Exit poll religion questions are misleading, critics say

by Cathy Lynn Grossman in the April 13, 2016 issue

Evangelicals vote for Donald Trump. No, Ted Cruz. Wait. Aren't some Christians voting for Hillary Clinton, who is Methodist, and Bernie Sanders, who is Jewish?

Why do exit polls draw such a confusing picture of religion's role in the 2016 presidential race?

Exit polls are surveys designed and funded by the news media to help them report and explain the vote before the full results come in.

Six news organizations—ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, NBC, and the Associated Press—form the National Election Pool. Survey directors consult with one another to craft 15 to 20 questions and determine where and when the surveys will be conducted.

Then New Jersey–based Edison Research executes the survey, sending thousands of interviewers to select polling places on election day. At each site, interviewers ask a random sample of voters to complete the three- to five-minute, self-administered questionnaire, said Joe Lenski, executive vice president of Edison.

Media organizations use the results to announce their projected winners. The rest of the questions probe voters' political leanings, the issues foremost on their minds, and demographic characteristics such as race, age, education, and gender.

Lenski said the three most common religion questions that may appear are these:

- Are you [Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, other Christian, Jewish, Muslim, other, or none]?
- Would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian? [Yes or No]
- How often do you attend religious services? [More than once a week. Once a week. A few times a month. A few times a year. Never.]

Rarely does the survey include more than one religion question.

Another question asks Republican voters whether shared religious beliefs mattered a great deal in their choice. This is how ABC News could say after Super Saturday on March 5: “Nearly four in ten voters in Texas said shared religious beliefs mattered a great deal in their choice, with Cruz pulling in four in ten of them, versus fewer than three in ten for Trump.”

Democrats, however, are asked about shared values, as if only Republicans were religious, noted Brian Kaylor, a Baptist author who writes for Ethics Daily and Churchnet. “And only southern Democrats were asked about church attendance, so we have no comparison to the Midwest states where Sanders is winning.”

The 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study found that white born-again or evangelical Protestants now account for 19 percent of American adults. They make up a core constituency of the Republican Party.

The problem, critics say, is that there’s no universally agreed upon understanding of the terms *evangelical* or *born-again*.

“Catholics will say yes to *evangelical*, Muslims, even atheists,” said Mark Gray, senior researcher at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, a Catholic organization.

Gray wrote on his blog that he might be just a “cranky social scientist,” but on the evangelical question, “the data you get back is, for lack of a better term, crap” that leads to overcounting this subgroup.

For many people, “*evangelical* is subtext for Christian,” Kaylor said. “So it comes across like, ‘Are you a Christian, or not?’ Or, more to the point, ‘Are you a God-fearing American, or not?’” Something else is driving the vote, not people’s evangelical identification, he said.

People who attend religious services frequently are more active and engaged in other institutions, such as voting, sociologists say.

But most self-identified religious believers don’t go to church weekly or often. Neither do many young people and many non-Christians whose religious or spiritual focus is more centered in personal practice than in congregational worship.

Another reason polls on worship attendance are problematic: people tend to exaggerate their attendance and give the socially acceptable answer, one that puts

them in a “good Christian” light.

Kaylor leans toward a question that asks how important religion is in someone’s life.

“It captures the nuance of spirituality in religion in America, ranging from the highly devout to the people with no religious identity who still find spirituality very important,” he said.

Princeton University sociologist Robert Wuthnow, who has charged that pollsters have created an inaccurate, shallow, and misleading portrait of American religion, would rather see a combination of questions.

If the goal of questions on religion is to learn voters’ value system framework, Wuthnow said, he would drop the Protestant/Catholic/Jew question.

“As much as I hate it, I would probably keep the evangelical question,” Wuthnow said. “And I would keep church attendance because it is a measure of behavior and so is voting. But I would add a third question: How important is religion in your life? You need a salience measure in there.”

The latter would shed light not only on the “no religion” folks but also on many of the nominally religious voters.

“Or you might identify as with a religion,” Wuthnow said, “and not care a whit about it in life or, in this case, when you vote.” —Religion News Service

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