

New data revealed on 2015 voting intentions of non-believers

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The British Election Study has shed new light on the voting intentions of non-believers, and highlighted the power of religious minorities to shape elections in the future. Benjamin Jones explores how atheists, agnostics and the irreligious plan to vote in 2015, and considers some of the possible long term electoral consequences of religious politics.

Whilst confirming the long-known, sustained collapse in the number of British people who describe themselves as religious, the British Election Study (BES) [research](#) also breaks down how the non-religious intend to vote in next year's general election, which has produced some interesting results. Additionally, the study provides detailed information on how different religious minorities plan to vote, and to what degree they vote in blocs.

Whilst atheism or agnosticism have been seen by many as of the left (particularly so during the Cold War), the study's data (broken down here by the "British Religion In Numbers" [blog](#)) finds that the "no-religion" or "none" vote is actually quite diffuse in its 2015 voting intention.

Although the "nones" do tend to favour the Labour Party (39.6%), the Conservatives manage surprisingly well among the "no religion" demographic, coming in second with 26.7%. In third is the United Kingdom Independence Party on 12.4%, closely followed by the LibDems on 10.5%. The remaining 10.8% of "nones" voted for other parties. If the Tory and UKIP vote is combined this puts the right as a whole on 39.1%, just half a percentage point below Labour.

Whilst there is a skew to the left among the "nones", their voting intentions are not hugely dissimilar to the wider public. For a rough comparison, a YouGov/Sunday Times [poll](#) conducted on the 16th and 17th of October found the Conservatives on 32%, Labour on 35% and the LibDems on 7% (with all other parties on 27%, including UKIP on 16%).

Comparing this poll with the "nones", we find that among non-believers the Conservatives are down just 5.3 points, with Labour up 4.6% and the LibDems up by 3.5 percent.

Given that both the Conservative Party and UKIP are wedded to the notion of Britain as a "Christian country", (and both compete over [claiming this mantle](#)) it is perhaps surprising to find such high levels of support for them among non-believers. It is likely that whilst these voters describe themselves as having "no religion" they do not rank the importance of their atheism, irreligion or agnosticism very highly, compared to issues like the economy, healthcare or immigration (for example). In the parlance of political science, their non-belief has little "salience", at least for the time being. So, whilst they may not agree with the Conservatives on Britain being a Christian country, they cast their votes on issues they rank as more important.

In America, religious voters have historically broken into fairly neat blocs of party loyalty, and the "none" vote in America today strongly favours the Democrats. This presents a lot of new demographic problems for the Republican Party, see [here](#), as once solidly Republican southern Senate seats become realistic targets for Democrats. In Britain, the "none" vote is too spread out to be a 'bloc' as the American "nones" are, and at present voters who describe themselves as "not

religious" are willing to vote for parties which promote the idea of Britain as a Christian country. This picture becomes more interesting when we compare the behaviour of the "no-religion" demographic with religious minorities.

In contrast with the "nones", British religious minorities are voting in much more cohesive units than their irreligious counterparts. Whilst the largest single affiliation among "nones" was 39.6% (for Labour), among Jews the largest single vote share was 46.3% (for the Conservative Party), among Catholics the largest group was 45.3% (for Labour), among Sikhs the largest single party loyalty was 63.5% (also for Labour), whilst among Muslims an extraordinary 73% will vote for the Labour Party at the next general election (though I note that the Muslim results are from a relatively small sample size). These minority groups are much more cohesive in their 2015 voting intentions, and clearly favour the Labour Party over the Conservatives.

Anglicans, often called the 'Tory Party at prayer', in fact only favour the Conservatives over Labour by 7.2%; 39.3% of Anglicans plan to vote Conservative in 2015, whilst 32.1% will vote Labour. Additionally, excluding minorities with an unreliably small sample size in the BES results, Anglicans are the group most likely to vote UKIP; this is clearly a demographic where Farage's party is badly hurting the Conservatives. 18.3% of Anglicans plan to vote for UKIP at the next general election.

Although no religious group is an absolutely homogenous bloc in terms of its voting habits, these high figures could point towards a future electoral landscape where politicians must actively compete for religious bloc votes. As the Labour Party loses lots of its traditional working class base to UKIP (see Ford and Goodwin on that point [here](#)) it will increasingly be forced to depend upon religious minorities to shore up its vote. This could further break apart the historic link between atheism/agnosticism and the left, and cause an even greater diffusion in the votes of the non-religious.

Clearly then, non-believers do not currently form a 'no religion vote' in the same way that UK analysts might speak of a 'Catholic' or 'Muslim' vote. If, however, (and as seems likely) Islamist extremism continues to dominate news headlines for years to come, the attachment of the "nones" to their non-belief could become much stronger; indeed, other research [reported](#) last week found that "a majority of 1,000 [UK] citizens said religious and ethnic hatred was the greatest danger facing humanity". This may well be the basis for an increasingly salient "non-belief".

In total, the BES survey found that 44% of the British public do not hold any religious affiliation; and this large slice of UK demographics may become increasingly vocal, pressurising a Labour Party dependent on religious minorities and a Conservative Party relying on older Anglicans (who are also tempted by UKIP).

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Benjamin Jones was the communications officer of the National Secular Society (2014-2017). Follow him on Twitter [@BenJones1707](#). The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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