

**Defining “Evangelical”
in Polling and Research:
Are We Speaking the Same Language?**

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Background

Particularly in an election year, evangelicals are frequently in the news. Just a few headlines from a variety of media:

- *Washington Times*: “Evangelicals Try to Overcome Stereotype”
- Fox News: “McCain Makes Inroads with Evangelicals”
- The Huffington Post: “The Evangelical Swing Vote”
- *Seattle Times*: “Young, Evangelical...for Obama?”
- *The Christian Post*: “8 Myths about Evangelicals”

Polling and survey data often report the attitudes and activities of evangelicals. However, there is no standard definition for just what an evangelical is, which means different polls often describe entirely different people under the banner of “evangelical.”

Consider the September 11, 2008 *Religion News Service* article “Poll shows support for torture among Southern evangelicals.” The article details a study conducted among “white evangelical Christian adults” but never states how the researchers define just what an evangelical is.

Unfortunately, this is a common problem related to research within the religious community. Terms such as “unchurched,” “evangelical,” and “Catholic” are thrown about as if everyone is using them the same way and means the same thing. Depending on the survey, “Catholic” might mean “considers himself Catholic even though he hasn’t darkened the door of a church in thirty years” or it might mean “regularly involved in a Catholic parish” – and the two are extremely different views of

what it means to be “Catholic.”

“Evangelical” is the same way. Working regularly in the religious community, we commonly see dramatic differences between surveys that supposedly represent the same population. Why? That’s what this report investigates.

Ellison Research has been studying the religious community in a variety of ways for the past 12 years, and company president Ron Sellers has been integrally involved in research on religious attitudes and behaviors for 18 of his 21 years in the research industry.

It’s easy to hear a report on CBS Radio or read a study covered in *Newsweek* about evangelicals, but without knowing what population the report is describing, it really has very little meaning (and can be completely misleading). This is further complicated by the fact that, according to a study recently released by Ellison Research, Americans themselves are often clueless about what an evangelical actually is, and most Americans don’t believe they actually know any evangelicals.

Three Common Definitions

From a research or polling perspective, there have been three primary ways of defining an evangelical:

- Self-description: does the individual call himself/herself an “evangelical”?
- Theology: does the individual hold religious beliefs that are generally considered to be “evangelical”?
- Religious involvement: does the individual attend a church within a denomination that is generally agreed to be “evangelical”?

Each of these ways of defining evangelicals has its own advantages and disadvantages, and they generally

do not result in segments of the population that have a lot of commonality. *In any survey, it is critical to know just how “evangelical” is defined in the research and analysis.*

Self-description

Self-description has been commonly used by organizations such as Gallup and the Pew Research Center to define evangelicals. It is also frequently used in political polls, including exit polling.

The most common form of this question asks: “Are you a born again or evangelical Christian?” For the purposes of political polling, often the findings are further narrowed to “White evangelicals,” since even though many African-Americans call themselves born again and/or evangelical, their voting patterns are often very different than the voting patterns of White self-described evangelicals. Without separating people by race or ethnicity, polling usually puts this definition of “evangelical” at approximately 33% to 40% of the American adult population.

The advantage of self-description is that it is quick and simple to ask. Like many other polling measures, it also leaves the definition up to each individual respondent. In this, it fits with other definitions such as political ideology (e.g. are you conservative, moderate, or liberal).

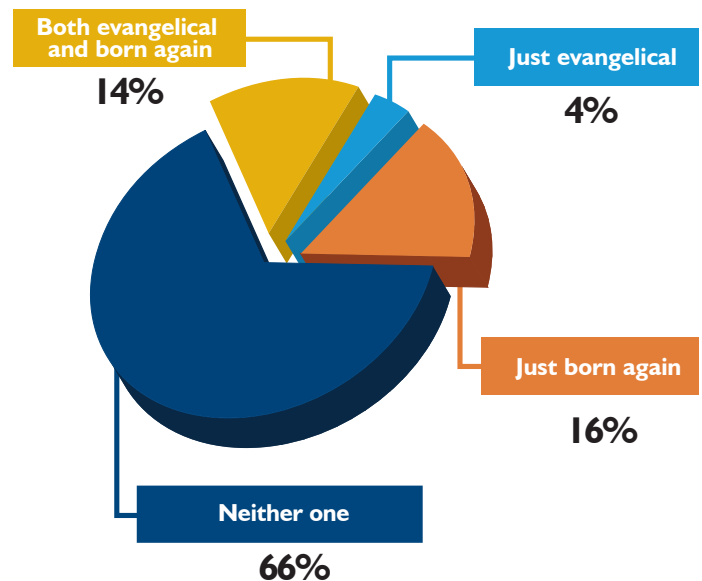
The problem with self-description is that many people simply don’t know what an evangelical really is, and others think they know but have definitions that would not be commonly accepted by other people using the same description. With considerable media usage, the term also has become loaded with connotations that may lead people to use it or forego it simply because of how they’ve seen it used in the media.

A recent Ellison Research study showed that 44% of all Americans could not give any sort of substantive

answer when asked to define what an evangelical Christian is, including 14% of the people who actually described themselves as evangelicals. Others gave answers that were far from accurate: that evangelicals are a type of Catholic, that they worship angels, or that they are professional traveling soul-winners, for instance. (See the September 2008 Ellison Research Report *America’s Definition: What Is an Evangelical?* for additional details.)

A further problem is that this definition usually makes the terms “born again” and “evangelical” synonymous, which many in the religious world would argue is incorrect.

What Americans Call Themselves



In fact, many Americans would also argue that these terms are not the same thing. In a recent Ellison Research study of 1,007 American adults, 34% of all Americans would use one (or both) of these phrases to describe themselves. However, of those who would, just 40% would use both. Forty-nine percent would call themselves a born-again Christian, but not an evangelical, and another 11% would call themselves an evangelical, but not a born-again Christian. So

when a survey question asks, “Are you a born-again or evangelical Christian,” six out of ten people who say yes are only reacting positively to *one* of those phrases, not both. Most Americans do not see “evangelical” and “born-again” as the same thing.

Theological Definition

Definition by theology classifies evangelicals according to what they say they believe. This definition is completely independent of where or even whether they attend religious worship services, as well as what they would call themselves. Definition by theology was originally championed by Barna Research, a small California research firm, back in the early 1980s, but it’s been used in some form by others since then. People identified as evangelicals through this process are sometimes called “nine-point evangelicals.”

A two-step process is used; the first step determines whether someone is “born again” according to their beliefs about life after death. Respondents must say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their lives today, and must then select a statement about life after death that says they believe they will go to heaven when they die because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior (as opposed to statements about going to heaven because they’ve been a good person, reincarnation, everyone goes to heaven, etc.)

Anyone who fits this definition is, according to Barna, born again. Their surveys over the years have defined about 33% to 44% of the American adult population as born again. However, they do not make born again and evangelical synonymous. Born again respondents are then given a battery of seven different theological statements, using a four-point agree/disagree scale. These generally have included statements about the inerrancy of the Bible, the

omniscience of God, the personal responsibility of Christians to spread their faith to others, the existence of Satan as a real being, the sinlessness of Christ, and the existence of salvation only through the grace of God (not works).

A respondent must give the “correct” answer (either agreeing or disagreeing strongly, as appropriate) to every one of these statements in order to be defined as an evangelical through this method. National surveys over the years have generally defined about 7% to 12% of the American adult population as evangelical through this definition. Obviously, this is radically smaller than the “evangelical” population as defined by self-description.

This method has a number of advantages. For one thing, it does not rely on different definitions respondents have of “evangelical.” It does not make “evangelical” synonymous with “born again.” And it relies on what people actually believe, which in both religion and politics is probably a more accurate depiction of where people are than is the method of what they would call themselves or what their activities are.

This definition crosses denominational boundary lines; it is entirely possible for a Mormon or a Roman Catholic to be termed an “evangelical” under this definition (and consistently, some are treated in just this manner in the research).

However, this is far from a perfect method. For one thing, research about beliefs is very tricky; one or two different words used in a question can substantially alter responses.

For another thing, this is an extremely strict definition. For example, consider an individual who is “born again” (by the above definition) and who gives the “correct” answer to six of the seven statements defining an evangelical. However, this person harbors

some doubts about whether Satan truly is a real being or is just a symbol of evil, so she answers “agree somewhat” to that statement. Using this theological definition, this respondent is not an evangelical, even though she believes everything else “evangelical,” she considers herself evangelical, she supports many evangelical organizations, and she attends a clearly evangelical denomination.

This issue is not just a fine point. A recent Ellison Research study put the proportion of evangelicals (using this nine-point definition) at 10.8% nationally. However, a number of relatively minor changes in the definitions would change this number substantially:

- If people could agree strongly *or* agree somewhat to each statement about their beliefs, rather than making them agree strongly with each one, the proportion who are considered evangelicals would rise by 48%.
- If people could agree somewhat with one of the seven statements, while agreeing strongly with all of the other six, the proportion who are considered evangelicals would rise by 28%.
- If people only had to give the “correct” answer to six of the seven statements, and any one of the seven statements could have any “incorrect” answer, the proportion who are considered evangelicals would rise by 56%.

The kinds of people most likely to be included as “evangelical” if any of these changes were made in the definition would be older Americans, women, people in the South, Protestants, churchgoers, and political conservatives. Clearly, even minor changes in the requirements for being an “evangelical” under this definition have a major impact on what “evangelicals” look like in the research. Changes wouldn’t just alter

the percentage, but would also alter what “evangelicals” look like demographically.

One other point to understand is that because this is such a small and tightly defined group of people, in national studies the sample size of evangelicals tends to be fairly small. National research studies typically include around 1,000 respondents, which is a robust and flexible sample. But if evangelicals by this definition account for 7 – 12% of the U.S. population, this means they represent a subsample of around 70 – 120 people in a sample of 1,000. Much national reporting of the attitudes or behaviors of evangelicals using this definition has been with sample sizes below 100 people, which makes for a relatively large margin of error in the sample.

An even bigger problem with this method is that in order to form this definition, someone originally had to choose the scale and the seven specific statements that define “evangelical.” Is a four-point scale the best way to measure this, rather than a five-point or seven-point scale that would bring greater differentiation? Is believing in the reality of Satan as an actual being (or any of the other statements) necessary in order for someone to be an evangelical? Are there other beliefs which should be included in this battery of questions that have been excluded? Is each statement worded in exactly the “correct” manner? (And, in fact, the actual statements and the wording of those statements has changed somewhat over the years by the people who most commonly use this definition of “evangelical” in their research, raising some questions about year-to-year comparisons of the data.)

Dealing with people’s theological beliefs brings up all sorts of fine points and opens the wording and categorization of each question up to considerable debate.

Definition by Religious Involvement

A third way of defining evangelicals is by what church they attend. This definition has been used by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the Henry Institute, Baylor University, and others. (The simple fact that two different arms of the Pew Foundation use completely different methods to define “evangelical” shows how problematic this definition is.)

The advantage of this method is that it does not rely on either self-description or the complexities of specific theological beliefs; in short, the advantage is that it lacks the disadvantages of the other methods. But there are still a number of drawbacks.

First, someone has to determine which denominations fit the definition of “evangelical.” In many cases, this is fairly clear – United Church of Christ pretty obviously does not, while Presbyterian Church in America pretty obviously does. But not all denominations are this clear cut.

Second, not every church within a denomination adheres strictly to the perspectives of the denomination. This is particularly true of mainline Protestant churches. Large mainline denominations such as United Methodist or Presbyterian Church (USA) contain individual churches that are theologically liberal for the denomination, as well as theologically conservative. There are (sometimes rather large and active) evangelical “renewal” groups in many mainline denominations. So someone can be attending a church in a non-evangelical denomination and still be getting largely evangelical teachings and perspectives.

And there’s no guarantee at all that because someone attends a church that is evangelical, that individual is evangelical (or vice versa). Our research has shown that many pastors don’t even agree with everything their denomination officially stands for, no less the individuals who sit in the pews.

Finally, many people quite frankly don’t know the exact denomination of their church. For one thing, Ellison Research has found that about 7% of all churches with a denominational connection (including megachurches such as the Southern Baptist congregation Saddleback Church in California or the ELCA congregation Community Church of Joy in Arizona) do not include reference to their denomination in their name. This can lead some survey respondents to report attending a non-denominational church, when in fact they are attending one affiliated with a denomination.

For another thing, most people know they attend a Baptist church (and not Lutheran or Nazarene), but they sometimes don’t really know whether that church is American Baptist, Southern Baptist, National Baptist, Free Will Baptist, or any of the other specific Baptist denominations – some of which would generally qualify as evangelical, and some of which would not. The same is true for other denominational groupings.

In a recent Ellison Research study, 13% of the people regularly attending a Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Church of God, or Church of Christ congregation could not further define the exact denomination of their church. This problem also doesn’t take into account non-denominational churches, which may or may not be evangelical in their belief system. So somehow, these individuals still need to be categorized as evangelical or non-evangelical, using a different definition.

This definition also fails to take into account people who do not attend church at all, or who attend a house church. Eighteen percent of people who call themselves evangelical do not regularly attend church, along with 11% of those who qualify as evangelical according to the strict nine-point theological definition. Combine

these numbers with the number who really don't know what specific denomination they attend, and a fairly sizable chunk of the religious world can't really be included or excluded as evangelicals based only on what denomination church they attend.

Finally, a flaw in the questionnaire design of some surveys that use this method is that people must start by identifying their general religious affiliation: Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, etc. Many Protestants will not call themselves “Protestant” but will only use their denomination – e.g. “I’m Baptist” or “I go to a Wesleyan church.” If the question does not provide a way to include these individuals as “Protestant,” it is removing many people from the equation who should be included in further specific denominational definitions.

The Implications

It is important to note that Ellison Research is not trying to discredit all research that has been done related to “evangelicals,” nor are we attempting to portray one of these three definitions as more accurate or less accurate than the others. The simple fact is that there is no definite, agreed-upon classification system that has proven to be accurate, widely accepted, and beyond criticism. Everyone doing research among evangelicals has to choose some definition of the group (and in fact when doing privately commissioned research, we have been asked to define evangelicals in additional ways, such as people who call themselves evangelical but who also attend a Protestant denomination).

However, it is critical to understand the impact each definition has on the research being done and on the results being reported.

It is also imperative to understand that various research studies purporting to portray the attitudes or actions of evangelicals are *not* surveying the same

groups, and therefore the findings will often vary dramatically from one survey to the next. This is not due to any flaw inherent in the research itself, but because the definitions are so radically different.

It's perfectly fine to adhere to one method of defining “evangelicals,” and to use that for public studies or for privately commissioned work, but only if you know exactly what the definition means for the research findings, and whether or not it can be compared to other research. If there is any hope of understanding what the evangelical population (however it is defined) thinks and how it behaves, a choice of definitions must be made. It must be made, however, with eyes wide open as to who is really included and just what impact that choice has on the findings.

How Much in Common?

The simple truth is that many evangelicals themselves (no matter how they are defined) don't know what an evangelical is. In the previously referenced Ellison Research study in which people were asked to define what an evangelical is, we were able to take the categories of responses and view them among people who fit the term “evangelical” according to each of the three definitions. The responses had some similarities, but they were definitely not the same. For instance, 14% of all nine-point evangelicals said part of being an evangelical is being particularly zealous or devoted toward your beliefs, compared to 10% of those who called themselves evangelical, and just 7% of those who attend an evangelical denomination.

It is also truly amazing that 14% of the people who called themselves evangelical later told us in the survey that they don't have any idea what an evangelical is. Twelve percent of the nine-point evangelicals, and 28% of people attending an evangelical denomination, also had no definition of what an evangelical Christian is.

What is an “Evangelical Christian”?

Categories of Responses	9-point Evangelical		Call Self Evangelical		Attend Evangelical Church	
	Evangelical	Not	Evangelical	Not	Church	Not
They evangelize	40%	15%	30%	15%	31%	15%
A type of Christian	11	9	14	8	6	10
Zealous or devoted	14	9	10	9	7	10
They rely on the Bible	23	6	20	6	18	6
Theological beliefs	28	6	27	4	17	6
Worldview or politics	2	7	6	6	4	7
Fanatical	—	6	1	6	1	6
Assorted critical views	—	5	1	5	—	5
Closed-minded	—	4	—	4	—	5
Greedy/money-focused	—	3	1	3	—	3
Impose beliefs on others	—	4	1	4	—	4
Flashy	—	3	—	3	1	3
Off-base theology answer	2	2	4	2	2	2
Ministry professionals	1	2	—	2	3	2
Followers of Christ	3	—	2	—	2	—
Based on activities	2	1	3	1	3	1
Don't know	12	39	14	40	28	38

The table above shows the answers among each group of “evangelicals” (defined in each of the three ways).

Exploring these definitions is not just research minutiae, but is a highly critical point to understanding surveys that purport to define what evangelicals think, how they vote, or what they do. It’s important because there is not a lot of commonality among the three definitions. Consider the following:

- Only 57% of the people who are defined as “evangelical” by their theology actually call themselves “evangelical”
- Among people who do call themselves “evangelical,” just 36% actually are defined that way by the nine-point theological definition
- Forty-six percent of people who call themselves “evangelical” do not attend a church that is generally considered to be part of an evangelical denomination

- Eleven percent of those who do not call themselves “evangelical” actually do attend an evangelical denomination church
- Forty percent of Americans who are theologically nine-point evangelicals do not attend an evangelical denomination
- Thirteen percent of those who are not theologically evangelical do attend an evangelical denomination

Again, clearly, there are major differences in just who is defined as “evangelical” in much of the research that is being released by research organizations and reported in the media (as well as that which is actually being conducted by the media’s research departments).

Since in our recent research we had all three ways of defining “evangelical,” we can look at how people differ according to whether they fit into each of these

three groups. Note the relatively small sample sizes: 174 self-described as evangelical (not “evangelical or born again”), 109 nine-point evangelicals, and 186 who attend a church in an evangelical denomination.

First, look at some measures related to church. Self-described evangelicals are less likely than others to attend church, and when they do, they tend to go to smaller churches. Nine-point evangelicals are particularly likely to report a church experience prior to the age of 18 that had a strong positive influence on their lives today.

On various religious matters, nine-point evangelicals are the most likely to be of one mind as a group. They are consistently more likely to define a variety of

questionable activities as sinful, while self-identified evangelicals have the most permissive attitudes of the three groups.

The biggest differences can be seen in political measurements, which is particularly important given how frequently evangelicals’ voting habits are studied and reported. Those defined as evangelical by their church denomination are almost three times more likely than nine-point evangelicals to describe themselves as strong Democrats, and twice as likely to describe themselves as Democrats at all.

Eighteen percent of those who attend a church in an evangelical denomination, and 17% of self-described evangelicals, position themselves politically as left of

Church Measures	Self Described	Nine-point	Evang. Denom.
Attend church once a month or more	82%	89%	100%
Median self-estimated church size (adults attending)	78	100	150
Thoughts about their own church attendance before age 18:			
– made them much more interested in religion as adults	61	74	58
– had a highly positive influence on their life	68	82	63

Religious Measures	Self Described	Nine-point	Evang. Denom.
Personally do not currently know any evangelicals	8%	11%	28%
Believe each of the following is “sin”:			
– drinking alcohol	23	28	31
– getting drunk	72	90	72
– using tobacco	35	47	44
– not taking proper care of your body	55	69	59
– racism	87	96	90
– telling a “little white lie” to spare someone’s feelings	50	66	59
– gossip	79	98	77
– smoking marijuana	65	80	66
– sex before marriage	80	92	79
– homosexual activity or sex	83	93	84
– reading or watching pornography	77	93	80
– not reporting some income on your tax returns	75	94	76
– having an abortion	82	94	80

Religious Measures	Self Described	Nine-point*	Evang. Denom.
Agree strongly with the following statements:*			
– the Bible is the written word of God and is totally accurate in all that it teaches	71%	100%	68%
– you, personally, have a responsibility to tell other people about your religious beliefs	63	100	58
– your religious faith is very important in your life today	87	100	81
– eternal salvation is possible through God’s grace alone; nothing we do can earn salvation	74	100	69
– God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today	88	100	89
– you have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in your life today	90	100	81
Disagree strongly with the following statements:*			
– the devil, or Satan, is not a real being but is just a symbol of evil	71	100	73
– when he lived on earth, Jesus Christ was human and committed sins, like other people	62	100	66
Believe when they die, they will (eventually or immediately) go to Heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior	76	100	75
Would describe themselves as a born-again Christian	78	86	79
Have sent their children to a private, Christian school	16	24	17

*These statements help define “evangelical” so all of the nine-point evangelicals would agree strongly or disagree strongly with them (as appropriate), by definition.

Political Measures	Self Described	Nine-point*	Evang. Denom.
Political affiliation (how they think of themselves):			
– Republican	48%	49%	41%
– strong Republican	29	35	25
– not a strong Republican	19	14	16
– Democrat	26	16	33
– strong Democrat	10	5	14
– not a strong Democrat	16	11	19
– independent	21	30	22
– something else	5	5	4
– lean Republican (among independent/something else)	8	14	6
– lean Democrat (among independent/something else)	3	1	3
– in the middle (among independent/something else)	16	20	17
Describe their own political leanings as:			
– very liberal	2	—	1
– liberal	6	2	7
– slightly liberal	9	4	10
– moderate or middle of the road	29	34	33
– slightly conservative	13	8	15
– conservative	26	33	23
– very conservative	16	20	11

center, compared to just 6% of nine-point evangelicals. Fifty-three percent of nine-point evangelicals called themselves politically conservative or very conservative, compared to 42% of self-described evangelicals, and just 34% of those in evangelical denominations. Obviously, these differences would have a huge impact on the numbers reported by exit polls and political polling in general.

In Summary

Whether it's evaluating political polls, defining “evangelical” for the purposes of a market study for a new product, or reading about new research on what evangelicals believe or how they behave, it's critical to understand how “evangelical” is defined and used in the research. These three different definitions are all often reported simply as “evangelical” by the various research organizations that use them, and by the media that report on the studies, but our research has demonstrated just how different the three populations represented by these three definitions actually are.

Again, let us emphasize that this report is *not* meant to be an indictment of any or all of the three definitions, nor a call to use one over the other two. But we receive calls all the time from clients and journalists who ask, “Why do these two studies about evangelicals show such different results? Which one is right?”

Given the frequency of questions such as this, we decided to provide this report as something that will hopefully clarify and explain the most common definitions, and demonstrate what kind of people are actually included in each one. We hope this insight will help bring some clarity to what is, frankly, a pretty muddled situation.

Ellison Research

Since 1996, Ellison Research has been conducting both qualitative and quantitative research for a wide variety of for-profit and non-profit organizations. Some clients are clearly secular, with no connection to the religious world, some are in the Christian community and generally would be considered evangelical, and others are in the Christian community but generally not defined as evangelical. Although our clients are highly diverse and our work is very broad-based (financial services, automotive, sports, etc.), one of the areas in which we have specialized is research related to religion.

We have also conducted numerous studies at our own expense to understand the American mindset more thoroughly, often on topics related to religion and society. Results from these studies have been covered in the international media, such as *The Financial Times of London*, *Associated Press*, *USA Today*, *MSNBC*, *USA Radio Network*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Clergy Journal*, *Detroit News*, and many other outlets in the USA, China, England, Russia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Korea, Sweden, Hungary, the Philippines, Australia, and other parts of the world.

More information on the company is available at www.ellisonresearch.com.

Non-profits we have served include:

- National Association of Evangelicals
- United Methodist Publishing
- Focus on the Family
- World Vision
- The Inspiration Networks
- Compassion International
- Central Association of the Miraculous Medal
- World Concern
- LifeWay Christian Stores
- Evangelical Environmental Network

On the for-profit side, companies we have served include:

- General Motors
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