

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 new found 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 three 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 actually 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” (Burge and Lewis 2018; Smith et al. 2018), there has been very little scholarship that describes how an individual alters their course in the immediate aftermath of a having a born-again conversion experience. Using panel surveys from two 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 how the average person sees the process of becoming born-again, and how that process can impact the religious landscape.

Becoming Born-Again From A Religious Perspective

The theological justification for an individual experiencing a born-again experience is found in a collection of verses scattered throughout the New Testament, however the longest meditation on the subject comes in the Gospel of John. In the third chapter of that book, Nicodemus, a respected Jewish leader in Jerusalem comes to visit Jesus at night for a theological discussion. Jesus says to him, “very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3 NIV). What follows is Nicodemus asking for clarification of this statement, as the Jewish leader understood birth as a biological process that individuals go through when they enter the world from their mother’s womb. Jesus goes on to explain, “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (John 3:6 NIV). This section of the chapter quickly moves away from the subject and Jesus begins to speak more generally about why He believes that He came into the world and Nicodemus is not heard from in the rest of the Bible.

While this may be the clearest explanation in the Bible of the concept of being born-again, the most famous example of this process happens to Saul of Tarsus in the book of Acts. Saul, a high-ranking Jewish official, who had spent years persecuting the early Christian church is on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus where he has been ordered to find and capture followers of Jesus. During his journey, Saul encounters a blinding light and is commanded to go to Damascus, but he must be led there by fellow travelers because the experience on the road rendered him both blind and mute. Eventually, a voice speaks to an early follower of Jesus named Ananias to go see Saul. When Ananias lays his hands on him the Bible says that, “scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again” (Acts 9:18a NIV). The chapter goes on to describe that Saul is baptized, gains strength, and immediately begins to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, renouncing his Jewish faith. Eventually, Saul is referred to by his Roman name: Paul, which is used throughout the rest of the Bible.

Paul’s story of undergoing a radical conversion is a central part of the theology of evangelical Christians (Balmer 2002, 236). This is especially the case in American evangelicalism, as it finds its theological roots in the early Puritan settlers who came to the New World. One religious historian notes that, “Almost every Puritan of stature appears to have had a profound conversion experience” (Brauer 1978, 230). Many of these Puritan ministers began to extol the virtues of having a born-again experience to the early settlers in the

Thirteen Colonies (Caldwell 2017). This “First Great Awakening” set the stage for an even larger revival movement in the United States during the early 1800’s when millions of Americans attended evangelical religious services and experienced a born-again conversion (Smith 2004). This tradition of the evangelical revival meeting was brought into the 20th Century through the ministry of Billy Graham, a Southern Baptist minister, who rose to prominence after a planned three week revival meeting in Los Angeles turned into eight weeks of capacity crowds, a fact that was covered extensively by the media (Dart 1997). Over his lifetime, 3.2 million individuals committed their lives to Jesus by having a born-again experience through the ministry of Billy Graham (Smith 2018), with one television broadcast of a Graham revival potentially reaching 2.5 billion viewers (Stammer 1996).

Becoming Born-Again From A Social Science Perspective

Yet, despite the fact that becoming born-again is a regular occurrence among evangelical Christians, social science has struggled to understand exactly how the conversion process works. 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 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, Smith, and Ritchey 2015). Looked at from this angle, it seems that the type of conversion that happens for a significant minority of Americans is not necessarily been studied by social science.

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).

While there have been some controversy regarding how to properly ask a survey question about being born-again (Dixon, Levy, and Lowery 1988; Schumm and Silliman 1990), social science clearly indicates that born-again respondents are more conservative politically than the American public, at large (Dixon, Lowery, and Jones 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. 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, Smidt, and Wilcox 1993, 208)

However, in the nearly three decades since these initial studies, religious identity has become more closely aligned with political partisanship (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). 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 individual’ worldview in the period directly after the conversion? None of these surveys that are the most widely used by social scientists ask respondents how long ago that their conversion took place, meaning that those who became born-again five days or fifty 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 in the immediate aftermath of such a conversion. However, with the release of two panel surveys in the last five years, 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 express a new identity? As previously mentioned, because being born-again is often seen as taking on a new identity 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/Measures

The data for this analysis comes from two 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 5,000 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 other survey employed here 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 9,500 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 weighted variable, which was included in the following analysis where appropriate.

Findings

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 for a total of 89.4% of respondents who maintained the same status between 2010 and 2014. For the VSG sample, 66.6% of respondents indicating no born-again experience in each of the three waves, while 22.3% replied that they were born again in 2011, 2016, and 2017. In total, 88.8% of the sample maintained their born-again status between 2011 and 2017. 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 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, however the total percentage of conversion changers was statistically the same.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Figure 1 is an alluvial diagram of the portion of each survey who indicated a change in conversion status in one of the three waves of each of the survey. The most likely path for this group was going from a born-again experience in the first wave to a not born-again experiences in Waves 2 and 3 (2.4% in the CCES and 3.5% in the VSG). 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 both samples, just 2.4% in the CCES and 1.9% in the VSG. Therefore, the overall impression given by these results is that a born-again status is a relatively infrequent occurrence but not exceedingly rare in the survey populations.¹

Demographic Factors

Is there a pattern that emerges among those who said that they have changed their born-again status across in each of the two surveys? Figure 2 displays the percentage of each group that changed their conversion status along with 95% confidence intervals for each estimate. The top left panel indicates that in both the CCES and VSG data, 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% more women indicating a change. The top right panel breaks each of the survey samples into five different age group and a clear difference develops between the two surveys. 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. 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 (Firebaugh and Harley 1991).

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The bottom left panel 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

¹ A table of these results is available in the Appendix

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 four-year college degree. This result provides 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, Bader, and Polson 2010; Wuthnow 2015). Finally, the bottom right panel displays the percentage of each racial group that changed their conversion status. The results here vary widely between data sources. For instance, Hispanics were twice as likely to change their status in the VSG panel than in the CCES results, and African-Americans were 50% more likely to change in the VSG data, as well. There is no discernible pattern among these results for race that would allow any strong conclusions.

Changes in Church Attendance

As previously described, 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. 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 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. Therefore, the most attendance change that is possible is +/- 5, with a score of zero indicating no attendance change.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

The top two panels of Figure 3 display how attendance changes occurred in the CCES panel data, with the left panel indicating those 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 to the assertion that conversion should lead to greater levels of attendance, while deconversion should lower the frequency. The bottom 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 bottom 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.

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 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 two left panels, while those who become a born-again Christian are indicated in the right two panels.

INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

The pattern here is of greater overall stability than was found in the church attendance analysis. For instance, in the four 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 these four graphs. It is clear that political partisanship is a more stable anchor point in American's lives than church attendance. 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 bottom two panels, visualizing the results from the Voter Study Group, indicate a somewhat different result. For instance, the bottom left panel 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 bottom right panel notes that those who became born-again were almost twice as likely to move toward the Democrat party than the Republican party. The results from both of these survey 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.

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

four- or six-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. However, what may be the most surprising finding is that there is no clear relationship between those becoming born-again being more likely to attend church much more frequently or express a stronger affiliation with the Republican party. In fact, these results may provide some support for the opposite conclusion, specifically those that become born-again are more likely to move to the Democratic party.

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.

A second 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” 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.

The other 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, but this was not evident in the CCES data. This is complicated by the fact that the question asks, “would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian, or not?” The survey question includes the term “evangelical” which may further confuse respondents.

Even with these caveats, this research offers a valuable insight into what should 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 immediate aftermath of their new-found religious identity. It may be that the dramatic conversion experience that happened to Saul 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 (Bielo 2012; Burge and Djupe 2014). Moving in and out of a religious tradition, can be a process fraught with enormous possibility and peril for individuals and social science has only begun to scratch the surface in explaining this process.

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FIGURE 1

How Do People Change Their Born Again Status?

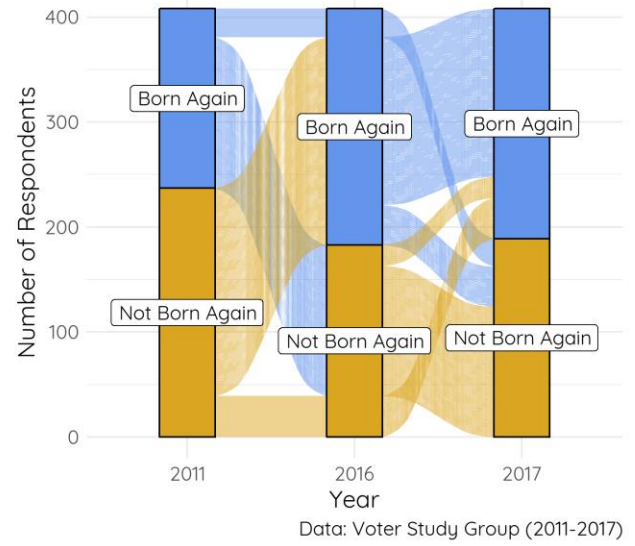
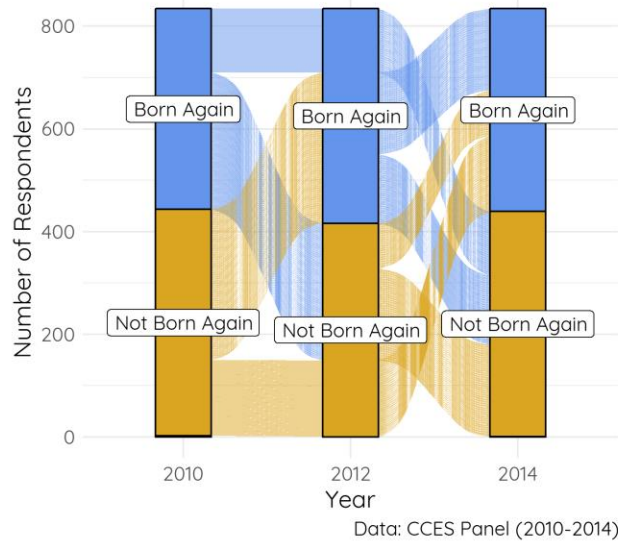


FIGURE 2

Born-Again Status Change by Demographics

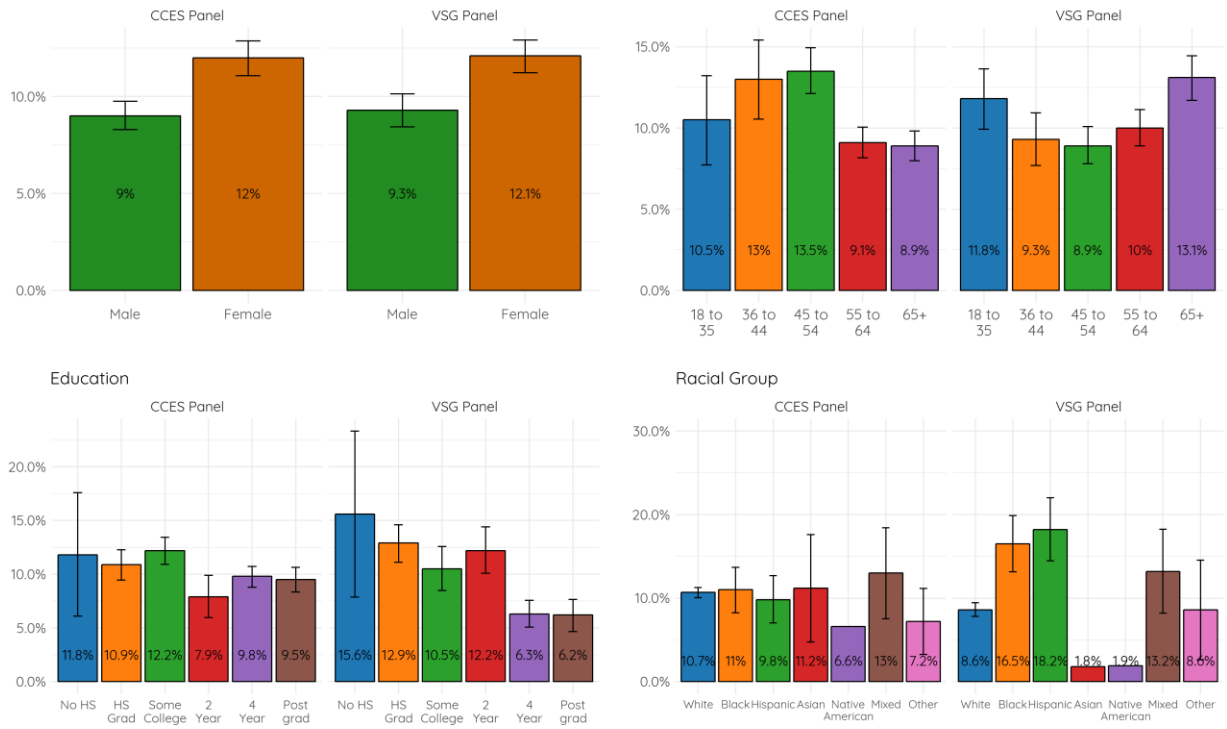


FIGURE 3

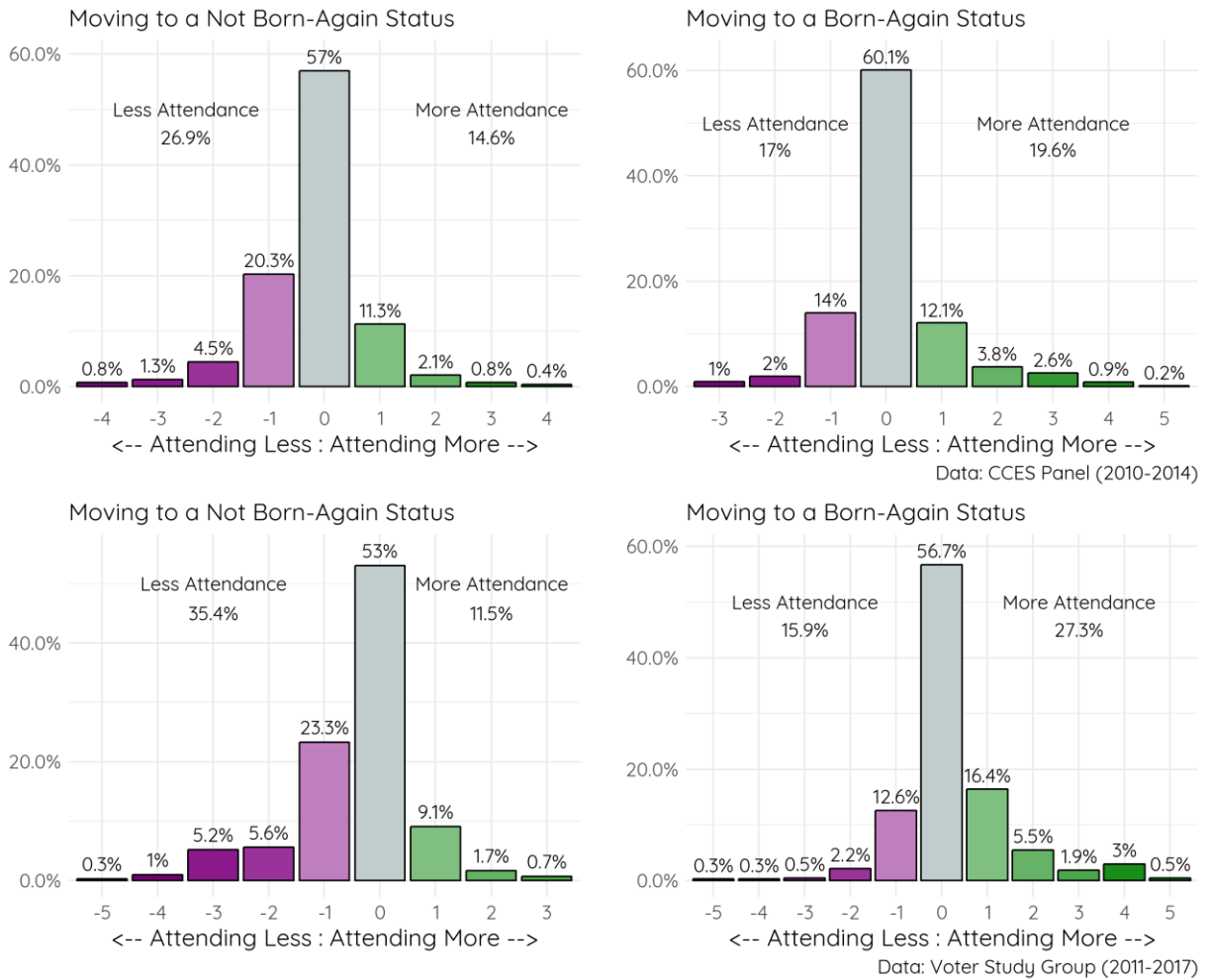
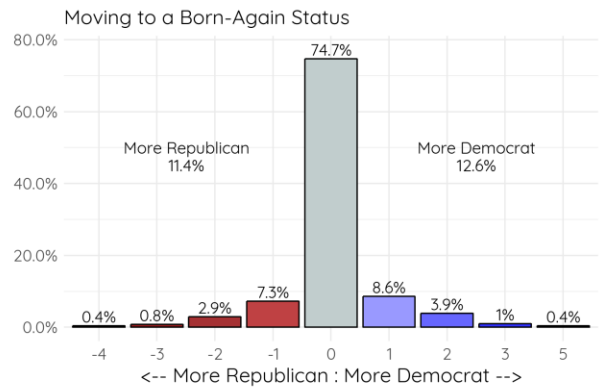
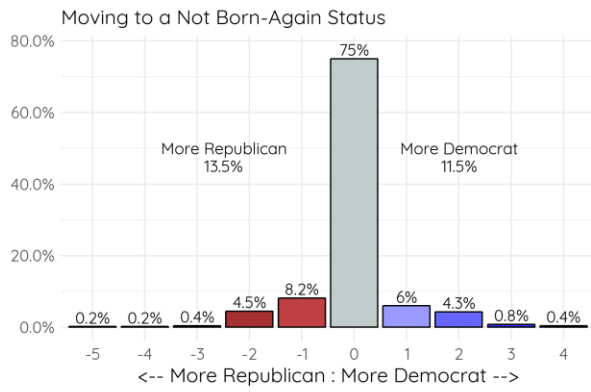
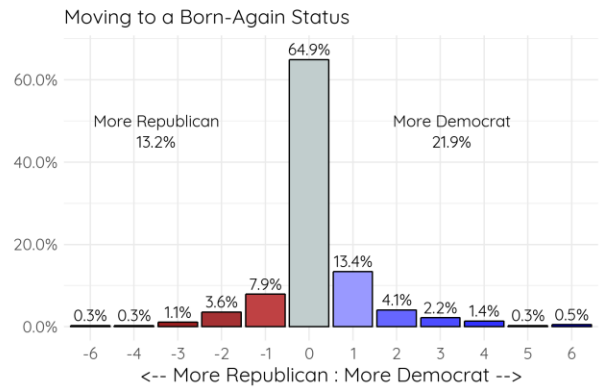
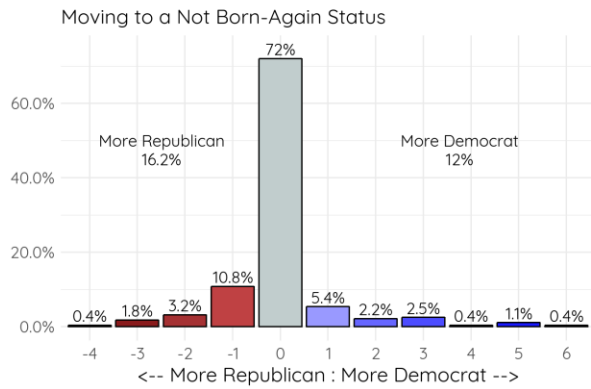


FIGURE 4



Data: CCES Panel (2010-2014)



Data: Voter Study Group (2011-2017)