How Many “Nones” Are There? Explaining the Discrepancies in Survey Estimates

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Abstract:

While there has been a great deal of media focus recently on the rise of those without religious affiliation (also known as the “nones”), there is an underlying issue facing this line of research: different surveys come to completely different conclusions about how many nones actually exist in the United States. Using the General Social Survey (GSS) and the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) this work details how each of these instruments measures religious affiliation in a different manner and how that results in an estimate of the nones that diverges by over eight percentage points in 2018. Statistical analysis reveals that the GSS has a much higher share of Protestants who never attend church than that found in the CCES. In addition, the CCES Protestant subsample is more Republican, while the nones in the GSS are more to the left of the political spectrum than the nones in the CCES. Some advice and caution is offered to researchers who are interested in studying the religiously unaffiliated in these two surveys.

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