



## Public Opinion in Britain towards the Disestablishment of the Church of England

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### ABSTRACT

This article provides a detailed empirical assessment of British public opinion on the issue of the disestablishment of the Church of England, one of the most important questions concerning relations between church and state. It uses a nationally representative survey conducted in 2011. It finds that, in socio-structural terms, those more supportive of disestablishment are men, those living in Scotland and those with a degree-level education. In political and ideological terms, Liberal Democrat party identifiers and those with left-wing and liberal policy preferences are more supportive of disestablishment. There are also significant differences on the basis of newspaper readership, with *Guardian* readers most supportive. The findings contribute to existing empirical research on this topic and demonstrate the need for further analysis of how religious orientations shape public attitudes on this debate.

**KEYWORDS:** Britain, church and state, Church of England, disestablishment, empirical analysis, nationally representative survey, public opinion.

### *Introduction*

In recent years both religious and secular voices have questioned the wisdom of the Church of England's position as the established church. Religious voices question the current set-up on both theological and

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practical grounds; secularists contest the Church's privileged position in a society marked by increasing secularity and a pluralist religious fabric.<sup>2</sup> These religious voices have included the Archbishop of Canterbury and other senior clergy within the Church of England,<sup>3</sup> as well as the former head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales.<sup>4</sup> Beyond Christian denominations, a report issued by the New Politics Network think-tank in 2004 showed that many non-Christian religious groups favoured disestablishment or some form of reform to the present arrangements.<sup>5</sup> Secular voices see a religious institution with less social significance and political relevance. Religious affiliation data from the British Social attitudes surveys show that the proportion of the British population who see themselves as Anglican has declined markedly from 40.3 per cent in 1983 to 19.8 per cent in 2010, while the proportions with no religion increased from 31.3 per cent in 1983 to 45.0 per cent in 2010. Moreover, debates over the question of establishment are often engendered by a hostile party political or media reaction to public pronouncements made on a topical issue by the Archbishop of Canterbury – who 'is arguably England's leading moral and religious leader'<sup>6</sup> – or other senior clerics. The debate over disestablishment has also resurfaced within current debates over the Church of England's stance and internal differences on the issues of same-sex marriage and the ordination of women bishops.<sup>7</sup>

2. G. Smith, L.J. Francis and M. Robbins, 'Who Wants Establishment? A Comparison of Clerical and Lay Opinion in the Church of England', *Journal of Beliefs and Values: Studies in Religion and Education*, 24.3 (2003), pp. 349–65 (350).

3. D. Gardner, 'Man in the News: Rowan Williams', *Financial Times*, 16 July 2010. Available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c614f5d6-911d-11df-b297-00144feab49a.html#axzz20Ufpxwf4>; M. Wainwright, 'Church Should Cut Links with Crown, Urges Bishop', *The Guardian*, 11 March 2002. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/mar/11/religion.world?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT348>.

4. M. Greaves, 'Cardinal: Disestablishment Would Benefit the Church of England', *Catholic Herald*, 24 August 2012. Available at: <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2012/08/24/cardinal-disestablishment-would-benefit-the-church-of-england/>.

5. R. Gledhill, 'Support Fades for Established Church', *The Times*, 21 June 2004.

6. D. Gover, *Turbulent Priests? The Archbishop of Canterbury in Contemporary English Politics* (London: Theos, 2011). Available at: <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/files/files/Reports/TheosTurbulentPriests2.pdf>.

7. P. Collins, 'End this Failed Marriage of Church and State', *The Times*, 28 December 2012. Available at: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/philipcollins/article3641753.ece>; R. Gledhill, 'Gay Marriage Plan

There has, however, been comparatively little scholarly analysis of popular opinion on this issue, as it only episodically tops the political agenda, nor does it represent a 'bread-and-butter' issue for public opinion. Recent polling data have shown, however, that 'antidisestablishmentarianism ... reflects the public mood'.<sup>8</sup> Recent opinion surveys have also shown that greater support for the Church of England as the established church or for having an official state religion in general is exhibited by Anglicans, those who have a strong sense of feeling Christian and those who consider Christianity to be important.<sup>9</sup> But, alongside religious differences based on denomination and beliefs, what are the broader social and attitudinal bases of popular attitudes on this issue?

This article provides the most detailed empirical assessment to date of who supports and opposes the disestablishment of the Church of England in the British public, one of the most important issues concerning relations between religion and the state. It builds upon existing research into the attitudes of Anglican laity and clergy<sup>10</sup> and public opinion over time<sup>11</sup> on this issue. It uses a nationally representative survey with a large sample – conducted in 2011 – to examine which population subgroups are more likely to agree or disagree with disestablishment of the Church of England.

The study demonstrates that those more supportive of disestablishment are men, those living in Scotland and those with a

(Footnote continued)

Could Divorce Church from State', *The Times*, 12 June 2012. Available at: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/faith/article3442753.ece>.

8. P. Kellner, 'What Britain Really Wants', *Prospect*, 23 March 2011. Available at: <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/monarchy-britain-popularity-royal-wedding/>.

9. ComRes, Parliamentary Panel, 'Disestablishment of the Church of England', 9–27 February 2004. Available at: [http://www.comres.co.uk/polls/Disestablishment\\_CoE.pdf](http://www.comres.co.uk/polls/Disestablishment_CoE.pdf); Ipsos MORI, 'Religious and Social Attitudes of UK Christians in 2011', Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science (UK), 2011. Available at: <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/ipsos-mori-religious-and-social-attitudes-tables-2012.pdf>.

10. Smith *et al.*, 'Who Wants Establishment?'; G. Smith, L.J. Francis and M. Robbins, 'Establishment or Disestablishment? A Survey among Church of England Clergy', *Implicit Religion*, 5.2 (2002), pp. 105–20. C.D. Field, 'Rendering unto Caesar? The Politics of Church of England Clergy since 1980', *Journal of Anglican Studies*, 5.1 (2007), pp. 89–108.

11. C.D. Field, "'A Quaint and Dangerous Anachronism'? Who Supports the (Dis)Establishment of the Church of England?', *Implicit Religion*, 14.3 (2011), pp. 319–41.

degree-level education. Interestingly, there are no significant differences by age group, despite generational differences in religious behaviour, beliefs and belonging. In political and ideological terms, Liberal Democrat party identifiers and those with left-wing and liberal policy preferences are more supportive of disestablishment. There are also significant differences on the basis of newspaper readership, with *Guardian* readers most supportive. The findings contribute to existing attitudinal research on this topic and demonstrate the need for further analysis of how religious identities shape individual-level attitudes on this debate and other church-state issues.

The article is structured as follows. First, it examines the issue of disestablishment and its broader role in British society and public debate. Secondly, it reviews the data source and the measurement of dependent and independent variables. Thirdly, it presents the findings from the survey analysis and discusses the main findings. Fourthly, it concludes the analysis and signposts further areas of research on this topic.

#### *The Issue of Disestablishment of the Church of England*

'Establishment' is neither a straightforward nor an inflexible concept. Originally meaning simply 'settled' or 'resolved', the present establishment of the Church of England originates in the 'Elizabethan settlement' of later sixteenth century when, after the confessional upheavals of the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary, the Acts of Uniformity and Supremacy made attendance at parish church compulsory and confirmed the monarch's role as supreme governor 'in all Spiritual or Ecclesiastical Things or Causes' of the realm.<sup>12</sup> Since that settlement, the nature of establishment has changed significantly but sporadically. The Church remained the sole legally recognized ecclesiastical body until the 1640s. Following the Interregnum, the Act of Settlement 1662 was an explicit reinstatement of the Elizabethan Settlement but was itself modified by the Toleration Act 1689 which granted a measure of recognition to non-conformist Protestant groups. This settlement was further significantly renegotiated in the mid-nineteenth century with, among others, with, among others, the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts 1828, and the passing of the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829, the Religious Disabilities Act 1846 and the Irish Church Act 1869. Between them these measures changed the Church of England from what had

12. 1 Eliz I, c.1; 1 Eliz I, c.2.

been, in effect, the state church over the 'long' eighteenth century to being the leading but not sole church of the nation, thereby recognizing a measure of religious pluralism in England for the first time. Such changes were supplemented by restoration of (a measure of) the Church's self-government, which had been prorogued in 1701, in 1854.

Since the later nineteenth century, religious pluralism has given way to legal secularization. According to Rivers, four key changes have taken place: the law has abandoned any attempt to adjudicate expressly between religions and worldviews; public and religious services have become more clearly differentiated, access to the former not being predicated on allegiance to the latter; established churches (in England and Scotland, the Church of Wales was disestablished in 1919) have enjoyed increasing independence from the state; and individual conscience has taken centre-stage in the law's approach to religion.<sup>13</sup> When the common law of blasphemy was abolished in 2008, 'the last whisper of the direct enforcement of Christian orthodoxy by the law was finally removed'.<sup>14</sup>

In spite of these significant changes, the Church of England still remains firmly established, although in a very different way to that of previous centuries. History has left many marks although not all of these are necessary for, or necessarily part of, formal establishment. Thus, 26 Church of England bishops, sit, speak and vote by right in the House of Lords. The Monarch remains Supreme Governor of the Church of England, is anointed and crowned by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and formally appoints bishops and archbishops on the advice of the Prime Minister and the Crown Appointments Committee. Church of England Measures are passed by General Synod but need to be approved by both Houses of Parliament and have the same force and effect as Acts of Parliament. Although it remains possible for primary legislation concerning the Church of England to be made by Act of Parliament, this has happened only very rarely since the enactment of the Church of England Assembly (Powers) Act 1919 and there is a constitutional convention that Parliament does not legislate for the internal affairs of the Church of England without its consent.<sup>15</sup>

13. J. Rivers, *The Law of Organised Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 25–31.

14. J. Rivers, 'Is English Law Christian?', in N. Spencer (ed.), *Religion and Law* (London: Theos, 2012), pp. 143–50 (144).

15. See Church of England legislation at [www.churchofengland.org](http://www.churchofengland.org).

In addition to these formal arrangements, people in England, if baptized, have the legal right to be married in their parish church (unless they have been divorced, when it is discretionary) and also to have their children baptized there. The Church of England also has the largest network of 'faith schools' in the country, split primarily between voluntary-aided schools, which have a degree of discretion over admissions, employment and religious education, and voluntary-controlled schools, where that freedom is curtailed by the local authority. Schools should provide a daily act of collective worship, although this is not necessarily Christian, let alone Anglican, and this measure is widely ignored in any case.

Many of these factors remain incidental to the fact of establishment, such as the existence of Church schools and the presence of Lords Spiritual. Others are more significant, such as the formal legal arrangements between Synod and Parliament. If Establishment resides in one thing, it is mutual recognition between Church and Crown, in which rights and responsibilities are publically acknowledged and enacted, most visibly in the rite of Coronation.<sup>16</sup> However, even this has changed over the centuries and is different in nature from other European countries, such as Denmark and Finland, which have comparably established settlements.<sup>17</sup>

The move towards legal secularization over the last century or so has taken place in the context of social secularization. According to the 2011 Census, 59.3 per cent of the population of England and Wales identified themselves as belonging to the Christian religion, a fall of around 12 per cent since 2001 (71.7 per cent), the first year that question was asked.<sup>18</sup> The majority of this decline has come in declining affiliation with the Church of England, which, as noted above, claims allegiance of approximately one in five people today. The transfer has been predominantly to the 'no religion category', which rose from 14.8 per cent to 25.1 per cent between Censuses, although there has also been a noticeable increase in people of non-Christian religions.<sup>19</sup> There is much debate whether these changes comprise a trend towards secularization or pluralism.

16. W. Carr, 'This Intimate Ritual: The Coronation Service', *Political Theology* 4.1 (2002), pp. 11–24.

17. J. Fox, *A World Survey of Religion and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

18. Office for National Statistics, *Religion in England and Wales 2011* (2012). Available at: [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776\\_290510.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_290510.pdf).

19. Office for National Statistics, *Religion*.

Either way, the establishment of the Church of England can no longer be seen to reflect the *natural* affiliations and loyalties of the English population. While there remains considerable affection for the Church of England, and in particular some of its institutions (like cathedrals)<sup>20</sup> and services (such as those around Christmas time), the social reality of the established church has changed as significantly as its legal status.

These changes mean that the historic defences of establishment are far less likely to be heard today. The most long-standing, and the most readily seen in the Coronation service, that establishment embodies the idea that the state is subject to a higher authority, is not much in evidence outside political theology seminars. Similarly, the idea that there is a necessary link between religion and morality and that establishment recognizes and protects this is a historical relic. The idea that establishment somehow protects the position of the Church of England, or of Christianity, in England is equally untenable, and has been since the late Victorian period.

In the light of this, the most commonly heard defence of establishment today is that the Church of England's constitutional position both signals that there is indeed a place for religion in the public square and offers 'an umbrella under which other religions can also shelter'.<sup>21</sup> Appropriately, this view is perhaps most clearly heard from the monarch herself who said in her speech at Lambeth Palace on 15 February 2012 that she believed that 'the concept of our established Church is occasionally misunderstood and ... commonly under-appreciated'. The Church of England's role, she explained, 'is not to defend Anglicanism to the exclusion of other religions', but rather 'to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country'. She went on to say that while 'it certainly provides an identity and spiritual dimension for its own many adherents', the Church of England also 'gently and assuredly ... has created an environment for other faith communities and indeed people of no faith to live freely ... [and] has helped to build a better society - more and more in active co-operation for the

20. The Grubb Institute and Theos, *Spiritual Capital: The Present and Future of English Cathedrals* (London: Theos, 2012. Available at: <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/files/files/Reports/Spiritual%20Capital%2064pp%20-%20FINAL.pdf>).

21. C. Smith, 'Is There a Place and Role for an Established Church in a Liberal Democratic State?', in Spencer (ed.), *Religion and Law*, pp. 135-42; also R. Trigg, 'Religion in the Public Forum', *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 13.3 (2011), pp. 274-86 (284).

common good with those of other faiths'.<sup>22</sup> With the origins and evolution of the issue of disestablishment discussed and the main parameters of contemporary debate reviewed, the focus now turns to a detailed analysis of contemporary public attitudes on this question.

#### *Methodology: Data Source and Variable Measurement*

This section first discusses the features of the survey used and the measurement of the dependent and independent variables.

#### *Data Source*

The analysis uses data from the Alternative Vote Referendum Study (AVRS), undertaken in spring 2011 in conjunction with the British Election Study 2009–10.<sup>23</sup> The AVRS had a pre-post campaign design comprising two waves: the fieldwork for the first wave was conducted from 5 April to 4 May 2011 and for the second wave after the referendum vote on 5 May.<sup>24</sup> The study collected information on an extensive range of socio-demographic and attitudinal variables. The data are weighted to provide a representative sample (the total sample is 18,856 cases) and cases with missing data are omitted from the analysis. Separate analyses are carried out for the entire British sample and for those living in England only, since Scotland and Wales do not have an established church (the Church of England was disestablished in Wales in 1920, becoming the Church in Wales, and the Church of Scotland, which remains the national church, was disestablished in 1929).<sup>25</sup>

#### *Dependent Variable*

The question asked in relation to the status of the Church of England used a Likert five-item response scale (from 'strongly agree' through to 'strongly disagree') and was worded as follows:

The Church of England should keep its status as the official established church in England?

22. The Queen's speech at Lambeth Palace, 15 February 2012, <http://www.royal.gov.uk/LatestNewsandDiary/Speechesandarticles/2012/TheQueensspeechatLambethpalace15February2012.aspx> (accessed 9 January 2013).

23. P. Whiteley, H.D. Clarke, D. Sanders and M. Stewart, 'Britain Says NO: Voting in the AV Ballot Referendum', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 65.2 (2012), pp. 301–22 (302).

24. Whiteley *et al.*, 'Britain Says NO', p. 328.

25. J.A. Beckford, 'Politics and Religion in England and Wales', *Daedulus*, 120.3 (1991), pp. 179–201 (179).



**Table 1.** Distribution of opinion for the dependent variable

	Full British sample (%)	<i>Unweighted</i> <i>base</i>	English sample (%)	<i>Unweighted</i> <i>base</i>
Strongly agree	24.0	4,693	25.5	4,235
Agree	29.5	5,461	30.4	4,823
Neither	22.4	4,065	21.5	3,294
Disagree	7.6	1,508	7.4	1,253
Strongly disagree	8.2	1,719	7.7	1,376
Don't know	8.2	1,110	7.5	832
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>22,124</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>18,556</i>

Note: Weighted data.

Strongly agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree nor disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly disagree  
 Don't know

Overall, in the entire sample, a majority of respondents agreed with the proposition, thereby supporting the status quo (53.5 per cent), showing a similar 'antidisestablishment' majority to that noted in other public opinion research.<sup>26</sup> Around a fifth had a neutral stance (22.4 per cent) and a minority disagreed with the current arrangements (15.8 per cent). A relatively small proportion offered a 'don't know' response (8.2 per cent). As Table 1 shows, the percentage responses do not differ by much when we look at the distribution for the English sub-sample (55.9 per cent support establishment, 21.5 per cent hold a neutral viewpoint, 15.1 per cent are in favour of disestablishment and 7.1 per cent cannot choose). Levels of 'don't know responses' are low in response to this question. In relation to national opinion polls, Field notes 'that replies to questions on this subject are sensitive to wording and typically characterized by a high proportion of "don't know" answers. The latter is a significant discovery in itself, perhaps denoting that respondents were either not very familiar with the topic and/or not especially interested in it'.<sup>27</sup>

26. Kellner, 'What Britain Really Wants'.

27. Field, "'A Quaint and Dangerous Anachronism'?", p. 322.

The low proportion having no opinion here would be partly affected by the presence of a neutral response category (neither agree nor disagree). Of course, we need to be alert to the nuances of question wording and the numbers and type of response options offered to respondents, and multiple indicators of attitudes to this question are preferable, but this survey provides a solid base from which to analyse contemporary views on the issue. It is worth noting here the general lack of attention to this issue in general social surveys in Britain (such as the British Social Attitudes series, which began in 1983). Linear regression analysis is used, with the dependent variable scored from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), with higher scores therefore representing opposition to the status quo. The small proportion of respondents who responded 'don't know' are excluded from the analysis.

#### *Selection of Independent Variables*

The selection of independent variables has been informed by the limited existing attitudinal research on this topic as well as the wider socio-political context of the issue. While there has been recent research into the views of Anglican laity and clergy on this issue,<sup>28</sup> there has been little scholarly analysis of attitudes in the general population.<sup>29</sup> One important exception is Field's longitudinal focus on public opinion in Britain, involving secondary analysis of national opinion surveys. Based on detailed analysis of the views of population sub-groups on the issue, Field concluded that:

Support for disestablishment is not uniform, even among the demographic subgroups where it is disproportionately clustered, notably men, the young, the AB social class, Scots, Labourites, Liberal Democrats, Roman Catholics, and those without religion.<sup>30</sup>

Recent opinion polls have also reaffirmed similar social and party-political divisions on different aspects of the issue. First, a YouGov poll on religion undertaken in February 2007 asked the following question: 'The Church of England is the Established Church with the

28. Field, 'Rendering unto Caesar?'; Smith *et al.*, 'Establishment or Disestablishment?'; Smith *et al.*, 'Who Wants Establishment?'

29. The Smith, Francis and Robbins' study found more support for establishment at the grassroots of the Anglican Church: 'The survey of the laity demonstrated that in many ways the laity value establishment more highly than the clergy. In comparison with the clergy, the laity are more likely to want the church-state links to stay as they are' ('Who Wants Establishment?', p. 364).

30. Field, ' "A Quaint and Dangerous Anachronism"?' , p. 334.

Queen as its head and some of its bishops sit in the house of Lords. Is this ...'. The main response options were: 'a good thing'; 'a bad thing'; and 'a matter of indifference to me'. Those more likely to agree that it was 'a good thing' included women and those aged over 50; those more likely to think it 'a bad thing' include men, those aged 30–50 years of age and those living in Scotland.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, a YouGov/*Sunday Times* poll, undertaken in February 2012, asked whether 'The Church of England still carries out a valuable role in Britain'. Older age groups were more likely to agree with this statement: 50.0 per cent of those aged 60 and over compared to 31.0 per cent of those aged 18–24 years and 38.0 per cent of those aged 25–39 years. Those in Scotland were less likely to agree (32.0 per cent compared to 40.0–45.0 per cent agreeing in other regions). In party-political terms, Conservative supporters were most likely to agree (55.0 per cent) compared to Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters (43.0 per cent and 35.0 per cent, respectively).<sup>32</sup> Thirdly, a YouGov poll, undertaken for the magazine *Prospect* in February 2011, asked whether the monarch should continue or cease to be head of the Church of England. Conservative Party supporters were much more likely to agree that the monarch should continue in this role (70.0 per cent) compared to Labour (54.0 per cent) and Liberal Democrat supporters (46.0 per cent). Divisions were much less apparent on the basis of sex, age group and social grade; those in Scotland (29.0 per cent) were much less likely to support the continued role, however, compared to those from other regions (where between 56.0 and 60.0 per cent supported the monarch staying as head of the Church of England).<sup>33</sup> Fourthly, a survey conducted by Harris Interactive in April 2011 asked respondents 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the Church of England being the official established church in this country?' Women (44.0 per cent) were more likely than men to agree (38.0 per cent), while older age groups (highest at 56.0 per cent for those aged 55 and over) were more supportive of the status quo than were

31. YouGov, *Survey Results*, 1–5 February 2007. Available at: <http://iis.yougov.co.uk/extranets/ygarchives/content/pdf/Humphrys%20Religion%20Questions.pdf>.

32. YouGov / *Sunday Times*, *Survey Results*, 16–17 February 2012. Available at: [http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus\\_uploads/document/6195qkb1kr/YG-Archives-Pol-ST-results-17-190212.pdf](http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/6195qkb1kr/YG-Archives-Pol-ST-results-17-190212.pdf).

33. YouGov / *Prospect*, *Survey Results*, 1–2 February 2011. Available at: [http://cdn.yougov.com/today\\_uk\\_import/yg-archives-pol-prospect-monarchy-240311.pdf](http://cdn.yougov.com/today_uk_import/yg-archives-pol-prospect-monarchy-240311.pdf).

younger age groups (lowest at 26.0 per cent for those aged 25–34 years). In terms of regional variation, those living in Scotland were much less likely to agree (at just 11.0 per cent), followed by those living in the East of England (at 32.0 per cent), with over two-fifths in agreement in every other region.<sup>34</sup>

The above findings provide important insights as to what explanatory factors should be included in the multivariate analysis conducted here. In order to provide as comprehensive analysis of public opinion as possible, it is important to look at the role of attitudinal factors and media usage, as well as social structural factors such as sex, ethnic background, age, social grade, education and region. Moreover, the effects of social characteristics can be mediated by individuals' partisan loyalties. First, we examine the role of partisanship, expecting that Conservative Party supporters are more likely to support the status quo and for Liberal Democrat partisans to oppose having an established church. The Church of England has historically been known the 'Conservative Party at Prayer'; analysis of voting behaviour at the 2010 election showed that Anglicans were most still likely to support the Conservative Party.<sup>35</sup> The Liberal Democrat party officially supported disestablishment of the Church of England in their 2001 general election manifesto, as a longer-term commitment, 'to end political interference in the Church'.<sup>36</sup> In the run-up to the May 2010 general election the Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, also publicly stated that he supported disestablishment.<sup>37</sup>

Second, we examine the influence of media usage, specifically newspaper readership. Readers of newspapers with a broadly centre-right approach to politics, such as *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*, might tend to favour keeping the existing arrangements in place, adopting an 'establishment' position.

34. Harris Interactive Inc / Daily Mail Poll, *Survey Results*, 21 April 2011. Available at: [http://www.harrisinteractive.com/vault/HI\\_UK\\_Corp\\_News-Daily-Mail-Poll-Apr11.pdf](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/vault/HI_UK_Corp_News-Daily-Mail-Poll-Apr11.pdf).

35. B. Clements, 'Religious Affiliation and Political Attitudes: Findings from the British Election Study 2009/10', *British Religion in Numbers* (2010). Available at: <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2010/religious-affiliation-and-political-attitudes-findings-from-the-british-election-study-200910/>.

36. Liberal Democrats, *Liberal Democrat General Election Manifesto: Freedom, Justice, Honesty* (2001). Available at: <http://www.libdemmanifesto.com/2001/2001-liberal-manifesto.shtml>.

37. T. Hobson, 'Clegg Should Assert Secular Liberalism', *The Guardian*, 29 April 2010. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/apr/29/clegg-disestablishment-church-england>.

Conversely, readers of newspapers with a broadly liberal or 'progressive' centre of political gravity, such as *The Guardian* or *Independent* whose publications – in their editorials and op-ed pieces – have often advocated and campaigned for political and constitutional reform in recent years, may incline towards reforming the status quo and oppose the existence of an established church.

Third, we examine the role of domestic policy attitudes, in this case preferences for raising social spending and taxation versus cutting expenditure and taxes (which can act as a proxy for broader left-right beliefs), as well as preferences for reducing crime versus protecting the right of those accused. Both of these questions involved respondents placing themselves on scales ranging from 0 to 10; with the lowest and highest values denoting the extremes of the opposing positions. More left-wing and liberal policy preference may be associated with support for the disestablishment of the Church of England. Including these measures of policy attitudes also provides a more robust analysis of the impact of partisanship.

The measurement of the independent variables is as follows.

- *Sex* is measured as a dummy variable whereby female takes the value of 1 and male takes the value of 0.
- *Age* is measured as a continuous variable, ranging from 18 years and upwards (mean: 48.04; standard deviation: 15.46).
- *Ethnic group* is measured by dummy variables for white, mixed, Asian, black and other ethnic background.
- *Region* is measured in two ways. For the analysis of the full British sample, dummy variables are used for those living in England, Wales and Scotland. For the analysis of those living in England, dummy variables are included for East Anglia, East Midlands, Greater London, northern England, north-west, south-east, south-west, West Midlands and Yorkshire and Humberside.
- *Education* is measured as a series of dummy variables representing the age at which each respondent completed their full-time education: 15 and under, 16–18 years, 19–20 years and 21 years and over. A measure of highest qualification obtained was not available in the survey used here.
- *Party support* is operationalized as a series of dummy variables measuring the party a respondent identifies with: Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, other party (such as the Greens, UKIP, SNP or Plaid Cymru) and no party.
- *Newspaper readership* is measured as a series of dummy variables for national daily tabloids and broadsheets.

- *Tax and spend preferences* are based on a self-placement scale ranging from 0 to 10, whereby 0 = cut taxes and spend less and 10 = raise taxes and spend more (mean: 5.45; standard deviation: 2.0).
- *Reduce crime-protect rights preferences* are based on a self-placement scale ranging from 0 through to 10, where 0 = reduce crime and 10 = protect rights (mean: 2.48; standard deviation: 2.36).

For the multivariate analysis, each group of dummy variables has a reference category for comparison, which comprise the following categories: aged 18–24 years; other ethnic background; lives in Scotland or lives in the north-west of England; degree level qualification or higher; Liberal Democrat supporter; and reads the *Guardian*.

### *Results and Discussion*

The results from the linear regressions presented in Tables 2 and 3 show the unstandardized *B* coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses), standardized *Beta* coefficients and *t* statistics. The results presented in Table 2 show that a range of social and attitudinal factors shape public attitudes towards disestablishment. Sex has a significant impact, with women less likely to disagree with the current set-up, which ties in with the historical findings from existing research.<sup>38</sup> In terms of ethnicity, those from a black ethnic background are less likely to support change to the current set-up, which may well reflect the membership of members of this groups in various Christian denominations (such as the Pentecostal and Baptist churches). Interestingly, there are no significant effects for the age variable, despite the expectation that older people would be less supportive of disestablishment. This is interesting as a recent Saga survey of those aged 50 and over for the *Daily Telegraph* found that 24.0 per cent supported the separation of church and state, 28.0 per cent opposed it while nearly half had no opinion either way (49.0 per cent).<sup>39</sup> Earlier polls have also shown that support for establishment is highest in the older age groups.<sup>40</sup>

38. Field, '“A Quaint and Dangerous Anachronism”?’.

39. M. Beckford, 'What Next for the Church of England?', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 December 2008. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/3835325/What-next-for-the-Church-of-England.html>.

40. A. Travis, 'Support Grows for Splitting Church and State Link', *The Guardian*, 23 January 2002. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2002/jan/23/uk.religion?INTCMP=SRCH>.

**Table 2.** Linear regression of attitudes towards disestablishment of the Church of England (full sample)

Independent variables		B (SE)	Beta	<i>t</i>
	Constant	3.42*** (0.10)		33.42
Sex	Female	-0.22*** (0.02)	-0.09	-12.10
Ethnic background	White ethnic background	0.07 (0.08)	0.01	0.92
	Mixed ethnic background	0.10 (0.11)	0.01	0.86
	Asian ethnic background	0.10 (0.10)	0.01	0.98
	Black ethnic background	-0.32** (0.11)	-0.03	-2.92
Age	Age	0.00 (0.00)	-0.01	-1.27
Region	Lives in England	-0.45*** (0.03)	-0.13	-13.64
	Lives in Wales	-0.39*** (0.05)	-0.07	-7.69
Education	TEA: 15 and under	-0.35*** (0.03)	-0.10	-10.72
	TEA: 16 to 18 years	-0.19*** (0.02)	-0.08	-8.60
	TEA: 19 to 20 years	-0.10** (0.04)	-0.02	-2.63
Party identification	Conservative Party identifier	-0.32*** (0.03)	-0.12	-12.68
	Lib Dem Party identifier	0.05 (0.03)	0.01	1.62
	Other party identifier	-0.08** (0.03)	-0.02	-2.59
	Non-identifier	0.00 (0.03)	0.00	-0.03
Ideology	Tax and spend	0.03*** (0.00)	0.04	5.64
	Reduce crime-protect rights	0.08*** (0.00)	0.16	20.21
Newspaper readership	<i>Daily Mail</i>	-0.89*** (0.05)	-0.24	-16.61
	<i>Daily Star</i>	-0.83*** (0.10)	-0.07	-8.46
	<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	-0.72*** (0.06)	-0.12	-11.47
	<i>Daily Express</i>	-0.83*** (0.07)	-0.11	-11.56
	<i>Independent</i>	-0.24** (0.08)	-0.03	-3.14
	<i>Daily Mirror</i>	-0.65*** (0.05)	-0.16	-11.97
	<i>The Sun</i>	-0.83*** (0.05)	-0.23	-15.81
	<i>The Times</i>	-0.48*** (0.06)	-0.08	-7.87
	Other newspaper	-0.51*** (0.05)	-0.13	-9.64
	Does not read a newspaper	-0.53*** (0.05)	-0.21	-11.11
Model fit statistics	Weighted <i>N</i>		16,143	
	<i>F</i> statistic		106.261***	
	Adjusted <i>R</i> square		0.15	

Notes: \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ ; \* $p \leq 0.05$ . Standard errors in parentheses.

Weighted data.

Reference categories: other ethnic background; lives in Scotland; TEA: 21 and over; Labour Party identifier; *Guardian* reader.

Reflecting the differing regional patterns of institutional religion, those living in England and Wales are less likely to disagree with the current set-up compared to those living in Scotland where, aside from

**Table 3.** Linear regression of attitudes towards disestablishment of the Church of England (English sub-sample)

Independent variables		B (SE)	Beta	<i>t</i>
	Constant	2.98*** (0.11)		27.99
Sex	Female	-0.23*** (0.02)	-0.09	-11.89
Ethnic background	White ethnic background	0.11 (0.08)	0.02	1.39
	Mixed ethnic background	0.20 (0.12)	0.02	1.65
	Asian ethnic background	0.18 (0.10)	0.02	1.73
	Black ethnic background	-0.28* (0.11)	-0.02	-2.52
Age	Age	0.00 (0.00)	-0.01	-1.05
Region	East Anglia	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.01	-0.80
	East Midlands	-0.11** (0.04)	-0.03	-2.74
	Greater London	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.01	-1.35
	Northern England	0.02 (0.05)	0.00	0.41
	South-east	-0.06 (0.03)	-0.02	-1.72
	South-west	-0.02 (0.04)	0.00	-0.47
	West Midlands	-0.11** (0.04)	-0.03	-2.76
	Yorkshire and Humberside	-0.07 (0.04)	-0.02	-1.69
	Education	TEA: 15 and under	-0.34*** (0.04)	-0.10
	TEA: 16 to 18 years	-0.18*** (0.02)	-0.07	-7.65
	TEA: 19 to 20 years	-0.09* (0.04)	-0.02	-2.25
Party identification	Conservative identifier	-0.29*** (0.03)	-0.11	-10.72
	Liberal Democrat identifier	0.07 (0.04)	0.02	1.94
	Other party identifier	-0.10** (0.04)	-0.03	-2.83
	Non-identifier	0.00 (0.03)	0.00	0.00
Ideology	Tax and spend scale	0.03*** (0.01)	0.04	5.29
	Reduce crime-protect rights scale	0.08*** (0.00)	0.16	19.24
Newspaper readership	<i>Daily Mail</i>	-0.91*** (0.06)	-0.26	-15.94
	<i>Daily Star</i>	-0.93*** (0.10)	-0.08	-8.92
	<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	-0.72*** (0.07)	-0.13	-10.82
	<i>Daily Express</i>	-0.85*** (0.08)	-0.11	-11.12
	<i>Independent</i>	-0.23** (0.08)	-0.03	-2.79
	<i>Daily Mirror</i>	-0.68*** (0.06)	-0.16	-11.61
	<i>The Sun</i>	-0.86*** (0.06)	-0.25	-15.29
	<i>The Times</i>	-0.51*** (0.06)	-0.09	-7.81
	Other newspaper	-0.55*** (0.06)	-0.13	-9.53
	Does not read a newspaper	-0.56*** (0.05)	-0.22	-10.83
Model fit statistics	Weighted <i>N</i>		13,999	
	<i>F</i> statistic		69.173***	
	Adjusted <i>R</i> square		0.14	

Notes: \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ ; \* $p \leq 0.05$ . Standard errors in parentheses. Weighted data.

Reference categories: other ethnic background; lives in the North West; TEA: 21 and over; Labour Party identifier; *Guardian* reader.



those with no religion, the largest religious groupings are the Church of Scotland and Roman Catholicism.<sup>41</sup> The regional dummy for those living in Scotland may, therefore, be an indirect proxy for the effect of belonging to the Roman Catholic Church. Education has a strong impact, with all groups finishing their full-time education aged 19–20 years or younger less likely to disagree with the current set-up compared to those who left full-time education aged 21 and over. Many of the latter group will be educated to degree level, and may have inculcated a more secular outlook, and be more supportive of religious pluralism with no particular faith deserving of political or institutional privileges.

Next, looking at the results for partisanship, there is clear evidence that, compared to Labour Party identifiers, Conservative Party identifiers are much less likely to disagree with the status quo; that is, they appear stalwart supporters of the Church of England as the established religion, befitting the historical adage that the Church of England represents the 'Conservative Party at prayer'. Closer inspection of the association between Conservative partisanship and the disestablishment questions shows that 75.1 per cent of those who 'strongly identify' with the Conservative Party agree with the status quo compared to 70.4 per cent of those who 'fairly strongly' identify and 65.6 per cent of those who identify 'not very strongly'. This finding for the Conservative grassroots is broadly in line with the recent views of Conservative MPs on the issue. When parliamentarians (a sample of 201 MPs) were polled by ComRes in February 2004, only 24.0 per cent of Conservative MPs supported disestablishment compared to 67.0 per cent of Labour MPs and 74.0 per cent of MPs from other parties. Across all parties around a fifth of MPs had 'no opinion'.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, a survey of Conservative Party representatives from various groups – including, *inter alia*, MPs, Peers and councilors – conducted in 2002 found that 64.0 per cent of the sample disagreed with disestablishment (with opposition highest amongst local councillors).<sup>43</sup>

41. ScotCen Social Research, Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 2010 [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], May 2012. SN: 7018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-7018-1>.

42. ComRes, Parliamentary Panel, 'Disestablishment of the Church of England', 9–27 February 2004. Available at: [http://www.comres.co.uk/polls/Disestablishment\\_CoE.pdf](http://www.comres.co.uk/polls/Disestablishment_CoE.pdf).

43. N.G. Meeke, Conservative Party Representatives Study, 2002 [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], August 2010. SN: 6552, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6552-1>.

Even when partisan loyalties are accounted for, there are strong effects for policy attitudes. Specifically, those who support higher social expenditure and taxation (the left-wing position) and who think protecting the rights of the accused are more important (a more liberal view) are more likely to disagree with the status quo. This finding fits in with the broader push for wide-ranging reform of the political system, including seemingly anachronistic institutional arrangements such as the House of Lords and the monarchy, on the part of centre-left parties and pressure groups in recent decades. Interestingly, though, the variables for Lib Dem partisans is not significant, even though the party has a strong record of advocating for constitutional and political reform and has historical links with the nonconformist churches (such as Methodists and Quakers). It may be that the effect for Lib Dem partisans in this model is being channelled via the measures of (left-right and liberal-authoritarian) policy attitudes.

Finally, each variable capturing readers of the main national tabloid and broadsheet newspaper has a significant impact. Compared to those reading *The Guardian*, readers of every other newspaper are less likely to disagree with the existing set-up; that is, they are less likely to oppose the Church of England being the established religion. This is even the case for readers of *The Independent*, a broadly centre-left or 'progressive' newspaper which has long campaigned for reform of the political system. Overall, the model explains a reasonable 15.0 per cent of the variance in the dependent variable, a score which would no doubt be increased by the inclusion of variables measuring individuals' religious orientations.

Table 3 presents the same model estimations for the English sample. Interestingly, the independent variables generally exhibit the same relationships – in terms of direction and statistical significance – as in Table 2. The exception is for those from a black ethnic group, which is again negatively signed but does not attain statistical significance. Only two categories from the new set of regional dummies have significant effects: specifically, those who live in the East or West Midlands are *less likely* to support disestablishment compared to those residing in the north-west of England, traditionally an area where Catholic immigrants settled in towns and cities (in the British Social Attitudes 2010 survey, 22.0 per cent of Catholics in the sample lived in the north-west region).

### Conclusion

This article has provided the most detailed empirical assessment to date of general public attitudes towards the question of disestablishment in

Britain. It built upon previous work looking at the attitudes of Anglican clergy and laity<sup>44</sup> and longitudinal analysis of the views of the British public using opinion polls.<sup>45</sup> It showed the presence of clear divisions between social groups, as well as difference based on partisanship and policy beliefs. Those social groups showing less support for disestablishment also tend to comprise those sectors of society which show a higher level of affiliation to the Anglican church: women, older age groups, those from a white ethnic background, live in England, those who finished their education at an earlier age, and those who support the Conservative Party (see Appendix 1 for the proportions in different social groups affiliated as Anglicans, based on evidence from the 2010 BSA survey).

This indicates one clear limitation of this study, and therefore an interesting avenue for future research. The limitation is the absence of any assessment of how religious orientation may affect support for, or opposition to, disestablishment. The analysis could not provide corroborating evidence of Catholics' greater opposition to the Church of England as the established church,<sup>46</sup> or examine the views of adherents of non-Christian faiths or of those with no religious affiliation. Future research could also examine how different aspects of religion – such as 'belonging', 'behaving' or 'believing' shape public attitudes,<sup>47</sup> looking in particular at the interaction of religious variables (such as affiliation and commitment) and between religious and non-religious variables (such as age or sex and affiliation). Also, future research could build on the general picture of support and opposition given here and provide a more disaggregated look at the issue of disestablishment. While the analysis conducted here was based on a single question asking about attitudes in general, it is worth acknowledging that this is a multifaceted issue consisting of various elements, such as the role of the monarch as Supreme Governor of the Church of England, or the presence of the Church of England bishops ('Lords Spiritual) in the House of Lords. Nonetheless, the reasonably comprehensive social and attitudinal factors examined here can help inform public debate over the issue of disestablishment and church-state relations in Britain,

44. Smith *et al.*, 'Who Wants Establishment?'; Smith *et al.*, 'Establishment or Disestablishment?'; Field, 'Rendering unto Caesar?'

45. Field, "'A Quaint and Dangerous Anachronism'?"

46. Field, "'A Quaint and Dangerous Anachronism'?"

47. D.C. Leege and L.A. Kellstedt, *Rediscovering the Religious Factor in American Politics* (Armonk: ME Sharpe, 1993).

an issue which has come into sharper focus as the Church of England grapples with difficult social issues over same-sex marriage and the ordination of women bishops.

**Appendix.** Anglican religious affiliation by social group

Social group	%	Social group	%
Male	16.1	<b>Lives in England</b>	<b>21.7</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>23.0</b>	Lives in Scotland	0.7
<b>White ethnic background</b>	<b>21.5</b>	Lives in Wales	17.6
Mixed ethnic background	5.4	<b>TEA - 15 and under</b>	<b>31.7</b>
Asian ethnic background	1.6	TEA - 16 to 18 years	19.2
Black ethnic background	3.1	TEA - 19 to 20 years	17.9
Other ethnic background	7.1	TEA - 21 and over	11.9
Aged 18–24 years	3.0	Still in full-time education	3.8
Aged 25–34 years	8.3	Labour Party	16.3
Aged 34–44 years	12.9	<b>Conservative Party</b>	<b>30.5</b>
Aged 45–54 years	20.3	Lib Dem Party	18.4
Aged 55–64 years	26.8	Other party	15.2
<b>Aged 65 and older</b>	<b>38.7</b>	No party	11.1

*Note:* Category with the highest level of affiliation within each variable is indicated in bold.

*Source:* BSA survey 2010. Weighted data.