

Anglicans, Dissenters and Electoral Behavior in 19th century Great Britain

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Abstract

This paper examines the religious origins of political parties in Great Britain. To that avail, we digitize all 19th century censuses at the most micro level (Parish level). We merge these datasets to all electoral results in the 19th century and to the March 30, 1851, Religious Census. The latter is the only census in UK's history to tally attendances for every single church and chapel in all of England and Wales. Our results indicate that support for Tories (Whigs) was significantly stronger where the Anglican Church (New Dissent) was stronger. These results are robust to the inclusion of various sociodemographic controls, suggesting that religion had an influence on party support over and above social class or economic interest.

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1 Introduction

Understanding the role of religion in the political landscape of 19th century Britain has been for decades the goal of many political scientists. Most scholars agree that religion was a central factor in British politics, likely being the major determinant for voters, at least as late as the 1870s (Nossiter, 1970; Crockett, 1998; Wald, 2014). It is hard to find political issues that were not overlaid and influenced by religious debate (Snell and Ell, 2000).

This paper aims to shed light on the relationship between political and religious preferences in 19th century Britain. To do this, we merge three datasets that, to the best of our knowledge, have never been used together: (i) the United Kingdom Census of 1851; (ii) election results for all elections between 1832 and 1868; and (iii) the 1851 Religious Census. Using the religious census to examine voting behavior is the main contribution of this paper.

A religious census had been carried out in 1834 in Ireland which in part led to the reorganisation of parishes and dioceses. It was proposed to include similar questions in the 1851 population census but vigorous opposition by the Bishops in the House of Lords (led by Bishops of Oxford and Salisbury) successfully prevented this. To avoid a storm of protest about asking about personal religious affiliation in the standard census, the government decided to carry out a large-scale survey to all places of faith. The week before March 30, 1851, enumerators were sent to all churches and chapels in England and Wales to collect information on its denomination, endowments, sittings, attendance at religious services on that Sunday, March 30 (morning, afternoon, evening), and average numbers during the preceding twelve months. Local ministers filled the forms.¹ As Horace Mann stated, “[a]t the recent census, it was thought advisable to take the latter course; partly because it had a less inquisitorial aspect, — but especially because it was considered that the outward conduct of persons furnishes a better guide to their religious state than can be gained by merely vague professions” (Mann, 1854). Although it was intended to repeat the Religious Census in 1861, the various denominations could not agree to the form it should take and thus the plan was dropped — hence the 1851 census is the first and only such carried out in the UK (and Man). In this paper, we use the aggregated results at the registration district level that Keith Snell, Paul Ell and Alasdair Crockett constructed and kindly shared with us.

Thanks to this unique religious census, we have data on religious attendance, as well as standard sociodemographic characteristics, at the registration district level (623 observations). In order to examine the relationship between religion and voting, we merge it with all election results from all English and Welsh constituencies (282 in total) that are within a decade of the religious census. While the data does not allow us to study causal effects, we do uncover a few suggestive patterns that improve our understanding of the birth and growth of political parties in modern democracies.

All our results show an unambiguous correlation between religion and voting. The measure of support for all denominations that we use follows Snell and Ell (2000): total attendance for the denomination over total population. Including a range of standard sociodemographic controls, we find that attendance

¹All returns have been scanned and are available in the UK National Archives Website, under “HO 129”.

to the Church of England predicts voting in all five elections under study (1841, 1847, 1852, 1857, and 1859): a one 1 standard deviation increase in attendance to the Church of England increases vote share for Tories around 7 percentage points (and a nearly mirror effect for Whig vote shares). Attendance to New Dissent services can predict vote shares equally well in all elections (in this case, increases correspond to larger vote shares for Whigs). Nonetheless, attendance to Old Dissent services is uncorrelated to vote shares.

Results regarding Church of England confirm previous research that highlights the relationship between Tories and Anglicanism. On the other hand, while not entirely surprising, results for attendance to nonconformist services are not fully consistent with previous findings. Larsen (2005) explains that old dissenters were never Tories, but that some new dissenters were. We would expect to find that strongholds of Old Dissent tended to largely vote for Whigs, but we do not find this to be the case. On the other hand, we do find such positive relationship for New Dissent and vote share for Whigs. This could simply be an artifact of aggregate data: mean index of attendance for Old and New Dissent is below 20% (while it is 35% for the Church of England). Hence, it is possible that even in nonconformity strongholds, the majority of the population still attended the Church of England.

We also find that total sittings per capita also predicts vote (the more seats, the higher shares for Tories). This suggests that areas with higher religious commitment overall were more supportive of the Tories. However, other stories could also explain this pattern: wealth factors (richer regions tend to have more and bigger churches and chapels); pork barreling (state and the Church directing more funds to particular areas); slow real estate response (sittings per capita in 1851 merely reflects religious preferences from years/decades before); or a combination of all.

Last, we find that the proportion of population who have medium skilled jobs in the constituency is a strong and clear predictor of voting patterns. More precisely, we construct a measure of proportion of the population with middle-level managerial jobs (all non manual): Lower managers (Hisclass=3), lower professionals and clerical and sales personnel (Hisclass=4), and lower clerical and sales personnel (Hisclass=5).² A one percentage point increase in the fraction of middle professionals is correlated with an increase of 3–4 percentage points in the vote share for Whigs. While this seems like a remarkable effect, we should note that the mean of middle professionals was around 4%. This result lies in contrast to Nossiter (1970), who argues that “[t]he Whigs were predominantly the party of the upper and professional classes (...)and it was the Conservative Party which was the most nearly representative of the social composition of the electorate as a whole, despite a tendency to draw somewhat more support from the upper classes, the older free trades, the shipping interest, and the church.”

Overall, our results suggest that the typical Tory voter was in a rural and highly religious area, and was himself supportive of the Church of England, whereas the representative Whig voter came from an urbanized and not strongly religious region, very likely to be a high skilled professional, and a nonconformist.

²Hisclass measure taken from Leeuwen et al. (2002).

There are a few caveats that are worth mentioning.³ First, the boundaries for administrative units (census) and for electoral units do not overlap, not even closely. We impute census and religious data on constituencies by means of area overlap. Needless to say, this creates measurement error. Second, while census and religious data summarizes practices and characteristics for the *whole* population in each registration district, voting only reflects political preferences of a male, wealthy minority. In particular, it might be that this wealthy minority is not representative of the whole population in terms of religious practices. We know that to be the case for Catholics, but do not know of any work systematically relating other denominations to social class. Hence, our religious measures, as well as most sociodemographic measures, may not necessarily coincide with that of the average voter. As the leaders of the Church back in 1851 would have wanted, we are unable to match individual voters to any denomination.

2 Context: Great Britain in the 19th century

2.1 Political context

During the Victorian era, around three quarters of the electoral districts elected two MPs. Most of the rest elected just one (around 20%), while a handful of them —mostly urban— returned three or four. Electors had two votes. The electoral system was first-past-the-post in single-member districts, and single non-transferable vote in multi-member districts (that is, those candidates with most votes were elected). The vote was public and *viva voce* until 1872. Male franchise came with titles and properties —female franchise did not arrive until after the First World War. Right after the 1832 Great Reform Act, around 721,000 individuals, i.e., 10% of the male population had the legal right to vote in England and Wales. By 1861, this number had increased to around 17.5% of the adult male population.

The main cleavages in British politics during the Victorian era were the *Corn Laws*, the franchise, and the Church. There were three parties during this period, although virtually only two of them managed to win seats in the House of Commons regularly: the Whigs and the Conservatives. As opposed to the Conservatives, the Whigs were proponents of free trade (that is, against the protectionism imposed by the corn laws), more willing to expand the franchise, and to separate Church and state. The Radical-Liberals had a similar agenda to the Liberals, but, as the name indicates, had more maximalist demands (e.g., universal male suffrage). Eventually, in 1859 the Radical Liberals merged with the Whigs, free trade-supporting Peelites (a faction that had broken from the Conservatives in 1846) and the Independent Irish Party to officially form the Liberal Party. Throughout this paper, we refer to them indistinctly as Whigs/Liberals and Tories/Conservatives. As noted above, these parties also differed in the social composition of their base: “The Whigs were predominantly the party of the upper and professional classes (...) and it was the Conservative Party which was the most nearly representative of the social composition of the electorate as a whole, despite a tendency to draw somewhat more support from the upper classes, the older free trades, the shipping interest and the church [while t]he core of the Radical-

³All caveats are discussed in more detail in section 7, as well as current solutions we envisage for future iterations of this paper.

Liberal Party was the shopkeeping class and the artisans.” (Nossiter (1970), p. 382).

Understanding voting behavior in 19th century Britain has been for decades the goal of many political scientists. Using data from the poll books (individual recorded votes), Cox (1986) shows that split voting (voting for one candidate from each party) was a relatively common practice until the 1860s: it reached double digits in all elections from 1832 to 1859 (except in 1841). Similarly, Dewan et al. (2019) show that the electorate was party-centered by the time of the extension of the franchise in 1867.

Voting during the period of our study depended on factors above and beyond party membership. Nossiter (1970) argues that “[u]ntil 1851 the outcome of elections appears to have been largely dependent on all manner of local factors but from then onwards political cleavages emerged along geographical lines” (p. 389). “[Gilbert (1976) and Wald (2014)] argue that religious affiliation was a more important determinant of political affiliation than ‘social class’ for much of the nineteenth century” (Crockett (1998), p.2). It is likely that the Corn Laws⁴ (passed in 1815, repealed in 1846) played also a major role in voting decisions, in particular in focusing on candidates rather than political parties.⁵ Influence, pork barreling, and corruption perceptions were other key determinant voting factors at the time (Nossiter, 1970).

2.2 Religious context

The 18th and 19th century in Britain can be described that of a constant “struggle for religious equality of non-conformity”, which eventually resulted in the “Church of England surrendering many of its monopoly privileges (...) It was the rising influence and popularity of nonconformity (...) and not the pressure of mass ‘irreligion’ or a strongly secularist State” which led to the modified religious landscape of the 19th century (Crockett (1998), p.4).

Religious uniformity had been regarded as a partial guarantee of social cohesion and political tranquility. Hence, from Elizabeth I (1558-1603) to James II (1685-1688), monarchs tried to penalize non-attendance to the Anglican Church, among other things (Gilbert, 1976). Although the Act of Tolerance of 1689 might be considered a landmark of religious openness, “technically, it conceded very little” (Gilbert (1976), p. 10). Nonconformism had to fight for equality until way into the 19th century. Despite this, it was clear as early as 1740 that the Church of England had a “growing inability to impose its services upon English society (...) 1740 was a situation of de facto voluntarism” (Gilbert (1976), p. 11).

Nonconformism, a term that encompasses a variety of denominations, did not “conform” to the governance and usages of the established Church of England, started around the 16th and 17th centuries. “Old Dissenters” grouped Independents (or Congregationalists), Baptists, Quakers, Unitarians, Presbyterians

⁴The Corn Laws were tariffs and other trade restrictions on imported food and grain enforced in the United Kingdom between 1815 and 1846. They were designed to keep grain prices high to favour domestic producers, and represented British mercantilism. The Corn Laws blocked the import of cheap grain, initially by simply forbidding importation below a set price, and later by imposing steep import duties, making it too expensive to import grain from abroad, even when food supplies were short.

⁵Even though the Tories were the champions of the Corn Laws, it was under a Tory Prime Minister, Robert Peel, that they were repealed. In fact, PM Peel secured that one third of his own party in the Commons supported repeal (McLean and Bustani, 1999): “Repeal appears to have gained passage as [pivotal Peelites] switched from voting more as trustees to voting more as delegates” (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2003, p. 581). “The Conservatives entered government in 1841 with a strong and (what appeared to be) unified commitment to protecting agriculture, and yet their leader, Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel, completely reversed this stance within five years (...) [Peelites] eschewed Conservative party unity and their own personal ideology in favour more of the preferences of their constituents” (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2003, p. 581).

outside Scotland⁶, and the Church of Scotland. “New Dissenters” emerged in the 18th century and were mainly Methodists: Wesleyan Methodists, Calvinistic Methodists, Independent Methodists, Primitive Methodists, the Wesleyan Methodist New Connexion, and the Wesleyan Methodist Association were part of it. It also included Wesleyan Reformers, Bible Christians, Lady Huntingdons Connexion, Moravians, New Church, and Latter Day Saints. Old Dissenters emphasized religious freedom and equality, pursuit of justice, and opposition to discrimination, compulsion, and coercion. New Dissenters (and also the Anglican evangelicals) stressed personal morality issues, including sexuality, temperance, family values, and Sabbath-keeping.

Nonconformity grew remarkably during the first half of the 19th century, while Anglicanism lagged behind. Tables 1 and 2 show the details. During that period, sittings for the Church of England grew by 30%, a much smaller growth than that of the English and Welsh population, which essentially doubled. On the other hand, sittings for the Independents and the Baptists (Old dissenters) virtually trebled, while sittings for the Wesleyan Methodists increased by an eight-fold.

Table 1: Sittings and population growth, 1800-1851

	Δ 1831 - 1851	Δ 1801 - 1851
England & Wales population	28.6%	101%
Church of England	18.6%	30.6%
Wesleyan Methodists [New Dissent]	137.4%	808%
Independents [Old Dissent]	62.8%	249%
Baptists [Old Dissent]	72%	315%

Data refers to sittings. Source: Graham (1854)

Table 2: Total sittings and population, 1800-1851

	1801	1851
England & Wales population	8,892,536	17,882,314
Church of England	4,069,281 45.76%	5,317,915 29.74%
All other denominations	963,169 10.83%	4,890,482 27.35%

Data refers to sittings. Source: Great Britain General Register Office (1854), pages 37-8

There was a geographical pattern to the popularity of the different denominations. As Gilbert (1976) notes, where freehold tenure and small holdings for farming prevailed, the rates of Anglican religious practice was lower. In those lowland parishes with enclosed and natural boundaries, single farming communities, and compact and small villages, there was a stronger influence of squire and parson, a higher dependency system, and, typically, Anglican paternalism and dominance. The lowlands (strongholds of Anglicanism) had relatively smaller population growth, which can help explain the patterns shown in Tables 1 and 2. As extraparochial land (marshland, heath, moors, forest, heartland, etc. i.e., land with poor soil) was occupied by migration, spatial and cultural isolation from the establishment influence created the seed for nonconformity to grow. The Church of England was too slow (or too busy and uninterested) to win the hearts and souls of those who were moving beyond their traditional areas of

⁶Presbyterian Church in England, the United Presbyterian Church.

influence. In a similar fashion, industry and urbanization created a new network of economic and social relationships. As cities and industries grow, nonconformity found a place to grow influence.

Despite the aforementioned large growth in support of nonconformity as compared to Anglicanism, political grievances persisted. Other than the Church rates, there were other five listed by a meeting of Protestant Dissenting Deputies in March 1833: “compulsory conformity to the Anglican marriage service; the lack of a legal registration for Dissenters’ births and deaths; the liability of places of worship to poor rates; the denial to Dissenters of the right of burial by their own ministers in parochial churchyards; their exclusion from the benefits of Oxford and Cambridge universities” (Brent (1987), p. 889). Even though dissenters looked to the Whigs in order to secure for them their political goals, religious beliefs did not easily translate into a particular set of political allegiances: “by their efforts in education and their lack of efforts on religious grievances, the Whigs had proved that they could not be trusted to act on behalf of the Nonconformists” (Larsen (1997), p.2). “By the end of the 18th century, nonconformists had moved beyond toleration and demanded full religious freedom (...) But to this extreme the Whigs would not go!” (Cowherd, 1954). One thing was however clear: while not all nonconformists supported the Whigs, “there was scarcely a single Dissenter (...) who was a Tory” (Larsen (1997), p.39).⁷

3 The data

We are interested in understanding the relationship between religion and voting, controlling for various sociodemographic factors. To that avail, we use three datasets: one on religion, one on standard sociodemographic characteristics, and one on election results. The first two are aggregated at the registration district level (i.e., the administrative unit). There were 625 such units during the period we analyse. The electoral data is collected at the constituency level. There were 282 such districts during the period we analyse. We first provide more details on each of these datasets, and below explain how we merge them.

The sociodemographic data we use is aggregated to the registration district level from the the 1851 Census. The variables we use are degree of rural/urban, % of highly skilled professions, % of medium skilled professions, proportion of adult males and females in the labour force, and % of households with 2 or more servants. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics, which also includes religiosity (total religious sitting per capita including all denominations).

Political preferences are measured by means of electoral results, which we take from Craig (1977). Our voting dataset includes all results from all elections between 1832 and 1868. For most of the analysis, we only use the two elections before and three elections after 1851, to keep all datasets as closely as possible in time (i.e., within one decade of the religious census). To capture political preferences, we compute the share of votes for each party in each district.

Elections were generally competitive, but, as can be seen in Table 4, walkovers were not rare. In our

⁷As Larsen notes, it has not always been so clear that Wesleyans (New Dissent) aligned with the Whigs: “It has become increasingly clear over the last several decades, however, that rank-and-file Wesleyans did not generally follow [the no-politics] lead even in the 1830s but, in fact, inclined toward the Whig-Liberal side. Still, there was a widespread perception at the time outside the Wesleyan camp that the denomination was predominantly Conservative, and Wesleyans did support the Tories to an extent that had no parallel in the old dissent” (Larsen (2005), p.110).

Table 3: 1851 census: Descriptive statistics.

	Median	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max	Obs.
Urban	2.73	2.68	1.01	1	4	282
% High skilled	2.23	2.61	1.78	0.97	21.11	282
% Medium Skilled	4.85	5.03	2.07	1.50	16.3	282
% households with 2 to 10 servants	7.18	7.72	4.03	0.96	24.3	282
% Adult males in labor force	95.9	95.5	1.9	86.3	98.4	282
% Adult females in labor force	26	26.5	6.4	12.2	46.6	282
Religiosity (total sittings per capita)	0.65	0.64	0.16	0.28	1.05	282

Degree of urban (1=least urban, 4=most urban, coded as in Snell and Ell (2000)). % High skilled: % of higher managers or higher professionals among the population (HISCLASS 1–2, Leeuwen et al. (2002)). % Medium Skilled: % of non-manual, medium and lower skilled, among the population (HISCLASS 3–5, Leeuwen et al. (2002)).

main specification, we treat walkovers as 100% vote shares for the party that gets the seat, and 0% for the party that did not run. While this exacerbates political preferences at the local level, it certainly proxies them quite closely: walkovers tend to happen where victories are expected to be by landslide. By doing this, we all keep observations in our analysis. Table 4 shows the vote shares for all elections in our data.

Table 4: Vote shares for Tories.

	1832	1835	1837	1841	1847	1852	1857	1859
Excluding walkovers								
% Tories (average)	31.7	42.7	49	51.9	45.4	46.3	36.6	39.9
Observations	196	161	189	146	121	167	133	128
Including walkovers (100% if no opposition; 0% if not running)								
% Tories (average)	31.9	43.3	51.9	59.5	52.4	53.4	42.3	47.6
Observations	282	282	282	282	282	282	282	282

Vote shares per constituency. Unweighted average.

Our measure of religiosity is taken at the registration district level. The primary source is the Religious Census of 1851: on March 30, 1851, enumerators were sent to all churches and chapels in England and Wales to collect information on its denomination, endowments, sittings, attendance at religious services on that Sunday (morning, afternoon, evening), and average numbers during the preceding twelve months. Local ministers filled the forms.⁸

In order to capture religious preferences at the local level, we construct three main variables *for each denomination* in each registration district: (i) total sittings per capita; (ii) share of total attendances (total attendance for that denomination/total attendance for all denominations); and (iii) index of attendance (total attendance for that denomination/total population). Total attendances include all three services (morning, afternoon, and evening). As noted by Snell and Ell (2000), this measure “is well established in the historiography (p. 431)”.

Each of these variables has its advantages and shortcomings, which we briefly discuss here. The fundamental advantage of total sittings per capita is that it is likely the *least noisy* measure we have:

⁸All returns have been scanned and are available in the UK National Archives Website, under “HO 129”.

while local ministers may have made errors when counting (either guessing, or rounding, or inflating the numbers), it is reasonable to believe they would have known the exact number of seats in their church or chapel (and, for that matter, less likely to misreport it given it was relatively easy to double-check). On the other hand, total sittings per capita may not capture the shifts that took place during the 1830s and 1840s in a quite dynamic (in confessional terms) society as the British one. In other words, it may overrate popularity in certain areas, while underrate it in others. If sentiments shifted from one denomination to another but no proper accommodation had been built by 1851, then this measure would overrate the presence of the fading denomination, while underrate the presence of most fashionable one. Similarly, it may overstate the presence of the Church of England, which, by means of being the dominant denomination, managed to secure state funding. Such favourable resources likely resulted in oversupply of sittings for the Church of England as compared to all other denominations.

The second and third measure (share of total attendances and index of attendance) are based on people attending Sunday services, and, therefore, have the same advantages and suffer from the same pitfalls. As stated above, counts of attendances are likely to be noisy: rounding and inflating being the two main reasons for that. We assume that misreporting is orthogonal to denomination, but cannot dismiss the fact that ministers in some denominations may have been more willing to misreport their numbers more than others. As Thompson (1967) notes, ““But may there not have been a tendency to exaggerate just because the census was taken by ministers or church members?” (p.94).

Also, weather conditions affected some areas differently to others.⁹ To the best of our knowledge, there is no reliable weather information for the whole country on March 30, 1851. Therefore, we carry out the analysis as if all regions were equally affected by weather conditions. While we know this was not the case, the tiny number of references to weather conditions in the primary sources suggests that it is unlikely that numbers are heavily distorted because of that.

Contrary to total sittings, these two variables have the advantage that they are “more dynamic” than sittings: In regions where a particular denomination grew in popularity but whose leaders hadn’t had time to build chapels, attendances will capture this, while total sittings would not. Attendances also capture *intensity* of preferences: churches from a particular denomination being half-empty does not necessarily mean that people switched to other faiths in that region —it may mean simply that they were not engaged enough to show up to Church on a regular Sunday.¹⁰

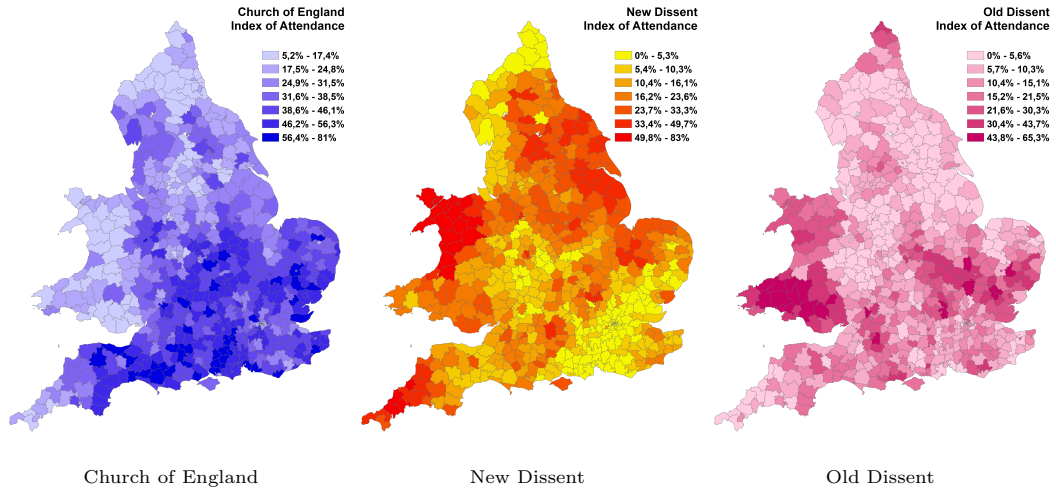
Both measures (share of total attendances and index of attendance) intrinsically capture the relative popularity of the different denominations in each region, but in a slightly different manner. While the first one allows us to rank denominations in a given region, the second one further allows us to assess religious fervor in each region. To be more precise, if region X the Church of England gathered 60% of total attendance, whereas New Dissent chapels gathered the remaining 40%, we learn that the Church of

⁹For instance, the report for St. Leonard’s Chapel in Aston, Buckinghamshire, states that “The 30th of March was unfavourable as to weather. The people are very scattered so that the Winter months are somewhat less favourable as to the average attendance”. Similarly, the report for the Church of St Andrew, Bolam, Northumberland, notes in relation to the “average for the past 12 months” that “[t]he church being situated close to the northern boundary of the parish with but a very small population near it. The attendance at church is as variable as the weather, so that though [the] church is sometimes pretty full; the above is merely an average congregation for 12 months.” ‘

¹⁰Easter Sunday fell on April 20 in 1851, so March 30 was not a particularly relevant day from a Christian point of view

England was the most popular denomination in region X . However, we learn little about religiosity in the region: perhaps only 10% of its inhabitants went to service, but perhaps 90% did. Index of attendance, on the contrary, also conveys this important piece of information. Critically, both variables produce the same ordinal ranking in an given region. We follow Snell and Ell (2000) in using the latter in our main specification. As they note, “[it] has the main advantage of allowing one to discern the actual strength of worship on Census Sunday. (p. 431)”. Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of the index of attendance for the three main denominations in 1851: the Church of England, Old Dissent, and New Dissent.

Figure 1: Index of Attendance for the three main denominations. Religious Census, 1851.



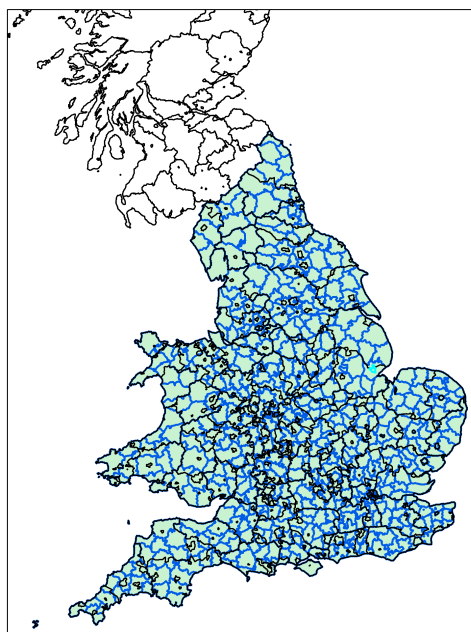
3.1 Merging the datasets

One of the challenges any scholar working with British data from the 19th century will face is that of non-overlapping boundaries. As Figure 2 shows, electoral boundaries and administrative boundaries had nothing to do with each other. Hence, we cannot directly merge electoral results with census data. In our case, since our variable of interest is ultimately vote shares, we merge registration districts into electoral districts. That is, we construct a data set of 282 constituencies where the goal is to have, for each constituency, its vote shares, religious characteristics, and sociodemographic characteristics.

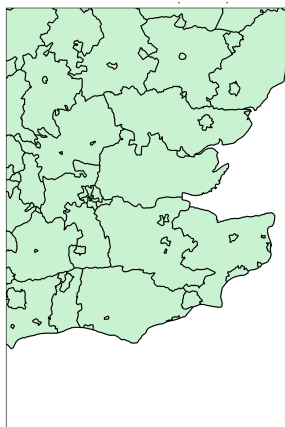
We impute registration district characteristics on constituencies based on area overlap: If a constituency C is scattered across two different registration districts x and y , we compute the share of the constituency area of each registration district, and use that share as a weight to input the characteristics. Suppose that 90% of C falls into registration district x , and 10% into y (i.e., area shares are $x = 90\%$ and $y = 10\%$). Further suppose that % Adult females in the labour force for these two units is $x = 50\%$ and $y = 100\%$. Then the imputed % Adult females in the labour force for C will be $(0.9 \times 0.5) + (0.1 \times 1) = 0.45 + 0.1 = 0.55$.¹¹ More formally, for any independent variable V ,

¹¹We are aware of the problems that this may have, namely, that large areas may be rural areas and therefore have little population, thereby inflating the weight of larger (in size) registration districts. In the next iteration of this paper, we will have substituted area weights by population weights

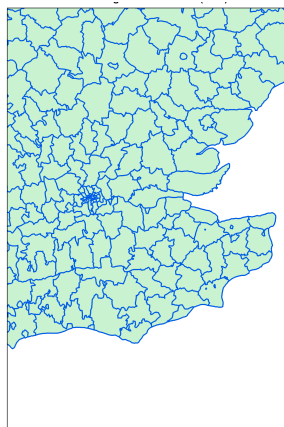
Figure 2: Electoral and Administrative boundaries in England and Wales. In black: Constituencies (1832-1862). In blue: Registration Districts (1851)



(a) England and Wales



(b) Zoom to South East of England. Constituencies (1832-1862).



(c) Zoom to South East of England. Registration Districts (1851).



(d) Zoom to South East of England. Overlap of electoral and administrative boundaries.

$$V_C = \sum_{j=1}^J \omega_j \times V_j$$

$$\text{where } \omega_j = \frac{\text{Area of } C \text{ that overlaps with } j}{\text{Area of } C}, \quad \text{such that } \sum_{j=1}^J \omega_j = 1 \quad (1)$$

and $j = 1, 2, \dots, J$ are all registration districts that overlap with constituency C

4 Empirical strategy

The goal of this paper is to examine the relationship between religion and political preferences. Ultimately, we would like to assess the magnitude of the effect, i.e., to what extent did growth of a particular denomination affect electoral choices. Before doing that, however, we should assess whether there was *any* relation at all. To do so, we adopt a machine learning based approach to sort through all the possible partial correlations between predictors and voting. This allows us to relax the more parametric approach of OLS when sorting through the possible predictors of voting. In other words, a machine learning approach allows us to identify which factors —among the ones we have in our dataset— can explain vote patterns in Britain during the 19th century.

In particular, we use the Lasso regression approach, with the Extended Bayesian Information Criterion (EBIC). Compared to the BIC, the Extended BIC imposes an additional penalty on the number of parameters, so that the algorithm picks the stronger predictors of voting (see J. Chen and Z. Chen (2008) for further details). This is useful for us because it allows us to assess the importance of religion in explaining vote patterns.

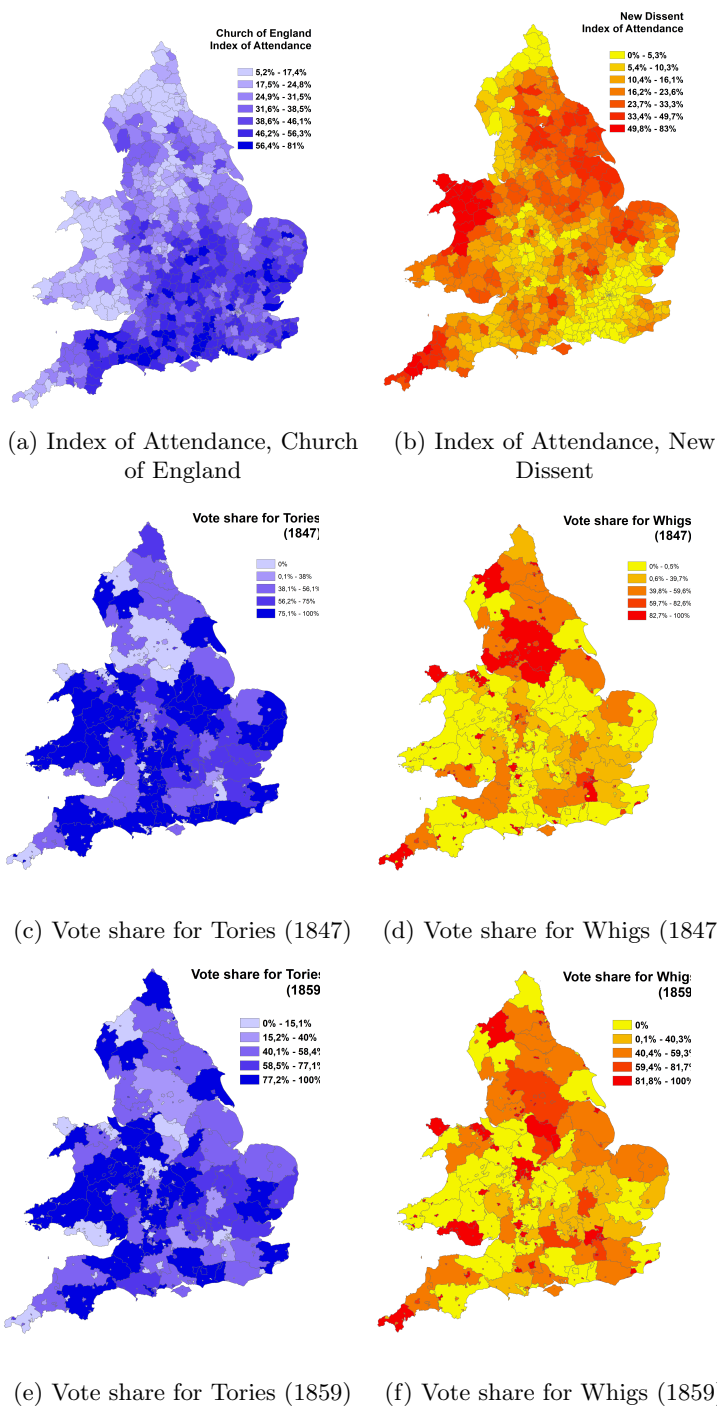
Table 5: Model selection using Lasso with Extended BIC

Candidate	1841	1847	1852	1857	1859
Attendance Church of England	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Attendance New Dissent					
Attendance Old Dissent		✓			
Religiosity (\approx total sittings)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Degree urban	✓		✓	✓	✓
% managers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
% hhds. 2–10 servants	✓	✓	✓		✓
% male in labour force		✓			
% female in labour force		✓	✓		

“Attendance” refers to “Index of Attendance” as described in text: Total attendance for that denomination/Total population.

Results in Table 5 confirm that, indeed, religious patterns can help predict voting patterns: for instance, index of attendance of the Church of England is a key explanatory variable in all five elections considered. To examine the direction and magnitude of the effect of religion (and other variables), we run an OLS model, where the unit of observation is still the constituency. For each election (1841, 1847, 1852, 1857, 1859), we use the following specification:

Figure 3: Electoral results and religious attendance.



$$\begin{aligned} \%Vote\ P_i = & \alpha + \beta_1 Att.Denomination_{ji} + \beta_2 Urban_i + \beta_3 Med.Skilled_i \\ & + \beta_5 Religiosity_i + \beta_6 Wales_i + \varepsilon_i, \quad \text{where} \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

i = Constituency

j = Religious denomination {Church of England, Old Dissent, New Dissent}

$\% \text{ Vote } P$ = Vote share (%) for party P {Conservative, Liberal}

Att. Denomination $_j$ = Index of Total Attendance (in %) for denomination j

Urban = Degree of urban (1=least urban, 4=most urban), as in Snell and Ell (2000)

Med. Skilled = % of lower managers and lower professionals among population

Religiosity = # of sittings per capita (all denominations)

Wales = Dummy for Wales

5 Results

Figure 4 shows the results for the Church of England for all five elections in this study. As one should expect, results are nearly symmetric for Whigs and Tories, since they were virtually the only two parties competing at the time. Results are unambiguous: Controlling for various sociodemographic factors, attendance to the Church of England predicts more votes for the Tories, and fewer votes for the Whigs. In terms of magnitude, the effect is not small: a 1% increase in attendance leads to a 0.5% increase in vote shares for the Tories; a one standard deviation increase in attendance for the Church of England results into an increase in vote shares for Tories of approximately 7 percentage points. Attendance to New Dissent services can predict vote shares equally well in all elections (in this case, increases correspond to larger vote shares for Whigs). Nonetheless, attendance to Old Dissent services is uncorrelated to vote shares.

Figure 4: Attendance to the Church of England and voting

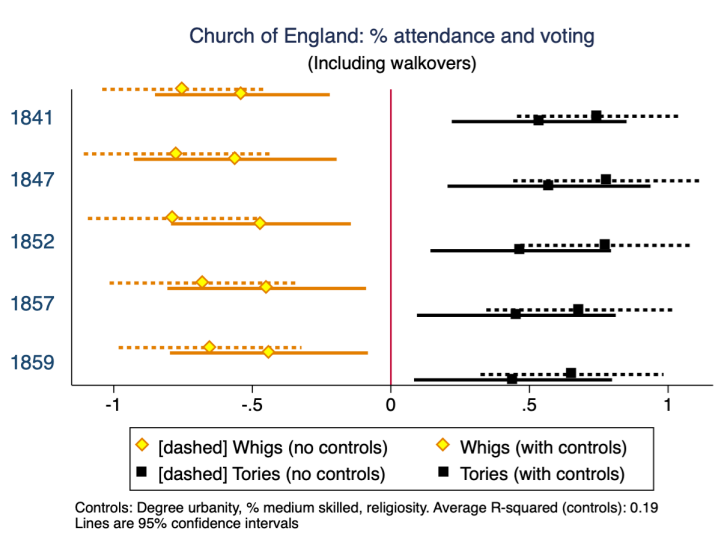
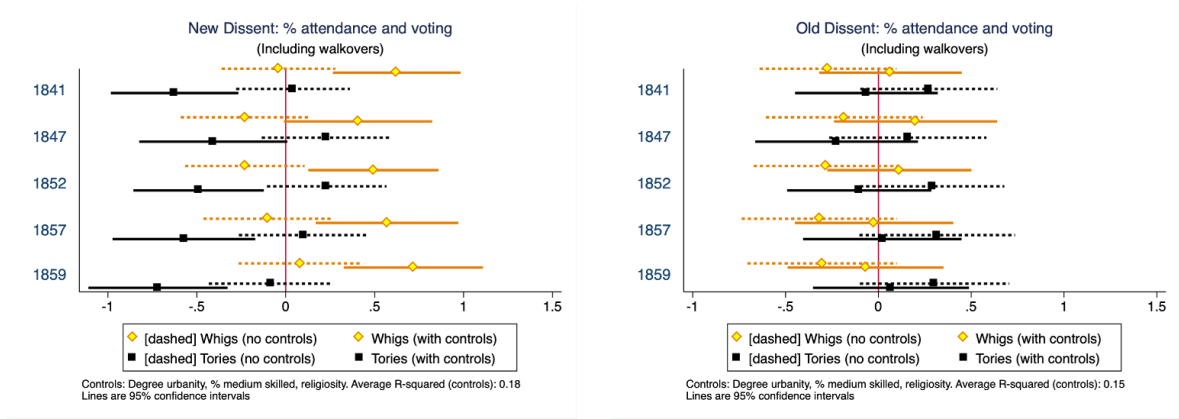


Figure 5: Attendance to Old and New Dissent and voting



5.1 Did other factors have a similar impact?

Next we examine whether sociodemographic factors can further explain vote in Britain during the 19th century, using the same specification as above (equation 1) but now focusing on the control variables. We first assess whether religiosity (proxied by sittings per capita) can predict voting. Figure 6 shows the results. They reveal that relatively more religious areas tended to vote more for Tories. In terms of magnitude, a one standard deviation increase in the number of seats per capita (0.14 seats) results in approximately a five percentage point increase in the vote share for Tories across the years. Interestingly, the effect seems to vanish in the later years (let us remind the reader that the number of seats per capita is fixed at 1851 in all our regressions).

Figure 6: Religiosity (sittings per capita) and voting

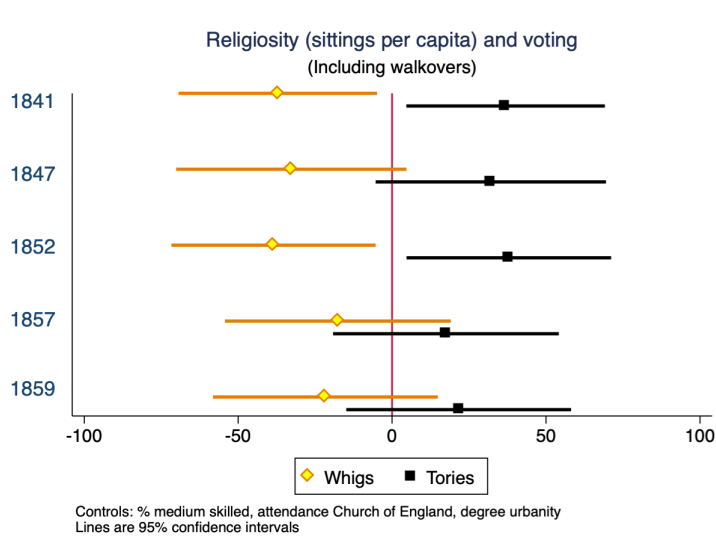
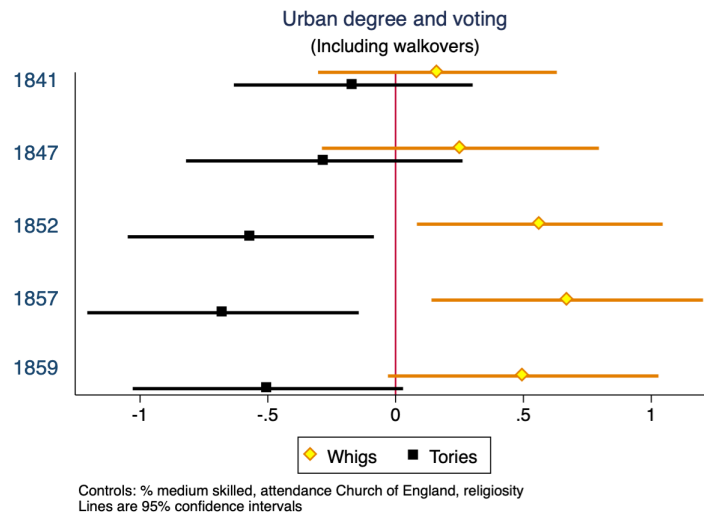


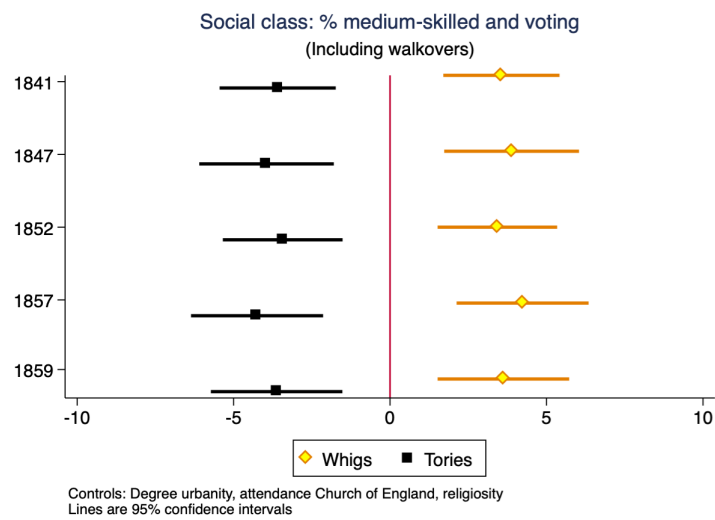
Figure 7 shows the results for urban/rural, using the 1–4 coding created by Snell and Ell (2000). These suggest that urban areas tended to vote more for Whigs. When using population density in the regression instead, significance vanishes in all years (results not shown in this version), thereby casting some doubts on the robustness of these results.

Figure 7: Urban degree and voting



Finally, we assess to what extent professional (workforce) composition was related to voting patterns. As stated above, we create a measure that captures the proportion of “Lower managers” (Hisclass=3), “Lower professionals, and clerical and sales personnel” (Hisclass=4), and “Lower clerical and sales personnel” (Hisclass=5). I.e., the proportion of population who have medium skilled jobs in the constituency (all non manual). Figure 8 shows the results: They unambiguously reveal that constituencies with a higher percentage of skilled professionals tended to be more supportive of the Whigs: a one percentage point increase in the fraction of middle professionals is correlated with an increase of 3–4 percentage points in the vote share for Whigs. While this seems like a remarkable effect, we should note that the mean of middle professionals was around 4% (the range being 1.5% – 16.3%).

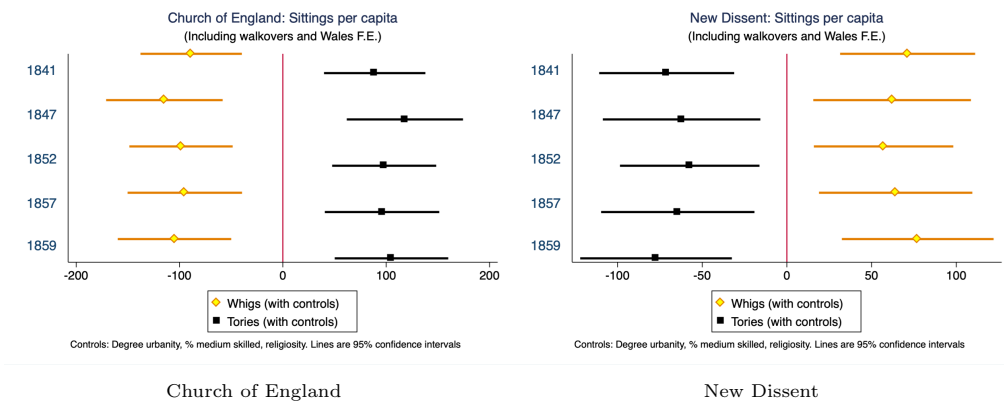
Figure 8: Urban degree and voting



6 Robustness Checks

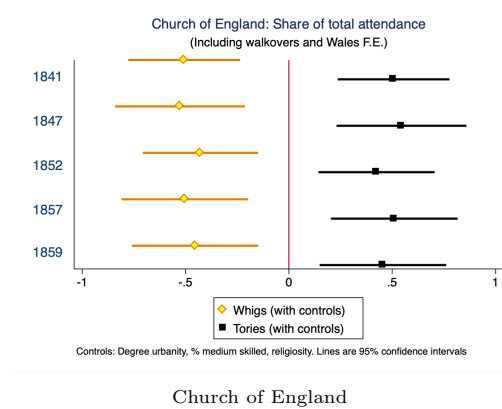
As noted in section 3 above, we use two other measures to test the robustness of our results: total sittings per capita, and share of total attendances. Figure 9 sows the results for sittings per capita.¹² Results unambiguously provide support to the findings shown above: Areas with more sittings per capita for the Church of England are areas where the Tories gathered more support. Areas with more sittings per capita for New Dissent are areas where the Whigs gathered more support.

Figure 9: Sittings per capita by denomination and voting



Figures 10 and 11 use the denomination's share of total attendances as the main independent variable of interest. Results provide further support to all previous ones: Shares of total attendances of Church of England and New Dissent predict voting patterns, while Old Dissent share of attendances is uncorrelated to voting behavior.

Figure 10: Share of total attendances and voting (Church of England)

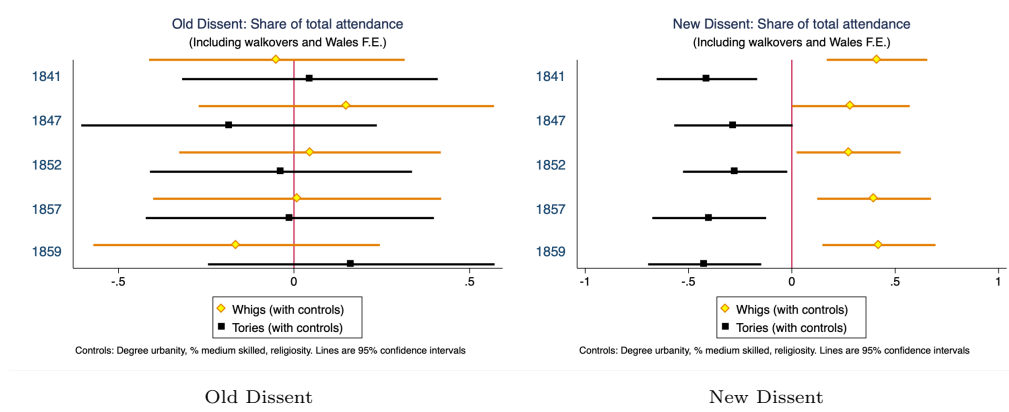


7 Discussion

Various factors seem to be quite good predictors of vote in 19th century Britain. Religion is the one that sticks out the most: both sittings per capita *and* attendance to the Church of England are key

¹²Unfortunately at this point we do not have the sittings per capita for Old Dissent.

Figure 11: Share of total attendances and voting (Old and New Dissent)



explanatory factors for all elections we have in our data. Workforce composition and urbanization are also important factors to consider when analyzing voting patterns.

There are some caveats to these findings that we would like to address.

First, vote was far from universal. Women could not vote, and only around 10% of men had the right to by 1831 (by 1861 it had increased to around 17.5% of the adult male population). Therefore, the measures of religious attendance we use do not necessarily reflect in a reliable manner religious practices of the enfranchised population. All results in this paper are based on the assumption that the enfranchised population roughly followed religious practices of everyone else in their region. Next iteration of this paper will examine possible correlations between religiosity, popularity of religious denominations and % of enfranchised people. This way, we will be able to discuss more thoroughly the possible biases that selective franchise may have.

In a similar way, all sociodemographic characteristics taken from the Census that we use do not necessarily reflect those of the enfranchised population. While it goes without saying that results regarding the effect of sociodemographic variables should be taken with a pinch of salt, there are reasons for us to believe results regarding urbanization and professionals are, in fact, quite robust. First, degree of urban affects equally voters and non-voters. Second, the franchised population represented in 1831 around 10% of the adult male population. It is likely that our measures of highly & middle skilled population closely match the franchised population in urban areas —while it is less likely it does in more rural areas. If anything, proportion of highly & middle skilled population could be proxying for regional economic dynamism.

Second, merging datasets by area is far from ideal. Suppose that a given constituency is composed majorly of two registration districts: one is a middle-sized, densely-populated, mostly dissenter, town, and the other a large, relatively uninhabited, pro-anglican, rural area. In our data, after imputation, this constituency will look like an Anglican one, with a rural-looking sociodemographic composition when, in fact, most of its population are urban and followers of nonconformism. This is likely to create noisy estimates, if anything biased against our findings. Next iteration of this paper will merge the datasets by population instead of by area, which will get rid of the biases imposed by the current merging strategy.

Third, our measure of religiosity may not necessarily only capture religious *fervor*: it could also capture legacy of the Church of England, as well as relative wealth. Given that church and chapel building is a slow and costly process, we cannot overlook the possibility that regions with more sittings per capita are areas where there are more funds (either private or state-based) to produce them.

This paper can be further improved by means of using by-elections to proxy for walkovers. The example of Rochester in 1857 will help us illustrate how by-elections can refine our dataset. In 1857, 2 Liberal candidates won with no opposition (walkover). Our current hence has 100% of vote shares for the Whigs, and 0% for the Tories. However, there had been a by-election in 1856 due to an MP resigning. The Tory candidate had won 499 votes (47%), while the Whig candidate had secured 560 votes (53%). Imputing these shares to 1857 is likely a more reliable depiction of the distribution of preferences in Rochester in 1857. There are 39 useful by-elections in total (8 in 1859; 11 in 1857; 5 in 1852; 9 in 1947; 6 in 1841).

8 Concluding remarks

This paper has sought to examine the religious origins of political parties in Great Britain using a novel combination of datasets. Results indicate that support for Tories (Whigs) was significantly stronger where the Anglican Church (New Dissent) was stronger. With the current approach used here, there is no evidence that religiosity trumped social class in shaping voting decisions (nor there is evidence otherwise). Using highly disaggregated data (i.e., aggregated at the parish level) should allow us to further disentangle the predictive power of the different variables, and tease out whether religion was in effect the main factor in shaping political decisions in 19th century Britain.

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