

Belief, faith and religion: shifting attitudes in the UK

May 2023

DOI: 10.18742/pub01-134

THE
BEHAVIOURAL
INSIGHTS
TEAM

sci

SOCIAL
CHANGE
INITIATIVE

UCL

Introduction

The World Values Survey (WVS) is an international research programme devoted to the study of people’s social, political, economic, religious and cultural values around the world. Running since 1981, the WVS is the world’s largest and most widely used social survey, with over 800,000 data downloads per year. The WVS covers 120 countries represented across seven waves of data, with the most recent wave – 7 – the largest wave yet.

The questionnaire has extensive coverage of a huge range of attitudes, beliefs and values. The WVS also has a 50% overlap with the European Values Survey (EVS), opening up comparisons with another five waves of European data.

In the UK, fieldwork was completed Mar-Sept 2022 by Ipsos, among a random probability sample of **3,056 adults aged 18+**. This included respondents in England (1,645) and boost samples in Scotland (523), Wales (437) and Northern Ireland (446). This means not only can we compare the UK against other countries around the world, but also the four UK nations against each other. (See the technical details section at the end of this report for more information on the UK sample and international samples.)

How countries were selected for inclusion in this report

This is wave 7 of WVS, which included around 90 countries and ran from 2017 to 2022. This report focuses on comparison with a cross-section of 24 countries from WVS wave 7 and EVS wave 5 (see table for fieldwork years).

Countries were initially shortlisted based on the availability of reliable and accurately weighted data and then narrowed down, focusing on global coverage (based on the [UN's standardised country coding system](#)), regional coverage and population size. This selection gives coverage of 12 of the 17 UN M49 geographic regions across 24 countries, representing almost 50% of the world's population (source: [World Bank](#)).

Latest data for the UK was collected in 2022. However, for analysis of trends over time, data is for Great Britain due to a lack of available trend data from Northern Ireland.

Questions with 10-point scale response options

For several questions in this report, respondents were asked to give their answer on a numerical scale between 1 and 10, with only these two points on the scale labelled. For our analysis, following examination of the profile of responses and comparison with similar questions from other studies that use fully labelled semantic scales, we group the top three and bottom three response items together, with items 4–7 considered a middle group.

Countries included and latest years for which data is available	
Australia (2018)	Japan (2019)
Brazil (2018)	Mexico (2018)
Canada (2020)	Morocco (2021)
China (2018)	Nigeria (2017/2018)
Egypt (2018)	Norway (2018)*
France (2018)*	Philippines (2019)
Germany (2017/2018)	Poland (2017/2018)
United Kingdom (2022)+	Russia (2017)
Greece (2017)	South Korea (2017/2018)
Indonesia (2018)	Spain (2017/2018)*
Iran (2020)	Sweden (2017/2018)*
Italy (2018)*	United States (2017)

* European Values Survey (EVS) country; 50% question coverage.

+ UK used comparing WVS7 data; Great Britain used for analysis over time due to data availability.

1. Belief in God, heaven, hell and life after death

The share of Britons who say they believe in God and heaven has been in decline for decades, but belief in life after death and hell has remained stable – and by international standards the UK ranks relatively low on belief in all of these

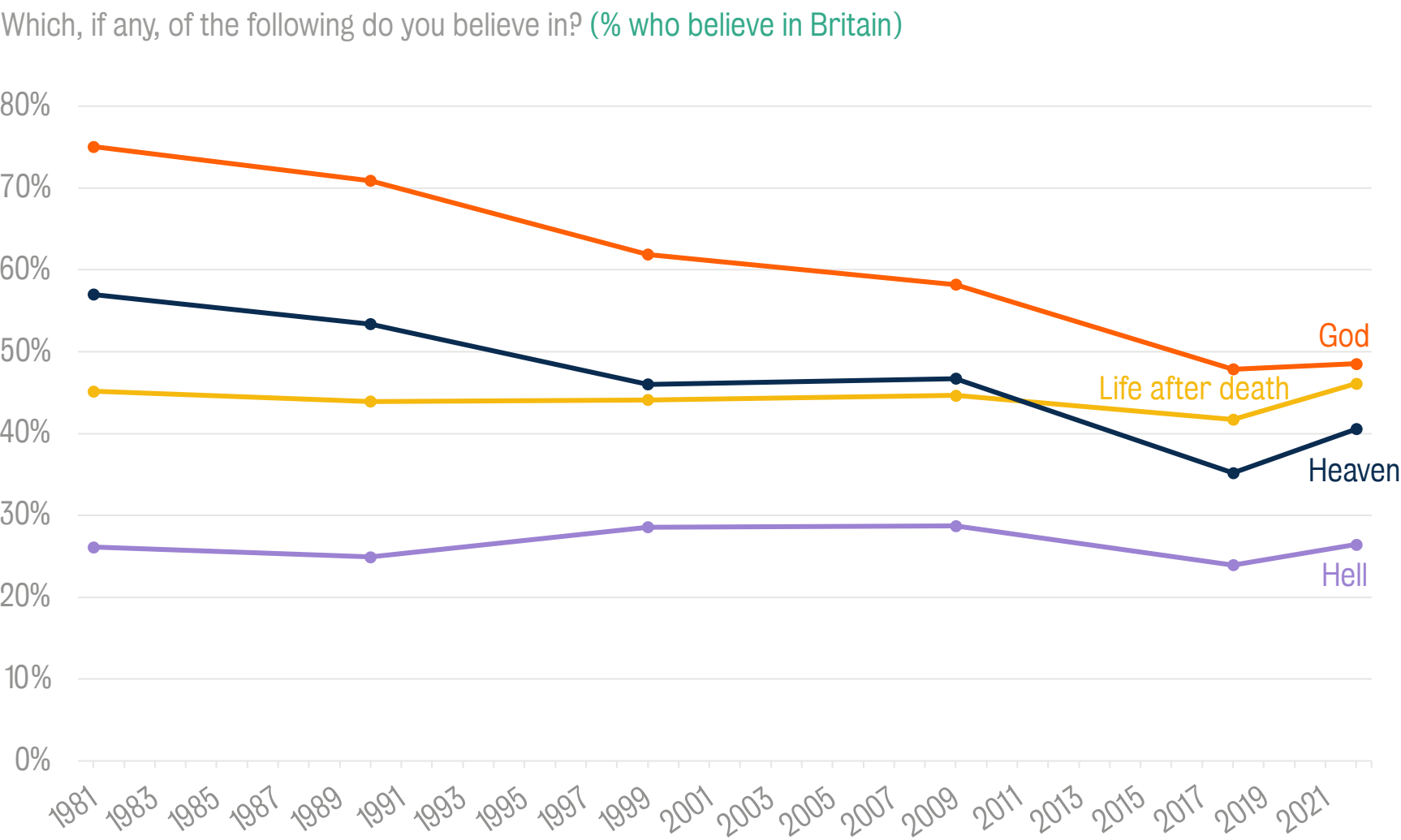


Belief in God and heaven has fallen significantly, but belief in life after death and hell remains virtually unchanged since the 1980s

Three-quarters (75%) of Britons said they believed in God in 1981, compared with just under half (49%) in 2022.

Over the same period, the share of the public believing in heaven fell from 57% to 41%. Despite this, the idea of heaven is still more popular than hell, which 26% said they believed in in 2022 – a figure largely unchanged since trends began.

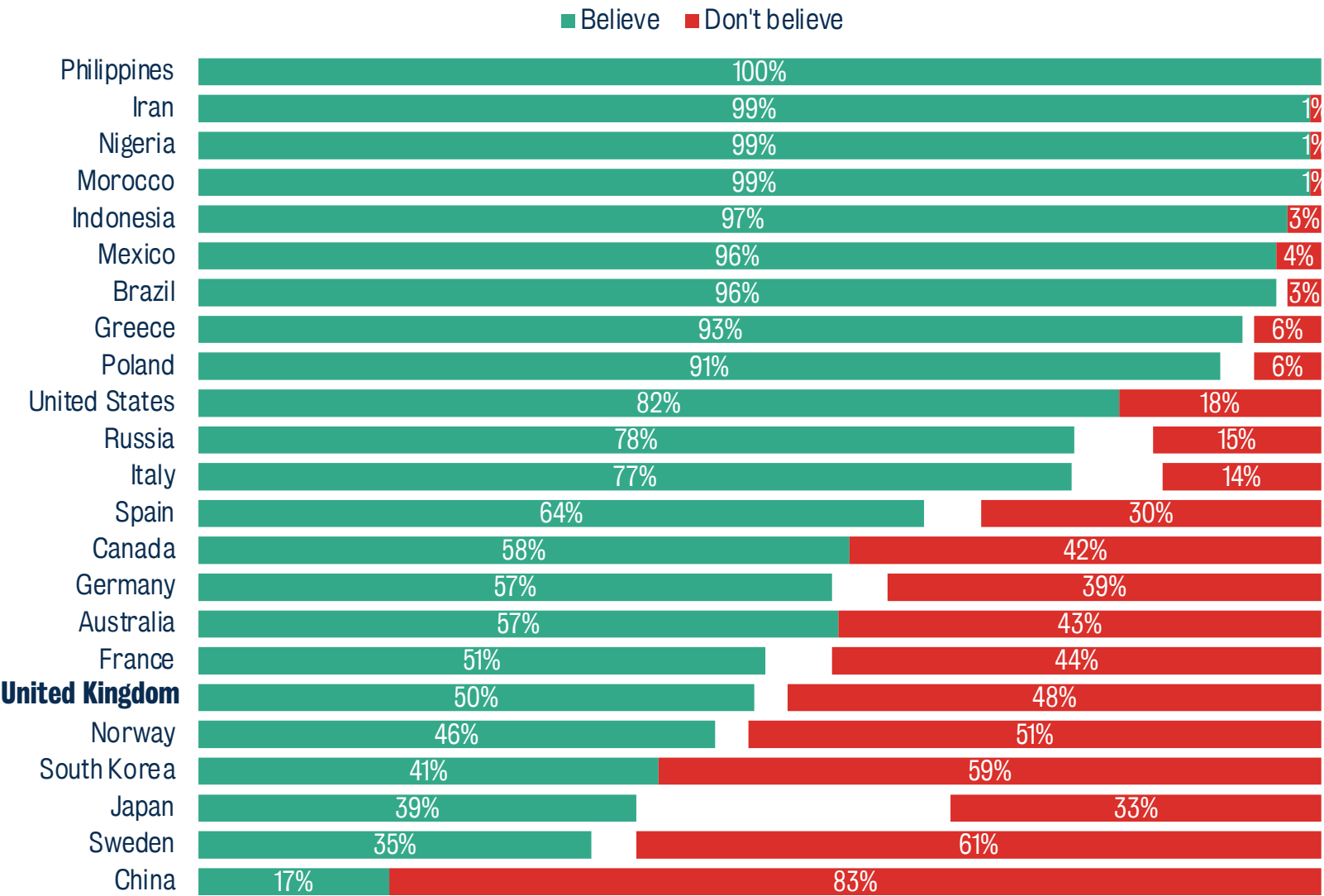
Similarly, views on life after death have held up well over the last four decades, with just under half of the public consistently saying they believe in it.



Only five nations are less likely than the UK to say they believe in God

China (17%), Sweden (35%), Japan (39%), South Korea (41%) and Norway (46%) are the only countries less likely than the UK (50%) to say they believe in God.

Which, if any, of the following do you believe in? **God**

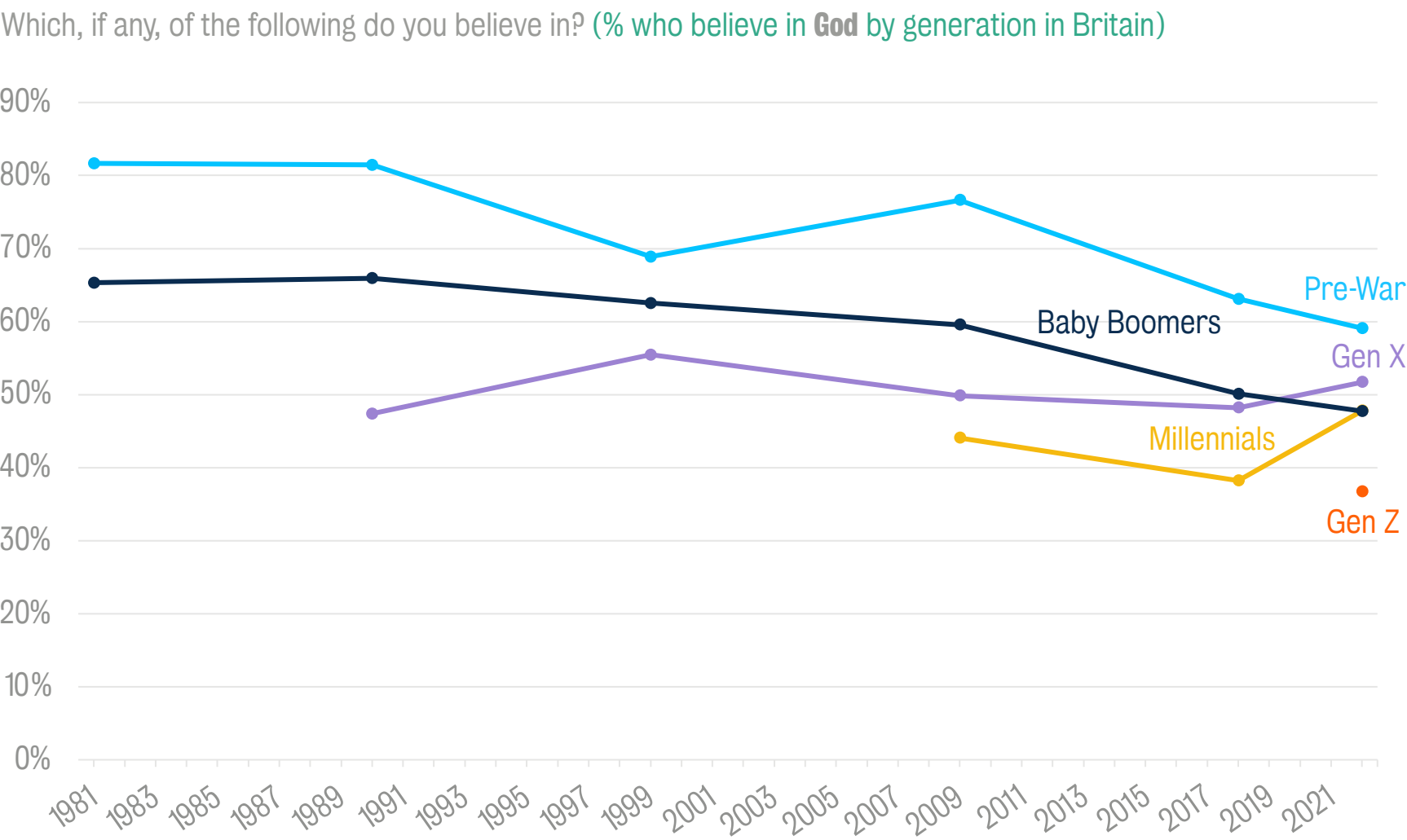


Belief in God has declined among the Pre-War generation and Baby Boomers, but remained stable among Gen X and Millennials

In 1981, 82% of the Pre-War generation in Britain said they believed in God – but this is now down to 59%.

Baby Boomers have followed a similar trend, with 2022 marking the first time less than half (48%) said they believed in God.

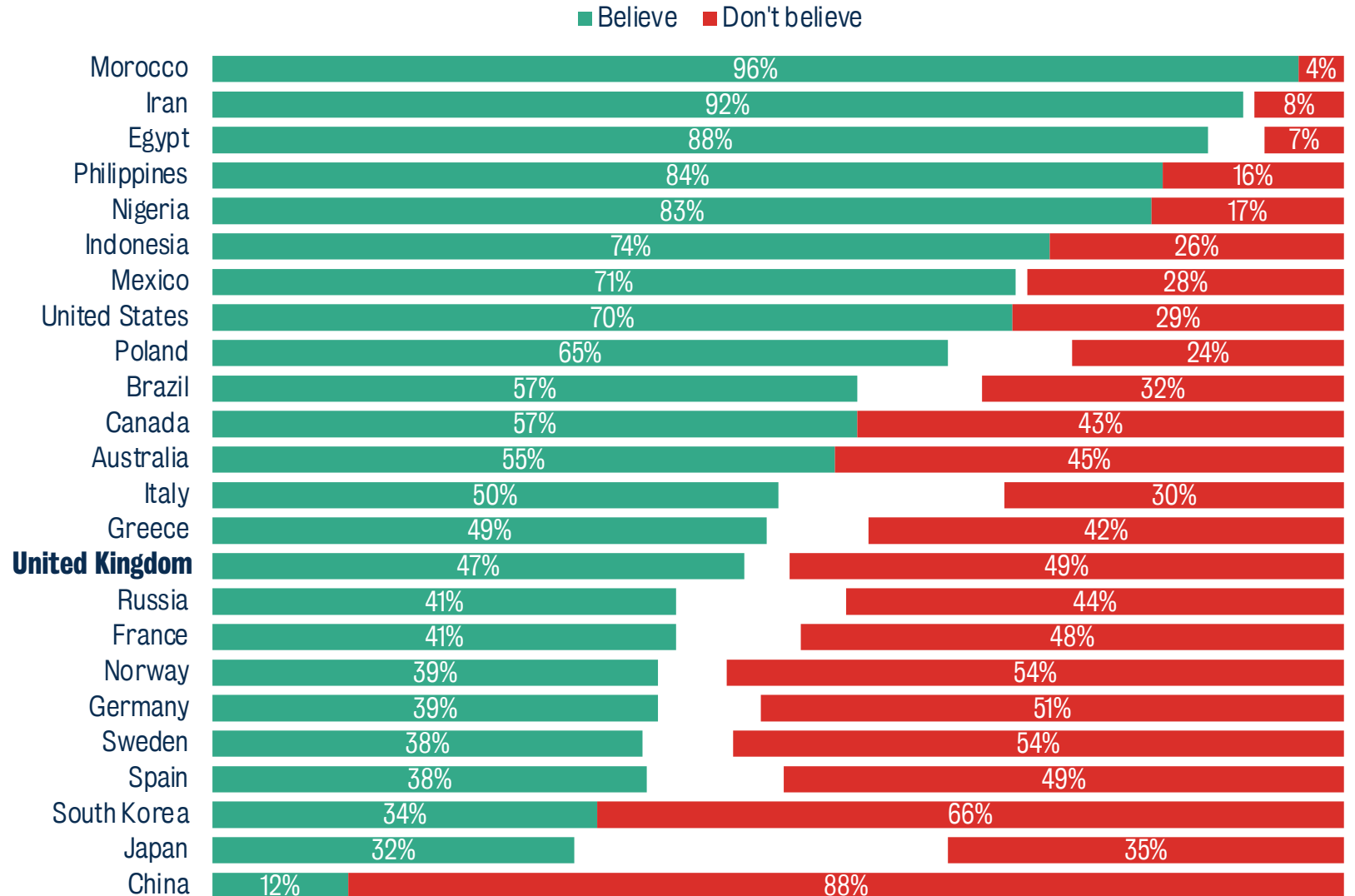
But Gen Z (37%) have the lowest levels of belief.



The UK ranks among the bottom half of nations for belief in life after death

People in the UK (47%) are more likely to believe in life after death than their counterparts in some other European countries, such as France (41%) or Spain (38%) – but the UK is still far behind the US (70%) and ranks lower than the likes of Canada (57%) and Australia (55%) for this belief.

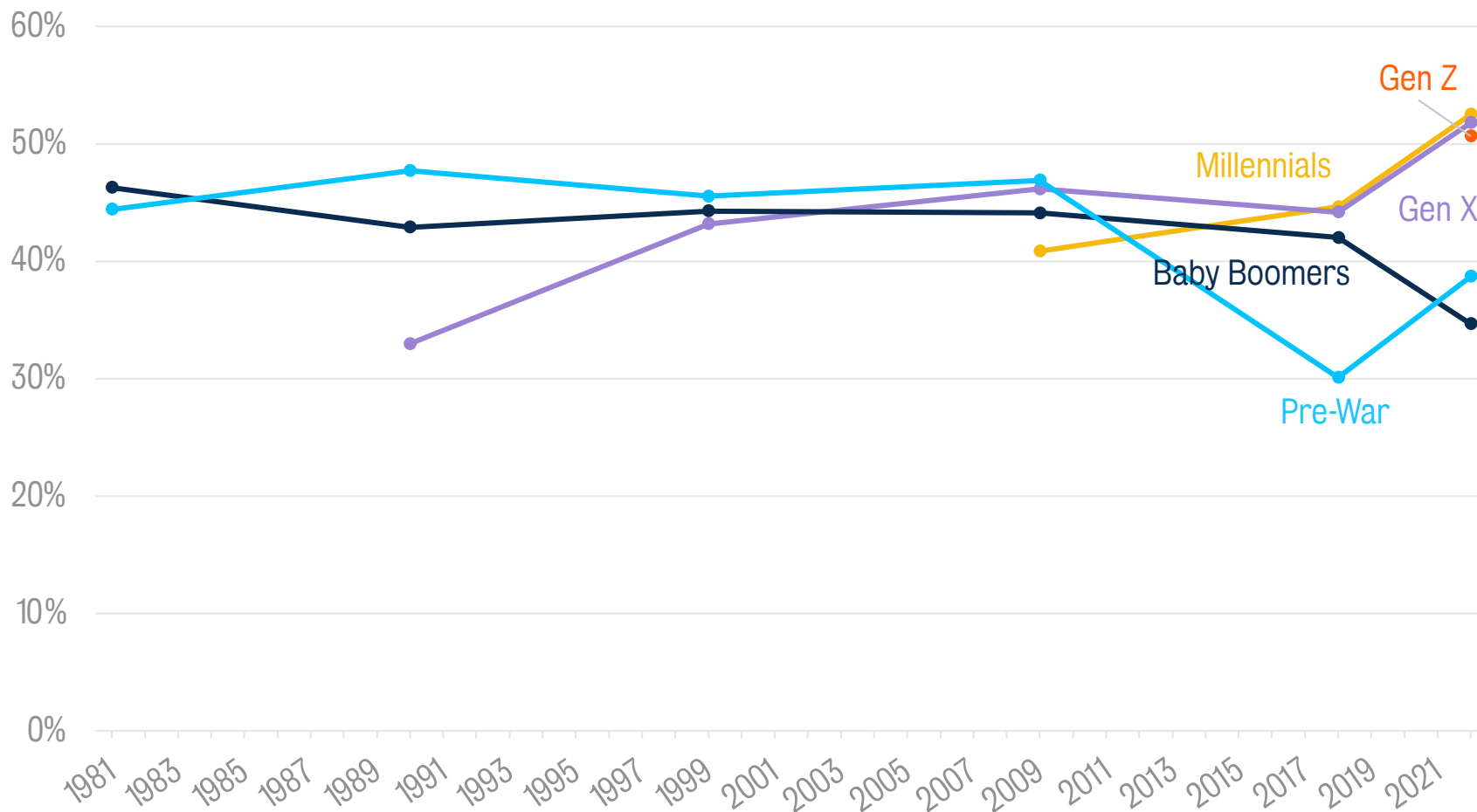
Which, if any, of the following do you believe in? **Life after death**



While younger people are less religious than older people, they are *more* inclined to believe in life after death

In 2022, majorities of Gen Z (51%), Millennials (53%) and Gen X (52%) in Britain said they believed in life after death – notably higher than the share of Baby Boomers (35%) and the Pre-War generation (39%) who said the same.

Which, if any, of the following do you believe in? (% who believe in **life after death** by generation in Britain)

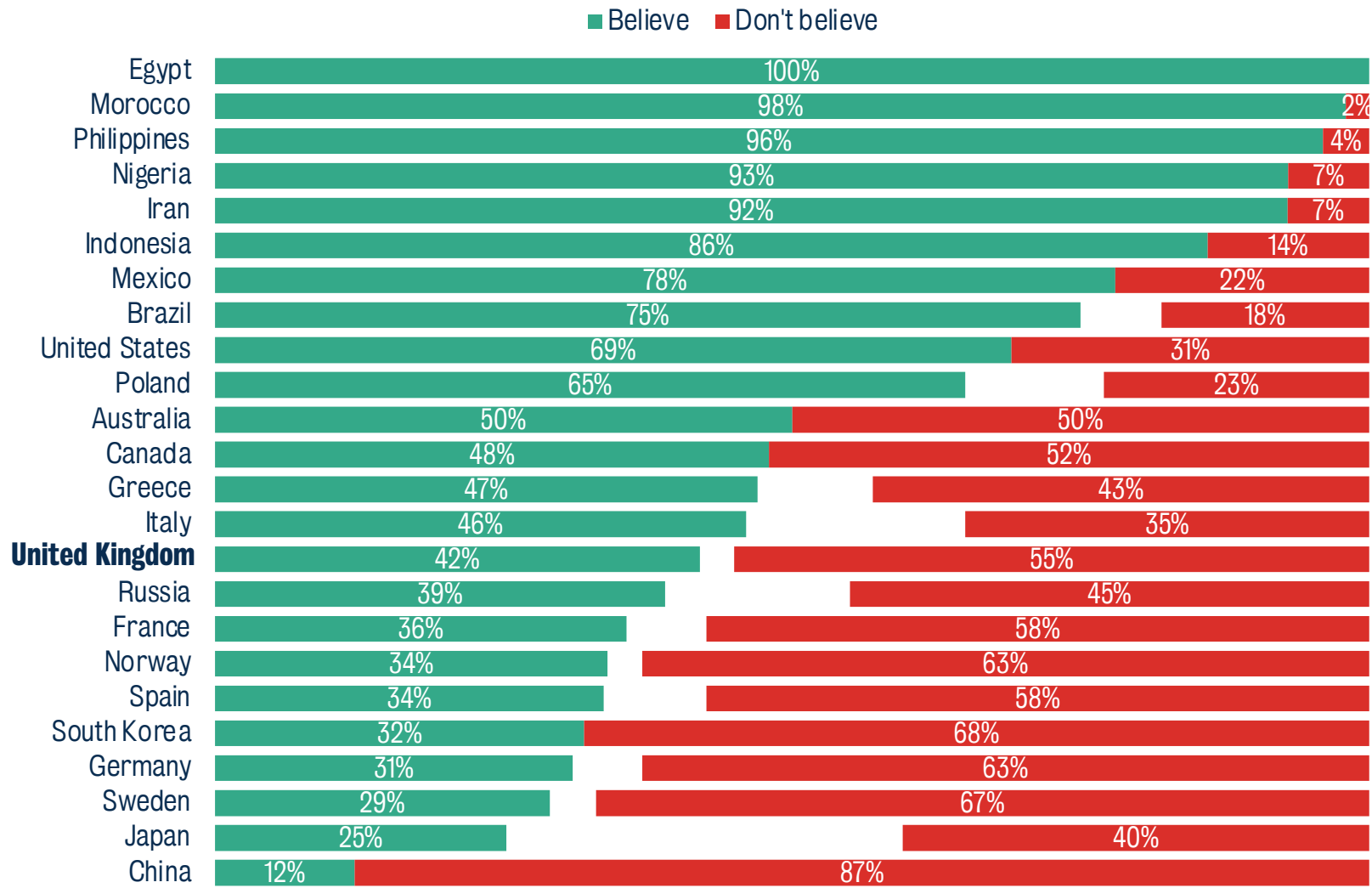


The UK is more likely than some of its European neighbours to believe in heaven – but still less likely than most other nations

The UK (42%) ranks above several peer nations for belief in heaven – but behind others, such as Australia (50%) and the US (69%).

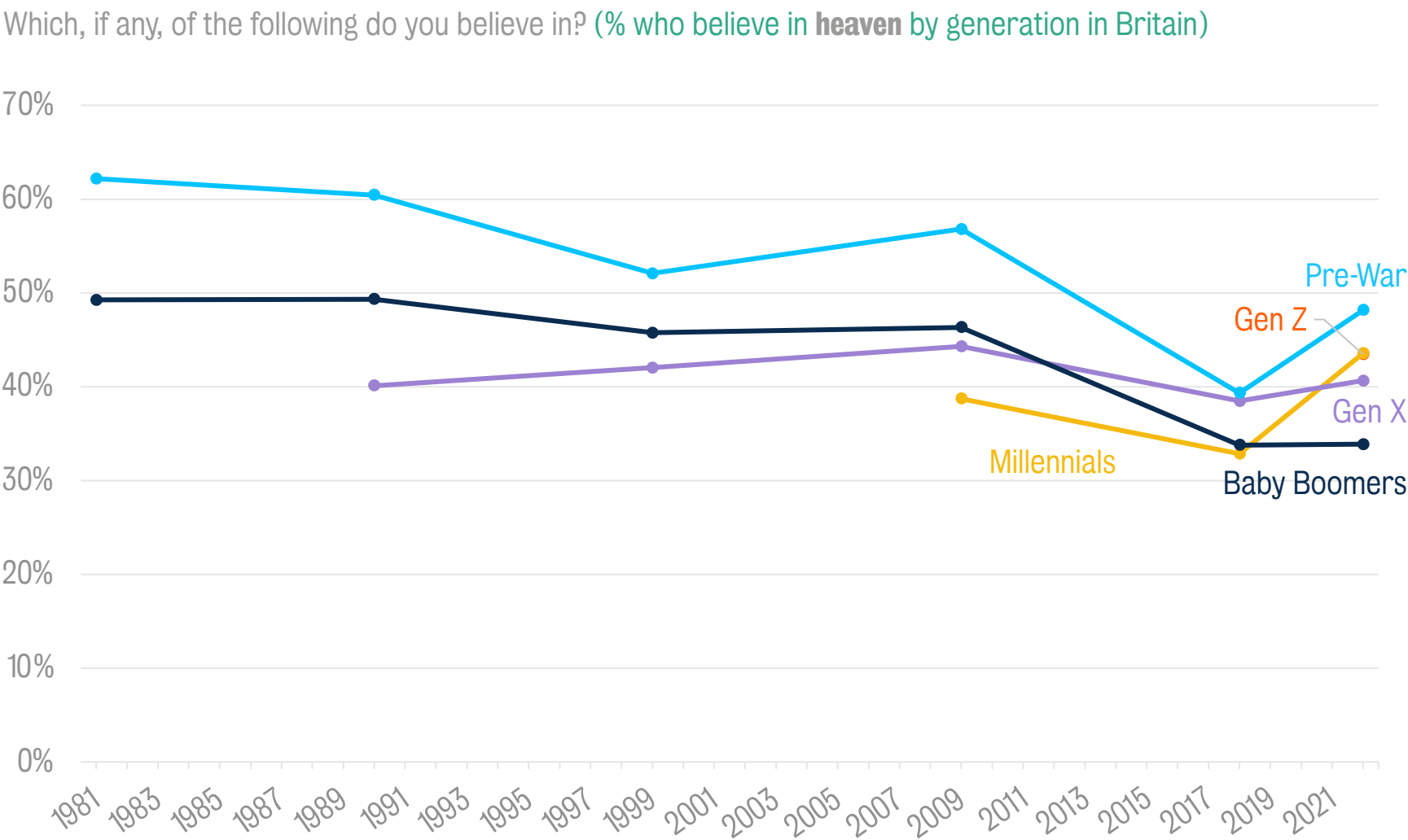
People in China (12%) are by far the least likely to hold this belief, while at the other end of the table, 100% of the population in Egypt say they do.

Which, if any, of the following do you believe in? **Heaven**



Belief in heaven has declined among the oldest generations in Britain

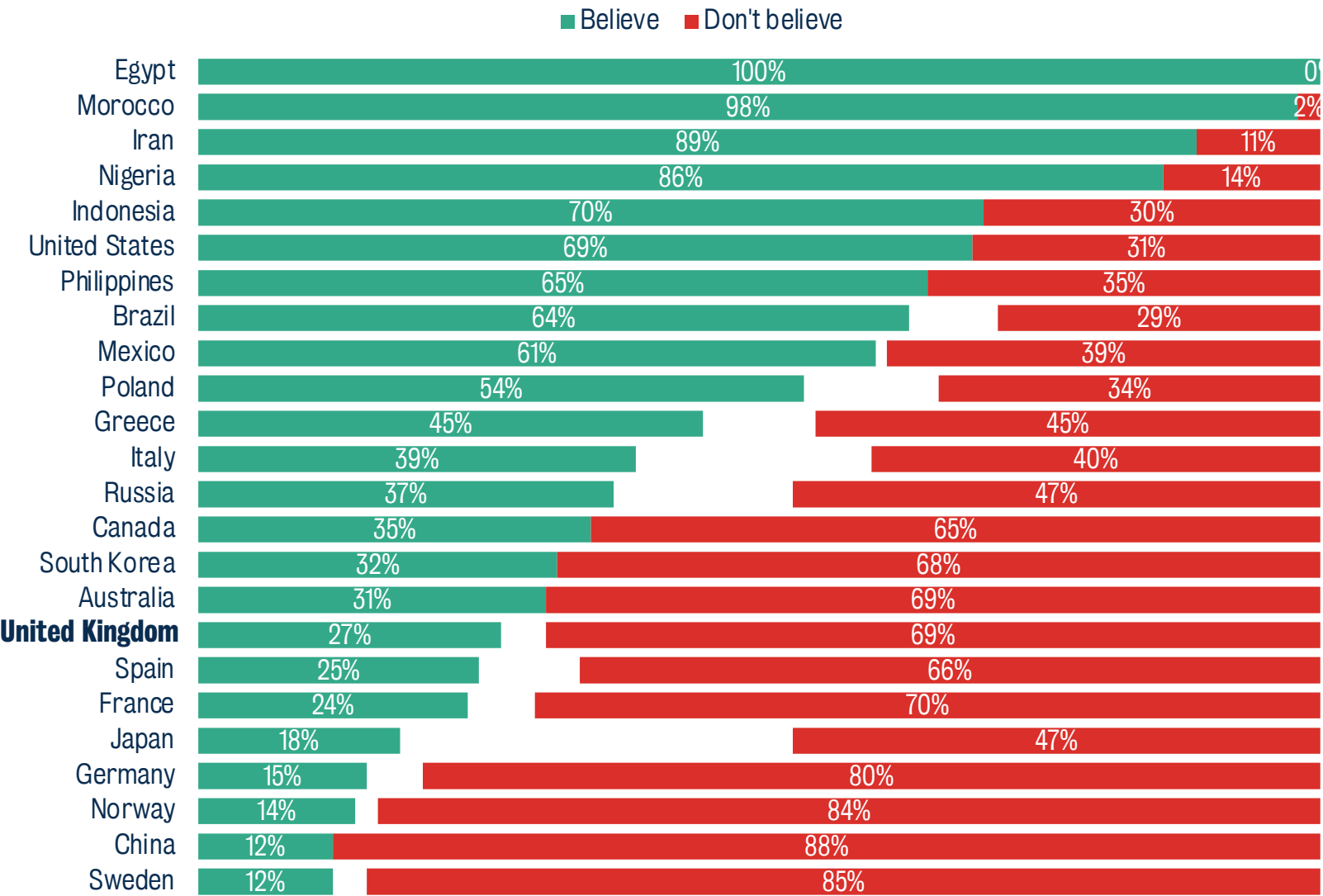
Declining belief in heaven among the Pre-War generation and Baby Boomers means there is now little difference in views between older and younger cohorts.



By international standards, the UK is less likely to believe in hell

People in the UK (27%) are less likely than those in many peer nations, such as Italy (39%) and Canada (35%), to believe in hell, although a handful of other European countries, as well as China (12%) and Japan (18%), are less likely to hold this belief.

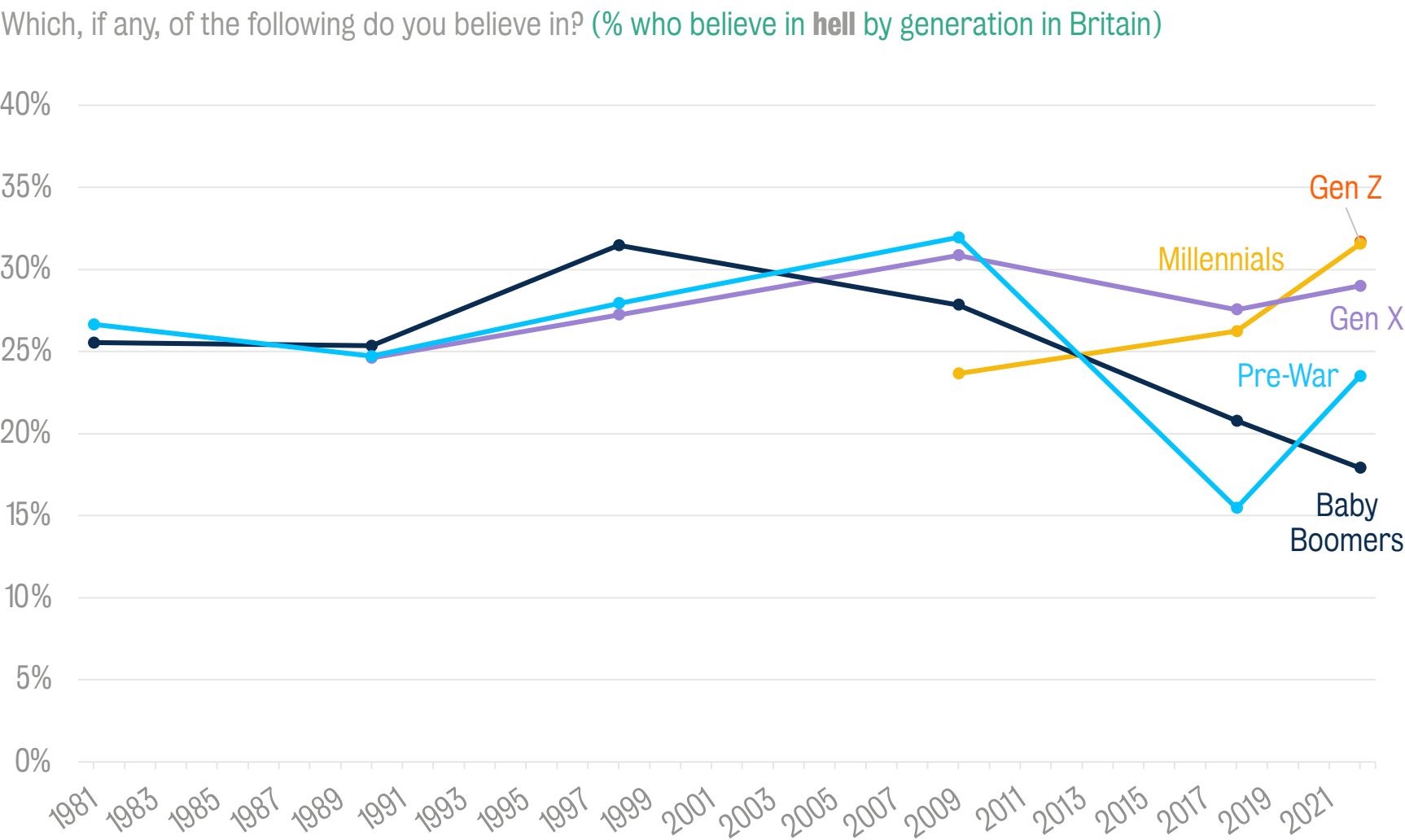
Which, if any, of the following do you believe in? **Hell**



Younger people are more likely than older people to say they believe in hell

Belief in hell has declined among older cohorts, to the point that they are now less likely than younger groups to believe in hell.

For example, 32% of Gen Z and Millennials say they hold this belief, compared with 18% of Baby Boomers and 24% of the Pre-War generation.



2. How religious are we?

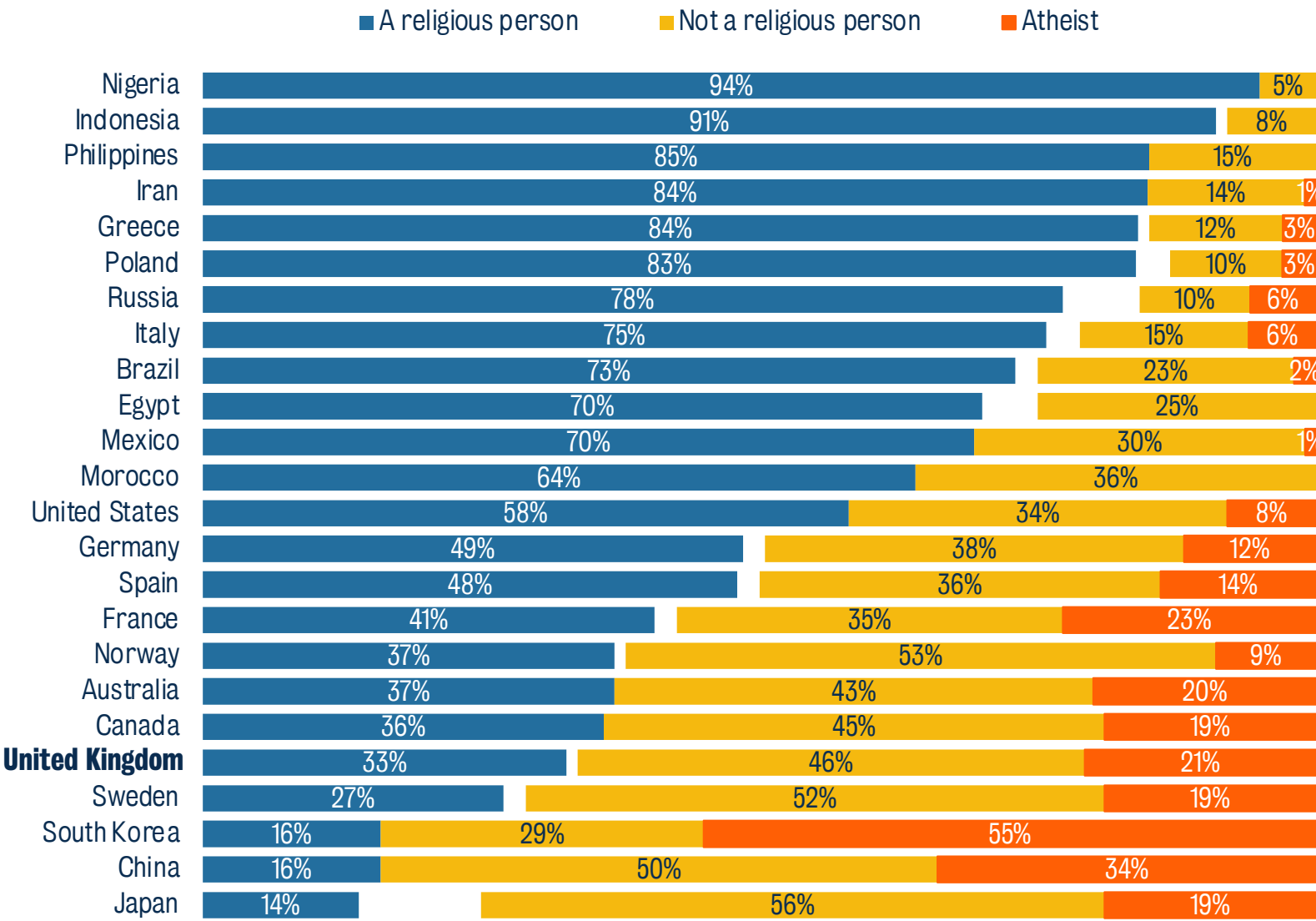
The UK public are among the least likely internationally to identify as religious, with atheism also growing in popularity



The UK public are among the least likely to see themselves as religious

Only those in Sweden (27%), South Korea (16%), China (16%) and Japan (14%) are less likely than people in the UK (33%) to consider themselves religious.

Independently of whether you attend religious services or not, would you say you are...?

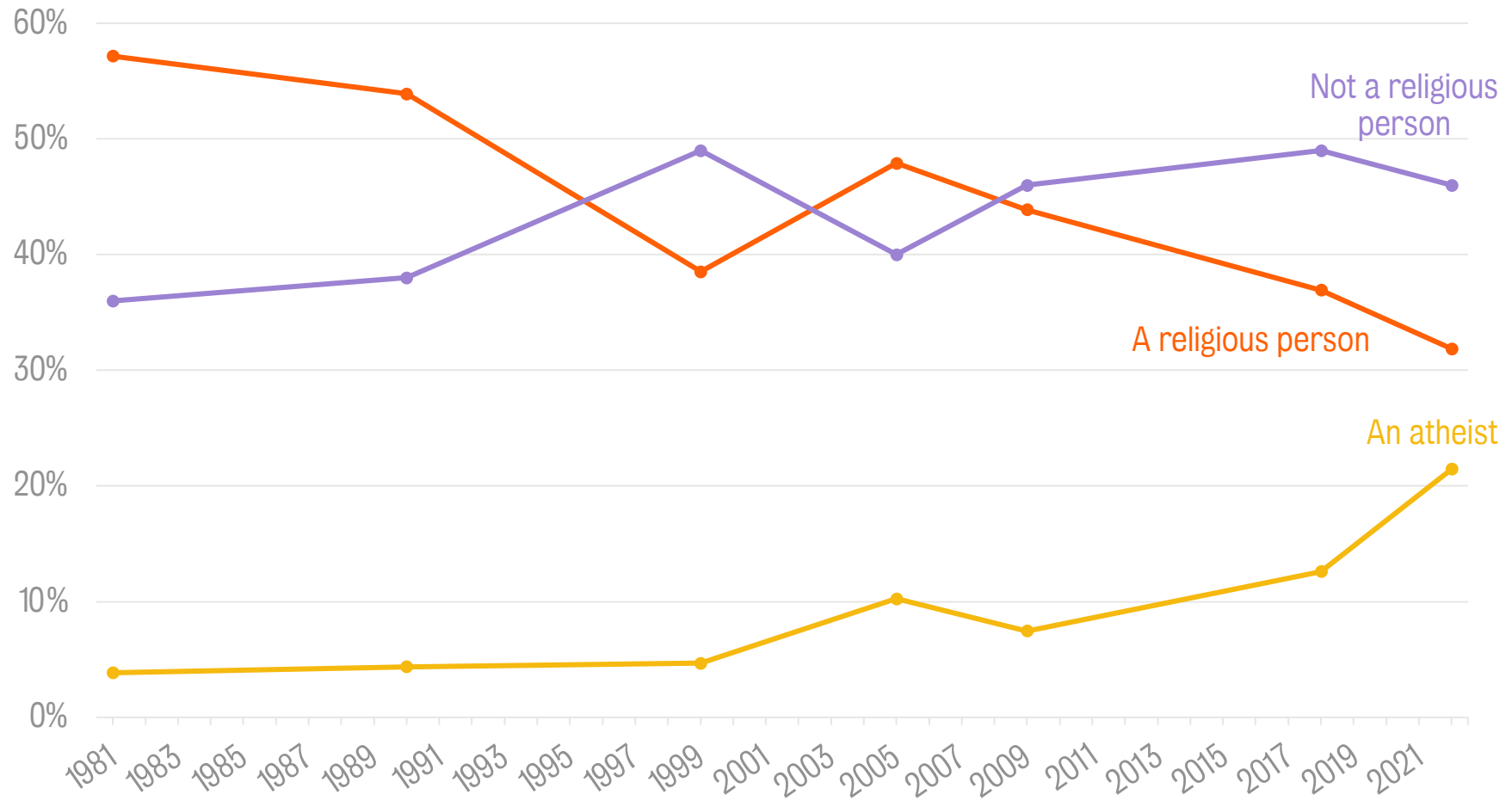


The share of the British public who say they are a religious person has halved since the early 1980s

In 1981, 57% of Britons considered themselves religious. By 2022, this had nearly halved, falling to 32%.

Over the same period, the proportion who see themselves as an atheist has increased fivefold, from 4% to 21%, with a notable uptick between 2018 and 2022.

Independently of whether you attend religious services or not, would you say you are...?
(responses in Britain)



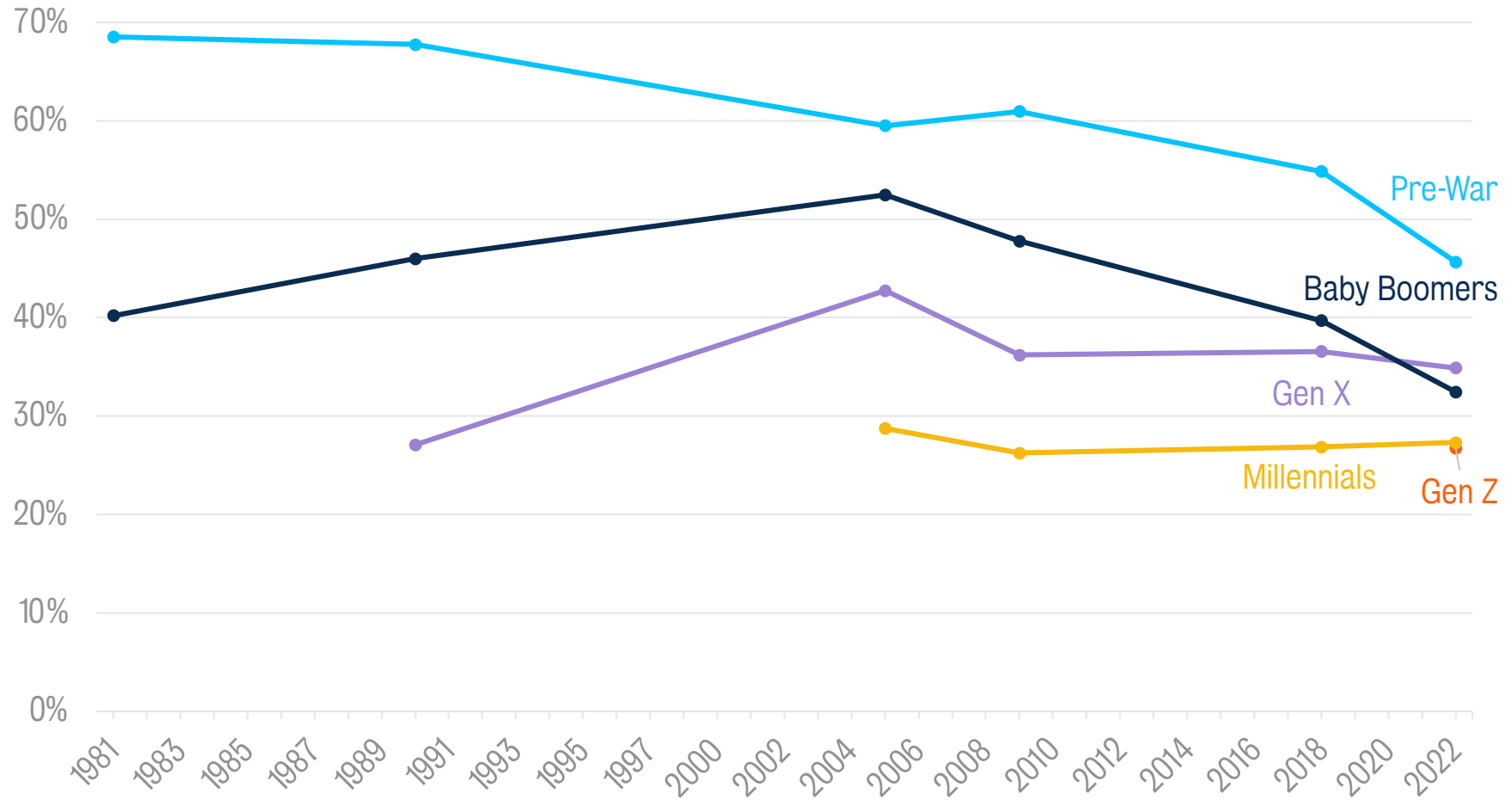
The Pre-War generation in Britain has seen the biggest decline in religious identification

69% of the Pre-War generation said they were a religious person in 1981 – a figure that had dropped to 46% by 2022.

Baby Boomers have seen less of a decline, while Gen X are actually more likely to identify as religious than they were when trends began.

The youngest cohorts – Millennials and Gen Z – are least likely to see themselves this way, with 27% of each saying they are a religious person.

Independently of whether you attend religious services or not, would you say you are...?
(% who say they are a **religious person** by generation in Britain)

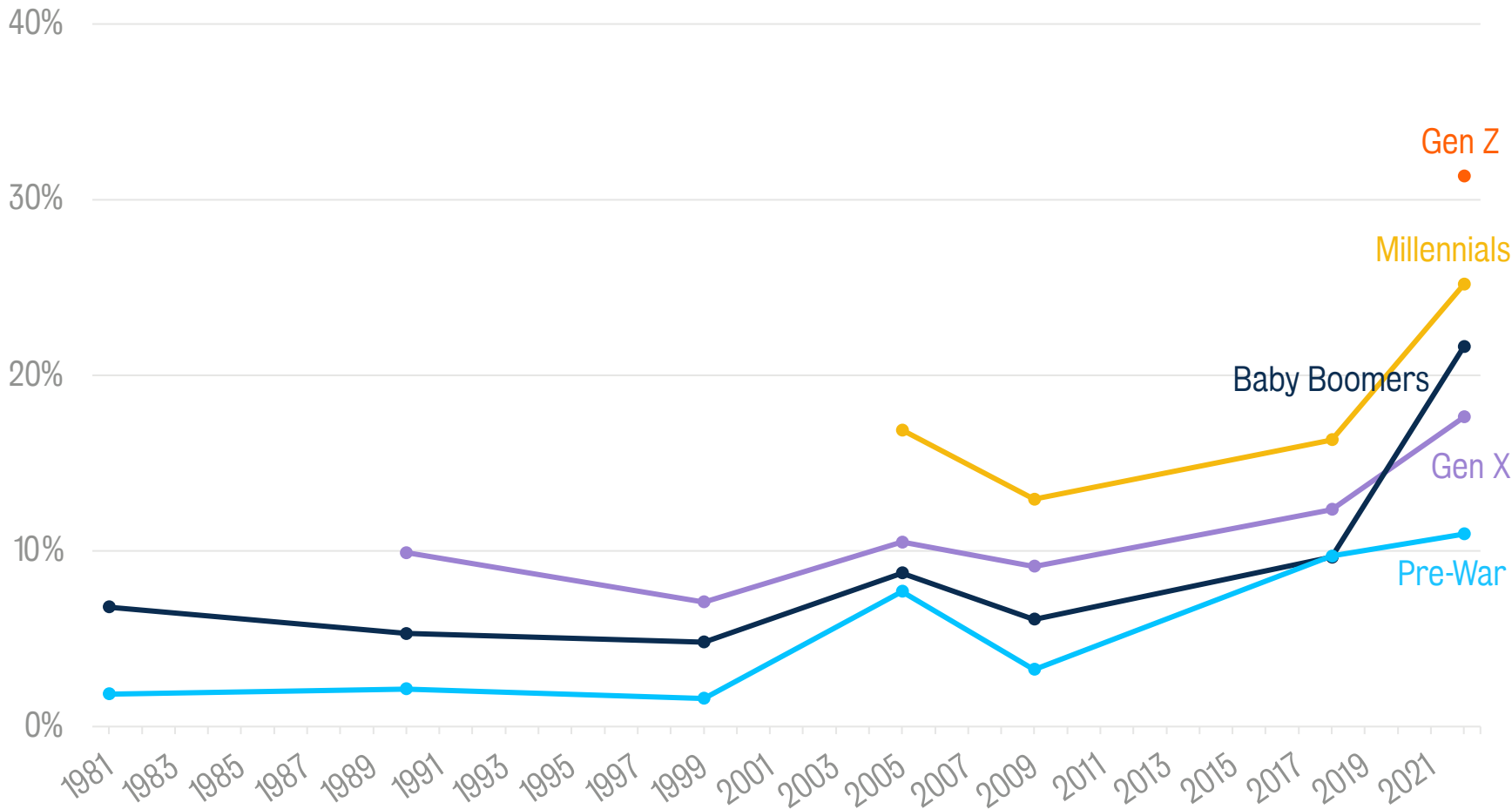


Gen Z are most likely to identify as atheists – but older generations have also become more likely to see themselves this way

31% of Gen Z consider themselves to be atheists – the highest of any cohort.

However, all other generations are increasingly likely to identify in this way. For example, 7% of Baby Boomers said they were atheists in 1981, compared with 22% in 2022.

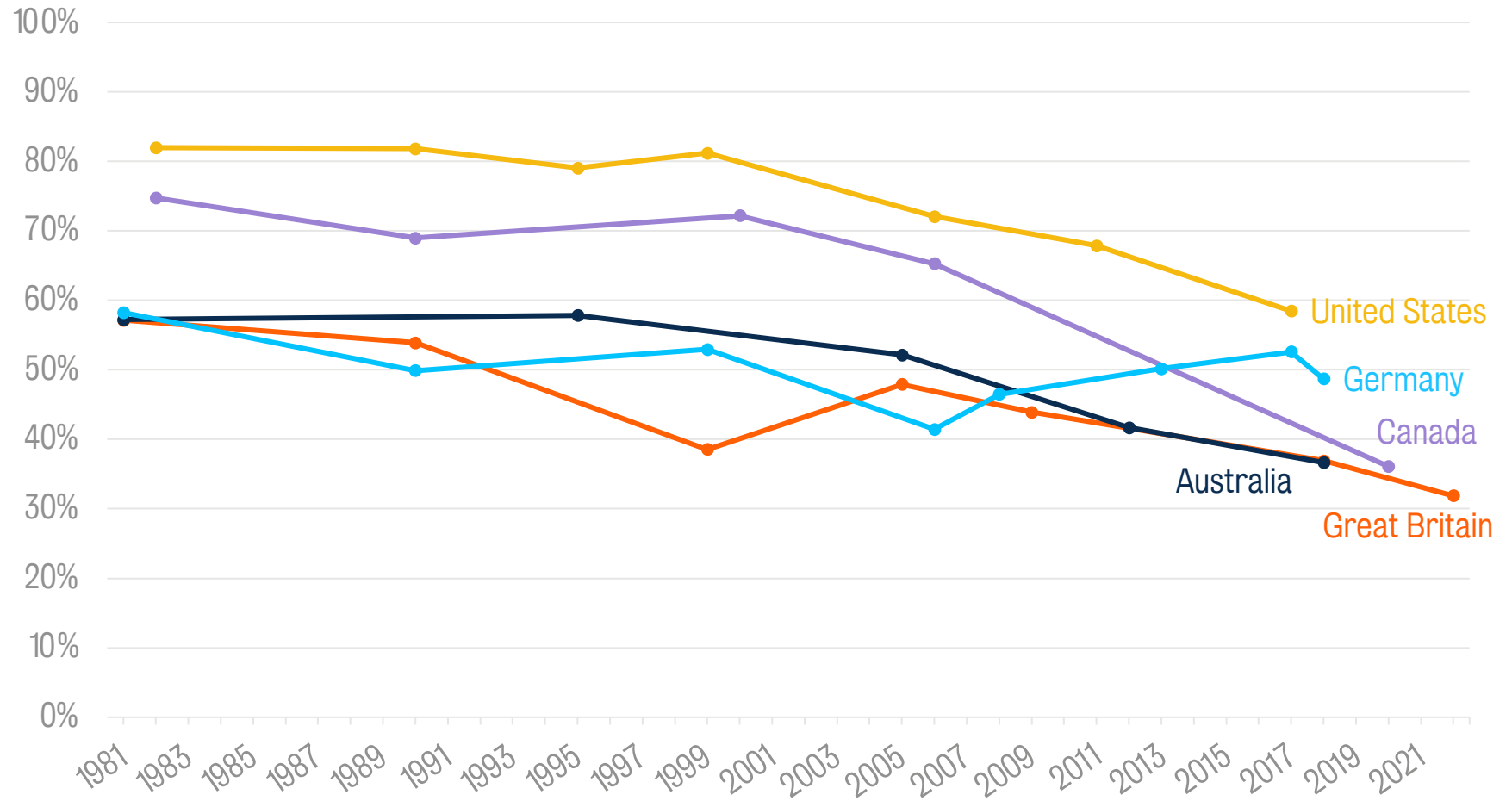
Independently of whether you attend religious services or not, would you say you are...?
(% who say they are **an atheist** by generation in Britain)



Religiosity has declined at a similar pace across many western nations

Other western nations have followed a similar path to Britain when it comes to declining religiosity – including the US, where the share of the population who see themselves as religious fell from 82% in 1982 to 58% in 2017. But Germany is one exception, with trends remaining more stable.

Independently of whether you attend religious services or not, would you say you are...?
(% who say they are a religious person)



3. The importance of God and religion in people's lives

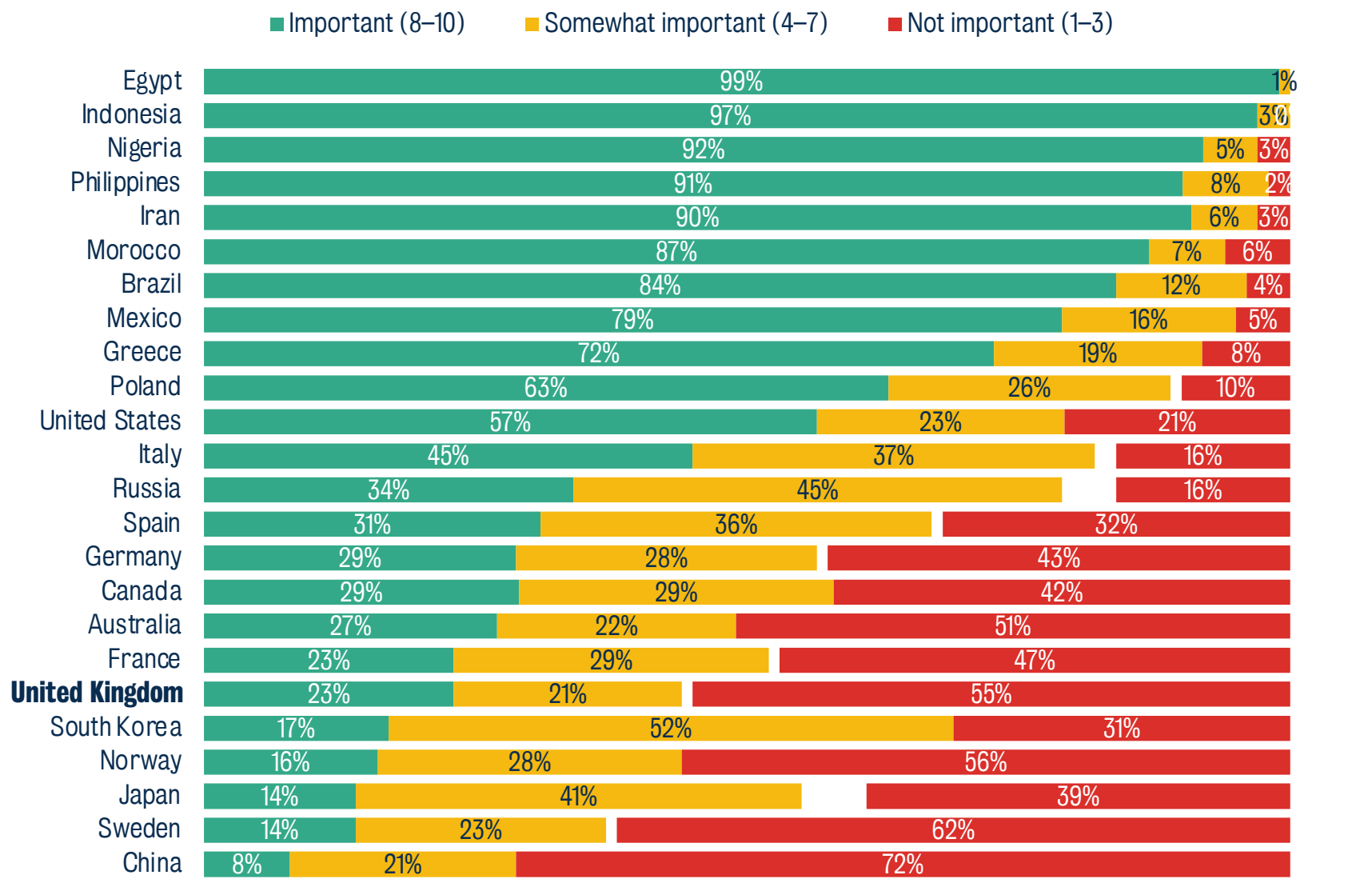
The UK public are among the least likely internationally to say that God is important in their life, with the share of Britons who feel this way doubling since 1981 and now at a record high



Compared with other nations, people in the UK are among the least likely to say God is important in their life

23% of the UK public say that God is important in their life – with only those in East Asian and Scandinavian nations ranking lower on this measure.

How important is God in your life? Please use this scale to indicate. 10 means “very important” and 1 means “not at all important”

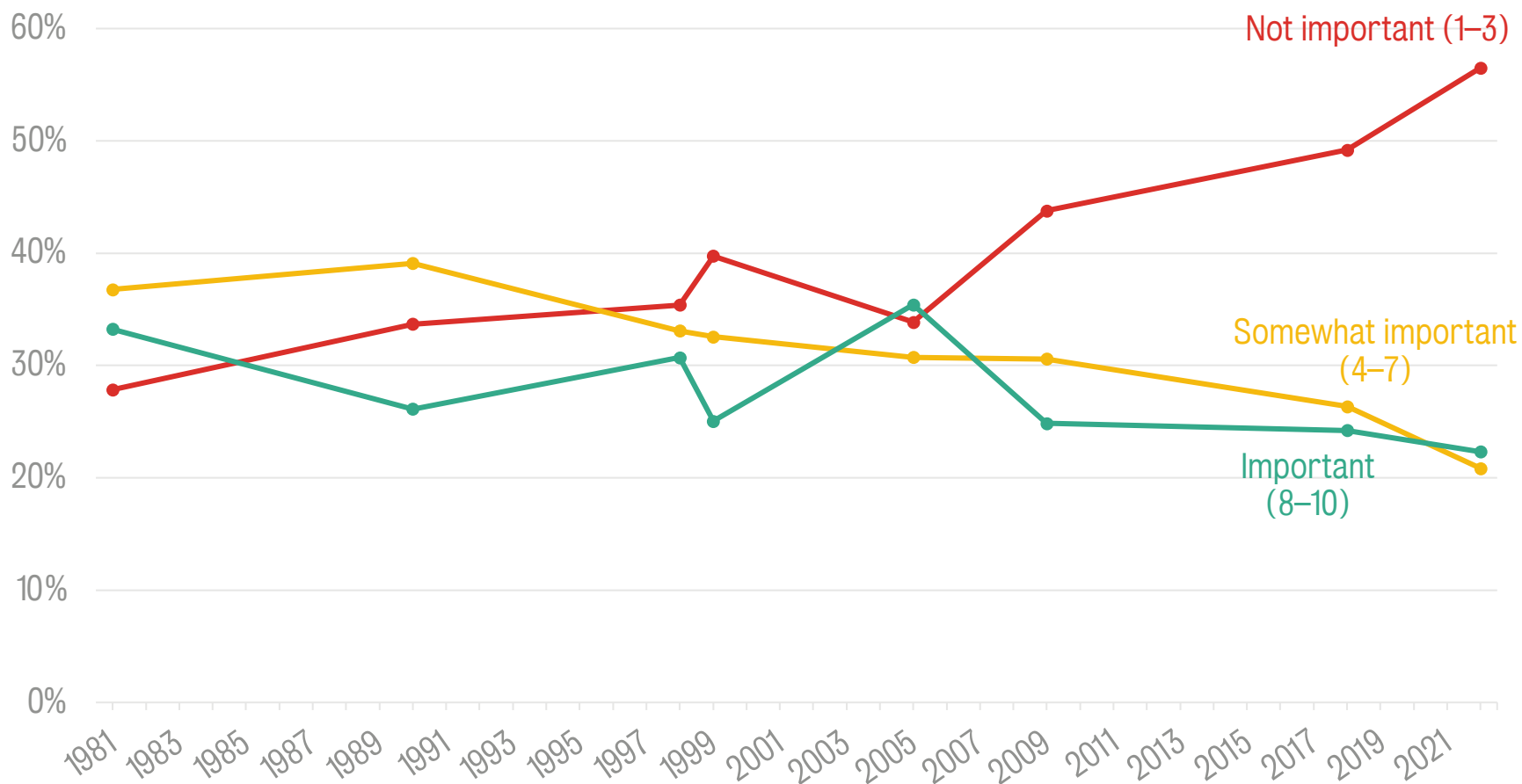


The share of the British public who say God is not important in their life has doubled since the 1980s and is now at a record high

Between 1981 and 2022, the proportion of Britons who said God was not important in their life rose from 28% to 57%.

Correspondingly, the share of the public who consider God to be important or even somewhat important to them has fallen over the same period.

How important is God in your life? Please use this scale to indicate. 10 means “very important” and 1 means “not at all important” (responses in Britain)

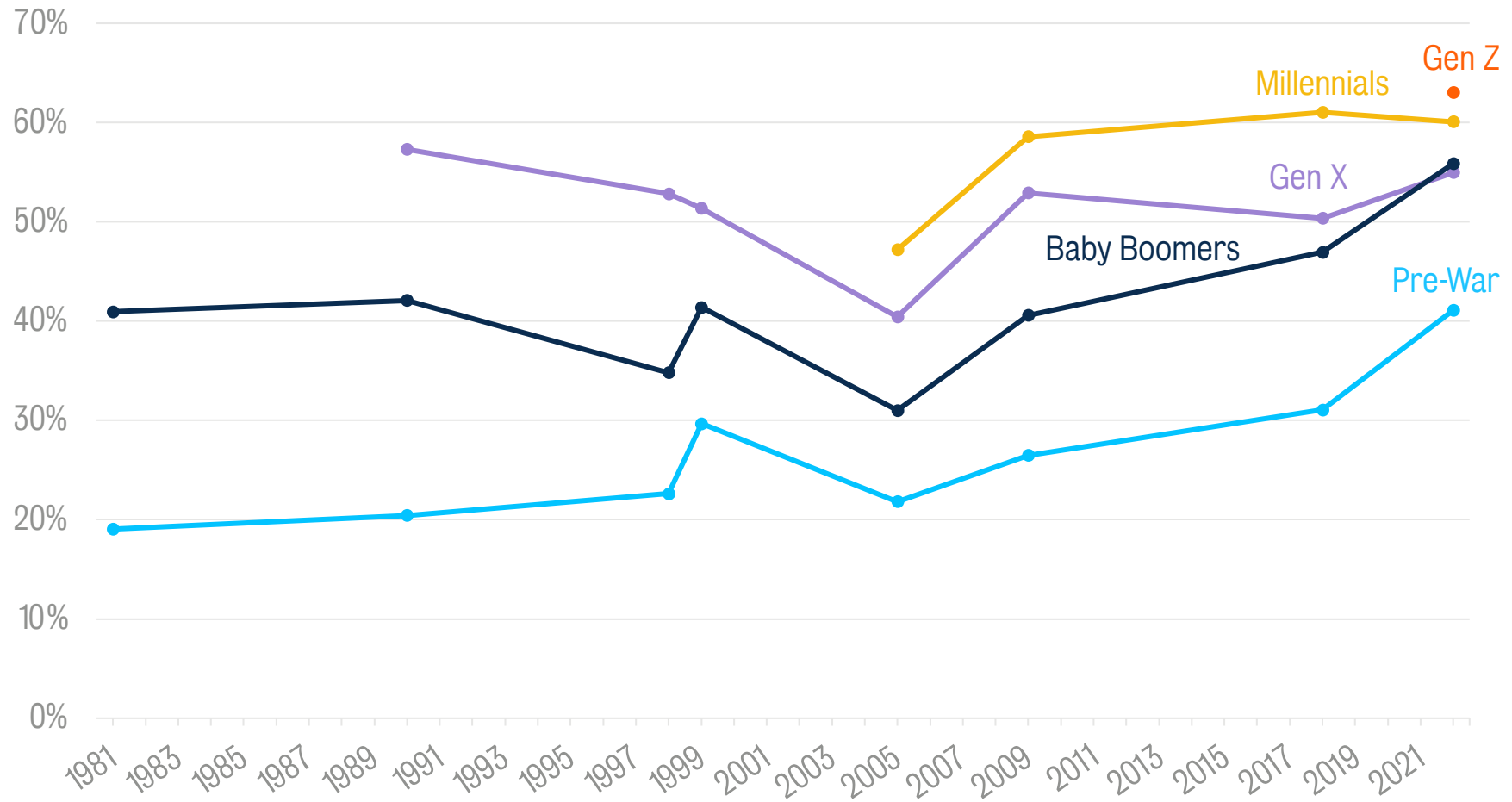


Most generations have become more likely to say God is not important in their life, with Gen X the only exception

The share of the Pre-War generation who say God isn't important in their life has doubled from 19% in 1981 to 41% in 2022, with a notable uptick from as recently as 2018 (31%).

Baby Boomers have followed a similar trajectory, while Millennials also see God as less important than they did when trends began – but attitudes today among Gen Z are roughly what they were back in 1990. 57% said God wasn't important back then, compared with 55% in 2022.

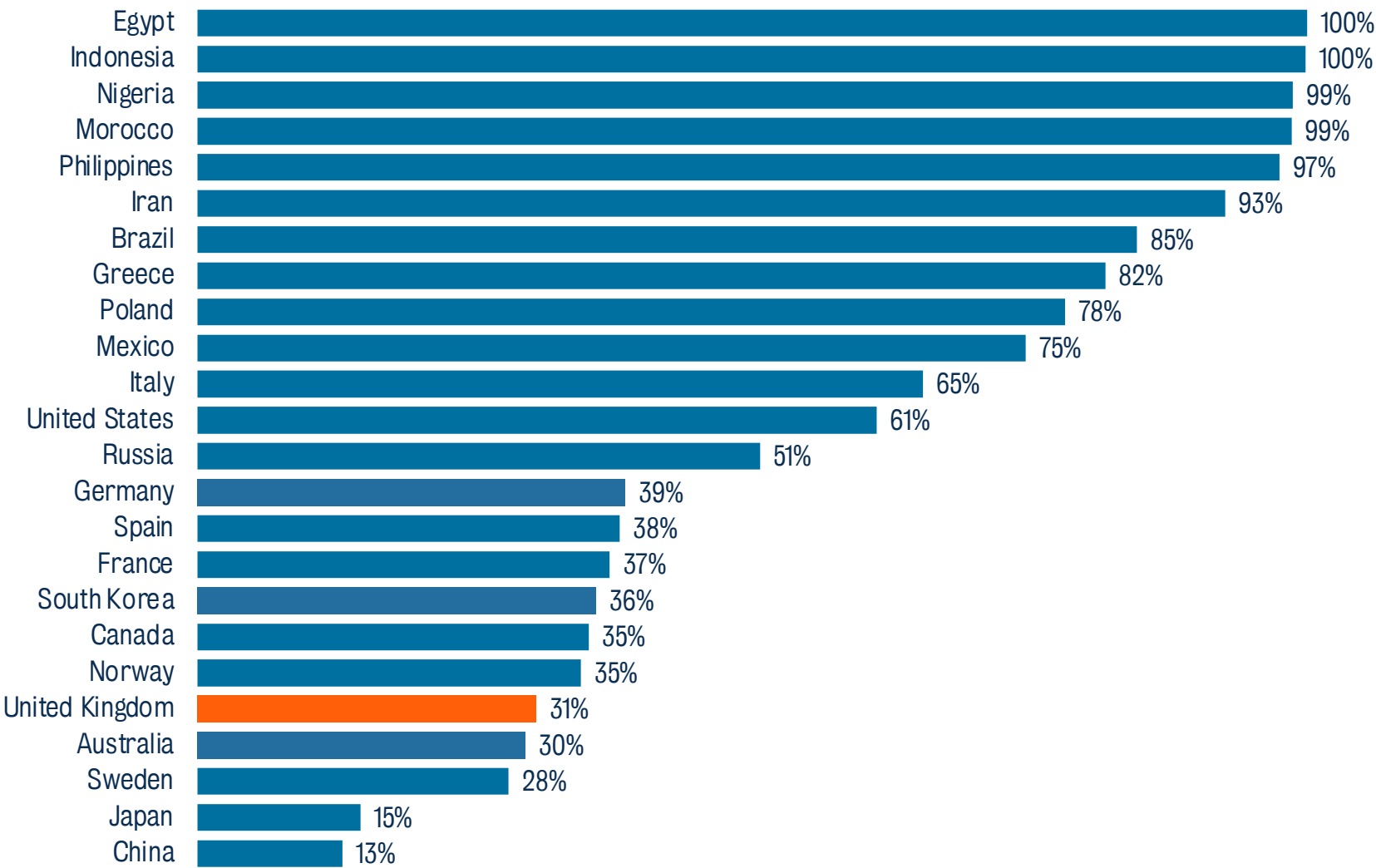
How important is God in your life? Please use this scale to indicate. 10 means “very important” and 1 means “not at all important” (% who say not important by generation in Britain)



Only four nations are less likely than the UK to say religion is very or rather important in their life

Only people in Australia (30%), Sweden (28%), Japan (15%) and China (13%) are less likely than the UK public (31%) to say religion plays an important role in their life.

For each of the statements below, please indicate how important it is in your life: **Religion**
(% who say very/rather important)

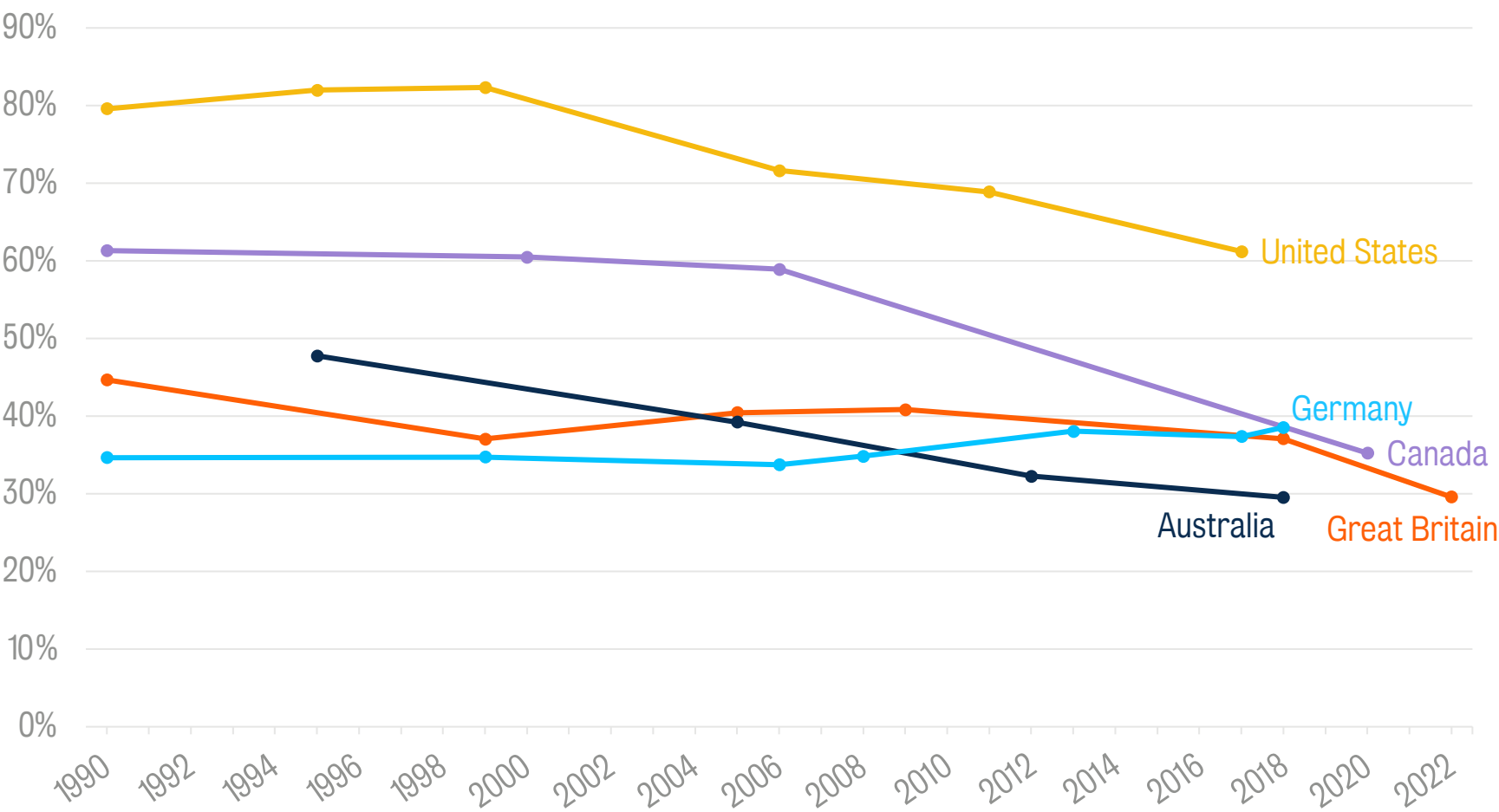


The share of the British public saying religion is important in their life remained relatively stable for many years, only recently declining further

Between 1981 and 2018, the proportion of the British public who said religion was important in their life decreased only slightly, from 45% to 37%. But since 2018, there has been a sharper drop, down to 30%.

Attitudes in Germany have been similarly stable up until 2018, unlike in the US, Canada and Australia, which have seen more sustained declines in the importance of religion.

For each of the following, indicate how important it is in your life: **Religion** (% who say very/rather important)



4. Religious tolerance and trust

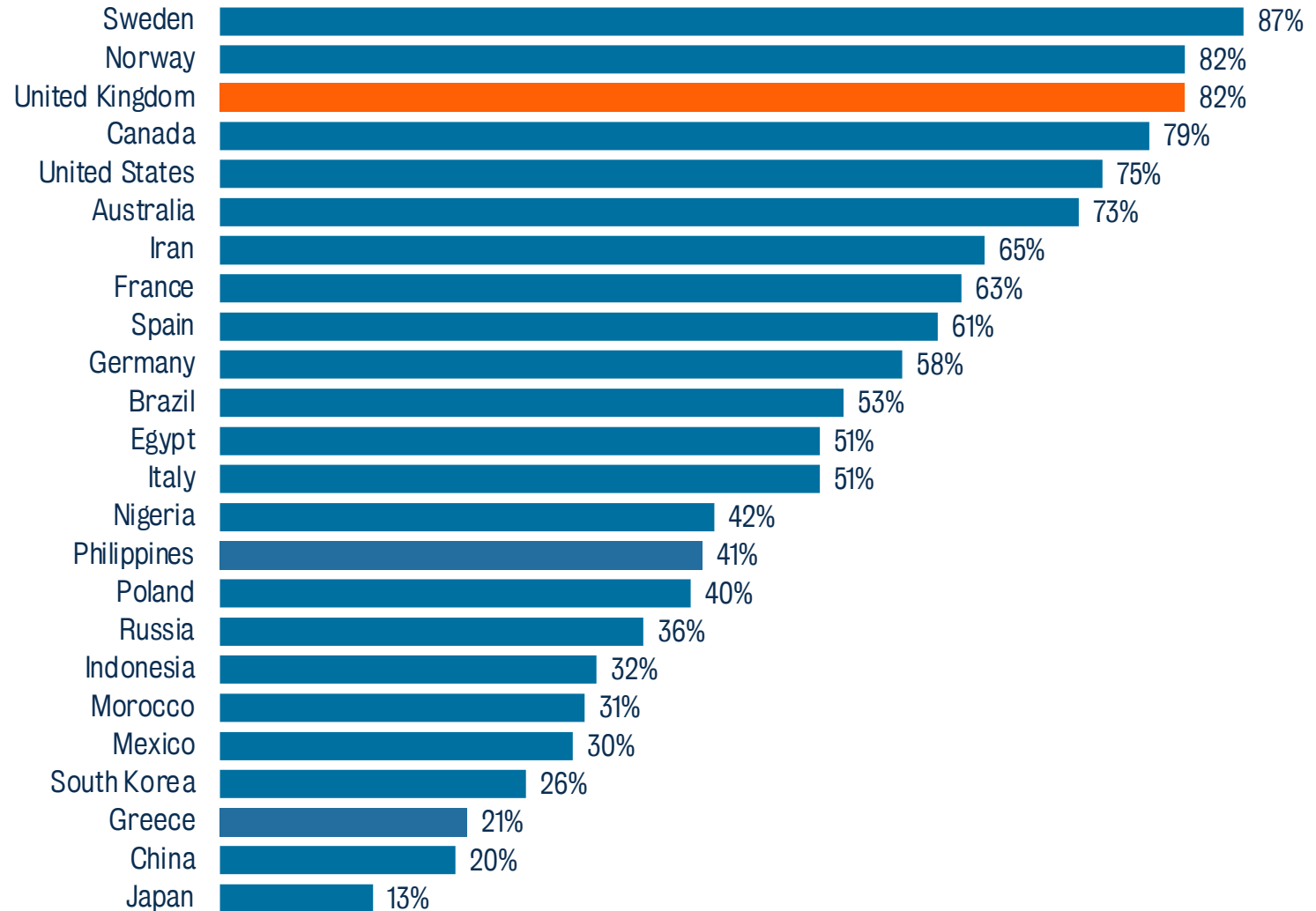
The UK public are among the most trusting of people of different religions, and among the most relaxed about other faiths



The UK is second only to Sweden for trust in people of different faiths

The low salience of religion in the UK coincides with high tolerance of those belonging to different faiths: 82% of the UK public say they trust people of a different religion – the second highest of 24 nations.

Below is a list of various groups. Please indicate for each the extent to which you trust people from this group.
People of another religion (% who trust)

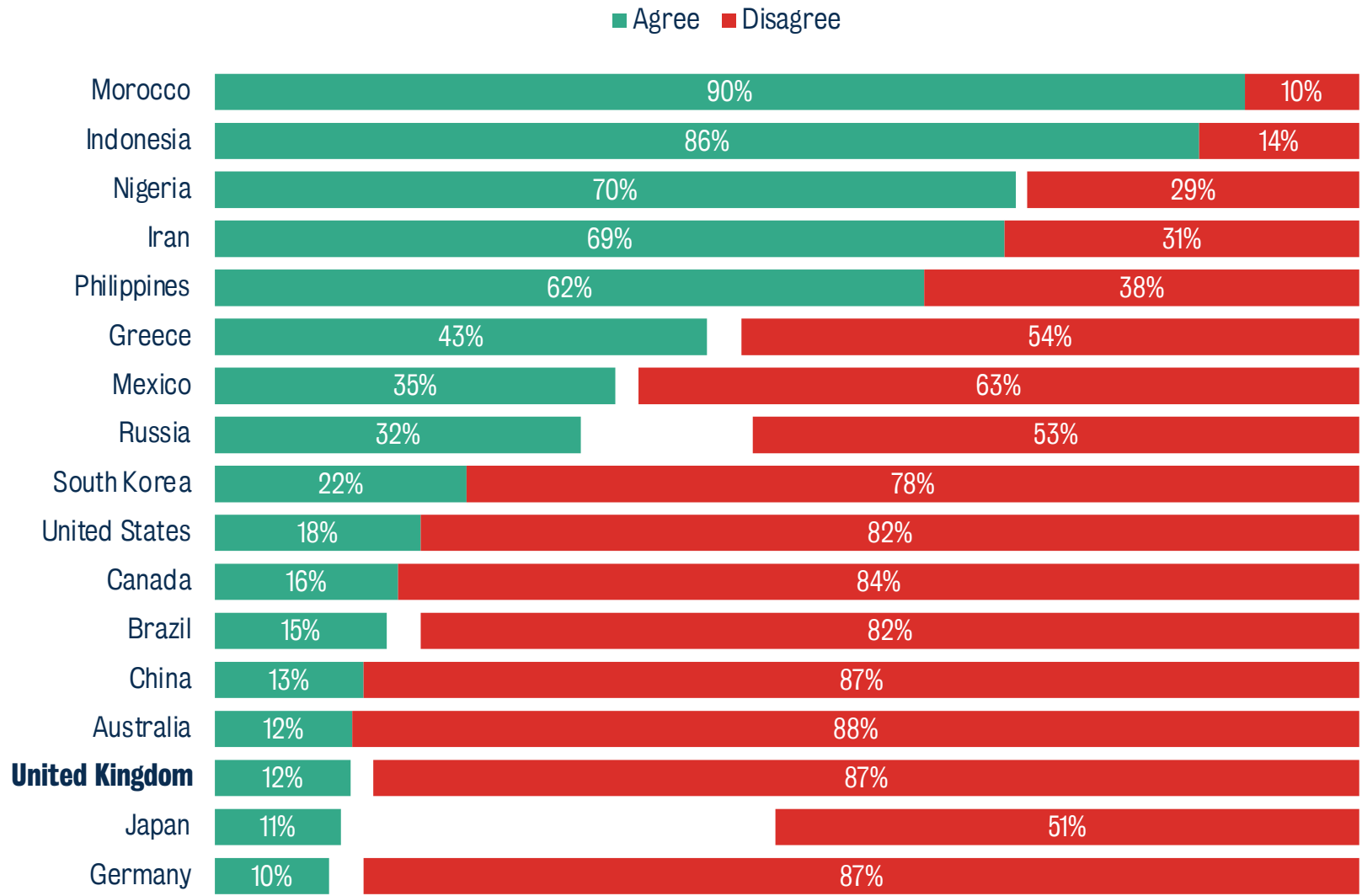


The UK public are among the least likely to say the only acceptable religion is their religion

High trust in people of different faiths in the UK is matched by high acceptance of religious diversity, with few agreeing that the only acceptable religion is theirs.

This puts the UK (12%) alongside Germany (10%), Japan (11%), Australia (12%) and China (13%) as the most relaxed about other faiths.

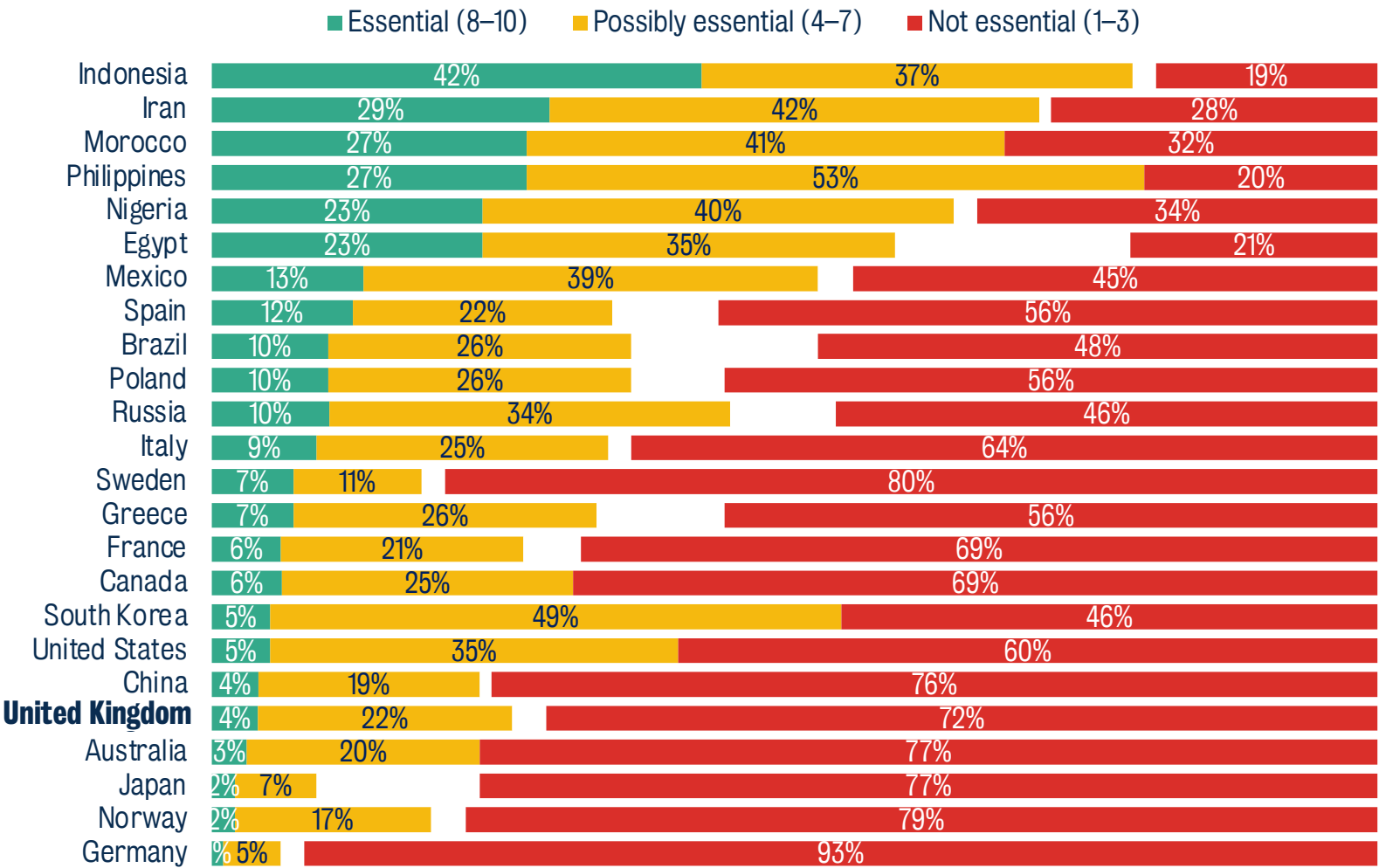
Please tell us if you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements:
The only acceptable religion is my religion



The UK ranks low internationally for the belief that religious authorities should ultimately interpret the laws in a democracy

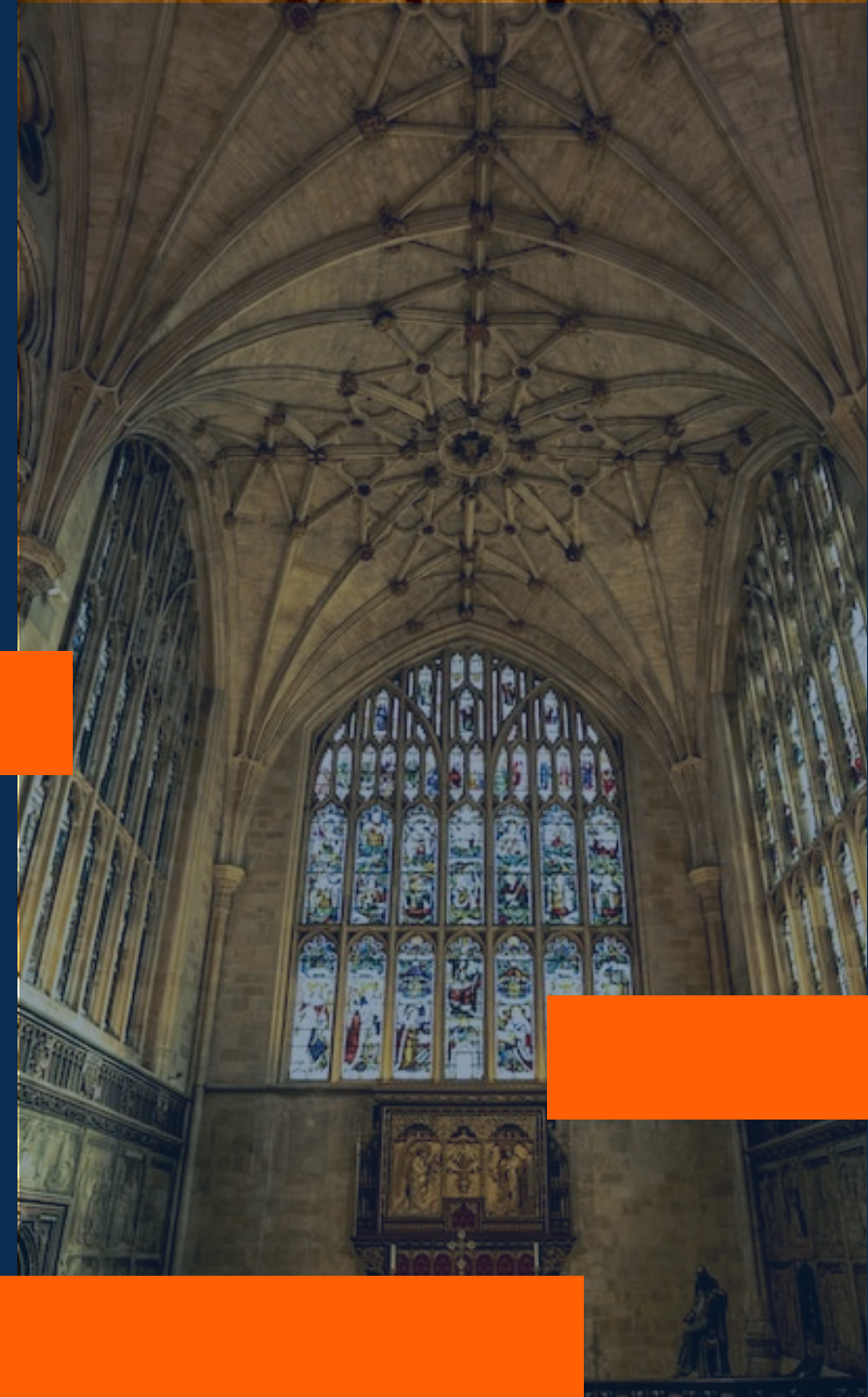
Just 4% of the UK public think it's essential for religious authorities to interpret the laws in a democracy – among the lowest internationally. But a fifth (22%) nonetheless give an answer indicating that it might be essential.

Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as a characteristic of democracy.
Religious authorities ultimately interpret the laws



5. Religious attendance and worship

The share of Britons regularly attending religious services has remained consistently low since the 1980s, and by international standards very few people say they often pray in the UK

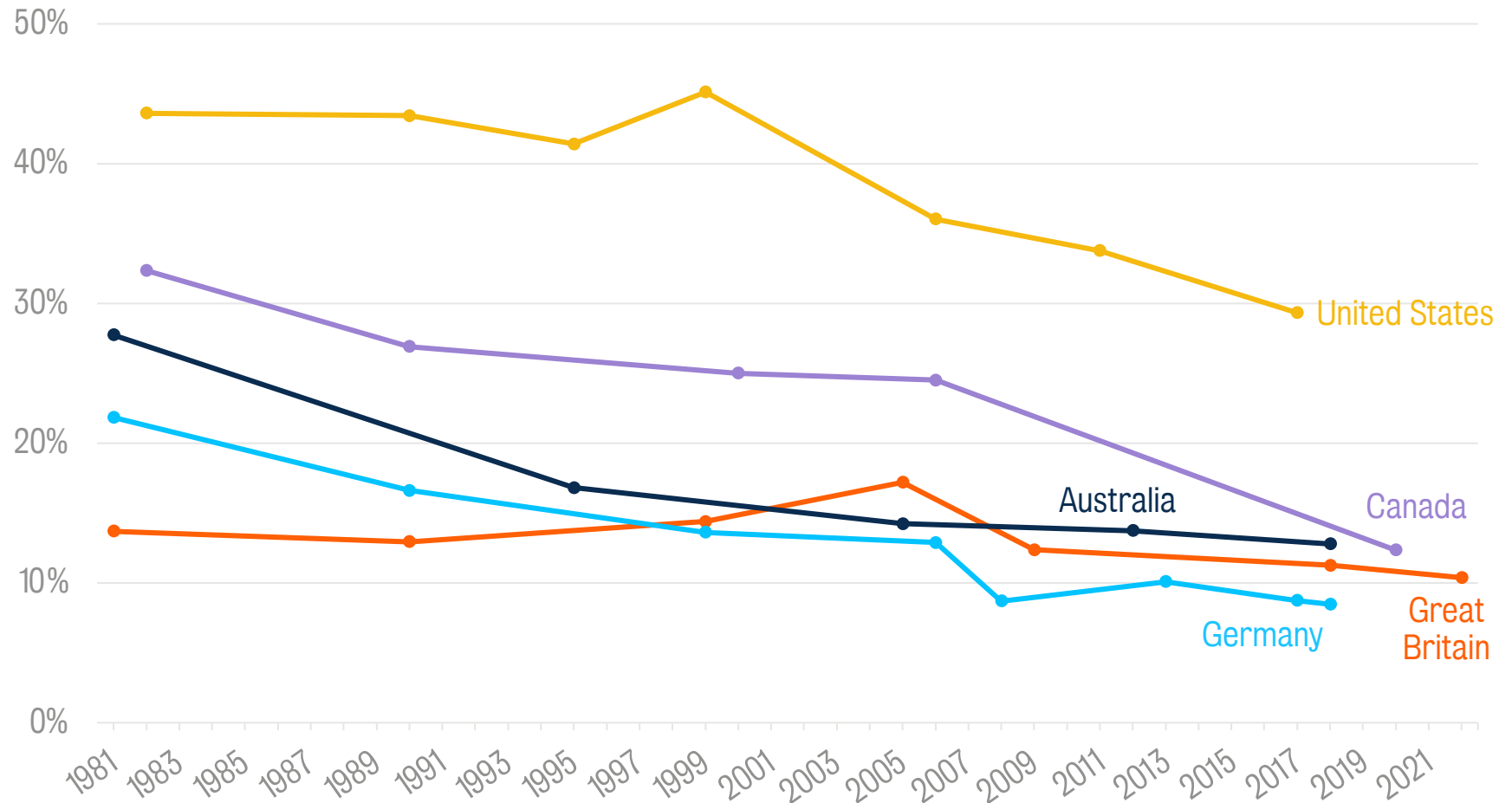


Attendance at religious services has remained consistently low in Britain, but other nations have seen big declines in recent decades

In 2022, around one in 10 people in Britain said they attended religious services at least once a week – a figure that has changed little since 1981.

However, other western nations have seen greater shifts. For example, in 2017, 29% of people in the US said they attended religious services weekly – down from 44% towards the beginning of the 1980s. And in Canada, it fell from 32% to 12% over a similar period.

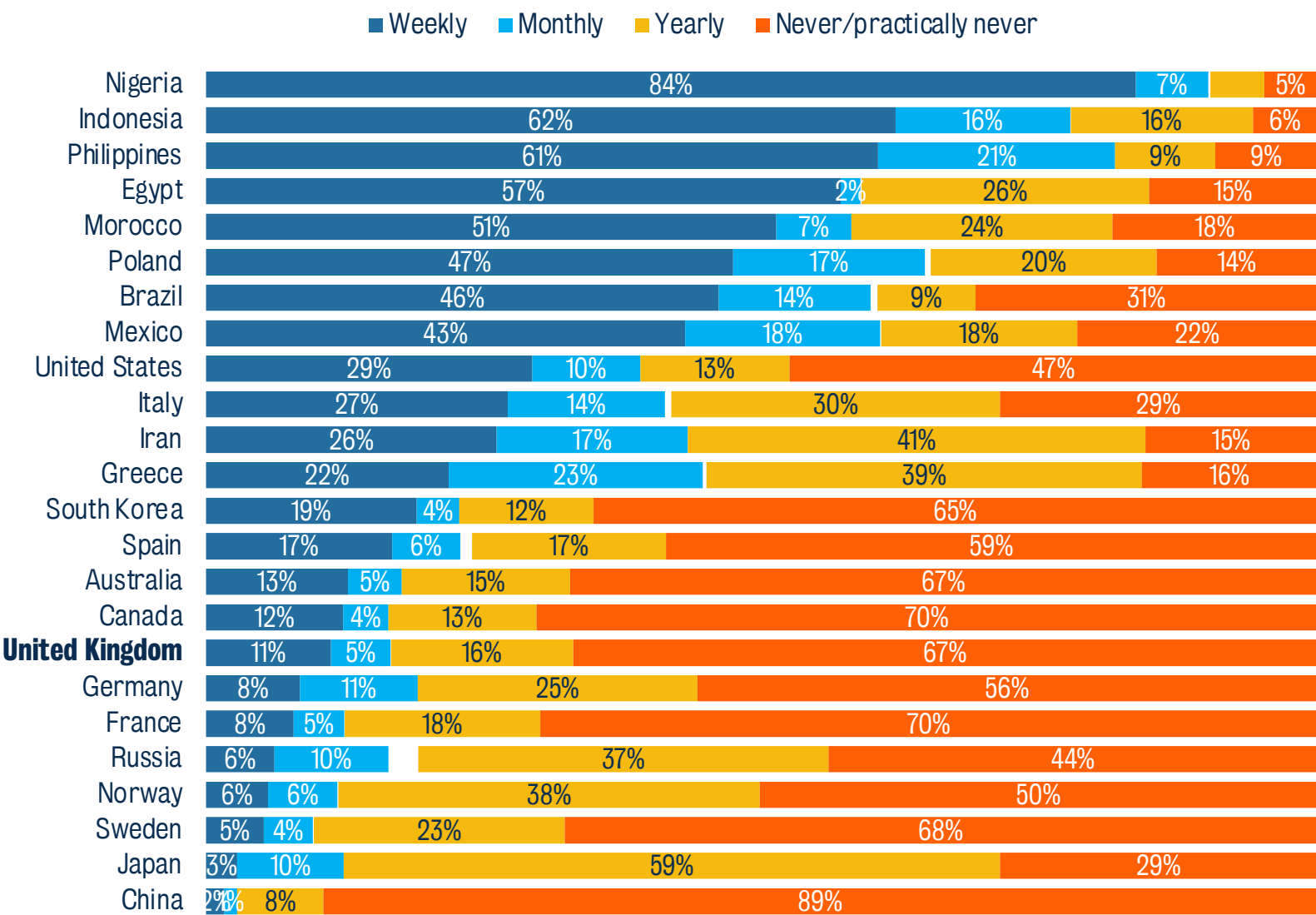
Apart from weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services these days?
(% who say they attend weekly)



Religious attendance in the UK is low compared with many other nations

11% of people in the UK say they attend religious services weekly – below the US (29%), Italy (27%) and Greece (22%), but on a par with Australia (13%) and Canada (11%).

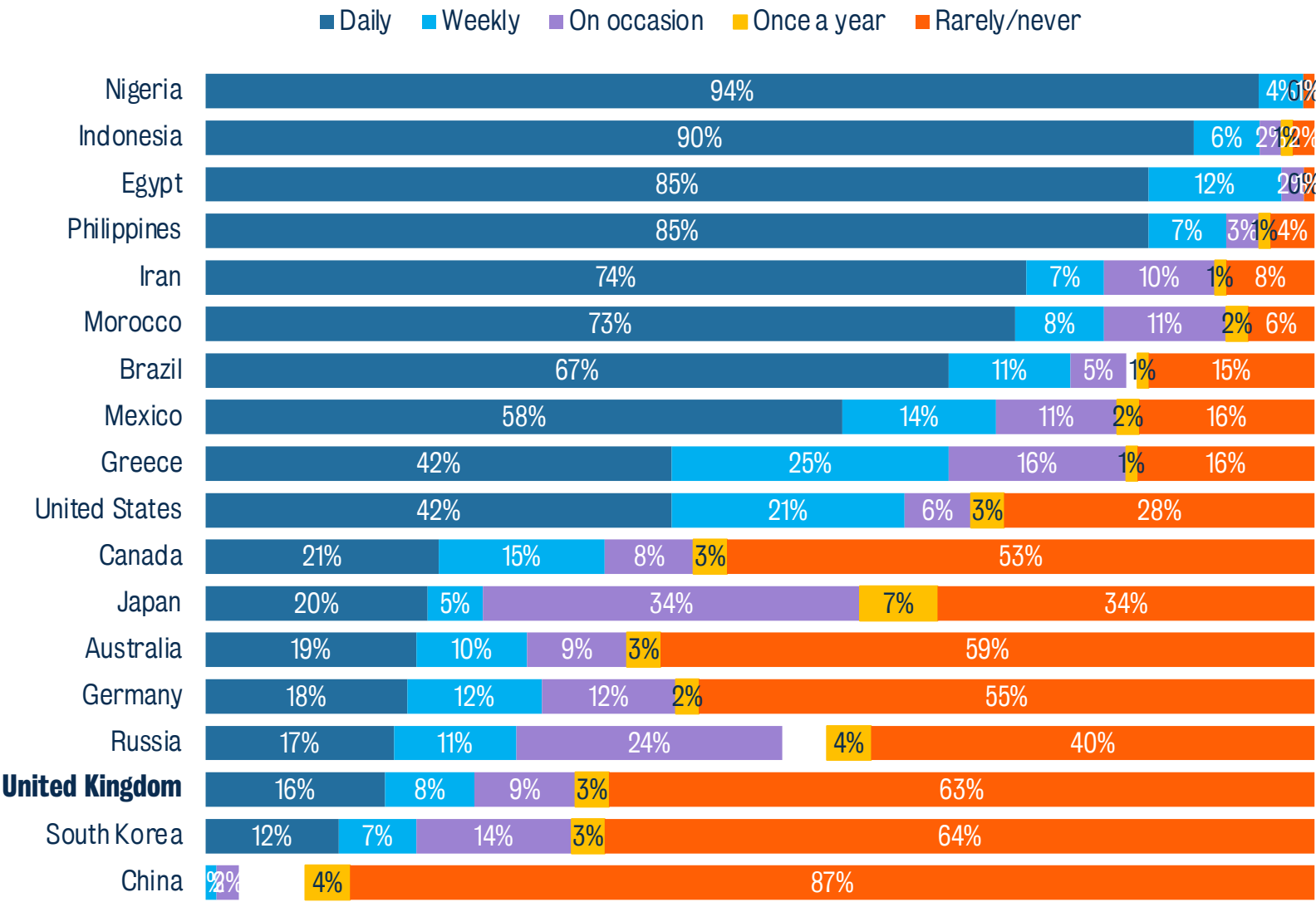
Apart from weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services these days?



Only people in South Korea and China say they pray less often than those in the UK

16% of the UK public say they pray daily, with only South Korea and China ranking lower on this measure. And these three nations are most likely to say they rarely or never pray – although China is far ahead of the other two.

Apart from weddings and funerals, about how often do you pray?



6. Confidence in churches and religious organisations

Despite Britons' declining religiosity, confidence in churches and religious organisations has increased in recent years

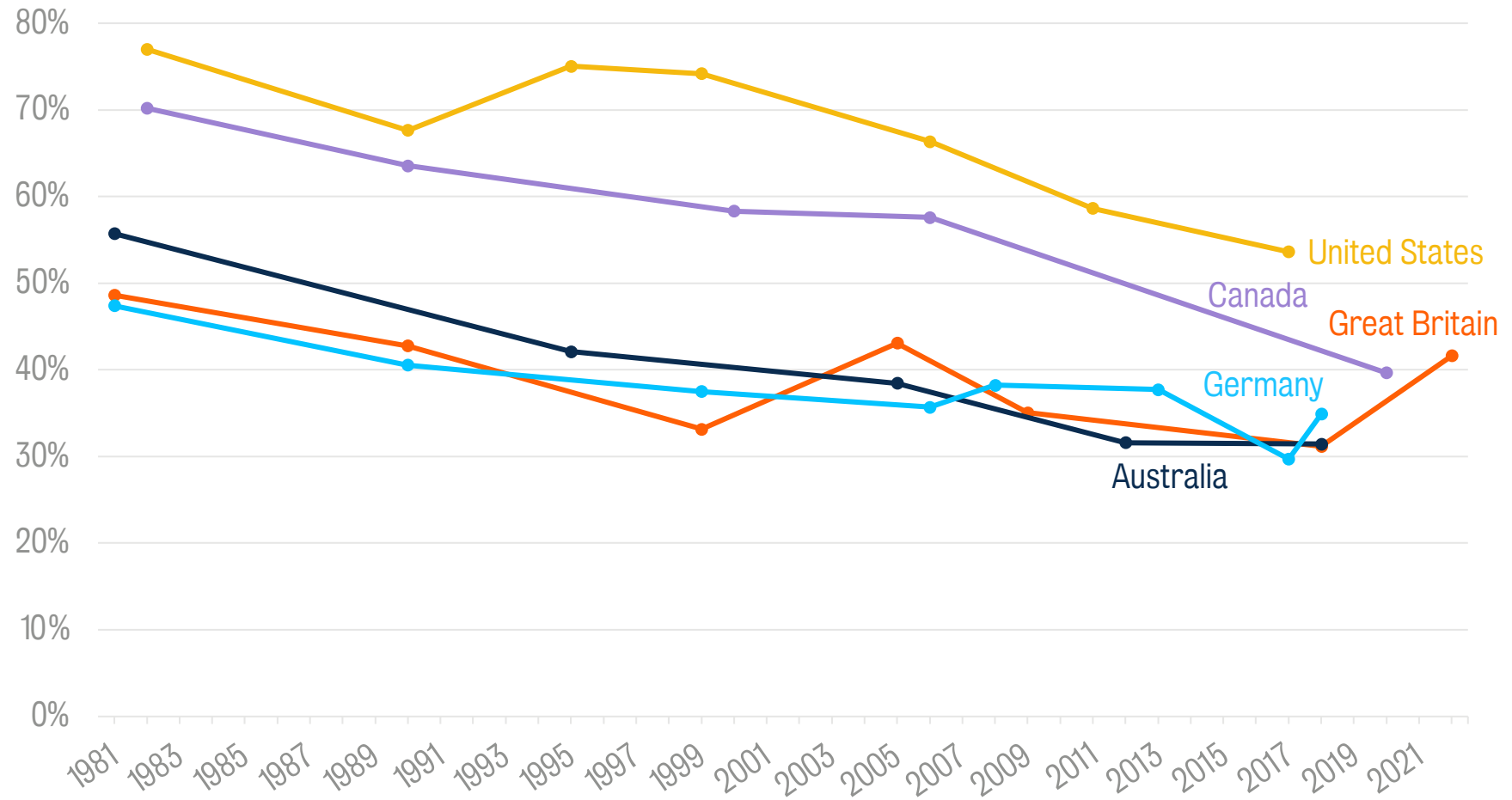


Confidence in religious institutions in Britain has begun to rebound after being in decline

Between 1981 and 2018, confidence in churches and religious organisations in Britain fell from 49% to 31%, but by 2022 had risen again, to 42%.

This contrasts with other western nations, where confidence has declined more steadily over a long period.

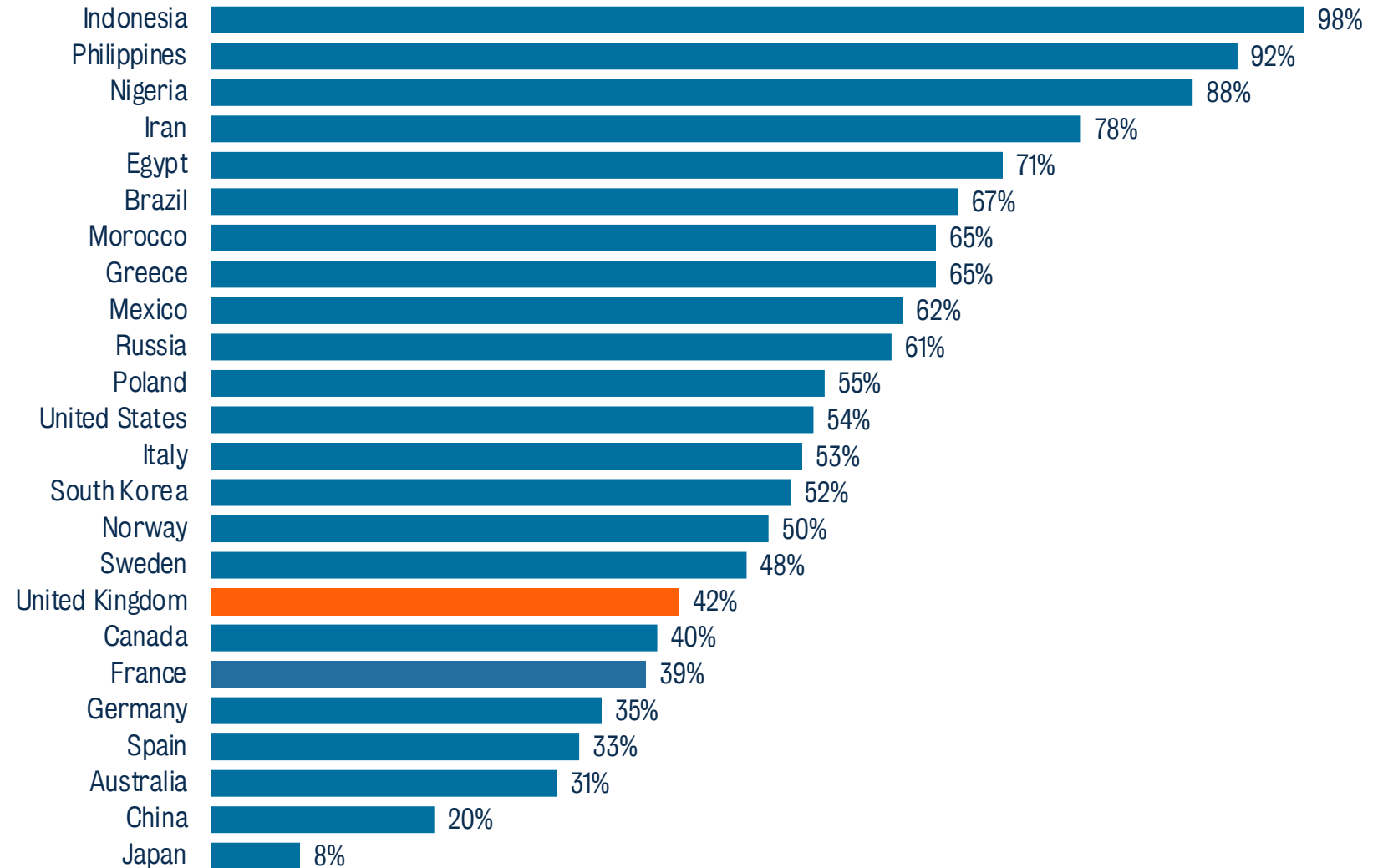
I am going to name a number of organisations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them? **Churches and religious organisations** (% who say a great deal/quite a lot of confidence)



The UK ranks among the bottom half of countries for confidence in churches and religious organisations

42% of the UK public have confidence in religious institutions, which is higher than in some peer nations, such as Canada (40%), Germany (35%) and Australia (31%), but still relatively low by international standards.

Below is a list of organisations. For each one, please indicate how much confidence you have in them.
Churches and religious organisations (% who say a great deal/quite a lot)



7. Technical details

The background of the slide features a dark blue color with a faint, stylized grid pattern on the left side, resembling a globe or a technical drawing. The grid consists of several vertical and horizontal lines that intersect to form a series of rectangular cells. The lines are a lighter shade of blue than the background.

Technical details

Ipsos interviewed a random probability sample of 3,056 adults aged 18+ across the UK. This included respondents in England (1,645) and boost samples in Scotland (523), Wales (437) and Northern Ireland (446). Data has been weighted by region, education and age interlocked with gender to be nationally representative. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic respondents were able to complete the survey either through a face-to-face survey (1,509 completes), an interviewer-led video interview through MS Teams (86), or through either a self-completion paper survey (592) or an online push-to-web follow-up (869). Fieldwork ran from 1 March to 9 September 2022. Ipsos is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

Further information on the sampling methodology for other countries included in this report is available via the [World Values Survey Association website](#).

Unweighted sample sizes for UK nations	
England	1,645
Northern Ireland	446
Scotland	523
Wales	437
Region unknown	5
Total	3,056



For more information, contact:

Bobby Duffy

WVS Principal Investigator,
Professor of Public Policy and
Director of the Policy Institute,
King's College London

bobby.duffy@kcl.ac.uk

[@bobbyduffyking](https://twitter.com/bobbyduffyking)

[@policyatking](https://twitter.com/policyatking)

[@WVS_Survey](https://twitter.com/WVS_Survey)

[kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute](https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute)

[worldvaluessurvey.org](https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org)

WVS team at the Policy Institute,
King's College London:

Antonio Dorileo

Digital Communications Officer

Suzanne Hall

Director of Engagement

Rozi Harsanyi

Stakeholder and Engagement Officer

Kirstie Hewlett

Research Fellow

George May

Head of Communications

Zara Regan

Research Assistant

Paul Stoneman

Research Fellow

James Wright

Quantitative Research Assistant

Co-investigators:

David Halpern

Chief Executive of the Behavioural
Insights Team

Roger Mortimore

Professor of Public Opinion and
Political Analysis at King's College
London

Antonio Silva

Head of Social Cohesion at the
Behavioural Insights Team

David Voas

Professor of Social Science at the
UCL Social Research Institute