

Political and Operational Influences on Attitudes towards the British NHS Over the Longue Durée

Chris Deeming (University of Strathclyde), John Curtice (University of Strathclyde)

This paper looks at how public attitudes towards the British NHS and healthcare have evolved in Britain over the course of the last forty years, focusing in particular on the role of party preference and operational effectiveness. We draw on the four decades of data collected annually by the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) since 1983. Each year BSA has interviewed a random probability sample of adults aged 18 or over, until the pandemic doing so face to face but since 2020 online. Throughout this period the survey has regularly collected data on levels of satisfaction with the NHS as a whole and with many of its specific services, on the potential sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and on how health care should be funded. It also has a wide range of demographic and political information that can be used to analyse the data. The paper focuses on two issues. First, how have the political and operational determinants of levels of satisfaction with the British healthcare system varied over time? In the case of political preference, one possibility is that voters who support the party that is currently in government are always likely to be more satisfied with the health service because people view the subject through a partisan lens. However, it may also be that, other things being equal, because of the Labour party's close association with the NHS, that Labour supporters are more likely to be satisfied with the service. Operationally, one of the areas where the NHS has sometimes been under pressure (as at present) and at times been relatively successful (as under the Labour government of 1997-2010) has been in respect of waiting times. The paper assesses the extent to which changes in levels of satisfaction with the NHS as a whole and with individual services are related to difficulties in securing access to care. Second, a key feature of the British NHS is that it is funded via taxation and is intended to be free at the point of use. But this model has sometimes been challenged. The paper assesses the extent to which the public have remained supportive of the current funding model, and how far this varies by party support and levels of satisfaction with the service. Meanwhile, a 'thermostatic' theory of public attitudes towards funding public services suggests that the level of support for increasing spending on the NHS should vary inversely with levels of satisfaction and waiting times, but may also, of course, also depend on party preference. The paper discusses the implications of these findings for the future of the British healthcare system as it attempts to recover from the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.