

NO RIGHT TURN

Britain's enduring
support for
public services

**Natan Doron
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**FABIAN
SOCIETY**

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Summary

This report analyses original research undertaken by the Fabian Society in Spring 2012. Through nine hours of focus groups and a nationally representative survey of over 2,000 respondents, the research investigated the relative popularity of arguments for and against tax-funded public services.

The main findings were:

- Overall, the 'pro'-state arguments proved significantly more popular than the 'anti' ones. Only one 'anti' argument received broad support (i.e. more people convinced than not convinced) while every 'pro'-state argument did.
- Participants supported 'pro'-state arguments because of a 'care ethic' towards those less fortunate and also on the basis of long-term self-interest. The most popular arguments related to life-cycle support (we all depend on public services at some point in our lives) and economic prosperity (decent public services are the foundations of a successful economy).
- The 'anti'-state argument, which received wide support, stated that high levels of public spending make people lazy and dependent. If the left can tackle this widespread concern, it should be able to embed much more pro-state politics in Britain.
- There was little public support for 'neo-liberal' arguments against state action which characterise US political debate, with women particularly unconvinced. This rejection of small-state ideas resulted in only 27 per cent of adults supporting tax cuts. 47 per cent opted for current levels of tax and 28 per cent wanted tax rises.
- On most but not all the questions, Conservative voters were more anti-state than Labour voters. In these cases 'swing voters', who will decide the next election, were much closer in their responses to Labour voters than to Conservatives.

This report suggests that progressive advocates for the state and tax-funded public services have reason to be confident in constructing public arguments drawn on the positions tested in this research. There is very little appetite for a US-style small-state and swing-voters' views are much closer to Labour than to Conservative opinion. The left should therefore resist urges to seek out a middle-way that cedes ground to the right on public service debates. Labour can set out a collectivist case for maintaining high quality, tax-funded public services.

Table 1: A list of 'pro' (+) and 'anti' (-) arguments about tax-funded public services. Arguments are listed in order of how convincing they were to our nationally representative survey.

Below are a number of statements about public services. How convincing or unconvincing an argument for/against public services do you find each one?

	Very/quite convincing	Very/quite unconvincing	Net convincing
+ At different stages of our lives we all need decent public services like health and education. Each of us personally benefits from these services	83%	4%	79
+ An educated and healthy society is the foundation of a successful economy. Public services are essential for business to succeed and incomes to grow	73%	9%	64
+ Public services should not be restricted according to ability to pay. We all deserve help when we need it and an equal chance	69%	12%	57
+ Services like health and education should not be run as businesses. They depend on the values and ethos of the public good	64%	17%	47
- Providing more than a basic safety net makes people lazy and dependent on the state. People should take care of themselves	55%	26%	29
+ Despite recent economic problems, the UK is a rich country and that means we can afford decent public services	48%	29%	19
- We should only fund basic services to try keep tax as low as possible. People know how to spend their money better than the government	36%	38%	-2
- Government should do the bare minimum and stay out of people's way. People are freer when there is less government	34%	37%	-3
- Government does things very inefficiently. We should let private companies or charities run more of our services	32%	40%	-8
- When the government provides more than the basics it holds back business and stops the economy growing	29%	39%	-10

1

INTRODUCTION

This year's US presidential election is a battle about the role of the state. Mitt Romney and his running-mate Paul Ryan offer American voters the choice of a radical small-state political economy, with less tax and much less public provision. Their prospectus is backed by a philosophy, championed by the Tea Party, which calls into question the very legitimacy of government action. Against them, Barack Obama offers a more European model of state-funded social entitlements. American politics may have plenty of faults, but shirking big debates is not among them.

But how do these questions play out in Britain? It is a truism that the UK is a more pro-state nation than the USA, but we are also a nation that thinks much less deeply about competing views of the state. We tend to talk about bread-and-butter politics rather than broad philosophical questions. But rival perspectives on the state inform everything our politicians do and say. So we wanted to know how people respond to and discuss arguments 'for' and 'against' public provision, and whether they want 'more' or 'less' government.

A powerful strand in British political thinking has adopted a diluted version of US anti-state rhetoric. A combination of fiscal pressure and a reaction to New Labour's centralist statecraft has led to a range of calls for 'less' state, which often conflate financial and organisational arguments. This is seen in the coalition government's advocacy of the 'big society' as something defined against the 'big state'. Even within the Labour party, parts of 2011's *The Purple Book*, argued in favour of "leaving the big state behind".

British proponents of a mid-Atlantic vision of the state have drawn on scanty evidence to suggest public support. For example, a *Daily Telegraph* headline (26th January, 2010) boldly stated "Britain has grown more conservative under Labour" based on British Social Attitudes data showing that the numbers wanting to cut tax and public spending had risen from 3 per cent in 1997 to just 8 per cent in 2008.

The research presented in this report demonstrates that, in the eyes of the public, the state is far more popular and less 'problematic' than conventional political wisdom would have us believe. When it comes to arguments for or against state spending on public services, people are more concerned with competing notions of entitlement, compassion and desert rather than debates about the size or relative powers of government. It is not the state in itself but

the values and ethos that state activity can represent which matter.

The first reason for the popularity of 'pro'-state arguments is what we call the 'care ethic'. Our research saw supporters of all political parties back arguments in favour of tax-funded public services as a way of caring for those less fortunate in our society. But enlightened self-interest also plays a role, with many recognising that their own wellbeing and prosperity depends on government.

On the other hand few participants supported arguments in favour of letting people fend for themselves in a system of services delivered by the market. Even Conservative supporters were pretty evenly split on the merits of 'small state' positions and positive about most 'pro' arguments. Importantly the views of swing voters, the group that will decide the outcome of the next election, were much closer to those of 2010 Labour voters.¹ Our conclusion is that public opinion does not support calls by some for the Labour party to adopt a middle-way on public service debates that cedes ground to the right.

However, support for public provision through the state is not unqualified, with contribution and desert both important factors in how people think about entitlements. This research highlights the enduring public perception that welfare dependency is an unsavoury consequence of high levels of public spending. This is the major roadblock which stops majority public opinion being unambiguously 'social democrat' in its views on government. To some this will come as a disappointment, but it also suggests that if the left can credibly resolve people's concerns about 'dependency' it may in future be able to make the case for a more north European version of government.

For now, most people in the UK are wedded to the status quo. To conclude the research we tested participants' views on whether levels of tax in Britain should be higher or lower or stay roughly the same. Almost half opted for the middle option, with around a quarter each choosing higher or lower taxes. However, this broad support for today's level of tax reflects small-c conservatism more than statist ideology; more than half of those who wanted no change said that if they had to choose they would prefer less taxes to more.

As this last finding reveals, the research includes some difficult messages for progressive advocates of the state. But in the main our evidence demonstrates that the left can feel confident in its ability to construct 'pro'-state arguments in defence of quality public services which can go with the grain of public opinion.

2

COMPARING 'PRO' AND 'ANTI' STATE ARGUMENTS

In both the focus groups and the survey we tested how people responded to arguments in favour of as well as against state spending on public services. We tested five 'pro' and five 'anti' arguments to see how convincing people found them. Our objective was to understand not only which side of the argument was more popular but also the relative strength of different 'pro' and 'anti' positions. We achieved this by asking people not which views they agreed with, but which they found most 'convincing'. This is a less polarising question which enables people to evaluate the freestanding merits of an argument, regardless of their other views.

Our principal finding was that the 'pro' arguments convinced far more people than the 'anti' arguments (see tables 2 and 3). The difference between the share of people who found each statement convincing and unconvincing is described as the 'net convincing' score.

Table 2: 'Anti'-state arguments. Below are a number of statements about public services. How convincing or unconvincing an argument against public services do you find each one?

	Very/quite convincing	Very/quite unconvincing	Net convincing
Providing more than a basic safety net makes people lazy and dependent on the state. People should take care of themselves	55%	26%	29
We should only fund basic services to try keep tax as low as possible. People know how to spend their money better than the government	36%	38%	-2
Government should do the bare minimum and stay out of people's way. People are freer when there is less government	34%	37%	-3
Government does things very inefficiently. We should let private companies or charities run more of our services	32%	40%	-8
When the government provides more than the basics it holds back business and stops the economy growing	29%	39%	-10

Of the five ‘anti’ arguments presented in our survey, only one was convincing for more people than it was unconvincing - and was the only one that was more popular than one of the ‘pro’ statements. By contrast the five ‘pro’ arguments all enjoyed positive net convincing scores.

It is clear that British public opinion is very far from the anti-state views held widely in the US. The strong support for four of the ‘pro’ statements obviously provides a strong body of evidence for constructing resonant political narratives in future. But why were the ‘pro’ arguments so persuasive in our survey?

Table 3: ‘Pro’-state arguments. Below are a number of statements about public services. How convincing or unconvincing an argument in favour of public services do you find each one?

	Very/quite convincing	Very/quite unconvincing	Net convincing
At different stages of our lives we all need decent public services like health and education. Each of us personally benefits from these services	83%	4%	79
An educated and healthy society is the foundation of a successful economy. Public services are essential for business to succeed and incomes to grow	73%	9%	64
Public services should not be restricted according to ability to pay. We all deserve help when we need it and an equal chance	69%	12%	57
Services like health and education should not be run as businesses. They depend on the values and ethos of the public good	64%	17%	47
Despite recent economic problems, the UK is a rich country and that means we can afford decent public services	48%	29%	19

2.1 The popularity of the ‘pro’-arguments

Our focus groups pointed to some answers. First they exposed what we can call the care ethic. This care ethic is shown in quotes that display positive responses to ‘pro’-state arguments based on concerns with our obligations to one another in society, particularly those who are more vulnerable. But alongside this altruistic instinct there was a strong sense that public provision is important for people’s own self-interests.

The two thoughts were often combined:

I quite like [the statement about each of us benefiting from services]. I like the idea of, more of a unity thing, we all need these things, so we need to all work towards, I suppose like you said we all need to work

towards making it better for everybody kind of thing, and we all need the services...

[Gillingham]

In another example the care ethic trumps an argument based on freedom:

This one [statement that government should do the bare minimum to increase freedom], I strongly disagreed with this, the government should do the bare minimum, people are freer when there is less government, well I think they are in terms of freedom, but do I think that's a socially acceptable way to go? No I don't, because I think it's about having a social conscience and having standards.

[Male, Peterborough]

The conversations also revealed strong egalitarian convictions, with 'anti' arguments seen by many participants as favouring the rich or breeding corruption:

You can sit there and laugh at me, but I think we're all money orientated in this country, there's no caring, we should care for one another, you might have the ability to pay but in the twinkle of an eye anything can go wrong with your abilities so you could be rich one day and lose everything the next, so should you then be discriminated against and not have the same chance of being cared for?...

[Female, Peterborough]

If you had a government like that [only doing the bare minimum], it would be like other countries in the world, very corrupt, and you'd only have people there to make money...

[Male, Gillingham]

The 'pro' arguments compared

In the quantitative study the most egalitarian and altruistic of the 'pro' arguments ('Public services should not be restricted according to ability to pay. We all deserve help when we need it and an equal chance.') was widely endorsed but it was by no means the most popular of the statements. It also divided Conservative voters from supporters from other parties and from swing voters (see table 4).

By contrast, the two most popular arguments (which successfully those with different political perspectives) both played to people's long-term self-interests.

The most popular argument was the 'life cycle argument' which suggested that at different stages of our lives, we all rely on decent public services. The second argument linked quality public services to a successful economy.

Table 4: Comparison of responses to 'pro'-state arguments by voter group. Below are a number of statements about public services. How convincing or unconvincing an argument in favour of public services do you find each one?

	Con Net convincing	Lab Net convincing	Lib Dem Net convincing	Swing voters Net convincing
At different stages of our lives we all need decent public services like health and education. Each of us personally benefits from these services	77	82	87	82
An educated and healthy society is the foundation of a successful economy. Public services are essential for business to succeed and incomes to grow	59	73	73	70
Public services should not be restricted according to ability to pay. We all deserve help when we need it and an equal chance	43	67	70	68
Services like health and education should not be run as businesses. They depend on the values and ethos of the public good	25	61	66	60
Despite recent economic problems, the UK is a rich country and that means we can afford decent public services	4	40	30	36

In the focus group participants explained their support for this proposition:

Male: Well if you didn't have transport people couldn't go to work could they, or very few could go to work. If you were ill, as [other male respondent] was saying, if the education system falls down then we haven't got business people to run our companies, and things like this. So the statement is very true.

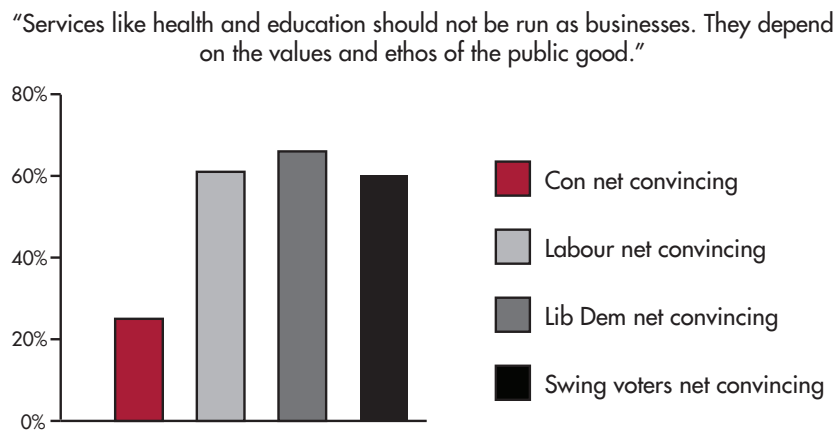
Moderator: Nodding along, [female]?

Female: Yeah well I think as well public services creates jobs. So the more people that work in public services put money in through their taxes, so I guess in that sense.

[Gillingham]

The fourth argument to receive majority support turned on the nature of public provision: ‘Services like health and education should not be run as businesses. They depend on the values and ethos of the public good.’ This was strong endorsement for an argument that is pretty conceptual and politically-charged. It shows that many people value the ‘public’ nature of government provision separately from the tangible benefits services bring. This finding may come as a surprise to many within Westminster who tend to dismiss such claims as ‘special pleading’ by vested interests in the public sector. Unsurprisingly responses to this statement are politically divided, with Labour and Liberal Democrat voters much more likely to support the statement than Conservatives.²

Figure 1: Net convincing scores broken down by different voting groups

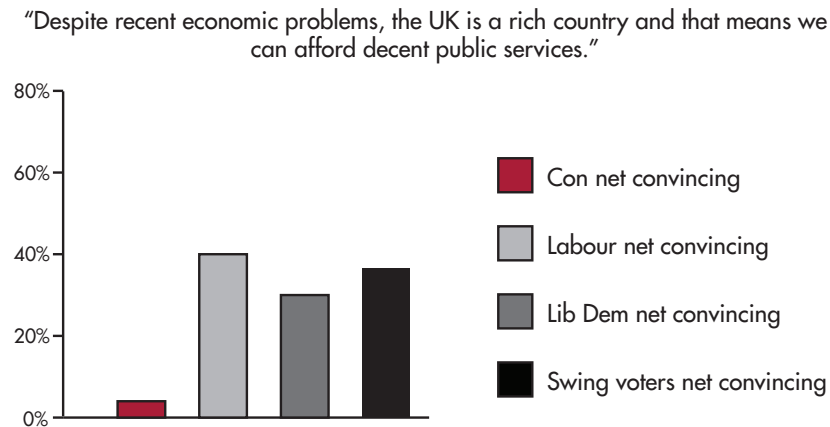


In all the cases where reaction to the ‘pro’ arguments divided on political lines swing voters are firmly aligned with Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters. From the perspective of political positioning ahead of the 2015 election this is a very striking finding.

2.2 Can we afford good public services?

The statement that Britain can afford good public services was, by some way, the least popular of the ‘pro’ statements and the only one not to attract majority support. Figure 2 shows that Conservative voters were far less optimistic in their assessment of the UK’s economic health than other voters.

Figure 2: Net convincing scores broken down by different voting groups



The qualified endorsement for this statement chimes with the focus group findings. Participants in the groups at times stated that the ‘pro’ statements represented an idealised vision of Britain but questioned whether it was affordable. For example:

Female: Well because like [other participant] just said, I think things do work well in our country, I think because we’re British we’ve got a tendency to complain a lot but I think if you look at other countries in the world we are quite fortunate because of all these things that are accessible to us. And I don’t necessarily think that going down the ‘look after number one’ route would be a better way.

Male 1: That is a very good way of putting it actually, looking after number one. so you might, if I was to revise that, all of these [‘pro’ arguments] to me, that is living in a perfect society, every one of those statements is true, in my opinion, and should score, upwards of eight every time. But that [‘anti’ arguments] is a divided society, that’s what happens when one person gets too much power, so I’m against everyone of them statements.

Moderator: Male 2, you’re nodding along?

Male 2: Yeah I would agree with that, that is perfect Britain. It’s not perfect because of statement 1 (reference to earlier comment that the UK is not a rich country), but that’s how everybody would like it to be.

[Gillingham]

The focus groups revealed that a story of national decline had clearly taken hold amongst many people. In one exchange a participant even suggested

that India and China were “better off” than the UK.³

Male: Yeah there was a thing about India recently, we’re pretty much imposing money on them and they said “we don’t want it”.

Female: Yeah because they’re better off than us. They’ve grown and grown and grown like China, and we’re getting poorer.

[Peterborough]

These stories of national decline were tied to concerns with public sector debt and spending profligacy, in this case with respect to overseas aid:

Female: We’re not a rich country.

Male 1: We owe a lot of money.

Male 2: And the reason the UK is not a rich country is because we’ve given that much away to help other countries out, but we don’t get any return back, so how can the UK say we’re rich? We’re not.

[Carlisle]

2.3 ‘Lazy and dependent’: The only popular ‘anti’-argument

Talking about the affordability of public services almost always triggered discussions about ‘welfare dependency’ and people who make inadequate contributions:

Female: ‘Despite the recession the UK is rich enough to provide decent services like health and education.’ [reading statement]

Moderator: Reactions?

Female: I think you’d get a lot of people that use our health services and our education, when they’re not paying any taxes towards anything. And it’s not fair for all the ones that do. And the older people that go to work for years and get nothing back, and have to sell their houses and whatnot to pay for their, to go to a home, then people who have been on benefit for ever get theirs for nothing.

[Gillingham]

This quote neatly illustrates how many people divide families into ‘undeserving’ (not paying tax but receiving good public provision) and ‘deserving’ (people who work and pay-in but still may not get anything back because of means testing). Some participants talked of a ‘split society’:

I think the word in that question [argument suggesting that access to public services should be equal and not restricted according to ability to pay] is equal. We want everyone to be equal, well we’re not. We’re a split society, we’ve got people who work and people who don’t.

[Male, Gillingham]

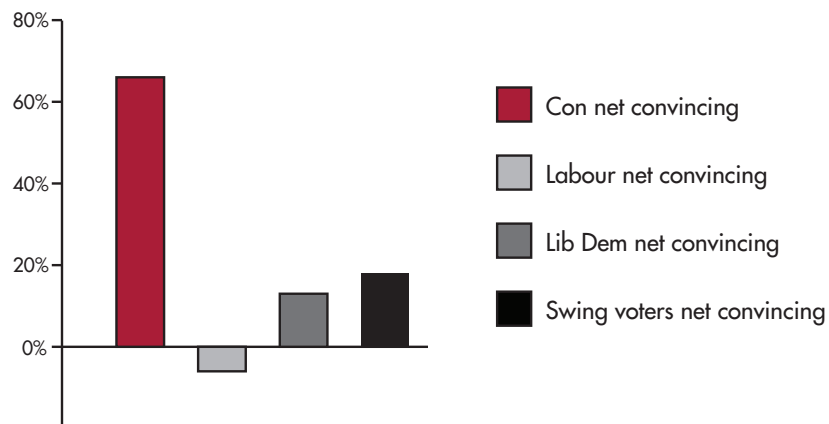
You've got your genuine people, that desperately want to work, and those that never had a day's work in their life and just want to take, take, take, and if I had it my way they could be offered a job, and if they don't take it, that's it, all benefits stop.

[Female, Peterborough]

These sentiments explain why the survey statement, which mentioned people being 'lazy' and 'dependent', attracted considerable support with a 'net convincing' score of 29 per cent. The quantitative results also revealed this view is politically divisive, attracting far more support from people who voted Conservative in 2010 than anyone else (figure 3). Nevertheless it is a striking result and suggests that feelings about 'dependency' are the main roadblock to the British public wholeheartedly embracing 'pro'-state political positions.

Figure 3: Net convincing score broken down by different voting groups

"Providing more than a basic safety net makes people lazy and dependent on the state. People should take care of themselves."



Some participants who supported the statement made a link between UK economic decline and welfare 'dependency' (just as some did with respect to overseas aid):

Because if people weren't dependant on the state, then it would make us richer. If we didn't keep giving our money away.

[Female, Gillingham]

For all these concerns it is important to remember that four out of five of the 'pro' arguments are more popular the 'lazy and dependent' statement. Given the frequency with which concerns about benefit fraud and people being out of work by choice were raised in the groups, this is perhaps surprising. How can it be explained?

In part it may be that people's strong support for the 'pro' positions acts to counter-intuitions about dependency. But the focus groups also revealed internal tensions within the dependency argument, with people rushing to judgement but then feeling the need to qualify their views.

For example, in Gillingham, there were a lot of concerns raised about people out of work using services. But when participants were presented with the 'lazy and dependent argument', some were hesitant to endorse it.

Male 1: Erm, I don't know, I wouldn't say it makes them lazy. I think we just want people out there in work.

Male 2: The statement is very true, the statement is true, but, you can't decide between a person that is disabled, you can't say that that person is now capable of not looking after themselves, you can't put them in the same category as a person that doesn't want to go out and do something about it. So to me that statement again is wrong.

Male 3: Yeah. I mean we do need the services and we do need more of the services, we've got to make them bigger. Obviously certain services will make people lazy and others won't.

Moderator: So a bit of a mix?

Male 3: Yeah bit of a mix

Female 1: I think it's dependant on what it is. Because sometimes if you give people too much then they will just take advantage of it, just keep taking, whereas other times, it depends on what it is.

[Gillingham]

Perhaps the hesitance to condemn is a response to the care ethic. The argument is strongly worded, and the final phrase suggests that 'people should take care of themselves'. Male 2 endorses the statement in principal but then focuses on the genuine claims of people who cannot work.

This idea of desert and legitimacy in claiming state support was taken further by a participant in another group who suggested that the 'lazy and dependent' 'anti' and the life-cycle 'pro' arguments are not in conflict with each other.

The two [arguments] don't conflict at all. I would strongly agree with both. I think everybody, like that one says, everybody should look after themselves, everybody should want to look after themselves, everybody occasionally comes up against a brick wall and needs help.

[Male, Carlisle]

At stake is the notion of desert in accessing services. In the view of these participants desert is derived from either working and contributing, or being unable to do so through no fault of your own.

2.4 Rejecting the small-state

The four remaining 'anti' arguments were conventional neo-liberal positions, touching on low taxation, freedom, public sector inefficiency and getting in the way of business. None of the statements had more supporters than opponents, even though we were asking about how convincing they were not whether people agreed with them.

It is these responses that paint the most stark difference between British public opinion and the political debate in the United States. Those within the Conservative Party who hanker after neo-liberal purity in the UK are out of touch even with their own voters. Each of the four statements received the endorsement of half or fewer of Conservative supporters, with three of the 'pro' arguments being much more popular. A fourth, the argument that public services should not be run as businesses was a little ahead of its 'anti' alternative, that 'government does things very inefficiently'.

Table 5: Comparison of responses to 'anti'-state arguments by voter group. Below are a number of statements about public services. How convincing or unconvincing an argument in favour of public services do you find each one?

	Con Net convincing	Lab Net convincing	Lib Dem Net convincing	Swing voters Net convincing
Providing more than a basic safety net makes people lazy and dependent on the state. People should take care of themselves	66	-6	13	18
We should only fund basic services to try keep tax as low as possible. People know how to spend their money better than the government	28	-28	-24	-15
Government should do the bare minimum and stay out of people's way. People are freer when there is less government	21	-28	-20	-16
When the government provides more than the basics it holds back business and stops the economy growing	21	-33	-34	-24
Government does things very inefficiently. We should let private companies or charities run more of our services	17	-33	-26	-21

In the case of Labour, Liberal Democrat and swing voters many more rejected than endorsed each statement. There was a little more divergence between Labour and Lib Dem voters on reactions to the 'anti' statements than the 'pro' statements, neatly reflecting the difference between liberal and social democrat traditions. Unlike with the 'pro' arguments the views of swing voters sit between those of Conservative and Labour/Lib Dem voters. They are nevertheless far closer to the latter than the former, and show that few of this crucial demographic hold much truck with small-state arguments.

These arguments triggered strikingly different responses from men and women. While women and men respond similarly to the 'pro' argument and the 'lazy and dependent' 'anti' argument, the neo-liberal arguments are very divisive.

Table 6: Comparison of different gender responses to 'anti' arguments
How convincing or unconvincing an argument in favour of public services do you find the below?

	Men Net convincing	Women Net convincing
Providing more than a basic safety net makes people lazy and dependent on the state. People should take care of themselves	29	28
We should only fund basic services to try keep tax as low as possible. People know how to spend their money better than the government	2	-7
Government should do the bare minimum and stay out of people's way. People are freer when there is less government	8	-15
When the government provides more than the basics it holds back business and stops the economy growing	-6	-16
Government does things very inefficiently. We should let private companies or charities run more of our services	-5	-12

In the focus groups there were some differences in the arguments presented by men and women (though the sample was obviously too small to draw firm conclusions). Arguments in favour of efficiency were usually made by men, for example:

To run it, not to provide the money for it. A lot of companies are better run than the government run the country, a lot of charities are not run very well. There's a lot of companies that's run very very well, obviously,

because they make money and the organisation there could probably run the country better than the government.

[Male, Carlisle]

In the same group a woman said:

I think government does do things inefficiently, but I still like them providing the services, I just wish they'd buck their ideas up.

[Female, Carlisle]

A woman in Gillingham said:

I don't know if it's because we're so used to the way things are in this country, with the NHS, but I can't imagine a hospital being a profitable organisation, I can't see how that would work. But obviously I know in places like America it is like that.

Well I think the thing with private companies is their main goal is to make profit, and that will always be their main goal. Whereas the government should, whether it does or not, its main priority should be to serve the people, which is a difficulty with that. Even stuff like the BBC, I know it's not government, but because it's a public service, you usually find its quality is better than say ITV.

[Gillingham]

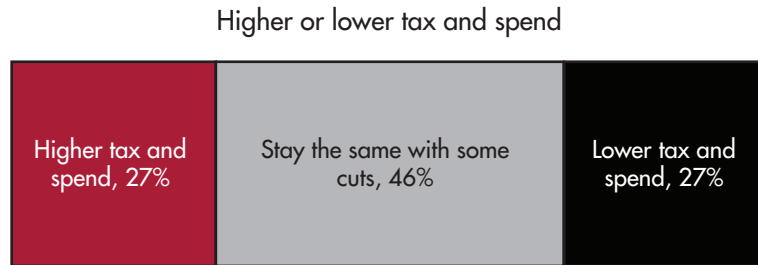
2.5 Tax and spend

The most popular of the four 'neo-liberal' arguments focused on low taxes and convinced one third of respondents. So how did our participants react when given the option of paying less tax? Did the generally 'pro'-state feelings identified in the rest of the research translate into tolerance for taxation – or did a direct question about paying taxes lead to more negative reactions?

We asked our survey participants to choose between three options: higher levels of tax and spending; lower levels of tax and spending; or broadly the same level of tax, with some spending cuts to reduce the public spending deficit. We were mindful that the research was being conducted in the midst of fiscal retrenchment, when people are already feeling squeezed, taxes have been increased and spending cuts are underway. We expected this would boost support for reduced tax.

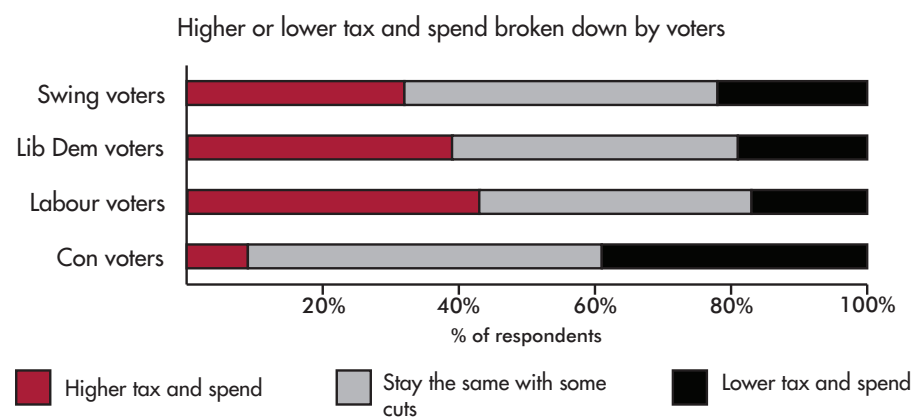
The results show that when it comes to 'tax and spend' many people are small-c conservative and like the status quo, with 46 per cent of those answering preferring to keep the same levels of tax. Just over a quarter each wanted higher taxes and lower taxes.

Figure 4: All participants responses to the question of having higher, lower or the same level of tax and spending (with some cuts)



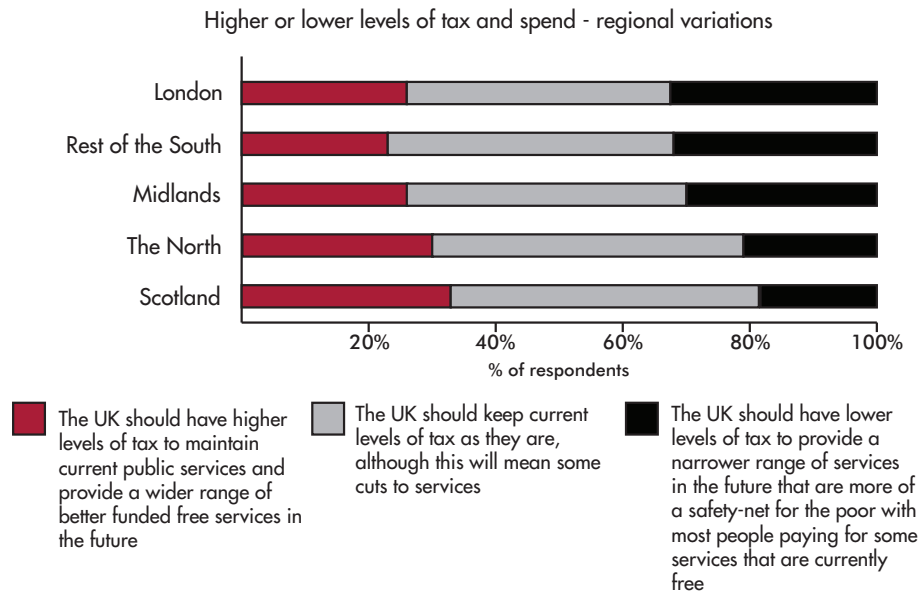
Whilst those favouring higher or lower taxes were almost equal in number, breaking down responses according to voter intention reveals a different picture. As figure 5 below shows, Labour voters were the only group that had a majority preference for higher levels of tax. Conservative voters were the only group that had a greater number preferring lower of tax. Amongst swing voters, 78 per cent thought that levels of tax and spend should stay as they are or increase. Only 22 per cent of swing voters thought that taxes should be lower.

Figure 5: Higher or lower tax & spend broken down by different voting groups



There is little evidence that views on levels of public spending diverge on regional grounds. Voters in the south are perhaps marginally less statist in their views than those in other parts of the UK. This is illustrated in the graph below. The majority of people in all regions clearly favour maintaining the status quo.

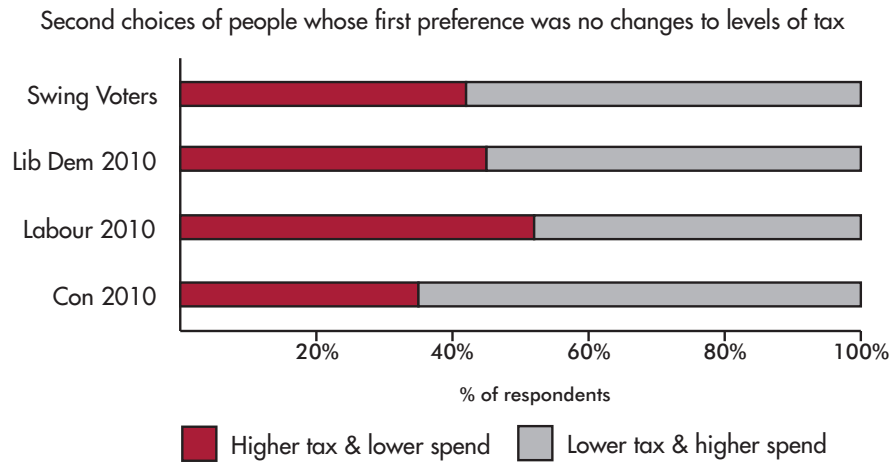
Figure 6: Higher or lower tax & spend broken down by region



Anticipating that many respondents would select the middle option, we asked a second question which forced people to choose between the two extremes. As seen in the graph below, a clear majority preferred lower levels of tax and spend. The differences according to voting groups were as expected with only Labour voters featuring a majority in favour of higher tax and spend. Conservative voters are slightly more enthusiastic about having lower levels of tax and spend than other voters.

These findings demonstrate the limits of the public's support for government. We have seen very little appetite for neo-liberal arguments for a retrenchment of the state, with the vast majority of people being happy with at least the 'British model' of tax and spend. But, when pushed, only a minority are prepared to contemplate going further, towards a more north European fiscal settlement. The left can feel confident in defending the status quo from the tax-cutting right. But those who want to argue for a greater role for tax and public spending have more work to do.

Figure 7: Second choices of people whose first preference was no change to levels of tax broken down by different voting groups



The focus groups reinforced the impression that most people are broadly happy with the status quo. In the groups, we simplified the debate by showing participants three circles, each of a size relating to the levels of government spending in the three options, which we also gave a shorthand name to facilitate the discussion. These names were based loosely on the countries associated with the approaches and were referred to in the groups as ‘the UK model’ (maintaining current levels of tax and spend), ‘the US model’ (lowering levels of tax and spend) and ‘the Scandinavian model’ (raising levels of tax and spend).

It was clear that many of the responses were tied up with participant perceptions of life in those countries. A common view was that the USA’s health-care arrangements represented something unfavourable in comparison to the UK.

... I think I personally feel I wouldn’t want to live in a country where it was like the US, where the doctors are more bothered about you showing your insurance policy than treating you. So I’m quite glad I live in a country where rich or poor you can go to a hospital and someone will treat you so I wouldn’t want to see the US model happening here.

[Female, Gillingham]

Similarly, whilst participants often recognised that the quality of services were higher in Scandinavia, they also acknowledged that it came at a higher rate of taxation. The following view was typical.

Male: I suppose the Scandinavian model would give every citizen sort

of minimum expectations in terms of life style wouldn't it? Ability to live comfortably, that's how I would view it.

Moderator: So you'd view that as a positive? Are there any disadvantages?

Male: Well yeah, it costs you a lot of money doesn't it?

[Peterborough]

In two of the groups participants opted for keeping current levels of tax and spending, while in the third, participants suggested striking a balance between British and Scandinavian levels were the best option.

Some participants had unrealistic expectations of what could be achieved with British levels of taxation. A participant in Gillingham suggested that Scandinavian levels of provision could be achieved with current tax by improving 'efficiency'. Others suggested that cracking down on benefit fraud would solve the UK's public finances.

3 CONCLUSION

This report has explored a wealth of evidence which suggests that ‘pro’-state advocates have reason to be confident in their rebuttals of neo-liberal approaches to public services, with most voters rejecting arguments against the principle of tax-funded public services.

But the research also provides a strong indication that the left must do more to address the perception that public provision can make people lazy and dependent on the state. This is the only ‘anti’ argument which enjoyed a net positive score. This perception persists despite the fact that fraud accounts for only 0.8 per cent of benefits spending in the UK.⁴ So if Labour could successfully address perceptions of ‘dependency’, the party could radically realign debates about the role of government.

More positively for the left, the research clearly demonstrates that voters of all parties unite behind almost all of the arguments in favour of public services. In particular, the argument that we all depend on public services at different stages of our lives draws support by emphasising the importance that public services play throughout everyone’s life cycle. Voters of all parties also unite behind the idea that decent public services can serve as a foundation for a successful economy. Perhaps most importantly, the research demonstrates that a healthy care ethic operates in the views of the public towards the principles of tax-funded services.

For politicians perhaps the most important findings relate to the views of swing voters. Time and again their views are closer to those of people who voted Labour in 2010 than to Conservatives. This shows that Labour can win a majority in 2015 without tacking to the right on questions of the role and size of the state. Labour needs to work on its credibility as a government-in-waiting rather than worry about shifting rightwards to a ‘new centre’ on the policy questions examined in this report.

This research gives the left strong grounds for resisting calls to mimic Conservative posturing on public services, which is cumulatively seeking to create a mid-Atlantic model of the state. Not only should the Labour party feel confident that its pro-state values resonate with its 2010 ‘core’ vote, it should feel particularly buoyed to see that swing voters are already close to Labour in their views on government.

Appendix I: The research

This research was based on nine hours of focus groups and a nationally representative survey carried out by YouGov in April 2012.⁵

The data analysed in this report is based on respondents being presented with five arguments for and five arguments against the idea of tax-funded public services in principle. The arguments were devised by the Fabian Society research team and were selected in order to represent the political philosophy of mainstream political parties in the UK. We also asked an additional question on levels of taxation and public spending. The quantitative results reported exclude those participants who answered 'don't know'.⁶

The focus groups took place in Carlisle, Gillingham and Peterborough. All groups saw voters of extreme parties filtered out and were weighted to include voters from the three main political parties. Carlisle participants were drawn from socio economic groups C2 and D⁷; Gillingham participants were drawn from socio economic groups B and C1 and Peterborough was a mix from across BC1C2D. Gender splits in the groups were half and half.

In reporting voting intention, we have used data on how participants voted in the 2010 election. At the halfway point in the parliamentary cycle, voting intentions fluctuate greatly and we felt that past voting provided a stronger indicator of party identification. Swing voters are defined as those who did not vote Labour in 2010 but are considering doing so now. This was a large group, making up almost a quarter of the survey sample.

Endnotes

- 1 In this research 'swing voters' are defined as people who did not vote Labour in 2010 but who would now consider voting for the party at the next election.
- 2 For further discussion see 'For the Public Good' (Fabian Society, 2012)
- 3 This view is possibly a result of the media obsession with reporting economic progress as measured by gross domestic product (GDP). Whilst GDP growth is higher in India and China, levels of poverty are much higher too. In addition, the coverage of public service provision as well as most measures of health and educational outcomes are much higher in the UK.
- 4 The Department of Work & Pensions estimates that, only 0.8% of all benefits spending were accounted for by fraud. A further 1.2% of spending was over spend as a result of customer or official error. The individual benefit with the highest rate of fraud was jobseekers allowance which had a fraud rate of 4.1%
- 5 The total sample size was 2050 adults. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).
- 6 Numbers answering 'don't know' for the arguments exercises never exceed 10% of the sample size and are on average closer to 6% on the pro arguments and 8% on the anti arguments.
- 7 ABC1 and C2DE refer to the National Readership Survey (NRS) social grades and these are taken to equate to middle class and working class respectively. Only around 2% of the UK population identifies as upper class, and this group is not included in the classification scheme. The NRS social grades are a system of demographic classification used in the United Kingdom

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NO RIGHT TURN |

BRITAIN'S ENDURING SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC SERVICES

Natan Doron
Andrew Harrop

Those of the left and right have long assumed that the people of Britain want the state to be smaller. But this report suggests that progressive advocates for the state and tax-funded public services have reason to be confident, as findings show voters of all parties uniting behind almost all of the arguments in favour of public services, with swing voters much closer to a Labour position.

The idea that we all depend on public services at different stages of our lives and that tax-funded public services are a way of caring for those less fortunate in our society were both popular. Themes of contribution, desert and the important role that public services play throughout everyone's life cycle were key themes.

The left should resist the urge to seek out a middle-way that cedes ground to the right on public service debates. Labour can be confident and bold in making pro-state arguments and can set out a collectivist case for maintaining high quality, tax-funded public services.