

Closing the Gap: Gender, Race, and Welfare State Knowledge

Jasmine English*

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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 that knowledge batteries measure. 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 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 patterns. Women score lower on canonical items but outperform men on welfare state knowledge, 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 gaps by revealing domains of political expertise that canonical measures overlook and underscore how measurement choices shape whose political experiences are represented in the study of public opinion.

*Assistant Professor of Political Science, Reed College (jasenglish@reed.edu)

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 responded by arguing 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 criticism, 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; Jackson, 2025).

Although most revised knowledge measures remain anchored to an elite-institutional model of politics—knowledge of who holds office, how institutions work, electoral issues, and so on—one promising strand of this research demonstrates the value of shifting beyond the elite political domain. Stolle and Gidengil (2010), for example, find that Canadian women know more about how to access government benefits and services than men. Relatedly, Cohen and Luttig (2020) demonstrate that Black Americans know significantly more about the carceral state—knowledge of African American victims of police and state violence—than their white counterparts. Together, these studies show that group knowledge patterns look fundamentally different when scholars measure political knowledge in domains where women and racial minorities more frequently encounter the state.

Building on these domain-expanding approaches, I introduce a welfare state knowledge battery that mirrors the logic of the canonical political knowledge measure. Unlike existing

procedural or event-based measures—such as knowledge of how to access government services (Stolle and Gidengil, 2010) or of specific instances of state violence (Cohen and Luttig, 2020)—this battery captures a structural, institutional understanding of what welfare programs do, who they serve, and how policy authority is organized. This information is precisely what citizens need to evaluate and form political opinions about welfare policies. This measure allows us to assess political knowledge of a central domain of governance and, crucially, to evaluate whether group knowledge gaps persist, narrow, or reverse in this domain.

Using original, nationally diverse survey data from the United States, I compare the canonical political knowledge measure with a new battery measuring knowledge of major welfare programs. The results reveal a pronounced shift in group patterns. In line with established findings, women and racial minorities score lower on canonical knowledge 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 political knowledge gaps are domain-specific and that women and racial minorities have forms of political knowledge that existing measures miss. Methodologically, I show that measurement choices profoundly shape what we conclude about who knows politics 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 through enactment the value of using concepts that capture the political experiences of different groups 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- and male-dominated political arenas: officeholders who are overwhelmingly men 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 small but growing literature argues that political knowledge should be measured not only in terms

of elite national politics but also the administrative, bureaucratic, and coercive domains of government. Within this line of work, Stolle and Gidengil (2010) show that Canadian women know more about how to access government benefits and services than men, pointing to a domain of political knowledge organized around care work, household management, and interactions with state bureaucracies. Another prominent example is Cohen and Luttig (2020), who demonstrate that Black Americans possess greater knowledge of police and state violence, reflecting historically patterned interactions with policing and the criminal justice system. These studies differ substantively—one focuses on knowledge of procedures for accessing benefits, the other on events of police violence—but together demonstrate that group knowledge patterns look meaningfully different across political domains.

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

What unifies the domain-expanding interventions of Stolle and Gidengil (2010) and Cohen and Luttig (2020) is that they move the concept of political knowledge beyond elite-institutional politics to domains of everyday governance. However, they also measure different *types* of knowledge than the canonical framework: Stolle and Gidengil (2010) focus on procedural political knowledge (knowledge of how to access welfare benefits and services), and Cohen and Luttig (2020) measure case- or event-based political knowledge (knowledge of specific victims of carceral state violence). Both knowledge types illuminate crucial aspects of political understanding and undoubtedly shape opinion formation. However, on their own, neither captures the structural information about institutions and policies that citizens often use to form political opinions and evaluate public policy (i.e., precisely the focus of the canonical knowledge framework). In what follows, I make the case for a political knowledge battery that follows the logic of the canonical battery 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 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 offers a strategic domain for examining whether political knowledge gaps persist across political contexts or simply reflect the limited scope of the canonical knowledge framework.

Second, why analogize the canonical measure of political knowledge? As discussed, existing domain-expanding contributions measure two important types of knowledge: procedural political knowledge of how to access welfare benefits (Stolle and Gidengil, 2010) and event-based political knowledge of victims of carceral violence (Cohen and Luttig, 2020). Although both offer important political insights and certainly shape public opinion and behavior, neither on its own provides a complete picture of the knowledge citizens often use to form political opinions and evaluate public policy: knowledge, for instance, of what welfare programs do, who they serve, and how political authority is organized. This kind of institutional knowledge is (a) what the canonical knowledge framework identifies as enabling citizens to link preferences to politics and evaluate government performance, and (b) what the measure I develop in this paper aims to capture. By extending the logic of canonical measurement to the welfare state, this measure allows us to explore the persistence of gender and racial gaps in the kind of structural, programmatic knowledge that citizens need to evaluate the welfare state.

2.3 Group-Specific Expectations Across Domains

Canonical 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, well documented gender and racial gaps should reproduce in the canonical knowledge domain. By contrast, welfare state knowledge captures structural and policy-oriented information about programs that organize everyday governance and are disproportionately encountered through gendered and racialized patterns of exposure to the state, including caregiving and household management, interactions with public bureaucracies, and

participation in community-level information environments. In the welfare domain, group differences in political knowledge should therefore narrow and may, in some cases, reverse relative to canonical knowledge measures.

3 Data & Measurement

To examine canonical and welfare state political knowledge, I fielded an original survey to a nationally diverse sample of 1,362 American adults on Prolific in Fall 2025.¹ 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 based on the 2024 American Community Survey (applied 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. Because of some missing cases on weight dimensions, my final sample size is 1,304. This sample also excludes the 35 respondents who failed an attention check.²³

Table 1 presents the questions and correct answers for the canonical and welfare state knowledge measures. To measure canonical political knowledge, I use a five-item multiple choice battery designed to capture knowledge of political institutions, actors, 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. Each respondent is scored as correct (1) or incorrect (0) and their score is summed and scaled to run from 0 to 1. Survey respondents received the canonical knowledge questions in random order.

¹ 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.

² 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.

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

Table 1: Political Knowledge Items: Canonical and Welfare State

Panel A. Canonical Political Knowledge

Canonical Political Knowledge Items

Which party currently has a majority of seats in the House of Representatives? *Republican Party*

What majority is needed in the House and Senate to override a presidential veto? *Two-thirds*

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

Whose responsibility is judicial review? *Supreme Court*

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

Panel B. Welfare State Political Knowledge

Welfare State Political Knowledge Items

Which group receives SNAP benefits at the highest rate? *Households with children*

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

What is generally required of most adults receiving TANF cash assistance? *Participating in work or job-training activities*

What can SNAP benefits be used to purchase? *Groceries and cold food items*

Which of the following determines a household's SNAP benefit amount? *Household income and size*

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

To measure welfare state political knowledge, I use a five-item multiple choice battery designed to capture citizens' structural knowledge of core public assistance programs. The measure is designed as a domain extension of canonical political knowledge rather than as procedural or experiential index. Accordingly, the battery is intentionally constructed to parallel the logic of canonical political knowledge measures: 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 scored as correct (1) or incorrect (0) and summed and scaled to run from 0 to 1, matching the scale of the canonical knowledge measure. Respondents received the welfare state political knowledge items in random order.

Item selection for the welfare state battery followed three explicit criteria. First, to maintain conceptual equivalence with canonical political knowledge, 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 policy debates about who receives benefits, work requirements, program generosity, and federal–state authority.⁴ Third, items had to be general and widely applicable rather than tied to specific administrative experiences, ensuring that the measure assesses policy understanding rather than just personal program navigation.

Within this framework, SNAP and TANF offer particularly appropriate domains. They are among the most salient, frequently debated, and widely studied public assistance programs in the United States, and they represent two distinct welfare logics: a near-universal food

⁴ 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—exactly the kinds of institutional facts captured in this battery. These are not technocratic details but the factual foundations of partisan conflict over the welfare state.

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 citizens need to evaluate welfare state policy, while maintaining conceptual alignment with the canonical knowledge measure.

Because the contribution of the paper rests on comparing political knowledge across domains, I assess the psychometric properties of both batteries to evaluate item quality, dimensionality, and potential sources of measurement artifact. Item-level diagnostics assessing difficulty, discrimination, and response patterns indicate that both the canonical and welfare state knowledge 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 substantially greater variation in difficulty, with proportion correct ranging from 0.35 to 0.98. Importantly, the welfare items are not uniformly easier or harder than the canonical items. Item discrimination is also similar across the two batteries, further indicating that the observed differences are not driven by systematic differences in item difficulty or poorer item quality in the welfare battery. “I don’t know” response rates (Appendix S3.4) are likewise not uniformly higher for welfare items and are concentrated in specific policy areas, suggesting that cross-domain differences would reflect substantive variation in policy familiarity rather than differential guessing or generalized respondent confusion.

Internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) and inter-item correlations (Tables A4 and A5) indicate that each battery functions as a coherent measurement scale. Alpha values around 0.45 are typical for short, five-item dichotomous factual batteries and comparable to those reported in prior work on political knowledge. To assess whether canonical and welfare 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 canonical and welfare knowledge items. Together, these results show that individuals who are highly knowledgeable about elite political institutions are not necessarily knowledgeable about the welfare state, 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 developed in Section 2, this section examines whether gender and racial gaps persist when knowledge measures focus on the welfare state rather than elite-centered political institutions. I begin by examining gender differences across the two political knowledge batteries. Table 2 reports weighted mean scores for women and men on both the canonical political knowledge items and the welfare state knowledge items, with differences scaled from 0 to 1. Consistent with established findings, women score lower than men on the canonical battery. 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.

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 state knowledge battery with mean scores of 0.74 and 0.71, respectively. The resulting difference of +0.03 is statistically significant ($p = 0.003$). This reversal demonstrates that group-level gender differences in political knowledge depend on the political domain in question: women perform worse than men on elite-institutional knowledge measures but outperform men when questions focus on major public assistance programs.

To formally test whether the gender gap differs across domains, I pool the canonical and welfare state items into a single stacked dataset in which each respondent contributes two observations—one for each knowledge domain—and estimate a survey-weighted linear

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.

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 to welfare state political knowledge. Substantively, this represents a reversal in political expertise: women score about six points lower than men on canonical items but about three points higher on welfare state items.⁵

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 political knowledge. This reversal indicates that observed gender gaps in political knowledge depend on the domain of governance being measured. Canonical items emphasize elite and institutional knowledge, where men have an advantage, whereas welfare state items capture structural and policy-oriented knowledge, where women demonstrate greater expertise.

4.2 Racial Differences Across Knowledge Domains

Turning next to racial differences in canonical and welfare state political 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,

⁵ 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 when demographic covariates are added (Table A13 in Appendix S6) and 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. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

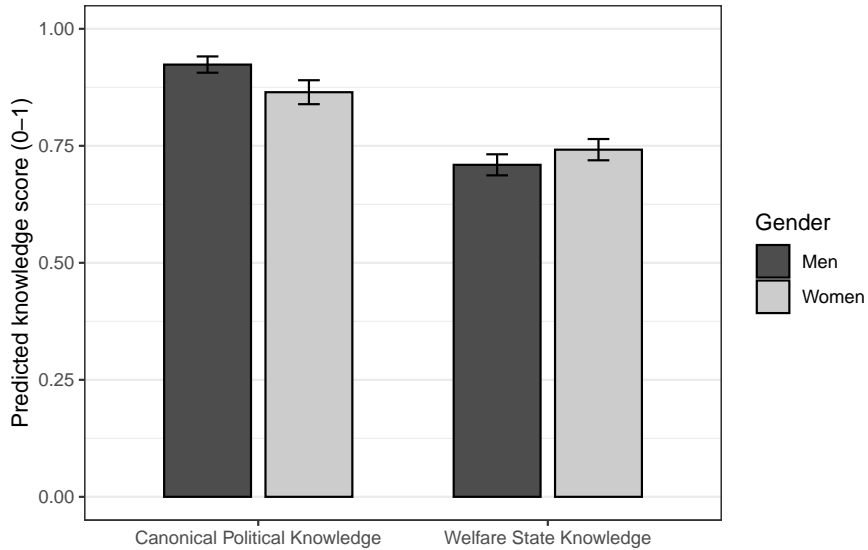


Figure 1: Predicted political knowledge across domains by gender. Predictions are from survey-weighted stacked model; 95% CIs clustered by respondent.

Hispanic/Latino, Asian, or other). In line with existing research, there is a sizable racial gap in canonical political knowledge: white respondents score six points higher than respondents of color (0.92 vs. 0.86, $p < 0.001$). However, consistent with the expectation that domain shifts should attenuate some forms of political knowledge disadvantage, this pattern does not travel to welfare state knowledge: on the welfare state battery, the racial gap narrows substantially and is statistically indistinguishable from zero (0.73 vs. 0.71, $p = 0.11$). These patterns suggest that racial differences in political knowledge are domain-dependent: large for elite-institutional knowledge questions, but attenuated when measures focus on the welfare state.⁶

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 predicting 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 political 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 on the welfare state measure. 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.⁷

⁶ Tables A9 and A10 in Appendix S4 present knowledge means for each racial and ethnic group. In the canonical domain, racial gaps are sizable and statistically significant: white respondents score substantially higher than Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian respondents. In the welfare domain, these differences are somewhat attenuated. Black respondents move from a significant deficit 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 modestly smaller than in the canonical domain. Asian respondents also score lower than whites in both domains but the magnitude of this difference is virtually the same across batteries. Overall, the canonical racial knowledge hierarchy does not fully replicate in the welfare domain, with the clearest narrowing occurring among Black respondents.

⁷ Results are similar when adjusting for age, education, income, gender, region, and party identification.

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. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

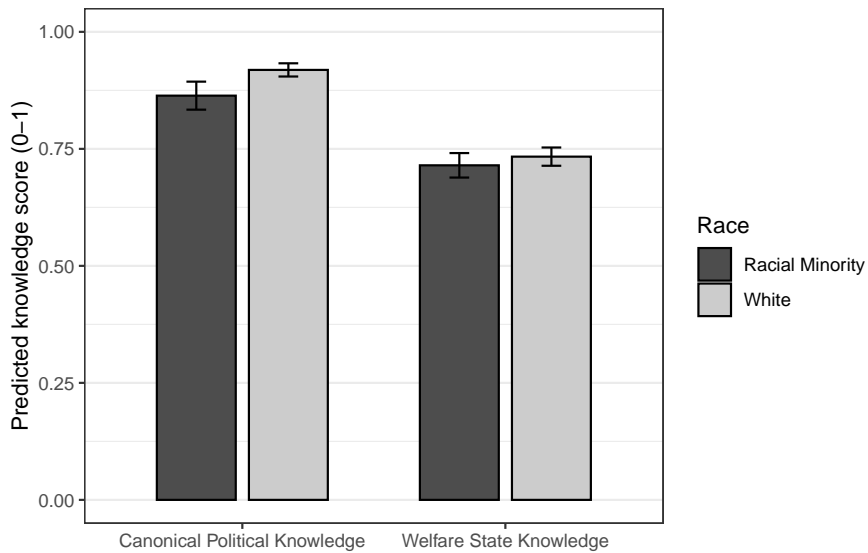


Figure 2: Predicted political knowledge across domains by race. Predictions are from survey-weighted stacked model; 95% CIs clustered by respondent.

This covariate-adjusted model is reported in Appendix S6 (Table A14). The unweighted model also produces nearly identical results (Table A16 in Appendix S6).

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. In the welfare domain, however, these knowledge gaps narrow substantially. White women outperform white men, and both minority men and minority women score at levels statistically indistinguishable from white men. As such, canonical batteries reproduce a racialized and gendered hierarchy that places minority women at the bottom of the knowledge distribution, whereas welfare state items do not. This pattern indicates that intersectional disadvantage is not an inherent feature of political knowledge but a product of measurement choices.

Interestingly, the patterns presented in this section are not entirely driven by differential contact with welfare programs. Appendix S7 reports knowledge means separately for respondents with and without welfare state contact, defined as direct program use, household use, or employment related to welfare programs. Large gender and racial gaps in canonical political knowledge persist regardless of whether respondents have had welfare contact. By contrast, when political knowledge is measured in the welfare state domain, racial and gender gaps shrink substantially among both 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 attenuates racial gaps among both respondents with and without contact. Taken together, 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 direct 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 provides citizens with exposure to program details even in the absence of welfare state contact. While this paper does not adjudicate among 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 political knowledge measures would exaggerate some forms of political disadvantage by privileging elite-centered information environments. The patterns observed here align with this expectation: gender gaps reverse in the welfare domain, while racial gaps narrow to the point of statistical indistinguishability. Importantly, these differences do not reflect changes in what citizens know, but rather changes in how political knowledge is operationalized. Shifting the domain of measurement from elite political institutions to other arenas of governance reveals forms of political competence that are obscured by canonical measures. Together, these patterns underscore the conceptual value of moving beyond the canonical political knowledge battery: the content of what is measured meaningfully shapes the distribution of who appears politically knowledgeable and competent. The following section considers the 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 strongly 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, these gaps narrow substantially and, in the case of gender, reverse. 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, should not be conflated with either procedural knowledge of how to navigate bureaucracies or experiential knowledge derived from direct program use. Procedural knowledge concerns how to apply for benefits, which offices to contact, or how to comply with administrative requirements. Experiential knowledge reflects lived encounters with welfare institutions. By contrast, the measure developed in this paper captures structural and institutional facts about program design: who programs serve, what benefits can be used for, and which level of government exercises authority. This distinction matters conceptually. Structural knowledge is precisely the type of information citizens draw on when evaluating policy proposals, attributing responsibility, and forming opinions about welfare reform. The finding that group differences reverse or attenuate at this level suggests that women and racial minorities are not merely knowledgeable because of proximity or exposure, but possess policy-relevant understandings that canonical measures systematically overlook.

Conceptually, these results contribute to debates about what political knowledge measures are taken to represent. The canonical knowledge measure captures only one slice of the political information that citizens use to form political opinions and navigate political life. In practice, however, the canonical measure is frequently treated not simply as one indicator among others, but as a proxy for overall political competence. The results here show that this inference is unwarranted: performance on elite-institutional items does not reliably generalize across arenas of governance. Yet welfare programs constitute some of the most frequent and impactful points of citizen-state interaction and are a site of active political contestation: debates about eligibility, work requirements, and federal–state responsibility consistently occupy the public agenda and structure partisan conflict. For these reasons, welfare state knowledge is not peripheral but central to how individuals make sense of policy and evaluate government action. That political knowledge gaps reverse or narrow in this domain challenges the notion of a single, canonical measure and suggests that political knowledge is better understood as a family of domain-specific competencies.

These conceptual insights have important methodological implications for the study of political behavior. Specifically, these findings 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-institutional battery risks over- and understating the political competencies of different groups. 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. Conventional knowledge measures are regularly used to assess political competence and civic preparedness. But if knowledge gaps reverse or narrow across political domains, then the canonical framework risks masking important forms and patterns of political expertise. In other words, our 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 representative scholarly accounts of political knowledge and behavior.

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 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 state 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 or experiential 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, programmatic, procedural, and experiential). Doing so would allow scholars to assess whether the domain-dependence observed here reflects a broader pattern in political learning or is specific to particular forms of governance. Future research could also extend the institutional, programmatic approach developed here 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 document clear domain-specific group patterns, they do not directly adjudicate among 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 of these pathways matter most—and how they interact with formal political socialization—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 emerge as at least as knowledgeable as groups traditionally viewed as more informed. These patterns indicate that assessments of political knowledge are inseparable from decisions about which domains of governance count 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 commonly observed in short factual political knowledge scales. 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” response rates for each item. Overall, DK responses are uncommon. Across the five canonical political knowledge items, the mean “I don’t know” 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 political knowledge 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 measured political knowledge are unlikely to be artifacts of differential guessing or response uncertainty.

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	0.885	0.937	-0.051	< 0.001
Canonical	Contact	0.853	0.912	-0.059	< 0.001
Welfare	No Contact	0.681	0.692	-0.011	0.528
Welfare	Contact	0.775	0.725	0.051	< 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	0.932	-0.042	0.006
Canonical	Contact	0.848	0.909	-0.061	< 0.001
Welfare	No Contact	0.665	0.702	-0.037	0.064
Welfare	Contact	0.745	0.757	-0.012	0.377

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.