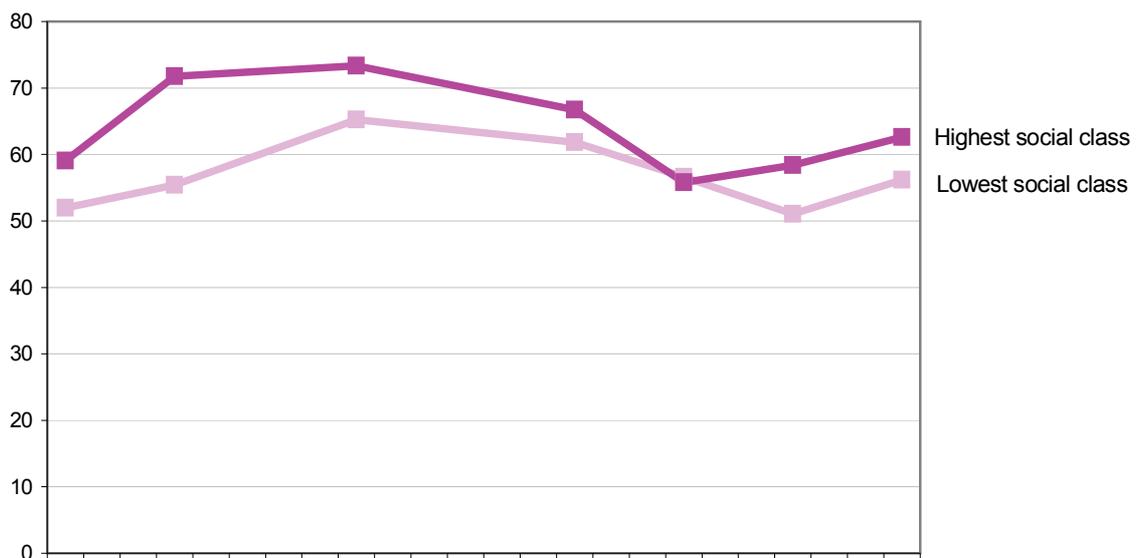
In 2009, we find that the belief there is “quite a lot” of poverty in Britain today was held relatively consistently across the public as a whole, with between five in ten and slightly more than six in ten respondents in each sub group defined by age, social class and political party identification adopting this view. Moreover, over time, the prevalence of the view that there is “quite a lot” of poverty in Britain among sub groups defined by age and social class has fluctuated in very similar ways. Figure 10 shows that the distribution of views across different age groups has remained broadly similar across the past three decades, with those aged 65+ being consistently less likely to believe there to be “quite a lot” of poverty in Britain. This may result from a broader definition of what are regarded as “necessities” being consistently held among younger age groups, meaning the definitions of poverty adopted by the oldest age group are more stringent – and thus apply to a smaller proportion of society.

Figure 2.10 Agreement that there is “quite a lot” of poverty in Britain, by age group, 1986-2009



Similarly, the views of different social classes have moved in similar ways over the past three decades, suggesting that particular groups' views on poverty levels are not more or less influenced by the economic circumstances of the time. Figure 11 depicts the changing views of the highest and lowest of the five social classes used in this analysis and indicates that, generally, a slightly larger proportion of the highest social class have perceived there to be significant levels of poverty in Britain, compared with the lowest social class.

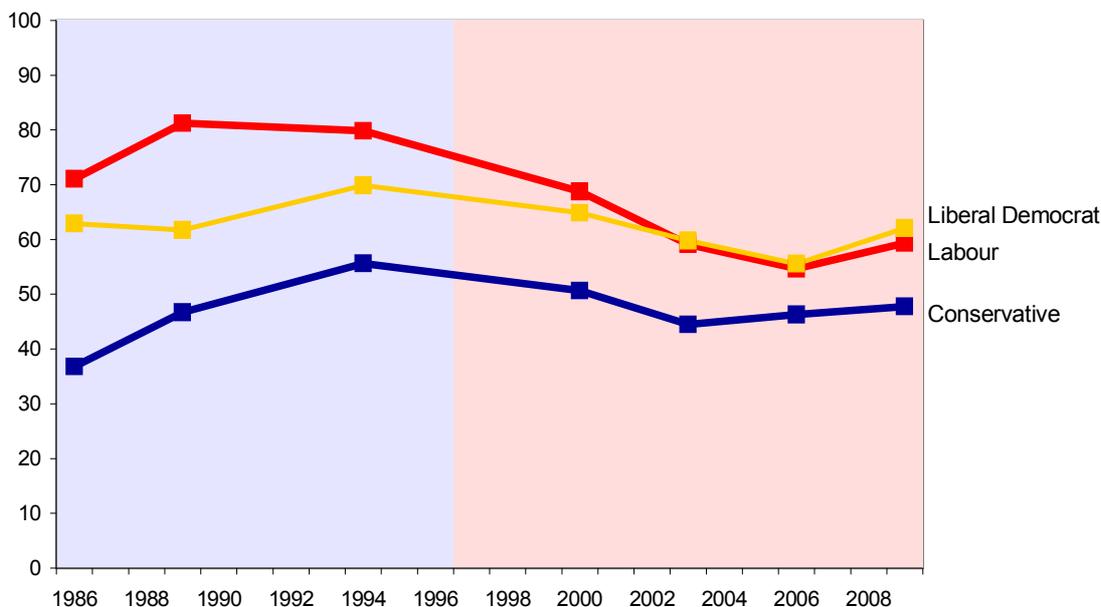
Figure 2.11 Agreement that there is “quite a lot” of poverty in Britain, by social class, 1986-2009



However, when we consider political party identification, it emerges that the views of Labour Party supporters have fluctuated much more than those of Conservative or Liberal Democrat supporters in relation to levels of poverty over this period. As shown in Figure 12, the view that there is “quite a lot” of poverty in Britain declined among Labour supporters just before and during the period in which Labour was in

government (perhaps reflecting an assumption that its various strategies to reduce poverty were working). Conservative and Labour Party supporters are now much closer in their views about levels of poverty in Britain than they were in 1986 (with a difference of 12 percentage points now separating the proportions of each set of party identifiers holding the view there is “quite a lot” of poverty in Britain, compared to a gap of 36 percentage points in 1986).

Figure 2.12 Agreement that there is “quite a lot” of poverty in Britain, by political party identification, 1986-2009

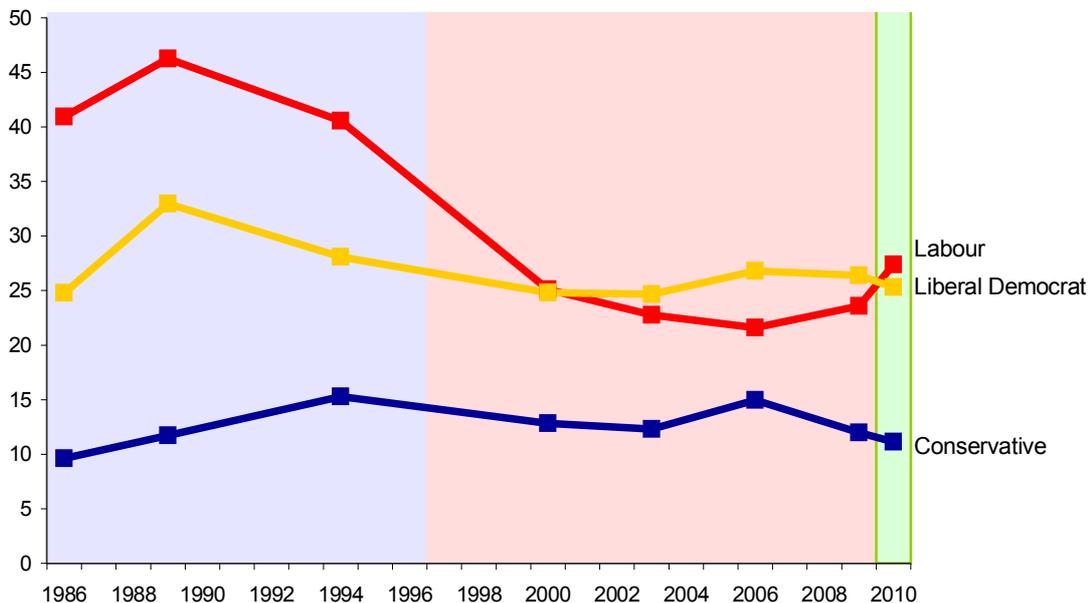


2.3.2 Causes of poverty

As noted previously, the chief change in public perceptions of the causes of poverty in the last three decades is the increase in an individualistic explanation (based on individuals’ laziness or willpower), at the expense of a societal explanation (based around injustice in society). Members of the oldest age group (those aged 65+) are the most likely to offer an individual explanation and the least likely to offer a societal explanation; 33% of those aged 65+ think that people live in need because of laziness or a lack of willpower compared to less than one quarter in each of the other three age bands. However, as with the less prevalent perception among the oldest age group that there is “quite a lot” of poverty” in Britain, this difference has persisted throughout the past three decades; it is not the case that different age groups have grown more divided on this issue. Similarly, the views of different social classes do not appear to have changed in a systematic way in the past three decades.

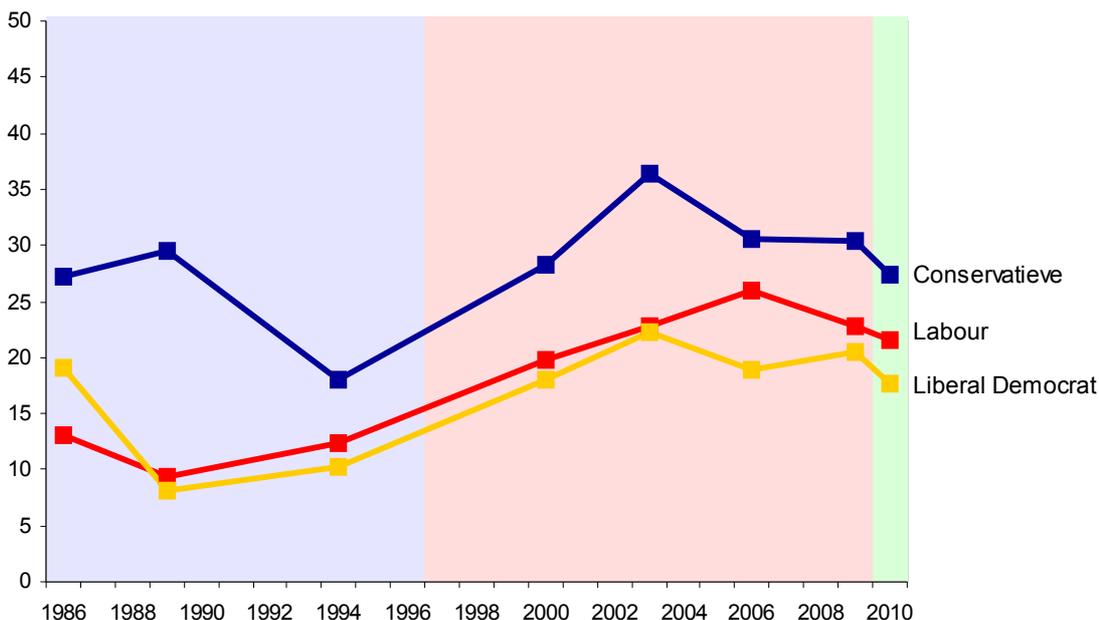
It is in relation to the views of supporters of different political parties where we see considerable differentiation in how attitudes have changed over time. Indeed, as shown in Figure 13, the decline in the popularity of a societal explanation for poverty appears to have been confined to Labour Party supporters. 41% of Labour Party supporters in 1986 thought that people lived in need because of injustice in society, compared to 27% in 2010 – while the views of Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters have generally remained stable. Though we cannot be confident about the exact timing of this change among Labour Party supporters, it appears that much of the decline occurred when Labour was in office – adding weight to the view that the more right-wing direction of its policies came to be adopted in the views of its supporters on a range of issues over this period, including poverty.

Figure 2.13 Belief people live in need because of “injustice in society”, by political party identification, 1986-2010



Conversely, as depicted in Figure 14, the individualistic viewpoint, that people live in need because of laziness or a lack of willpower, gained favour among supporters of all three main political parties between 1994 and 2003, a period which covered much of the Labour Party’s first two terms in office. However, whilst by 2010, this belief among Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters had fallen back to the levels measured in 1986, among Labour supporters the increase in this view has been sustained (13% held this view in 1986 compared with 22% in 2010).

Figure 2.14 Belief people live in need because of laziness or a lack of willpower, by political party identification, 1986-2010



2.4 Conclusions

Public attitudes to poverty have reacted in a number of different ways to the economic circumstances and direction of government policy over the last 25 years. While definitions of what constitutes 'poverty' appear to be relatively unsusceptible to political or economic influences, views about how much poverty there is in Britain today are clearly influenced by current or recent economic circumstances. There is also some evidence that public views, and those of Labour supporters in particular, may have become more positive when Labour entered government with a major policy focus on this issue. Nevertheless, expectations for the future appear consistently bleak, with little evidence of good economic times or government focus or targets in this area having the power to heighten expectations.

Perceptions of the causes of poverty have evolved to some extent, with increased support for an individualistic explanation and a decline in the view that poverty results from injustice in society. These changes have been most marked and sustained among Labour Party supporters, suggesting that their views have responded to the shifting ideology of their party.

While the oldest age group exhibits distinct attitudes to poverty (being less likely to believe there is much poverty in Britain and more likely to believe it results from individual factors such as laziness), these differences have always been evident. Moreover, there are no clear patterns of change in the views of different social classes, suggesting changing economic circumstances exert an impact on attitudes to poverty across society, not just among those most likely to be affected by them.

3 Attitudes to child poverty

- While the majority of the public perceive there to be significant levels of child poverty in Britain, perceptions of how these levels have changed in the past decade and are likely to change in the next are far from positive.
- The public endorses the importance of reducing child poverty and view this as a task for government. While they recognise its causes are multi-faceted, the most popular explanations for child poverty relate to the characteristics and behaviour of parents and families, rather than broader societal factors.
- Those aged 65+ and Conservative Party supporters are the least likely to both perceive significant levels of child poverty in Britain and to subscribe to a societal explanation for its existence. Those in the lowest social class are the most likely to view its causes as societal rather than individualistic.

3.1 Child poverty: overview of policy background

Child poverty has been an enduring focus of government policy for more than a decade, from the pledge by Tony Blair in March 1999 to “eradicate” child poverty by 2020, to the continued commitment to this target, set out in the Coalition’s Programme for Government (2010). Progress towards this and a number of related intermediate targets, including one to halve child poverty by 2010/11, has been limited. Disagreement remains as to how child poverty should be measured and the underlying causes which need to be tackled.

3.2 Attitudes to child poverty

Questions on child poverty have only been included on the British Social Attitudes survey on one or, in some instances, two occasions since 2009, meaning analysis of long-term changes in public attitudes is not currently possible. In the following sections we use the most recent available data to explore the attitudes of the public in general to child poverty, the extent to which there is a consensus across society and how attitudes vary by individual economic circumstances and political party identification. Such analysis will allow us to ascertain how far the public view child

poverty as a distinct issue (separate from general poverty), and how far political party affiliation and economic circumstances may link in similar ways with attitudes.

3.2.1 Levels of child poverty

Respondents to the 2009 British Social Attitudes survey were asked a comparable set of questions about child poverty, to those discussed in relation to poverty in the previous chapter, to explore perceptions of its past, current and future prevalence. Specifically, respondents were asked:

Some people say there is very little child poverty in Britain today. Others say there is quite a lot. Which comes closest to your view?

There is no child poverty in Britain today

There is very little child poverty in Britain today

There is some child poverty in Britain today

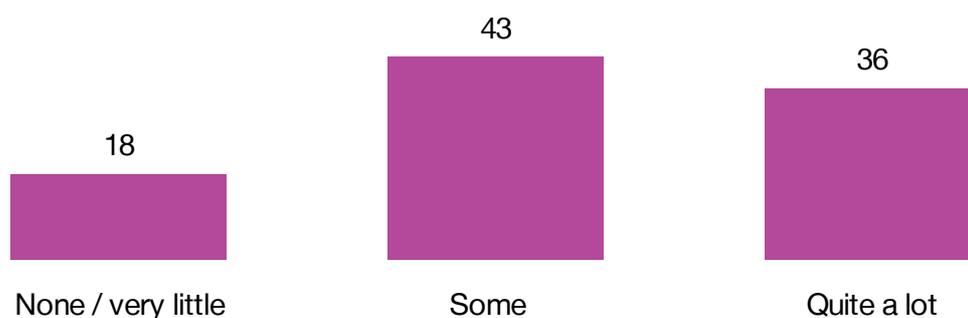
There is quite a lot of child poverty in Britain today

Over the last ten years, do you think that the proportion of children in poverty in Britain has been increasing, decreasing, or staying at about the same level?

And over the next ten years, do you think that the proportion of children in poverty in Britain will... increase, decrease, or, stay at about the same level?

As shown in Figure 1, almost four in five respondents in 2009 believed there was “quite a lot” (36%) or “some” (43%) child poverty in Britain. Less than one in five (18%) believed there was none or very little child poverty. It is not possible to compare perceptions of the extent of child poverty in 2009, compared to general poverty, as the answer categories used in the two questions are not identical.

Figure 3.1 Perceptions of levels of child poverty in Britain, 2009

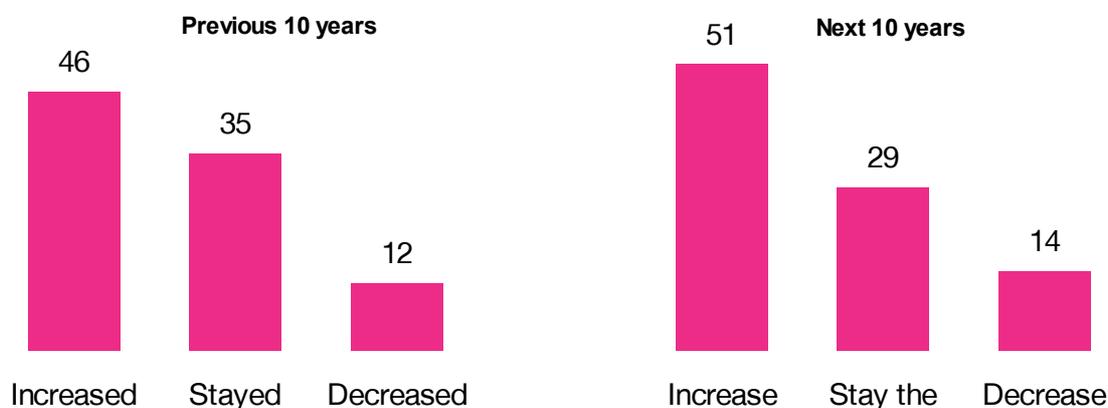


Despite the fact that the Labour government had introduced its target to eradicate child poverty by 2020 ten years ago, as shown in Figure 2, assessments of recent and future progress in relation to child poverty in 2009 were, on balance, negative. Almost half (46%) thought child poverty had increased over the last ten years and around half (51%) expected it to increase over the next decade. Only slightly more than one in ten thought child poverty had declined in the past decade (12%) or would do so in the next (14%).

These assessments and predictions for the future are broadly similar to those found in 2009 in relation to poverty in general. For instance, 56% thought poverty in general would increase over the next 10 years, compared to 51% who thought this about child poverty, while 11% and 14% of respondents respectively thought poverty in general

and child poverty in particular would decline during the next decade. This correlation suggests the public may see child poverty as synonymous with general poverty or view their causes as similar, and thus expect them to progress in comparable ways.

Figure 3.2 Perceptions of how levels of child poverty in Britain have changed in last decade and will change in next decade, 2009



3.2.2 Importance of and responsibility for reducing child poverty

To assess public support for the government’s target of child poverty reduction and to explore perceptions of responsibility for its delivery, we asked respondents to the 2009 survey:

How important or unimportant do you think it is to reduce child poverty?

- Very important*
- Quite important*
- Not very important*
- Not at all important*

Who do you think should be responsible for reducing child poverty in Britain?

- Central government (e.g. Parliament, Government Departments)*
- Local government (e.g. local council)*
- People in poverty (including parents)*
- Friends/relatives of people in poverty*
- Charities*
- Other*

In 2009, the public expressed widespread support for the government target to eradicate child poverty, with more than eight in ten (82%) viewing its reduction as “very important”, and less than one in fifty (1%) regarding this as not very or not at all important.

Moreover, respondents in 2011, the latest occasion on which the question was asked, strongly endorse the view that child poverty reduction is a governmental responsibility – with three-quarters (74%) viewing it as a responsibility of central government and slightly more than half (53%) as one of local government.¹ The public also attributes a

¹ Proportions identifying a particular organisation as being responsible for child poverty reduction were all lower in 2011 than they were in 2009. However, as this question was the first asked about child poverty in 2011, whereas in 2009 it came after a series asking about child poverty levels and the importance of its

role to people in poverty, their families and friends: almost one in three (36%) thought people in poverty, including parents, had a responsibility for child poverty reduction while three in ten (30%) thought this about the friends or relatives of those in poverty. Charities were viewed as having responsibility for this issue by one in four respondents (25%).

3.2.3 Causes of child poverty

To explore public understandings of what causes child poverty, respondents in 2009 and 2011 were asked to identify all of its causes, from the following list, and to identify which one they felt to be its main cause:

Social benefits for families with children are not high enough +
They – or their parents – suffer from a long term illness or disability -
There has been a family break-up or loss of a family member +
Their parents' work doesn't pay enough +
Their parents suffer from alcoholism, drug abuse or other addictions -
Their parents have been out of work for a long time -
They live in a poor quality area +
There are too many children in the family -
Their parents lack education -
Their parents do not work long enough hours -
Their parents do not want to work -
Their grandparents were also poor – i.e. it has been passed down the generations +
Their family suffers from discrimination, such as because of their ethnicity, age, disability +
Their family cannot access affordable housing +
Because of inequalities in society +
Other
None of these

Perceptions of the causes of child poverty in 2011 were very similar to those observed in 2009 (Clery, 2011). The two most popular reasons in both years were that parents suffer from alcohol, drug abuse or another addiction (68% in 2011) and that parents do not want to work (62% in 2011). These two reasons were also most often selected as the main reason for child poverty – by 16% and 17% respectively across the two years.

The fact that respondents chose, on average, six factors which cause child poverty shows an appreciation that this is multi-faceted problem and that its eradication would involve tackling a number of different issues. We saw in Chapter 2 that the public expresses relatively mixed views about the causes of poverty in general, with the most widespread view being that it is an inevitable part of modern life, and with an individualistic explanation (laziness and lack of willpower) gaining favour at the cost of a societal explanation (injustice in society) in recent years. To explore how these perceptions map onto public understandings of the causes of child poverty, we categorised the reasons listed above as constituting either a “societal” explanation for poverty (+) or an explanation relating to parents and families’ own behaviour, aspirations and characteristics (-). Societal explanations encapsulate inequality in society, the welfare, housing and employment provision available to parents and the quality of the local area. Explanations relating to parents’ behaviour and

reduction, we cannot conclude that these differences represent general change in attitudes in the population.

characteristics include individual characteristics such as an alcohol or other addiction, lack of education or disability, family characteristics such as having too many children, individual experiences such as family break up or having been out of work for a long time and aspirations such as not wanting to work.

When we analysed what respondents perceive to be the main cause of child poverty, using this categorisation, we found that explanations relating to parents' characteristics, behaviour and experiences were much more popular than those relating to society more broadly. Two-thirds of respondents (66%) offered a main explanation for child poverty relating to parental characteristics and behaviour while less than three in ten (28%) provided a reason relating to broader societal issues. We have seen, in relation to general poverty that societal explanations have declined at the expense of explanations based on individual characteristics and behaviour, such as laziness or a lack of willpower, in recent years. While we do not have sufficient data to draw such a conclusion about perceptions of the causes of child poverty, it is interesting that explanations relating to individuals and families in poverty dominate, with a relatively small proportion viewing child poverty as something inherent in or generated by society. The majority view broadly reflects the diagnosis of the current government, which points towards family breakdown, drug and alcohol addiction, limited education and skills and worklessness in explaining child poverty (DfE and DWP, 2011).

Thus far we have seen that the public view the reduction of child poverty as important, as a job for government and one on which they do not perceive much progress to have been made to date or have expectation of significant progress in the future. As there is little time series data available, we cannot conclude how far these attitudes and expectations link to current economic circumstances or the policies and direction of the Coalition government in relation to child poverty. In the next section, we begin to explore how attitudes vary across the population – which may uncover the importance of political policy and rhetoric and economic circumstance in influencing perceptions in this area.

3.3 How attitudes vary across the public

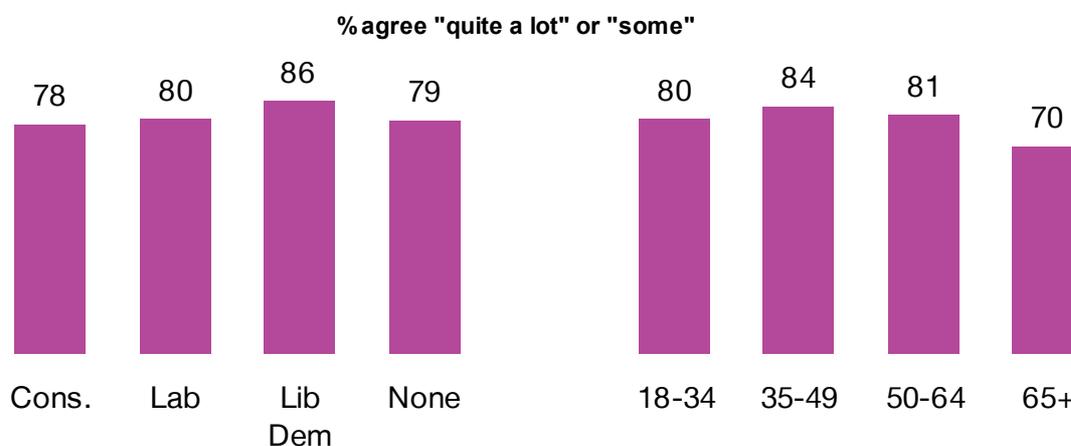
3.3.1 Levels of poverty

We saw in the previous chapter that the perceptions of levels of poverty held by groups defined by age and social class had changed in very similar ways over time, although the oldest age group had always been the least likely to perceive significant levels of poverty. However, the perceptions of supporters of different political parties differed markedly, with Conservative supporters being much less likely to think that significant levels of poverty exist, though the views of supporters of different parties have become much closer over time. Although only relatively recent data are available, the patterns we find in relation to perceptions of levels of child poverty at the current time generally reflect these trends.

In 2009, there was a relative consensus that there was “quite or lot” or “some” child poverty in Britain. As shown in Figure 3, Labour Party supporters were slightly more likely than Conservative Party supporters to hold this view (though not significantly so, as was the case in relation to levels of poverty in general). Again, we find that the oldest age group, those aged 65+, are least likely to perceive significant levels of child poverty – with just seven in ten (70%) believing there to be “quite a lot” or “some” child poverty compared with more than eight in ten of each other age group. As noted previously, this may be because older respondents have more stringent definitions of

what constitutes 'poverty', due to the increase in living standards during their lifetimes.

Figure 3.3 Perceptions of levels of child poverty in Britain, by age and political party identification, 2009



Perceptions also vary by social class, with those in the highest social class being the most likely to perceive significant levels of child poverty in Britain. 84% of those in this group believe there is "quite a lot" or "some" child poverty in Britain, compared with 76% of those in the lowest social class. This may result from the fact that those who are better-off tend to have less stringent definitions of child poverty, than those whose own experiences bring them closer to it and mean it is more likely to be viewed as the 'norm'.

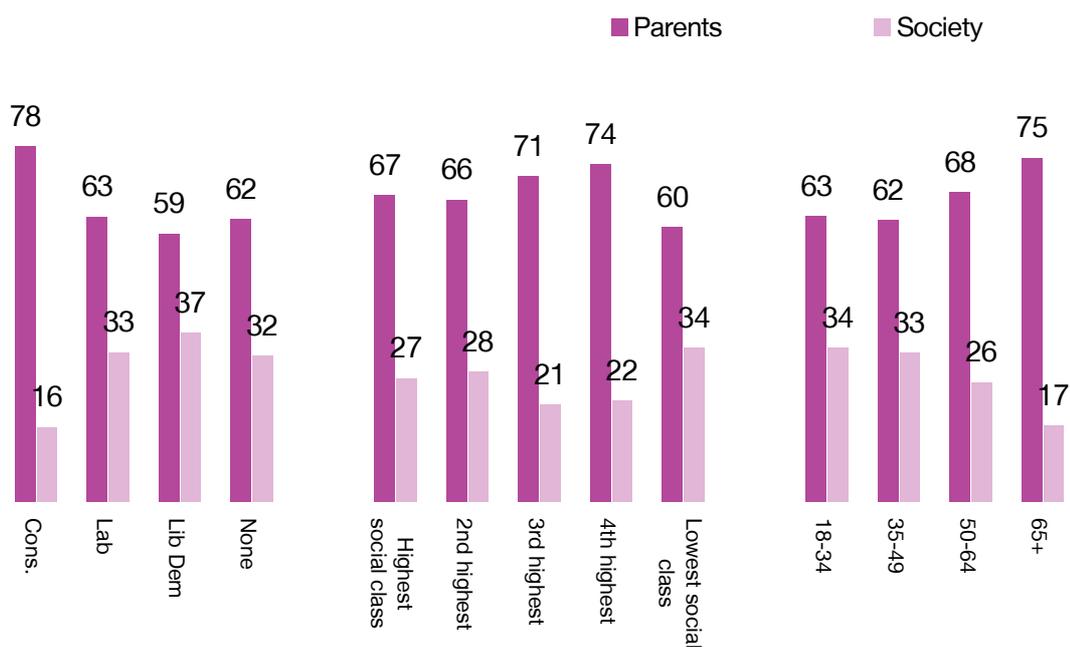
Clearly then, while a substantial majority of each sub group examined regard there to be significant levels of child poverty in Britain, variations in this proportion can be linked back to sub-groups' likely definitions of and relationships with child poverty.

3.3.2 Causes of child poverty

When we examine how perceptions of the causes of child poverty vary across the population, a number of substantial variations emerge. Figure 4 presents the proportions of sub groups defined by age, social class and political party identification who view the main cause of child poverty as one that can be categorised either as relating to parents or families' characteristics and behaviour, or one relating to society in general.

Explanations for child poverty routed in parents' behaviour, characteristics and experiences are much more prevalent among Conservative Party supporters and the oldest age group. Almost eight in ten (78%) Conservative supporters believe child poverty to be mainly caused by a factor relating to parents' characteristics and behaviour, compared with around six in ten of each other group defined by political party affiliation. Acceptance of an explanation relating to parental characteristics and behaviour is higher among older age groups (75% of those aged 65+, compared with slightly more than six in ten of those aged 18-34 and 35-49 years). These trends reflect the findings of the previous chapter, where Conservative Party supporters and those in the oldest age group were most likely to offer an individualistic, rather than a societal, explanation for levels of poverty in general.

Figure 3.4 Perceptions of main reason for child poverty in Britain, by demographic characteristics, 2011



The position in relation to socio-economic groupings is particularly interesting. Those in the lowest group (working class) are the least likely to offer a main explanation of child poverty that relates to parental behaviour and characteristics and the most likely to view its main cause as relating to broader society. However, the second lowest occupational group (intermediate – blue collar) are the most likely to do so, with this view then becoming slightly less prevalent among higher groups. Six in ten (60%) of those who are defined as working class offer an explanation based on parental behaviour and characteristics, compared with almost three-quarters of those defined as intermediate – blue collar (74%). Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who are economically less well-off, and more likely to encounter or be close to poverty in their own lives, are more likely to perceive child poverty as a result of societal factors, rather than resulting from the behaviour and characteristics of the individuals involved.

3.4 Conclusions

There is a considerable consensus among the public that there is substantial child poverty in Britain, that its reduction is important and that this is a task for government. In these ways public attitudes chime with the prioritisation of this issue by consecutive governments in Britain. However, given governmental focus on this area over more than a decade and the targets put in place for its eradication, public perceptions of progress to date and likely progress in the future are very negative. The public recognises poverty is a multi-faceted problem, though favour explanations relating to the characteristics and behaviour of individuals and families in poverty, rather than pointing towards broader societal factors to explain its existence, broadly reflecting the diagnosis of the Coalition government.

Patterns in the views of different sub groups broadly reflect those found in relation to general poverty. Conservative Party supporters and the oldest age group are the least likely to perceive significant levels of poverty in Britain and also the most likely to offer explanations based on individualistic, rather than societal, factors. Those likely to be

closest to child poverty in their own lives are the most likely to view its causes as societal.

4 Attitudes to welfare spending

- Support for government spending in general, on welfare benefits in particular and on a range of specific benefit types, is historically low.
- Support for spending on welfare benefits has declined over the past three decades, with this decline being most marked among Labour Party supporters, suggesting their views have followed the direction of their party's policies.
- Attitudes to welfare spending bear little relation to economic circumstances, even among those groups most likely to be affected by them and to require welfare as a result. However, among benefit types, unemployment benefits do appear to be prioritised in time of economic hardship.

4.1 Welfare spending: overview of policy background

Welfare spending is currently a major focus of government policy, media debate and popular discussion. In 2012 the Welfare Reform Act passed into law. Commonly described as legislating for the biggest change in the welfare system for more than 60 years, one of its primary aims, over the next decade, is to reduce levels of spending on welfare using a number of strategies: by limiting eligibility to a range of benefits, incentivising employment for those able to work and streamlining the system. Spending on welfare has continually increased since the 1980s, from around 24.4 billion in 1980 to 112.7 billion in 2011.² Current government policy is aimed at reversing this increase.

4.2 Attitudes to welfare spending: change over time

Since its inception in 1983, British Social Attitudes has included questions to measure the public's attitudes to various aspects of the welfare system most years. In this chapter, we focus on those dealing with the issue of welfare spending, examining how attitudes have changed over the past three decades and how they have responded to the direction of government policy and to times of economic hardship.

² These figures were obtained from www.ukpublicspending.co.uk

4.2.1 Spending on welfare

Attitudes to government spending on welfare are likely to be influenced by a wide range of factors, including attitudes to government taxation and spending in general. An individual might be opposed to extra spending on welfare because they are opposed to extra government spending *per se*, and *vice versa*. We therefore consider attitudes to government taxation and spending in general, before examining attitudes to welfare spending in particular.

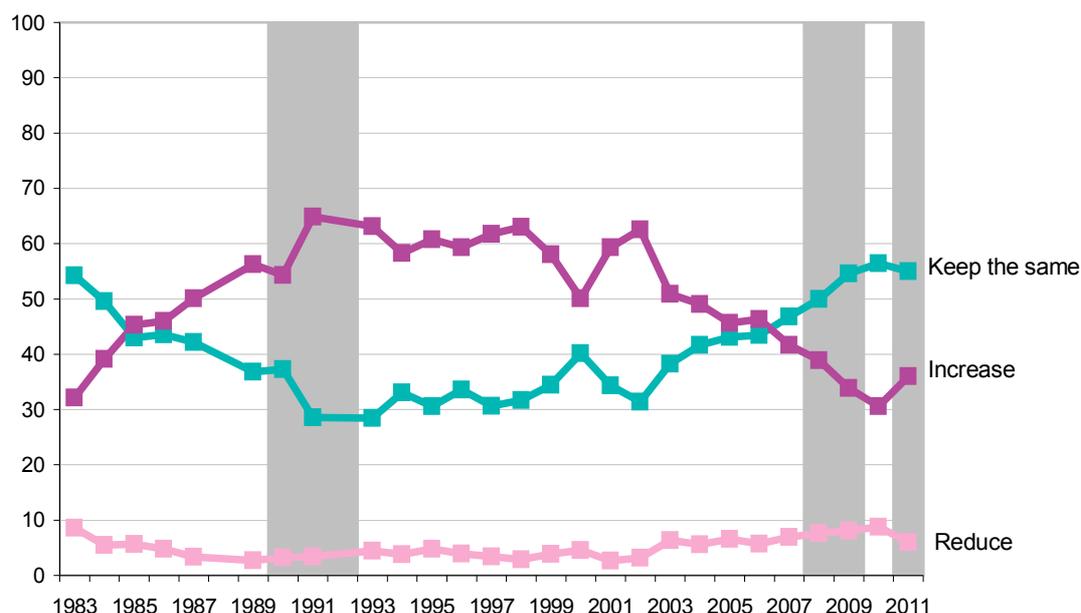
Since 1983 respondents to the British Social Attitudes survey have been asked which of the following three options the government should choose:

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

Responses to this question over time are shown in Figure 1. While there has been considerable fluctuation in attitudes, the options of keeping taxes and spending on health, education and social benefits at the same level or increasing taxes and spending in these areas have always been the most popular. In 2011, slightly more than half (55%) recommended keeping taxes and spending at the same level while slightly more than a third (36%) recommended increasing them. Only around one in twenty respondents (6%) advocated reducing taxes and spending.

By mapping attitudes to taxation and spending against economic circumstances in Figure 1 it is immediately apparent that, before 2000, support for increased taxation and spending rose during, or after, experiences of economic hardship. We can perceive this in the early 1980s, from 1983, following the recession of 1980-2 and particularly clearly in the recession of the early 1990s. However, during the recession of the late 2000s, the opposite occurred, with public support for extra taxation and spending continuing its long-term decline (though there are signs of this reversing with the second phase of the double-dip recession in 2011).

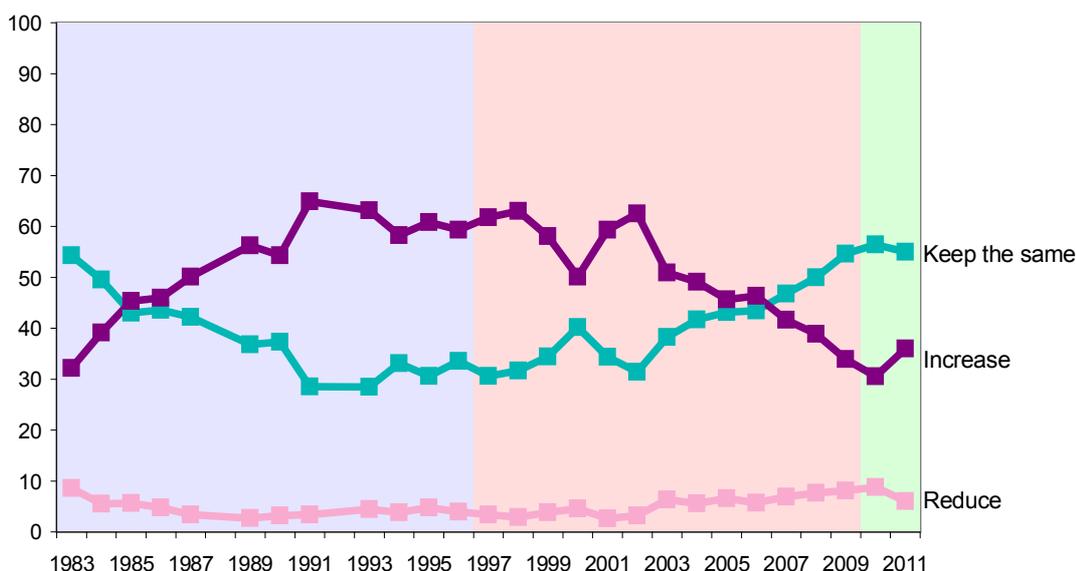
Figure 4.1 Attitudes to taxation and spending, by UK experience of recession, 1983-2011



Public attitudes to taxation and spending appear to have abandoned their traditional behaviour in response to economic circumstances. We next review their relationship with the direction of government policy and consider whether this appears to exert a greater impact on attitudes in this area.

Figure 2 shows attitudes to taxation and spending, plotted against the political party in government across the life-time of the survey. Strikingly, support for increased taxation and spending rose for much of the period during which the Conservatives were in office, before falling during Labour's terms in government. Since spending on education and health in particular rose substantially from 1997, this trend reflects the finding from previous analyses of British Social Attitudes, that the public tends to act like a "thermostat" in this area, responding to changes in levels of taxation and spending (Curtice, 2010). That is, additional spending appears less necessary in times when public expenditure is known to be increasing – as it had been under the last Labour government. Further weight is given to this hypothesis by the increase in support for extra government spending in 2011, when the Coalition's cuts were receiving widespread publicity.

Figure 4.2 Attitudes to taxation and spending, by political party in government, 1983-2011



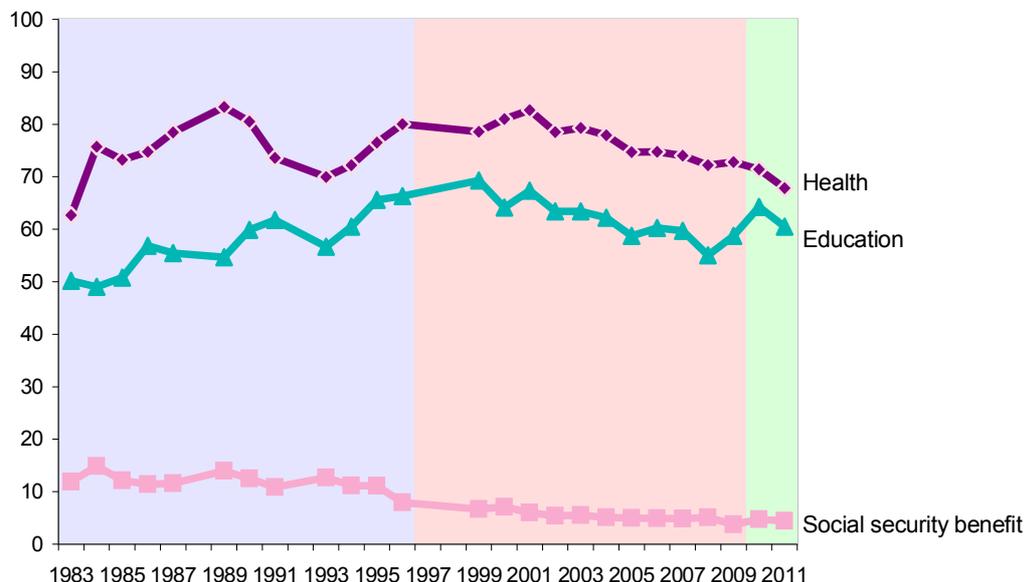
The findings in Figure 2 relate broadly to government taxation and spending pertaining to education, health and social benefits. It may be that support for particular approaches to tax and spending is determined by attitudes to one of these areas of social policy, and that attitudes to others may, in fact, be in conflict. In other words, we cannot conclude that the above trends are indicative of public attitudes to welfare spending specifically.

To explore how the public prioritise spending on different areas of government policy, British Social Attitudes includes a question asking respondents to identify their first and second priorities for extra government spending. Figure 3 shows how the public's top two priorities (and prioritisation of spending on welfare benefits) have changed over time, mapped against the political party in government.

Clearly, the public is far more likely to view extra spending on health and education as their top priorities, compared with extra spending on social security. The proportion prioritising social security benefits for extra spending is far lower, having peaked at

15% in 1984, and now stands at five per cent. Support for extra spending on social security has declined steadily from the early 1990s and it has been argued elsewhere that this reflects the Labour Party's adoption of a less left-wing stance in relation to this area, from the period prior to their election in 1997 (Curtice, 2010).

Figure 4.3 First and second priorities for extra government spending, by political party in government, 1983-2011



Interestingly, prioritisation of extra spending on social security does not appear to be prompted by experience of recession, where there might be perceived to be a greater justification for this, with increased unemployment for example. The early 1990s and late 2000s recessions appear to have made no discernible dent in this downwards trend in the prioritisation of welfare spending.

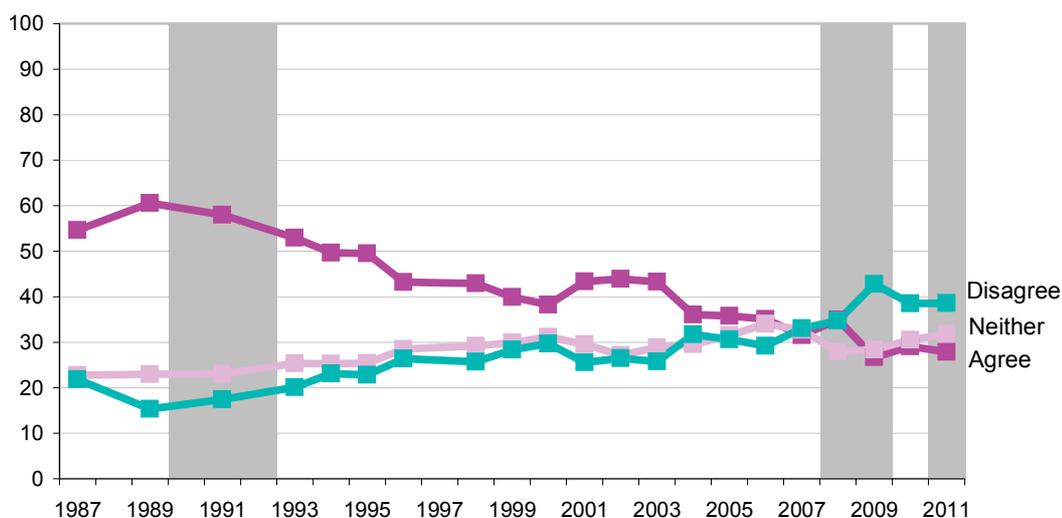
Arguably, the public might view welfare spending as important – but not as important as other areas of government policy. To explore attitudes to welfare spending in a vacuum, we asked respondents whether they agree or disagree that:

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

Figure 4, which presents public attitudes mapped against experience of recession, shows that the public is currently divided on this issue, with a slight bias towards reducing current welfare spending levels. Nearly three in ten (28%) agree the government should spend more, while four in ten (39%) disagree; one in three (32%) neither agree nor disagree, suggesting a degree of uncertainty or ambivalence around this issue.

Over the last two decades, support for more spending on welfare benefits has declined. Strikingly, the two recessionary periods have done little to allay this decline, supporting the conclusion above that public attitudes to welfare spending are little influenced by experiences of economic hardship. Moreover, this decline appears to have been relatively consistent, with a few exceptions, regardless of which political party was in power.

Figure 4.4 Views on whether the government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor, by UK recessions, 1983-2011



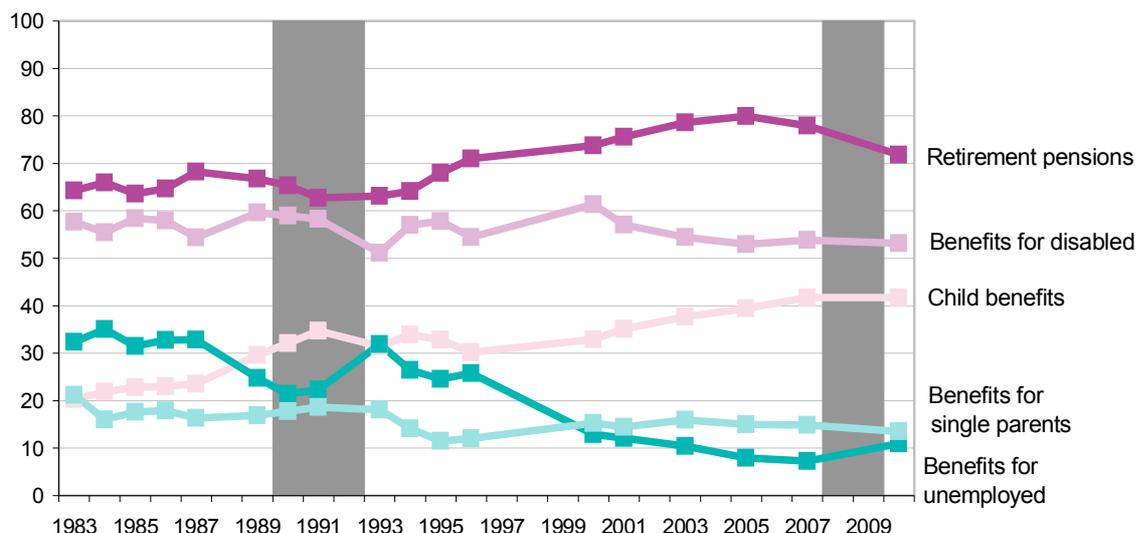
4.2.2 Spending on different welfare benefits

We have seen that welfare is only a priority for extra government spending among a minority and that less than three in ten want to see additional spending in this area. However, just as attitudes to taxation and spending might conceal attitudes to distinct areas of government policy, so might attitudes to spending on welfare mask different views about specific welfare benefits. To ascertain whether the public differentiates between different types of welfare benefits and prioritise some over others for government spending, we asked respondents which of the following, if any, would be their first and second highest priorities for extra spending on welfare:

- Retirement pensions*
- Child benefits*
- Benefits for the unemployed*
- Benefits for disabled people*
- Benefits for single parents*

In Figure 5 we see that the public clearly distinguish between different types of benefits, with some being ascribed a much higher priority for extra spending than others. Retirement pensions and benefits for the disabled have consistently been the public's top two priorities for extra welfare spending. Interestingly, the experience of recession does, to some extent, appear to have encouraged the prioritisation of particular benefit types for extra spending. We might have expected this to have been the case in relation to unemployment benefits and both the recessions of the early 1990s and late 2000s appear to have abated the long-term decline in prioritisation of spending on the unemployed (albeit temporarily). The majority of the decline in prioritisation of spending on unemployment benefits occurred under the Labour government and it has been argued elsewhere that this trend was indicative of the public adopting the new tougher stance of the government around unemployment.

Figure 4.5 First and second priorities for extra government spending on different benefits, by UK recessions, 1983-2010

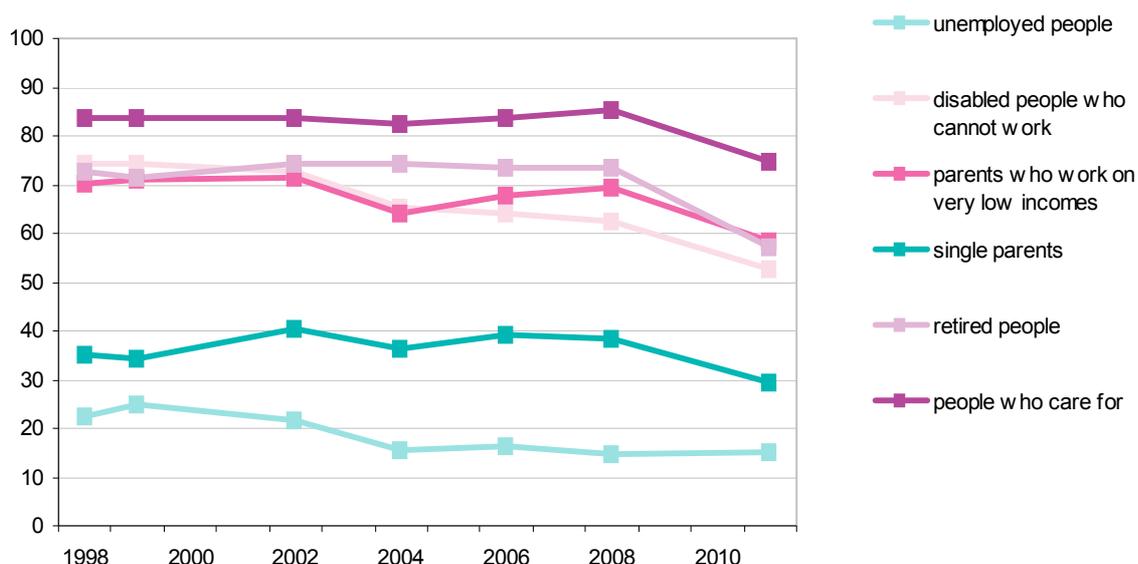


The question above prompts respondents to select priorities for extra government spending on welfare, so the data elicited is indicative of the public’s ordering of areas rather than the absolute importance ascribed to extra spending on one particular benefit type. To examine the latter, we ask respondents about each area of social spending in turn, and whether they would like to see “more or less government spending than now” on:

- Benefits for unemployed people*
- Benefits for disabled people who cannot work*
- Benefits for parents who work on very low incomes*
- Benefits for single parents*
- Benefits for retired people*
- Benefits for people who care for those who are sick and disabled*

Although this question has only been asked periodically, Figure 6 shows that public support for extra spending on all types of welfare benefit has declined since the late-1990s with, in many cases, much of this decline being very recent (since 2008). The largest decline has occurred among those choosing extra spending on benefits for disabled people who cannot work, which has dropped by 22 percentage points since 1998, and by 10 percentage points in the last three years. This might reflect the emphasis of the Labour government, and now the Coalition, on reducing the cost of long-term disability benefits, with public announcements that claims have grown faster – rather than an actual increase in the incidence of illness and disability. It is likely that these changing views reflect a belief that people are being incorrectly classed as disabled or unable to work, rather than a ‘hardline’ view that disabled people do not deserve to be helped (Clery, 2012). Similarly, there has been a decline in the proportion supporting extra spending on benefits for retired people (16 percentage points since 2008). Finally, we see that the public is least likely to advocate more spending on benefits for unemployed people, though the decline in the proportion agreeing they would like to see this occurred during the early years of the Labour government, and is thus likely to link to Labour’s tougher stances on this issue. What is clear from these data is that the experience of double-dip recession has done little to stem a decline in support for extra spending across the range of benefit types.

Figure 4.6 Proportion of public who would like to see extra spending for different benefit recipients, 1998-2011



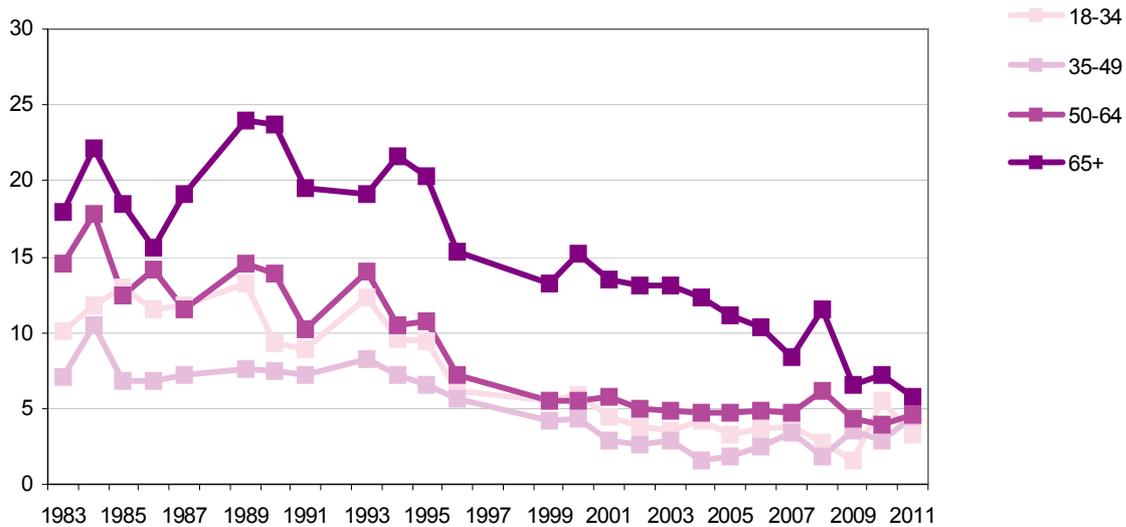
Clearly, welfare is not an area of government spending prioritised by the public and support for spending on particular benefits is in decline. Support for extra spending on welfare bears little relation to economic circumstances, with the exception of some evidence of the prioritisation of unemployment benefits, and can be more clearly linked to the direction of government policy and rhetoric. We next consider if this tendency is reflected in the views of particular sub groups on this issue.

4.3 How attitudes vary across the public

4.2.3 Welfare spending in general

The extent to which social security has been a priority for extra government spending over the last 30 years varies markedly among different sections of the population. In 1983 the oldest age group, those aged 65+, were much more likely to choose social security as one of their top two priorities for extra government spending; almost one fifth (18%) selected this, compared with one in ten (10%) of the youngest age group. As shown in Figure 7, due to a decline in the older age group's prioritisation of this area, the views of all age groups have become much closer over time. In 2011, the proportion of each age group selecting this area as a priority ranges between 4%-6%, compared to a range of 7%-18% in 1983. Seemingly, the public is now much more united in subscribing a low priority to this area of spending.

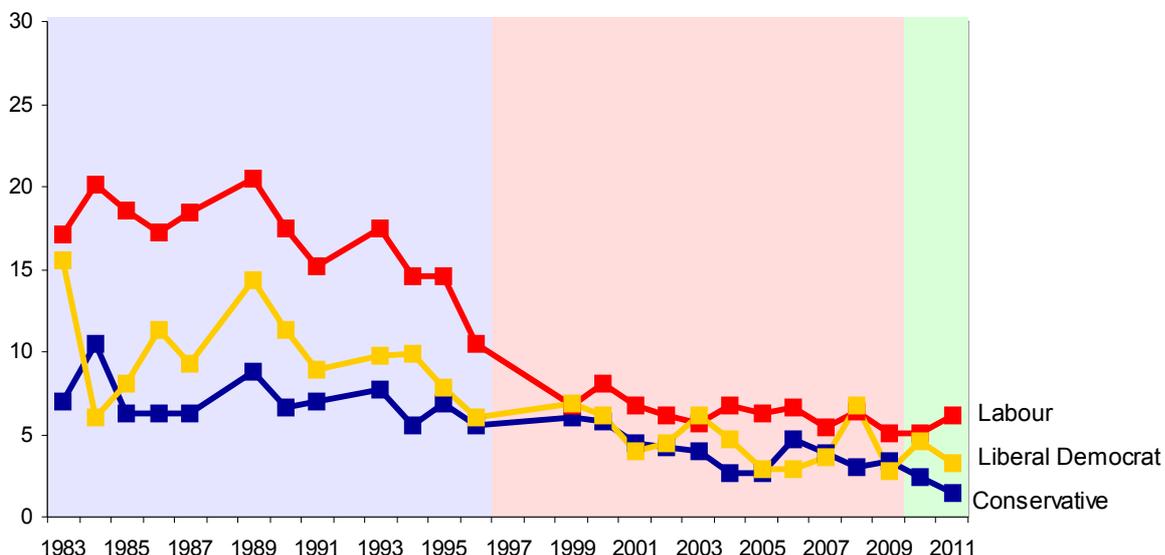
Figure 4.7 Proportion choosing social security as first or second choice for extra government spending, by age group, 1983-2011



Support for prioritising social security spending follows a similar pattern for different social classes. The lower social classes were more likely to prioritise this area for extra government spending in 1983; this was the case for 16% of those in the lowest social class and 5% of those in the highest social class. Over time, social security declined as a priority for all social classes and, by 2011, they were much more united in identifying this area as a low priority (with the proportion selecting social security as a priority ranging from 3% to 7%).

However, trends in the views of groups defined by political party identification are more varied. As shown in Figure 8, the extent to which social security is prioritised for extra government spending has declined among supporters of all three main political parties since the early 1980s.

Figure 4.8 Proportion choosing social security as first or second choice for extra government spending, by political party identification, 1983-2011

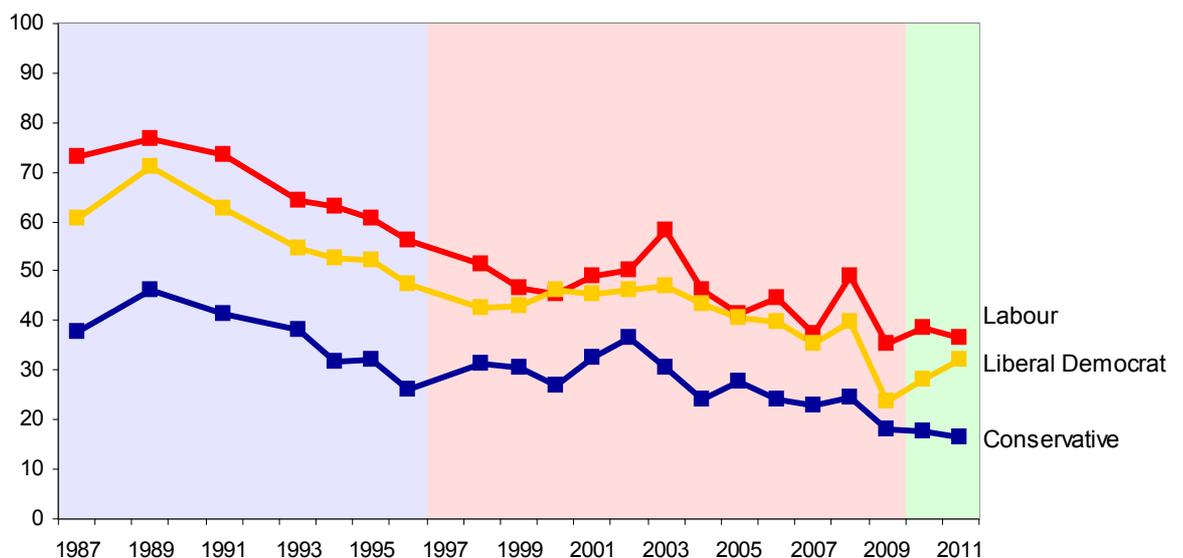


However, this decline has been much more pronounced among Labour Party supporters: the proportion prioritising welfare as one of their top two areas for extra government spending has fallen, since its high point in 1989, by 14 percentage points compared with seven percentage points for Conservative Party supporters. As shown in Figure 8, the extent to which Labour supporters have prioritised extra spending on social security has fallen much more sharply than among supporters of the other two parties since the period before Labour won office in 1997. This is likely to be a response to New Labour repositioning itself and becoming less pro-welfare during the late-1990s; it has been argued elsewhere that Labour supporters followed the direction of their party in this way on a number of issues (Curtice, 2010).

The prioritisation of welfare as an area for extra government spending has declined in all sections of society, but particularly among Labour supporters and the oldest age group. Using the data presented in Figure 8, we can consider if these patterns endure when we consider support for extra spending on welfare in isolation (removing any potential impact of other areas of government policy being prioritised over it).

Once again, in Figure 9, we see that Labour Party supporters have always been the most likely to agree that the government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor, but that their support for this proposition has declined more than any other group over time. In 1987, 73% of Labour Party supporters agreed that the government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor, compared with 36% now (a decline of 36 percentage points). The support of Conservative Party and Liberal Democrat supporters for extra spending in this area declined by 21 and 28 percentage points respectively during the same period. As shown in Figure 9, this decline occurred throughout both the Conservative and Labour terms in office, though we cannot yet be confident that it is continuing into the Coalition term.

Figure 4.9 Agreement government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor, by political party identification, 1987-2011

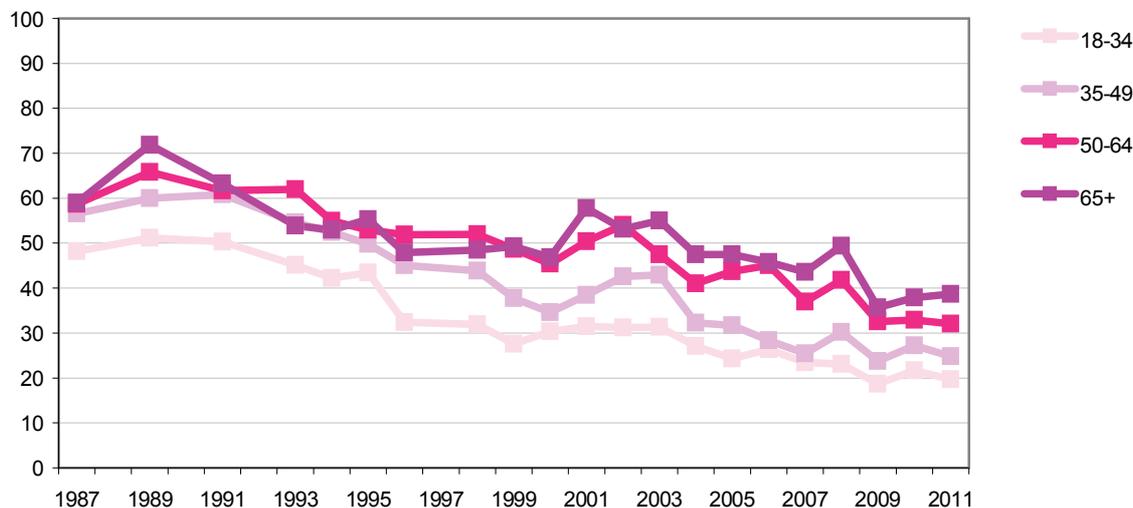


Among different social classes, support for extra spending on welfare benefits for the poor has declined relatively consistently over the past two decades and the distribution of views in 2011 is relatively similar to that seen in 1987, albeit at a much lower level.

We saw earlier that the prioritisation of social security as an area for extra government spending has declined most markedly among the oldest age group, aged 65+, with their views now being much more similar to those of other age groups. When we consider support for extra spending on welfare benefits for the poor in Figure 9, we see that the oldest age group remain the most supportive, though the support of all age groups has declined over time. 39% of those aged 65+ agree that government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor, compared with 20% of the youngest age group (aged 18-34 years).

This suggests that the steep decline in the prioritisation of those aged 65+ for spending on social security may be due to their increasing prioritisation of other areas of government spending, rather than a disproportionate decline in support for welfare spending per se (about which they are clearly continue to be more favourable).

Figure 4.10 Agreement government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor, by age, 1987-2011



4.3 Conclusions

Public attitudes to spending on welfare can be approached from a number of different angles. From the questions reviewed above, it is clear that public support for welfare spending, as one area of government spending and in its own right, is comparatively low and has declined substantially over the past three decades. Nevertheless, the public clearly differentiates between different types of benefits, and views spending on unemployment benefits particularly unfavourably. Experience of economic hardship only appears to have had a discernible effect on support for spending on welfare in relation to unemployment benefits, but does not appear to have had a particular impact on the views of those groups most likely to be affected by recession. It is government policy that exhibits the much closer relationship with attitudes in this area – with the views of all sections in society, and Labour supporters in particular, appearing to follow the approaches of the Labour government and the current Coalition towards promoting a reduction in welfare spending.

5 Attitudes to the welfare state and welfare recipients

- Views about the extent to which welfare recipients are ‘deserving’ have remained relatively stable over time, with the exception of beliefs that the unemployed could find a job; opinions on this issue are strongly linked to experience of recession but also became much more negative during the period in which Labour was in office.
- The view that the generosity of welfare benefits encourages dependence has become more prevalent; much of this change occurred when the Labour Party was in office and economic circumstances appear to have had little impact.
- Changes in attitudes have been concentrated among the youngest in society and Labour Party supporters. The views of different social classes have behaved in very similar ways, suggesting attitudes in this area have a stronger relationship with political policy and rhetoric than with economic circumstances.

5.1 Welfare state and welfare recipients: background

The nature of the current welfare state and the current population of welfare recipients are receiving considerable policy and media attention. Debates focus on how deserving welfare recipients are of the levels of support provided to them. There is a considerable focus on the extent to which, in addition to providing support for those in need, the current welfare state may be encouraging dependence and worklessness, as well as providing support for groups who do not require it. Many elements of the 2012 Welfare Reform Act seek to limit eligibility to welfare, in terms of making the receipt of certain benefit types more stringent and time-limited. In addition to this current focus, these issues have consistently featured in government policy and debate in recent decades, with the Labour government elected in 1997 developing welfare policies more geared towards establishing the rights and responsibilities of benefit recipients than in the past.

5.2 Attitudes to the welfare state; change over time

Since the mid 1980s, the British Social Attitudes survey has regularly included a set of questions, termed the ‘welfarism’ scale, designed to measure public attitudes to the welfare state and welfare recipients³. In the section below, we consider how views on the issues it encapsulates have changed over the past 25 years and whether they appear to have responded to periods of economic hardship or political policy and rhetoric.

5.2.1 Attitudes to welfare recipients

Since 1987, the ‘welfarism’ scale has included three items designed to explore attitudes to the notion that welfare recipients are deserving of the help given to them and that they are claiming it honestly. Specifically, respondents are asked how strongly they agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one

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

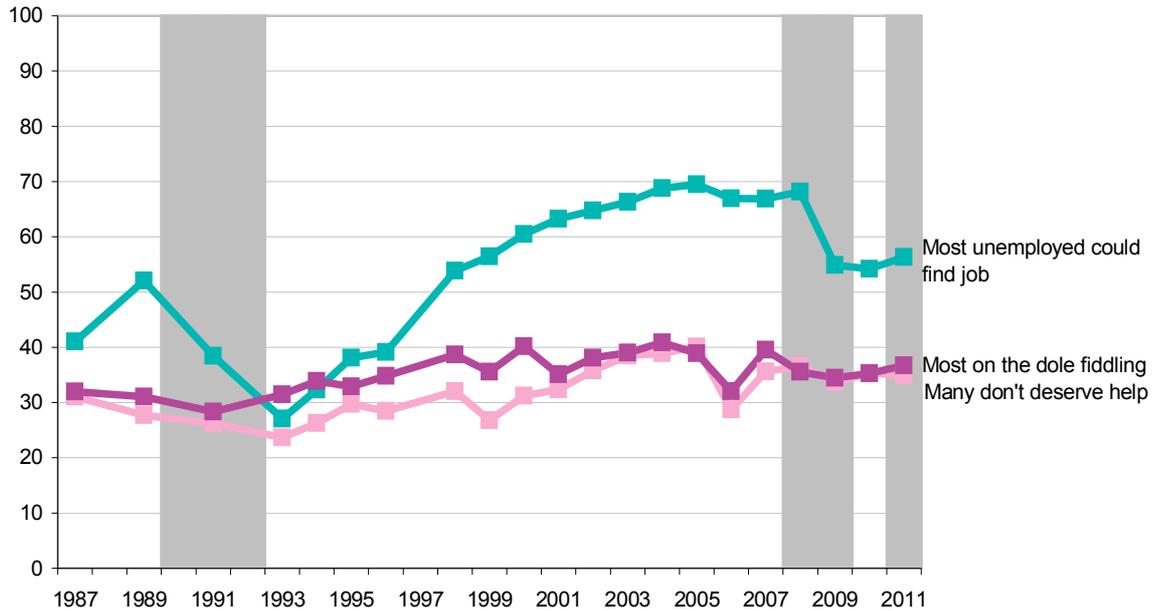
Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another

Figure 1 below presents the proportions of respondents agreeing with each statement (and thus expressing a negative opinion of welfare recipients) over time. It demonstrates that, in 2011, negative perceptions of welfare recipients were held by considerable minorities of the population, with those in receipt of unemployment benefits being viewed negatively in terms of their ability to find a job by a majority. Slightly more than one third agree most people on the dole are fiddling (37%) and that many people who get social security don't really deserve any help (35%). More than half (56%) agree that most unemployed people in their area could find a job if they wanted one.

The proportions agreeing with the first two statements have remained relatively stable, despite some fluctuation, over time. When examined against the UK's experience of recession, it seems that economic circumstances have no discernible impact on the belief that “most people on the dole are fiddling”. During and after the recession of the early 1990s and during the recession of the late 2000s, no substantial change occurred on this measure. On the other hand, there was a slight decline in the level of belief that most people on social security don't deserve any help during the early 1990s recession and during the first stage of the late 2000s recession, presumably because many had met individuals for whom benefit receipt was necessitated by economic circumstances. However, it is in relation to the notion that most unemployed people could find a job if they wanted one, that perceptions change most during times of recession – presumably because, of all benefit recipients, recessions have the potential to have the greatest impact on the unemployed. In 1989, more than half (52%) thought that most people in their area could find a job if they wanted one, a proportion which declined to 38% in 1991 (during recession) and 27% in 1993 (after recession). Although the recessionary impact is less stark, in 2008, at the start of the late 2000s recession, almost seven in ten respondents (68%) believed that most unemployed people could find a job if they wanted one. By 2009, this proportion had fallen to slightly more than half (55%), remaining at this level in 2010 and 2011.

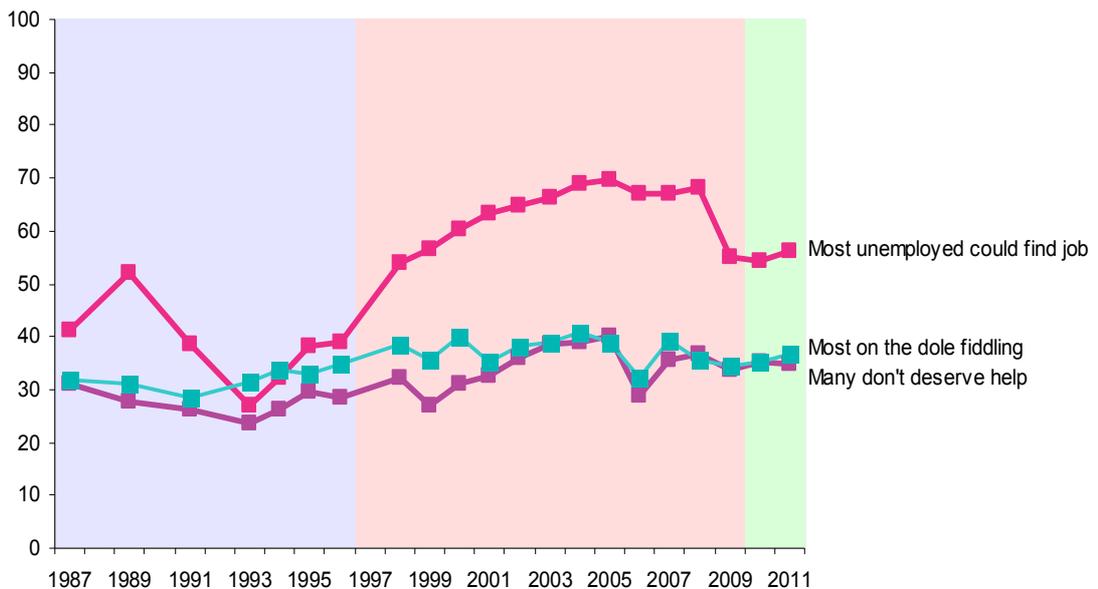
³ The specific questions included in the welfare scale have evolved over time, meaning analysis of aggregated responses is not possible for the entire duration of the survey. For this reason, the analysis presented in this chapter focuses on the component elements of the welfarism scale separately.

Figure 5.1 Attitudes to welfare recipients by UK experience of recession, 1987-2011



However, fluctuations in the belief that most unemployed people could find a job cannot just be explained by economic circumstances. As shown in Figure 2 below, belief in this notion was consistently highest during Labour’s term in office – despite the fact that Labour is traditionally more pro-welfare than the Conservative Party.

Figure 5.2 Attitudes to welfare recipients by political party in government, 1987-2011



While the fall in support for the view that most unemployed people could find a job in the years in which the Coalition has been in government can be linked to the recession, agreement with this viewpoint is still much higher than it has been in previous times of recession, suggesting other factors are having an impact. Previous

analyses of British Social Attitudes data have concluded that support for welfare recipients and the welfare state, on measures such as this, declined during Labour's period in government, as Labour supporters in particular adopted the tougher stance on welfare initiated by their party (Curtice, 2010). We examine this notion in greater detail later in the chapter.

While perceptions of the extent to which welfare recipients are 'deserving' have remained relatively stable over time, views about the unemployed and the extent to which their situation is avoidable have fluctuated considerably, becoming less negative in times of recession, but seeming to become persistently more critical since Labour came to power in 1997. In the next section, we examine whether the recessions of the last three decades and Labour's policies on welfare are likely to have had a similar aspect on attitudes to the welfare state and its relationship with welfare recipients.

5.2.2 Attitudes to the welfare state

The following four statements have featured in the 'welfarism' scale for different lengths of time, with respondents being asked to identify the extent to which they agree or disagree with each:

The welfare state encourages people to stop helping each other

If welfare benefits weren't so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet

Cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people's lives

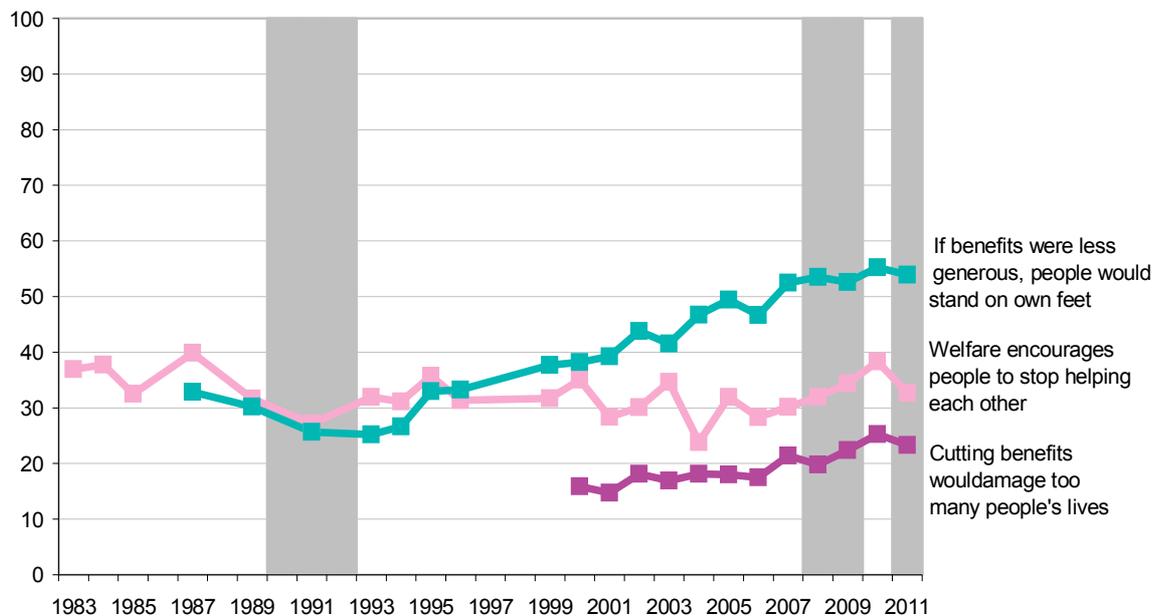
The creation of the welfare state is one of Britain's proudest achievements

Data collected for all years for which these questions featured on the survey is presented in the chart below for the first three measures (with the proportion holding a negative belief in relation to each statement being highlighted). The statements can be categorized as those which relate to the worthiness of the welfare state (whether limiting it would damage lives and whether it is an achievement to be proud of) and those which measure beliefs that the very existence of the welfare state discourages other forms of help (albeit self-help or help from other people).

Only small minorities of the public hold negative attitudes to the worthiness of the welfare state, with slightly less than a quarter in 2011 disagreeing that cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people's lives (23%) and less than two in ten (15%) disagreeing with the idea that the creation of the welfare state is one of Britain's proudest achievements. Although these two items have only featured on British Social Attitudes for a relatively short period, it is clear from the data below that the proportion with a negative stance on the view that cutting benefits would damage too many people's lives has remained relatively low over time (the same is true in relation to those who disagree that the creation of the welfare state is one of Britain's proudest achievements; disagreement with this view has remained stable over time). Nevertheless, the proportion disagreeing with the notion that cutting benefits would damage too many lives has risen by seven percentage points since 2000, with much of this increase occurring during the period in which the UK was in recession. This trend suggests that the experience of recession (and the associated reliance of greater proportions of the public on welfare) has not had a discernible impact in increasing the perception that the welfare state plays a worthwhile function or is something to be proud of.

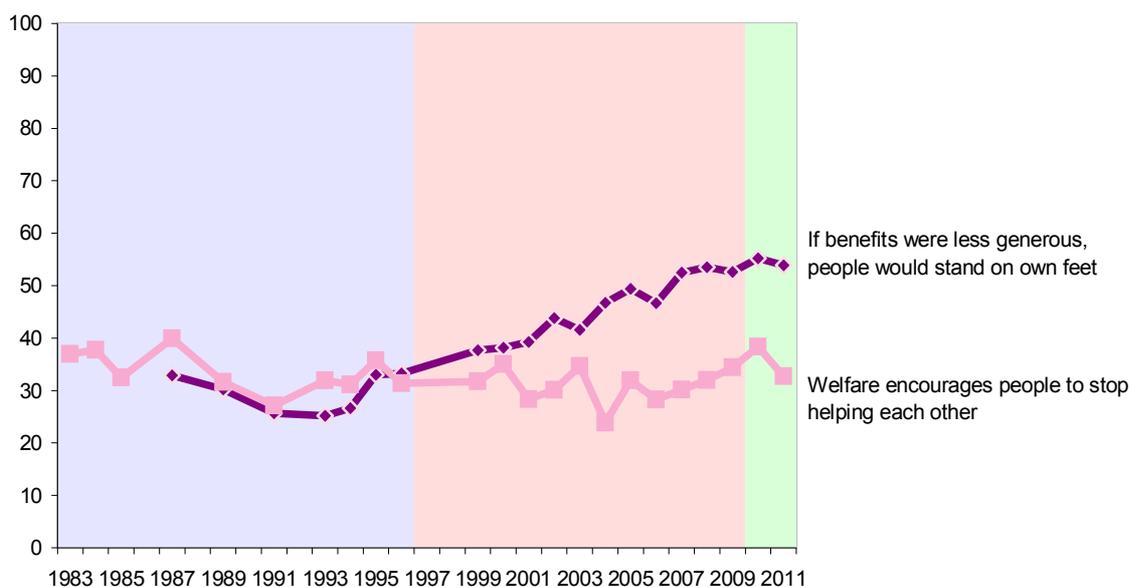
The two items which measure perceptions of the notion that the welfare state encourages dependence tell a different story. Adherence to the view that the welfare state encourages people to stop helping each other has remained relatively stable over the past three decades, with this view being held by one third (33%) in 2011 and a slightly larger proportion (37%) when the question was first asked in 1983. Although agreement with this view appeared to decline during the early 1990s recession (from 32% in 1989 to 27% in 1991), the same is not true of the late 2000s recession, where attitudes to this issue did not behave in a consistent way. On the other hand, the view that, if welfare benefits were not so generous people would learn to stand on their own two feet, has become more prevalent over time; 33% believed this in 1987 compared to 54% now. Again, while it appears that agreement with this view declined slightly in the early 1990s recession, during the late 2000s recession it continued to rise. Clearly then, the link between public attitudes to the welfare state and economic circumstances is far from clear although, overall, it is evident that negative views are less likely to decline in times of recession than they have in the past.

Figure 5.3 Attitudes to welfare state by UK experience of recession, 1983-2011



In fact, as shown in Figure 4 below, the increase in the belief that people would stand on their own feet if welfare benefits were less generous links much more clearly to the identity of the political party in power, with much of this increase occurring during the period in which Labour was in office. As indicated previously, earlier analyses of British Social Attitudes data have concluded that the attitudes of all sections of society, but Labour Party supporters in particular, to the welfare state and welfare recipients became more negative during this period, as they adopted the thinking of the party in government.

Figure 5.4 Attitudes to welfare state by political party in government, 1983-2011



Clearly, the relationship between public attitudes to the welfare state and welfare recipients and political and economic circumstances is not consistent, with particular attitudes appearing to have a stronger relationship with economic circumstances and the identity and direction in policy of the political party in power. In the next section, we examine, on three key measures, whether this is the case for all sections of society and if some sub groups respond in particular ways to political and economic circumstances.

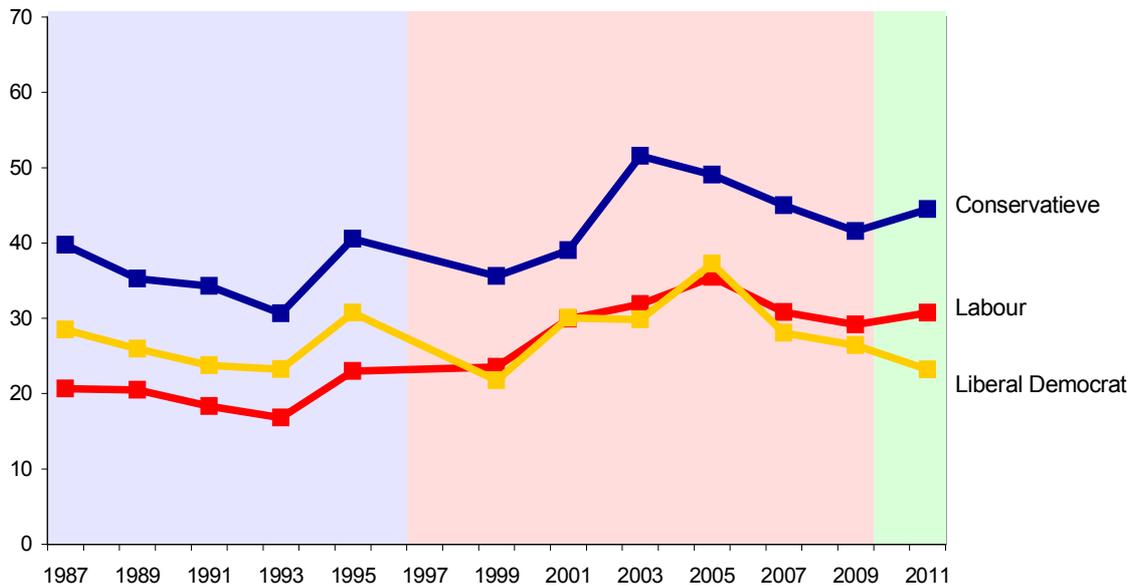
5.3 How attitudes vary across the public

5.3.1 Attitudes towards welfare recipients

In this section, we consider the extent to which the public agree with the view that many welfare recipients do not deserve any help, as this measure most broadly encapsulates perceptions of the extent to which welfare recipients are deserving. Although it was noted previously that agreement with this view had not increased substantially across the population as a whole since the early 1980s, the Figure 5 below reveals that, nevertheless, the attitudes of supporters of different political parties have behaved in far from consistent ways.

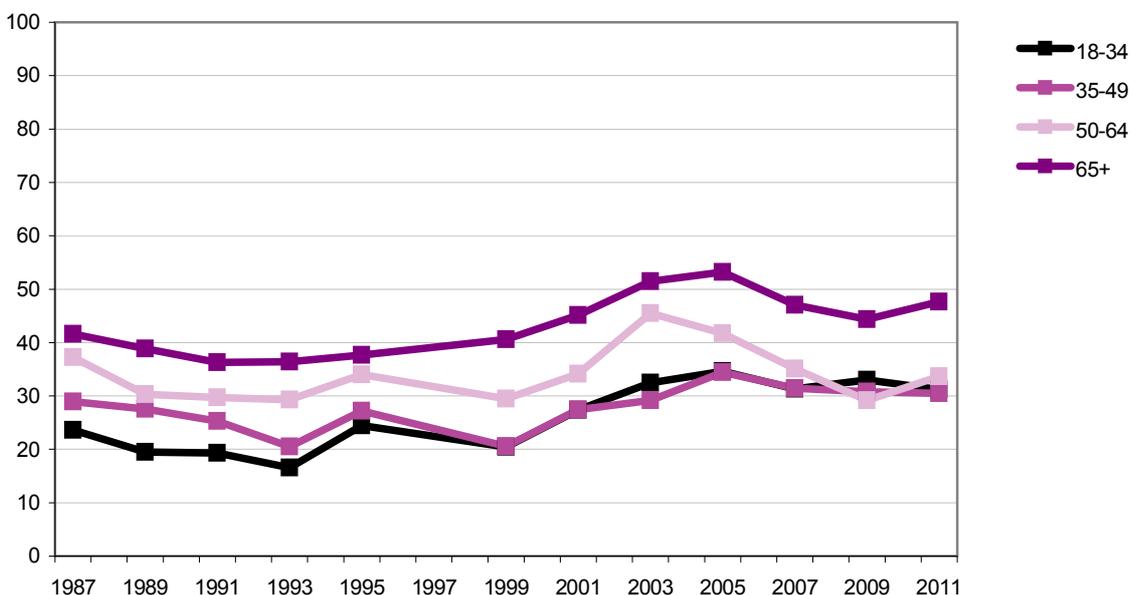
Among Labour supporters, the proportion holding a negative view increased by 10 percentage points between 1987 and 2011 (and by 14 percentage points when it had reached its high point in 2005), with the bulk of this increase occurring during the period in which Labour were in power. This endorses the view, reported elsewhere, that during this period, the views of Labour supporters followed the policy directions adopted by their party (Curtice, 2010). Over the entire period, the proportion of supporters of other parties who agreed with this view, despite some fluctuations, remained relatively stable.

Figure 5.5 Agreement that many welfare recipients do not deserve help, by political party affiliation and political party in government, 1983-2011



Similarly, the views of different age groups have not changed in a comparable way over time, as shown in Figure 6 below. The oldest age group, those aged 65+, have always held the most negative attitudes to welfare recipients, as measured by responses to this question. However, in 2011, their level of agreement is more markedly different to that of other age groups – with almost half (48%) agreeing many welfare recipients do not deserve help, compared to one third or less of each other age group. Strikingly, it is only the views of the oldest and youngest age groups which have changed substantially since the question was first asked in 1987; the view of the middle two age groups have remained relatively consistent. These changes bear no obvious link to economic circumstances, suggesting an explanation for them needs to be sought in other characteristics and experiences common to these age groups.

Figure 5.6 Agreement that many welfare recipients do not deserve help, by age group, 1983-2011



On the other hand, the views of different social classes have changed in very similar ways over time. This is perhaps surprising, as we might have expected lower social classes to be more sympathetic to welfare recipients, particularly in times of recession.

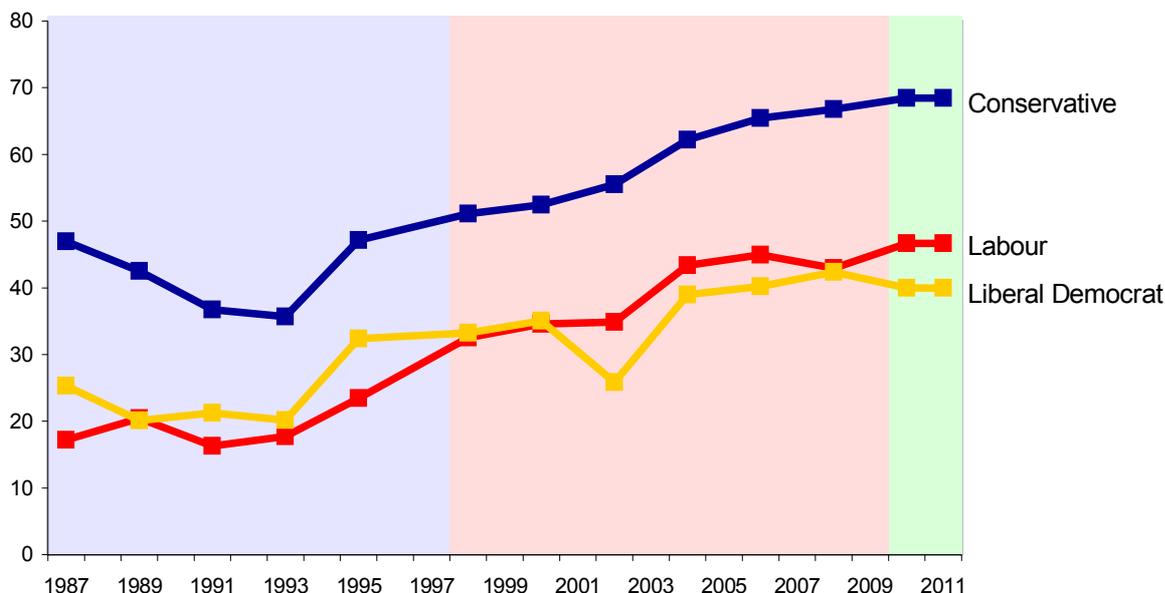
5.3.2 Attitudes to the welfare state

As noted previously, the most striking change in public attitudes to the welfare state over the past three decades is in the proportion agreeing that, if benefits were less generous, people would stand on their own two feet. It is therefore interesting to consider whether agreement with this view increased equally across all sections of society or whether it was confined to particular sub groups.

Interestingly, the patterns we found in relation to changing attitudes to welfare recipients are replicated here, with the views of Labour Party supporters having changed the most and the views of different age groups behaving in very distinct ways. Once again, the attitudes of different social classes have behaved in very similar ways.

As shown in Figure 7 below, views of Labour supporters have changed most since the question was first asked in 1987 – with agreement increasing by 30 percentage points, compared to 21 percentage points for Conservative supporters and 16 percentage points for supporters of Liberal Democrat supporters. Much of this increase occurred immediately before and during the period Labour was in power, providing testimony to claims that Labour supporters were more influenced by their party’s tougher stance on welfare than others.

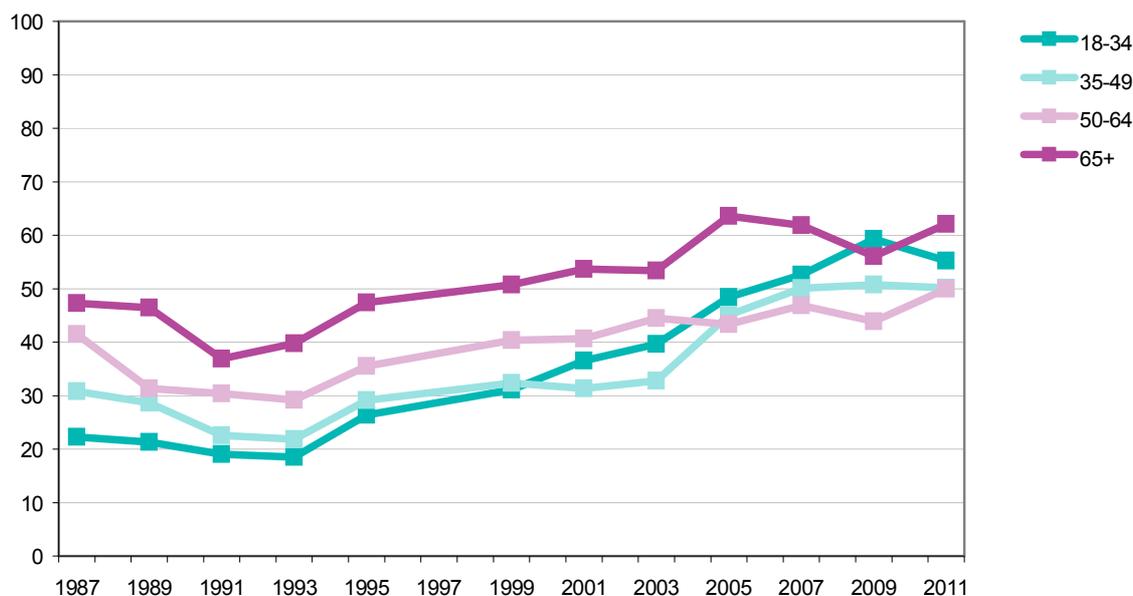
Figure 5.7 Agreement that if benefits were less generous, recipients would stand on their own feet, by political affiliation and political party in power, 1987-2011



In relation to age, we again in Figure 8 find that the attitudes of different age groups are much closer in 2011 than they were in 1987 – including the oldest age group, who stood out in their attitudes to welfare recipients reported above. So while 15 percentage points separated the views of the oldest and youngest age groups in 1987 (with the oldest holding the most negative attitudes), by 2011 views of different age

groups were separated by just seven percentage points. One of the factors causing this divergence of views is clearly the trend in the attitudes of the youngest age group; from being the most positive in 1987, they had become one of the most negative by 2011, with an increase of 33 percentage points in the proportion holding a negative view. This pattern may reflect the fact that age and party affiliation are known to be correlated, with younger respondents being much more likely to affiliate with the Labour Party.

Figure 5.8 Agreement that if benefits were less generous, recipients would stand on their own feet, by age, 1987-2011



From the two measures reviewed, it is clear that negative attitudes to the welfare state and welfare recipients, while occurring across most sections of society, have increased to a greater extent among two key groups – Labour Party supporters and the youngest age group. From the evidence reviewed, it seems clear that these changes are driven to a far greater extent by public reactions to political policy and rhetoric, rather than as a response to changes in economic circumstances.

5.4 Conclusions

Attitudes to welfare recipients and the welfare state have not changed in a uniform way over time. However, with the exception of views about the ability of the unemployed to find a job, clearly linked to experience of recession, changes in views appear to link with developments in political policy, rather than particular economic circumstances. Change is evident at a societal level, but is concentrated among the views of Labour supporters and the youngest age group, which have become much more negative over time.

6 Conclusion

Over the past three decades, the public's attitudes to different aspects of poverty and welfare have behaved in a number of different ways and do not exhibit a consistent relationship with economic circumstances or political policy or rhetoric. Nevertheless, from the analysis presented in this report, a number of clear patterns do emerge.

Economic circumstances have a much clearer and more consistent relationship with public attitudes to poverty than they do with attitudes to welfare. Perceptions and expectations regarding poverty levels routinely become more negative in times of economic hardship, with the view that poverty is a result of societal factors or fate, rather than individual characteristics, gaining prominence in such circumstances. However, while public attitudes to welfare have tended to become more sympathetic in times of economic hardship, this relationship appears to have weakened over time, with the clearest enduring links being between experience of economic hardship and support for recipients of unemployment benefits. In most cases, these trends cut across society, rather than being confined to the social groups more likely to be affected by poverty and to require welfare, in times of hardship. Moreover, economic circumstances appear to have no longer have a consistent discernible relationship with broader attitudes to welfare spending and welfare recipients, both at the population level and among those likely to require welfare in times of hardship.

On the other hand, there is substantial evidence that attitudes to both poverty and welfare changed in the period before and during Labour's term in office and that this change was concentrated among, although not exclusive to, Labour Party supporters. In particular, the view that poverty is caused by individual, rather than societal factors increased most markedly among Labour supporters during this period. Similarly, views that welfare recipients are undeserving and that the welfare state encourages dependence increased most among Labour supporters in the period in which Labour adopted a more right-wing approach to this policy area. We can see, in recent trends, how public attitudes to welfare are continuing to move in line with government policy and rhetoric (now that of the Coalition) – and that there is little sign that views of Labour supporters are reversing, now 'their' party is not in government.

Aside from economic and political circumstances, it is noteworthy that the views of the oldest age group, those aged 65+, stand out in relation to a number of issues. In some cases, the views of this age group have always been different; over the past three decades they have consistently been less likely to perceive there to be significant levels of poverty in Britain and have offered an individual, rather than a societal explanation for the poverty that does exist (a tendency also reflected in the more recent data available on attitudes to child poverty). On other issues, different age groups have become much more similar in their attitudes over the past three decades; the oldest age group no longer stands out in its prioritisation of welfare spending and the views of the oldest and youngest regarding the extent to which the welfare state encourages dependence have converged.

Due to these trends in relation to age and political party affiliation, the British population appear to have become more united in their attitudes to poverty and welfare, with the differences between different age groups and political party supporters in particular being much less marked than they were three decades ago. This is likely to result from the diverging of the views of the two main political parties, with Labour supporters (who are traditionally younger) adopting positions closer to those occupied by (traditionally older) Conservative supporters. While additional

multivariate analysis is needed to conclude that it is an individual's political party allegiance that has driven changes in their attitudes over the past three decades, from this analysis there is a clear expectation that this would be the case.

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