

The "Religious Right": Definition and Measurement

By David W. Moore

While the Christian right has been the focus of intense debate within political circles, pollsters have been unable to identify those who make up this movement. The term "religious right" has been widely used in surveys over the past few months. Yet, the results generated may not represent what pollsters are attempting to measure. Practitioners of polling run a risk which might be described: "My friends call it that, so everyone must." The case of the "religious right" illustrates this nicely.

The title of a *New York Times* article last July proclaimed that the "Christian Right Defies Categories." This assertion was based on a survey which, among other things, asked the public, "Do you think of yourself as a member of the religious right movement, or don't you?"¹ Just 9% did in that poll. In a CBS News/*NYT* survey two months later, however, 17% responded affirmatively.

In September 1994, a Gallup Poll for CNN/*USA Today* used the same question and found that 11% of Americans identified as members of the Christian right movement—very close to the number found by the CBS News/*NYT* poll in July, but a third fewer than found by their survey in September. Gallup used the same question—although in slightly different questionnaire contexts—with varying results in October (16%), November (22%), and December (14%).

That this question may not accurately classify people as members of the "Christian right" is suggested not just by the wide variation in responses (9% to 22%), but by two additional questions in the July CBS News/*NYT* poll which showed how unfamiliar people are with the concept itself. When asked what comes to mind when they hear the term "religious right," the largest plurality (29%) said freedom of religion. The second largest response (26%) was "don't know." Another 11% mentioned

political activities, but that answer was in the preface to the question: "there's been talk recently about the religious right in politics..."

Thus, these three categories of answers alone constitute 65% of the public. They show that people have little knowledge about what the movement represents. This conclusion is bolstered by an additional question in the July poll, which asked if people generally agreed or disagreed with the issue positions of the religious right, "or don't you know enough about them to say?" Only

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32% expressed an opinion (11% agreed, 21% disagreed), with the rest saying they didn't know.

A profile of the people who say they are members of the religious right also suggests some problems with the classification question. A Gallup poll in December 1994, shows that of those who say they are members of that movement, almost half (48%) say they are not conservative, 12% say religion is only "fairly" or "not very" important in their lives, and more than half (58%) say they attend church only about once a month or less frequently. Such people hardly constitute religious and conservative citizens.

"Religious" and "Right"

If "religious" is defined as feeling that religion is very important in one's life AND attending religious service almost every week or more, and if people are classified as "conservative" based on the standard self-definition of political philosophy, then the Gallup poll suggests that only 30% of the self-classified members of the religious right movement can be said to be both "religious" and "right." The July 1994 CBS News/*NYT* poll reveals the same lack of fit—only 32% of those who said they were members of the religious right movement were actually conservative and "religious."²

Thus, not only do most people indicate that they have little idea of what "religious right movement" means, many of those who are willing to classify themselves as such do not fit what might seem a reasonable definition of that group—no doubt because they have a different view of the concept than the political observers who are using the term in the first place. The operational descriptors for "religious" and "right" outlined above would thus seem more useful for identifying potential members of the movement than the self-described survey item currently used by pollsters.

Members of the religious right movement are worthy of study because they are working within the Republican party to advance their agenda. There may indeed be conservative Christian Democrats, but by identifying with that party such people exclude themselves from the political movement that appears to be a growing force within the GOP. In addition, the religious right bases its arguments on a fundamentalist Christian morality; thus, conservative but non-Christian respondents should probably also be excluded from any estimate of the religious right movement.

The “Religious Right”—Self-Defined vs Empirically Defined

Using results from the December 1994 Gallup poll, these empirically defined members of the “religious right”—namely those who are conservative, independent or Republican, Christians who say religion is very important in their lives and who attend religious service “almost weekly” or more—constitute about 14% of the general public. This is the same *percentage* of people who say they are members of the religious right, but it is not the same *group* of people. A profile of the two groups is shown in Table 1 (a poll from March 1994 which included identical questions for classifying people as religious and conservative is also displayed).

Note that only 4%-5% of the empirically-defined group is black, compared with 20% of the self-defined group. Note, too, major adjustments in the socioeconomic level of the groups. The empirically defined group has higher educational and income levels than the self-defined group. Only 12% of the self-defined religious right, for example, have a college education, but more than twice that number (29%-31%) have that level of education in the empirically-defined groups. Similar differences are found regarding income levels. Another major difference is in the regional distribution: 28% of the self-defined group is in the East, and only 14% in the Midwest. Among the empirically-defined members, however, the figures are almost reversed; 17%-21% in the East and 27%-35% in the Midwest.

Finally, in the December survey, the self-defined members of the religious right gave a collective approval rating to President Clinton of 37%, only five points below the national rating at the time. This is hardly the level one would expect from what political observers believe is a very conservative group. The empirically-defined members, however, gave Clinton only an 11% approval rating, which would seem, at least on the surface, to be more consistent with the views of highly conservative Americans.

Table 1
The “Religious Right:”
Composition Changes With Definition

	Self-Defined December 1994 (N=137) (14% of sample)	Empirically-Defined December 1994 (N=149) (14% of sample)	Empirically-Defined March 1994 (N=149) (14% of sample)
Party			
Republican (including leaners)	65%	97%	99%
Independent	5	3	1
Democrat (including leaners)	30	0	0
Ideology			
Conservative	52	100	100
Moderate	34	0	0
Liberal	14	0	0
Gender			
Male	41	49	46
Female	59	51	54
Race			
White	76	92	93
Black	20	4	5
Region			
East	28	17	21
Midwest	14	27	35
South	45	39	31
West	13	17	13
Education			
High school or less	65	43	38
Some college	23	28	31
College graduate	12	29	31
Yearly Income			
< \$20K	39	23	23
\$20K-50K	48	47	45
> \$50K	13	30	32
Age			
18-29	20	21	12
30-49	40	38	45
50-64	19	21	26
65 +	21	20	17
Religion			
Protestant	66	67	80
Catholic	21	24	19
Jewish	0	0	0
Clinton Rating			
Approve	37	11	N/A
Disapprove	59	87	N/A

Note: Although the sample sizes are small, the data from the above surveys suggest a significant difference between self-defined and empirically-defined “religious right” groups.

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization for CNN/USA Today.

The “Religious Right” vs Other Conservatives

It is important to compare the views of empirically-defined religious right members with other conservative independents and Republicans to determine whether the “religious” part of the clas-

sification has any special impact. On most issues, few significant differences emerge. However, major distinctions were found on the issues of abortion and homosexuality.

On abortion, the March 1994 Gallup survey found that the religious right

expressed substantially more conservative views than did other conservatives—although not the universal opposition to abortion one might expect from this group. Almost a third (30%) of the newly defined religious right said abortion should be *illegal* under *all* circumstances, compared with just 9% of the other conservatives. Further, only 9% said abortion should be *legal* in *all* circumstances, well below the 25% of other conservatives. Yet, 59% of the religious right said it should be *legal* in *some* circumstances, similar to the 62% of other conservatives.

Another question asked whether respondents would prefer a Republican presidential candidate who supports or opposes abortion rights, or wouldn't the issue matter to them. The religious right were clearly more conservative than other conservative Republicans. Nineteen percent said they would prefer a candidate who supports abortion rights (compared with 39% of the other group), another 19% said it wouldn't matter (compared with 34% of other conservatives). Almost three times as many religious right respondents (62%) as other conservatives (23%) said they would prefer a candidate who opposed abortion rights. Seventy-five percent of the religious right (compared with 57% of the other conservative Republicans) said they would be unwilling to vote for a Republican nominee if he or she were for abortion rights.

Other topics in this survey produced significant differences between the religious right and other conservatives. About two-thirds (67%) of the religious right prefer a candidate who opposes new laws to protect the rights of homosexuals, compared with roughly half (51%) of the other conservatives.

On several questions that deal specifically with religion, the religious right are—not surprisingly—more optimistic about the importance and relevance of religion. More than nine in 10 (92%) say

religion can answer all or most of today's problems, compared with just half (51%) of other conservatives. Roughly half (51%) of the religious right say that conservative Christian groups have too little influence in the Republican party today, a view shared by only 15% of other conservative Republicans. A mere 5% of the religious right say such groups have too much influence, compared with five times that number (25%) among other conservatives. Finally, 26% of the religious right say that the influence of religion on American life is increasing, while only 16% of other conservatives believe the same.

Abortion—Part of the “Religious Right” Definition?

Given the importance of abortion in the religious right movement, it may seem reasonable to exclude from this category anyone who says they support abortion in all circumstances—9% of the religious right as empirically-defined. With that exclusion, the religious right would then constitute about 12% of the population (rather than 14%).

Still, even among this group, 16% prefer a political candidate who supports abortion rights (69% are opposed, 14% say the issue wouldn't matter). Furthermore, 65% of this newly defined group believe abortion should be legal “under certain circumstances,” while 34% say under no circumstances. This guarded support of abortion rights is probably an accurate reflection of even the most religiously conservative. If the current definition is modified to exclude all but those who oppose abortion in all circumstances, just 4% of the population would be classified as religious right, which would be only 9% of Republicans.

Conclusion

The term “religious right,” common in political circles, is not widely used by Americans generally and does

not carry any widely agreed upon meaning. Because of this, whatever refinements to our empirical definition that may be necessary, it is clear that some empirically-defined measure of the group is required. Depending on the definition (except for the most drastic one outlined above), the religious right constitute somewhere between 25% to 30% of the Republican party. Compared with other Republicans, however, the religious right are significantly more likely to turn out to vote (92% said they voted in the 1992 presidential election, compared with 72% of other Republicans) and thus may constitute more than a third of the Republican electorate in high turnout elections, and possibly even more than that in low turnout elections.

As the discussion above reveals, on most issues the religious right adherents look no different in their views from other conservatives who are Republican or independent. However, on the issues that are more directly concerned with religious views—such as abortion, homosexual rights, and the role of religion in society—group members do express views substantially distinct from their partisan counterparts. For these Americans, religion does make a difference—both in their personal lives and in their political views.

Endnotes:

¹“Christian Right Defies Categories: Survey Discloses Diversity in Politics and Doctrine,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 1994, p. 1. (Results were based on a CBS News/*New York Times* poll, July 14-17, 1994.)

²My thanks to Marjorie Connelly of *The New York Times* poll for calculating “religious” using the same general definition as described in this text and for providing other information about the July poll. One note: while the *Times* definition of “religious” was essentially the same as described for the Gallup poll, the question on the importance of religion in people's lives differed somewhat from the Gallup question. Thus, the percentages are not exactly comparable, although both figures are surprisingly similar and both support the conclusion that people who say they are members of the religious right are not necessarily religious or conservative.



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