

Public Reactions to the Economy and Economic Crisis in the UK

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Final Draft, 15 March 2012

An early version of this paper was presented at the “Popular Reactions to the Great Recession” conference, at Nuffield College, Oxford, June 2011. We are grateful to participants, and especially to Larry Bartels, Nancy Bermeo and Stephen Fisher, for helpful comments. We are also grateful to Quinn Albaugh for his ongoing work on this project; and to Roger Mortimer, Director of Political Analysis at Ipsos MORI, who was as always very helpful in our search for data. This work is funded in part by the Quebec Fonds de recherche sur la société et la culture (FQRSC) through the Soutiens aux équipes de recherche program.

There is little doubt that public reactions to economic trends have important political consequences. There are vast and growing bodies of literature exploring the relationships between macroeconomics and political opinion. We know that public preferences on a wide range of policies, particularly redistributive policies, vary alongside macroeconomic trends (e.g., Durr 1993; Erikson et al. 2002; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Stevenson 2001).¹ We know that support for governments rises and falls with macroeconomic trends as well, and that parties can win and lose elections based on the public's evaluations of the economy (e.g., Clarke and Stewart 1995; Duch and Stevenson 2008; Happy 1982; Hibbs 1999; Kayser and Wlezien 2010; Kiewiet 1983; Lanoue 1987; Lewis-Beck 1988; MacKuen et al. 1992; Nadeau 1994, 1996; Norpoth et al. 1991; Price and Sanders 1993; Sanders et al. 1993; Sanders 1996, 1999; Wlezien and Erikson 1996; Erikson and Wlezien 2008).² We also know, based on recent work in the US, that there are differences in the ways in which income cohorts react to the economy, and differences in the extent to which these groups connect their sociotropic economic evaluations with both partisan preferences and their own egotropic economic interests (Bartels 2005, 2010).

In short, we know a fair bit about the various connections between economic conditions and political opinion. But the Great Recession provides a unique opportunity — and perhaps a heightened need — to look further at these relationships. What is the state of public opinion on economic matters during the Great Recession? Does economic crisis lead to a somewhat different relationship between the state of the national economy and public opinion? Does public opinion about taxation or redistribution shift fundamentally during especially hard economic times? Do some income groups react differently to economic crisis than others?

These are the questions motivating the current chapter. The aim, in short, is to offer some preliminary investigations into (a) the distribution of opinion during the most recent economic crisis, and (b) the possibility that public responses shifted or reacted to the economy during this period of economic crisis in unique ways. Doing so requires that we look at data not just from the very recent past, but over an extended period of time. The paper accordingly focuses on British public opinion

¹ Media coverage of the economy may matter to public opinion, above and beyond the impact of the economy itself (e.g., Goidel and Langley 1995; Haller and Norpoth 1997; Nadeau et al. 1999).

² There also is evidence of asymmetries in public reactions to economic information, where negative shifts seem to have a greater impact than equivalent positive shifts, and where governments are penalized more for declines than they are awarded for increases (e.g., Bloom and Price 1975; Claggett 1986; Anderson, 1995; Soroka 2006).

over the past thirty years, drawing mainly on British Social Attitudes surveys. Our primary variables of interest relate to redistributive policy; and we are particularly interested in differences in opinion across low-, middle- and high-income respondents.

As it turns out, our story is much more about long-term trends in opinion than about short-term changes in the current period of economic crisis. As of 2011, at least, the Great Recession has not led to major shifts in British opinion on issues of redistribution. But changes over the past thirty years are important. Multiple variables across large bodies of survey data suggest a similar dynamic: a gradual rightward shift in British public preferences towards redistribution, even (in fact, particularly) amongst low- and middle-income respondents. On some dimensions it thus appears as though differences in preferences for redistribution across income groups are narrowing; and one consequence is that on some issues the median British voter has been moving towards the right. This is true even as the British public recognizes income inequality as a problem, and even in the recent period of crisis. These results may have consequences where British governments' reactions to economic crisis are concerned. We discuss this in some detail below. To begin with, we review the current British economic climate.

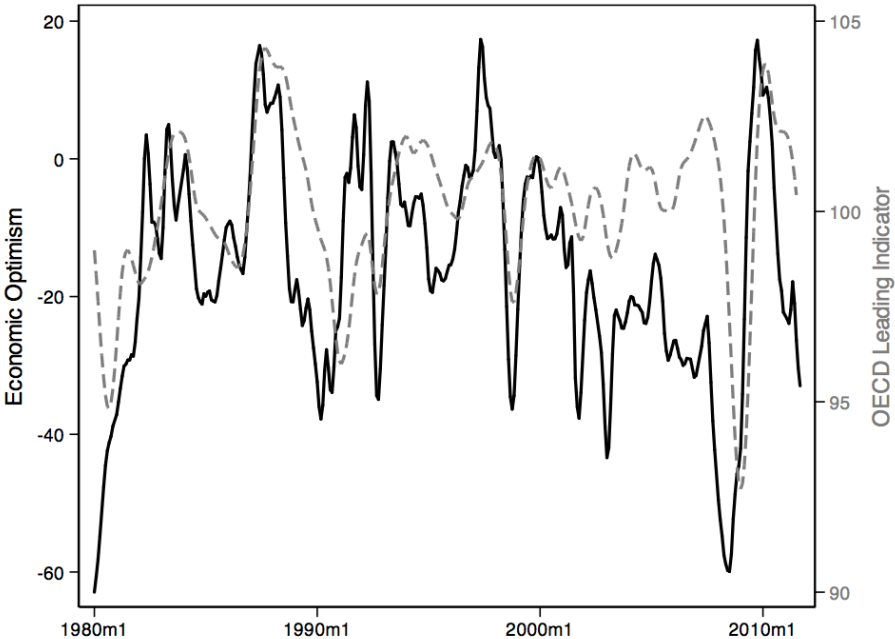
The Great Recession in the UK

Figure 1 puts the current economic situation in the UK in historical context. The black, solid line in the figure is a (lowess-smoothed) measure of prospective economic perceptions. It is based on a question asked by MORI and used as their Economic Optimism Index (EOI): “Do you think that the general economic condition of the country will improve, stay the same or get worse over the next 12 months?” Here, we subtract the proportion of respondents in the negative categories from the proportion of respondents in the positive categories to produce a single measure that captures both the direction and magnitude of the difference between positive and negative assessments at any given time. The gray dashed line in the same figure shows the OECD’s Composite Leading Indicator (CLI) for the UK. The leading indicator series includes a range of different measures, including GDP, output variables, money aggregate, consumer and producer prices, trade measure, labour indicators and so on and, importantly, *not* public opinion. (This is in contrast with The Conference Board’s Index of Leading Economic Indicators for the US.) We use leading economic indicators because they presumably best correspond with our public opinion measure, which taps prospective perceptions.

The two series are correlated, though perhaps not as closely as one might expect—the Pearson’s r is 0.44 ($p < .01$). Both indicators make clear, however, that the Great Recession in the UK is markedly worse economically than any period in the

last 30 years — this is readily evident from the sharp drop in both series toward the end of our timeline. This comes as no surprise, of course; what may surprise is how sharply things bounced back, at least temporarily. The low point for economic optimism is in July 2008 (-64.0); the composite index is already very low at that stage, but bottoms out in January 2009 (92.7). But optimism has shot up to +23 by November 2009; and the composite index peaks in February 2010 (103.9). Clearly, economic indicators and public sentiment pointed to a quick recovery. That was not to be so, however, and both optimism and the composite index have declined since that time, at least through 2010, when our series ends.

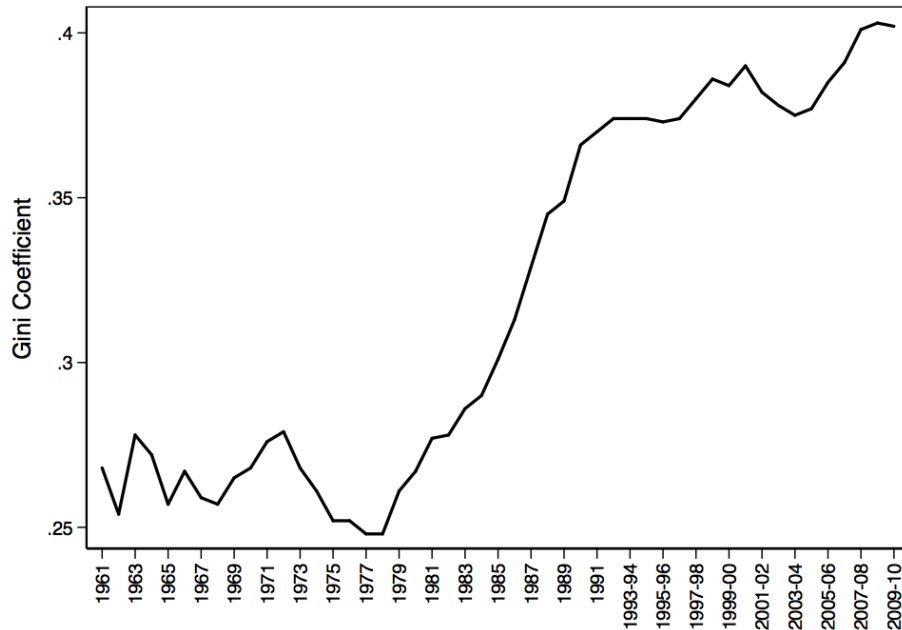
Figure 1. Economic Optimism and Leading Economic Indicators



Alongside the marked decline in the economic situation in 2008, the UK has been experiencing a steady long-term rise in inequality. Figure 2 shows trends in the Gini coefficient since 1980.³ There were periods in the mid-1990s and mid-2000s when the Gini coefficient held steady, but the overall trend is quite clearly upwards. Taken together, then, Figures 1 and 2 suggest that as of 2008/9 the UK was not only in its worst economic slump since 1980, it also exhibited much greater (and rising) income inequality, indeed a 60% increase

³ Data are from the Institute for Fiscal Studies' *Inequality and Poverty Spreadsheet*, available at ifs.org.uk. for Work using these data, see Goodman and Shepherd 2002; Brewer et al. 2009; for similar data, see Hills et al. 2010.

Figure 2. The Gini coefficient, 1979 to 2007-8 (GB)



It is worth noting, as well, that there appears to have been a partisan tinge to the rise in equality over the past fifty years. The major rise in inequality, readily apparent in Figure 2, occurred under Conservative rule. Indeed, over this fifty-year period the mean annual change in the Gini coefficient under Conservative governments is .005, while the mean for Labour governments is .00004.⁴ This finding is in line with recent work by Brewer et al (2009), which points to rising inequality in the UK through a combination of increasing incomes for the wealthy and decreasing incomes for the poor; and differences in the distribution of income across Conservative and Labour Governments, where the latter produce income gains across the spectrum and the latter produce gains mainly for the wealthy. In short, Brewer et al. argue that inequality is worsening, particularly during Conservative rather than Labour governance.

The partisan difference is less important for our current purposes than is the general economic climate: a faltering economy, coupled with growing inequality. But the three trends together are notable for their similarity with what Bartels (2010) has recently observed in the US.⁵ Bartels finds that, even as the economy

⁴ Party coding is based on the party in power for the majority of the year. The difference in means is statistically significant at $p < .05$.

⁵ There are earlier observations on the link between partisanship and changes in inequality in the US as well. See, e.g., Hibbs and Dennis 1988. For a very recent take, see Kelly 2009.

worsens and inequality rises, American public opinion on redistribution has *not* changed; he argues that in moving away from redistributive policies, US governments have been moving further and further from the public preferred level of policy. Is the same true in the UK? We explore this possibility below, at least where the state of public opinion is concerned, and find a somewhat different pattern.

Public Opinion across Income Groups

Economic Optimism

As a starting point, we examine differences across incomes in economic optimism — the same data used to illustrate the current economic climate in Figure 1. Given that economic perceptions may affect voting behavior, the possibility that different subgroups react differently to macroeconomic trends is of some importance. Income subgroups seem to be especially relevant. One the one hand, those with higher incomes are likely to be affected differently by economic conditions than those with lower incomes,⁶ so there are perhaps good reasons for differential responsiveness. On the other hand, there is a growing body of work in the US examining inequalities in both public responsiveness to the economy, and political representation, across income groups (e.g., Bartels 2005, 2010; Gilens 2005; Jacobs and Page 2005; Enns and Wlezien 2011). There has thus far been relatively little (if any) work considering the possibility of a similar dynamic in the UK. Differential reactions to economic circumstances may matter in UK politics as well.

Income is not available in MORI survey data, but social class is. MORI divides respondents using the NRS social grades, based on the occupation of the head of the household.⁷ Figure 3 shows (lowess-smoothed) data for 2003 onward, the time period for which data on social class is available, breaking the sample into two groups: *ABC1* (upper middle to high) and *C2DE* (lower-middle to low).⁸ In line with past work (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1992; Soroka and Wlezien 2008, 2011), these two series are not fundamentally different — indeed, they are relatively similar both in levels, and in the direction of monthly changes.⁹ To the extent that there are differences, it may be that the *ABC1* cohort is slightly more optimistic most of the time. Alternatively, given that the *ABC1* cohort drops below the *C2DE*

⁶ Whether it is less or more is unclear; it surely depends on what aspects of the economy are changing.

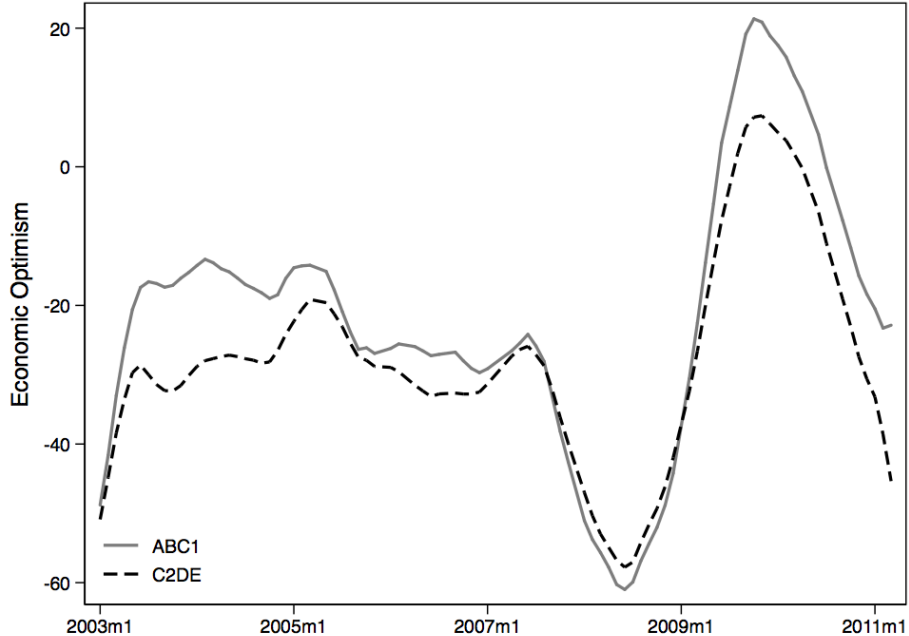
⁷ Full information on NRS social grades is available at <http://www.nrs.co.uk>.

⁸ Further breaking down the sample introduces more error due to smaller samples but makes no real difference for the results.

⁹ The Pearson's r for the two (unsmoothed) series is .94.

cohort at the low-point of the Great Recession, they may simply show somewhat more variance over time, perhaps a product of education/sophistication.

Figure 3. Economic Optimism across Income Groups, MORI surveys



Regardless, there isn't much evidence here that those with lower incomes react fundamentally differently to economic information than those with higher incomes. There also is little evidence that the recent crisis produced a unique change in the relationship between economics and optimism across the different income cohorts.

Public Opinion about Redistribution

The parallelism in economic optimism across income cohorts is echoed, at least in part, in preferences on redistribution from the British Social Attitudes surveys. BSA surveys have surveyed a range of political opinion annually since 1983. Two regular questions are of particular interest here:

Opinion about the Income Gap: Thinking of income levels generally in Britain today would you say that the gap between those with high incomes and those with low incomes is... [too large, about right, too small]?

Support for Redistribution: How much do you agree or disagree that, government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less

well off? [agree strongly, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, disagree strongly]¹⁰

We look at trends over time in responses to both questions. For the income gap measure, the variable is recoded so that 100 is “too large,” 0 is “about right,” -100 is “too small.” For support for redistribution, a net support measure is produced based on the annual average of responses where “agree strongly” is coded as +100, “agree” as +50, “neither agree nor disagree” as 0, “disagree” as -50, and “disagree strongly” as -100. The resulting measure takes on a value of +100 when all respondents agree strongly and -100 when all respondents disagree strongly. Of course, average values tend to be somewhere in between.

Figure 4 shows opinion about the income gap by income level, where incomes are divided into terciles.¹¹ Here we see a consensus about the income gap. Indeed, supermajorities at all three income levels think that the gap is “too large.” Trends across the three income groups are also strongly parallel — the average bivariate correlation is 0.68. Even so, there are slight differences in opinion across income levels. The low- and middle-income groups both are more inclined to think that the gap is “too high,” and with virtually identical numbers. High-income earners are less likely to believe the income gap is “too large.” This is perhaps as we should expect — both the low- and middle-income groups presumably have an interest in a more equal allocation of income. Note also that differences between income groups vary over time. While opinions flow together, that is, they do not move in perfect sync—there was near-convergence across groups through much of the 1990’s that has disappeared in the new millennium.¹² Upper-income respondents now are increasingly less inclined to see the income gap as a problem; middle- and low-income respondents continue to have very similar opinions. Interestingly, this divergence emerged just as Labour took control of government in the late-1990’s.

Differences across income groups are somewhat clearer when the question focuses on preferences for redistribution, shown in Figure 5. Low-income citizens tend to

¹⁰ Note that there are other related questions in the BSA. The one most regularly asked and most clearly related to the income gap and redistribution is as follows: “How much do you agree or disagree that, ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth [agree strongly, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, disagree strongly].” Trends in responses to this question (as well as differences across income groups) are not very different from the *Support for Redistribution* examined here.

¹¹ Income terciles are based on the distribution of incomes in the BSA datasets. As both the distribution of income and survey response categories shift from year to year, we estimate terciles for each year independently before merging the annual datasets.

¹² Of course, preferences differ from year to year partly due to sampling error, but there also are more systematic patterns.

Figure 4. Public Opinion about the Income Gap across Income Groups, BSA surveys

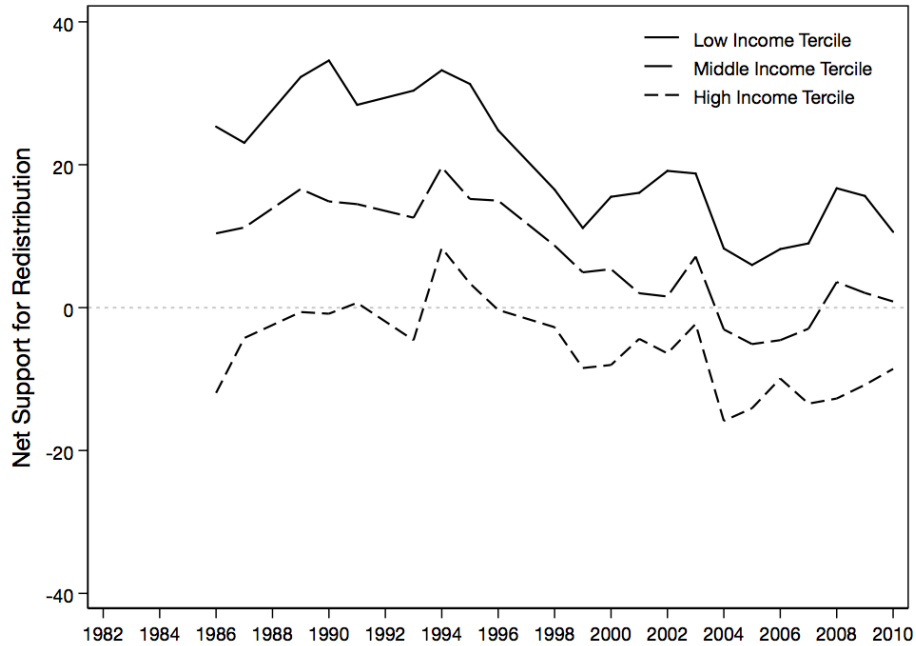


favor redistributing income and high-income citizens oppose it, with middle-income citizens clearly in between. Note, then, that while clear majorities across all income groups identify the income gap as a problem (Figure 4), citizens are divided about actually doing anything about it. This is especially true for low- and middle-income citizens, who share almost identical perceptions of the income gap, but quite different opinions about redistribution. As we move away from general opinion about income inequality towards questions of redistribution, people in the middle are just not as willing to try to address the problem in government policy.

Such differences between low- and middle-income respondents and/or middle- and high-income respondents are likely of real consequence (see Soroka and Wlezien 2008, 2010; Wlezien and Soroka 2011). There are strong theoretical reasons to expect policymakers to follow the median voter or to follow high-income voters; there are fewer reasons to expect them to follow low-income voters. So, to the extent that the level of policy matches levels of policy support,¹³ the representation of the poorest voters' preferences in policy is likely to be greatest when their

¹³ Note that it is very hard to tell if this is the case. That is, while matching changes in policy to preferences for change is relatively easy, comparing levels of policy to levels of preferences is very difficult in all but a few policy domains. See Soroka and Wlezien (2010).

Figure 5. Net Support for Redistribution across Income Groups, BSA surveys



preferences are closer to the median voter.¹⁴ Relatedly, closeness between the middle- and high-income respondents makes it difficult to know whether policymakers are reacting to the median or to the wealthy.

Differences in levels do not preclude a very high degree of parallelism, of course, and the average correlation between the three series in Figure 5 is 0.86.¹⁵ This parallelism should not mask an important over-time difference, however; in 2010, net support for redistribution for the wealthiest group is at roughly the same level as in 1986, while net support for the other two cohorts is markedly lower than their 1986 levels. Overall, then, the difference across income cohorts is narrowing — not through upward shifts in the high-income group, but through downward shifts in the middle- and low-income groups. The result is that the median British voter has, over the past 20 years, been moving to the right (at least where preferences for redistribution are concerned). Low-income voters in the UK were as a consequence less supportive of redistribution before the Great Recession, and while support increased in 2008, 2009 and 2010, even in the thick of the recent recession

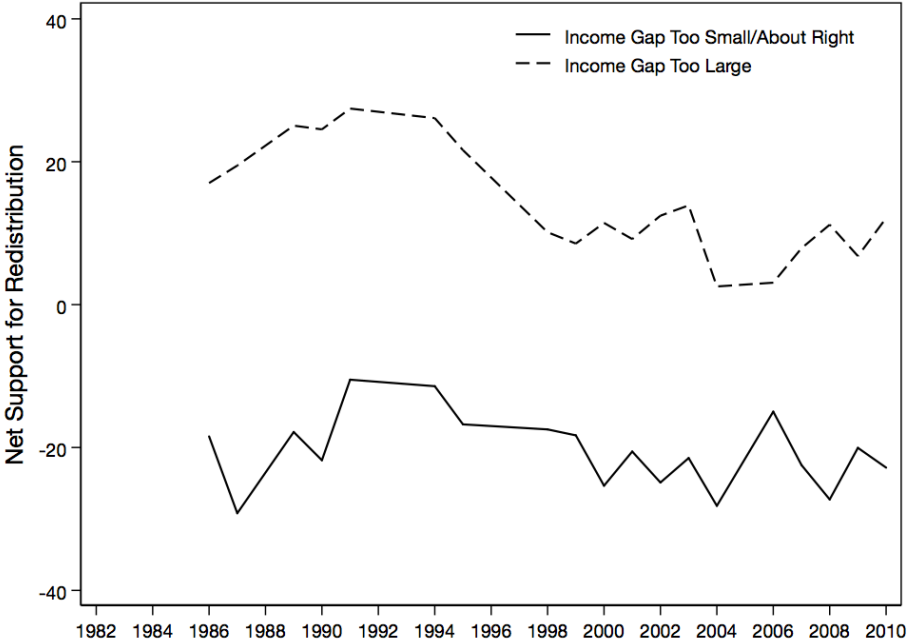
¹⁴ It also may be that representation is greatest when the preferences of poorer citizens are close to those of the richest voters, though this is unlikely in the case of redistributive policy. It is more likely (and in fact sometimes the case) in a range of other policy domains—see Soroka and Wlezién (2008).

¹⁵ In a principal components factor analysis, a single factor accounts for 91% of the variance in the three series.

preferences for redistribution were lower than they had been during the recession in the early 1990s. In short, although most people now see the income gap as at least as big as it was twenty-five years ago (recall data in Figure 4), they are less inclined to actually support redistribution.

Results in Figures 4 and 5 raise questions about the relationship between perceptions of inequality and support for redistribution. We can explore these relationships more directly, of course. Since there are in fact very few respondents (less than 5%) who say that the income gap is too small, we collapse the “too small” and “about right” categories, and show preferences for redistribution by opinion about the income gap in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Net Support for Redistribution by Opinion about the Income Gap, BSA surveys



Clearly, there is a strong relationship between opinion about the gap and redistributive preferences: those we believe that the income gap is too large are most supportive of redistribution. That said, the gap in redistributive preferences across the two groups has narrowed over time. This is not a consequence of shifting redistributive priorities amongst the group that believe the income gap is too small or about right — it is a consequence of *declining support for redistribution amongst those who feel the income gap is too high*. Figure 6 lends further support, then, to the finding implicit in Figures 4 and 5: a growing proportion of BSA respondents (largely middle-income respondents) believe the income gap is too large, but do not support greater levels of redistribution.

Preferences for Taxes and Spending

Thus far we have focused on general support for “redistribution.” To what extent do the patterns we have observed apply to the two policy instruments themselves—taxing and spending? We rely here on three measures, again from BSA surveys:

Support for Taxes and Spending: 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.]¹⁶

Support for Welfare: The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes. [agree strongly, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, disagree strongly]

Support for Taxes by Income Group: How would you describe taxes in Britain today... for those with high incomes? / For those with middle incomes, are taxes... / For those with low incomes, are taxes... [much too high, too high, about right, too low, much too low]?¹⁷

Note that the first deals with taxes and spending combined, while the others deal with spending and then taxes independently. We code responses in ways similar to previous questions: for support for taxes and spending, “reduce” is coded as -100, “same” as 0, and “increase” as +100; for support for welfare, a net support measure is produced based on the annual average of responses where “agree strongly” is coded as +100, “agree” as +50, “neither agree nor disagree” as 0, “disagree” as -50, and “disagree strongly” as -100.; the tax question is coded similarly, with “much too high” as +100 and “much too low” as -100.

Figure 7 shows results for the taxes and spending question. Note that there is always more support for increasing taxes and spending than for decreasing it — the y-axis shows only positive values, though the variable could in principle range from

¹⁶ Note that we view this as an imperfect measure of tax preferences, but while there are other questions dealing more directly with taxes (without spending) in BSA surveys, none are asked as consistently as this one. Indeed, no question dealing with taxes directly is asked more than four times over the past 30 years, and we do use these data to assess the balance and structure of preferences below.

¹⁷ There are, as above, other questions available in the BSA that ask about tax preferences. The most relevant is, “Do you think people with high incomes should pay a larger share of their incomes in taxes than those with low incomes, the same share or a smaller share? [much larger, larger, the same share, smaller, much smaller].” Results from this question are not very different (over time, or across income groups) from the combined results from the *Support for Taxes by Income Group* questions examined here.

+100 to -100. Preferences evolve in a near-parabolic way, rising sharply through the 1980's and into the 1990's before dropping sharply thereafter. Support for taxing and spending in 2010 is essentially the same as it was in 1982. The figure also demonstrates a very high degree of identity across the three groups. Support is virtually indistinguishable until the very end of the series. There, middle- and high-income preferences diverge from low-income preferences, though even here the differences are not fundamental.

Figure 7. Public Opinion about Taxes and Spending across Income Groups, BSA surveys

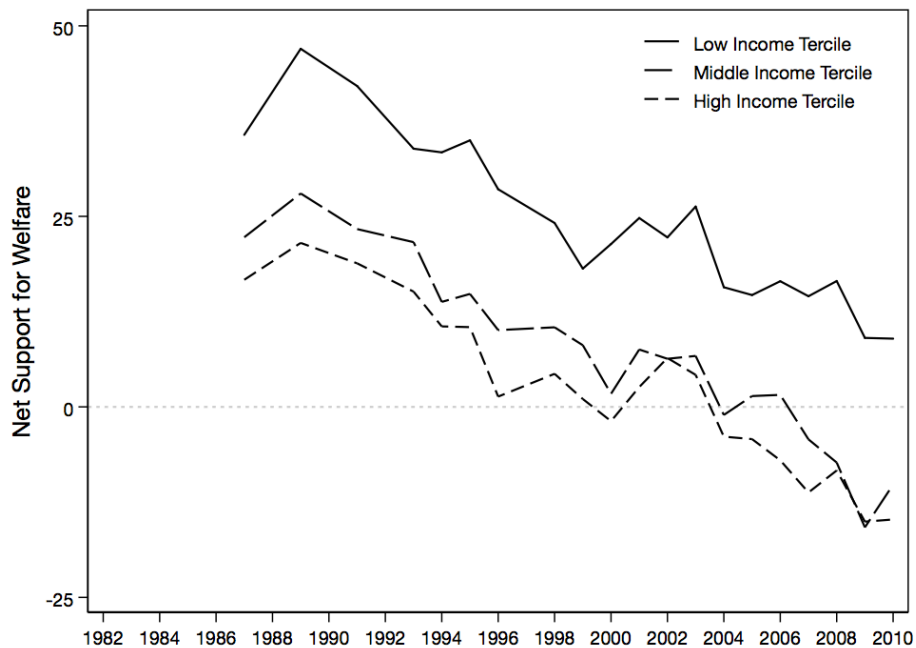


It is difficult to know just how much of the dynamic in Figure 7 is a consequence of shifting opinion about spending and/or shifting opinion about taxing. The two need not move together, of course — and data that captures opinions on spending and taxing suggest, in fact, that they did not. Consider first Figure 8, which displays net preferences for welfare spending. The lowest income group is clearly the most supportive of welfare though as of 2010 they are only barely so. Perhaps most importantly, the preferences of the middle-income group are nearly identical to those of the high-income group. This contrasts sharply with what we see for opinion about the income gap and also preferences for redistribution. It does comport with our own past work on preferences for welfare spending in the US, however (Soroka and Wlezien 2008, 2010; Wlezien and Soroka 2011). As we already have discussed, this has real consequences for representation — even if policymakers are following the preferences of the median voter, they will tend to

produce welfare policy that better matches the preferences of high-income earners instead of the poor.

Figure 8 also reveals certain similarities in welfare spending preferences across income groups. First, they move in parallel over time. Second, they all have declined markedly over time. From a consensus for more spending in the middle-1980's, public support has dropped in secular fashion, even in the wake of the Great Recession. In 2011, middle- and upper-income citizens express support for less spending on welfare and low-income citizens are virtually neutral.

Figure 8. Net Support for Welfare Spending across Income Groups, BSA surveys



The trend is rather different for preferences on taxing. Unfortunately, the BSA tax questions were not asked as regularly as the others investigated here. Even so, we have four years' worth of data, spanning three decades. Table 1 shows results for each of the three questions asking about tax levels for low, middle and high income earners. Results are shown by income tertile; recall that the measure ranges from -100 (much too low) to +100 (much too high).

Not surprisingly, high income tertile respondents are more likely to say that their taxes are too high, and low income tertile respondents are more likely to say that *their* taxes are too high. Opinions about taxes on middle income earners hover midway between “about right” (0) and “too high” (50) over time, and in 2009 are only slightly different from what they were in 1987. There are some interesting

shifts in opinions about taxes on high and low income earners, however. Regarding the former, the low and middle tercile respondents seem to have shifted upwards — away from “too low” and towards “about right” — over the past decade or so. That is, middle and low income tercile respondents seem to be more sympathetic to the tax plight of high income earners. The opposite is true regarding opinions about taxes for low income respondents. Here, while preferences are still closer to “too high” than to “about right,” there is a clearly downward shift (of 13 to 17 points), across all three income terciles.

Table 1. Tax Preferences for Low, Middle and High Income Earners

	Taxes on Low Income			
	Overall	by Income Tercile		
		Low	Mid	High
1987	62.0	67.6	62.4	55.3
1996	49.3	63.3	49.9	37.9
2006	44.4	52.0	47.2	35.3
2009	47.4	54.6	50.6	38.3

	Taxes on Middle Income			
	Overall	by Income Tercile		
		Low	Mid	High
1987	21.7	18.4	20.7	26.8
1996	13.9	16.8	13.2	11.3
2006	26.5	26.5	26.6	25.4
2009	23.8	21.9	24.6	23.0

	Taxes on High Income			
	Overall	by Income Tercile		
		Low	Mid	High
1987	-9.3	-12.3	-17.2	2.3
1996	-15.4	-13.5	-20.6	-16.2
2006	2.2	-0.4	-2.0	7.4
2009	-2.5	-6.1	-6.8	0.6

Cells contain means values for a variable ranging from -100 (too low) to +100 (too high).

The end result is that opinion about tax levels overall are roughly as they were twenty years ago, but the gap between opinion on taxes for high and low income earners has narrowed a little. Consider the first column in Table 1, which shows preferences for taxes for all respondents combined. The difference between preferences for low and high income earners in 1987 was 62.0 versus -9.3 respectively; by 2009, the difference is 47.4 versus -2.5. Put differently, opinions about taxes on high income earners now sit firmly at “about right” (0); opinions

about taxes on low income earners sit at “too high,” but are down nearly 15 points from their 1987 level.

Note that this narrowing fits with what we have seen above, namely, (bare) majority support for redistribution in 2010 and markedly less than in the early 1990s (see Figure 5). Declining support for taxation over the past 20 years roughly parallels the decline in support for welfare spending (see Figure 8). Although the downward trends are similar, we should not lose sight of one fundamental difference in public opinion about taxes and spending: the former is very similar across income groups while the latter differs fundamentally. In short, low income respondents are more supportive of spending on welfare but are not markedly more supportive of taxes, even when those taxes are directed at wealthier cohorts.

Figure 9. Net Support for Welfare Spending by Opinion about the Income Gap, BSA surveys

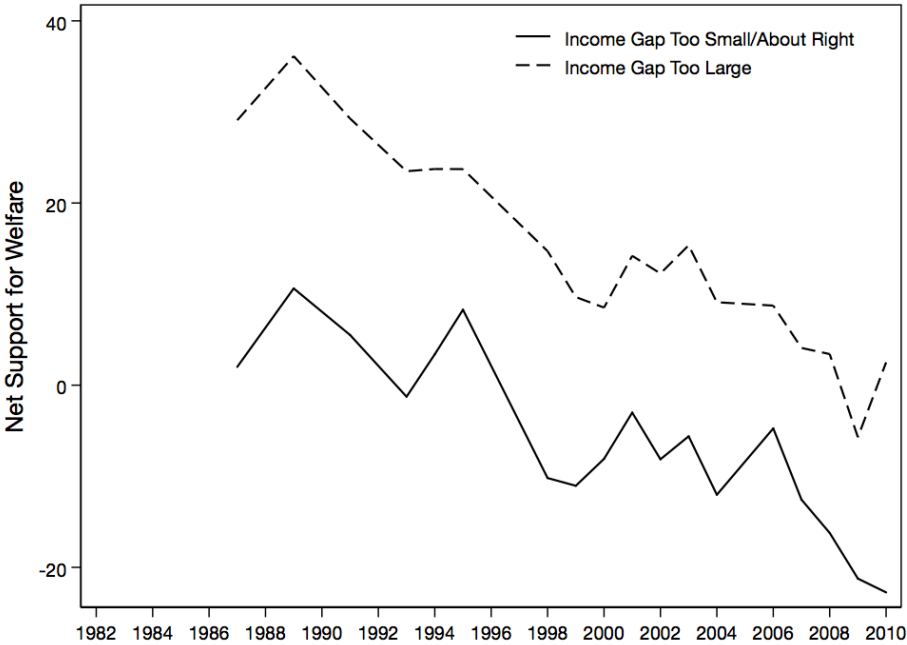


Figure 9 makes this point one final time, by drawing together data reviewed in both this and the previous sections. The figure shows trends in support for welfare spending for different groups based on their opinions about the income gap. This final figure serves three purposes. First, it illustrates (again) a weakening of support for redistribution, particularly amongst those who think the income gap is too large (many of whom would likely benefit directly from increased spending). Second, it confirms that the increasing decoupling of perceptions of inequality and demand for redistribution seen in Figure 6 is also evident when we look at more

concrete policy opinion, such as support for welfare. Third, it hints at a possibility only barely evident (if at all) in preceding figures: a potential shift in opinion towards welfare since the start of the Great Recession. That is, in 2010 there is a more than 5-point increase in support for welfare spending among those who believe the income gap is too large. It is of course too soon to know whether this reflects a permanent or ongoing shift, of course, and it is important to note that it follows on an equal and opposite shift in preferences in 2009. But it is one of the very few hints in the BSA data that the Great Recession has had an impact on public opinion about redistribution in the UK.

Discussion and Conclusions

In the midst of Great Recession, results from the BSA surveys point towards a middle-income group that is more closely allied with the poor when it comes to support for a reduction in the income gap, but — by some measures at least — more closely allied with the well-to-do when it comes to support for redistributive policy. These findings are not unlike Bartels’ in his influential 2005 “Homer Gets a Tax Cut.” Bartels argues that, “The results of my analysis suggest that most Americans supported tax cuts not because they were indifferent to economic inequality, but because they largely failed to connect inequality and public policy” (2005:16). We see hints of a similar possibility here; at least, we see increasing inequality in the UK, alongside a disjuncture in public preferences that may well encourage policy outcomes that are most beneficial to the wealthy. This may mean that the UK public suffers from the same failure to “connect inequality and public policy” that Bartels identifies in the US. It may, alternatively, mean that while they correctly identify the inequality, the British public simply does not really want to do anything about it using redistributive policy.¹⁸

Either way, it is striking that in the mid-1980s the median BSA respondent identified inequalities, and was supportive of redistributive policy generally and welfare specifically; but in 2010, though the median respondent is more acutely aware of inequality, they are ambivalent about redistribution and welfare. This change over time is one difference between what we see in the BSA data and what Bartels finds in the US: while Bartels argues that public opinion about redistribution has not changed over time in the US, the same clearly is not true in the UK. Over the past twenty-five years or so, support for redistributive policy has declined across all income cohorts — and particularly amongst the low-income cohort. The end result is that the median voter in Britain in midst of the Great Recession is clearly to the right of the median voter in either of two previous recessions.

¹⁸ The same may be true in the US.

What accounts for this shift? One notable possibility is the impact of party politics — a critical part not just of Bartels’ story, but of a wide body of work focused on the relationship between preferences, politics and policies over time (e.g., Erikson et al. 2002; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). The general trend in the preferences of partisans is as we might expect given the results above, however. As an illustration, Figure 10 shows preferences for redistribution across party identification. The story where partisanship is concerned is pretty clear: Conservative Party supporters are now roughly where they were in the early 1980s, while, in spite of a moderate reversal over the past six years, Labour Party supporters are much further to the right.

Figure 10. Net Support for Redistribution by Partisanship



Results in Figure 10 are in line with previous analyses of BSA data by Curtice and Fisher (2003). These authors probe in more detail the composition of the Labour and Conservative parties, and note a rightward shift in the opinions of Labour supporter in the mid-1990s — a shift linked, they argue, to Tony Blair’s effort to move Labour to the centre and thus win over previously Conservative voters. Results above suggest that the trends in Figure 10 are not just about shifting voting patterns, however. As Curtice and Fisher note, the change in preferences amongst Labour voters reflects a combination of shifting party identifiers and changes in the preferences of existing Labour voters. What is striking in our more recent data, then, is the fact that the trends evident in 2002 have largely continued.

Indeed, the trends have continued into and thus far through the Great Recession. In spite of rising inequality, and in spite of economic expectations falling to their lowest level since Thatcher's first term in government — the British public remains markedly less supportive of redistributive policy. This is true not just at the outset of the Great Recession, in 2008 — it is true in 2010, two years (and one election) into the recession. The Great Recession has done little to reverse the rightward trend in preferences evident since the early 1990s.

These public preferences may have had consequences for policy reactions to the recession. That is, in attempting to address fiscal imbalance in recent years, governments have: (a) increased taxes on the rich and (b) cut spending on welfare. We have seen hints of majority support for each of these actions in our figures, particularly for welfare spending cuts. But party control evidently has mattered as well. After all, it presumably is no accident that the sitting Conservative (-Lib Dem) government cut spending and the preceding Labour government raised taxes. This is what we have to come to expect, not just in the US, but in the UK as well (Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002; Wlezien, 2004; Soroka and Wlezien 2005, 2010).

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