

The rise and fall of anti-welfare attitudes: what it means for welfare reform in 2024 and beyond

Campaign for Social Science event,

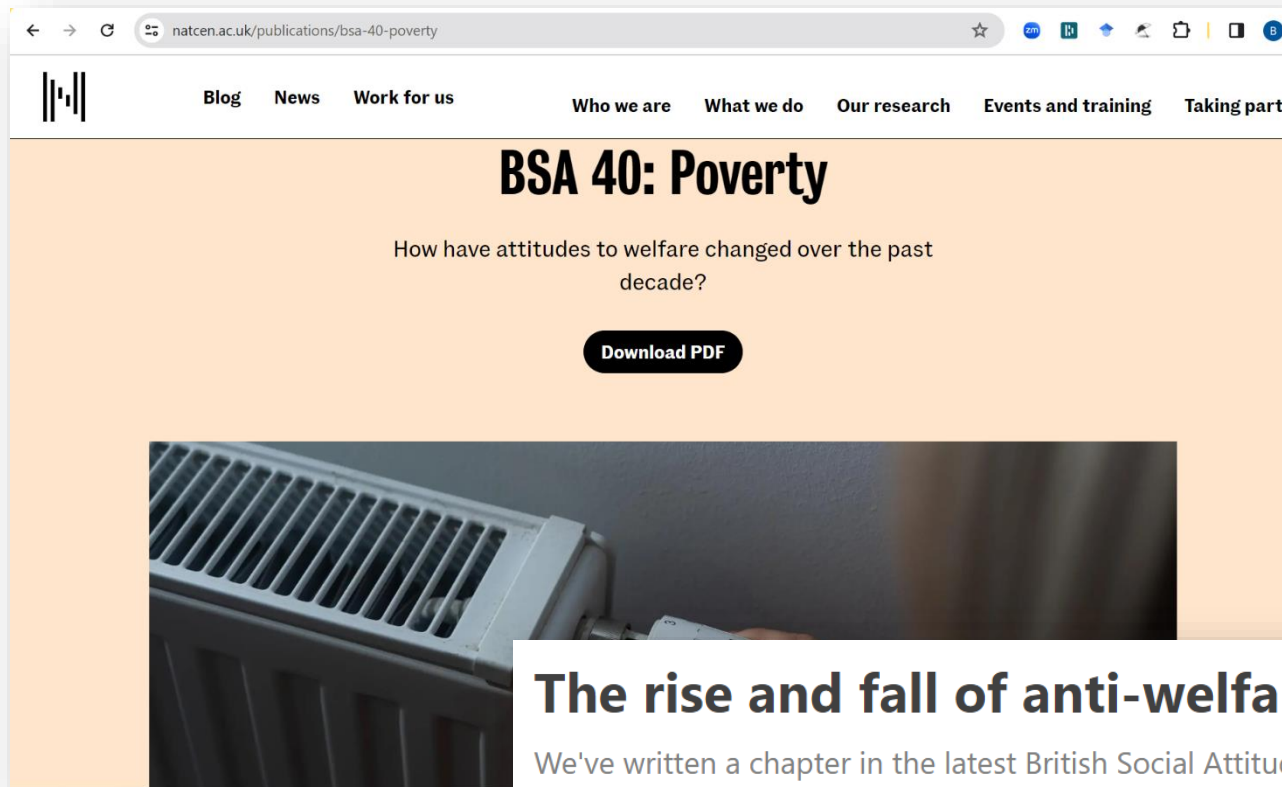
Online, 24th January 2024

Ben Baumberg Geiger

PART #1

The rise and fall of anti-welfare attitudes

A quick summary of BSA chapter with Rob de Vries, Tom O'Grady, & Kate Summers



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL natcen.ac.uk/publications/bsa-40-poverty. The website has a navigation menu with links for Blog, News, Work for us, Who we are, What we do, Our research, Events and training, and Taking part. The main content area features the title "BSA 40: Poverty" and the subtitle "How have attitudes to welfare changed over the past decade?". A "Download PDF" button is visible. Below the text is a photograph of a white radiator.

The rise and fall of anti-welfare attitudes

We've written a chapter in the latest British Social Attitudes report - you can find our summary and preferred PDF version on this page.

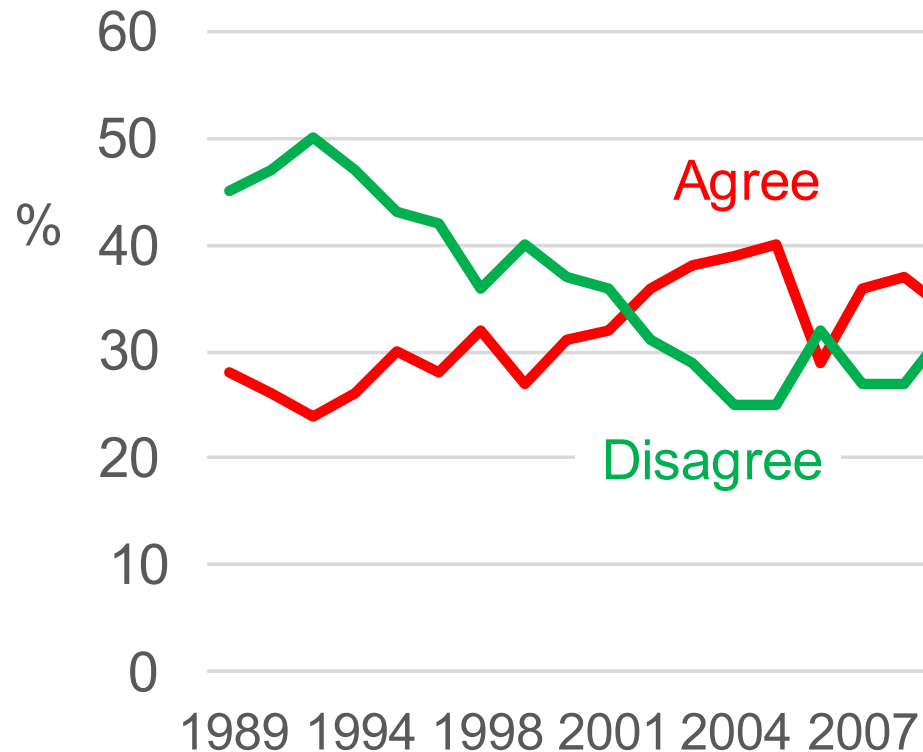


BEN GEIGER

JAN 24, 2024

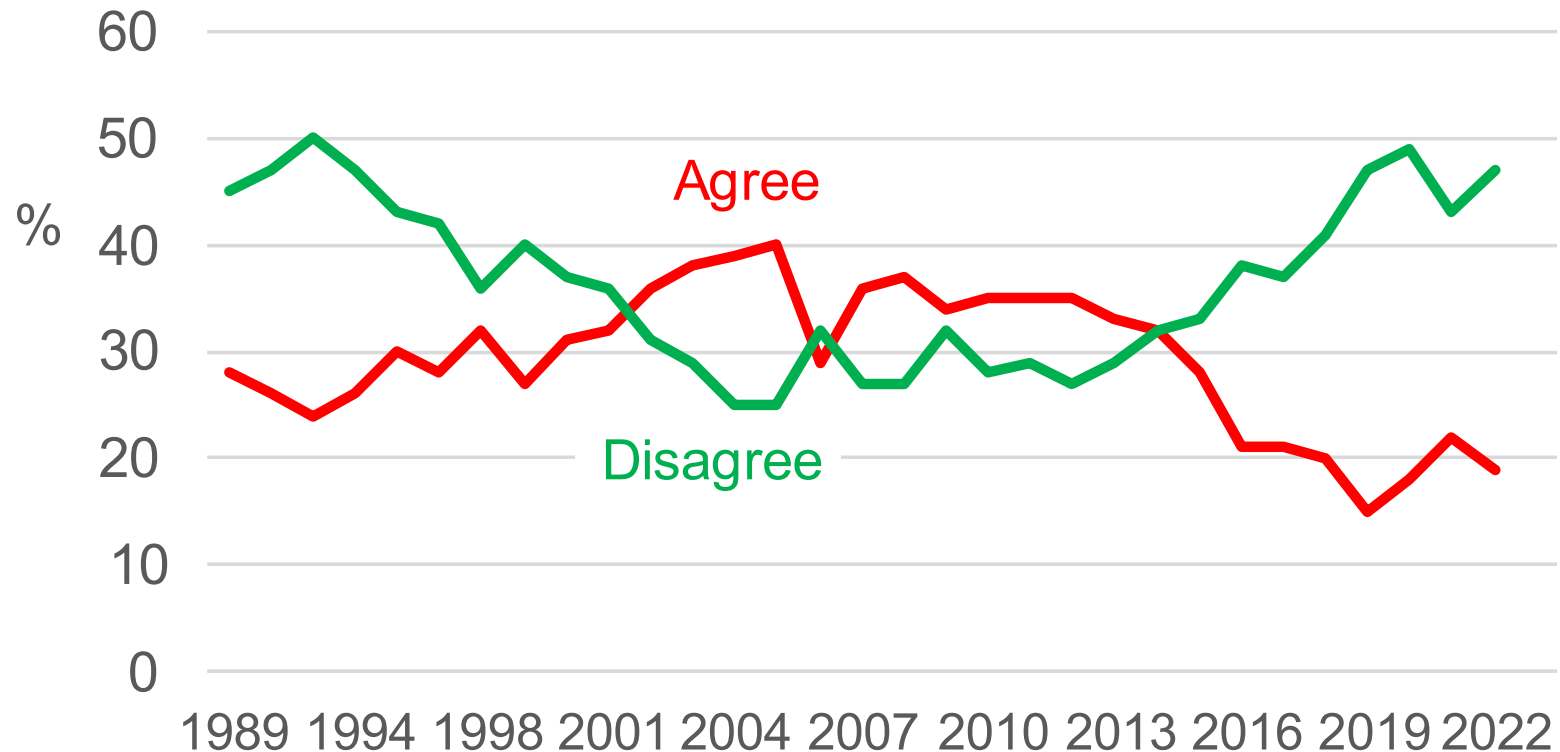
A sharp rise in anti-welfare attitudes in the late 1990s...

Agreement that many claimants don't really deserve any help, 1989-2022



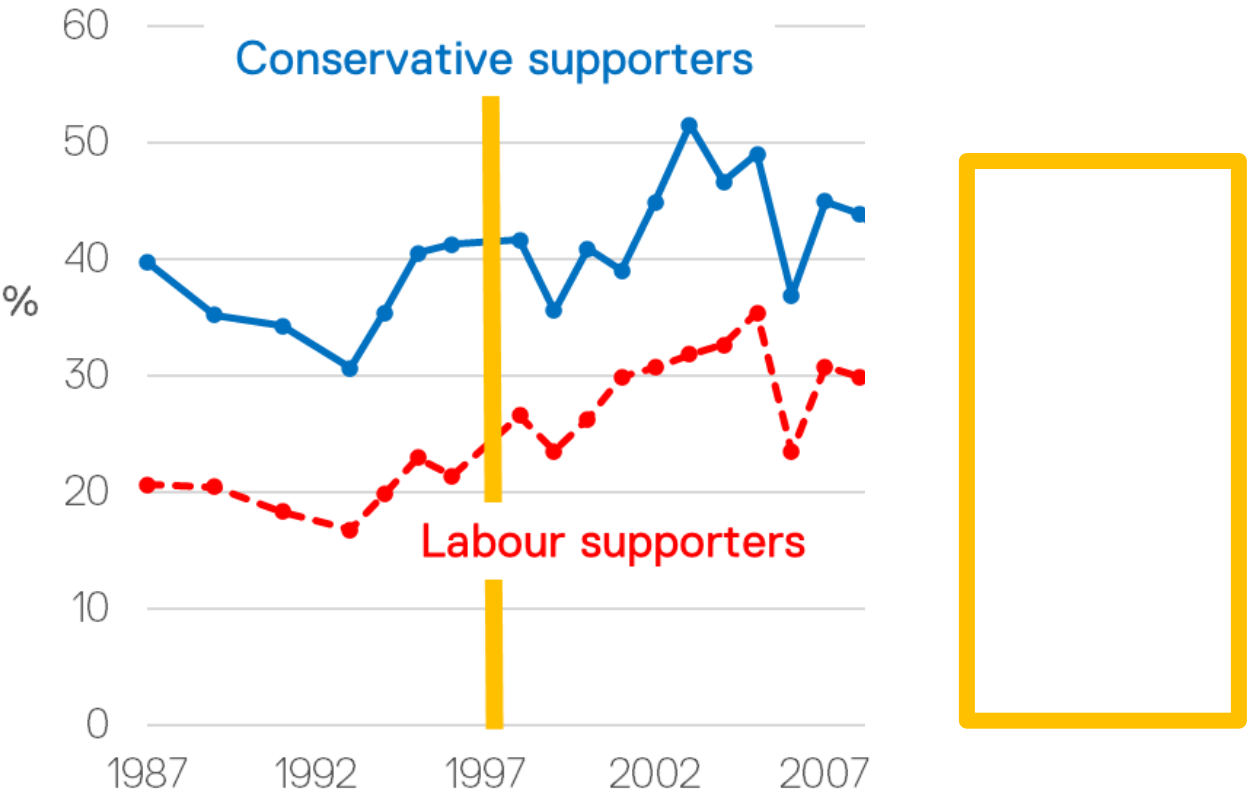
...but now some anti-welfare attitudes are at record lows

Agreement that many claimants don't really deserve any help, 1989-2022



Politics party explains the rise

Agreement that many claimants don't really deserve any help, 1987-2022



So how do we explain falling anti-welfare attitudes?

No smoking gun – not partisanship, not Covid-19 (de Vries, Geiger et al 2023), not poverty perceptions; *‘parallel publics’*.

Plausibly...

1. Less hostile politics / media, even in e.g. Daily Mail (see Tom O’Grady 2022)
2. Itself a response to austerity and welfare reform; a less plausible framing

PART #2

**Which leaves us
with a puzzle...**

At a time of falling anti-welfare attitudes, we see this:

The Telegraph
Sunak: I'll cut tax by curbing welfare



THE
SPECTATOR



Fraser Nelson

Yes, five million are on out-of-work benefits. Here's the proof

📅 27 November 2022, 2:22pm

THE  TIMES

Millions more will claim disability benefits as mental illness soars

Spending set to rise by £17bn a year by 2030

MailOnline

Disability benefits for anxiety and depression have risen 200-FOLD in a decade

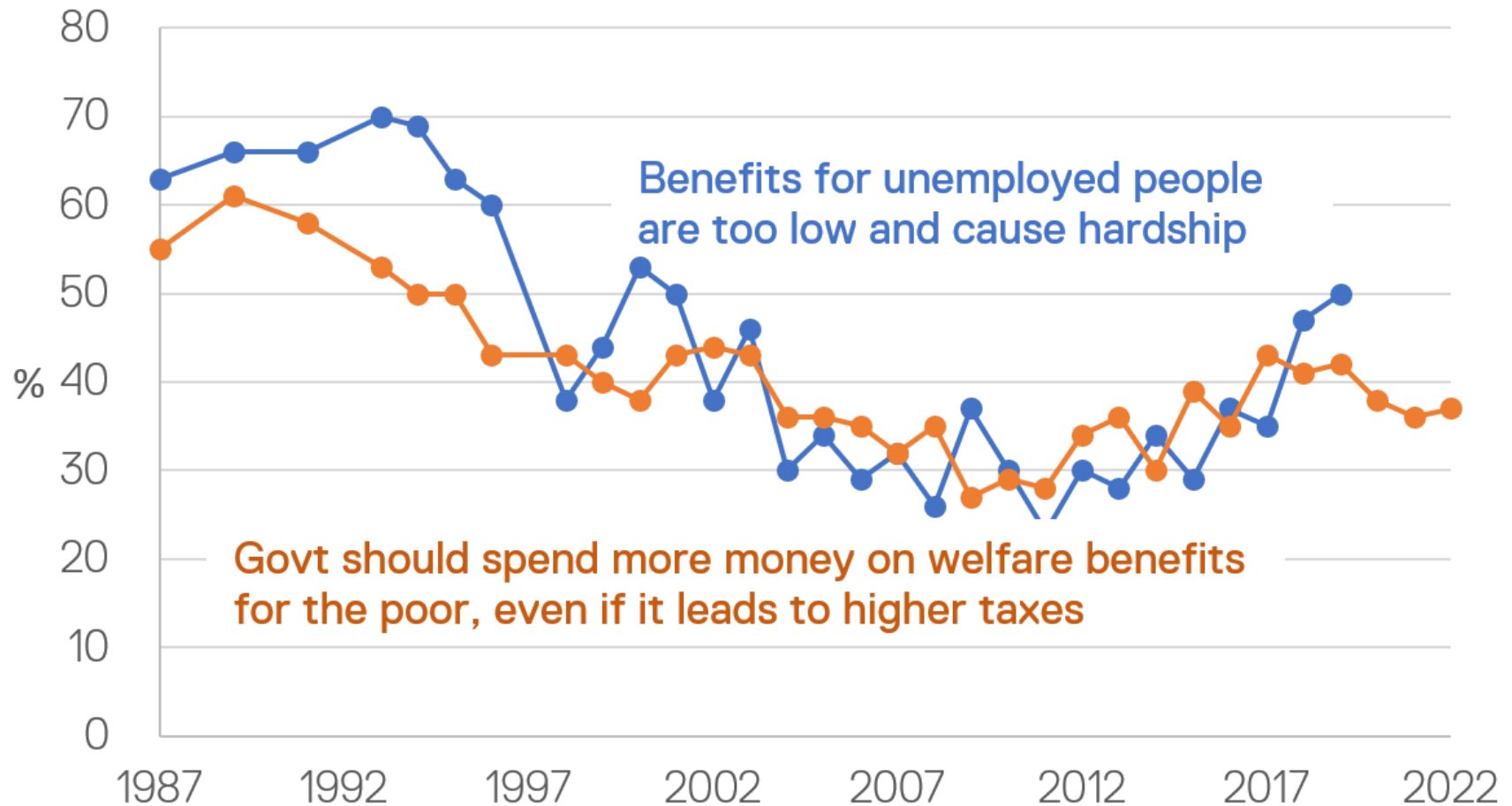
- Payments for the two mental health conditions now cost £1.6billion per year
- The personal independent payments figure stood at £7.5million in 2013

By EMILY STEARN, HEALTH REPORTER FOR MAILONLINE

PUBLISHED: 17:38, 8 January 2024 | UPDATED: 17:40, 8 January 2024

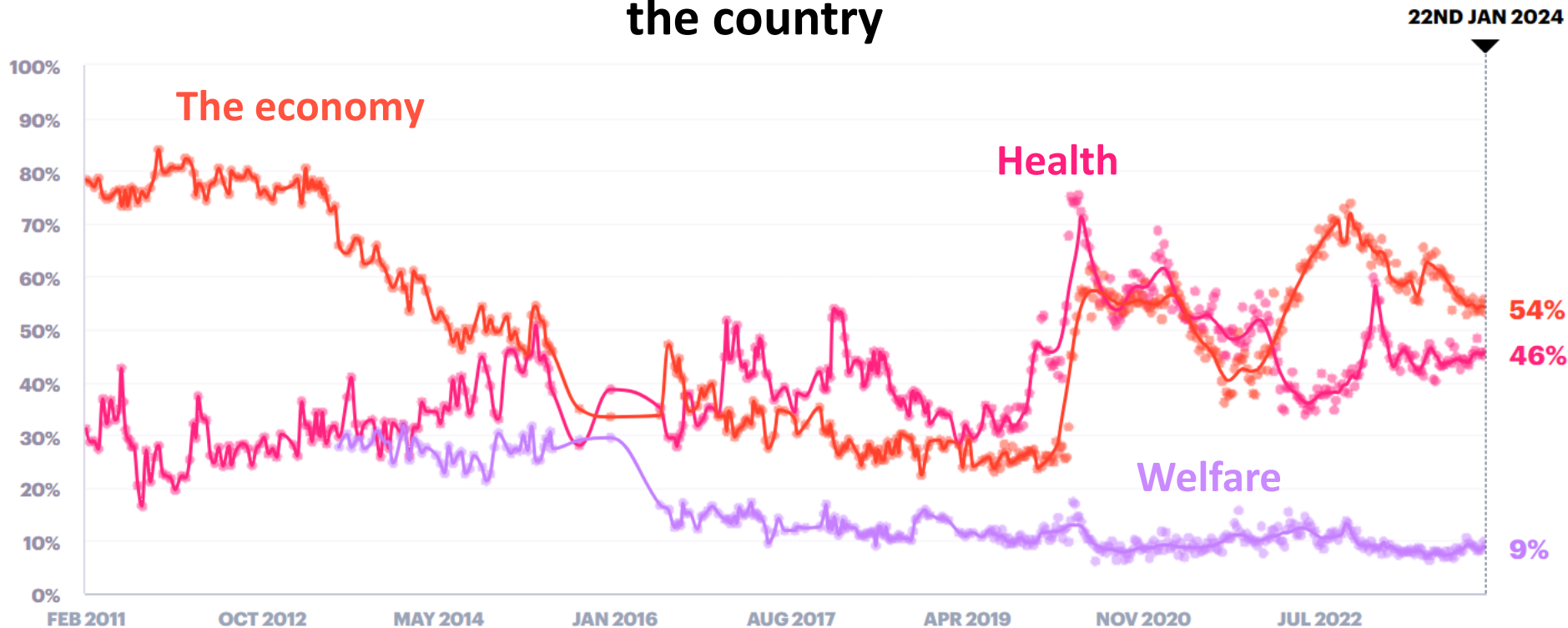
What's going on?
Some thoughts
for debate...

1. Attitudes are ambivalent and soft, not strongly pro-welfare



1. Attitudes are ambivalent and soft, not strongly pro-welfare

The most important issues facing the country



2. Welfare attitudes are more complex than 'pro' or 'anti'

Opposition to untargeted cuts in benefits:

- Liz Truss
- Autumn 2023 budget: raising benefits with inflation popular even among Tory voters

[[YouGov](https://www.yougov.com)]



But public support for specific cuts / harsher treatment

Harsher conditionality for l-t unemployed:
low policy impact, but widespread support

Curbing anxiety/depression claims

- Not always seen as 'deserving' ([Geiger 2021](#))
- No challenge
- But debatable framing (see Inequalities...)
- Delayed attitude shift? ([Geiger 2023](#))

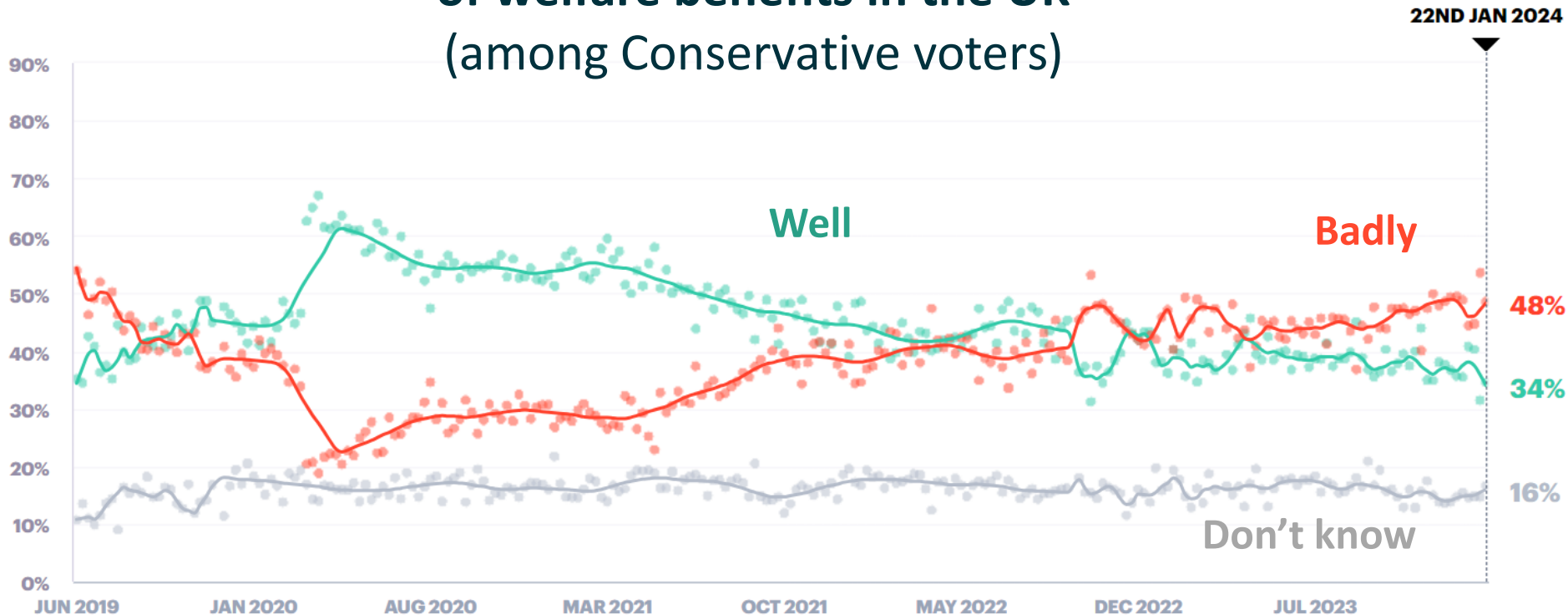
3. And obviously politics is about more than average attitudes...

Conservative attacks may appeal to both core vote & (divided) party, *'another arrow in the culture war quiver'*

Labour concentrating on avoiding risk, esp. spending commitments

No political payoff for Tory attacks (yet)...

How the government is handling the issue of welfare benefits in the UK (among Conservative voters)



What about Labour's policy if they win the 2024 election?

The challenges:

- Must address adequacy: a mutiny of Labour supporters if ignored
- But fiscal challenges that are much worse than Budget 2024 will show...
- Polling & issues both complex: disability benefits, two-child limit

What about Labour's policy if they win the 2024 election?

The opportunities:

- The need to persuade rather than follow narrow polls [[Sam Freedman](#)], cf. Beveridge
- Fertile ground for reform: most think welfare works badly [[YouGov](#)], relatively pro-welfare attitudes
- Radical reform could land well: not just adequacy but changed experiences

A short summary of what I've said today:

Anti-welfare attitudes have fallen, back to the level of the early 1990s

- So are Conservative attacks mistaken?
- Not necessarily: must understand complexity of welfare attitudes

If Labour win in 2024, face both challenges and opportunities on welfare

KING'S
College
LONDON



Centre for
Society and
Mental Health



ben.geiger@kcl.ac.uk



[@benbgeiger.bsky.social](https://benbgeiger.bsky.social) / ([@BenBaumberg](#))



<http://www.benbgeiger.com>



<https://inequalities.substack.com/>