The consequences of response options: Including both "Protestant" and "Christian" on surveys

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The term "Protestant" is used extensively by scholars of religion and has been included in surveys about American religion for decades. Yet it is possible that many Americans do not have a full understanding of the meaning of this term and its inclusion may be introducing measurement error on surveys. Two recent survey efforts provide illumination to this question. The Nationscape question on religion replicates all the options included in the Cooperative Survey, but also includes an option for "Christian." This provides an ideal opportunity to assess the implications of adding this response choice. When the "Protestant" and "Christian" groups are combined in the Nationscape and compared to the "Protestant" group in the Cooperative Election Study (CES), there is a great deal of similarity between the two samples. But, the results from the Nationscape indicate that the term "Protestant" is becoming increasingly unfamiliar to younger Americans, especially for racial minorities.

Measuring items using survey responses is an extremely fraught exercise. For instance, religious demographers have to assume several things about survey respondents that are often hard to accurately gauge. Those participating need to be attentive to the survey—not trying to rush to completion, they must fully understand the question being asked, and they must also be willing and able to read all response options and understand their implications. This is a difficult assumption in the best of circumstances, but it is especially tenuous when survey researchers include items on a questionnaire that are seemingly straightforward to the person writing the instrument but may be alien to the average American.

This is the case with a single term that is ubiquitous to scholars of American religion: Protestant. In almost every large-scale longitudinal survey conducted by social scientists, the first response option presented after the respondent is asked about their present religious affiliation is Protestant, including the General Social Survey, the American National Election Study, the Cooperative Election Study, the Nationscape Survey, and Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Survey.

Beyond the first two response options being Protestant and Catholic, there is tremendous variation in the choices afforded to survey respondents regarding their faith. These variations can have far reaching implications for how social science understands the composition and contours of American religion.

For example, do scholars know with any certainty that the term "Protestant" is salient to the public at large? Is it a term Americans hear frequently and (more consequentially) would be willing to choose on a survey? If given an alternative to the Protestant option, what are the ramifications for our understanding of religious demography? Fortunately, we now have the opportunity to explore some of these key questions.

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Beginning in July 2019, the Democracy Fund at UCLA began fielding a weekly survey called Nationscape, which asked over 6000 respondents a series of questions about several factors, including their present religion. The survey's response options look fairly standard, beginning with the standard array of choices: Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, and Orthodox Christians. But the fifth item was listed as, "Christian, other than above." Unexpectedly, of the 318,000 people taking part in Nationscape, more than 65,000 chose this option compared to nearly 57,000 who indicated they were Protestants.

Because the Nationscape survey asks the standard religious affiliation question, save for one small change, this affords researchers the ability to understand what demographic and political factors drive respondents toward the "Christian" option and the implications this collective choice has on our understanding of contemporary American religion. But it also creates an interesting research opportunity, as respondents in the Nationscape can be compared to persons sampled in the Cooperative Election Study, which has the same response options minus the "Christian" option.

Ideally, a survey experiment would be employed to test these questions. Half the sample would receive just a Protestant option, while the other half of the sample would receive a Protestant option alongside a "Christian" option. However, running a survey experiment is a costly endeavor. Because the Nationscape and the CES both have large sample sizes and make their data freely available for download, comparing them is a relatively simple process that can offer important insights into the implications of these survey designs without having to field an entirely new instrument.

To conduct our analysis, several assumptions must be made. First, surveys fielded in the same manner and during the same basic time period should represent the affiliations and feelings of the general public in a reasonably consistent way. Both the CES and the Nationscape were fielded through an online delivery, both used an online panel design (CES utilized YouGov, Nationscape contracted with Lucid), and both were in the field at basically the same time (November 2018 and July 2020). As previously mentioned, a survey experiment with a split design would be the "gold standard" in this case, but comparing the results from the CES and Nationscape do provide empirical utility and will give researchers a general sense of how these design choices impact analyses.

What follows is a brief review of the existing literature on how scholars have thought about measuring religion on surveys and how such measurement has changed over time. This is followed by a discussion of how scholars have conceptualized the term "Protestant" and why its usage in modern society may be shifting. This is followed by a short description of the two data sources employed, including some analysis of how the religious composition of a sample is altered by including a "Christian" option. In addition, an exploration is conducted of some factors that may lead individuals to choose Christian instead of Protestant. These factors include age, race, education, and evangelical self-identification. The section concludes with a multivariate analysis of the factors leading someone to choose Christian instead of Protestant on the Nationscape survey as well as some models that try to determine if collapsing Protestants together with Christians in the Nationscape is equivalent to percentage of Protestants in the CES. Finally, some recommendations are offered to the scholarly community regarding the construction of response options to religion questions.

MEASURING RELIGION—A BRIEF HISTORY

It is fair to say that over the last 75 years, social science has slowly progressed in the way it measures religious demography, constantly iterating and adapting to new survey techniques and developments in Americans' understanding of religious terminology. For instance, Samuel

Stouffer's initial approach in 1955 to understanding American religion was somewhat rudimentary, offering just five different response options: Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other, and None (p. 260). However, as a way to tacitly embrace the nuances of American Protestantism, Stouffer did divide the sample into those living in the North or the South as a crude proxy for what would eventually become evangelical and mainline traditions (p. 141).

When the General Social Survey launched its initial instrument in 1972, it embraced the same basic structure established by Stouffer 17 years earlier, but made additions and alterations as time passed. For example, in those early waves the survey utilized those five general religious response options, but later it included an important follow-up for those who chose the "Protestant" category (Smith 1991). They were asked, "What specific denomination is that, if any?" And then each individual would describe their specific Protestant tradition as best as possible, at which point the survey administrator would place them in one of 28 more specific categories. Although, it is important to note that many survey respondents would merely say, "Baptist," "Methodist," or "Lutheran" and they would be placed in a generic denominational category such as, "Baptist, Don't Know Which."[1]

The addition of this follow-up proved crucial for the creation of future religious classification schemes including Smith's FUND approach (1990), as well as the widely used RELTRAD system that created a seven-category typology which has been used thousands of times in academic social science work (Steensland et al. 2000). Similarly, the General Social Survey altered their original religious preference question in 1998 when it added a number of additional response options to the five-item core. Those included items like: "Buddhism," "Hinduism," "Moslem/Islam," "Christian," and "Inter-nondenominational." Yet the implications of providing these options have been relatively unexplored, especially in recent years.[2]

There is obviously a large and growing literature that focuses on how subtle changes to response options and question wording can have tremendous impacts on the results obtained. There is ample evidence that concludes candidates who are listed first on ballots or surveys get selected more frequently than those listed thereafter (Meredith and Salant 2013; Miller 1998). These results align with research that used eye-tracking to conclude many survey participants do not read all the response options before making a selection (Galesic et al. 2008). It has been illustrated that question wording, meanwhile, can have large impacts on the distribution of responses about subjects like support for government programs (Rasinski 1989), self-reporting of crime (Fisher 2009), and views on the environment (Schuldt, Konrath, and Schwarz 2011), to name a few. These questions were explored among scholars of religion several decades ago, but more recently have been largely ignored

There was a small collection of analyses in the 1970s and 1980s that did try to discern the implications of question wording and response items for religion items. For instance, scholars discussed the validity of asking questions about religious attachment through forced response options versus open-ended items (Smith 1991) or asking about "current religion" versus "religious preference" (McCourt and Taylor 1976). Likewise, topics such as the distinction between denominational affiliation and church membership (Lazerwitz and Harrison 1980) were discussed when many longitudinal surveys were being constructed.

In contrast, over the last several decades there has been a dearth of attention paid to the implications of response options for religious categorization. One notable exception was an attempt

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[1] The full set of response options can be seen here: https://gssdataexplorer.norc.org/variables/288/vshow

[2] The reason that an in-depth analysis of how the "Christian" category differs from the "Protestant" respondents in the GSS is an issue of statistical power. In the entire cumulative data file of the GSS, just 780 weighted respondents identified as "Just Christians." Of that number, just 403 were from the 2010 to 2018 waves of the survey. Once divided up based on demographic factors, the margins of errors increase significantly making it difficult to do any real comparisons of these two groups using the GSS data.

to accurately track the decline of Protestant Christianity from Smith and Kim (2005), which included a short discussion about the ambiguity among respondents regarding choosing Protestant or Christian on surveys. The authors note that, "even among Protestants, Protestantism is not most people's primary religious identification" (p. 213). They go on to describe how not including a response option for Protestant "encourages replies of Christian" (p. 213). According to the authors, when respondents are not cued by the inclusion of a Protestant option and are instead allowed an open-ended response, many will mention their specific Protestant denomination such as Episcopalian, Baptist, or Methodist. They further note that even when the term Protestant is included, significant numbers of respondents who are, in fact, Protestants do not select it (p. 221). They conclude by writing, "Thus, not mentioning Protestantism results in lower reports (of Protestant affiliation)" (p. 213).

Thus, the previous literature alludes to an unsettling conclusion—many Americans do not seem to have even a tacit awareness of the term Protestant. This may have tremendous implications when it comes to measuring the size and composition of the American Christian landscape. The need to reassess this comes into sharper focus when considering the fact that most of the published work on this topic is at 20 years old (with much of the data dating back to the 1970s and 1980s). In the last 20 years, there have been ample indications that the term Protestant may be falling further outside the mainstream American lexicon and consequently be providing even more biased estimates of American religion.

What is a Protestant?

In terms of quantitative social science, the definition of a Protestant is quite simply demarcated by the architects of the General Social Survey: "the General Social Survey (GSS) defines Protestantism as including all post-Reformation Christian faiths" (Smith and Kim 2005:212). A more workable definition encompasses anyone who identifies as a Christian but does not affiliate with the Catholic church.[3] This approach likely provides more utility to the average survey taker because many of them would not be aware of the Protestant Reformation and its implications on Western Christianity (Prothero 2007).

There is considerable reason to believe that the term Protestant may have significantly less salience in a sample collected in 2020 compared to just 20 or 30 years ago. The reason for decreased awareness of the term Protestant relates to a larger shift in American religion over the last several decades away from religious labels and denominational attachments toward a much more fragmented, localized form of Protestant Christianity that places less emphasis on history and tradition while openly rejecting religious labels.

For instance, one of the fastest growing church planting networks is the Association of Related Churches (ARC), which has planted nearly 1000 churches in its 20-year history. What is notable is that these ARC plants average nearly 300 attendees on their first Sunday (Shellnut 2019), meaning that they are larger than 90 percent of existing Protestant congregations on their first weekend (Earls 2019). Another planting organization (Acts 29) has helped start 740 churches in two decades (Shellnut 2019). In both organizations, their churches have names that are generic in their description (Refuge, Journey, The River) and indicate no attachment to any denomination or Christian tradition.

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[3]Obviously, this is an oversimplification of a very complicated topic. Those of the Orthodox tradition are undoubtedly Christians, yet are less than 1 percent of the adult population according to Nationscape and it seems fair to assume that the vast majority of Orthodox Christians would correctly identify themselves on surveys given the uniqueness of their faith. Other groups like the Latter Day Saints are fraught with a variety of classification concerns, but in every major survey an option for Latter-day Saints (LDS)/Mormon is present and it stands to reason that the vast majority would choose that label over Protestant or Christian.

According to data from the General Social Survey, just 3.4 percent of Protestants identified as nondenominational in 1972. By 2018, that share had increased to 22.9 percent as part of a trend that shows no signs of stopping. In fact, the only Protestant group reflecting substantial growth over the last three decades is nondenominational churches, while the largest established denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention (Shellnut 2020) and the United Methodist church are reporting substantial decline (Hahn 2019).

The literature on religious socialization suggests this shift away from traditional denominations (who tend to still subscribe to traditional understandings of American Christianity) to nondenominational churches (whose messaging is often on how they are different from other churches) may lead to younger generations not having a strong awareness of terms like Protestant. Sherkat defines religious socialization as, "an interactive process through which social agents influence individuals' religious beliefs *and understandings*." (2003:151, emphasis added). If a parent attends a nondenominational church, it seems reasonable to assume that they will be less likely to communicate to their children an understanding of their religious orientation that includes terms like Protestant, as they may be unaware of the term themselves.[4]

That said, are there mechanisms that may ameliorate the impact that age may have on the propensity for choosing Christian instead of Protestant? The literature suggests that some demographic factors may increase the likelihood of religious literacy in the American population. Prothero (2007) argues that while higher education generally does an inadequate job of teaching religious literacy, it does stand to reason that those with higher levels of education are generally more aware of religious concepts. This sentiment is echoed by Eugene Gallagher, who argues that the role of religious studies in higher education is primarily introducing new material to students. Given this, we can likely assume that helping students understand the broad contours of American Christianity would lead to a greater awareness of terms like Protestant on surveys (Gallagher 2009).

In addition to age and education, race is also deeply intertwined in the American understanding of religion and religious affiliation. There is ample literature to indicate that the religious experience of African Americans is unique to the rest of the population (McDaniel 2008; Shelton and Cobb 2017; Shelton and Emerson 2012), but the same could be true of all people of color.

Finally, there is one more potential variable in the Nationscape data that may provide some insight into the decision-making process of survey respondents: whether they self-identify as born-again/evangelical or not. There has been a great deal of scholarship published recently that tries to demonstrate how the average American relates to the term evangelical, both historically (Kidd 2019) as well as on social media (Burge 2021). Understanding if Protestants are more likely to self-identify as evangelicals than Christians could help scholars get a sense of how the average survey respondent conceptualizes American religion.

Thus, comparing the results of the religious classification question from the Nationscape survey and Cooperative Election Study can provide researchers a first look into how religious identity shifts based on something so minute as response options. Given that both surveys have a robust sample size it is possible to analyze how younger respondents tackle a survey instrument that lets them identify as either a Protestant or a Christian in the Nationscape compared to just having the Protestant option in the CES. The aim of this article is to encourage survey researchers to carefully consider the ramifications of their survey design decisions on the composition of their sample and potential impacts on the empirical analysis.

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[4]There does exist the possibility that someone could be socialized as a young person to understand that they are a Protestant, but when they join a nondenominational church as an adult they jettison that identifier for the more generic "Christian" option on a survey. Klingenberger and Sjo (2019) note that scholars have primarily focused on religious socialization as a childhood process, but there exists the possibility that peoples' understanding of religion can shift even into adulthood. Because the Nationscape survey does not contain a detailed denominational battery, it is impossible to test this at present.

Data

The data for this analysis come from UCLA's Democracy Fund. In July 2019, the Democracy Fund financially supported a Nationscape survey being placed into the field every week for the remainder of 2019 and the entirety of 2020. The results of these surveys have been released in several tranches at various points over the last several years. In September 2020, all survey responses gathered from the beginning of the collection period through July 2020 were released. Each week's survey contained, on average, 6375 respondents and was conducted using Lucid's online panel design. Altogether, the total sample size for this data set is 318,736 survey respondents. The survey administrators also included weights in the final released data set which have been included in the analysis.[5]

The relevant question under study is: "What is your present religion, if any?" and then respondents were offered 13 different response options, presented in the following order: Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, Eastern or Greek Orthodox, Christian other than above, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Atheist, Agnostic, Nothing in particular, and Something else.

This approach to assessing religious tradition is very similar to the construction of the same question in the Cooperative Election Study (both use the same outline created by the Pew Research Center). The CES has been conducted at least biannually since 2006, and like the Nationscape survey is conducted in an online format that produces a large sample size (the 2018 wave was 60,000 respondents). However, there is one key difference between the Nationscape and the CES—the CES does not present a "Christian, other than above" option. Thus, this provides survey researchers the ability to understand how the addition of that single option shifts how people respond to the question. This is presented in Figure 1 using the 2018 version of the CES with weights included in both calculations.

In most cases, the differences in share of the population are relatively minor. That is especially true for smaller religious groups like Mormons, Jews, and Buddhists. The difference for both atheists and agnostics is also between 1 and 2 percentage points. However, there are some groups that vary significantly in size. For instance, Catholics are 20.9 percent of the Nationscape sample, but just 18.1 percent of the CES—there is no single sufficient or satisfactory explanation for this divergence. In addition, the "nothing in particular" category is slightly larger in the CES compared to the Nationscape (20 percent vs. 18.8 percent).

However, the biggest discrepancy between the two instruments can be found in the share of Protestants. In the 2018 CES, 39 percent of all respondents identified as Protestant, which is nearly twice as large as any other response option. In contrast, just 18.6 percent of those taking the Nationscape survey indicated that they were Protestant. The inclusion of the "Christian, other than above" option in the Nationscape was key in how these distributions shifted. In the Nationscape, 20 percent of all respondents chose this option, making it the second most popular choice, behind Catholic.[6]

When the share of those who identified as Protestants in the Nationscape is combined with the share who chose the Christian option, it represents 38.6 percent of the sample. Recall that the Protestant share of the CES was 39 percent in 2018, which means that these two groups added together are not substantively different from just the Protestant category alone.

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[5]These weights were generated based on the following factors: gender, region, race, income, age, education, language spoken in the household, presidential vote in 2016 and nativity. Full information about the representativeness of the sample and how the weights were applied is available through the following report: "Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape Methodology and Representativeness Assessment" by Tausanovitch et al, December 2019. URL: https://www.voterstudygroup.org/uploads/reports/Data/NS-Methodology-Representativeness-Assessment.pdf

[6]Because the religious tradition variable in the CES collected during the month of October in 2018, but the Nationscape was collected weekly over a period of 50 weeks, it was necessary to understand how response options to the religion question shifted during the collection period. The results of this can be seen in the Appendix.

Figure 1
The Distribution of Religion in Two Surveys [Color figure can be viewed at
wileyonlinelibrary.com]
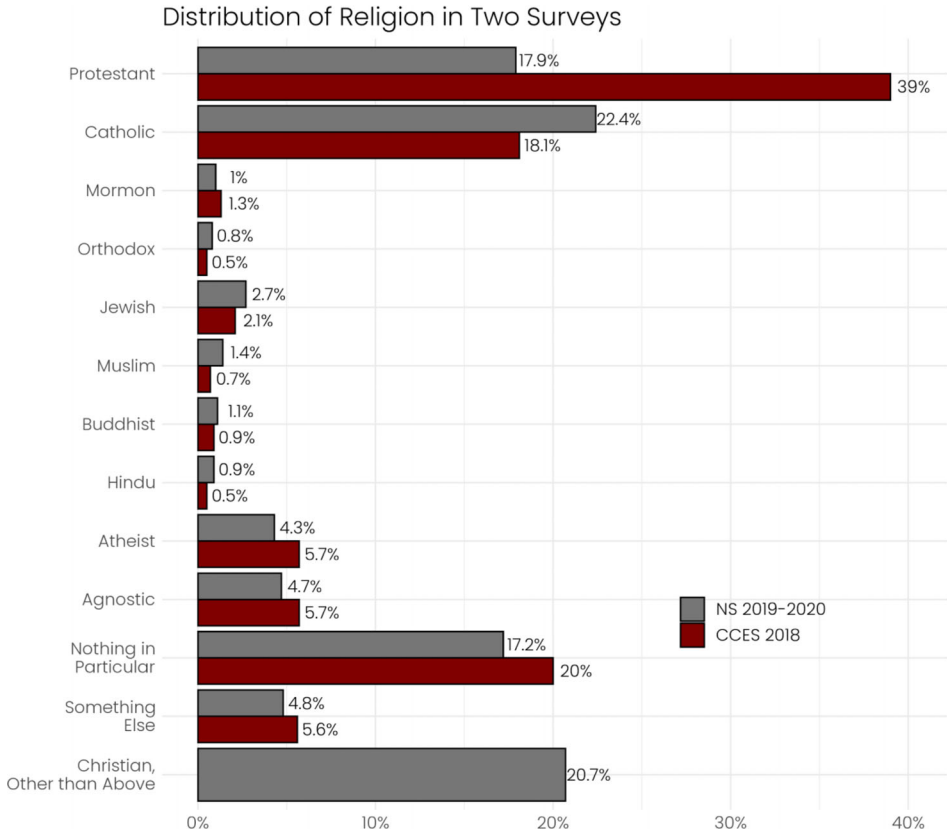
From this very cursory analysis, it appears that the Nationscape's approach merely splits the Protestant category in the CES into two smaller groups (Protestant or Christian), but that the overall size of the group is no different between the two instruments. This leads to more lines of inquiry. First, what factors can help explain why some people choose the Christian option compared to those who self-identify as Protestants in Nationscape. Second, how does the composition of these two groups differ from the unified Protestant category in the CES?

THE COMPOSITION OF PROTESTANTS VERSUS CHRISTIANS

The factor most likely to impact an individual choosing the Protestant option compared to selecting Christian on the survey is age. As described above, the rapid ascendance of nondenominational churches across the United States—with their clear rejects of labels and traditions—is a relatively recent phenomenon. Thus, we expect that older respondents came of age in an era when traditional denominations used the term Protestant as part of regular discourse, whereas this was less likely to have occurred among younger respondents.

To test this, the sample was broken down into individual ages and the share who identified as Christian was calculated, as well as the share who identified as Protestant. This analysis was done for respondents aged between 18 and 80 years old and is displayed in Figure 2. The trend is visualized using an locally estimated scatterplot smoothing (LOESS) line.

Figure 2
Protestant vs Christian by Age [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
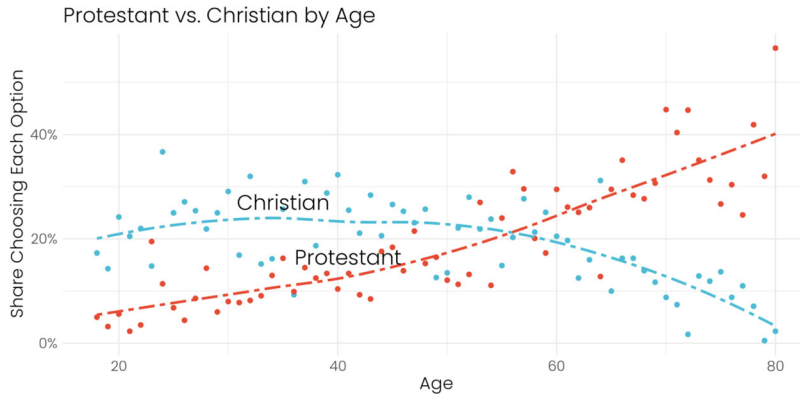
The unmistakable conclusion is that there is a large age effect occurring—younger respondents are much more likely to identify as "Christian" while older respondents are more inclined to identify as "Protestant." For instance, 23.6 percent of those aged between 18 and 20 indicated that they were Christians, which was three times higher than those who chose Protestant in the same age group (7.1 percent). This gap of 16 percentage points persists even through those aged between 40 and 45 (11.1 percent identify as Protestant, 27.5 percent identify as Christian).

The difference in these estimates begins to narrow quickly among those who are in their early 50s. Among those aged between 50 and 55, it is just 5.3 percentage points. Only when moving to those over the age of 60 does the share of individuals who identify as Protestants clearly outpace those who chose the "Christian, other than above" response option. Among those aged between 70 and 80, 8.1 percent indicate a Christian affiliation compared to 37.4 percent who chose the Protestant option. To place this in historical context, the term Protestant began to lose out to the more generic "Christian" option among those born after 1960.

It is also worth considering that the total share who chose either Protestant or Christian declined significantly among younger respondents. For instance, among those aged between 18 and 25, 30.5 percent chose either option. It was 45.5 percent of those aged between 70 and 80. Thus, there is not only a change in the composition of this group, but also it is overall share of the population.[7]

Having established that there is a divergence in responses to the religious affiliation question which are predicated significantly by age, it seems worthwhile to understand what other demographic factors can narrow the gap between the share choosing "Protestant" versus "Christian." This is especially illuminating when looking at those aged between 18 and 45, an age range where the "Christian" option is chosen three times more often than those that indicated that they were Protestant.

A good starting point would be to look through the lens of educational attainment. As previously mentioned, educational attainment can be seen as a proxy for overall religious literacy (Prothero 2007). The Nationscape survey asked respondents about their highest level of education completed, ranging from third grade or less to a doctoral degree. Those 11 options were collapsed into six categories, ranging between those without a high-school diploma and those who have taken some graduate courses visualized in Figure 3.

Evidently, people with higher levels of education are more likely to choose the "Protestant" option than they are to identify as "Christian." For instance, among those who did not graduate
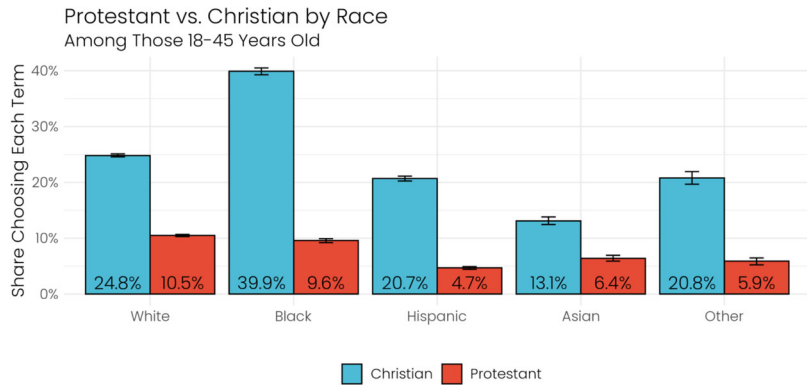
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[7]This is visualized in the Appendix, Figure A1.

Figure 3

Protestant vs. Christian by Education [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
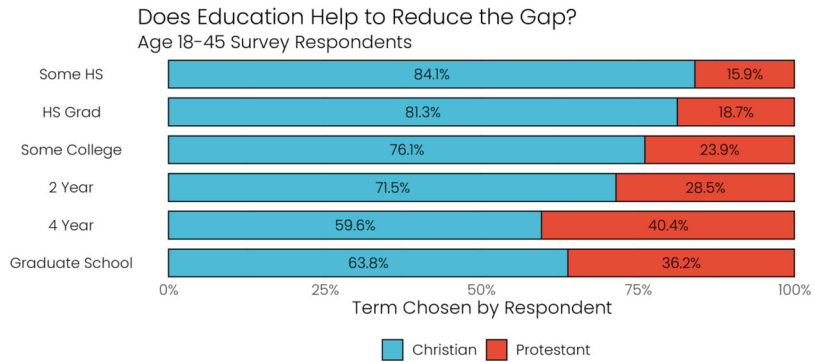
Figure 4

Protestant vs. Christian by Race [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

high school, 84 percent chose "Christian" while only 16 percent chose "Protestant." Among those who graduated from a four-year college or university, that gap is just 20 percentage points (60 percent chose Christian, 40 percent chose Protestant.) It is noteworthy that even among the most highly educated people aged between 18 and 45, the term "Christian" is much more popular and Protestant lags behind significantly.[8]

As previously discussed, race may be a valid explanatory variable. To analyze this, the share of the sample was restricted to those aged between 18 and 45, where the largest gap exists between Protestants and Christians, and the sample was broken up into five racial categories: white, non-Hispanic; black; Hispanic; Asian, and those who indicated a different racial background. This was also visualized in Figure 4 with 84 percent confidence intervals, which are an equivalent way of judging statistically significant differences between two groups.[9]

The first thing that quickly emerges is the significant gap in black respondents. In total, 49.5 percent of African Americans indicated that they were either Protestant or Christian, easily the highest percentage of any racial group. But there exists a tremendous disparity between the two

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[8]The Nationscape survey also asked two questions that gauged the political knowledge of respondents. The share of Protestants increased among those with higher levels of political knowledge. This is described in detail in the Appendix.

[9]The most up-to-date guidance for visualizing uncertainty is to generate 84 percent confidence intervals—which is equivalent to a 95 percent *t*-test (Goldstein and Healy 1995; Knol et al. 2011; MacGregor-Fors and Payton 2013; Payton, Greenstone, and Schenker 2003).

response options. Nearly 40 percent indicate that they are just "Christian" compared to just 10 percent who respond that they are "Protestant." This 30-point gap between the two options is the largest of any group. For white, non-Hispanics the gap is just about 15 percentage points; for Hispanics, it is about the same. For Asian respondents, it is just over 6 percentage points, and for the other racial category, it is 15 points. In all cases, those differences are statistically significant.

There could be a variety of factors that help to explain this disparity. As previously discussed, those with a higher level of education are more likely to choose the "Protestant" option than the "Christian" one. For this sample, nearly 42 percent of Asians aged between 18 and 45 had earned a 4-year college degree. Just about a third of white respondents had reached this level of education, and it was 30 percent of those in the "other" racial category. Both Hispanic and African American respondents lagged these other groups, with 19 percent of black respondents and 13 percent of Hispanics having reached this education milestone.

While Hispanics and African Americans were equally likely to choose the Protestant option, 40 percent of black respondents were Christians, compared to 21 percent of Hispanics. This difference is likely explained by the fact that there are fewer Hispanics who are non-Catholic Christians. In this sample, 8 percent of African Americans indicated they were Catholic compared to 40 percent of Hispanics. Thus, there may be a racial component to how certain Christian traditions use the term Protestant, but that is likely masked by other factors that are difficult to untangle.

Unfortunately, the Nationscape survey does not offer researchers many variables that probe into the religious makeup of the American electorate, save for the aforementioned religious tradition question as well as one other that asks respondents, "Would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian, or not?"[10] This question, first publicized by the Pew Research Center, now appears on a number of widely utilized surveys. Research has indicated that using this self-identification approach to classifying evangelicals is a suitable substitute for using religious tradition (Burge and Lewis 2018, Smith et al. 2018).

For a baseline comparison, the 2018 CES includes the self-identification question and 57 percent of all Protestants in that sample also identified as evangelical or born-again. For the Nationscape survey, 52 percent of Protestants also identified as evangelical. But for those who chose the "Christian, other than above" response, the share who identified as evangelical was 58 percent. If the Protestant and Christian categories are combined in the Nationscape, 55 percent of this group chose to self-identify as evangelical—very similar to the CES results. Given this perspective, it appears that larger shares of those from mainline traditions chose the Protestant and not-evangelical options, pulling this percentage down.

One of the clearest demographic factors delineating between mainline Protestants and evangelicals is their education level. Many mainline traditions, such as Episcopalians and United Methodists, have high concentrations of persons with a college degree (Roof and McKinney 1987). And, while evangelicals have been progressing in educational attainment (Claassen 2015), they still lag behind their mainline brethren. Thus, there is an expectation that as education increases so does religious knowledge (Prothero 2007), leading those who come from a mainline tradition to be more likely to identify as Protestant and not evangelical.

As Figure 5 depicts, at lower levels of education there is no substantive difference between the share of Protestants or Christians who identify evangelicals. Among high-school graduates, Christians are about 2 percentage points more likely to identify as evangelical. However, as the level of education begins to increase the gap becomes noticeably larger.

[10]In five of 50 waves of the Nationscape survey, respondents were asked, "How important are your religious beliefs to your identity?" The share of Protestants and Christians who said "very important" across waves is not consistent, thus offering no clear conclusions. This is explored in more detail in the Appendix.In addition, the Nationscape survey does not include a question about religious attendance.

Figure 5

Share Self-Identifying as Evangelical by Level of Education [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
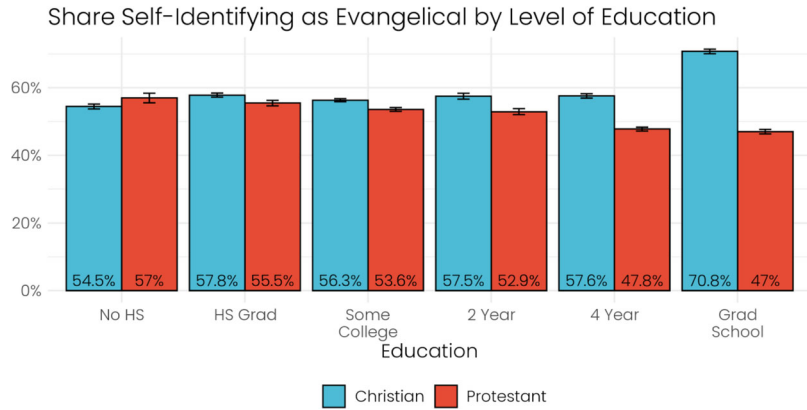
For instance, among those who completed an associate's degree, 58 percent of Christians identified as evangelical while 53 percent of Protestants did the same. This gap is even larger for those with a 4-year degree—58 percent of Christians identify as evangelical, only 48 percent of Protestants. But the difference becomes much larger for those who have completed graduate level work. The share of Protestants who identify as evangelical remains at 47 percent, but the share of Christians who identify as evangelical increases by over 13 percentage points to 70.8 percent.

Thus, it appears education helps mainline Protestants indicate their distinct religious tradition, as they are less likely to identify as evangelical. But higher levels of education seem to help evangelical Christians stand out as well. If the assumption is that overall education leads to an increase in religious literacy (Dinham and Francis 2015; Prothero 2007), it stands to reason that these respondents would be more equipped to answer questions about religious tradition accurately. Among those with graduate degrees, religious sorting was more evident with mainliners choosing Protestant and not evangelical—and those from the evangelical tradition—who indicate they were both Christian and "a born-again or evangelical."

While far from conclusive, there seems to be some evidence here that at least in the more educated portion of the population, Protestantism is less linked to evangelicalism than those who indicated they were Christians. However, one must wonder if the question wording (i.e., "would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian, or not?") nudges respondents away from identifying as Protestant in the prior question and toward indicating they are an "evangelical Christian" in the following question.

MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

Having explored some factors that may be linked to a greater propensity of selecting the Christian option over identifying as Protestant, it is appropriate to combine these factors together into a regression model to determine which ones have the largest impact on how respondents make their decision. To do that, a dichotomous variable was constructed, whereby those who chose the Christian option were coded as 1 and those who selected Protestant were coded as zero; all others were excluded from analysis.

In addition, a number of previously iterated independent variables were specified, including: age, gender, race, income, education, an affiliation with the Republican party, self-identification as an evangelical, and a dichotomous variable for those living in the South. Thereafter, a logit model was specified, robust standard errors were calculated, and each variable was scaled to allow for

Estimating Factors That Predict a Christian (Instead of Protestant) Identity
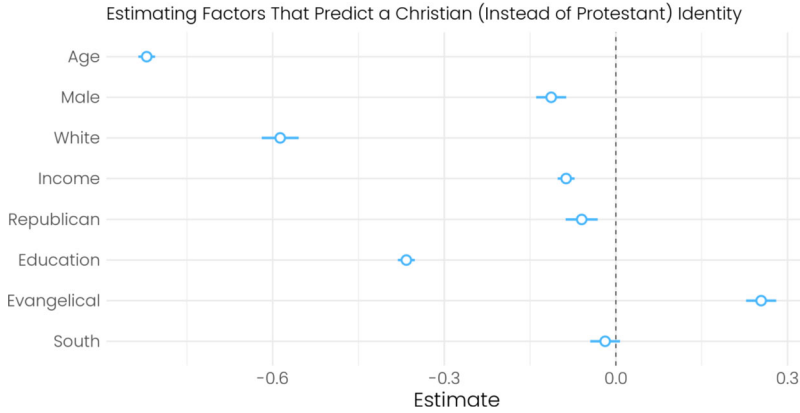
easy comparison of effects' sizes in Figure 6. The resulting coefficient plot has a straightforward interpretation: if the point estimate is to the right of zero, that variable predicts a stronger likelihood of identifying as a Christian; if it is to the left, it is a greater likelihood of identifying as a Protestant; and if the point estimate or the lines (which represent the standard errors) overlap with zero, the relationship is not statistically significant.

The most impactful factor in this model is clearly age: *ceteris paribus*, an older person is much more likely to identify as a Protestant than a Christian. The other two factors that drive the likelihood of selecting the Protestant option are identifying as white and having higher levels of education. However, it is worth pointing out that the impact of age is twice that of education, while several factors only slightly drive up the likelihood of identifying as a Protestant. These include identifying as a male, having a higher household income, and aligning with the Republican party. The only variable included here that makes it more likely for a respondent to indicate that they were a Christian is also self-identifying as born-again or evangelical.

From this analysis of the Nationscape data, it is apparent that a multitude of factors make it more likely for respondents to choose the "Christian" option instead of indicating that they are "Protestant" on the survey. However, the share of Protestants plus Christians in the Nationscape is nearly identical to another recently collected survey that only includes the "Protestant" choice— the Cooperative Election Study. What has not been established is if the group that chooses to identify as Christians looks different than those who indicate a Protestant affiliation. And when those Protestants and Christians are combined, whether they resemble the Protestants from the CES data.

To test that possibility, three different regression models were specified. In each case, four different subsamples were created: Protestants from the Nationscape, Christians from the Nationscape, both groups combined from the Nationscape, and finally the Protestant group from the Cooperative Election Study. The aim of this is to understand how each group inside the Nationscape behaves differently in a regression model, but also to understand if combining those two groups together may yield coefficients that look similar to the Protestant group from the CES.

The first of those regressions is an OLS model with educational attainment as the dependent variable and is displayed in Figure 7. This model was included to test whether these groups are similar using a simple demographic variable. A second model uses self-identification as born-again/evangelical as the dependent variable. Given that this is a dichotomous variable, a logit model was employed. Finally, the third model uses a Republican affiliation as the dependent variable. In each case, a number of controls that could be replicated across both surveys were added

Figure 7

Estimating Education Attainment Using Different Samples [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
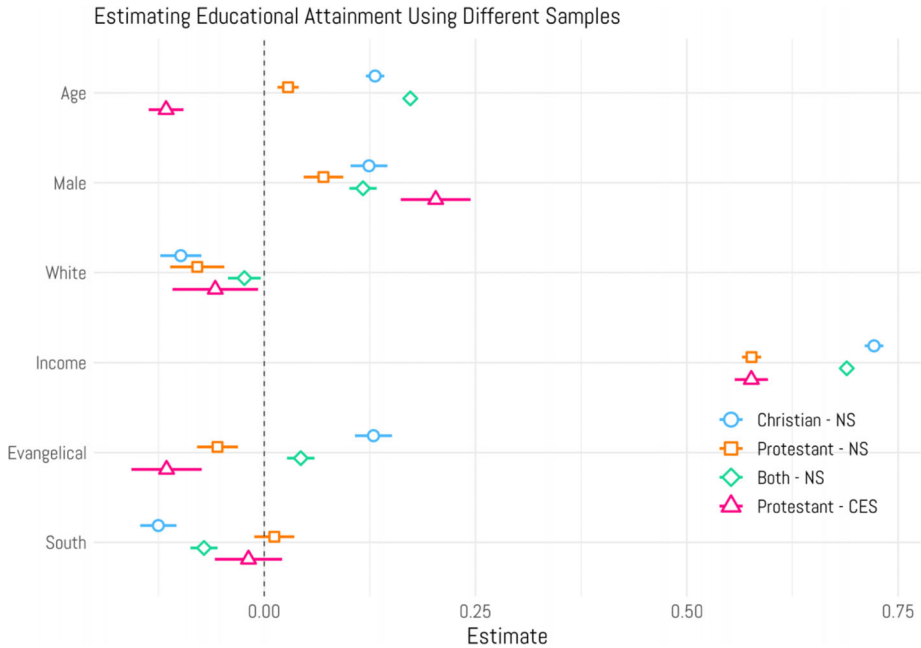

to the model. They include: age, gender, race, income, education, self-identified evangelical, Republican affiliation, and whether someone lives in the South. Again, the results are visualized in a coefficient plot.

In some cases, Protestants as sampled in the CES look very similar to the combined Protestant/Christian category in the Nationscape survey. The coefficients for gender, income, and race look similar when predicting level of educational attainment. However, there are occasions when they differ. For instance, in the CES sample, a Republican affiliation predicts lower levels of educational attainment than the combined sample in the Nationscape. The coefficients for the evangelical variable also differ in that in the Nationscape sample, self-identifying as an evangelical leads to higher levels of educational attainment, whereas the coefficient is signed negatively in the CES. In terms of comparing the Protestant group to the Christian group in the Nationscape survey, it appears that they are fairly similar in this regression model. The biggest divergence is on the evangelical variable—it is positively signed for Christians, but negatively related to educational attainment for Protestants.

Figure 8 visualizes a regression model with evangelical self-identification as the dependent variable, and clearly there are some notable differences between the combined groups in the Nationscape and the CES Protestant option. For instance, in the cases of age, gender, and education, the coefficients are signed in the opposite direction. In each case, those independent variables predict a higher likelihood of identifying as an evangelical for the Nationscape sample but a lower likelihood for the Protestant sample in the CES.

The closest comparison seems to be between the Protestants in the Nationscape and the Protestants in the Cooperative Election Study when it comes to predicting an evangelical self-identity. For most independent variables, the differences between these two groups are statistically indistinguishable. This raises interesting questions about how and why the Christians in the Nationscape sample seem to have a different relationship to the terms "born-again/evangelical" than Protestants do in either sample.

Figure 8
Estimating Evangelical Identity Using Different Samples [Color figure can be viewed at
wileyonlinelibrary.com]
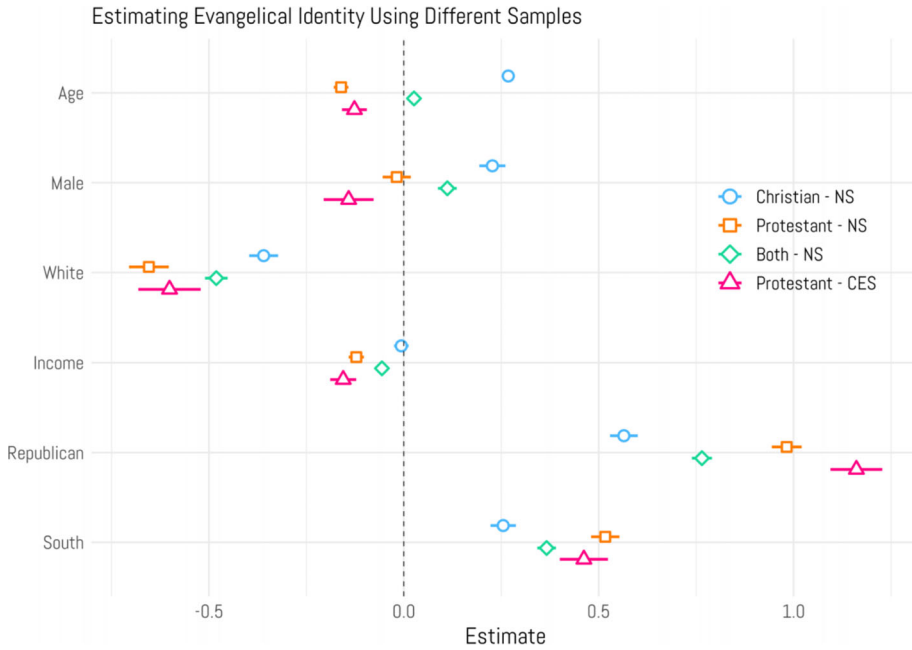
Finally, Figure 9 visualizes a model where the independent variable indicates whether the respondent identifies with the Republican party. In this case, there is fairly compelling evidence that all four different subgroups behave very similarly in a logit regression model. In terms of age, gender, income, education, and living in the South, the differences between each are relatively minor. The dichotomous race variable has a larger coefficient in the CES model than it does in the Nationscape and the same is true for the evangelical variable. In fact, there is a fairly large gap between this coefficient for Christians in the Nationscape and Protestants in the CES. Again, the groups that most closely resemble each other on this coefficient are Protestants in the Nationscape and Protestants in the Cooperative Election Study.

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Measuring the size and composition of religious groups through the use of surveys is fraught with difficult choices. Framing the question in terms of religious preference or religious affiliation, the order of response options, the inclusion of a "free response" option, and—as we have effectively demonstrated—including a "Christian, other than above" choice can have wide ranging implications in how social scientists perceive and interact with the American religious landscape.

This work contributes to our understanding of American religion by casting light on the quickly declining popularity of the term "Protestant" in the lexicon of survey respondents. Clearly, the term began to fall out of favor sometime in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a trend that has only accelerated with the rapid rise of nondenominational Christianity in the United States. Notably, certain demographic factors seem to support respondents choosing "Protestant" instead of "Christian" on surveys, with educational attainment narrowing the response gap. In addition, it appears the gap has a clear racial component, with white and Asian respondents being more likely to identify as Protestant than Hispanics or African Americans.

Figure 9

Estimating Republican Affiliation Attainment Using Different Samples [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Most importantly, perhaps, is that when the Protestant and Christian groups are combined, the end result is strikingly similar to another large-scale survey that only included the Protestant option, with the overall size of the two groups diverging by less than a single percentage point. In a multivariate environment, the two groups do seem to behave in ways that are relatively similar, as well. Thus, there seems to be little downside to including both survey response options and combining them when appropriate for analysis.

As the cost of conducting methodologically rigorous academic surveys continues to decline and availability of access to these surveys continues to improve, making them more accessible to a broader swath of the scholarly community, we would be well served to thoroughly test various approaches to measuring concepts that have traditionally been assessed through a single set of survey questions and response options. Simple changes, like the addition of the "Christian" option, may open up entirely new arenas of inquiry that will only assist us in acquiring a fuller picture of the diversity of contemporary American religion.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix Figure A1-Figure A9 information