

# Reexamining the “Racial Gap” in Political Knowledge

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Scholars have long lamented the low levels of political knowledge in the American public, particularly the “racial gap” in the rates of knowledge between racial/ethnic minorities and whites. This article examines whether the racial gap is an artifact of perceptual biases or differential item functioning, brought about by the distinct political experiences of racial/ethnic minorities in the United States. In analyzing data from the 2008 American National Election Studies, the raw responses to political knowledge questions indeed reveal a discrepancy in blacks’ and Latinos’ placements of prominent political figures when compared to whites. However, once these perceptual biases are corrected for, the racial gap dissipates. Blacks and Latinos are able to accurately identify the positions of prominent political candidates and parties on a range of policies across the liberal-conservative dimension. These findings pose several implications for our current understanding of the uneven distributions of political knowledge in the nation.

The low levels of political knowledge and information that characterize the American public have been well documented by scholars (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1993).<sup>1</sup> Another consistent finding that emerges from the literature is that levels of political information are unequally distributed in the United States (Mondak and Anderson 2004; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1993). As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1993) find, variations in political knowledge are particularly pronounced across the major ethnic/racial groups in the United States, with blacks and Latinos possessing lower levels of political knowledge than whites. They attribute this discrepancy to the relative lack of resources (time, money, skills) that minorities possess when compared to whites in having the available resources to learn about politics. However, a recent study conducted by Prior and Lupia (2008) finds that even when individuals are provided with such resources, ethnic/racial minorities are still less likely to possess the same levels of knowledge as whites.

I contend that the negative association between race/ethnicity and political knowledge actually has little to do with resources, time, or a lack of political knowledge but instead due to the measurement problem known as differential item functioning (DIF), which occurs when survey

respondents answer questions in different ways. It can occur due to cross-cultural differences or perceptual biases (Aldrich and McKelvey 1977; King and Wand 2007). The experiences of blacks and Latinos in the United States have been so distinct that it has resulted in an orientation and understanding of American politics that is fundamentally different from the experiences of white Americans (for blacks, see Dawson 1994, 2001; Pinderhughes 1990; for Latinos, see Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Garcia Bedolla 2009). Due to these experiences, particularly as it relates to politics, blacks and Latinos possess a perceptual “bias” that leads them to interpret such questions in a way that differs from the way the majority of Americans interpret those same questions. While most of the existing research has identified biases in scale perceptions in cross-national studies (King and Wand 2007), the distinctive historical circumstances that have shaped the political beliefs and orientations of blacks and Latinos indicate that DIF is also likely to exist across the three major ethnic/racial groups in the United States.

To demonstrate that these differential experiences are causing perceptual biases in their responses to political knowledge questions, I first review the existing research that accounts for the perceptual biases of blacks and Lati-

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1. Supplementary material for this article is available at the “Supplements” link in the online edition. Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results in the article will be made available <http://dss.ucsd.edu/~mabrajan/> by January of 2015.

nos in the political arena. Next, I discuss and apply a generalization of the Aldrich and McKelvey (1977) scaling procedure known as Blackbox Transpose (Poole 1998) on data from the 2008 American National Election Survey (ANES). Using this particular dataset is ideal since it contains a sizable sample of black, Latino and white respondents; it also includes political knowledge questions where it is possible to correct for interpersonal comparability across responses.

Employing this procedure reveals several important insights. First, DIF indeed exists in the responses to the political knowledge questions provided by black and Latino respondents when compared to white respondents. But once DIF is accounted for, blacks and Latinos are equally knowledgeable as whites on the issue and ideological positions of prominent political figures from the 2008 presidential election. Robustness checks using the 2012 ANES reaffirms these results.

As such, these findings question the conventional wisdom regarding the large variations in the levels of political sophistication across America's racial/ethnic groups. These findings pose a number of important implications, not only for our current understanding of how political knowledge is distributed throughout the populace, but also because political knowledge is linked to a whole host of other behaviors (voting, participation, interest, etc.).

### THE RACIAL GAP IN POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

The racial gap in political knowledge has been well documented in the existing research (Abrajano 2010; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Prior and Lupia 2008; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1993). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1993) comprehensive study that compares racial/ethnic groups use a political information scale based on eight items—three of which are related to naming public officials and five on knowledge of government and politics. They find that the average political information score was highest for whites at 4.1, followed by African Americans at 3.1, and Latinos at the bottom with an average score of 2.7. These findings parallel their related research regarding the lower levels of political participation and activity amongst the blacks and Latinos as compared to whites. Thus, the results from this study are highly influential in advancing the belief that ethnic and racial minorities are less politically informed than whites. Recent work by Abrajano (2010) compares the political knowledge levels between Latinos and whites and finds that Latinos are less politically informed than whites based on factual political questions from the 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Surveys. Likewise, Abrajano and Alvarez (2010) find that whites' levels of

political knowledge are nearly twice as great as it is for Latinos in the 2000 presidential election.

Many studies on political knowledge turn to the ANES as a rich source of information given that these surveys regularly include a battery of political knowledge questions across many years (for example, see Gibson and Caldeira 2009; Luskin and Bullock 2011; Martinez and Craig 2010; Mondak and Anderson 2004; Mondak and Davis 2001). One of the drawbacks, however, of using these surveys to assess the racial gap in political knowledge is the small sample size of racial/ethnic minorities. But commencing with the 2008 ANES, it is now possible to make meaningful statistical comparisons of political knowledge levels across racial/ethnic groups. This survey marks the first time in its 63-year history where it included an oversample of Latinos ( $N = 507$ ) and African Americans ( $N = 527$ ).<sup>2</sup> Even with these larger sample sizes, the distributions of political knowledge across the three major ethnic/racial groups are consistent with past research findings—racial/ethnic groups possess lower levels of knowledge about politics on both of these measures. In fact, the majority of blacks and Latinos incorrectly identified Republicans as controlling the House prior to the 2008 election; in contrast, a majority of whites knew that it was Democrats who had control of the House. On the candidate recognition questions, blacks and Latinos were also at a disadvantage when compared to whites.

### EXPLAINING THE RACIAL GAP IN POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

One implication from these previous studies is that racial/ethnic minorities are disadvantaged in the kinds of resources, such as time and money, which are needed both to learn about politics as well as to partake in it. Prior and Lupia (2008) attempt to rectify this problem by designing an experimental study where they offer individuals these additional resources to determine whether they positively affect their political knowledge levels. Their findings indicate that even when controlling for basic demographics (e.g., age, income, education) and political interest, racial minorities were less likely to provide correct answers to factual political questions relative to whites. These racial distinctions persist even when minorities were offered a monetary incentive for answering correctly as well as more time (24 hours) to respond to the questions. Thus, since neither time nor resources could diminish the effect of racial differences in political knowledge, then what is it about being a racial/ethnic minority in the United States that results in low levels of political knowledge when compared to whites?

2. For more details about this dataset, please see the appendix.

The negative relationship between race/ethnicity and political knowledge, I argue, cannot be attributed to the resource-based explanations advanced by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1993). Instead, the reason why we see these differences can be attributed to perceptual biases, or DIF. Recall that DIF occurs due to interpersonal comparability or differences in the way individuals respond to survey questions. The unique political experiences of blacks and Latinos (relative to whites) has led each group to develop a perceptual “bias” in the way they interpret political knowledge questions. The existence of this bias is what makes them appear as being less politically knowledgeable than white Americans.

A considerable number of scholars have discussed the distinct political experiences of blacks and Latinos in the United States when compared to the experiences of the majority (Dawson 1994, 2001; DeSipio 1996; Garcia Bedolla 2009; Garcia and Sanchez 2008; Pinderhughes 1990). Amongst Latinos, the population is largely comprised of individuals born outside of the United States; one out of six of Latinos are born in Latin America, Central America, the Caribbean, or Spain (Garcia Bedolla 2009). That 40% of Latinos are foreign born means that they do not learn about politics in the classic “American” sense, e.g., through one’s parents (Campbell et al. 1960). This critical pathway of learning about the ins and outs of American politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991) is therefore missing for a considerable portion of the Latino electorate. As such, what knowledge of politics they bring with them to the United States is therefore based on the politics of their homelands, many of which vary considerably from the American political system (Skidmore, Smith, and Green 2009).

While some may expect these gaps to dissipate as Latinos reside in the United States for a long period of time or are born in the United States, the existing research suggests otherwise. Numerous studies focusing on native-born Latinos have demonstrated that their experiences and interactions with the American political system are distinct from those of non-Latinos (Garcia Bedolla 2009; Garcia and Sanchez 2008). Some of these experiences pertain to the legacy of institutionalized segregation, discrimination, and isolation in much of the American Southwest as well as in other regions of the country (Garcia Bedolla 2009). But it is also important to note that such interactions are not isolated to the past; today, the recent swath of anti-immigrant legislation at both the state and federal level have also led to distinct political experiences for the Latinos (Felix et al. 2006; Merolla et al. 2012; Pantoja, Ramirez, and Segura 2001). These studies conclude that moments of heightened anti-immigrant and anti-Latino sentiment can lead some

Latinos to become disenchanted with the political system. In turn, this can affect their feelings of political efficacy, as well as their interest and desire to participate in and learn about politics.

An additional concern with regards to the Latino community arises over survey wording and methodology in bilingual survey instruments. In recent work, Perez (2009) finds that English and Spanish-language survey items are not equivalent to one another. That is, Latino respondents who answer the same question in English fail to provide the same response in Spanish. For instance, consider how one of the most frequently mentioned terms in American politics, “liberal,” is defined in Latin America in comparison to the United States. Being liberal in Latin America is to identify oneself as someone on the right of the political spectrum, whereas being liberal in the United States takes on the opposite meaning (Potash 1996). Thus, due to these different political contexts, as opposed to a lack of knowledge, a Latino respondent may incorrectly identify John McCain as a liberal in the United States, yet if she were in Latin America, this description would be accurate.

In the case of African Americans, the forcible separation of blacks from whites in the late nineteenth century led to the creation of a separate black counterpublic (Brown 1989; Dawson 1994). A key player in the formation of this counterpublic was the church; it helped to shape the culture, norms, values, policy positions and most modes of behavior (Dawson 1994). Scholars argue that African Americans continue to be isolated from the larger community and, today, are limited to a counterpublic of “barbershops, bibles and BET” (Dawson 2001; Harris-Lacewell 2006). Thus, much of what blacks learn about politics comes from experiences in their community that in turn leads to high levels of group consciousness. Known as *linked fate* (Dawson 1994), this strong degree of group consciousness has a substantial impact on blacks’ political attitudes and behavior, with the welfare of the group playing a prominent role in their decision-making process. As Dawson asserts, “African-American politics, including political behavior, is *different*. It has been shaped by historical forces that produced a different pattern of political behavior from the pattern found among white citizens” (1994, 5).

Finally, one other possible explanation for the racial gap in knowledge could be attributed to the types of questions that have been used to measure political knowledge. A growing body of research has suggested that differences in political knowledge amongst the public may be partially attributed to the sorts of survey questions used to tap into knowledge (Gibson and Caldeira 2009; Mondak 2001; Mondak and Davis 2001; Prior 2014). Most recently, Prior

(2014) finds that some individuals who were previously considered to be less informed (e.g., the less educated, women, older people) possess some of their political information visually as opposed to verbally. Thus, when presented knowledge questions that include a visual component to it, a small increase is observed in their levels of political knowledge. As such, by primarily relying on verbal cues of knowledge, prominent national surveys overlook the power that verbal cues impart to particular subgroups within the American populace. Additionally, most, if not all, of the political knowledge questions fail to consider that the sorts of political knowledge that blacks and Latinos possess may differ considerably from the sorts of political information that white Americans possess. One exception is a survey where individuals were asked about their knowledge of the landmark Supreme Court ruling ending racial segregation in public institutions, *Brown v Board of Education*. When asked about this case, more blacks reported having heard “a great deal” about it when compared to whites.<sup>3</sup> Because this question pertains to an issue that is extremely salient for blacks as a whole, no “racial gap” emerges in their familiarity with this case and in fact, a larger percentage of blacks know about this case when compared to whites.

Perhaps the biggest concern regarding what type of political knowledge question to use pertains to open-ended questions, as exemplified by the candidate-recognition questions used by ANES. Gibson and Caldeira’s (2009) study on the implementation of this particular question format led the ANES principal investigators to conduct their own study from which they drew the following conclusions: (1) many of the 2004 interviewers failed to adhere to instructions to transcribe responses as correct or partially correct; (2) the coding scheme did not distinguish responses that would be considered correct but incomplete; (3) variations existed in the instructions provided to coders in 2000 versus 2004, with no documentation of any instructions before 2000 (Martinez and Craig 2010, 1). Research by Mondak (2001), Mondak and Davis (2001), and Gibson and Caldeira (2009) has therefore advocated for the use of close-ended questions, as survey respondents are far more capable of identifying the office of prominent politicians from a set of options as opposed to the open-ended format. Mondak (2001) also contends that some individuals are more likely to offer a “don’t know” response than others and has therefore called on interviewers to be more cautious in offering this response category so readily.

3. This survey was from the Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll, April 1994; 32% of blacks heard a great deal about *Brown v Board* compared to 29% of whites.

This present study is able to circumvent some of the problems associated with the use of open-ended knowledge questions by focusing on a set of knowledge questions that are close-ended; the questions I use also do not vary significantly by racial/ethnic group in terms of their “don’t know responses.”<sup>4</sup> While these questions cannot rule out the possibility that visual cues could be also partially responsible for the perceived racial gap in political knowledge, it is certainly a question ripe for future research.<sup>5</sup>

### Correcting for Individual-Level DIF

This study seeks to determine the extent to which the racial gap in political knowledge is an artifact of DIF. Again, the primary reason why DIF occurs is due to intracultural differences between racial/ethnic minorities and whites, particularly with respect to their orientation to and interactions with politics. To determine whether this is the case, I examine several political knowledge questions where it is possible to correct for DIF. The Blackbox Transpose procedure that I use requires that such questions: (1) be perceptual in nature; (2) share a common space that makes it possible to locate respondents on the same scale; (3) have endpoints that are labeled (Poole 1998). Thus, I use a rich battery of scaled perceptual questions that tap into political knowledge. Specifically, I use the 7-point scale questions from the 2008 ANES that asks respondents to locate prominent political entities (Barack Obama, John McCain, as well as Democrats and Republicans) on a 1–7-point scale on a number of different issues, ranging from the government’s role in providing jobs and health care to government aid in assisting blacks.<sup>6</sup> Only the end points of the 7-point scales are labeled and respondents are told these (usually) polar-opposite positions.<sup>7</sup> As discussed earlier, I analyze the 2008 ANES due to its oversample of black and Latino respondents.

In addition to avoiding some of the issues that have been raised in the use of the open-ended political knowledge questions (Gibson and Caldeira 2009; Mondak 2001), these 7-point-scale questions are equally as good, or some may

4. Analyses of these questions also reveal that racial/ethnic minorities are no more likely than whites are to respond “don’t know.”

5. Unfortunately, no such questions are available in either the 2008 or 2012 ANES.

6. I also examined government aid to blacks, women’s role in society, government spending on social services, provision of health insurance, and provision of jobs and a good standard of living. A question on abortion was also included, given its important role in American politics (Leege et al. 2002).

7. See the online supplementary appendix for the exact question wording.

argue even better, at tapping into one’s level of political knowledge as the open-ended questions discussed earlier (Burnett and McCubbins 2013; Lupia 2006). Such questions require individuals to pay attention to the current presidential election, at least in the placement of the two presidential candidates, and have some understanding of the L-R continuum, defined as the role of government in the economy, that is the basis of the American political system (Poole and Rosenthal 1984). Altogether, I focus on six issue questions, plus a question that asks respondents to locate the ideological position of these political entities. Such questions retain the same objective features of the candidate recognition or civics-based questions, since Obama, McCain, and the two parties have distinct positions on the L-R scale. Likewise, they differed in their stances on the role of government to provide services and jobs as well as on the other issues used in this analysis.

Before I turn to a discussion of how I correct for DIF, it is first important to examine what the “raw” distributions look like for these 7-point-scale questions. That is, what sorts of conclusions would researchers draw if one were to only focus on these uncorrected estimates? Figure 1 presents the distributions to the question that perhaps best embody an in-

dividual’s knowledge of politics and current events—respondents are asked to locate the ideological position of the two most prominent political entities in the 2008 general election—presidential contenders Barack Obama and John McCain.

These distributions offer several noteworthy insights, with the most striking being that the plurality of black and Latino respondents (19% and 34.1%, respectively) incorrectly locate Obama at “7” on the 7-point L-R scale. As such, these raw distributions would lead to the conclusion that most blacks and Latinos perceive Obama to be extremely conservative, which is obviously inaccurate and the complete opposite of his ideological position. In addition, these findings also suggest that white respondents are correctly able to locate Obama’s ideological stance, with the plurality of them (29.5%) locating Obama at “2” on the 7-point scale. That these results indicate that blacks and Latinos are much less knowledgeable (and in fact, wrong) about Obama’s ideological stance, relative to whites, would simply serve to reinforce what the existing literature has identified as the racial gap in political knowledge.

With regards to perceptions of McCain’s ideological position, blacks and Latinos appear to be more knowledgeable than they were about Obama’s ideology, yet they still fare behind whites in the percentage of correct placements towards the right of the scale (locating McCain at either 5, 6, or 7). Consider that 33.2% of blacks and 22.5% of Latinos perceive McCain to be liberal, whereas only 16% of whites perceive McCain in this manner. Similar to the distributions on Obama, a larger percentage of blacks and Latinos are “wrong” about McCain’s political ideology, when compared to whites. Again were researchers simply to focus on the distributions from the raw data, their conclusions would be in line with the existing scholarly research on the heterogeneity of political knowledge across different subgroups within the United States. Yet as I will demonstrate below, the discrepancy in political knowledge across racial/ethnic groups dissipates once DIF is accounted for.

The method I use to correct for DIF is known as Blackbox Transpose, and it is a generalization of the Aldrich-McKelvey scaling procedure developed by Poole (1998).<sup>8</sup> This procedure addresses DIF by assuming that the stimuli, which in this case are the two major presidential candidates and parties in the 2008 election, possess some “true” position; however, the way respondents perceive these positions

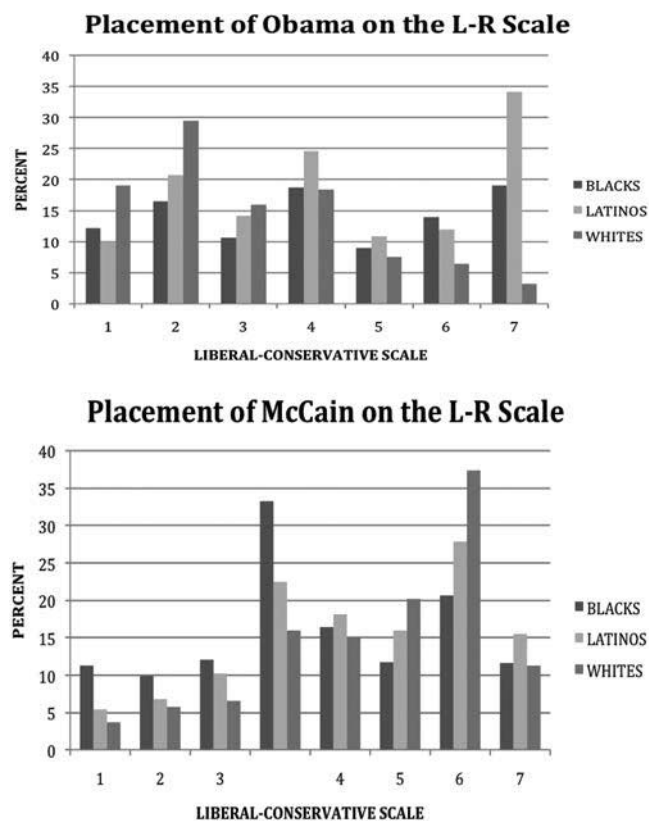


Figure 1. Raw distributions of Obama and McCain’s perceived ideological positions, by racial/ethnic group.

8. The Blackbox procedure makes all the same assumptions as the Aldrich-McKelvey model, but is advantageous to the Aldrich-McKelvey procedure in its ability to estimate multiple dimensions; it can also deal with the difficulties incurred by missing data (Poole 1998).

are distorted in some systematic way.<sup>9</sup> In this particular application, assume that there are  $J$  stimuli (which are prominent political actors), to be located on a scale by  $N$  respondents. The true or latent position of the political figures is  $\theta_j$  ( $1 \leq j \leq J$ ); each survey respondent,  $i$  ( $1 \leq i \leq N$ ), also possesses a latent perception of the  $j$ -th political actor. This latent perception is defined as the true position with errors that adhere to standard Gauss-Markov assumptions, ( $\theta_{ij} = \theta_j + \varepsilon_{ij}$ ). Unfortunately, these true positions are not what researchers have at their disposal. Instead, they are limited to survey responses that capture the observed perception on the L-R scale of political figure  $j$  by respondent  $i$ ,  $Y_{ij}$ . As such, Blackbox accounts for the existence of perceptual biases (DIF) by including stretch parameters,  $\alpha_i$  and  $\beta_i$ . Such parameters distort respondent  $i$ 's placement of  $j$ -th political figure so that:

$$\theta_j + \varepsilon_{ij} = \theta_{ij} = \alpha_i + \beta_i Y_{ij}.$$

Based on these assumptions, the Blackbox procedure estimates  $\alpha_i$  and  $\beta_i$ , the stretch parameters, as well as the positions of the political figures,  $\theta_j$ , by minimizing the sum of squared residuals for all respondents and political figures<sup>10</sup>

$$\sum \varepsilon_{ij} = \sum \alpha_i + \beta_i Y_{ij} - \theta_j, \forall ij, \forall j.$$

To determine just how prevalent DIF is in the survey responses, Figure 1a–1c plot the raw ANES data (on the x-axis) against the “corrected” data (on the y-axis) for all the 7-point questions, by racial/ethnic group.<sup>11</sup> In each of these figures, the diamond markers denote respondents’ placements of Obama on the various issues, and the square markers correspond to placements of McCain. The round marker indicates respondents’ placements of the Democrats on the L-C scale, while the triangular marker indicates their placement of the Republicans on the L-C scale. The most straightforward way to interpret these graphs is to focus on those markers that deviate from the 45-degree line, since perfect correspondence between the raw and corrected estimates would be linear. The horizontal axis represents the average placements, by racial/ethnic group, of the raw data, with the scale ranging from 1 to 7. The vertical axis rep-

resents the average placements of the corrected data, by racial/ethnic group, with the scale ranging from  $-.5$  to  $.5$ . Both axes can be interpreted on an L-C continuum.

As the graphs indicate, interpersonal biases exist in the responses provided by each racial/ethnic group; this is particularly the case for blacks and Latinos. DIF appears to be most pervasive amongst Latinos, since it is evident in all but one of the scaled knowledge questions. Further, across the three ethnic/racial groups, the correlation coefficient between the raw data and corrected estimates is lowest for Latinos ( $r = .41$ ), followed by blacks ( $r = .45$ ) and then whites ( $r = .62$ ). These findings are consistent with the theoretical expectation that the distinct political experiences of blacks and Latinos lead to greater instances of DIF when compared to white Americans.

Figure 2a–2c also make it possible to determine which of the scaled knowledge questions produced DIF for each racial/ethnic group. Take for instance, blacks’ placements of Obama on government-sponsored health insurance. In the raw data, they locate Obama as opposing government efforts to provide health insurance, whereas the DIF-corrected data actually reveals the opposite (and correct) location. Due to their distinct political experiences, blacks’ perceptual biases are so great that they actually locate Obama all the way to the right on this issue. One reason for these biases may be due to their distinct view of government when compared with the majority of the public. In general, blacks are less trusting of government than are whites; one reason for this could be attributed to the legacy of segregation and discrimination that has led to a heightened sense of group consciousness (Avery 2006; Hetherington 1998; Tate 2003). Due to this view of government, blacks may be interpreting the endpoints of the scale based on their own distinct experiences with government, which is one way that DIF can emerge (Aldrich and McKelvey 1977, 112).

In terms of locating Obama’s ideological position, the average black respondent in the raw data locates him somewhere in the middle of the scale, yet once DIF is corrected for, they accurately identify him as being on the left along the L-R ideological scale. Again, the reason for this perceptual bias can once again be traced to their distinct political experiences. A long history of multiple ideological traditions exists in the history of African American political thought that range from disillusioned liberalism to black conservatism, radical egalitarianism, black feminism, black social democracy, and community nationalism (Dawson 2001). Thus, as Aldrich and McKelvey (1977, 112) note, respondents may anchor the scales based on their own understanding of the endpoints, and this clearly appears to be the case for African Americans.

9. Given the limited computational resources at the time, Aldrich-McKelvey acknowledged but did not model several other features of the problem, such as the ordinal nature of the response categories (King et al. 2004). Subsequent research by Poole (1998) indicates that this is not an issue.

10. This assumption is based on the model-identification constraint that the position of the political figure,  $\theta$ , has mean zero and unit sum of squared distances from the mean (Poole et al. 2013).

11. Figures present the estimates from the first dimension. Fit statistics are in the appendix.

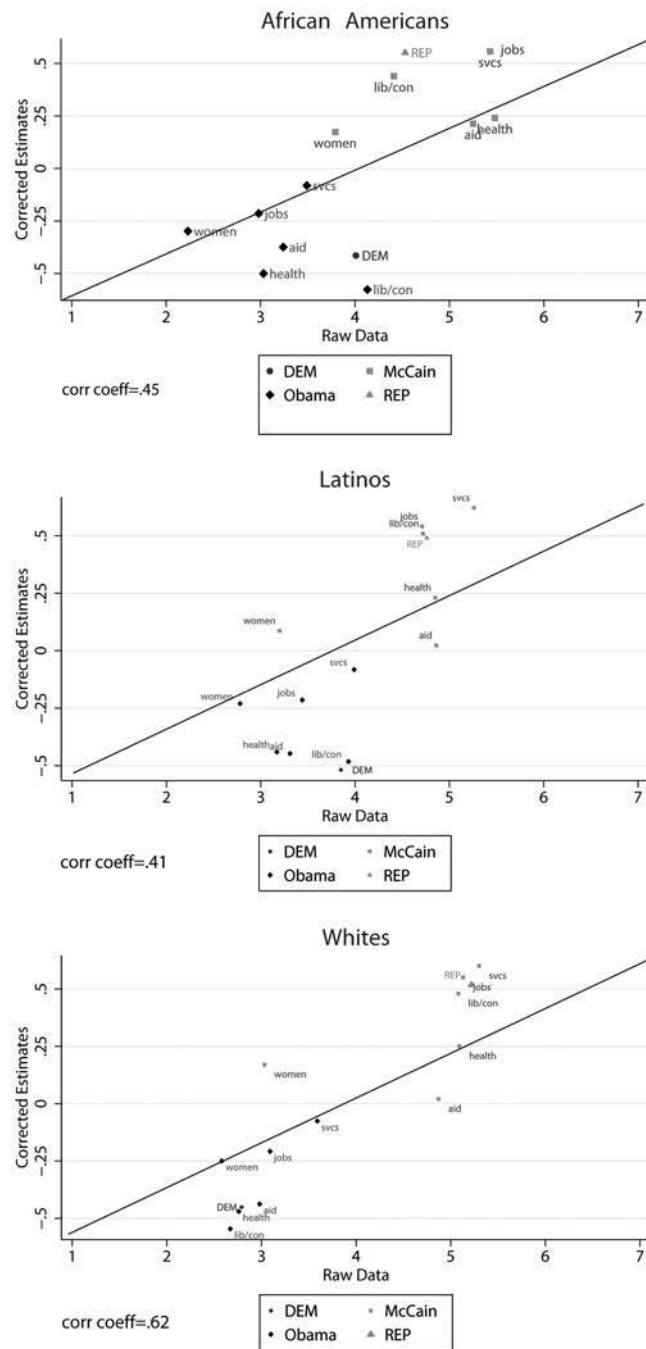


Figure 2. Corrected versus uncorrected placements of Obama and McCain, by race/ethnicity. Placements are based on the average respondent for each ethnic/racial group.

A similar phenomenon is evident in the responses provided by Latino survey respondents. Their average placement of Obama in the raw data is close to the midpoint of the scale, but the corrected estimates indicate that Latinos correctly locate Obama on the left. The same can be said with regards to their ideological placement of the Democrats; the average Latino respondent locates this party around the

midpoint of the scale, yet the corrected estimates indicate that the average Latino places Democrats at  $-.5$ , which is on the left of L-R scale. As discussed earlier, the term “liberal” in Latin America actually means the opposite from the way liberal is defined in the context of US politics (Potash 1996). Thus, although Latinos correctly recognize the ideological position of Obama, an analysis of the raw data alone as presented in Figure 1 would indicate otherwise.

One final noteworthy observation from these estimates is that McCain’s position on health insurance was the only issue where no interpersonal differences were evident for all three groups. That McCain adopted a position that was distinct from Obama’s on government-sponsored health insurance likely explains why all groups were knowledgeable about this particular issue. Comparing the DIF-corrected estimates with the raw data underscore the need to correct for DIF amongst groups whose experiences have resulted in a differential understanding of politics. And once DIF is corrected for, blacks and Latinos are just as knowledgeable as whites are of the ideological and policy preferences of the major presidential contenders in the 2008 election. Thus, the purported “racial” gap in political knowledge indeed appears to be an artifact of DIF and not because of a lack of political interest, attention, or resources.

### COMPARING GROUPS’ KNOWLEDGE LEVELS

In this next section, I provide detailed spatial maps that locate each racial/ethnic group’s perceptions of Obama, McCain, and the two major parties across several issues. Doing so makes it possible to more fully compare the levels of political awareness across the three racial and ethnic groups for an array of different policy areas.

Figure 3a provides a spatial representation of Obama and McCain on the liberal-conservative question for the average respondent of each ethnic/racial group. These estimates locate each group’s average position for the issue of interest (as denoted by the token “L” for Latino, “B” for black, and “W” for white). Figure 3b is identical except that the political actors of interest are the two major political parties—Democrats and Republicans. Overall, the standard error estimates for both the first and second dimensions are relatively small, indicating that the point estimates are robust.<sup>12</sup>

On this most fundamental and basic of all core political attitudes, that of political ideology, Figure 3a reveal a number of important insights. First, it is quite clear that all ethnic/

12. The corresponding bootstrapped standard error estimates for all the coordinates, estimated using the technique described in Lewis and Poole (2004), can be found in the appendix.

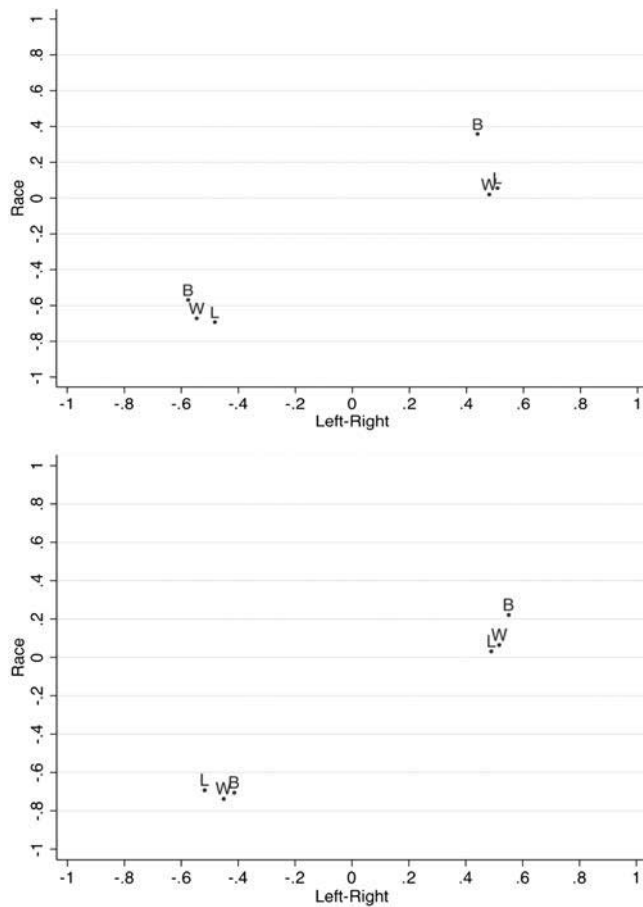


Figure 3. Spatial map of Obama/McCain and the democratic/republican party on the liberal-conservative scale, by ethnic/racial group. Placements are based on the average respondent for each ethnic/racial group. Tokens on the left of the map in Figure 3a denote group placements of Obama, while tokens on the right of the map denote placements of McCain. In Figure 3b, placements are based on the average respondent for each ethnic/racial group. Tokens on the left of the map denote group placements of Democrats, while tokens on the right of the map denote placements of Republicans.

racial groups see a strong distinction between Obama and McCain on both the first and second dimensions. As such, there is little question that both blacks and Latinos recognize the distinction between left and right. The results here indicate that ethnic/racial minorities have a clear understanding of the ideological differences between the two candidates as well as a conceptual understanding of the ideological landscape in the United States.

In the first dimension, blacks locate Obama as being more to the left, relative to whites and Latinos. In terms of their placement of McCain, it is Latinos who perceive him furthest to the right, followed by whites and blacks. In the second dimension, blacks' views towards McCain are quite different from those of Latinos and whites. Blacks perceive McCain to be significantly less progressive on race-related

matters when compared to Latinos and whites, who hold relatively similar perceptions towards McCain. Blacks' assessments of Obama's position on race also vary from white and Latino placements of Obama on the race dimension. Here, whites and Latinos actually perceive Obama to be more progressive on race, relative to blacks. This runs contrary to what many would believe to be the conventional wisdom that blacks would consider Obama to be more progressive on matters relating to race when compared to other ethnic/racial groups. And rather surprisingly, blacks and Latinos do not share similar perspectives on the two presidential candidates with regards to their ideological positions on the race dimension; in fact, Latinos' assessments of McCain and Obama are much closer to whites than to blacks. Thus, the commonly held belief that ethnic/racial minorities share similar ideological preferences does not seem to be supported in this analysis.

Figure 3b offers a spatial representation of the major political parties along the same two dimensions. Once again, all three ethnic/racial groups recognize a major distinction between the two parties across both dimensions. This once again challenges the conventional wisdom that ethnic/racial minorities have lower levels of political knowledge when compared to whites. Interestingly, blacks perceive Republicans to be more to the right than do whites and Latinos. Perceptions of the Democratic Party on the first dimension also vary according to the ethnic/racial group in question. Latinos are the ones who view Democrats as being most to the left, followed by whites and then blacks. On the second dimension, virtually little difference exists in how each group locates the Democratic Party in the second dimension. This suggests that ethnic/racial groups perceive minimal ideological distinctions regarding the party's position on racial issues. On the other hand, blacks in the second dimension perceive very sharp differences in their views of the Republican Party when compared to the viewpoints of whites and Latinos. Blacks perceive Republicans to be far less progressive on the race dimension relative to whites and Latinos, whose locations are much closer to one another.

Similar to the differences that emerged between blacks and the other ethnic/racial groups in their placement of McCain, blacks perceive the Republican Party as being ideologically more distant in terms of racial issues relative to the perceptions held by Latinos and whites. Interestingly, blacks are the only ethnic/racial minority who perceive one of the political parties, Republicans, to be ideologically distinct when it comes to race-related matters. The other ethnic/racial minority in the analysis, Latinos, locates the Republican Party in nearly the same location as do whites on the race dimension.



Figure 4a–4b present a spatial map of respondents’ perceptions of Obama and McCain on the various 7-point-issue-scale questions. Figure 4a focuses on whether or not the government should be involved in improving the social and economic position of blacks in the United States. While this issue can be characterized as one that deals with redistribution (Poole 2005), it could also tap into race due to the context of the 2008 presidential election (with the candidacy of Barack Obama) as well as the fact that the analysis focuses on ethnic/racial groups.

As this spatial representation reaffirms, all three ethnic/racial groups view Obama and McCain’s stance on government assistance to blacks to be distinct from one another across the two dimensions. They perceive Obama to be further to the left on this issue in the left/right dimension and to be more progressive on the race dimension. In addition, all groups view McCain to lean to the right on the first dimension and to be less progressive on the second dimension with respect to this issue. The results also indicate some ethnic/racial group variations on perceptions of the candidates’ locations. For instance, in the second dimension, Latinos perceive McCain’s position on providing aid to blacks as distinct from those of whites and blacks. Latinos view McCain to be closer to the right relative to the other two ethnic/racial groups. These assessments could have been influenced by the tough immigration stance adopted by McCain during the campaign, which was a complete turnaround from his earlier and more progressive stance on this issue (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010). Moreover, blacks locate McCain far more to the right on the first dimension when compared to Latinos and whites. Thus from an ideological standpoint, blacks perceived McCain to be located further to the right on government efforts to assist blacks relative to whites and Latinos.

In terms of their perceptions of Obama, blacks locate Obama slightly more to the right on the left/right scale relative to Latinos and whites on this issue. Substantively, this suggests that whites and Latinos view Obama to be somewhat more liberal than do blacks. It is in the second dimension where the greatest variations arise by ethnic/racial group. From a racial perspective, whites perceive Obama as being much more supportive of providing aid to blacks compared to the other groups. Consistent perhaps with the stereotypes of what would occur once a minority is elected into office (Frymer 1999), the evidence here suggests that whites perceive the election of an African American president would result in government policies that would directly aid blacks to a larger extent than the perceptions held by Latinos and African Americans. Interestingly, blacks, who would stand to benefit most from these policies, do not lo-

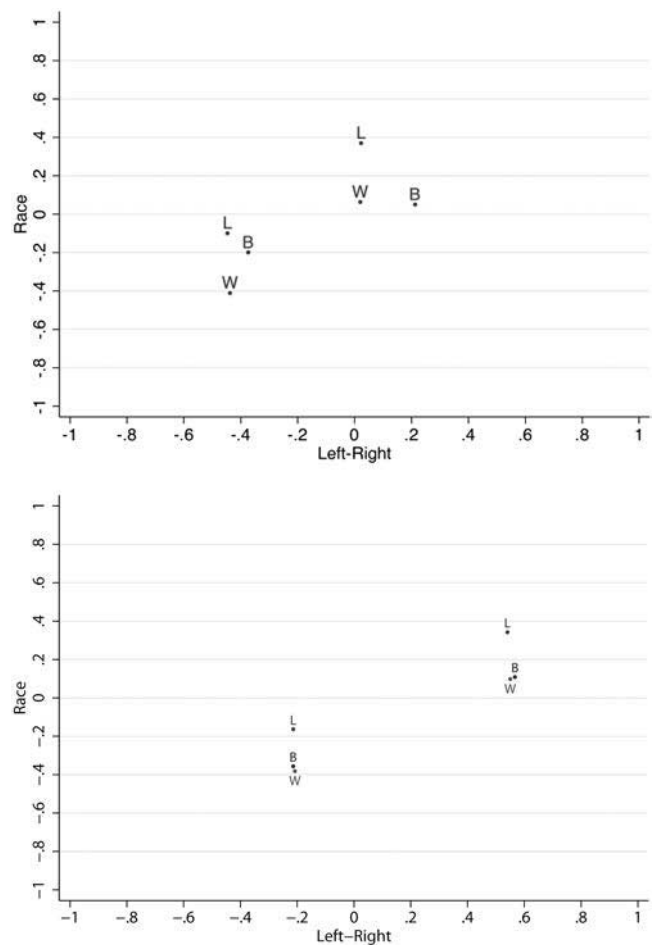


Figure 4. Spatial map of Obama and McCain’s position on government aid to blacks and government efforts to provide jobs. Placements are based on the average respondent for each ethnic/racial group. Tokens on the left of the map denote group placements of Obama, while tokens on the right of the map denote placements of McCain.

cate Obama to be nearly as supportive on this issue as do whites.

Figure 4b offers a spatial representation of Obama and McCain’s position on government efforts at redistribution; specifically, it focuses on the government’s role in providing jobs.<sup>13</sup> Similar to the previous analysis, it is clearly the case that respondents see a distinction in the two presidential candidates with respect to redistribution along both dimensions. Thus, on fundamental issues such as government redistribution, blacks and Latinos are just as knowledgeable of the candidates’ policy stances than are whites.

In the first dimension, the placement of all the groups for Obama and McCain are remarkably similar. Yet the second dimension offers a different story. Both African Americans and whites view Obama as more supportive of

13. The spatial map on the question of government redistribution of services is available in the appendix.

redistributive job policies relative to Latinos. This difference could be attributed to racial stereotypes regarding Obama's perceived position on redistributive policies (Frymer 1999). Latino perceptions of McCain also vary from whites and blacks in the second dimension. Latinos view McCain as being more opposed to redistributive job policies compared to blacks and whites (who have relatively similar positions on this issue). Again, given the dynamics of this election and McCain's tenuous relationship with Latinos going into the general election, this may help to explain why Latinos viewed him in this manner when compared to the other two racial/ethnic groups.

As a robustness check, this analysis was replicated as closely as possible using the 2012 ANES where an even larger oversample of Latino and African American respondents were surveyed, due to the fact that face interviews were supplemented with online surveys.<sup>14</sup> The findings using the 2012 ANES are consistent with the results using the 2008 ANES. There are greater instances of DIF in the responses provided by black and Latino respondents, relative to whites. But once the issue of DIF is resolved, blacks and Latinos correctly locate the ideological and policy positions of President Obama, Mitt Romney, as well as the two political parties to the same extent as whites do. All in all, this replication effort offers reassurance that the results from the 2008 ANES are robust to a different and a larger sample of respondents, a distinct electoral context as well as other political figures (Romney as opposed to McCain).

## CONCLUSION

The premise of this article was to challenge the commonly held belief that a racial gap exists in the levels of political knowledge and information in the American public. I contend that these existing findings are primarily due to a measurement problem known as differential item functioning, or DIF, which arises due to the distinct political experiences of blacks, Latinos, and whites. The historical and current legacies of segregation and discrimination, as well as the distinct political socialization processes of the largely immigrant Latino population results in an orientation to politics that is distinct from white Americans.

Addressing the issue of DIF reveals several important findings. First, DIF does exist in the survey responses provided by Latinos and blacks, particularly when compared to whites. As a result, it makes it appear as if blacks and Latinos are less politically knowledgeable than are whites on the scaled political knowledge questions. But once DIF

is corrected for, blacks and Latinos are just as aware as whites are of the basic fundamental tenets underlying the American political system, particularly as it relates to the role of government in the economy; they are also knowledgeable of the issue positions that prominent political candidates and political parties adopt for the current election cycle.

The findings from this article also highlight how the differential political experiences of the two largest ethnic/racial groups lead them to respond to the same surveys items in different ways. In doing so, the findings here open up a whole host of questions regarding the conclusions reached by existing studies that make comparisons across the major ethnic/racial groups in the United States. The degree to which DIF affects the conclusions drawn from these studies is an area ripe for future research. These findings also give rise to a whole host of future research questions. For instance, can DIF be detected in other survey responses that make comparisons across racial/ethnic groups?

In particular, future studies examining the political knowledge across racial/ethnic groups would benefit from using survey questions where it is possible to correct for DIF. Most, if not all, existing surveys on political knowledge use close-ended questions where the responses are not on a scale or they rely on open-ended questions, such as those in the ANES. Thus, one option for survey researchers would be to include more scaled political knowledge questions, such as the ones here, since such questions can correct for DIF. Another option for researchers is to use a recent technique developed by King and Wand (2007), known as anchoring vignettes. This approach also corrects for DIF but requires surveys to include multiple vignettes on key political attitudes of interest, such as ideology or political trust. Another possibility would be to include questions that include a visual component to it (Prior 2014).

In light of the profound demographic change that has transformed the American population over the past 50 years, where whites have declined from 90 to 65% of the population and Latinos are now the largest ethnic or racial group in the country comprising 16% of the American populace, it is critical to rethink the way political knowledge is measured. Such demographic shifts imply that more and more racial/ethnic minorities will be part of the electorate; they will also comprise a larger share of those surveyed in public opinion polls. Thus, in order to more accurately assess how the public fares in their knowledge of politics, and potentially on other political attitudes and opinions, researchers need to be cognizant of how best to measure political knowledge in an electorate where groups' orientations to politics differ.

14. More details regarding this robustness check can be found in the online appendix.

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