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Refusing to Engage: Political Competence and the “Don’t Know” Response on Surveys

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Pierre Bourdieu's theories of political competence and the political field have not been used widely in studies of political life in the United States.¹ But these concepts offer a more theoretically grounded and coherent way of understanding how people in this country do and do not engage with politics than most conventional approaches to political participation. In two seminal works ("Public Opinion Does Not Exist" 1979 and *Distinction* 1984), Bourdieu described a little-noticed but key finding: that, at least in the French public opinion surveys he analyzed, some people were much more likely to say "I don't know" than others when asked political questions by pollsters. He found that women, those who have less education, and working class and poor people were much more likely to say "I don't know" than men, better-educated people, and people with more income (1979: 125; 1984: 400). In those works, Bourdieu invoked these "no replies" to illustrate all that is made invisible in statistical reports of "public opinion" on an issue. While that is an important consequence of these findings, it is not my main focus. In this study, I first show that Bourdieu's findings about the relationship between "don't know" response and social position are as applicable to the United States over the last thirty years as they were to France twenty and more years ago. Next, I argue that this pattern of "don't know" response illuminates gaps in many approaches to political participation. Finally, I show that an individual's rate of "don't know" response is not only interesting in and of itself, but predictive of the likelihood that they report voting in the last presidential election.

Bourdieu's Approach

The first theoretical tool that a Bourdieusian approach to political participation offers is the concept of "field." A field, for Bourdieu, is in many ways like a playing field for a sport, except that the rules and the boundaries of the game are not usually explicitly defined, and the players are not necessarily aware they are playing a game. But, like a sporting field, most importantly, a field is a site of competition. There are rules that apply only to those who are in or on it, and the players develop a nearly unconscious, deeply held 'sense of the game' which non-players do not have. Playing presupposes believing that the game is worth playing. Prototypical fields for Bourdieu include the field of literary production and the academic field².

¹ I'd like to thank Sam Lucas, Mike Hout, Marion Fourcade-Gourinchas, Carole Uhlaner for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this paper (not all of which have I yet fully integrated). I'd also like to thank Sarah Garrett for help with the writing, and Rachel Best and Laura Mangels (and Mike Hout and Sam Lucas again) for help with the regression models.

² Bourdieu describes and deploys the term "field" throughout his work; a good overview of the concept can be found in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992) pp 94-115.

Cultural capital is the other essential concept from Bourdieu for thinking about political engagement. Bourdieu describes capital as:

accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its “incorporated,” embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor. It is *vis insita*, a force inscribed in objective or subjective structures, but also *les insita*, the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world (“Forms of Capital” 241).

Cultural capital takes the form of both explicitly understood knowledge and less conscious tastes, beliefs, and dispositions that work to their holder’s advantage. All fields have types of cultural capital that are specific to that field, and cultural capital is not worth very much except when deployed within the field for which it is suited. In other words, cultural capital specific to the literary field will not be much good to its holder in a biology lab or at most corporate board meetings.

The political field is one special case of a field. The “players” in the political field are various kinds of political professionals: politicians, campaign and office staff, pundits, political action committees, political scientists, political reporters and others whose professional lives center around politics. These political professionals create most of the political objects – party positions, speeches, commercials, and so on – available to citizens. Or, as Bourdieu says:

[T]he political field is the site in which, though the competition between the agents involved in it, political products, issues, programmes, analyses, commentaries, concepts and events are created – products which ordinary citizens, reduced to the status of ‘consumers’, have to choose, thereby running a risk of misunderstanding that is all the greater the further they are from the place of production. (*Language and Symbolic Power* 1991: 171-2)

Dominance in the political field, in U.S. democracy as elsewhere, is largely dependent on the actions of those outside of the political field – elected officials cannot keep their seats unless they can keep a majority of voters voting for them, and those political professionals who are not elected are also invested in the outcomes of elections as well as in “public opinion” as it is reported and understood. The political products that these players produce, then, are usually designed in large part to secure their position in the field.

This way of thinking about politics is perhaps best explained by analogy to other forms of cultural consumption. Art and baseball, two take two examples, are fields which (like all fields) require specific cultural capital in order to be either understood or appreciated. It is relatively intuitive, even without invoking Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, that those who have little or no exposure to art and art museums will have very little to say about Eduoard Manet or Claude Monet, and no sense of the differences or similarities between them. Similarly, someone who has managed not to see baseball games live or on television will have neither opinions nor strong feelings about either the Oakland A’s or the San Francisco Giants, and so on.

If our theoretical artistic neophyte were to spend a bit of time at a museum examining Manets and Monets, she might develop some opinions. But these opinions would most likely not be very “good” opinions according to the standards of the artistic field. Our art neophyte might, among other things, be moved by the frame of the Manet instead of technical aspects of the painting. Similarly, a newcomer to baseball spectatorship might very well be more interested in the variations in the way the baseball players wear their hats than in batting averages or innings. More than that, a non-museum-going person (or a non-baseball fan) will almost certainly be

aware that she is not part of the group that does go to museums (or baseball games). Should she find herself suddenly confronted with an art historian asking her questions about Manet, even if the Manet is right in front of her, she will feel quite uncomfortable. It would not be at all surprising if she refused to answer the questions posed to her, even if they seemed quite simple and straightforward to her interlocutor.

Democratic politics is supposed (in both senses of the word) to be quite different from baseball and art. In these fields, the distance between consumers (fans, amateurs, connoisseurs) and producers (players and coaches, artists and curators) is both explicit and valued. Democratic politics is dependent on, in fact defined by, the theoretical possibility of broad swaths of the population participating on equal terms – all citizens are imagined to be players, not just spectators. The necessary corollary to thinking about politics as a field, as a site of both cultural production and competition, is that not every citizen is or can be a “player.” Just like in baseball and art, only those with both the *illusio* (the buy-in to the essential beliefs of the field) and a certain amount of *political competence* (the cultural capital specific to politics) will be able to interpret, understand, and then effectively engage with political products. Being able to answer questions about politics, being interested in politics, and being willing to participate all require both *illusio* and political competence. From a Bourdieusian perspective, these qualities are not at all likely to be equally distributed throughout the citizenry, and indeed they are not.

Political issues – and *a fortiori* political questions on surveys – are created by experts within the political field, and therefore often do not relate to anything that the non-expert has previously considered. The number of times a given individual opts out of answering a political question by saying “I don’t know”³, as I will argue below, is an indicator of low political competence or high distance from the political field.

The Verba, Schlozman and Brady Approach

In *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Verba et al (1995) present what they call their “Civic Voluntarism Model.” Based on a large-scale survey of U.S. citizens, they marshal an formidable array of evidence to reach their unassailable conclusions:

Over and over, our data showed that participatory input [into US politics] is tilted in the direction of the more advantaged groups in society – especially in terms of economic and educational position, but in terms of race and ethnicity as well. The voices of the well-educated and the well-heeled – and therefore, those with other politically relevant characteristics that are associated with economic and educational privilege – sound more loudly. [...] rates of activity of the advantaged and the disadvantaged differ least in the religious domain and most when it comes to politics. Since politics is the realm for which democratic norms seem to promise a level playing field, this is a somewhat ironic finding (512-3).

Verba et al’s model of civic participation is, in many ways, aligned with Bourdieu’s descriptions of the factors that determine political competence and thus participation in politics. Their model centers on the role of resources in predicting political participation. For them, family income and free time are relatively straightforwardly related to ability to donate money and volunteer, respectively. Further, “civic skills” such as letter-writing, group decision-making, planning or chairing meetings, and giving presentations (311) are a type of resource that

³ Henceforth referred to as “don’t know rates.”

can be acquired at work, in voluntary organizations, or in religious organizations, as well as through high school participation in clubs and student government. Vocabulary (as stand-in for cognitive ability), political interest and political information are also particular kinds of resources, all of which they show are associated with social cleavages. Modeling participation as dependent on these resources (plus recruitment to political action), they say, explains the long-seen but little-understood link between socio-economic status and political participation (280-3), and works to solve the problems rational actor theory has in accurately predicting participation (283-7)

Verba et al highlight the education plays a central role in predicting not just political participation, but most of these predictors of political participation – resources such as income and civic skills, likelihood of involvement in institutions which will result in recruitment to politics, political interest and political information 433-7).

After describing the key role that education plays in political participation, Verba et al note a puzzle they cannot solve: “at any moment in time, education plays a significant role, but over time it does not lead to more activity” (437). This is a puzzle a Bourdieusian approach solves easily – education doesn’t only produce knowledge and skills, it also produces status, cultural capital, and the knowledge that one is more or less entitled to participate in society. This effect of education is about one’s “relative position in the educational hierarchy” (one of Verba et al’s potential, but not definite, solutions to their puzzle, p. 437).

While the big picture for both Bourdieu and Verba et al is similar – less privileged people participate less in politics – Bourdieu’s conceptualization can solve a key puzzle Verba et al cannot, and in doing so provides a better way to understand the stratification of participation – it’s about status as much as it’s about skills. Bourdieu’s model can not only explain lower participation among less privileged people, but also situates that lower involvement in both the subjective experiences of the disadvantaged and the objective structure of politics.

Approach of this paper

In order to develop this point, I begin this paper by examining non-response to various kinds of questions on the General Social Survey⁴. As Bourdieu found about French citizens almost 30 years ago, political questions on large national surveys have substantially higher don’t know rates than other topics do. Members of privileged groups answer more political questions with substantive (as opposed to don’t know) responses than do disadvantaged people. I show that these higher don’t know rates cannot be accounted for sufficiently by explanations in the literature on survey research, and argue that they directly challenge some common assumptions about political (non-)participation. Next, I explore, as far as possible within the limits of available survey data, the factors associated with higher don’t know rates for political questions. Finally, I show that those who answer fewer political questions are also significantly less likely to vote than are other citizens. Political competence, as indicated by higher don’t know rates for political questions, is an essential addition to sociologists’ understanding of U.S. citizens’ relationship with the political field.

⁴ I have replicated many of the results in the following sections using a two different years of the National Election Studies as well, but have yet to complete a full analysis.

The Distribution of “Don’t Know” Responses

The General Social Survey

In order to compare non-response rates across a wide variety of question topics, I first analyzed data from the full General Social Survey. I limited my analyses to questions that have been asked across many years, and that were clearly either political or non-political. A limitation of the GSS for researchers is that there are multiple versions of the survey instrument within and across years. Demographic identifiers and a small “core” of questions are asked of all respondents every year; most substantive questions, even those asked for many years, are asked of only 1/6 to 2/3 of the respondents. Many pairs of variables have no joint observations. Nonetheless, the diversity of content (e.g., opinions on homosexuality, confidence in congress, and understanding of God) allows for fruitful comparisons, and the fact that questions are repeated over multiple years means that there is rich potential for extending the analysis.

The GSS has a lower non-response rate – an average of about 4% on all substantive questions and about 2.75% on all the questions I analyzed closely – than either the National Election Studies or the polls analyzed by classic studies of “don’t know” responses⁵. This may in part be due to the fact that the great majority of questions used in the GSS are not “filtered” for don’t knows – that is, these questions do not offer “don’t know” or “no opinion” as an explicit alternative. The relatively low rate of non-response is in fact helpful to this project: if the GSS succeeds in minimizing the chance that people will respond “off-script” with “I don’t know,” then those who do say “I don’t know” must be quite motivated to give that response⁶.

The Indices

Bourdieu’s argument that low political competence is what leads to higher political don’t know rates depends on political don’t know rates being systematically different from other kinds of don’t know response. So, the first step towards confirming Bourdieu’s results is to compare the level of don’t know response to political questions with don’t know response to other kinds of questions. In order to do this, I first selected approximately 150 variables that represent substantive questions asked of a sizeable portion of respondents over the years of the GSS. I recoded all of those questions with a “1” for a “don’t know” response and a “0” for any other kind of response. I next set about to choose coherent groupings of questions from which to form indices. In line with Bourdieu’s studies of don’t know rates, Converse (1976) found that don’t know rates increase the further a question’s content is from respondents’ everyday experience (527). I created two indices of ‘non-political’ questions, and three of ‘political’ questions, roughly based on Converse and Bourdieu’s schemes of “nearness” and “distance” to everyday experience.

⁵ Converse 1976; Schuman & Presser 1979, 1980, 1981; Bishop, Tuchfarber & Oldendick, 1986.

⁶ Although I have not reported the results in this paper, I have done some similar analyses on a few years of the National Election Studies, and my initial results are in line with everything presented below.

Table 1a: Non-Political Indices

GSS variable name	Question content (paraphrased)	# asked item	% don't know
<i>Worldview</i>	<i>Average number of questions per respondent = 6.56</i>		<i>1.69</i>
Trust	Would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful?	29590	0.32
getahead	Do people get ahead more because of their own hard work or because of lucky breaks?	28554	0.76
Fair	Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance, or would they try to be fair?	29930	0.82
helpful	Would you say that most of the time people are helpful, or are they mostly looking out for themselves?	29948	0.55
postlife	Do you believe there is a life after death?	30544	9.54
Mapa	Where would you place your image of God between "Mother" and "Father"?	15323	0.90
mastersp	Where would you place your image of God between "Master" and "Spouse"?	15198	1.34
judgeluv	Where would you place your image of God between "Judge" and "Lover"?	15214	1.16
frndking	Where would you place your image of God between "Friend" and "King"?	15298	0.82
world1	Where would you place your image of the world between "human nature is basically good" and "human nature is fundamentally perverse and corrupt"?	16431	0.30
world4	Where would you place your image of the world between "human nature is basically good" and "human nature is fundamentally perverse and corrupt"?	11810	0.23
Obey	How important is it for children to learn to obey?	17095	0.00
thinkself	How important is it for children to learn to think for themselves?	17095	0.00
popular	How important is it for children to learn to be well-liked or popular?	17095	0.00
workhard	How important is it for children to learn to work hard?	17095	0.00
<i>Morality</i>	<i>Average number of questions per respondent = 6.51</i>		<i>2.31</i>
xmarsex	Is it always wrong, sometimes wrong, or not wrong at all for a married person to have sex with someone other than their spouse?	28561	1.37
premarsex	Is it always wrong, sometimes wrong, or not wrong at all for an unmarried man and woman to have sex with each other?	28515	3.00
homosex	Are sexual relations between same-sex adults always wrong, sometimes wrong, or not wrong at all?	28506	4.76
Suicide1	Do you think people have the right to end their lives ...if they have an incurable disease?	23980	4.14
Suicide2	... if they are tired of living and ready to die?	23970	1.48
Suicide3	... if they have dishonored their family?	23966	1.71
Suicide4	... if they have gone bankrupt?	23957	2.66
Hitok	Would you ever approve of a man punching an adult male stranger?	19219	4.59
hitdrunk	... if the stranger was drunk and bumped into the man and his wife?	18380	2.57
hitmarch	... if the stranger was in a protest march opposed to the man's views?	18388	1.81
hitbeatr	... if the stranger was beating up a woman?	18376	3.81
hitrobb	... if the stranger had broken into the man's house?	18398	2.17
<i>Combined Non-Political Questions</i>	<i>Average number of questions per respondent = 13.06</i>		<i>1.94</i>

Table 1b: Political Indices

GSS variable name	Question content (paraphrased)	# asked item	% don't know
<i>Social Policy</i>		<i>Average number of questions per respondent = 4.46</i>	
	Is the nation spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on:		<i>3.46</i>
nateduc	...improving the nation's education system	28652	2.92
Natfare	... Welfare	28640	4.22
Natsoc	... Social Security	30166	4.71
natheal	... Improving and protecting the nation's health	28654	3.33
nathealy	... Health	15445	2.73
nateducy	... Education	15459	1.51
natfarey	... assistance to the poor	15452	2.63
helpsick	Would you agree more with the position that the government should help pay for health care or that people should pay for these things themselves?	22279	2.47
helpoor	Would you agree more with the position that the government should try to improve the standard of living for poor people or that people should take care of themselves?	22306	2.96
Eqwlth	Would you agree more with the position that the government should help try to reduce the differences between rich and poor or that it should not?	23044	1.87
<i>Political Institutions</i>		<i>Average number of questions per respondent = 3.45</i>	
	Do you think the government should do more or less to solve people's problems?		<i>4.02</i>
helpnot	Do you think the government should do more or less to solve people's problems?	22294	5.47
Confed	Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, some confidence, or no confidence at all in: ...The Executive Branch of the Federal Government	32681	2.97
conlegis	... Congress	32660	2.95
conjudge	... The U.S. Supreme Court	32665	4.39
polviewsx	Where would you place yourself on a scale of political views from Left to Right?	785	7.01
polviews	Where would you place yourself on a scale of political views from liberal to conservative?	39485	4.36
<i>Foreign Policy</i>		<i>Average number of questions per respondent = 2.16</i>	
	Is the nation spending too much, too little, or about the right amount of money on ... Foreign Aid?		<i>4.36</i>
Nataid	Is the nation spending too much, too little, or about the right amount of money on ... Foreign Aid?	28662	4.95
Nataidy	... Assistance to other countries?	15433	3.76
Usintl	Do you think it will be best for the future of our country if we take an active part in world affairs, or stay out of them?	18601	4.03
Usun	Do you think our government should continue to belong to the United Nations, or pull out?	17963	6.02
commun	Do you think Communism is the worst form of government, a bad form of government, OK for some, or a good form of government?	19584	2.95
<i>Combined Political Questions</i>		<i>Average number of questions per respondent = 10.07</i>	
			<i>3.76</i>

In order to address the fact that not all respondents were asked all questions, each respondent's score for each index is the percentage of questions they answered "don't know" out of the total number of questions on that index that they were asked. Indices make sense for looking at don't know rates because most respondents say don't know very few times, if any, and most individual questions have quite low don't know rates. If it is true that most people try to say "I don't know" (or otherwise get off-script in the interview setting) as little as possible, then even one "I don't know" answer out of a set of related questions is both significant in itself and a possible indicator of an unexpressed preference for not expressing a preference on other related questions. While high correlation of the components of an index is usually an indicator of robustness, in the case of don't know indices I would expect to find (and did in fact find) low correlations and even negative correlations between items within a given index.

There were five initial indices composed of questions about worldview, morality, social/domestic policy, foreign policy, and political institutions. The indices each have a theoretical range of 0 – 100; a score of 100 means the respondent answered every single question he was asked in that index with "I don't know." The distribution of don't knows within each index and across the indices is strongly skewed towards zero. While there are a few people with scores at or near 100 on each index, the vast majority – about 67% – do not say "don't know" to even a single question on any index. Most of the rest (98.9 percent of all respondents) say don't know 6 times or fewer to *any* of the questions on any of the indices. Respondents were asked, on average, just over 13 questions included in my indices; 19% said don't know only once, 7% said don't know twice, and 3% said don't know 3 times.

The worldview index includes questions regarding the respondent's understanding of the way the world works. These included questions about important traits for children to learn⁷, religious outlook, and characterizations of 'the world' and of 'people in general'. Most of these questions address philosophical issues that are most likely taken for granted by most respondents (with the possible exception of the question about belief in life after death). The mean don't know rate for the worldview questions index is the lowest of all the indices at 1.66%⁸.

The morality index included questions asked in moral or ethical terms. Respondents to these questions were asked to choose between right and wrong, OK and not OK, or good and bad for a variety of actions and situations. I included only questions that made no explicit reference to laws about any of these issues, as law invokes politics. Although questions about abortion are generally considered to be about morality, abortion is not included here for two related reasons: first, because abortion is widely understood to be an issue of political contention, and second, because the questions asked by the GSS are explicitly about when, if ever, abortion should be legal rather than whether it is right or wrong. The don't know rate for these questions

⁷ This series of questions had 0 don't know responses. This may be a feature of the question format, which asks respondents to rank a set of qualities. However, other ranking questions do have don't know answers. My results remain substantively the same whether or not these questions are included in the worldview index.

⁸ In the text, when I report the average don't know rate across each index, as well as the average number of questions per respondent exclude all those respondents who were coded as missing in one or more of the key variables in my models (but include those who refused to report their income). These respondents were, of course, also excluded from all statistical models – N=40783. The means reported for specific questions in Tables 1a and 1b, however, include all cases where a respondent was asked that particular question. This results in small differences. See Figure 1 for average don't know rates when respondents with missing values on various variables are excluded.

ranges from .9% to 4.8% (the latter on the question about homosexuality)⁹. The mean don't know rate for the morality questions index is the second lowest of all the indices at 2.3%.

I also created three separate political indices. The three categories were again based on both Converse and Bourdieu's observations about which kinds of questions are most difficult for those further from the political process to answer. The social policy index consists of questions about government spending on social issues such as assistance to the poor, social security, health, education, improving the standard of living of poor people, and reducing income disparity. These questions have don't know rates between 1.5% and 4.7%, with a mean for the index of 3.4%.

Questions in the political institutions index ask about respondents' to discuss government and ideology more generally. There are questions about the respondent's confidence in congress, the executive branch and the Supreme Court; about whether government in general should do more or less, and two versions of a liberal/conservative ideology self-placement question¹⁰. The don't know rate for these questions ranged from 2.9% to 7% with a mean of 3.9%.

Finally, the 5 *foreign policy* index questions included the respondent's feelings about communism, the role of the US in the UN and in international affairs, and two questions about spending on foreign aid. Respondents were asked an average of only 2.3 of these questions. Don't know rates were between 2.9% (communism) and 6% (role of the US in the UN), and the mean refusal rate was the highest of all the individual indices at 4.3%.

Because the question I am most interested in here is about political don't know rates, I combined my five indices into two – one non-political and one political. This simplifies many comparisons, and has the added benefit of extending the range of these indices, thereby increasing the statistical power of my analyses.

Comparing Don't Know Rates

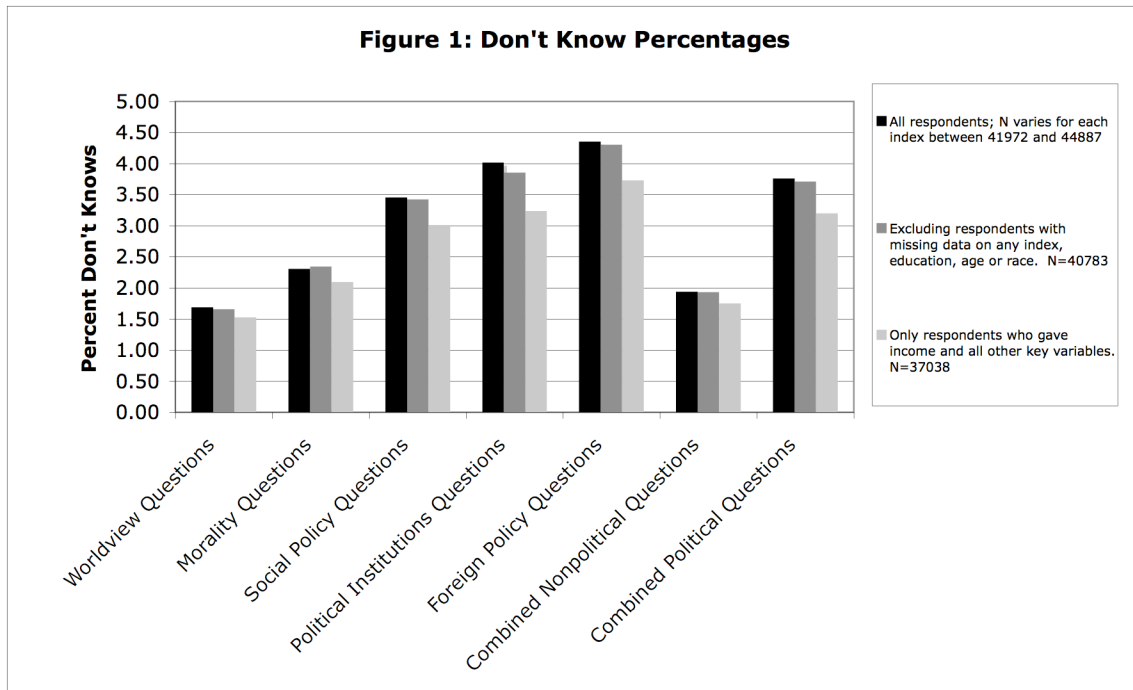
The first confirmation of Bourdieu's results can be seen in Figure 1: there are substantial differences in means between the different indices. People do indeed say "don't know" more to political questions than to other kinds of questions. Foreign policy questions have the highest mean don't know rate, followed closely by political institution questions and then social policy questions. Political questions have the highest don't know rates.

Since most people say "I don't know" infrequently if at all, it was also important to examine the rates of saying "don't know" even once on each of my indices. To that end, I created dummy variables for each index, coded "1" if the respondent said I don't know at least once, and "0" otherwise. The pattern here is less obvious than when we compare index don't know rate means. This is because the probability that a given person will say "I don't know" at

⁹ As I discuss below, Berinsky has argued that high non-response rates may often be due to a social desirability bias – respondents who sense or know that their answer to a question is socially sanctioned may choose to answer "I don't know" rather than risk disapproval with an unpopular answer, on the one hand, or lie about their true beliefs, on the other. This may in part explain the relatively high "don't know" rate for this question. Another explanation is the one I give above – that this is a case in which, since there is (and was in 1994) much public debate it is clearly acceptable not to have a fully formed opinion.

¹⁰ This is the one question I included despite its being asked of relatively few interviewees. I included it because the ability to place one's self ideologically should be one key indicator of political competence.

least once to any question on a given index is related not only to the content of that index but to the number of questions from that index each person was asked.



As can be seen in Table 2, calculating the ratio of the percentage of people with any don't knows to the number of questions on each index reveals the same pattern we see in Figure 1. As above, worldview questions and morality questions have the lowest numbers of people saying 'don't know' even once per question asked, and the political questions have the highest rates of any don't knows per question asked as well as the highest rates of total don't know response within the index.

Different Causes of Different Don't Knows

Understanding the Don't Know Response

We have now seen that more people say "don't know" to political questions than to other types of substantive questions. Bourdieu argues that this is due to low political competence: the greater distance that women, people with less education and lower income people have from the political field makes them less at ease with politics, and thus less likely to be willing or able to provide opinions about political issues. There are a lot of other models of don't know response, so we now need to discuss more fully what saying "don't know" means in the interview setting. It's not possible to know for certain what's "behind" a "don't know" response, but we can at least lay out some different possibilities and then try to adjudicate between them.

Table 2: Any Don't Know Rates

	All respondents			Excluding respondents missing data (except income)			Only respondents with all data		
	percent with any don't knows	average number of questions	ratio of percent with any don't knows to number of questions	percent with any don't knows	average number of questions	ratio of percent with any don't knows to number of questions	percent with any don't knows	average number of questions	ratio of percent with any don't knows to number of questions
Worldview Questions	8.45	6.56	1.3	8.53	7.14	1.2	8.0	7.13	1.1
Morality Questions	11.66	6.51	1.8	11.93	7.16	1.7	11.1	7.18	1.5
<i>Combined Nonpolitical Questions</i>	<i>17.98</i>	<i>13.06</i>	<i>1.4</i>	<i>18.34</i>	<i>14.30</i>	<i>1.3</i>	<i>17.2</i>	<i>14.31</i>	<i>1.2</i>
Social Policy/Programs Questions	11.78	4.46	2.6	11.90	4.68	2.5	10.7	4.66	2.3
Political Institutions Questions	10.08	3.45	2.9	9.80	3.83	2.6	8.6	3.83	2.2
Foreign Policy Questions	8.23	2.16	3.8	8.38	2.32	3.6	7.5	2.34	3.2
<i>Combined Political Questions</i>	<i>21.40</i>	<i>10.07</i>	<i>2.1</i>	<i>21.97</i>	<i>10.83</i>	<i>2.0</i>	<i>20.1</i>	<i>10.84</i>	<i>1.9</i>

The simplest model of the survey response is one in which we imagine that surveys extract exactly what respondents think and feel about various matters. There are certainly some discussions of don't know response that proceed, more or less, from this assumption. Using this logic to think about "don't know" responses, John Zaller writes in *The Nature and Origin of Mass Opinion* (1992), "presumably, people make ["no opinion"] responses when they are unable to call to mind any consideration that would give them a reason for supporting one rather than the other side of an issue" (194).

Adam Berinsky (2004) promulgates a different model in his work on the don't know response in opinion polls and survey research: he represents the decision to answer "don't know" as the result of respondents' weighing of the costs and benefits of an answer. One of the two "costs" or concerns that he thinks is relevant to generating don't know responses is that which is incurred when people who are unable either to "construct a representation of [the] target object" or to form an opinion about it try to come up with a response. In other words, Berinsky believes it may be too costly for people who really just "don't know" their answer to a question (at least in the way that it's asked in the survey setting) to make one up, so they'll say "I don't know."

However, at least two important series of studies contradict the assumption that don't know is either a simple reflection of not knowing, or the less "costly" option when a respondent can't immediately come up with an answer. As Bishop et al (1986) point out, the survey setting creates a great deal of pressure to provide answers to the questions being asked (248). Bishop et al and Schuman & Presser (1981), among others, have found that, rather than admit ignorance or a lack of opinion, most people will make up answers to questions that are either fictional or impossible for them to really know anything about. Based on both these studies, one can conclude that a substantial number of people find it more desirable (and less "costly") to offer an opinion, regardless of whether they have one, than to say "I don't know," especially when the "don't know" option is not offered. Because standardized survey interviews present respondents with a prescribed set of possible answers to most questions, they generally make it quite easy for respondents to choose an answer to give the interviewer. Even those without a precise understanding of the question or the ability to form an actual opinion about it can choose, as they are often asked to do, a number between 1 and 7. In the setting of an interview, then, there are more substantial "costs" to *not* answering than to answering the interviewers' questions. A respondent who says "I don't know" when it's not explicitly offered when an interviewer needs as many "valid" answers as possible is resisting a certain amount of pressure to "know."

If there's a cost to not answering, to opting for "don't know" against the social pressures of the interview situation, then why do so many people, especially those who generally have less power in many interactions, say don't know to political questions?

It could be that there are simply some types of personalities who are generally willing to declare ignorance when they are, in fact, ignorant; or who tend to refuse to abide by the expectations of the survey situation by providing substantive answers. If it turned out that the same people tend to say "I don't know" more than others to all types of questions, there would be little evidence for the claim that political don't know responses indicate anything particular about people's relationship to politics. If political "don't knows" are only about simple recalcitrance, or admissions of ignorance, then we still might expect to see higher rates of don't know on more distant or difficult questions – on political questions – than for easier or more familiar topics. And we would also expect the same kinds of people to be more likely to say "don't know" to all kinds of questions, even if they are also more likely to say don't know to political of questions than to non-political ones.

Models of Don't Know Rates

In order to find out whether the higher don't know rates on political questions are related to differentially distributed political competence (and not just personality traits), I used ordinary least squares regression, logistic regression (for any don't knows), and zero-inflated negative

binomial regressions to estimate models for each of the indices¹¹. I was most interested in whether markers of status and privilege – gender, race, income and education – had different effects on different indices, and found that they did. I also controlled for interviewees’ age, and the interviewer’s assessment of the subject’s understanding of and attitude towards the interview.

The race variable on the GSS groups people into only three categories: black, white and “other”. I used the ethnic origin codes to assign respondents to five distinct groups – Black, White, Latino, Asian, and Native American. Those few respondents who still could not be categorized were coded as missing. I recoded income into inflation-adjusted constant dollars¹², then chose to use the log of income after observing an approximately logarithmic relationship between income and the political indices. This resulted in a slightly better, but not substantially different, fit over models that used untransformed income measures. Because income is one of the questions with a very high refusal rate, I wanted to make sure that people who refused to disclose their income were still included in my models. I replaced missing values on income with the mean value, and included a dummy for “missing income” in all my models. This gave me somewhat lower coefficients for income than I obtained by excluding all the missing values, but avoids the problem of selection bias since those who refuse to answer questions about their income tend to be different from those who share that information (see Figure 1 and Table 2). For education, I used the “highest year of school completed” variable, which ranges from 0 to 20. Age ranged from 18 – 89.

I also included two measures of the interviewer’s assessment of the respondent in my regression models. The “uncooperative” variable is the interviewer’s perception of the subject’s attitude toward the interview, ranging from “friendly, interested” (the lowest value - 0) through “cooperative” to “restless, impatient” and finally “hostile” (coded as 1). The “incomprehension” variable records the interviewer’s perception of the understanding of the questions, with three possible values: the lowest score (0) for “good,” “fair” in the middle and “poor” at the high end (1).

Before running any regressions, I simply compared the mean don’t know rates of different groups. There were substantial (and statistically significant) differences in don’t know rates on political questions between the educated and less educated, between whites and blacks (as well as whites and “others”), those with higher incomes and those with lower incomes, and men and women. However, there is little meaningful difference between these groups on questions about morality and worldview¹³.

Using these characteristics in OLS¹⁴ regression analyses of the various indices confirmed these findings, with one interesting exception in the case of race. In a simple comparison of means, race appears to make a significant difference in the likelihood of political don’t know responses, but when I controlled for all the other factors the story became more complicated.

¹¹ The ZINB results were generally similar to the OLS and logit results, and are not shown here. I use ZINB for estimating somewhat more extensive models of political don’t know response below.

¹² I am indebted to Mike Hout for providing me with “do” files for creating both the race/ethnicity variables and the income measure.

¹³ (I think it would be good to include these numbers here, but since I wrote this my hard drive died and I can’t get at my data until it’s – hopefully – recovered in the next few weeks.)

¹⁴ A linear regression is, of course, a terrible model of don’t know response, given the non-linear and highly skewed distribution of don’t know responses. Significant results using OLS, then, are an especially good indicator that the patterns revealed are valid.

Table 3: Comparing the Indices

	Worldview Questions Index	Morality Questions Index	Social Policy Questions Index	Political Institutions Index	Foreign Policy Index	Combined Non-Political Questions Index	Combined Political Questions Index	<i>Ratio of Combined Political to Non-Political Coefficient</i>
Age	0.013	0.027	0.036	0.022	0.023	0.020	0.028	<i>1.378</i>
Male	0.166	-0.255	-1.058	-1.861	-2.473	-0.076	-1.627	<i>21.391</i>
Black	-0.059	0.015	-1.051	0.220	0.890	-0.041	-0.203	<i>4.975</i>
Latino	-0.066	0.182	0.298	1.591	1.291	0.002	0.869	<i>535.982</i>
Asian/Asian-American	1.191	1.533	2.538	4.716	3.642	1.310	3.388	<i>2.586</i>
Native American	-0.485	-0.342	-0.843	-0.474	-0.121	-0.383	-0.613	<i>1.603</i>
Natural Log of Income	-0.058	-0.036	-0.113	-0.376	-0.409	-0.055	-0.279	<i>5.100</i>
Education (years in school)	0.043	0.056	-0.129	-0.464	-0.305	0.033	-0.283	<i>-8.607</i>
Incomprehension of Interview	1.813	2.260	5.548	12.763	8.547	2.010	8.393	<i>4.176</i>
Uncooperative Attitude	1.615	3.358	4.151	5.875	5.851	2.268	4.786	<i>2.111</i>
Income Missing	1.004	1.897	3.135	4.156	4.107	1.347	3.661	<i>2.718</i>
Constant	0.650	0.150	3.920	10.988	10.416	0.672	7.912	<i>11.779</i>
R-squared	0.0121	0.0281	0.0531	0.119	0.0598	0.0341	0.1421	

Coefficients in bold are significant at $p < .05$

OLS Regressions, all independent variables included in table; dependent variables are percentages of questions in each category respondent answered "don't know."

N= 39040

of clusters = 364

population, corrected for clustering and weights = 39044.7

When everything else (at least everything else in my model) is held constant, African-Americans provide substantive answers to questions about social policy significantly *more* than whites, and to questions about foreign policy much less than whites. Blacks are not significantly different from whites in their responses to political institutions questions; and when the three political indices are combined into one, Blacks' overall "don't know" response rate, all else held equal, is roughly the same as whites'. Asians and Latinos, on the other hand, both say don't know to all kinds of political questions more than whites.

I found that there are substantial differences in the determinants of don't know response on political questions versus on other kinds of questions. As can be seen in Table 3, income is not significant in predicting don't know response rates on worldview, morality or social policy questions, but it has a substantial and significant effect on the percentage of "don't knows" for the foreign policy index, the political institutions index, and the combined political index. While the effect of income on the combined non-political index is statistically significant, it is substantively quite small; the effect of income on political don't knows is more than 5 times the effect for non-political don't knows.

Education is statistically significant for all the indices, but is also only substantively meaningful for the political indices. The effect of education on the percent don't-know responses in the combined political index is over 8.5 times its effect for the combined non-political index. Similarly, men have significantly lower don't know rates on all types of questions, but the differences between men and women are substantially larger for political questions than for non-political questions.

There are also some interesting differences between the different kinds of political questions. There is less difference between men and women on the social policy questions than on the other kinds of political questions, and income is not even statistically significant here. That result, combined with fact that blacks have substantially lower don't know rates than whites on social policy questions, is consistent with the idea that people are more likely to be able to answer political questions with which they are directly concerned. In this case, people with less money have more investment in questions about policies meant to aid poor people. And blacks, having been associated in public perception with programs such as welfare (at least for most of the time span covered by the GSS) are likely to learn about these issues regardless of their income.

Uncooperativeness and/or incomprehension were significant in almost all the regressions, so there is certainly evidence for some level of "personality trait" effects. Some people are just recalcitrant and don't want to participate, or just don't quite get what's going on, or are just willing to admit or claim ignorance, and that that leads to higher rates of don't know responses. But it is worth considering an alternative explanation – that some combination of interviewer biases and/or relatively high rate of "don't know" response could lead an interviewer to see her subject as uncooperative or not understanding the questions. Models¹⁵ which exclude these interviewer-perception variables have substantively similar, but somewhat larger, coefficients on the race, income, and education variables. The difference between blacks and whites also becomes significant. It is not possible with the evidence at hand to adjudicate between these competing interpretations of interviewers' coding of their respondents' participation in the interview. Whatever the explanation for the high significance of these variables, we can be sure that grumpiness/incomprehension visible to the interviewers is not the only source of don't know

¹⁵ Not included in this paper.

responses, and that income, education and gender matter substantively and significantly¹⁶ above and beyond these traits.

Table 4: Any Don't Knows

	Worldview Questions Index	Morality Questions Index	Social Policy Questions Index	Political Institutions Index	Foreign Policy Index	Combined Non-Political Questions Index	Combined Political Questions Index
Age	0.007	0.011	0.009	0.004	0.003	0.010	0.006
Male	0.065	-0.101	-0.339	-0.614	-0.694	-0.045	-0.522
Black	0.096	-0.005	-0.249	0.061	0.041	0.060	-0.020
Latino	0.079	0.059	0.171	0.244	0.124	0.079	0.180
Asian/Asian-American	0.580	0.327	0.646	1.050	0.597	0.436	0.729
Native American	-0.289	-0.099	-0.197	-0.144	-0.108	-0.168	-0.109
Natural Log of Income	-0.051	-0.048	-0.064	-0.215	-0.155	-0.055	-0.131
Education (years in school)	0.036	0.009	-0.025	-0.124	-0.114	0.022	-0.077
Incomprehension of Interview	0.680	0.609	0.880	1.481	1.175	0.637	1.233
Uncooperative Attitude	0.802	0.925	0.947	1.163	0.799	0.861	0.924
Income Missing	0.438	0.487	0.651	0.773	0.645	0.492	0.730
Constant	-2.917	-2.329	-1.615	0.909	0.268	-1.878	0.582

Coefficients in bold are significant at $p < .05$

Logistic Regressions, all independent variables included in table; dependent variables are 1 if respondent answered "don't know" at least once in that category; 0 otherwise.

N= 39040

of clusters = 364

population, corrected for clustering and weights = 39044.7

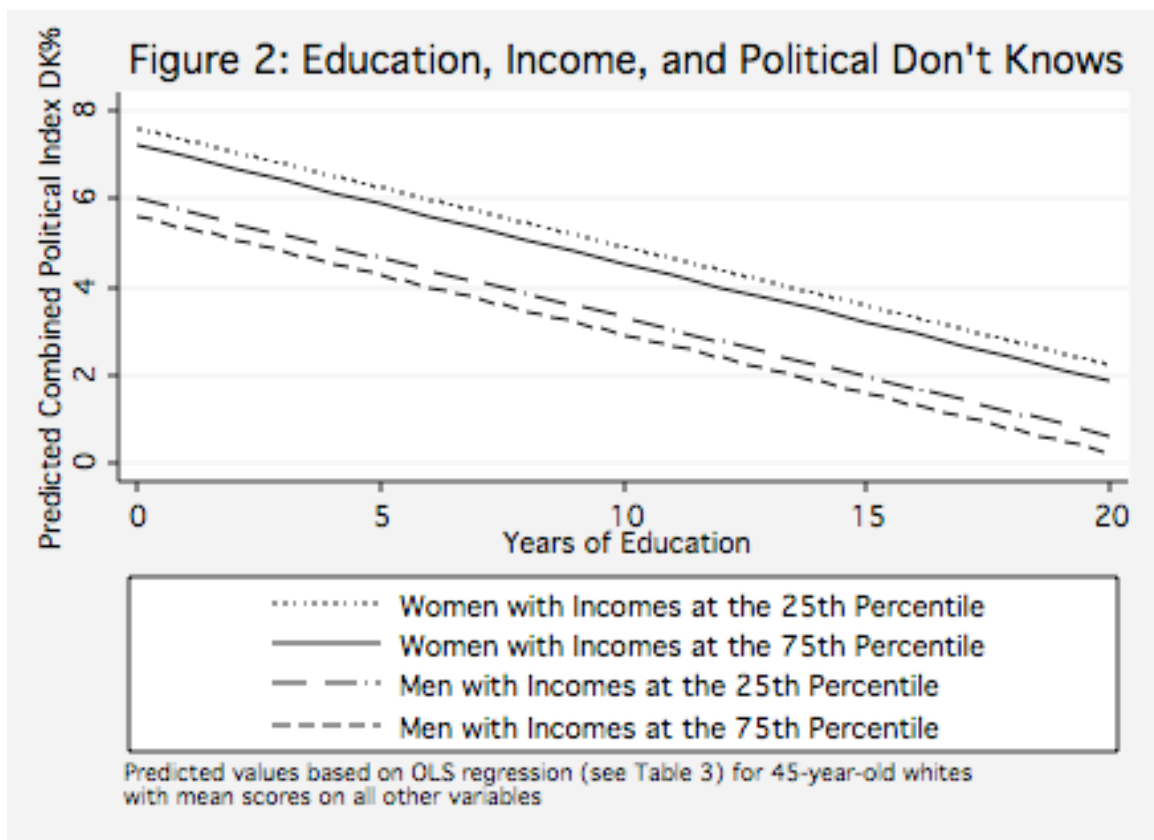
Since so many people never say “I don’t know” in response to any questions, it is worth examining the differences between those who respond with a “don’t know” at least once and those who never do. After modeling the percentage of don’t know responses on each index, I also examined whether the same features play a role in influencing whether someone says “I don’t know” even once to each kind of question.

I modeled the probability of at least one “don’t know” response for each index using logistic regression – as can be seen in Table 4. With the exception of being Native American, all the factors that are significantly associated with political don’t know rates are also associated

¹⁶ It is worth noting that I obtained substantively and statistically significant results for these factors despite modeling the very skewed distribution of “don’t know” rates using a simple linear model. In the next section, I use zero-inflated binomial regress to further explore who says “don’t know” to political questions.

with the chance of saying don't know at all to political questions, and the pattern remains largely the same across the indices – education, income and gender matter much less for worldview or morality questions than for questions about politics.

Across both types of regression, three of the four primary markers of privilege – gender, education, and income, but not race – are significantly and substantively associated with both the political institutions index and the combined political index. Men answer 1.6% more questions (say “don't know” 1.6% less) than women, all else held equal. While 1.6% may seem like a small effect, since most people say don't know very few times and the overall don't know rate for the GSS is only 4 - 5%, this is a substantial difference. A single additional year of education reduces the don't know rate, all else held equal, by 0.28%, or more than a quarter of a percentage point. This effect, and the different don't know rates for men and women and those with higher and lower incomes, can be seen in Figure 2.



All this clearly shows that those who are more distant from the political field are uniquely likely to claim they “don't know” the answer to political questions posed to them by interviewers, much like how a non-baseball fan would most likely respond to a request to name a favorite team in the playoffs.

Who says “don't know” to political questions the most?

Now that we know that there political don't knows are related to characteristics that matter much less for other kinds of don't knows, it's worth exploring who it is that is saying “I don't know”

to these political questions. In “Public Opinion Does Not Exist” Bourdieu reported that class and education matter in predicting non-response on political questions, and we’ve certainly seen that above. I had a number of further hypotheses about other factors that might predict political competence and political don’t know rates: a person’s place in the occupational hierarchy, their class identity, and especially their class background – their parents’ occupations, income levels, and education as they were growing up. Despite trying a number of sets of different categorical variables for occupation, as well as including variables directly measuring each of the above factors in a wide array of analyses, I never obtained significant results. I am not convinced that these factors are unimportant for political competence, but they do not show direct effects in my models. I also tested for interaction effects among my variables and for squared terms, and generally found only a few additional variables that were substantively and statistically significant and added explanatory power to the simple models predicted above. While the direct measures of class background were not significantly related to rates of political don’t knows, there are two indirect measures of the respondent’s accumulated economic and cultural capital that were significant.

Table 5 shows the results of zero-inflated negative binomial (ZINB) regression models “explaining” don’t know rates on the combined political index. ZINB is used for count data with high zeroes, which is exactly what I have¹⁷. The table includes five models. The first model is essentially the same as the one shown in Tables 3 and 4; it includes only simple demographic variables along with a dummy for missing income and the uncooperativeness and incomprehension variables. Because ZINB is based on count data, and not all respondents are asked the same number of questions, I include the number of political questions each respondent was asked as a control in all models¹⁸.

Missing income, uncooperativeness and incomprehension comprise the “inflate” portion of the first model. The inflate portion models how likely it is that someone is part of a group that will not say “don’t know” even least once. Negative coefficients in this part of the model mean that there is a smaller chance of not saying “don’t know” at all, or a larger chance of saying “don’t know” at least once. Each of these can be understood either as influencing a person’s overall willingness to say “I don’t know” on any topic, or as specifically related to their political competence and so likelihood of saying “I don’t know” at all to political questions. Most likely both are true to some extent, and it’s not entirely possible to parse out the difference in this model.

The next model adds a term to the inflate portion of the model for white males, who are substantially different from both white females and people of color of both sexes in their unwillingness to say “I don’t know” to political questions. The inflate portion also includes respondents’ non-political index don’t know rate. This is a good measure of willingness to say “don’t know” to many kinds of questions, and it is telling that even with this variable included in the model, the other variables retain their significance as well as substantial, if somewhat smaller, coefficients.

¹⁷ I checked these models for robustness both by running OLS regressions using the same variables, and by moving variables around between the different portions of the ZINB. In both cases, there were no substantive differences in my results.

¹⁸ I’ve recently learned that using exposures is a better way to control for the number of questions asked; later versions of this paper will use that method.

Table 5: The Combined Political Index

	I	II	III	IV	V
Number of questions asked	0.108	0.110	0.111	0.100	0.102
Age	0.007	0.006	0.008	0.005	0.005
Male	-0.460	-0.346	-0.284	-0.317	-0.287
Black	<i>0.098</i>	<i>0.043</i>	0.030	-0.101	-0.181
Latino	0.293	0.230	0.029	-0.041	0.011
Asian/Asian-American	1.047	0.908	0.553	0.539	0.571
Native American	<i>-0.168</i>	-0.203	-0.115	-0.147	-0.170
Natural Log of Income	-0.112	-0.111	<i>-0.049</i>	-0.105	-0.076
Education (years in school)	-0.092	-0.137	-0.098	-0.121	-0.101
Education Squared		0.002	0.001	<i>0.002</i>	0.002
Home Owner			-0.136		-0.147
Born in the United States			-0.400	-0.312	<i>-0.275</i>
Score on Vocabulary Test				-0.074	-0.060
Constant	0.444	0.773	0.236	1.292	0.827
<i>inflate portion of the model</i>					
Income Missing	-1.758	-1.279	-1.132	-1.261	-0.962
Incomprehension of Interview	-2.912	-2.189	-2.112	-1.682	-1.819
Uncooperative Attitude	-1.899	-1.377	-1.540	-1.613	-1.598
whitemale		0.419	0.353	0.467	0.390
Combined Non-Political Index Score		-0.189	-0.212	-0.216	-0.234
Constant	0.298	0.572	0.709	0.457	0.544
Number of Observations	40783	40783	18270	16789	11175
Nonzero observations	8962	8962	3764	3562	2309
Zero observations	31821	31821	14506	13227	8866
# of clusters	381	381	263	302	184
Wald chi2(9)	1518.97	1560.95	736.16	601.52	498.86
-	-	-	-	-	-
Log pseudolikelihood =	30375.49	29966.92	12630.22	11857.86	7706.966

coefficients in bold are significant at p<.005
coefficients in italics are significant at .005<p<.05

Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial Regressions. The dependent variable is the Combined Political Index.

By including the non-political index here, I am able to essentially filter out any general inclination to answer “don’t know” and instead focus more directly on factors that influence political competence.

Finally, the second model includes a term for education squared, which reflects the curvilinear effect of education. Going from very little education to a bit more education makes a much bigger difference than adding another year of college; and in fact those with post-graduate education tend to answer “don’t know” a bit more than those with a lot, but not quite as much, education.

The third model adds two new variables to the equation, both of which are often associated with differential levels of political participation. The first is a dummy for whether the respondent was born in the United States, coded 1 if they were born here and 0 otherwise. Unsurprisingly, those born outside the U.S. answer substantially fewer political questions than those who were born here. Much of this effect probably has to do with the fact that a substantial portion of these respondents may not be citizens; unfortunately, the GSS has not asked about citizenship status very often. Seventy-six percent of Asians and 34% of Latinos in the sample were not born in this country; so adding this variable to the model changes the estimated difference between Asians or Latinos and whites – it makes the Latino dummy variable insignificant, and the “effect” of being Asian declines almost 40%. In other words, it seems that Latinos born in the US are not very different from whites in answering political questions, and Asian-Americans who were born here are much less different than whites, all else held constant, than those born elsewhere.

Home ownership is also substantially associated with fewer political “don’t know” responses. As Oliver & Shapiro (1997) pointed out, home ownership is associated with family wealth. Since the GSS has no measure of family wealth, and only fairly broad measures of class background, home ownership is best understood here as in some senses a measure of class background.

Model 4 drops the variable for home ownership and adds a variable representing a score on a vocabulary test.¹⁹ This test asks respondents to give definitions of 10 words; wrong answers as well as “don’t know” answers are coded as wrong. Some might see the score on this vocabulary test could be understood as indicating some kind of innate intelligence, but as sociologists well know scores on all kinds of standardized tests are highly correlated with a variety of family background variables. This vocabulary score variable, then is largely indicative of the level of cultural capital in the respondents’ family of origin²⁰.

Finally, Model 5 is the full equation that includes all the variables. Although some of the significance levels decrease, overall the effects remain substantively and statistically significant. Refusing to disclose one’s income, and having higher rates of non-political don’t knows all are associated with higher likelihoods of saying “don’t know” to at least once political question, while white men are much less likely to say “don’t know” to any political questions. Knowing a lot of vocabulary words and owning a home, both at least in some part indicators of better-off family backgrounds, are associated with fewer don’t know responses even with everything else

¹⁹ I have shown regressions with wordsum and home ownership separately because only about a quarter of respondents have been asked both the home ownership question and administered the word definition test. Only including wordsum or home ownership, but not both, gives Ns of 18,270 or 16,789.

²⁰ In fact, parents’ education was significant in models (not shown here) of political don’t know rates until I added the wordsum variable.

held constant, as is being born in this country. Higher income, more education (up to a point) and being male all decrease don't know responses as well.

The race categories are somewhat more complicated – blacks again say “don't know” to political questions less than whites, which seems to be driven entirely by their substantially lower don't know rates on social policy questions. Asians say don't know more than whites, even among those born in the US. Latinos and Native Americans are not much different from whites when other factors are held constant.

With the possible exception of the race variables, these models paint a clear picture of political don't know rates stratified along the same lines as US society as a whole. It is not exactly surprising that those who are furthest from the political field tend to be those with the least education and income, women, and folks with less cultural and economic capital. But it is important to recognize that distance from the political field is evident not simply in lower participation rates, but even in how willing people are to answer political questions. Political disengagement is not only the result of a simple lack of the resources required for participation. It is also the lack of the buy-in, the understanding, and the comfort with politics as politics that keeps people away from the world of political participation.

So what is going on when people say “don't know” to political questions? Based on the above results, the best interpretation is a lack of political competence²¹. This is what Pierre Bourdieu says matters in generating responses to political questions:

... There are several principles which can be used to generate a response. First of all, there is what could be called “political competence,” a notion which corresponds to a definition of politics which is both arbitrary and legitimate, both dominant and concealed as such. This “political competence” is not universally distributed. It varies with the level of education. In other words, the probability of having an opinion on all the questions which presuppose a certain political knowledge can be compared to the probability of going to a museum; it is a function of a person's level of education. (1979: 126)

For Bourdieu, one's level of education is important not because more education leads directly to more knowledge or understanding of politics, but because more education is itself cultural capital and is also associated with coming from a relatively privileged background.

The probability of replying [to an opinion poll] depends in each case on the relationship between a question (or, more generally, a situation) and an agent (or class of agents) defined by a given competence, a capacity which itself depends on the probability of exercising that capacity. ‘Interest’ or ‘indifference’ towards politics would be better understood if it were seen that the propensity to use a political power ... is commensurate with the reality of this power, or, in other words, that indifference is only a manifestation of impotence. (1984: 405-406)

It is not possible, of course, to know for certain what people's true motivations are for providing (or failing to provide) particular answers to survey questions. It is best to understand not answering political questions as an indicator of, rather than caused by, the kind of distance from politics that Bourdieu describes. Either way there is a significant relationship here that provides a more complete picture of survey non-response than simply “not knowing.”

²¹ This is not to say that there are no other reasons for don't know responses to political questions – as I show below, a number of factors influence don't know response, not all of which have to do with political competence.

Political Competence and Voting

The final statistical test of my claim that don't know rates are indicative of levels of political competence, and that political competence is a superior way to think about and understand how people relate to politics, is to see whether political don't know rates actually have anything to do with political participation.

**Table 6:
Voting**

Model	I	II	III	IV
Age	0.051	0.052	0.044	0.045
Male	-0.014	-0.051	-0.118	-0.152
Black	0.155	0.152	0.261	0.246
Latino	-0.475	-0.468	0.072	0.074
Asian/Asian-American	-1.749	-1.696	-0.835	-0.805
Native American	-0.249	-0.262	-0.250	-0.261
Natural Log of Income	0.315	0.309	0.158	0.153
Education (years in school)	0.199	0.193	0.207	0.202
Incomprehension of Interview	-0.722	-0.570	-0.252	-0.158
Uncooperative Attitude	-0.686	-0.589	-0.708	-0.630
Income Missing	-0.334	-0.258	-0.163	-0.114
Combined Political Index Score		-0.021		-0.023
Combined Non-Political Index Score			-0.007	0.000
Home Owner			0.419	0.415
Born in the United States			1.416	1.401
Score on Vocabulary Test			0.109	0.107
Constant	-6.943	-6.794	-7.473	-7.296
number of clusters	364	364	184	184
number of observations	39040	39040	9985	9985
population, corrected for clustering and weights	39044.67	39044.67	9733.4415	9733.4415

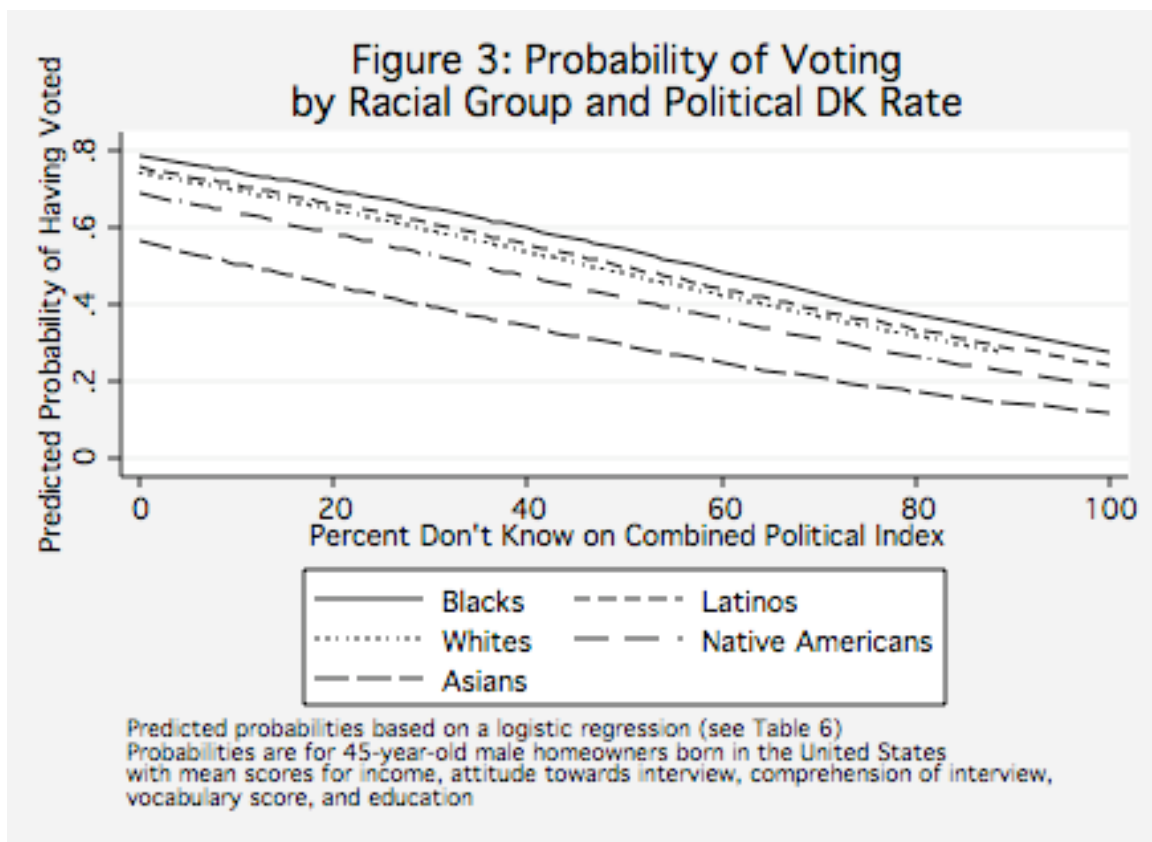
coefficients in bold are significant at $p < .05$

Logistic Regression. Dependent variable is coded 1 if the respondent reported voting in one or both of the two most presidential elections; 0 otherwise.

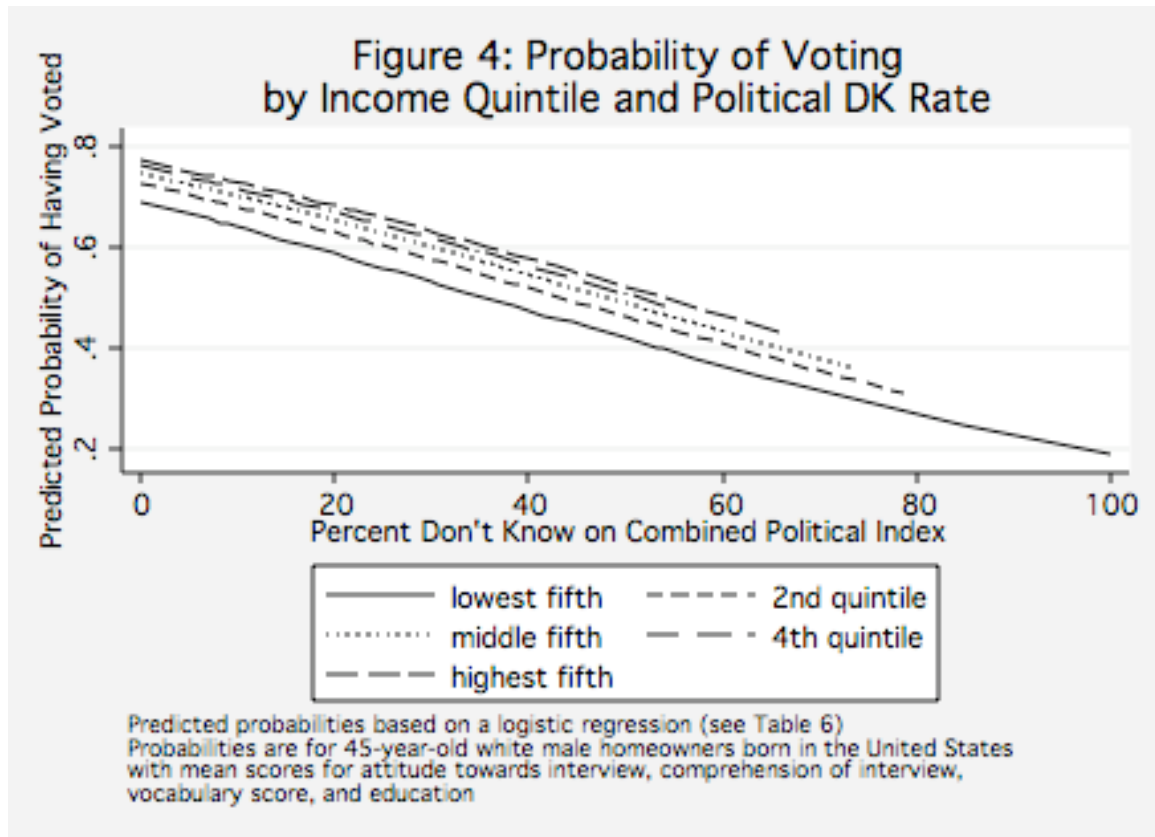
The only measure of political participation consistently asked on the GSS is a question about whether the respondent voted in one (or sometimes two) of the last presidential elections. I

created a variable coded 1 if the respondent had voted²² in at least one of the presidential elections about which she was asked, and 0 if not. I first modeled voting using only my original simple demographic variables, plus uncooperativeness and incomprehension to control for any possible “antisocial” or “just doesn’t understand the world and so doesn’t engage” types of effects. Adding the combined political index to this model was significant. I next included a few more relatively standard predictors: home ownership, and whether the respondent was born in this country. Even with these variables included, the coefficient for combined political index is still significant and substantial.

Higher rates of don’t know response on the “all politics” index predict a substantial and significant decrease in the probability of voting. Even after controlling for all the things found to matter for determining level of don’t know response in the first place (which are also the factors typically used to begin to explain voting rates), those at the highest end of the index are less than half as likely to report voting as those who answered all political questions. Moving one standard deviation above the mean for the political don’t know index decreases the probability of voting by about the same amount as moving one standard deviation below the mean of income.



²² Rates of reported voting on surveys are generally a bit higher than actual turnout. So this really measures only whether the respondent said they voted.



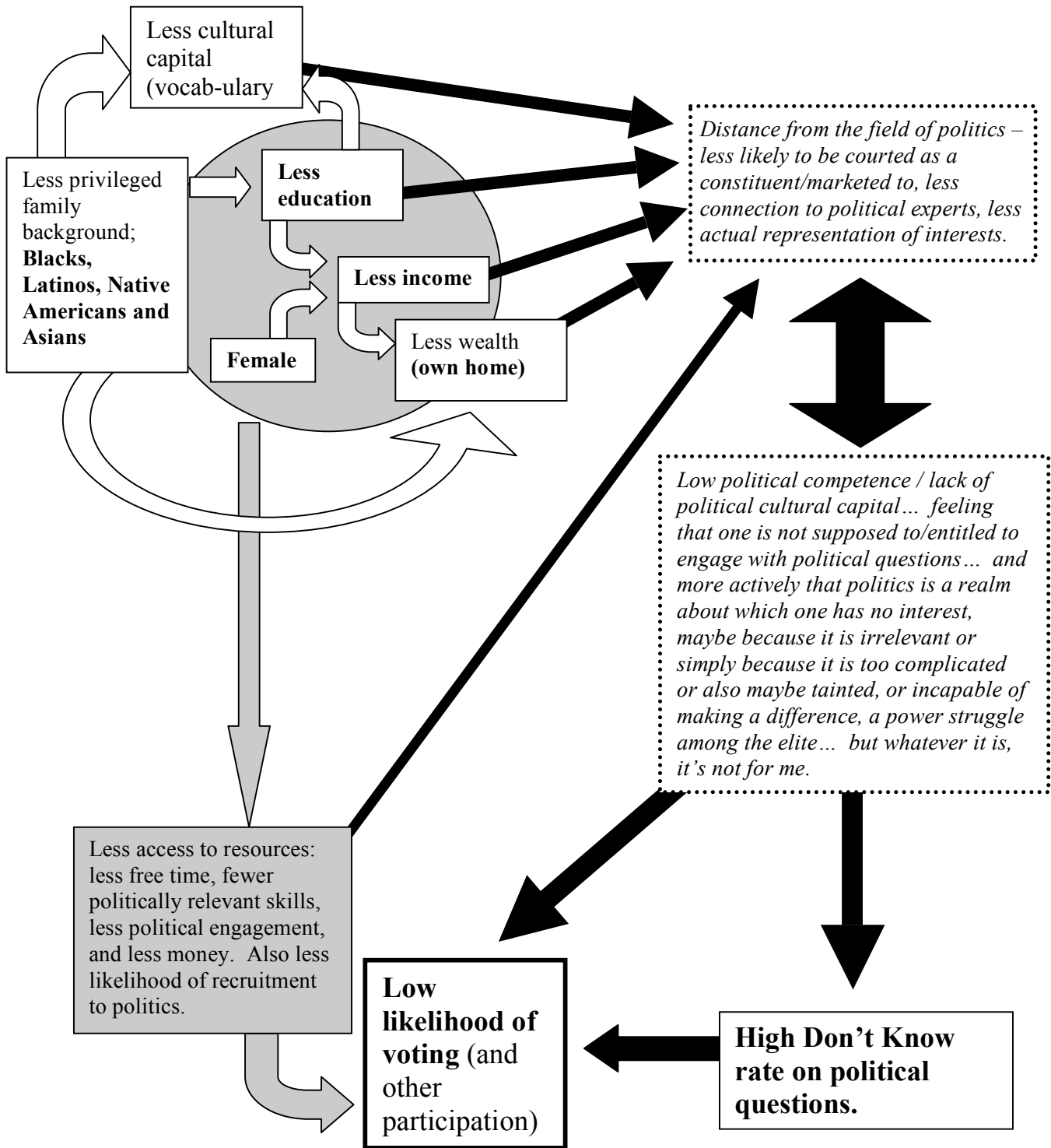
As Figure 4 shows, moving from a political don't know rate of 0 to 10% decreases the predicted probability of voting by about the same amount as going from the 4th to the bottom income quintile at the same point, or from the 2nd to the 4th. This result adds an important element to our understanding of political participation. Many models of political participation, notably Verba, Schlozman and Brady's Civic Voluntarism Model (1995), explain participation differences by income in terms of either resources of time and money or skills such as letter-writing and organizing. None of these consequences of having more money should, in their models, have any effect on the likelihood of answering political questions once education is held constant. And there is nothing in their model like political competence, as indicated by the political don't know rate.

Conclusion

Bourdieu argues that the problematic posed in opinion polls “is the problematic which essentially interests the people who hold power and who consider themselves to be well informed about the means of organizing their political action.” All surveys “put people in a position where they must answer a question they have never thought about” (1979: 125). This paper, then, seeks to do three things: first, to challenge commonly accepted renditions of the causes of the “don't know” response to political questions; second, to explore the relationship between “don't know” response and social stratification; and finally to argue that don't know response is best understood in terms of Bourdieu's notion of “political competence.”

Figure 5: Conceptual Scheme

Key:	Light grey indicates concepts and relationships that are part of standard US approaches to political participation.	Bolded concepts are directly represented by variables in my models.	Black arrows indicate relationships that are implied but not be directly observed in this study	White arrows indicate relationships that are well-established by other studies.
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I have tried in this paper to illustrate some of the major arrows in the conceptual scheme outlined in Figure 5. The political field, like any field, is made up of institutions and elites who possess much more specifically political cultural capital than those outside the field. This disparity in expertise has the effect of discouraging participation through restricting the sense of entitlement or obligation to participate – among those with less education, income, and other resources²³. While this study only begins to explore these questions, I believe there is much fruitful insight to be gained from examining don't know responses on the GSS and other surveys – both to complicate and challenge conceptions of surveys as voice for the voiceless, and simultaneously to add to our understanding of who those people are whose voices are not heard in politics.

²³ And as Theda Skocpol pointed out in *Diminishing Democracy* (2003), politics is becoming more and more the domain of professionals.

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