

The British Social Attitudes Survey

Explore the findings of the most recent BSA survey

What, who, how?

The British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey produced by the National Centre for Social Research is an annual survey that has been in operation for almost 40 years. Having longitudinal data on people's attitudes on a range of social, cultural and economic issues is very important for framing policy, but it is also of great interest and use for sociologists. The latest (2021) survey was published in 2022 and, as always, it makes for fascinating reading. The BSA survey may not be perfect — few surveys are — but it can tell us something useful about how attitudes of the public change over time. We, as sociologists, just have to work out why.

How the survey works and who is involved are vital questions for academic researchers. The sampling frame for potential respondents is the Postcode Address File (PAF). Letters are sent to a random sample of addresses asking up to two adult household members to complete the survey. Some 36,898 addresses were finally selected as eligible in 2021. Respondents could complete the survey online or in a telephone interview. Out of an estimated 69,737 adults who were *eligible* to respond, some 6,250 finally took part — a response rate of just 9%. So, this is quite a large sample, but is it a *representative* one?

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Attitudes to taxation

Surveys undertaken like this one can, over time, reflect changing attitudes towards matters of national importance, such as taxation and public services. Figure 1, for example, shows that reducing taxes has never been especially popular, but between 2005 and 2015 raising taxes to pay for services became rather less popular. And then things began to change again. Why do you think that was?

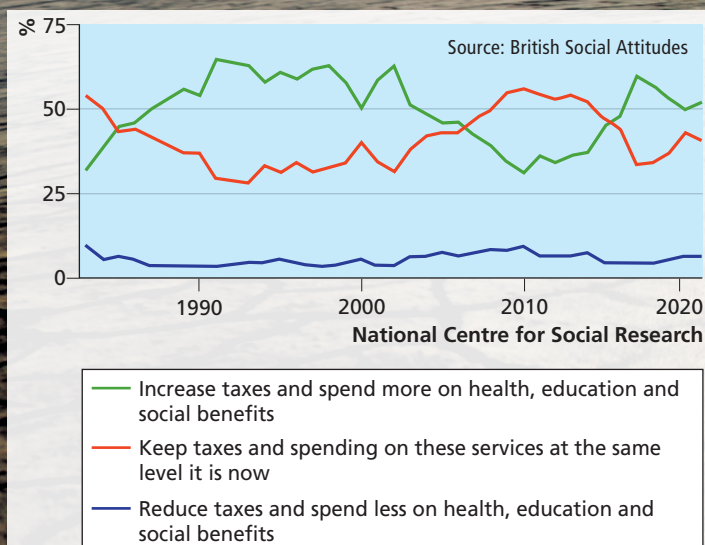


Figure 1 Attitudes towards taxation and spending on health, education and social benefits, 1983–2021

Attitudes to environmental problems

Finally, the BSA survey is able to show how views on *environmental change* have shifted quite radically, even over a period of just a decade (see Figure 3). In 2010 climate change and using up our natural resources were neck-and-neck in terms of public concern, but by 2021 climate change had become much more prominent. A majority (60%) today believe that the world's climate has been changing mostly due to human activity, while only 6% say the climate has not been changing, or that it has been changing mostly due to natural processes.

RESOURCES

'British Social Attitudes Survey 39'. Available at:
www.tinyurl.com/mrcyesvc

Attitudes towards electoral reform

Attitudes towards electoral reform have also shifted recently. There has been much debate about the two-party system in the UK because, it is argued, governments are usually returned with much less than half the majority of votes cast and smaller parties do not get the parliamentary seats their national vote deserves. Figure 2 shows that in 2011 only 27% of those asked in the BSA survey favoured electoral reform, but by 2021 a majority of people wanted change. Are the old party loyalties, shaped by class difference, diminishing? Is *issue politics* increasingly important to younger people?

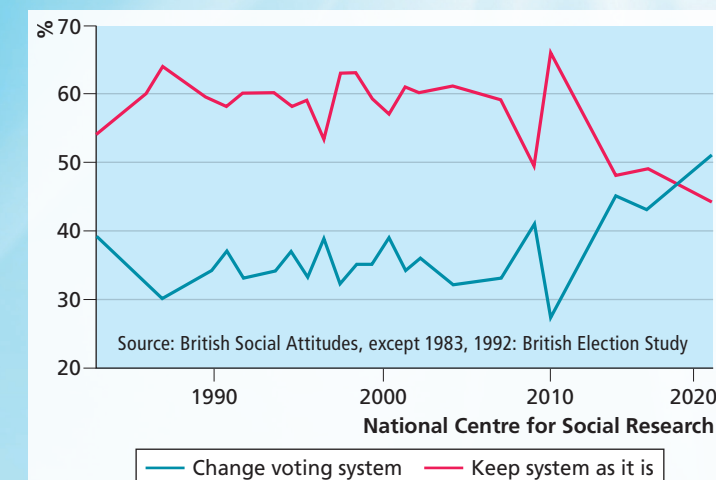


Figure 2 Attitudes towards electoral reform, 1983–2021

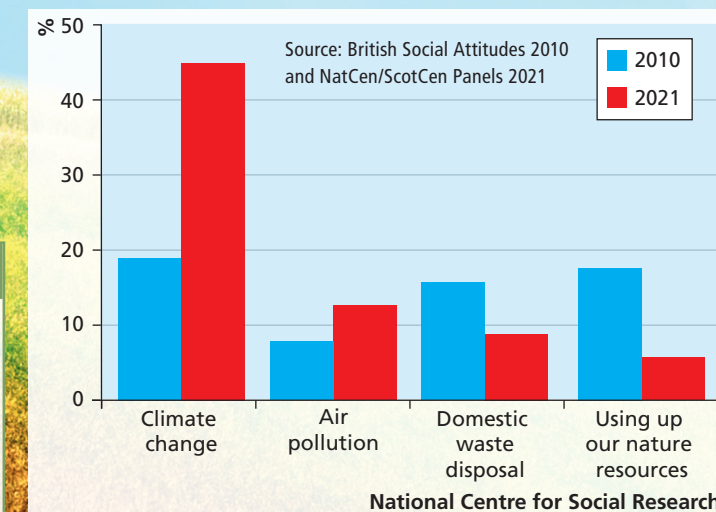


Figure 3 Most important environmental problem for Britain, 2010–21