

# **The more things change...**



## **Government, the economy and public services since the 1970s**

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Analysis of long-term trends by the MORI  
Social Research Institute

October 2003

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# Executive Summary

## Overview

MORI has been asking the public their opinion of government, the economy and public services for over 30 years. This gives us a unique insight into what is changing, what is going in cycles and what is staying the same. This report brings together some of these key trends for the first time. It shows that:

- The economy remains a fundamental driver of views of government. This is not so much actual economic indicators or even economic optimism, but ratings of the competence of economic management. However, we need to be careful not to simplify the relationship, as ratings of economic management are likely to at least partly be determined by political sympathies;
- In any case, events of all sorts intervene in ratings of governments, and wars in particular still have a strong (positive or negative) effect;
- The Major Government provides a whole series of exceptions, achieving record levels of unpopularity in record time, and never recovering;
- The current Government did enjoy a longer and more notable honeymoon than we have seen in the recent past, but their popularity is now at a remarkably similar level to Mrs Thatcher's Government in the middle of its second term. The key question is whether they continue with their unusually steep decline in popularity, or lock on to the more usual, gradual decline experienced by Conservative governments in the 80s and 90s;
- The issues that most concern the public at the moment are public services - a very different situation from the 1970s and 1980s;
- While the government does seem to get credit for sound economic management, and the blame when things go wrong, the available data suggests the relationship between views of public services and views of government is weak. So even if the public does notice that services are delivering, it may not directly improve their views of the government;
- In general older people are less critical than younger people, and looking at long-term trends this seems likely to continue - after a certain age we seem to get happier with public services and life in general (or we expect less). In fact, there are hardly any fundamental shifts in views of government or public services between recent generations - with the most worrying exception being the more negative views towards the police among the current generation of young people.

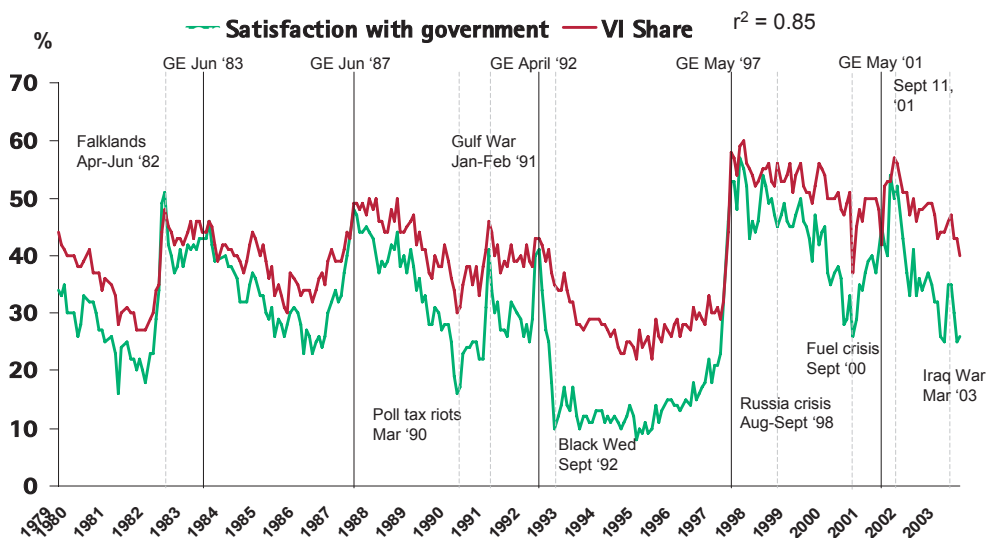
# We're going in cycles

The popularity of successive governments follows a very similar cycle, peaking shortly after elections and reaching its lowest ebb around three-quarters through their term.

However, each has its own patterns and characteristics, mainly due to key events, particularly economic disasters and wars. The Major Government of 1992-1997 provides the most striking example, where record levels of unpopularity seem to have been triggered by a whole series of events, including Mellor and sleaze, but particularly Black Wednesday. However, while economic optimism recovered quickly, the government never did. Further, despite these record low levels of satisfaction there remained a core of supporters that just could not be shifted, and voting share did not fall below a floor of between a quarter and a third of the vote.

The current government is seeing its own divergence from historic patterns. For example, voting share is higher than we would expect from current satisfaction levels - probably because of a lack of viable opposition. Perhaps more important in the long run, more now say the budget is good for the country rather than good for them personally - and the gap is growing. These have always tracked fairly closely, and it seems likely that people will increasingly ask to be shown what is in it for them.

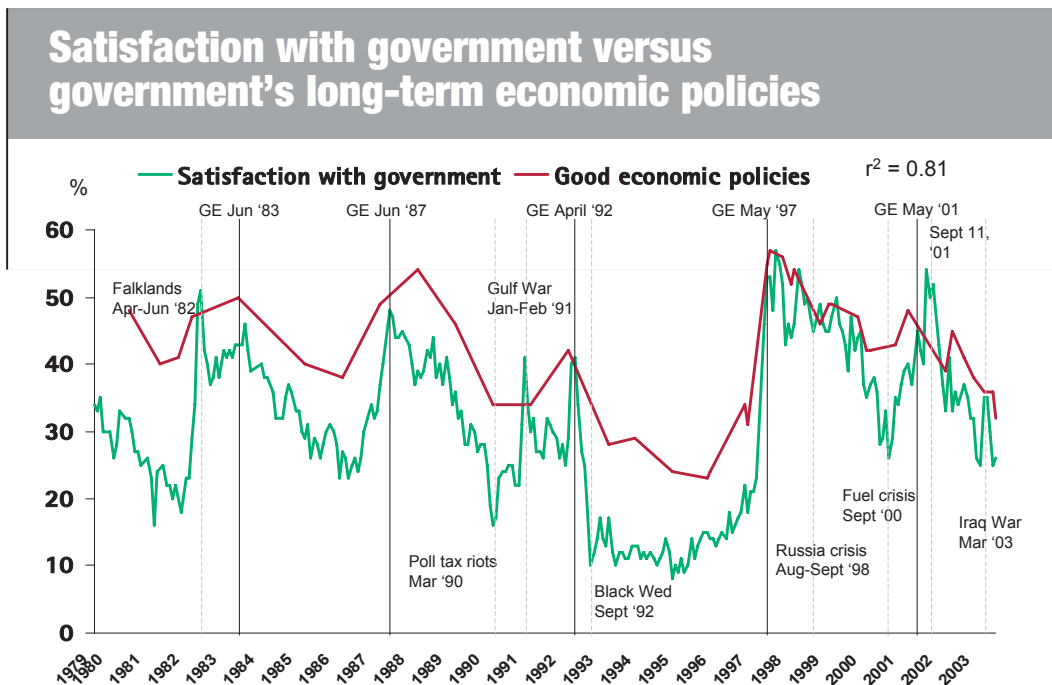
## Satisfaction with government versus Voting Intention share of ruling party



## It's the economy...

The central importance of economic management for governments that want to stay in power is well known - generally satisfaction with government, voting intention and views of economic competence track each other closely.

In fact, the very strength of the relationship suggests that, to some extent, they are measuring a very similar attitude - that is, an overall mood about the government and the direction the country is going. There will be a two-way relationship between these, with political sympathies affecting the way you view a government's economic policies, and vice versa. Nonetheless, economic competence (particularly relative to your main opposition) should be a central concern of any government.



However, the link between views of government, economic optimism and key economic indicators is not so straightforward. Indeed general economic optimism is a fairly erratic measure that does not seem to track key economic indicators but is greatly affected by individual events. As we have found when examining the level of trust placed in public services<sup>1</sup>, it is likely that indirect experiences (discussing the economy with family and friends, stories in the media) will have a particularly important impact on people's economic optimism<sup>2</sup>.

## Events, dear boy

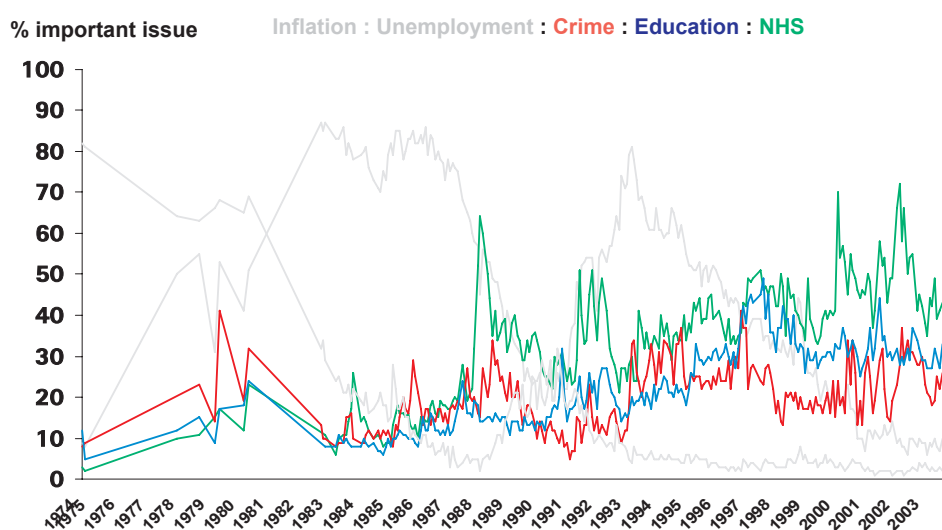
Wars do have a significant positive effect on satisfaction with the government in the short-term, as the country rallies against an external enemy. This declines rapidly, but there is some evidence of a longer-term residual positive effect - although this is of course difficult to disentangle from the impact of other events. In any case, the 2003 Iraq War provides an exception, with the "Baghdad Bounce" in fact being only a slight blip, and the downward trend in popularity continuing almost immediately after.

Of course, it is not just wars that have an impact. Black Wednesday, the poll tax riots, the fuel crisis, and September 11th are all events that have pulled ratings of government away from the 'natural' cycle.

# The rise of public services

When we asked what are the most important issues facing Britain, throughout the 1970s and much of the 1980s and early 1990s it was always economic issues that came out on top - particularly unemployment and inflation. Now it is the NHS, education and crime/policing that we see as most pressing. This will no doubt reflect a real feeling of long-term decline in the quality of these services and that the economy is relatively stable and less of a concern. However, there is also evidence of how successful political parties have been at changing our focus. Education is the most obvious example, with concern growing steeply in the run-up to the 1997 election, where it was a key focus, and then falling away sharply afterwards, before any real improvements could have fed through.

## Most important issues - rise of public services



## But does the quality of services affect views of government?

Our data provide no evidence of a significant link between views of two key public services (the police and NHS) and views of government or voting intention. This could be worrying for the current government - improving public services is clearly a major focus but they may not get credit for any rise in service ratings. However, we need to be careful not to oversimplify this. First, improving perceptions of the NHS will and should remain a key focus for government in its own right. But also, while there is no apparent linear relationship, this does not rule out views of key services as one of many important factors that have some influence on general outlook and overall feelings towards government. There is still a real need to understand more fully the mechanisms by which individual ratings influence overall views - something we plan to return to.

# Things get better as we get older

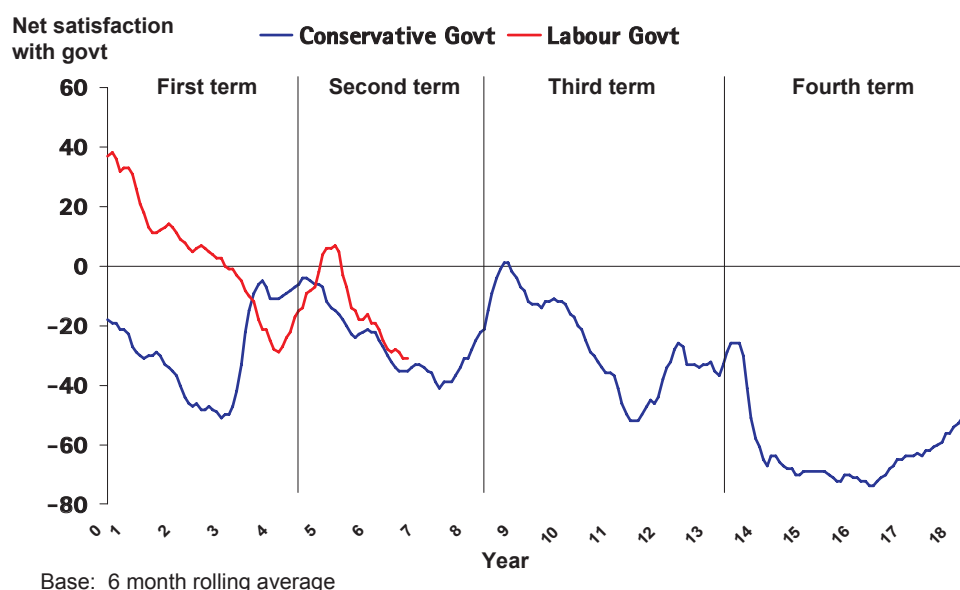
We have trends over a long enough period to start to look at different cohorts as they pass through individual age bands. This allows us to assess whether there is a cohort effect, or whether patterns we observe now, such as older people being more satisfied with services, are going to continue in the future. Generally it seems that we do just get happier, or probably more to the point our expectations fall, as we get older. This is important to know because, for example, it suggests that there is not a grateful post-war generation that is just going to fall away to leave a more demanding "grey baby-boomer" population - although the real test of this will come over the next ten years. Indeed, given that views soften as people get older, and there is going to be an increase in the proportion of the population from older groups, higher satisfaction levels could be seen.

But in any case, there are two important (and worrying) shifts suggested by the fairly limited data available - less positive views among the current generation of younger people about police, and less positive views of the NHS among higher social classes.

## Next steps

The underlying message from this research appears to be that while there are some rules of thumb that do apply to the political cycle, and to people's perception of government (for example, mid-term blues, the importance of economic competence), these are only 'default' settings, and can be overridden by events. Nevertheless, the next step for our research is to pick up on these hypotheses to see whether we can build any predictive models for the future direction of public opinion. Is it possible to say with any certainty how key indicators will change in the next few years, and if so is the relationship with views of government stable enough for them to be used in predictions of government popularity?

### The electoral cycle



A brief taster of this work is given above. Working with our partners MORI Market Dynamics (experts in developing market modelling and forecasting systems), we have produced a six-month rolling average for satisfaction in government, to smooth out some of the jumps, and overlaid the experience of the Conservatives between 1979 - 1997 with the New Labour Government. Despite the fact that New Labour began in a much stronger position, the similarities are striking - particularly the way that both parties are in almost exactly the same position halfway through their second term in government. The key question for the current government is whether they will continue on this steep descent or now lock on to a more gradual decline in popularity.

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Bobby Duffy  
Gideon Skinner



# Satisfaction with the Government

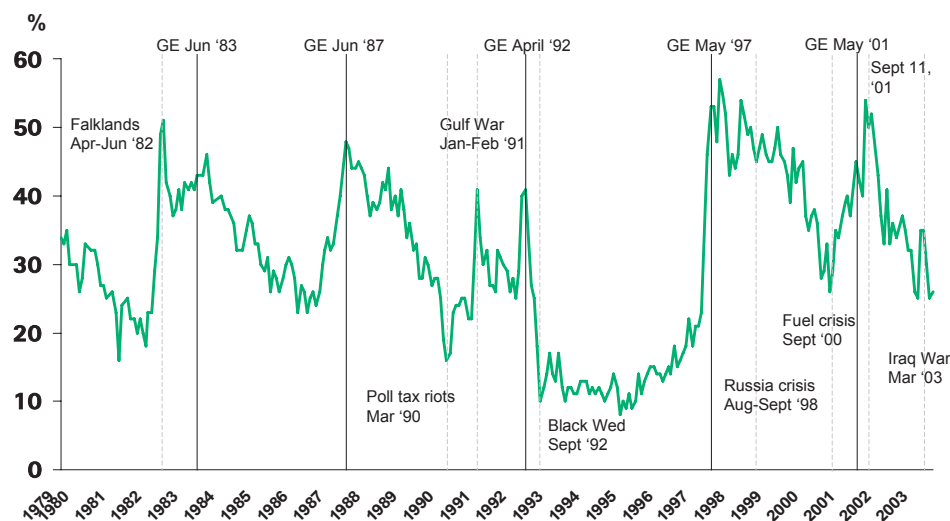
Political cycles in popularity are well documented, and in many ways MORI data confirms the remarkable similarity in the patterns experienced by successive governments. Satisfaction with the government peaks immediately after they are elected, then falls to its lowest level roughly two-thirds to three-quarters of the way through the term, as the chart below shows. Ratings begin to rise again in the run-up to the new election, no doubt as the government of the time makes its case vigorously, and the alternatives come under closer scrutiny.

The most notable exception to this in the last twenty-odd years is the Major Government of 1992-1997. This stands out as suffering an almost immediate plummet in perceptions that they never recovered from. Tony Blair did benefit from a long honeymoon, but this was not that far out of line with governments in the eighties. In fact, the current government started this latest cycle with levels of satisfaction significantly below their first term average (until September 11th caused a temporary rise), and have slipped into mid-term blues rapidly.

The deepest troughs in satisfaction are not surprisingly often associated with notable events but it seems possible to split these into two distinct categories:

- disastrous events, that governments do not recover from (such as Black Wednesday);
- damaging events, that reinforce a fall in popularity and seem to set a new lower "norm" for that government - but which are survivable (for example, the September 2000 fuel crisis).

## Satisfaction with Government



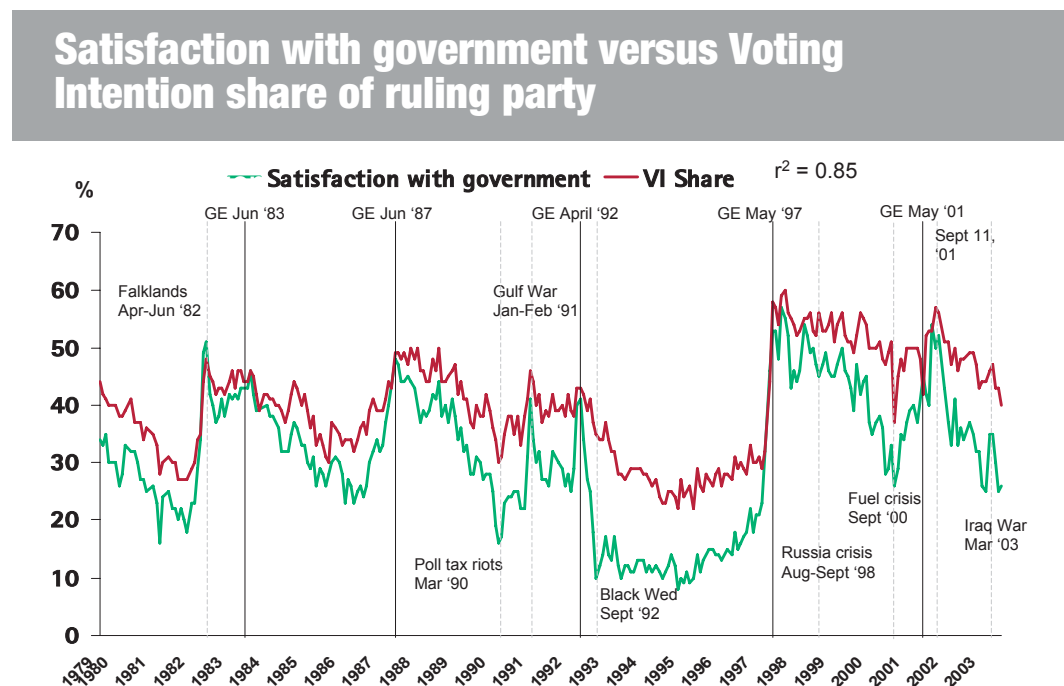
Base: All respondents (c1,000)

War, on the other hand, seems to bring increased popularity. It is clearly not possible to assign cause and effect in these complex situations where a number of factors are all impacting on views - but it seems that while the peaks in satisfaction are not long-lasting, they can serve to restore governments to a higher norm level, as is seen with both the Falklands war and the Gulf war.

For the current Labour Government, elected in May 2001, there was a sharp rise in popularity after the September 11th terrorist attacks, but since then satisfaction has fallen very rapidly. The "Baghdad Bounce" has been nothing like the positive boost seen with previous wars, no doubt because of the very high levels of opposition to it.

As we would expect, the ruling party's share of the vote closely follows satisfaction with the government, as seen in the chart below. But again the Major government of 1992 stands out as something of an exception. Here the government was significantly less popular than the Conservative share of the vote suggested. This is likely to be because there is a core of party supporters that will never desert, just about no matter what you do. The Major government tested this severely, but the view that each of the main parties has a natural vote of around 30% seems to hold.

We may be seeing the start of a second gap between voting and satisfaction with the current government. It is too early to say, but in any case here the share of the vote is much higher than their "core" supporters, and is more likely to be due to the lack of a viable opposition; other MORI analysis shows that the current Labour vote is much "softer" than the Conservative vote.



We can use a statistical formula to work out the correlation between two variables. This is expressed as the r-squared figure ( $r^2$ ) in the top-right hand corner of the graph. If we plot voting intention against satisfaction with government, we would expect to find a general pattern, where one tends to increase as the other increases (i.e. a positive correlation). Correlation is a useful way of seeing how closely the responses to one variable or question match another, and summarising the strength of the relationship in a single figure. The higher the absolute value of the correlation the greater the strength of the relationship, with a correlation of 1 being a perfect relationship.

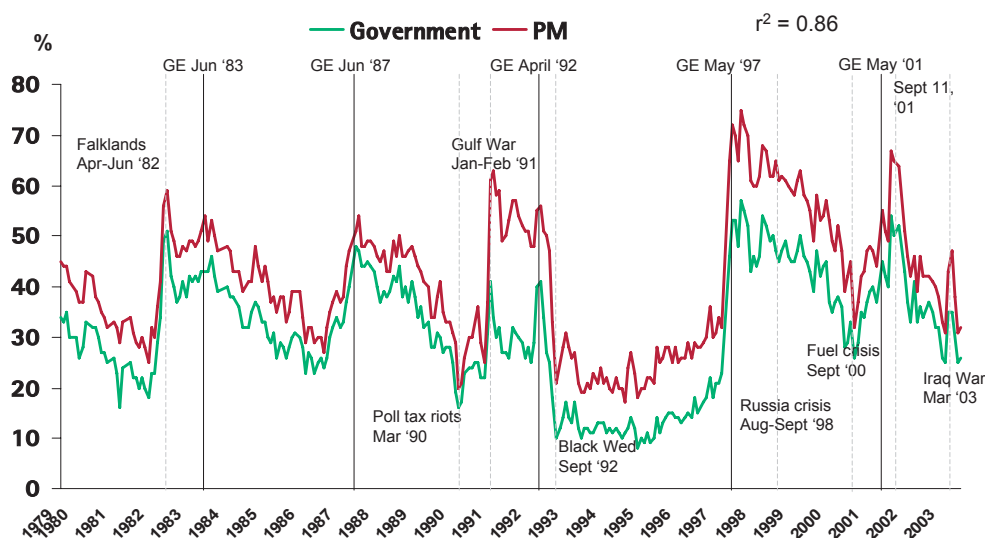
Looking at the figures for satisfaction with government and voting intention, we notice a very strong correlation, with  $r^2=0.85$ , suggesting that these two variables are almost (but not quite) measuring the same construct<sup>3</sup>.

# Satisfaction with Government Leaders

## Satisfaction with the Prime Minister

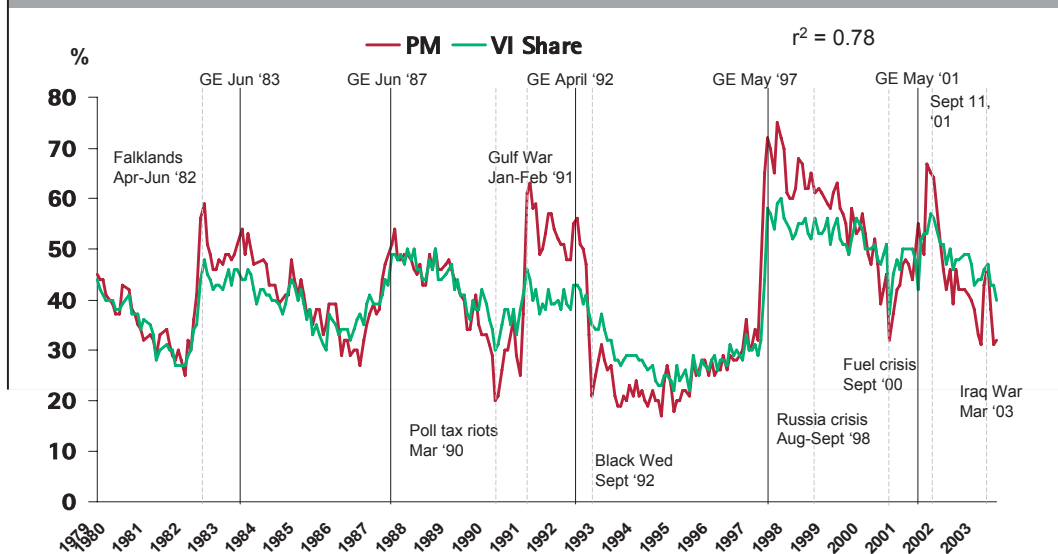
As would be expected, satisfaction with the Prime Minister of the day closely follows satisfaction with the Government. Generally, people are more satisfied with the Prime Minister than with the Government (indicating that a PM does not act as a "lightning rod" for public discontent, in fact they are likely to have a stronger image - other research tells us that people trust individuals more than institutions). This was most obvious in the first John Major Government, after he was appointed Prime Minister as the Gulf War started (though this continued after 1992), and in Tony Blair's honeymoon period - though now his ratings are very similar to those of the Government.

### Satisfaction with government and Prime Minister

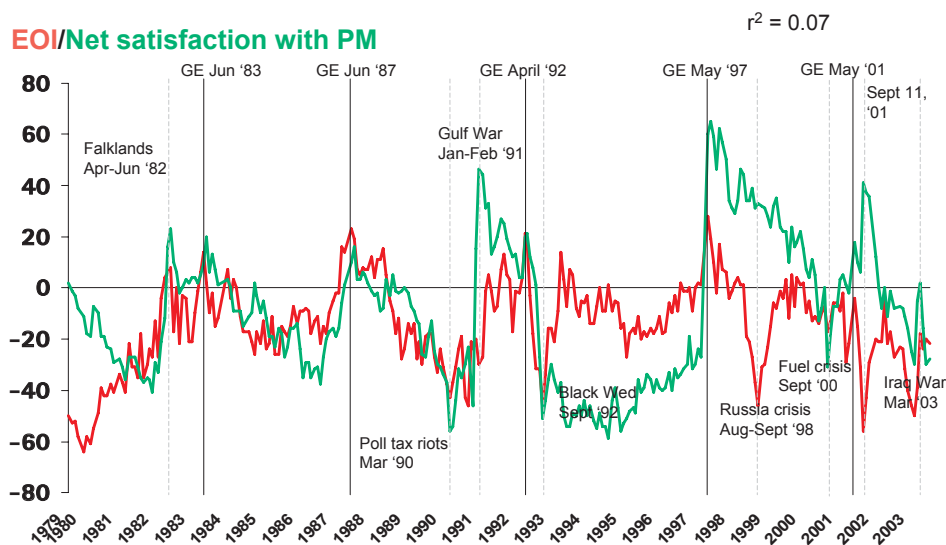


Similarly, satisfaction with the Prime Minister closely follows the governing party's share of the vote, and the connection (and areas of divergence) between satisfaction with the PM and economic optimism is similar to that for satisfaction with the Government and economic optimism (with the exception of John Major's first term, when his ratings were above those of the Government and economic optimism). As discussed in more detail in the next section, there is a much stronger statistical correlation between satisfaction with the PM and satisfaction with the government and VI, than there is between satisfaction with the PM and economic optimism.

## Satisfaction with Prime Minister versus Voting Intention share of ruling party



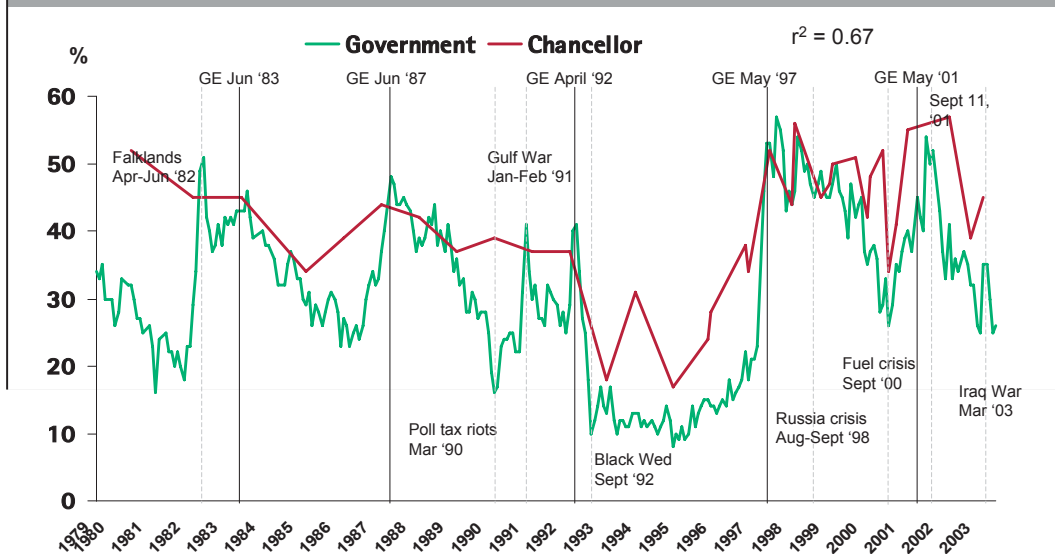
## Economic Optimism versus satisfaction with Prime Minister



## Satisfaction with the Chancellor and the Budget

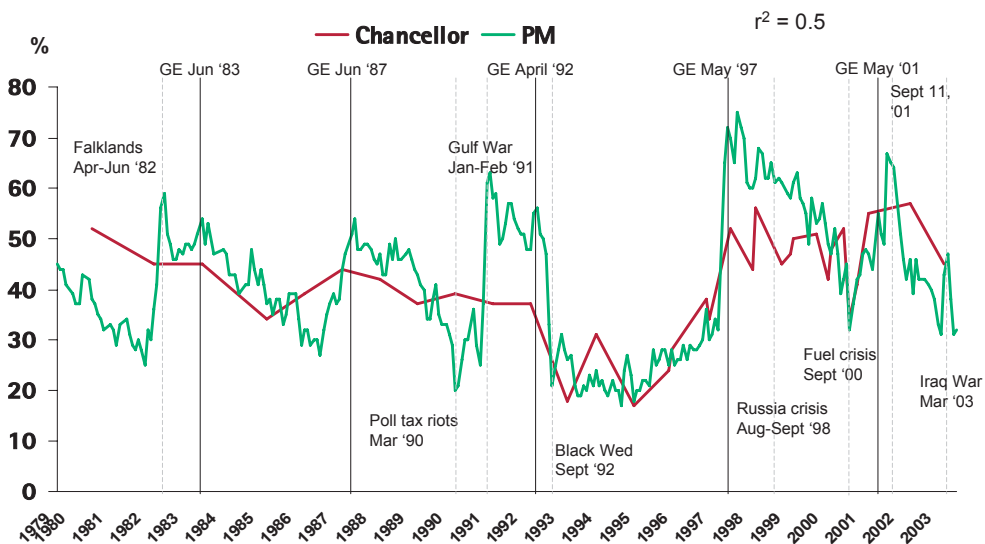
Satisfaction with the Chancellor of the Exchequer follows the same pattern as satisfaction with the government as a whole (although note there are fewer data points in these trends, as these questions tend to be asked less frequently). The biggest exception is Kenneth Clarke from 1993-1997, who was consistently better viewed than the government - although there were some notable fluctuations around different budgets.

## Satisfaction with government and Chancellor



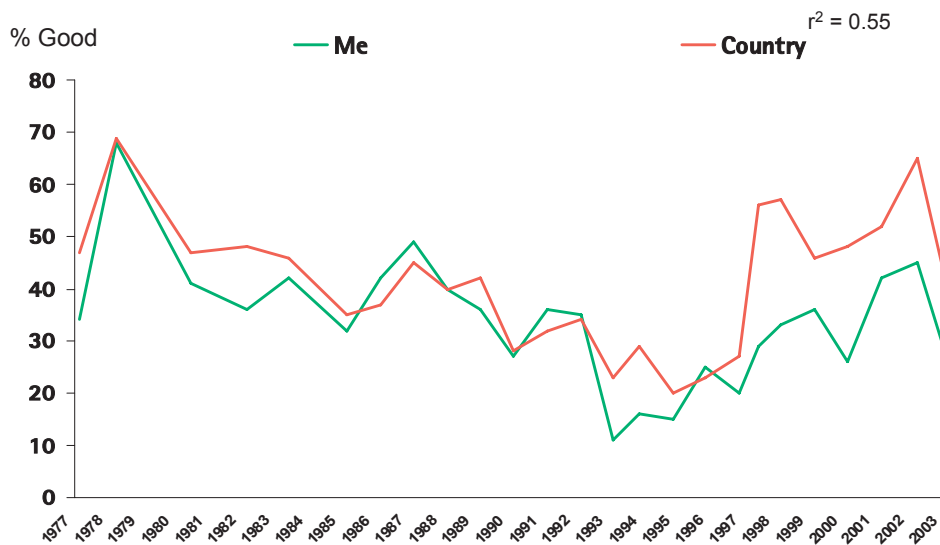
Satisfaction with the Chancellor also follows a similar path to satisfaction with the Prime Minister. Again there are two obvious exceptions; John Major was consistently better regarded than Norman Lamont, as was Tony Blair over Gordon Brown when New Labour was first elected - though now this has, if anything, reversed.

## Satisfaction with Prime Minister and Chancellor



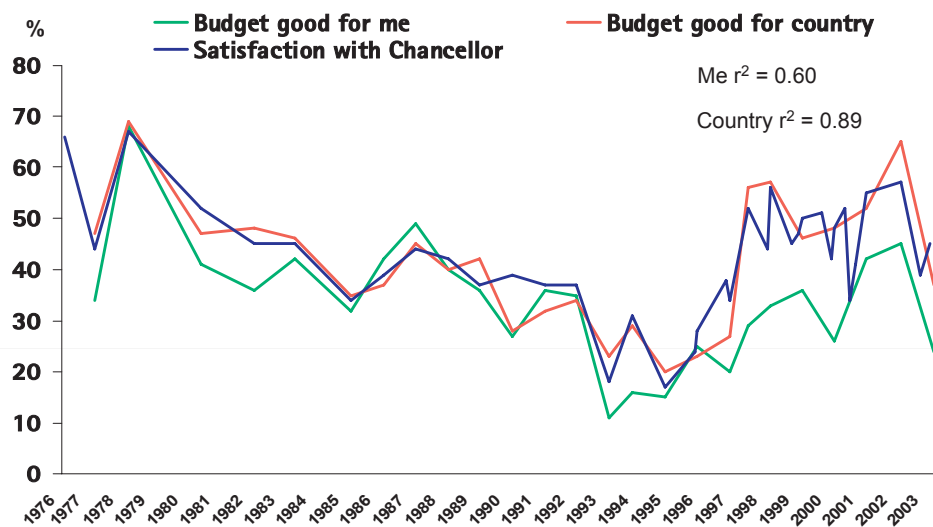
Between 1976 and 1997, people made similar assessments of the Budget's implications for them and for the country as a whole, perhaps being slightly more optimistic about the impact on the country than on them personally. Since 1997, though, this difference has become much more pronounced, with more people saying the Budget will be good for the country than saying it will be good for them. People have clearly noticed increased taxes, and expect that this will be going to benefit public services generally, and therefore the country as a whole. Again this divergence of views is likely to be no problem in the short-term - particularly when the economy in general is still relatively strong. However, it seems unlikely that there has been a fundamental shift in views, and people may become less forgiving the longer it goes before they see what is in it for them.

## Budget good for you/country



Unsurprisingly, attitudes towards the Chancellor of the day are closely linked to assessments of the Budget he produces, as is seen in the chart below. However, in Gordon Brown's tenure, satisfaction with the Chancellor tracks people's assessment of the impact the Budget will have on the country as a whole, rather than on them personally (reflected in the higher r-squared figure linking satisfaction with the Chancellor and ratings for "Budget good for the country"). This is no doubt because of the higher tax/public spending approach of recent budgets - and, again, the question is whether more selfish concerns will come to the fore in time.

## Views on Budget and Chancellor



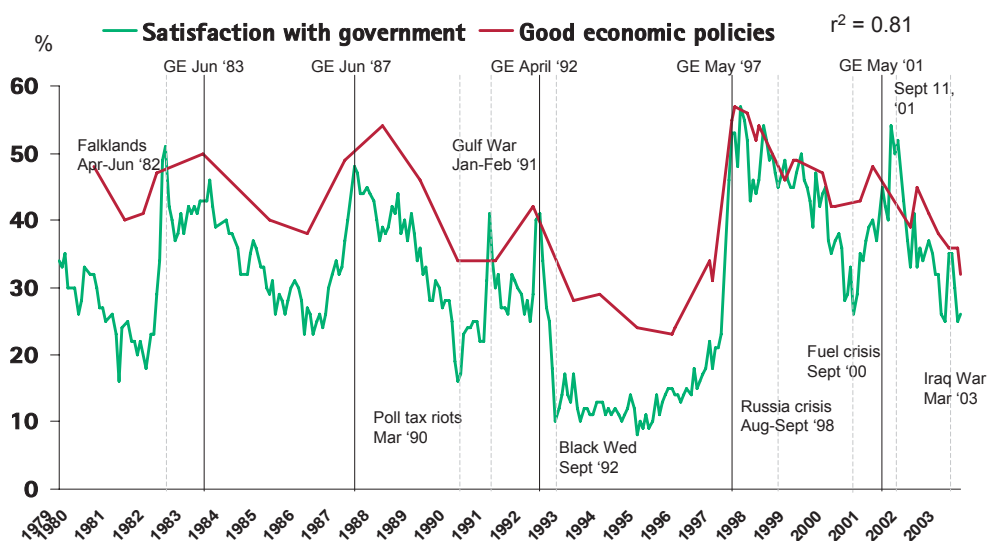
# The Importance of the Economy

Bill Clinton ran against George Bush Snr with the famously catchy slogan "It's the economy, stupid". This has been used (and abused) since - and while there does seem to be a significant amount of truth in it, it is less straightforward than implied. In particular, views on the government's economic management appear to be central, but optimism about the economy in general is not, and links between perceptions and actual economic measures are weak.

## Views of government and long-term economic policies

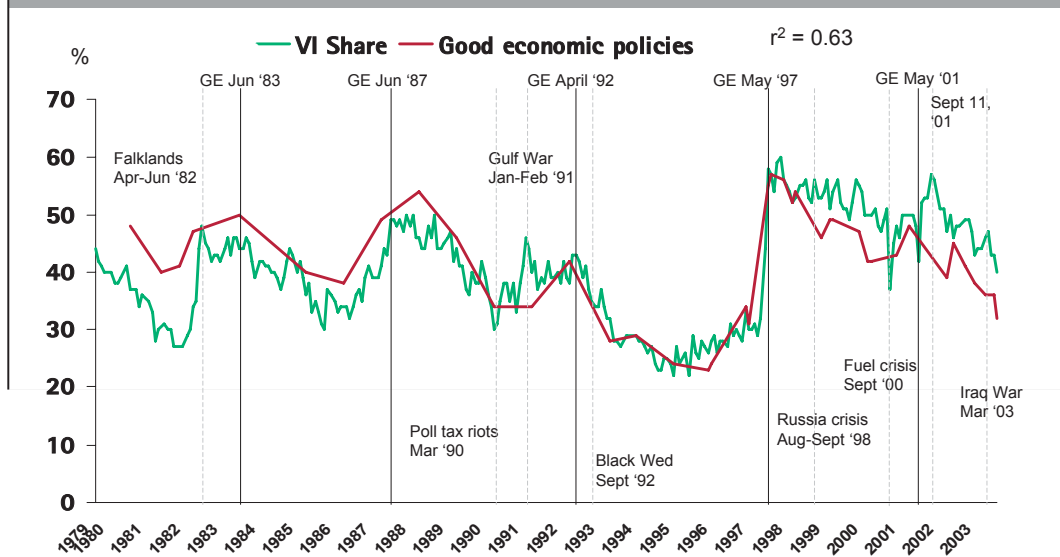
There does seem to be a very strong link between ratings of government (and voting intention), and attitudes towards that government's long-term economic policies. Since 1980, MORI has been asking the public the following question about the government's economic competence: "Do you agree or disagree that, in the long-term, this government's policies will improve the state of the British economy?". As the two charts below demonstrate, people's views towards the long-term impact of that government's economic policies closely follow their overall satisfaction with the government, and the voting intention share of the ruling party (with correspondingly high correlations).

### Satisfaction with government versus government's long-term economic policies





## Voting Intention share of ruling party vs ratings of their long-term economic policies



In fact, the very strength of the relationship implies that, to some extent, they may be measuring a very similar aspect - that is, an overall positive or negative mood towards the government and the direction the country is moving. There will be a two-way relationship between these, with political sympathies for a government affecting the way you view their economic policies, and vice versa. Nonetheless, this data does suggest that proving your economic competence (particularly relative to your main opposition) should be a central concern of any government<sup>4</sup>.

Up to 1997, more people thought that the government's economic policies will be good for the British economy in the long-term than were satisfied with the government itself. We see this particularly in the first few years of Mrs Thatcher's government (and perhaps recognised in her theory that, "Economics is the method. The object is to change heart and soul."), and immediately after Black Wednesday. Since 1997, however, ratings of the government and its long-term economic policies have been much the same - and voting intention share has actually been above the level we would predict. This is worth Labour keeping an eye on, as it suggests that while views of their economic competence are way ahead of the current (weak) Conservative opposition, economic management is still not the relative strength it was for the Thatcher governments - and it could still be the factor to end their success.

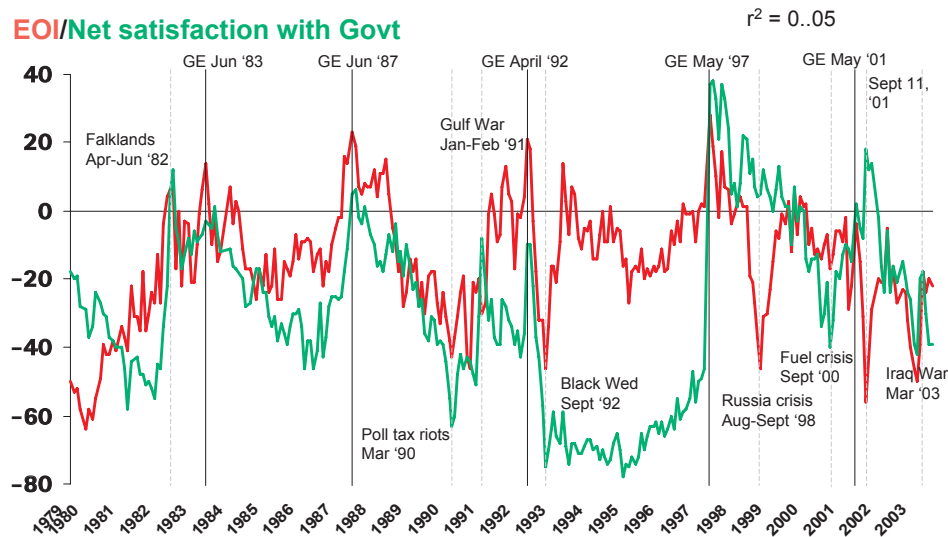
# Economic optimism and views of government

There is nothing like the same strength of relationship between views of government and optimism about the economy as a whole - though there are still some broad similarities, as shown in the chart below. This shows that the MORI Economic Optimism Index (EOI), which asks people whether the economy will improve or get worse over the next 12 months, tends to peak directly after an election, as with satisfaction with government, but that it is much more erratic and affected by events.

For example, Black Wednesday had an extremely damaging effect on both the government and economic optimism - but while people gradually became more optimistic about prospects for the economy, the government never recovered. On the other hand, while the economic crisis in Russia and Asia in summer 1998 appears to have caused a great deal of concern about the impact on the economy, the government came out relatively unscathed. This is likely to be because it was an external event to blame that was not attributed directly to the government, and partly because New Labour was still in its honeymoon period.

September 11th is one of those rare events that have opposite effects on economic optimism and ratings of the government. The nation pulled behind the government, but became much more pessimistic about the future of the British economy. However, this divergence did not last long. Other periods of conflict - the Falklands, Gulf War and Iraq War - do not appear to have long-term negative effects on the EOI, and sometimes see a rise in line with the popularity of the government.

## Economic Optimism versus satisfaction with government



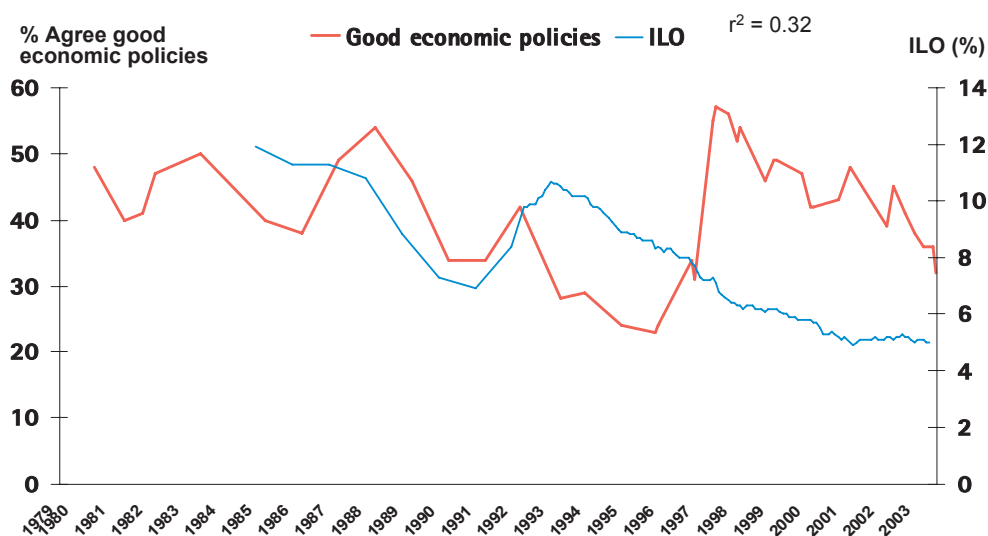
# Real economic indicators

So are there any key economic indicators that people are looking to when forming decisions about either the economic management skills of a government, or their level of optimism for the economy? The simple answer appears to be no, as the four charts below comparing views of economic management and optimism against unemployment rates and inflation seem to show.

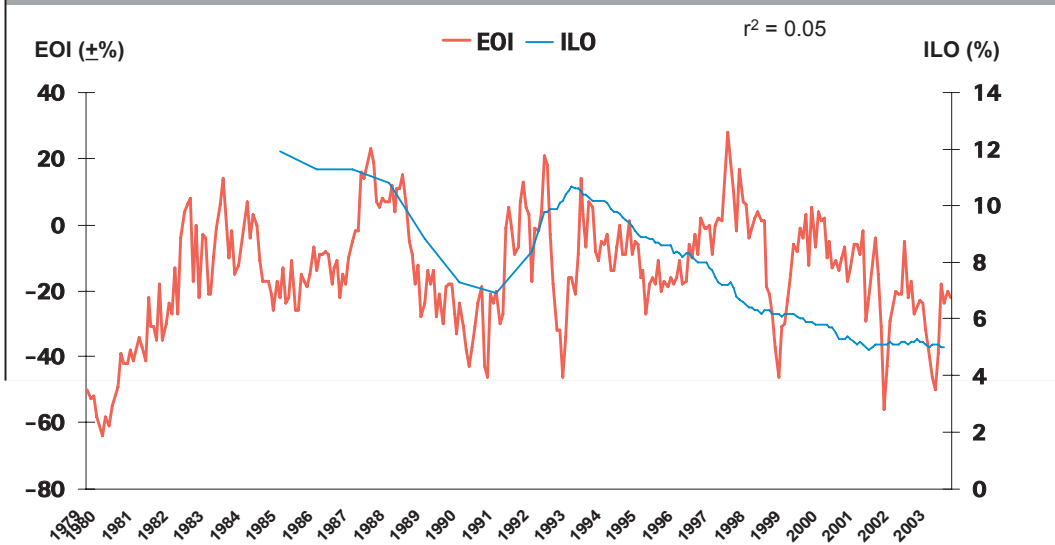
Again this lack of relationship is quite understandable. Firstly, as noted, we would imagine that views about economic competence are to an extent synonymous with views of the government (and could be largely determined by existing political sympathies). Secondly, economic optimism is an erratic measure, highly influenced by events, and discussion of their impact in the media - given the difficulty economists have with predicting future economic conditions it is no surprise that the general public are also uncertain.

We also need to take into account the reference periods people have in mind when answering these type of questions. While rating of government and voting intention are current, economic optimism specifically relates to the next 12 months, and views of economic management are "long-term". We will be looking more closely at issues of time-lags in relationships in future work, where we will attempt to model the drivers of government popularity.

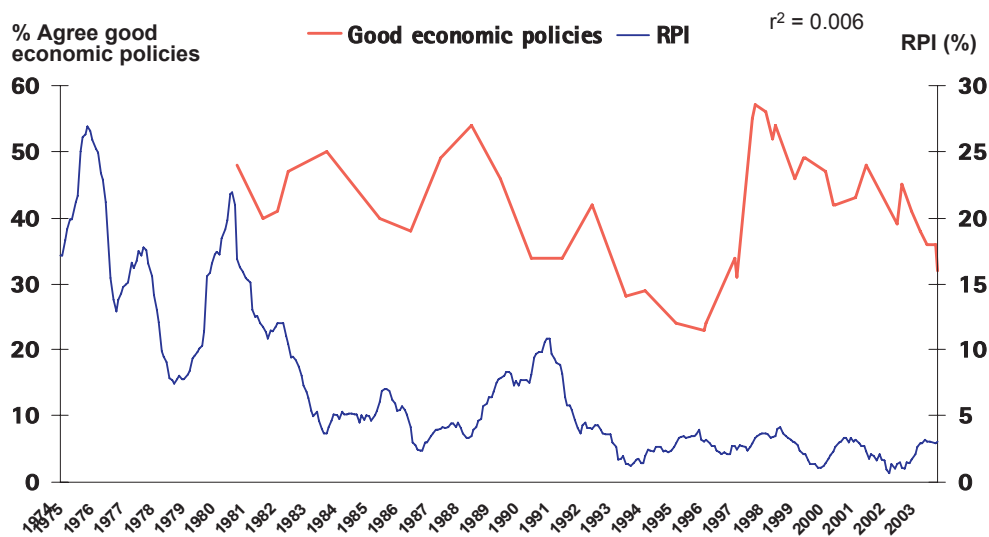
## Government's long-term economic policies versus ILO unemployment rate



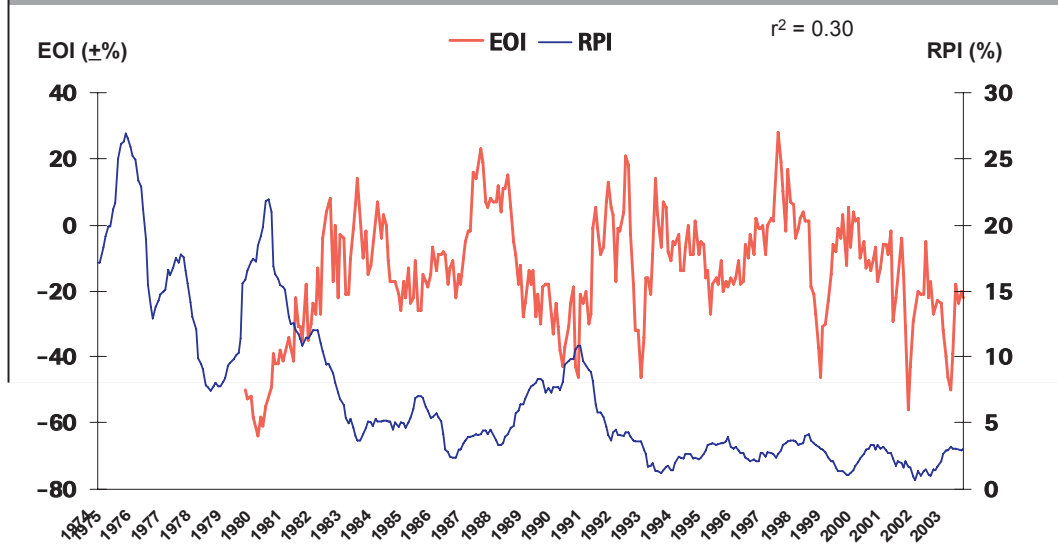
## Economic Optimism Index versus ILO unemployment rate



## Government's long-term economic policies versus actual Retail Prices Index



## Economic Optimism Index versus actual Retail Prices Index

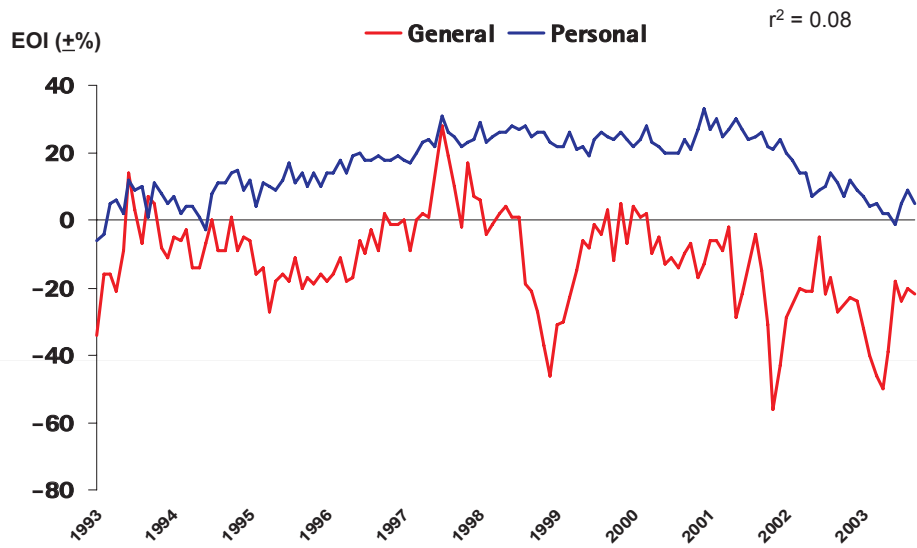


## Personal versus national optimism

Since 1993, people have generally felt more optimistic about their own personal financial circumstances than those facing the country, as is seen in the chart below. Personal EOI has also tended to be much more stable, with a broad trend upwards to 2001, then a slow downwards dip since. There are a number of reasons why we might see this pattern.

Firstly, our own circumstances will obviously seem much more predictable to us than national changes. People are obviously closer to their own financial circumstances, and are able to make an informed judgement. On the other hand, they will need to rely much more on the media and family and friends for information about the national economy, which could be more sensitive to bad news stories. But there is likely to also be an element of blinkered optimism in this, with people thinking that although others are losing their jobs, it will not happen to them.

## Economic Optimism: general versus personal

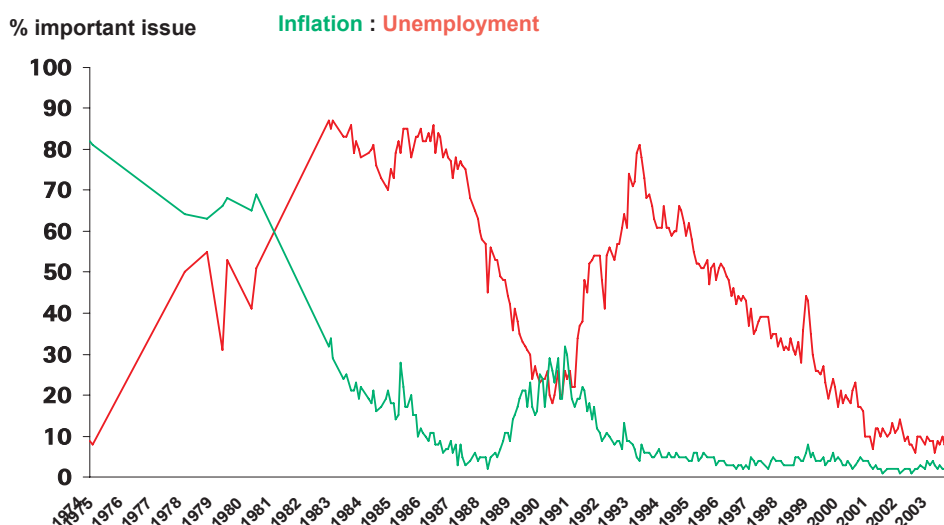


# Issues Facing the Country

We have measured what people see as the most important issues facing the country regularly since 1974. This provides a very rich picture of our changing focus over the last 30 years, and reminds us how recently some apparently long-term patterns actually emerged.

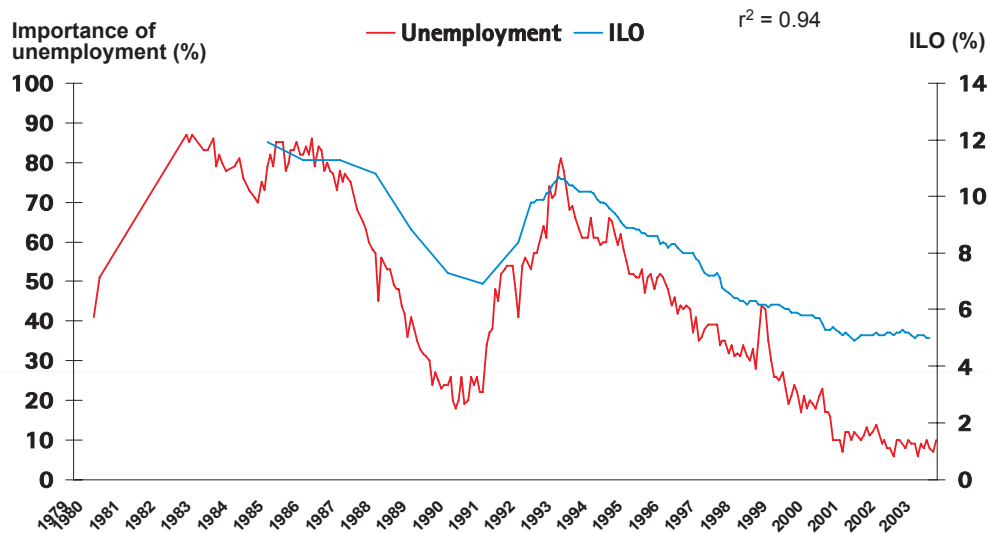
In the 1970s, inflation was seen as the most important issue facing the country, but since then there has clearly been a fall in its perceived importance. Unemployment was the top priority in the 1980s and early 1990s, but since then has also seen a downward trend. These are by far the highest levels of concern recorded for any issue, and it does add weight to the "it's the economy, stupid" school of thought by showing that when these go wrong, they affect everyone and dwarf all other concerns.

## Most important issues - fall of inflation and unemployment

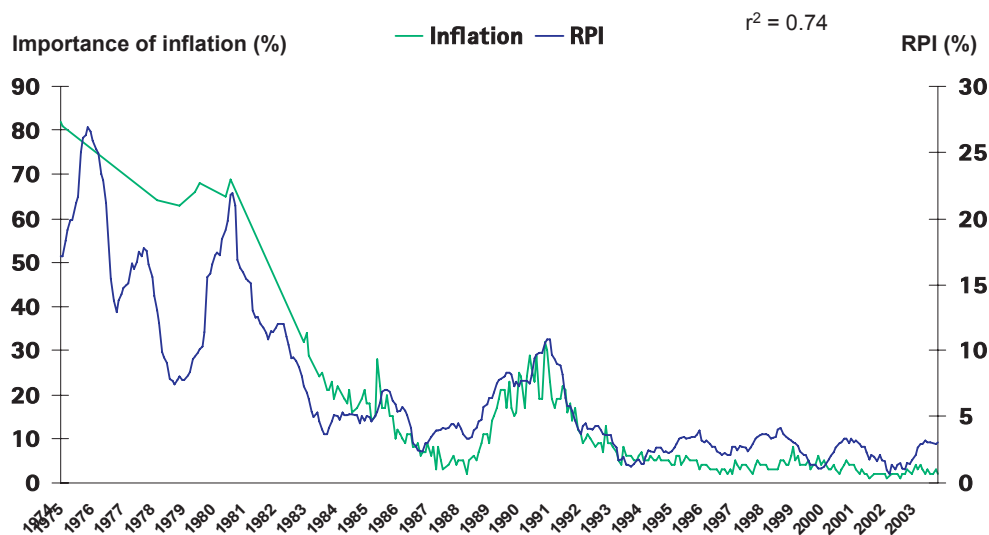


Unlike economic optimism, there does seem to be a close link between the importance of unemployment and inflation as issues facing the country, and what the objective economic indicators are telling us, as is seen in the two charts below. Both have strong statistical correlations, especially the link between the stated importance of unemployment and the actual ILO rate. In particular, it seems that it is the rate of change of the indicators that has the greatest impact; for example, when unemployment starts to drop in the late eighties, concern falls away even faster. Similarly now that unemployment has settled to a fairly low, predictable level, concern has fallen away to very low levels. On the other hand, concern about inflation did not fall with falls in RPI in the late seventies, no doubt because of the extreme volatility.

## Importance of unemployment versus ILO unemployment rate



## Importance of inflation versus actual Retail Prices Index

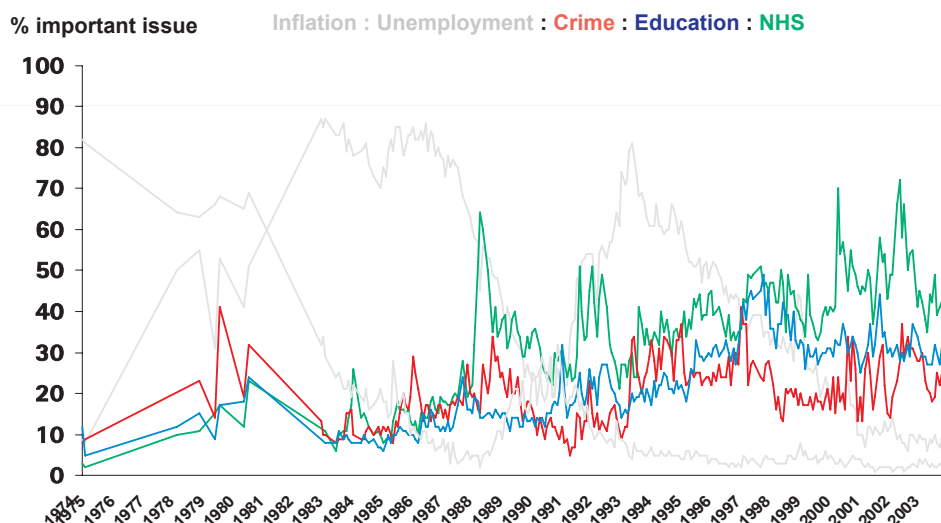


The main type of concerns that have replaced economic factors are around public services - in particular education, crime/policing and the NHS (despite isolated incidents, public transport does not have the same status). It is easy to think these have always been top of our agenda, but they are in fact only a relatively recent focus.



This also illustrates the extent to which governments are involved in setting our agenda. In particular, the focus on "education, education, education" in the run-up to the 1997 election clearly worked in shifting our attention. Our concern then tailed off, which, given the very short period of time involved is not likely to be because the problems were solved. It may be because we expected future improvements, but it is likely to at least partly be because we were not being reminded about the issues.

## Most important issues - rise of public services

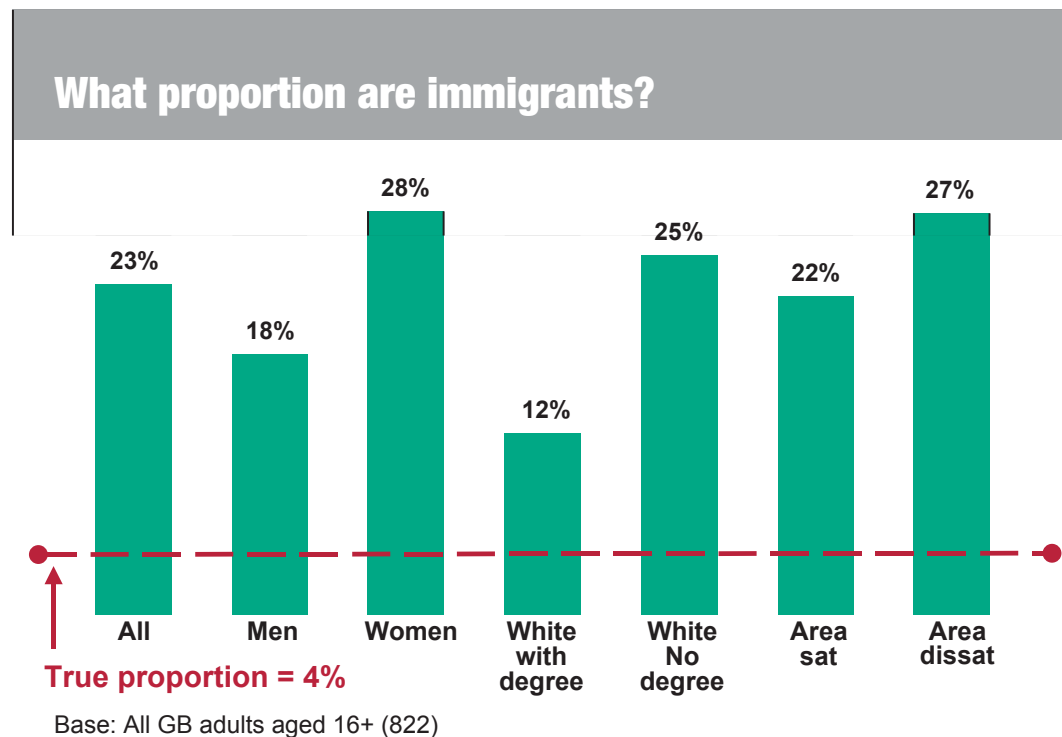


One other particular issue it is worth considering is the rise in concern about immigration and asylum over the last four or five years. This has shot up the agenda in a series of pronounced peaks, no doubt reflecting the fact that concern is very dependent on news stories.

## Most important issues - recent rise of immigration



While the overall rise in concern tallies with rises in actual numbers of asylum seekers entering the country, direct experience or contact with them in local areas is small (given that they tend to be concentrated in a very small number of areas), and so most information is received through the media. Furthermore, research carried out by MORI on behalf of the Commission for Racial Equality suggests that people - both white and from minority ethnic groups - overestimate the proportion of immigrants entering the country.



It is also worth noting that these (i.e. key public services) are the issues raised when we ask what about national concerns. As we have argued in previous reports, the concerns at a local level are rather different, with much more of a focus on the local physical environment (litter, graffiti etc), feelings of safety and in particular things for young people to do<sup>5</sup>.

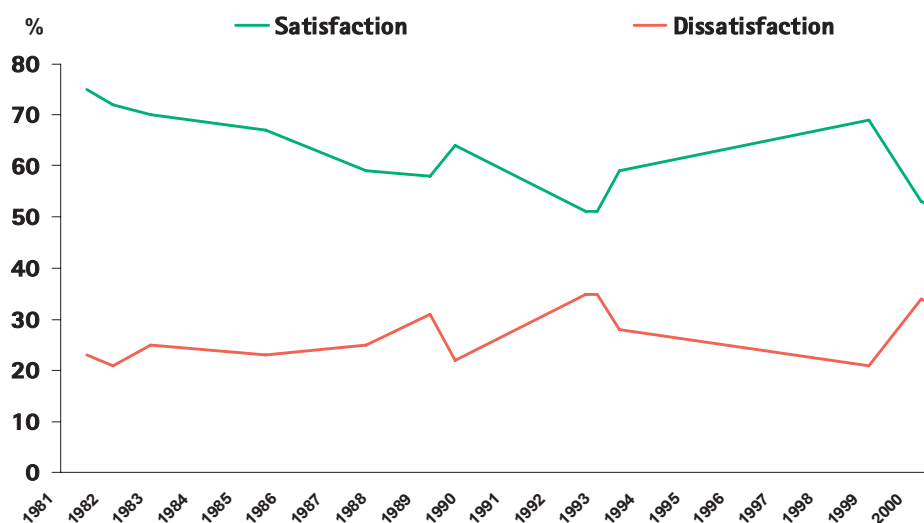
# Long-term Views of Services

We also have information on how satisfaction with specific public services has changed over the past couple of decades. However, as noted earlier, it is only relatively recently that research has been carried out into how different public services are viewed. We therefore have fewer long-term measures than for the other issues and we cannot look at relationships with as much confidence, or indeed use correlation statistics. Having said that, it is worth attempting to identify patterns, as it is clearly vital for governments to understand whether they get the credit or blame for the quality of public services. We look at two services below, the police and the NHS. While these are the only two public services we have long-term trends for, health care and law & order are two vital duties of a government, and we would expect to find a link here if anywhere.

## Police

Satisfaction with the police fell throughout the eighties, then rallied briefly before falling further in the early nineties. It then rose again to the late 90s, but has fallen steeply since. This actually seems to be fairly independent of political events such as elections, despite featuring prominently in campaigns.

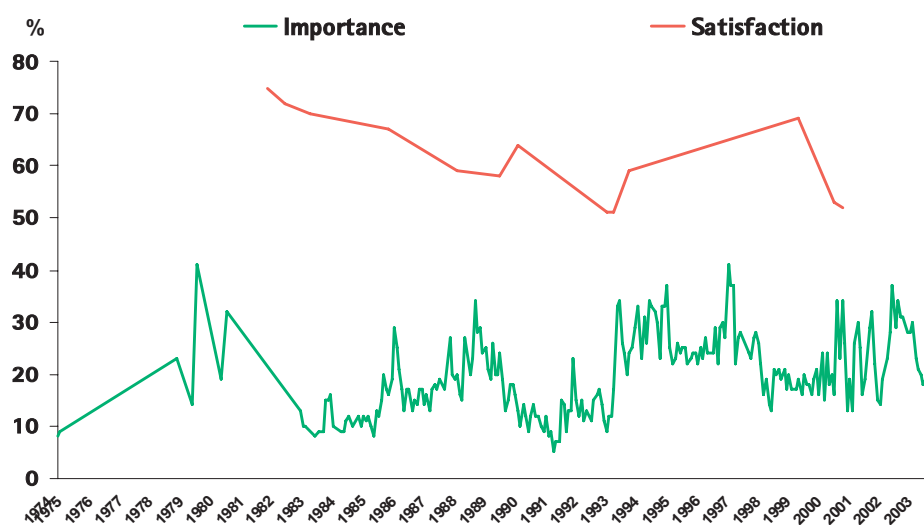
### Satisfaction with the police



It seems reasonable to expect that there should be a relationship between how satisfied people are with police services and how serious an issue policing and crime are seen to be nationally - with satisfaction dropping when concern rises. But this does not seem to be the case, with no real discernible relationship seen in the chart below.

As seen earlier, the importance of crime and policing is among the more volatile of measures - perhaps because it is particularly influenced by media coverage of individual events. It is also the case that the satisfaction measure is focused on local police services, while the importance question is about national issues - and judgements about these will be based on very different factors.

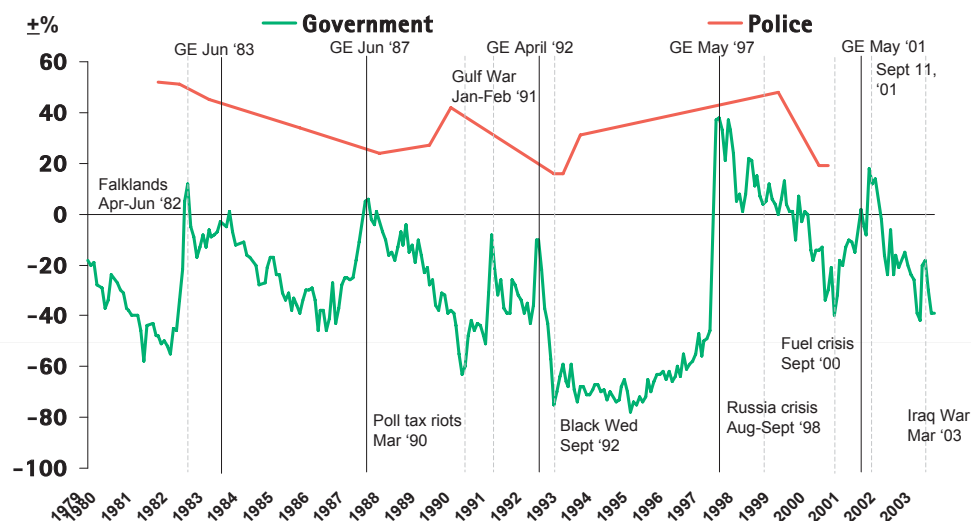
## Police: satisfaction versus importance



As a key national service we may also expect to see some relationship between views of government and views of the police. This could either be because the government is held responsible for poor police services, or a negative general view of the government leads people to be negative about one of their highest profile services - or a mixture of both of these.

There appears to be a slightly stronger case for this relationship - but only slightly, as shown in the chart below. We do see mirrored drops in views in the early nineties, some recovery to the late nineties, then another steep drop. However, the relationship is clearly very weak, and overall there is no indication that views of the police affect views of the government.

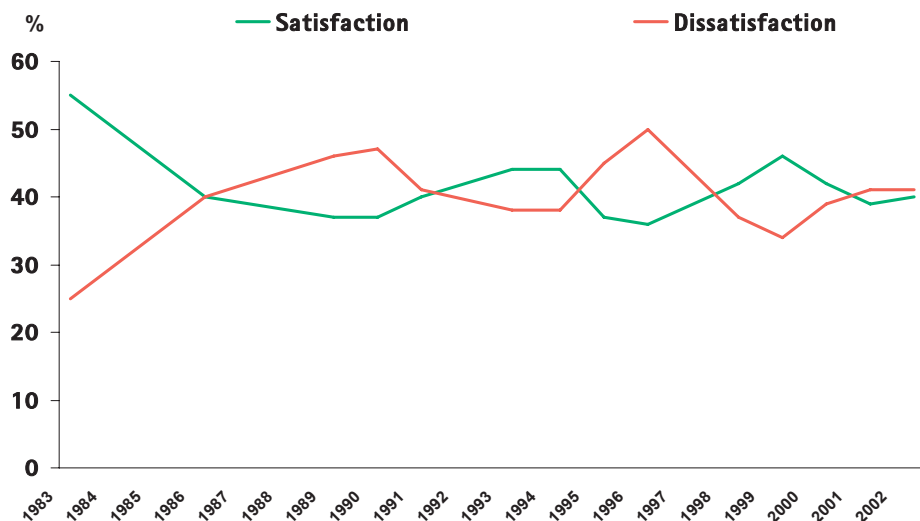
## Net satisfaction with government versus police



## The NHS

Satisfaction with the NHS follows a similar pattern. There was a decline in the eighties, a brief recovery in the early nineties then another fall. Satisfaction rose after the 97 election, since when it has slipped again.

## Satisfaction with the NHS

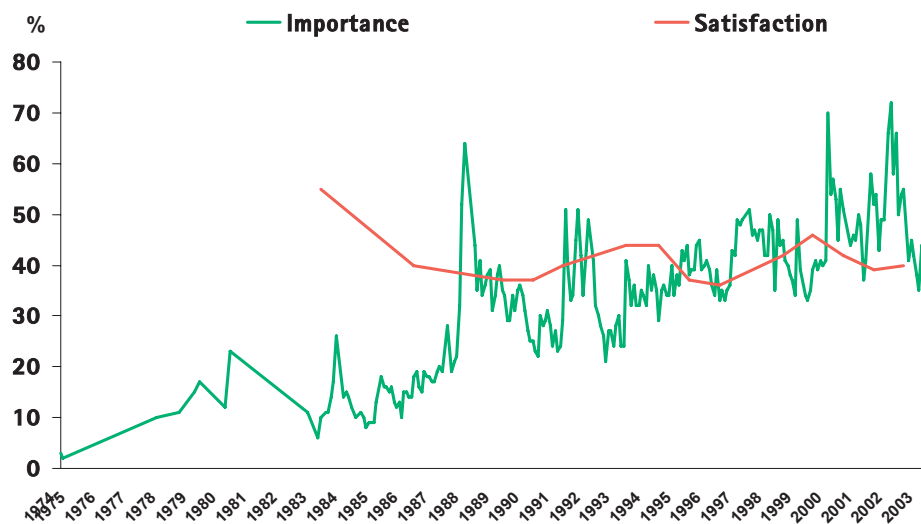


Source: British Social Attitudes Survey

Again, when we compare how satisfied people are with the NHS and how important an issue it is to the country as a whole, we do not get the pattern we might expect. The rise in importance placed on this issue does not appear to be linked to a major rise or fall in satisfaction.

There are likely to be a number of factors at work here. Clearly, as noted above, the government itself (through the media) has a significant impact on what is seen as the most pressing issue: if they are putting significant amounts of money into NHS services, they will be telling us this is an important thing to do, thus raising concerns. But there is also likely to be some expectation of future improvement solely from the announcement of increased resources, particularly given that most people have relatively limited direct contact with the NHS. However, this tends to be a short-term phenomenon, with, before long, people expecting to directly experience improvements - as we have seen in more recent local work.

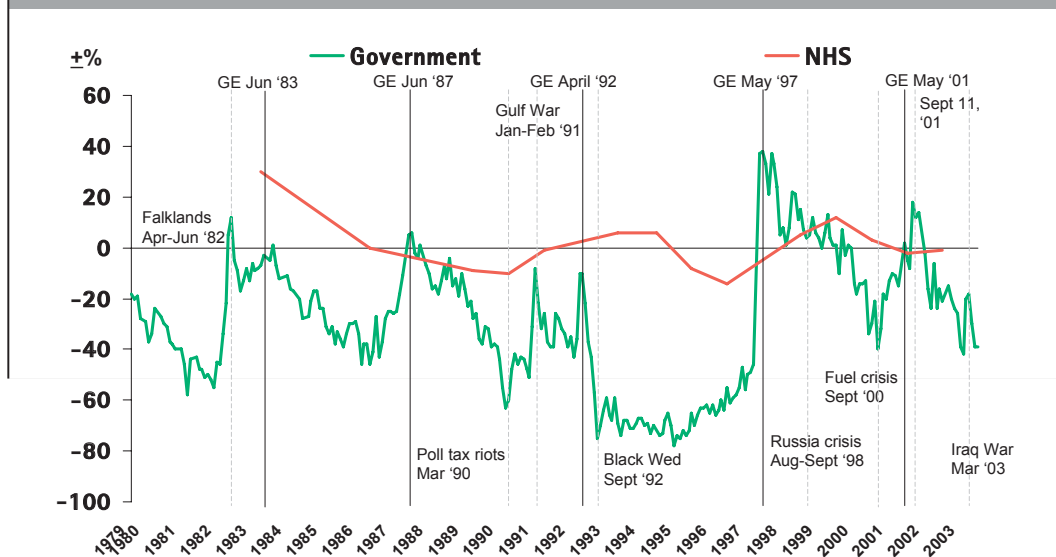
## NHS: satisfaction versus importance



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey and MORI data

As with the police, there does not appear to be an obvious relationship between overall views of the NHS and views of the government. This means the government has several hurdles to overcome. As well as delivering 'real' improvements to the service, the extra resources dedicated to the NHS are likely to have raised people's expectations, which makes it harder to improve perceptions of the service. Even if perceptions of the NHS do improve, the mechanism that translates this into higher ratings for the government is not entirely clear. This is a complex judgement that relies on a number of influences, not just direct satisfaction with an individual public service.

## Net satisfaction with government versus NHS



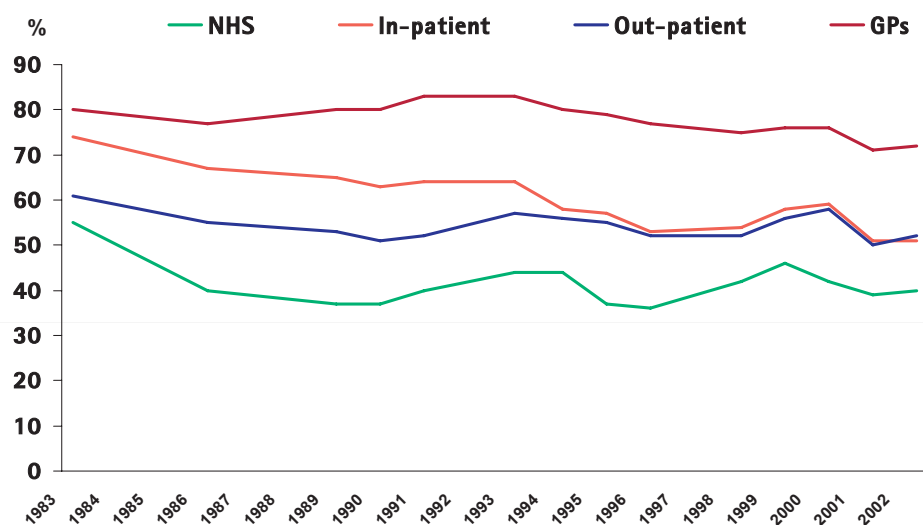
Source: British Social Attitudes Survey and MORI data

Of course, people do not use "the NHS" - they use hospitals and GPs. The NHS is likely to draw in all sorts of other associations that do not directly relate to the services provided. It is therefore important to look at views of more specific elements.

As we might have expected, GPs are particularly highly regarded, and in-patient services are better viewed than outpatient services, as is seen in the chart below. But in recent years, while GPs have remained the most positively rated, there has been some convergence between in-patient and out-patient services. Unfortunately this has been because of a decline in views of in-patient services rather than an improvement in views among out-patients.

Ratings of all these services follow the same slow-moving pattern as the NHS itself, despite the argument that ratings of, for example, your local GP will be primarily influenced by personal experience, and ratings of the NHS by stories in the media, contact with family and friends and your own values. It would be interesting to test what impact the greater use of "the NHS" in branding and communications and use of services such as NHS Direct, is having on this.

## Satisfaction with all health services



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey



# Cohort Effects

There are a number of differences in perceptions of public services between subgroups of the population that we see consistently across surveys - for example, older people tend to be more satisfied than younger people. However, it has not been clear whether these are recent or more stable, long-term patterns. It is important to examine this further because it may help us better understand the reasons behind opinions, and the extent to which views of services can be influenced. When looking at age in particular, it is useful to understand the extent to which cohort views differ and the extent to which they change with age, regardless of cohort.

As noted earlier, there are relatively little data on perceptions of public services before the 1990s - measuring perceptions of public services is a fairly recent concern. However, there are some data available from the early 1980s that can give us a relatively long view. The same two services are looked at here - the police and the NHS.

## Police

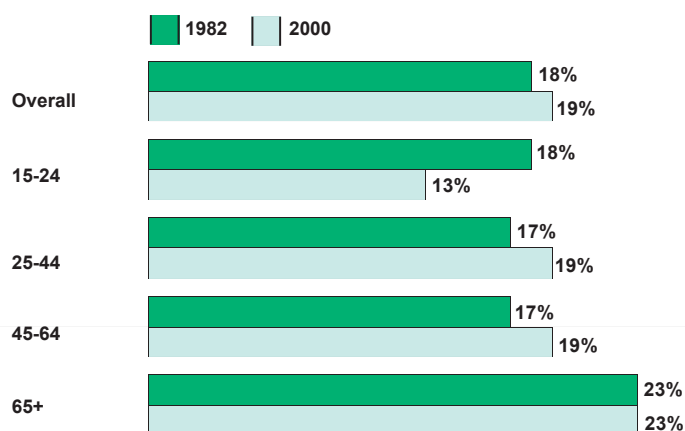
The charts below show overall ratings of the police (based on the proportion saying they are very satisfied) from surveys in 1982 and 2000. The questions used are slightly different, but this is not a major concern, as we are interested in sub-group patterns rather than overall levels of satisfaction. That is, we are interested in how the views of different subgroups compare in each year.

Looking at age first, older people appear to have been more satisfied than other groups for a long time. The implication is that people become more satisfied with the police as they get older, rather than there being a cohort effect, where people from a certain generation have higher levels of satisfaction with the police. Those who were in the 45-64 age group in 1982 will have largely moved through into the 65+ by 2000, and if there was a cohort effect we would have expected this older age group to be less satisfied relative to other age groups now.

However, it is also clear that the pattern of younger age groups having lower levels of satisfaction with the police is a recent development - that was not the case in 1982. This may have implications in the longer term, if we are seeing a group coming through with significantly less positive views of the police.

## Attitudes to the police

Satisfaction with police services - % very satisfied

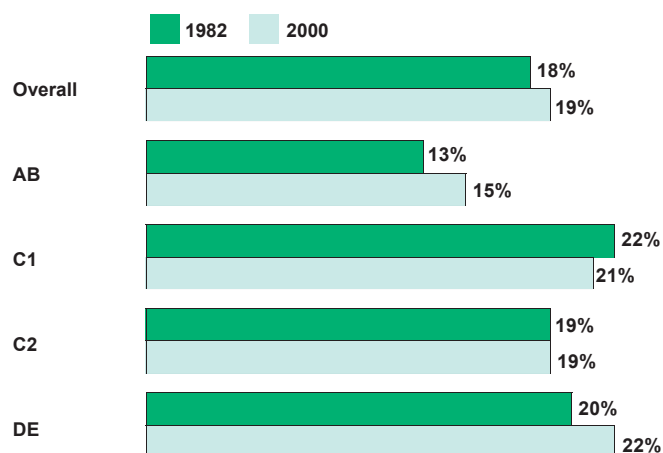


Base: All respondents

We can also look at how views vary by class, another important analysis variable. The highest social classes are less satisfied with the police, while all other social classes have very similar levels of satisfaction. There is a remarkable degree of consistency in this pattern over the last couple of decades.

## Attitudes to the police

Satisfaction with police services - % very satisfied



Base: All respondents

# NHS

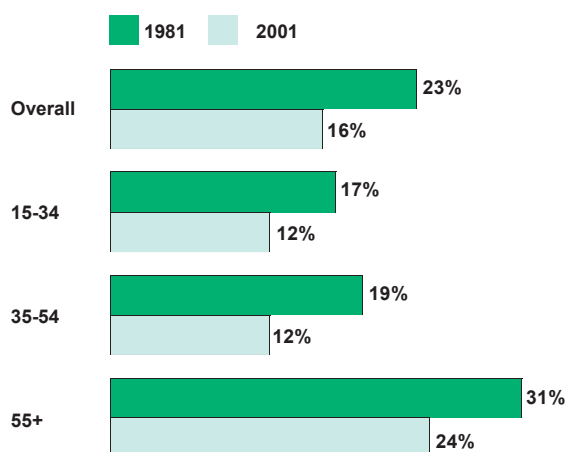
The charts below show views of the NHS as a whole in two different surveys to those looked at above, one in 1981 and the other in 2001. The questions considered here do not exactly match and so the overall trend is not accurate - but that should not concern us, as we are looking at patterns within each study. In fact the questions are the same in this case, it is just that the scales used are slightly different.

Looking at age, we can see the main pattern is that older people are significantly more satisfied than other age groups - and this is the case in both 1981 and 2001. There does not seem to be much difference in views between other age groups - and this is consistent across the two surveys.

Again, the analysis illustrates the lack of a cohort effect - given that the relatively critical 35-54 year olds in the 1981 survey will have moved through into the relatively positive 55+ grouping by 2001<sup>6</sup>.

## Attitudes to the NHS

Satisfaction with NHS - % very satisfied

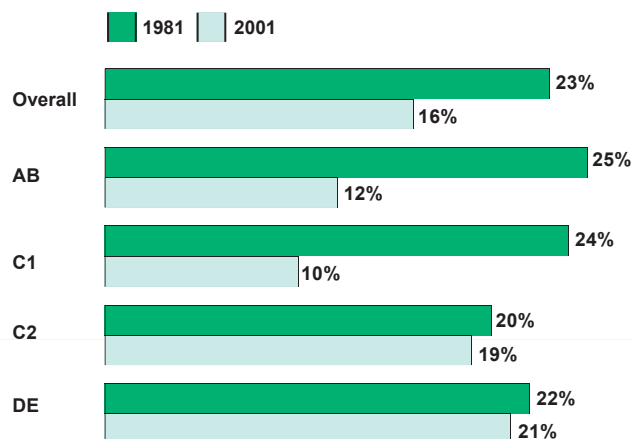


Base: All respondents

But looking at class there seems to have been a significant shift in opinion over the past 20 years. In 1981 those in higher social classes had very similar views of the NHS to those in other social classes - but now higher social classes (ABC1) are significantly less satisfied than others. This might be due to greater exposure to private care among higher social class groups - although this seems unlikely as overall, the total proportion of households with private care only increased from 6% to 9% between 1985 and 1999.

## Attitudes to the NHS

Satisfaction with NHS - % very satisfied



Base: All respondents

So overall, from this fairly limited evidence, it seems that cohort effects are relatively weak, and that people generally change their views with age. This may not seem that startling, but we would have expected to see more of a cohort effect, as the generation we grow up in seems likely to colour our views. For example, we might have expected to see a positive and/or disillusioned baby boomer generation moving through the data, changing the views of individual age groups. Overall therefore we should not expect to see great shifts in opinion in the future, as new generations move through - although the next 10 years will provide the greatest test of this.

In any case there are some patterns that only seem to have emerged in recent years - in particular, the relative drop in satisfaction with the police among young people and with the NHS among higher social classes. Given the relative stability of views among individual groups over time, these may represent fairly significant shifts that would be worth exploring further. For example, we could relate declining views of the NHS among higher classes to the growth in private health care - but it is more difficult to explain the change in young people's rating of the police.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Exploring Trust in Public Institutions, MORI SRI report for the Audit Commission 2003

<sup>2</sup> This issue is discussed in more detail in the forthcoming paper Television News, Economic Perceptions and Political Preferences in Britain, 1997-2001, Sanders & Gavin 2003

<sup>3</sup> It is possible to look at the relationship between time-series data in more sophisticated ways than simple correlations shown here, for example, taking account of any lags in the impact of changes in one variable on changes in another. We will be exploring this further in future work when we look at modelling views of government in more detail.

<sup>4</sup> A number of previous studies have highlighted that economic management is a "valence" issue, where the key is not differences in policy as such but perceptions of competence relative to the opposition. This is discussed in Sanders & Gavin 2003, op.cit

<sup>5</sup> The Rising Prominence of Liveability, MORI September 2002

<sup>6</sup> Remember that it is relative views of services that are important - and despite their lower overall ratings the 55+ group are as positive relative to other age groups as they were in 1981

# MORI

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