

Measuring Evangelicals: Practical Considerations for Social Scientists

Research Note

By

Ryan P. Burge
Department of Political Science
Eastern Illinois University
rpburge@eiu.edu

Andrew R. Lewis
Department of Political Science
University of Cincinnati
Andrew.Lewis@uc.edu

June 22, 2017

Abstract

Evangelical Protestants garner much attention in polling and public opinion research, in large part because they have become an important electoral coalition in conservative politics. Despite this attention, measuring white evangelicals remains elusive and often opaque. This article seeks to provide practical guidance to researchers who want to measure or analyze evangelicals. In the social sciences, many have adopted a detailed religious affiliation approach that categorizes evangelicals based on the religious tradition of the denominations to which they belong. Others have used a simpler self-identification classification scheme, which asks respondents if they consider themselves “born-again or evangelical”, though it is often unclear if these pollsters and researchers limit their evangelical classification to Protestant self-identifiers. While the affiliation and self-identification schemes are predominant, a practical examination of which approach is best for researchers has been absent until now. Using several waves of the General Social Survey and the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, we compare the affiliation and self-identification approaches to classifying evangelicals. We find almost no statistical differences between the two measurements in prominent demographic, political, or religious factors. Thus, we suggest that for most researchers, especially when space and time are important considerations, a simple question about broad religious affiliation followed by a born-again or evangelical self-identification question will suffice.

The 2016 American Presidential election of Donald Trump was one that was an outlier in a number of respects. In the Republican primary, Trump did not earn the endorsement of any major figure in Republican politics (Friedersdorf 2016). During the general election, he did not engage in a significant fundraising campaign (Ballhaus 2016), and he was vastly understaffed in his ground game in the final three months of the cycle (Shepard 2016). Despite all this, Trump triumphed in the electoral college and was inaugurated President of the United States, to the chagrin of most election forecasters (Vogel and Isenstadt 2016).

While there are many reasons why pundits and pollsters believed Trump would perform poorly in a general election, an early, compelling critique was that evangelical Protestants would never vote for a thrice married, crude-talking, religiously unsophisticated, businessman (Enten 2015; French 2016; Zylstra 2016). Yet, with the election looming, polls found that Trump was narrowing Hillary Clinton's polling advantage as the Republican base, including white evangelicals, were "coming home" to back the Republican nominee (Bump 2016; Hopkins 2016; Pew Research Center 2016). In the days and weeks following Trump's stunning victory, this evangelical movement toward Trump was confirmed, as a number of media outlets reported the results of their exit polling: 81% of evangelicals had cast their ballots for Trump (G. A. Smith and Martinez 2016). This statistic, which according to Pew Research Center was a record high for the Republican candidate, was repeated by a variety of other Christian outlets (Markoe 2016; Shellnutt 2016).

However, the definition of an evangelical under Pew's criteria differs significantly from the way evangelicalism is conceived in the bulk of academic social science. In the footnote of their results Pew described their methodology of evangelicals to include any respondent who self-identified as born-again or evangelical, even if that person also identified as being affiliated with a non-evangelical tradition like the Catholic or Mormon faiths. This evangelical identity-only approach eschews both theology and sociology of religion, as most scholars would contend that being "born-

again” is a specifically evangelical phenomenon that is exclusive from other Christian faith traditions such as Roman Catholicism or Mormonism (Hunter 1981; C. S. Smith 1998).

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

To date, there has been scant analysis of different approaches to measuring evangelicals, with a glaring omission of practical wisdom for contemporary survey researchers. Hackett and Lindsay’s (2007) systematic analyses of separate coding schemes remains the best dissection of the state of the art, but it lacks practical advice for survey researchers and insight from the growth of online based polling that has grown over the past decade. Using three waves of two large scale survey instruments, we analyze the differences between measuring evangelicals using the RELTRAD and self-identification approaches. We then provide easily adaptable advice and tools for academic and professional survey researchers.

The Trouble with Measuring Evangelicals

In punditry, polling, and political science, the term evangelical is bandied about with little sophistication. This is only magnified by the debates within Christianity about the nature of evangelicalism and the difficulty of scholars of religion and political behavior to settle on an

appropriate and usable classification scheme. We seek to streamline the measurement of evangelicals in public polling, while minimizing measurement error and inaccurate understandings of the Christian tradition.

While it is possible to trace the origins of the “evangelical” back to the decades after the death of Jesus or to the writings of the Protestant Reformation (Eskridge 2012), the modern American evangelical finds its roots in the American colonial revivals led by John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards (Noll 2010). These preachers extolled the value of having a “born again” experience and inculcated a belief in their followers that the most important activity for a believer was to pass that “good news” on to others in the community. While the amount of evangelicals in the United States ebbed and flowed in the United States for the next two hundred years, the word would see a resurgence during the tent revivals of famed evangelist Billy Graham in the 1950’s (Marsden 1990), who also focused on the “born-again” experience of his followers (Whalin 2014) though he too had trouble defining the term evangelical (Mattingly 2013).

While Graham was struggling with a definition, so were social scientists. Some early practitioners divided American Protestants into two geographic categories, Northern and Southern, as a sort of proxy for liberal/conservative theology (Stouffer 1955). From this early conception, other scholars took a different tack. Tom Smith created a tripartite FUND measure (fundamentalist-moderate-liberal), which he sorted denominations into one of those three camps (T. W. Smith 1990). This however drew sharp criticism as being overly reductive by fellow scholars (Green et al. 1996). In its place a new scheme was devised that sorted respondents into one of seven traditions¹ based on a respondent’s church affiliation (Steensland et al. 2000). This scheme, known as RELTRAD, has become the most widely used in social science having been cited over 1,100 times (Stetzer and Burge

¹ Evangelical Protestant, Black Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other Religion, No Religion.

2016). However, the scheme is incredibly lengthy and somewhat complicated to replicate in a survey setting and takes over 150 lines of code to implement during data analysis.

While most academics were moving forward with using religious affiliation as a means to sort out religious traditions, other observers of American religion took a different approach. As early as 1976, the Gallup polling organization began asking respondents if they had “a born-again experience”, which was replicated in a large-scale survey conducted by *Christianity Today* in 1979 (Schmalzbauer 2002). In subsequent surveys, Gallup would employ a question that equated a born-again experience with being evangelical,² and used that question for its regular tracking benchmark of evangelical political behavior (Hackett and Lindsay 2008). In addition to allowing individuals to self-identity as born-again, other surveys have asked individuals to self-identify as evangelical. A number of scholars extol the values of allowing self-identification, believing that individuals are well equipped to understand where they exist in the religious landscape. (Kellstedt and Smidt 1991; C. S. Smith 1998), while some subsequent analysis has indicated that self-identifying evangelicals are more likely to be politically conservative (Lewis and De Bernardo 2010).

In just the last few years, a number of evangelical organizations including *Christianity Today* and Lifeway Research have attempted to bring clarity to the definition of evangelicalism by looking through the lens of religious belief. While David Bebbington offered a list of four essential evangelical convictions³ (1988), Lifeway Research operationalized those beliefs into four statements that they contend provides the necessary components of evangelical belief (Smietana 2015). This four statement typology has been endorsed and adopted by the National Association of Evangelicals (“What Is an Evangelical?” 2017).

² “Would you describe yourself as a born-again, or evangelical, Christian?”

³ Biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, activism.

Taking a step back, this literature has taken two distinct methodological approaches (self-identification vs. research classification) as well using three different conceptions of evangelicalism (behavior, belief, or belonging). Several recent articles have tried to understand what impact these design choices have had on our understanding of evangelicalism. Work by Hackett and Lindsay conclude that measurement strategy can widely distort the number of evangelicals in the population, with this number ranging from as low as 9% to as high as 38% (2008). Other work has cast doubt on the ability of individuals to correctly self-identify their religious affiliation, and that difficulty can lead to measures of evangelicalism that are politically biased toward conservative political ideology (Lewis and De Bernardo 2010). While the recent work highlighted here does an exemplary job of showing the methodological pitfalls of different measurement strategies, none of it provides practical, prescriptive advice to scholars of politics and religion. What follows is an empirically grounded discussion regarding the best practices for measuring evangelicalism through survey questions.

Data

Beginning in 2006, a number of social scientists joined together to provide large scale, comprehensive survey data under the umbrella of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) (Vavreck and Rivers 2008). The CCES is especially valuable because it has spanned three presidential election cycles, as well as containing a number of different measures of religious affiliation. It allows researchers to analyze the born-again self-identification strategy, as well as the RELTRAD denominational approach, both of which have been used extensively in the previous literature. In addition, we will utilize a well-established survey to compare the two measures, the General Social Survey (GSS). The RELTRAD coding classification was originally created to sort the denominational variables and that syntax has been reviewed and updated in recent years (Steenland et al. 2000; Stetzer and Burge 2016). In addition, the GSS has asked respondents if they have had a

born-again experience consistently beginning in 2004. To be clear, here are the criteria that will be employed to create our two groups:

1. Using RELTRAD denominations to identify evangelical churches + only white respondents. (Affiliation Measure)
2. Those who responded in the affirmative to: “Would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian, or not?” + those who indicated that they were Protestant + only white respondents. (Self-Identification Measure)

We chose to further include anyone who said they were born-again and also Protestant, as that concept is a uniquely Protestant one which does not fit well into Catholic or Mormon faiths ((Hunter 1981; C. S. Smith 1998; Hackett and Lindsay 2008)). This approach is distinct from the Pew Research Center as they include anyone who affirms a “born-again” experience, irrespective of religious tradition.

Findings

The most appropriate place to begin to understand the differences between the measures is to look at their distribution in each of the surveys. We chose to use the prior four waves of the GSS (biannually from 2010 to 2016) and the CCES survey conducted in the last three presidential election years (2008, 2012, and 2016). The percentage of the total sample that were included in each measure can be found in Figure 1 using the appropriate weights included by the survey authors. In order to aid interpretation, each histogram contains error bars representing 95% confidence intervals. It is clear that the difference between the two samples is small or statistically non-existent, especially in the case of the GSS in which the samples were not statistically distinct in any of the four waves. In the three waves of the CCES, two out of three samples are statistically different with the largest difference occurring in 2008 (3.9%), however this provides a rigorous statistical test as the total sample size of the CCES is exceptionally large and therefore the margin of error shrinks to +/-

1%.⁴ If any trend emerges between these two measures, it seems that the self-identification approach generates a slightly smaller population, however their overall proportion is relatively stable. It is worthwhile to note that across the seven surveys we analyzed the percentage of respondents using the affiliation measure is never statistically divergent, and in regards to measuring self-identified evangelicals, only the 2008 CCES stands as a true outlier.⁵

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

In order to further test the differences between the two groups, we analyzed two variables important to research on both politics and religion: self-described party affiliation and self-reported religious attendance. Figure 2 displays the mean party identification for each of the seven surveys that were analyzed. There are several notable findings on this dimension. First, note that in all seven instances the differences between the means is not statistically significant at the $p > .05$ level, indicating that either approach is statistically indistinguishable when it comes to the measurement of party identification. While the CCES samples are somewhat more conservative than the GSS waves, the convergence in the latter is somewhat noteworthy with the distance between the means decreasing in each subsequent survey year.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The other dimension, church attendance, can be found in Figure 3. The pattern between the party ideology and church attendance is similar. Again, none of the difference of means were significant at the $p > .05$ threshold, indicating that the measures are not statistically dissimilar for church attendance. As was seen in Figure 2, the GSS sample is seeing a convergence on religious attendance as well. In fact, the difference in religious attendance in the 2016 wave is .001 on a seven-

⁴ Appendix Table 1 contains descriptive statistics of total sample size, percentage of respondents in each classification, and margin of error for each of the seven surveys utilized here.

⁵ Appendix Table 2 contains summary statistics of a number of demographic factors including age, gender, and education for each measurement technique across all seven surveys. Appendix Table 3 contains a table indicating how many respondents were only BA + Protestant, how many were only RELTRAD evangelicals, and how many fell into both camps.

point scale. Taken together, the pattern is clear: using a self-identification strategy or the affiliation measure based on RELTRAD, there is not a noticeable difference in respondents' political affiliation or their worship attendance.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

To further explore the differences between these measures of evangelicals, a regression model was specified which used a political issue with strong religious overtones: abortion (Evans 2002; Jelen and Wilcox 2003). Both the CCES as well as the GSS asks respondents if they favored a woman's ability to obtain an abortion for any reason of her choosing.⁶ This affords us the ability to understand whether these two measures operate differently when some basic controls are included (education, gender, age, and party identification)⁷. In order to provide a direct comparison all variables were coded on the same scale (0 to 1), and a logit model was specified as the dependent variable was dichotomous in both instances. Figure 4 displays the results of two of these regressions as coefficient plot.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

In looking at the results from the General Social Survey (2016), the education and gender variables do not reach statistical significance in either of the two subsamples. The age measure is statistically significant for the evangelical group and is signed in the negative direction. The final independent variable: party identification (with higher values indicating Republican ideology) is significant and signed in the negative direction, as well. However, the coefficients for each of the groups are not statistically distinct from one another indicating that party identification does not have a stronger impact for evangelicals than born again Protestants. The panel to the right contains results from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (2016). The general pattern is similar

⁶ CCES version: Do you support or oppose each of the following proposals? Always allow a woman to obtain an abortion as a matter of choice (Support/Oppose). GSS version: Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if the woman wants it for any reason? (Yes/No)

⁷ Full variable coding available in the appendix.

between the GSS and the CCES but there are a few notable differences in the CCES sample. Both age and education are statistically significant for the evangelical group, but are not significant for self-identified evangelicals. The remaining two variables, gender and party identification, are statistically significant for both groups, but only the latter indicates that the coefficients are distinct from one another, with party identification having a greater impact on abortion attitudes among those affiliated with an evangelical tradition than those who self-identify as evangelical. In addition, regression analysis was conducted for the 2010, 2012, and 2014 versions of the GSS. In both the 2010 and 2012 waves there is no statistically difference for any of the four independent variables, however in 2014 education is statistically significant for born again Protestants, but not for evangelicals, the pattern is repeated for Republican ID indicate that for the 2008 CCES, only the age variable diverges with it reaching statistical significance for self-identified evangelicals but not for those who affiliate with an evangelical tradition. The CCES 2012 sample does not reveal any statistical differences between the two measurement approaches, either in the magnitude of coefficients or statistical significance.⁸ The clear sense from these regression models is that there is little, if any, systematic difference between the evangelical measurements when considering an issue that should have a significant religious component.

Advice for Future Surveys

Taken as a whole, we feel confident in saying that either the affiliation measure or the self-identification approach provides a theoretically and statistically sound measurement of white evangelical Protestants in the United States. Analyzed from both descriptive as well as multivariate angles, we find that, in most cases, there is no real difference in the overall size or composition of either of these classification techniques. We offer this prescriptive to researchers of American political behavior: if space is running short on a survey it is possible to add a religious dimension to

⁸ All coefficient plots are available in the Appendix.

the instrument through the addition of two straightforward questions. However, if greater specificity is desired, using the full denominational approach (with appropriate follow-ups) is a sound collection technique, as well. To aid researchers in this endeavor, we have included question wording for new surveys in the Appendix. The 2016 presidential election showed that white evangelical Protestants are one of the most stable electoral coalitions, as well as the most important. Yet unlike more easily identifiable demographic groups, measuring evangelicals suffers from a multitude of measurement strategies that are often plagued by measurement error, inconsistency, and complexity, this much is evident in the findings of the Pew Research Center. Using their methodology pegs Trump received 81% of the vote from white evangelicals, under the two measures debated here a slightly different picture emerges. According to the CCES 2016, Trump received 79.2% support from white self-identified evangelicals, but just 75.9% of white respondents who affiliate with an evangelical church.

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

Bibliography

- Ballhaus, Rebecca. 2016. "\$100 Million? How Trump's Self-Funding Pledges Panned Out." *WSJ*. November 7. <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/11/07/pretty-much-self-funding-an-election-eve-look-at-trumps-campaign-financing/>.
- Bebbington, David W. 1988. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. Revised ed. London u.a.: Routledge.
- Djupe, Paul A., Jacob R. Neiheisel, and Anand E. Sokhey. 2017. "Reconsidering the Role of Politics in Leaving Religion: The Importance of Affiliation." *American Journal of Political Science*, doi:10.1111/ajps.12308.
- Eskridge, Larry. 2012. "Defining Evangelicalism | Wheaton." <http://www.wheaton.edu/isae/defining-evangelicalism>.
- Evans, J.H. 2002. "Polarization in Abortion Attitudes in US Religious Traditions, 1972–1998." In *Sociological Forum*, 17:397–422. Springer.
- French, David. 2016. "Evangelicals, Our Problem Is Spiritual, Not Political." *National Review*. October 11. <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/440968/evangelicals-spiritual-crisis-moral-failures-led-donald-trump>.
- Friedersdorf, Conor. 2016. "How the Party Decided on Trump." *The Atlantic*, May 3. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/05/how-gop-influencers-cued-voters-to-choose-donald-trump/480294/>.
- Green, J.C. 1996. *Religion and the Culture Wars: Dispatches from the Front*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Hackett, C., and D.M. Lindsay. 2008. "Measuring Evangelicalism: Consequences of Different Operationalization Strategies." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47 (3): 499–514.
- Hunter, James Davison. 1981. "Operationalizing Evangelicalism: A Review, Critique & Proposal." *Sociology of Religion* 42 (4): 363–72. doi:10.2307/3711547.
- Jelen, T.G., and C. Wilcox. 2003. "Causes and Consequences of Public Attitudes toward Abortion: A Review and Research Agenda." *Political Research Quarterly* 56 (4): 489.
- Kellstedt, Lyman, and Corwin Smidt. 1991. "Measuring Fundamentalism: An Analysis of Different Operational Strategies." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30 (3): 259–78. doi:10.2307/1386972.
- Lewis, Andrew R., and Dana Huyser De Bernardo. 2010. "Belonging Without Belonging: Utilizing Evangelical Self-Identification to Analyze Political Attitudes and Preferences." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49 (1): 112–26. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01495.x.
- Markoe, Lauren. 2016. "White Evangelicals, Catholics and Mormons Carried Trump." *Religion News Service*. November 9. <http://religionnews.com/2016/11/09/white-evangelicals-white-catholics-and-mormons-voted-decisively-for-trump/>.
- Marsden, George. 1990. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans.
- Noll, Mark A. 2010. *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys*. S.I.: IVP Academic.
- Schmalzbauer, John. 2002. *People of Faith: Religious Conviction in American Journalism and Higher Education*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Shellnutt, Kate. 2016. "Trump Elected President, Thanks to 4 in 5 White Evangelicals." *Gleanings | ChristianityToday.com*. November 9. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2016/november/trump-elected-president-thanks-to-4-in-5-white-evangelicals.html>.
- Shepard, Steven. 2016. "Democratic Insiders: Clinton's Ground Game Will Sink Trump." *POLITICO*. November 4. <http://politi.co/2f6VBbi>.

- Smietana, Bob. 2015. "What Is an Evangelical? Four Questions Offer New Definition." *Gleanings | ChristianityToday.com*. November 19.
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/november/what-is-evangelical-new-definition-nae-lifeway-research.html>.
- Smith, C.S. 1998. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Gregory A., and Jessica Martinez. 2016. "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis." *Pew Research Center*. November 9. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>.
- Smith, T.W. 1990. "Classifying Protestant Denominations." *Review of Religious Research*, 225–245.
- Steenland, B., J.Z. Park, M.D. Regnerus, and L.D. Robinson. 2000. "Measure of American Religion: Toward Improving the State of the Art, The." *Social Forces* 79: 291.
- Stetzer, Ed, and Ryan P. Burge. 2016. "Reltrad Coding Problems and a New Repository." *Politics and Religion* 9 (1): 187–90. doi:10.1017/S1755048315000929.
- Stouffer, S.A. 1955. "Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties: A Cross-Section of the Nation Speaks Its Mind." *Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955*.
- Vavreck, Lynn, and Douglas Rivers. 2008. "The 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 18 (4): 355–66. doi:10.1080/17457280802305177.
- Vogel, Kenneth, and Alex Isenstadt. 2016. "How Did Everyone Get It so Wrong?" *POLITICO*. November 9. <http://politi.co/2feuVaZ>.
- "What Is an Evangelical?" 2017. *National Association of Evangelicals*. Accessed March 14.
<https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>.

Figure 1

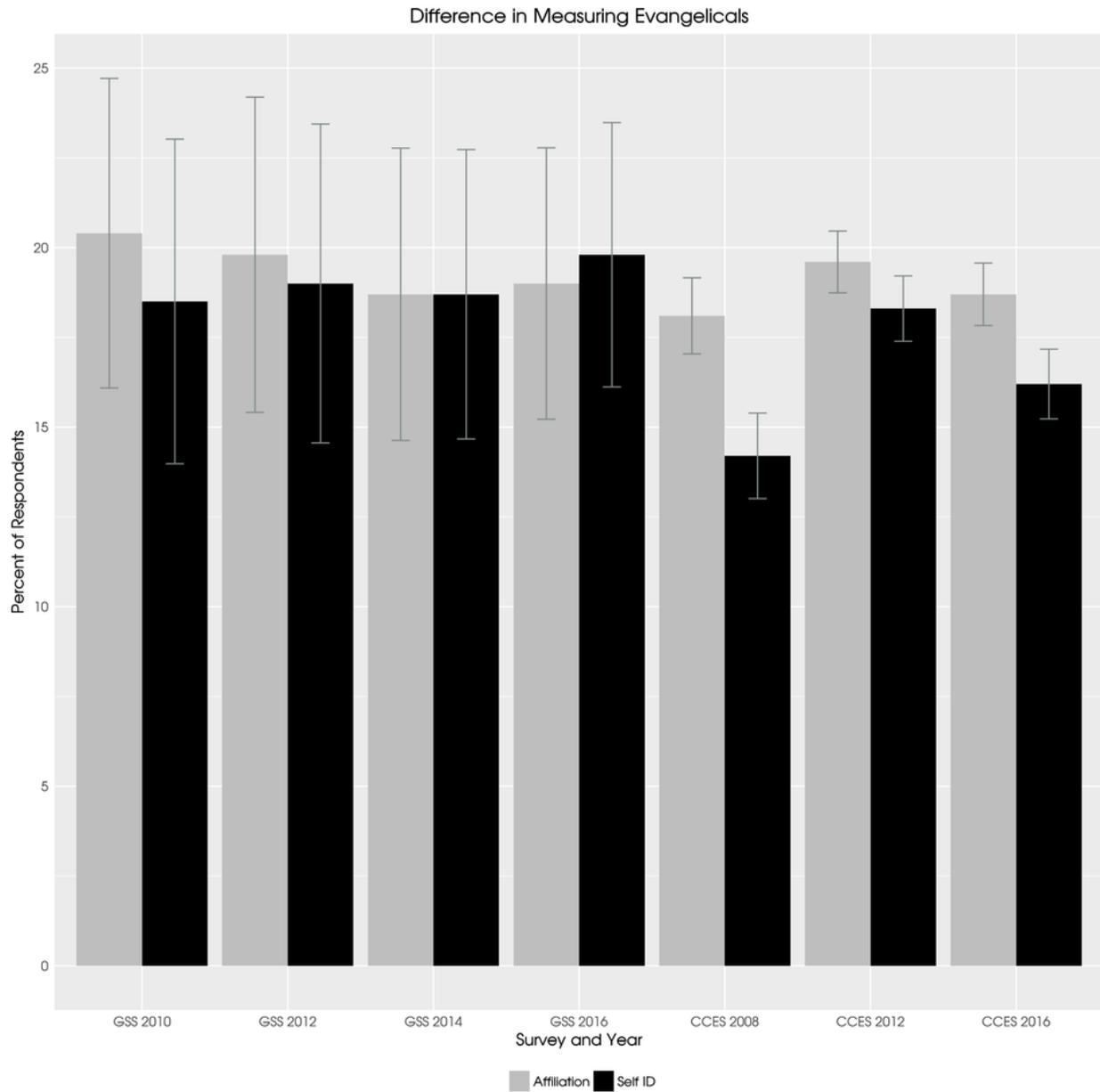


Figure 2

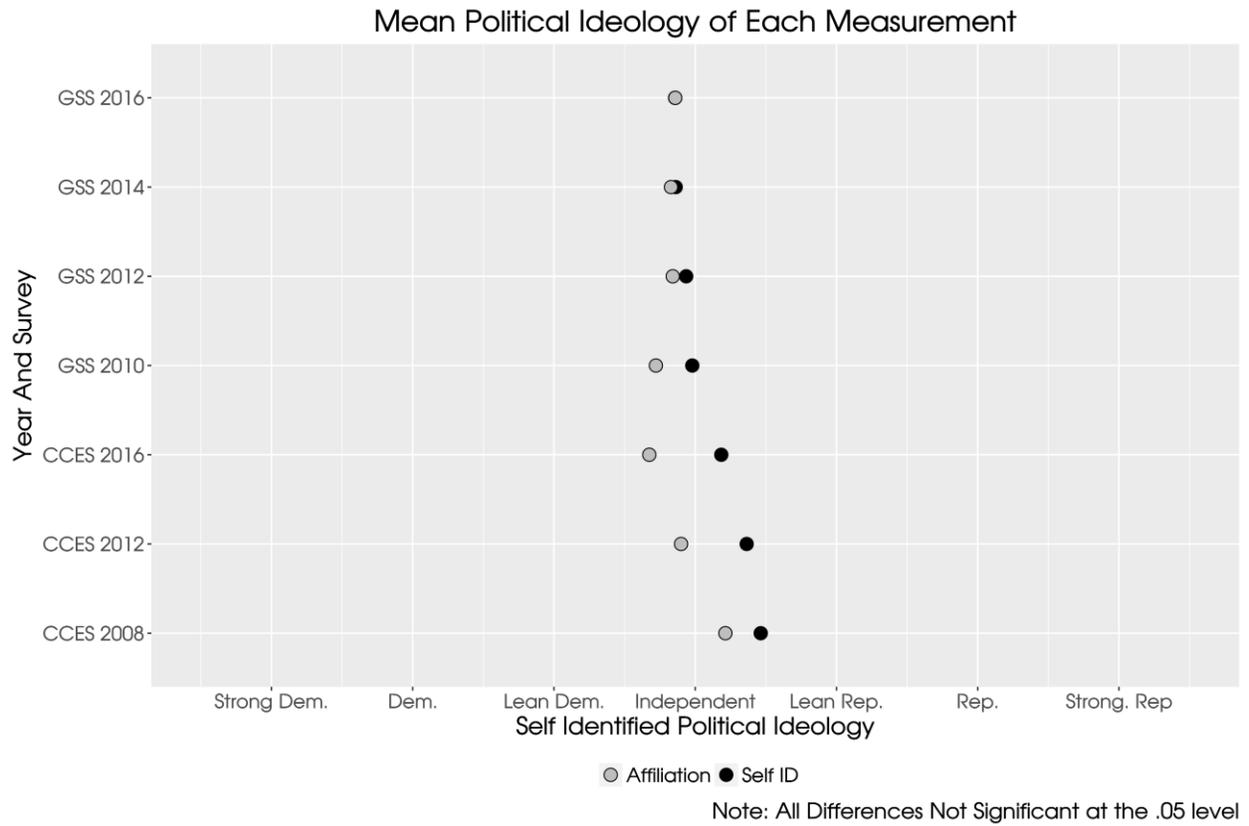


Figure 3

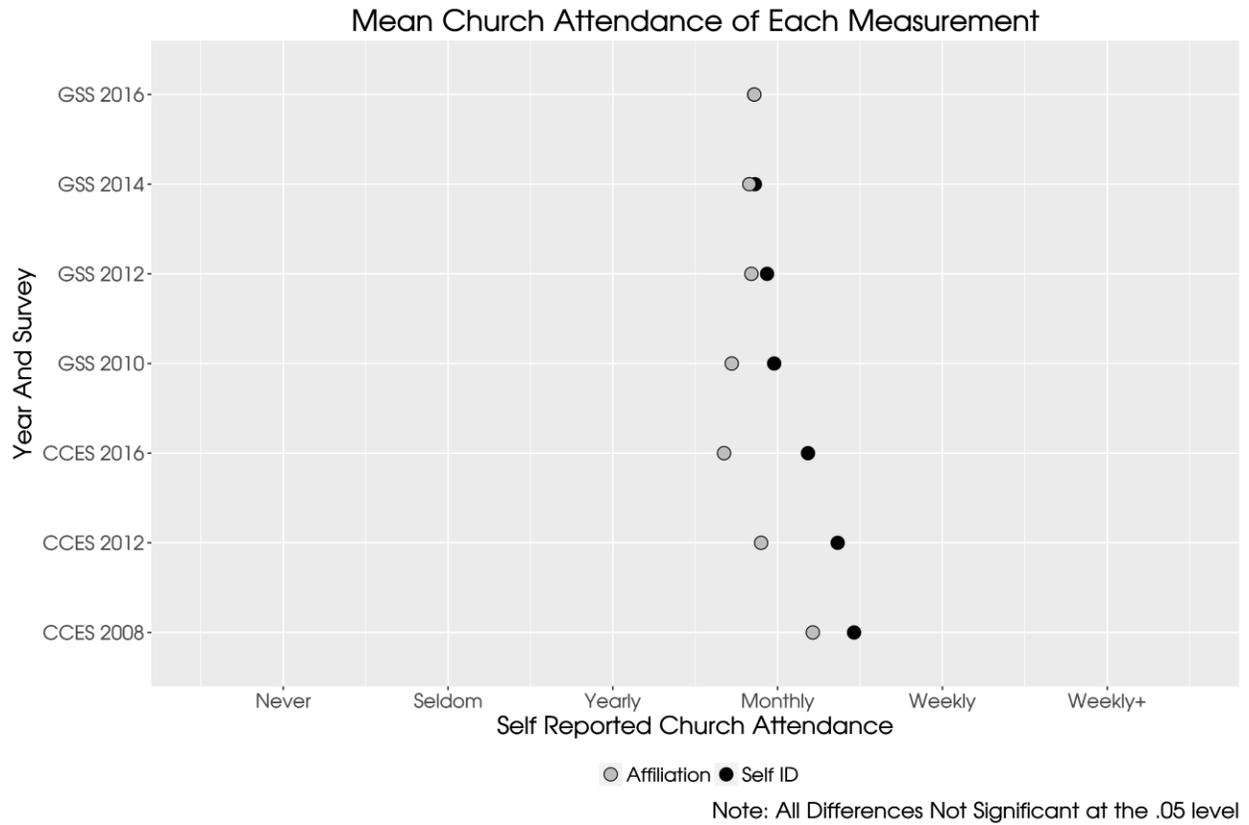


Figure 4

