

New Research Reveals Disturbing Trend Among Self-Proclaimed Evangelicals

About 1 in 4 Americans identifies as an evangelical Christian.

Most of them are white, live in the South and identify as Republican.

Many go to church every week.

But they're not always sure what they believe.

Fewer than half of those who identify as evangelicals (45 percent) strongly agree with core evangelical beliefs, according to a new survey from Nashville-based LifeWay Research.

"There's a gap between who evangelicals say they are and what they believe," said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research.

And a significant number of evangelical believers reject the term "evangelical." Only two-thirds (69 percent) of evangelicals by belief self-identify as evangelicals.

Beliefs and Belonging

For the past few years, LifeWay Research has been looking at the intersection of belief and belonging in the evangelical movement.

Some research studies define "evangelical" by self-identification—respondents pick from a list of religious traditions. Others categorize people as evangelical by the churches they identify with.

In this new survey, LifeWay used a set of four questions about

the Bible, Jesus, salvation and evangelism. Those questions were developed in partnership with the National Association of Evangelicals. Those who strongly agree with all four are considered to be evangelicals by belief.

Fifteen percent of Americans are evangelicals by belief, according to LifeWay Research. By contrast, 24 percent of Americans self-identify as evangelicals.

Researchers found some significant differences between the two groups.

Evangelicals by belief are more diverse than self-identified evangelicals. Fifty-eight percent are white, 23 percent are African-American and 14 percent are Hispanic. Five percent claim another ethnicity.

By contrast, 70 percent of self-identified evangelicals are white. Fourteen percent are African-Americans. Twelve percent are Hispanic, and 4 percent claim another ethnicity.

Evangelicals by belief go to church more often. Seventy-three percent say they attend services once a week or more. That drops to 61 percent for self-identified evangelicals.

Evangelicals Congregate in the South

The two groups of evangelicals share some similarities. About half are Southerners. Most are Republicans.

Just over half (55 percent) of evangelicals by belief live in the South. Twenty-two percent are in the Midwest. Sixteen percent live in the West, while 6 percent live in the Northeast.

Among self-identified evangelicals, 48 percent live in the South. Twenty-five percent live in the Midwest. Seventeen percent live in the West, and 9 percent live in the Northeast.

“If you are an evangelical who lives in the South, you’re

often going to run into people who believe the same things you do,” said McConnell. “In the Northeast, you’re often going to feel alone.”

Two-thirds of evangelicals by belief (65 percent) are Republicans or lean Republican. Thirty percent are Democrats or lean Democratic. Four percent are undecided or independent.

Among self-identified evangelicals, 64 percent are Republicans or lean Republican. Thirty-three percent are Democrats or lean Democratic. Three percent are undecided or independent.

Both groups also tend to be older. Thirty-one percent of Americans 65 and older identify as evangelicals. That drops to 22 percent among those 18 to 34. Nineteen percent of those 65 and older hold evangelical beliefs. That drops to 10 percent for those 18 to 34.

The more education Americans have, the less likely they are to be evangelicals of either type. A quarter of Americans with a high school diploma or less (26 percent) or some college (28 percent) identify as evangelicals. Eighteen percent of those with a bachelor’s degree say they are evangelicals.

Americans with some college (20 percent) are more likely to have evangelical beliefs than those with a bachelor’s degree (9 percent) or graduate degree (12 percent).

Some of the results surprised McConnell, especially when it comes to politics. He expected more political differences between the two types of evangelicals.

“The political differences between them turn out to be very small,” he said.

LifeWay Research also asked if politics played a role in whether Americans identify as evangelicals. It appears that few evangelicals shun the term because of its political implications.

When asked, "If the term had nothing to do with politics, would you consider yourself an evangelical Christian?" 1 in 4 Americans say yes.

That's almost identical to the number of who identify as evangelicals without any political qualifications.

McConnell suspects that party affiliation and race play a bigger role in how people vote than their faith does.

"Evangelical religious beliefs by themselves do not explain political behavior," he says. "Ethnic group is a better predictor of political behavior, but the best predictor of voting patterns is one's political party identification."

Born-again Americans Are a Diverse Crowd

The term "born again" has often been used as a synonym for self-identified evangelicals. LifeWay Research found some overlap between the two groups.

Two-thirds (66 percent) of self-identified born-again Americans say they are evangelicals. That remains true even if the term evangelical didn't have political implications (67 percent).

Like self-identified evangelicals, fewer than half (45 percent) hold evangelical beliefs. And they are less likely (56 percent) to attend services once a week or more than either type of evangelicals.

Born-again Americans have more political parity than either type of evangelical. Fifty-six percent are Republican or lean Republican. Four in 10 (39 percent) are Democrats or lean Democratic. Five percent are undecided or independent.

African-American Christians appear to find the term "born again" more appealing than "evangelical."

African-Americans are more likely to say they are born again

(49 percent) than whites (27 percent), Hispanics (24 percent) or those from other ethnicities (19 percent).

African-Americans are also the most likely to have evangelical beliefs (30 percent). Whites (13 percent), Hispanics (13 percent) and those from other ethnicities are less likely (9 percent). African-Americans (30 percent) and whites (26 percent) are more likely to say they are evangelical than Hispanics (18 percent) or those from other ethnicities (11 percent).

In the past, said McConnell, some research groups, limited the term “evangelical” to white Christians. Others have focused on white evangelical voters—which has left other ethnic groups out.

“For many African-Americans, the term ‘evangelical’ is a turn-off, even though they hold evangelical beliefs,” said McConnell. “The term ‘evangelical’ is often viewed as applying to white Christians only. And that’s unfortunate. It’s lost some of its religious meaning that actually unites these groups.” {eoa}

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