

BORN AGAIN BUT NOT EVANGELICAL? HOW THE (DOUBLE-BARRELED) QUESTIONS YOU ASK AFFECT THE ANSWERS YOU GET

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Abstract Public opinion research often identifies evangelical Christians based on a double-barreled, yes-or-no, question asking respondents whether they are an evangelical *or* born-again Christian. This paper uses a survey experiment to demonstrate the implications of this measurement strategy. Among White Americans, more than one-third of those whom researchers classify as evangelical using the standard double-barreled question actually eschew the evangelical label; the same is true for just under two-thirds of African Americans. Additionally, these born-again *non*-evangelical Christians hold less conservative political outlooks compared to the self-identified evangelicals with whom they are grouped, and, in fact, oftentimes more closely resemble those who reject both the evangelical and born-again labels. Despite this, the double-barreled identification question produces a White “evangelical or born-again” group that looks politically similar to a composite “evangelical” or “born-again” group based on two questions asking about each identity separately. Finally, important differences appear across race, suggesting that religious and political histories affect how people interpret and respond to double-barreled questions.

The perils of double-barreled questions—single survey questions that ask about more than one topic—are well known. Indeed, a double-barreled

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question is “one of the most common survey mistakes . . . It’s also a great way you ruin your survey results” (SurveyMonkey 2019). And yet, researchers typically use a double-barreled question to identify a politically important group in the United States: evangelical Christians. After initially asking Americans about having a “born-again experience” in 1976, Gallup changed the yes-or-no question in 1986 to be: “Would you describe yourself as a ‘born-again’ or evangelical Christian?” The double-barreled version stuck, and the National Exit Poll as well as surveys commissioned by Pew Research Center, the Kaiser Foundation, and Associated Press-NORC have continued asking a similar question. Using this wording over the past 35 years has ensured question continuity—another key element of good survey design—however, researchers do not know whether and how the double-barreled nature of the question affects individuals’ responses. This paper examines just that.

Analyses of a question-wording experiment reveal that 1) asking two single-barreled questions produces a larger number of “evangelical or born-again” Christians than when the identities are asked using one double-barreled question; 2) a large share of “evangelical or born-again Christians,” particularly among African Americans, do not identify as evangelical at all; 3) while born-again Christians are less Republican, conservative, and supportive of Trump compared to those who identify with the evangelical label, a composite White “evangelical or born-again” group based on two single-barreled questions looks politically similar to the same group based on one double-barreled question; and 4) interpretations of and responses to the double-barreled versus single-barreled questions differ for White and African-American survey takers. These findings offer both methodological and substantive contributions to the public opinion literature. While researchers recognize the threats of double-barreled questions, this paper joins a small literature that empirically tests the consequences of using a double-barreled question. The findings also contribute to research exploring the nexus between religious and political attitudes, including White evangelicals’ continued support for Donald Trump, politics’ effects on religious choices, and the implications of an increasingly diverse evangelical tradition.

Background

IDENTIFYING EVANGELICALS: LESSONS FROM THE MEASUREMENT LITERATURE

Without theoretically grounded and carefully crafted survey questions, researchers would have little to say about the individual-level relationship between religion and politics. Recognizing this, scholars have spent decades studying how best to distill an often complex and individualized combination

of beliefs, practices, and identities into digestible close-ended questions (Wilcox, Jelen, and Leege 1993; Layman 2001; Green 2007). This paper homes in on and explores the consequences of a measurement strategy commonly used to identify evangelical Christians.

Identifying evangelicals in a survey is difficult because scholars do not agree on whether evangelicalism is best measured as identification with a group or social movement (Wilcox et al. 1993; Hackett and Lindsay 2008), adherence to a set of beliefs (Guth et al. 1988; Hunter 1991; Barna Group 2007; Lifeway Research 2015), or membership in certain religious denominations (Kellstedt et al. 1996; Steensland et al. 2000; Lehman and Sherkat 2018). This ongoing religious measurement debate (Lehman and Sherkat 2018; Shelton 2018; Sherkat and Lehman 2018; Smith 2018; Burge and Djupe 2021) has real-world implications, as different definitions of who “is” an evangelical change the narrative about this group (Hunter 1991; Hackett and Lindsay 2008; Woodberry et al. 2012). Consequently, researchers have started doing the important work of exploring whether there are political differences between “evangelicals” based on different measurement schemes (Hackett and Lindsay 2008; Burge and Lewis 2018; Smith et al. 2018; Smidt 2022); however, little research to date has explored the fact that the self-identification question is actually two questions in one (see, however, Smidt 2022).¹

Survey researchers have long recognized that double-barreled questions, which are a specific form of ambiguous survey questions, are highly problematic (Krosnick and Presser 2010; Pew Research Center 2017). Asking about two constructs or objects at one time, often using “or” or “and”, increases the amount of information that respondents must process, which can reduce accuracy (Oksenberg, Cannell, and Kalton 1991; Beatty and Willis 2007; Menold 2020), particularly when respondents have different attitudes toward the two objects (Sinkowitz-Cochran 2013; Cragun 2019). Scholars have shown that survey respondents assign different meanings to single- and double-barreled questions (Menold 2020) and spend more time on and ask more clarifying questions about double-barreled questions compared to their single-barreled counterparts (Bassili and Scott 1996). Measurement quality—specifically reliability and validity—also suffers

1. “Evangelical” and “born again” are related, but not interchangeable, concepts. While many who hold the beliefs associated with evangelicalism have had a “born-again” experience, there are other “confessional” evangelicals who have not (Hunter 1983; Guth et al. 1988). Moreover, having a born-again experience may be considered a necessary, but not sufficient, component of being an evangelical (Barna Group 2007; National Association of Evangelicals 2021), and initial survey evidence suggests that survey takers do not consider the terms to be synonymous (Newport 2018; Smidt 2022). Smidt (2022) explores the differences between born-again and evangelical identities for White Americans. These results, while informative, do not address the consequences of asking about both identities in a single question.

when employing double-barreled questions (Menold 2020). And, perhaps most importantly, separating a double-barreled question into its component parts can change our understanding of public opinion. For example, whereas results from a Gallup survey suggested that over 40 percent of Americans believe that God created humans in the last 10,000 years, support for this extreme creationist viewpoint declined precipitously when Grant Levy (2019) separated beliefs about the time frame from the role of the supernatural. A double-barreled question, by fundamentally changing how people interpret and answer a survey question, can affect the main takeaways from public opinion research.

Bringing together the methodological literatures on religious measurement and survey design results in two foundational research questions.

- *RQ1*: If the “evangelical or born-again” question taps into two distinct constructs, how do respondents vary in their rates of identification with the two labels?²
- *RQ2*: If people interpret, understand, and respond to single- and double-barreled questions differently, does the absolute size of the “evangelical or born-again” Christian group differ depending on whether respondents answer a double-barreled question or two single-barreled questions?

Having discussed how survey design can influence response patterns, the religion and politics literature describes the ways in which the double-barreled question may shape—or be shaped by—the political landscape.

IDENTIFYING EVANGELICALS: LESSONS FROM THE RELIGION AND POLITICS LITERATURE

The evolution of religious language highlights the difficulty that pollsters faced when creating a survey question meant to identify evangelical Christians. For example, the contemporary evangelical movement emerged in the 1940s to distinguish itself from the fundamentalist evangelical movement, with fundamentalists stressing otherworldly concerns and separation from society and contemporary evangelicals seeking engagement with the broader world (Smidt 1988; Balmer 2010). Despite fundamentalist Protestantism being a strand of evangelical Christianity, a fundamentalist

2. In their conclusion, Hackett and Lindsay (2008) note a 2002 PBS/U.S. News & World Report Survey that finds that 38 percent of born-again Christians would also describe themselves as evangelical and 75 percent of self-identified evangelicals would call themselves born-again Christians. Similarly, Smidt (2022) finds that 30 to 40 percent of survey respondents identify as born-again Christians, while fewer than 20 percent, on average, report identifying as evangelical.

Protestant may not have identified with the evangelical label on account of the modern connotations associated with the term. Relatedly, many who we think of as evangelicals today rejected the label in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, Foy Valentine, the executive director of the Southern Baptist Convention's Christian Life Commission, famously said: "We are not evangelicals. That's a Yankee word" (Camp 2010), noting that the term "evangelical" had often been used to describe Northern (and educated) Protestants. Consequently, when *Christianity Today*—evangelicalism's flagship publication—surveyed Christians in 1979, they avoided the term "evangelical" altogether; the survey instead asked respondents about having had a "born-again experience" (Hackett and Lindsay 2008). Pollsters in the 1970s and 1980s recognized the potential problems associated with asking directly and solely about an evangelical identity, and these concerns may explain the decision to ask about born-again and evangelical identities together.

Importantly, the religious-political environment has also changed dramatically in the decades since Gallup first asked whether respondents identified as "evangelical or born-again." The year 1976—"the year of the evangelical"—saw the rise of Jimmy Carter as the first born-again president, with Southern Democratic evangelicals supporting his candidacy. Since that time, religion—particularly evangelicalism—has become closely associated with the Republican Party (Putnam and Campbell 2010; Campbell, Green, and Layman 2011; Patrikios 2013), and this linkage has shaped Americans' decisions about church attendance (Margolis 2018c) and membership (Djupe, Neihsel, and Sokhey 2018) as well as religious (non)-identification (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Campbell et al. 2018; Margolis 2018a), particularly for White Americans. This research suggests that Democrats (Republicans), even those who are quite devout (not very religious), may eschew (adopt) the evangelical identity on account of their political outlooks. These findings—coupled with the research showing that double-barreled questions are particularly problematic when respondents' evaluations of the individual constructs differ (Sinkowitz-Cochran 2013; Cragun 2019)—raise the possibility that today's religiously charged political environment might affect survey responses. More specifically, people may respond differently to a double-barreled question asking about "evangelical or born-again" identities compared to two single-barreled questions asking about the identities separately.

Applying the recent research exploring the complicated relationship between religion and politics to the measurement issue at hand produces two additional research questions:

- *RQ3*: What do people who hold different combinations of the "evangelical" or "born-again" identity look like with respect to their demographic traits and political opinions?

- *RQ4*: Would creating a composite “born-again or evangelical” category based on two single-barreled questions produce a group that looks similar to or different from (with respect to demographics and political opinions) the double-barreled “born-again or evangelical” group?

Finally, there are also reasons to suspect that different groups of Americans might interpret the double-barreled question differently, thereby qualifying our answers to the previous four research questions. As both the absolute number and relative size of non-White evangelicals continue to grow (Wong 2018a), scholars have demonstrated key differences in evangelical histories, theologies, opinions, and behaviors based on race and ethnicity. For example, White supremacist attitudes and behaviors in the United States can be tied to White evangelical theology (Balmer 2010; Jones 2020; Butler 2021). Meanwhile, Black Protestantism—which developed on account of racism and exclusion from White churches—promotes a different theological worldview from White evangelicalism. While still evangelical in their orientation, Black Protestant denominations emphasize the literal word of the Bible on issues such as “injustice, exploitation, and neglect of the less fortunate; and has underscored the imperative of promoting fairness and equality” (McDaniel and Ellison 2008, p. 182). Distinctive theological worldviews, paired with the continued racial segregation that takes place in houses of worship (Smietana 2015; Wong 2018a), results in evangelical Americans of different political stripes. White evangelicals, on the one hand, are conservative in their policy views and supportive of Republican candidates (Layman 2001; Wong 2018a); Black evangelicals, on the other hand, are more progressive in their policy views and make up the backbone of the Democratic Party (Putnam and Campbell 2010; Wong 2018a). These findings prompt most scholars to look at evangelicals (and Christians more generally) separately based on race and ethnicity (Steenland et al. 2000; Valenzuela 2014; Wong 2015, 2018b); they also raise the possibility that White and Black Christians respond to the single- versus double-barreled question wording differently. This evidence leads to a fifth research question to be addressed by the present research:

- *RQ5*: If question wording affects the size, demographic makeup, and political outlook of evangelical Christians, is the effect similar for Black and White Christians?

In other words, *RQ5* asks whether the answers to *RQ1*–*RQ4* vary as a function of race. *RQ5*, therefore, represents an overarching question that I address in the process of answering the first four questions.

Data and Methods

In October 2019, I ran a population-based online survey experiment using data from the National Opinion Research Center's (NORC) AmeriSpeak Panel. AmeriSpeak respondents represent a random sample of American households; see the [Supplementary Material](#) for information about how AmeriSpeak recruits its online panel. The analyses focus on three groups. First, I discuss the results of the 2134 respondents who identified as either Protestant or "Just Christian" at the survey's outset. I refer to these individuals as "Protestant or Christian" throughout the paper.³ I also look at subsamples of non-Hispanic White ($N = 1406$) and African American ($N = 374$) Protestants and Christians in order to answer *RQ5*.⁴ After accepting the invitation to take part in a research study, providing informed consent, and answering NORC's religious identification question, qualified respondents were randomly assigned into one of three experimental conditions and asked more about their religious identities. The first treatment condition asked the traditional double-barreled self-identification question on its own screen: "Would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian, or not?" The second condition asked two questions separately, first about evangelical identity ("Would you describe yourself as an evangelical Christian, or not?") and then about born-again identity ("Would you describe yourself as a born-again Christian, or not?"). The third condition asked the two questions in reverse order as a way to reduce concerns about question-ordering effects.⁵ Each single-barreled question appeared on its own screen.

Using the two single-barreled questions, I then create religious sub-categorizations. I differentiate between respondents who identify as: evangelical but not born again (*Evan only*), born again but not evangelical (*BA only*), both evangelical and born again (*Evan and BA*), and neither evangelical nor born again (*Neither*).⁶ Further, I use the single-barreled questions to create an "evangelical or born-again" group made up of respondents who identify as either an evangelical Christian or a born-again Christian (or both),

3. Amerispeak invited 14,870 individuals from their panel to participate in the study. The cooperation rate for this study is 28.8 percent, which is the screener completion rate (29.8 percent) multiplied by the survey completion rate (96.7 percent). Here, the screener asks respondents their religious identities. The cooperation rate on this study matches other TESS studies. TESS studies are often part of larger omnibus surveys; however, this study was a standalone.

4. Scholars have also taken notice of "evangelical Catholics" (Welch and Legee 1991) as well as Latinx and Asian evangelicals (Valenzuela 2014; Wong 2015, 2018a); however, the present analyses do not look at these groups due to sample size.

5. [Supplementary Material section C](#) discusses the potential for and interpretations of question-ordering effects. Question-ordering effects do not produce or dramatically alter the main results.

6. The analyses that follow focus on groups that have at least 65 respondents. The [Supplementary Material \(section A\)](#) details and discusses the sample sizes used in the main analyses.

when asked separately—producing the *union* of the two questions. To explore core demographic and political differences across these religious subgroups, I code whether a respondent: self-identifies as female (1) versus male (0); resides in the South (1) versus elsewhere (0); is married (1) or not (0); is 30 years old or less (1) versus older than 30 (0); is 65 years old or more (1) versus under 65 (0); and has a college degree (1) or not (0). The five binary political variables measure respondents' partisanship, ideology, vote choice in 2012 and 2016, and presidential approval.⁷ Respondents who identify as Republican or conservative, report having voted for Romney in 2012 or Trump in 2016, and approve of Donald Trump's performance as president are coded as 1 on each respective measure, whereas other respondents receive a score of 0.⁸

The figures below present weighted proportions and difference-of-proportions in order to visually display whether subsets of those in the “evangelical or born-again Christian” category look similar to one another or not.⁹ To corroborate the visual findings, I use OLS regression analyses to produce the standard errors and *p*-values noted in the paper.¹⁰ I treat *p*-values < 0.10 as the cutoff for statistical significance; however, I present all standard errors and *p*-values in the main text so readers can make their own assessments. Further, to assess whether there are any racial differences in the empirical patterns presented, I classify White (African American) respondents as those who both self-identify racially as White (Black or African American) and who also do not identify as Hispanic. With this coding, I run difference-in-difference models—represented by an interaction term—to test whether the magnitude of a particular finding is the same for Black and White respondents.

7. With the exception of the presidential approval question, AmeriSpeak measured the demographic and political variables when respondents first joined the panel and then on an annual basis thereafter. If a respondent had not answered one of the demographic or political variables, that person received the question at the end of the survey. The presidential approval question as well as a series of attitudinal questions appeared after the question-wording experiment. Random assignment determined the order in which questions on these topics appeared, and questions on different topics appeared on different screens. Full question wordings are available in [Supplementary Material section A](#).

8. For the analyses that follow, I classify partisan leaners as partisans (Keith et al. 1992; Pew Research Center 2015); respondents who consider themselves slightly liberal (conservative), liberal (conservative), and extremely liberal (conservative) as liberal (conservative); and respondents who somewhat or strongly approve of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as president as approving. Alternative coding schemes yield similar statistical and substantive results.

9. Weighted and unweighted data produce substantively and statistically similar results. The analyses do not control for design effects.

10. OLS regression provides a straightforward and easily interpretable way to test the difference-in-proportions across the treatment groups. Logistic regressions, however, produce similar statistical and substantive results. Unless specifically noted, the models do not include any control variables and include only the relevant groups being compared as independent variables.

Experimental Results

Figure 1 visualizes respondents' willingness to identify with the "evangelical" and "born-again" labels (*RQ1*) for the full sample of Protestants and Christians (top panel). The left set of bars looks at respondents who answered two single-barreled questions. These four bars show that "evangelical" and "born again" are not interchangeable religious terms in the minds of survey respondents. About 30 percent identify with one label—either only as an evangelical (5 percent) or born again (24 percent)—28 percent identify with both labels, and 43 percent do not identify with either label. Among respondents who only identify with one label, 83 percent identify only as a born-again Christian. More generally, one in four Protestants and Christians considers themselves "born-again" but rejects the term "evangelical," and more than four in ten (42 percent) of those who identify with at least one label would be more accurately classified as non-evangelical born-again Christians. These results comport with previous research showing that "born again" is a more common label than "evangelical" (Hackett and Lindsay 2008; Smidt 2022).

The second set of bars shows that measuring identities separately produces a larger "evangelical or born-again" composite group than measuring both identities in a single question (*RQ2*). The single-barreled bar displays the percentage of respondents who reported identifying as an evangelical *or* born-again Christian (or both) when asked separately. The double-barreled bar represents the percent of respondents who identify as an "evangelical or born-again Christian" using the traditional double-barreled question. Fifty-seven percent consider themselves an "evangelical" or "born-again" Christian (single barreled), which is 5.1 percentage points *higher* than the percent affirming the double-barreled identity (s.e. = 2.22; p -value = 0.026).¹¹

Having addressed *RQ1* and *RQ2* using the full sample of Protestants and Christians, I next revisit these questions to assess whether the patterns are similar for White and Black respondents (*RQ5*). The middle panel of **figure 1** presents the results for White respondents who identify as either Protestant or Christian. Perhaps not surprisingly, as non-Hispanic White respondents make up a majority of the sample (62 percent), the results for the White subsample reveal a pattern similar to the full sample of respondents. The born-again label is once again adopted with greater frequency than the evangelical

11. In order to allow readers to perform an "eyeball test" of 95 percent statistical significance across different samples, 84 percent confidence intervals surround the proportions. Confidence intervals that do not overlap indicate that the difference between two samples is statistically significant at approximately the $p < 0.05$ level. [Supplementary Material section D](#) discusses if and how acquiescence bias plays a role in these findings.

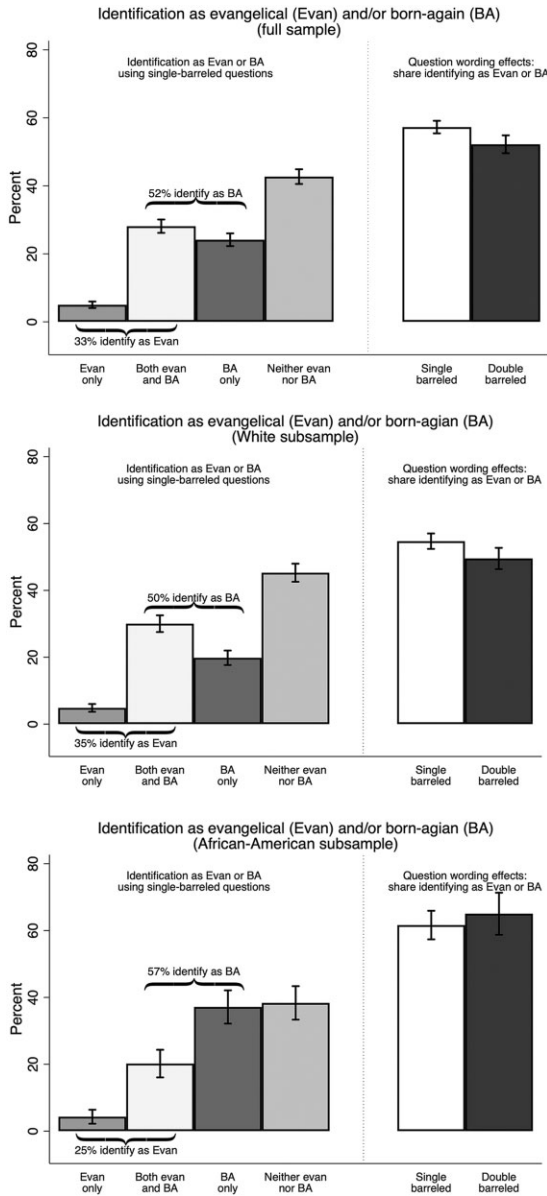


Figure 1. Response distributions based on question wording.

label, and the composite “evangelical” or “born-again” group based on the union of two single-barreled questions is about five percentage points higher than the group that emerges based on the double-barreled question

(s.e. = 2.78; p -value = 0.062).¹² The bottom panel, which looks at African American respondents, tells a somewhat different story. The left part of the panel shows that far fewer African Americans call themselves evangelical (25 percent) compared to born again (57 percent). Moreover, 37 percent identify as born-again Christians but not evangelicals, 20 percent identify with both labels, and 4 percent (11 respondents) identify only as an evangelical. These differences in identification, however, do not translate into differently sized groups based on whether we classify respondents based on two single-barreled questions or one double-barreled question (right part of figure; difference = -3.40; s.e. = 5.50; p -value = 0.537).

Looking at the patterns of both White and African-American respondents together yields four important takeaways. First, while African-American respondents are more likely than White respondents to accept both the double-barreled (difference = 15.50; s.e. 5.08; p -value = 0.002) and single-barreled born-again (difference = 7.47; s.e. = 3.38; p -value = 0.027) labels, African Americans are much less likely to accept the evangelical label (difference = -10.38; s.e. = 3.16; p -value = 0.001). This finding confirms theories and arguments suggesting that the term “evangelical” is predominantly associated with White religion. Second, and relatedly, both White and Black respondents are more receptive to the term “born-again Christian” relative to “evangelical Christian” despite the fact that journalists and academics often refer to this group as evangelicals. Third, while the double-barreled question wording produces a White “evangelical or born-again” group that is smaller than a composite group based on the union of the single-barreled questions, there is no difference among African Americans.¹³ These results suggest that not all subgroups interpret double-barreled questions in the same manner. And fourth, the breakdown of which component identities people adopt varies across Black and White respondents. Whereas 55 percent of White respondents who identify with at least one religious label actually accept both, this is the case for only 33 percent of Black respondents. Put another way, while the majority of White identifiers do, in fact, accept both the born-again and evangelical labels, the overwhelming majority of so-called “Black evangelicals” actually reject the evangelical label.

12. One in five white Protestants and Christians considers themselves “born again” but reject the term “evangelical,” and more than one in three (36 percent) of those who identify with at least one label (constituting the union) would be more accurately classified as non-evangelical born-again Christians.

13. The difference-in-difference estimate comparing the double-barreled and union measures for African-American and White respondents is 8.58 (s.e. = 6.07; p -value = 0.158). While this result is not statistically significant at conventional levels, it is worth noting that the relationship runs in opposite directions for respondents of different races. Among White respondents, the union produces a larger subsample of “evangelicals or born-again” Christians; among African-American respondents, the double-barreled question produces the larger group.

WHAT DO “BORN-AGAIN” AND “EVANGELICAL” CHRISTIANS LOOK LIKE,
DEMOGRAPHICALLY AND POLITICALLY?

I next use responses to the single-barreled questions to examine whether demographic characteristics and political attitudes vary across the combinations of “evangelical” and “born-again” identities (*RQ3*). The figures present weighted proportions for *Neither*, *BA only*, and *Evan and BA* respondents; there are too few *Evan only* respondents to include in the analyses.¹⁴

The top parts of [figure 2](#)’s panels show demographic differences, which present a somewhat muddled story. Among the full Protestant and Christian sample (top panel) there are no differences between those who identify as *Evan and BA*, *BA only*, and *Neither* in the proportion female and being under 30 years old. *BA only* respondents, however, are more likely to live in the South, less likely to be over 65, and less likely to have a college degree compared to *Evan and BA* and *Neither* respondents. Further, *Evan and BA* respondents are more likely to be married than other respondents. The White subsample (middle panel) once again looks similar to the full sample.¹⁵ Among African-American respondents (bottom panel), *BA only* respondents are more likely to be female compared to *Neither* respondents (p -value = 0.027); *Evan and BA* respondents are less likely to be under 30 years old compared to *BA only* (p -value = 0.093) and *Neither* (p -value = 0.025) respondents and more likely to be 65 and older compared to *BA only* (p -value = 0.023) and *Neither* (p -value = 0.074) respondents. There are no statistical differences across the three groups with respect to residing in the South, being married, and having a college degree. While these results do not lend themselves to a neat story about what sorts of Christians identify with different labels, they make it clear that there are demographic differences among those who make up the “evangelical or born-again” group.

In contrast, a clearer picture of political differences emerges among the three religious subgroups.¹⁶ In both the full and White samples, *Evan and BA* respondents are more likely to be Republican and conservative, have

14. Once again, 84 percent confidence intervals surround the proportions in order for readers to visualize whether differences between groups are statistically significant at the traditional 95 percent level. Confidence intervals that do not overlap indicate that the difference between the two samples is statistically significant at approximately the $p < 0.05$ level.

15. Compared to the full sample, there is only one difference in the results: there is no statistically significant difference in the proportion married between *BA only* and *BA and Evan*. See [Supplementary Material section B](#) for full results, including point estimates, standard errors, and p -values.

16. [Supplementary Material section B](#) discusses replicated analyses that test whether political differences emerge because of demographic differences across the groups. I do not find evidence that demographic differences produce the political gaps I discuss in the main text of the paper.

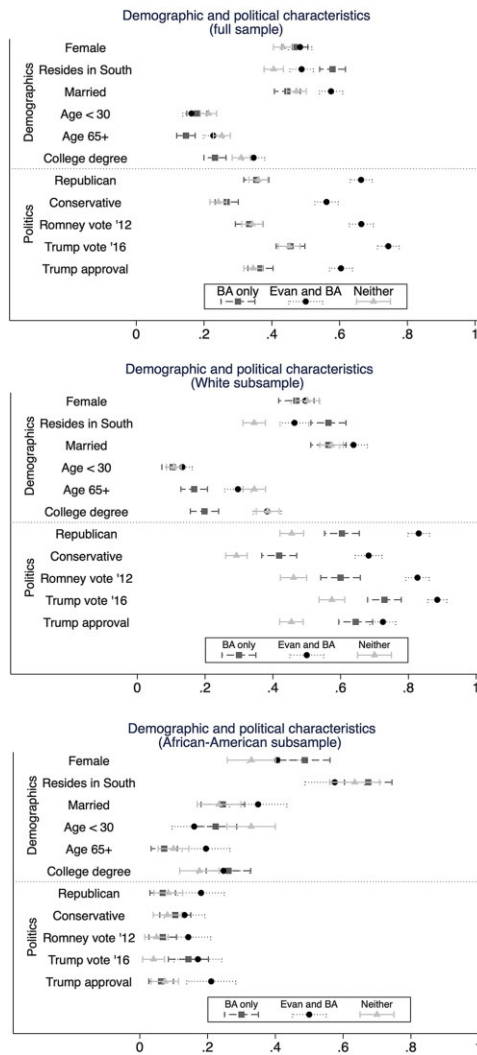


Figure 2. Demographic and political characteristics based on responses to single-barreled identification questions.

Demographic and political variables are binary and indicate whether a respondent is a member of the category (1) or not (0). Point estimates represent the proportion of a sample that is part of a category.

voted for Romney in 2012 and Trump in 2016, and approve of Trump's performance as president compared to *BA only* and *Neither* respondents. Moreover, there are no statistical differences in political outlooks between

BA only respondents and *Neither* respondents in the full sample. In other words, non-evangelical born-again Christians look like Protestants and Christians who eschew both labels and quite dissimilar from those who accept both labels. Among White Protestants and Christians, *BA only* respondents fall between those who accept and eschew both labels, landing closer to those in the latter group. The one exception is that *BA only* and *Evan and BA* respondents provide roughly similar presidential approval ratings (difference = -0.08, p -value = 0.08).¹⁷ Among African Americans, *Evan and BA* respondents are more likely to identify as Republican compared to the *Neither* (p -value = 0.059) and *BA only* respondents (p -value = 0.029), more likely to have voted for Romney in 2012 compared to the *Neither* respondents (p -value = 0.057), more likely to have voted for Donald Trump in 2016 compared to the *Neither* respondents (p -value = 0.023), and more likely to approve of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as president compared to the *Neither* (p -value = 0.008) and *BA only* (p -value = 0.004) respondents.^{18,19} In contrast, only on 2016 vote choice do I find a political difference between *BA only* and *Neither* respondents, with the *BA only* respondents voting for Trump at a higher rate (difference = 0.10; p -value = 0.04). The two groups otherwise look politically indistinguishable. Together, these results suggest that acceptance of the evangelical label generally corresponds with more conservative political outlooks (*RQ3*), and this pattern holds for both Black and White respondents (*RQ5*).

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO THE DEMOGRAPHIC MAKEUP AND POLITICAL ATTITUDES OF EVANGELICALS IF WE MEASURED THE GROUP DIFFERENTLY?

Finally, [figure 3](#) examines the implications of using the double-barreled question for the full (top), White (middle), and African-American (bottom) sample of respondents, addressing *RQ4* and *RQ5*. The gray circles and dashed confidence intervals represent the difference-in-proportions comparing respondents who identify as an evangelical or born-again Christian when asked using single-barreled questions (*union*) to respondents who identify as

17. Interestingly, roughly equal proportions of *BA only* respondents report identifying as Republican, voting for Trump in 2016, and approving of the job Trump is doing as president. Among *Evan and BA* respondents, the rates of Republican identification and Trump vote is much higher than approval rates. The lack of a difference between the *BA only* and *Evan and BA* groups on Trump approval stems from *Evan and BA* respondents reporting lower levels of approval than one might predict based on party identification and vote choice.

18. There are 91, 65, and 88 African-American respondents, respectively, in the *BA only*, *Evan and BA*, and *Neither* categories.

19. I do not find evidence of ideological differences among African Americans. Traditional ideology question may not be a valid measure for understanding African-American ideology ([Jefferson 2021](#)), which may explain the null result.

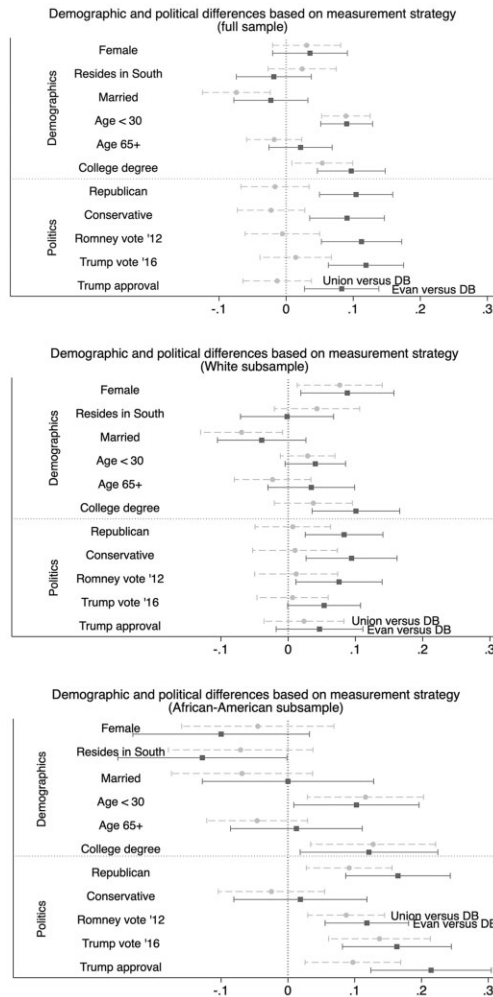


Figure 3. Demographic and political differences of groups based on question wording. Union versus DB is the “evangelical or born-again” group based on the single-barreled questions (1) compared to the double-barreled question (0). Evan versus DB is the evangelical group based on the single-barreled evangelical identification question (1) versus the double-barreled question (0). Demographic and political dependent variables are binary and indicate whether a respondent is a member of the category (1) or not (0).

an evangelical or born-again Christian when asked with a double-barreled question (*DB*).²⁰ Among the full sample, the identity stemming from the union of two questions produces a group that is less likely to be married (p -value = 0.016), more likely to be under 30 years old (p -value < 0.001), and more likely to have a college degree (p -value = 0.051) than the resulting group that comes from a single question. The middle panel shows that the White *union* group is more likely to be female (p -value = 0.047) and less likely to be married (p -value = 0.063) than the White double-barreled group, while the bottom panel reveals that the union group is more likely than the double-barreled group to be under 30 years old (p -value = 0.029) and have a college degree (p -value = 0.026) among African-American respondents.

Turning to the political measures, I find no differences between the *union* and *DB* “evangelical or born-again” groups among both the full sample and White subsample. This finding should be reassuring to researchers who are interested in the political views of White evangelicals. Stark differences appear, however, among African-American respondents: the *union* group is more Republican (p -value = 0.020), more likely to have voted for Romney (p -value = 0.014), more likely to have voted for Trump (p -value = 0.004), and more likely to approve of the way Trump is handling his job (p -value = 0.027) compared to the group created using the double-barreled question. While African-American respondents are overwhelmingly Democratic in their identification and vote choice regardless of measurement strategy, the double-barreled question produces a more steadfast Democratic group relative to a composite group created through two single-barreled questions. Additionally, a difference-in-difference model reveals that the political gaps found among the Black subsample are statistically different from the results found among White respondents on partisanship, 2016 vote choice, and presidential approval.²¹ Together, these results suggest that the demographic traits and political outlooks of an “evangelical or born-again Christian” depend on both the nature of the question (single- versus double-barreled) and respondents’ race.

Finally, the black squares and solid confidence intervals compare respondents who identify as evangelical Christian, when asked about the two identities separately (*Evan*), to respondents who identify as an evangelical or born-again Christian in the double-barreled question (*DB*). The latter set of analyses tests how the makeup of the group would change if researchers

20. Additional analyses (Supplementary Material table B4) reveal that demographic differences do not explain the political differences presented in figure 3.

21. Positive numbers on the difference-in-difference estimate indicate that the relationship is bigger for African-American respondents compared to White respondents. Republican identification = 0.14; s.e. = 0.07; p -value = 0.046; Trump vote in 2016 = 0.15; s.e. = 0.07; p -value = 0.032; Romney vote in 2012 = 0.06; s.e. = 0.069; p -value = 0.38; Trump approval = 0.118; s.e. = 0.07; p -value = 0.095.

focused on the identity that most journalists and researchers emphasize in their writing. Asking about evangelical identity alone would produce a group that looks demographically and politically distinct. Using a single-barreled evangelical identity question produces a group that is more right-leaning and supportive of Donald Trump compared to the double-barreled group in the full sample as well as the White and African-American subsamples. These results corroborate the results from [figure 2](#): non-evangelical born-again Christians have a leftward pull on the “evangelical or born-again” group.

Discussion and Conclusion

White evangelicals’ sway within the political conservative arena coupled with the relative growth and power of non-White evangelicals make understanding evangelical opinion crucial for making sense of American politics. This paper questions how researchers identify evangelicals on public opinion surveys, showing that “evangelical” and “born again” are not synonymous. Many people who are born again reject the evangelical label, and in political terms, these individuals do not resemble the self-identified evangelicals with whom they are categorized. Moreover, the absolute size of this group varies directly on account of how this question is asked, and different measurement strategies result in groups that are demographically and politically distinct.

These results highlight that the size and cohesion of both White and Black evangelicals vary dramatically depending on question wording. For example, excluding those who identify as born again but not evangelical produces a smaller, but more politically cohesive, White evangelical subpopulation. This difference changes our understanding of the group from a large constituency that needs to be won over or mobilized to a smaller constituency that is unlikely (or even less likely) to abandon the Republican Party. On the other hand, the large number of non-evangelical born-again African Americans represents the liberal bastion of the group: African-American respondents who accept the evangelical label actually push the group slightly away from their staunchly left position. Together, these results illustrate how the complex relationship between race, religion, and politics together produces a scenario in which the consequences of an ambiguous survey question affect our basic understanding about this group.

The results also offer guidance to researchers. First, researchers should weigh the costs and benefits of *switching from one double-barreled question to two single-barreled questions*. The biggest cost to switching is that researchers potentially lose overtime trend data; after all, if you want to measure change, you can’t change the measures.²² That said, [figure 3](#)

22. Thank you to Reviewer 2 for this great quote.

shows that there is currently not much evidence that asking about the two identities in a single question produces a White subsample that looks politically distinct from a subsample produced by the union of two separate questions. This provides some comfort to researchers interested in studying the political attitudes of *White* born-again or evangelical Christians. Researchers can consider using two single-barreled questions—representing a methodological improvement—without necessarily sacrificing political trend data.²³ Importantly, however, the double-barreled question produces a Black born-again or evangelical subpopulation that is politically distinct from a similar group formed using two single-barreled questions. This means that changing the question wording would preclude researchers from tracking political attitudes of Black born-again or evangelical Christians over time.

Switching to single-barreled questions has two key benefits. First, such a switch could potentially stave off future problems if the evangelical label becomes more closely linked with Republican (or Trumpian) politics. Those who identify only as born again may increasingly respond “no” to a question that asks about born-again and evangelical identities in a single question. Asking about the identities separately will reduce concerns associated with changing connotations of religious language. Second, using two single-barreled questions would allow researchers to measure changes in subgroup identification (e.g., *BA only*, *BA and Evan*) over time and test how different subgroups look and act politically.

A second practical lesson is that researchers and pollsters *should avoid using “evangelical” as shorthand when discussing this group*. After all, both White and Black non-evangelical born-again Christians—who researchers ultimately classify as evangelicals—do not look like self-identified evangelicals at all. Whether using a double-barreled question or creating a joint “evangelical or born-again” group based on two survey questions, researchers should be careful and deliberate in their language by noting that this question (or set of questions) produces a composite “evangelical or born-again” group whose members may differ in their social and political outlooks.

A third practical lesson is that researchers should *think about how question wording effects operate across different groups*. Not only are Black Christians less likely than their White counterparts to accept the “evangelical” label, but the double-barreled question affects response patterns for Black and White respondents differently. When researchers engage in question-wording research they should consider what, if any, heterogenous

23. While researchers interested in studying *political attitudes* would not lose *political* trend data, the double-barreled question produces a White born-again or evangelical subsample that is demographically different from and smaller than the subsample produced from two single-barreled questions.

treatment effects might appear on account of respondents' backgrounds. This paper focuses on racial identities; however, different contexts may warrant different expectations in this regard. And fourth, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to measurement in this context; instead, *scholars must make decisions in light of their research interests and be transparent in describing their measurement strategy and coding choices.*

Finally, this paper opens the door to future research. First, scholars should explore similar questions for Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans. Both groups have distinct religious, cultural, and political histories, which warrant attention; we should not assume that the results for either White or Black respondents apply to other racial and ethnic groups. Second, researchers can extend this line of inquiry to look at policy attitudes as well. Scholars have explored if, when, and how religious elites (Djupe and Gwiasda 2010; Adkins et al. 2013; Margolis 2018b) and local religious communities (Bean 2014) affect evangelical public opinion. Future studies can draw on this research to generate expectations about whether the double-barreled identification question affects our understanding of evangelicals' policy preferences. Third, researchers should explore how the single- versus double-barreled self-identification findings map onto denominational classification schemes, such as RELTRAD (Steensland et al. 2000). For example, do non-evangelical born-again Christians (as identified through two single-barreled questions) generally belong to churches identified as Mainline Protestant or evangelical Protestant? Or do those who attend churches that scholars have identified as evangelical call themselves "evangelical" at higher rates than those who attend non-evangelical churches? Incorporating knowledge from this paper into the broader religious measurement literature will further our understanding of evangelicalism in the United States, including how best to measure it. Fourth, future research can test whether the politicized evangelical label explains the main findings from this paper. More specifically, do survey respondents view "evangelical" as a religious label, political label, or both, and do survey respondents' own interpretations of the term affect their willingness to accept the label? Knowing the answers to these questions will further guide researchers in how best to identify members of this important religious and social group.

Data Availability Statement

REPLICATION DATA AND DOCUMENTATION are available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/MTEYXB>.

Supplementary Material

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL may be found in the online version of this article: <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfac035>.

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