

Have voters embraced a bigger state?

John Curtice

*How far do the government's tax and spending plans reflect
the public mood?*

The Covid-19 pandemic has occasioned a dramatic increase in the economic role of the state. During 18 months of varying degrees of lockdown that required many businesses to shut and made heavy demands on the NHS and other public services, the state paid the wages for nearly 9 million workers,¹ increased welfare provision for the working age poor,² and increased spending on public services.³ Government spending accounted for well over half of the economy in 2020/21, its highest ever level in peacetime.⁴ But even now that lockdown is over, the government has unveiled tax and spending plans that imply that public spending will account for a higher proportion of GDP than it has done on a sustained basis at any time since the 1970s, not least thanks to increased spending on health, social care and welfare. Meanwhile, the tax take will be at its highest since the early 1950s.⁵ Whereas the government's response to the economic and fiscal shock occasioned by the 2008–9 financial crash was to rein in public spending,⁶ this time it has apparently come to the conclusion that the state needs to play a more active role – in the hope that this will enable the country to 'build back better'.

1 Office for National Statistics [ONS] (2021) 'Coronavirus job retention scheme statistics: 4 November 2021', <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-4-november-2021>

2 Brewer M and Gardiner L (2020) 'The initial impact of COVID-19 and policy responses on household incomes', *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 36(S1): 187–99.

3 HM Treasury (2021) *Public Expenditure: Statistical Analyses July 2021*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1003755/CCS207_CCS0621818186-001_PESA_ARA_2021_Web_Accessible.pdf

4 Office for Budget Responsibility (2021) 'Economic and fiscal outlook: July 2021'. <https://obr.uk/efo/economic-and-fiscal-outlook-october-2021/>

5 Ibid

6 Emmerson C (2017) 'Two parliaments of pain: The UK public finances 2010 to 2017', Institute for Fiscal Studies, briefing note. <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/9180>

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But to what extent does this development reflect the public mood? Has the experience of the pandemic led voters also to the conclusion that the state should now play a more active role in the economy? One reason why it might have done is that the pandemic stimulated a renewed debate about whether the government should be doing more to reduce the relatively high levels of inequality in Britain.⁷ The pandemic hit some sections of society more than others. Levels of morbidity and mortality were highest among those living in deprived areas and in high-density housing, as well as among the ethnic minority population and those who were working in less well-paid occupations that could not be pursued from home.⁸ Meanwhile, the issue of inequality was dramatised by a campaign led by the Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford to ensure that children who were entitled to free school meals should continue to receive them during lockdown.⁹ For some commentators and analysts at least, the experience of the pandemic was a clear signal that a government that had been committed even before the pandemic to ‘levelling up’ should now be as good as its word.^{10,11,12}

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In this article, we address where attitudes towards both inequality in particular and the role of the state in general stand in the wake of Covid-19 by analysing the results of three surveys that were undertaken (primarily

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- 7 Blundell R, Cribb J, McNally S, Warwick R and Xu X (2021) *Inequalities in education, skills, and incomes in the UK: The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic*, Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/inequalities-in-education-skills-and-incomes-in-the-uk-the-implications-of-the-covid-19-pandemic/>
- 8 Marmot M, Allen J, Goldblatt P, Herd E and Morrison J (2021) *Build back fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review*, Institute for Health Inequality. <https://www.instituteoftheequity.org/resources-reports/build-back-fairer-the-covid-19-marmot-review>
- 9 Smith R (2020) ‘As Boris Johnson plays Scrooge, Britons feed the hungry themselves’, *New York Times*, 2 November 2020
- 10 Benach J (2021) ‘We must take advantage of this pandemic to make a radical social change: The coronavirus as a global health, inequality and eco-social problem’, *International Journal of Health Services* 51(1): 50–54
- 11 Thomas C (2021) *The disease of disparity: A blueprint to make progress on health inequalities in England*, Institute for Public Policy Research. <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/disease-of-disparity>
- 12 Prieg L (2021) ‘The road to recovery’, *New Economics Zine*, 3: 6–8

online) at various stages during the pandemic and each of which asked questions that had been carried on similar surveys conducted before the pandemic, including in many instances ever since the 1980s.¹³ The first of these surveys was conducted in July 2020, just as the first wave of the pandemic was coming to an end, and comprised 2,413 interviews with members of NatCen's mixed-mode random probability panel.¹⁴ The members of this panel are all people who were originally interviewed (face to face) for one of the annual British Social Attitudes (BSA) surveys and who have agreed to complete further surveys online (or in a minority of cases by phone).^{15,16} The second survey is the regular annual 2020 BSA, conducted (primarily online) with a fresh sample of 3,964 randomly selected respondents between October and December when the prevalence of the disease was rising once again.¹⁷ Meanwhile the third survey was undertaken with 2,217 members of the NatCen panel in June 2021, just as the various lockdown measures were beginning to be eased significantly. This design means that we can trace how attitudes evolved during the course of the pandemic as well as ascertain how they compare with the public mood in the years leading up to what has been the most significant public health crisis in a century.

PERCEPTIONS OF INEQUALITY

We begin by looking at how people have responded to two statements about the existence of inequality in Britain. The first (see table 1) says that 'there is one law for the rich and one for the poor', while the second (see table 2) claims that 'ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth'. In both cases our three pandemic surveys all show somewhat higher levels of agreement than was in evidence in the BSA

13 Curtice J, Abrams D and Jessop C (2021) 'New values, new divides? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public attitudes', in Cley E, Curtice J, Frankenburg S, Morgan H and Reid S (eds), *British Social Attitudes: The 38th report*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-38/new-values-new-divides.aspx>

14 Curtice J, Abrams D and Jessop C (2020a) *Coronavirus and public attitudes: Plus ça change?*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/1989002/Coronavirus-and-public-attitudes.pdf>

15 Curtice J, Hudson N and Montagu I (eds) (2020b) *British Social Attitudes: The 37th report*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-37/key-time-series.aspx>

16 Jessop C (2018) 'The NatCen panel: Developing an open probability-based mixed-mode panel in Great Britain', *Social Research Practice*, 6: 2–14

17 Cley E, Curtice J, Frankenburg S, Morgan H and Reid S (eds) (2020b), *British Social Attitudes: The 38th report*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-38/introduction.aspx>

Table 1. Levels of agreement and disagreement with the proposition that ‘there is one law for the rich and one for poor’, 2017–21

	2017	2018	2019	July	Oct/ Dec 2020	June
	%	%	%	2020	%	2021
				%		%
Agree	57	60	56	67	64	66
Neither agree nor disagree	22	21	25	19	19	20
Disagree	19	18	18	13	16	14

Source: *British Social Attitudes 2017–19, Oct/Dec 2020; NatCen Panel July 2020, June 2021*

Table 2. Levels of agreement and disagreement with the proposition that ‘ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth’, 2017–21

	2017	2018	2019	July	Oct/ Dec 2020	June
	%	%	%	2020	%	2021
				%		%
Agree	61	62	57	64	64	63
Neither agree nor disagree	26	26	30	26	23	26
Disagree	12	10	10	9	12	10

Source: *British Social Attitudes 2017–19, Oct/Dec 2020; NatCen Panel July 2020, June 2021*

surveys conducted during the three years before the pandemic – though more clearly so in table 1 than in table 2. On average, our three pandemic surveys found that two-thirds (66 per cent) now agree that rich and poor are treated differently, compared with 58 per cent in the three pre-pandemic readings. In the case of whether ordinary people fail to secure their fair share of the nation’s wealth, the difference is smaller. On average, 64 per cent now agree that they do not get their fair share, compared with 60 per cent in the three years before the pandemic.

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Table 3. Levels of agreement and disagreement with the proposition that ‘government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well-off’, 2017–21

	2017	2018	2019	July 2020	Oct/ Dec 2020	June 2021
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	42	42	39	42	46	40
Neither agree nor disagree	27	27	31	27	23	29
Disagree	30	29	27	30	30	30

Source: *British Social Attitudes 2017–19*, Oct/Dec 2020; NatCen Panel July 2020, June 2021

There is then some indication that in the wake of the pandemic there may have been a slight increase in the proportion of people who regard Britain as an unequal society – though there is no sign that this was increasingly the case as the pandemic played out. Moreover, the levels of agreement with our two propositions about inequality are still no higher than they were for much of the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁸ It certainly cannot be said that the pandemic has caused the recognition of inequality in Britain to reach unprecedented heights.

In any event, while Covid-19 may have occasioned some increase in the proportion who regard Britain as unequal, this does not necessarily mean that more people now support government action to reduce that inequality. The level of support for redistribution has always been lower than the proportion who acknowledge the existence of inequality. And now the two have not moved in step with each other either. Table 3 reveals that in our three pandemic surveys, on average only 43 per cent agreed that the government should redistribute income from the better off to the less well off, little different from the 41 per cent who expressed that view beforehand. Indeed, the most recent reading of 40 per cent is actually a little below the 42 per cent recorded in two of our three pre-pandemic BSA surveys. At least in so far as reducing inequality is concerned, it is not clear that the pandemic has created a very different public mood at all.

18 Curtice J, Abrams D and Jessop C (2021), ‘New values, new divides? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public attitudes’, in Clery E, Curtice J, Frankenburg S, Morgan H and Reid S (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 38th report*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-38/new-values-new-divides.aspx>

Table 4. Levels of agreement and disagreement with the proposition that ‘if welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet’, 2015–21

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	July 2020	Oct/ Dec 2020	June 2021
	%		%	%	%	%		%
Agree	52	44	43	40	34	39	34	36
Neither agree nor disagree	22	25	25	27	28	29	25	30
Disagree	24	29	30	32	37	32	40	34

Source: *British Social Attitudes 2015–19, Oct/Dec 2020; NatCen Panel July 2020, June 2021*

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ATTITUDES TO WELFARE

Although the pandemic may have raised questions about the level of inequality, the more immediate consequence of lockdown was that many people who thought they were in secure employment and who had never been reliant on welfare during their working lives suddenly found that their position was potentially precarious. Although in the event the government’s furlough scheme avoided high levels of unemployment, the initial shock might still have caused some people to be more sympathetic to the provision of welfare for those of working age – and area where public spending had been especially squeezed in the wake of the financial crash of 2008–9.¹⁹

Table 4 looks at how people have responded in recent years to a negative statement about welfare benefits that suggests that they undermine people’s self-reliance. It will be noticed that there was a sharp change in the pattern of response in the years leading up to the pandemic. As recently as 2015, just over twice as many people (52 per cent) said that they agreed with the statement as indicated that they disagreed (24 per cent), figures that were

19 Hills J (2015) *The Coalition’s record on cash transfers, poverty and inequality 2010-15*, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion. <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spcc/WP11.pdf>

Table 5. Levels of agreement and disagreement with the proposition that ‘Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one’, 2015–21

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	July 2020	Oct/ Dec 2020	June 2021
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	60	56	56	55	51	51	42	52
Neither agree nor disagree	23	25	25	25	29	26	27	28
Disagree	15	17	18	18	18	23	30	20

Source: *British Social Attitudes 2015–19, Oct/Dec 2020; NatCen Panel July 2020, June 2021*

typical of what had been obtained throughout the previous decade.²⁰ Yet during the subsequent four years, opinion swung substantially in the opposite direction, such that by 2019 respondents were more or less equally divided between those who agreed (34 per cent) and those who disagreed (37 per cent). In short, it appears that before the pandemic struck, the public had already become more sympathetic to the provision of welfare benefits.

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The pandemic itself witnessed no more than a continuation of the new mood. Between them our three post-pandemic surveys suggest that opinion remains evenly divided on the issue; on average, 36 per cent agree that welfare benefits can stop people standing on their own two feet and 35 per cent disagree. Rather than persuading voters afresh of the merits of welfare, it appears that the pandemic did no more than confirm some in their already revised, more supportive outlook.

A similar pattern is in evidence if we examine attitudes towards benefits for the unemployed in particular. Table 5 illustrates this by looking at how people have responded when it has been put to them that ‘around here,

20 Curtice J, Abrams D and Jessop C (2021) ‘New values, new divides? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public attitudes’, in Clery E, Curtice J, Frankenburg S, Morgan H and Reid S (eds), *British Social Attitudes: The 38th report*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-38/new-values-new-divides.aspx>

most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one'. Of course, in part the responses to this question can be expected to be sensitive to the current level of unemployment.²¹ However, they can also be expected to tap into people's longer-term disposition towards those who find themselves out of work. Indeed, even though it was a period during which the level of unemployment fell,²² the proportion who agreed with the proposition fell from 60 per cent in 2015 (a figure not untypical of what had been recorded since the turn of the century),²³ to 51 per cent in 2019.

Here too, it seems that the pandemic may simply have witnessed a continuation of the new mood. Although the BSA survey conducted towards the end of the year found only 42 per cent in favour (at a time, perhaps, when the restoration of economic activity potentially looked a long time off), our other two pandemic surveys recorded much the same result as the pre-pandemic survey in 2019, with 51 per cent and 52 per cent indicating that they agreed.

“it seems that the pandemic may simply have witnessed a continuation of the new mood”

A similar pattern is found if we examine the views that people express about benefits for the unemployed. The BSA survey has regularly asked people whether ‘benefits for unemployed people are too low and cause hardship’ or whether they are ‘too high and discourage them [that is, unemployed people] from finding jobs’. Not everyone is willing to accept this binary choice and some prefer instead to say ‘neither’. However, among those who were willing to choose one or other answer, the proportion saying unemployment benefits are too high fell markedly in the years leading up to the pandemic. In 2015, 71 per cent said that the benefits were too high and only 29 per cent that they were too low. By 2019 the two options were equally popular at 50 per cent apiece. Meanwhile, on average our three pandemic surveys have found 52 per cent saying the benefits are too high and 48 per cent that they are too low.

21 Curtice J (2020) ‘Will COVID-19 change attitudes towards the welfare state?’, *IPPR Progressive Review*, 27(1): 93–104.

22 Office for National Statistics [ONS] (2021) ‘Coronavirus job retention scheme statistics: 4 November 2021’, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-4-november-2021>

23 Curtice J, Abrams D and Jessop C (2021) ‘New values, new divides? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public attitudes’, in Clery E, Curtice J, Frankenburg S, Morgan H and Reid S (eds), *British Social Attitudes: The 38th report*, NatCen Social Research.

That public attitudes towards the provision of benefits for the unemployed are different now from what they were a few years ago is confirmed by the responses to another question, albeit one that has been asked less frequently. In 2013, just 15 per cent said that they would like to see more government spending on benefits for unemployed people, while as many as 49 per cent stated that they would prefer the government to spend less. When the question was asked again in 2017 opinion had already shifted somewhat, with 20 per cent wanting more spending and 37 per cent less. The question was not asked again before the pandemic, but, as we might by now anticipate, the two pandemic surveys conducted in July 2020 and June 2021 found on average that those wanting more spending (27 per cent) almost exactly counterbalanced those wanting less (28 per cent), while 44 per cent would now want to maintain the status quo.

Welfare benefits for some other working-age groups also became rather more popular in the run-up to the pandemic and continued to be so during lockdown.²⁴ In 2011, just 29 per cent wanted to see more spending on benefits for single parents, as did just 31 per cent in 2013. But by 2017, this figure had increased to 42 per cent, while it averaged, 45 per cent in our July 2020 and June 2021 surveys. There was also a less sharp increase, from 58 per cent in 2011 and 59 per cent in 2013 to 66 per cent in 2017 in the proportion who would like the government to spend more on ‘benefits for parents who work on very low incomes’, while the figure has averaged 64 per cent in the same two pandemic surveys.

Our evidence suggests that the pandemic has not occasioned any marked change in public attitudes towards welfare. However, the pandemic did occur at a time when public attitudes, which for much of the previous 20 years had been relatively unsympathetic towards those in receipt of benefits, had already moved in a more supportive direction. Consequently, the public were already more likely to be supportive of measures such as the furlough scheme and the £20 uplift in universal credit that was put in place during the course of lockdown. The trend also means that the post-pandemic mood is less likely to be supportive of the kind of squeeze on working-age welfare that characterised the government’s response to the fiscal crisis occasioned by the 2008–9 financial crash. That said, it should be noted that on many of our measures, public opinion is still not as supportive of the provision of welfare as it was for much of the 1980s and

24 See also Curtice J (2020) ‘Will COVID-19 change attitudes towards the welfare state?’, *IPPR Progressive Review*, 27(1): 93–104.

1990s. For example, between 1986 and 1996, on average nearly half (47 per cent) *disagreed* that welfare benefits discouraged people from standing on their own two feet, still well above the 35 per cent who have done so in our three pandemic surveys.

“The trend also means that the post-pandemic mood is less likely to be supportive of the kind of squeeze on working-age welfare that characterised the government’s response to the fiscal crisis occasioned by the 2008–9 financial crash”

A BIGGER STATE?

What though of attitudes towards the broader question of the role and size of the state? Has the dramatic increase in public spending whet the appetite of the public for an enlarged role for government? Or – as previous experience has suggested – has the increase occasioned a negative reaction because some voters now feel that the government is doing too much.^{25,26} Table 6 gives us an initial indication of the answer to this question by showing how people have responded over the last 10 years to the following question:

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

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

As the table shows, very few voters ever say that the government should reduce taxes and spending – but opinion does shift over time between those who opt for keeping taxes and spending at the same level as now, and those who say that taxes and spending should be increased.

Here too, we can see that public attitudes had already shifted prior to the lockdown. In the years immediately after the financial crash, when the

25 Curtice J (2010) ‘Election 2010: A new mood on tax and spend?’, *Policy and Politics*, 38(2): 325–9

26 Wlezien C (1995) ‘The public as thermostat: Dynamics of preferences for spending’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 69(4): 981–1000

Table 6. Attitudes towards tax and spend 2011–21

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	July 2020	Oct/ Dec 2020	June 2021
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Which should the government choose...												
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits	6	6	6	7	4	4	4	4	5	6	6	6
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	54	53	54	52	47	44	33	34	37	41	43	43
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	36	34	36	37	45	48	60	57	53	53	50	50

Source: *British Social Attitudes 2011–19, Oct/Dec 2020; NatCen Panel July 2020, June 2021*

government was pursuing a strategy of fiscal ‘austerity’, only just over one in three were saying that taxes and spending should be increased. But from 2015 onwards there were signs of a reaction against that austerity, such that by 2017 as many as 60 per cent said that taxes and spending should be increased. That proved to be a high point in support for more spending, but in 2019, on the eve of the pandemic, it was still the case that over half (53 per cent) of voters were saying that taxes and spending should be increased.

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There is certainly no sign that the pandemic has been accompanied by any increase in support for more spending, which has averaged 51 per cent in our three pandemic surveys. At the same time, however, there is also little indication of any negative reaction to the growth in the size of the state during lockdown. It may be that people have yet to register the change in the size of the state that has occurred, and that when the tax rises that the government is now planning are implemented support for more tax and spend will fall. Equally, however, it may be that the fact that support for increased spending has held steady despite the growth in spending is an indication that the public do now have higher expectations of government.

“There is certainly no sign that the pandemic has been accompanied by any increase in support for more spending ... however, there is also little indication of any negative reaction to the growth in the size of the state during lockdown”

We can gain some further purchase on which of these alternatives may be closer to the truth by examining the answers that people give to some questions on what should be the responsibility of government. Unlike our question on tax and spend, these questions do not ask whether governments should be doing more or less than at present. Consequently, the meaning of the questions is not potentially affected by changes in the status quo. As a result, if the public are now more likely to believe that government should be accepting certain responsibilities, this might be regarded as indicative of support for a bigger state.

Yet of this there are only limited signs. True, whereas in 2016 only 48 per cent said that it should ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ be the government’s responsibility ‘to provide a job for everyone who wants one’, in our July 2020 and June 2021 surveys, on average 60 per cent expressed that view. That said, however, that 60 per cent figure is little different from the one of 63 per cent that was recorded in 2012 or that of 59 per cent in 2010. Similarly, while between 2016 and 2020/21 there was an increase from 31 per cent to 48 per cent in the proportion saying that the government should ‘definitely’ ‘provide industry with the help it needs to grow’, the proportion was still below the 58 per cent recorded in 2012 or indeed the 52 per cent that backed this view as long ago as 1985. While it might be argued that the public are now more inclined to expect government to be economically active than they have been at some points in the past, it is not clear that the tilt in that direction is as unprecedented in character as the increase in tax and spend itself has been.

Another perspective on this issue is provided by the levels of agreement and disagreement with the proposition that ‘major public services and industries ought to be in state ownership’. Those who are comfortable with a large state could be expected to be more likely to agree with this statement. Prior to the pandemic, the question had not previously been asked since 2009, when 41 per cent said that they agreed and only 22 per cent stated that they disagreed. Despite the length of time that had subsequently elapsed, at 44 per cent, the proportion who agreed in our July 2020 and June 2021 surveys was little different from what it had been on that occasion, though at 16 per cent the average level of disagreement was a little lower. At most there is perhaps now less of a presumption that the private sector is necessarily to be preferred over the state as a provider of goods and services, but again there is relatively little indication that the public have come to embrace a more active state.

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Meanwhile, on one service that faced particularly difficult circumstances during the pandemic – the provision of social care for older people – public

Table 7. Attitudes towards the funding of social care 2012–21

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

Source: *British Social Attitudes 2012, 2018; NatCen Panel July 2020, June 2021*

opinion appears to have moved away from the view that it should simply be funded by government. This is shown in table 7, which shows how people have responded when presented with four possible options. Apart from the government and the individual receiving care, these options are ‘the individual should pay what they can and the government should pay the rest’ and ‘the individual should pay what they can up to a capped amount and the government should pay the rest’. The first of these two options essentially describes the current position in England (the position in the devolved territories varies) whereby someone is liable to pay the costs of care until their assets fall below a certain level, while the latter refers to the idea that, irrespective of their wealth, there should be a limit on the total amount that someone should have to pay for care during their lifetime,²⁷ and is the system towards which it is proposed that England should now move.²⁸

Table 7 reveals that as recently as 2018, just a couple of years before the pandemic, as many as 44 per cent said that the funding of social care should wholly be the government’s responsibility. However, in the two readings we obtained during the pandemic that proportion dropped to little more than one-third. True, there has been little change in the level of support for the existing system (which can leave individuals paying very high costs). Instead, what has become markedly more popular is capping the amount that an individual has to pay. Although the proposed

27 Dilnot A (2011) *Fairer care funding: The report of the Commission on Funding of Care and Support*. https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20130221121529mp_/https://www.wp.dh.gov.uk/carecommission/files/2011/07/Fairer-Care-Funding-Report.pdf

28 Giles C and Neville S (2021) ‘How will reform of social care in England work?’, *Financial Times*, 7 September 2021.

introduction of such a system will be more expensive for taxpayers than the current position, given the swing against the government footing the whole bill, here too we have little sign that voters have become more likely to embrace the idea of a bigger state.

CONCLUSION

Our evidence suggests that the pandemic has had very little discernible impact on public attitudes towards inequality and the role of the state. Voters might have become a little more likely to regard Britain as an unequal country, though that does not seem to have fed through into increased support for welfare provision, let alone redistribution. The public mood with which policymakers are having to negotiate is in truth largely little changed from that in evidence before the pandemic.

Yet this would be to miss an important point. In some respects at least, public attitudes had already shifted significantly before the pandemic set in – and lockdown did nothing to reverse that shift. In particular, there was a more supportive attitude towards the provision of welfare benefits for those of working age, including those who are unemployed. At the same time, there had already been a swing in favour of more tax and spend. As a result, the public mood during the pandemic has been significantly different from what it was during and after the financial crash of 2008–9, suggesting that the strategy that was pursued then to reverse the fiscal damage – spending cuts including not least in respect of welfare – would be more difficult politically to pursue this time around. That does not mean that in the longer term voters will necessarily accept the increased tax burden that now faces them, but for the time being at least it seems that the current public mood requires a different approach from the one that was followed a decade ago.

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