



Is Becoming Born-Again a Transformative Experience? Results from Three Sets of Panel Data

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Abstract

The process of becoming a born-again Christian is one that has intrigued social scientists for decades but has never been studied in a large-scale way, using panel data. While sociologists have tried to conceptualize and operationalize how one converts to a new religious experience, many political scientists have used “having a born-again experience” as a way to classify evangelical Protestants. While there is a great deal of scholarship devoted to understanding how born-again Christians navigate the social and political world, the direct impact of adopting a born-again status has eluded scholars. Using panel surveys from three different polling organizations, this work analyzes how those who convert and de-convert to born-again Christianity change their political and religious behaviors in after the switch. Analysis indicates that conversion and deconversion is not uncommon among the population, occurring in approximately 1 in 10 survey respondents. Results indicate that women, younger Americans, and those with less educations are more likely to change their conversion status. Of those who do make a switch, few significantly change their partisanship, while shifts in church attendance are more common and this is confirmed through statistical modeling. These findings fill a gap in scholars’ previous understanding of the changes in behavior and political orientation following a shift in born-again status—something that was only studied at the aggregate level in prior work. This research offers an additional angle for scholars who are seeking to understand the caused by religious switching in the United States.

Keywords Evangelical · Born-again · Conversion · Partisanship · Church attendance

All data used in this analysis is freely available on the Cooperative Congressional Election Study website (<https://cces.gov.harvard.edu/>) from the Democracy Fund’s Voter Study Group (<https://www.voterstudygroup.org/>) or the National Opinion Research Council (<https://gss.norc.oregon.gov/get-the-data/stata>). The full coding syntax will be made available on GitHub after publication.

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Introduction

In 1978, while staying in a hotel in Tucson, Arizona the widely heralded and internationally known folk singer Bob Dylan believed that he had an encounter with God. Dylan explained in an interview that he sensed, “a presence in the room that couldn’t have been anybody but Jesus.” The folk singer told the interviewer that the feeling was not just in the spiritual realm but, “Jesus put his hand on me.” Dylan noted that the experience was life altering and that the “glory of the Lord knocked me down and picked me back up.” (Webb 2006, 81). As a result, Dylan’s music became focused on his newfound faith with his 1979 album *Slow Train Coming* containing explicit references to Jesus with song titles such as “When He Returns” and “I Believe in You.” However, after a period of 3 years, Dylan began to drift away from evangelicalism and return to the Judaism in which he was raised (Lister 2017). While Bob Dylan’s sudden and radical conversion and subsequent deconversion was intriguing to the entertainment community, this change takes place in the lives of thousands of average citizens everyday across the United States. Yet despite the frequency of such a significant religious event, little is known about how an individual’s behavior changes when one has a born-again experience.

When a person decides to dedicate their life to the precepts of a religious tradition, that should result in a significant change in the way that an individual sees the world around them and their place in that world. In the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, nearly one third (32.9%) of respondents indicated that they were a “born-again or evangelical Christian.” While scholars have debated about the political and religious behavior of “born-again” (Lewis and De Bernardo 2010), there has been very little scholarship that describes how an individual alters their course soon after having a born-again conversion experience. The goal of this work is not to discuss how social science measures a concept like evangelicalism or if someone changes their religious denomination, such as a shift from Southern Baptist to non-denominational Christianity. Instead, the purpose of this work is to assess the implications of a singular change in religious identity: taking on the label of born-again Christianity.

Using panel surveys from three different data sources, this work describes how individuals change their behavior in either becoming a born-again Christian, or no longer claiming a born-again status. What factors are instrumental in driving up the likelihood of changing a born-again status? And, what are the subsequent changes to a person’s life after they alter their conversion status? Hopefully, this work will help scholars of religion understand the underlying demographic factors that lend themselves to a change in born-again status.

Becoming Born-Again from a Social Science Perspective

Even though becoming born-again is a regular occurrence among the general population, social science has struggled to understand exactly how the conversion process operates. The earliest work in this area is focused on how individuals become involved in religious groups that make up a very small portion of the population and often hold views that are outside mainstream society. For instance, Lofland and Stark proposed a “process model” of conversion that was based on their interviews and observations of several people becoming members of the Unification Church (1965). This model contends that a religious conversion happens when someone possesses a high degree of personal adaptability and then encounters a number of situational factors that expose them to a new way of belief and behavior. Other studies have tried to expand the idea of conversion to other social contexts and reinforce this original understanding of conversion (Greil and Rudy 1983; Richardson 1985). However, what may be the best way to describe subsequent scholarship on conversion is scattered. For instance, Lofland and Skonovd proposed six different “conversion motifs” that would explain the process in different contexts and in different time periods (1981). Other scholars contend that conversion is best understood as a natural socialization process (Long and Hadden 1983), and that individuals convert to a new religion in much the same way as a young person becomes attached to the ideology of a political party (Niemi and Sobieszek 1977).

Despite a good deal of scholarship from a wide variety of disciplines and theoretical perspectives trying to unpack the process of adopting a new religious identity, Thumma notes that the vast majority of these studies have analyzed individuals becoming part of “New Religious Movements” that “together... constitute a very small, and peculiar, percentage of the total religious community in the United States” (189). In addition, Thumma writes that this body of work, “treat(s) conversion as a completely unique social phenomenon” (190). When, in fact, tens of millions of Americans have experienced a conversion in a largely predictable and not at all disruptive way, when they joined the ranks of born-again Christianity as children (“When Americans Become Christians” 2015). A recent survey from LifeWay Research indicates that 29% of Americans identify as “born-again” (Webber 2017), and other data indicates that approximately two thirds of adult Americans maintain the religious identity of their youth (Cooperman et al. 2015). Looked at from this angle, a significant minority of Americans have experienced a born-again conversion, but social science has been unable to shed light on the behavior implications of such a moment. A significant reason for this lack of scholarship is that this is an area in which determining causality can be incredibly problematic—do church attendance changes lead to a change in born-again status or do they result from a status change? Panel data can get us closer to an answer.

While few scholars have tried to identify the causal mechanisms that lead to an individual becoming a born-again Christian, that is not to say that academics have not considered the political and social behaviors of those who identify as

born-again. For instance, some scholars argue that being born-again may lead to individuals becoming less engaged in civil society because the conversion experience leads to a more vertical and individualistic orientation (Benson and Williams 1982). Other research indicates that becoming born-again is really a process of identifying with a religious group and therefore an increased desire to see that group represented in the public square may lead to greater participation in the political process (Jelen 1993).

There is a great deal of agreement that those who do affiliate with the evangelical tradition behave in ways that are distinct from the general population. In terms of family life, evangelicals are more likely to hold to clear gender roles (Bartkowski 2001), have a higher likelihood of using corporal punishment to discipline their children (Ellison and Sherkat 1993), and are more prone to adopt children into their household (Perry 2017). Those differences also come to the fore during the electoral process. Evangelicals are the religious tradition that is most likely to associate with the Republican Party (Djupe and Claassen 2018) and tend to hold very conservative views on topics such as abortion (Lewis 2017) and immigration (Narea 2019). However, almost all that work relies on cross-sectional data that can only speak to trends in the aggregate. Panel survey data offers a level of analysis that is more effective at looking at net result of embracing a religious change. For instance, there has not been a careful examination of the consequences of adopting the born-again label in terms of embracing the evangelical worldview soon after that cathartic experience.

While there has been some controversy regarding how to properly ask a survey question about being born-again (Dixon et al. 1988; Schumm and Silliman 1990), social science clearly indicates that born-again respondents are more conservative politically than the American public, at large (Dixon et al. 1992). One of the most thorough treatments of the subject finds that born-again status does predict more conservative political attitudes and voting behavior in multivariate analysis (Lewis and De Bernardo 2017). However, a dichotomous measure of being born-again produces a stronger effect when combined with other religious variables such as a belief in a literal Bible. For instance, opposition to abortion increases by 50% when a born-again status is interacted with a belief in a literal Bible (Jelen et al. 1993, 208).

However, in the nearly 3 decades since these initial studies, religious identity has become more closely aligned with political partisanship (Layman 2001; Olson and Warber 2008; Djupe and Calfano 2013). To that end, Patrikios argues for the “existence of an overlooked type of group identity that fuses religious and partisan elements into a shared representation of a single category: born-again or evangelical Republicanism” (2013, 801). The end result of that shared identity is not the creation of bridges between social groups (Putnam and Campbell 2012), but instead a clear distance between in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel 1979). The scholarship to elucidate the direction of the causal arrow between religion and politics has seen a tremendous burst of activity recently, with a consensus emerging that politics is the first cause and religious affiliation lies downstream from that (Hout and Fischer 2002; Margolis 2018; Djupe et al. 2018). While all the prior studies have helped understand how born-again Christians think about the social and political world, they ignore a significant issue: did having a born-again experience change these individuals’ worldview in the period directly after the conversion? None of the

surveys that are the most widely used by social scientists ask respondents how long ago that their conversion took place or when someone first identified as evangelical, meaning that those who became born-again 5 days or 50 years ago are treated the same in the analysis.

Therefore, it is not possible for us to ascertain if undergoing a born-again experience leads to a dramatic change in political or social behavior soon after such a conversion. However, with the release of several panel surveys in the last decade, it is possible for researchers to begin to understand if becoming born-again is the transformative experience that is often portrayed in the Bible or religious communication. As such the research question that will guide this inquiry is as follows: Does undergoing a born-again experience result in a significant and measurable change in the church attendance or the political partisanship of those who express a new identity? As previously mentioned, because being born-again is often seen as taking on a new identity (one that is fused with evangelicalism) it seems likely that these new converts will express higher levels of church attendance to reinforce their in-group identity (Tajfel 1979), while also drawing closer to the Republican Party, as research has indicated a strong fusion between a born-again identity and the GOP (Patrikios 2013). On the other hand, those who express a deconversion (going from born-again to not born-again) should likely see a decline in church attendance along with a move away from the Republican Party.

Data/Methods

The data for this analysis comes from three separate panel surveys that were conducted by different organizations. The Democracy Fund's Voter Study Group (VSG) was a panel design that was first conducted in December of 2011, with a total sample size of 45,000 respondents. That sample group was invited to be surveyed again in November of 2012, they were asked about their vote choice in the primaries in July of 2016, then contacted again in December of 2016 and July of 2017. The total sample size of the survey was 5000 respondents after all waves were completed, due to panel attrition. In the first wave in 2011, as well as in 2016 and 2017, respondents were asked the same question: "Would you describe yourself as a "born-again" or evangelical Christian, or not?" Response options were, "Yes", "No" and "No Response."

The second survey employed comes from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). This panel began with a total sample size of 55,400 adults in the Fall of 2010, followed by a pre and post-election survey in both 2012 and 2014. In total, there were 9500 respondents who completed all three waves of this panel survey. The question posed to respondents in this survey was worded in exactly the same way as previously described in the Voter Study Group, with the same response options. Each survey included a sample weight variable, which was included in the following analysis where appropriate.

Finally, the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted a panel design beginning in the year 2010. Every 2 years, the panel would receive a follow up survey instrument that asked a series of similar questions regarding demography, political viewpoints,

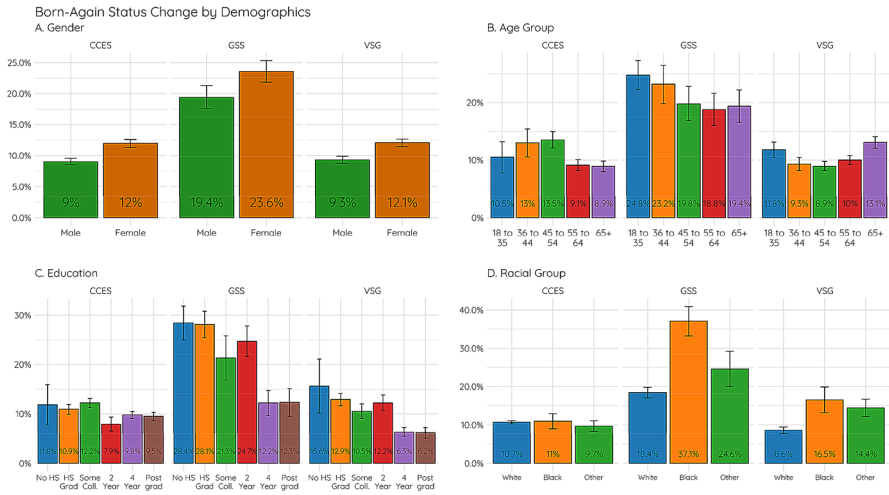


Fig. 1 Born Again Status Change by Demographics

and questions concerning religiosity. The panel began with 2044 respondents in 2010, but attrition led to only 1290 completing the crucial question about born-again status by 2014. The value of the GSS is that it asks the question about born-again status in a slightly different way. While both the VSG and the CCES use the phrase: “born-again or evangelical,” the GSS does not include the term “evangelical.” Instead it reads, “Have you been ‘born again’ or have had a ‘born again’ experience—that is, a turning point in your life when you committed yourself to Christ?” By including this set of panel data, it will help to illuminate the conflation between the terms born-again and evangelical. Possibly, there is more reluctance to embrace the evangelical label, compared to just the born-again moniker.

To gain insight into the mechanisms that generate a born-again status shift, two key variables will be considered: church attendance and political partisanship. Church attendance is a six-point scale ranging from one (never attending) to six (attending more than once a week) for the VSG and the CCES. This question was identical in both the VSG and the CCES survey instruments, including response options. In the GSS, attendance is an eight-point range. The measure of political partisanship is a seven-point scale, which has become the standard in political science research. It ranges from 1 (strong Democrat) to 7 (strong Republican) with 4 indicating a political Independent. The response options are similar for the GSS, but the values range from 0 to 6, with three representing an independent.

The outcome that is being pursued is a change in either church attendance or political partisanship after a change in response to the born-again question. Calculating that change was done as follows: church attendance reported in the more recent wave was subtracted from their self-reported church attendance in the wave immediately prior. A move from never attending in Wave 1 (score of 1) to attending more than once a week in Wave 2 (score of 6), the result would be a +5 attendance change. For partisanship, the same procedure was adopted, but positive numbers

indicating a move to the Democratic side of the spectrum, while negative numbers denote a shift to the Republicans. A score of zero indicates no change on either variable.

Before moving to a discussion of how these two factors shift as a result of a born-again status change, it is worthwhile to understand how basic demographics play a role in these identify shifts. Figure 1 displays the percentage of each group that changed their conversion status along with 84% confidence intervals for each estimate, comparison of any two confidence intervals is the equivalent of a single 95% test at the point of overlap.¹ Panel A indicates that in all three data sets, women were more likely to express a change in status than men and that difference is statistically significant, however the reality is not substantively large with 3–4% more women indicating a change. Panel B breaks each of the survey samples into five different age groups and no clear pattern seems to emerge. The VSG data has a pronounced curvilinear relationship with both the youngest (35 and under) and older age groups (65 and over) being the most likely to change their born-again status. The same pattern does not appear in the CCES where the likelihood of a status change increases incrementally from 18 to 54, then drops significant at 55 and above. For the GSS, there seems to be a small, but negative relationship between age and a status change, but there is a much higher likelihood of switching status in these data. Older respondents are somewhat less likely to switch their response to this question. This finding does not provide strong support for the life cycle hypothesis that people drift away from religion in their college and young adult years, but return as they mature into adulthood, and then experience stable identifies throughout the rest of the life course (Firebaugh and Harley 1991). Instead, religious identity shifts persist far into adulthood and do not necessarily become fixed as respondents move into middle age (Margolis 2018).

Panel C displays the percentage of each educational group to change their conversion status. The results for the CCES panel stand in contrast to that from the VSG. For those in the CCES there is no substantive difference in the likelihood of changing status from the bottom of the educational spectrum to the top. However, for the Voter Study Group Panel there is a clear downward trend—those with higher levels of education are less likely to express a born-again status change. In fact, the likelihood of a change drops in half from those who have a high school degree to those with a 4-year college degree. The GSS indicates a much greater likelihood of a status change among those with low levels of education. For instance, over a quarter of those who did not graduate high school changed status over 4 years of the GSS, which is nearly double the rate in the other two surveys. This may be evidence that

¹ 84% confidence intervals are the equivalent of a 95% single t-test.

See: Goldstein H., and Healy M.J.R. (1995), The graphical presentation of a collection of means. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society A*, 158: 175–177.

MacGregor-Fors, I., and Payton, M.E. (2013), Contrasting Diversity Values: Statistical Inferences Based on Overlapping Confidence Intervals. *PLOS-One*, 8(2): e56794.

Payton, M.E., Greenstone, M.H., and Schenker, N. (2003), Overlapping confidence intervals or standard error intervals: What do they mean in terms of statistical significance? *Journal of Insect Science*, 3:34–39.

the GSS question (which excludes the term “evangelical”) does generate a higher level of switching. Generally speaking there is some support for the possibility that respondents with lower levels of education may potentially be confused or lack the knowledge to properly answer the born-again question and therefore their answers across panel waves are inconsistent (Finke et al. 2010; Wuthnow 2015). Finally, Panel D displays the percentage of each racial group that changed their conversion status. For the CCES data, there’s no really difference between racial groups. However, in the VSG data white respondents are much less likely to respond this question differently over time. Finally, the overall rate of change in the GSS is much higher, especially among racial minorities.

Findings

Figure 2 is an alluvial diagram that visualizes a change in conversion status across three waves of each of the surveys—note that this only visualizes the respondents who made a born-again status change. The color of the prior status is reflected in the bands that stretch between each wave of the panel surveys. For instance, the darker bands moving from Wave 1 to Wave 2 are those who said that they were born-again in the first wave. Notice that the top dark band for the CCES panel then moves down toward a not-born again status. One of the most likely paths is going from being not born-again in Wave 1 to choosing born-again in both Wave 2 and 3. This was the case for 2.4% of the CCES sample, 3.5% for the VSG, and 4.1% of the GSS. The second most likely outcome was the mirrored opposite (going from being born-again in Wave 1 to not being born-again in Waves 2 and 3.) The share of respondents who changed born-again status twice was relatively small in the CCES and VSG samples, just 2.3% in the CCES and 1.9% in the VSG. But, this was alternation was much higher in the GSS, where 7.5% of the sample changed status twice.²

To get a general sense of the size of the population that reports the change in a born-again status, in the CCES Panel, 59.6% of participants indicated that they had not had a born-again experience in any of the three waves, while 29.8% responded affirmatively to the born-again question all three times. Thus 10.6% of respondents changed their status between 2010 and 2014. For the VSG sample, 66.6% of respondents indicate no born-again experience in each of the three waves, while 22.3% replied that they were born again in 2011, 2016, and 2017—leaving 11.1% who changed their status. The GSS is an outlier in one important facet: the share of people who said that they had never had a born-again experience was not as high, just 51.2%. That was eight points lower than the CCES and fifteen points less than the VSG. Stability was higher in the VSG, with 88.8% of the sample maintaining their born-again status between 2011 and 2017—11.2% responded differently to the born-again question. It is important to note that 7% more of the respondents in the Voter Study Group said that they were consistently not born-again than in the

² A table of these results is available in the “Appendix”.

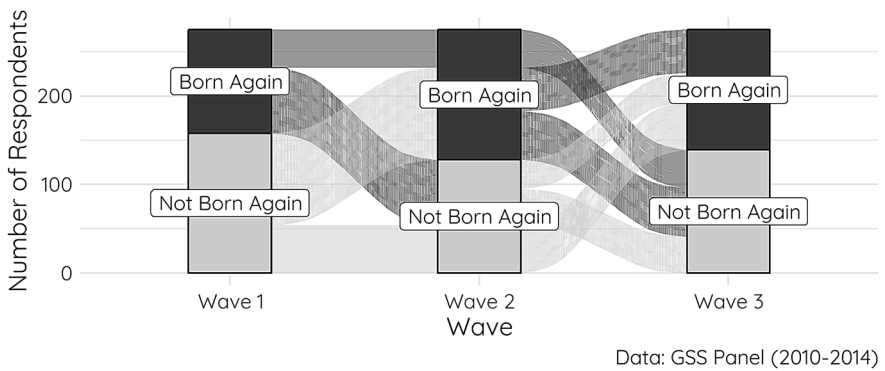
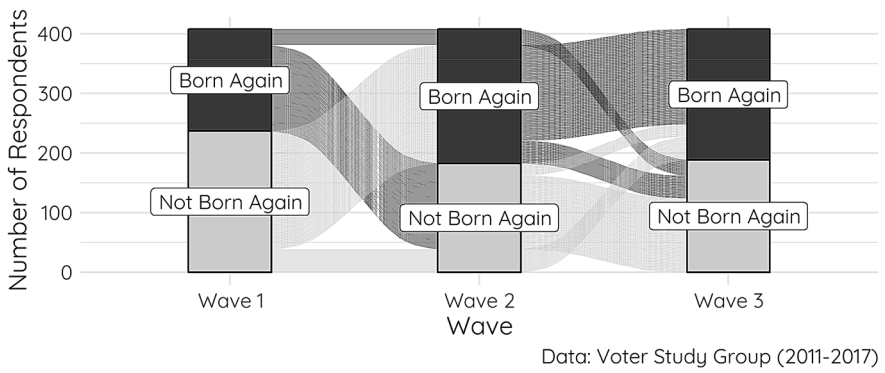
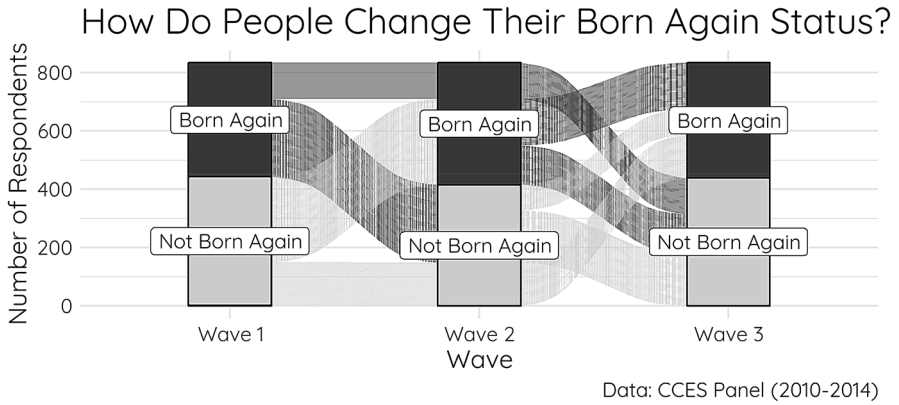


Fig. 2 Alluvial Diagram of Born-Again Status Change

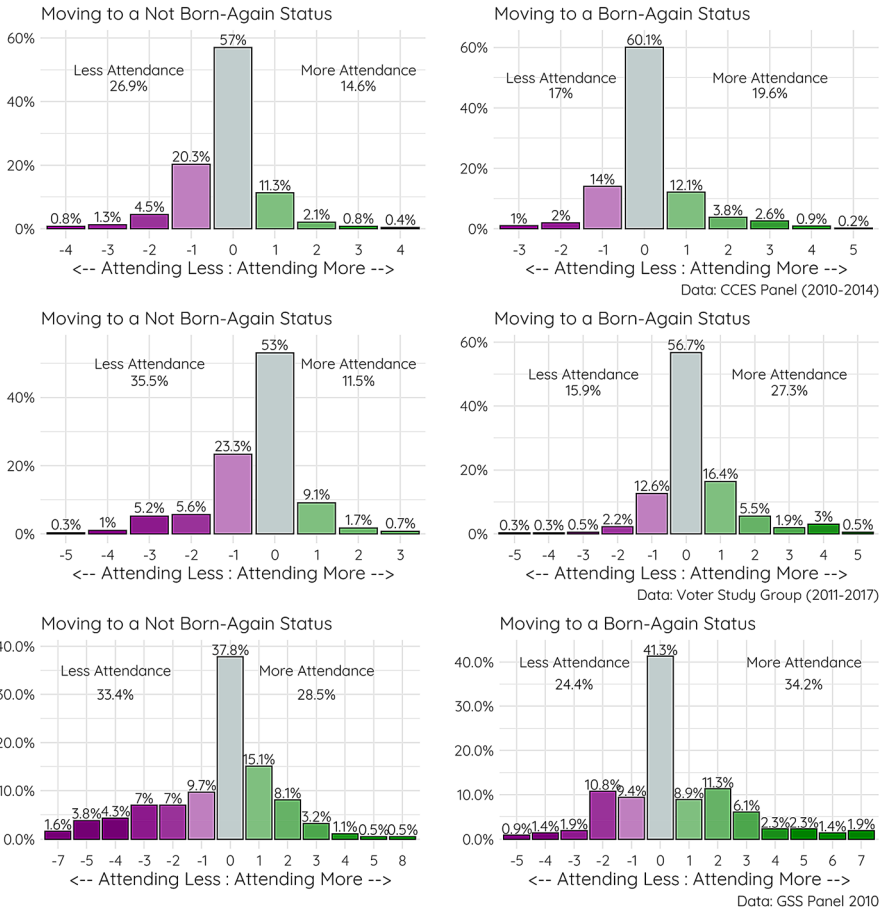


Fig. 3 Church Attendance Change After a Born-Again Status Change

Cooperative Congressional Election Study, however the total percentage of conversion changers was statistically the same.

Changes in Church Attendance

As the literature on religious conversion indicates, a born-again experience has all the trappings of an event that should lead to a radical behavior change that aligns individuals with their newfound religious identity. As previously discussed, each of the three surveys ask questions about church attendance. Both the CCES and VSG surveys ask about religious attendance in the same way, giving survey participants options that range from never attending (1) to attending more than once a week (6), in the GSS it's an eight-point scale. In order to understand how changing born-again status alters church attendance, the score for church attendance in the wave in which they changed their status was subtracted from their church attendance score in the prior wave. For

instance, if someone attended once a week in the second wave (a score of 5), then began attending more than once a week in the third wave (a score of 6), their overall attendance change would be +1.

The top two panels of Fig. 3 display how attendance changes occurred in the CCES panel data, with the left panel indicating those who went from being born-again to not identifying as born-again, with the right panel displaying the results for who became a born-again Christian. The first thing that stands out is how relatively stable church attendance is for both of these samples. In both cases, at least 86.2% of the population changed their overall attendance by one point or less in either direction. That means that just slightly more than one in ten respondents who experienced a conversion status change significantly changed their overall church attendance. The previous literature supposes that becoming born-again should lead to a noticeable increase in attendance, while deconverting should lead to a decline in attendance. That argument receives some support. For instance, those that move to a not-born again status are nearly twice as likely to attend church less than attend more frequently. However, among those who had a conversion experience there is no substantive difference in those that attend church more frequently and those who attend less often.

The Voter Study Group shows slightly more volatility than the CCES panel, with approximately 15% of those who changed their conversion status also changing their religious attendance by more than one point in either direction. The most significant difference for the VSG data is the shifts in attendance were asymmetrical and comport with the assertion that conversion should lead to greater levels of attendance, while deconversion should lower the frequency. The left panel indicates that someone who moves away from a born-again status is three times as likely to attend less as attend more. The right panel displays that those who said that they had become again were almost twice as likely to say that they were attending more than attending less. However, it needs to be mentioned that in both the VSG and the CCES, 16–17% of respondents who said that they were newly born-again responded that they attended less after the status change.

The overall level of change in the GSS is higher than what was observed in the other two surveys. While the share that maintained the same level of attendance hovered between 53 and 60% in the VSG and the CCES, it was just 38–41% in the GSS. This may be due to the fact that there were more response options afforded to those taking the GSS. Looked at broadly, there is some evidence here of a born-again status change leading to higher levels of attendance, with over a third reporting a higher frequency after the shift, compared to just 24.4% who were attending less. Among those who changed their response to not born-again, this group was slightly more likely to indicate decreased attendance (33.4% vs. 28.5%). Taken together, this is a mixed bag of results—those who move to a not born-again status seem to be slightly less likely to attend after their deconversion but the magnitude is fairly small.

Changes in Party Identification

The other question that requires testing is that those who become born-again will be more likely to move toward the Republican Party after the shift, while those who

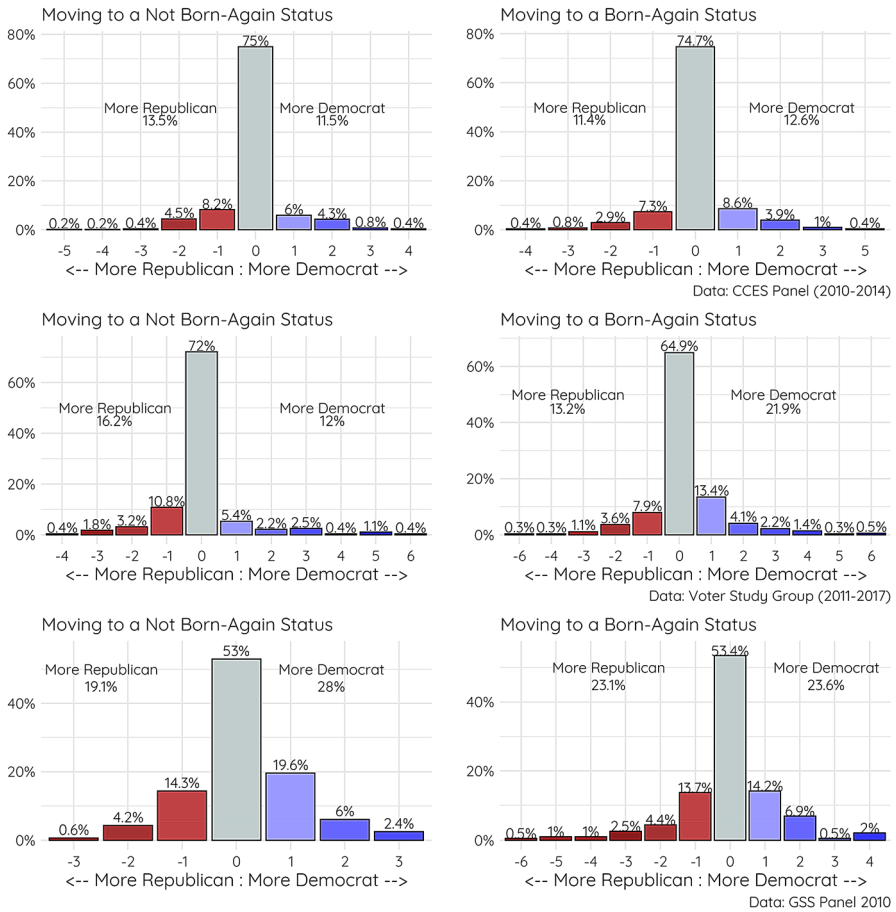


Fig. 4 Partisanship Change After a Born-Again Status Change

deconvert may align themselves more closely with the Democrats. Each survey asked respondents how they would describe themselves politically with the response options ranging from “Strong Democrat” (scored as 1) to “Strong Republican” (scored as 7), with independent coded as a 4. The same approach of subtracting the wave before the conversion to the wave after the conversion was employed for this analysis. Figure 4 visualizes how those who moved away from a born-again status changed their partisan identification in the left panels, while those who become a born-again Christian are indicated in the right panels.

The pattern here is of greater overall stability than was found in the church attendance analysis. For instance, in the attendance graphs 53–60% of respondents did not alter their church attendance after a conversion change. The share of respondents who did not change their partisanship ranges between 65 and 75% in both the VSG and the CCES. However, for the GSS, shifting partisanship is more prevalent with just over half of respondents changing their partisan alignment between waves.

Turning to the top two panels, which visualize the results from the CCES survey, we find that there is very little difference in the partisan shifts among those who become born-again and those who are no longer born-again. For those who became born-again, 11.4% became more Republican, compared to 13.5% of those who said that they were no longer born-again. This result does not provide support for the assertion that Republican partisanship has fused with a born-again evangelical Christianity.

The middle two panels, visualizing the results from the Voter Study Group, indicate a somewhat different result. For instance, the left panel of the VSG indicates that those who renounced a born-again status were actually slightly more likely to move toward the Republicans than the Democrats (4.2%). The right panel notes that those who became born-again were almost twice as likely to move toward the Democratic party than the Republican party. For the bottom two rows, visualizing the results from the GSS, there is some evidence of a changing response to the born-again question that runs in parallel with being more likely to move to the Democratic side of the spectrum. There is no clear pattern for those who adopted a born-again identity. The results from all of these panel datasets provide no support for the argument that becoming born-again should lead to a move toward the Republican party. In fact, this analysis provides tacit support for the opposite conclusion: becoming born-again is related to becoming more closely aligned with the Democrats.³

Modeling

Simple descriptive statistics do not indicate that there is a clear connection between switching responses on the born-again question and shifts in partisanship or church attendance, the connection between these two factors can more thoroughly analyzed through the use of a regression model. To that end, two separate fixed effect model were specified that used the change in partisanship and church attendance as the dependent variables. The key independent variable was a dichotomous measure of people who went from not born-again the prior wave to born again in the more recent one. These individuals were coded as one, while people who did not change their born-again status were coded as zero and serve as the reference category. Basic demographic controls were included, as well: a dummy for race and gender, continuous variables for age, education, and household income, alongside a variable that captured the shift in partisanship (when the dependent variable was church attendance) or church attendance (if the DV was a change in partisanship).

³ In addition to this analysis, the scale was collapsed to three-point partisan identification (Democrat, Independent, Republican) and the shifts were tracked among those took on a born-again identity in each of three surveys. Shifts in partisanship among Democrats was infrequent (occurring 11–27% of the time), but was even rarer among Republicans (ranging from 22.4% of the time to just 5.6% of the CCES sample. The full analysis is available in the “Appendix”.

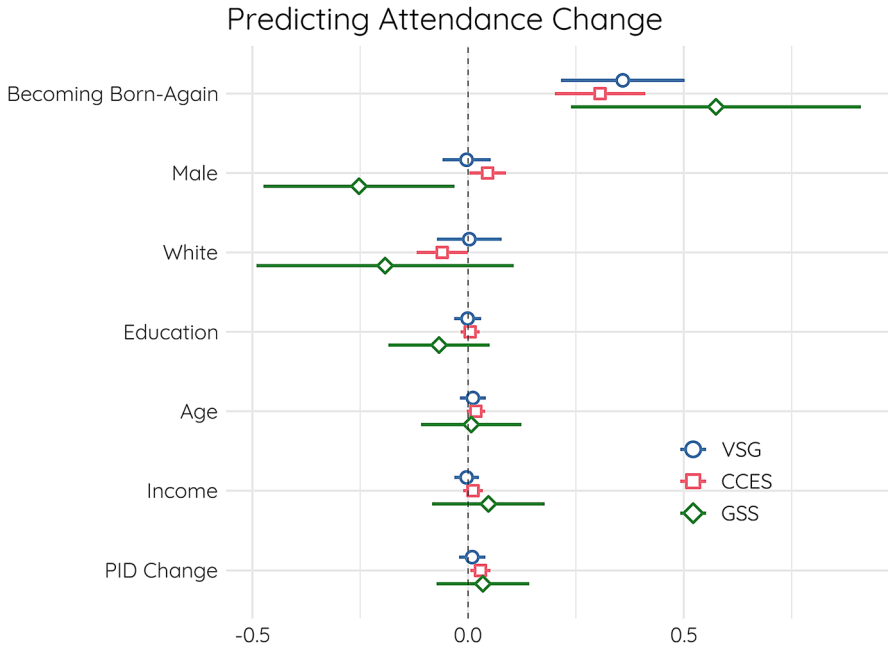


Fig. 5 Regression Model Predicting Church Attendance Change

The results for predicting a change in church attendance are visualized in the coefficient plot in Fig. 5. The model was a standard OLS and was calculated for all three sets of panel data. The interpretation is straightforward: a point estimate to the right of zero indicates a positive shift in church attendance, while a point estimate to the left is lower attendance levels. If either the point estimate or the confidence intervals intersect with zero, there is no statistically significant relationship. The coefficient estimates have all been standardized to allow for comparisons in magnitude between each variable.⁴

In all three datasets, there is a positive relationship between becoming born-again and increasing church attendance. The data indicates that someone taking on the “born-again” labels leads to an increase in church attendance of 6–7%.⁵ However, note that the GSS question does not include the term “evangelical” but there is no statistically significant difference in the result between that question and those two posed by the VSG and CCES. In terms of control variables, there are not many that reach statistical significance and when they do, it’s not consistently across all three data sources.

⁴ The tabular results of all these models are included in the “Appendix”.

⁵ In a model where the comparison group was shifted to those who no longer claimed a born-again status, the increase in church attendance was 9–10% in the VSG and CCES data, but the coefficient for the GSS was statistically insignificant.

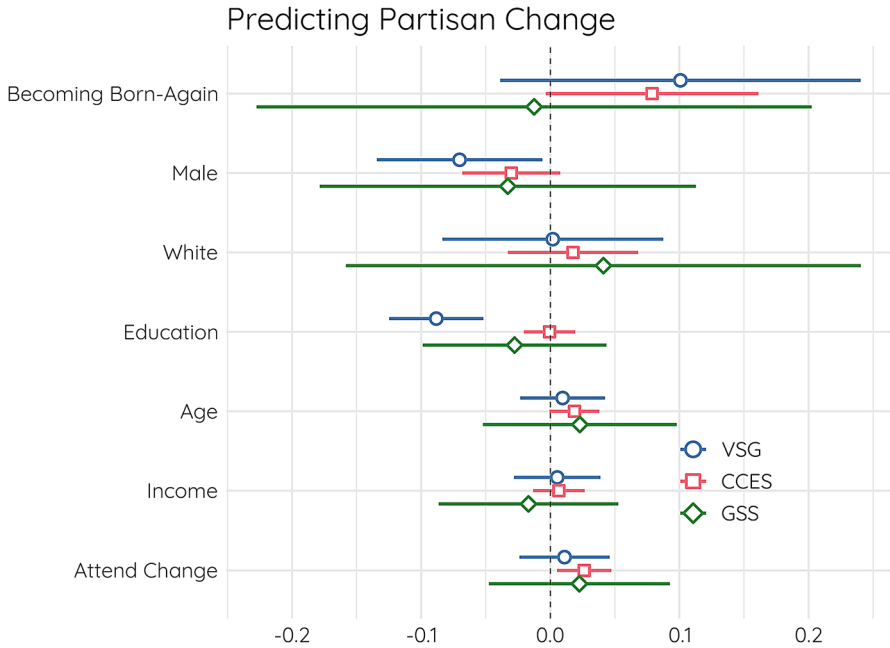


Fig. 6 Regression Model Predicting Partisanship Change

In a similar manner, an OLS regression was specified where a shift in partisanship was the dependent variable and changes in attendance was an independent variable alongside the same controls that were employed in the prior regression. Here the results are much less conclusive (Fig. 6). In the case of becoming born-again there is no statistically significant shift in political partisanship—that’s true in all three of the datasets analyzed. In terms of controls, there is little to report here as well. For some variables, like gender, there is a statistically significant relationship in one dataset (the VSG), which is not repeated in the other two instruments. The most reasonable conclusion is that partisanship is more resistance to changes compared to church attendance.⁶

The same regression analysis was conducted for those who switched to a not born-again status, as well- the results of which can be found in the “Appendix”. In two of the three datasets (VSG and CCES), changing to a not born-again label led to a decrease in church attendance, but the effect was smaller, less than 5%. For the GSS, the result was not statistically significant. In terms of partisanship, there was no statistical significance in changing to a not born-again status. The vast majority of controls did not reach statistical significance, in either model. Generally speaking, a shift in becoming born-again does move the needle on church attendance in a consistent way.

⁶ When the comparison group was shifted to those who no longer claimed a born-again status, the coefficient for becoming born-again did not predict a partisan change in a statistically significant way, either.

Discussion

These results provide researchers a glimpse into a process that, for a long time, has been largely opaque. While social science has written a great deal about conversion into small and oftentimes radical religious groups, the scores of people who become born-again evangelicals every year have not been assessed in a quantitative way during their conversion process. These results indicate that changing a born-again status happens infrequently, but it is not rare with just over one in ten respondents changing their status in either a 4- or 6-year time frame. The data also indicates that women are more likely to change their status than men, but there is no clear pattern when it comes to age, education, or racial background. In the descriptive results, the distribution of attendance changes does not indicate a clear pattern toward higher church attendance. However, in a regression model, there does appear to be a modest increase in attendance after embracing a born-again label. In terms of partisanship, the findings are inconclusive. Those who take on a born-again identity do not change their political partisanship in a statistically significant direction.

However, there are a number of limitations that must be mentioned to temper these results. First, it is impossible to know which came first in this scenario: the conversion/deconversion or the attendance/partisanship changes. The analysis presented here presupposes that a conversion change should result in a change in religious behavior/partisanship when the opposite scenario could be possible. For instance, if a respondent began attending church more than once a week because they felt a strong pull towards becoming born-again, then after they had a conversion experience, they began attending services only once a week that would still be registered as a decline in attendance. That scenario seems more plausible than someone who never attended church coming on a spur of the moment, becoming born-again, and then attending frequently. While these panel waves are close in frequency, they are not repeated at the rate that will allow researchers to pinpoint which event came first.

This leads into another limitation in the data: the existence of ceiling and floor effects. Both the church attendance question and seven-point political partisanship scale have maximum and minimum values. This does not appear to be a tremendous problem in the church attendance data. For instance, less than 10% of respondents in the VSG data who had a conversion experience were attending church at the highest level before the conversion. This is slightly more problematic when looking at political partisanship because 22% of those who became born-again identified as a strong Republican before the status change. These individuals may have become even more attached to the Republican party but that could not be expressed in the seven-point scale.⁷

A third limitation is that this analysis is only capturing a small portion of the population that undergoes a conversion experience. For instance, the Barna Research Group notes that 64% of born-again Christians say that they experienced their conversion before the age of 18, with another 13% indicating that this process took place between 18 and 21 years old (“Evangelism Is Most Effective Among Kids”

⁷ Visualizations of the distribution in partisanship and church attendance in the VSG can be found in the “Appendix”.

2004). This (and most other) surveys only include respondents who are over the age of eighteen, and many of these datasets contain a very small number of people between the ages of 18 and 21. That means that these results are limited to only those who experienced a conversion later in life, which as the data indicates, is just one quarter of all those who claim a born-again status. It seems likely that this group of adult converters did not grow up in particularly religious households, while also possibly have significant demographic differences than those who converted as children. That possibility cannot be fully explored given the data constraints.

A final limitation of these findings is the real possibility of a significant portion of the population lacking the background knowledge to answer questions on religion in an effective way. If one is not fully aware of all the religious and social implications of declaring themselves born-again it seems likely that they would answer the born-again question in an inconsistent way. For instance, recent scholarship has found that 30% of those who say that they are born-again also indicate that they are not Protestant (Burge 2018), while other research has noted that a recent increase in the number of born-again Catholics is largely driven by Catholic respondents with lower levels of education answering the born-again question affirmatively (Perry and Schleifer 2018). There is some evidence that survey respondents with lower levels of education were more likely to change their conversion status in the Voter Study Group and the General Social Survey, but this was not evident in the CCES data.

Conclusions and Implications

Even with these caveats, this research offers a valuable insight into what is posited to be one of the most transformative experiences in an individual's life. While approximately a third of the American population indicates that they are born-again, researchers have not been able to understand what changes that conversion process entails in the aftermath of their new-found religious identity. It may be that the dramatic conversion experience that happened to Saul in the book of Acts is not the normal process of becoming born-again. What evangelists often preach could be described as a light switch flipping from the "off" to the "on" position. The line from the famous hymn "Amazing Grace" notes, "I once was blind, but now I see," for instance. However, the process for most people may be more akin to a dimmer switch, with one finding themselves more born-again every day. For instance, David Brooks, the noted *New York Times* columnist who was raised Jewish noted that his transition to a Christian faith "was as boring and gradual and incremental a process as is possible to imagine. There was never any blinding 'Road to Damascus' experience" (Bailey 2019). If Brooks' experience is the norm, then a change in church attendance or political partisanship may be undetectable.

Going forward, scholars would do well to focus more intently not only on the factors that lead to a religious conversion, but also what causes respondents to no longer identify as born-again. In fact, several religious movements have been created as a means to try and provide a refuge for those that leave evangelicalism but do not want to jettison Christianity entirely (Biello 2012; Burge and Djupe 2014). Causality is notoriously difficult when it comes to understanding the relationship between religion and politics, but that seems to be especially the case when it comes to the

concept of becoming a born-again Christian. Obviously, the phrase “born-again or evangelical” seems to carry with it not just a religious connotation, but also the weight of a political orientation. Does that mean that political liberals are more hesitant to respond to the altar call at the end of a revival? Or do they just not show up in the first place? The answers to these questions are tremendously consequential to the future of the American religious marketplace. If the audience for evangelists have shrunk to just those who are sympathetic to the Republican Party, American evangelicalism will have a hard time bringing new converts into the fold in the future.

Appendix

See Figs. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and Tables 1, 2, 3.

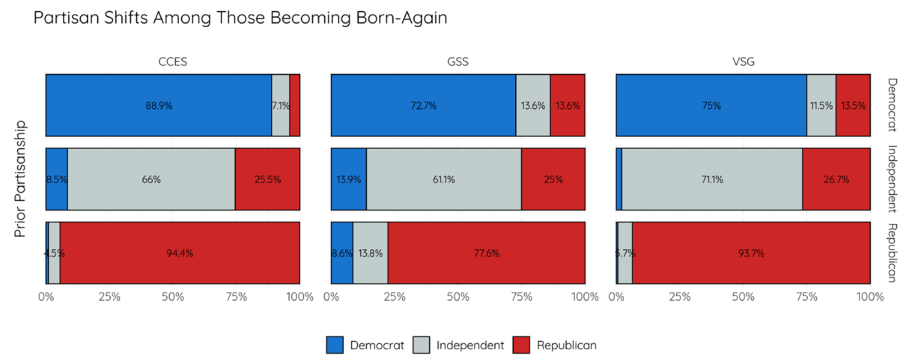


Fig. 7 .

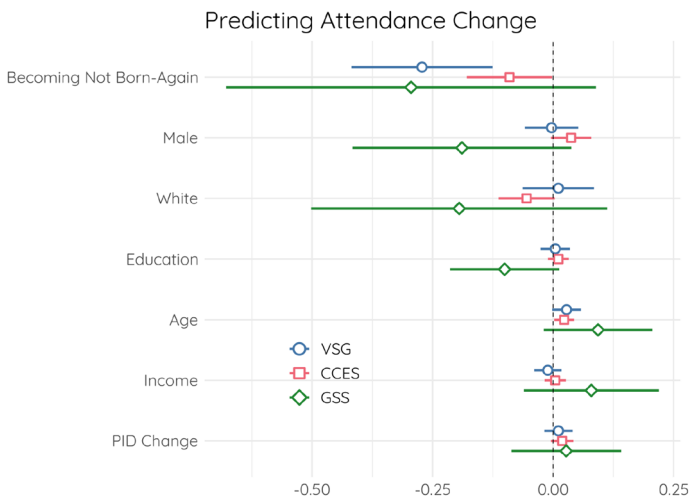


Fig. 8 .

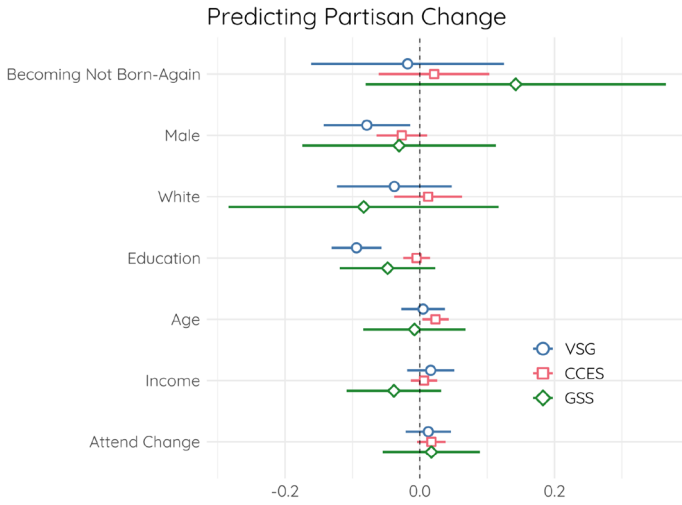


Fig. 9 .

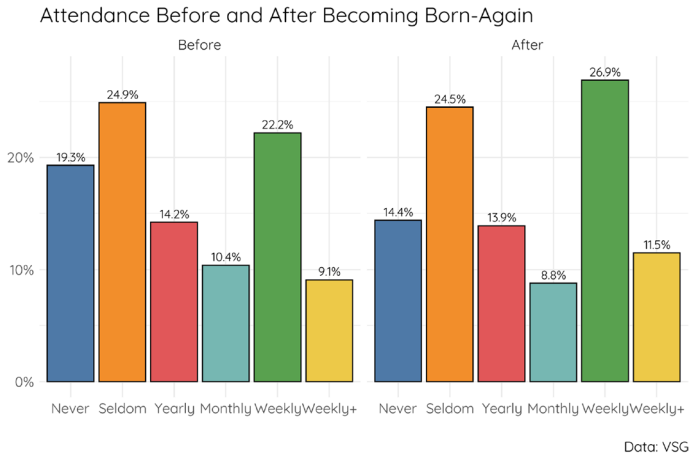


Fig. 10 .

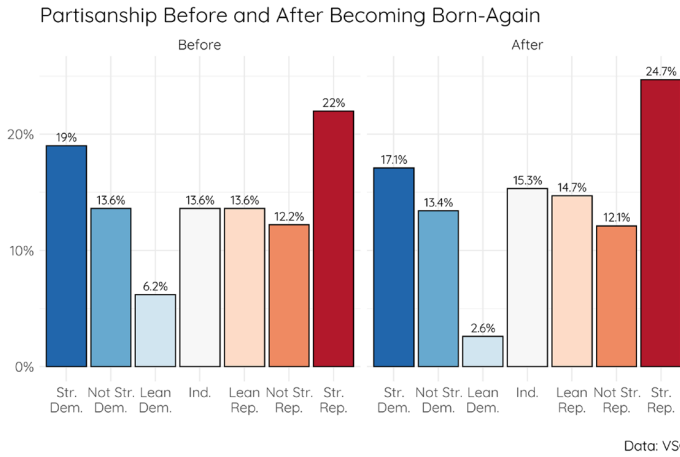


Fig. 11 .

Table 1 The Distribution of Born-Again Changes in Three Sets of Panel Data

	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Total	Percent
CCES	Yes	Yes	Yes	2835	29.8
CCES	No	No	No	5660	59.6
CCES	No	Yes	Yes	231	2.4
CCES	No	No	Yes	217	2.3
CCES	Yes	Yes	No	105	1.1
CCES	Yes	No	No	228	2.4
CCES	Yes	No	Yes	137	1.4
CCES	No	Yes	No	86	0.9
VSG	Yes	Yes	Yes	1113	22.3
VSG	No	No	No	3329	66.6
VSG	No	Yes	Yes	173	3.5
VSG	No	No	Yes	60	1.2
VSG	Yes	Yes	No	29	0.6
VSG	Yes	No	No	176	3.5
VSG	Yes	No	Yes	29	0.6
VSG	No	Yes	No	66	1.3
GSS	Yes	Yes	Yes	344	26.9
GSS	No	No	No	655	51.3
GSS	No	Yes	Yes	53	4.1
GSS	No	No	Yes	49	3.8
GSS	Yes	Yes	No	43	3.4
GSS	Yes	No	No	39	3.1
GSS	Yes	No	Yes	33	2.6
GSS	No	Yes	No	62	4.9

Table 2 Predicting church attendance changes

	VSG	CCES	GSS
Becoming born-again	0.36*** (0.07)	0.31*** (0.05)	0.57*** (0.17)
Male	-0.00 (0.03)	0.05* (0.02)	-0.25* (0.11)
White	0.00 (0.04)	-0.06* (0.03)	-0.19 (0.15)
Education	-0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.07 (0.06)
Age	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.06)
Income	-0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.05 (0.07)
PID Change	0.01 (0.02)	0.03* (0.01)	0.03 (0.05)
N	4165	7813	1074
R2	0.01	0.01	0.02

All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. Standard errors are heteroskedasticity robust. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 3

	VSG	CCES	GSS
Becoming born-again	0.10 (0.07)	0.08 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.11)
Male	-0.07* (0.03)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.07)
White	0.00 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	0.04 (0.10)
Education	-0.09*** (0.02)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.04)
Age	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.04)
Income	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.04)
Attend Change	0.01 (0.02)	0.03* (0.01)	0.02 (0.04)
N	4165	7813	1074
R2	0.01	0.00	0.00

All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. Standard errors are heteroskedasticity robust. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

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