

## **EUROPEAN OPINION ON THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF GOVERNMENT**

Comparing survey findings from across Europe with information about the manifestoes of different political parties shows that parties help to shape public opinion as well as reflect it. According to the latest NatCen British Social Attitudes report, cross-national differences in views about the role of government reflect differences in the positions taken by the main political parties in each country:

- Countries have different 'centres of gravity', which both the public and political parties tend towards. The public continue to hold traditionally left-wing attitudes in countries such as Norway and France, which have strong parties well to the left of the political spectrum. By contrast, the last decade has seen the centre of gravity in Britain shift towards the centre.
- Just over half (55%) of people in Britain think it should be the government's responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed, compared with two thirds in France and Germany (68% and 69%) and around nine in ten in Norway (88%) and Spain (93%).
- Two thirds (67%) of people in Britain think it is the government's responsibility to reduce income differences between rich and poor, compared with 70% in Germany, 74% in Norway, 78% in France and 86% in Spain.

When the ideologies of political parties move closer together, so too do the attitudes of their supporters:

- Support for traditional left-wing policies of economic intervention has declined in countries like Britain and Spain, where the main parties of the left, and their supporters, have moved towards the ideological centre ground.
- In 1986, more than four in five (85%) people in Britain thought it was up to government to provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed; just over half (55%) think this now.

Stephen Padgett, co-author, comments:

"The fact that public attitudes towards the role of government vary across countries and change over time in ways which are consistent with changes in party platforms, lends support to the idea that political parties can influence public attitudes on this issue. The decline in left-wing attitudes among the British electorate between 1996 and 2006, for example, clearly suggests the influence of New Labour".

ENDS

This summarises 'How do political parties shape public opinion? Britain in a European perspective' by Stephen Padgett and Robert Johns, in British Social Attitudes: the 26<sup>th</sup> Report, published by Sage for NatCen.

## Notes to Editors

- 1 **British Social Attitudes: the 26th Report** is published on Tuesday 26th January, 2010 by SAGE, price £50.00. It is edited by Alison Park, John Curtice, Katarina Thomson, Miranda Phillips, Elizabeth Clery and Sarah Butt. SAGE is at <http://www.uk.sagepub.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book234304&series=Series30&>.
- 2 The report includes two additional chapters not covered by this press release. Findings from these chapters, on religion, were released earlier in the year.
- 3 British findings are from the British Social Attitudes survey, with the exception of the chapter by Andy Ross and Amanda Sacker, which also uses data from the British Household Panel Study, and the chapter by Rossy Bailey, Elizabeth Fuller and Rachel Ormston, which also uses data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey and the Health Survey for England. Findings that compare Britain with other countries are taken from the European Social Survey ([www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org)) or the International Social Survey Programme ([www.issp.org](http://www.issp.org)).
- 4 The British Social Attitudes survey series has been conducted annually since 1983. The 2008 survey consisted of 4,486 interviews with a representative, random sample of people in Britain.
- 5 The survey is funded by charitable and government sources. The questions in the 2008 survey were funded by the following government Departments: Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (now Business, Innovation and Skills); Children, Schools and Families; Health; Transport; and Work and Pensions. Other funders came from: the Economic and Social Research Council; the Food Standards Agency; the Gatsby Charitable Foundation; the Hera Trust; the John Templeton Foundation; the Leverhulme Trust; and NORFACE.
- 6 NatCen, Britain's largest independent social research organisation, aims to promote a better-informed society through high quality social research ([www.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.natcen.ac.uk)).

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