

# Closing the Gap: Gender, Race, and Welfare State Knowledge\*

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April 7, 2026

## Abstract

Decades of research document persistent gender and racial gaps in political knowledge. However, a growing literature shows that these gaps depend on the content of political knowledge batteries. Building on these insights, I introduce a measure of welfare state knowledge that captures understanding of what welfare programs do, who they serve, and how political authority is organized. Using an original survey in the United States, I compare welfare state knowledge with canonical political knowledge and find pronounced shifts in group knowledge patterns. Women score lower on canonical items but outperform men on welfare state knowledge, thereby reversing the gender gap. The racial gap narrows substantially in the welfare domain, with racial minorities scoring indistinguishably from white respondents. These findings challenge prevailing narratives about group knowledge deficits by revealing domains of political expertise that canonical measures overlook and underscoring how measurement choices shape whose political experiences are represented in the study of public opinion.

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\*This project was funded by APSA's Women, Gender & Politics Section and the Carrie Chapman Catt Prize for Research on Women and Politics.

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# 1 Introduction

A long line of research shows persistent group differences in political knowledge, with women and racial minorities scoring lower on average than men and white respondents (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Mondak and Anderson, 2004; Jerit and Barabas, 2017; Fraile, 2014; Verba et al., 1993; Prior and Lupia, 2008; Mondak, 1999; Abrajano, 2010). These gaps are troubling because they raise concerns about unequal political influence: political knowledge consistently predicts political engagement, vote choice, attitude stability, and the ability to hold elected officials accountable (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2001; Nie et al., 1996; Zaller, 1992; Meirick and Wackman, 2004; Siegel-Stechler, 2019; Gilens, 2001).

However, many scholars have argued that canonical political knowledge batteries undervalue what women and racial minorities know by focusing overwhelmingly on elite politics, national institutions, and white- and male-dominated domains (Dolan, 2011; Barabas et al., 2014; Hutchings, 2001; Pérez, 2015). Consistent with this critique, incorporating gender- or race-relevant knowledge items—such as knowledge of female officeholders or minority-focused policy issues—tends to narrow or reverse observed knowledge gaps (Dolan, 2011; Dolan and Hansen, 2020; Kraft and Dolan, 2023; Abrajano, 2015; Pérez, 2015; Jackson, 2025).

Although most revised knowledge measures remain anchored to an elite-institutional model of politics—knowledge of elected officials, legislatures, courts, national elections, and so on—one promising strand of research demonstrates the value of shifting beyond the elite political domain (Stolle and Gidengil, 2010; Cohen and Luttig, 2020; Weaver et al., 2019; Cramer and Toff, 2017; Jackson, 2025). Stolle and Gidengil (2010), for example, find that Canadian women know more about how to access government benefits and services than men, while Cohen and Luttig (2020) demonstrate that Black Americans know significantly more about victims of police violence than their white counterparts. Related work examines experiential knowledge of state coercion in highly policed communities and how incorporating identity-relevant knowledge can shift group differences (Weaver et al., 2019; Jackson, 2025). Together, this strand of literature suggests that group knowledge patterns can look fundamentally different when political knowledge is measured outside the elite-institutional domain. However,

these “domain-expanding” interventions also shift the *type* of knowledge: from institutional knowledge to more procedural or experiential forms of knowledge. This raises a central question: do familiar knowledge gaps persist when political knowledge is measured using the canonical logic—generalizable, factual knowledge of institutions used to evaluate politics and policy—but in a different domain of governance?

To answer this question, I introduce a welfare state knowledge battery that extends the domain of political knowledge while holding constant the canonical emphasis on factual institutional knowledge. Unlike existing “domain-expanding” measures that capture procedural or experiential knowledge—such as knowledge of how to access welfare (Stolle and Gidengil, 2010), specific instances of state violence (Cohen and Luttig, 2020), or how to navigate state coercion (Weaver et al., 2019)—this battery measures generalizable, factual knowledge of institutions: what welfare programs do, who they serve, and how authority is organized. In this way, I extend the domain of political knowledge while preserving the canonical logic and measuring precisely the kind of information that citizens use to evaluate and form opinions about welfare politics and policy. This approach therefore allows me to examine whether familiar gender and racial gaps persist when political knowledge is measured with the canonical logic in a major domain of governance: the welfare state.

Using original, nationally diverse survey data from the United States, I compare the canonical measure of political knowledge with a novel battery measuring knowledge of major welfare programs. The results reveal a pronounced shift in group knowledge patterns. In line with established findings, women and racial minorities score lower on canonical items. However, women know significantly more about the welfare state than men, and racial minorities score indistinguishably from white respondents. Pooled models confirm that gender and racial knowledge gaps differ significantly across domains. Together, these findings demonstrate that group differences in political knowledge are domain-specific and that canonical measures obscure political expertise among groups typically characterized as less knowledgeable.

This paper makes three main contributions. Conceptually, it challenges prevailing assumptions about group knowledge differences by demonstrating that knowledge gaps are

domain-specific. By extending the canonical logic of measurement to a new domain, I show that women and racial minorities possess politically consequential knowledge that canonical measures systematically overlook—specifically, knowledge of how welfare institutions are structured and whom they serve. Methodologically, I show that measurement choices fundamentally shape what we conclude about political knowledge distributions and underscore the need to diversify political knowledge batteries beyond the elite-institutional domain. Normatively, the paper questions whose realities canonical concepts represent and illustrates the value of concepts that capture the political experiences of a broader range of citizens.

## **2 Rethinking Political Knowledge Through the Welfare State**

### **2.1 Political Knowledge: The Canonical Framework and Critiques**

Political knowledge has long been understood as the factual information citizens need to connect their preferences to politics, evaluate government performance, and exercise democratic accountability (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2001; Gilens, 2001). Within this canonical framework, an informed citizen is one who can identify political officeholders, understand the structure of national institutions, and recall basic factual information about public affairs. Political knowledge batteries have thus historically focused on questions about who holds political power and how national political institutions function.

Within this measurement tradition, one of the most robust empirical findings is that women and racial minorities score lower on political knowledge batteries than male and white respondents (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Mondak and Anderson, 2004; Fraile, 2014; Verba et al., 1993; Abrajano, 2010; Abrajano and Alvarez, 2010). These gaps are remarkably consistent and central to debates about political inequality: if knowledge predicts political participation, opinion stability, and the ability to hold elected officials accountable, then systematic group differences raise concerns about unequal political voice and civic competence.

In response to this literature, however, a sizeable body of work demonstrates that canonical knowledge batteries do not measure political knowledge in a vacuum. Instead, they systematically encode biased assumptions of what “counts” as political knowledge by focusing

disproportionately on white, male officeholders and political domains that reflect historically elite, white, and male concerns. Accordingly, gender and racial gaps in political knowledge tend to shrink or reverse when researchers expand political knowledge questions to include female and minority politicians and political issues relevant to women and racial minorities (Dolan, 2011; Kraft and Dolan, 2023; Barabas et al., 2014; Dolan and Hansen, 2020; Pérez, 2015; Abrajano, 2015; Jackson, 2025).

Although most knowledge gap critiques of this kind focus on expanding the elite-institutional domain (i.e., adding women and minority issues to canonical items), a growing line of work examines political knowledge beyond elite national politics (Stolle and Gidengil, 2010; Cohen and Luttig, 2020; Weaver et al., 2019; Cramer and Toff, 2017; Jackson, 2025). This work shifts attention to domains in which citizens encounter the state through policy implementation, administration, and coercion, and suggests that group knowledge patterns may look different when measured outside of traditional institutional arenas.

## **2.2 The Case for Extending the Canonical Logic to the Welfare State**

This shift beyond elite-institutional politics can be understood as a broader move toward domains of everyday governance. By everyday governance, I refer to the administrative, bureaucratic, and coercive settings in which citizens routinely encounter the state outside of elections and national political institutions. In these settings, political authority is exercised through policy implementation, administrative discretion, and direct interactions with state actors, rather than through representation or electoral competition. They include public assistance programs, policing and the criminal justice system, and other policy arenas that structure daily life and shape citizens' political experiences and interpretations.

Multiple strands of scholarship move the study of political knowledge in this direction. Stolle and Gidengil (2010), first, show that Canadian women know more than men about how to access welfare programs, pointing to a domain of knowledge organized around care work, household management, and interactions with state bureaucracies. Cohen and Luttig (2020) demonstrate that Black Americans possess greater knowledge of state violence

exercised through policing and the criminal justice system. Related work emphasizes how political knowledge emerges through direct, often involuntary interactions with coercive state institutions, producing detailed, experience-based understandings of how state authority operates in practice (Weaver et al., 2019). Cramer and Toff (2017) similarly move beyond elite-institutional politics by highlighting how citizens interpret political information through everyday experience and social context. Jackson (2025), finally, examines political knowledge relevant to the lived experiences of Black women and finds that canonical gaps reverse in the context of Black women-specific knowledge.

Together, this strand of literature demonstrates that political knowledge varies across governance domains and that group knowledge hierarchies can look fundamentally different outside of elite institutions. However, these “domain-expanding” approaches do more than shift the domain of political knowledge—they also measure different *types* of knowledge. Stolle and Gidengil (2010), for instance, focus on procedural knowledge (how to access services), while Cohen and Luttig (2020) measure case- or event-based knowledge (specific instances of police violence). Weaver et al. (2019) examine experience-based understandings of how state coercion operates in practice. Cramer and Toff (2017) emphasize interpretive knowledge derived from personal experience and social context, while Jackson (2025) examines knowledge grounded in lived experience, including knowledge of discrimination and event-based knowledge of police violence. This literature thus examines forms of political knowledge rooted in lived experience, state encounters, and interpretation, rather than the abstract, institutional focus of the canonical measure. In other words, it expands the study of political knowledge by shifting both the *domain* and the *type* of knowledge being measured.

This distinction matters because these alternative types of political knowledge do not preserve the logic of canonical measurement. In this paper, I extend the *domain* of political knowledge to the welfare state while holding constant the canonical emphasis on generalizable, factual knowledge of institutional structure. Rather than measuring how individuals personally navigate programs or recall specific state actions, my operationalization captures what welfare programs do, who they serve, and how political authority is organized. In other

words, I change the domain (from elite political institutions to the welfare state) while retaining the *type* of knowledge measured in the canonical framework. This approach allows me to directly examine whether familiar knowledge gaps persist when the domain shifts but the measurement logic remains constant. In what follows, I make a more detailed case for a political knowledge battery that follows the logic of the canonical measure but shifts the content to the welfare state.

First, why the welfare state as the political domain of interest? Decades of scholarship show that the welfare state is one of the most pervasive sites of government for many citizens (Orloff, 1993; Soss, 1999; Mettler, 2011; Schneider and Ingram, 1993). Moreover, women and racial minorities disproportionately interact with welfare programs due to structural inequalities in income, employment, and caregiving responsibilities, alongside gendered and racialized program design and administrative burdens (Michener, 2018; Herd and Moynihan, 2018; Hancock, 2004; Soss et al., 2011; Glenn, 2010; Morgan, 2006). As such, the welfare state provides a strategic domain for assessing whether political knowledge gaps persist across domains or instead reflect the narrow content of the canonical measure.

Second, why extend the canonical logic of political knowledge (i.e., why hold constant the type of knowledge)? As discussed, existing domain-expanding contributions measure important forms of procedural and experiential knowledge—the ability to recall specific cases of carceral violence (Cohen and Luttig, 2020), for instance, or knowing how to access welfare (Stolle and Gidengil, 2010). While these types of knowledge are undoubtedly politically consequential, they do not capture the kind of generalizable, institutional knowledge that canonical measures are designed to assess: knowledge of what programs do, who they serve, and how they are structured (i.e., the kind of knowledge that equips citizens to evaluate welfare politics and policy). The measure developed here preserves this canonical logic while shifting the domain of inquiry to a core site of government interaction.

### 2.3 Group-Specific Expectations Across Domains

This framework yields clear expectations about how political knowledge should vary across domains and social groups. The canonical measure of political knowledge emphasizes elite officeholders and national political institutions, arenas historically dominated by men and shaped by elite-centered patterns of political socialization. Because access to and familiarity with these political arenas are unequally distributed by race and gender, longstanding gender and racial gaps should reproduce in the canonical knowledge domain. By contrast, welfare state knowledge captures awareness and understanding of programs that organize everyday governance and are disproportionately structured by gendered and racialized patterns of state exposure and program use. As a result, group knowledge differences should narrow in the welfare domain and may, in some cases, reverse relative to canonical knowledge measures.

## 3 Data & Measurement

To examine canonical political knowledge and welfare state knowledge, I fielded an original survey to a nationally diverse sample of 1,362 American adults on Prolific in Fall 2025.<sup>1</sup> Compared to convenience samples such as MTurk, Prolific respondents tend to be more attentive and more demographically diverse, though like other online samples they skew younger and more educated than the U.S. population (Peer et al., 2021; Albert and Smilek, 2023). To address these imbalances, I apply post-stratification weights in addition to front-end quota sampling to ensure representativeness by gender, age, race and ethnicity, and political affiliation. I constructed these weights using population estimates of gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, and income from the 2024 American Community Survey.<sup>2</sup> Because of some missing cases on weight dimensions, my final sample size is 1,304. This sample also excludes the 35

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was thus fielded outside of a presidential election campaign, which reduces the likelihood that short-term campaign dynamics drive responses. While levels of factual knowledge may vary across political moments, the analysis focuses on relative differences across domains within the same respondents, making the core comparisons unlikely to hinge on period-specific shocks.

<sup>2</sup> As shown in Appendix S1, post-stratification weights substantially reduce known Prolific skews, particularly with respect to race/ethnicity and age, bringing the sample into much closer alignment with ACS population benchmarks.

respondents who failed an attention check.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1 presents the questions and correct answers for the canonical and welfare state knowledge batteries. To measure canonical political knowledge, I use a five-item multiple choice battery designed to capture knowledge of political institutions, elected officials, and how government works. In line with the existing literature, I use Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993) as a starting point for selecting and wording questions. I scored each respondent as correct (1) or incorrect (0) before summing and scaling each score to run from 0 to 1. Survey respondents received the canonical items in random order.

Table 1: Political Knowledge Items: Canonical and Welfare State

<b>Panel A. Canonical Political Knowledge</b>
<b>Canonical Political Knowledge Items</b>
Which party currently has a majority of seats in the House of Representatives? <i>Republican Party</i>
What majority is needed in the House and Senate to override a presidential veto? <i>Two-thirds</i>
Which party is considered more conservative at the national level? <i>Republican Party</i>
Whose responsibility is judicial review? <i>Supreme Court</i>
What office is currently held by J.D. Vance? <i>Vice President</i>
<b>Panel B. Welfare State Political Knowledge</b>
<b>Welfare State Political Knowledge Items</b>
Which group receives SNAP benefits at the highest rate? <i>Households with children</i>
Which level of government sets most eligibility rules and benefit levels for TANF? <i>States</i>
What is generally required of most adults receiving TANF cash assistance? <i>Participating in work or job-training activities</i>
What can SNAP benefits be used to purchase? <i>Groceries and cold food items</i>
Which of the following determines a household's SNAP benefit amount? <i>Household income and size</i>

*Note:* Correct answers in italics. Items presented in random order within each battery.

To measure welfare state knowledge, I use a five-item multiple choice battery designed to capture knowledge of core public assistance programs. As discussed in Section 2.2 this measure

<sup>3</sup> Appendix S2 presents the survey questionnaire. Appendix S8 describes how the study adheres to APSA's Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research.

is designed to parallel the logic of canonical political knowledge measure. Accordingly, the items assess factual knowledge of how social policy is structured: who welfare programs serve, what benefits can be used for, which level of government holds authority over eligibility and benefit design, and the rules that govern program generosity. By focusing on institutional architecture rather than procedural know-how or lived experience, the measure mirrors the logic of canonical knowledge items, which aim to assess citizens' understanding of political institutions and policies as objects of evaluation. Each respondent is correct (1) or incorrect (0) and scaled to run from 0 to 1, thereby matching the scale of the canonical knowledge measure. Respondents received the welfare items in random order.

Following standard practice, I gave respondents an "I don't know" (DK) option for each knowledge item (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993; Luskin and Bullock, 2011; Jessee, 2017; Sturgis et al., 2008; Brown and Pope, 2021). However, prior work shows that DK responses are not evenly distributed across groups, with women more likely to select DK responses than men (Mondak and Anderson, 2004; Lizotte and Sidman, 2009; Ferrín et al., 2018). To assess whether differential DK patterns might affect the analyses, Appendix S3.4 examines DK rates across items and demographic groups. As shown there, DK responses are not uniformly higher for welfare items and are instead concentrated in a small number of items, particularly those involving greater administrative complexity. Moreover, although DK rates vary somewhat across groups, these differences do not consistently favor one battery over the other. Together, these patterns suggest that any cross-domain differences are unlikely to be driven by differential guessing or systematic differences in DK responding. As an additional robustness check, Appendix S3.4 also shows that the main results are substantively similar when DK responses are treated as missing rather than incorrect.

Item selection for the welfare battery followed three explicit criteria. First, to maintain conceptual equivalence with the canonical framework, the welfare items focus on general structural features of U.S. social policy: who programs serve, what benefits can be used for, and which level of government controls eligibility and benefit rules. Second, items were required to be politically consequential, tapping information that citizens plausibly use when evaluating

welfare debates about who receives benefits, work requirements, program generosity, and federal–state authority.<sup>4</sup> Third, items had to be general and widely applicable rather than tied to specific administrative experiences so that the measure assesses policy and institutional understanding rather than personal program navigation.

Within this framework, SNAP and TANF offer particularly appropriate policy contexts. First, they are among the most salient, frequently debated, and widely studied public assistance programs in the United States. Second, they represent two distinct welfare logics: a near-universal food assistance program with federally defined benefit structures (SNAP), and a time-limited cash assistance program administered with substantial state discretion (TANF). Together, these programs allow the battery to span variation in program design while holding constant the type of institutional knowledge being measured. The resulting battery thus captures the kind of knowledge that citizens need to evaluate welfare policy.

Because the contribution of the paper rests on comparing political knowledge across domains of governance, I assess the psychometric properties of both batteries to evaluate item quality, dimensionality, and potential sources of measurement artifact. First, item-level diagnostics indicate that both the canonical and welfare batteries span a meaningful range of difficulty (Appendix S3.1). Within the canonical battery, the proportion of correct responses ranges from 0.73 to 0.96. The welfare battery exhibits greater variation in difficulty, with the proportion of correct responses ranging from 0.35 to 0.98. Although the welfare items span a broader range of difficulty, they are not uniformly more difficult than the canonical items. Item discrimination is also similar across the two batteries, indicating that the results in Section 4 are not driven by differences in item quality in the welfare battery.

Internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) and inter-item correlations (Tables A4 and A5) indicate that each battery functions as a reasonably coherent measurement scale. Alpha values are around 0.45, which is consistent with the modest internal consistency often observed

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<sup>4</sup> For example, recent congressional proposals to expand or tighten SNAP work requirements hinge on precisely who qualifies for exemptions, how benefit amounts are calculated, and whether states or the federal government set key eligibility rules. Likewise, disputes over TANF’s block-grant structure routinely center on state discretion in determining benefit levels and work activities—i.e., exactly the kinds of institutional facts that feature in this measure. As such, the welfare battery represents the factual foundations of partisan conflict over the welfare state.

in short factual knowledge batteries (Mondak and Anderson, 2004; Mondak, 2001; Gidengil et al., 2016; Jackson, 2025).<sup>5</sup> To assess whether canonical and welfare state knowledge reflect a single underlying dimension or distinct domains of political knowledge, I further examine cross-domain correlations and exploratory factor analyses (Appendices S3.2 and S3.3). Item-level correlations across domains are weak: the average tetrachoric correlation between canonical and welfare items is 0.10, and the correlation between the additive canonical and welfare scales is similarly low (0.14). Factor analyses reinforce this distinction: a one-factor solution fits the data poorly, whereas a two-factor solution cleanly separates the canonical and welfare items. Together, these results show that individuals who are highly knowledgeable about elite political institutions are not necessarily knowledgeable about the welfare state, thereby indicating that the two batteries capture substantively distinct dimensions of political knowledge.

## 4 Group Differences in Canonical and Welfare State Knowledge

### 4.1 Gender Differences Across Knowledge Domains

Guided by the framework from Section 2, this section examines whether gender and racial gaps persist when knowledge measures focus on the welfare state rather than elite political institutions. I begin by examining gender differences across the two knowledge batteries. Table 2 reports weighted mean knowledge scores for women and men on the canonical items and the welfare items. Consistent with established findings, women score lower than men on the canonical battery. Specifically, women correctly answer 0.86 of the five items on average, compared to 0.92 among men, a statistically significant difference of -0.06 ( $p < 0.001$ ). This pattern replicates the canonical gender gap documented across multiple surveys and contexts (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Mondak and Anderson, 2004; Jerit and Barabas, 2017).

However, this pattern reverses in the context of the welfare state. Consistent with the theoretical expectations developed in Section 2, women score higher than men on the welfare knowledge battery (0.74 vs. 0.71), a statistically significant difference of +0.03 ( $p = 0.003$ ).

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<sup>5</sup> Political knowledge is typically measured using a small number of heterogeneous items, and prior work notes that such measures often exhibit modest internal consistency while still providing meaningful indicators of political knowledge (Mondak, 1999; Pérez, 2015).

This reversal contrasts with the canonical gender gap and demonstrates that gender differences in political knowledge depend on the political domain in question: women perform worse than men on elite-institutional questions but outperform men when questions focus on the welfare state. As such, this finding is consistent with a broader literature showing that gender differences in political knowledge vary with the substantive content of knowledge items (Dolan, 2011; Kraft and Dolan, 2023; Barabas et al., 2014; Stolle and Gidengil, 2010).

Table 2: Gender Variation Across Knowledge Domains

	Women	Men	Difference	p-value
Canonical Political Knowledge	0.86	0.92	-0.06	< 0.001
Welfare State Knowledge	0.74	0.71	0.03	0.003

*Note:* Weighted means. Difference is women minus men. All p-values from weighted two-sample t-tests. Knowledge variables scaled 0–1.

To formally test whether the gender gap differs across domains, I pool the canonical and welfare state knowledge items into a single stacked dataset in which each respondent contributes two observations—one for each knowledge domain—and estimate a survey-weighted linear regression predicting knowledge as a function of gender, domain, and their interaction, with standard errors clustered by respondent. Table 3 presents the results. The negative coefficient on female (-0.059,  $p < 0.001$ ) captures the gender gap in the canonical domain. The key term of interest is the interaction between female and welfare domain. The positive, significant interaction term (0.091,  $p < 0.001$ ) indicates that the gender gap shifts by roughly nine points when moving from canonical knowledge to welfare state knowledge. Substantively, this represents a reversal in political expertise: women score around six points lower than men on canonical items but three points higher on welfare items.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1 plots predicted knowledge scores from the pooled, survey-weighted model by gender and knowledge domain. The figure shows a clear domain-specific pattern: women score lower than men on canonical political knowledge but higher on welfare state knowledge. This

<sup>6</sup> Because the argument concerns how measures behave across domains rather than what predicts knowledge, I present the pooled model without covariates in the main text. The results are virtually unchanged with demographic covariates (Table A13 in Appendix S6) and are nearly identical to the unweighted pooled model (Table A15 in Appendix S6).

Table 3: Gender Knowledge Gaps Across Domains

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Knowledge Score
Female	−0.059*** (0.016)
Welfare Domain	−0.214*** (0.013)
Female × Welfare Domain	0.091*** (0.021)
Constant	0.924*** (0.009)
Observations	2,608

*Notes:* Survey-weighted linear regression. Data are stacked such that each respondent contributes two observations (canonical and welfare knowledge). Standard errors are clustered by respondent. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

reversal indicates that observed gender gaps in political knowledge depend on the domain of governance being measured. Canonical items emphasize elite-institutional knowledge, where men have an advantage, whereas welfare items capture knowledge of how public assistance programs are structured and operate, where women demonstrate greater expertise.

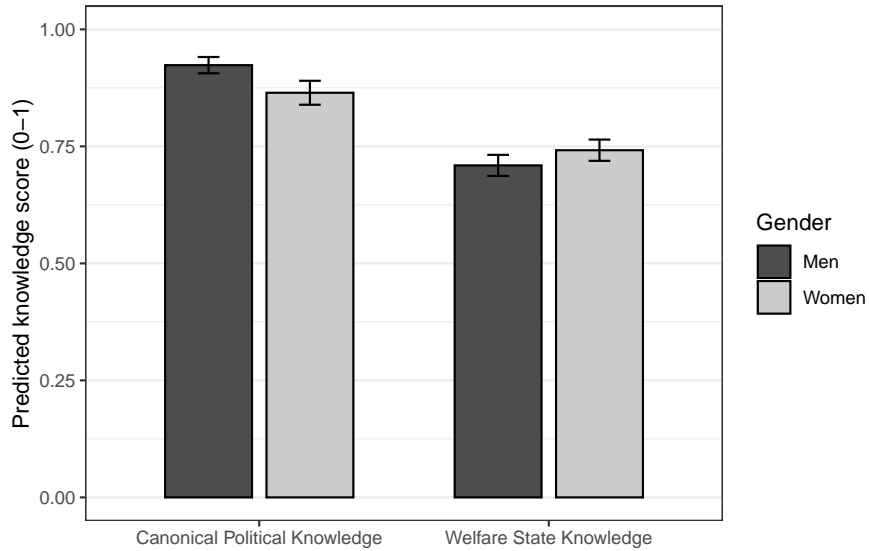


Figure 1: Predicted political knowledge across domains by gender. Predictions are from survey-weighted stacked model; 95% CIs clustered by respondent.

## 4.2 Racial Differences Across Knowledge Domains

Turning next to racial differences in canonical and welfare state knowledge, Table 4 reports the weighted mean knowledge scores for white respondents and racial minorities, defined here as respondents identifying with any non-white racial group on the survey (Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, or other). In line with existing research (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Verba et al., 1993; Abrajano and Alvarez, 2010; Abrajano, 2010), there is a sizable racial gap in canonical knowledge: white respondents score six points higher than respondents of color (0.92 vs. 0.86,  $p < 0.001$ ). However, this pattern does not extend to the welfare domain. On the welfare battery, the racial gap narrows substantially and is statistically indistinguishable from zero (0.73 vs. 0.71,  $p = 0.11$ ). This attenuation contrasts with longstanding racial knowledge

gaps and indicates that racial knowledge differences are domain-dependent: large in the elite-institutional domain and narrow in the welfare domain. This finding is thus broadly consistent with work showing that group differences in political knowledge vary with the domain and content of questions (Pérez, 2015; Abrajano, 2015; Cohen and Luttig, 2020; Jackson, 2025).<sup>7</sup>

Table 4: Racial Variation Across Knowledge Domains

	Racial Minority	White	Difference	p-value
Canonical Political Knowledge	0.86	0.92	-0.06	< 0.001
Welfare State Knowledge	0.71	0.73	-0.02	0.11

*Note:* Weighted means. Difference is racial minority minus white. All p-values from weighted two-sample t-tests. Knowledge variables scaled 0–1.

Next, I pool the canonical and welfare items into a single stacked dataset in which each respondent contributes two observations and estimate a survey-weighted linear regression. This regression predicts knowledge as a function of race, domain, and their interaction, with standard errors clustered by respondent (Table 5). The negative coefficient on racial minority ( $-0.055$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) represents the racial gap in canonical knowledge. The key term is the interaction between race and welfare domain. This interaction is positive but not statistically significant ( $0.036$ ,  $p = 0.12$ ), indicating that the racial gap narrows in the context of the welfare state. Figure 2 illustrates this pattern: predicted scores for white and minority respondents differ markedly on canonical knowledge, but are nearly overlapping in the welfare domain.<sup>8</sup>

Intersectional comparisons (Tables A11 and A12 in Appendix S5) show that the canonical knowledge hierarchy is strongly stratified by both race and gender: white men score the highest, followed by white women and minority men, with minority women scoring the lowest. These patterns closely mirror the canonical knowledge hierarchy documented by Delli Carpini

<sup>7</sup> Appendix S4 presents means for each racial/ethnic group. Racial gaps are sizable and statistically significant in the canonical domain: whites score higher than Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian respondents. In the welfare domain, however, Black respondents move to parity (and even a slight advantage) relative to white respondents. Hispanic/Latino respondents continue to score lower than whites, though the welfare gap is slightly smaller than the canonical gap. Asian respondents also score lower than whites in both domains but the difference is virtually the same across batteries. Overall, the canonical knowledge hierarchy does not fully replicate in the welfare domain, with the clearest narrowing occurring among Black respondents.

<sup>8</sup> Results are similar when adjusting for age, education, income, gender, region, and party identification. This covariate-adjusted model is reported in Appendix S6 (Table A14). The unweighted model also produces nearly identical results (Table A16 in Appendix S6).

Table 5: Racial Knowledge Gaps Across Domains

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Knowledge Score
Racial Minority	-0.055** (0.017)
Welfare Domain	-0.185*** (0.012)
Racial Minority × Welfare Domain	0.036 (0.022)
Constant	0.919*** (0.007)
Observations	2,608

*Notes:* Survey-weighted linear regression. Data are stacked such that each respondent contributes two observations (canonical and welfare knowledge). Standard errors are clustered by respondent. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

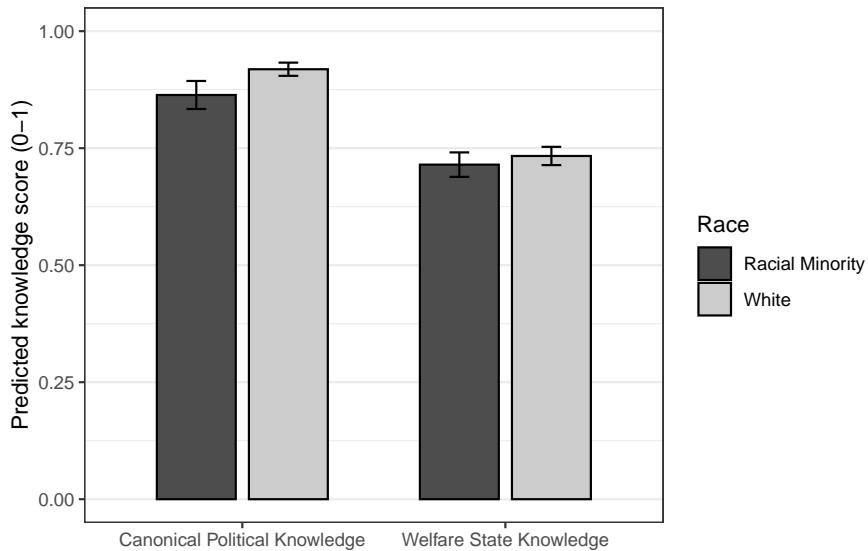


Figure 2: Predicted political knowledge across domains by race. Predictions are from survey-weighted stacked model; 95% CIs clustered by respondent.

and Keeter (1996), in which white men score highest and Black women lowest. In the welfare domain, however, this hierarchy collapses: white women outperform white men, and minority men and women score indistinguishably from white men. As such, the canonical battery reproduces a racialized and gendered hierarchy that places minority women at the bottom while the welfare battery does not. This pattern indicates that intersectional disadvantage is not an inherent feature of political knowledge but a product of measurement choices.

Interestingly, the domain-specific narrowing and reversal of gender and racial gaps are not driven solely by differential contact with welfare programs. Appendix S7 reports knowledge means for respondents with and without welfare state contact, defined as direct program use, household use, or welfare-related employment. Large gender and racial gaps in canonical knowledge persist regardless of whether respondents have had welfare contact. By contrast, racial and gender welfare gaps shrink substantially for respondents with and without welfare state contact. Among women, the gender gap narrows to zero among respondents with no welfare contact and reverses among those with contact. For race, welfare state knowledge substantially narrows racial gaps among respondents with and without contact. These results indicate that the narrowing, and in some cases reversal, of group differences in welfare state knowledge cannot be attributed simply to higher rates of program contact.

Together with the main results, this welfare contact analysis points to broader group differences in political learning pathways and information environments. These patterns are consistent with the multiple pathways through which citizens may acquire political information about the welfare state. First, women and racial minorities interact differently with the welfare state due to gendered caregiving roles, historically racialized program design, and unequal exposure to poverty governance. These patterned encounters shape familiarity with program rules, eligibility criteria, and administrative authority. Second, information about welfare programs diffuses through social networks—families, schools, workplaces, and local communities—creating learning environments that channel information about public assistance in ways that diverge from information flow about elite officeholders and institutions. Finally, media coverage of welfare politics routinely foregrounds the features captured in the

welfare battery and exposes citizens to program details even in the absence of welfare state contact. While this paper does not adjudicate between these mechanisms, its findings are consistent with the existence of multiple pathways of political learning.

Overall, the results in this section are consistent with the theoretical framework developed in Section 2. This framework predicted that canonical measures would exaggerate group differences by privileging elite-centered political content, while applying the same measurement logic to the welfare domain would attenuate or reverse these gaps. The observed patterns align with this expectation: gender gaps reverse in the welfare domain, while racial gaps narrow to the point of statistical indistinguishability. Shifting the focus of measurement from elite institutions to other domains of governance thus shows that canonical measures obscure or misrepresent group differences in political competence. Together, these patterns underscore the conceptual value of moving beyond the canonical knowledge battery: the content of political knowledge measures shapes who appears politically knowledgeable and competent. The following section considers the broader conceptual, methodological, and normative implications of these findings for the study of political knowledge and behavior.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

This paper examines whether longstanding gender and racial gaps in political knowledge are stable across domains of governance. Consistent with the framework developed above, I show that group differences in political knowledge are domain-dependent. Familiar gender and racial gaps appear when political knowledge is measured using canonical, elite-centric items. When measurement shifts to the welfare state, however, the racial gap narrows substantially and the gender gap reverses. Together, these findings demonstrate that group knowledge gaps are not fixed attributes but products of what scholars choose to measure.

An important clarification is that welfare state knowledge as measured here is distinct from procedural knowledge of how to navigate welfare programs and experiential knowledge derived from direct program use. Procedural knowledge might concern how to apply for benefits, which offices to contact, or how to comply with administrative requirements. Experiential

knowledge is derived from encounters with and direct navigation of welfare institutions. By contrast, the measure in this paper captures institutional facts about program design: who programs serve, what benefits can be used for, and which levels of government exercise authority. This distinction matters conceptually. This kind of institutional knowledge is precisely the type of information that citizens draw on when evaluating policy proposals, attributing responsibility, and forming political opinions about welfare reform. The finding that group differences reverse or attenuate at this level suggests that women and racial minorities possess policy-relevant understandings that canonical measures systematically overlook.

Conceptually, these results contribute to debates about what political knowledge measures are taken to represent (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Dolan, 2011; Kraft, 2023; Cramer and Toff, 2017; Cohen and Luttig, 2020; Weaver et al., 2019). The canonical measure captures one slice of the information that citizens use to form political opinions and navigate political life. In practice, however, it is often used as a comprehensive proxy for political competence. The results in this paper suggest that this approach is incomplete: performance on canonical items does not generalize to the welfare state—one of the most frequently encountered, consequential, and politically contested sites of state interaction. The reversal and attenuation of knowledge gaps in this domain therefore challenge the notion that political knowledge can be captured by a single-domain, canonical concept.

Methodologically, these conceptual insights have important implications for the study of political knowledge. Specifically, they suggest that political knowledge batteries should draw on *multiple domains of governance* rather than relying exclusively on elite-institutional content. If group knowledge differences are domain-dependent, then a single, elite-centered battery risks overstating the political competence of some groups while understating that of others. A multi-domain approach could provide a more complete assessment of political knowledge by capturing the varied state interactions and information environments through which different groups of citizens learn about politics. Developing such a battery is a promising direction for future research. Without such an approach, scholars risk mistaking domain-specific familiarity with elite institutions for general political competence.

Finally, and normatively, this paper raises questions about whose political experiences are made visible by canonical concepts in political science. Canonical knowledge measures are regularly used to assess political competence and civic preparedness. Yet this framework risks obscuring forms and patterns of political expertise if knowledge gaps reverse or narrow across domains of governance. In other words, inferences about political competence and inequality depend on the slice of the political world we choose to measure. Recognizing that different groups of citizens encounter different parts of the state in different ways—and incorporating that reality into our measures—is essential for producing more representative scholarly accounts of political behavior. This paper contributes to this effort in the context of political knowledge, thereby joining recent work that develops more representative measures of core political concepts, including political efficacy (Phoenix and Chan, 2022), political trust (Chudy and Engelhardt, 2023), participation norms (Anoll, 2018), punitive attitudes (Jefferson, 2023), and ideological identification (Jefferson, 2024).

Several limitations and directions for future research are worth noting. First, the analysis draws on an original survey conducted in the United States, and the findings should be interpreted with that institutional context in mind. The structure, visibility, and politicization of the welfare state vary substantially across countries, as do gendered and racialized patterns of interaction with public institutions. Replicating this approach in comparative perspective—particularly in social democracies with more universalistic welfare regimes or in contexts where welfare provision is more fragmented—would help to establish the scope conditions of the argument. Such extensions could clarify whether domain-specific variation emerges primarily in means-tested systems characterized by administrative complexity and moralized policy debates, or whether similar patterns appear across welfare regimes.

Second, the welfare knowledge battery developed here is intentionally narrow and institutional in focus. While this design choice is central to the paper’s conceptual contribution—extending the logic of canonical political knowledge rather than measuring procedural, experiential, or event-based knowledge—it necessarily captures only a subset of welfare-related political understanding. Future work could expand this approach by incorporating additional

policy domains, such as healthcare, housing, or childcare, or by constructing multi-domain batteries that systematically vary the type of political knowledge being measured (for instance: elite-institutional, procedural, experiential, and event-based). Such an approach would allow scholars to assess whether the findings in this paper reflect a broader pattern of political learning or depend on the domain or type of knowledge being measured. Future research could also extend the canonical, institutional approach to other arenas of governance—such as policing and the criminal justice system or the immigration bureaucracy—to evaluate whether these patterns extend beyond the welfare state.

Third, although the analyses in this paper document clear group patterns across domains, they do not adjudicate between the mechanisms through which citizens acquire political knowledge. The results are consistent with multiple pathways, including differential exposure to policy-relevant information through caregiving roles, community networks, workplaces, and media coverage of welfare politics. Identifying which pathways matter most—and how they interact with political socialization in schools and civic education curricula—remains an important task for future research. Mixed-method approaches combining survey data with qualitative interviews or network-based measures of information flow may be especially useful in unpacking these processes.

The focus of the present paper, however, is to examine group patterns of welfare state knowledge. The findings underscore a broader normative and empirical lesson: assessments of political knowledge and competence depend on what we count as political. When researchers focus exclusively on elite institutions, they risk mischaracterizing the distribution of political expertise and reinforcing narrow definitions of political competence. When the domain of political knowledge shifts to sites of everyday governance—such as the welfare state—women and racial minorities appear at least as knowledgeable as groups traditionally viewed as more informed. These patterns indicate that assessments of political knowledge depend on which domains of governance are treated as political, and that broadening those domains is essential for producing a more complete account of political behavior.

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# Supplementary Material for “Closing the Gap”

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# 1 Descriptive Statistics: Prolific Sample

Table A1.1 Demographic breakdown: Prolific sample.  
Means for continuous variables; percentages for binary indicators.

Variable	Respondents
N	1327.0
Age (mean)	45.5
Education (mean, 1-4 scale)	2.6
Income (mean, 1-13 scale)	7.4
South (Percent)	40.8
Democrat (Percent)	34.3
Republican (Percent)	28.1
Independent/Other (Percent)	37.6
White (Percent)	67.4
Racial Minority (Non-White) (Percent)	32.6
Black or African American (Percent)	12.7
Hispanic/Latino (Percent)	9.4
Asian (Percent)	7.8
Other Race (Percent)	2.6

Table A1.2 Demographic breakdown: Prolific sample.  
Weighted means for continuous variables; percentages for binary indicators.

Variable	Weighted Mean
N	1304.0
Age (mean)	47.9
Education (mean, 1-4 scale)	2.9
Income (mean, 1-13 scale)	7.8
South (Percent)	41.0
Democrat (Percent)	33.8
Republican (Percent)	28.9
Independent/Other (Percent)	37.3
White (Percent)	56.3
Racial Minority (Non-White) (Percent)	43.7
Black or African American (Percent)	11.7
Hispanic/Latino (Percent)	20.0
Asian (Percent)	6.2
Other Race (Percent)	5.8

## 2 Survey Questionnaire

### A. Standard Political Knowledge Battery

**Party Control of House** Which party currently has a majority of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives?

- Democratic
- Republican
- Tea Party
- I don't know

**Veto Override** What majority is needed in the House and Senate to override a presidential veto?

- 51%
- 2/3
- 3/4
- I don't know

**Party Conservatism** Which party is considered more conservative at the national level?

- Democratic
- Republican
- They are considered equally conservative
- I don't know

**Judicial Review** Whose responsibility is judicial review?

- President
- Congress
- Supreme Court
- I don't know

**J.D. Vance Office** What office is currently held by J.D. Vance?

- Secretary of State
- Vice President
- Chief Justice of Supreme Court
- I don't know

## B. Welfare State Knowledge Battery

**SNAP Recipients** Which group receives SNAP benefits at the highest rate?

- Adults without children
- Retirees
- Households with children
- I don't know

**SNAP Purchases** What can SNAP benefits be used to purchase?

- Restaurant hot meals
- Household cleaning supplies
- Groceries and cold food items
- I don't know

**TANF Authority** Which level of government sets most eligibility rules and benefit levels for TANF?

- Federal government
- Counties
- States
- I don't know

**TANF Requirements** What is generally required of most adults receiving TANF cash assistance?

- Enrollment in Medicare
- Proving disability
- Participating in work or job-training activities
- I don't know

**SNAP Amount Determination** Which of the following determines a household's SNAP benefit amount?

- Length of unemployment
- Household income and size
- Credit score
- I don't know

## C. Demographic Measures

**Gender** What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Some other gender
- Prefer not to say

**Age** What is your age? (*open numeric field*)

**Race/Ethnicity** What is your race/ethnicity? Please select all that apply.

- White
- Black or African American
- Asian
- Hispanic/Latino
- Other

**Education** What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Graduate or professional degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Associate degree
- Some college, no degree
- High school diploma or GED
- Less than high school

**Household Income** What is your total annual household income before taxes?

- Less than \$10,000
- \$10,000–\$19,999
- \$20,000–\$29,999
- \$30,000–\$39,999
- \$40,000–\$49,999
- \$50,000–\$59,999
- \$60,000–\$69,999
- \$70,000–\$79,999
- \$80,000–\$89,999
- \$90,000–\$99,999
- \$100,000–\$149,999
- \$150,000–\$199,999

- More than \$200,000

**Region** In which region of the United States do you currently live?

- Northeast
- Midwest
- South
- West

**Party ID** Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a . . .

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent/Other

## D. Welfare Use Measures

**Direct Use** Have you ever received benefits from any of the following programs? (Select all that apply.)

- SNAP
- TANF
- WIC
- Housing assistance (public housing, Section 8)
- Unemployment insurance
- Medicaid or CHIP
- Other government cash or food assistance
- I have never received benefits from any of these programs

**Household Use** Has anyone in your household ever received benefits from any of the following programs? (Select all that apply.)

- SNAP
- TANF
- WIC
- Housing assistance
- Unemployment insurance
- Medicaid or CHIP
- Other government cash or food assistance
- No one in my household has received benefits

**Benefits Work Experience** Have you ever worked in a job where you helped people apply for, receive, or manage government benefits or social services?

- Yes
- No

### 3 Item-Level Results

All item-level correlations, internal consistency statistics, and factor analyses are computed on the full analytic sample prior to the application of survey weights, as they are intended to diagnose relationships among items rather than estimate population parameters.

#### 3.1 Item-Level Properties

Tables A2 and A3 report item-level properties for the canonical and welfare state political knowledge batteries. For each item, I present the percent correct, item difficulty (1-p), and item discrimination ( $r_{it}$ ), calculated as the corrected item-total correlation between each item and the sum of the remaining items in the same battery (excluding the item itself). The canonical items are uniformly high-performing, with percent-correct rates between 73% and 96% and moderate item-total correlations typical of dichotomous knowledge items. The welfare state items display greater variation in difficulty—from very easy (98% correct) to challenging (35% correct)—while exhibiting generally moderate item-total correlations comparable to those of the canonical battery. Importantly, the welfare items are not uniformly easier or harder than the canonical items, indicating that the group differences documented in the main text are unlikely to be artifacts of systematic differences in item difficulty or discrimination.

	Label	Percent correct	Item diff. (1-p)	Item discrim. ( $r_{it}$ )
1	House majority party	0.90	0.10	0.28
2	Veto override threshold	0.73	0.27	0.29
3	More conservative party	0.96	0.04	0.22
4	Judicial review	0.87	0.13	0.30
5	Vice President	0.96	0.04	0.20

Table A2. Item-level properties of canonical political knowledge items.

	Label	Percent correct	Item diff. (1-p)	Item discrim. ( $r_{it}$ )
1	Who receives most SNAP	0.89	0.11	0.26
2	What SNAP buys	0.98	0.02	0.13
3	What SNAP depends on	0.96	0.04	0.25
4	Level of gov. setting TANF	0.35	0.65	0.28
5	Requirement for TANF	0.52	0.48	0.29

Table A3. Item-level properties of welfare state knowledge items.

### 3.2 Internal Consistency (Cronbach’s Alpha) and Inter-Item Correlations

Cronbach’s alpha is 0.47 for the canonical battery and 0.43 for the welfare state battery, consistent with reliability levels observed in short factual political knowledge scales (Mondak and Anderson, 2004; Mondak, 2001; Gidengil et al., 2016; Jackson, 2025). Inter-item correlation matrices (Table A4 and A5) demonstrate moderate positive correlations within each domain. These results indicate that both batteries form coherent constructs while capturing empirically distinct dimensions of political knowledge, consistent with the main text’s findings.

	House majority party	Veto override threshold	More conservative party	Judicial review	Vice President
House majority party	1.00	0.20	0.14	0.16	0.18
Veto override threshold	0.20	1.00	0.12	0.25	0.08
More conservative party	0.14	0.12	1.00	0.15	0.18
Judicial review	0.16	0.25	0.15	1.00	0.12
Vice President	0.18	0.08	0.18	0.12	1.00

Table A4. Inter-item correlation matrix for canonical political knowledge items.

	Who receives most SNAP	What SNAP buys	What SNAP depends on	Level of gov. setting TANF	Requirement for TANF
Who receives most SNAP	1.00	0.18	0.27	0.14	0.16
What SNAP buys	0.18	1.00	0.24	0.01	0.04
What SNAP depends on	0.27	0.24	1.00	0.11	0.13
Level of gov. setting TANF	0.14	0.01	0.11	1.00	0.27
Requirement for TANF	0.16	0.04	0.13	0.27	1.00

Table A5. Inter-item correlation matrix for welfare state knowledge items.

### 3.3 Exploratory Factor Analysis

To assess whether the ten knowledge items (five canonical, five welfare) form a single latent dimension or reflect multiple underlying constructs, I conduct exploratory factor analyses (EFA) using the tetrachoric correlation matrix among the dichotomous items. Tetrachoric correlations were computed using `psych::tetrachoric()`, and factor models were estimated using maximum likelihood (ML) with oblimin rotation. The first two eigenvalues exceed 1, and the decline after the second factor is substantial, suggesting that the items are not well described by a unidimensional structure.

	Factor	Eigenvalue
1	1	3.11
2	2	2.08
3	3	1.33
4	4	0.80
5	5	0.69
6	6	0.58
7	7	0.55
8	8	0.49
9	9	0.27
10	10	0.11

Table A6. Eigenvalues from exploratory factor analysis of the ten knowledge items.

A single-factor model (Table A7) fits the data poorly. Most canonical items load very weakly on the factor (0.08-0.33), while welfare items load strongly (0.41-0.86). Fit indices such as the root mean square of the residuals (RMSR) is 0.19, which further indicates that a one-factor representation is inadequate.

	Item	Loading
1	pol_house	0.12
2	pol_veto	0.30
3	pol_conservative	0.08
4	pol_judicial	0.33
5	pol_vp	0.31
6	snap1	0.69
7	snap2	0.70
8	snap3	0.86
9	tanf1	0.41
10	tanf2	0.41

Table A7. One-factor maximum likelihood solution for canonical and welfare knowledge items.

The two-factor ML solution (Table A8) produces a markedly better-structured pattern of loadings. All welfare items load strongly on one factor (loadings = 0.39–0.89), while all canonical items load strongly on the second factor (loadings = 0.51–0.69). Cross-loadings are minimal in both directions, indicating clean separation. The two factors each explain roughly similar proportions of variance (22% and 19%, respectively), and together account for 41% of total variance—typical for short factual batteries.

	Item	Factor1	Factor2
pol_house	pol_house	-0.08	0.65
pol_veto	pol_veto	0.14	0.51
pol_conservative	pol_conservative	-0.15	0.69
pol_judicial	pol_judicial	0.14	0.58
pol_vp	pol_vp	0.13	0.62
snap1	snap1	0.69	-0.03
snap2	snap2	0.69	0.05
snap3	snap3	0.89	0.00
tanf1	tanf1	0.39	0.06
tanf2	tanf2	0.43	-0.04

Table A8. Two-factor maximum likelihood solution for canonical and welfare knowledge items.

Overall, across all criteria, the canonical and welfare state knowledge items represent two distinct latent dimensions, not a single factor: weak cross-domain tetrachoric correlations, low additive-scale correlation, poor fit of a one-factor model, and a clean two-factor solution that aligns exactly with the theoretical domains. These analyses demonstrate that canonical political knowledge and welfare state knowledge are empirically separable constructs rather than manifestations of a common underlying dimension of political knowledge.

### 3.4 “I Don’t Know” Response Patterns

To assess whether cross-domain differences in political knowledge might be driven by differential guessing or respondent confusion, I examine “I don’t know” (DK) response rates for each item. Overall, DK responses are uncommon. Across the five canonical political knowledge items, the mean DK rate is 5.1%. For the welfare state items, the mean DK rate is 13.1%.

This difference is driven primarily by two TANF items, which exhibit substantially higher DK rates (25.8% and 30.4%, respectively). In contrast, DK rates for the remaining welfare items are low and comparable to those observed for canonical items. These patterns suggest that higher DK responses are concentrated in specific policy domains characterized by administrative complexity rather than reflecting generalized confusion or differential response behavior across knowledge batteries. Accordingly, cross-domain differences in political knowledge are unlikely to be artifacts of differential guessing or response uncertainty.

To further assess whether DK responding differs across demographic groups, I examine average DK rates by gender and race across both batteries. Women exhibit higher DK rates than men in the canonical battery (7.0% vs. 2.9%), consistent with prior work showing that women are less likely to guess and more likely to select DK responses (Mondak and Anderson, 2004; Lizotte and Sidman, 2009; Ferrín et al., 2018). However, this difference disappears in the welfare state battery, where DK rates are nearly identical across gender groups (13.0% vs. 13.3%). Racial differences in DK responding are modest and do not follow a consistent pattern across batteries: racial minority respondents have slightly higher DK rates than white respondents in the canonical battery (6.0% vs. 4.6%), but slightly lower DK rates in the welfare state battery (12.3% vs. 13.6%). Overall, these patterns suggest that while DK responding varies somewhat across demographic groups, these differences do not systematically differ across batteries. Accordingly, group differences in DK responding are unlikely to drive the cross-domain comparisons central to the analysis.

To examine whether the coding of DK responses affects the results, I also re-estimate the main analyses treating DK responses as missing rather than incorrect. The results are substantively unchanged. For gender, women score lower than men in the canonical battery (0.928 vs. 0.950; difference = -0.023,  $p = 0.001$ ) but higher in the welfare state battery (0.873 vs. 0.853; difference = 0.020,  $p = 0.02$ ). For race, racial minority respondents score lower than white respondents in both the canonical battery (0.921 vs. 0.953; difference = -0.033,  $p < 0.001$ ) and the welfare state battery (0.846 vs. 0.875; difference = -0.029,  $p = 0.002$ ), with a slightly smaller gap in the latter. Importantly, the direction and magnitude of these differences are similar under both coding approaches, indicating that the findings are not driven by how DK responses are treated.

## 4 Knowledge Gaps by Racial/Ethnic Subgroup

Table A9. Racial/Ethnic Differences in Canonical Political Knowledge

Group	Subgroup Mean	White Mean	Difference	p-value
Black	0.86	0.92	-0.06	< 0.001
Hispanic/Latino	0.86	0.92	-0.06	0.004
Asian	0.89	0.92	-0.03	0.08

*Note:* Weighted means. Differences are subgroup minus White. p-values from weighted two-sample t-tests. Knowledge variables scaled 0–1.

Table A10. Racial/Ethnic Differences in Welfare State Knowledge

Group	Subgroup Mean	White Mean	Difference	p-value
Black	0.76	0.73	0.03	0.1
Hispanic/Latino	0.68	0.73	-0.05	0.005
Asian	0.70	0.73	-0.04	0.089

*Note:* Weighted means. Differences are subgroup minus White. p-values from weighted two-sample t-tests. Knowledge variables scaled 0–1.

## 5 Intersectional Knowledge Gaps

Table A11. Gender  $\times$  Racial Minority Differences in Canonical Political Knowledge

Group	N	Subgroup Mean	White Men Mean	Difference	p-value
White women	464	0.898	0.937	-0.039	< 0.001
Minority men	200	0.904	0.937	-0.033	0.018
Minority women	221	0.827	0.937	-0.11	< 0.001

*Note:* Baseline group is White men. Weighted means. Differences are subgroup minus White men. p-values from weighted two-sample t-tests. Knowledge variables scaled 0–1.

Table A12. Gender  $\times$  Racial Minority Differences in Welfare State Knowledge

Group	N	Subgroup Mean	White Men Mean	Difference	p-value
White women	464	0.751	0.718	0.032	0.013
Minority men	200	0.697	0.718	-0.022	0.199
Minority women	221	0.732	0.718	0.013	0.402

*Note:* Baseline group is White men. Weighted means. Differences are subgroup minus White men. p-values from weighted two-sample t-tests. Knowledge variables scaled 0–1.

## 6 Pooled Models

### 6.1 Pooled Models with Covariates

Table A13. Gender Knowledge Gaps Across Domains (Covariates)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Knowledge Score
Female	−0.056*** (0.014)
Welfare Domain	−0.214*** (0.013)
Age	0.0003 (0.0003)
Education: Some College/2yr	0.043 (0.022)
Education: College Grad	0.083*** (0.021)
Education: Postgraduate	0.101*** (0.022)
Income: 10k–49k	0.050* (0.025)
Income: 50k–99k	0.040 (0.025)
Income: 100k+	0.041 (0.026)
Race: Black	0.007 (0.016)
Race: Hispanic/Latino	−0.042* (0.018)
Race: Asian	−0.032 (0.022)
Race: Other	0.015 (0.026)
Region: Northeast	0.015 (0.016)
Region: South	0.010 (0.014)
Region: West	−0.011 (0.019)
Democrat	0.0003 (0.012)
Republican	−0.002 (0.014)
Female × Welfare Domain	0.091*** (0.021)
Constant	0.819*** (0.030)
Observations	2,608

*Notes:* Survey-weighted linear regression. Data are stacked such that each respondent contributes two observations (canonical and welfare knowledge). Standard errors are clustered by respondent. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Table A14. Racial Knowledge Gaps Across Domains (Covariates)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Knowledge Score
Racial Minority	−0.038* (0.015)
Welfare Domain	−0.185*** (0.012)
Age	0.0004 (0.0003)
Education: Some College/2yr	0.046 (0.024)
Education: College Grad	0.084*** (0.023)
Education: Postgraduate	0.104*** (0.023)
Income: 10k–49k	0.043 (0.025)
Income: 50k–99k	0.031 (0.025)
Income: 100k+	0.032 (0.026)
Female	−0.009 (0.011)
Region: Northeast	0.016 (0.016)
Region: South	0.014 (0.014)
Region: West	−0.010 (0.019)
Democrat	−0.003 (0.012)
Republican	−0.004 (0.014)
Racial Minority × Welfare Domain	0.036 (0.022)
Constant	0.809*** (0.031)

*Notes:* Survey-weighted linear regression. Data are stacked such that each respondent contributes two observations (canonical and welfare knowledge). Standard errors are clustered by respondent. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

## 6.2 Unweighted Pooled Models

Table A15. Unweighted Pooled Model (Gender  $\times$  Domain, No Covariates)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Knowledge Score
Female	-0.060*** (0.010)
Welfare Domain	-0.187*** (0.011)
Female $\times$ Welfare Domain	0.081*** (0.014)
Constant	0.916*** (0.007)
Observations	2,608

*Notes:* Models are unweighted. Standard errors are clustered by respondent. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Table A16. Unweighted Pooled Model (Race  $\times$  Domain, No Covariates)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Knowledge Score
Racial Minority	-0.031*** (0.011)
Welfare Domain	-0.152*** (0.009)
Racial Minority $\times$ Welfare Domain	0.023 (0.016)
Constant	0.894*** (0.006)
Observations	2,608

*Notes:* Models are unweighted. Standard errors are clustered by respondent. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

## 7 Knowledge Gaps by Welfare State Contact

The gender results show that canonical gender gaps are large and negative regardless of welfare state contact. In the welfare domain, the pattern diverges across groups. Among respondents with no welfare contact, women and men perform similarly, indicating a narrowing of the gender gap but not a reversal. Among respondents with welfare contact, however, women substantially outperform men (+0.051,  $p < .001$ ), producing a clear reversal. Thus, welfare contact is not necessary for narrowing the gender gap, but the full reversal appears most strongly among those who interact with the welfare state.

Table A17. Gender Gaps by Welfare State Contact

Domain	Welfare Contact	Women Mean	Men Mean	Difference	p-value
Canonical	No Contact	0.89	0.94	-0.05	< 0.001
Canonical	Contact	0.85	0.91	-0.06	< 0.001
Welfare	No Contact	0.68	0.69	-0.01	0.53
Welfare	Contact	0.78	0.73	0.05	< 0.001

*Note:* Weighted means. Differences are women minus men. p-values from weighted two-sample t-tests. Knowledge scores range 0–1. Contact indicates any direct use, household use, or work related to welfare programs.

For racial gaps, the canonical differences remain sizable and significant regardless of welfare contact. In the welfare domain, by contrast, racial knowledge gaps shrink substantially. Among respondents with no welfare state contact, the difference is small (–0.037) and does not reach statistical significance ( $p = .064$ ). Among respondents with any welfare contact, the racial gap essentially disappears (–0.012,  $p = .38$ ). The canonical racial hierarchy therefore weakens in both groups but collapses most fully among respondents with welfare contact.

Table A18. Racial Gaps by Welfare State Contact

Domain	Welfare Contact	Minority Mean	White Mean	Difference	p-value
Canonical	No Contact	0.89	0.93	-0.04	0.01
Canonical	Contact	0.85	0.91	-0.06	< 0.001
Welfare	No Contact	0.67	0.70	-0.04	0.06
Welfare	Contact	0.75	0.76	-0.01	0.38

*Note:* Weighted means. Differences are racial minority minus white respondents. p-values from weighted two-sample t-tests. Knowledge scores range 0–1. Contact indicates any direct use, household use, or work related to welfare programs.

## 8 Ethical Considerations

This project received ethics review and was determined to be exempt from further oversight by the [REDACTED] Institutional Review Board under U.S. federal exemption criteria for minimal-risk survey research. All data were collected in Fall 2025 via Prolific, and respondents were compensated at Prolific's prevailing fair-wage rates. Respondents were adults drawn from a general population sampling frame, and no vulnerable populations were targeted or disproportionately represented. No deception was used, and all respondents provided informed consent prior to participation.