
**A Revisit to "The Vanishing Protestant Majority" and
Expanded Religious Probes on the 2004 General Social Survey**

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Introduction

Past research (Smith and Seokho, 2004), has shown that the Protestant share of the population has been declining since the early 1990s and that Protestants were likely to soon lose their majority status. The 2004 General Social Survey (GSS) indicated that this trend was continuing with the Protestant share slipping to 51.6% in 2004 from 52.4% in 2002 (Table 1). The 2002-2004 per annum decline of 0.4 points was slightly greater than the per annum decline of 0.33 points for the 1998-2004 period which could indicate that a de-acceleration in the Protestant decline has ended.¹

The earlier research also examined the hypothesis that some of the Protestant decline might be artifactual and that many Protestants were simply being lost or misclassified into the Other category on major religion (See Appendix 1), most particularly as Christian and Inter/non-denominational. The Other category had grown from 2-3% in the 1980s and early 1990s to 6.9% in 2002 and in 2004 increased again to 7.5%. Much of this growth was in the Christian and Inter/Non-denominational categories. Christians rose from 0.8% in 1990-1996 to 2.3% in 2002 and then to 2.6% in 2004. Inter/non-denominational climbed from 0.3% in 1990-1996 to 1.1% in 2004 and then fell to 0.9% in 2004. Together the two went from 1.1% in 1990-1996 to 3.5% in 2004. To both further explore this artifact hypothesis and to improve the classification of religious affiliation in general several probes were added to the standard GSS religion questions.

Revised Religion Questions in 2004

Appendix 1 shows the standard GSS religion questions. They consist of a major religion question that initially classifies respondents as Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other, or No Religion/None and follow-up questions that respectively ask Protestants and Jews to indicate what denomination or tradition they follow. The Other response verbatims are inspected and cases are either reassigned into a) a mentioned category on RELIG (Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or None) or b) an unmentioned category (Buddhism, Hinduism, Other Eastern, Moslem/Islam, Orthodox-Christian, Christian, Native American, or Inter/non-denominational) or retained in the Other category.

To improve the classification of respondents' religion a series of probes was added in 2004 (See Appendix 2). First, interviewers divided all Other cases into three groups: 1) "Christian' or some other religion that you think may be a Christian denomination other than Eastern Orthodox churches...", 2) Eastern Orthodox and Non-Christian, and 3) "inter' or 'non-denominational'." The Christians were then asked the same follow-up questions that Protestants had always gotten, "What specific denomination is that, if any?" The Eastern Orthodox and non-Christians were asked no further questions since there was already sufficient information to classify them under the GSS religious coding scheme. The Inter/non-denominationals were asked, "Would that be a Christian Church?" If they said "yes", they were next asked, "Would you consider that a Protestant church?" If they were "not sure", they were asked to "Specify" that

¹These figures are properly weighted (Davis, Smith, and Marden, 2005), but the discussion of the coding of cases refers to unweighted, whole counts of cases.

uncertainty.

The purpose of the denominational follow-up to "Christians" was to identify those ~~who~~ were a) generic Christians without any specific affiliation, b) followers of a specific Protestant denomination known as "Christian" (e.g. the Disciples of Christ), and c) followers of some other specific Protestant denomination who had used "Christian" merely as an general or umbrella term and had simply not mentioned more specifics. The purpose of the Inter/non-denominational follow-ups was to first try to separate people following ecumenical faiths broader than or other than Christianity from Christians and second to separate those following a Christian faith broader than or encompassing the major Christian traditions (Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Mormonism, etc.) from those adhering to an inter/non-denominational faith within Protestantism.

Religious Classifications

Of the 457 cases initially coded as Other, 302 were coded as Christian on the probe (IVQRELIG), 40 as Eastern Orthodox or Non-Christian, 91 as Inter/non-denominational, and 24 were unclassified (mostly Don't Know). The Inter/non-denominational and the unclassified were asked the follow-up questions about being Christian and, if applicable, being Protestant. The unclassified ended up being reassigned as 19 non-Christian, 1 None, 1 missing, and 3 Protestant. The Inter/non-denominational were reassigned as 32 Protestant, 14 specific non-Christian faiths, 14 Inter/non-denominational, 9 Christian, 6 None, 1 Native American, and 1 missing and 14 remained as Other on RELIG. The Eastern Orthodox/Non-Christian ended up as 31 specific non-Christian faiths, 8 Eastern Orthodox, and 1 as Protestant (based on a verbatim). Of the 302 Christian/Christian denomination, 212 were reassigned as Protestant, 61 as Christian, 12 as Inter/non-denominational, 5 as Eastern Orthodox, 1 as Jewish, and 1 as None and 10 remained as Other. Of the 61 Christians, none offered any more specifics despite being asked twice and probed specifically for a denomination. Almost all said just "Christian" or "Christianity". Of the 12 coded as Inter/non-denominational, all said only "non-denominational" when probed for a specific denomination.

Thus, of the 457 cases initially coded as Other on RELIG, all but 37 were reassigned to other codes as follows based on the initial verbatims and/or the follow-up probe:

1. 258 were moved to one of the other mentioned, major religions where they should have been all along: 248 Protestants, 1 Jewish, and 9 Nones.

2. 65 were reassigned to one of the unmentioned major religions: 13 Buddhist, 13 Hindu, 9 other eastern religions, 16 Muslim, 13 Orthodox Christian, and 1 Native American.

3. 1 was reassigned as missing on RELIG since the Other verbatim was just a missing value code.

4. 26 were reassigned as Inter/non-denominational and 70 as Christian (more on these below).

Of the 37 retained as Other, 33 had verbatims that indicated that they should remain in this

category and 4 had no verbatims and remained in Other by default.²

The Christian and inter/non-denominational cases were the residuals from a larger group that could not be reassigned to a more specific code. First, there were initially 97 cases listed as Christian based on the verbatims (96 as "Christian" or "Christianity" and one as "We read the Bible."). After they were probed for a specific denomination, 70 remained and 27 were reassigned into specific Protestant denominations. Second, there were initially 29 cases listed as inter/non-denominational (27 "non-denominational", 1 "ecumenical", and 1 "non-denominational spirituality"). Almost all (26) remained in the inter/non-denominational category as no additional specific denominational information was obtained. Finally, there were 9 cases listed as "non-denominational Christian". These all were eventually reassigned as non-denominational Protestants (code 70 on DENOM). However, two of these assignments are questionable since respondents said "no" to being Protestants on PROTCHRH.³ In sum, of the 135 cases initially in the general Christian or Inter/non-denominational categories, most (96) remained there and the rest (39) were reassigned into some type of Protestant code based on follow-up probes. The likelihood of Protestants being included in these groups is discussed below.

Hidden Protestants

Despite the additional probes and follow-up question to clarify people's religious identification in general and identify Protestants in particular, some Protestants might be incorrectly coded under another code. Possible locations are among those missing on RELIG (12 cases), those Other on RELIG (37 cases), those Inter/non-denominational on RELIG (26 cases), and those Christian on RELIG (71) cases. For each of these 146 cases, responses to all religious items and all verbatims to religious questions were reviewed:

Missing on RELIG (12 cases): for six there was no information whatsoever on current religion or religion raised in, three were raised as Catholic, and three as Protestants. For the three raised as Protestant one never attends religious services, one attends less than once a year, and one is missing on attendance. Including these 12 cases in the base as non-Protestants would probably wrongly miss several Protestant cases. Excluding them from the base (as Table 1 does), in effect assumes that they are distributed like the non-missing cases or that about half are Protestants. This probably is higher than is the case. The small number of cases involved however means that any effect is negligible.

Other on RELIG (37 cases): of the 33 cases for which an other religion verbatim was

²There were about a dozen cases in which contradictory information was given on a person's religious identification such as a verbatim that a person was a "Druid" and an interviewer's assignment of the case as "Christian" for the follow-up probe (IVQRELIG). Verbatims were given heavier weight in resolving such disagreements.

³A general review of the 1483 Protestant cases also identified two other cases that may not be Protestants.

specified only one had a possible Protestant connection. This case was "First Christian/Catholic". Even if "First Christian" ~~did~~ refer to a Protestant church, GSS convention assigns it as Other since it mentions an inter- or multi-denominational affiliation broader than Protestantism. For four cases no Other religion verbatim was specified. None of these cases indicated any Christian or Protestant affiliation on the follow-up probes. Thus, it is unlikely that any Protestants are included in the Other cases.

Inter/Non-denominational (26 cases): these cases were either classified as Christian by interviewers in the follow-up probe (12 cases) or as inter/non-denominational on this probe (14 cases). The 12 Christian cases were asked the denominational follow-up question. Both in response to the initial religion question and the denominational follow-up, no specific church was mentioned and all verbatims were variants of "nondenominational". The 14 inter/non-denominational cases were asked the follow-up questions as to whether their religion was Christian and, if yes, whether it was a Protestant church. Two said not Christian, three said Christian and Protestant, five said Christian and not Protestant, and four said Christian, but not sure if Protestant. None mentioned any specific church at any point. The four saying they were unsure if Protestant were probed further and one repeated "non-denominational" and three replied "none." This suggests that at least three were in Protestant churches, about another 16 were indicated as Christian and without explicitly rejecting or accepting a Protestant label, five were Christian, but not Protestant, and two were non-Christian.

Christian (71 cases): 61 were classified as Christian on the follow-up probe, nine as inter/non-denominational, and one initially as a Protestant non-denominational. Of the 62 initially classified as Christian or Protestant, none gave a specific church (including the one "Protestant" case who reported his/her denomination as "Christianity"). Of the nine coded as Inter/non-denominational on the follow-up probe, six said they were Christian and not Protestant, one as Christian and Protestant, one as Christian and unsure if Protestant, and one as non-Christian (but since this person had given a verbatim of "Christian" he/she was kept as such). This group of unspecified "Christians" could contain four sub-groups: 1) generic Christians with no affiliation with any specific church, 2) inter/non-denominational Christians associated with a church that would be classified as more ecumenical than covered by Protestantism, 3) inter/non-denominational Protestants associated with a non-denominational church within the Protestant tradition, and 4) followers of a specific Protestant church referred to as "Christian" such as the Disciples of Christ. The last possibility is unlikely since several attempts were made to identity specific churches, but cannot be ruled out. The first possibility might be associated with people who rarely attend church and 21 of these 71 attend church no more than twice a year, 26 several times a year up to two-three times a month, 23 nearly every week or more often, and one is missing on attendance. Thus, the low attenders would mostly likely be unaffiliated, generic Christians, while the higher attenders are most likely to have some specific affiliation with a congregation and denomination. Looking at the religion in which people were raised and their current attendance identifies two groups most likely to contain Protestants: 1) 19 who were raised as Protestant and at least

moderately attending (several times a year or more) and 2) 11 who were raised as Christian and have at least moderate attendance. Of course they may not actually be current Protestants and the people raised in other traditions (18 Catholic, 7 none, 1 Native American, 2 missing) or those raised as Protestants or Christians but rarely attending (13 cases) could be Protestants. However, the 30 moderately+ attenders with Protestant/Christian backgrounds are the most likely candidates for hidden Protestants. Unfortunately there is no good way to distinguish which of the cases are inter/non-denominational Christians and which are the inter/non-denominational Protestants. It is possible however that inter/non-denominational Protestants might make up a non-trivial proportion of the residual Christians, perhaps 20-40 of the 72.

Overall, very few hidden Protestants were definitely identified among the 146 cases. Only four cases gave verbatims or other responses clearly indicating that they were Protestants. However, despite the questions added to help sort out initial mentions of "Christian" or "inter/non-denominational", there remains a substantial number of cases that could be Protestants as opposed to generic Christians or inter/non-denominational Christians.

Conclusion

The 2004 GSS data continue to show a declining Protestant share of the adult population and support the prediction that the Protestant share of the adult population will soon fall below 50%.

To help improve the measurement of religious identification in general and to examine whether Protestants were being hidden in the growing Christian and Inter/non-denominational categories, several additional probes were added. They found very few definite Protestant cases in these groups, but still did not fully resolve the status of several dozen cases.

On the 2006 GSS there will be a follow-up study of congregations using a hypernetwork sample of congregations as done on the GSS in 1998 (Chaves, 2004) and 2000 (Carroll and McMillan, 2001; Woolever and Bruce, 2002). It will ask about the congregations that people going to religious services at least once a year attend. This should help to identify the affiliations of almost all of the still uncertain cases and thus clarify the presence of undetected Protestants among the Christian and Inter/non-denominational groups.

References

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Table 1

GSS Religious Trends by Year

| Year | Protestant | Catholic | Jewish | None | Other | |
|------|------------|----------|--------|------|-------|--------|
| 1972 | 62.5 | 27.4 | 3.0 | 5.1 | 1.9 | (1605) |
| 1973 | 61.8 | 26.4 | 2.7 | 6.6 | 2.4 | (1500) |
| 1974 | 63.3 | 26.1 | 3.0 | 7.0 | 0.6 | (1483) |
| 1975 | 64.7 | 25.3 | 1.5 | 7.3 | 1.1 | (1488) |
| 1976 | 62.6 | 27.4 | 1.7 | 7.4 | 0.9 | (1497) |
| 1977 | 64.9 | 26.0 | 2.1 | 5.9 | 1.1 | (1523) |
| 1978 | 63.1 | 26.3 | 1.9 | 7.6 | 1.1 | (1529) |
| 1980 | 63.9 | 25.3 | 1.9 | 6.8 | 2.0 | (1464) |
| 1982 | 63.9 | 25.7 | 2.1 | 7.1 | 1.2 | (1498) |
| 1983 | 60.3 | 28.2 | 2.5 | 7.5 | 1.5 | (1594) |
| 1984 | 62.5 | 27.4 | 1.8 | 6.8 | 1.5 | (1461) |
| 1985 | 62.8 | 26.4 | 2.1 | 7.2 | 1.4 | (1528) |
| 1986 | 61.2 | 27.4 | 2.5 | 6.9 | 2.0 | (1467) |
| 1987 | 64.9 | 24.7 | 1.3 | 7.1 | 2.0 | (1461) |
| 1988 | 60.4 | 27.1 | 2.0 | 7.7 | 2.8 | (1480) |
| 1989 | 62.3 | 26.2 | 1.5 | 7.8 | 2.1 | (1533) |
| 1990 | 62.6 | 24.5 | 1.9 | 7.7 | 3.3 | (1368) |
| 1991 | 63.3 | 26.8 | 1.9 | 6.3 | 1.7 | (1516) |
| 1993 | 63.1 | 23.0 | 2.1 | 9.0 | 2.8 | (1596) |
| 1994 | 58.4 | 26.9 | 1.9 | 9.0 | 3.8 | (2982) |
| 1996 | 56.5 | 24.2 | 2.1 | 11.9 | 5.3 | (2900) |
| 1998 | 53.6 | 26.3 | 1.8 | 13.7 | 4.6 | (2792) |
| 2000 | 52.7 | 25.4 | 2.2 | 14.1 | 5.5 | (2813) |
| 2002 | 52.4 | 25.5 | 1.5 | 13.8 | 6.9 | (2749) |
| 2004 | 51.6 | 24.7 | 2.1 | 14.1 | 7.5 | (2802) |

Appendix 1: Pre-2004 GSS Religion Questions

(GSS mnemonics in **bold**)

1. What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion? **RELIG**

- 1 Protestant
- 2 Catholic
- 3 Jewish
- 4 None
- 5 OTHER (SPECIFY RELIGION AND/OR CHURCH DENOMINATION)

IF RELIG = 3, GO TO **JEW**

IF RELIG = 1, GO TO **DENOM**

a. What specific denomination is that, if any? **DENOM**

(INTERVIEWER: PROBE FOR COMPLETE NAME OF DENOMINATION)

- 10 American Baptist Association
- 11 American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A
- 12 National Baptist Convention of America
- 13 National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc
- 14 Southern Baptist Convention
- 15 Other Baptist Churches
- 18 Baptist, Don't know which
- 20 African Methodist Episcopal Church
- 21 African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
- 22 United Methodist Church
- 23 Other Methodist Churches
- 28 Methodist, Don't know which
- 30 American Lutheran Church
- 31 Lutheran Church in America
- 32 Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod
- 33 Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
- 34 Other Lutheran Churches
- 35 Evangelical Lutheran Church of America
- 38 Lutheran, Don't know which
- 40 Presbyterian Church in the United States
- 41 United Presbyterian Church in the USA
- 42 Other Presbyterian Churches
- 43 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
- 48 Presbyterian, Don't know which
- 50 EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Appendix 1 (continued)

60 OTHER (SPECIFY)*

70 NO DENOMINATION GIVEN OR NON-DENOMINATIONAL CHURCH

IF **DENOM** EQUALS 35 or 43.

PROBE: Do you know the name of your denomination prior to the merger?

IF **RELIG** EQUALS 3:

Do you consider yourself Orthodox, Conservative, Reform or none of these? **JEW**

- 1 Orthodox
- 2 Conservative
- 3 Reform
- 4 None of these

* Denominations specified under code 60 on **DENOM** are recoded into the variable **OTHER**. For the coding of **OTHER** see Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2005.

Appendix 2: 2004 GSS Religion Questions

(GSS mnemonics in **bold**; Added 2004 items in *italics*)

1. What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion? **RELIG**

- 1 Protestant
- 2 Catholic
- 3 Jewish
- 4 None
- 5 OTHER (SPECIFY RELIGION AND/OR CHURCH DENOMINATION)

IF RELIG = 3, GO TO **JEW**

IF RELIG = 1, GO TO **DENOM**

1.1 IF YOU HAVE ENTERED "CHRISTIAN" OR SOME OTHER RELIGION THAT YOU THINK MAY BE A CHRISTIAN DENOMINATION OTHER THAT EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCHES (E.G. GREEK, RUSSIAN, SERBIA, OR ARMENIAN ORTHODOX), ENTER 1. IF EASTERN ORTHODOX OR NOT CHRISTIAN, ENTER 2, IF "INTER" OR "NON-DENOMINATIONAL", ENTER 3.

IVQRELIG

CHRISTIAN.....(ASK A).....1
EASTERN ORTHODOX/NOT CHRISTIAN.....(GO TO NEXT QUESTION)....2
INTER/NON-DENOMINATION.....(ASK 1.2).....3

*1.2 Would that be a Christian church? **CHRISTCH***

Yes.....(ASK 1.3).....1
No.....(GO TO NEXT QUESTION)...2

*1.3 Would you consider that a Protestant church? **PROTCHRH***

Yes.....1
No.....2
Not sure.....(SPECIFY _____).....3

a. What specific denomination is that, if any? **DENOM**

(INTERVIEWER: PROBE FOR COMPLETE NAME OF DENOMINATION)

- 10 American Baptist Association
- 11 American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A
- 12 National Baptist Convention of America

Appendix 2 (continued)

- 13 National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc
- 14 Southern Baptist Convention
- 15 Other Baptist Churches
- 18 Baptist, Don't know which
- 20 African Methodist Episcopal Church
- 21 African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
- 22 United Methodist Church
- 23 Other Methodist Churches
- 28 Methodist, Don't know which
- 30 American Lutheran Church
- 31 Lutheran Church in America
- 32 Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod
- 33 Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
- 34 Other Lutheran Churches
- 35 Evangelical Lutheran Church of America
- 38 Lutheran, Don't know which
- 40 Presbyterian Church in the United States
- 41 United Presbyterian Church in the USA
- 42 Other Presbyterian Churches
- 43 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
- 48 Presbyterian, Don't know which
- 50 EPISCOPAL CHURCH
- 60 OTHER (SPECIFY)*
- 70 NO DENOMINATION GIVEN OR NON-DENOMINATIONAL CHURCH

IF **DENOM** EQUALS 35 or 43.

PROBE: Do you know the name of your denomination prior to the merger?

IF **RELIG** EQUALS 3:

Do you consider yourself Orthodox, Conservative, Reform or none of these? **JEW**

- 1 Orthodox
- 2 Conservative
- 3 Reform
- 4 None of these

* Denominations specified under code 60 on **DENOM** are recoded into the variable **OTHER**. For the coding of **OTHER** see Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2005.