

Read the Headline; Check the Numbers

Michael Sean Winters | May. 2, 2012 | Distinctly Catholic

[The Barna Group has a report on their newest survey of voters](#) [1]. The headline reads: "Evangelical Support for Obama Doubles in Past Three Years." That would certainly be news. According to their survey, Obama's previous support among white evangelical Christians was 11 percent and it has now grown to 22 percent. The survey also indicates that white evangelical Christians make up just 7 percent of the population and 10 percent of the electorate.

A quick check with Robert P. Jones and Dan Cox of the [Public Religion Research Institute](#) [2] helped clarify why we must treat such numbers with care. For starters, the Barna group relies on a peculiarly restrictive notion of who is, and is not, an evangelical Christian, hence the remarkably small figure of 7 percent of the population. Barna does not ask people to self-identify their religion and, furthermore, distinguishes between born-again Christians and evangelical Christians. The first category, born-again Christians, are those who say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus and expect to go to Heaven because of His saving deeds. Dan Cox, in an email, sent me the language Barna uses to classify the group:

?Evangelicals? meet the born again criteria (described above) plus seven other conditions. Those include saying their faith is very important in their life today; believing they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians; believing that Satan exists; believing that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; believing that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; asserting that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches; and describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today. Being classified as an evangelical is not dependent upon church attendance or the denominational affiliation of the church attended. Respondents were not asked to describe themselves as ?evangelical.?

He also noted it is not clear what model Barna uses to determine who is a likely voter, and that such determinations are difficult at this early stage in the campaign.

I would not be surprised to find that the more hardcore a person's evangelicalism is, the more likely they are to harbor doubts about Mr. Romney, in part because of his Mormonism and in part because, at the end of the day, he really is a "moderate from Massachusetts" as Newt Gingrich used to say. But, I really have a hard time believing that reservations about Romney among evangelical Christians will translate into support for Obama. More likely, a fair number of evangelicals will go fishing on election day.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.barna.org/culture-articles/562-election-2012-preferences-political-polarization-among-us-faith-segments>

[2] <http://publicreligion.org/>