

Voting and Values in Britain: Does religion count?

Ben Clements and Nick Spencer

Executive Summary

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Theos – clear thinking on religion and society

Theos is a Christian think tank working in the area of religion, politics and society. We aim to inform debate around questions of faith and secularism and the related subjects of values and identity. We were launched in November 2006, and our first report '*Doing God: a Future for Faith in the Public Square*', written by Nick Spencer, examined the reasons why faith will play an increasingly significant role in public life.

what Theos stands for

In our post-secular age, interest in spirituality is increasing across western culture. We believe that it is impossible to understand the modern world without an understanding of religion. We also believe that much of the debate about the role and place of religion has been unnecessarily emotive and ill-informed. We reject the notion of any possible 'neutral' perspective on these issues.

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what Theos believes

Theos was launched with the support of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, but it is independent of any particular denomination. We are an ecumenical Christian organisation, committed to the belief that religion in general and Christianity in particular has much to offer for the common good of society as a whole. We are committed to the traditional creeds of the Christian faith and draw on social and political thought from a wide range of theological traditions. We also work with many non-Christian and non-religious individuals and organisations.

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introduction

- The 'religious vote' in America is a well-researched and well-recognised phenomenon, even if popular conclusions about theo-political alignment are exaggerated.
- The 'religious vote' in Britain – if it exists – is less well-researched and less understood. This report, drawing on extensive data from the British Election Survey and the British Social Attitudes survey, is the first step towards rectifying that.

the religious vote: by affiliation

- Britain never developed a tradition of Christian Democracy or a major Christian party because, by the time this happened in Europe, it already had three – Anglican Tory, Nonconformist Liberal, and Nonconformist and Catholic Labour. Although correlations are perhaps weaker, this is still the case today.
 - ♦ (Self-identifying) Anglicans have been more likely to vote Conservative than Labour, the exceptions being in 1966 and 1997. In 2010, they were nearly twice as likely to vote Conservative as Catholics were.
 - ♦ (Self-identifying) Catholics generally have preferred to vote Labour, often by large margins, since 1959 (the exception being in 1979) and have generally shown lower support for the third party than have other Christian denominations.
 - ♦ (Self-identifying) Nonconformists have shown greater voting fluidity than either Anglicans or Catholics, with a marginally stronger association with the third party than these denominations.
- Voting patterns are also discernible among the non-Christian and non-religious populations, though any analysis of non-Christian religious groups must be undertaken with caution on account of low sample sizes.

- ◆ In 2010, Muslims favoured Labour, whilst the Jewish vote was more for the Conservatives. The Hindu vote tended to Labour, although was more balanced in 2010. The Sikh vote was evenly split between the two main parties, whilst the Buddhist vote was disproportionately for the Liberal Democrats.
- ◆ Those who do not identify with any religious group have also fluctuated over elections, although their support for the Conservatives has been lower, while that for the third party, particularly recently, has been higher.
- Anglicans follow the national pattern of reporting a higher level of support for the Conservative Party among women than among men.
 - ◆ This gap is also evident for Catholics, and is slightly larger, with 33.3% of women voting Tory compared to 24.5% of men.
 - Among other religious groups, women tend to be less likely than men to vote Tory. There is no gender divide within the non-religious vote.

the religious vote: by attendance

- Electoral behaviour can be measured by attendance as well as affiliation.
 - ◆ Regularity of attendance makes a difference among Anglicans. Those who attend services regularly have historically been more likely to vote for the Conservatives than those who attended less often. In other words, practising Anglicanism is more Tory than nominal Anglicanism.
 - ◆ Attendance made no difference among Catholics, with regular and irregular attenders generally being equally likely to vote for the Labour party.

voting intentions

- These patterns tend to hold for current voting intentions, although these data must be treated with caution as the way someone claims they intend to vote in 18-24 months does not necessarily correlate with the way they will vote (if they do turn out to vote).
 - ◆ Even taking this mid-term of the electoral cycle in account, Anglicans clearly demonstrate greater support for the Conservative Party than all other

groups. Catholics, similarly, show most support for Labour (as do members of non-Christian religions) reflecting their historical tradition of voting Labour at general elections.

- ◆ While the Liberal Democrats suffer from low levels of support across the board, 'Other Christian' groups are more likely to say they would vote for them in a hypothetical election compared to those affiliated with the two main Christian denominations.
- ◆ Support for the Liberal Democrats is also higher amongst those who belong to some other religion, those who do not reveal their religious affiliation and those with no religious affiliation.
- ◆ There are noticeable differences within some denominations based on whether a respondent adheres to a traditional belief in God or not (which reminds us of the problems with affiliation).
 - ✦ Amongst Catholics and Nonconformists, levels of support for the Tories are noticeably higher amongst those with a traditional belief in God. The opposite is the case for Church of Scotland/Presbyterian affiliates.
 - ✦ This is not the case for Anglicans, who show similar levels of support for the Conservatives whether or not they believe in God.
 - ✦ Amongst members of non-Christian religions, there is a stronger link to electoral support for Labour amongst those who express a firm belief in God.

issues

- What drives these electoral allegiances? Is it possible to analyse this by looking at political issues and underlying political values?
 - ◆ In terms of political issues, in 2010 all groups, irrespective of religiosity, placed the economy as their most important issue, followed by immigration, the outcome of the election itself, and the budget deficit. There was some difference over the fifth most important issue, either unemployment or consumer debt, or both of these ranked equally.

- ◆ What are known in the US as ‘values voting’ issues (e.g. those relating to family, sexuality, abortion, etc.) were mentioned by very few respondents across the board.
- ◆ Not surprisingly, people’s evaluations of which party was best able to deal with these issues followed existing lines of party support. Thus, Anglicans were most likely to rate the Conservative party as best able to handle their chosen issue, Catholics most likely to rate Labour as best able to deal with theirs (although in 2010 they only had a slight advantage over the Conservatives here).

values

- Analysis of values allows us to position different religious groups (groups of affiliation and attendance) on three major political spectra – left-right, libertarian-authoritarian, and welfarist-individualist – the data for which are drawn from 19 statements asked annually in British Social Attitudes surveys.

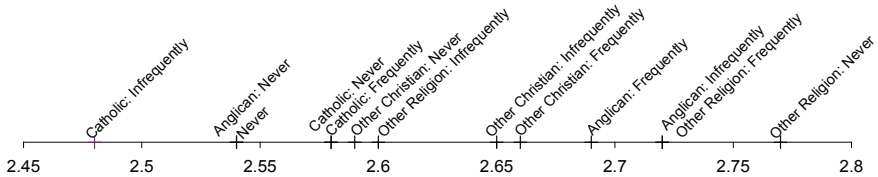
left-right

- On the left-right scale (based on five statements¹), we can see that among the affiliation groups:
 - ◆ People who consider themselves belonging to the ‘other religion’ group (a large proportion of whom are Muslim) are most consistently left in the left-right axis.
 - ◆ Catholics are next most consistently left in the left-right axis.
 - ◆ Anglicans are most consistently right in the left-right axis.
 - ◆ People of no religion tend slightly to be to the left in the left-right axis.
 - ◆ These differences, with the exception of the first, are not particularly large or consistent.
- These opinions also change when people are asked the more policy-specific question relating to tax and spend.

- ◆ Catholics were slightly more pro-tax and spend when compared to the other groups but, interestingly given the positions outlined above, it was the 'other religion' group that tended to be slightly – and at times noticeably – more hostile to tax-and-spend.
- ◆ Overall, the direction of public opinion was firmly against more tax-and-spend. Most wanted to keep tax-and-spend at the same level, rather than reducing it.
- On the left-right scale, religious attendance is a better indicator of left-right views than simply religious affiliation.
 - ◆ Those people who never attend a religious service are more likely to be on the left of the political spectrum, particularly when it comes to abstract opinions on poverty and wealth, than are other groups.
 - ◆ That noted, when it comes to the policy-specific question, non-attenders have fallen out of love with tax-and-spend just as much as other groups have over the last decade. Similarly, the rise of people who agree that government should keep tax and spending the same has been even across groups, with no difference by frequency of attendance.
- It is possible to combine affiliation and attendance to get a more detailed analysis of where people sit on the left-right scale, although this comes at the cost of sample size (and, therefore, also of the robustness of the result). That noted, we can see from Figure 0.1 that:
 - ◆ Infrequently-attending (i.e. less than once a month) Catholics were the most left-wing group (in 2011), followed by purely nominal (i.e. never attending) Anglicans, and people who are consistently non-religious (i.e. non-religious and never attend).
 - ◆ At the other end, purely nominal people of non-Christian religions were the most right-of-centre (though this was a particularly low sample size), followed by infrequently-attending Anglicans, and committed (i.e. frequently-attending) people of other religions.

- ◆ Committed (i.e. frequently-attending) Christians, whether Anglican, Catholic or another denomination, were more 'centrist', though Anglicans were more right-of-centre, and Catholics more left-of-centre.

figure 0.1: left (1) – right (5) scale, by affiliation and attendance, in 2011



Source: British Social Attitudes 2011

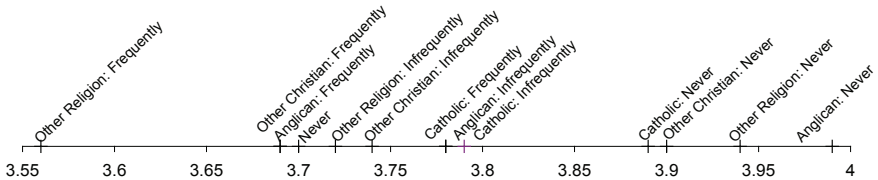
libertarian-authoritarian

- On the libertarian-authoritarian scale (based on six statements²), by affiliation:
 - ◆ The population is generally more authoritarian than it is libertarian, and has become slightly more authoritarian over the last ten years.
 - ◆ Anglicans tend to be most authoritarian, although unlike the other groups, they have not become more authoritarian over the last decade.
 - ◆ The 'No religion' group tends to be most libertarian, although it has shifted more towards authoritarianism than have other groups over the last decade.
 - ◆ Other groups, in particular the 'Other religion' group tends to oscillate between these poles (though in the case of the 'Other religion' group this is likely to be on account of the small sample number)
 - ◆ The differences between groups on these matters tend not to be substantial or consistent, the exception being regarding censorship where there is and has long been a deep and significant difference between non-religious (against) and (all) religious groups (for).
- On the libertarian-authoritarian scale, by attendance:
 - ◆ Those who never attend have been more libertarian over the last decade, although this has not universally been the case. They have, however, become more authoritarian over time, and in particular in 2011. The result of this was

that the most recent data show non-attenders as the most authoritarian, with the ‘frequent-attenders’ least authoritarian.

- ◆ The ‘infrequent-attenders’ also moved sharply towards authoritarianism in 2011, whereas the ‘frequent-attenders’ moved away, and became the most libertarian group.
- ◆ These recent data do seem to be comparatively volatile, however, and they do not change the fact that all groups are more authoritarian than they are libertarian.
- On the libertarian-authoritarian scale, by affiliation and attendance, Figure 0.2 shows that all groups are notably more authoritarian than libertarian.
 - ◆ The only real single outlying group is ‘frequent-attenders’ from non-Christian religions who, in 2011, had a more distinctly libertarian position (though note the small sample size in this instance).
 - ◆ At the other end, nominal Anglicans were the most authoritarian group.
 - ◆ Indeed, nominal believers of all religious groups were more authoritarian than ‘infrequently-attending’ believers, who tended to be slightly more authoritarian than ‘frequently-attending’ believers.

figure 0.2: libertarian (1) – authoritarian (5) scale, by affiliation and attendance, in 2011



Source: British Social Attitudes 2011

welfarist-individualist

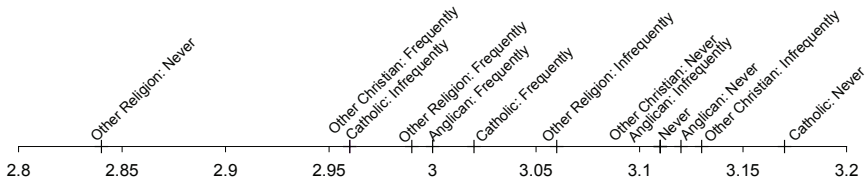
- On the welfarist-individualist scale (based on eight statements³), by affiliation:
 - ◆ The overall trend in public opinion is away from welfarism and towards individualism. This trend has been significant and reasonably consistent

over the last decade, although it has slowed somewhat over the last few years.

- ◆ Differences of opinion between religious groups here are almost always much smaller than the general shift in public opinion. However else religious affiliation shapes people's opinion in this area, it does not decide it.
- ◆ As a general rule, Anglicans were more anti-welfarist than other groups and Roman Catholics more welfarist, though the differences are not huge or consistent.
- ◆ One of the few genuinely consistent differences is in the fact the 'No religion' group is significantly less inclined to agree that the creation of the welfare state is one of Britain's proudest achievements.
- On the welfarist-individualist scale, by attendance:
 - ◆ The more religiously observant respondents were more likely to have a positive attitude to state welfare. For example:
 - ✦ 'Frequent-attenders' were more willing to countenance the government spending more on welfare benefits for the poor even if it leads to higher taxes;
 - ✦ 'Frequent-attenders' were more likely to disagree that most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one;
 - ✦ 'Frequent-attenders' were more sceptical concerning the claim of people dole-fiddling;
 - ✦ 'Frequent-attenders' were more likely to disagree that "if welfare benefits weren't so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet";
 - ✦ 'Frequent-attenders' tended to believe that cutting welfare benefits would damage many people's lives;
 - ✦ 'Frequent-attenders' were more likely to think that "the creation of the welfare state is one of Britain's proudest achievements".
 - ◆ On the welfarist-individualist scale, by affiliation and attendance:

- ✦ As Figure 0.3 shows, the various different groups are a) comparatively clustered together and b) highly centrist.
- ✦ The single outlying group here were the nominal 'other religion' group (i.e. those who nominally belonged to a non-Christian religion), who were most welfarist (though NB the low sample size again).
- ✦ At the other end, nominal Catholics were most individualist.
- ✦ Practising believers of all denominations tended to be among the more welfarist groups.

figure 0.3: welfarist (1) – individualist (5) scale, by affiliation and attendance, in 2011

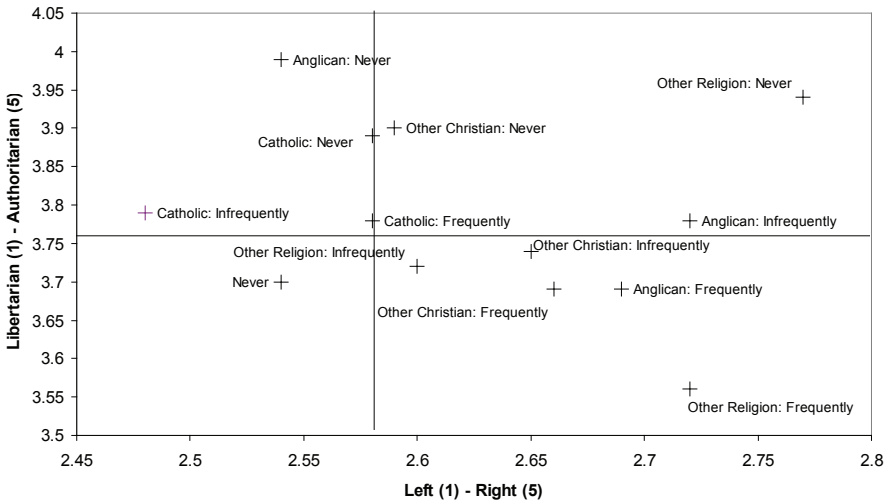


Source: British Social Attitudes 2011

summary of political values

- Although each of these three scales is important, political positioning has often, historically, been constructed on the first two scales – left-right and libertarian-authoritarian. Accordingly, it is possible to plot the different groups according to these two scales and compare them to the national average to get an idea of where they sit.

figure 0.4: left-right & libertarian-authoritarian scatter graph, by affiliation and attendance, in 2011



Source: British Social Attitudes 2011

- This shows that in 2011 the only group securely in the right-authoritarian quadrant is the nominal non-Christian religious group.
- Infrequently-attending Anglicans are right of centre but neither especially libertarian nor authoritarian.
- The only group securely in the right-libertarian quadrant is the committed non-Christian religious group
- The only group securely in the left-libertarian quadrant is the non-religious group, and even then this group is not massively left or libertarian.
- No groups are securely in the left-authoritarian quadrant, although infrequently attending Catholics are disproportionately left (but not authoritarian) and nominal Anglicans are disproportionately authoritarian (but not left).

executive summary references

- 1 Specifically: "Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers"; "Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance"; "Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off"; "Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth"; and "There is one law for the rich and one for the poor".
- 2 Specifically: "People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences"; "For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence"; "Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values"; "Schools should teach children to obey authority"; "Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards"; and "The law should always be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong".
- 3 Specifically: "The welfare state encourages people to stop helping each other"; "The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes"; "Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one"; "Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help"; "Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another"; "If welfare benefits weren't so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet"; "Cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people's lives" and "The creation of the welfare state is one of Britain's proudest achievements".

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Ask someone their religion in America and you can have a reasonable guess as to their politics. Faith is not an infallible political guide in the US, and there are signs that it may be becoming more fallible, but it remains useful.

What about Britain? For too long, the precise relationship between religious (and non-religious) commitment and political identity and values in Britain has been under-researched, the subject of claim, counter-claim and hyperbole.

Voting and Values in Britain seeks to rectify that. Drawing on a decade's worth of detailed survey work, from the British Election Study and British Social Attitudes surveys, as well as from other sources, Ben Clements and Nick Spencer examine the true relationship between religious and political commitments in Britain.

The first two chapters look at the religious vote, yesterday, today and tomorrow. Is there such a thing? Do different denominations express a meaningful preference for different parties and, if so, which? Alternatively, is electoral behaviour shaped more by the *level* of religious commitment, such as the frequency of religious attendance? Chapters 1 and 2 answer these questions with reference to electoral survey data from the 1970s to 2010 and beyond.

Chapters 3 to 5 move on to look at the political values that underpin electoral loyalties. In the US, 'values voting' has come to signify people's attitude to a relatively limited number of personal 'moral' issues. This is not the case in Britain, where 'issues' polling shows that religious and non-religious voters are thinking about broadly the same issues when they vote.

What, then, of the bigger values, that underlie all political commitments? Where do different groups sit on the left-right political scale? Who is more authoritarian and who is more libertarian, and over which issues? Which groups favour a more 'welfarist' approach to politics, and which a more individualist?

Voting and Values in Britain examines these issues, looking at what Anglicans, Roman Catholics, other Christians, people from other religions, and people of no religion think, and whether the level of people's religious commitment makes a difference.

If, as many claim, class is declining as the determining factor in electoral behaviour, identities and values such as those analysed in this report may play an ever greater role. *Voting and Values in Britain* is a major contribution to this issue and will help politicians, strategists, journalists and all other interested parties get an accurate and reliable idea about how far religious and non-religious commitments count in 21st century politics.

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