

‘We don't do God’? Religion and party choice in Britain

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Little attention has been paid to the way in which religion shapes British political behaviour. Using data spanning the last 45 years, this paper shows that religion is a consistently important predictor of voters' party choices. This relationship is not primarily due to the social make-up of different religious groups, nor is it due to ideological differences, whether in terms of social conservatism, economic leftism or national identity, between religious groups. Instead, I show that denominations are associated with parties that historically represented those groups in the early twentieth century when social cleavages were 'frozen' within the system: Catholics with Labour, Nonconformists with the Liberals and Anglicans/ Presbyterians with the Conservatives. I argue that the main mechanism for the continuance of these divisions is parental transmission of party affiliations within religious denominations. These findings have implications for how we view the persistence of, and mechanisms behind, social cleavages more generally.

Tony Blair's director of strategy and communications, Alistair Campbell, famously interrupted an interview with the then Prime Minister to tell a journalist that 'We don't do God'. That succinctly summarizes the role of religion in elite political discourse in Britain over the last 50 years. Very few politicians refer to religion and very few, with the ironic exception of Tony Blair, are overtly religious. This is perhaps not surprising as Britain is a very secular country and the role of religion in post-war politics has generally been perceived as weak. Indeed Britain was typically thought of as the archetypal one social cleavage society, with a dominant class cleavage splitting voters and splitting parties. Despite this class cleavage having declined enormously, there is little work that looks at the other important 'frozen' cleavages that Lipset and Rokkan identified.¹ In this paper I show that not only is the religious cleavage of important historic interest in Britain, but it is also of current importance in shaping people's party choices. Moreover, I test the mechanisms behind this religious cleavage and show that it is not a proxy for other social cleavages, such as class or national identity, nor is it based on religiosity and its impact on people's ideology. Rather, religion matters today in British politics much as it did in the distant past: religious denominations have long-standing associations with parties and these links are passed down from parents to children. These findings have wide-ranging implications for electoral politics and the way in which we view both the underlying mechanisms that maintain cleavage politics and the persistence of those political cleavages over time.

The religious cleavage over time

¹ Lipset and Rokkan 1967. For discussion of the decline of the class cleavage see: Clarke et al. 2004; Dalton 2008; Evans and Tilley 2012a; Evans and Tilley 2012b; Franklin 1992.

In many European countries, religion has been seen as the central social cleavage around which politics has been organised. Although Lipset and Rokkan's original article emphasizes the owner-worker class cleavage as the dominant division, it is actually religion that appeared most important in many countries over the immediate post-war period.² Most European countries had Christian Democratic parties that directly appealed to religious voters, and some countries, most notably the Netherlands, had parties that explicitly appealed to specific denominations.³ An exception to this pattern is Britain. Britain has no Christian Democratic party and traditionally it is the class cleavage that has been seen as the most important.⁴

The continuing importance of the religious cleavage in the rest of Western Europe has been both acknowledged, but also questioned, over the last twenty years. Some have claimed that religion remains an important division in many European societies⁵, but much of the literature has focused on the decline of religion as a political force. Secularisation, it is argued, has resulted in fewer people identifying with, as well as practising, a religion in most countries, meaning that religious divisions have become less important.⁶ More generally, the decline of the religious cleavage is often discussed as part, and parcel, of the decline of social cleavages as a whole.⁷

² Lijphart 1979; Lorwin 1971; Rose and Urwin 1969, 1970.

³ See Lijphart 1975 for details of religious divisions in the Netherlands, and also de Graaf et al 2001 for how this has changed.

⁴ Butler and Stokes 1974; Madeley 1982; Rose 1974; Rose and McAllister 1986.

⁵ Elff 2007, 2009; Knutsen 2004; Norris and Inglehart 2004.

⁶ Dogan 2001, 2004; Wallis and Bruce 1992.

⁷ Dalton 2008; Franklin 1992.

What is common to much of this cross-national work about the decline, or not, of religious politics is that Britain is typically talked of as a ‘mono-religious Protestant’ state in which neither denomination nor religiosity matters.⁸ Norris and Inglehart argue that there are no ‘religious parties’ in Britain and so do not measure links between party and religion over time, and Brooks et al do not measure Catholicism in Britain, ‘as almost all respondents with religious identities are Protestants’.⁹ This is not to say that there is no work that examines religion and voting in Britain. Indeed, even some of the earliest studies of British voting behaviour tend to mention religion *inter alia*. Both Butler and Stokes and Rose show that the reputation of the Church of England as the ‘Tory party at prayer’ is to some extent deserved.¹⁰ Nonetheless, this role of religion is presented as interesting, but not nearly as central as class to party choices. Some recent work has looked at religious politics in Britain more intently, but in all cases in a rather partial way. For example, Kotler-Berkowitz measures religion and its links to party very carefully using data from the 1990s, but fails to analyse whether this has changed over time and does not distinguish between the very different political and religious traditions of England and Scotland.¹¹ Moreover, comparisons over time that do exist are either of single time points¹², only look at denominational difference¹³, or only look at differences by religiosity.¹⁴ Here I look

⁸ Madely 1982, 150.

⁹ Norris and Inglehart 2006, 95.

¹⁰ Butler and Stokes 1974; Rose 1974.

¹¹ Kotler-Berkowitz 2001.

¹² Raymond 2011.

¹³ Seawright 2000; Seawright and Curtice 1995.

¹⁴ Raymond 2011.

at both religiosity and denomination over the most comprehensive time series there is available.

Britain is an important test case. If religious cleavages are alive and well in Britain, then this suggests that the religious cleavage can survive in even the most unpromising of circumstances. Description is thus an important part of this paper: is there a religious cleavage in Britain and if so, how has it changed? A more important part of this paper, however, is explanation. Almost all the above literature, whether comparative or not, fails to examine the mechanisms through which religion affects party choices. This paper also aims to answer the question of why religion matters.

Why might religion matter?

Much of the literature does not explicitly set out the mechanisms that underpin links between religion and vote choice. Here I systematically examine why religion affects voters' choices. There are three important explanations that we might consider. The first is that religion is simply correlated with other dominant explanations of voting behaviour. The most obvious of these is class. As Manza and Wright put it, 'religion can ... provide a basis for social stratification and inequality, in which members of a "dominant" denomination have privileged access to valued positions'.¹⁵ Manza and Wright talk about the 'WASP' denominations in the US, but in the British context we might see this as akin to the dominant Anglican and Presbyterian national churches. Class, historically the most important cleavage in British politics, is the obvious other determinant of vote to examine with reference to denomination. Religiosity, on the other hand, is unlikely to be linked to class, but is very likely to be associated

¹⁵ Manza and Wright 2003, 298.

with birth cohort. Religious people are typically older¹⁶, and older people are more likely to vote for the Conservatives.¹⁷ The first step is thus to account properly for these other socio-structural factors that are associated with party choice, religious denomination and religious practice.

The second mechanism is somewhat different. This is that religion produces, or is at least correlated with, a particular set of values that are more or less similar to the policy offerings of different parties. These values might be ideological. In particular, there is good reason to believe that religious people are socially conservative, and in favour of ‘traditional’ family life and so forth.¹⁸ The alleged emergence of the ‘God gap’ in the US, religiously observant people with conservative attitudes increasingly voting Republican, is one highly visible example of this mechanism.¹⁹ There is also more recent evidence that religious people are more economically right wing and opposed to a redistributive welfare state.²⁰ Either way, if religion affects ideology then the mechanism could be this: parties differ ideologically, religion produces ideological differences in the electorate and, therefore, there are differences in party choice by religion. This is thus analogous to the way in which income affects people’s views on redistribution and those views on redistribution predict party choices.²¹

¹⁶ Tilley 2003; Voas and Crockett 2005.

¹⁷ Russell et al 1992; Tilley 2002; Tilley and Evans 2014.

¹⁸ Clements 2013; Guth 1993; Hayes 1995; Scheepers and van Der Silk 1998; Woodrum 1988.

¹⁹ Jelen 1993; Smidt et al. 2010; Wuthnow 1988.

²⁰ Stegmüller et al 2012.

²¹ Evans and Tilley 2012b.

This explanation is primarily about religiosity, as we might expect all religious behaviour to produce similar changes in values.²² Values can also be affected by denominational adherence, however. In particular, the other values that may be affected by religion are those of national identity. The Church of England is not the Church of Britain, and we might therefore see Anglicanism produce a distinctively English outlook that chimes better with the more English Conservative party. By contrast, the Church of Scotland represents a more British than Scottish outlook. Protestantism in Scotland is associated with the Union Jack and the Empire, symbols that ‘appealed to Scotland’s indigenous Protestant community rather than its immigrant catholic population’.²³ Labour and the SNP are associated much more with Scottishness, and to that extent, we might expect Presbyterians with a weaker Scottish identity to favour the unionist and less Scottish Conservatives. Again, the mechanism is thus that religion creates a certain national identity, and this affects which party is chosen.

The final explanation is related more directly to the history of particular political parties and how divisions based on religion may continue to structure voting behaviour even after the issues that linked parties to particular religious groups have

²² It also depends on parties offering different policy options. In terms of economic left-right policy, according to analyses of manifestos, the Conservatives have been consistently on the right, Labour on the left and the Liberals in between since the 1960s. Nonetheless the gap between Labour and the Conservatives has substantially narrowed since the 1997 election: see Bara 2006; Budge 1999. The social conservative-liberal dimension is more difficult to measure using manifestos, but there appears to be a small gap between Labour and the Conservatives which is quite constant over time according to Budge 1999.

²³ Seawright and Curtice 1995, 325.

faded away. This is the classic Lipset and Rokkan view of cleavages. It is also, under a different name, the traditional view of religious voting in the US in which religious divisions from the 19th century continued to shape patterns of party support 100 years later.²⁴ There are four main historical associations in Britain that we might consider. First, there is the link between the Church of England and the Conservative party. The Church of England is the established church, and as Madeley says, this aligned ‘the supporters of Anglican privileges with the Conservatives’, as the Conservatives were the party of established privilege in the 19th century.²⁵ Second, and by contrast, the Liberals were clearly aligned with Nonconformists in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This was related not just to the disestablishment of Anglicanism in Wales, but also education policy and the temperance movement. Third, Labour explicitly mobilized Catholics as the party grew in the early 20th century. This was in the main related to issues of Irish home rule, which Labour supported, but also explained by the fact that Catholics were predominantly working class Irish immigrants who were natural supporters of the new workers’ party. Finally, a similar story can be told about Scotland in this period. Presbyterians were the established dominant church that allied itself with the unionist Conservative party, and the immigrant Catholic population allied with the newly founded Labour party. These historical divisions over policy were real, and as Wald has shown, using voting data at the aggregate level, they explain why different groups voted for different parties.²⁶

²⁴ Kleppner 1979; Manza and Brooks 1997, 2004; Stanley and Niemi 1991.

²⁵ Madeley 1982, 167.

²⁶ Wald 1983.

This is a description of a ‘frozen cleavage’. The mechanism by which this ‘freezing’ takes place is not entirely clear cut, but an obvious explanation would be that party attachments are, at least partially, heritable. As Giurcanu and Wald put it in the US context, ‘religious subcultures develop strong and durable ties to particular parties ... [that are] transmitted to young members of the group through the normal process of political socialization’.²⁷ This third explanation thus depends on children being socialised into their parents’ religion and their party. Even if this socialisation is imperfect, it will allow the divisions that characterised the political world of people’s parents, grandparents and beyond to continue to shape the way in which people choose political parties today. If this explanation is correct, then religion is not a mask behind which other cleavages (whether economic, ideological or national) lie, rather it is that the conflicts of the past continue to resonate in the contemporary world.

Hypotheses

The first hypothesis relates to the descriptive part of the paper and whether the religious cleavage has changed. As discussed at the beginning of the paper, some have argued that religious cleavages, like other social cleavages, have declined in importance in most countries. In particular, secularization has been claimed to have reduced the effect of religious divisions. Is this true in Britain?

H1: Religious divisions in party support have declined over time.

²⁷ Giureanu and Wald 2013, 3.

Hypotheses 2-4 relate to the explanatory part of the paper and thus how we account for religious divisions. The second hypothesis is that the effects of religion are simply a proxy for the effects of class and other social characteristics. Accounting for class should eliminate any denominational differences due to religion. This general argument holds not just for occupational class, and other related factors such as income, housing and schooling, but also for factors that we know are related to party choice and religious behaviour such as age. Older people are typically more religious than younger people, and older people typically support different parties to younger people.

H2: Any religious divisions in party support are due to class and other social characteristics that predict either denomination and party preference, or religiosity and party preference.

The third hypothesis relates to a different mechanism whereby religion can affect party choice. Here the explanation for differences in party choice by religion is that religion affects people's ideology, especially in terms of social conservatism, but also potentially in terms of economic ideology and national identity. In that sense, the cleavage is due to the differences in values that religious identification and religious practice create.

H3: Religious divisions in party support are due to the differences in values (both ideology and national identity) that religion produces.

The final hypothesis, which I split into two, concerns the frozen cleavage mechanism. If religious divisions today are based on the political conflicts of the past then the religion-party patterns of the 19th and early 20th century should be replicated today. Specifically, we should expect Catholics to support Labour, Nonconformists to support the Liberals and Anglicans and Presbyterians to support the Conservatives.

H4a: Religious divisions in party support are similar to the religious-party links of the past.

The second part of the frozen cleavage story is the mechanism of transmission. Accounting for people's parents' party identifications should substantially reduce the effect of religion, given that the dominant mechanism depends on parents passing on their religious group's party preferences to their children.

H4b: Religious divisions in party support are due to parental party attachments.

Data and methods

These hypotheses are tested using two sets of surveys. The first group of surveys derives from the British Election Study (BES), which has been conducted at every election in Britain since 1964. For the over-time analysis I use all surveys apart from the ones conducted in 1974, 2001 and 2005, which either did not have measures of religious identity, measures of religious attendance or both. To test hypothesis 4b I

use a subset of the BES surveys from 1979-1997 which contain a question about parental party identification. The second data source is the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA), which has been fielded in almost every year since 1983. For the over-time analysis I use all 25 BSA surveys, but the regression models are limited to the 1996-2010 period as key questions were not asked in earlier surveys. I examine Scotland separately from England and Wales (which I combine and refer to as England from here on), given the very different religious traditions of Scotland and England.²⁸ The main dependent variable of party choice is operationalised using the two party identification questions on the BES and a set of three party identification and vote intention questions on the BSA. Using measures of party identification rather than simple vote choice allows the measurement of party preference in non-election years and also eliminates the problem of tactical voting which the first-past-the-post British electoral system generates. BES respondents in England are asked:

*‘Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat or what’
[IF NO] ‘Do you generally think of yourself as a little closer to one of the parties than the others?’*

After 1970 in Scotland and Wales respondents were also explicitly given the option of SNP or Plaid Cymru respectively. Around a half of initial non-identifiers on the first question were willing to place themselves ‘closer to a party’ on the second question. Across the whole 1964-2010 dataset less than 10 per cent of respondents give no party identity. This rises over time, but even in 2010 only 15 per cent of

²⁸ In the main, the data preclude analysing Wales separately from England due to the small number of people surveyed in Wales. If England and Wales are examined separately, there appear to be no major differences (although the effect of Nonconformism on support for the Liberals is very slightly higher in Wales than in England), so grouping England and Wales together seems reasonable.

people are unwilling to assign themselves a party identification. The BSA question is slightly different as it does not prompt people with a party label. The three questions are as below:

*‘Generally speaking do you think of yourself as a supporter of any one political party?’
[IF NO] ‘Do you think of yourself as a little closer to one political party than to others?’
[IF NO] ‘If there were a general election tomorrow, which political party do you think you would be most likely to support?’*

Across the whole 1983-2010 dataset 17 per cent of people give no party choice (although this figure is notably lower in election years), and there is the same rise in choosing no party over the period, from slightly above 10 per cent in the 1980s to slightly above 20 per cent in the 2000s. For both the BSA and BES data people who were unwilling to give a party choice were excluded.

In England (and Wales) identifiers with minor parties (these are mainly the Greens and the UKIP) and the Welsh nationalists (Plaid Cymru) are also dropped from the analysis. Very few people choose these parties and for the BES data overall less than 2 per cent of people identify with parties that are not the Conservatives, Liberals or Labour in England, which rises to 3 per cent in 2010. In Scotland, SNP identifiers are included, but identifiers with minor parties (mainly the Scottish Socialists and the Greens) are not included in the analysis. Again, these smaller parties attract few supporters: 1 per cent for the whole BES sample and 2 per cent in 2010.

Measuring religion

Religion is measured using both a question about religiosity (church attendance) and a question about denominational identification. For denomination in England, for both sets of data, people are categorised as Church of England, Catholic,

Nonconformist²⁹ and no religion. For the whole BSA dataset, these groups make up 36 per cent, 10 per cent, 7 per cent and 47 per cent of the sample respectively. In Scotland, for both sets of data, people are categorised as Church of Scotland, Catholic and no religion. For the whole BSA dataset, these groups make up 38 per cent, 15 per cent and 47 per cent of the sample respectively. In both sets of surveys the question format consisted of asking first whether people regarded themselves as ‘belonging to any particular religion’, and then following up an affirmative answer with an unprompted ‘which one?’.³⁰ Those who gave any other response to the question on religious identity are excluded from analysis. These are people who are either non-Christian (around 5 per cent of the English original BSA sample, who are in the main Muslim), identify as simply ‘Christian’ (around 3 per cent of the English original BSA sample), or finally identify as Church of Scotland but who in live England (less than 1 per cent of the English original BSA sample) or identify as Church of England/Nonconformist³¹ but live in Scotland (around 4 per cent of the Scottish original BSA sample).

²⁹ This category is mainly made up of Methodists (slightly over half this group) and Baptists (around a fifth of this group), but also includes the United Reformed Church, Congregationalists, independent Welsh chapels, Mormons, Quakers, Pentecostals, the Salvation Army and those who are identified in England and Wales by the survey as ‘other Protestant’ without a precise code.

³⁰ Although it should be noted that the question in the BES before 1979 simply asks ‘What is your religion?’ which means the number of people with no religion increases quite sharply between 1970 and 1979.

³¹ The 2 per cent of non-specified ‘other Protestants’ are categorised as part of the Church of Scotland group. In Scotland these are likely to be people from the Free Church of Scotland (colloquially known as the Wee Frees) or the Free Presbyterian church (colloquially known as the Wee Wee Frees) rather than, as in England and Wales, smaller Nonconformist churches.

Religious practice is measured using a straightforward question about church attendance. The exact wording of this question for both the BSA and BES (after the 1970s) includes the preamble, ‘apart from such special occasions as weddings, funeral and baptisms’, which means that any reported attendance is presumably a choice rather than a duty to friends and family.³² For the over time analyses, I simply distinguish between practising and non-practising Church of England identifiers in England, and between practising and non-practising Church of Scotland identifiers in Scotland. Practising in this context is taken to be attendance of more than a few times a year. In later models, in which the data are pooled over many years, religious attendance can be broken down further and for all religious denominations, not just the dominant one. The distinction made is between regular attendees (those who go to church several times a month or more), people with irregular attendance (several times a year or more) and those who attend church once a year or less.

Measuring social characteristics and values

The models that test hypotheses 2-4 also include a large number of important control variables. These can be divided into a) socio-structural factors to test hypothesis 2 b) ideological values to test hypothesis 3 and c) measures of parental party identity to test hypothesis 4. The first of these includes measures of social position: occupational social class (using a slightly modified version of the commonly employed Erikson-Goldthorpe class schema), household income (top decile, 9th decile, 4th quintile, 3rd quintile, 2nd quintile and 1st quintile), education (degree, some higher education, A-levels or equivalent, O-levels or equivalent, CSEs or

³² Prior to 1983, the BES does not include this preamble. This means ‘voluntary’ church attendance in the 1960s and 1970s is probably lower than the data suggest.

equivalent, apprenticeship, no qualifications), private schooling (attended private primary or secondary school, only attended state schools) and housing type (council housing, private rental or owner-occupier). Also included are other measures linked to the basic class cleavage in British politics such as employment status (in work, retired, unemployed/incapacitated or housewife/househusband), sector of work (public or private) and trade union membership (current member, former member or never member). Finally I include social characteristics that are known to be connected to both party choice and religion such as sex, birth cohort (categorised into seven 10-year birth cohorts), region (for England only) and ethnicity (white or non-white).

The second group of independent variables measure the basic values and ideology of the electorate. First is a measure of economic left-right position, second, a measure of social conservatism and third, a group of variables that measure national identity. As discussed, these correspond to three distinct possibilities: that religious people, regardless of denomination, are more socially conservative, that religious people, regardless of denomination, are more economically right wing, or that certain denominations have a distinctive form of national identity. The first two of these are measured using batteries of questions that tap into issues of inequality, redistribution and public ownership and, second, issues of censorship, child rearing and crime. Both have received extensive testing of reliability and validity.³³ For left-right ideology, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statements:

'There is one law for the rich and one law for the poor'

³³ Evans and Heath 1995; Evans et al. 1996; Heath et al. 1994; Sturgis 2002.

'Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth'
'Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers'
'Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off'
'Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance'

There are five similar items for social conservatism-liberalism:

'Schools should teach children to obey authority'
'Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards'
'People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences'
'Young people today do not have enough respect for traditional British values'
'For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence'

Both sets of questions had a Likert scale response format: 'Strongly agree', 'Agree', 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'Disagree', 'Strongly disagree'. The individual item responses are summed and divided by five to make two scales.³⁴

To measure national identity, respondents were asked, 'Which of these words describes the way you think of yourself?', and were then given a list that included the descriptions, British, English, Scottish, Irish, European, as well as number of other options. If someone gave more than one option, they were then asked, 'Which one best describes the way you think of yourself?'. For respondents in England I create a five category variable measuring Englishness versus Britishness. People who thought of themselves as solely English, as better described as English than British, as better described as British than English, solely British and neither English nor British. For people in Scotland I create a similar variable that measures Scottishness versus Britishness. Also included are two variables that measure whether respondents think of themselves as Irish or European.

³⁴ For the data used here, the left-right scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82 and the social conservatism-liberalism scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.69.

Finally, parental party identity is measured using two questions that ask respondents to name the party with which their mother and their father identified. This question is only available for the BES up to 1997. Of the available sample around 80 per cent of people were willing to identify their mother/father's preferred party.

Analysis

Is there an enduring religious cleavage?

First, how have religion and party choice varied over the last 50 years in Britain? I start with Scotland. Figure 1 shows the relationship between religion and Labour party support in Scotland using the BES data that cover 1964 to 2010 and the BSA data which cover 1983 to 2010. The graph for the BSA data shows 3 year moving averages to reduce some of the 'noise'. Unfortunately the BES question on religious identity changed in 1979 so I cannot reliably measure those with no religion before 1979 as the numbers are so small.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

There are three important points to note here. First, there are very large effects of religious denomination for both sets of data. Catholics are considerably more likely to be Labour supporters than those with no religion, who are in turn considerably more likely to be Labour supporters than practising Presbyterians. These patterns are essentially identical for the BES and BSA. Second, there are clear effects of religious observance. People who identify with the Church of Scotland but do not actually attend services are no different to those who do not have a religious identification. Third, while the total proportion of people supporting Labour varies over time, the

pattern of religious voting appears to remain almost completely constant. There is a 30-40 per cent gap between Catholics and practising Presbyterians in their support for Labour, which is as evident in the 2000s as it was in the 1960s. This lack of change was tested more formally by running a logit regression model with year as an interval level variable, religion and an interaction between year and religion. There is no statistically significant change in the difference between practising Presbyterian and Catholic Labour support for either the BES (1964-2010) or BSA (1983-2010) data (see appendix for full details).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

In Table 1, the BSA data are grouped by decade, making it possible to distinguish between practising and non-practising Catholics. As Table 1 shows, the impact of religious denomination is large, but the impact of religious practice is confined to Presbyterians in Scotland. Over three quarters of Catholics, *regardless* of whether they attend church or not, support Labour, while practising Presbyterians are twenty percentage points less likely to support Labour than non-practising Presbyterians in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

There are similar, though less extreme, patterns in England. Figure 2 shows the change over time in Labour support by religion for the different religious groups. Here the ‘no religion’ category can be extended back to the 1960s, although, to be clear, it is not entirely comparable to the irreligious group from 1979 onwards.

Nonetheless, the basic pattern of Catholics supporting Labour more than those with no religion, and the irreligious supporting Labour more than practising Anglicans is surprisingly similar to Scotland. Again, while there is a great deal of change over time in Labour's total support, there is little change in these differences by religion. Moreover, while the gap between Catholics and practising Anglicans is smaller than the gap between Catholics and practising Presbyterians, it is still large: over 25 percentage points on average. Again, changes over time in this gap were tested more formally and again there is no statistically significant change in the difference between practicing Anglican and Catholic Labour support for either the BES (1964-2010) or BSA (1983-2010) data (see Table A1 for Scotland and A2 for England).

There are also some differences between England and Scotland. The first obvious difference is that there is the extra group of Nonconformists, who lie somewhere in between the practising Anglican group and the irreligious in terms of Labour support. There is also more of a distinction between non-practising Anglicans and those with no religion than was the case in Scotland. Non-practising Anglicans are consistently less likely to support Labour than those with no religion. Table 2 breaks down the religious denominations by church attendance like Table 1.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Again there are broad similarities with Scotland. For example, the large difference between Catholics and Anglicans remains, as does the lack of change in how religious practice affects party choices. Nonetheless, there are some differences. First, there is an effect of religious practice that appears to decrease Labour support

amongst all three religious groups in all decades. Those who simply identify with a religion are more likely to support Labour than those who attend church relatively regularly. Nonetheless, Anglican church attendance seems to have a much greater effect on reducing Labour support than does Catholic or Nonconformist church attendance. Second, this pattern is constant for Anglicans and Catholics, but does change for Nonconformists. In the 1980s there was much less support for Labour from practising Nonconformists, but this difference reduced substantially in the 1990s.

Is this truly a 'religious' cleavage?

Religion matters. It matters more in Scotland than in England, but in both nations religion is an exceptionally good predictor of party choice. Even at the height of class voting in Britain, the difference between the middle and working class was only the same as the difference between Catholics and practising Anglicans in England, and was less than the difference between Catholics and practising Presbyterians in Scotland. Moreover these differences are quite constant over time (with the sole exception of practising Nonconformists between the 1980s and 1990s). Of course, this sheds little light on why religion matters. Hypothesis 2 suggests that these religious differences are illusory, that they are due to other social structural factors that correlate with both religion and party preference. Equally, hypothesis 3 suggests that the explanation for religious differences in party support is that they are due to ideology or national identity.

To test hypotheses 2 and 3 I run a series of multinomial logit regression models on the pooled BSA data for which I have full measures available (every survey from

1996-2010). The data are pooled as there is no evidence that there were major changes in the impact of religion over the forty year period, let alone this narrower 14 year period (including interactions between year and religion in the models makes no difference to the results shown here). Model 1 contains just religion and year as independent variables. Note that religious practice is broken down further by separating out regular churchgoers (church going of several times a month or more) from irregular churchgoers (church going of more than once a year) from non-practising (church going of once a year or less). Model 2 then adds socio-structural variables and model 3 adds measures of ideology and national identity.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

The full tables of these models are in the appendix (table A3 for Scotland and A4 for England), but figure 3 shows predicted probabilities from the models of the impact of religion on Labour support in Scotland. The figure shows the difference between the two religious groups and the no religion group. Model 1 confirms what we have already seen (to generate the predicted probabilities the year is set to 2010). Practising (whether regularly or irregularly) Presbyterians are less Labour than those with no religion, non-practising Presbyterians are very similar to those with no religion, and all Catholics are much more Labour than those with no religion. Frequency of attendance appears to make little difference; the most devout churchgoers who attend almost weekly look very similar to those who attend less frequently. This is true for both Presbyterians and Catholics.

More interesting though is the comparison among the three models. First, the inclusion of social structural controls such as class makes very little difference to the patterns of association between religion and party. Practising Presbyterians move a little closer to those with no religion and Catholics in terms of Labour support (due to Presbyterians being slightly more middle class and older), but there is little overall change. Second, the inclusion of ideology and national identity actually slightly widens the gap between practising Presbyterians and those with no religion. Thus the results of model 3 look almost identical to the results of model 1.³⁵ We cannot account for religious voting in Scotland by reference to the different social position of people in different religious groups, and we cannot account for religious voting by reference to differences in ideology, whether economic, social, or national. For Scotland, hypotheses 2 and 3 can be refuted. How far does this analysis apply to England?

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Figure 4 shows a similar set of predicted probabilities from a similar set of models for England.³⁶ Again model 1 in effect just replicates the earlier graphs with religion

³⁵ The predicted probabilities for models 2 and 3 need to hold the control variables constant, and hence are for a white man in the routine non-manual class, who has a private sector full-time job, who gained O-levels from a state school, who is not a trade union member, who is in the middle income quintile, who owns his own house and who was born between 1946 and 1955. For model 3 the ideological variables are set at their means (for Scotland). The hypothetical person has a more Scottish than British national identity, but does not think of himself as Irish or European.

³⁶ The predicted probabilities from models 2 and 3 for England are for a white man in the routine non-manual class, who has a private sector full-time job, who gained O-levels from a state school, who is

and year as the only variables included. Again the difference between regular and irregular churchgoers is slight for all three religious groups, but the difference between non-practising and practising people is evident for all three in England. Practising Anglicans, Nonconformists and Catholics are all less Labour than their non-practising counterparts. Model 2 introduces social-structural controls and there are some differences from model 1. In the main, we see a reduction in the effect of religious practice. All three groups within each denomination become more similar. Nonetheless it is clear that class, cohort and so forth cannot explain away the effects of religious denomination. There is still an almost 20 percentage point gap between Catholics and practising Anglicans in their support for Labour. It is interesting that the denominational differences remain, but, with suitable controls added to the model, the effects of religious attendance become much more marked for Anglicans than they do for Nonconformists and Catholics. Model 3 emphasizes that point further. Controlling for ideology and national identity again reduces the differences between religious groups in England. But while the effects of religious denomination may be smaller, in many ways the pattern now matches the pattern seen in Scotland. Nonconformists as a group look rather similar: regardless of religious practice they are less likely to support Labour (and in fact more likely to support the Liberals). Catholics as a group look rather similar too: regardless of religious practice they are more likely to support Labour. Finally, Anglicans look a bit different. Practising Anglicans are much less likely to support Labour, 13 percentage points less than

not a trade union member, who is in the middle income quintile, who owns his own house, lives in the North and who was born between 1946 and 1955. For model 3 the ideological variables are set at their means (for England and Wales) and the hypothetical person has a more British than English national identity, but does not think of himself as Irish or European.

secularists for both regular and irregular churchgoers, but non-practising Anglicans are more similar to those with no religion.

It appears, therefore, that party choices are associated with religion because of the frozen religious cleavage, not because it is a product of another economic, social or national cleavage. In both cases, people in the dominant national church are less enamoured of the Labour party, but only when they are socialised within the church. People who identify with one of the non-national churches, whether Nonconformist or Catholic, do not require this socialisation within church, however. As part of the minority their allegiance to the Labour party, for Catholics, and the Liberal party, for Nonconformists, appears tied to their religious identity regardless of practice. Overall, these results thus appear to support hypothesis 4a. Denominations are linked to different parties in a particular way. Figure 5 shows the relative chances of supporting a particular party for different denominations relative to those with no religion. As we have seen previously, Catholics, unlike in every other European country, are more likely to support the left. Nonconformists are more likely to support the Liberals and practising members of the established churches in both Scotland and England are more likely to support the establishment party of the Conservatives. As hypothesis 4a suggested these are the same patterns evident in the early 20th century.

FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

There is a second piece of evidence though that relates to the way in which parents socialise their children. For frozen cleavages to persist children need to inherit their

partisanship to some extent, and this inheritance must account, at least in part, for the denominational differences in party identity. This can be tested by modelling party support using religion and including a measure of parental party attachment. Unfortunately this measure is only available for the BES surveys prior to 2001, so the data used here come from the 1979, 1983, 1987, 1992 and 1997 surveys. Controls for most social characteristics (income and employment status are not available) are also included, but none of the ideological and identity measures used previously. The absence of the latter measures should not be a problem given that they had only small effects. Table 3 shows the results of these models in terms of predicted probabilities of supporting Labour (Table A5 and A6 in the appendix show the full models for Scotland and England respectively).³⁷ Model 4 includes a simplified measure of religion and most of the demographic controls used in models 2 and 3 earlier. Model 5 adds in parental party attachment (for both mother and father).

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

As Table 3 shows the inclusion of parental party identification does not eliminate the effect of religion, but it does drastically reduce it. The gap between Catholics and practising Presbyterians in Scotland falls from 37 per cent to 22 per cent when

³⁷ For model 4, the predicted probabilities are for a white woman in the routine non-manual class, who has O-levels from a state school, who is not a trade union member, who owns her own house and who was born in the 1950s. For model 5 the predicted probabilities are the same except that I set mother's party identification to no ID and father's party identification to no ID. The differences in the effect of religion between models 4 and 5 appear to be due to the political factor of parental party support rather than other background variables, such as parental income, as the addition of father's social class to model 4 makes no difference to the results.

parental party identification is held consistent. The gap between Catholics and practising Anglicans in England is also substantially reduced from 23 per cent to 16 per cent. While hypothesis 4b is not completely supported, these models suggest that parental socialisation into a religious and party identity is an important mechanism that contributes to the persistence of the link between religion and party loyalty.

Conclusion

British voters, perhaps surprisingly, do ‘do religion’. Religious cleavages in both Scotland and England are large and stable over time. Even more importantly, these divisions cannot be reduced to differences in the social make-up of the religious groups, or to ideological differences between religious communities, whether on economic, moral or national identity grounds. In that sense, these are truly denominational divisions that appear to reflect conflicts from the beginning of the 20th century or even earlier. Anglicans and Presbyterians are more likely to support the Conservatives; Catholics are more likely to support Labour; and Nonconformists are more likely to support the Liberals. Not all denominations are equal, however. In particular, identification with the established church in both Scotland and England seems to have little impact on party choice unless it is accompanied by church attendance. This makes sense as many people may have a lingering identification with established churches, but this is, by its very nature, a much weaker identification than with one of the minority religious groups. There is an oft quoted footnote from Butler and Stokes that perhaps illustrates this:

One of our interviewers recorded a colloquy with a respondent who said ‘none’ in answer to her original question about religious affiliation. She then inquired, on her own initiative, whether she ought to put him down as ‘atheist’ or ‘agnostic’. After hearing her account [of the difference

between the two] ... the respondent said, 'You had better put me down as Church of England'³⁸

Identifying with the national state church simply means less than identifying oneself as Catholic or Methodist and therefore being a member of a minority group. Thus denominational identification creates a party political difference only between practising Presbyterians or Anglicans on the one hand and Catholics or Nonconformists on the other. It appears that these differences are due, at least in part, to the way in which partisan affiliations are passed down from parents to their offspring.

All of this marks out the religious cleavage as perhaps different in type to other social cleavages in Britain, and also hints at why we might not have seen such a drastic decline in the role of religious cleavages in politics more generally.³⁹ The class cleavage is about inequalities in society and the role that parties play in reducing or increasing those inequalities. Thus class mainly manifests itself by affecting people's ideology which, given differences among the parties in terms of that ideology, will affect people's party choices. Religion, at least in Britain, is not like that. Instead it is a relic of past associations between groups and parties. This highlights the point that the reasons why class has declined in political importance in many countries may not apply to religion in the same way. This has important implications for how we view religious cleavages and, more generally, how we explain the persistence of some cleavages when others seem to change rapidly.

³⁸ Butler and Stokes 1974, 160.

³⁹ Elff 2007.

These findings, while specific to Britain and the religious cleavage, suggest that cleavages that seem to be built on very little today can ironically be more resilient than those that seem to be built more firmly on the self-interest of today's voters. The reason for this is that the cleavage that this paper looks at is, in some senses, simply a marker of parents' and grandparents' party affiliation from an era when religion did matter for self-interested voters. As crucially very few people change their denomination from their parents, other than to give up religion⁴⁰, someone's religious denomination tells us in what kind of political household their parents and grandparents were raised. If I was brought up in a Scottish Catholic household then it is likely that I was brought up in Labour household and my parents were brought up in a Labour household. More importantly, as religion is itself a product of parental socialisation, someone's religion also tells us something about the effectiveness of socialisation within that family.⁴¹ Religion is thus a stronger, more resilient cleavage because it is not about contemporary politics and contemporary party policy, but because it is rooted in those socialisation processes. This suggests that cleavages that sustain themselves past any resonance in contemporary political debate are likely to be ones for which interlocking socialised identities are key.

That said, the exact method of socialisation in the case presented here is not completely clear. Parental party affiliations can only partially account for the relationship between religion and party choice. This may be due to relatively poor

⁴⁰ Hayes 1996; Voas and Crockett 2005.

⁴¹ This is a key difference with the US, in which secularization has not taken place to the same extent, and may explain why denominational differences in partisanship, especially the link between Catholics and the Democratic party, have declined since the 1970s. See Manza and Brooks 2004.

recall measures of what parents thought and did⁴², but it may also be due to other underlying socialisation mechanisms. For example, the extent to which people of different religious denominations live and work in different neighbourhoods and different areas of the country may affect how people form party attachments.

There is a more important caveat, however. The number of people effectively socialised into a religious identity, and thus a matching party identity, has fallen dramatically in most countries. Divisions among religious groups may be stable, but the number of people in each of those religious groups has changed considerably. In Britain in the mid 1980s, according to the BSA, around 18 per cent of the English and Welsh population who identified with a party were practising Anglicans, around 12 per cent were Catholic and 10 per cent were Nonconformists. By 2010, the number of practising Anglicans, even on the generous definition of practising used here, had almost halved to 11 per cent; the number of Nonconformists had halved to 5 per cent and the number of Catholics remained constant at 12 per cent. There is a similar story in Scotland, where the number of practising Presbyterians decreased from around a quarter of the population to nearer 10-15 per cent and the number of

⁴² It is notable that for the pooled BES 1979-1997 data, many more people thought their parents voted Labour (44 per cent of fathers and 40 per cent of mothers in England) than Conservative (25 per cent of both fathers and mothers in England), suggesting that people's accuracy when recalling parental party choices may not be very good. As Katz et al 1980 show, the consistency of responses to parental party identification questions is relatively high, but answers about parental party support do become biased towards respondents' own party preference over time. Both biases towards current preferences and errors in recall should reduce the impact of controlling for parental party choices on the effect of religion on current party choice, suggesting that, if anything, better measures of parental party support would reduce the effect of religion on party preference further.

Catholics similarly decreased from around a quarter of people to 10-15 per cent. In effect, while some families are socialising their children into religious and party identities, others are not. As Best argues, when thinking about social cleavages, we need to consider group size as well as the strength of association among those groups and parties.⁴³ In this sense religion has become less important. There are fewer people in the groups that identify with specific parties. Nonetheless, there is still a substantial minority of people in Britain that has a religious identity that matters for party choice, and in most other European countries this group is considerably larger. Given this, we should not only take seriously the role of the religious cleavage in shaping party choices in the past, but also think about how it will matter in the future.

⁴³ Best 2011.

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