

Counting Religion in Britain

A Monthly Round-Up of New Statistical Sources

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OPINION POLLS

Importance of being Christian in order to be ‘truly British’: NatCen findings

The proportion of Britons believing that it is very or fairly important to be a Christian in order to be ‘truly British’ has declined from 32% in 1995 and 31% in 2003 to 24% in 2013 and 19% in 2023, according to the chapter on national identity by John Curtice and Alex Scholes in *British Social Attitudes*, 41, published online on 3 September 2024. The 19% figure in 2023 varied somewhat by demographics, being: 18% among those self-identifying as British, 21% among those self-identifying as not British, 10% among those aged 18–34, 17% among those aged 45–54, 35% among those aged 65 and over, 19% among white persons, 17% among other ethnicities, 14% among those educated to degree level, 28% among those with GCSEs or equivalent, 31% among those with no educational qualifications, 19% in England, and 16% in Scotland. The data derive from (a) an International Social Survey Programme module on national identity and citizenship that was answered by 1,611 respondents to the 2023 British Social Attitudes Survey and (b) separately by 1,574 respondents to the 2023 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey. The chapter can be read at:

- <https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/british-social-attitudes-41-national-identity>

UK general election, 2024: religion and voting behaviour—YouGov polling

Religion remained an important predictor of voting behaviour in the UK 2024 general election, according to an online post-election poll of 2,182 British adults by YouGov on 5–8 July 2024, undertaken on behalf of Ekaterina Kolpinskaya and Stuart Fox of the University of Exeter. In particular: Anglicans remained core Conservative supporters, 45% voting for the party, accounting for 40% of its support; Catholic support for Labour, once rock-solid, continued to erode, just 32% of Catholics voting for the party, much the same proportion as in the electorate as a whole; backing for Labour and, especially, the Liberal Democrats was strong among religiously unaffiliated voters, who amounted to 56% and 58% of their supporters, respectively; and 47% of Reform UK voters were non-religious with 27% Anglicans. These results are said to align with patterns in the Understanding Society and British Election Study datasets. Kolpinskaya and Fox have a blog on the research at:

- <https://www.electionanalysis.uk/uk-election-analysis-2024/section-2-voters-polls-and-results/religion-and-voting-behaviour-in-the-2024-general-election/>

There is also a University of Exeter press release at:

- <https://news.exeter.ac.uk/faculty-of-humanities-arts-and-social-sciences/religion-remained-an-important-predictor-of-voting-behaviour-in-the-2024-general-election-analysis-shows/>

Marriage in church: who should walk the bride down the aisle?

When it comes to the marriage of a heterosexual couple in church, the majority (54%) of Britons still favours the tradition of the bride’s father (or a substitute) walking her down the aisle at the start of the wedding service, according to a recent YouGov poll. This is especially the case among Reform UK voters (72%), Conservatives (70%), and the over-65s (67%). One in eight people (12%) preferred the bride and groom to walk down the aisle together, this being

most appealing to Labour voters (16%), Liberal Democrats (15%), Londoners (15%), and 18–24s (15%). Just 4% overall, and no more than 6% in any demographic, thought the bride should walk down the aisle on her own, while 4% chose another option and 26% were undecided. YouGov interviewed 4,483 adults online on 5 September 2024. The full data are available at:

- <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/survey-results/daily/2024/09/05/72c2e/3>

Round-up of latest YouGov online trackers on religion

A majority (57%) of Britons continues to believe that, on the whole, religion has a negative influence on the world, with just 22% thinking it has a positive influence. YouGov interviewed 2,048 adults on 31 July 2024, with data available at:

- <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/trackers/the-influence-of-religion-on-the-world-according-to-brits>

Three in ten Britons believe there is a God or gods. One fifth (21%) do not believe in a God or gods but do believe there is some sort of spiritual greater power. The plurality (38%) believes neither in god(s) nor a spiritual greater power. One in eight (12%) are undecided what to think. YouGov interviewed 1,941 adults on 5 August 2024, with data available at:

- <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/trackers/brits-beliefs-about-gods>

Religious Studies is considered one of the least significant subjects to teach in secondary schools. Only 12% of Britons judge it very important to do so, with a further 27% saying it is quite important. The majority deems it either not very important (32%) or not at all important (24%). YouGov interviewed 1,684 adults on 24–26 August 2024, with data available at:

- https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/P_Main_Political_Tracker_Survey_Rotation12_sr_2.pdf

The majority of Britons (54%) favours shops in England and Wales being able to open for as long as they want on Sundays, which would be in contravention of the Sunday Trading Act 1994. One quarter argues that shops should only be allowed to open for a maximum of six hours on Sundays, as determined by the Act. However, 13% still believe that shops should not be permitted to open at all on Sundays. YouGov interviewed 1,678 adults on 14–16 September 2024, with data available at:

- https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/P_Main_Political_Tracker_Survey_Rotation12_sr_5.pdf

FAITH ORGANIZATION STUDIES

Church of England cathedral statistics, 2023

The Church of England Data Services team has published the 2023 edition of *Cathedral Statistics*, covering all 42 mainland Church of England cathedrals together with Westminster Abbey. Among other things, the survey asked about attendance at Sunday and midweek services, Easter and Christmas services, school visits, baptisms, marriages, and funerals, musical activities, and volunteering. Headline findings are summarized thus: ‘By most measures, attendance, participation, and engagement were higher in 2023 than in 2022, but lower than they were in 2019 [before the Covid-19 pandemic]. Those few exceptions where the 2023 figures were lower than those from 2022 – particularly baptisms, marriages, and graduations – suggest that the 2022 numbers included some things that had been postponed from previous years.’ The report is available at:

- <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/cathedralstatistics2023.pdf>

Three recent Institute for Jewish Policy Research reports

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) has published three new reports this month, all based on data from JPR's Jewish population research panel of adults aged 16 and over. David Graham's 11-page *Shana Tova (Happy New Year): The Observance of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur Among Jews in the UK* reveals that 74% of UK Jewry observe these High Holy Days at the start of the Jewish New Year, making it the most widely observed Jewish festival. The report, drawing on the November-December 2022 panel, is available at:

- <https://www.jpr.org.uk/reports/shana-tova-observance-rosh-hashana-and-yom-kippur-among-jews-uk>

Carli Lessof and Roy Shinar Cohen have written the 12-page *What Do Jews in the UK Think of Israel and its Leadership, and How Has This Changed Since October 7?* They argue that 'British Jews are showing growing pessimism about Israel's future alongside significant disapproval of the current Israeli leadership' (four in five UK Jews disapproving of the incumbent Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu). The report, mainly drawing on the June-July 2024 panel, is available at:

- <https://www.jpr.org.uk/reports/what-do-jews-uk-think-about-israel-and-its-leaders-and-how-has-changed-october-7>

Carli Lessof's 10-page *Antisemitism in Schools: How Prevalent is it, and How Might it Affect Parents' Decisions About Where to Educate Their Children Post-October 7?* finds that, among Jewish parents with school-age children at Jewish or mainstream schools, 23% claimed their child or children had experienced anti-Semitism post-7 October 2023, either at school, in the vicinity of school, or travelling to or from school. The discussion about the potential impact of anti-Semitism in schools on future parental choices for a Jewish or mainstream school for their children is interesting but perhaps somewhat hypothetical. As Lessof acknowledges, 'At this time, we do not have evidence that would suggest antisemitism has moved up the ranks of drivers influencing parents' choices about the schools they would prefer for their children'. The report, drawing on the June-July 2024 panel, is available at:

- <https://www.jpr.org.uk/reports/antisemitism-schools-how-prevalent>

Economic contribution of British Muslims

Research by think tank Equi calculates that British Muslims generate £69.1 billion a year for the UK economy, comprising £42 billion from the Muslim workforce, £24.7 billion from Muslim-owned businesses, and £2.4 billion in charitable donations and volunteering. Moreover, it is argued, 'the globally connected nature of the British Muslim population has positioned the UK as a hotspot for Islamic financial investments, Muslim tourism, and halal industries. London has become the West's Islamic finance capital, with UK based Islamic banks controlling assets worth £5.73 billion ...' At the same time, it is suggested, there is a potential British Muslim 'brain and wealth drain', posing a risk to the UK economy and society. According to polling by Savanta (which interviewed online on 6–19 August 2024 1,024 British Muslims and a cross-section of 2,237 British adults), 'British Muslims are 50% more likely to want to leave the UK than the average British citizen', escaping religious discrimination being the third commonest reason given for Muslims wishing to emigrate. The polling data have not yet been published in full, but *The Economic Contribution of British Muslims to the UK's Growth and Prosperity, and the Risk of Exodus* (37 pages, including appendices, bibliography, and copious endnotes), by Mohammed Sinan Siyech and Sofiah Laila Shah, is available at:

- <https://equi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Equi-Economic-Contribution-Report.pdf>

OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Religion of civil servants, 2022–24

The Cabinet Office has published tables of the number of civil servants by religion or belief and responsibility level at 31 March in each of the three years 2022, 2023, and 2024. In 2024, there were 542,840 civil servants, 30.6% of whom were Christian, 0.3% Buddhist, 1.3% Hindu, 0.2% Jewish, 4.0% Muslim, 0.9% Sikh, 3.2% another religion, and 31.1% no religion. The remaining 28.3% of civil servants either made no active declaration about their religion or belief or declined to disclose it. The tables are available at:

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/civil-service-employment-by-religion-or-belief-and-responsibility-level-2022-to-2024>

APPENDIX: KEYWORDS/TAGS

Alex Scholes, anti-Semitism, belief in God or gods, Benjamin Netanyahu, brain drain, British Social Attitudes Survey, Cabinet Office, Carli Lessof, choice of schools, Church of England cathedrals, civil servants, David Graham, economic contribution, Ekaterina Kolpinskaya, emigration, Equi, general election, Institute for Jewish Policy Research, heterosexual couples, importance of being Christian, importance of teaching Religious Studies in secondary school, International Social Survey Programme, Israel, Jewish New Year, Jews, John Curtice, marriages in church, Mohammed Sinan Siyech, Muslims, religion as negative influence on the world, religious education, religious profession, Rosh Hashana, Roy Shinar Cohen, Savanta, Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, Sofiah Laila Shah, Stuart Fox, Sunday shop opening hours, Sunday trading, truly British, University of Exeter, voting behaviour, walking the bride down the aisle, Yom Kippur, YouGov