

Just Deserts?

Attitudes to Fairness, Poverty and Welfare Reform

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Executive Summary

Politicians stress their commitment to “fairness”. But there are different ideas about what fairness is. We commissioned in-depth research by YouGov to examine what the public thinks fairness really means. We found a strong attachment to ideas focused on meritocracy and reciprocity. They also believe poverty is about more than simply low income, and identify root causes based on people's own actions. In keeping with these underlying values – the idea of a quid pro quo – there is strong support for a more conditional welfare system, in which welfare rights would be balanced by new responsibilities and requirements.

What is fairness?

- Fairness is more important than most other values. Second only to “economic responsibility”, “fairness” is the second most important value which voters want to see in a political party. Economic responsibility was identified as a priority by 59% of respondents, and fairness by 50%. These two values were considered significantly more important than equality (21%), liberty (20%), patriotism (17%) or family values (32%).
- Fairness means getting what you deserve. The majority of people think that fairness is mainly a question of people getting what they deserve, rather than being about equal treatment. This is true of voters of all the main parties. 63% of people say that “fairness is about getting what you deserve”, while just 26% say that “fairness is about equality”. In other words, people’s idea of fairness is strongly reciprocal – something for something.
- Meritocracy, not equality or the free market: Meritocratic ideas (reward according to effort and ability) are more widely endorsed than either free market conceptions (reward according to what the market will pay) or egalitarian conceptions (equal rewards). 85% backed fairness as meritocracy, while 63% backed the free market conception and only 41% an egalitarian version. By a margin of four to one (73%-18%) people agree that society can be fair even if it is unequal – as long as there is equality of opportunity.

- Reducing unemployment (45%), cutting tax on low earners (45%), and reducing the cost of living (38%) were seen as the most important steps to a fairer society. Some of the least popular options we polled were reducing tuition fees (11%) and banning private education (4%), while increasing welfare benefits was the least favoured option of all, with just 3% identifying this as an effective way to create a fairer society.

Poverty and its causes

- Most people have a restrictive definition of what poverty is, and don't think it is a relative concept. Asked what it means to be in poverty in Britain today, most people (70%) think it still means not having enough to eat, or a place to live. Few members of the public endorse the more expansive definitions of poverty favoured by many academics, which equates poverty with differences in relative incomes, or some people not having goods that other people have. Only 7% think that poverty is about not having things other people have, and only 18% think it means having nothing beyond your basic needs.
- People don't blame the poor for their situation. But they do make a strong distinction between the "deserving" and "less deserving" poor. By two to one (48%-24%), people say that people end up poor because of forces outside their control – not their own poor decisions. But on the other hand, by a margin of four to one (71%-16%) they agree with the statement that "Some people who are poor are much more deserving than other people who are poor. We should focus help on those who are trying hard and doing the right thing, rather than those who have made themselves poor."
- The root causes of poverty. Asked what factors might make a child more likely to end up poor in later life, people identify factors like growing up with drug/drink addicted parents (60%), failing to gain any qualifications at school (37%), or growing up with parents who are unemployed (33%). Growing up with parents with low incomes was not seen as a likely cause of future poverty (just 7% chose this), nor was growing up with a lone parent (6%). This is a challenge to the government's current child poverty strategy, which is focused on relieving low income with transfer payments, in the belief that this is an effective way to combat future poverty.

Fairness and welfare reform

- There is overwhelming support for workfare. By a margin of six to one (80%-13%), people agree that "people who have been out of work for 12 months or more, who are physically and mentally capable of undertaking a job, should be required to do community work in return for their state benefits." The notion of 'something for something' is very strong.

- There is support for stronger work search requirements. The median voter would back the idea that jobseekers should spend 3-5 hours a day searching for work. Evidence usually suggests that jobseekers spend much less time than this searching for work. One recent study found that jobseekers in the UK spend an average of eight minutes per day looking for jobs.
- People think benefits are too generous, and see this as a cause of unemployment. By three to one (50%-16%), people think benefits are too high rather than too low. The generosity of the benefit system was seen as the most important cause of unemployment, although a broad range of other causes were endorsed too.
- The public would back a stronger sanctions regime in the benefits system than exists at present. Half (49%) of voters backed the idea that claimants who are sanctioned for not complying with their jobseekers agreement should lose half or more of their benefits. 21% backed the idea that they should lose all their benefits “regardless of the hardship it would cause”. At present first offence sanctions are much smaller than this.
- Voters think different regimes are appropriate for different groups of claimants. The public would back particularly tough sanctions for drug users, people with criminal records, or those who have claimed benefits several times before. In contrast they would back a particularly “light” sanctions regime for carers or lone parents with dependent children.
- People do not support either benefits or tax breaks for people with children. By a margin of 55%-36% people disagree with the idea that “People with children should be given higher benefits to compensate for the costs of bringing them up.” Tax breaks for children are more popular than benefits, but people are quite evenly split on the parallel statement that “People with children should have to pay less tax to compensate for the costs of bringing them up”, with 44% in favour and 47% against.
- The public support a cap on child benefits. By more than two to one (66%-27%) people agree that “People who have more than three children should not get extra child benefit if they have a fourth”.
- The government shouldn’t encourage marriage through the tax system, but should discourage people from becoming lone parents. People split 45%-40% against the idea that “The government should try to encourage marriage through the benefits system”. But by nearly two to one (59%-31%) they back the idea that “The government should try to discourage people from becoming lone parents”.
- People shouldn’t be offered expensive council houses, or council housing in expensive areas. By five to one (73%-15%) people agree that “People should not be offered council houses that are worth more than the average house in their local authority”. This is even true for people

who live in social housing, who agree by a margin of two to one (53%-26%). By a margin of 60%-28% voters agree that “People should not be offered council housing in expensive areas.”

Background

- We are all in the squeezed middle now... There has been much discussion about the “squeezed middle”. Most people believe they are in the middle of the income distribution. Asked which decile (tenth) of the income distribution they are in, 61% say they believe they are in the middle 30% of earners. Only 2% of people believe they are in the top 30% of earners, while just 9% think they are in the bottom 20%.
- We think we are getting more middle class. 48% identify themselves as working class, but 58% think their parents are working class. Meanwhile 42% think they are middle class, but just 35% say their parents are middle class. 20% think they are in a higher social class than their parents, and 10% a lower class. 60% think they are in the same class.

Context: the debate about “fairness”

“Fairness means giving people what they deserve – and what people deserve depends on how they behave.”

David Cameron

“Fairness means everyone having the chance to do well, irrespective of their beginnings... fairness means social mobility.”

Nick Clegg

“21st century inequality, the fairness divide in our economy, threatens to be about a division between the richest at the top who have been doing well, and the majority, lower and middle-income, who have been struggling to keep up.”

Ed Miliband

As the quotations above suggest, there are many ideas about what exactly “fairness” is. Since the election of the Coalition government there has been a vigorous debate about fairness, particularly in the context of fiscal consolidation.

The emergency budget produced by the Coalition government stressed that the distributional impact of the consolidation programme is fair. Budget documents produced the same kind of analysis favoured by the previous Labour government: in particular charts showing the impact of budget decisions broken down by income decile. However, subsequent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies sparked controversy when it suggested that the effect of budget decisions was more regressive than the government had claimed. Interestingly, while disputing the IFS figures, the government also stressed that there was more to fairness than an analysis of income distributions. Amongst other criticisms of this “purely numerical view of what fairness is”, Nick Clegg wrote that,

“You cannot measure poverty with a snapshot because people’s lives last longer than a single second. If you want to measure genuine fairness, the question to ask about government policy is what its dynamic effects are, particularly across the generations. How does it change the future course of people’s lives? How does it increase their opportunities? Will it unlock the poverty trap or deepen it?”

These comments reflect the fact that there are many different conceptions of what “fairness” is.

In a previous paper for Policy Exchange, *On Fairness*, Andrew Lilico argued that being fair was a special case of being proportionate.¹ He argued that it was not always necessarily desirable to be fair, and set out a series of questions and challenges for policymakers about fairness. He argued that while justice is a moral concept and an ethical obligation (one always ought to be just), fairness is a technical concept and an ethical consideration. He also raised questions about how we judge fairness across families of different size, asking whether “a child is a consumption choice, like a Ferrari; or a dependent person that increases the costs and reduces the ability to pay tax of whoever is supporting it?” Another recent contribution to the debate by Patrick Nolan for the think tank Reform argued that fairness was essentially about “combating disadvantage”.² Nolan argued against middle class welfare and for debt reduction.

These differing views show that we need a more open discussion about what we view as fair and equitable. Government policy has long been based on an implicit assumption that the key driver of fairness is a function of money and the number and type of people in a family. Do the public agree with this assumption and what are the implications for poverty, welfare and social policy?

About this poll

The full tables from the YouGov Research are available online.³ What follows is a summary of some of the main results and their potential significance for policymakers.

As well as the responses to our questions, the survey also contains much information about how different sub-groups differ in their opinions. This allows us to explore how attitudes to fairness, poverty and welfare vary between all kinds of people: different genders, classes, and ages, the supporters of different political parties, and so on. These are typical variables. Given the nature of the research, as well as people’s social class (defined by their occupation) we asked about their own self-perceived class and how they perceive their parents class. We also asked people whereabouts in the income distribution they thought they were – from the top tenth to the bottom tenth.

¹ http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/pdfs/On_Fairness.pdf

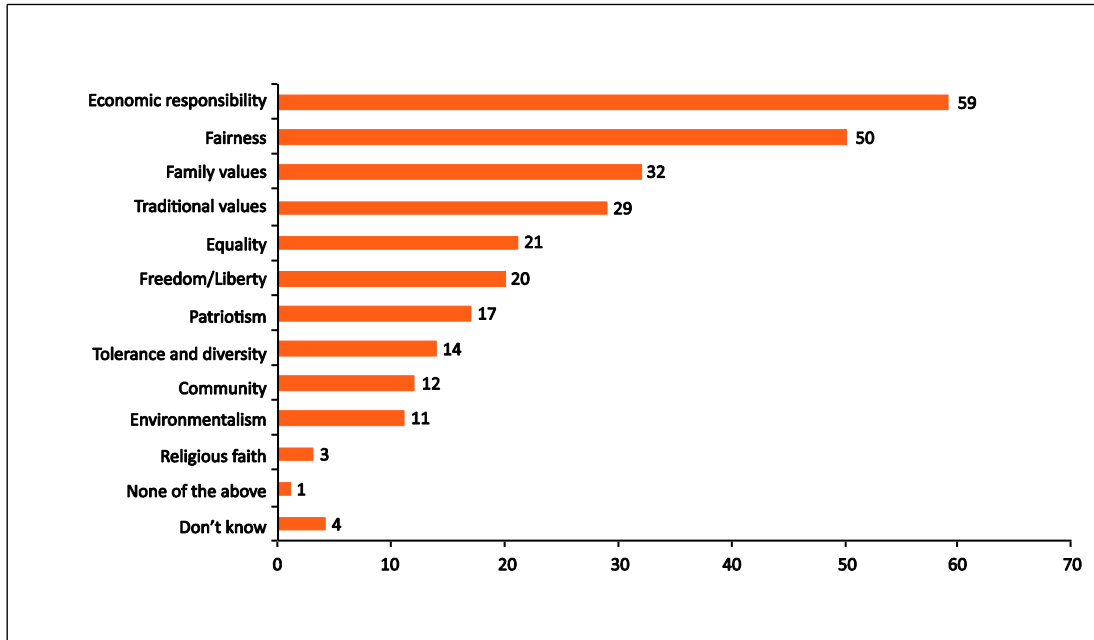
² http://www.reform.co.uk/Portals/0/documents/The_fairness_test_web.pdf

³ <http://bit.ly/PXjustdesertspolls>

What is “fairness”, and how important is it to the public?

Fairness versus other values

Below is a list of different values. Which two or three of the following would you most want a political party to reflect? Please tick up to three.



Asked what values they want to see in a political party, “fairness” and economic responsibility are the most important by some distance. While different social groups differ in the importance they attach to other values, this pairing is regarded as the most important among all social groups. We can also view how these values differ between voters for different political parties.

Below is a list of different values. Which two or three of the following would you most want a political party to reflect? Please tick up to three.

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Economic responsibility	59	73	56	61
Fairness	50	44	59	58
Family values	32	37	32	20
Traditional values	29	39	22	21
Equality	21	12	31	20
Freedom / Liberty	20	20	21	24
Patriotism	17	25	11	8
Tolerance and diversity	14	8	21	26
Community	12	8	16	18
Environmentalism	11	11	9	23
Religious faith	3	3	2	3
None of the above	1	0	0	0
Don't know	4	1	2	0

Labour voters see fairness as marginally more important than the economic responsibility (59% and 56% respectively) whereas Conservative voters see economic responsibility as much more important (73%-44%). Predictably Labour voters were more likely to see equality as important (31%) than either Liberal Democrats (20%) or Conservatives (12%). However, voters from across the political spectrum thought fairness was roughly twice as important as equality.

Turning to the other values, Liberal Democrat supporters saw family values as less important than either Conservative or Labour voters did. Traditional values appealed more to Conservatives, while support for freedom was surprisingly equal among supporters of all three main parties.

Conservative supporters were less likely to prioritise tolerance and diversity than either Labour or Liberal Democrat voters, while Liberal Democrats were much more likely than average to emphasise environmentalism.

Turning to other social groups, it is noticeable that older people are more likely to emphasise traditional values and patriotism than younger people. Emphasis on patriotism is also much lower among university educated respondents and broadsheet readers. Women and people with children are more likely to emphasise family values.

How fair is Britain?

People are roughly split on whether Britain today is fair or unfair, with 51% in total saying it is unfair, compared to 42% saying it is fair. Conservative and Lib Dem voters think on balance that Britain is fair, while Labour voters disagree. People in lower social classes are more likely to think Britain is unfair. Interestingly white British voters are more likely to say that Britain is unfair than other ethnic groups, who split equally on the question (45%-45%).

How fair do you think society in Britain is today?

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
British society is very fair	4	6	3	4
British society is mostly fair	38	53	33	57
TOTAL FAIR	42	59	36	61
British society is mostly unfair	35	29	44	24
British society is very unfair	16	10	17	13
TOTAL UNFAIR	51	39	61	37

Different conceptions of a fair society

We tested some initial ideas of what might constitute a fair society. We compared a “free market” conception (fairness based on what the market is prepared to pay), a meritocratic one (based on getting rewards for effort and ability), and an egalitarian one (based on equal rewards regardless of effort or

ability). We then also asked a question which specifically pitted equality of opportunity against egalitarianism.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

<i>In a fair society, people's incomes should depend on how much other people value the services they provide %</i>	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Total agree	63	67	63	76
Total disagree	24	25	27	19
Don't know	12	8	11	5
<i>In a fair society, people's incomes should depend on how hard they work and how talented they are %</i>	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Total agree	85	91	85	94
Total disagree	8	5	10	4
Don't know	7	3	6	2
<i>In a fair society, nobody should get an income a lot bigger or a lot smaller than anybody else gets %</i>	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Total agree	41	22	52	53
Total disagree	50	72	41	39
Don't know	9	6	7	8
<i>You can have a fair society even if people's incomes are quite unequal, as long as you have equality of opportunity %</i>	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Total agree	73	86	71	74
Total disagree	18	10	22	23
Don't know	8	4	7	3

The meritocratic conception was the most popular, with support fairly similar among different social groups, and supporters of different parties. Support was somewhat stronger among more highly educated voters, higher social classes and broadsheet readers.

The free market conception was less popular, but again had similar levels of support among different groups. Interestingly Labour voters agreed with the statement, and Lib Dem voters were the most strongly in favour of all.

The egalitarian conception was less popular, and the most divisive. Labour voters, Liberal Democrats and lower social classes agreed with the statement on balance, while Conservatives, graduates, and higher social groups strongly disagreed.

Interestingly, support for the egalitarian concept was much higher among older voters. The over 60s split evenly on this statement (48%-48%) while 25 to 39 year olds split 55%-31% against it.

The final statement that “you can have a fair society even if people's incomes are quite unequal, as long as you have equality of opportunity” also scored highly, with relatively high levels of agreement among all social groups.

Desert versus equality

We asked a question contrasting two quite different ideas of what “fairness” means. One is that it is about being treated *equally*, and another that it is about getting what you *deserve*.

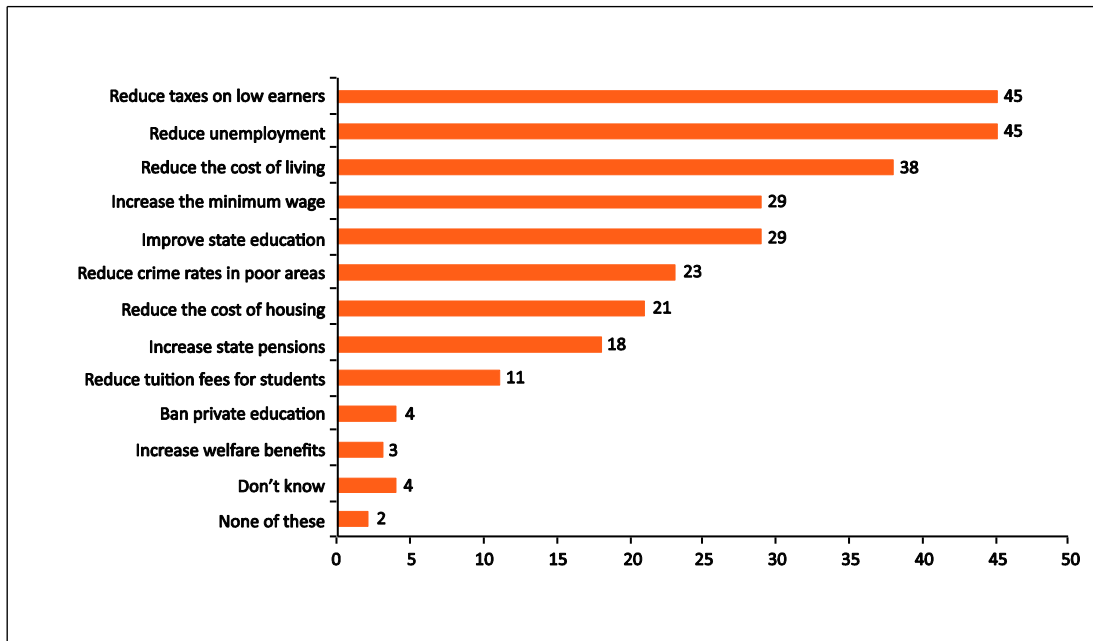
Which of the following comes closer to your idea of what fairness is? Even if you don't agree completely with either, please select the one that comes closest to your view.

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Fairness is about getting what you deserve: that those who do the wrong thing are punished and those who do the right thing are rewarded	63	84	49	63
Fairness is about equality – about treating people equally and having an equal distribution of wealth and income	26	9	41	26
Neither	6	5	6	9
Not sure	5	2	4	1

People’s idea of fairness appears to be much more about just deserts than about equal treatment. In fact among all social groups, desert is closer to people’s idea of fairness than equality is. However there are significant variations. Differences are most pronounced among supporters of different parties with Conservatives overwhelmingly in favour of desert, Labour voters more evenly split, and Liberal Democrats somewhere in between. Higher social classes and older voters are more strongly in favour of desert.

How could Britain be made fairer?

Which two or three of the following things do you think would be the most effective things the government could do to create a fairer society? Please tick up to three.



Reducing unemployment and cutting tax on low earners were seen as the most important steps to a fair society. This was the case for almost all social groups. Reducing the cost of living is a relatively close third.

Some of the least popular options we polled were reducing tuition fees and banning private education. Increasing welfare benefits was the very least favoured option.

The contrast between two policies which might both be seen as benefiting poorer groups (low income tax cuts and benefit increases) is particularly striking – one is the most popular option and one the least.

Some notable (though minor) variations among different groups include

- Particular concern about the cost of living among 25-39 year olds (45%).
- Particularly strong support for low income tax cuts among Lib Dem voters (57%).
- Stronger support for the minimum wage among Labour voters (38%).
- Particular emphasis on improving state education and cutting crime in poor areas for Conservatives.
- Under 25s placed more emphasis that the average on reducing the cost of housing (28%) and reducing tuition fees (22%).
- There was more emphasis on improving education among those with degrees than among those with only GCSEs (40% and 19% respectively).

Poverty

What does “poverty” mean in Britain today?

Which of these do you think is the best description of what it means to be “in poverty” in Britain today?

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
You are in poverty if you have enough to buy the things you really need, but not enough to buy the things most people take for granted	7	4	10	6
You are in poverty if you have a place to live, and enough money to live on, but nothing else	18	11	23	20
You are in poverty if you don't have a place to live, or enough to eat or live on	70	83	62	72

Most people have a restrictive definition of what poverty is. Relatively few members of the public endorse the more expansive definition of poverty favoured by many academics that stresses relative incomes, or not having access to goods that other people have.

Even though the question prompts people to think about what poverty means both *in Britain* (not in developing countries) and *today* (in a world of higher living standards) people still believe that the word poverty is about the most severe material deprivation. Though there are variations, this is the case for all social groups. Even amongst those who regard themselves to be in the bottom two income deciles, only 11% of respondents thought poverty was a basically relative concept.

Desert and poverty

We asked two different questions surrounding the question of desert and poverty. First a question asked whether people were in poverty because of their own actions, and a second question asking whether the government should make a distinction between “deserving” groups in poverty and those who have made themselves poor. The divided results suggest the public have quite a nuanced view of this subject.

Which of the following statements best reflects your views?

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Most people living in poverty in the UK today are doing so because of their own bad choices and decisions	24	43	13	19
Most people living in poverty in the UK today are there because of things that have happened to them outside of their own control	48	28	66	46
Neither	17	20	14	25
Don't know	11	9	7	9

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Some people who are poor are much more deserving than other people who are poor. We should focus help on those who are trying hard and doing the right thing, rather than those who have made themselves poor”.

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Agree	71	85	63	74
Disagree	16	8	25	14
Don't know	13	8	12	13

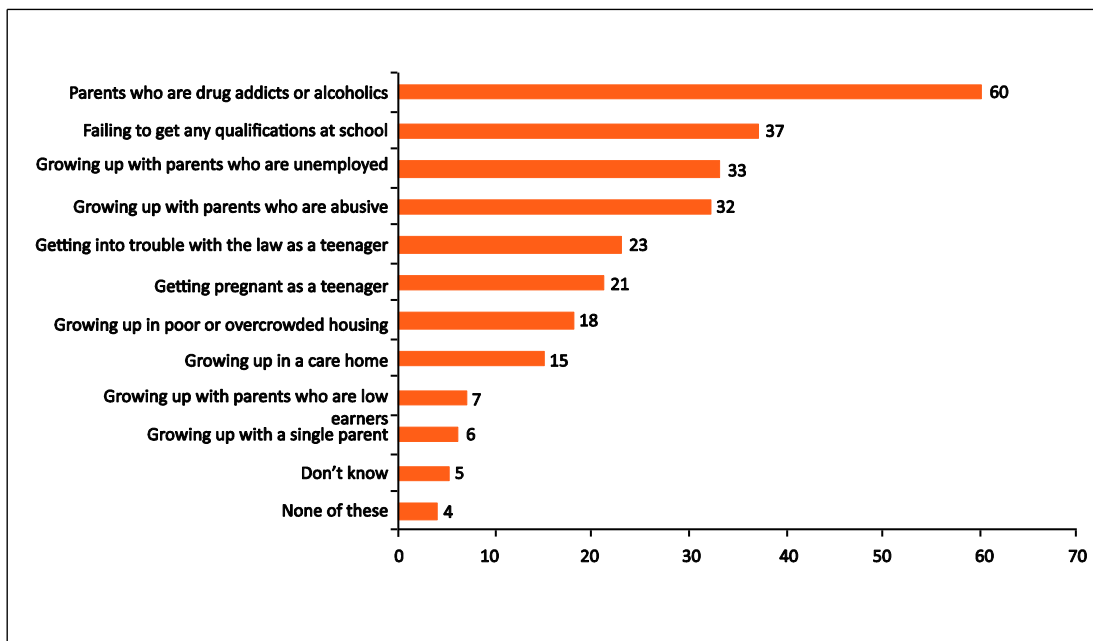
On balance voters reject the idea that people end up in poverty mainly because of their own choices. Yet at the same time they do make a distinction between more and less deserving people in poverty, and would favour prioritising those who are more deserving. The former argument is much more divisive, while most groups agree quite strongly with the second statement.

Looking at different groups’ responses, Conservative voters do agree that “Most people living in poverty in the UK today are doing so because of their own bad choices and decisions.” Poorer groups and those in social housing disagree the most strongly.

The strongest agreement with a more/less deserving distinction is found among older voters. 80% of the over 60s agree with the second statement, compared to 65% of under 25s.

What are the causes of poverty?

Which of the following experiences when growing up do you think are most likely to lead to someone experiencing poverty later in their lives? Please tick up to three.



Growing up with substance-dependent parents was seen as far and away the most likely factor to lead to children growing up to experience poverty later in their life. Failing to gain qualifications, growing up in a workless household or with abusive parents are all seen as other potent causes of future poverty. There is little variation between different groups on this question. Growing up with a single parent was seen as the least likely cause of future poverty.

There is an interesting contrast between growing up in a *workless* household and growing up in a *low income* household. Worklessness was seen as one of the most likely causes, while low income was seen as the second least likely, with only 7% of people thinking it was one of the top three causes of future poverty.

This has implications for the government's approach to poverty, embodied in the child poverty target. This target effectively commits the government to income transfers in order to alleviate low income, in the belief that low income is a primary cause of future poverty. However, the result of this question suggests that voters think the government should be focusing on other causes of poverty. Policy Exchange has made the case for a different set of poverty indicators focused on a wider range of dimensions of poverty, and also on the root causes, rather than symptoms of poverty.⁴

⁴ http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/pdfs/Tackling_the_causes_of_poverty_-_Apr_11.pdf

Welfare reform

The causes of unemployment & the generosity of the benefit system

What do you think is the MAIN reason why some people are unemployed for long periods of time?

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Benefits are too generous or easy to claim	33	50	22	30
There are not enough jobs available	20	10	28	17
They do not have the skills necessary to fill the jobs available	16	12	21	20
The rewards from working are too small	14	9	14	20
They are lazy or lacking in willpower	12	17	10	8
Other	2	0	2	3
Don't know	4	2	2	2

Thinking about the benefits available to people who are out of work, which of the following comes closest to your view?

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Benefits for unemployed people are too high and discourage them from finding jobs	50	72	37	45
Benefits for unemployed people are at about the right level	15	11	18	21
Benefits for unemployed people are too low and cause hardship	16	4	26	17
None of these	7	3	10	7
Don't know	12	10	8	9

We asked people to choose from a number of possible explanations for why some people remain unemployed for long periods of time. While excessive generosity in the benefit system was cited as the number one reason, a number of other causes were regarded as relevant.

While Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters were more likely than Conservative voters to endorse “social” causes, rather than personal ones (lack of jobs, lack of skills, lack of incentives), support was relatively low across the political spectrum for the idea that a key driver of unemployment was that rewards to work were too small. This is in stark contrast to the government’s current approach to tackling unemployment which places financial incentives at the forefront of the policy debate. The only group to come out much stronger on this issue was people living in a household with three or more children aged under 18. However, even amongst this group who face significant costs of childcare when working, only 30% felt that the main driver of unemployment was that rewards to work were too low.

Women, older people, whites, Christians, and richer groups were more likely to endorse the idea that excessive benefit generosity is the main problem.

Looking specifically at whether benefits for the unemployed are too high, too low, or about right, there is a large majority in favour of the idea that benefits are too generous. Overall, more than three times as many people think such benefits are too high than too low. Even among Labour voters more people thought benefits were too high than too low.

Almost all social groups thought the same. People in social housing and those who perceive themselves as being in the very bottom 20% of the income distribution thought that on balance benefits were too low. However working class voters generally (C2DE) thought they were on balance too high.

The sanctions regime in the benefits system

Currently when an unemployed person starts claiming Jobseekers Allowance they sign an agreement which states what steps they will take to find a job in order to receive their benefit. If they do not comply with these requirements afterwards – for example by refusing job offers, or refusing to attend interviews – then they lose some of their benefit income for a period.

Thinking about what sanctions, if any, should be given to people claiming Jobseekers Allowance who refuse job offers or interviews, which of the following best reflects your view?

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
They should not lose any of their benefits	6	1	8	10
They should lose a small amount of their benefits (e.g. 10%)	19	10	27	21
They should lose a large amount of their benefits, say half, but keep enough to cover their basic needs	49	57	45	53
They should lose all their benefits, regardless of what hardship it causes	21	29	16	16
Don't know	5	2	4	1

During the general election the Conservative party launched a poster featuring the words “Let’s cut benefits for those who refuse work”. We asked a series of questions trying to find out how strong people thought that the sanctions regime should be, and also how their attitudes to sanctions varied depending on what type of people were being sanctioned.

First we asked the question above without telling people anything more about the circumstances of the claimant, other than that they were claiming Jobseekers Allowance.

The most favoured option by some distance is a substantial (50%) cut in benefit income. The formulation be used here of “covering basic needs” may have made it more attractive. But this option

was substantially preferred over a small (10%) cut. Interestingly, some studies have shown that the 10% figure is much closer to the typical sanction that a claimant is likely, in reality, to receive for a first violation.⁵

The form of the question we asked “rubbed in” the consequences of the final option and made it sound particularly harsh. Nonetheless 20% of voters supported this option. Only one in 20 voters disagreed with the basic premise of the sanctions regime.

While there was predictable variation between supporters of different parties, the differences are not particularly large for the middle responses. Differences between different social groups are relatively minor too, with younger and poorer voters somewhat more likely to support more limited sanctions.

We then asked the same question again, but asked people to think about how it might be applied to different types of claimants with different circumstances.

%	People who are caring for a relative	Single parents who have dependent children who live with them	People who are in a couple where the other person is not working, and have dependent children who live with them	People in a couple where the other person is working, and have dependent children who live with them
Should not lose any of their benefits	53	26	16	14
Should lose a small amount of their benefits (e.g. 10%)	21	31	32	26
Should lose a large amount of their benefits, but keep enough to cover their basic needs	14	30	36	35
Should lose all their benefits, regardless of what hardship it causes	4	7	9	18
Don't know	7	6	7	7
Total 50% or over	18	37	45	53

⁵ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/realisingpotential.pdf>

%	People who are single	People who have been in prison, or have a criminal record	People who have claimed benefits lots of times before	People who are drug users
Should not lose any of their benefits	7	7	7	4
Should lose a small amount of their benefits (e.g. 10%)	18	19	15	11
Should lose a large amount of their benefits, but keep enough to cover their basic needs	47	39	39	38
Should lose all their benefits, regardless of what hardship it causes	21	26	31	39
Don't know	6	9	8	8
Total 50% or over	68	65	70	77

People favour particularly tough conditionality for drug users, and people with criminal records. Perhaps surprisingly, people favour tougher sanctions for those who have claimed lots of times before than for people with criminal records or who have been imprisoned.

Whether the other member of a couple is working seems to make some difference to how strong people think sanctions should be. People support stronger sanctions on somebody who has a working partner. Support for sanctions was most limited among lone parents with dependent children and those caring for relatives. A majority were opposed to any sanctions *at all* for such carers.

The difference between the sanction people think appropriate for single people with dependent children, compared to single people without children, is large. The gap between lone parents and couple parents who are both out of work is relatively small.

At present differences between sanctions only take account of some circumstances. For example the sanctions regime for lone parents claiming income support is much weaker than for Jobseekers Allowance claimants. This is in line with the views represented in our poll, but the system often does not discriminate so strongly between the other types of claimants we asked about. For instance, the sanctions regime for problem drug users or repeat claimants is no different to that for anybody else. The sanctions system also only covers Jobseekers Allowance (and its equivalents), rather than looking across the range of benefits that people can receive. This means that even if people lose Jobseekers Allowance, their benefit income may not be affected dramatically because of the maintenance of other benefits and because of things like hardship payments. This seems contrary to the wishes of a large portion of the voters in our poll.

During James Purnell's period at the DWP it was suggested that benefits for problem drug users might be made conditional on their accepting support to tackle the problem and Paul Gregg's review of

conditionality discussed some more innovative ideas for how the sanctions system could be reformed. Such reforms might have taken the system towards that which voters in our poll felt right, but many of these suggestions have since been abandoned after critical reactions from a number of lobby groups.

Conditional welfare: work search and workfare

We asked people two questions about what people should have to do in exchange for receiving their benefits. We asked one question about work search requirements, and one about “workfare” (work for you benefits).

At present, Jobseekers Allowance claimants are required to search for work but there is no fixed amount of time they are mandated to spend doing this. In fact, a recent survey conducted by two Princeton economists for the Institute for the Study of Labor, found that jobseekers in the UK spend an *average of eight minutes per day* looking for jobs.⁶ Claimants who are transferred to the Work Programme (formerly the New Deals) may be required to attend training or undertake work placements. But there is no equivalent of the wide-scale US or Australian style workfare in the UK at present.

However the two questions we asked suggest that there is strong support for both of these ideas, both of which ask something of people in return for their benefits. These findings chime with the support for a desert-based conception of “fairness” discussed above.

How many hours each day do you think a person on Jobseeker's Allowance should have to be searching for work, applying for jobs, or in order to receive benefits?

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
There should not be a requirement	14	8	18	14
1 Hour	7	5	9	9
2 Hours	18	19	18	15
3-5 hours	31	33	32	41
5-8 hours	19	26	15	11
Don't know	11	9	9	10
TOTAL 3-8 HOURS	50	59	47	52

⁶ Krueger, Alan B., and Andreas Mueller. *Job Search and Unemployment Insurance: New Evidence from Time Use Data*. Forschungsinstitut zur Zukunft der Arbeit (IZA), p. 33.

People who have been out of work for 12 months or more, who are physically and mentally capable of undertaking a job, should be required to do community work in return for their state benefits.

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Strongly agree	49	62	40	43
Tend to agree	31	29	32	46
TOTAL AGREE	80	91	72	89
Tend to disagree	8	4	13	7
Strongly disagree	5	2	8	2
TOTAL DISAGREE	13	6	21	9
Don't know	7	3	7	2

Interestingly, while different groups had been divided over whether the benefit system was too generous, the idea that it should be more conditional is far less divisive, and enjoys a high level of support among all social groups and the supporters of all parties.

In terms of mandatory minimum time periods for work search, the median option favoured by supporters of all three main parties was 3-5 hours a day. There is relatively little variation between different groups, although support is lower among those in social housing and those who perceive themselves as being in the bottom 20% of the income distribution.

Support for workfare is also broadly based. While support was lower than 70% for people in social housing, non-whites, and people who perceive themselves as being at the bottom of the income distribution, even among these groups it has majority support.

Children, tax and benefits

We asked a series of questions about whether people supported more favourable treatment for people with children either through the tax or benefit system. Previous research has found the public are quite split on these issues.⁷

In the Policy Exchange Research Note *On Fairness*, Andrew Lilico asked: “is a child a consumption choice, like a Ferrari; or is it a dependent person that increases the costs and reduces the ability to pay tax of whoever is supporting it?”⁸ The current benefit and tax credits system comes out very strongly in favour of the latter of these concepts as it redistributes large sums of money to families with children to compensate them for the associated costs. Voters, however, are far more split on this question.

⁷ http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/pdfs/Families_in_Britain.pdf

⁸ http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/pdfs/On_Fairness.pdf

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

People with children should have to pay less tax to compensate for the costs of bringing them up.

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Strongly agree	12	9	15	8
Tend to agree	32	30	32	47
TOTAL AGREE	44	39	47	55
Tend to disagree	27	32	25	25
Strongly disagree	20	26	18	16
TOTAL DISAGREE	47	58	43	41
Don't know	9	3	10	5

People with children should be given higher benefits to compensate for the costs of bringing them up.

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Strongly agree	8	4	13	4
Tend to agree	28	23	32	37
TOTAL AGREE	36	27	45	41
Tend to disagree	33	38	30	38
Strongly disagree	22	30	17	17
TOTAL DISAGREE	55	68	47	55
Don't know	8	5	7	4

People who have more than three children should not get extra child benefit if they have a fourth.

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Strongly agree	36	49	28	30
Tend to agree	30	29	31	38
TOTAL AGREE	66	78	59	68
Tend to disagree	17	12	21	18
Strongly disagree	10	8	14	8
TOTAL DISAGREE	27	20	35	26
Don't know	7	3	6	7

Tax breaks for people with children are more popular than benefits – but neither commands a majority. By a margin of 55%-36% people disagree with the idea that “People with children should be given higher benefits to compensate for the costs of bringing them up.” This is in stark contrast to the current benefits and tax credits system.

Tax breaks for children are somewhat more popular, but people are evenly split on the parallel statement that “People with children should have to pay less tax to compensate for the costs of bringing

them up”, with 44% in favour and 47% against. The current tax system does not currently account for the number of children in a family.

In both cases, support for more favourable treatment of people with children is higher among Labour and Liberal Democrat voters. For Labour voters there is little difference between tax breaks and benefits for people with children. But for Conservative voters, there is dramatically less support for benefits for people with children than tax breaks.

The same is true for young voters, and older voters. Young voters see little difference between the two. However older voters are strongly in favour of tax breaks for children and strongly against benefits for children. This may reflect the history of the benefit system which has moved over time from a system of tax breaks for people with children, to today's child benefit and child tax credits (which are essentially a benefit given that people do not need to be working in order to claim them.)

People in lower social classes and those in social housing are also more sympathetic to the idea of preferential treatment for people with children.

Predictably, people with more children are much more sympathetic. People with no children are against child tax breaks by a margin of 53%-40%. In contrast, people with three or more children are in favour by a margin of 63%-23%.

There is majority support for a cap on child benefit at three children. Conservative voters are more strongly in favour of this idea than Labour voters, but even among Labour voters there is a large majority in favour. There is relatively little variation between different social groups. Even those with three or more children themselves would support a cap by a margin of 57%-34%.

Overall this suggests that although a large portion of people feel that the tax or benefit system should be used to redistribute income to families with children to compensate for the associated costs, an equally large (and sometimes larger) portion do not agree that this should happen. There is also broad support that where redistribution is made, that this is not given continually, but instead is capped as the number of children increases. A welfare and tax system that reflected these views would be very different from the system as it exists at present.

Marriage and lone parents

We asked whether government should be supporting marriage through the benefit system, and whether government should be trying to discourage people from becoming lone parents.

People split 45%-40% against the idea that “The government should try to encourage marriage through the benefits system”.

But by nearly two to one (59%-31%) they back the idea that “The government should try to discourage people from becoming lone parents.”

The government should try to encourage marriage through the benefits system.

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Strongly agree	18	26	13	15
Tend to agree	22	28	17	26
TOTAL AGREE	40	54	30	41
Tend to disagree	22	18	26	28
Strongly disagree	23	13	34	22
TOTAL DISAGREE	45	31	60	50
Don't know	15	14	11	10

The government should try to discourage people from becoming lone parents.

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Strongly agree	28	38	21	16
Tend to agree	31	35	28	49
TOTAL AGREE	59	73	49	65
Tend to disagree	18	12	24	17
Strongly disagree	13	6	20	13
TOTAL DISAGREE	31	18	44	30
Don't know	10	9	8	5

The idea of encouraging marriage strongly divides opinion between different groups. Conservative voters were in favour by a margin of 54%-31%. But Labour voters were opposed by 60%-30%. Older voters were in favour, but younger voters are against. Christians are in favour, while those who are not religious are against. Owner occupiers are in favour, while people in social housing are against.

Interestingly, opinion on this issue seems to be U-shaped with respect to social class and income. There is little difference between ABC1s and C2DEs. But looking at self-perception, both people at the very bottom and very top of the income scale are the most opposed to this idea, with those in the middle equally split. Support is also strongest in the middle of the class spectrum.

The idea that government should discourage people from becoming lone parents is less divisive, although that may be because in this question we have not specified what exactly government might do to achieve this aim.

Men are more strongly in favour of this statement than women (65%-28% in favour, compared to 55%-33%). Older voters are much more strongly in favour than younger voters (over 60s are 75%-20% in favour, compared to 47%-36% among the under 24s).

Social housing

We asked two different questions about social housing. One asked whether people should be offered social housing that was worth more than the average house in their local authority area. The other asked whether people should be offered social housing in expensive areas. The two are obviously related, but somewhat different.

People should not be offered council houses that are worth more than the average house in their local authority.

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Strongly agree	47	63	36	40
Tend to agree	26	23	27	35
TOTAL AGREE	73	86	63	75
Tend to disagree	10	5	16	10
Strongly disagree	5	2	8	2
TOTAL DISAGREE	15	7	24	12
Don't know	12	7	13	13

People should not be offered council housing in expensive areas.

%	Total	Con	Lab	Lib
Strongly agree	38	51	28	29
Tend to agree	22	23	20	29
TOTAL AGREE	60	74	48	58
Tend to disagree	19	14	26	23
Strongly disagree	9	4	15	4
TOTAL DISAGREE	28	18	41	27
Don't know	13	8	11	15

People agree with both propositions, but agree more strongly with the idea that people should not be offered social housing worth more than the average house in their area.

Compared to the more morally-charged questions about marriage and lone parenthood, variation between different social groups on these questions was more limited. There is a large majority in favour of both propositions among all social groups. Interestingly, there is a majority in favour of both propositions among those who actually live in social housing.

Labour voters were quite evenly split on whether people should be offered housing in expensive areas, although there was a small balance against allowing this. Older voters, better-off groups, whites, and the occupiers are more strongly in favour of restricting social housing in these two ways.

Conclusion: Voters have a coherent view of fairness, poverty and welfare

There seems to be coherence between public attitudes to what fairness is, what poverty is and public attitudes to welfare reform.

Firstly, people backed a strongly meritocratic and desert-based idea of what fairness is.

Similarly they believe poverty is about more than simply low income, and identified root causes based on people's own actions. While most people don't want to "blame" poor people for being in the situation they are in, they are more strongly in favour of helping those who help themselves.

It is no surprise therefore that the leading ideas about what would create a fairer society were things which would help people help themselves.

Given these attitudes, a general perception that the benefit system is too generous, and the belief that low returns to work are not the main factor driving unemployment, it is unsurprising that there was such strong support for conditional welfare – the idea of "something for something". Voters expect people to do more in return for their benefits and are prepared to sanction them more heavily than at present if they do not do what is expected.

These findings suggest support for much stronger conditionality and sanctioning than exists in the system at present. Policy Exchange will shortly be publishing work on this subject.

There has been comparatively little research on the allocation of social housing. But again, the findings in this poll seem to suggest support for some quite radical changes.

On other questions the public are much more divided. On the question of whether children are everybody's responsibility, or whether the costs of bringing children should fall on parents, there is no consensus. However, it is clear that large portions of voters do not agree with the way the current tax and welfare system treats children. And on the intersection of what we might call "moral" questions, with the welfare reform debate – issues like government support for marriage and lone parenthood – again there is no particularly strong consensus.

Appendix

Self-assessed wealth

Most people believe themselves to be in the middle of the income distribution, or very slightly below the middle.

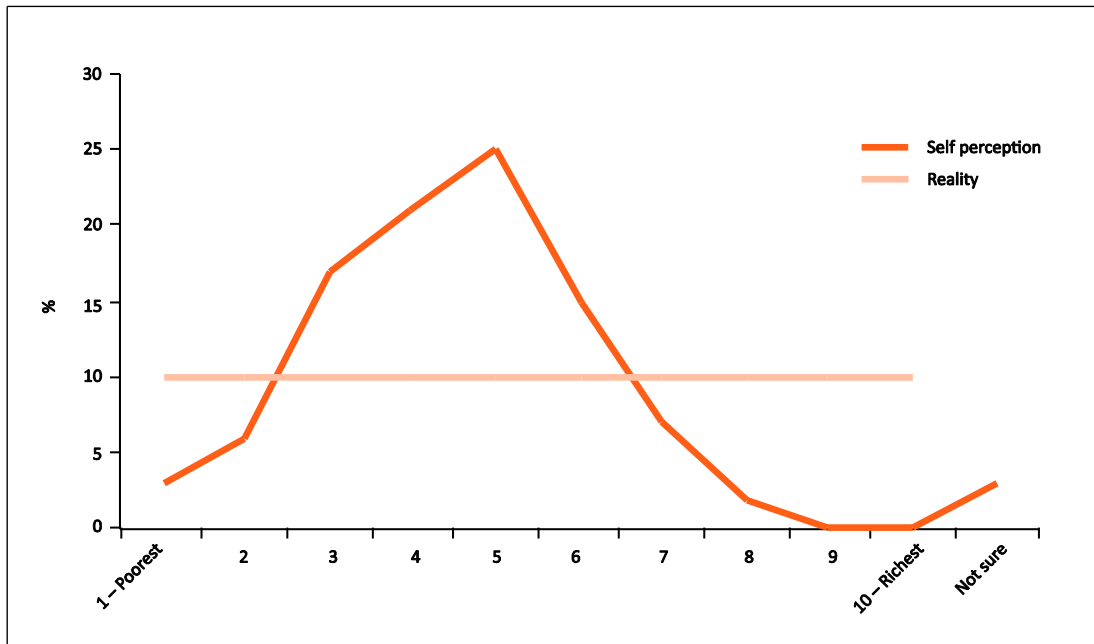
61% say they believe they are in the middle 30% of earners. 78% believe they are in the middle 40%. Only 2% of people believe they are in the top 30% of earners, while just 9% think they are in the bottom 20%.

Some of this may be an artefact of the poll sample, which is weighted to be representative of the population sample based on occupational class, rather than to have exactly 10% of respondents in each income decile. However, given the representative weighting of the sample it is likely that such an extreme clustering in the centre of the distribution reflects the fact that people are mistaken or uncertain about where they sit. Checking their answers to other questions suggests this is so. People's self-perceived position in the income distribution varies little depending on their social class or educational background. Among people who have a university education, the median average position was in the fifth decile, while among those within the GCSEs or lower qualifications, the median was in the fourth decile – a surprisingly small difference.

This finding has a number of implications. There has been much discussion about the “squeezed middle.” This is likely to find a wide resonance, given that most people believe themselves to be in the middle.

A previous Policy Exchange report, *Beware False Prophets* looked at the thesis set out in Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's book *The Spirit Level*. One of the arguments advanced in the book is that income inequality causes those at the bottom of the income distribution to perceive themselves as low status. They argue that this has negative effects on their health, beyond the effects we might expect from material disadvantage on its own. There are a number of problems with this thesis. However, if people don't really know where they fit in the income distribution, it is even less likely that income redistribution policies aimed at reducing the gini coefficient (a measure of inequality) are likely to have the positive effects Wilkinson and Pickett hope for.

On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means the poorest tenth of people in Britain, and 10 means the richest tenth, where would you say you fit in?



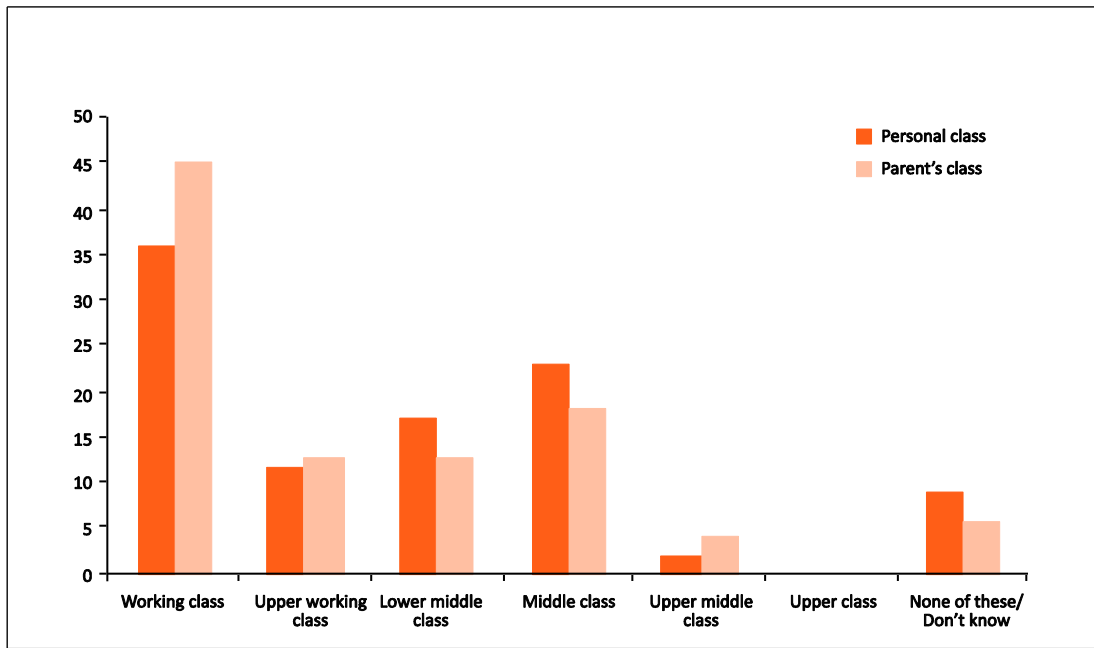
Self-perceived social class

We also asked people about their self-perceived social class, and how they perceived their parents social class. In general people are more likely to say that they are middle class than their parents. 20% of the sample say they are in a higher social class than their parents, 10% in a lower class, and 60% say they are in the same class.

While 48% identified themselves as somewhere in the working class, 42% thought they were somewhere in the middle class. This is a much more bourgeois split than when they describe their parents. 58% think their parents are working class, with just 35% identifying them as middle class.

Comparing people's perception of their class to how they would be typically be classified by their occupation, 51% of ABC1 voters describe themselves as part of the working class, while 26% of C2DE voters perceive themselves as part of the middle class.

Which of the following would you say best describes you?



About the Author

Neil O'Brien is the Director of Policy Exchange. He was previously director of Open Europe, a cross-party think tank working for free market reform in Europe. Neil grew up in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, and took a first in Politics, Philosophy and Economics, at Christ Church, Oxford. His interests include economic reform and social policy.

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