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Measuring Evangelicals: Practical Considerations for Social Scientists

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Abstract: Evangelicals garner much attention in polling and public opinion research, yet measuring white evangelicals remains elusive, even opaque. This paper provides practical guidance to researchers who want to measure or analyze evangelicals. In the social sciences, many have adopted a detailed religious affiliation approach that categorizes evangelicals based on the religious tradition of the denominations to which they belong. Others have used a simpler self-identification scheme, which asks respondents if they consider themselves "born-again or evangelical". While the affiliation and self-identification schemes are predominant, a practical examination of these approaches has been absent. Using several waves of the General Social Survey and the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, we compare them. We find almost no statistical differences between the two measurements in prominent demographic, political, or religious factors. Thus, we suggest that for most a simple question about broad religious affiliation followed by a born-again or evangelical self-identification question will suffice.

Increasingly, the news media and pundits turn to exit polls to digest major elections in the United States, especially presidential elections. After Donald Trump's surprising victory over Hillary Clinton in 2016, data from exit polls was digested for months. One of the most prominent exit poll numbers following Trump's election was that Trump garnered 81% of the white evangelical Protestant vote – a record for Republican candidates (Smith and Martinez 2016). While this number has remained a part of the media narrative, it was not produced using one of the standard

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definitions of evangelicals. As such, the wide dissemination of the 81% statistic highlights the need to develop practical guidelines for survey researchers in measuring evangelicals.

To arrive at the number, Pew Research Center compiled data from the National Election Pool exit polls, finding that 81% of white evangelicals who voted had cast their vote for Trump. (Smith and Martinez 2016). This statistic was repeated by a variety of other religious and secular outlets (Bailey 2016; Markoe 2016; Shellnutt 2016). However, the approach employed by Pew to arrive at this 81% statistic differs importantly from the way evangelicalism is conceived in the bulk of academic social science. In the footnote of their results, Pew described that the exit polls' criteria for categorizing an evangelical were any white respondent who self-identified as born-again or evangelical, even if that person also identified as being affiliated with a non-evangelical tradition like the Catholic or Mormon faiths.[1] This evangelical identity-only approach eschews both theology and sociology of religion, as most scholars would contend that being "born-again" is a specifically evangelical phenomenon that is exclusive from other Christian faith traditions such as Roman Catholicism or Mormonism (Hunter 1981; Smith 1998).

The 2016 exit polls, producing headlines of "record numbers" of evangelicals supporting the Republican candidate, is one of a litany of examples of researchers of religion and politics using alternate definitions of the same concept: evangelical Protestants. In punditry, polling, and political science, the term is bandied about with little sophistication. The recent election showed that this constituency remains politically potent, yet measuring evangelicals remains elusive. This is compounded by both the complexity of some approaches and the lack of scholarly consensus. For example, the detailed religious tradition (RELTRAD) approach probably has the most scholarly traction, but it is lengthy and complicated to code. Others prefer a simplified self-identification approach, where individuals identify as born-again or evangelical, but there are inconsistencies to this approach when it is sometimes limited to Protestants and sometimes not, as seen in the 2016 exit polling example.

Operationalizing evangelical Christianity is of tremendous consequence to those who are interested in studying religion and politics. The ascendance of the Christian Right and its continued influence on all levels of American government is one of the most important stories in American religious life (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2006). Evangelical Christians are consistently the most likely to identify with Republican Party and support the GOP's candidate for President (Lipka 2016; Burge 2017).

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Understanding if this group is expanding or contracting over time could be predictive of how Republican candidates will fare in the electoral process. In addition, properly operationalizing evangelicalism could help religious demographers track changes on a wide variety of societal trends.

Despite the importance of evangelicals, to date, there has only been meager analysis of different approaches to measuring them, with a glaring omission of practical wisdom for contemporary survey researchers. Hackett and Lindsay's (2008) systematic analyses of separate coding schemes remains the best dissection of the state of the art, but it lacks practical advice for survey researchers and insight from the growth of online-based polling that has grown over the past decade. We seek to streamline the measurement of evangelicals in public polling while minimizing measurement error and inaccurate understandings of this Christian tradition. In what follows, we analyze the differences between measuring evangelicals by the RELTRAD and self-identification approaches, using five waves of two large-scale survey instruments. We then provide easily adaptable advice and tools for academic and professional survey researchers.

THE TROUBLE WITH MEASURING EVANGELICALS

While it is possible to trace the origins of the "evangelical" back to the decades after the death of Jesus or to the writings of the Protestant Reformation (Eskridge 2006), the modern American evangelical finds its roots in the American colonial revivals led by John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards (Noll 2010). These preachers extolled the value of having a "born again" experience and inculcated a belief in their followers that the most important activity for a believer was to pass that "good news" on to others in the community. While the amount of evangelicals in the United States ebbed and flowed in the United States for the next 200 hundred years, the word would see a resurgence during the tent revivals of famed evangelist Billy Graham in the 1950s (Marsden 1990), who also focused on the "born-again" experience of his followers (Whalin 2014) though he too had trouble defining the term evangelical (Mattingly 2013).

While Graham was struggling with a definition, so were social scientists. Some early practitioners divided American Protestants into two geographic categories, Northern and Southern, as a sort of proxy for liberal/conservative theology (Stouffer 1955). From this early conception, other scholars took a different tack. Tom Smith created a tripartite FUND

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measure (fundamentalist-moderate-liberal), which he sorted denominations into one of those three camps (Smith 1990). This, however, drew sharp criticism as being overly reductive by fellow scholars (Green et al. 1996). In its place, a new scheme was devised that sorted respondents into one of seven traditions[2] based on a respondent's church affiliation (Steensland et al. 2000). This scheme, known as RELTRAD, has become the most widely used in social science having been cited over 1,100 times and has been largely validated by subsequent testing (Dougherty et al. 2007; Frendreis and Tatalovich 2011). However, the approach is incredibly lengthy and somewhat complicated to replicate in a survey setting and takes over 150 lines of code to implement during data analysis. In addition, RELTRAD employs the use of racial filters in some cases and church attendance filters in others. In a follow-up article published in 2012, the original authors assess the scheme after 12 years and note that RELTRAD needs significant updating to consider the rising number of nondenominational Christians, the difficult interaction between race and affiliation inside RELTRAD, and the constant evolution of Christian denominations that appear on the General Social Survey (GSS) (Woodberry et al. 2012).

While most academics were moving forward with using religious affiliation as a means to sort out religious traditions, other observers of American religion took a different approach. As early as 1976, the Gallup polling organization began asking respondents if they had "a born-again experience", which was replicated in a large-scale survey conducted by *Christianity Today* in 1979 (Schmalzbauer 2002). In subsequent surveys, Gallup would employ a question that equated a born-again experience with being evangelical,[3] and used that question for its regular tracking benchmark of evangelical political behavior (Hackett and Lindsay 2008). In addition to allowing individuals to self-identity as born-again, other surveys have asked individuals to self-identify as evangelical. A number of scholars extol the values of allowing self-identification (see Lewis and De Bernardo 2010), believing that individuals are well equipped to understand where they exist in the religious landscape (Kellstedt and Smidt 1991; Smith 1998), while some subsequent analysis has indicated that self-identifying evangelicals are more likely to be politically conservative (Lewis and De Bernardo 2010).

In just the last few years, a number of evangelical organizations including *Christianity Today* and Lifeway Research have attempted to bring clarity to the definition of evangelicalism by looking through the lens of religious belief. While David Bebbington offered a list of four essential evangelical

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convictions[4] (Bebbington 1988), Lifeway Research operationalized those beliefs into four statements that they contend provides the necessary components of evangelical belief if one affirms them strongly (Smietana 2015). This four statement typology has been endorsed and adopted by the National Association of Evangelicals ("What Is an Evangelical?" n.d.).

Taking a step back, this literature has taken two distinct methodological approaches (self-identification vs. affiliation) as well using three different conceptions of evangelicalism (behavior, belief, or belonging). Several recent articles have tried to understand what impact these design choices have had on our understanding of evangelicalism. Work by Hackett and Lindsay conclude that measurement strategy can widely distort the number of evangelicals in the population, with this number ranging from as low as 9% to as high as 38% (2008). Other work has used attempted to use a self-identification approach, for example Smidt (1998) used a question regarding whether individuals considered themselves fundamentalists or not. More recent scholarship suggests that excluding self-identified evangelicals from the evangelical movement by limiting the categorization to affiliation alone might limit researchers' understanding of evangelical Christianity, especially as applied to politics since evangelicals by affiliation have similar attitudes to evangelicals by self-identification. This approach suggests that evangelical belonging be defined as a "spectrum" and self-identification, along with affiliation, can aid in the process of understanding evangelicals (Lewis and De Bernardo 2010, 124). While the recent work highlighted here does an exemplary job of showing the methodological pitfalls of different measurement strategies, none of it provides practical, prescriptive advice to scholars of politics and religion. What follows is an empirically grounded discussion regarding the best practices for measuring evangelicalism through survey questions.

DATA

Beginning in 2008, a number of social scientists joined together to provide large-scale, comprehensive survey data under the umbrella of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) (Vavreck and Rivers 2008). The CCES is a national stratified sample of over 35,000–65,000 Americans fielded online in two waves each election year. The CCES is especially valuable because it has spanned three presidential election cycles, as well as containing a number of different

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measures of religious affiliation.[5] It allows researchers to analyze the born-again self-identification strategy, as well as the RELTRAD denominational approach, both of which have been used extensively in the previous literature. In addition, we will utilize a well-established survey to compare the two measures, the GSS. The GSS is a nationally representative sample of 1,900–3,000 Americans conducted via in-person interviews typically every 2 years.[6] The RELTRAD coding classification was originally created to sort the denominational variables and that syntax has been reviewed and updated in recent years (Steensland et al. 2000; Stetzer and Burge 2016). In addition, the GSS has asked respondents if they have had a born-again experience consistently beginning in 2004.

To be clear, here are the criteria that will be employed to create our two groups:

(1) Using RELTRAD denominations to identify evangelical churches. (Affiliation Measure)
(2) Those who responded in the affirmative to: "Would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian, or not?"[7] + those who indicated that they were Protestant. Furthermore, all African-Americans were excluded from this measure so as to minimize the conflation of evangelical Protestants with Black Protestants. (Self-Identification Measure)

We chose to further include anyone who said they were born-again and also Protestant, as that concept is a uniquely Protestant one which does not fit well into Catholic or Mormon faiths (Hunter 1981; Smith 1998; Hackett and Lindsay 2008). This approach is distinct from the exit polls that Pew analyzed (discussed above) as they include anyone who affirms a "born-again" experience, irrespective of religious tradition. Another point of divergence between the exit polls' methodology and social science is the issue of race. Pew reported results regarding evangelical Protestants who were white, however, RELTRAD evangelicals are not exclusively white; nor does the self-identification measure include a racial filter. Our approach self-identification approach does not limit evangelicals to only whites, instead just eliminating blacks from the evangelical category. Because of this, there is a significant level of racial diversity. In fact, the 2016 CCES indicates that just 71% of those who are classified as evangelicals were white, while the self-identification measure was 68% white.[8]

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FINDINGS

The most appropriate place to begin to understand the differences between the measures is to look at their distribution in each of the surveys. We chose to use the prior five waves of the GSS (biannually from 2008 to 2016) and the CCES survey conducted biannually since its inception in 2008. The percentage of the total sample that was included in each measure can be found in Figure 1 using the appropriate weights included by the survey authors. In order to aid interpretation, each histogram contains error bars representing 95% confidence intervals. It is clear that the difference between the two samples is small or statistically non-existent, especially in the case of the GSS in which the samples were not statistically distinct in any of the five waves. In three of the five waves of the CCES, the self-identification approach does classify a larger percentage of individuals as evangelicals and this difference is statistically significant. However, this provides an incredibly rigorous statistical test as the total sample size of the CCES is exceptionally large and therefore the margin

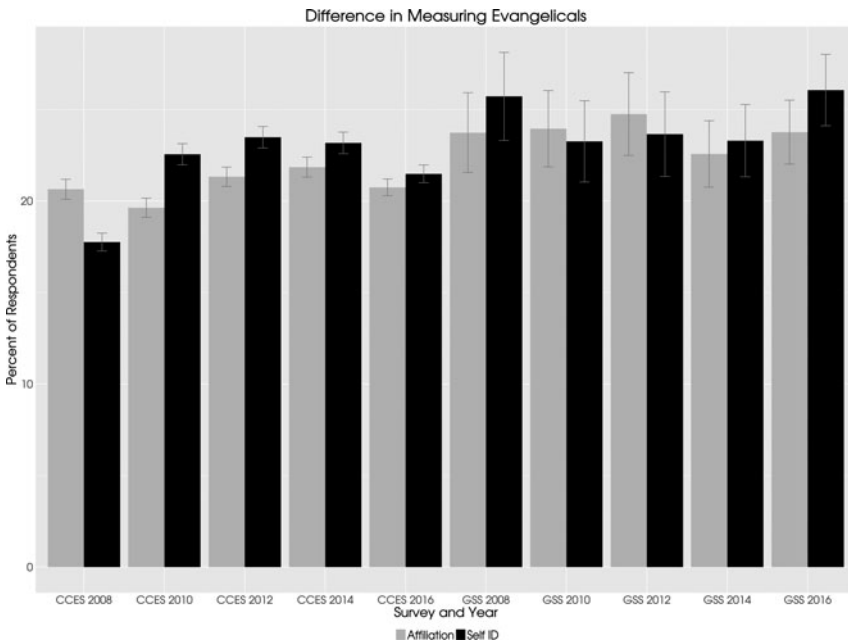


FIGURE 1. Percentage of evangelicals using both affiliation and self-identification measures.

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of error shrinks to ±1%.[9] If any trend emerges between these two measures, it seems that the self-identification approach generates a slightly larger sample. However, both measurement strategies result in an overall proportion that is relatively stable. It is worthwhile to note that across the ten surveys we analyzed the percentage of respondents using the affiliation measure is never less than 19% and never more than 24% which comports with other research that has utilized a similar affiliation approach in a different sample (Alwin et al. 2006). In regards to measuring self-identified evangelicals, only the 2008 CCES stands as a true outlier.[10]

In order to further test the differences between the two groups, we analyzed two variables important to research on both politics and religion: self-described party affiliation and self-reported religious attendance. Figure 2 displays the mean party identification along with 95% confidence intervals for each of the ten surveys that were analyzed. There are several notable findings on this dimension. First, note that in all five GSS surveys the differences between the means is not statistically significant at the $p > 0.05$ level, indicating that either approach is statistically indistinguishable when it comes to the measurement of party identification. The CCES samples do indicate that self-identification group is slightly more conservative than the group generated using the affiliation strategy, however, this

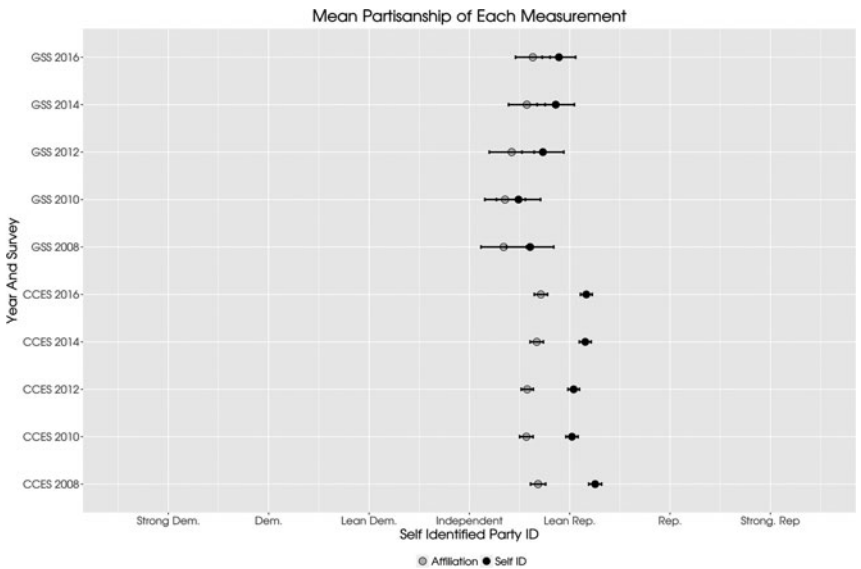


FIGURE 2. Mean partisanship of evangelicals using both affiliation and self-identification measures.

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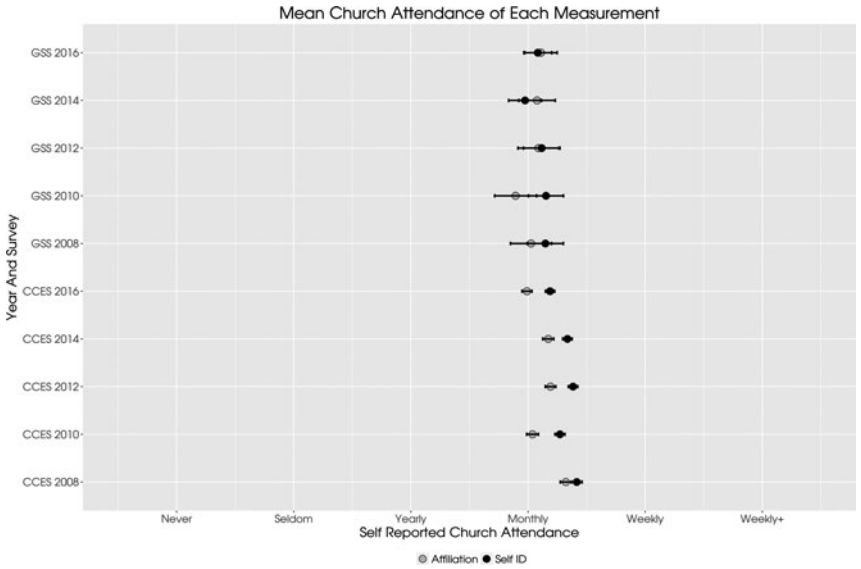


FIGURE 3. Mean church attendance of evangelicals using both affiliation and self-identification measures.

difference is never more than half a point on a seven-point scale. While the CCES samples are somewhat more conservative than the GSS waves, the more recent surveys of both have indicated a somewhat rightward drift among both self-identifiers and those with an evangelical affiliation.

The other dimension, church attendance, can be found in Figure 3. The pattern between the party ideology and church attendance is similar. Again, none of the difference of means in the GSS samples was significant at the $p > 0.05$ threshold, indicating that the measures are not statistically dissimilar for church attendance. However, the differences are statistically different for the CCES, but the magnitude of these differences is still small. In fact, the mean attendance never diverges by more than one-quarter of one point on a six-point scale. The other result that is worth considering is that all ten samples are statistically very similar for church attendance for both measurement approaches. Taken together, the pattern is clear: using either a self-identification strategy or the affiliation measure based on RELTRAD, there is not a noticeable difference in respondents' reported political affiliation or their worship attendance.

To further explore the differences between these measures of evangelicals, a series of regression models limited only to the sub-set of evangelicals (separately by affiliation and self-identification) were specified.

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These models used a political issue with strong religious overtones: abortion (Evans 2002; Jelen and Wilcox 2003) as the dependent variable. Both the CCES as well as the GSS asks respondents if they favored a woman's ability to obtain an abortion for any reason of her choosing.[11] If self-identified evangelicals are similar in composition to those classified evangelicals through RELTRAD we would expect to see that coefficients in a regression analysis should be statistically similar (i.e. signed in the same direction and with coefficients of roughly the same magnitude).

In these models of the evangelical subsample, four basic independent variables were included: education, gender, age, and party identification.[12] In order to provide a direct comparison all variables were coded on the same scale (0–1), and a logit model was specified as the dependent variable was dichotomous in both surveys. Figure 4 displays the results of two of these models as a coefficient plot.

In looking at the results from the GSS (2016), three of the four variables (education, gender, and age) do not reach statistical significance for either of the two measurement approaches. The only variable that is statistically

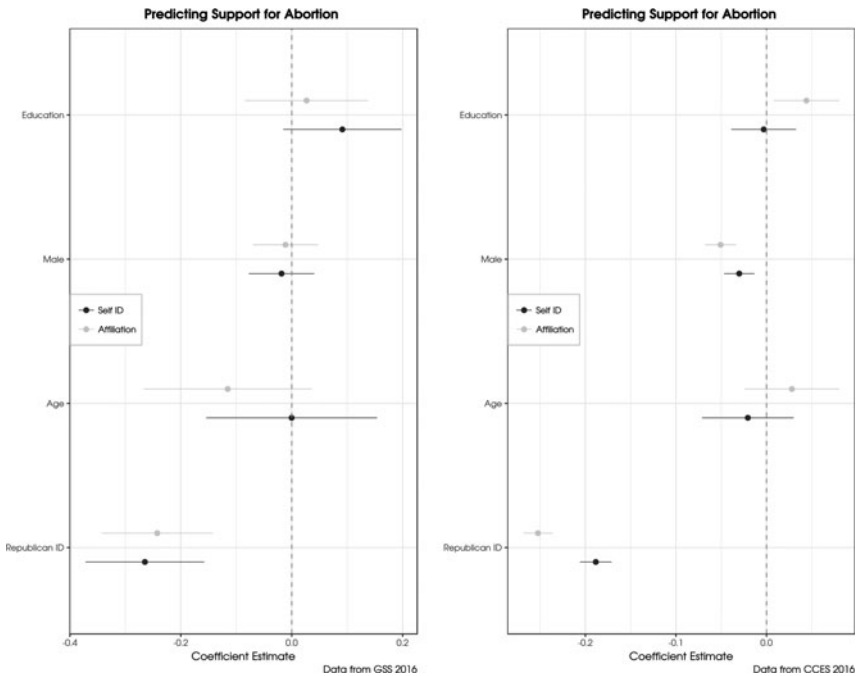


FIGURE 4. Regression analysis predicting support for abortion using both affiliation and self-identification measures.

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significant is party identification. In this case, a strong affiliation with the Republican party drives down support for access to abortion services. Note that for both the self-identification strategy and the affiliation approach the coefficients are not statistically distinct from one another.

Turning our attention to the panel on the right, which displays the results from the 2016 CCES, a somewhat similar pattern emerges. The education variable is statistically significant for the affiliation approach, but not significant for the self-identification strategy. Note, however, that the magnitude of the coefficient is not statistically distinct. The male variable reaches statistical significance in both of the two subsamples and predicts lower support for access to abortion. Age, for both measurement strategies, is not statistically significant but identifying with the Republican party is significant and signed in the direction of less support for abortion. The affiliation subsample does evidence slightly less support for abortion access as they become stronger identifiers with the Republican party than does the self-identification group, but the coefficient only deviates by less than 0.05. Taken together, with eight total coefficients across two surveys, the two measurement strategies behave in a statistical similar manner. In addition, regression analysis was conducted for 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014 versions of the GSS and the 2008 and 2012 waves of the CCES. Taken together, these results are similar in nature and magnitude to those described in Figure 4.[13]

ADVICE FOR FUTURE SURVEYS

Taken as a whole, we feel confident in saying that either the affiliation measure or the self-identification approach provides a theoretically and statistically sound measurement of evangelical Protestants in the United States. Analyzed from both descriptive as well as multivariate angles, we find that, in most cases, there is no real difference in the overall size or composition of either of these classification techniques. We offer this prescriptive to researchers of American political behavior: if space is running short on a survey it is possible to add a religious dimension to the instrument through the addition of two straightforward questions (plus race). However, if greater specificity is desired, using the full denominational approach (with appropriate follow-ups) is a sound collection technique, as well. To aid researchers in this endeavor, we have included question-wording (borrowed from Pew Research and replicated in the CCES) for new surveys in the online Appendix. The 2016

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presidential election showed that white evangelical Protestants are one of the most stable electoral coalitions, as well as the most important. Yet unlike more easily identifiable demographic groups, measuring evangelicals suffer from a multitude of measurement strategies that are often plagued by measurement error, inconsistency, and complexity, this much is evident in the findings of the Pew Research Center.

This disparity in results might lead other social scientists to balk at wading into the waters of measuring religion. It seems likely many survey authors would like to include a religious dimension in their questionnaire but have hesitated when they discovered the complex follow up a structure that is employed by surveys such as the GSS. By suggesting a simplified strategy of combining religious affiliation with self-identification as "born-again or evangelical" and showing its statistical reliability, it is our hope that many more surveys will choose to include consistent religion variables. Our aim was to provide a coherent, clear, and rigorous approach to understanding an extremely difficult concept to measure: evangelical Christianity. We hope that researchers who were wary of including religious questions on their surveys for fear of incorrect operationalization will feel confident in using measures that have been analyzed and considered to be "best practices" in the social sciences.

Supplementary Material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048318000299

NOTES

1. It is important to note that while Pew became the primary source for the 81% number, it did not conduct their own exit polling. Instead, Pew relied upon data collected from a number of media outlets that were members of the National Election Pool. Therefore, the Pew meta-analysis was significantly constrained by the choices made by other polling firms.
2. Evangelical Protestant, Black Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other Religion, No Religion.
3. "Would you describe yourself as a born-again, or evangelical, Christian?"
4. Biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, activism.
5. There has been no agreed upon coding syntax for creating RELTRAD in the CCES. This necessitated the creation of a coding scheme which was created to adhere as closely as possible to the guidelines described by Steensland et al. (2000) in that article's online Appendix. That coding syntax is available at https://github.com/ryanburge/reltrad.
6. The number of respondents for both the GSS and CCES varies by survey year. We have included the Ns for each survey year we have used in the online Appendix.
7. The wording for the GSS is slightly different. "Would you say you have been "born again" or have had a "born again" experience – that is, a turning point in your life when you committed yourself to Christ?"

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8. The 2016 GSS sample was 81% white, using the affiliation approach. Using the self-ID measure the sample was 64% white.

9. Online Appendix Table 1 contains descriptive statistics of total sample size, percentage of respondents in each classification, and margin of error for each of the ten surveys utilized here.

10. Online Appendix Table 2 contains summary statistics of a number of demographic factors including age, gender, and education for each measurement technique across all ten surveys. Online Appendix Table 3 contains a table indicating how many respondents were only BA + Protestant, how many were only RELTRAD evangelicals, and how many fell into both camps.

11. CCES version: Do you support or oppose each of the following proposals? Always allow a woman to obtain an abortion as a matter of choice (Support/Oppose). GSS version: Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if the woman wants it for any reason? (Yes/No)

12. Full variable coding available in the online Appendix.

13. All coefficient plots are available in the online Appendix.

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