

Measuring Evangelicalism: Consequences of Different Operationalization Strategies

CONRAD HACKETT
D. MICHAEL LINDSAY

Several investigations of American evangelicalism have been conducted in recent decades, yet they conceptualize evangelicalism in different ways. It is not surprising, therefore, that different profiles of the evangelical movement and its adherents emerge from these studies. This research reviews major studies on the subject undertaken since 1976, when evangelicals first attracted national attention. Using data collected in a single data set—the 1998 General Social Survey—we show how measurement strategies employed in different studies yield drastically different pictures of evangelicalism. Conservative measures indicate that only one in 20 Americans is evangelical while one in two is evangelical according to a combination of more expansive measures. The demographic, cultural, and religious characteristics of evangelicals, as well as theories about them, hinge upon how the population is defined.

The election of Jimmy Carter brought renewed attention to the evangelical movement and prompted social scientists to lament the lack of empirical research on modern American evangelicalism (Hunter 1981; Warner 1979). Since then, scholars have produced a wealth of research that examines many different facets of the movement. These studies often identify the evangelical population using different measures of belief, behavior, and belonging, even within the same report. Thus, claims about the demographic and religious characteristics of American evangelicals are often inconsistent, even contradictory. Studies have estimated the adult evangelical population in the United States to be as small as 7 percent (Barna 2004; Smith et al. 1998) to as large as 47 percent (Gallup and Lindsay 1999). Social scientists aware of these differing pictures have expressed concern about the way studies “somewhat arbitrarily identify [respondents] as evangelicals” (Hart 2004:176). For many, “evangelical” is a catch-all term for conservative Protestantism, and evangelicals may or may not be distinguished from fundamentalists or Pentecostals, depending on the context. The usefulness of the term “evangelical” has been challenged recently and many within the movement dislike the term because of its theological and analytical fuzziness (Dayton and Johnston 1991; Noll 2001; Woodberry and Smith 1998).

Noll (2001) examines several representative institutions of American evangelicalism and finds points of doctrinal affinity among them in many areas like the Bible, God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, humanity, evangelization, Christian living, the church, and the prospect of a final judgment (see also Marsden 1991). In fact, most studies of the evangelical movement—regardless of the way the researcher frames the evangelical population—present a broadly similar picture about religious doctrine. However, starkly different portraits emerge based on the implications of those beliefs and the way the evangelical movement interacts with wider society. This is exacerbated by the various methods scholars have employed in identifying the evangelical population in the United States.

If scholarly works define evangelicals in different ways, which portrait of American evangelicalism is the best? We propose that most of the previous studies on the subject present reliable

Conrad Hackett is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Population Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin. D. Michael Lindsay is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Associate Director of the Center on Race, Religion, and Urban Life at Rice University. E-mail: mlindsay@rice.edu
Correspondence should be addressed to Conrad Hackett, Population Research Center, University of Texas, 1 University Station, G1800, Austin, TX 78712-0544. E-mail: conradhackett@gmail.com

results, which can be supported in subsequent studies if the measure of evangelicalism is held constant. Conclusions about the size of the movement, as well as the demographic, religious, and political characteristics of adherents are contingent upon the way researchers identify adherents. That is why, for example, we find support for the depictions of American evangelicalism provided by both Smith et al. (1998) and Hunter (1983), although they differ significantly from each other. How they define the population to be studied is the crucial distinction between their studies.

Defining Evangelicals

Most studies employ one of the three methods—or occasionally, a combination thereof—to define the evangelical population. The most common method among social scientists uses denominational affiliation as a means of classifying a respondent into broad categories such as “evangelical,” “fundamentalist,” or “conservative Protestant.” A second method relies on the respondent’s self-classification: if he/she calls himself/herself an evangelical, then he/she is one regardless of denominational affiliation. These self-identity methods of classification can be based on “yes/no” responses to a list of identities or in response to a forced-choice question in which a respondent is asked to pick the identity that fits best.¹ Finally, some studies select the evangelical population based on the respondent’s declared beliefs on particular subjects that have historically been important to evangelicals.

Affiliation

Social scientists have long identified denominational affiliation as a valid method for classifying religious groups (Glock and Stark 1965; Greeley 1972; Lenski 1977). Recognizing the complexity of American denominational profiles, Tom Smith (1990) proposes a classification method, FUND, which aggregates the separate denominational groups into an ordinal scale convenient for statistical analyses. This method locates denominational traditions along a trichotomous continuum of religious conservatism from fundamentalism to moderatism to liberalism. T. Smith classifies all religious affiliations in the General Social Survey (GSS) into three values (fundamentalist, moderate, liberal). In the 1990s, this method of defining religious groups prevailed within social science because it simplified the panoply of denominational affiliations given by GSS respondents and allowed further study of religion’s predictive power on other measures. According to T. Smith’s typology, the fundamentalist category is a proxy for evangelicals and conservative Protestantism, closely allied with the Holiness and Pentecostal branches of American religion.

Some scholars have criticized Smith’s three-part typology as crude and imprecise. Kellstedt et al. (1996) argue that more categories for analysis are needed and in recent work they have extended their model of religious traditions to include 18 subgroups based on traditionalist, centrist, and modernist categories within each of the major religious traditions (Green 2004; Guth et al. 2003). Building on the work of Guth et al., Steensland et al. (2000) proposed a substantial revision of T. Smith’s FUND method that considers more fully the role of religious history and race in defining religious subpopulations. Their classification method, RELTRAD, categorizes conservative Protestant denominations under the label of “evangelical Protestants.” Both the RELTRAD method and that of Guth et al. separate historically African-American denominations into a separate black Protestant category. While there is evidence that black Protestants are significantly different from white evangelicals and white mainline Protestants in their social and political attitudes, a significant percentage of the black Protestant population does identify with the evangelical movement, which further confounds the category of American evangelicals. Steensland et al. also critique the continued use of the term “fundamentalist” since many respondents would deny they are “fundamentalist” because of the term’s “typically negative connotations in the media” (2000:5). Finally, Steensland and his colleagues propose that

distinctions between religious affiliations are nominal, not ordinal, in nature; therefore, mainline Protestantism is not simply a diluted form of evangelical orthodoxy but different in kind.

Some scholars sympathize with the overall logic of the RELTRAD scheme while expressing reservation about the coding strategies recommended by Steensland et al. For example, they classify as black Protestants unspecified Baptists and Methodists who are African American as well as African Americans with American Baptist Churches USA and Southern Baptist affiliations (Steensland et al. 2000: footnote 16, Appendix). In contrast, the recent study of conservative Protestants in the GSS by Greeley and Hout (2006:6–8) seems to bracket out African Americans who identify with a historically black Protestant denomination as black Protestants while including African-American Southern Baptists in the conservative Protestant category.

In sum, the affiliation method of defining evangelicals classifies the denominational tradition of a respondent into a series of categories that can be ordinal (Smith 1990) or nominal (Steensland et al. 2000) in nature. Using this method, the analyst approximates evangelicalism by one's denominational affiliation and assumes that evangelicalism is a distinctly Protestant phenomenon.

Identity

Self-identified descriptions about religious identity make up a second trajectory in the quest for identifying the evangelical population. Within this method, researchers have taken broad as well as narrow means to defining the population. Regarding the former, consider the role of the Gallup Organization.

Gallup first asked Americans about having a “born-again experience” in 1976—the so-called “year of the evangelical” when both *Time* and *Newsweek* published cover stories on the topic (Schmalzbauer 2003). As Table 1 displays, 35 percent of the adult population that year said they had undergone a born-again experience. In 1979, *Christianity Today*, American evangelicalism's flagship publication, sponsored the first large-scale, national survey on evangelicalism. The *Christianity Today* study polled Americans about their beliefs and their identity, but in the end Gallup opted to treat “born-again” experiences as a proxy for being evangelical.² In 1986, a Gallup Poll question treated “born-again” and “evangelical” as equivalents (“Would you describe yourself as a born-again, or evangelical, Christian?”). Starting in 1992, this question became Gallup's trend question on the topic (see Table 1). Since 1992, the percentage of Americans classified by Gallup as evangelical has wavered between 36 percent and 47 percent of the adult population (Gallup and Lindsay 1999). Some of this variation may be due to fluctuation in the placement of the evangelical measure across Gallup polls. The context of Gallup's question about evangelical identity varies within and between surveys. In some polls, respondents' only opportunity to express a religious commitment is by answering “yes” to whether they identify as born-again or evangelical. By framing the evangelical category as one of self-definition, Gallup allows non-Protestants including Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and even non-Christian adherents to be considered “evangelical” if they respond affirmatively to Gallup's self-identity question. Examining Gallup data that are aggregated for all of their surveys that address religious questions between 1992 and 1998 ($N = 24,871$), we find more than half of Protestants (54 percent) label themselves as born-again or evangelical Christians, and a sizable segment among other religious traditions use the same self-identifications. Among those in Orthodox churches, the figure is 31 percent, among Catholics the figure is 21 percent, and 7 percent among Jews.³ These data show that evangelicals are most heavily concentrated in the Southeast and Southwest and least heavily concentrated in New England.

Whereas the Gallup data regard much of the U.S. population as “evangelical,” another study that relies on self-identification estimates the percentage of evangelical adults to be far lower. Using a national survey ($N = 2,087$), Smith et al. (1998) identify just 7 percent of the population as evangelical and argue that evangelicalism constitutes a distinctive subcultural identity that is

TABLE 1
GALLUP POLL EVANGELICAL QUESTIONS

Dates Survey Conducted	Exact Question(s)	Percentage Classified as "Evangelical"
August 27–30, 1976	Would you say that you have been "born-again" or have you had a "born-again" experience—that is, a turning point when you committed yourself to Christ, or not?	35%
February 2–5, 1979	Which, if any of these, do you practice . . . the evangelical movement?	7%
December 7–10, 1979	Would you say that you have been "born-again" or have you had a "born-again" experience—that is, a turning point when you committed yourself to Christ, or not?	39%
July–September, 1986	Would you describe yourself as a born-again, or evangelical, Christian? (becomes trend question)	31%
1992 (annual data based on quarterly surveys and then aggregated to allow more detailed analysis)		36%
1993		42%
1994		36%
1995		41%
1996		39%
1997		44%
1998		47%
1999		46%
2000		45%
2001		44%
2002		46%
2003		42%
2004		41%
2005		41%
2006		43%
2007		41%

"thriving" amid pluralism. Smith and colleagues propose that present-day religious pluralism animates a distinction-with-engagement logic of action (Friedland and Alford 1991) that allows it to flourish. Unlike Hunter (1983) and others, C. Smith finds that evangelicals tend to be better educated, experience greater class mobility, and are not disproportionately concentrated in the South. The different profiles of evangelicals provided by Hunter and Smith could be the result of changing evangelical composition in the 17-year period among the data sets they analyze. However, our results here suggest the differences are instead the result of measurement differences.

C. Smith's data show a diversity of religious self-identifications within denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention, suggesting that churchgoers do not think like social scientists about the link between denominational affiliation and categories of Protestantism. It should be noted, however, that C. Smith's method of defining evangelicals is not entirely based on

self-identification, as is the case with Gallup. C. Smith's survey screens respondents to include only Protestants and those who either attend church at least two–three times per month or who regard religion as “extremely important” in their lives. In his follow-up volume, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* (2000), C. Smith discusses the effects of different measurement tactics at some length.⁴ A common definition, he says, of an evangelical is a Christian who holds a particular regard for the Bible, embraces a personal relationship with God through a “conversion” to Jesus Christ, and seeks to lead others on a similar spiritual journey (Bebbington 1989; Kellstedt et al. 1996; Smith 2000; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1989). Self-identification of religious categories, though, often yields different results than classification based on denominational affiliation. For example, the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) is usually classified as a moderate or liberal (“mainline”) Protestant denomination. In a 2002 Presbyterian Panel survey, 12 percent of PCUSA members said they identify with an evangelical “approach to faith.” Over a third of panelists said they are theologically conservative, and 30 percent described themselves as born-again Christians (Marcum 2004). The Presbyterian study shows that denominational affiliation measures alone may miss a slice of the population who identify with American evangelicalism.

Beliefs

The first major sociological examination of American evangelicalism was conducted by Hunter (1983), using the 1979 Gallup study conducted for *Christianity Today* ($N = 1,553$). Hunter estimates that evangelicals make up 22.5 percent of the adult population and presents a profile of the typical American evangelical woman at that time: a woman who votes Democratic, is poor, is from the South, and who lives in rural areas.⁵ Hunter finds that American evangelicalism is rooted in the socially marginal background of places like rural Appalachia and among immigrant communities. He concludes that evangelicals occupy a “greater demographic distance from the institutional structures and processes of modernity than any other religious group” (1983:69) and argues that the forces of modernity increasingly encroach upon the sacred canopy that religious adherents use to maintain the vitality of their faith. These forces are cognitive rationality, cultural pluralism, and structural differentiation.

Hunter's study identifies evangelicalism as a “Protestant phenomenon” (1983:139), and he decides that evangelically minded Roman Catholics or those who come from a Jewish heritage (the “Jews for Jesus”) should not be regarded as “true evangelicals” (1983:140). He therefore operationalizes evangelicalism along two theological propositions: the inerrancy of Scripture and the divinity of Christ. Respondents also had to affirm a belief that salvation comes through Jesus Christ through either a conversion experience or a personal confession.

Given his decision to use belief affirmations as a way of defining evangelicals, findings about the religious affiliations of evangelicals from Hunter's study are intriguing. For example, 14 percent of evangelicals in his study are not church members, and they occupy a “minority position” in all the major American Protestant denominations except the Southern Baptist Convention. Hunter provocatively claims that the adoption of the “born-again” motif among evangelicals is largely socially constructed as an “exciting and optimistic public relations theme” (1983:89), a proposition that has recently been argued more fully by Hart (2004). Hunter distinguishes between evangelicalism and fundamentalism and suggests that contrary to the evangelical movement, which has begun the process of “collective bargaining” with modern, secular society, fundamentalism has successfully militated against the corrosive forces of modernity by eschewing cultural engagement. Hunter believes that the process of accommodation, once undertaken, will bring about the movement's demise.

George Barna, evangelicalism's prolific pollster, uses an elaborate set of belief affirmations to identify evangelicals. Unlike Gallup's trend question, which treats “born-again” and “evangelical” as synonyms, Barna considers evangelicals as a subset of the born-again population. And for

neither case does he ask respondents if they consider themselves “born-again” or “evangelical.” Barna Research Group defines a born-again Christian as a respondent who says he or she has (1) “made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today,” and (2) who believe “that after he or she dies, he will go to Heaven because he has confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as his savior.”⁶ According to Barna’s method, respondents who meet these twin criteria are classified as born-again regardless of whether they would say they are born-again Christians. Among those respondents who are defined as “born-again,” a segment is further defined as “evangelical” Christians. These born-again respondents must meet seven additional criteria. Those include: (1) saying their faith is very important in their life; (2) believing they have a responsibility to share their faith in Christ with non-Christians; (3) believing in the existence of Satan; (4) believing that eternal salvation is gained through God’s grace alone, not through human efforts; (5) believing that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life while on earth; (6) believing the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches; and (7) affirming God as an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today. This definition has no relationship to church attendance, membership, or denominational affiliation.

In his examination of born-again Christians, Barna finds that born-again Christians, estimated at nearly 40 percent of the adult population, represent all walks of life and are not relegated to the lower economic and educational strata (Barna 1994). Nearly half of respondents living in the South (46 percent) and 57 percent of self-identified political and social conservatives are born-again, compared to 22 percent of liberals. Barna classifies more women than men as born-again, and the percentage of blacks so classified outnumbers whites and Hispanics. Curiously, 40 percent of Barna’s born-again population did not attend church within the last week. In addition, because evangelicals are a subset of born-again, Barna finds that nearly one-third of the adult population (31 percent) is born again, but not evangelical (Barna 2004).

By contrast, according to Barna’s measures, evangelicals compose 7 percent of the U.S. adult population. Most of them are white (76 percent), are married (74 percent), and are affiliated with the Republican Party (62 percent). More than half of all evangelicals (54 percent) live in the South. Unlike previous studies that have suggested a lower level of education among evangelicals (Hunter 1983), Barna’s evangelicals are above the national average of college degree holders (29 percent of Barna’s evangelicals have a college degree). In terms of religious identity, 11 percent of all Protestants are evangelical according to Barna’s measures, and 1 percent of Roman Catholics are evangelical.

In addition to enumerating a list of tenets or affirmations, analysts can also propose a set of religious activities that typify evangelicals. As we have seen in other instances, regular church attendance is one way of distinguishing the activist approach to Christianity that often typifies American evangelicalism (Smith 2000; Smith et al. 1998). Ammerman (1997) classifies Protestants based on how they prioritize the practices of a “good” Christian life. “Evangelicals are those who emphasize reading and studying the Bible, spending time in prayer and meditation, [and] seeking to bring others to faith in Christ” (1997:213). To summarize, most social-scientific studies on evangelicalism have predominantly relied on one of these three methods, and the decision about operationalization influences all conclusions about evangelicals, including the simple description of their demographic and geographic characteristics. The power of framing the subject to be studied is best understood when these various modes of defining evangelicals are compared within a single data set.

DATA AND METHODS

Since previous studies of evangelicals come to different conclusions and employ differing operationalizations of evangelicalism-conservative Protestantism in their studies, we sought one data set allowing us to compare the consequences of using different definitions while holding

TABLE 2
MEASURING EVANGELICALS: A SIMPLIFIED GUIDE TO DEFINING TRAITS
IN VARIOUS METHODS

Scheme	Only Protestant	Conserv. Protest. Denom.	Born- Again	Evangel. Identity	Faith Very/ Extrem. Import.	Other	% of Popul.*
<i>Affiliation</i>							
RELTRAD	†	†				a	27
FUND		†					**
<i>Identity</i>							
GALLUP			†	†			31–47
SMITH	†			†	†	b	7
<i>Beliefs</i>							
HUNTER	†		†			c	22
BARNA					†	d	7

*Estimated percentage of the U.S. population categorized as evangelical, according to the author of each method.

**Tom Smith does not document the estimated size of what he calls the fundamentalist population in his documentation of the FUND method.

^aIn the RELTRAD system, African Americans who provide unspecified Methodist or Baptist affiliations are classified as black Protestants. Furthermore, African Americans who identify Southern Baptist affiliation are classified as black Protestant.

^bSmith evangelicals attend at least 2–3 times a month or say that religion is very important in their lives.

^cHunter evangelicals agree with the GSS statement that the Bible is the literal word of God.

^dBarna evangelicals believe Satan exists, have evangelized, and strongly try to apply their beliefs in their lives.

the sample constant. Few data sets have enough religious measures to facilitate comparison of the different measures of evangelicalism. The most useful data set available to us is the 1998 GSS. There are 1,445 cases in Sample A of the 1998 GSS, which include the International Social Survey Program religion module and the core GSS religion questions. Questions include worship attendance, religion, and denominational affiliation, a religious movement self-identification measure, and the question, “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?”⁷ We approximate various strategies of measuring evangelicalism using questions asked of these respondents.

Table 2 provides an overview of key traits used to operationalize evangelicalism by the authors of each of these methods. The FUND variable, which is included with GSS data sets, is coded based upon respondents’ religious affiliations (Smith 1990). For each of the other methods of identifying evangelicals, we use GSS variables to approximate various measures of evangelicalism as closely as possible. We create the RELTRAD variable following the instructions of Steensland et al. (2000), drawing primarily on the RELIG (religion), DENOM (denomination), and OTHER (other Protestant denomination) variables. In addition to religious affiliation variables, the RELTRAD system also uses race data to identify black Protestants and attendance data to assign regularly attending Protestants with limited or ambiguous affiliation data into the evangelical Protestant category. Although FUND and RELTRAD have multiple categories, henceforth all references to *FUND* will pertain to its category labeled fundamentalist and all references to *RELTRAD* will pertain to its category labeled evangelical Protestant. Respondents are evangelicals according

to the *GALLUP* method if they had a born-again experience (REBORN) or self-identify as an evangelical (RELGID). The *SMITH* method selects self-identified evangelicals (RELGID) who attend at least two–three times a month (ATTEND) or strongly try to carry their beliefs into other dealings (RELLIFE).⁸ In the GSS, like C. Smith’s scheme, only Protestants were asked the question that permitted respondents to self-identify as evangelical. *HUNTER* and *BARNA* both require a born-again experience (REBORN) as well as adherence to a variety of beliefs. Although some doctrinal questions used by these authors are not included in the GSS, the questions we use to approximate these belief-based methods identify respondents with the orthodox Christian beliefs these authors affirm. *HUNTER* evangelicals are Protestants who believe the Bible is the literal word of God (BIBLE).⁹ *BARNA* evangelicals believe hell definitely exists (HELL), strongly try to carry beliefs into other dealings (RELLIFE), and have evangelized (SAVESOUL).

RESULTS

The share of respondents we identify as evangelical with each method in the 1998 GSS closely matches the percentage of the population identified as evangelical by those associated with the respective method (see Tables 2 and 3). The highest result comes from *GALLUP*, which includes everyone captured by the born-again and the evangelical self-identity measures. By this definition, the GSS data suggest that 38 percent of the American population is evangelical, which is within the range of Gallup estimates (see Table 1). However, Gallup estimates in 1998 were unusually high; that year, 47 percent of the population said they were born-again or evangelical Christians. In any given year, the estimates of religious populations from a high-quality in-person survey like the GSS are likely to be more reliable and more conservative than Gallup estimates because Gallup (like other phone-based surveys) tends to oversample religious respondents. Religious respondents are more likely than nonreligious respondents to have phones and participate in a survey with limited call-back attempts (Woodberry 1998).

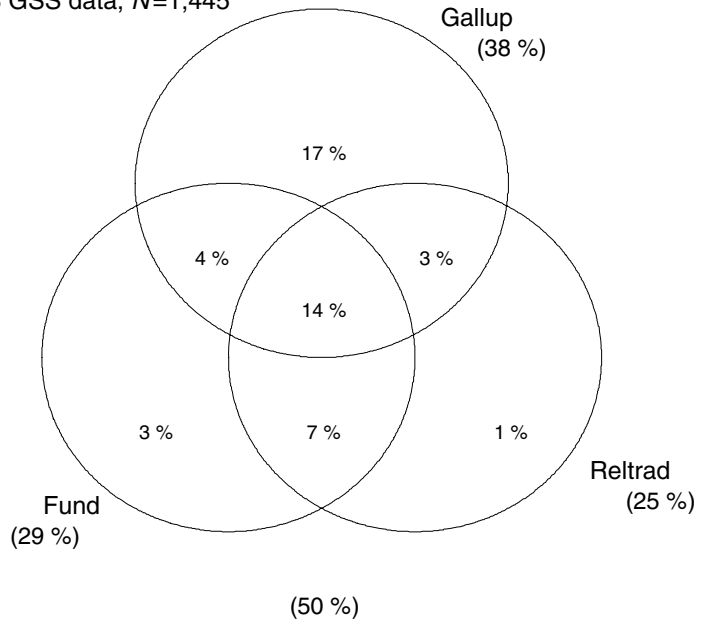
After *GALLUP*, the largest estimates of the evangelical population come from the measures based on conservative Protestant denominational affiliation, *RELTRAD* and *FUND*. The Venn diagram in Figure 1 depicts the overlap among these three broad definitions of evangelicalism. Nearly half of all those classified as evangelical by *GALLUP* are not so classified by *RELTRAD* or *FUND*. These *GALLUP* evangelicals include non-Protestants as well as Protestants whose

TABLE 3
TRAITS ASSOCIATED WITH VARIOUS EVANGELICAL OPERATIONAL
METHODS IN THE 1998 GSS (PERCENTAGES AND MEAN VALUES)

Method	% in Sample	<i>N</i>	Age	South	Republican	Strong Republic.	College Grad
<i>Affiliation</i>							
RELTRAD	25	359	47.5	51	46	13	20
FUND	29	416	46.3	55	37	11	16
<i>Identity</i>							
GALLUP	38	554	46.0	46	42	11	19
SMITH	5	79	49.1	38	48	13	32
<i>Beliefs</i>							
HUNTER	17	245	48.3	53	41	12	13
BARNA	9	137	47.2	55	45	18	23
Total Sample		1,445	45.6	36	34	8	24

FIGURE 1
AMERICANS WHO ARE EVANGELICAL BY THE MOST
EXPANSIVE DEFINITIONS

Unweighted 1998 GSS data, $N=1,445$



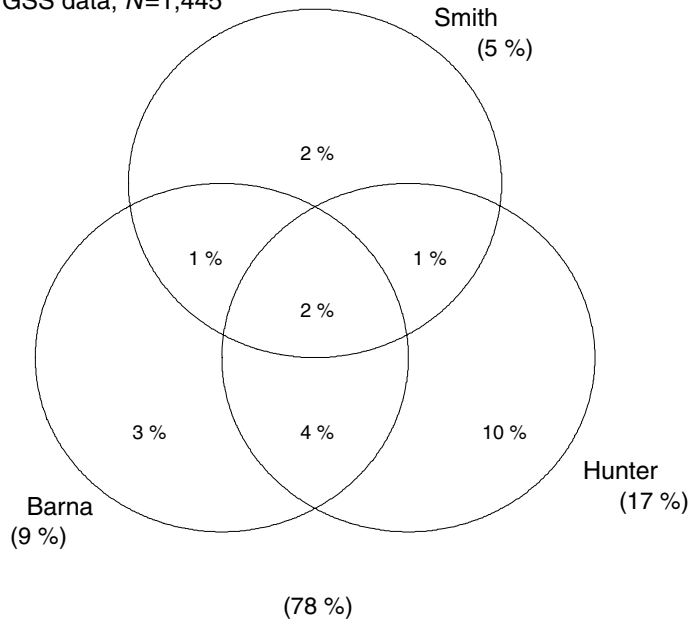
denominational affiliation would not be theologically conservative enough for *FUND* or *RELTRAD*. *RELTRAD* classifies 25 percent of the sample as evangelical based on ties to evangelical Protestant denominations. The *RELTRAD* method has a separate category for black Protestant denominations, many of which would otherwise be grouped in the conservative Protestant category. The *FUND* system does not make this distinction, which is the main reason why its estimate of the “fundamentalist” (or what some have regarded as the evangelical) population is larger, at 29 percent of the adult population. *FUND* also includes sectarian denominations, which are characterized as other in the *RELTRAD* system. In this sample, respondents selected by *FUND* but not *RELTRAD* include Christian Scientists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Latter-Day Saints (Mormons).

As Figure 1 depicts, half of our GSS sample is classified as evangelical by at least one of the three broad measures of evangelicalism. To put this in perspective, 54 percent of respondents identified as Protestant in 1998 and Protestants may soon lose their majority status in the United States (Smith and Kim 2004). However, as Figure 2 reveals, our remaining measures suggest the evangelical population is much smaller than the combination of *GALLUP*, *FUND*, and *RELTRAD* would suggest. *SMITH* and *HUNTER* exclude non-Protestants. *BARNA*, like *GALLUP*, includes non-Protestants but its belief measures are quite discriminating (16 percent of Catholics are evangelical by the Gallup measure compared with 2 percent by the *BARNA* measure). *HUNTER* evangelicals (born-again Protestants who interpret the Bible literally) make up 17 percent of the sample. The *BARNA* category, which also uses belief measures (hell definitely exists, strongly tries to apply beliefs, has evangelized), pegs evangelicals as 7 percent of the sample.

The smallest estimate of the evangelical population, *SMITH*, relies on identity with the evangelical Protestant movement and particular religious behavior.¹⁰ In the sample, 7 percent of respondents claimed an evangelical identity.¹¹ If we omit respondents who self-identify as evangelical but do not attend church at least twice a month or claim religion is extremely important to them (following Smith et al. 1998), our sample suggests these *SMITH* evangelicals are only 5 percent of the U.S. population.

FIGURE 2
AMERICANS WHO ARE EVANGELICAL BY THE MOST
RESTRICTIVE DEFINITIONS

Unweighted 1998 GSS data, N=1,445



All of our *SMITH*, *BARNA*, and *HUNTER* evangelicals are in the 50 percent of the sample captured by the *GALLUP*, *FUND*, or *RELTRAD* measures. However, less than a quarter of the sample (22 percent) is classified as evangelical by at least one of the *SMITH*, *BARNA*, or *HUNTER* measures and only 2 percent of the sample is classified as evangelical by all three of these measures.

Hunter suggests that evangelicals preserve distance from modernity by means of geographical isolation and have less exposure to higher education than the general population. What evidence is produced in response to this claim from our various classifications? In Table 3, we present demographic and political characteristics of the sample. All the methods except evangelical self-identity (*SMITH*) suggest that evangelicals are largely concentrated in the South and less likely to be college graduates than the general population. *SMITH* evangelicals are about as likely to live in the South as the average American and they are more likely to be college graduates (32 percent vs. 24 percent). Table 3 shows that *HUNTER* evangelicals have lower levels of education than the average respondent in the sample and lower levels of education than any other categorization of evangelicals. While only 13 percent of *HUNTER* evangelicals have college degrees, a third of *SMITH* evangelicals are college graduates (the sample average is 24 percent). *SMITH* evangelicals are, on average, older (49), better educated (13.6 years), and more likely to claim Republican Party affiliation than the general sample or any other grouping of evangelicals.

Table 4 displays differences in terms of religious beliefs and behaviors traditionally associated with evangelicalism. Belief in hell is not unique to evangelicalism, but it seems more salient for evangelicals than for other Protestants. Hunter suggests that a literal interpretation of the Bible is a hallmark of evangelical orthodoxy though Ammerman (1982) and others have contested this. These measures indicate the relative levels of orthodoxy among different categories of evangelicals. Table 4 also includes measures of evangelism, application of faith to other realms of life, and regular worship attendance. If the results from this table are interpreted as measures of vitality, *RELTRAD*, *FUND*, and *GALLUP* produce the “weakest” evangelicals. In some cases,

TABLE 4
RELIGIOUS CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH VARIOUS EVANGELICAL
OPERATIONAL METHODS IN THE 1998 GSS (PERCENTAGES
AND MEAN VALUES)

Method	Bible Literal Word of God	Bible Inspired Word of God	Hell Definitely Exists	Attends at Least 2-3x/ Month	Strongly Tries to Apply Beliefs	Has Evangelized
<i>Affiliation</i>						
RELTRAD	52	41	66	56	33	68
FUND	55	38	64	53	35	70
<i>Identity</i>						
GALLUP	50	44	66	59	41	77
SMITH	65	35	80	97*	62*	90
<i>Beliefs</i>						
HUNTER	100**	0	77	67	48	89
BARNA	66	28	100**	83	100**	100**
Total sample	30	49	43	39	27	43

*To qualify as evangelical in this method, respondents must either attend frequently or strongly try to apply beliefs in other areas in addition to self-identifying as a Protestant and an evangelical.

**This characteristic is part of our operationalization of evangelicals in this method.

these religious traits are used to construct categories. Therefore, *BARNA* evangelicals by definition believe hell definitely exists, strongly try to apply their beliefs, and have evangelized. The religious vitality of *SMITH* evangelicals stands out because only the attendance variable is included in the construction of this category (not all *SMITH* evangelicals attend regularly; some are included because they strongly try to carry their faith into other areas of their life). By all measures that do not include “strongly apply beliefs to other realms” in their construction, less than half of conservative Protestants report making this strong connection between their faith and their daily lives. Sixty-two percent of *SMITH* evangelicals do so, and nine out of 10 also report having shared their faith with others.

DISCUSSION

The 1998 GSS can support both of Hunter’s claims that the evangelical population is less educated and more geographically isolated than the general population and also support Smith’s claim that evangelicals are more educated than the population at large, though geographically similar. In other words, we can use the data to support arguments about both distance from and engagement with modernity. The operationalization of the population under consideration decides the outcome we find. In this section, we discuss drawbacks of the various methods and outline recommendations for future analysis.

Affiliation Measures

The *FUND* variable included in the GSS is widely used by researchers interested in the trends among religious populations as well as by researchers who want to “control” for the influence of religion. We agree with Steensland et al. (2000) about the shortcomings of *FUND*:

it does not distinguish between black Protestant and other traditions, inappropriately groups the growing ranks of nondenominational Protestants, and improperly suggests that denominations can be ranked on a one-dimensional fundamentalist-moderate-liberal continuum. Nonetheless, the *FUND* variable is still widely used to distinguish between conservative Protestants and the rest of the U.S. population (Hout and Fischer 2002; Hout, Greeley, and Wilde 2001).

Niebuhr (1957) noted that denominations are often demarcated by ethnic and class boundaries. Recent analysis suggests that denominational differences are no longer as pronounced (Park and Reimer 2002; Smith and Faris 2005). As denominational ethnocultural boundaries faded in the 20th century, denominational identity became less salient (Guth et al. 2003). Several scholars have argued there is now as much difference within denominations as between them (Hunter 1991; Wuthnow 1988, 1989). Nonetheless, denominations structure much of American religion and distinct theological and social differences are observable among them (Sherkat 2001). For analysis purposes, it is helpful to aggregate denominations with similar theological traditions, such as fundamentalism, evangelicalism, mainline Protestantism, and black Protestants (Steensland et al. 2000).

Measures like *FUND* and *RELTRAD* are able to categorize denominations that can be described as historically evangelical. However, they are not able to capture membership in the transdenominational evangelical social movement that exists today. Early attempts to study evangelicalism did not assume that it would be confined to conservative Protestant denominations. When Warner called for scholarly inquiry into the phenomenon, he said, “[e]vangelicalism is, in fact, a social movement,” whose adherents could be found, he said, in established evangelical denominations, new religious groups, and “as a burgeoning underground in traditionally liberal denominations” (1979:3). Movement identification measures ask respondents if they would use various identities to describe themselves, such as fundamentalist, evangelical, mainline Protestant, liberal Protestant, Pentecostal, or charismatic. These identities tap into affiliation with social movements whose boundaries are much more porous than traditional religious institutions. Unfortunately, movement self-identity and affiliation with religious tradition are only moderately correlated. It is striking that the Southern Baptists in C. Smith’s study were more likely to describe themselves as liberal Protestants than evangelicals (1998). Though movement identity is not necessarily related to denominational affiliation, religious movements seem to have their own distinct subcultures and structures, which bind members together.¹²

Identity: The Gallup Poll

Few popular discussions of evangelicalism omit Gallup Poll estimates suggesting that somewhere between 1 out of 3 and between 1 out of 2 Americans are evangelical. Gallup’s method of measuring the evangelical population (“Would you describe yourself as a born-again, or evangelical, Christian?”) has one significant benefit and several drawbacks. Since Gallup asks its question to all Americans, regardless of religious affiliation or commitment, we know that many Catholics, Mormons, and Orthodox Christians identify with the born-again or evangelical label, despite the claim of many that evangelicalism is properly understood as a Protestant phenomenon (Hunter 1981; Smith et al. 1998).

Unfortunately, Gallup’s method does not discriminate between born-again and evangelical labels. The question implicitly assumes that these terms are synonymous. However, survey evidence suggests that many Americans understand the terms differently. Many more people describe themselves as born-again than describe themselves as evangelical. The Exploring Religious America Survey (PBS/U.S. News & World Report 2002) asked respondents whether they would describe themselves as evangelical and if they would describe themselves as born-again.¹³ Among those who described themselves as “born-again,” less than half (38 percent) also described themselves as an “evangelical Christian.” Although evangelical Christians are sometimes understood as a subset of the born-again population, about 1 in 4 (27 percent)

self-identified evangelical Christians said they would not describe themselves as born-again. Ideally, Gallup should ask about born-again and evangelical identity separately. We are concerned that the inconsistency regarding the context in which the Gallup measure is asked in specific surveys contributes to measurement error. A further concern is that Gallup often does not give respondents the option to express a non-born-again, non-evangelical Christian identity. There is evidence that some respondents respond positively to the Gallup measure in order to affirm a general Christian identity (Dixon, Levy, and Lowery 1988).

Identity: Religious Movements

Movement identity measures something fundamentally different in kind from religious tradition measures. Respondents who identify with the evangelical movement have significantly different geographic, political, and religious characteristics than members of the conservative Protestant religious tradition. Therefore, we affirm the value of continuing to include movement identification instruments in future surveys. We agree with Hout and Wilde (2000) that a considerable portion of churchgoing, Protestant respondents are not able to identify with a religious movement (20–40 percent depending upon the design of the religious movement questions). This is inconvenient if one is trying to pigeonhole all Protestants into one or another category. However, for those interested in understanding the evangelical movement in America, especially the ways that it has crossed traditional denominational divides, it is imperative to include the movement measure and, indeed, allow Mormons, Roman Catholics, and affiliates of other traditions not normally tied to evangelicalism to express their affinity with the movement.

We favor widening the pool of respondents eligible to answer questions about movement identification on omnibus surveys such as the GSS, and in specialized surveys focusing on religion. Denominational affiliation and movement identification are useful for answering different kinds of questions. However, the usefulness of movement identification data can be constrained by data collection decisions. For various reasons, there may be Catholics or Mormons who self-identify as fundamentalists or evangelicals. We contend that data collection should not preclude this possibility. Those who think such combinations are mutually exclusive will be able to limit the sample (of evangelicals, fundamentalists, and others) accordingly after the data have been collected.

We suggest initially asking about each movement identity separately, which will allow for greater flexibility if the relevant movement identifications should change in the future. This is the procedure followed by Smith et al. for *American evangelicalism*. An alternative (and increasingly common) way of gathering this information is to ask respondents to choose one among a list of identities. However, there is no consensus about the ideal combination of categories for movement identification or, for that matter, who should be asked these questions (e.g., attenders/nonattenders, non-Protestants).¹⁴

CONCLUSION

Research findings are often contingent upon how the subject under investigation is operationalized. We have demonstrated that this is the case when describing basic characteristics of evangelicals in America. Future studies of American evangelicals should offer clear descriptions and rationales for their measures of evangelicalism. We would also like to see discussion of whether new findings are the result of changes in measurement strategy, changes in the population, and/or research innovation.

The measure of evangelicalism chosen by a researcher will be related to the type of research question pursued. We offer some general suggestions based on this review of the literature and exploration of the impact of different ways of defining evangelicals. First, the affiliation and

identity methods are the more sociological methods for selecting respondents than belief measures. As Hout and Wilde (2000) demonstrate, denominational affiliation is a religious measure that nearly all GSS respondents can answer with relative ease, making the affiliation method of determining a population based on religious denomination particularly useful for future research.¹⁵ Second, we disagree with those who advocate the abolition of the term “evangelical” because it is riddled with ambiguous meanings and theological untidiness. Simply because a term is used inappropriately in everyday life and academic research does not justify its elimination. Instead, we must discipline ourselves to think carefully what we mean by “evangelicals” and the “evangelical movement.” Moreover, in studies where respondents are afforded the chance to self-identify as evangelicals, we should also inquire about what that means for them. Findings from Lindsay (2007) suggest that many self-identified evangelicals believe the term says more about evangelism and being “born-again” than it does about the Bible or their denominational preferences. Hence, our third recommendation is that researchers should continue to employ the identification method for defining evangelicals, but respondents should not be screened before asking the question. Gallup data show that a noteworthy segment of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions self-identify as “evangelical” or “born-again.” As a result, studies that ask the self-identification question about evangelicalism only of Protestants are not really studying the full extent of the evangelical movement. We offer this recommendation with one caveat, though. Gallup’s practice of treating “born-again” and “evangelical” as equivalents is problematic and, as we have shown, those two populations are not the same. We propose, therefore, that survey designers ask respondents questions about both denominational affiliation (which would allow researchers to estimate conservative Protestantism) as well as self-identity questions about being an evangelical without introducing other terms like “born-again” that confuse more than they clarify. As researchers employ exacting, descriptive categories for both defining and analyzing the evangelical population, we will understand this significant segment of the American religious landscape with increasing measure.

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NOTES

1. See Appendix A on website (www.conradhackett.com/research) or (www.rice.edu/mlindsay/research) for a description of how several recent surveys have asked about movement identification.
2. Writing in the late 1980s, Gallup and Casteilli treat a respondent as evangelical if she or he has “had a born-again experience,” holds a “literal view of the Bible,” and has “attempted to lead someone else to Christ (1989:60–66). By that standard, Gallup data present the evangelical adult population as 18 percent in 1976 and 22 percent by 1984.
3. Respondents classified as “Jews” chose the category from among a list of religious traditions, not ethnicities, which makes this finding even more curious. It is possible that this segment represents those Americans who refer to themselves as “Jews for Jesus.”
4. Smith discusses the fact that the different methods produce different results. However, he glosses over significant points, such as the variation in the number of evangelicals produced by the different methods. Indeed, an early graph in the book says the number of self-identified evangelicals is 11 percent of the population. In contrast, Smith estimates the population at 7 percent in *American Evangelicalism*.
5. This profile matches the historical record of the movement. Some recent works have continued to affirm this (Wuthnow 2002) while others paint very different portrayals (Lindsay 2007; Schmalzbauer 2003).
6. This information and other materials on the Barna Research Group come from personal correspondence with Barna’s president David Kinnaman, conducted August–September 2004.
7. The born-again question was also asked in 1991, the same religious identity question was asked in 1996, and then in slightly different form in 2000.

8. Christian Smith defines evangelicals as churchgoing Protestants who choose to identify as evangelical. However, since some are physically unable to attend worship services, Smith allows those who identify as “extremely religious” to be classified as evangelical even if they do not attend services regularly.
9. The 1998 GSS does not have questions that measure whether Jesus is the only hope for salvation or the divinity of Christ. It does have questions about a new “commitment to religion” and about the number of religions in which truth is found. Of course, we recognize that those measures are not nearly as precise as Hunter’s measures. Hunter observed that some Jews and Catholics have an evangelical affinity. Nonetheless, he argued they should not be classified as evangelicals. Eliminating non-Protestants removed 20 Catholics and one Jew from our sample.
10. In the 1998 GSS, only Protestants were asked these questions. It is possible that some Christians who did not identify themselves as Protestants but should have been so classified were missed.
11. Five percent of respondents claimed a fundamentalist identity. Evangelical and fundamentalist were the only conservative Protestant identities listed in 1998; later iterations of the GSS allowed for additional conservative Protestant identities.
12. There is significant variation in the way survey researchers ask respondents about their movement affiliation. These differences are described in Appendix A on website (www.conradhackett.com/research) and (www.rice.edu/mlindsay/research).
13. The Exploring Religious America survey is appropriate for examining the relationship between born-again and evangelical identity because it asks about each identity separately in contrast to Gallup, which groups them together, and GSS, which asks about evangelical identity in a forced-choice question with several other movement identities that can be chosen.
14. See Appendixes A and B on website for a comparison of the way movement identification is assessed in various surveys.
15. On the other hand, the growing number of Americans affiliated with large churches that make no reference to, or have no, denominational affiliation is one of several dynamics slowly eroding the utility of affiliation measures. For example, the megachurch founded by bestselling author Rick Warren plays down its Southern Baptist affiliation.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The following supplementary material for this article is available at www.conradhackett.com/research and www.rice.edu/mlindsay/research:

Appendix A: Methods of Measuring Religious Movement Self-Identification in Various Surveys

Appendix B: Questions Used to Operationalize Evangelicalism in Various Studies

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