

Attitudes towards religion in contemporary Europe

David Voas

Institute for Social Change

University of Manchester

Great Britain

***Re-emergence of Religion as a
Social Force in Europe?***

**Extending and enhancing the
ISSP 2008 module on religion**

Background

- The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) produced survey modules on religion in 1991 and 1998; the third was used in 2008
- These datasets will constitute the best longitudinal, multinational study in existence on religion
- The project aims to extend and enhance this major resource

Investigators

- David Voas, University of Manchester ([Great Britain](#)) - PI
- Alison Park, National Centre for Social Research ([Great Britain](#))
- Gillian Robinson, University of Ulster ([Northern Ireland](#))
- Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, University College Dublin ([Ireland](#))
- Ariana Need, Radboud University Nijmegen ([Netherlands](#))
- Peter Lüchau, University of Copenhagen ([Denmark](#))

Objectives

- Two key challenges: small samples and a limited range of questions
- Three broad themes: the social significance of religion, the impact of social change on religion, and religious tolerance and extremism

To what extent is religion a social force in Europe?

- Influence of institutional churches is declining
- Average individual religiosity is declining
- For native European populations, religion has less and less influence on attitudes and behaviour (voting, values, etc.)

So where does the notion of 're-emergence' come from?

- Religion is important to many new ethnic minority groups
- The association of religion with ethnic minorities generates opposition to a public role for religion

For today ...

- Will focus on tolerance and attitudes towards religion
- Is opposition to religion a social force in Europe?

A European view of religion

- Religion can be bad (Taliban) or good (Dalai Lama)
- The bad aspects are best controlled by making religion a private matter
- The good aspects are most beneficial when other people are religiously socialised

Key findings on tolerance, diversity and the role of religion

- Little support for freedom of expression
- Negative views of Muslims
- Broadly based anti-religious sentiments
- Religion seen as a private matter
- Considerable toleration of private religion

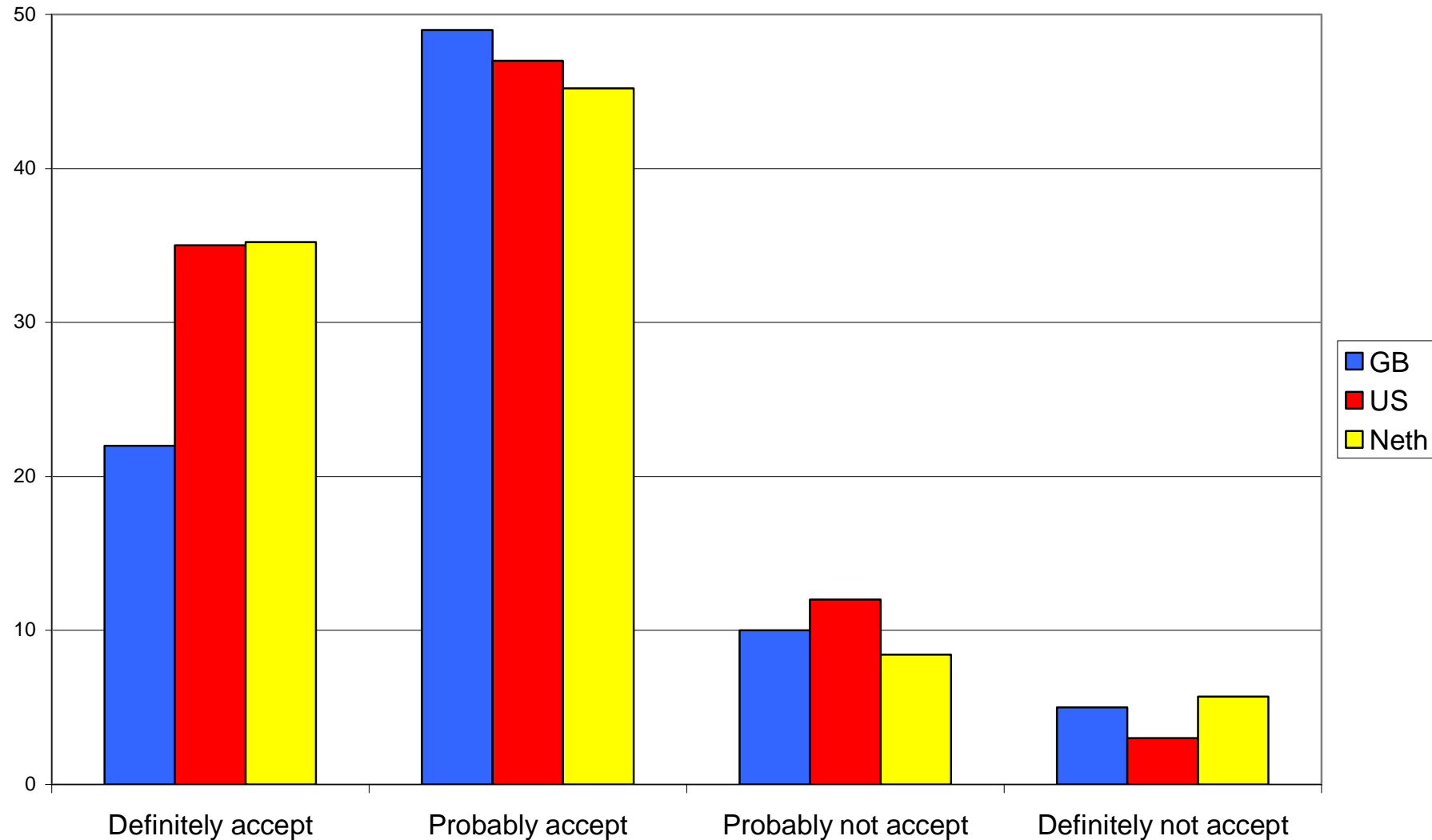
Generalised tolerance

- Three quarters say that being Christian is not important for being truly British (89% for Dutch)
- 70% in Britain agree that we must respect all religions (80% for Dutch); only 13% (10%) disagree
- “Can a good person who is not of your faith go to heaven or attain salvation?” – only 4% say ‘no’

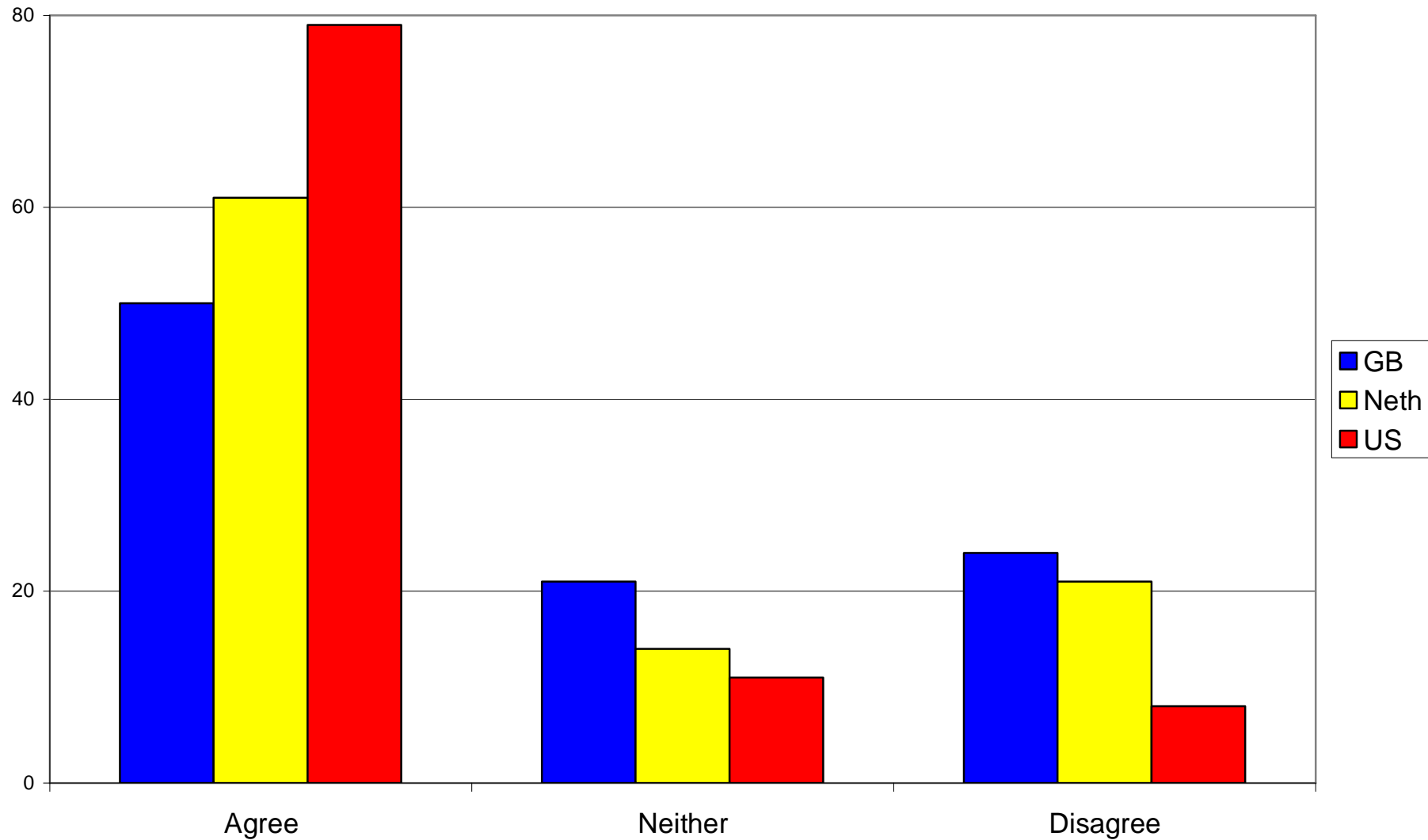
Practising a religion helps people to ...

- gain comfort in times of trouble or sorrow (83%)
- make friends (71%)
- find inner peace and happiness (67%)
- meet the right kind of people (32%)

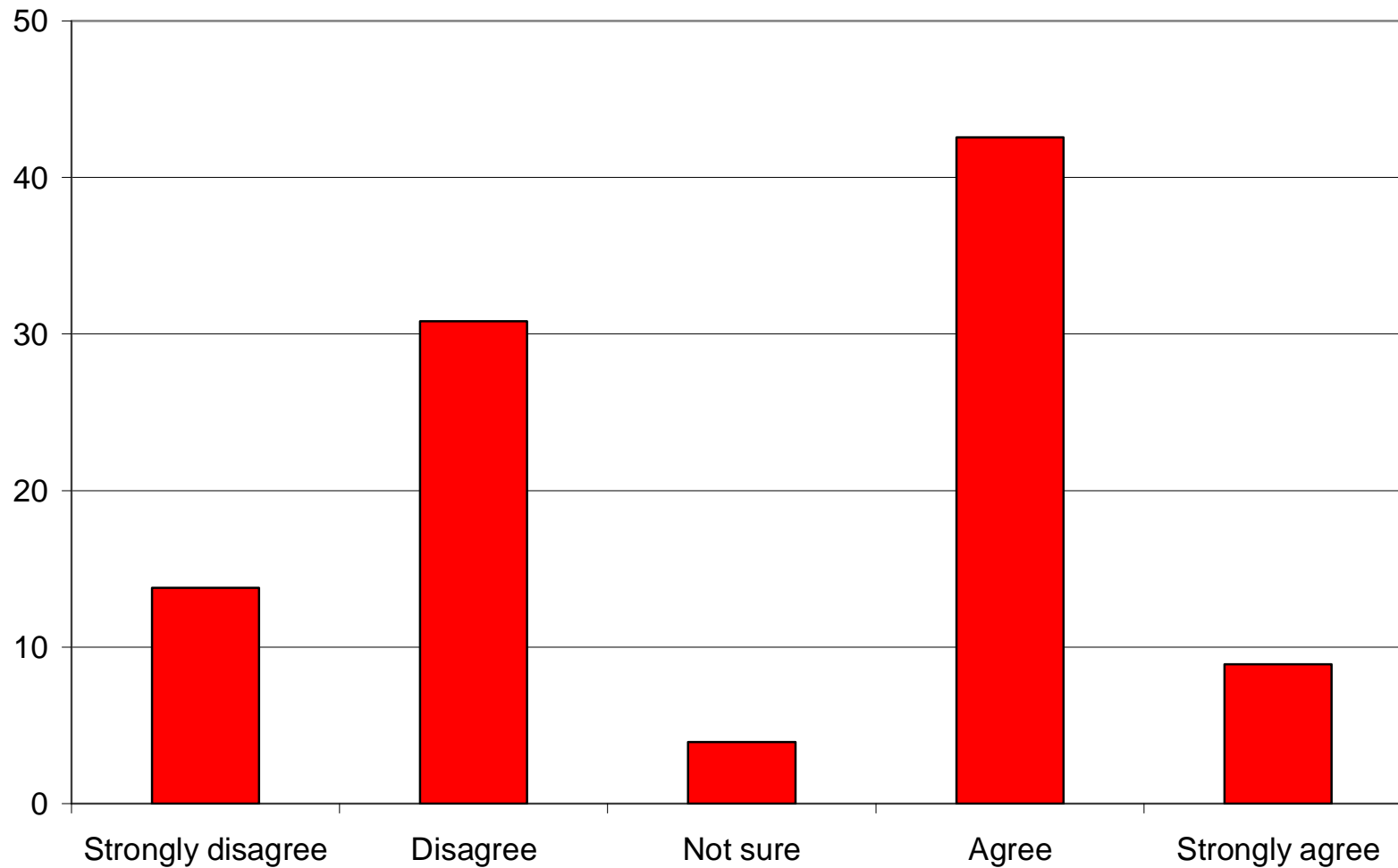
Would you accept a person from a different religion being a candidate of the political party you prefer?



“All religious groups should have equal rights”



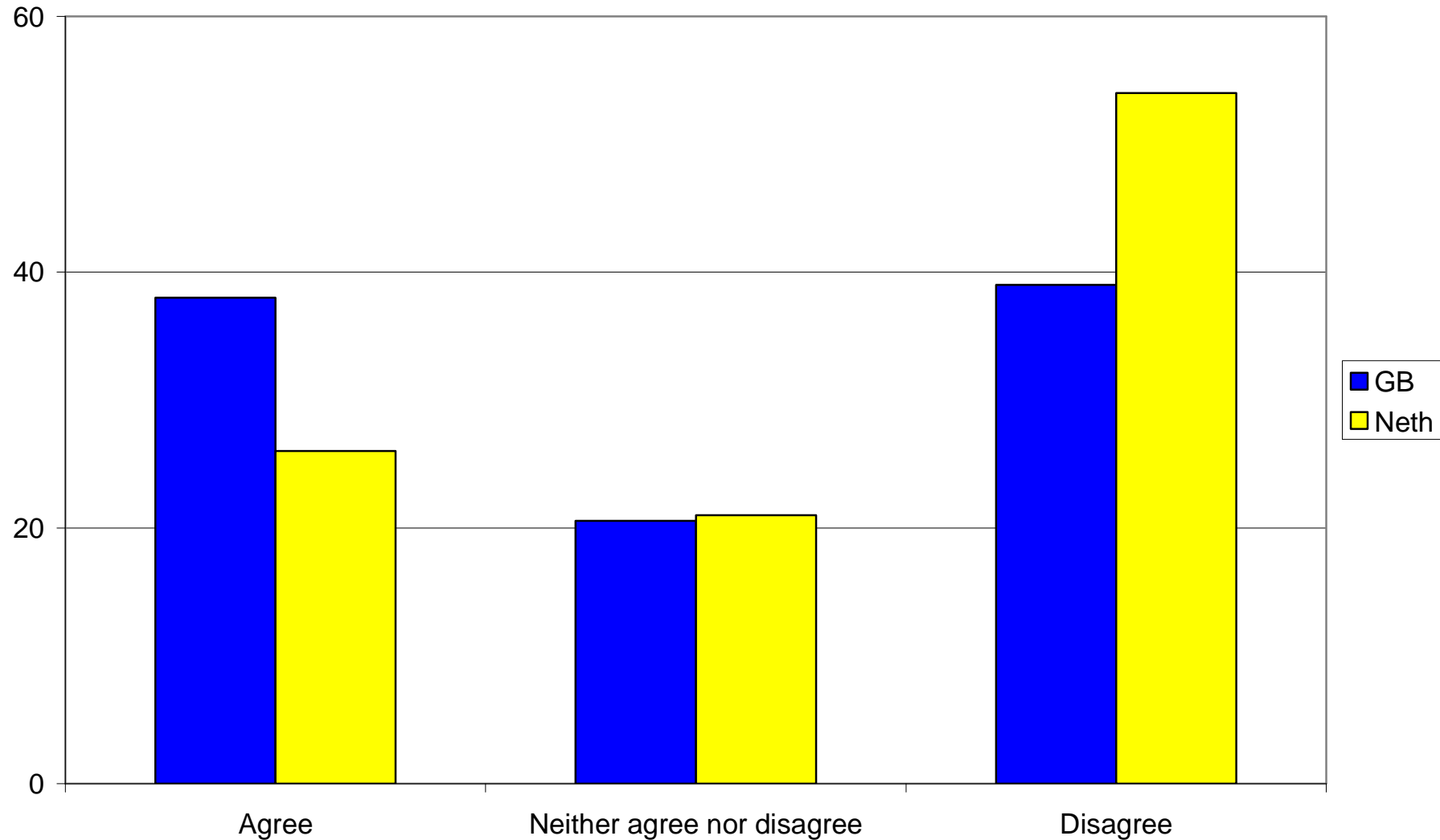
Religious diversity has been good for Britain



Diversity and intolerance

- 67% of white respondents in Britain, but only 38% in the Netherlands, agree that 'immigration is a threat to our national identity'
- 58% in Britain would be bothered by a large mosque being built in their community
- only 16% by a large church

“Nearly all Muslims living in Britain [the Netherlands] really want to fit in”



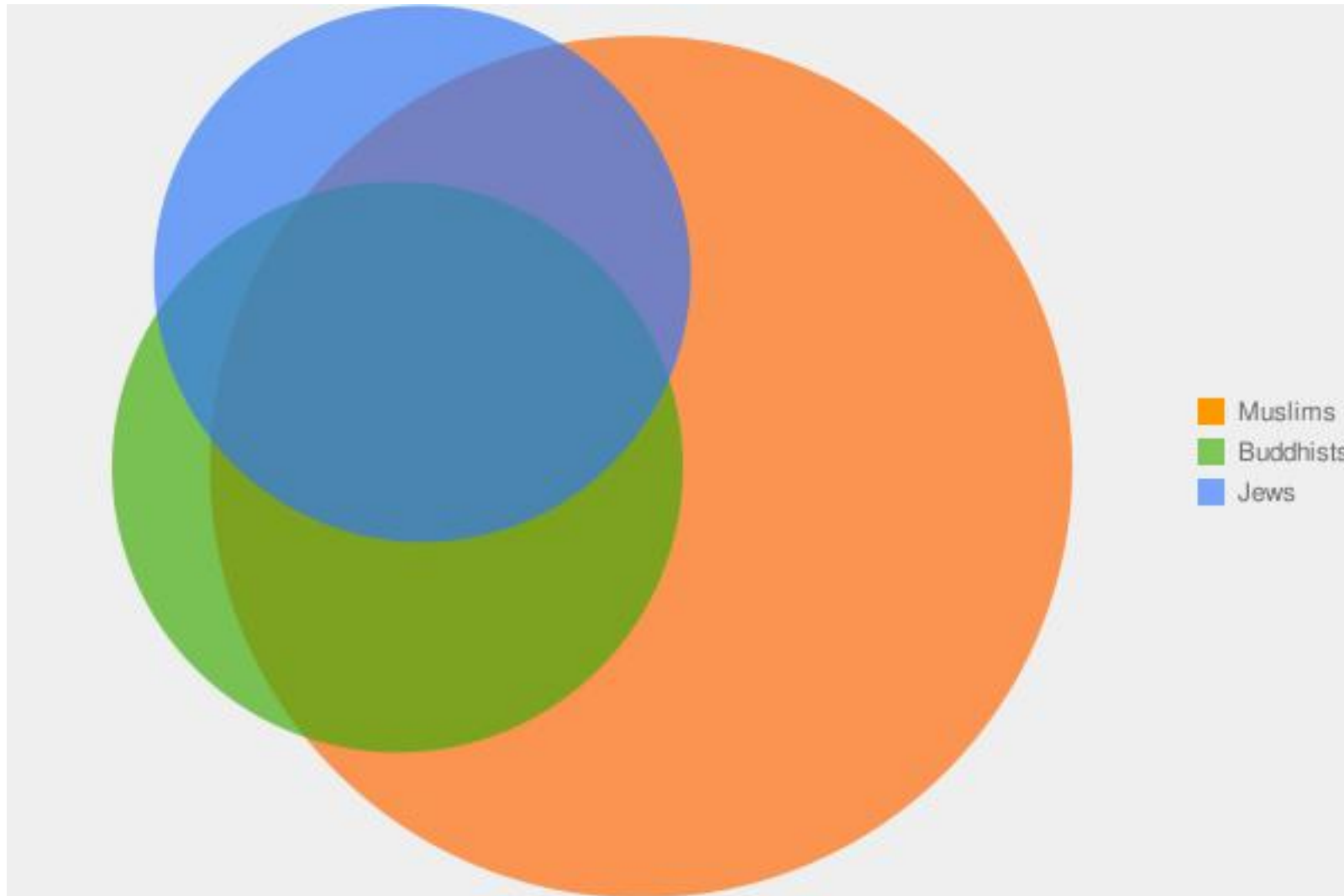
White respondents, GB: Negative feelings towards ...

- Muslims 37%
- Deeply religious people 31%
- Jews 14%
- Blacks 11%
- Catholics 9%
- Whites 2%

Dutch-born respondents, Netherlands: Negative feelings towards ...

- Muslims 33%
- Hindus 9%
- Jews 9%
- Buddhists 7%
- Atheists 6%
- Christians 4%

Overlap in adverse feelings towards Muslims, Buddhists and Jews



Key points

- Some of the antipathy towards Muslims comes from people with a generalised dislike of anyone different.
- A larger subset of the population responds negatively only to Muslims.
- Relatively few people feel unfavourable towards any other religious or ethnic group on its own.

Negative views about religion

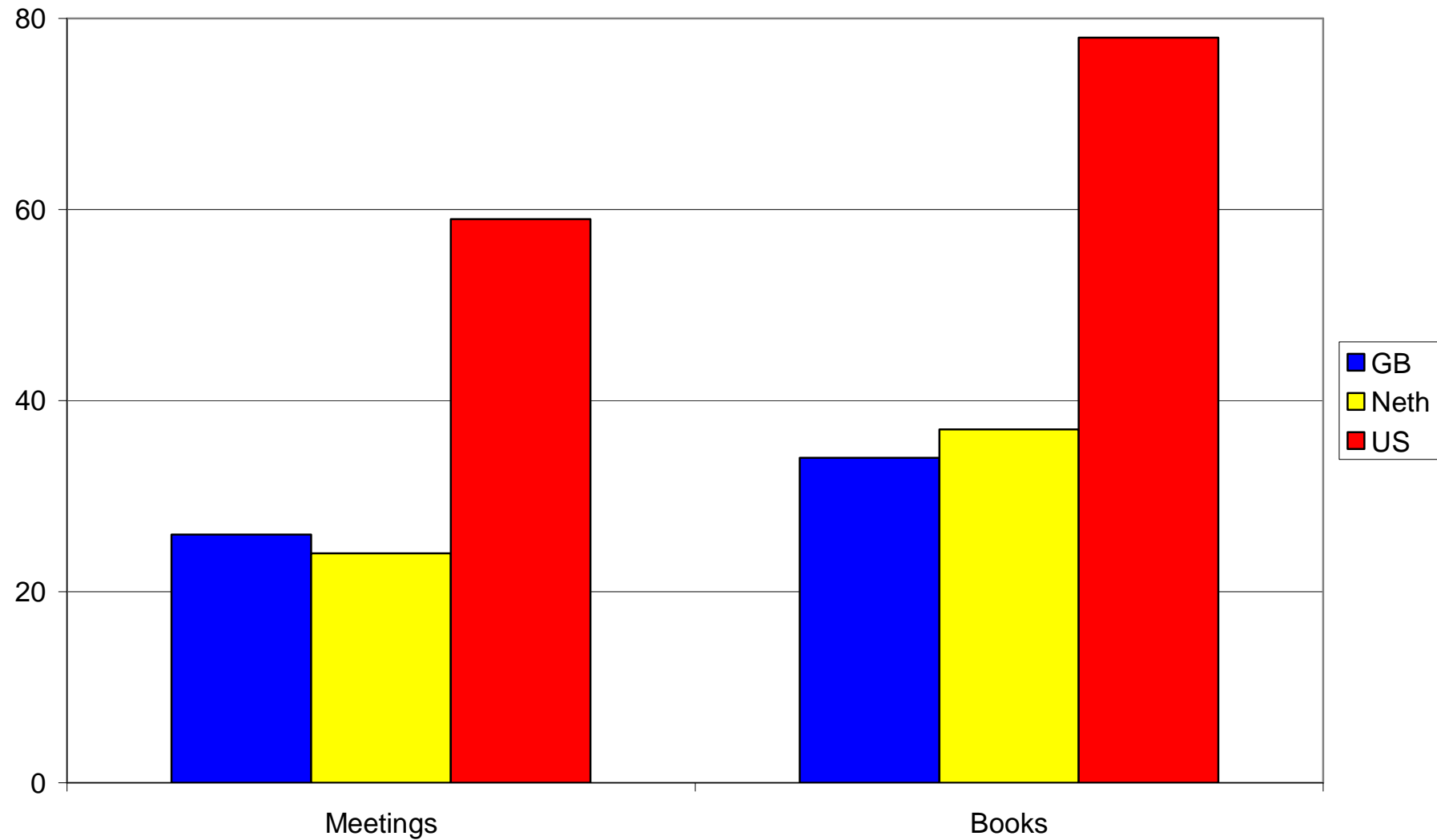
- Religion is often seen as threatening, oppressive or divisive
- Three quarters agree that ‘around the world religions bring more conflict than peace’; only 9% disagree
- Nearly three quarters agree that ‘people with very strong religious beliefs are often too intolerant of others’ (80% in Netherlands)

Freedom of expression

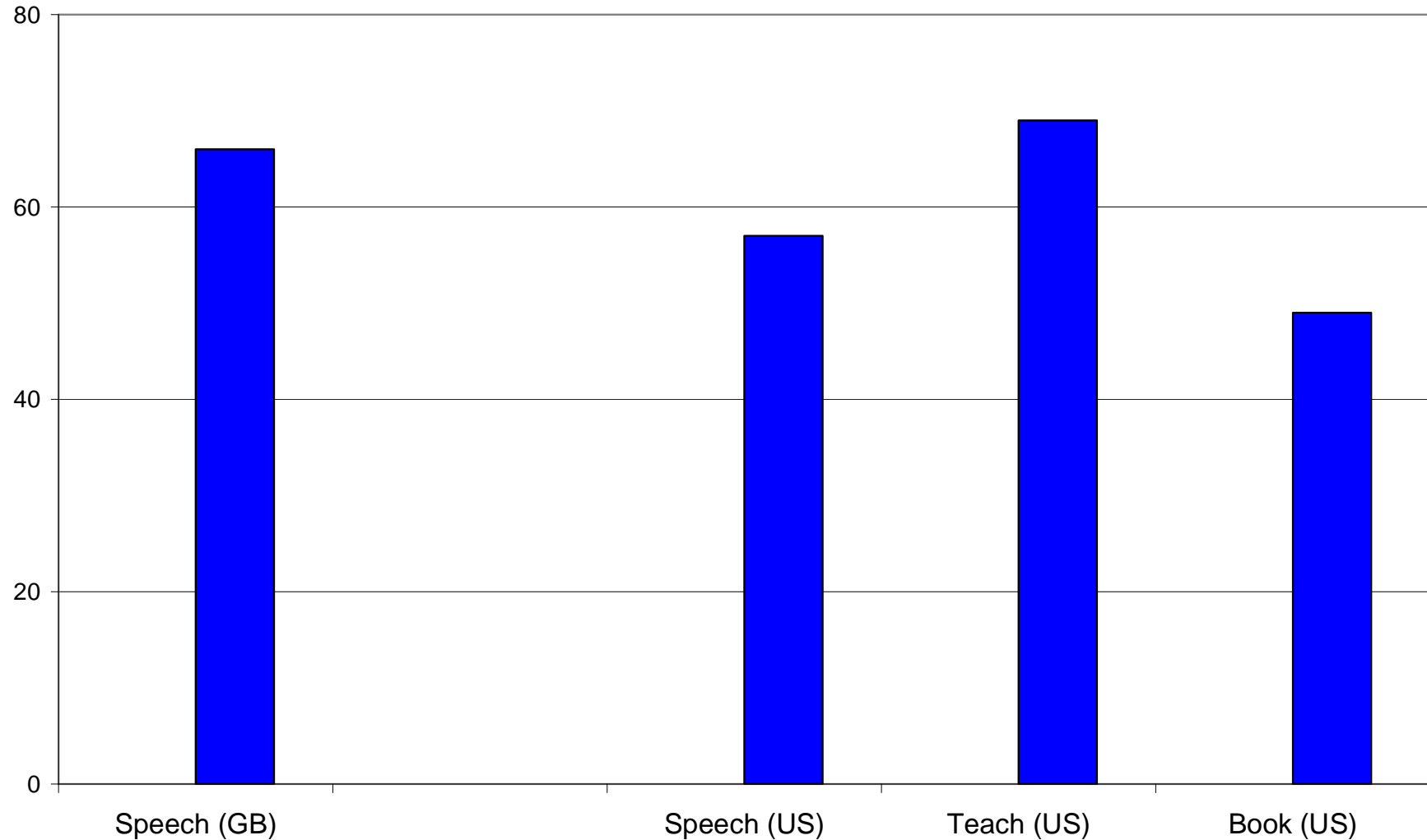
“Consider religious extremists, who believe that their religion is the only true faith and all other religions should be considered as enemies. Should such people be allowed to publish books expressing their views?”

... Should such people be allowed to hold public meetings to express their views?”

Allow religious extremists to speak / publish



Forbid speech defending Osama (GB) or radical Muslim cleric to speak / teach / have book in library (US)



But ...

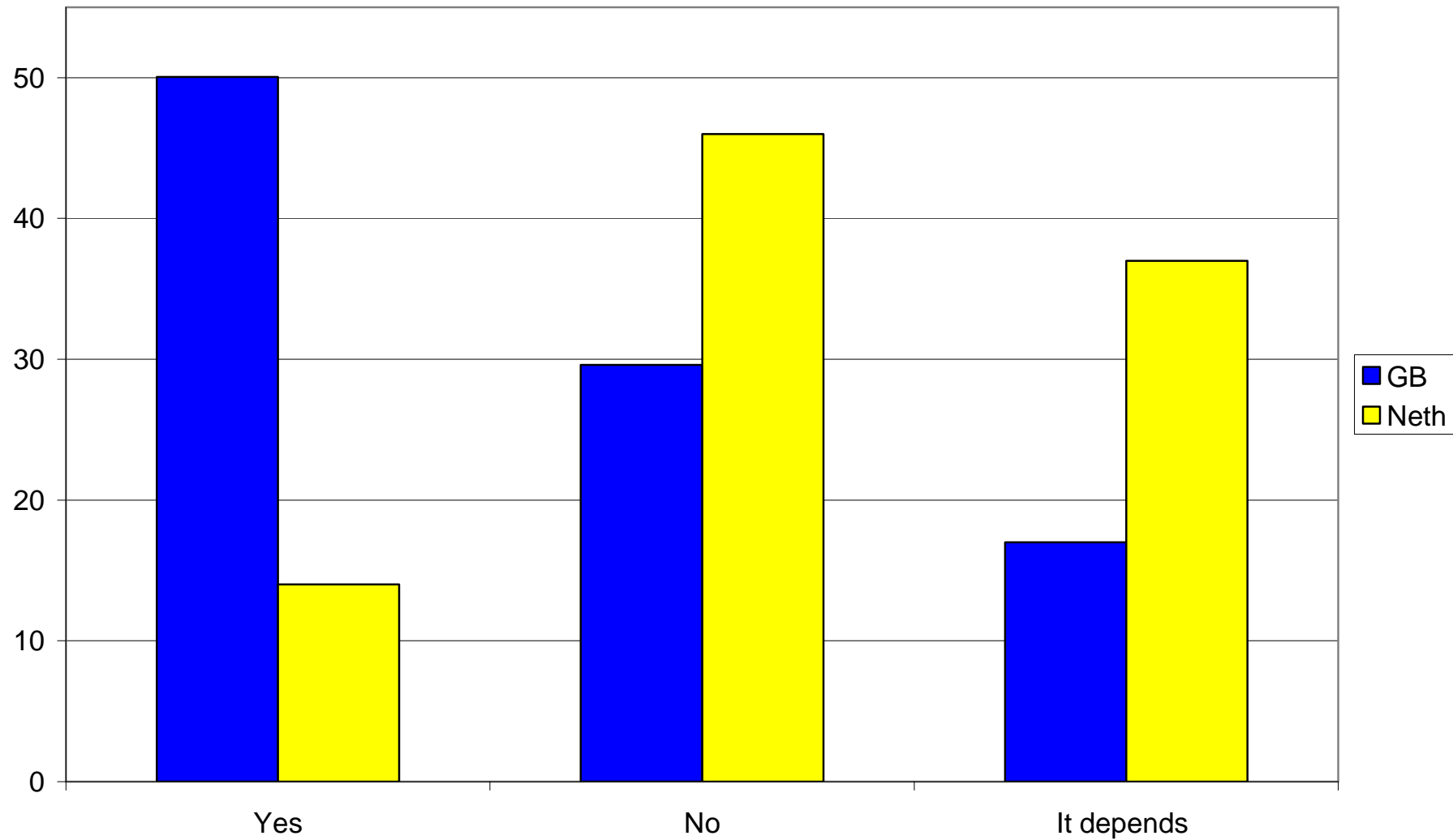
- Perhaps these results are tainted by security concerns
- People may be prepared to sacrifice free speech that could lead to violence
- Less threatening forms of expression would still be permitted
- Right?

For example,

How many would say 'no' if asked:

“Should people *who work with the general public* be allowed to dress in a way that shows their religious faith, by wearing veils, turbans or crucifixes?”

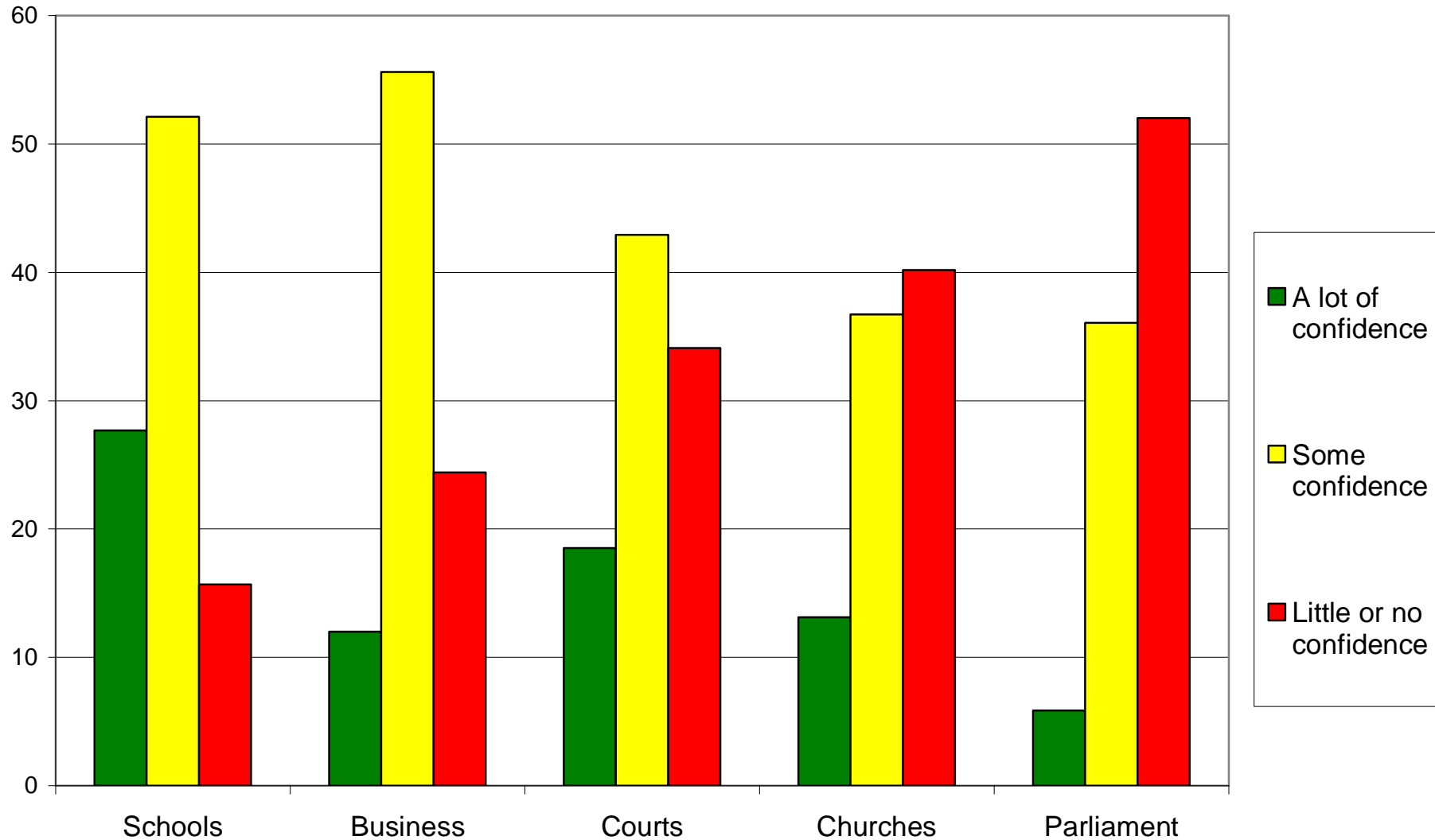
Allow religious dress



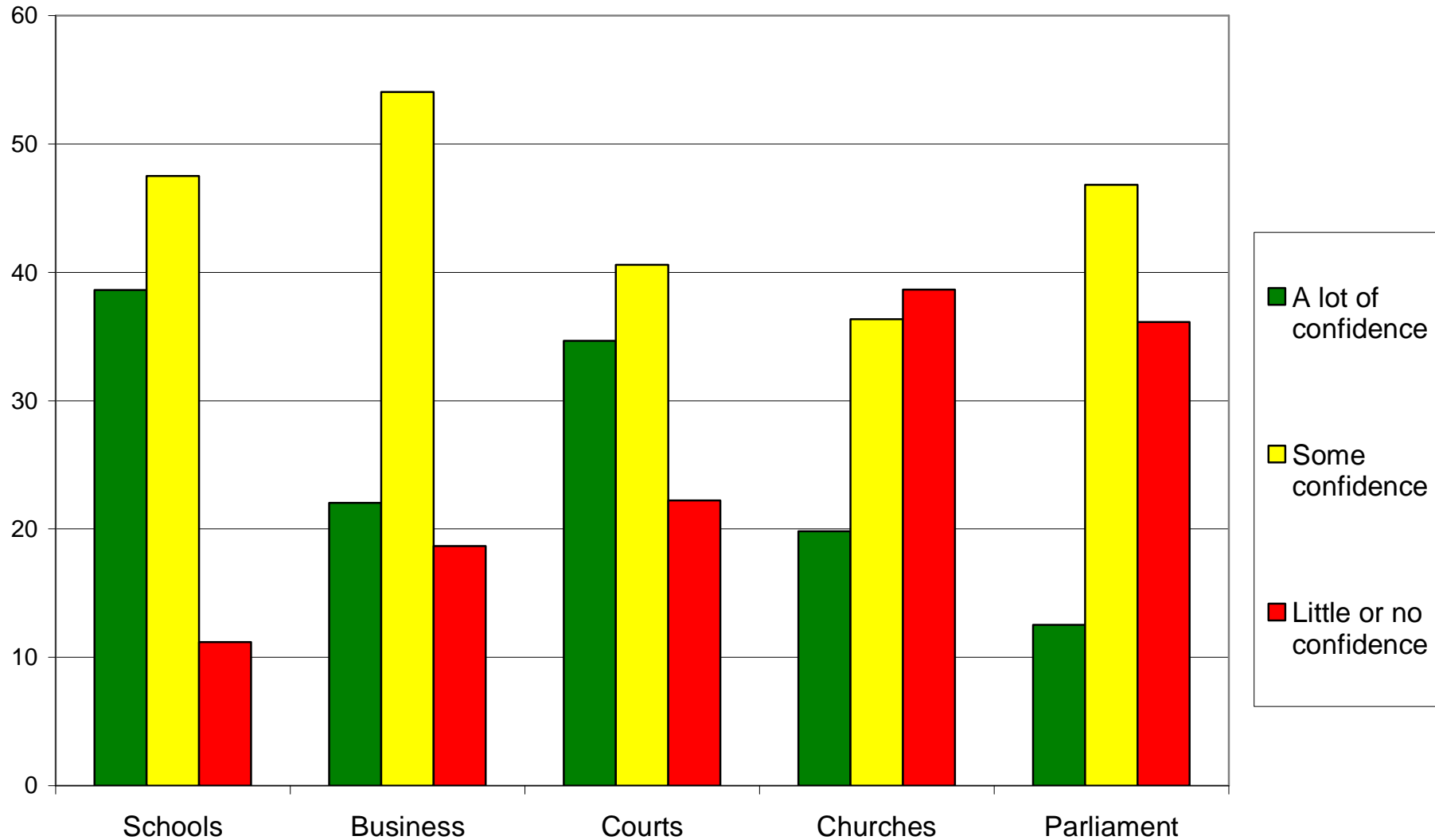
What's going on?

- Restrictions are already the status quo in the Netherlands
- Also, the Dutch question appears on a self-completion questionnaire; in Britain it was in a face-to-face interview
- When asked in a questionnaire whether religious dress should be allowed *at all*, 42% in Britain said 'no'

Confidence in institutions - Britain



Confidence in institutions - Netherlands



Does religion make politicians better?

- ‘If many more of our elected officials were deeply religious, do you think that the laws and policy decisions they make would probably be better or would probably be worse?’
- Better: 26%
- Worse: 45%

Religion and politics

- 72% agree that 'religion is a private matter that should be kept out of debates over social and political issues'; 12% disagree
- Likewise three quarters oppose religious leaders trying to influence voting decisions; 11% would allow it (8% Neth.)
- Only 14% are willing to let religious leaders try to influence government decisions (10% Netherlands)

Is it OK to try to convert others to your faith?

- Yes: 17%
- No, 'everyone should leave everyone else alone': 81%

What's the good news for religion?

- In its place (behind closed doors), it's fine
- Religion can be good for people (especially other people)
- Core religious principles are laudable
- Religion was part of our upbringing (though is less and less so)
- Nearly half the population believes in God (sometimes, maybe)

Value change

- Tending to reduce the social salience of religious difference
- Mechanism: tolerance, often in the form of relativism
- But also producing hostility
 - dislike of specific beliefs and values
 - suspicion of high levels of commitment
 - view that religion should be private

Value change and the paradox of pluralism

Value change tends

to increase tolerance of religious diversity

but also

to decrease tolerance of religious commitment

Conclusions

- Most people are not hostile to religion *per se*
- Religion and religious diversity are now associated with unpopular things, however (Islamist extremism, immigrants, George Bush, preachy morality, abuse)
- But we have an interest in anything that might make other people behave well, and some nostalgia for traditional religion lingers

Is opposition to religion a social force in Europe?

- Suspicion of 'risky' religion could have an impact on rights to free expression
- Strong opinion that religion should be confined to the private sphere could have an impact on integration